

Jefferson and Shakespeare: Miseducation and class struggle in America

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Within one month, a University of Michigan professor has been removed from his course for screening a film version of Shakespeare's *Othello*, and the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio has decreed that it will remove a statue of Thomas Jefferson, holding the Declaration of Independence, from New York's City Hall. Both the professor, the renowned composer Bright Sheng, and the statue, fashioned by the great French sculptor David D'Angers almost two centuries ago, have been "canceled" and must be hidden from sight because they provide "ocular proof," as Othello would call it, that enlightened thought and democratic Enlightenment ideals are incompatible with the needs of the ruling class.

Sheng, who has taught at Michigan since 1995, was either removed or "took a step back," as the *Michigan Daily* had it, from his undergraduate composition course after showing the class Stuart Burge's 1965 film *Othello*, starring Laurence Olivier in the role of the North African general who marries the white daughter of a Venetian senator and ultimately murders her in a jealous rage. Sheng showed the film in conjunction with teaching the opera *Otello* by Giuseppe Verdi.

A student in Sheng's class related to the *Michigan Daily* that she was "shocked" when she realized Othello was being played by a white actor in black makeup. As the WSWS has explained, the blackness of his makeup was an anti-racist choice on the part of Olivier, one of the twentieth century's greatest Shakespearean actors. Sheng may not have provided such contextual information to his class, but anyone watching the film should have been able to distinguish Olivier's portrayal of Shakespeare's tragic hero Othello from an instance of Jim Crow minstrelsy. Nevertheless, the *Michigan Daily* referred to the matter as a "blackface incident."

The university administration, in the person of School of Music, Theatre and Dance dean David Gier, reacted to the student's complaint in a fashion that is by now predictable. He panicked. Accommodating himself, and the university, to the perspective of the undergraduate, who clearly knew nothing of *Othello* and perhaps nothing of Shakespeare, Gier replaced Sheng with Professor Evan Chambers and declared that now, with Sheng and Shakespeare out of the way, the students would enjoy "a positive learning environment." Or in the words of the shocked undergraduate, "a safe space." For his part, Professor Chambers pronounced Sheng's showing of the film to be in itself "a racist act."

Othello is one of Shakespeare's great works of tragedy. First performed in 1604, the play is conscious and critical of racism, with the Moorish Othello depicted sympathetically and given some of Shakespeare's most beautiful and most powerful lines. Of Desdemona Othello says,

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have used.

The play is also about the malignity and violence of jealousy. The jealous and racist Iago, Othello's lieutenant, is able with a few well-placed remarks and subtle hints to poison Othello's love for Desdemona with suspicion and drive him to her murder. Already undermined by his own self-doubt, Othello is, as Iago knows, entirely vulnerable to the suggestion of Desdemona's faithlessness, so that the same loving husband of the lines above can later roar out, "I will chop her into messes!"

Like Othello, today's university, which is supposed to be the repository and greenhouse of Enlightenment thought, is in fact shaken to its foundation by the anti-democratic and irrationalist forces of identity politics. How easy it is, with just a few words—"safe space," "blackface," "racism"—to cancel rational thought and inquiry, the pillars upon which the university is built, and to send university administrators running for cover. Just as it is with the #MeToo movement, an accusation is a conviction in the racialist atmosphere of contemporary academia. This is Iago's tactic, and it has been taken up by grasping layers of the upper-middle class, promoting themselves and their careers with the reactionary nonsense that race is the measure of all things, that surface is depth, and that truth—even historical and scientific truth—is subjective.

Thomas Jefferson, the founder of the University of Virginia, did not believe such things. Profoundly, radically, Jefferson declared that "all men are created equal" in a time when such a truth was anything but "self evident." Thomas Mackaman has argued, eloquently and forcefully, for the tremendous debt humanity owes to Jefferson for the Declaration of Independence. Mackaman also points out that the decision taken by de Blasio's Democratic administration to remove the statue of Jefferson from City Hall is related to the larger issues of the moment:

It is not accidental that the attack on Jefferson, the figure most closely associated with equality in American history, comes in the midst of a pandemic that has killed 750,000 Americans and a gathering strike wave emerging in the working class. The Democrats' aim is to divert social anger into a "racial reckoning" that leaves untouched capitalism and the staggering social inequality it upholds.

And here is the rub. The careerist academics and journalists, like Ibram X. Kendi and Nikole Hannah-Jones, who cash in on the repressive academic and cultural atmosphere that elevates race above all things and promotes division and mistrust such that these careerists might be called our new segregationists, they are the beneficiaries of this atmosphere but not its source. A few demagogic New York City council members may score political points with their more disoriented constituents by claiming to be outraged by a statue of a slaveholder who also happened to be the country's greatest proponent of Enlightenment thought, but they too are mere functionaries. Because the toxic racialism that exerts such pressure

on official American culture emanates ultimately from the Democratic Party and, through it, the ruling class.

The corporate and financial elite see clearly that the working class is reaching its boiling point. Anger at intensified exploitation, in the form of forced overtime and stagnant wages, and outrage at being exposed to the coronavirus in the workplace have spurred a wave of strikes across the country and around the globe. Over 10,000 John Deere workers have been on strike since October 14. In Massachusetts, over 700 nurses at St. Vincent Hospital have been striking for six months, livid over staffing and supply shortages during the pandemic, and in South Buffalo over 2,000 nurses and hospital staff at Mercy Hospital are entering the fourth week of their strike, also in protest over staffing, inadequate equipment and wages.

Kellogg food production workers, Alabama coal miners and other workers have struck their places of work in the past several months, and a last-minute sellout deal by their union barely averted, for now, a strike by 60,000 film and television workers over wages and hours. Meanwhile in South Africa, 170,000 metalworkers are in their third week on strike. In most of these strikes, the wage increases workers demand are simply those that would keep up with inflation.

With such working class unrest, the ruling class—the financiers, corporate boards and CEOs—finds itself in a dire situation. Unlike in the years of the Great Depression, the US does not control a surplus of real wealth, the kind generated by labor. Instead, the government is hopelessly in debt and, like most other industrialized nations, keeps its investment banks and major corporations afloat by purchasing their debt to the tune of trillions of fiat dollars. Such conjured cash is for the wealthy, though, and not disbursed to the working class. As a result, there will be no grand spending bills, as this week’s defeat of Biden’s limited spending proposals made clear.

That leaves the elite with few options for subduing an awakening working class. For their part, the Republicans are fashioning an American fascism, the open rule of the fist. Through the Democratic Party, the ruling class continues its bait-and-switch strategy of keeping hope alive, as with Biden’s spending bill, and makes full use of the “progressive” wing of the party and personages such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Though these pseudo-left figures are full of sound and fury, they signify nothing.

Then there are the trade unions. These organizations, bearing no resemblance to the workers organizations of an earlier era, have for the past forty years served as a workplace police force, providing capital with cheap labor and preventing strikes. The act was already wearing thin before the COVID-19 pandemic, but now that organizations like the United Auto Workers and the American Federation of Teachers are bull rushing their members into infected factories and classrooms, workers are coming close to outright revolt.

The Times’ Project is a politically-motivated falsification of history. It presents the origins of the United States entirely through the prism of racial conflict.

The Democrats have one more deterrent to revolution in their increasingly ineffectual playbook: identity politics. The strategy of divide and conquer is as old as politics itself, and in the US the preferred line of division of the Democratic Party has long been race. As progressive historians of American history like Bernard S. Bailyn and Victoria Bynum have demonstrated, the ruling class in this country has from the beginning sown racial division—often in the form of legislation—to divide and weaken the working class. Along with Bynum’s work on the widespread, multiracial Unionist movement in the Confederate South, the powerful instances of multiracial labor action throughout the twentieth century offer a firm rebuke to the Democrats’ divisive efforts.

Ingeniously, in the post-Civil Rights era, when open race-baiting is outré, the Democrats have dipped their arrows in the irrationalist poison of postmodernism. Racism, we are told, particularly white racism against

African Americans, is endemic to American society, inherent in “whiteness.” *The New York Times*’ 1619 Project elevated this dangerous claim to a scientific principle when Nikole Hannah-Jones declared that racism is “in the DNA” of the nation. Such thinking draws upon the foulest ideology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, as David North said in a critique of the 1619 Project, “loiters in the realm of the Third Reich.”

On Tuesday, the University of Michigan withdrew its request for a Title IX investigation into Professor Sheng’s screening of *Othello*, and he was pronounced worthy of returning to the classroom. No explanation, and certainly no public apology to Sheng, attended the announcement of this reversal of course. Such conduct on the part of the administration suggests the effectiveness of the outcry on behalf of Sheng that came from students, scholars and workers around the country, most notably led by the WSWS. It also exposes the utter bankruptcy of an institution, and of academia generally, under the tyranny of identity politics.

There is nothing progressive or liberating, let alone Marxist, in the tripe propagated by the proponents of identity politics. The subjective judgment leveled at a historical figure like Jefferson—the very notion that history itself is a morality play in which we worship immaculate heroes as if they were Marvel comic book characters (and this does a disservice to the better comic books)—is intellectually backward. It betrays an idealist understanding of history that cannot bear scrutiny and that cannot serve the interests of the revolutionary working class. Decades of cuts to the funding of public education and the promulgation of the self-involved, self-righteous rhetoric of identity have had a disastrous effect on the historical consciousness of the American public, such that even the brightest and best educated of middle class youth are intellectually crippled by subjectivism and racialism.

On Wednesday, outside Michigan’s School of Music, Theatre and Dance, a group of students who had a passing familiarity with the Sheng case nonetheless spoke summarily on the issue and in the language of racialism in which they have been drilled. Sheng was declared “problematic.” Neither his nor Olivier’s intentions were to be taken into consideration because, they agreed, it was a case of “intent versus impact.” One of the students said on three occasions that “a school with the power and money of the University of Michigan had to demonstrate the highest standards and act quickly.” All agreed that a white actor could never portray a black person (though mention of the play *Hamilton*, in which a black performer plays the white founder, did bring out ideas of a general humanness to which we all have access). What, then, is acting? What is art? And what is left of these human achievements once we agree that one “kind” of person can never understand—or attempt to understand—another kind? That we must each stay “in our lane”? That one person is wholly alien from every other, and that each has their own “truth”? One recalls Lear’s fool: “So, out went the candle, and we were left darkling.”

Finally, one student spoke of the “harm” suffered by the students in Sheng’s class. Such as, no doubt, the “shock” endured by the student who recognized she was watching a white actor. In 2021, one cannot blame the student for being surprised at such a sight. But “shock”? “Harm”? Such histrionic language pops out of the young as if naturally, but it has been carefully inculcated in them. As Rosalind says of Orlando’s exaggerated professions of love in *As You Like It*,

But these are all lies; men have died
from time to time, and worms have eaten them,
but not for love.

Olivier’s performance may well have made some students

uncomfortable, but the university classroom is the ideal place to discuss and analyze such discomfort. The university, that is, provides a “safe space” *for* ideas, not from them. Banish Shakespeare and Jefferson, and banish all the world.



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