

The Institutionalization of Racism: Contemporary DEI's Effect on Higher Education

By Erec Smith



Impassioned debates about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have erupted across the United States in recent years, taking center stage in Congress, corporate boardrooms, college campuses, and countless other venues.

As a rhetoric professor and former diversity trainer, Cato Institute research fellow Erec Smith has firsthand experience with the ways that contemporary DEI rids individuals of their agency and needlessly divides Americans along arbitrary lines. Smith testified before the House Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development on March 7, arguing that most DEI programs perpetuate the very racism they are nominally fighting against. Below is a lightly edited transcript of Smith's prepared remarks.

DEI is built on a foundation whose very mission is to perpetuate racism.

Contemporary DEI is not an extension of the civil rights movement. It is undergirded by a quasi-Marxist ideology called “critical social justice.” The primary tenet of critical social justice is this: The question is not “Did racism take place?” but rather “How did racism manifest in that situation?” So, according to critical social justice, racism is always already taking place. There is no need to think for oneself; the narrative—one of perpetual oppression—does the thinking for you.

Another underlying concept of critical social justice is prescriptive racism: the prescribing of certain values, attitudes, and behaviors onto someone based on race. To

shirk these values, attitudes, and behaviors is to be inauthentic, to not be a true member of a particular racial group.

Questioning of this ideology is considered proof of your racism.

I have many stories to tell, but I will share one that illustrates these concepts and the general absurdity of critical social justice.

A prominent figure in my field, which is rhetoric and composition, wrote a mass email requesting that people boycott an academic organization because he and others experienced racism during a committee meeting.

However, neither he nor anyone else would explain what happened.

I wasn't going to boycott an influential academic organization based on incomplete information, so I asked a simple question: What happened? For this I was vilified by colleagues of all colors and accused of perpetuating white supremacy. Merely asking the question—"What happened?"—was considered a form of racism. With critical social justice, an accusation of racism cannot be questioned; remember, the question is not "Did racism take place?" but rather "How did racism manifest in that situation?"

Another story involves two professors who always allow their black students to write in black vernacular (or African American Vernacular English, aka Ebonics). However, the students' refusal to do so because they were there to learn standardized English was seen by these professors as a form of self-hatred and internalized racism.

One rhetoric professor (and a self-proclaimed Marxist) went as far as to say these students were being "selfish" and "immature" for wanting to write in

standardized English because that would just perpetuate a status quo of whiteness. As black students who wanted to write in standard English, they shirked the attitudes and values those professors prescribed to them as black students. Their desire to write in standard English was treated like a kind of pathology.

Whenever I hear stories like this, I always say the same thing to myself: Thank God these weren't my professors when I was in college. I would have been steeped in negative emotionality and learned helplessness. If I'd had hopes and dreams, I would not have had the courage to chase them.

I know some people out there are trying to do DEI in a way that does not assume racism at all times, does not prescribe behavior based on race, and does not shirk critical thinking to abide by a narrative. But those doing DEI undergirded by critical social justice—and there are many—are not fighting racism. They are perpetuating racism.

I don't know if you've all noticed yet, but I'm black, and I'm against DEI. Why? Because I really like being black. And this ideology is infantilizing, it is anti-intellectual, and since I am a mature intellectual person, it doesn't align with me. I am too good for contemporary DEI, and so are many others. ✦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erec Smith is a research fellow at the Cato Institute, an associate professor of rhetoric at York College of Pennsylvania, and the cofounder of Free Black Thought, a nonprofit dedicated to highlighting viewpoint diversity within black communities. His primary work focuses on the rhetorics of anti-racist activism, theory, and pedagogy, as well as the role of rhetoric in a free, pluralistic, and civil society.