

**KILLING THE MESSENGER:
A COMMENT ON REACTIONS TO ROTHMAN, LIPSET, AND
NEVITTE'S STUDY**

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We hear regularly about the ancient kingdom where couriers bearing bad news were put to death. No one has ever identified this kingdom—or any even remotely like it—but bad news is never popular. The legend deserves to be true. My interpretation of the reaction to Professors Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte (2003) is that they, like several others in recent years, are guilty of bearing bad news to an institution that is not prepared to listen to it. The institution is academia, and their message is a challenge to one of its most sacred beliefs. In the USA, the belief now goes by the name of diversity or inclusiveness. Earlier it was affirmative action; the unvarnished term 'reverse discrimination' is used in some other countries, but was never popular in the USA. The University of Michigan would never acknowledge that it is trying to achieve diversity by practicing reverse discrimination. No one can be against diversity, and it's hard to argue in favor of discrimination, even if done in reverse and for good reasons.

The core argument, which is close to a sacred text on most campuses, goes something like this. We are all born innocent and good—and equal—and man-made institutions corrupt us. The right-wing would argue that government restraints on personal and economic freedom are at fault. The left-wing argument, which clearly dominates academia in the West, is that certain groups—white, male, Western capitalists—construct institutions to maintain their privilege and dominance while marginalizing and exploiting everyone else. Reverse discrimination (or diversity) is now the preferred mechanism for returning us to our natural state. Victimhood-centered academic disciplines such as most ethnic and women's studies are devoted to reinforcing this belief and applying it to social and political reform. Just about every social science textbook, journal article, and conference paper has some reference to the 'social construction' of just about everything. Race, gender, social, class, and even culture get the most attention. Since social differences are the result of social construction, any group difference is *prima facie* evidence of discrimination. In the American tradition of pragmatism, research is mobilized to explain real-world problems and then to redress them. Hence, diversity as an academic theory and a social policy.

The weakness of this argument is that it is absurd on its face and applied selectively, almost always to advance political objectives. Take sports, where innate skill usually triumphs. No natural differences between men and women or among white, black, and Asians? Social construction as the explanation for the dominance of blacks in most sports and the near-absence of Asians in all but a handful of sports? Or the failure, so far, of women to compete successfully against men? In practice, the argument is that there are no natural differences in gender, race, or culture except where it is useful to argue in favor of them. Underrepresentation of women in graduate business programs and some natural sciences is cited as evidence of the need for continued special advantage in all fields even though women are in parity in most professional programs and now represent a substantial majority of undergraduates across all universities and fields. So far, no one has called for the extension of diversity programs to increase the number of whites and Asians in college or professional sports or demanded inclusiveness of women on the football field. Federal law, of course, assumes that overall disparities in the numbers of men and women participating in college sports must be eliminated, whatever the cause. The federal purse is used to ensure compliance.

In fact, every society is lumpy rather than homogeneous in the distribution of various demographic groups on any measure, and an ideology that selectively invokes disparities in outcome as proof of the failure of social institutions needs more than words to be taken seriously. The University of Michigan's novel argument before the Supreme Court was that its goal of removing the lumps from its graduate and professional student bodies was good in itself—not the result of prior discrimination—and that just about everyone agreed. Rothman *et al.* (2003) have arrived with bad news.

They are not alone, of course. In 1994, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray set off a firestorm with the publication of *The Bell Curve*. I read the book as sober social science that explored implications of racial group differences of what they called 'cognitive ability', better known as IQ. It relied heavily on a massive government-sponsored panel that followed several thousand high school students starting in 1979. The book is excruciatingly exhaustive in details of data and analysis.

Murray (his co-author died before the firestorm) soon found that he was effectively banned from many campuses and shouted down on others and gave up trying to defend his work in public. The book generated an unprecedented volume of criticism, including several books in rebuttal. I made a point of following the debate less for the political arguments than in anticipation of re-analysis of their data or introduction of other empirical evidence. There was none. Even in—or especially—in the contemporary academy, you fight empirical evidence with words, strong, emotional words, not with data. And questions challenging social construction are not admitted to debate.

A Danish statistician, Bjorn Lomborg, encountered a similar response after he published a massive, data-heavy book questioning the gloomy assessments of

global environmentalists (2001). And it also set off a firestorm among academics and the politically committed. The Danish Committees on Scientific Dishonesty concluded that ‘publication of the work under consideration is deemed to fall within the concept of scientific dishonesty’. It did not offer a single instance of inaccuracy or distortion. The *Economist*, which had published an overview of his findings as an invited commentary, called the ruling ‘incompetent and shameful’.

Closer to home was a 2001 book, *Coloring the News*, by William McGowan. The subtitle gives away the problem: ‘How Crusading for Diversity Has Corrupted American Journalism’. The book was given an award for media criticism by the National Press Club in Washington, which was then attacked by the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) and National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ). In 2002, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), at the request of its Commission on the Status of Minorities (CSM), approved a resolution asking the press club to rescind the award, noting that ‘various CSM members have read the book and agree with the NAHJ and NABJ condemnation based on the fact that McGowan’s work represents fiction and specious arguments rather than fact’. Evidence? None was included in the resolution, of course, although we are reassured to learn that some AEJMC members had at least read the book. The incident is important because the national Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC) includes a ‘commitment to diversity and inclusiveness’ among its criteria for accreditation.

Democracies in general and universities in particular promise vigorous debate and a clash of ideas as the only sure way to discover truth. Most of us really do believe Milton’s assertion about truth emerging from a free and open encounter with falsehood, but American universities are not a good place to find either debate or a clash of ideas. Diversity rarely extends to ideas that challenge the canon of beliefs. Professors Rothman, Lipset, and Nevitte have found, as did Herrnstein and Murray, Lomborg, and McGowan, that messengers with bad news are still met with hostility. At least in the twenty-first century, they are not put to death. But then, they probably never were.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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