

What Happens Next – July 25, 2021

Critical Race Theory, Golf Strategy, and Enforcing Non-Compete Agreements

Robert Pondiscio QA

Larry Bernstein:

Robert, thank you. I want to start with some basic questions. What is critical race theory and why do you find it objectionable?

Robert Pondiscio:

Well, I'm not sure that I would characterize that I find it objectionable. I think it is a theory, it is a lens through which to view history and culture, and I wouldn't argue that it deserves a place of privilege or I wouldn't argue that it deserves to be banned. I mean, it is one lens among many that an educated person should have to look at history and culture through.

Larry Bernstein:

Can you give me an example of its application?

Robert Pondiscio:

I'm a curriculum guy, so I'll focus on curriculum applications. If you have the idea ... and this has been one of those ideas that's been at loose in American education for decades now ... that children should be able to ... or that the curriculum should be dominated as it were by knowledge and culture and literature and art, et cetera, that is relevant to that child's culture ... in other words, what we call culturally relevant pedagogy, well then that is by definition limiting.

Before the broadcast, we were talking about E.D. Hirsch Jr., who was kind of my guiding light. His insight has been that look what kids learn has to reflect the same basic broad background knowledge that literate Americans have and assume that you have too. So Hirsch's work has been kind of misinterpreted over the years as trying to "impose a cannon" when it's really not. It's a curatorial effort. His insight is that language proficiency works when every American, regardless of their background, shares the same basic knowledge allusions, cultural references, as it were, as every other American.

So one unassailable insight that really can't be gainsaid, but it requires that public education really attend to that and ensure that every kid, regardless of their background or economic status, ends their K12 education with the same array of mental furniture as more privileged American kids.

Larry Bernstein:

Last week we had Angus Fletcher from Ohio State, and he recommended a different approach. What he wanted was that each child could bring in their own book to English and read whatever they wanted, and then use that as an opportunity to have a broader discussion about literature. And then the homework assignments, instead of being an analysis of literature, would allow students a chance to do their own creative work to match the storyline as the book

that they were reading. How do you think about the relevance of having a specific canon E.D. Hirsch wants or allowing either individual teachers or individual students to design their own curriculums?

Robert Pondiscio:

I'm going to push back on the idea that what Hirsch advocates for is imposing a canon. It's really not. I think that to really understand where he's coming from and where I'm coming from, you have to understand the fundamental misnomer that it sounds like your previous guest also was laboring under. We tend to think of reading as a skill, reading comprehension as a skill, in other words, like riding a bike or throwing a ball, but once you've learned how to ride a bike, you can ride any bike. And we think of language the same way. Once you learn how to read, well, then you can read anything, a novel, a sports page, et cetera.

It really doesn't work that way. There's 26 letters of the alphabet and the words that that form them, but language is really context-specific. I mean, a simple example, think of the word "shot." It means something very different on a basketball court, in a bar, or in a doctor's office. You have to understand the context to understand which version of the word shot the writer or speaker is talking about.

So at a large level, language really is ... the 26 letters in the words are the tip of the iceberg and all the context is the stuff below the waterline. So a better example, a cultural example, might be if somebody refers to an Achilles' heel or a Pandora's box or an Ahab or a white whale. If you understand Greek mythology, if you understand Moby Dick, those references are not lost upon you. If you don't understand those things, then it goes over your head.

I often describe text as like a child's game of Jenga, where every block is a bit of vocabulary or background knowledge. If you've play that game with your kids or grandkids, you can pull out a few blocks and it's fine. At one point you pull out one block too many, and the entire thing collapses. So that's kind of a useful metaphor for how language works.

The idea that that every kid can choose their own adventure, so to speak, and read what they want is predicated on this assumption that reading is a skill, that is not context dependent. But it really is context-dependent. It's one of the most difficult things I find for educated people to wrap their head around because we are all language-rich, we are all knowledge-rich, so it feels to us like a skill, because we have the benefit of so much of that mental furniture.

But I taught for years fifth graders in a low-income, low-performing school in the south Bronx, which is why I became a Hirsch-ian, because he describes like nobody else had exactly what I saw in my classroom every day, kids who could "read," they could decode, but they struggled with comprehension. And we were spending all of our time trying to teach reading as a skill, try to teach it as a cultural construct, in other words, ensuring that all of the things that the kids were reading and writing about reflected their interests and experience, and it was like going to the gym and doing nothing but working out your arms. You would think ... you don't look like Popeye when that happens. It just has no good effect.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned the Disrupt Texts movement. Specifically in your article, you referenced ... it's Heather Levine is the individual who was successful in not teaching the Odyssey and removing it from her classroom despite that fact that it was in the curriculum. Who represents this Disrupt Texts movement? What are they trying to achieve? Are they successful? Should we care?

Robert Pondiscio:

It's hard to say, but what we should care about ... in other words, if it let's say you are concerned with critical race theory. Well, let's say you were concerned with racial essentialism and children being taught that there are immutable characteristics to being white or black, et cetera, which is a gross oversimplification, but a useful one of what people object to about this critical lens. I mean, kids being sorted into affinity groups, for example, by race in classrooms.

Well, a lot of teachers think that they have not just the right, but the duty to ensure that everything that kids read reflects their own experience and interest. So, this Disrupt Texts movement, and I'm not a spokesman for it, obviously, takes this idea to its logical extension and wants to realign the curriculum to the interests and culture of kids of color, and perhaps to "decolonize the cannon at large."

Well, there's nothing wrong with that impulse, but the point is that that's something that teachers assume they have the right and authority to do, but they really don't. And this is neither a criticism or a complaint. If it's the culture of teaching, and I was taught this myself at ed school 20 years ago. When I was taught to try to come up with readings to engage my students, it was exactly the same impulse. It was a surprise to me some years later to find out that that decades of case law say something very, very different.

Now, to be clear, I'm not sure a lot of school boards want this authority because as a practical matter, it wouldn't be possible for a school board to review every single lesson plan and be aware of every single thing that happens in the classroom every single day. But to answer a question you're not asking, Larry, while I have some serious misgivings about the bills to "ban critical race theory," I can see some good coming from this.

In other words, where some critics have said, "Well, this is going to have a chilling effect on teacher speech and on curriculum," if this says to teachers across the country, "Oh, this is a subject, race, that I should tread carefully on. Before I teach this unit on the 1619 Project, maybe I should check with somebody. Maybe I should check with my assistant principal or the school board or whatnot." Well, that will be a good thing. In other words, teachers should be aware of where the landmines exist, and when they're teaching material that some folks in the community might have an opinion about.

I mean, at the end of the day, we have 13,000 school districts in this country. That's the system we have, and it's not going to change anytime soon or ever. We really do run on local control, and teachers at some level have drifted far from this idea that the community has a say in this. So we're seeing these ... every day on Twitter, you see another video from a school board of parents complaining about this or that that's happening in your schools. Well like it or not, that's the system we have and that's the system we're going to have.

Larry Bernstein:

In your talk, you mentioned sort of the abandonment of textbooks as the primary teaching vehicle in the classroom, and that teachers were grabbing lesson plans online. It just seems like almost 20 years ago, there was an enormous fight for common core, where we were going to have consistent textbooks across the nation. How did we abandon the textbook in favor of ad hoc or arbitrary lesson plans as the means for educating our young?

Robert Pondiscio:

Yeah, those are two different phenomenon. I mean, textbooks have been kind of battled over for years. Common core is a different kettle of fish. I'm intimately involved or was intimately involved in the argument for a common core. But the key thing to understand there is that common core is not a curriculum. Common core is standards.

The analogy I always use in defending, frankly, common core, the battle that I more or less lost, was look, if you decide to build a tool shed or a skyscraper, you have to build it to code. So the standards, common core in this case, don't tell you what to teach, but once you decide what it is, what texts, what books, et cetera, you're going to teach, you have to teach them to standard. In other words, you have to build it to code.

So people were under the great misimpression that common core was going to homogenize the curriculum and dictate what kids read all day, that every single kid would be reading the same thing in unison with every other kid all the way across the country. Well, that's just not so. That's what curriculum could do if we had a national curriculum, which we can't. I mean, the Constitution forbids it. But standards are just not the same thing as curriculum.

We had Paul Rossi on our show a few months ago. Paul was the Grace Church math teacher who opposed teaching sixth graders that they're oppressors. To what extent has this sort of idea of white children as oppressors taken hold in the classroom, as something to be taught either in assemblies or in the classroom generally?

Well, this is the unknown and unknowable that I referred to because you essentially have 3.7 million teachers who ... and again, I don't want to suggest that this is some kind of subversive plot, but the culture of education, for reasons both good and ill, encourages teachers to "make it their own." So you really have no idea. When the 1619 Project is being taught, well, is the teacher also assigning, say, a John McWhorter essay? You really don't know the professional development that teachers have been exposed to. You don't know the teacher's conversational style. I mean, every kid in America is kind of hardwired to listen for cues and more or less either knowingly or unconsciously reflect back the teacher's views to him or her.

So it's almost impossible to say to what degree this is aberration or to what degree this is, again, the water in which people are swimming on. I mean, Paul Rossi has been bravely talking about this. There's a journalist at the Manhattan Institute named Chris Rufo who has made a career out of surfacing incidents like this. And the one thing you can say with confidence is that a depressing number of them have come to life. So whether it's every classroom or just a few, it seems that the Chris Rufos of the world are not suffering from any shortage of material.

Michael Wexler:

Hey Robert, this is Michael. A question for you. We're in a period of change. We're in a period of change where you have folks who want to rip down statutes.

We have folks who want to get rid of symbols of what some perceive as racism, others perceive it in different ways. Where does critical race theory fit in with folks who would say rip down a statute, or don't teach about who that leader or general or whoever it was in the past, but where does that fit in? Because I'm not sure which side critical race theory comes down on when it comes to this sort of revision or denial of history that some folks would label it.

Robert Pondiscio:

That's a good question. I think as a practical matter it's useful to think of critical race theory as an educational, it's interest in education is what we're debating, but it's not limited to education. In other words, if your view of American society and culture, is that any time that you have a disparate outcome that is evidence of de facto racism, well, then there's really no end to it. In other words, this will not stop at the classroom. This will extend to crime and punishment, to public monuments, to hiring and firing, et cetera. The theory, and again, I'm probably not the best spokesperson for it, but the broad theory is that any disparate outcome is evidence of systemic racism. So, there's no end to venues in which you can perceive it.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to ask you a question about regional differences. Are we seeing radically different behavior in red states versus blue states, urban versus rural communities versus suburban communities, public schools versus private schools? Is it a huge variation across the sectors?

Robert Pondiscio:

Yeah, I think so. I mean, the anti CRT bills that we're seeing are almost exclusively coming out of red states. In blue states, you have kind of a strange phenomenon since you alluded to Paul Rossi, he teaches or taught at the Grace Church School in Manhattan, which I think the tuition there is on the order of \$55,000 a year. Now, the irony of course is, so therefore by definition, you've got some of the most privileged American's sending their sons and daughters to schools like that, to Manhattan exclusive private schools. It turns out that they are some of the most "woke schools" in the country. And Bari Weiss has done a good job of chronicling just the seething discontent of parents in that school who are complaining about the type of thing that Paul Rossi blew the whistle on, that their children are being separated into racial affinity groups, that their curriculum is entirely racially focused.

Now, the theory of school choice would say, and this is kind of an interesting sub-challenge here, but the school choice theory would say, well, when parents are upset with their schools, well they'll leave, and in the case of affluent Manhattan parents, you're talking about folks who literally have any option open to them. They can go to a different private school, they can move to the suburbs, they can hire tutors to homeschool, et cetera. So why is it that those parents who have the most choice are the least likely to change schools? The going theory is that they still perceive those schools as kind of the brass lane to get their children into the Harvard's and

Yale's of the world. But there's an interesting challenge right now in all this to, and I'm a choice guy, don't get me wrong, but there's an interesting challenge to those who say that choice is the answer here to critical race theory. Well, it doesn't seem to be working out that way among parents who have the most choice.

Larry Bernstein:

As a parent of, my kids are now in college, but I sent two children to private schools in New York. There was very little choice and you just couldn't move, it was extremely difficult to move from one school to another, and it wasn't obvious that the teachings would be different in the next school versus another one. I think that the idea that parents can just up and leave is very challenging. The one example we have is the Brearley parent who wrote a very nasty letter to the board saying that this has gone too far. But he'll be forever known as the Brearley parent throughout the community. You're sort of limited unless you want to create a public stink.

Robert Pondiscio:

That's right, and look, I was a Brearley parent as well. My daughter went to Brearley from K to eight. So there was a little bit of this going on 10 years ago, but now again, my point about this, gradually and then suddenly, what has been the progressive ethos that has been at loose in K-12 education for quite some time, and particularly among elite private schools, is now suddenly boiling very, very hot and on the front burner. So the parents liked it, the so-called Brearley dad that you just referred to, that's a really good example. They are few and far between however, I'm guessing that for every private school parent who was willing to be public about their discontent, there's probably a box car number larger who are talking about it privately. The wonder is why they continue to keep their kids in schools that subvert their interests and values.

Larry Bernstein:

It's funny, you talk about gradually then suddenly, but you seem to describe a system that's just evolving and moving in a particular direction, and it doesn't seem to be suddenly, it seems to be consistently, but do you see pushback coming? Do you see either from the teachers, the students or the parents, or the school board or the community that this won't last?

Robert Pondiscio:

Oh, you've seen the pushback already. I mean, you've seen it, I alluded to it in my talk every morning, maybe it's summer now, so it's died down but until recently, for several months, you'd see these videos of angry parents at school board saying, what exactly are you doing here? So I think this is just a theory, I don't have data for this, but my surmise is that this is an effect of COVID. In other words, that black box of the classroom where you don't know precisely the nature of classroom interactions and discussions, well, suddenly that's been coming into our living rooms for the last year, thanks COVID.

Robert Pondiscio:

The cameras in the classroom with all the kids on Zoom, bring that classroom discussion into your home, quite literally. But in many cases, the discontent that parents were expressing as a direct result of, and having being able to peer into that black box. So, I mean, now that this issue has become in sharp relief for many parents, I don't think it's going to go away anytime soon. But I do wonder, obviously it was triggered by George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, but I think the pushback to that has been driven in large measure because of COVID and Zoom schools.

Larry Bernstein:

I ask each of our speakers to end at a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Robert Pondiscio:

I don't think that these kinds of controversies are necessarily bad. In other words, I'm a local control guy as much as I'm a choice guy. Choice means that people will make choices that you don't necessarily like, but you have to support because you support the idea of choice. So, when my choice friends pushed back on me and say, hey, Pondiscio how come you don't love freedom? Why would you think that that choice is the answer to critical race theory? And they say, hey, how come you don't want democracy? Why do you view angry parents at school board as a problem to be avoided? Self-government is hard, and this is what it looks like, is when folks in a school board or folks in a district go to their school board and say, wait a minute, what do we believe in this district?

Do we think the country started in 1619 or 1776? It's unfortunate those debates become shouting matches, but they're important debate. And for good or for ill, and I think obviously for good, we were intended to have these debates. We were intended to hash these things out in public forum. And I don't think that that's something to be avoided. I think that's something to be embraced. Now, are we well equipped to have these discussions at the moment? I'd be a little bit more sanguine if I felt like we had better grasp of our own kind of civic traditions and history, but there's nothing inherently wrong with this conflict as long as we're willing to accept the judgment of our fellow citizens.

Larry Bernstein:

Robert, thank you.