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Paula Rothenberg
William Paterson University of New Jersey

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The Hand that Pushes the Rock

Cover Page Footnote

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The Hand that Pushes the Rock*

by
Paula Rothenberg

Only a very few schools in this country actually require all students to spend an entire semester thinking about issues of race and gender. Many more have found a way to incorporate these issues in required courses in “social problems” where racism and sexism get their two weeks along with environmental pollution and other current issues. I think this approach is dead wrong. Racism and sexism are not “problems” or “topics.” They are ways of defining reality and living our lives that most of us have learned along with learning how to tie our shoes and how to drink from a cup. You cannot begin to get students to understand their force and their function by spending a few classes looking at sexist advertising or a sampling of statistics that document discrimination in employment. It has taken our students and ourselves a lifetime to learn our racism and sexism and it will take considerably more than even a one semester course to get us to begin the lifelong process of unlearning them.

Talking to faculty and students about race and gender courses at a variety of institutions (including my own, William Paterson College in New Jersey) suggests that there are two distinct approaches to teaching this content. The “soft” approach spends a lot of time looking at things like race and gender stereotyping in the media and racism in sports. These are things that students find interesting and they should be included in the curriculum; but unless the course goes beyond these manifestations of racism and sexism to an analysis of the comprehensive and structural nature of these forms of oppression, we leave our students with a superficial understanding of the depth, breadth and complexity of both phenomena. Too many students leave courses in women’s studies or race and gender studies with the mistaken belief that changing sexist advertising is the solution to all of society’s ills.

How does the “hard” approach differ from what I’ve described? What kind of insights should we help our students develop as we integrate issues of race and gender into the curriculum? What do they need to understand in order to make sense out of the world they live in and begin the process of changing it? While everybody has their own approach to teaching this material, I think there are some fundamental insights that students should take away from any course that focuses on racism and sexism.



1 Racism and sexism in the United States are different from discrimination against any or all ethnic groups. Neither the concept of prejudice nor the concept of discrimination is adequate to encompass the comprehensive nature of racism and sexism, which can only be understood in terms of a history that seems to extend endlessly backwards in time and a present that pervades every single institution and aspect of culture and human relations. Racism and sexism are comprehensive systems of oppression that cannot be reduced to mere prejudice or discrimination.

While it may be useful to draw parallels with ethnic prejudice and anti-Semitism where they are appropriate, it is important that students understand the uniqueness of both racism and sexism. Care must be taken to see that using such parallels doesn’t allow students either to dismiss or underestimate the virulence of racism and sexism. There is a great temptation on their part to do so. “My grandparents came to this country speaking Italian,” announces one student, “but there were no signs in Italian in the Post Office for them. Why should we have signs in Spanish now?” Focusing on the unique nature and history of racism (and sexism) is crucial in order to show students that both involve more than mere prejudice.

2 Whether an action, attitude, belief, custom, social practice or policy is actually racist or sexist has little if anything to do with the intentions of those who carry out those actions, hold those beliefs, practice those customs or formulate that policy. Racism and sexism have to do with the consequences that flow from any of the above, not what motivates them.

To make this point, I have students read Marilyn Frye’s wonderful discussion of the “male door-

opening ritual” from *The Politics of Reality*. Frye argues that although individual men may hold the door open for women to be polite or respectful, the ritual itself implies that women are weak and dependent and makes a mockery of the notion of service. I introduce this reading by acknowledging that most of my students will find Frye’s position off the wall. But I press them to follow her meticulous analysis through to the point we both want to make — that, in Frye’s words, “one cannot see the meanings of these rituals if one’s focus is riveted upon the individual event in all its particularity, including the particularity of the individual’s present conscious intentions and motives and the individual woman’s conscious perception of the event in the moment.” The point that racism and sexism can be unconscious and unintentional and thus are often perpetuated by well-meaning individuals is important for students to understand early in the course because it allows them to be self-critical without having to self-define as racist or sexist, and forces them to distinguish individual intentions from social meanings which play a key role in constructing gender and race.

Students’ journal entries return to this example throughout the semester, and by the end many students cite it as a case of a feminist point of view they first rejected out of hand but finally came to accept. Once students begin to question what was previously and indisputably part of the given, they are on their way to a feminist version of Descartes’s doubt.

3 Race and gender are social and political categories, not biological givens. What appear to be fundamental and unbridgeable differences rooted or grounded in “nature” are really artificial, constructed to create, justify and perpetuate the wealth and privilege of those in power. This takes us beyond discussions of sex-role socialization to an analysis of the social construction of gender and race.

Richard Wright has written about his “first lesson in how to live as Negro.” When I teach “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” I always ask my students why he needed lessons in living as Negro if he was born black? Puzzling over this question leads to a discussion of the social construction of race and is furthered by the second question I always ask, which is “Who taught him?” Students come to see quickly that the lessons were administered by white people who had the power to define what it meant to be “Negro.” Moving on to talk about the social construction of gender follows naturally.

4 Attacks on lesbian women and gay men are part of the social construction of gender which uses homophobia to coerce conformity with rigid gender role caricatures. Homophobic portrayals of gay and lesbian sexuality and lifestyle as “unnatural” are attacks on the freedom of each of us to define our-

selves and to form relationships that recognize that multiplicity of human possibilities. Showing a film like *The Times of Harvey Milk* is particularly effective in a course such as this, because it helps make all the connections between racism, sexism, class oppression and homophobia. I usually show it after teaching a section on the legal status of women and people of color in the US; the film reinforces its conclusion that justice is neither equal nor blind. My students are genuinely shaken and moved by watching it, no small achievement in these days of rampant and virulent homophobia.

5 There is a vast difference between violence carried out by the dominant group in a society which perpetuates racial or sexual oppression and the violence carried out by subordinate groups in response to it. When white youths on Staten Island or in Howard Beach or at the University of Massachusetts attack black men because they are black, that’s racism. When black youths attack white men because they are white that is a reaction to or consequence of white racism. It is part of the human cost of living in a racist society. Both acts of violence based on race are deplorable, but only one constitutes racism; the other is a consequence of it.

This is probably one of the most hotly debated claims I ever make to my students and we argue it throughout the semester. It’s a claim that helps concretize point #1 above, but it only begins to make sense to many students after they have studied the history of race relations in this country. For example, reading the legal documents that reflect this history allows them to see cases of whites attacking blacks who enter their community within the context of the Black Codes and earlier laws which expressly prohibited blacks from walking in white areas and gave any and all white men the power to punish those blacks who did.

The fact that we as individuals are living out our lives within a context established by the history of race relations in this country alters the meaning of daily experience. Last semester this point was brought home for my class when a previously quiet and often sullen white male student talked about an experience he had had the week before. He had gone to pick up a pizza and accidentally brushed up against a young black man waiting next to him. The white student had apologized immediately but the black man wasn’t satisfied; he kept muttering under his breath and shooting hostile glances in the white student’s direction. Initially, this fanned some angry racist feelings in both the white student who told the story and his classmates who listened. But the discussion that followed was an eye-opener. With some help, the white student began to look at the context in which the incident occurred: the black man was the only person of color in the pizzeria, which was situated in an Italian neighborhood, while he him-

self had been going there for years and knew everyone. We talked about how different the place must have felt to each of them. Then the student was encouraged to speculate about what kinds of experiences the black man might have had earlier in the day or in the week or in his life that would set him up to take offence at what others might shrug off. He concluded, and helped the class to realize, that the incident in the pizzeria had been mediated by a history of white/black racism that extended well beyond the two individuals involved.

6 Failing to notice a person's race or gender is not an example of "not being sexist or racist." Where vast differences in wealth, power, opportunity and chances of survival separate the races and sexes, failure to acknowledge those differences means that we will never do anything to abolish them. A color-blind social policy in a racist society, a gender-neutral social policy in a sexist society, simply guarantee that both racism and sexism will be strengthened and perpetuated instead of eradicated.

Because of the New Right's attempt to make race invisible, this is a particularly important and difficult point to make. Students come into the course thinking that noticing someone's race is racist. They find it difficult to understand that treating everyone "equally" when their circumstances are different perpetuates inequality. Last semester this point was dramatically driven home because one of my students was dependent on a wheelchair to get around. One day the elevator was broken and Tom couldn't get to our third-floor classroom. Finally I found another empty room which was wheelchair accessible. When our class got under way there, about twenty minutes late, I asked the students whether it had been fair to make thirty of them move to another building and miss class time just so Tom could attend. They all thought it was fine, as I expected — and I could then point out that instead of pretending that everyone was the same and treating everyone equally, we had first acknowledged Tom's particular situation and then accommodated to his special needs. Throughout the semester I was able to use this case to draw parallels with the need to recognize race and gender difference and where appropriate formulate social policy based upon it.

7 The economic situation of most poor people, working people, white women and men of color has not improved substantially over the past twenty or thirty years. Students, with good reason, are suspicious of statistics. They know that they can be manipulated in a variety of ways. The most effective way to paint an accurate picture of the way race, class and gender impact on people's living standards and life possibilities is to present statistics that show patterns or trends over periods of time.

For example, compare statistics which show the

concentration of wealth in the United States today alongside those figures for twenty years ago. Apart from showing a distribution of wealth so unequal as to shock most students, the comparison indicates that the concentration has significantly increased over the past twenty years — which contrasts sharply with students' informal assumptions about what government policy has done during this period and whose interests it has served.

Make a point, when presenting wage and salary figures by gender and race, of correlating earnings with education. Most students believe that education and hard work create opportunity for all. They need to reflect on statistics that show that neither a college degree nor a Harvard Ph.D compensate for being a white woman, or a woman or man of color. Above all, send them to the library to bring back statistics to share with each other. Let them help paint the picture of the racism and sexism and class privilege that jumps out from figures on health care, infant mortality, job segregation, poverty rates, literacy, rape, educational achievement, crime and punishment and a host of other areas.

8 Racism and sexism and class privilege in the United States are not unfortunate, accidental, unintended consequences of a country genuinely committed to "liberty and justice for all." They were woven into the fabric of the nation's laws and customs and policies from the very first days of the Republic. Few students have had any real exposure to a course in US history that includes the truth about relations between white Europeans and Native Americans, Afro-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanics and other people of color, nor has the history they studied included the truth about relations between men and women or the unique burdens and role of women of color. Only exposure to this history can help students understand how racism differs from ethnic prejudice and grasp the comprehensive and systematic nature of racism and sexism in the United States.

9 Anti-communism plays a critical role in maintaining race, class and gender privilege in this society by preventing most of us from seriously entertaining questions about economic and social injustice in the United States. The anti-communism our students have internalized takes the form of labeling any discussion of economic inequality and injustice as "Un-American." "Would you rather live in 'Russia'?" they ask. For this reason it's very important to help them understand how far they have been conditioned to avoid dealing with evidence of inequality in this country by internalizing a knee-jerk anti-communism. They need to understand the ways in which racism and sexism preserve class privilege by placing it beyond critical examination.

10 Yes, it is possible to do something about the racism, sexism and class oppression we spend all semester studying. They are not part of “human nature,” they are not inevitable, they are not immutable. Students must be exposed to concrete examples, past and present, of people organizing themselves to work for social change. To illustrate the point, I ask them for examples of things that have been accomplished on our own campus as a result of grassroots organizing, and tell them about things they now take for granted, which student and faculty collaborative action brought into being. They are fascinated by a detailed account of how the Women’s Collective worked to establish our child care center in the face of enormous initial opposition from the administration; they are amazed to hear how, years ago, students and faculty chained themselves to buildings to pressure the administration to increase minority student presence on campus. After looking at our own campus I talk about local and national organizations and movements for social change and encourage them to explore the work being done by a variety of organizations ranging from the local NOW chapter to the New Jersey Public Interest Research Group to the Rainbow Lobby.

It should be obvious that introducing students to this way of analyzing racism and sexism requires more than integrating a sensitivity to issues of race and gender, or some topics in race and gender, into existing courses. Such broad curriculum transformation is most effective when students already have

the kind of perspective on racism and sexism outlined above. Otherwise, such courses are always in danger, in spite of our good intentions, of encouraging students to mistake symptoms of the problem for the problem itself. A superficial familiarity with race and gender issues and perspective is better than none at all, but it’s no substitute for the kind of comprehensive analysis described above, which takes no less than an entire semester of intense study.

It goes without saying that teaching this material provokes considerable resistance on the part of students. Some teachers I know have spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to make their students comfortable with this course content and even report that they have had some measure of success in doing so. “The class is going just fine,” they tell me. “I’ve stopped making my students feel angry or threatened.” I’m not at all sure that this is laudable. On the contrary, I am convinced that the quantity and quality of the resistance I provoke from my students early in the course is the way to measure my success as a teacher. If things go too well too quickly, if I am not overcome periodically by a sense of despair and futility, if that Sisyphean rock isn’t hard to push or doesn’t keep rolling back down the hill, then maybe I’m leaving out what students need to hear most.

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Paula Rothenberg, Ph.D., is Professor of Philosophy and Women’s Studies with William Paterson College of New Jersey.