The Crime of White Maleness

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In the multicultural arenas of American universities there is much controversy over the meaning and value of the phrase "white male." I recently attended several conferences on gender, race and ethnicity. At the first conference a speaker (who might be described in the vernacular of today's communal politics as a "non-Hispanic white female heterosexual feminist") declined to participate in a round-table discussion with the males in the room on the grounds that her only interest in men was as sexual objects.

At another conference a speaker denounced "West Side Story" because it had been produced by a "successful white male" who, in her view, had no authority to represent the Puerto Rican American experience.

Let's proceed with the discussion of how to create true diversity. Please.

When it was pointed out by a startled and wounded fan that "West Side Story" was a variation on "Romeo and Juliet," a play originally created by a "successful white male" who was neither Italian nor a citizen of Verona, the speaker denounced William Shakespeare as a racist.

Historians have theorised that in the 1890's at Stanford University, amid debate over which authors should be included in the Western civilization curriculum, semantics became an academic subject. The phrase "dead white male," used as an epithet, entailed a freight of obscene implications - racist, sexist, homophobe. According to these linguists, "white male," dead or alive, is now used as an accusation.

While it may be disputed whether it is semantically correct to use "white male" as a slur, the connotation has supporters on both sides of the political spectrum. The left relishes the usage. It thinks that white males have held center stage too long, that it's time for them to be displaced by their "victims." The right knows how easy it is to make free-speech-minded white males feel proud about being on the P.C. enemies list. Given the choice between being silent and being stigmatized, many white males won't keep their mouths shut.

The irony in the academy has been earnest views of the meaning of "white male," although no consensus exists over the meaning and value of the phrase "white male." One view is that "white male" is the name for a recently discovered logical paradox. Here is the puzzle: If you are a white male and you oppose communal separations and distinctions of the multicultural kind, you will be branded assimilationist and racist. Yet if you propose communal separations and distinctions you will be branded racist and assimilationist.

It's probably of little significance that anyone has ever committed "white male," though assimilationist notions have been replaced by pluralism. The doctrine that if you really value differences it is desirable to explore those differences and benefit from them.

Of greater significance is the fact that scholars on the left and right at university agree on a political correctness crucial to pluralism. The quest for variety has given way to the hegemonic vision of single-mindedness. The right knows how guy it is to make free-speech-minded white males feel proud about being on the P.C. enemies list. Given the choice between being silent and being stigmatized, many white males won't keep their mouths shut.

Then perhaps we can proceed with the discussion of how to create true diversity. Please.