

# The Crime of White Maleness

By Richard A. Shweder

**I**N CHILMARK, Mass. 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.

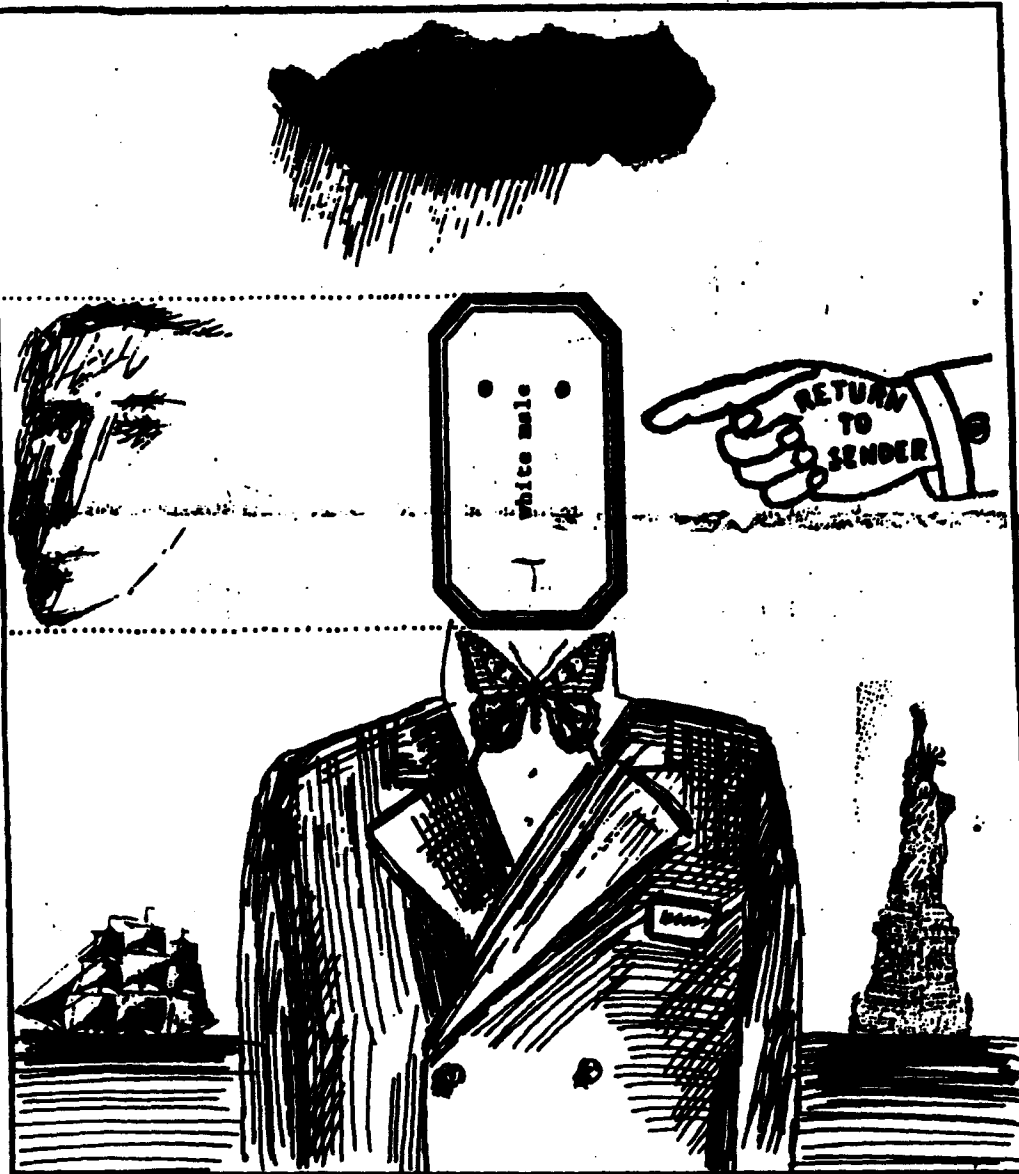
At another conference a speaker denounced "West Side Story" because it had been produced by a "successful white male" who, in her view, had no authority to represent the Puerto Rican American experience.

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.

Historical linguists have theorized that in the 1960's at Stanford University, amid debate over which authors should be included in the Western civilization curriculum, semantics

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ceased to be simply an academic subject. The phrase "dead white male," used as an epithet, exhibited a freight of obscene implications — racist, sexist, homophobic. 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 has use for it as well. Through its crusade against political correctness and the "thought

police," the right would love to turn the epithets "racist" and "sexist" into badges of honor. 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 ironists in the academy have less earnest views of the meaning of "white male," although no conscious satirical opinion has emerged. 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 the communal separations and distinctions of the multicultural agenda you will be branded sexist and racist, yet if you propose communal separations and distinctions you will be branded sexist and racist, too.

It's probably of little significance that some has suggested that "white male" means "a human being who happens to inhabit a body that is white and male." This is because liberalism is dead on campus and has 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 genuine pluralism is under siege from the left and right at our universities. The quest for variety has given way to the hegemonic vision of single-minded interest groups. This will remain so until the rest of us grow weary of the polarizing discourse of political correctness and of the campaign against it.

When boredom sets in someone is bound to point out that the authority of a voice ought to reside in what it says and not in who says it, that to grow is to exceed the limits of parochial experience, that people have written brilliantly about cultures and genders other than their own, and that our humanity is polymorphous and complex.

Then perhaps we can proceed with the more significant and difficult discussion about how to promote diversity, excellence, justice and community in America without turning the university into a tower of Babel, a client state of the Federal juggernaut or a battleground for hostile tribes. If we succeed in improving our culture in that way, it would not only be more fashionable to value the white male, but he might even become a suitable subject for parody and an honorable thing to defend. □

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