

FEATURE

Education and racism: dirt on the ivory tower

by Ira Nayman

Teenagers are taunted with words like "dirty Jew," have pennies thrown at them or find their desks have had swastikas written all over them after their high school class reads Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. A professor at the University of Western Ontario becomes the focus of controversy when he publishes a paper linking intelligence, sexual activity and race.

Clearly, the ivory tower collects its share of dirt.

These were two of the subjects dealt with at Rethinking the Curriculum: Race, Culture and Liberal Education, a con-

ference at York University's Osgoode Hall Law School on April 27. Approximately 250 educators, mostly staff and faculty at York, attended the day long conference according to Shirley Katz, Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts.

"Questions about race... gender... ethnicity command a response that goes well beyond our usual intellectual discourse," said Tom Traves, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, which sponsored the conference. "I come to this conference... from a position of privilege" as a white, middle class male, he said, expressing the hope that the conference would help challenge such privilege.

ter," he said, "if not put into perspective by teachers, can promote an ugly stereotype."

He played a tape, made less than two years ago, on the effect *The Merchant of Venice* had on Jewish high school students. "Kids started calling me a Jewish moneylender," one student said. "Shylock and Jew became the words that substituted for bad words, even swear words," another student remarked.

Farber advocated teaching controversial texts at upper levels. Although some consider this a form of censorship,

Farber argued that the proper maturity level of students is always considered in course

"[Minorities] do not exist until we say what our experience is..."

Sandra Harding

Such a challenge seems necessary because, according to Frances Henry, from the Department of Anthropology, Ontario's ethnic diversity is increasing. In a workshop on "Institutional Barriers," Henry provided the following information, culled from government statistics:

- in 1986, 36% of Ontario residents were of neither British nor French origin;
- close to one half of immigrants to Canada come to Ontario; two thirds of them settle in Toronto;
- currently, about one half of Torontonians were born outside Canada.

Some of the ways these changes affect universities include the fact that:

- in 1983, the percentage of students of Chinese ancestry and origin attending post-secondary education was higher than the national average;
- a 1981 survey showed that visible minorities were more likely to get a post-secondary education than the general population.

According to Henry, such facts made a compelling argument for change. But, the evidence in the workshop on "Bias in Texts" indicated that there has been very little movement so far, and that the problem starts long before university.

Bernie Farber, Director of Research for the Canadian Jewish Congress, told the workshop that texts which could contain racist messages, such as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, should be taught carefully to high school students. "Shylock's charac-

ter, you wouldn't teach advanced physics to a Grade Two class).

Faculties of education had to offer more courses on race relations and Professional Development days had to include on-going race relations education, Farber added. In this way, racism could be combatted at the high school level.

At the university level, biases which "are much more insidious and dangerous" can occur according to Alok Mukherjee, former Race Relations Adviser to the Toronto Board of Education. Ingrained sexist or racist assumptions are hard enough to root out and deal with, he said, but, because textbooks are considered value neutral authorities, students are even less likely to question them.

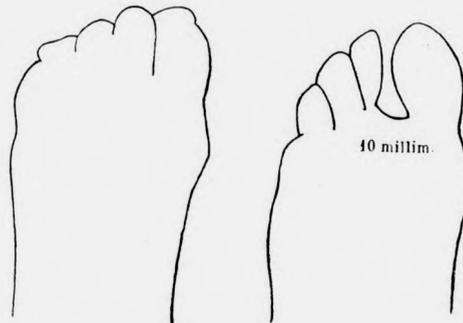
Educators must answer the question, "What's best worth knowing?" Unfortunately, Mukherjee said, the answer was invariably ethnocentric and racist. Others who attended the workshop noted biases in supplied texts which included: favouring technological advanced societies over less advanced ones; sexism; the absence of native perspectives. As well as what they write about us, Mukherjee added, texts tell us what is important by what they omit.

Sandra Harding, author of *The Science Question in Feminism* and Philosophy professor at the University of Delaware, was equally emphatic. "All knowledge is socially oriented," she said. "Ethnocentric learning distorts the lives... of social and ethnic minorities in the west and in the third world, the lives of the poor, of sexual minorities, of women..."



The face of racist teaching: some of the slides accompanying psychology professor David Wisenthal's presentation on "Race, Science and Non-Science." LEFT: "Causes of Decline in Births: Unemployment, Comfort, Misbehavior and Greed; Poverty..." and so on (Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis, by Robert Proctor). Eugenics played a major part in Nazi ideology. ABOVE RIGHT: a "born criminal." (The Mismeasure of Man, by Stephen Jay Gould). Judging people by the size and shape of their heads, as

Phillipe Rushton has to some extent, was considered acceptable science a century ago. BELOW RIGHT: the feet of a prostitute, used to prove that evil can be shown through physical deformity (THE MISMEASURE OF MAN, Stephen Jay Gould). "These observations show admirably that the morphology of the prostitute is more abnormal even than that of a criminal, especially for atavistic anomalies, because the prehensile foot is atavistic."



At the opening plenary, Harding said that the attitude that knowledge was accumulated by a "perfect knower" who could be everywhere and know everything (alternately referred to as "the view from

nowhere" and "the god trip") had to be rejected.

While she did not believe that each individual's experience was the only basis of knowledge, Harding claimed that it did play an important part in education: "We do not

exist until we say what our experience is, and how different it is from what you all (representatives of dominant culture) said it was."

On the practical level of the classroom, Harding advocated the teaching and learning of

mainstream groups alongside minorities. Because knowledge is created actively, it is important for the majority to do more than passively take in minority studies.

Henry described three models for change, which could apply to the education system: assimilationist, ad hoc and systematic.

The assimilationist approach assumes that Canadians are primarily white, European anglophones, and that immigrants have a responsibility to assimilate into the country's monoculture. This theory refuses to recognize social barriers to education, in the belief that knowledge is the same no matter who is being taught. There is no need, therefore, to change the system.

The ad hoc approach recognizes some issues of race, but deals with them by adding to existing structures. These may include occasional translation of materials, token hiring of minorities or the creation of a "Multicultural Office." Henry said that "this day is an enormous step forward for York University," even though it was symptomatic of an ad hoc approach.

The systematic approach involves setting clear and spe-

cific policies; involving legitimate and credible policy makers in them; creating a supportive organizational structure; and, expecting new behaviour from front line staff (in the case of a university, its faculty). Although bureaucratic organizations have many means for rejecting this approach, from denial ("We have no racism here") to confessions of helplessness ("We don't really have any power/money"), Henry made it clear that this was the most effective method of achieving change.

The conference, according to Associate Dean Katz, was intended to start a conversation within the York University community on issues relating to race, sex and other minorities. She expressed the hope that on-going workshops and other follow-ups would raise consciousness of these issues, particularly within faculty.

Associate Dean Katz admitted that there was resistance on the part of some faculty members, that some were apprehensive about change. "I'm aware that you have to be careful..." she said. "You don't want to impose things on people." Otherwise, she thought the conference had been a "great success."

Continued exposure to new ideas, Katz said, was "an essential part of... being an academic."

Teaching teachers

They sit in small groups and answer questions supplied to them by the person at the front of the classroom. Each one wants to get her/his point of view across. They argue. Sometimes what they say is not related to what was asked. Sometimes, it is simply incorrect. You might think they are students. You would be wrong.

They are teachers. Attending a conference for educators can be a strange experience for a student.

Students tend to see professors as figures of authority, accepting what they say as "truth." This was the way most of us were taught in public school and high school, for many, it carries over into university.

Of course, there are professors who know this and use it to establish personal power in their classes. On the other hand, there are professors who actively work against it, exhorting their students to question everything, including themselves. Either way, the power of unquestionable received wisdom is real.

That power is severely diminished when you see teachers in situations where they are the ones learning. The authority figure suddenly becomes human again, exhibiting all the traits students usually associate with themselves.

In a liberal arts institution like York, this can have a lot of positive affects. It makes personal relationships between students and faculty (never easy at a university with over 40,000 students) a little more possible. It encourages students to learn to question received wisdom and develop critical thought processes, one of the major aims of a liberal arts education which is made difficult by the authoritarian style of education at high schools.

It's also a lot of fun to watch. York hosts a number of events over the summer, many of which are specifically meant for educators. Students should be encouraged to attend, not only because they have a valuable perspective on the educational process, but because it may help them learn.

Race and Science

His name was barely mentioned. Yet, the spirit of University of Western Ontario professor Phillippe Rushton permeated the "Race, Science and Non-science" workshop at the Rethinking the Curriculum Conference held at York University's Osgoode Hall Law School on April 27.

Rushton published papers in scientific journals last year claiming that studies of brain capacity and penis size indicated that orientals were genetically more intelligent and less inclined to procreate than whites, who were genetically more intelligent and less inclined to reproduce than blacks. Although most scientists disagreed with his conclusions (and some racist organizations agreed), many academics argued that to interfere with him would be to deny free enquiry at universities.

"Racism in its many forms... is ubiquitous," York University Psychology professor Neil Wiener told the workshop, adding that it was "prominent at universities."

Weiner said that theories such as Rushton's assumed that people could be easily classified on the basis of race, but that that simply was not the case. Recent studies of mitochondrial DNA showed that the species was "highly homogenous," varying by little more than three one thousandths of a percentage point.

In fact, Wiener continued, differences between groups are often smaller than differences within groups. "The concept of race as a biological unit," he concluded, "is insane."

Theories of race differences lead to eugenics movements, which are devoted to improving the human species by controlling hereditary factors in mating. York Psychology professor David Wisenthal said that eugenics movements had been around since the turn of the century.

According to Wisenthal eugenicists made certain assumptions about human beings: intelligence was inherited; low intelligence caused social problems; morons overbred and bright people did not breed enough, leading to a decline in the nation's intelligence; the ultimate result would be an increase in social problems and a declining nation. All of these assumptions, Wisenthal pointed out, could be questioned.

Eugenics theories are dangerous because of the kinds of social policy to which they lead. Wisenthal described the positive eugenics movements, which advocate income bonuses, social benefits and education (like Quebec); and the negative eugenics movements, which advocate sterilization, institutionalization immigration restrictions and extermination (like Nazi Germany).

How do such ideas flourish in academic and scientific circles? Another York Psychology professor, Fred Weizmann, said that there is a standard party line of science being value neutral. "The image of the scientist as a lone individual..." he commented, "is very strong."

However, science is a collective and social endeavour involving a need for, among other things, research money and journal space. Weizmann pointed out. Thus, social factors affect how scientists think, he said, and it was "difficult to transcend... limitations" such as place, race, gender and social class.

"A veritable misinterpretation is necessary to found racist and elitist theories," of science, Weiner stated. Unfortunately, he added, "racists are more real biological entities than races..."



Members of the planning committee for Rethinking the Curriculum: Race, Culture and Liberal Education. TOP ROW: Lily Visano, Sociology; Hinani Banerji, Sociology; Toni Williams, Osgoode Hall Law School; Pat Rodgers, Director, Centre for the

Support of Teaching. BOTTOM ROW: Shirley Katz, Associate Dean of Arts; David Trotman, Director, Race and Ethnic Relations. Also on the committee: Frances Henry, Anthropology