Keywords: hoist, petard

On how Princeton’s crusade against systemic racism has backfired.

Perhaps we ought to have included “chickens” and “roost” among the keywords as well. For many years now, woke administrators, professors, and other activists at all the toniest colleges have been like the parade of flagellants in The Seventh Seal: skirling in public about their sins, above all their institutional or (as we have lately been taught to say) their “systemic” racism. Their cries are accompanied by the demand for alms—$50 million at Yale to support “diversity,” $100 million at Brown for kindred exercises in political penance, and so on.

On September 2, Christopher L. Eisgruber, the president of Princeton University, made a major contribution to this emetic genre. In an open letter to the university “community,” he beat his breast about America’s overdue “profound national reckoning with racism.” He didn’t exclude his own university. Indeed, he beat himself harder as he bemoaned Princeton’s long history of “intentionally and systematically exclu[ding] people of color, women, Jews, and other minorities.” Nor, according to him, has that history ended. “Racist assumptions from the past,” President Eisgruber sobbed, “remain embedded in structures of the University itself.”

His confession did not go unnoticed. On September 16, the Department of Education sent President Eisgruber a letter. The letter minutes an interesting discrepancy. Since Christopher Eisgruber became president of Princeton in 2013, the university has received more than $75 million in taxpayer funds. It has also “repeatedly represented and warranted to the U.S. Department of Education . . . Princeton’s compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” What’s Title VI? Among other things, it’s the law that stipulates that no institution receiving federal funds may discriminate against anyone because of “race, color, or national origin.” But here we have Christopher Eisgruber wailing in a public letter about Princeton’s long history of racist behavior and its current “embedded” racist structures, and then announcing his intention to launch new race-based “diversity” initiatives. Uh oh. “Based on its admitted racism,” the letter proceeds, “the U.S. Department of Education . . . is concerned Princeton’s nondiscrimination and equal opportunity assurances in its Program Participation Agreements from at least 2013 to the present may have been false.” We wonder whether President Eisgruber had gotten outside his morning coffee and kipper before reading this missive. It gets better, or at least more vivid:
The Department is further concerned Princeton perhaps knew, or should have known, these assurances were false at the time they were made. Finally, the Department is further concerned Princeton’s many nondiscrimination and equal opportunity claims to students, parents, and consumers in the market for education certificates may have been false, misleading, and actionable substantial misrepresentations in violation of 20 u.s.c. § 1094(c)(3)(B) and 34 cfr 668.71(c).

“Actionable.” You know that government chaps are serious when they start citing statutes by number, especially when they include those nifty section symbols. And serious it seems to be. “Therefore,” the letter’s prologue ends, “the Department’s Office of Postsecondary Education, in consultation with the Department’s Office of the General Counsel, is opening this investigation.” Neatly put, what?

And somewhat ironical, since, just a few months before, President Eisgruber had joined the sweaty mob baying for the head of Joshua Katz, a professor of classics who’d had the temerity to question the wisdom of a proposal, signed by some three hundred fifty Princeton faculty and staff, demanding, among much else, that junior faculty “of color” (who makes that determination, we wonder?) be “guaranteed” more sabbatical and institutional support than their presumably color-deprived colleagues. Katz, a popular teacher and one of the most academically distinguished members of the Princeton classics faculty, pointed out in Quillette that such proposals, if implemented, “would lead to civil war on campus and erode even further public confidence in how elite institutions of higher education operate.” The response to Katz was as swift as it was irrational. Not only did many of his colleagues, students, and former students join the chorus of repudiation, but the administration also announced darkly that it would be “looking into the matter further.”

The threatened official investigation was quietly withdrawn in the face of widespread public support for Katz, but he remains a pariah on a campus wedded to wokeness. As of this writing, the university’s public response to the doe investigation has been little more than bluster: they “stand by” their statements. They find it “unfortunate” that the Department of Education should break in upon their little melodrama (our paraphrase), etc.

We will be interested to see how Princeton responds to the demand for, inter alia, “A spreadsheet identifying each person who has, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, been excluded from participation in, been denied the benefits of, or been subjected to discrimination under any
program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance as a result of the Princeton racism or
damage referenced in the President’s Letter.” You said there were many people discriminated
against because of their race, so let’s have a list along with a précis of just how they were excluded
or discriminated against. And that’s just one of nine requests for “Records Production.”

We will also be fascinated to see how Princeton responds to the demand for answers to
various sticky questions. President Eisgruber admitted that racism does “damage” to
people of color” at Princeton. The doe wonders: “Do these admissions mean Princeton’s
nondiscrimination and equal opportunity assurances and representations to the Department
and/or to students, parents, and consumers in the market for education certificates have been false
and misleading?” Inquiring minds want to know. The list price to attend Princeton is $71,960 per
annum. We’d wager that many check-writing parents will be interested in President Eisgruber’s
answers. nd of course it’s not just Princeton. It looks like Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of
Education, is about to rain on a lot of college pow-wows. Early in October, the news came
down that the Department of Justice had sued Yale University for discrimination. “For at least 50
years,” the thirty-two-page complaint began, Yale “intentionally subjected applicants to Yale
College to discrimination on the grounds of race and national origin.” Moreover, for the last few
decades, “Yale’s oversized, standardless, intentional use of race has subjected domestic, non-
transfer applicants to Yale College to discrimination on the ground of race,” disfavoring “in
particular most Asian and White applicants.”

The suit is the follow-through on the doj’s two-year investigation into Yale’s admissions practices.
“Yale’s use of race is anything but limited,” a doj press release noted. “Yale uses race at multiple
steps of its admissions process resulting in a multiplied effect of race on an applicant’s likelihood
of admission. And Yale racially balances its classes.” The doj suggested the university undertake
“voluntary compliance” but concluded that “Yale declined even to propose any changes to its
pervasive use of race.”

Yale, like Princeton, like the overwhelming majority of colleges and universities, receives
federal funds. In the case of large institutions like Yale and Princeton, it is millions upon
millions of federal, i.e., taxpayer, funds. Our friend Title VI prohibits institutions that receive
federal funds from discriminating on the basis of race and several other categories. Yet Yale, again
like Princeton and the overwhelming number of American educational institutions, does
discriminate on the basis of race, even though they tell the government that they do not. Peter
Salovey, Yale’s president, said that he and his colleagues “look forward to defending [their]
policies in court.” We look forward to that, too.

You might be thinking, “Isn’t this just affirmative action, and isn’t that just business as usual in the
university?” (And, we might add, throughout corporate culture, other non-profits, and wherever
progressive virtuecrats and budding social engineers congregate.)

In one sense, the answer is yes, at least superficially. The more honest answer is that it is a
perversion of affirmative action as it was originally understood. Affirmative action was originally
undertaken in the name of equality. But, as always seems to happen, it soon fell prey to the Orwellian logic from which the principle that “All animals are equal” gives birth to the transformative codicil “but some animals are more equal than others.”

The whole history of affirmative action is instinct with that irony. The original effort to redress legitimate grievances—grievances embodied, for instance, in the discriminatory practices of Jim Crow—long ago mutated into new forms of discrimination. In 1941, Franklin Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Committee because blacks were openly barred from wartime factory jobs. But what began as a 1961 Presidential Executive Order directing government contractors to take “affirmative action” to assure that people be hired “without regard” for sex, race, creed, color, etc., has resulted in the creation of vast bureaucracies dedicated to discovering, hiring, and advancing people chiefly on the basis of those qualities. War is peace, freedom is slavery, “without regard to” comes to mean “with regard for nothing else.” Affirmative action is Orwellian in a linguistic sense, too, since what announces itself as an initiative to promote equality winds up enforcing discrimination precisely on the grounds that it was meant to overcome. Thus we are treated to the delicious, if alarming, contradiction of college applications that declare their commitment to evaluate candidates “without regard to race, gender, religion, ethnicity, or national origin” on page 1 and then helpfully hint to you on page 2 that it is to your advantage to mention if you belong to any of the following designated victim groups. Among other things, a commitment to woke identity politics seems to dull one’s sense of contradiction.

Had he lived to see the evolution of affirmative action, Alexis de Tocqueville would have put such developments down as examples of how in democratic societies the passion for equality tends to trump the passion for liberty. The fact that the effort to enforce equality often results in egregious inequalities he would have understood to be part of the “tutelary” despotism that hovers like a malign bureaucratic shadow over modern democratic regimes.

That’s putting it in somewhat elevated terms, however. Closer to earth, we espy a grubby skirmishing for power and social prerogative, cloaked, to be sure, in the rhetoric of justice and equality but deployed in an acrid atmosphere of fanaticism and petty betrayal, incidental byproducts of the larger betrayal of the university’s fundamental mission to form responsible citizens, pursue truth, and preserve and transmit the highest values of our civilization.

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