Canceling classics

On demolishing classical studies in the pursuit of “reparative intellectual justice.”

So The New York Times has finally caught up with Dan-el Padilla Peralta. Last month, the paper’s Sunday magazine ran a long, fawning story by Rachel Poser called “He Wants to Save Classics From Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?” The “he” in question is Padilla, this week’s poster child for petulant academic fatuousness, department of minatory wokeness. According to Poser, Padilla, who teaches classics at Princeton University, is “a leading historian of Rome.” This is not true. He has published only one academic book, a version of his dissertation, which is about Roman religion in the middle years of the republic. His only other book is a whiny, self-indulgent memoir called Undocumented: A Dominican Boy’s Odyssey from a Homeless Shelter to the Ivy League. Nevertheless, the thirty-something academic already has tenure at Princeton. Do you wonder why?

Woke academics like Padilla want to cancel all that. All classics scholars, he has insisted, have a “responsibility . . . to race the discipline.” Martin Luther King, Jr., taught that what matters is not the color of your skin but the content of your character. Padilla joins with the Black Lives Matter crowd in reversing that dictum. He is, as we put it in 2019, an “apostle of all race all the time.”

Among other things, this means that he is for racial preferences, just so long as blacks are the beneficiaries. It’s a delicate matter, however. He claims to have been outraged when, during a question period after his presentation at a conference sponsored by the Society for Classical Studies, an independent scholar named Mary Frances Williams suggested it was possible he got his job because of his race. Williams was ritually shamed and ejected from the conference for that impolitic observation. But the irony is that Padilla not only agreed with the substance of Williams’s comment, he also thinks it is a good thing that he was hired because of his race. Here is how he put it:
Seeing as no one in that room or in the conference corridors afterwards rallied to the defense of blackness as a cornerstone of my merit, I will now have to repeat an argument that will be familiar to critical race scholars of higher education but that is barely legible to the denizens of #classicssowhite. *I should have been hired because I was black* [emphasis his]: because my Afro-Latinity is the rock-solid foundation upon which the edifice of what I have accomplished and everything I hope to accomplish rests.

That’s not all. Padilla also believes that “white men will have to surrender the privilege they have of seeing their words printed and disseminated; they will have to take a backseat so that people of color—and women and gender-nonconforming scholars of color—benefit from the privilege of seeing their words on the page.”

And if that doesn’t happen? Then the discipline of classics might have to be destroyed: “the demolition of the discipline itself,” he wrote, might have to be part of a new program for “reparative intellectual justice.”

The idea that various traditional disciplines, including classics, should be destroyed in order to purge them of the sin of “whiteness” is all the vogue. Sarah Bond, a history professor and director of undergraduate studies at the University of Iowa, suggested in a tweet that such disciplines be “dismantled and burned so that . . . white supremacy can be smothered.” Nor is the fad confined to colleges. Heather Levine, a teacher at Lawrence High School in Massachusetts, recently bragged about how proud she was that “we got The Odyssey removed from the curriculum this year!” Levine is part of a movement, epitomized by the hashtag #DisruptTexts, whose goal is to cancel classic texts from Homer and Shakespeare down to the present day and replace them with “young adult” books that mirror the pieties and attitudes of woke commissars of correctitude. Naturally, The New York Times is a champion of all such initiatives. The 1619 Project, its infamous exercise in racially aggravated historical mendacity, is part of this effort, as is this eight-thousand-word encomium to Dan-el Padilla Peralta. As a piece of intellectual history, Poser’s essay is embarrassingly inept. In her eagerness to puff Padilla and exhibit her own credentials as a warden of wokeness, she has produced an incoherent goulash in which big names jostle with empty abstractions to produce a foul aroma of bloviating intellectual wind. “Figures like Diderot and Hume,” she writes, “derived some of their ideas on liberty from classical texts, where they found declarations of political and personal freedoms.” You don’t say; or, rather, so what? She follows this with a pointless snippet from Pericles’ Funeral Oration, and then says that in the Enlightenment “admiration for the ancients took on a fantastical, unhinged quality, like a strange sort of mania.” Then comes a little gibberish about the art historian Winckelmann, Hegel’s Aesthetics, and Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” dragged in, we feel certain, because of the word “Grecian” in its title. “Historians,” Poser writes, “stress that such ideas [which ideas?] cannot be separated from the discourses of nationalism, colorism and progress that were taking shape.

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during the modern colonial period. . . . Enlightenment thinkers created a hierarchy with Greece and Rome, coded as white, on top, and everything else below.” To which we can only say, no they didn’t. Oser, like Padilla, Sarah Bond, and many of the academics she quotes in this flaccid piece of thru-text, seems titillated by the prospect of destroying the discipline of classics. To some extent, of course, it is just playacting. Most of these would-be revolutionaries have tenure, and there is zero chance that they won’t be cashing their checks. But there are some dark sides to this drama. One has to do with character. It is clear that Padilla, clever as he is, has throughout his life been immensely lucky in finding teachers who have taken an interest in helping him. His is a poignant story. But as he became increasingly radicalized, he also became increasingly ungrateful. We suspect that is true of many other tenured radicals who want to destroy the thing that nurtured them and now supplies their livelihood.

Which brings us to another dark side of this story: the faltering confidence in the larger project of Western civilization. That phrase—“Western civilization”—is routinely held up for ridicule by academics whose education and leisure have depended upon its achievements and largesse. It is, let us remember, the civilization that bequeathed us such ideals as individual liberty, free speech, equality before the law, and limited government, not to mention the engines of technological progress and free-market prosperity. The irony is that such rancid philistinism should have been launched from within institutions entrusted with preserving the riches of the traditions that these new barbarians seek to destroy.

George Orwell once observed that some ideas are so asinine that only a member of the intelligentsia could believe them. The idea that the classical legacy, being instinct with racism, is “one of the most harmful stories we’ve told ourselves” eminently qualifies as an asinine idea in Orwell’s sense. It is sad that these self-infatuated poseurs (and Posers!) have deprived themselves of this fertile source of wisdom and aesthetic delectation, sadder still that they have deprived their students of it.