
FACING FEAR, RELEASING RESISTANCE, ENABLING EDUCATION

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In a 2007 essay, Barbara Applebaum explores privileged university students' "disengagement" when asked to confront institutionalized oppression. Applebaum analyzes and recommends Lynn Weber Cannon's rules for classroom discourse, rules that ask students "for the purposes of the course only" "to acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist" and "to agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls that prohibit group cooperation and group gain."¹

In a thoughtful and provocative response, Mordechai Gordon argues that Weber Cannon's "rules for classroom discourse" should be thought of as goals rather than rules. Gordon maintains that insisting on engagement may not be possible; even if it is possible, it can backfire and exacerbate resistance.²

In this essay, I respond to the problematic articulated by Applebaum with respect to racism and antiracist pedagogy, but do so with Gordon's admonition "that requiring engagement is counterproductive" in mind. I claim that insisting on engagement ignores the root of student resistance, a resistance that begins in doubt and blossoms into fear. Students become fearful by interpreting the instructor's rules for engagement as an attack, an interpretation that prompts fight, flight or paralysis and none of these responses will advance antiracist education. Facing the role of fear as constitutive of resistance is an important challenge for instructors and students in these contexts.

I support these related claims by: (1) exploring the meaning of pedagogical resistance under the circumstances Applebaum describes with the help of Lawrence Blum's analysis of racism; (2) determining why privileged white students resist using Charles Peirce's analysis of response to doubt; (3) fleshing out what is going on when students' fear is expressed in resistance following Sara Ahmed's characterization of fear in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; and (4) taking a conceptual detour to clarify that blame and responsibility are linked to our analyses of fear. In the end, I bring these overlapping elements together to argue that instructors who hope to release resistance to antiracist pedagogy would do well to face the fear that fuels resistance by deconstructing classroom power relations.

THE MEANING OF RESISTANCE TO ANTIRACIST PEDAGOGY

Pedagogical resistance does not only occur in response to antiracist pedagogy. I have observed resistance in psychology classrooms wherein students are asked to take seriously their own unconscious motivations or in

political science classrooms when students are challenged to understand their own and others' vested interests. Resistance is close-mindedness in the face of doubt. The initiating doubt is prompted by the recognition that another's habit of thought is challenging one's own. Doubt with respect to antiracist pedagogy is fostered by the instructor's assertion that it is even necessary. Students recognize the implication that they personally have something to learn about fighting racism. They infer, understandably, that they have been accused of being racist, in need of remediation. It is their awareness of accusation that gives rise to fear and then to resistance as a defensive mechanism.

As Blum points out clearly and repeatedly in "*I'm Not a Racist But...*" any charge of racism is a strong one representing moral revulsion and moral condemnation. It is not a descriptive or analytic term in ordinary use whatever our intention; rather, racism suggests the moral evil linked to slavery and its legacy. There is, says Blum, an "inhibiting fear of the dreaded charge of racism."³

Because he recognizes the force of this kind of charge, Blum asks that we make more careful use of race talk generally and of the term racism in particular. He distinguishes racial concerns from racist ones and warns against "categorical drift," that is, the tendency to assign the descriptor "racist" to "very different entities: beliefs, acts, attitudes, statements, symbols, feelings, motives, and persons." Imprecision allows for "conceptual inflation and moral overload."⁴

Addressing this imprecision, Blum rejects the distinction some scholars and activists make between prejudice as the *individual* face of destructive race relations and racism as the *systemic* manifestation. Instead he explores inferiorization and antipathy—the markers of all race-based concerns including racism—in personal, social, and institutional guises.

Despite Blum's call for rhetorical care, and even when an instructor is herself careful to avoid charged language, it is understandable that intelligent privileged white students connect the dots. Racism and less damning race-based concerns arise to rebuke them and their privilege. Their resistance is their way of fighting back. But why fight? Why not simply recognize the historical accuracy of racism as a socioeconomic and sociopolitical phenomenon and move forward to constructive, contemporary, shared responses?

WHY RESIST?

I have pointed to fear in defense of race privilege as the trigger. But perhaps it is more about the age and maturity level of the students who are perceived to be resistant. Some college students demonstrate a generalized malaise about education; they are neither emotionally nor intellectually prepared to wrestle with difficult problems of understanding self, other, and world, let alone with inequity and injustice. So when they resist antiracist

pedagogy, perhaps it has more to do with a generalized resistance to change than a specific response to issues related to racism.

Or perhaps other students have some specific personal prejudice and/or antipathy toward the instructor, especially when that instructor is a person of color, a member of a non-dominant culture, or GLBT. Or maybe the average student finds most antiracist pedagogues to be pushy and doctrinaire. In both these cases, the resistance might not be to antiracist pedagogy per se or to the perceived loss of race privilege, but to the particular instructor who is viewed as somehow intolerable.

These alternatives, though plausible and perhaps applicable to the experience of some students, are red herrings. Racism remains a super-charged topic in twenty-first century America. To raise the specter of racism leaves all exposed. The sources of resistance outlined above may exacerbate students' reactions, but they are not the primary focus when racism is on the table. I suggest that even when there are multiple triggers for student resistance, the prime mover is fear motivated by a loss of/to self. The charge of racism, the experience of race-related indoctrination, or even the generic sense that the instructor is upsetting my psychosocial appletart generates the same kind of defensive fear.

Students' fear and resistance arises in response to the morally repugnant label "racist" addressed toward them *and* doubt about whether or not they deserve that label. The resistance response is an example of what Peirce calls the "method of tenacity." In "The Fixation of Belief," Peirce argues that doubt disturbs belief and that there are four possible responses: the method of tenacity (a refusal to let go of one's belief no matter what the evidence), the method of authority (accepting the pronouncement of a superior), the method of reason (inference rooted in Cartesian introspection and intuition), and the method of science (a train of thought informed by both reason and experience).⁵ Peirce, of course, argues for the method of science as the most acceptable. In the case at hand, the method of science points to the recognition of racism as real given its pragmatic consequences and stimulates inquiry with respect to constructive response.

Both Peirce and William James held that habits of emotion and thought work to secure relationships within sets of circumstances. Thus, an instructor's habit of incorporating antiracist pedagogy and of employing specific rules for classroom engagement does create and solidify specifiable, and perhaps problematic, relations. This point will be elaborated later using the work of cultural theorist Ahmed. For now, consider the importance of interrogating an instructor's reason(s) for imposing "rules for engagement," for requiring students to adopt, even temporarily and as a thought experiment, judgments they feel to be repugnant. We must ask what the instructor is afraid of as he or she proclaims such rules.

Students who resist antiracist pedagogy cling to a vision of the world that they have learned in American cultures and American schools. It is a vision of equal opportunity and fairness and within that worldview, they are chosen rather than judged. They react against naming racism as a fatal flaw in a system of an American exceptionalism that privileges their own status. It is unsurprising that they would be afraid of losing and therefore tenacious in their defense of this sense of themselves, their social status, and the system that supports both.

Their resistance may indicate not their refusal to take race concerns seriously but their intuitive, implicit (and perhaps unconscious) understanding that such concerns have force. James, in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” suggests that any “ought” is a function of our own response to the claim of another, that claims and obligations are coextensive.⁶ This means that your moral claim has no force on me *unless* I take it seriously. If I didn’t already take it seriously at some level, I would just ignore you. I wouldn’t *feel* your claim. And because I felt no claim, I could feel no guilt. The doubt and fear that students experience in the face of antiracist pedagogy is a function of their own embryonic recognition of the claims of race concerns.

Two years ago, I observed a colleague teach a sophomore-level social foundations class during her very first semester at the university. Her focus for the session was Beverly Tatum’s *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*; her lesson plan invoked questions of institutional racism. Her class was made up of approximately thirty future teachers, all female, all white. She is black, stands over six feet tall, wears dreadlocks, and speaks with a voice of some authority based on fifty years of life experience, a doctoral degree in educational policy, and a law degree. She is also approachable, calm, and even gentle in her dealings with students.

As I observed her, I was struck (and deeply disturbed) by the level of resistance displayed as outright rudeness to what I perceived to be a non-threatening treatment of a phenomenon that is difficult to deny. I have taught these students smart but conventional, hard working but risk averse myself for more than two decades and have experienced resistance, but never of the kind or degree that my colleague did that day. My colleague was patient and direct as she worked hard to take students’ objections seriously, to engage them and to ground her pedagogical efforts in reason and experiential evidence. I was hard pressed to find the flaw in her presence or her presentation, the reason why she might have engendered this kind of negative response from normally kind human beings. From my present vantage point, however, the explanation is clear. When racial issues are raised by a black woman of singular authority, the implicit accusation is embodied, not abstract, and less easily sidestepped. Thus when teaching the same “stuff,” I encounter less resistance than I observed on that late fall afternoon because my white body does not say “*J’accuse.*”

The resistance I observed that day was not principled, but defensive. It did not stem from a desire to discriminate against another. It was a resistance rooted in a perceived danger to the students' sense of themselves as fair and decent human beings participating in a fair and decent society. It was fearful.

In fact, this should not be surprising. Fear and racism go together in our individual, social, and institutional experience. And the fears of the students I observed have individual, social, and institutional objects. They don't want to think of themselves as personally guilty of the moral evil that is racism. They don't want to be held accountable for an acknowledged social evil. They don't want to be forced to consider that their own understanding of the institution of schooling may be fatally flawed.

If I am right that students are reacting to their fear out of tenacity, the pedagogical challenge is to move them from tenacity to "science," that is, to a place where they are able to engage thoughtfully and based on evidence. Before considering this challenge, it will be helpful to consider fear as affect and as power relation.

FEAR AS A DYNAMIC ECONOMY OF AFFECT

Ahmed explores "the affective politics of fear" in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, a 2003 work that understands the experience of fear as *ontological action* securing cultural and political relations rather than as perceived emotion expressed by an individual and issuing from within.⁷ While Ahmed is primarily concerned with the macro-level manifestations of this mechanism in a world shaped and constrained by terror, her phenomenological analysis and insight can illuminate the context of antiracist pedagogy as well.

Ahmed begins her consideration of fear by citing a well-known passage from Franz Fanon's autobiography in which a child sees him (Fanon), calls out "Look, a Negro!" repeatedly, and then moves to "I'm frightened! Frightened! Frightened!" Fanon comments on his own shift in the course of the encounter from amusement to his acceptance of the construction of himself as an object of fear. "I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible."⁸ The child's statement is not simply an expression of a pre-formed feeling that arises from within the child. It is an ontological statement, creating fear-as-relation in response to the raw affect of discomfort perceived by the child *and* some history of relations involving Negroes. In this affective/cognitive/interactive act of creating fear, the child constitutes himself as the subject and Fanon as the object of that fear. The two are now related in mind and body and they (and we) experience that relation as fear. The child, in establishing that relation, limits the social space that either child or Fanon can inhabit.

Fanon is the *object* of the child's fear-constructing action, but not its *cause*. The cause of fear, the nexus of reasons why that child made that relational judgment about that man in that instance can only be understood by

digging through and digging up “histories of relations” – the personal, social, and institutional interactions that make sense of this particular relation of control.

This understanding of the experience of fear takes us far beyond our common sense understanding of fear as an internally generated emotion – a physiological reaction to perceived danger – that is named as a feeling as it comes to consciousness. It also takes us far beyond understanding fear as a cognitive appraisal. It both extends and intensifies our understanding of this apparently ubiquitous human experience.

In short, when I say “I am afraid,” I am not expressing some uncontrollable and noncognitive naturalistic bodily state, nor am I stating a reasoned judgment. Rather, I *act to control* a doubt filled and perceptibly dangerous situation – and those I perceive as dangerous. I designate myself as the subject of the interaction, thus putting myself (though perhaps counter-intuitively) in control. More importantly, I designate the other (object or person) as the objectionable object of the interaction. In a naturalistic stance, we assume the object specified to be the cause of fear, but from a phenomenological perspective, one recognizes that the cause of fear lay not in the object but in, as John Dewey argues, the interaction of the person and environment *over time*.⁹

Fear, in Ahmed’s terms, is an affective economy, a set of values that can (more or less stably) reside in (or “stick to”) but also “slide” across persons and objects. Her critical insight is two-fold: to ground fear (as a named emotion) in relations of power and control, and to highlight the dynamic and tentative character of fear using the images of “sticking” and “sliding.” Fear only temporarily sticks to particular persons or things, and only as is needed to maintain relations of control in that nexus.

LOOSE ENDS

Here I pause to interject a conceptual point and a psychological reminder. I’ll begin with the latter.

Whether we are subject or object of any particular fear relation, however we understand the nature of fear, whatever our fears, fear is uncomfortable. That is, we only invoke “fear” when discomfort is present. This does not imply that fear’s function in our lives is negative. There is no question that discomfort can serve a positive purpose with respect to survival and with respect to education. But it is also true that humans tend to avoid discomfort *in the absence of powerful personal motivation to endure discomfort for instrumental reasons*, and this psychological point may be relevant to our efforts to defuse fear in order to release resistance to antiracist pedagogy.

Also worth brief conceptual consideration is the link between fear, blame, and responsibility. The “sliding” that Ahmed describes occurs as fear relations are disturbed and reconstituted in an ongoing process of *shifting*

blame for inexplicable, nonstandard behavior from me to another (person or object). Humans tend to blame rather than explain when things go awry, a psychological observation. But the conceptual point is this: Blaming some other (the mark of a retrospective concept of responsibility) is at least partly a strategy for relieving discomfort. It substitutes for the kind of reflective explanation that would lead to reconstruction of habits and new responses. And shifting blame seems to be co-incident with constituting the other as object of fear. That is, when I enact a fear relation between us, when I am afraid of you, I am blaming you for making me afraid.

I raise this because the dominant concept of responsibility governing our social interaction seems to be a retrospective one, one that relies on the concept of blame in the face of discomfort and dissatisfaction.¹⁰ Can we develop an understanding of responsibility without blame? If we cannot de-couple blame and responsibility, then we also will not be able to let go of fear without abandoning some understanding of responsibility. And abandoning responsibility seems to be counterproductive with respect to antiracist pedagogy or any other social issue.

RESPONDING TO RESISTANCE

Keeping in mind the moral power of the charge of racism, the tenacity of belief in metanarratives of one's own goodness, the link between doubt and fear, the nature of fear as a relation of control, the ways that habits of emotion and thought secure relations of domination and submission, the quality of fear's discomfort, and the link between fear, blame, and responsibility, let us return now to student resistance to antiracist pedagogy. Once we understand the power relations at work and the ways these relations give rise to, result in, and release fear, how might we respond?

Here I offer an explicitly pragmatist move. If the meaning of a concept is its consequences in action, then consider the meaning of "antiracist pedagogy." In very many cases, the consequence of articulating and enacting this concept is resistance[] at least among privileged white students[] making that resistance the meaning of the concept. Student resistance responds to the "anti" in antiracist pedagogy. Whatever the instructor's intention, many white students will read the concept as anti-them *as they understand themselves*. And they are correct in reading it that way.

Think for a moment about the instructor's pedagogical motivation. To perform antiracist pedagogy is a move born of doubt. An instructor who is confident that students will see and attend to the realities of racial differentiation and discrimination need not frame language or action as "anti-." It is the instructor's concern that they won't see it, the fear that they will sidestep what the instructor takes to be the truth that causes the push that they rightly interpret as a controlling move. Their resistance, born of fear of control and weakening of worldview, is a response to *our* fear.

There is a sense in which resistance is good news, because it means that the instructor has tapped a place for growth. Doubt has been generated. Thought is possible. But the balance is admittedly delicate. Serious students cannot flee or remain silent. To flee is to give up their educational dream; to remain silent is to surrender one's sense of self as situated. They must fight. Ironically, perhaps, the better they are as students, the more they must fight. That fight takes the form of resistance.

So one's only constructive response as an instructor is first to interrogate one's own fear, the fear that prompts "antiracist pedagogy," rather than "collaborative consideration of the phenomenon of race," and then to act to prevent students' fears from arising. (What we know intuitively□ and what neuroscience is confirming□ is that it is much easier to defuse fear than it is to defeat it.) We can look for discomfort and identify the ways that that discomfort is relieved by blaming others. It is there that fear forms.

Since fear is relational, we open up past histories of relation and resistance□ histories of our selves, our students, our communities, and our institutions. Ahmed helps us to remember that "relation" does not imply "close" or "good," and that resistance constructs a relation of distance and dismissal. In relations relevant to racial concerns, it seems likely that distancing relations may be more common than connecting ones. Nonetheless, when we interrogate the relations between ourselves and our students, we come to know something of our students' histories, both generally and personally; and this coming to know will itself inevitably alter and layer relations of power. Fear will stick or slide for all in relation as their understanding triggers affects related to safety and control.

Of course, opening up past histories of relation and resistance with respect to race is a fair statement of the goals of antiracist pedagogy. Thus students might be engaged in two parallel efforts at "cultural politics," the first focused on the micro-level relations of control, doubt, and fear in the classroom as the issue of race arises, the second attending specifically to the same factors with respect to macro-level race-based concerns. It seems possible to defuse the development of fear, to fill the learning space long enough to enable the habit of "scientific inquiry" (Peirce) or the "method of intelligence" (Dewey) to ground different forms of relation.

One might begin by acknowledging that the resistant students are right. We *are* attacking their view of the world. This *is* going to hurt.¹¹ This is a critical moment in any educational effort. To teach is to disrupt another's taken-for-granted worldview, and it can happen in any subject area. The error is to think that a pedagogical thrust intended to explore the difference race makes is any different in form from a pedagogical thrust intended to open up what is referred to as the unconscious in psychology or vested interests in politics. One's understanding of self and world *will* change.

Other moves seem productive as well. One might accept Blum's contention that "racism" and "racist" are deeply judgmental terms, recognize that to use these terms as moral weapons is to enact relations of moral domination and submission, and heed his call for a reconstruction of the language of racial concerns. Instructors can then engage students in the development of "a more varied and nuanced vocabulary for talking about the domain of race."¹² This involves considering the categories and constructs that capture race matters, taking into account students' own experience but also the data of memoirs and movies. Contemporary demographic data can be compared to historical data and conceptualized in new ways. Delving deeply into the racial history of schooling and examining the concrete relations of educational practice (practices of segregation in systems, schools, and classrooms) can provide a forum for constructively engaging students in the project that Blum recommends. Their engagement in this project mirrors the kind of engagement for which Applebaum calls, but involves a project that interrogates rather than takes for granted the loaded language of race.

It seems best to abandon rules— even the kind of reasonable and well-intentioned rules that Applebaum recommends— that unwittingly reinforce the power relations that make fear stick and keep bodies in place in a social framework of unequal status. Put simply, for an instructor to invoke rules is to assert dominance. Students expect some kinds of classroom rules; most assume the authority of the instructor with respect to knowledge of the subject matter and basic classroom function. But to establish rules that stipulate beliefs (even hypothetically) goes beyond the norm and constitutes a threat.

Rules cannot repair a quality of relation that does not exist. A consideration of race concerns requires relations rooted in what Dewey calls the "method of intelligence" accompanied by the "four traits of method" he identifies: directness, open-mindedness, single-mindedness, and responsibility. If there *is* an established relation of honest inquiry between teacher and students, then the instructor can invite students to take up the rules of engagement that Applebaum recommends, to participate in what might be considered a philosophical thought experiment. But such rules no longer function like rules and, in any case, are not necessary if one has built this relationship on shared inquiry of the kind Dewey recommends.

It seems then that "antiracist pedagogy" is indefensible. Its logic prompts fear and resistance, making it self-defeating. But the goal of antiracist pedagogy remains worthy: to interrogate and render powerless race-based perceptions of persons that limit human potential.

Educating to end racism will not be successful unless instructors release the predictable resistance of privileged students. That resistance, that relation of distance— and even disrespect— is held in place by fear and the fixation of belief. So facing that fear is the instructor's primary task. But it's important to

remember that instructors too participate in the creation of fear relations when we doubt that the narratives and patterns of race relations are not themselves compelling enough to change our students' minds.

NOTES

1. Barbara Applebaum, "Engaging Student Disengagement: Resistance or Disagreement?" in *Philosophy of Education 2007*, ed. Barbara Stengel (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Educational Society, 2007).
 2. Mordechai Gordon, "Engaging Student Disengagement," in *Philosophy of Education 2007*, ed. Stengel.
 3. Lawrence Blum, "*I'm Not a Racist, But...*": *The Moral Quandary of Race* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), 8.
 4. *Ibid.*, 8–18.
 5. C.S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in *Pragmatism, Old and New*, ed. Susan Haack (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2006).
 6. William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *Pragmatism*, ed. Haack.
 7. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
 8. Quoted in Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 62–3.
 9. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1922), 149–68.
 10. I have suggested elsewhere that blame is only needed in a theory of responsibility when one hopes to justify punishment. See Barbara Stengel, "No-fault Responsibility," in *Philosophy of Education 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2006).
 11. This is a point made beautifully by Megan Boler in *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
 12. Blum, "*I'm Not a Racist, But...*" 8.
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