White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic Realism
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Barrish, Phillip.
White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic Realism.
The Ohio State University Press, 2005.
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Now, More Than Ever

In 1950, composing his preface to *The Liberal Imagination*, Lionel Trilling felt assured enough about liberalism’s ascendancy in U.S. culture to assert “the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation.” He found only a few “isolated and . . . ecclesiastical exceptions” to this truism. Trilling viewed the lack of conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation as a serious problem for liberals and liberalism. Unchallenged by intellectual opponents, liberals would never be forced to “examine their position for its weaknesses and complacencies.”

Suffice it to say that we no longer face the supposed problem of a lack of conservative antagonists, whether intellectual, ecclesiastical, or otherwise. Thanks to richly endowed right-wing think tanks, the new public prominence of Christian fundamentalism, and ever-more centralized corporate media, the “general circulation” of culture and ideas is now awash in conservative discourse. “Liberal” has become a pejorative epithet in national political campaigns.

I wrote most of this book during the first George W. Bush administration and concluded it during the run-up to the 2004 election. As 2004’s oft-repeated phrase had it, I did indeed regard the upcoming election as the most important one in my lifetime. At the University of Texas, a large number of my students come from families and backgrounds that predispose them to be suspicious of the L-word and every person and idea associated with it. At the time, not a single Democrat held statewide office in Texas.

I kept wondering as I worked on this book whether now was the right moment to profess reading and teaching practices that uncover contradictions and tensions internal to liberal identity. Put most crudely, wouldn’t some of the arguments articulated in this book, which in many cases I germinated in my undergraduate classes, provide aid and comfort to those already inclined to regard liberals as hypocrites who mouth politically correct pieties about equality and justice while enjoying privileged lifestyles? Wasn’t now a time, if ever there were one, for liberal intellectuals to circle our wagons and send our critical gaze outward, rather than direct it inward?
In 1950, Trilling ignored, or he took so deeply for granted as to render invisible, what I view as the one factor that did then and still continues to shape American liberal identity more than any other: its predominant whiteness. Despite some meaningful steps toward diversifying their faculties, most university humanities departments remain overwhelmingly white, as do the larger academic structures of which they form a part. Yet humanities departments also remain one of the few institutional homes for unabashedly liberal thinking and research. Such spaces, in which the liberal imagination is still self-consciously cultivated and explored, must be valued and vigorously protected.

The humanistic academy has become an indispensable site both for the liberal imagination and for leftist imaginaries—even more so, I would argue, than in Trilling’s day. At the same time, the humanistic academy is still deeply and disproportionately white. The tense combination of these two “plain facts” leads me to reiterate for our present moment Trilling’s half-century-old words: “The job of criticism would seem to be, then, to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty.” By comparison to today’s most prominent forms of conservative American identity, liberalism is indeed a more difficult and complex political subjectivity to inhabit. It is textured by “nuance” (presidential candidate John Kerry’s famous weakness in 2004). More profoundly, liberal identity is traversed by the series of structural dilemmas explored in the preceding chapters.

But it is precisely those dimensions within liberal identity that are most difficult, vexed, or hard to speak or think about that must continually be pressured and examined: above all, the deep mutual dependence between liberal identity and hegemonic American whiteness. As several of my chapters suggest, hegemonic whiteness and American liberal identity have functioned, both historically and in the present, to construct and support one another. One might argue that in focusing so exclusively on white liberal identity—after all, there are multitudes of liberals in the United States who are not white, including many who are academics—the current book merely reinforces a culturally and socially dominant link between liberalism and whiteness. Indeed, whiteness studies as an approach often risks recentering and reuniversalizing whiteness, even as it critically analyzes the strategies by which whiteness acquires its status as empowered norm. I believe the risk is worth taking. The versions of liberal identity treated in this book are effectively hollowed out by a mostly unspoken, unselfconscious, and often repressed entwinement with white hegemony. That entwinement drains moral consistency from white liberals, leaches meaning from their political commitments and beliefs, and interferes with their
ability to work actively for change. This book has been devoted to the proposition that, at least for white liberal critics, “the job of criticism” includes drawing on literature and its resources in order to “figure”—that is, both give legible figuration to and attempt to figure out—the gaps, contradictions, and incoherencies that our political, social, and personal investments produce, and to “figure” as well the economies by which white liberals maintain their often incoherent investments. Such acts of critical figuring are essential for a reimagining of liberalism to occur, particularly one that would alter—that would bring a new “variousness and possibility” to—American liberal identity’s continuing alliance with racial, class, and global hierarchies.