

Boundary Problems

It's no accident that Donald Trump's vaunted wall along the US-Mexico border became such a potent metaphor for a floundering American polity. The US has boundary problems — and not just with illegal immigrants (whoops, undocumented visitors). A mighty flux of standards and principles is symptomatic of an economy in freefall. Nothing is settled. All values are put up for re-negotiation. Steamrolling and bullying are the new fair play. Foundational ideas, such as the first amendment, erode under a flood of special pleadings. There is no center left to hold.

The latest identity politics fracas at Princeton University is instructive. Princeton students' Black Justice League demanded both the vilification of former university president Woodrow Wilson as an arch-segregationist at the same time they demanded a segregated "cultural safe space for black students." The pusillanimous current Princeton president, one Christopher Eisgruber, entertained their "demands" perhaps knowing that the threatened "indefinite" occupation of administration offices would be cut short by the Thanksgiving week vacation. (So far, the occupying force of the Black Justice League has not demanded delivery of free turkey and cranberry sauce — turkeys problematically have distinct regions of white and dark meat.)

The past ten days have also seen protests against free speech at snooty eastern elite Amherst College and a "white privilege retreat" at the University of Vermont for students "self-identifying as white" — why not "students of whiteness?" — with required reading on "The Invention of the White Race," "White Privilege, Male Privilege in Race, Class, Gender," "The Feminist Classroom," and "The Abolition of Whiteness."

You might whiff a general drift in all this of antagonism against people of whiteness and men in particular. Hence it's extra-specially unfortunate that the oafish and sadistic Donald Trump is so conspicuously out there representing that identity group. I suppose what that shows is that the process of boundary dissolution can really call out the demonic. The sad part is that white men of principle and reason are so beaten down that none dare oppose the forces of identity vengeance on the loose.

The fugitive truths surrounding the Black Lives Matter protests are too unpleasant for the public interest to digest. For instance, the behavior of the new Holy Trinity of Black Martyrs, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice, in the incidents where they lost their lives. All were doing something likely to get them into serious trouble: 1) beating up on an armed sentinel, 2) groping inside a patrol car for a policeman's gun, 3) brandishing a pellet gun designed to look like a .45 automatic in a public place. I'd go so far to suggest that the Black Lives Matter movement has become so virulent because it's increasingly obvious that black behavior is so embarrassingly bad and nobody knows what to do about it, especially black people. (Check the national murder rates.)

The colleges and universities have become the theater for these histrionics because they are institutionally so vested in the wish for better outcomes that evolved from the civil rights struggles of the last century. A general failure of those expectations has driven the colleges collectively crazy — or, more precisely, made them places for the enactment of craziness. The careers of reasonable people are hostage to the new campus Red Guards, who operate much like Mao Zedong's lunatic minions of the 1960s, who were set loose to distract public attention from the enormous failure of Mao's five-year plan economy.

A reasonable argument can be made that the temperament of the USA is worse than that of Germany in

1932. We're more foolish, feckless, and savage, our politics more ridiculous, and the wave we're riding is much more dangerous.