

## Totalism and Thought Reform in America's Universities

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In the summer of 2011, I received an e-mail message from the president of my university--I'm a professor of education--addressed to all faculty and staff that included the following.

We are requiring all first-year students to read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot over the summer. The book chronicles the life of Henrietta Lacks, a poor African American migrant worker from the tobacco farms of Virginia, whose cells were taken without her knowledge sixty years ago. Henrietta Lacks' cells became one of the most important tools in medicine, including breakthroughs leading to polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, and more. Her cells have been bought and sold countless times over while she has remained unknown and neither she nor her family have benefitted in any way. As Rebecca Skloot's website states, "*The Immoral Life of Henrietta Lacks* tells a riveting story of the collision between ethics, race, and medicine; of scientific discovery and faith healing; and of a daughter consumed with questions about the mother she never knew. It's a story inextricably connected to the dark history of experimentation on African Americans, the birth of bioethics, and the legal battles over whether we control the stuff we're made of.

The President went on to note that 2,400 students would be reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and that faculty from a variety of academic disciplines would be using the book in their classes. He urged all members of the university community to read the book and explore ways to engage in discussions around it, whether inside or outside the classroom.

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seller and has been optioned for a film by Oprah Winfrey.

The President's message didn't provide the rationale for this assignment, or spell out who the "we" are that is requiring this book. "We" could be a group of people or the university as a whole. My guess is that he meant the university is requiring this book. Reading the message, I was unaware of how, and by whom, this selection and this requirement was decided upon. Certainly nobody asked me what book or books I thought should be required or, more fundamentally, whether I think the university is justified in dictating (rather than recommending) certain reading prior to the beginning of school. I asked several of my colleagues if they knew where this assignment came from and they didn't know either, nor did the chair of the university curriculum committee. I emailed the President, and his chief of staff responded that the Honors College Student Council in conjunction with an associate dean had recommended the Skloot book to the President and that he had made the final decision. Thus no faculty were involved in this choice, at least formally, only students and administrators, and the university governance process, including the curriculum committee, was bypassed. This raises concerns around faculty participation in curricular matters and the transparency of university operations.

However, those kinds of issues are not the focus of this paper. From everyone I spoke to, and from my sense of the tenor of the university, this requirement of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is a highly popular choice by the overwhelming majority of faculty and administrators in the university. This book isn't being rammed down anybody's throat; just the opposite. Those making this call, including the President, did so with a solid understanding of what the faculty and administrators in the university think and want. If there had been wide faculty participation in this matter, the outcome undoubtedly would have been the same: require first-year students to read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and find as many ways as possible to use it in courses and elsewhere.

I'm going to base this writing on that assumption and explore the question that most intrigues me: why *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* was selected for this assignment over every other book that might have been chosen--imagine the possibilities, all of the literary and scholarly writing over the span of recorded time. And it is not that *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is one of several, or a number of, possibilities. It is not that incoming

students are different and come with different knowledge backgrounds and learning needs and interests, and that one book might be right for one person and another book right for someone else. They are considered alike enough, interchangeable enough, enough of an undifferentiated collectivity, that it seems warranted to decide that very single one of them needs to read this book. This book is it, the one, the only one. Every entering student has to, literally, be on the same Skloot page. Why?

Justifications for telling students they must read a particular book that immediately come to my mind, and I have been on university faculties for over four decades, don't fit this book. It is not that we are requiring a book written by a member of the academy as a way of saying to students this is what we do, this is world you will be entering. While Skloot has taught university courses, she is not an academic, not a member of a university faculty, not a professor. What work she has done in a university has been in the area of creative writing. She is not a recognized scholar in the field of medical research, bioethics, anything of that sort. While this book was well received by mainstream reviewers (I don't know of any academic reviews of the book) and clearly Oprah likes it, no one is saying that it is a major work of science or social science or philosophy. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is a good popular book, no more than that.

The answer to why *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is the single book a university would require prior to enrollment will have to come from some other reason, motive, perspective, agenda, and delving into what that might be is the subject of this writing. I consider it to be a highly important area to investigate. The assignment of this book, any book, to incoming students is a message both to them and their parents as to what this university is about, its priorities, its focus, what it cares about, its standards, the way it operates; it sets the tone. While this paper is grounded in my immediate experience, my referent is general: I am addressing a phenomenon I see in American universities across the board in our time, which I will frame primarily in terms of the concepts of totalism and thought reform. And while my perspective will show up in this--it already has, you have picked up that I'm not enamored of the direction reflected in curricular choices of the Skloot book sort--I'm not so much arguing anything here, although I am doing that, as attempting to shed light on one aspect of the contemporary

American university.

With all writing of mine I consider major, and I consider this writing major for me, I invariably take stock of my many limitations and think, "I shouldn't put this one out there," and I've done it again with this paper. But then I read something yesterday that Ernest Hemingway said: "Call 'em like you see 'em and the hell with it." So here it is.

To begin, and this extends a strand I began earlier, you can't explain *The Immoral Life of Henrietta Lacks* requirement by tapping into the usual suspects, as it were, the typical conceptions, or purposes, ascribed to a university education. Historically, one justification for a university education is that it hones students' intellects; it enhances their powers of discernment and critical judgment and choice; it develops their minds. Another rationale, the university is a context for the advanced study of the academic subjects or disciplines--philosophy, art, literature, science, mathematics, social science, history, and foreign language--their domains of concerns, their central creations and findings and assertions, their theories and constructs, their methods of inquiry, their most distinguished personages and major organizations. Another conception, the university is where one comes to know that which marks the educated person, a good part of which is familiarity with the finest and most influential creations and thoughts of humankind over the course of its history.

In all of these orientations, the university is a place of free and open inquiry and expression and debate, for both students and faculty; academic freedom and individual autonomy and integrity are cherished ideals. The university is a marketplace of ideas, as it were, a setting in which competing visions and perspectives and explanations are encouraged, acknowledged, explored, discussed, and debated. Philosophical and ideological pluralism, or diversity, and personal autonomy and integrity are guiding principles. Exemplary excellence, exceptionality--groundbreaking insight, creativity, freshness of analysis and discovery, and advocacy--is a supreme value. A university is a setting where people don't have to think alike or be alike or feel compelled to subordinate themselves to some larger cause or mission. Rather, it is a context in which to push with all that's in you to be top-of-the-line academically in your own unique way and to express the outcomes of that and be heard

and respectfully taken into account by others. The university is not in the business of stamping out cookie-cutter people, students or faculty. Simply, you are not going to flow from any of these frames of reference to the across-the-board requirement of *The Immoral Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot. It has to come from somewhere else.

And here is where Robert Jay Lifton is useful. Robert Jay Lifton (born in 1926) is an American psychiatrist, scholar, and writer, still active in his mid-eighties, whose recently-published memoir I just finished reading.<sup>1</sup> Lifton first became known to a general audience as a young man for his studies of *thought reform*, his term, during the Korean War--the coercive practices used with American prisoners of war by the Chinese with embarrassing effectiveness, methods that came to be known popularly as brainwashing. Lifton has been on the faculties of Yale and, now, Harvard, and is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at City University of New York. He has engaged major concerns and controversies of the last half-century, including Korean and Chinese mind control activities, the aftermath of Hiroshima, Nazi doctors' explanations of their conduct, the anti-Vietnam-war movement, the emergence of religious cults, the circumstance in the state of Israel, 9/11 and the War on Terrorism, and the Obama administration's diplomatic and military initiatives. One of his many books, *Death in Life*, about Hiroshima survivors, won the National Book Award. He has known and worked closely with a remarkable number of the premier intellectuals and artists of this era.

I will work with concepts Lifton first articulated in an early book, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*.<sup>2</sup> It should be understood that my first obligation is to make my points in this paper, not explicate Lifton's ideas. If this writing were a film, it would be "based on" or "inspired by" the writings of Robert Jay Lifton. If you want to study Lifton--and I think it is well worth anyone's time to do so--go directly to the source, his writing. A good start in that is his memoir. It provides an overview of his interests and activities and, depending on your particular interests, you can then decide what within all of that to focus on.

Lifton coined the term *totalism* to describe orientations, ideologies, organizations, programs, and individuals that seek to gain control over the thoughts and behaviors of masses, or at least

large numbers, of people. Totalism rings of totalitarianism, but Lifton uses totalism to get across that it is not just governments that do this kind of thing. So don't just think of Hitler and Stalin and Mao; think also about non-governmental organizations, the guy down the street and in the office next to yours, and, well, your local university. Totalism involves the fervent commitment to get everybody working harmoniously together in alignment with your vision and in service to your ends. A totalist outlook goes beyond simply arguing for your position and agenda, trying to persuade people, making your case to them, selling them on your ideas and ways, that kind of thing. Totalism means arranging people's lives, managing and controlling their circumstances and experiences and rewards and punishments so that they *will* see the light, *your* light, and enthusiastically get with the program, *your* program.

Lifton identified eight methods of thought reform that grow out of totalism: *milieu control; mystical manipulation; confession; self-sanctification through purity; aura of sacred science; loaded language; doctrine over person; and dispensed existence*. He first applied these eight to activities in Korea and China and then later to religious cults and, fleetingly, to his own medical and psychiatric training, modifying them as time went along. After a summary description of each of the eight methods--set in, smaller print--I will offer my commentary on how the contemporary university, in some of its operations, aligns with it. These descriptions are from a web site and not from Lifton's writings.<sup>3</sup> They were the best concise descriptions I could find, including in Lifton's own writings, that capture the evolution of what he originally called "the eight deadly sins" of totalism. The web site prose is wordy and stiff in places and I edited and smoothed it out some.

### *Method One: Milieu Control.*

Communication with the outside world is either filtered or completely cut off. Isolation from the ideas, examples and distractions of the outside world turns individuals' attention to the ideology being inculcated in them. Individuals are discouraged from thinking incorrect thoughts and to consider themselves evil, selfish, immoral, and the like, when they slip up and do so.

The university, and this isn't new, is an insular and managed environment. Students live together, first in the dorms and then in apartments, go to class together, eat together, and hang out and party together. They become a cohort, *us*, different in their minds from *them*, everyone else, including to a great extent, their families. They become a tribe apart, so to speak. Outside influences are limited. In their academic work, they, I'm thinking particularly of undergraduates, aren't so much *studying* anything--literature, history, sociology, the field of education, whatever it is--as *taking courses*. At an assigned time and place, they show up in a desk and a professor distributes a syllabus telling them exactly what to do and when for a semester usually, the next three months or so. There are classes, so many a week, for an hour, occasionally more, led by the professor. In this arrangement, information and communication can be tightly controlled. Student experiences can be strictly planned and orchestrated.

If a faculty member is of a totalist mindset and thought reform bent, this circumstance is nirvana. You don't have to grab students on the run to sell them your outlook. There they are, right in front of you, your syllabus in hand: you get to tell them exactly what to read and exactly what to write, and you can plan the class sessions down to the minute detail and get all your points in while they take notes, and you design the tests and you have the grade book in your top desk drawer, and if they need recommendation letters up the line they are going to come from you. If students cross you and don't tell you what you want to hear, they've got a problem and they know it.

All to say, you, the faculty member, control a great deal of what comes into students' heads and a good number of their rewards. Human nature being what it is, if you can do that, people--anybody, not just students--will, metaphorically, dance to your fiddle playing. More, they will take a liking to your music and the idea of dancing to it and promote proper dancing technique--i.e., your style--in each other and punish any among them (disapproval, social rejection, marginalization, exclusion, and the like) that don't dance correctly. This will be especially likely to go on if just about all of your colleagues play the fiddle as you do. And yes, getting out of metaphors, if the system is in place students will police and chastise themselves for any improper thoughts that pop into their heads, even if nobody else knows about them.

Thought reform in the American university in our time is in the direction of the left-of-center concept of *social justice*: in brief, the idea is to de-Europeanize this country, and de-nationalize it, and collectivize it (make the group, not the individual, the salient reality), and equalize it, and democratize it (empower the group, especially the government, over the individual--republics, we pledge allegiance to one, don't go far enough in that direction). This involves bringing minorities up a peg and white people, especially their men, who have been on the wrong side of history, down a peg, and using the government to confiscate resources from people who have too much and redistribute them to people who have too little. And while that's going on, cleaning up the environment (there is a movement in my university to replace a graduation requirement framed in terms of academic subjects with one organized around "sustainability"). Social justice doesn't stand apart from everything else as a separate topic or concern but rather permeates the academic areas--especially literature, sociology, political science, education, social work, and higher education--to the point that in good measure these fields are subordinated to and in service of social justice.

There is an intense and fierce moral loading to this social justice agenda: it is good, pure and simple--*really* good--and anything and anybody that gives off even a whiff of thinking otherwise or stands in its way is bad--*really* bad. To a critical mass of faculty nowadays, social justice is job one for the university, or right up there with their research into Frida Kahlo, and it is not all that complicated: the good guys and bad guys in this drama are readily discernable. You don't have to stay up nights studying the various sides of any of this, because there is only one side. An upside of all this for me is that I can get any book I want at the university library that doesn't parrot the social justice agenda, because students (and evidently faculty) never check them out.

### *Method Two: Mystical Manipulation.*

A part of the teaching is that the group has the highest of purposes. This may be altruistic, such as saving the world or helping people in need. It may also be, in fact, selfish, for example that group members will be saved and others outside the group will perish. All things are then attributed and



linked to this higher purpose. Attention is given to the problems of out-group people and attributed to their not being in the group. Revelations are attributed to spiritual causes. This association of events is used as evidence that the group truly is special and exclusive.

Indeed, the group is the salient element in current university thought reform: the individual is subsumed within it and defined by it. Students are categorized by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and, to a lesser extent, class (social justice despite its rhetoric is a middle class movement and plays down class in favor of ethnicity and race, gender, and sexual orientation--don't expect the topic of the day to be rural poverty). This sets up a group mentality in students in general, and in particular inculcates identity politics with its emphasis on inequities, grievances, and competing collective interests as a prime frame of reference.

To illustrate, if some white people did whatever it was that was bad, at some time or another, it could be in the distant past, they all did it, and if you fit into the white category, you did it, and your father and mother did it even if in actual fact they didn't do it, and you ought to feel guilty about that and atone for it. Collective guilt, you know? And more than that, you not only should feel guilty about what you did, you ought to feel stained for what you *are*, and that's a racist, it's inherent in your being. Even more, you have set up racist institutions, institutional racism it's called. And even if you come from a trailer park and your people have never gotten through high school, you are privileged and don't forget it, and don't be asking for examples of how exactly you have been privileged, we know what we are talking about, OK? Just take that fact on and wear it and act accordingly--which means be preoccupied with minority interests and serving them, while paying no attention to the status, interests, and destiny of your own people. Spending any amount of time basking in Mozart's magnificence and Watson and Crick's discovery of DNA, anything like that, and your racial or cultural connection with it is not going to happen here, you got that? Minorities can form campus organizations but don't you even think of trying it, is that clear?

All to say, if a black baby and a white baby were born on the same day in, say, 1993, the white baby is presumed to owe something to the black baby and not the other way around, and

they both have to have that fact drummed into their heads without it seeming as if that's what's going on. When you strip away all the fancy talk, getting that done is a job schools at all levels, including the university, have taken on full bore, and with singular effectiveness.

While what I just said is true, it is also true that a central goal of any classroom, in a university or anywhere else, or any television show, or stump speech, is to make the clientele, students in this case, feel good about themselves, and since you are a student here that includes you even if you are white. In this regard, something like *The Immoral Life of Henrietta Lacks* is a winner, because reading a book like that and discussing and writing about it in class, you can let it be known that you don't approve of what went on back then and are against racism and think something ought to be done about it, plus you haven't done anything like that and you aren't a racist (except you are if you're white, but that's OK because really you aren't), and get a pat on the head from the professor and your fellow students for being so enlightened and then go back to the dorm and rest easy. And you got that done without breaking a sweat; you probably didn't do more than skim the Skloot reading for the day, which left more time for video games and Hulu.

The sentence in the description about attending to the problems of the out-groups resonates. University classes that touch on the political correctness agenda, let's call it that, whatever else they do often come down to reinforcing the idea that we in this classroom have it wired and are among the anointed and that the problem is with people not in the room. They've got to get it together, we don't.

And yes, there is the notion that those in the group--this particular class and the university as a whole--have a higher purpose than many, not everybody, outside the group. There are some--those to the left ideologically and politically--on the same laudable path as we are. They and we are comrades in arms.

And yes indeed, it is an altruistic campaign; there's nothing in this for us (except feeling superior and righteous and safely nestled in the in-group and getting the perks that come with that, but we don't focus on that).

Spiritual doesn't apply here; this is a very secular enterprise. Religion, especially Christianity, is part of the problem, not the solution, the "religious right" and all that. (Thought reform stays

clear of labeling anything "left"--there is no "religious left," for example).

Special and exclusive don't quite fit. It is more that the university is on the unimpeachably right, in the sense of correct or just, side in the social/political/moral drama of our day. (Which is actually secular left, but it is never labeled that way.)

The idea of saving the world is a bit much when applied to the university, which in our time is a genteel place; take it easy, no big need to go overboard about anything. You're fine if you just don't get in the way of progress, say the wrong thing, vote the wrong way, get on the wrong committee, or drag your feet somehow. If you make it known you are on the proper side of the Henrietta Lacks story when it comes up at the convocation ceremony, which it is sure to do, and when it's a topic in class, and when the Resident Assistant brings it up in the dorm meeting, and you come off, or really are, sincere when you're doing it, you're solid. Just so your heart's in the right place--or I guess it is the left place--or appears to be at least, that's enough.

Apart from whether it is universities' business to straighten out the thinking of students in the areas that a book like *Henrietta Lacks* deals with (I've read it, and it doesn't just raise questions, it answers them, it's a sermon), there is the issue of how much it is actually needed. By the time eighteen-year-olds get to their first year of the university they have had thirteen years of schooling counting kindergarten and endless television shows and movies and CDs thought-reforming up a storm in the, let's call it, correct direction. I have a six-year-old daughter and I can attest that she is getting diversity propaganda in abundance in her first grade classroom. My impression from teaching first-year college students is that while they undoubtedly are unaware of the details of the Henrietta Lacks story, to stick with that example, they know very well the point of that story: black innocence and victimization, oppressive white racism, the evils of racial segregation and separatism, and capitalist economic exploitation. The selection of the Skloot book by the Honors College Student Council is consistent with this impression. When given a chance to select a book for incoming students, students further up the line chose one that reiterates the standard story of race relations in America--they had gotten the message, and it had come through to them long before they entered the university, although it had been strongly

reinforced there.

If thought reform education in its present form, as it deals with race anyway, really isn't all that needed (social justice, getting people moved significantly left ideologically and politically, arguably that is needed if one thinks it is a good idea), or at least by most students, the question becomes, why are universities so invested in it. To get at that, one has to look not at the culture and society or at students but rather at faculty. Faculty with a personal/professional social justice commitment, neo-Marxists, socialists, Obama bumper sticker people, and such, predominate in the contemporary university, and simply, it is personally rewarding to them to get on with imposing their beliefs, even if it isn't always needed. As many clergy can attest, preaching to the choir has its gratifications.

Beyond that, publicly buying into totalism and thought reform in its present manifestation serves fundamental needs of faculty and administrators. It is a way to get approved and respected. It is a way to get invited to lunch and the faculty party, it can even help your love life (zealotry in the middle of the acceptable action, that which isn't demonized and marginalized, is a turn-on), and it is a way to stay out of trouble, and people tend, understandably, to do that, who wants trouble? Even more basic, it is a way to get and keep a job: it puts food on the table and pays off the mortgage. The thought reform agenda is a career line--affirmative action and diversity offices, ethnic and gender studies programs, race and racism courses, and so on. Whatever academic area or program one is in, or at least in the humanities and social sciences and helping professions, being on the wrong side of this set of ideas and practices is a ticket to getting turned down on your application for a faculty or administrative position, and if you do have a position, losing out on a promotion or merit pay increase, and, before too long, unless you are tenured, reading the help-wanted notices over your morning coffee.

If you want to predict what faculty, anywhere, anytime, will believe in, look at what gets their bread buttered and deduce and you can count on being pretty close to accurate. Does a commitment to social justice get your article published and win you the grant and the promotion and get you the consultancy and the speaking gig and the award dinner? I predict you are for social justice, and sincerely so. People don't like living with dissonance, in

this case a contradiction between what they think and what they do; so, for example, if they start out thinking that the biggest example of racism on campuses is the diversity movement and it's in their interest to get on board with it, most often, and without realizing it, they will come to no-kidding believe in diversity. Their thoughts will now square with their actions and they won't have to feel like a phony, which is uncomfortable. Now when diversity legitimizes blatant racial discrimination against white people in school admissions, jobs, contracts and grants, they will sincerely view that as something other than racial discrimination; it's, well, affirmative action.

My claim, no less, is that many of the people hunting down haters in our time would have been ardent National Socialists if they had been in Germany universities in the 1930s, where if you weren't a National Socialist you were gone. Even the great philosopher Martin Heidegger caved back then. Human beings are very adaptable creatures and extremely adept at rationalizing self-interest, including to themselves--"I was never really a Nazi, I mean . . ." Pat people on the head and feed them regularly and they'll pull your sled whichever way you want it to go and lick your cheek during break times. Or most of them anyway; there are always some "dogs" that figure out what their handlers are up to and bide their time until they can get their teeth in some necks.

### *Method Three: Confession.*

Individuals are encouraged to confess past sins as defined by the group. This creates a tension between the person's actions and their stated belief that the action is bad, particularly if the statement is made publicly. This leads people fully to adopt the belief that the sin is bad and not repeat it. Discussion of inner fears and anxieties, along with confessing sins, exposes vulnerabilities and leads a person to place trust in the group and bond with it. When we bond with others, we tend to adopt their beliefs. Sessions where deep thoughts and intense feelings are surfaced exaggerate these effects. They also exhaust people, making them more open to suggestion.

Confession is more of what I would call a "Phase One" mind control activity, when you are first getting your ideas inserted into

people's heads. Confession, negative public self-disclosure in general, compromises and subordinates someone and makes him or her more susceptible to authority, to re-education, the Marxist term, and it ties this person to the group and makes him or her dependent on it and deferential to its interests. The Catholic Church has incorporated confession into its operations, as has AA. It went on in Korea and China, and goes on in religious cults, all of which Lifton investigated.

But once the thought reform indoctrination is in place, you don't really need confession; in fact, after a time, there really isn't much if anything for people to confess, as their bad thoughts and the behaviors that grow out of them have been eradicated. People feel cleansed of prior transgressions and don't experience anything of current relevance to confess; they aren't doing anything wrong now. "Phase Two" is more a matter of reinforcing and deepening Phase One conditioning. Rather than confession, Phase Two ends are furthered by *self-congratulation* and *finger-wagging*. That is to say, testimony and anecdotal accounts that make the point that the group members, students and faculty in this case, are "clean" on this issue, and condemnation and scolds of people "over there," not in this particular context. You don't want to alienate yourself from the group, so you put down, either by name or by reference to an undifferentiated "them" or "they," those not in the room who now or sometime in the past have been "dirty" in this area (the people who were bad to Henrietta Lacks will do).

Indeed, that is primarily what goes in university thought reform: not confession, and certainly not hard study or analysis, but rather testimonial and speeches: I'm fine on this issue; we in this room and in this university are fine on this issue; and they aren't or weren't. We know what's going on, and we are superior to them. Feeling in the know and better than others is an uplifting experience and will keep people coming back for more. Comics know this well. One of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's main jobs is to make their audience feel superior to "those people." *They* are out of it, losers, dumb, jerks, but you lolling on a couch munching Korn Kurls and watching TV are cool; and you are safe, you can trust that the joke will never be on you. Making people feel good about themselves is a way to get them to watch tomorrow's show or, in the case of a university, re-enroll next semester.

Deep thoughts, intensity, and exhaustion are also Phase One

characteristics that I don't associate with university thought reform. There is an easy-does-it, arms-length quality to goings-on generally in universities, thought reform or whatever else. Just say whatever is on your mind at the moment as long as is acceptable, reiterate accepted thinking, make a surface comment on the material or topic under consideration, that's enough and that's fine. No need to work up a sweat about anything. Knowing that I have written in this area, unsolicited by me, a number of students, have informed me that they know what the professors want in the areas included in what I am calling thought reform and they give it to them, in class and in papers and examinations. The students say they don't have to do more than peruse the material to get a sense of what it says. The university is like a secular church: you don't go to church to study and debate theology but rather to celebrate and affirm the faith. Students tell me they wind up saying essentially the same things over and over and over.

*Method Four: Self-sanctification Through Purity.*

Individuals are encouraged constantly to push toward an ultimate and unattainable perfection. This may be rewarded with promotion within the group to higher levels, for example by giving them a new status name (acolyte, traveler, master, etc.) or by giving them new authority within the group. The unattainability of the ultimate perfection is used to induce guilt and show the person to be sinful and sustains the requirement for confession and obedience to those higher than they in the group's order of perfection. Not being perfect may be seen as deserving of punishment, which may be meted out by the higher members of the group or even by the persons themselves, who are taught that such atonement and self-flagellation is a valuable method of reaching higher levels of perfection.

Here again, this rings of China and cults and doesn't touch down on the tenor of the university as I experience it. Constantly push toward ultimate and unattainable perfection? Guilt (beyond a basic guilt for being white, which is mitigated by the fact that you personally are OK)? No. We're fine as we are, and there's no use getting all worked up about anything.

That point again, schools at all levels have to please the

clientele to stay in business. Making punishment and self-flagellation a part of the operation is not a good way to keep the customers happy.

Promotion to higher levels in the group? No again. There is a kind of two-tier egalitarianism in today's university. There is the student tier, and within that everybody is basically the same, a student is a student is a student. There is no up or down within that stratum, except if you commit blasphemy and question the dogma, and then you will get cold and brusque treatment and pushed off to the side. Similarly, faculty, whatever their rank, are all alike in terms of, the popular term for it, political correctness, so there is no up or down there either. One qualification on that generalization: some faculty become more central and vocal around thought reform matters than others, which has its payoffs for them, among them, it feels good to preach the gospel while others listen knowing that in all likelihood no one will dare say anything but amen.

#### *Method Five: Aura of Sacred Science.*

The beliefs and regulations of the group are framed as perfect, absolute and non-negotiable. The dogma of the group is presented as scientifically correct or otherwise unquestionable. Rules and processes are to be followed without question, and any transgression is a sin and requires atonement deserving of punishment, as does consideration of any alternative viewpoints.

Indeed, the ideology and doctrine being propagated is an Ultimate Truth, beyond question and dispute. It's all been resolved, no need to study any of this, just get in step with it. No need to, say, investigate diversity as an ideology or movement, no need to concern yourself where it came from, the Bakke Supreme Court decision and Justice Powell, any of that, no need to bother yourself with looking at who is behind it, what interest groups, and how they have used it to further their causes, no need to explore arguments for and against it or consider alternative conceptions (pluralism being one) or to look hard at reality, both in this country and the world, to see if in fact diversity is always a good thing or whether it works here and not there or is partially good but has its downsides; no need to muck around with any of that.



As ironical as that may seem in a university, we aren't here to study diversity but rather to pledge allegiance to it and implement it. We all know diversity is good, that simply is a fact of the universe, and if you are don't see that, what's wrong with you? The least you can do is keep quiet while we do the talking and get about the good work of diversifying (as long as our own status is secure--we sacrifice *other* people for our good cause, not ourselves). In fact, you'd better keep quiet if you know what's good for you. Don't let us catch you being on the wrong side of diversity; because yes, challenging the merits of diversity is a sin of sorts, a secular sin, and, indeed, it deserves punishment. We're nice people and all, but cross us and we'll get you if we can without getting our hands dirty, including, if you work here, pitching you out onto the street.

*Method Six: Loaded Language.*

Words and language explain and justify profound truths that have been discovered. Existing words are hijacked and given new and different meaning. This is particularly effective due to the way we derive meaning and gain direction through language. A person who controls the meaning of words also controls how people think. Black-and-white thinking is embedded in the loaded language: wrong-doers are framed as terrible and evil, while those who do right are perfect and marvelous.

There is no more profitable way to study the current thought reform thrust in universities, schools at all levels, than to explore how it uses language. To a large extent thought reform is grounded in language and the meanings it ascribes to words--this rather than concrete reality. It uses language, and very effectively, to condition the hearts and minds of its subjects (speaking of language, subjects is a more fitting word than students). To list some major terms of today's thought reform: racism, hate, privilege, homophobia, sexism, the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, tolerance, multiculturalism, affirmative action, democracy, globalism, white male, progressive, and social justice. (Speaking of privilege, I've been around low-income white high school students in West Virginia and seen up close what their lives are like. For one of these young people to make it out of that circumstance and get to a university and then be

denigrated by some professor as privileged--and it happens--is cruel and contemptible.) And then there are pejorative terms I feel the need to put labels in parentheses on because otherwise their loading might not be clear: traditional (bad), capitalism (bad), corporations (bad), conservative (bad), Christians (bad), Southerners (slave owners and bad), rural people (hicks and bad), individualism (bad), nationalism (bad), "Reagan" (bad and dumb), "Bush" (bad and really dumb), white racial consciousness and commitment (words can't describe how bad that is). "Muslims" and "Arabs" are interesting cases, as their meanings have changed. Until just a few years ago, you could trash and mock them no holds barred. Now it's more iffy. Rural Southern whites are about the last ethnic group you can spit on with impunity.

None of these terms is strictly defined, they are kept open-ended, which allows them to be expanded over time; that is to say, more and more phenomena are considered examples of them. For example, my investigations have shown that when it occurs white negativity toward blacks is better characterized as disapproval than racism, but in our time even simple disapproval is condemned as racist and forbidden. I have also noted that when we are talking about racism in practically every instance the reference is to the actions of white gentiles. I published a review of a book by university professor George Frederickson used widely in university classes, *Racism: A Short History*.<sup>4</sup> While the Frederickson book is short in pages it is inclusive in coverage, recounting a myriad of racist acts over the past two thousand years. Every single one of them, no exceptions, was committed by white gentiles. I think there is a good amount of negative feeling toward gentiles, especially white ones, including their religion, Christianity, afoot in today's thought reform programs (pograms, subtle version?), but we don't have terms--anti-gentilism and anti-Christianism, say--to organize a consideration of this phenomenon.

A last example, consider the term "white male." My father was a man and I'm a white male, a negative characterization--the thought reform movement has quite effectively established that white is bad (think of the KKK and Nazis) and male is dehumanizing (animals are males). A word association test: list the first ten words or phrases that come to mind with reference to white male. How many of them were positive? Historically, pejorative stereotypes have legitimized hurting people that fit into that category. White

males are fair game in our time, and to bring up that fact is to get shut down hard. Still, it would be useful to have words like "anti-white" and "anti-white male," or "anti-white man" to work with. For that matter, it might be good to insert misandry--animosity toward boys and men--into the discourse along with misogyny, which now gets all the play.

Anyway, part of the appeal of something like the Skloot book is that it stays neatly within the current loaded language of thought reform.

### *Method Seven: Doctrine Over Person.*

The importance of the group is elevated over the importance of the individual. The group and its ideas rule over personal beliefs and values. Past experiences, beliefs and values invalid if they conflict with group's. In fact, this conflict can be used as a reason for confession of sins. Likewise, the beliefs, values and words of those outside the group are invalid if they differ.

Yes, the group, the collectivity, with its abstractions and demands and rewards and punishments is elevated over the individual. What you believe, what I believe, what either of us wants and intends is not the point. We certainly don't spend our time delving into actual reality (beyond selective anecdote, that is); that just muddies the water and slows things down. An example from my field of education: progressive education--that perspective, that set of ideas, assumptions, goals, and practices--a leftist model though it is not billed as such, is holy writ in colleges and of teacher education. It has been pumped into teacher education students in thought reform fashion for decades, including into me when I was training to be a secondary school teacher. For sure, its tenets sound great; it has to be good, here, there, everywhere, one size fits all. It's got the "clean" language down pat: child-centered, relevant, hands-on, integrative, caring, egalitarian, cooperative, community-in-the-classroom, democratic, and socially responsible. And it has all the "dirties" lined up: traditional, conservative, teacher-centered, subject-centered, individualistic, competitive, and politically and culturally reproductive, all of them the devil's work.

Here again, there's no confessing going on in progressive

education thought reform sessions but rather finger-wagging and self-congratulation: traditional teachers (probably old, there's an ageist tint to progressive education) are out there in droves boring students into a stupor with their lectures and worksheets and competitive grading and in the process propping up social injustice; and even though we are twenty years old and have never taught a day in our lives we are experts on teaching and rest comfortably on the moral high ground, we've seen the promised land. Progressive education, a thought reform success case *par excellence*.

The only problem with progressive education is that it doesn't work in practice if learning subject matter is what you are about. While that is a bit discomfoting to its adherents, ultimately it's no problem, because sitting in a university classroom you can effectively ignore reality, just don't talk about it. Stay with the high-and-pure ideas and how all of us in the room are linked together by our wisdom and goodness. When the students eventually get their own classrooms, they will be compelled by reality to do what gets them academic results. The teacher education faculty, however, can just repeat the process with the next batch of pre-service students and feel as if they are giving the world a great gift imparting the gospel of John Dewey, the patron saint of progressive education. (Dewey's socialist politics and his admiration for schooling in the USSR during the Stalinist era don't come up in the classes.) And really, they can do that feeling good about themselves, because progressive education does work in the areas that deep down it most cares about, and that's inculcating a collectivist, egalitarian, democratic, secularist, social reconstructive, and redistributive mind-set in schoolchildren.

#### *Method Eight: Dispensed Existence.*

There is a sharp line between the group and the outside world. Insiders are to be saved and elevated, while outsiders are doomed to failure and loss (which may be eternal). Who is an outsider or insider is chosen by the group. Thus, any person within the group may be damned at any time. There are no rights of membership except, perhaps, for the leader. People who leave the group are singled out as particularly evil, weak, lost or otherwise to be despised or pitied. Rather than being ignored or hidden, they are used as examples of how anyone who leaves will be looked down upon and

publicly denigrated. People thus have a constant fear of being cast out, and consequently work hard to be accepted by the group and not ejected from it. Outsiders who try to persuade the person to leave are doubly feared. All aspects of existence within the group are subject to scrutiny and control. There is no privacy and, ultimately, no free will.

This sounds like the workings of a religious cult and not the easy-does-it, no-hard-edges, benign-niceness university thought reform programs I have been describing. The last couple of sentences in this description hit home, however. Within the thought reform agenda, everything about your life is the university's business. Privacy and free will are not big with thought reformers. As an incoming student, you aren't free to say something like, "You don't even know me and you are telling me I have to read an Oprah book over the summer. If I want to read that kind of book I'll do that on my own. I don't need a university for that. I'm in the middle of reading Dostoyevsky and Proust. How about if you butt out of my personal beliefs and take care of yourself and leave me alone." That wouldn't play at all.

So that's Lifton, or at least my use of him. Do his writings about totalism and thought reform provide a conceptual lens useful in understanding what is going on in universities? Holding them lightly, not assuming a one-to-one fit, and modifying them as needed, yes, I believe they do. Are universities in the brainwashing business? Not in the China/Korea/religious cult sense, but the Nationalist Socialists and Maoists could relate to what we are doing, we aren't out of their ballpark. We might think, "Oh, those were bad people doing bad things, we're good people doing good things." *Everybody* thinks they are good people. University types tracking down the communists among their ranks in the 1940s and '50s saw themselves as good people.

From the time I was a student in the university a half century ago on through the mid-'80s I'd say, the idea of the university taking it upon itself to shape the thinking of students on social matters in a particular direction would have been viewed as inappropriately politicizing the university and antithetical to the university's scholarly mission, and as violating the academic freedom and personal integrity of both students and faculty, and as

simply presumptuous--who are we to tell people what to think or how to live, and even more fundamentally, it would be considered un-American. That kind of thing goes on some other place, Eastern Germany or somewhere, so it was thought, not in this country. The more I think about it the more I believe that we can add *mind control* and *conditioning* to the concept repertoire in framing the discourse about the contemporary university.

Back to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, given a totalist and thought reform orientation, what might argue for this book, or one basically like it?

A first reason, and it's a big one, and it doesn't come out of the discussions in this paper, it is relative easy, light, reading. At one time, I'm thinking of the first half of the last century, the university was reserved for top-tier students. It was a place for serious, rigorous study, you had to have mastered Latin and so on. In our time, however, just about anybody who wants to and can afford it goes to the university. It has become pretty much the next thing you do after high school. Whether you have any great intellectual talent or any particular predilection for the life of the mind really doesn't factor into it. The university is more or less an extension of high school. I've taught both in the senior year of high school and the first year of the university and you couldn't prove it by me that university students nowadays are any more capable or motivated academically than average high school students.

Along this same line, in contrast to prior generations, today's college students are younger developmentally. In the 1940s and '50s, college students were men and women, or young men and women anyway. Now they are kids--college kids. They refer themselves as kids, and faculty refer to them as kids. To get a sense of what I'm talking about, look at some pictures of college students in the distant past, in the 1940s and 1950s, say. They were dressed up, often in sport coats and ties and dresses, they looked older, they had sober, mature expressions. They were adults. Now look at a picture of today's college students, dressed down, smiling, benign, safe, innocent, innocuous (sorry), indistinguishable from high school students. Even if they are chronologically twenty-one or twenty-two, they are college kids, and they get the word out they want an education for kids, not adults, and the university,

responsive to the clientele as all schools are, and whether it fully realizes it or not, gives it to them.

Selecting something like the Skloot book is saying tacitly to incoming students, don't worry, we know you are still kids, and we'll be sure to take that into account in everything we do. We aren't going to be laying material on you out of your intellectual league or make you work too hard. Rest assured, we'll make things accessible and interesting for you. If you can get through a best seller you'll be OK here. If you just reiterate what's in the wind, and you can't miss that, you'll be fine with us. Actually, the immaturity of today's university students helps thought reform along. Those adults going to the university in 1949 undoubtedly would have told the prattling thought reform Church Ladies (does anyone remember Dana Carvey?) to stick it.

If I were to recommend books to incoming students I would include the Lifton memoir. Mary Catherine Bateson, a distinguished cultural anthropologist with a doctorate from Harvard, the President of the Institute for Intercultural Studies in New York, and the author of, among many respected works, *Composing a Further Life: the Age of Active Wisdom*, writes:

Robert Jay Lifton's memoir offers a model of the relationship between introspection and ethical commitment. He writes gracefully and temperately, without rant or jargon, but he is a prophetic voice as he recognizes and names the habits of mind that produce or recurrent humanity, demonstrating the compatibility of passion and scholarly investigation--and the necessity for both as we try to acknowledge and transcend the horrors of our time and to take action for a positive future.

The Lifton memoir is worthy of a university. It is a grown up book, a challenging book, a book that demands to be treated with more than talk-show shallowness, and it was written by a university academic. At the most basic level, Lifton's memoir depicts what one intellectual, now very near the end of his life, did with the time he had on earth and why, and it asks of young people, what are you going to do with your mind and your knowledge, and your life, in the time allotted to you, and why?

The Skloot book reflects the contemporary university's near-obsession with race, and particularly with African Americans from

within a certain narrative: a series of abuses at the hands of racist, capitalist America. A critical mass of university faculty and administrators see racism and racial injustice in every nook and cranny of American life, and it seems that they can't get enough of going on about it, to the point that if a university is going to pick a single book for students to read you can bet the farm that it is going to be about race.

At this writing, it is 2011. Just might a required book about bioethics deal with, say, cutting edge issues related to genome mapping, genetic engineering, cloning, anything like that? No. It will be about racial injustice to poor downtrodden African Americans. And interestingly, to me anyway, this sort of thing invariably comes from whites. Black intellectuals--I'm thinking of people like Thomas Sowell, John McWhorter, Shelby Steele, and Walter Williams--are much more prone to talk about African American personal responsibility and self-determination. I find it no coincidence that Rebecca Skloot is white. This book is the product of a middle class, middle-aged (I've noticed middle age is the time where this kind of thing really gets in gear), white liberal, and it plays to the perspective and needs and wants of middle class, middle-aged, white liberals, including those now entrenched in universities.

Historically, doctors have routinely kept tissue samples without informing their patients. In their eyes they weren't doing anything wrong; it wasn't as if they were taking vital organs, anything like that. A Rand corporation report noted that tissue samples from more than 179 million people (!) have been stored in the United States alone. They have been used to combat hepatitis, AIDS, Parkinson's disease, and breast cancer. It is not as if Henrietta Lacks is an isolated case and that she was singled out because she was black. Even though I can't get worked up about it, it can be argued that keeping tissue samples without patient approval is a bad practice, but to view this issue within the lens of race is misleading if not disingenuous.

Even though this book strongly implies otherwise, I couldn't pick up solid evidence that Henrietta Lacks received less aggressive treatment for her cancer because of her race. In fact, Howard Jones, a medical doctor, asserts that she received the same care that any white patient would have gotten.



I'm especially taken by how Skloot in this book propagates the most negative, child-like, Stepin Fetchit racial stereotypes of African Americans. A few quotes and a description to illustrate my point:

"Now I don't know for sure if a spirit got Henrietta or if a doctor did it," Cootie [a relative] said, "but I know her cancer wasn't no regular cancer, 'cause regular cancer don't keep going after a person die."

"I know your mother and father and all the cousins all mingled together in their own way, but don't you ever do it, Dale [Henrietta's daughter Deborah]. Cousins aren't supposed to be having sex with each other. That's uncalled for."

Deborah: "You been doing things to my body you ain't supposed to do. I don't want to be nowhere with you by myself no more. Lord give me enough sense to know that."

A year before going to a doctor about it, Henrietta told her girlfriend: "I got a knot inside me. A knot. It hurt somethin' awful --when that man want to get with me, Sweet Jesus aren't them but some pains."

Deborah, the daughter, five feet tall, two hundred pounds, a single mother of six, lived on Social Security Disability and food stamps.

What image of African Americans are first-year university students supposed to come away with after reading this? What do Deborah Skloot and white university academics get out of portraying people in such, well, racist terms? What needs of theirs are propped up by doing this kind of thing? I wouldn't expect them to engage these questions. Self-analysis and self-criticism are not hallmark characteristics of these people. Rather, with them there is the idea that they know the truth—there's no doubt about that. Their task is to get others to see things their way, the right way. Thomas Sowell, an African American intellectual, says that to white liberals blacks are trophies or mascots put on display as symbols of their own significance and virtue. African American intellectual Shelby Steele was asked by a good-willed white person, "What can we do for blacks?" Steele answered, "Leave us alone." Black nationalist Marcus Garvey back in 1921 said to his people, "Up you mighty race

of kings. You can accomplish what you will." Between the two of them, I vote for Marcus Garvey over Rebecca Skloot.

I've asked students whether they had ever studied the status and interests and destiny of white people in their courses. Do they know of any white analysts or advocates, any white leaders or organizations? No student has said yes. I have never had a chance to go to my follow-up question: if any of the students had said they had studied or knew about such white individuals and organizations, I would have asked whether they could name any that have not been characterized by their teachers and professors as racist, neo-Nazi, bigoted, ignorant, violence-prone, conspiratorial, and to be avoided like the bogeyman. One student said the idea of whiteness had come up briefly in a class, and that it had been presented as a bad thing that needed to be stamped out. When I heard that, I wondered how it would go over if blackness were portrayed in this same way. There'd be hell to pay, and rightly.

Nothing I'm saying here should be taken to mean that I believe the African American, or black, circumstance shouldn't be studied (studied, not preached, not pontificated). It should be. But from the perspective of multiple narratives, and by tapping the thinking of the full ideological and political and theoretical spectrum, and with scholarly intent and intellectual sophistication, and along with the respectful and objective study of other races, including whites.

Continuing with why something like the Skloot book, it's safe. University people are not known for their risk-taking. You aren't going to get any static and ruin your whole day if you come down on the side of requiring *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. It is not as if you had chosen a conservative to give the commencement speech and the roof caved in on you. (That is not a hypothetical example.) When I was in the army they used to say that to get along, go along. There was a lot of truth to that, and university people have learned that truth well.

Another, the Skloot book or something like it, a book that imparts this basic message, reflects the remarkable unanimity of thinking on university campuses. The university marketplace of ideas these years is a marketplace of an idea, singular: one product is packaged and sold, and everybody agrees on its merits, and if by some chance a few don't, they'd better keep their mouths shut about it if they

know what's good for them. (I guess, for whatever reason, I haven't heeded the word.) With something like the Skloot book, it is enough to announce that "we" are requiring the Skloot book, end of matter, case closed. What possible upset could accompany this decision? The answer: none. Another term that needs to be added to the discourse repertoire: *group think*.

In my own courses, if students were to read something like the Skloot book, or a section of it, they would do it concurrently with another writing that presents a very different take on this same material. This would underscore to students that there isn't just one, definitive, for-all-time answer to what is true and just in human affairs. People differ on what deserves attention and what is factual and moral and preferable. Students need to investigate these differences and come to understand them, deeply and on the presenters' own terms, and analyze and gain insight into them, including their philosophical and ideological and historical underpinnings, and explore and assess the merits and implications of these positions; and students need to create and share their own unique scholarly contributions with reference to them. Approaching it this way is, to my mind, education worthy of a university, and worthy of this country. I would hope that this kind of education encourages students to welcome, and seek out, alternative ideas and points of view, and discourages smugly ignoring, or demonizing, marginalizing, silencing, and attacking anyone that dares introduce intellectual, philosophical, or ideological diversity and complexity into the academic marketplace, arena. I don't want to reform students' thinking; I want to liberate it. And in the process of doing that, I want to liberate myself.

#### Endnotes

1. Robert Jay Lifton, *Witness to an Extreme Century: A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
2. Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961. See especially, chapter 22.
3. [http://changingminds.org/techniques/conversion/lifton\\_thought\\_reform.htm](http://changingminds.org/techniques/conversion/lifton_thought_reform.htm)

4. Robert S. Griffin, "Racism: A Short History," book review, *The Occidental Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 4, November-December, 2003.