

## Reevaluating White Privileged Ignorance and Its Implications for Antiracist Education

Liz Jackson  
*University of Illinois*

Barbara Applebaum's "White Privilege/White Complicity" provides antiracist educators with a powerful view of how whites perpetuate white supremacy by not knowing about it. As she sees it, whites' failure to see themselves as white thinkers preserves their privilege and thus makes them complicit in systemic racism. Whether they simplistically view racism as intentional racist action, or admit wrongdoing but strive for immediate redemption, whites resist understanding that there are things they cannot know, as whites, about racism, and this enables and perpetuates racism to their advantage.

I find Applebaum's model of white complicity insightful in elaborating how systemic racism functions in a society where most whites see themselves as nonracist, if not antiracist. And like Applebaum, I struggle with reconciling the strategic ignorance and related resistant practices of whites with the absolute need for people of color to experience equality and freedom. Yet I finish her text with some remaining questions about issues that should be further considered or clarified before reading it strategically as an antiracist pedagogy. First, is white students' privileged ignorance essentially an act of resistance to antiracist change? Second, why shouldn't well-intentioned whites want to ameliorate systemic racism, as whites? Should educators discourage reaction to injustice? Third, is it effective for antiracist educators to act as moral authorities, as Applebaum suggests, compelling their white students to admit complicity in structural racism?

Student resistance to knowledge is a common educational concern in areas where content knowledge appears contrary to conventional knowledge, startling or interrupting student prior belief and experience and potentially upsetting the student personally. For instance, a college history teacher might experience resistance to a lesson on how Christopher Columbus treated indigenous peoples by students who were previously taught to celebrate Columbus as a brave explorer of a new land. Foundational knowledge of a pivotal moment in American history is challenged here, and with this challenge students confront the unpleasant likelihood that other facts they think they know may be inaccurate, incomplete, and even morally problematic.

In teaching about social injustice, this seems to be par for the course; as Ann Berlak writes,

if a major purpose of teaching is to unsettle taken for granted views and feelings, then confrontation, with its attendant trauma...are necessary. Thus, confrontation and the intense emotional repercussions that are likely to follow may be essential to the process of eroding entrenched cultural acceptance of injustices such as racism.<sup>1</sup>

Despite my students' common expectation that no one's feelings should ever be hurt in my classes, I agree with Berlak that learning often must be painful in social

justice-oriented classrooms, as discussions of ethics can hardly be carried out with absolute neutrality or objectivity.

Yet resistance to uncomfortable learning is distinct from strategic ignorance perpetuating systemic racism. To the extent that the disturbing knowledge being resisted is knowledge of a so far unceasing, unfair advantage of whites over people of color, disavowals of complicity can be understood as resistance to the charge of complicity and to antiracist change, as Applebaum contends. However, if whiteness is simply an embodiment and knapsack of privilege, then why would it be so disturbing as to require disavowal? Perhaps complicity in racism is disturbing to whites only because it is now generally recognized to be morally wrong. However, following the reevaluation of whiteness by scholars, resistance might also involve the denial of painful knowledge of aspects of systemic racism that also harm whites, such as the alienation and lack of control or certainty regarding the self that is an aspect of being born into an oppressive society, making whites apparently incapable of being anything other than an oppressor.<sup>2</sup>

For example, in the case of Adolf Eichmann in Nazi Germany, his privilege was a mixed bag — while able to preserve his life as a Nazi, his existence was one of mental and physical subjugation. As Hannah Arendt observed, he was incapable of independent thought and action, submitting entirely to the Nazi regime.

*He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing. It was precisely this lack of imagination which enabled him to sit for months on end facing a German Jew...explaining again and again how it was that he reached only the rank of lieutenant colonel in the S.S. and that it had not been his fault that he was not promoted....It was sheer thoughtlessness...that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is "banal" and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace. It surely cannot be so common that a man facing death, and, moreover, standing beneath the gallows, should be able to think of nothing but what he has heard at funerals all his life, and that these "lofty words" should completely becloud the reality of his own death.*<sup>3</sup>

For Arendt, the court that concluded that Eichmann was simply a liar who denied his guilt had "missed the greatest moral and even legal challenge of the whole case."<sup>4</sup> Was Eichmann privileged and complicit in systemic harm? Clearly he was, yet the privilege and his embodiment of Nazi ideology and mass murder was hardly a matter of free and enjoyable choice; indeed he lacked any semblance of personal autonomy, manifesting a disordered conscience and inability to judge competing values or develop or voice independent ideas.

To summarize, then, I agree that white ignorance is a form of resistance, to the extent that whites benefit from white supremacy. Yet resisting painful knowledge in this case may also involve the painful knowledge of a loss of autonomy or means for self-actualization, and this is disregarded. While reevaluations of whiteness are not without their own risks and limitations, I am nonetheless not certain that whiteness merely bestows privilege; beyond resistance to antiracist change, one's straining to understand white supremacy and complicity might also indicate that there is more to whiteness than the theories Applebaum invokes imply.

From this view, I am less certain than Applebaum that the desire of some whites to do something about racism primarily reflects a self-centered aversion to discomfort and a continued resistance to knowledge of racism. Although I agree that in some cases a circling back to oneself and her/his own actions is an obvious method of disavowal and resistance, on the other hand, one might, by demanding an extended focus on the Other as Other, invite an empathetic response to injustice that does not connect testimonies of racism to oneself at all, as Megan Boler has discussed in her urging our “reconsideration of empathy’s illusory role in social justice.”<sup>5</sup> And while Applebaum emphasizes the painful personal processes of learning, I am not certain that one needs to feel complicit, or guilty, in order to understand and try to disable crucial operations of systemic racism — which I take to be among the central ends of antiracist pedagogy — and I am not sure in whose interest it is to not take seriously, as at least a promising sign, the question of what one might practically do about racism.

Finally, the pedagogical implications of Applebaum’s antiracist model concern me. As a dialogic educator, I strive to meet students where they are, and sense in their resistance first and foremost the reflection of their past experiences that do not cohere with my own knowledge and teachings.<sup>6</sup> I am wary of being overzealous and of discouraging them from considering certain illuminating yet unfamiliar perspectives, which I view as essential to the task of social justice education. As Applebaum’s essay demonstrates, when we are talking about racism, white students are disadvantaged in knowing or understanding; because I believe that systemic racism does not merely provide whites with an array of material and existential benefits, I thus regard them as, in a sense, disadvantaged subjects of antiracist education. I cannot see how, pedagogically speaking, in the face of their earnest challenges and interest in effecting antiracist change, my asking them to focus primarily on how and why they are complicit and thus racist would be effective for teaching them about racism or for considering with them possibilities for antiracist change. Rather, it is making a moral judgment and demanding their sense of guilt, since racism is viewed by most as morally wrong. I am not convinced that my students recognize me as a moral guide, or that they should.

Applebaum’s essay offers a helpful framework for understanding how privilege maintains itself through ignorance and perpetuates systemic racism by even well-meaning whites. Here I have posed some questions to her account concerning the nature of student resistance to charges of racist complicity, white student reactionary desire to be good and make antiracist change, and the classroom implications of her approach to understanding complicity in systemic racism. More critically examining the nature of white privileged ignorance and its pedagogical implications are important for further elaborating an antiracist educational philosophy.

---

1. Ann C. Berlak, “Confrontation and Pedagogy: Cultural Secrets, Trauma, and Emotion in Anti-oppressive Pedagogies,” in *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*, ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 23–4.

2. See, for instance, Jennifer Logue, "Deconstructing Privilege: A Contrapuntal Approach," in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005).
3. Hannah Arendt, "Postscript," in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1964), 287–8 (emphasis in original).
4. *Ibid.*, 26.
5. Megan Boler, "The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Michael Katz (Urbana, Ill: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995), 208–219.
6. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970).