

## **Academia's hidden crackpots: What kind of discipline would nurture a hate-filled academic such as fired professor Ward Churchill?**

**By Gregory Rodriguez, LA Times**

You don't have to be a crusading right-winger to recognize that University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill, who compared the victims of the 9/11 World Trade Center attack to Nazis, is an extremist, an ideologue whose scholarship is less than objective.

Nor do you have to be a flame-throwing left-winger to agree that the university where he was once director of the ethnic studies department shouldn't have ditched him the way it did. It needed to do much, much more.

Two short years ago, Churchill's labeling of WTC victims as "little Eichmanns," a reference to Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi in charge of sending Jews to death camps, provoked a heated yet necessary national debate on the state of scholarship at American universities. By last week, however, that deliberation had degraded into a mealy-mouthed academic discussion over one man's firing. The University of Colorado's trial and punishment of Churchill, in other words, was a little like the federal government prosecuting Al Capone for tax evasion and then calling its pursuit of gangsters complete.

Technically, the regents of the University of Colorado got rid of Churchill not for his outrageous political views but because of three faculty committees' findings that he had committed plagiarism and conducted fraudulent research in other writings. Too bad they hadn't subjected him to that much scrutiny before they hired him.

Rather than targeting Churchill and making him a martyr for academic freedom (the American Civil Liberties Union has chimed in on Churchill's behalf), university officials should have been more self-reflective and asked themselves how someone as intellectually irresponsible as Churchill got to be head of a department at their esteemed institution in the first place. Sure, Churchill might be gone, but that doesn't solve the problem that his notoriety brought to public attention: the presence of activists posing as scholars on college campuses, particularly in colleges supported by taxpayers' money.

For years now, conservatives have been railing against what they consider the leftist takeover of elite U.S. universities. And many of their complaints are not without merit. But I buy the self-selection argument -- those who pursue a career in academics tend to be more liberal to begin with -- so I don't think surveys showing that a majority of professors are Democrats proves there's discrimination against talented GOP PhDs. Efforts to create ideological -- or at least partisan -- balance on campus would only lead to the creation of a new form

of affirmative action. Furthermore, despite arguments to the contrary, Democrats are at least members of a mainstream political party.

What should concern us all, however, is academia's nurturance of loons like the hate-filled Churchill. No, they are not many, but they shout louder than their numbers would suggest. And though their influence is minor in American higher education overall, they can be very influential in particular fields, such as comparative literature and gender and ethnic studies. That's because the problem on campuses isn't rigorous Marxist materialists, as conservative stereotypes would have you believe, but craven emotional warriors in the arena of identity politics.

Ethnic studies departments, such as Churchill's, may be the worst offenders. Created in the wake of the ethnic pride movement in the early 1970s, many simply never had the same kind of academic oversight as more established and prestigious fields. Those professors generally toiled with little funding in isolated intellectual ghettos. Their scholarship wasn't tested in the high-stakes, high-profile competition that hones other academics and other fields. They earned their "psychic income" -- a phrase coined by former Gov. Jerry Brown -- trying to turn minority undergraduates into activists. (Meanwhile, the quality work on ethnicity was being done in more traditional disciplines.)

But by most accounts, today's undergraduates of all backgrounds tend to be in search of good jobs rather than ideological causes. If anything, ethnic studies are part of the accepted last stage of American education, the puncturing of myths -- in elementary school, we learn that George Washington could not tell a lie; in high school, we learn the dates and details of Valley Forge; in college, we learn that the father of our country was a hypocritical slave owner; and then, after college, few ever think about Washington again.

Still, just because an academic field is relatively harmless and even irrelevant (in the eyes of many fellow academics) doesn't mean that shoddy professors who can't sort fact from ideology should be tolerated, particularly at taxpayer expense. The Churchill case might be closed, but university officials nationwide have an obligation to bring scrutiny and the ideal of objectivity to these below-par departments -- perhaps by dismantling and absorbing them into more rigorous disciplines and insisting, not on any one set of views or conclusions, but on the high standards of scholarship that we expect from the best of academia.

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