

The soft bigotry of residual cultural identity
Roberto Ribeiro Baldino UERGS, RS
Tânia Cristina Baptista Cabral, UERGS e PUC, RS

Abstract

From the perspective of Hegel's dialectics, we show that J. W. Bush's slogan "soft bigotry of low expectation" conceals its true aim, namely, the formation of dark-skinned white supremacists. The article is cast into the format of a letter, since it was initially intended as a couple of remarks addressed to colleagues in the area of Mathematics Education whose work has been unjustly attacked in the name of Bush's slogan. We unify these attacks as the discourse of a single entity, forged after Orwell's 1984, that we call the Big Enemy (BE). This entity is intended to embody the white supremacist's discourse. We place mathematics in the form that it acquired in the 20th-Century (M20) as the corner stone of the logic of capital, fully endorsed by white supremacism. We distinguish culturally Black from dark-skinned subjects and understand difficulties in learning M20 as a refusal to abandon one's residual cultural identity. We end the article suggesting that such a refusal may be part of a Great Refusal of which terrorist attacks on schools and temples is one possible expression.

Key words

Hegel's dialectics, discourse, Mathematics Education, culturally Black Americans, White supremacy.

Dear Laurie Rubel and Andrea McCloskey

It has been a pleasure reading your impressive paper on "soft bigotry of low expectation" (Rubel & McCloskey, 2019) describing the dramatic struggle that you, Rochelle Gutiérrez and others have been carrying out against white radicalism, a much stronger enemy, in favor of equity in Mathematics Education. We will try to join you against this common enemy. We had intended a few remarks but they turned out into a full article.

We consider white radicalism, as you describe it, as an action of the Big Enemy (BE), the Orwell-inspired entity that we introduced in our MES10 conference in Hyderabad (Cabral & Baldino, 2019). BE is incapable of indignation in face of inequity, since he is only concerned with the growth of capital, whose logic is his only compass. We will endeavor to show that this entity unifies all the attacks on your position as emanating from a single voice. Unifying its discourse makes the enemy easier to fight. BE incarnates the white supremacist.

We will rely on two bastions. The first is the point of view that we have been developing, namely, *school as a place of economic production* (Baldino, 1998, Baldino & Cabral, 2013, 2018). We maintain that the school system produces a commodity, the *qualified-labor-power* that has to be sold in the market for higher salaries, otherwise the investment would not be worthwhile. This commodity has a seal of supposed quality guaranteed by standardized tests, regulated by laws. Our main argument is that owners of this commodity *tend to behave as capitalists towards such assets*. Consequently, insofar as the school apparatus produces qualified-labor-power, it *automatically reproduces* the capitalist ideology (Pais, 2014, Baldino & Cabral, 2019).

Our second bastion is Hegel's dialectical logic (Hegel, 1929). We have said that BE abides by the logic of capital. How do we characterize this logic? First, it is *dichotomous*: profit/loss, growth/decay, plus/minus, gain/loss, black/white. It is the binary logic of computers and the undisputable logic of 20th century mathematics (M20) leading to its inexorable verdict: right/wrong.¹ Next, the logic of capital is *dynamic*: capital only exists in movement, in circulation, money-commodity-money, simple work-power, schooling, qualified-labor-power. Finally, the logic of capital is *directed towards growth*: for BE, the growth of capital is valued above any ethics. For example, the capitalist media tends to highlight the slowness of government plans to defend populations from the consequences of climate change, instead of highlighting Greta Thunberg's campaign.

The logic of capital is an instance of what Hegel praises as "understanding," the greatest power of the human mind, capable of the dichotomous distinctions necessary to the development of science and technology. However, according to him, these sciences contain no truth, because they approach each subject unilaterally, they are unable to apprehend facts as a unity of opposites. For example, dialectics apprehends the injustice of discrimination through school and the capitalist rationality of "allocating" people into professions as two sides of the same coin. The same holds for the efforts to reduce the inequity of Mathematics Education as movement, and the *simultaneous* fomenting capitalism through publishing houses, congresses and research grants as necessary for this same movement, as recently discussed in the MES list. Žižek gives us a third example: "Maybe, just maybe, this explosion of violence with guns and so on that you get from time to time are collateral damage of some attitude towards freedom and so on (...)" (Žižek in MacKenzie, 2015). We will return to this.

For Hegel (and for us) truth lies in dialectics, the thought that is able to apprehend the intrinsic contradiction of ideological speeches. Dialectics is a threat to BE; in order to maintain his unilateral view, he cannot recognize the other's position and can only repeat its tautologies. In the face of dialectics, BE reacts with rhetorical figures, trivializing the discussion around clichés and using figures of language like "blame shifting," as you point out. The big media and some reviewers of journals of education take special care not to endorse dialectical thinking. Hegel has not produced much impact, they say.

We consider Hegel's Logic as a general theory of speech and apply it to draw out what BE's discourse is really saying. We will force BE to reveal how he covers up his true intentions. In addition to your concept of "blame-shifting," we introduce a few others, such as "residual cultural identity," "spinning tautology," and "culturally black," versus "black skinned," "trim-shift-paste," and "Great Refusal." We will highlight four fallacies on which BE's position is based.

First fallacy: tests measure learning.

Criticizing the logic of accountability enforced by the J. W. Bush administration, you say that

an essential problem with this orientation to education is that it sidesteps any discussion of broader, systemic, structural racism and thereby fails to acknowledge or address the role of white supremacy in U.S. education systems

¹ By M20 we essentially mean the discipline grounded on the set theory of Zermelo-Frankel-Choice. We write "mathematics" in quotation marks to mean the vague common sense meaning used throughout most of the Mathematics Education field. M20 is the "mathematics" that we are generally expected to teach.

(115). In Principles to Actions, NCTM continued the trend of placing the “blame” for and the “solution” to inequities within individual people’s sphere of influence without sufficient acknowledgement of systematic, historic, and institutional patterns of oppression (121).

To this, BE would reply: *You have saved me from the danger of revealing my true intentions. I really want to give free rein to racism and white supremacy; discussion would oblige me to confess my intentions.* Hegel would say that here we have a determination by the negative or, as you say, a dog whistle that only BE's committed followers can hear. It is interesting to learn that this whistle does not remain unheard to some people in NCTM. In contrast, if we consider school as a place of economic production, we can show that BE speaks through Bush's mouth, as you hint at in the following excerpt.

Bush argued that it is these school achievement gaps that produce discrimination (,,,) Effectively, standardized test scores were legislated to be the most significant measure of learning. Differences between racial groups on those tests are viewed as products of ineffective schools or as evidence of low expectations of individual teachers—all forming “soft bigotry.”

Bush's argument smoothly follows the logic of capital; BE would add: *school is just like inefficient industries, which raise discrimination against their products when they are defective and do not pass standardized quality tests at the end of the assembly lines. Legislation defends that high stake tests are the adequate measure of learning.* The comparison of "learning" with a material product emerging from an assembly line, implicit in Bush's and explicit in BE's discourse, raises the question: what does BE mean by "learning"? In his discourse, it is something that can be "measured." However, it is certainly easier to say what we mean by "measuring" than what we mean by "learning." "Measuring" has a too rich a meaning to be an attribute of "learning." Hegel would say that, in the discourse about learning, the subject disappears or "passes" into the predicate. In short, in BE's discourse, it is "measuring" that determines "learning." This implies the following redundancy: "learning" is the outcome of standardized tests that are supposed to "measure" it. In this sense, which is not what BE intended, we have a dialectical proposition, worthy of being developed.

At most, tests separate people according to the use-value (acquired know-how) of their qualified-labor-power as determined by school syllabuses. The use-value of a commodity is the actual materiality of what people call "learning." The use-value composes the total value of the commodity, together with the exchange-value (time spent on learning) and the sign-value (the brand of the institution). The salary and the possibility of allocation of such qualified-labor-power in the market oscillate around its total value. Only in this precise sense, as capital, can we say that "learning" can be "measured": *learning is human capital.*²

Therefore, from the point of view of the logic of capital, Bush's position is correct, but it is tautological: *standardized tests only "measure" what they, themselves, produce.* Politically, this tautology is dynamic: it is a *spinning tautology* that emits waves of discrimination. It has to be periodically reenergized by repeating the fallacy: tests are the most significant measure of learning.

² The concept of qualified-labor-power, a commodity that has value and price in the market, makes precise what Bourdieu loosely calls "human capital". This will simply de the use-value of qualified-labor-power, accumulated in "learning."

Second fallacy: learning is the result of effort and talent

It seems unquestionable that in present-day USA, BE's logic of capital in education has become dramatically superimposed to racism.

First, Rubel argued, as many others have before, that the rhetoric of meritocracy implies that success results from hard work or talent and is not a function of the myriad of institutional structures that mediate opportunities and distribute rewards according to race and social background (...). The rhetoric of a meritocracy inversely implies that any *lack* of success results from a *lack* of effort or ability (...). (114).

Of course, saying that "success results from hard work" is another spinning tautology: "success" is determined by tests which are made of the same material on which the "hard work" is supposed to have been applied. Saying that "success results from talent" or that "talent is success" is another example where the predicate "success" is much easier to describe than the subject "talent." Again, the subject passes into the predicate, since success is well determined by standardized tests. Therefore the subject disappears into the predicate; that is, "talent," far from implying "success," is what *results* from "success"; "talent" in mathematics is just a label applied to students with high scores in standardized tests or to mathematicians who publish in leading journals. This spinning tautology is energized by repetition of the meritocratic rhetoric.

The argument that "success" can be a function of "institutional structures," "opportunities" or biased "distribution of rewards" is a dangerous one, because it can be empirically checked. BE could design a study offering you all elements that you claim would be necessary. However, if these elements are not sufficient, as we think they are not, your position would be jeopardized.

We argue that there is another factor that contributes to what BE calls "lack of success." To produce it we will make a detour through the Brazilian Neolithic. Brazil has more

than three-thousand specialized schools for indigenous populations, of which nearly one-third do not have electricity or sewage. For these subjects, still plunged in the Neolithic Age, one plus one may be one, as in the case of a piton and a duck. It may also be zero, if one misses two throws and loses two arrows; or it may be three, as in the case of a father and a mother (Ferreira, 1997). For us, one plus one make two because we have previous and tacitly agreed that it is not about pitons and ducks that we are speaking. We neglect the question: if is not of pitons, ducks, arrows and families, then, *what, precisely, are we talking about when we say "mathematics"?*

To answer this question we would have to explain to our native-Brazilian student that we are referring to an agreement established a long time ago, when commercial exchange of commodities became essential to the reproduction of life in Greece. At that time, survival based on exchange of commodities generated what Sohn-Rethel (1978) calls Real Abstraction, an abstraction present in people's daily lives: commodities had to be exchanged according to *equality* of human work contained in them, thereby originating what came to be called mathematics." We would have to explain to our student that a dichotomous plus-or-minus logic is now the Real Abstraction dominating our daily lives, so that for us, one plus one can only be two. Of course, if the "neolithic student" could understand, *he would lose his neolithic identity*, just like a turtle cannot come out of its shell and remain a turtle. If he could understand and were free to speak, he would probably exclaim *how stupid!*

From the neolithic perspective, the Brazilian capitalist school apparatus inculcates stupidity into indigenous people.³ The whole richness of meanings of forest life has to be cut off. This sharp image alerts us about the *painful amputation of one's identity*

³ Teaching in a university in the Brazilian hinterland, M. Batarce reports, in the Brazilian Mathematics Education discussion list, that if he gives the same passing tests to everyone in his calculus course, he would flunk all indigenous descendants.

required to extract the subject from his culture and tame him into ours. We think of this amputation as a cultural extension of the *physical genocide* imposed on Brazilian Natives that started on the 17th Century. Today, what looks like a failure to learn "mathematics" that disturbs the neolithic descendants, may be a *refusal* to abandon their *residual cultural identity*, a refusal that finds no words to express itself in our language. Presently, a specialized organ of the Brazilian government is monitoring nomadic tribes that never had contact with our civilization. With the reduction of funds or, perhaps, the extinction of this organ promoted by the present government, very soon we will be able to study physical and cultural genocide *sur place*, perpetrated by illegal wood extractors. Physical genocide is still happening!

From a colleague⁴, we received the following contribution showing how the exclusion of native-Brazilian students is presently happening.

A few years ago President Dilma Rousseff stressed that universities should observe the legislation on the use of new technologies, new literacy strategies, issues of human rights, *ethnic, racial* and gender diversity, sexuality, generation conflict, special education of blind and deaf students, environment, etc. Such reinforcement of legislation seemed extremely important for our teacher formation program since ours is a very popular university in an indigenous region. In one of the meetings I appreciated the government resolution and suggested that perhaps now we could have a way to deal with my four native-Brazilian calculus students, one of whom could barely speak Portuguese. The answer came as prompt as definitive: "*there is no way to attack this problem, it depends on an institutional policy*". Somebody else said that only programs created under strong pressure of social movements manage to design a curriculum for these people. I was astonished. These colleagues are not accommodated classical right-wing

⁴ Marcelo Salles Batarce, Mato Grosso do Sul State University

people, shut up in offices and distant from classrooms. They are left liberals who are attentive to social questions, some of them have fieldwork in Indigenous villages. Where do they expect this policy to come from if not from them? On the contrary, they choose to conflate the government directive with a strict content biased technical curriculum, adequate only to a few students, if any. They assure the façade that hides exclusion.

Judging from the amount of literature dedicated to the theme, it seems certain that school "mathematics" is more overdetermined by racial issues in the U.S. than in the rest of the world. Inca and Aztec civilizations, as well as the societies from which slaves were brought to America, already worked on metals. We conjecture that, due to their technological development, their sense of identity could be even stronger than that of native-Brazilians. In any case, the attachment Black and Latino populations in the U.S. today have to their original cultural identities should be considered before BE can hastily attribute their difficulty with "mathematics" to some laziness or to some DNA deficiency. This difficulty may be due to sensitivity/awareness of the cultural amputation that they will suffer by adopting the dichotomous logic of capital condensed in "mathematics."

Third fallacy: soft bigotry of low expectation is racist

By using a clever sophism, BE labels you as being favorable to the "soft bigotry of low expectation," thereby building his stronghold against your position. You rightly call this figure of rhetorical "blame shifting."

The tweet's author does not accept Rubel's (widely accepted) critique that the narrative of the United States functioning as a meritocracy is a myth. Instead, its author premises that there is meritocracy in mathematics and a single, agreed-upon way to "do math correctly," as well as that white people achieve greater success in mathematics because they are "inherently intellectually superior." Again, we see

here a blame-shifting of the critique of white supremacy (“you believe black people are too stupid to do math”) (117).

It is not advisable to argue that your critique is widely accepted. Submitting it to a vote is all that BE would like to do; first, because in a ballot situation he would be free to use superficial clichés to the taste of the audience; he would escape discussion. Second, because public opinion depends on the capitalist media that is fully under his control. You would lose. It is not enough to point out BE's dishonesty and lack of precision in his quotations, hoping to raise indignation. BE, the chief of white supremacists, speaks to an audience used to reality shows, sports and Hollywood happy-ending films. They are "consumers," already committed to the binary logic of capital. The 12 pages of references in font 10 of Laurie's 2017 paper (Rubel,2017) will not shame them; they make their ignorance into an argument, as Marx would say.

Therefore, BE simply says what he wants to say, namely, that "black people are too stupid to learn mathematics," while, through a ruse of speech, he attributes his own speech to you, thereby leaving you the onus of disproving it. Unaware of what we have said about how learning affects identity, you could rush into the classroom to show how well black people can do "mathematics." You would be dealing with the difficult problem of residual cultural identity. Mathematics Education research risks falling into this trap, as we pointed out in Hyderabad (Baldino & Cabral, 2019) and as partly acknowledged by you in the following:

As we have shown in this article, any time we make reference to the historical, cultural, and political conditions that shape *all* of our conditions and expectations, we are vulnerable to inquiries from members of our own mathematics education research community, who ask, “Where’s the math?”; to cautions from mainstream mathematics education organizations that we are sacrificing mathematical “rigor”; or to accusations from all sides that we are perpetuating the “soft bigotry of low expectations.” (123)

As we understand it, not only BE, but also colleagues co-opted by him, accuse you of following the "soft bigotry of low expectation." This Bush cliché is based on the rhetoric of meritocracy, according to which success evaluated by capitalist logic depends only on effort and some mysterious DNA knot, called "talent." First, we must apply dialectics to decipher BE's blame-shifting rhetoric.

Turning the cliché into the affirmative, we ask BE: *are you saying that we must keep the expectation that "black people" are smart enough to do "mathematics" and be harsh to those who don't, because learning is a matter of will and effort?* Actually, BE demands us to strip off Blacks' *residual cultural identity* and replace it with a new one, molded according to the binary logic of capitalism, and show no mercy to those who resist such acculturation. Such BE imposition is based on the deliberate muddling of two concepts: *culturally black* and *black-skinned*. Dark-skinned people can learn "mathematics" like anyone else; what they cannot do is to do so *while remaining culturally black*, that is, *changing* their cultural identity while *keeping* their old identity.

Hegel would say that such keeping-while-changing, if restricted to the binary logic of understanding, is a contradiction in terms, like a "squared circle." He would also say that the dialectical (speculative) way to think such keeping-while-changing is described by the German verb "aufheben," generally translated into English by "to suppress." This is the way to face the question: how resilient is the cultural identity of the black communities in the U.S. today and how does it affect "mathematics" learning? In any case, we would say that "stupid" is one who thinks himself as "inherently intellectually superior" but is unable to understand the *cultural identity shift* implied when people who are culturally black learn "mathematics."

By undoing the muddling of "culturally Black" with "dark-skinned," it becomes immediately visible that the political reactions of the black population in the U.S. in

face of the acculturation imposed by the educational laws is distributed between these extremes. Examining this distribution, we suggest that one of the disguised aims of recent U.S. educational laws is the formation of *dark-skinned white supremacists*. The fishing hook of the official education enterprise for producing dark-skinned copies of BE is a piece of capital of which its owners naturally take good care, namely, *their qualified-labor-power obtained in school*.

Fourth fallacy: high stake tests assure professional competence

The following vignette displays the whole stupidity of the logic of capital

Hi - I am your doctor: I didn't actually go to medical school because of the racist meritocracy keeping me out, but I did do all my courses online. They didn't grade anything because - racist - but I received a completion award for everything. Oh, and don't worry - I did all my surgical rotations with my game "operation," 'cause I couldn't get into a hospital 'cause I didn't have the right courses 'cause - racist. So, Mrs. Rubel, are you ready for your gall bladder removal? Let's get started (119).

This excerpt provides several examples of how BE reacts when we push him to the verge of his contradictions. First, there is a rhetorical figure that we can call *shift-displace-paste*, following your concept of "blame shift." Our (perhaps your) suggestion of rewarding effort as a way to reduce cultural genocide in the school apparatus (Cabral et al, 2019) is trimmed from Mathematics Education where it belongs and displaced to the problematic context of medical school, where the need of standardized tests looks unquestionable. Our answer would be: *the more credentials you present me, the less I would be willing to let you touch me*. About this issue, one of us can offer you the following personal report

By the end of 1964, my 18-month-old son fell off a window in the second story of our house in the campus one of the best universities in US. Despite a serious head injury, after a few weeks he showed no serious sequels, but he started developing a

temperature. We took him to the pediatric clinic of the University Hospital, which at the time was developing the heart transplant and seemed to me the best option we had in the world. Their diagnosis was a cold. More than once, my son was sent home under the recommendation of giving him Coca-Cola and popsicles. But he got worse. After two days with a high fever and barely moving, the Brazilian community on campus decided that I should take him to a doctor, indicted by our Jewish friends. The diagnosis: pneumonia. He was immediately given an injection and started recovering. Two or three days later, we took him to the hospital clinic for a check-up. The nurse, probably a senior student, told me that, since I had taken the boy to another doctor, they would not see him anymore. I was astonished, but before I could argue, the nurse asked. *To whom did you take him? To Doctor Foster*, I replied. The nurse left with an upset face; he came back a few minutes later: *yes, we can continue seeing the boy*.

What should be done to confront BE's shift-displace-paste strategy is to question the whole system of state-awarded certificates, starting precisely with medical school. My personal report implies that we should never trust these certificates, whether they are given to a “mathematics” teacher or to a doctor, especially if he boasts to have passed high stake standardized tests: this is a sign that he may have been more concerned with passing the tests than with learning – or worse, that he has learned the manuals by heart but knows nothing about treating patients. Teaching and medicine are not exact sciences.

There is another lesson to be learned from the above excerpt. Is mathematics comparable to medicine? For BE, rewarding effort in mathematics education to weaken the level of cultural genocide is comparable to trusting your health to a doctor that never went to medical school. His rhetoric equates the importance of teaching in both “mathematics” and medicine. Thereby, BE confirms what we have been saying: the

teaching of “mathematics” owes its importance to the fact that M20 condenses the dichotomous logic of capital. The certainties of M20 make the cornerstone of the capitalist logic. K12 is the last stage where the qualified-labor-power is tested on its ability to reason in terms of black-and-white, the acculturation logic imposed on Indigenous Brazilians. BE is concerned that the falsification of this barrier may lead people too concerned with human beings into medical school, since in K16 M20 ability will no longer be the object of testing. This is why BE advances his intellectually bizarre comparison. Indeed, without the separation power of M20, the state guarantee about the use-value of qualified-labor-power would collapse at all levels of the school system. This is the gatekeeper role of M20.

Final words: the Great Refusal

In summary, a description of the acculturation of native-Brazilian students revealed that school functions as a Procrustes bed with respect to the residual cultural identity of native descendants subjects when we try to teach them "mathematics." Next, we followed your 2019 paper (Cabral and Baldino, 2019) to extend such understanding to present-day U.S., where the same amputation/inculcation of cultural identity through the teaching of "mathematics" has become dramatically overdetermined by racism and by the white supremacist ideology grounded on the logic of capital.

With the globalization of capital as the only possible game on Earth, its logic has penetrated into every pore of our lives and is already knocking at the bedroom's door, imposing its binary regulation to sexual conduct (Baldino & Cabral, 2018). It is not difficult to understand how the school extends its Procrustes function to adjust children's and youths' identities developed in the family to the universal capitalist logic embodied in "mathematics." Blacks may have been the first to suffer the inequity that spread like a

wave to Latinos and other strata of the population, not only in the U.S. A backlash revolt is to be expected.

Therefore, it is sensible to think of failure to learn mathematics as a *conscious act of refusal* ("I was never good in math," etc.), although the refused object, namely, the discourse of capital, only lurks in the unconscious. Malcom X, born Malcon Little, rejected his name because it had been imposed by the slave masters to his paternal ancestors. Malcom X professed the definite ideology of the Nation of Islam, but his act of symbolic rejection announced the radical refusal expressed by terrorist attacks on schools and religious temples today; these are places of formation of capitalist ideology. Žižek says that Malcom X "had an ingenious insight which was at the top of contemporary philosophy" (MacKenzie, 2015). Our MES 10 article ends with this phrase: "It is time to start conjecturing that the routine school massacres actually target (...) the capitalist mode of production." *Terrorism expresses the rejection of the very logic that tries to understand it.*

Terrorism cannot be thought of in terms of Marx's contradiction, which can be solved by a revolutionary change in the mode of production and further development of the dialectics of infra and super structure. Terrorism expresses Hegel's contradiction, which *can only be solved in thought*. People who have passed by Hegel without penetrating his Logic say that this contradiction is politically innocuous, because it stems from the development of a single principle and is therefore not overdetermined and cannot account for the multiplicity of singular contradictions of capitalism (Althusser, 1977:100). These people miss the main point of Hegel's philosophy: *thinking and being are the same* and it is as identical expressions that they should be registered in Logos. Our discourse *on* being is already the discourse *of* being itself (Hyppolite, 1997:27). Far from politically innocuous, Hegel's contradiction unifies all

particular contradictions of capitalism; it is universal and *absolutely overdetermined*.

Thinking cannot change unless the whole of society changes as well.

The result of such a change cannot be imagined from within our theoretical horizon. "Karl Marx was right when he wrote that capital considers any limitation as an obstacle to be removed. But these limitations also include the symbolic imagination of man" (Dunn, 2013). This means that our imagined alternatives to capitalism have already been fixed as battle targets by BE. In the last lines of his book with J. Butler and E. Laclau, Žižek asked for a new political universality with no taboos, that would "resignify terror, the ruthless exercise of power, the spirit of sacrifice" (Butler et al, 2000:326). Indeed, the lesson that terrorism teaches us is that the rejection of capitalism *in totum* implied by Hegel's contradiction is not grounded on pledges of a better way of organizing society; *the Great Refusal is grounded on itself*.

In summary, either we confront BE or we accept the destruction of life as we know it; this is the leap forward for Mathematics Education.

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