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‘Occupy the syllabus’ fails to note complexity of adding diversity to syllabi

By [Seth Tillman](#) | Special to the Daily Cal

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On Jan. 20, Meg Perret and Rodrigo Kazuo complained in an op-ed titled “[Occupy the syllabus](#)” that “in (their) upper-division course on classical social theory ... the syllabus did not include a single woman or person of color. ... The white male syllabus excludes all knowledge produced outside this standardized canon, silencing the perspectives of the other 99 percent of humanity.” The problem is that Kazuo and Perret offer no solutions, just complaints. They are sure the syllabus should “reflect” persons other than white males, but they cannot bring themselves to name even one likely candidate for inclusion. Why is that?

Perhaps it is because finding likely (nonwhite, nonmale) candidates for inclusion takes time and effort. Certainly, it is not an impossible task, but it is work. Here are some characteristics you might want to focus on when recommending other scholars’ works for inclusion. Is the scholar’s work already widely known? Is the scholar’s body of work one that a good many faculty have already studied and, therefore, are prepared to teach? Is the scholar’s work in the public domain? If not, students will have to pay for copies of the scholar’s work (with the concomitant effect of excluding poor students from academic success)? Did the scholar write in English, or are good translations freely available? Finally, and most importantly, once a new scholar — or two or three — is added to the syllabus for inclusion, one also has to begin thinking about whose scholarship will be removed. Writing a syllabus is about making choices. Class time, students’ time and professors’ time and resources all constrain what can be meaningfully assigned, read, discussed and examined in any single course. Precisely which authors on the current syllabus are Kazuo and Perret willing to see excluded?

Moreover, Kazuo and Perret take it for granted that considering the race, gender and life experiences of a scholar is appropriate when assessing scholarly worth. Not all agree. Some believe the primary consideration in assessing scholarship for inclusion ought to be the author’s ideas, not the author’s biography. By focusing on intellectual ideas and ideals, we might anticipate and discover a shared humanity of greater value than the accidents of birth and the historic contingencies of time and place.

Kazuo and Perret want to “break ... the epistemological assumptions on which ... exclusionary education rests.” Breaking things is easy; improving things is something else entirely.

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