



Weber: We have a culture in Mississippi that continues to inspire racism

INTERVIEW

By Javad Heirannia

TEHRAN — Eric Thomas Weber says there is a culture in Mississippi that “continues to inspire racism”.

“We have a culture here Mississippi that continues to inspire racism and to harken back to the values of white supremacists from the 1960s,” Weber, the associate professor of Public Policy Leadership at the University of Mississippi, tells the Tehran Times in an exclusive interview.

Following is the text of the interview:

■ **What are the philosophical roots of your theory of democratic leadership?**

A: Some of the earliest thoughts on democracy and leadership are found in Plato’s Republic. The great philosopher was skeptical about democracy, since the people in Athens decided to put his great teacher, Socrates, to death. In other dialogues, the Socrates

we know from Plato explained that he saw his aim in life as the pursuit of wisdom. He upset many people who purported to be wise, when trying to learn from them and discovering their ignorance.

For his pursuit of wisdom, Socrates was killed. Still today, in some countries philosophers are imprisoned because of their writings and teachings. There are dangers to democracy, Plato explained. When democracy emphasizes freedom, it permits vice, such as the gross injustice his teacher suffered. A virtuous society, he thought,



would limit people’s freedom for the sake of justice and the other virtues.

In addition, Plato believed in the necessity of classifying people according to castes, thinking of some people as having golden souls, while others have silver and bronze ones. His hierarchical outlook on humanity was intended, according to the Republic, to help guide society towards greater virtue, having the golden rulers direct the other classes. Virtue, he thought, requires having the best people controlling the others. Plato’s criticisms

of democracy can still motivate us today to beware of the dangers of simply following popular opinion. We limit the power of the majority in democratic societies by means of rules established in a Constitution. With limits on what the majority can do, democracy can pursue the general good of the people, of the majority, so long as it respects the rights and value of minorities, whether religious, ethnic, or racial. In this sense, we continue to heed Plato’s warning when we aim to limit majoritarian decision-making.

At the same time, Plato’s hierarchy of citizenship was paradigmatically undemocratic. We can still grant scholarships to very talented people, encouraging ability and effort, but in a democracy we must always remember that talent can come from anywhere. And, those who rise in competitive systems deserve no more of a vote than those of more average or modest abilities or means. ➔10

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➔1 Democracy refers to demos -- the people -- and -cracy -- power. The key, then, is to empower the people and to enable them to the extents that they can or wish to participate in leadership of their society. Democratic thinkers like John Dewey have noted that in this sense education is fundamental for democracy, as it is empowering. In addition, his views about genuine education see it as democratic, insofar as it gives people a sense of their own positive powers.

For these reasons, when I developed my theory of democratic leadership, I looked especially to Plato and Dewey. My goal was to retain elements of what Plato was right about, while leaving behind the undemocratic aspects of his philosophy.

■ **Why do you insist on democratic leadership to address challenges facing Mississippi?**

A: Mississippi has a reputation for many deep difficulties when it comes to democracy and education. The state’s public schools are known to be poorly funded. Mississippians have also self-segregated, when in the 1960’s and 1970’s thousands of private white academies were created in the South. That move to private schools was legal, at a time when states were compelled to integrate their segregated public schools. The result is that many white Mississippians believe that they have a financial interest in minimizing support for public education. Some actively seek to have their tax dollars for the public schools returned to them to help pay for private schooling.

The self-segregation of schooling has meant fewer resources per school, given the costs to economies of scale that result from division. In addition, schools that are diverse and larger have been shown to raise support for public schools and to improve the culture for financially disadvantaged kids. This set of historical issues illustrates a frustration of the need to empower citizens in Mississippi. Poorer children fail to have anything like equal basic opportunities for educational success in the state’s public schools. Our challenges for democracy are profound as a result.

In the United States, an African American male is approximately six times more likely to be incarcerated in his lifetime than a white male. In our failing schools and in our troubling patterns of incarceration, we see continuations of a caste system in Mississippi, especially on the bases of race and poverty. At the same time, Mississippi serves as a microcosm for the United States as a whole, in which these problems are evident

all over. Thus, studying Mississippi served for me as a means to test my theory of democratic leadership close to home for me, but with applicability for the wider region and nation.

■ **You have addressed key social virtues such as wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice in your book. How can democratic leadership promote these virtues?**

A: Wisdom in Plato’s view was to be found among the golden class of guardians. In the democratic age, we ought to recognize that wisdom can come from anywhere. The great insight of the modern world is that open, free inquiry results in far greater knowledge and hence the potential for much deeper wisdom. People in power ought to listen to those over whom they govern, for otherwise leaders will fail to incorporate key insights into the aims and methods of governance. In addition, when we confine inquiry to the few, we get far fewer intelligent eyes on a problem. The modern growth of the sciences clearly derives its greatest progress from the elimination of barriers to intelligence and inquiry.

The world does not look to North Korea for the latest innovations in the sciences. We look to free and open societies. Free countries allow people of all kinds to examine and consider ideas shared publicly, and to weigh in where they can. Wisdom is best understood as something shared and to be exercised on the basis of the best information and science. Great leaders need excellent judgment, but that comes from openness to scrutiny and from a willingness to incorporate the insights that others have to offer.

For a specific application of these ideas, consider that in Mississippi we have sex education policies that reflect neither wise judgment nor the insights of

the best and most established sciences. We have high teenage pregnancy rates here, yet we fail to educate young people in the best ways with respect to sexually transmitted diseases and contraception. That is one example of a great problem and flaw in current leadership. Since it is far more difficult to succeed in school when one is pregnant, it is imperative that we choose those policies that maximize the potential for people to develop their positive powers as individuals and citizens.

■ **To which kind of social problems do “wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice” refer?**

A: Beyond the virtue of wisdom, consider that the moderation of differences is vital for achieving a united society. To foster that, more communication is needed. Many communities throughout Mississippi are rural and isolated. Thus, enhancements to communications, such as in infrastructure, can put more people in touch with one another.

The virtue of justice is evidently needed in our state, furthermore, as we see in the 2014 case when young men hung a Confederate Battle Flag symbol, one embedded in the state of Georgia’s old flag, as well as a noose around the statue of James Meredith. Meredith was the Civil Rights hero who integrated the University of Mississippi.

Far more egregious was the racially motivated murder of James Craig Anderson in Jackson, MS, in 2011. We have a culture here that continues to inspire racism and to harken back to the values of white supremacists from the 1960s. Our state flag continues to bear the emblem of the Confederate Battle Flag, for example, even after multiple murders in Charleston, SC, which led other states to make changes in summer of 2015. Justice in leadership would seek to redress our wrongs and to promote a culture of respect for all people. We still have many changes to make.

At the same time, none of these will happen without the courage required to take on such challenges. Courage is necessary to do what is right even when it is unpopular. Leaders in Mississippi have yet to live up to the obligations of good democratic leadership, with a few exceptions. Nevertheless, the potential for progress in Mississippi is great. With good democratic leadership the state will make an incredibly good investment, I believe, since the stock people take in the state has been greatly undervalued. Courageous leadership can turn our culture around and in Uniting Mississippi I propose some of the steps in that direction.

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