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Race, Class and the Promise of the Public University

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Race, Class and the Promise of the Public University

Abstract

Commencement address by Professor Thomas Breslin at Florida International University dissects in a few words both the promise of a public university system and the threats to that system embedded in racial and class privilege.

Keywords

race, class, public university

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Thomas A. Breslin, Ph.D.
Prof., Politics and International Relations
Remarks to the Graduates of the School of International and Public Affairs
Florida International University Commencement
10am, August 6, 2013

I am grateful for and humbled by this award. My service was only possible with the support of taxpayers, students, and fellow FIU employees, especially my wife, Professor Maida Watson.

In 1882, Thomas A. Breslin, a 17-year old from County Donegal, Ireland, a second-class citizen in his homeland, arrived in New York City hoping to escape the religious and ethnic prejudice of English colonizers who had made themselves preeminent in the land of his birth. Hoping to find freedom and opportunity in America, he worked as a store clerk and mechanic and at night advanced his sixth grade education at the Cooper Union, a free school. In just four years, just four, he became a citizen. He worked in the coalmines of Pennsylvania and as a bartender in Philadelphia. There he met and married another Irish immigrant and raised seven children with her. He helped to build a parish church and a parochial school but died in 1930 before seeing Ireland truly free or America free of racial and religious prejudice.

That Thomas A. Breslin didn't live to see his widow insist that all their children go to college. He didn't live to see four sons serve America in a world war against foreign forces of racial pre-eminence and hatred. He didn't live to see a son provide legal services to poor whites, African Americans and Hispanics. He didn't live to see the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1950s and 60s challenge segregation and the Jim Crow legal system that supported it, a time when by public demand public university education was finally expanded in Florida beyond the old slave plantation belt in North Florida to Tampa, Orlando, Boca Raton, and Miami.

FIU was born of that struggle to bring to all Floridians an equal opportunity for a high quality public university education. Since 1976, I, those immigrants' grandson, that lawyer's son, along with President Rosenberg and thousands of other faculty and staff members, have worked to make your diploma worth more each year by making this an eminent public university, equal to any other in the state. While there is much yet to be done, FIU has been recognized as one of the finest universities founded anywhere in the world during the last 50 years.

But there is a shadow over this great progress. The heritage of North Florida, the spirit of slavery, segregation and Jim Crow, has spread again across Florida. Access to the ballot box has been curtailed, laws protecting the rights of working people to their wages have been repealed, urban public schools have been

disadvantaged, and support for the urban public universities has shriveled while tens of millions of our tax dollars have been set aside to help two pillars of the old plantation belt and the Jim Crow system, the University of Florida and Florida State University, achieve something called pre-eminence.

As we have been laboring to make this university equal to the others in Florida, we have educated you for something better than second-class citizenship in a Jim Crow system. In the classical humanist tradition that goes back to the ancient Romans and runs from Cicero through Quintilian, Moses Maimonides, Ignatius Loyola, and Erasmus, we have educated you to be good persons skilled in effective communication of worthy goals, dedicated to and engaged in the promotion of the common good of society, able to govern justly and mercifully.

Let us make Florida in our lifetimes a state where the sunshine of equal justice, equal opportunity, and equal access to an equally high quality public education at all levels shines on all.

Thank you.