

The Willful Blindness of Reactionary Liberalism

The critics of progressive identity politics have got it all wrong: They're the illiberal ones.



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It was always a given that 2020 would be a year to remember. Even so, it continues to surprise. It seems likely that June will go down as one of the pivotal months of our political era, a period when our streets, our press, and some of our major institutions were rocked by the force of progressive identity politics. Conversations over the implications of all that's

happened in recent weeks will continue for some time. One of the more active debates is whether our recent social controversies should be seen as further evidence for the advent of what the writer Wesley Yang has called a “successor ideology” that might supplant liberalism altogether.

This was the conclusion of an essay on upheaval in the media from journalist Matt Taibbi. “The leaders of this new movement are replacing traditional liberal beliefs about tolerance, free inquiry, and even racial harmony with ideas so toxic and unattractive that they eschew debate, moving straight to shaming, threats, and intimidation,” he wrote. “They are counting on the guilt-ridden, self-flagellating nature of traditional American progressives, who will not stand up for themselves, and will walk to the Razor voluntarily.” In another recent essay, *New York*’s Andrew Sullivan charged that progressives now believe “the liberal system is itself a form of white supremacy” and that “liberalism’s core values and institutions cannot be reformed and can only be dismantled.”

Versions of this argument have been circulating for over half a decade now. In a 2015 piece, *New York*’s Jonathan Chait warned readers to take a series of then-recent campus controversies seriously. “The upsurge of political correctness is not just greasy-kid stuff, and it’s not just a bunch of weird, unfortunate events that somehow keep happening over and over,” he wrote. “It’s the expression of a political culture with consistent norms, and philosophical premises that happen to be incompatible with liberalism.”

Now, it really would be quite remarkable if American students and activists had, within the space of five or so years, constructed or wandered into a real and novel alternative to the dominant political ideology of the last few centuries. But they haven’t. The tensions we’ve seen lately have been internal to liberalism for ages: between those who take the associative nature of liberal society seriously and those who are determined not to. It is the former group, the defenders of progressive identity politics, who in fact are protecting—indeed expanding—the bounds of liberalism. And it is the latter group, the reactionaries, who are most guilty of the illiberalism they claim has overtaken the American Left.

The word “liberalism” has grown many bizarre and contradictory appendages and meanings over the years, particularly in the United States, but the original ideas central to it are fairly clear. Liberalism is an ideology of the individual. Its first principle is that each and every person in society is possessed of a fundamental dignity and can claim certain ineradicable rights and freedoms. Liberals believe, too, in government by consent and the rule of law: The state cannot exercise wholly arbitrary power, and its statutes bind all equally.

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because liberals have come to take it entirely for granted.

Overall, the liberal ideal is a diverse, pluralistic society of autonomous people guided by reason and tolerance. The dream is harmonious coexistence. But liberalism also happens to excel at generating dissensus, and some of the major sociopolitical controversies of the past few years should be understood as conflicts not between liberalism and something else but between parties placing emphasis on different liberal freedoms—chiefly freedom of speech, a popular favorite which needs no introduction, and freedom of association, the under-heralded right of individuals to unite for a common purpose or in alignment with a particular set of values. Like free speech, freedom of association has been enshrined in liberal democratic jurisprudence here and across the world; liberal theorists from John Stuart Mill to John Rawls have declared it one of the essential human liberties. Yet associative freedom is often entirely absent from popular discourse about liberalism and our political debates, perhaps because liberals have come to take it entirely for granted.

For instance, while public universities in America are generally bound by the First Amendment, controversial speakers have no broad right to speak at private institutions. Those institutions do, however, have a right to decide what ideas they are and aren't interested in entertaining and what people they believe will or will not be useful to their communities of scholars—a right that limits the entry and participation not only of public figures with controversial views but the vast majority of people in our society. Senators like Tom Cotton have every right to have their views published in a newspaper. But they have no specific right to have those views published by any *particular* publication. Rather, publications have the right—both constitutionally as institutions of the press, and by convention as collections of individuals engaged in lawful projects—to decide what and whom they would or would not like to publish, based on whatever standards happen to prevail within each outlet.

When a speaker is denied or when staffers at a publication argue that something should not have been published, the *rights* of the parties in question haven't been violated in any way. But what we tend to hear in these and similar situations are criticisms that are at odds with the principle that groups in liberal society have the general right to commit themselves to values which many might disagree with and make decisions on that basis. There's nothing unreasonable about criticizing the substance of such decisions and the values that produce them. But accusations of “illiberalism” in these cases carry the implication that nonstate institutions under liberalism have an obligation of some sort to be maximally permissive of opposing ideas—or at least maximally permissive of the kinds of ideas critics of progressive identity politics consider important. In fact, they do not.

Associative freedom is no less vital to liberalism than the other freedoms, and is actually integral to their functioning. There isn't a right explicitly enumerated in the First Amendment that isn't implicitly dependent on or augmented by similarly minded

individuals having the right to come together. Most people worship with others; an assembly or petition of one isn't worth much; the institutions of the press are, again, associations; and individual speech is functionally inert unless some group chooses to offer a venue or a platform. And political speech is, in the first place, generally aimed at stirring some group or constituency to contemplation or action.

Ultimately, associative freedom is critical because groups and associations are the very building blocks of society. Political parties and unions, nonprofits and civic organizations, whole religions and whole ideologies—individuals cannot be meaningfully free unless they have the freedom to create, make themselves part of, and define these and other kinds of affiliations. Some of our affiliations, including the major identity categories, are involuntary, and this is among the complications that makes associative freedom as messy as it is important. Just as the principle of free speech forces us into debates over hate speech, obscenity, and misinformation, association is the root of identity-based discrimination and other ills. The Supreme Court's decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County* banning employment discrimination on the basis of LGBTQ identity last month was a huge step forward, but in practice, workers of all stripes often lack the means and opportunity to defend themselves from unjust firings—all the more reason for those preoccupied with “cancel culture” and social media-driven dismissals to support just-cause provisions and an end to at-will employment.

What about the oft-repeated charge that progressives today intend to establish “group rights” over and above the rights of the individual—that, specifically, minorities and certain disadvantaged groups are to be given more rights than, and held as superior to, white people? If this were the case, the critics of left “illiberalism” would truly be onto something: Individual rights are, again, at the center of liberal thought.

The goal is parity, not superiority.

But that divergence isn't anywhere to be found in any of the major controversies that have recently captured broad attention. A minority chef who says she wants to be paid as much as her white colleagues has not said that white people are inferior; an unarmed black man under the knee of a policeman and begging for his life is not asking to be conferred a special privilege. The goal is parity, not superiority. The heart of the protests and cultural agitation we've witnessed has clearly been a desire to see minorities treated equally—sharing the rights to which all people are entitled but that have been denied to many by society's extant bigots and the residual effects of injustices past.

Ultimately, it's the realities of our collective past that make the notion that progressives are dragging the country toward illiberalism especially ridiculous. Over the course of two and a half centuries in this country, millions of human beings held as property toiled for the

comfort and profit of already wealthy people who tortured and raped them. Just over 150 years ago, the last generation of slaves was released into systems of subjugation from which its descendants have not recovered. August will mark just 100 years since women were granted the right to vote; Black Americans, nominally awarded that right during Reconstruction, couldn't take full advantage of it until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. The litany of other inequities and crimes our country has perpetrated and continues to perpetrate against Native Americans, immigrants, religious and sexual minorities, political dissidents, and the poor is endless. All told, liberal society in the U.S. is, at best, just over half a century old: If it were a person, it would be too young to qualify for Medicare.

Critics of progressive identity politics frequently argue that progressives seem congenitally incapable of recognizing the progress our country has made. But to take that progress seriously is to recognize that much of what has recently been dubbed progressive illiberalism these past few weeks and years has been the stirring of a diverse nation at what is inarguably liberalism's zenith. Any given vandal taking down a statue of Grant or Lincoln or Washington is more committed to the cardinal liberal principles than any of those leaders were; most Americans today take the rights and autonomy of minorities and women entirely for granted, and they simply did not. Our noble defenders of historical statuary will continue to argue loudly that they *could* not, and issue complaints about holding the major figures of our past to today's standards, our need for heroes to venerate, and all the rest. But whether or not one agrees, our social tumult should be seen, on balance, as evidence of our country's movement forward—toward the liberal ideal and not away from it. One cannot claim otherwise without doing violence to a morbid, violent history.

That history isn't finished with us; the material disadvantages facing minorities remain grotesque. The net worth of the median white family was roughly 10 times the net worth of the median Black family in 2016; *The New York Times*' David Leonhardt wrote recently that the wage gap between white and Black men remains roughly as large as it was in 1950. Then there are all the challenges that sit atop material disadvantage, which shouldn't actually imply that they are prior in importance, even if they appear to occupy the bulk of the media's attention at times. But until policymakers get serious about making them economically whole, and inevitably long after they do, minorities making their way through the world will have to contend with an inescapable reality: Even absent conscious animus, white people can be blind to the way their actions impact minorities and the barriers they continue to face.

That isn't a problem that can be addressed by law or within formal politics: All we can do here is think critically about our personal lives, our culture, and the places where we live and work and consider how we might make them more equitable—from making meaningful efforts to hire, admit, or represent the historically underrepresented to

establishing norms that ensure they can be heard and respected. Obviously, these are the subjects most grating to critics of progressive identity politics; at this point, their grievances against affirmative action, in particular, are both well-known and well-worn and will not be relitigated here. Far more interesting is the reactionary turn against etiquette.

Not long ago, conservative columnists moaned endlessly about the decline of manners and patriarchal chivalry—killed off, they grumbled, by the feminists and “relativists” of the left. Naturally, now that we’ve arrived at what is functionally the Appomattox of the twentieth century’s culture wars, we’re urgently being told by a new set of elite thinkers that customs and mores are inherently dangerous and incompatible with the liberal project.

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In his essay last month, Chait charged that progressives now “interpret political debates as pitting the interests of opposing groups rather than opposing ideas.” But that, at bottom, is what political debates are. Ideas don’t float into the political arena on their own. They’re advanced by people shaped by particular backgrounds and a thicket of material and social interests. That doesn’t mean that ideas can’t be knocked down on their own merits or that truly individual selves can’t be recovered or created when people are unburdened from the weight of limiting circumstance. What it does mean is that people should not be pathologized or condescended to for banding together to make particular claims or defend particular values. This is the root of not only identity politics but all political activity. It is what we are all doing all the time.

Inevitably, the new wave of progressive identity politics has produced and will continue to produce overreach and excesses. Will there be genuine crises? Well, within living memory, the fringes on the left and within the civil rights movement took up arms to make themselves ready for a hot war with the rest of American society. It seems likely that society can sustain toppled statues and rechristened institutions.

How should we refer to these new, committed critics of progressive identity politics? A few weeks ago, *The New York Times*’ Bari Weiss included many of them in the discourse in a three-tweet [thread](#) recommending writers and thinkers for those “looking for people to explain this moment.” It was Weiss who famously [dubbed](#) a particular cadre of these figures the “Intellectual Dark Web” in 2018. That name, a clunker even then, simply won’t do for the group as a whole now. For starters, there’s nothing particularly dark or inaccessible about major publications like *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, where their writings or the substance of their opinions are often found. The phrase also seems to imply it’s merely describing a scene or a location for certain debates, when Weiss had actually identified the

leading lights of a particular ideological disposition—one we might call “reactionary liberalism.”

It’s “reactionary” liberalism not just because many of the figures in this sphere happen to be right of center on certain social issues, but also because they are incredibly reactive. Viral stories and anecdotal data that people focused on the major issues of our day might consider marginal are, for Weiss and her ideological peers, the central crises of contemporary politics: If Twitter were to shut down tomorrow, most of their political world and its concerns would simply vanish. That’s not to say that their preoccupations now aren’t undergirded by certain fundamental commitments—for one, they are devoutly attached to distinctly American speech norms, which they understand as essential to liberalism and the main barriers separating free society from Stalinesque repression.

Ask them to explain how liberal democracy has managed to thrive in Europe, a continent where laws against hate speech and Holocaust denial are common, or how New Zealand has retained a “chief censor” for decades without becoming a totalitarian state, and they’d likely be unable to, if they chose to respond at all. The point here is not that the speech regimes of other countries are better than our own—there are, in fact, many reasons why contemporary American permissiveness may indeed be the best—but that reactionary liberalism denies nuance and the very existence of other reasonable perspectives on these and related questions, hence the charge that their progressive opponents are, again in Chait’s words, pushing ideas “incompatible” with liberalism.

Slippery slope thinking, fallacious to most, is the reactionary liberal’s primary means of understanding the world around them, and their tendency to catastrophize produces a state of alarm about the spread of dangerous ideas as constant and hysterical as the stereotypical liberal arts student’s. Thus, *White Fragility*, the widely criticized and lampooned book by social justice educator Robin DiAngelo, can be characterized by Matt Taibbi as not merely counterproductive, misguided, or even harmful but actually “Hitlerian.” More broadly, the attention we’re now paying to the legacy of bigoted laws and institutions and inadvertent slights against minorities can be described by Andrew Sullivan as utilizing arguments “incredibly close to the language once used against Jews,” transmogrified by bad faith into the notion that all white people are intrinsically and immutably evil.

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This isn’t a mindset conducive to rational discourse. And reactionary liberals are actually no more invested in the ideal of a marketplace of ideas governed wholly by reason than anyone else. All of their supposed enthusiasm for debate and heterodoxy is typically

marshaled in defense of a handful of opinions—on transgender identity, feminist sexual politics, and the nature of racial disadvantage—which, far from having been chased into some intellectually “dark” corner, are relatively common and largely shared by the most politically powerful people in America today.

They also share an incuriosity about history and its actual implications. At times, it can seem that the past is useful to them primarily as a source for wild allusions: to the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials, and so on. It would be a bit more difficult to carry on as they do if they were genuinely informed by it. For instance, the idea that a cluster of controversies at college campuses here and there could foretell the end of the liberal university, or liberalism, or the West simply isn’t credible to those who understand the remarkably cyclical nature of student unrest and protest in this country over the last century.

Similarly, the residual effects of systemic bigotry are easier to understand and take seriously if one appreciates how historically recent straightforward racial subjugation and discrimination are. The efforts to hand-wave that history away can be unintentionally enlightening. Five years ago, the *Times*’ David Brooks wrote about Ta-Nehisi Coates’s then-recent memoir *Between the World and Me*—one of the works shaping the latest installment of our ongoing National Conversation about race. The column itself was, from its very title (“Listening to Ta-Nehisi Coates While White”), an early example of a now common discursive mode.

Brooks began his review generously, writing that the book had been “a great and searing contribution” to race discourse and “a mind-altering account of the black male experience.” But he came away with reservations. “I suppose the first obligation is to sit with it, to make sure the testimony is respected and sinks in,” he wrote. “But I have to ask, am I displaying my privilege if I disagree? Is my job just to respect your experience and accept your conclusions? Does a white person have standing to respond?” This last question was almost surreal in its condescension—what should one make of the notion, presented several paragraphs into his twice-weekly column for the paper of record, that David Brooks would have to request permission to enter a debate simply for being white? He didn’t, of course, so his response shortly followed.

This country, like each person in it, is a mixture of glory and shame. There’s a Lincoln for every Jefferson Davis and a Harlem Children’s Zone for every K.K.K. — and usually vastly more than one. Violence is embedded in America, but it is not close to the totality of America....

The American dream of equal opportunity, social mobility and ever more perfect democracy cherishes the future more than the past. It abandons old wrongs and transcends old sins for the sake of a better tomorrow. This dream is

a secular faith that has unified people across every known divide. It has unleashed ennobling energies and mobilized heroic social reform movements. By dissolving the dream under the acid of an excessive realism, you trap generations in the past and destroy the guiding star that points to a better future.

“Excessive realism”—a remarkable phrase in the service of a remarkable argument. Visceral and unsparing accounts of American history and contemporary inequity are condemnable not because they are wrong per se, Brooks suggested, but because their accuracy might be disillusioning. Historically and empirically grounded as they might be, they risk attenuating our sense of ourselves as already liberated individuals ready to scale the meritocratic ladder capitalism has set out for us.

One testament to the power of those accounts is that they’ve worked on David Brooks. He wrote a column endorsing reparations for slavery and explaining his conversion on the issue last year, and in a piece last month titled “How Moderates Failed Black America,” he recommended the work of writers like Frank Wilderson—who has argued that “the spectacle of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world”—for insight as to how deeply and justifiably faith in the American dream has collapsed among many Black people. “The gospel of the American dream teaches that as people make it in America they will feel more accepted by America, more at home in America,” Brooks wrote. “This is not happening for many African-Americans.”

Reactionary liberalism offers us few useful ideas for how we might truly move the country forward.

It isn’t happening because the ladder of American meritocracy is, in fact, a busted drainpipe. And reactionary liberalism offers us few useful ideas for how we might truly move the country forward. While progressive activists believe American society comprises intelligible, if often hidden, systems of movable parts, the reactionary liberal urges us to see it instead as a jumble of bits and pieces—a muddle that defies both systematic understanding and collective action, and which the atomized individual is better off wading through on their own. This is the suspicion of collective consciousness seemingly at the heart of elite preoccupation with “tribalism” and “polarization”; it is the source of the universal tendency of reactionary liberals to label the criticisms they face on the internet as the work of rampaging “mobs” animated by “groupthink.”

The ideological implications of this mindset can be read between the lines of Andrew Sullivan’s recent piece on the *Bostock* decision, which, he argued, toppled “the last major obstacle to civil equality for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people.” “This comprehensive victory obviously presents the major institutions of the gay-rights

movement with a dilemma,” he mused. “What do they exist for after this? What conceivable project is now worth the huge amounts of money that sustains these groups?”

Well, for starters, the problem of nonemployment discrimination against LGBTQ people remains unresolved even if *Bostock* makes it likely that the courts will continue to expand protections over time. And again, even those who would have solid standing in suits over LGBTQ discrimination might not have the means to actually bring those cases. All of this sits atop other material and social inequities LGBTQ people will surely continue to face for some time. Nevertheless, in Sullivan’s view, the work of activists is essentially over, and the problems that remain are trivial.

Bullying will never go away; nor will calling people names; nor grotesque generalizations about an entire group of people. Nor, for that matter, personal insecurity and self-doubt. But the answer to this is not deepening an embrace of victimhood, but developing the strength to withstand these slurs, to pity the bigoted rather than be intimidated by them. As Eleanor Roosevelt is believed to have said: “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

One of the remarkable truths of gay history is how so many, under social and legal pressures exponentially greater than today, were able to withhold that consent. They were objectively victims, but subjectively free.

Here again, as with Brooks, we see the “objective” and materially real supplanted by a putatively productive idealism. Those who felt inferior even when civil equality was a distant dream, it’s implied, simply lacked individual resolve. For Sullivan, the problems of identity are primarily matters of individual grit—struggles that can be overcome largely by mental exercise. And efforts to construct or draw upon a politics of mutual empathy should be understood as signs of weakness—hence his lament, elsewhere in the piece, over the possibility that the major LGBTQ advocacy groups “will simply merge into the broader intersectional left and become as concerned with, say, the rights of immigrants or racial minorities as they are with gay rights.”

The general tenor of these arguments should be familiar. The rhetoric of toughening up and relying on individual willpower also features not only in our discourses about racism and sexism but in our debates about the plight of the working class and the poor. This is the ideological ground reactionary liberalism emerges from, and given this, the folly of believing identity politics can be conceptually detached from our other concerns should be plain. What is ultimately at stake in our debates about identity is the very principle of solidarity.

One might imagine that opposing the reactionary liberal project would unite the American left. But the last several weeks of identity political debates have led some to odd places. Much of Matt Taibbi's essay on the recent controversies in journalism, for instance, is spent berating staffers at various publications for launching "internal uprisings" against their bosses. "*The New York Times*, the Intercept, Vox, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Variety*, and others," he noted ominously, "saw challenges to management." It would be a strange thing for the left if its major thinkers got used to deriding workers demanding changes to how their firms are run. Giving workers the power to democratically establish what is important to them and run firms themselves—goals of the democratic socialist project—would mean giving workers the power to make firm-level decisions, including identity political decisions, with which outside observers might disagree.

Within the present economy, more and more companies are beginning to make strategic and superficial concessions on race and other issues. How important can a movement be, it's often been asked, if the most heinous corporations and institutions in the world can glom onto it and earn praise for meaningless statements and gestures? But it's not obvious why those efforts should call the value of identity politics into question any more than panels on inequality at Davos, or the right-wing presidency of a man who ran on protecting workers from the predations of financial and corporate elites should raise doubts about the legitimacy of class politics. The powers that be wouldn't attempt to take advantage of and redirect the energies of these ideas if they weren't already potent and compelling.

It should be said that when driven by activists and their communities, even symbolic action can be productive. For one, it can help groups understand and organize themselves as political constituencies with a certain amount of power. And the ideas driving symbolic action matter. It is true, for instance, that pulling down a Confederate monument does absolutely nothing in itself to improve the material position of any struggling person in this country. But our debates over monuments have really been debates about how we should understand our history, and they seem to be succeeding in advancing a sense that the roots of racial disadvantage are very old and very deep—undermining arguments that inequality can be meaningfully addressed by incremental economic policy and individual determination.

Socialists have always been best positioned, ideologically, to test the commitments of liberals to their own first principles.

Socialists have always been best positioned, ideologically, to challenge those arguments and test the commitments of liberals to their own first principles. While it may be just to posit that each person has a fundamental dignity and certain rights, they contend, true autonomy, if it is possible at all, is surely a fiction under the domination of capital. Moreover, they argue, the democratic rights that we tell ourselves we possess in the political realm are nowhere to be found in the places where we spend most of our lives and

attempt to secure the material resources our lives depend on: at work under the arbitrary, unaccountable authority of bosses and managers.

As such, leftists are the very last people who need to be reminded that corporate P.R. is just P.R.; press releases are not actually going to satisfy those intent on fully remaking the economy, and socialists who take the concerns motivating Black Lives Matter seriously have been among the strongest critics of what some have called the “anti-racism industry” that suggests inequality can be remedied *primarily* by self-help—the nicer side of the same small coin as grin-and-bear-it individualism. That realm of discourse can be challenged without belittling underrepresentation and personal indignities or denying that they can have material consequences.

As we work through what to make of the successes of progressive identity politics, we shouldn’t forget that progressive identity politics were not supposed to succeed. Not long ago, critics predicted that as legitimate as the core grievances motivating activists were, dust-ups on campus, rhetoric condemning “white supremacy,” and property destruction accompanying protests against police violence would ultimately alienate the broader public and prevent ordinary people from joining identity political causes. It is empirically plain now that these arguments were wrong and that the past several years of activism have produced a large and rapid positive shift in American public opinion. We will spend many years working through how it happened, but one factor already seems crucial: The critics of progressive identity politics were not only unpersuasive but fundamentally uninterested in persuasion. Even now, white liberals sympathetic to Black Lives Matter are disdained and mocked, and those most committed to denouncing the zealous rhetoric of progressive activists have never paused to assess the effectiveness of their own histrionics.

The failure of these critics has only deepened their sense of themselves as martyrs—the last disciples of the one, true liberalism, who will be vindicated once a grand backlash against progressives finally arrives. There are good reasons to believe it won’t: Cultural antagonism on the right will continue to drive middle-of-the road Americans away, and progressive millennials and Gen-Zers will continue aging into the center of American politics and American life. But for all the positive changes we’ve seen and will continue to see in the consciousness of the American people, progressives are still far from being able to declare victory. The material work of creating a just society has barely begun.

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