Upon being named a member of the *New York Times* editorial board earlier this year, Sarah Jeong immediately became that greatest of rarities, a famous editorialist. The experience almost certainly left her nostalgic for obscurity. It turned out that Jeong—who attended the University of California, Berkeley, and Harvard Law School before becoming a journalist specializing in technology and the internet—had an active Twitter account, with over 97,000 followers. Readers who examined its archives brought to the public’s attention some of Jeong’s most interesting reflections:

- “Dumbass f***ing white people marking up the internet with their opinions like dogs pissing on fire hydrants.”
- It’s “kind of sick how much joy I get out of being cruel to old white men.”
- I’m “just imagining being white and waking up every morning with a terrible existential dread about how I have no culture.” (Jeong was born in South Korea in 1988 and emigrated at the age of three when her parents came to the United States to study. She became a U.S. citizen in 2017.)
- “Are white people genetically predisposed to burn faster in the sun, thus logically only being fit to live underground like groveling bilious goblins?”
- Those who attacked *Rolling Stone*’s (subsequently discredited) story about a sexual assault at a University of Virginia fraternity house did so because they “couldn’t believe nice white college boys were monsters.” The skeptics simply “channeled established rape culture responses.”
- “Have you ever tried to figure out all the things that white people are allowed to do that aren’t cultural appropriation? There’s literally nothing.”
- “The world could get by just fine with zero white people.”

Journalist Nick Monroe catalogued much, much more in this vein, written from 2013 to 2017. In response to a sudden uproar over Jeong’s postings, she and the *Times* each issued a statement the day after her appointment was announced. The new editorial hire didn’t really mean the harsh things she had written, both declared. Other people had started it by goading her. Now older and wiser, she would express herself less acerbically in the future.

It wasn’t much of an alibi, but at least the employee and employer got their stories straight. “As a woman of color on the internet, I have faced torrents of online hate,” Jeong’s statement read. “I engaged in what I thought of at the time as counter-trolling. While it was intended as satire, I deeply regret that I mimicked the language of my harassers.” She now understands “how hurtful these posts are out of context,” and would not write them again.

Monroe’s curation made clear, however, that Jeong’s flamethrower verbiage, read in context, rarely satirized or mimicked anyone...
in particular. Nevertheless, the paper’s statement took the same tack: “For a period of time,” Jeong responded to online harassment “by imitating the rhetoric of her harassers. She sees now that this approach only served to feed the vitriol that we too often see on social media. She regrets it, and the Times does not condone it.” Furthermore, “She understands that this type of rhetoric is not acceptable at the Times.”

To Name and Shame

The tone of disappointed forbearance with a misguided employee doesn’t allay the suspicion that the Times kinda does condone and accept Jeong’s rhetoric. The paper doesn’t equivocate or hesitate when it really can’t abide one of its employee’s social media posts. Earlier this year the Times, upon discovering that she had previously written racist and homophobic tweets, fired technology journalist Quinn Norton from its editorial page during her first day on the payroll. Norton’s claim that she had simply used the argot of the people she debated on Twitter—an excuse very similar to Jeong’s—didn’t save her job.

The Times is also unhesitant in calling out social media writings it doesn’t condone or accept, even when the perpetrators have no association with the newspaper. The week before Jeong’s hiring, Times sportswriter Michael Powell denounced Josh Hader, a pitcher for Major League Baseball’s Milwaukee Brewers, for posting such “hideous thoughts” on his Twitter account as “White Power” and “I hate gay people.” The tweets came to light this summer, even though Hader wrote them six years ago, when he was in high school.

For Powell, these considerations were not exculpatory: “A 17-year-old can drive or serve in the military, and is a year away from voting. That does not describe a child.” (The tweets Jeong apologized for had been written in her late 20s, after she completed law school.) Nor does Powell adjust his moral calculus for the fact that athletes rarely express their opinions. Instead, Powell demanded: “From what “our” and “we,” but doesn’t really need to. It clearly encompasses the like-minded people who dominate American journalism, education, and culture, both low- and highbrow. From their various platforms, they have delivered jeremiads every day since November 8, 2016, decrying Trump’s victory as a civic and organizational catastrophe, not just a political occurrence. The cultural power possessed by this social stratum, the milieu that nurtured and elevated Sarah Jeong, is indeed formidable. It is the power to name and shame, and right now cultural power is all we have.”

West doesn’t spell out who constitutes her “our” and “we,” but doesn’t really need to. It clearly encompasses the like-minded people who dominate American journalism, education, and culture, both low- and highbrow. From their various platforms, they have delivered jeremiads every day since November 8, 2016, decrying Trump’s victory as a civic and organizational catastrophe, not just a political occurrence. The cultural power possessed by this social stratum, the milieu that nurtured and elevated Sarah Jeong, is indeed formidable. It is the power to name and shame, to demand abject apologies, to obliterate reputations and careers. It is brought to bear against people accused of violating rules, often vague but always severe, about what may or may not be said, and who may or may not say it.

Cultural power, like power in general, becomes more dangerous in the absence of clear principles and goals. Without them, its exercise adheres to no strictures beyond the political tactics and evolving moral sensibilities of the powerful people who wield it. Pointing out and fighting to eradicate racism, West contends, “is how we build the racism-free world that all but racists profess to want.” That sounds more purposeful than plenary cultural power, with fewer dangers of being abused or exercised without limits... until one wonders the status, in West’s racism-free world, of Jeong’s tweets about white people. After racism is eradicated, will such sentiments and expressions be denounced as hideous? Met with the measured disapproval conveyed by the Times’s gentle reprimand of her? Or celebrated as exactly the kind of bold rhetoric needed to override centuries of oppression?

Before dismissing this final possibility, take note of Sarah Jeong’s most vigorous defenders, who denounced the Times for conceding that she had written anything that merited apology or regret. They called it unfair, absurd even, to find Jeong’s greatest hits objectionable, or to criticize them by imagining how they would be received if the word “black,” for example, were substituted every time she had used “white.” Libby Watson of the news and opinion website Splinter wrote that the tweets “were not racist,” merely “jokes about white people.” She went on to insist that making identically worded jokes about “any other historically oppressed minority” would be hateful because whites in the U.S., unlike other groups targeted for discrimination, “have never been systematically oppressed on the basis of their race alone.” Similarly, Slate staff writer Inkoo Kang wrote: “When people of color rail against white people, that’s often shorthand for speaking out against the existing racial structure that serves to keep white people in power.”

The most expansive brief for Jeong was advanced by Vox’s Zach Beauchamp, who found it “unfathomable” that so many people equated “the expressive way antiracists and minorities talk about ‘white people’ with actual race-based hatred.” He went on to argue that the discourse of what he calls the “social justice left” employs the term “white people” to “capture the way that many whites still act in clueless and/or racist ways,” as well as to “point

Books discussed in this essay:

Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?, by Martin Luther King, Jr. Beacon Press, 256 pages, $24.95 (cloth), $16 (paper)
Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. NYU Press, 188 pages, $89 (cloth), $19 (paper)
Developing New Perspectives on Race: An Innovative Multi-media Social Studies Curriculum in Racism Awareness for the Secondary Level, by Patricia Bidol-Padva. New Perspective on Race, 79 pages, out-of-print
Portraits of White Racism, by David T. Wellman. Cambridge University Press, 276 pages, $57.99 (paper)
White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism, by Robin DiAngelo. Beacon Press, 192 pages, $16 (paper)
out [how] a power structure that favors white people continues to exist.” (James Taranto of the Wall Street Journal noted that Beauchamp was, in effect, calling on readers to take Jeong’s tweets seriously but not literally.)

Sarah Jeong’s Twitter account not only made her famous, then, but set off a controversy that introduced a large portion of the public to the social justice Left’s language and objectives. Most importantly, it brought to the public square a particular understanding of the word “racism,” one previously unfamiliar to most people outside academia. As employed by Jeong and her defenders, “racism” condemns things that most people consider to be untainted by bigotry, while endorsing other things that strike most people as, well, racist.

Defining Racism

The definitional question is politically important. Because social justice leftists declare eradicating racism to be their highest, most urgent aspiration, it’s imperative to understand that term as they understand it. Absent such clarity, it will be impossible to ask rigorous, consequential questions about the contours of the world the Left wants to build.

More immediately, it is impossible to sort out quotidian political language in 21st-century America without examining how “racism” is deployed. As matters stand, “racist” is one of the most common, most severe accusations made against a person, but is at the same time among the vaguest terms in our political lexicon. The resulting discourse, confused and arbitrary, is far removed from the public debate we need, one that will be frank, fair, clarifying, and productive.

To rejoin in just two examples from an ocean full of them, Slate’s chief political correspondent, Jamelle Bouie, required only one week after the 2016 election to announce that he had lost patience with anyone who doubted the racism of Americans who had voted for Donald Trump. Any solicitude “in defense of Trump supporters—who voted for a racist who promised racist outcomes—is perverse, bordering on abhorrent.” Bouie doesn’t mention, and cannot account for, the fact that Trump did a bit better with black and Hispanic voters than other recent Republican presidential nominees. Indeed, the meaning of 2016 holds no complexities for him at all. “Trump campaigned on state repression of disfavored minorities,” he wrote. “If you voted for Trump, you voted for this, regardless of what you believe about the groups in question.”

In the same spirit, the Washington Post’s Erik Wemple recently declared that it was racist for Tucker Carlson of Fox News to cast doubt on the proposition that diversity is good—so good that we must not even ask whether it entails costs that should be weighed against its benefits. “How, precisely, is diversity our strength?” Carlson asked on air in September 2018. “Can you think of other institutions, such as marriage or military units, in which the less people have in common, the more cohesive they are?”

Wemple might have noted that, around the world, there are diverse beliefs about diversity: Japan, for example, is famous for its commitment to ethnic and cultural homogeneity. As a matter of conviction and circumstance, America has always placed a higher value on heterogeneity, but even America emphasized the assimilation of immigrants in a “melting pot.” Instead, Wemple’s indictment boiled down to the claim that Carlson “sticks up for white people all the time on his [television] program, in ways that just so happen to appeal to racists.” QED, he is himself a racist, or at least his questioning of diversity is an expression of racism.

Such uses of “racist” are not intended to shed light, guide the perplexed, or persuade the undecided. They are, rather, allegations meant to delegitimize political opponents, devices to shut down debate rather than efforts to win it.

And they take us very far from the definitions given in modern dictionaries. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “racism” means: “a belief that one’s own racial or ethnic group is superior, or that other such groups represent a threat to one’s cultural identity, racial integrity, or economic well-being.” Furthermore, this relatively new word—the first example OED offers is from 1903—denotes prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against people of other racial or ethnic groups.” The first definition offered by the Merriam Webster Dictionary stresses the same elements: “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.”

In Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (1967), Martin Luther King, Jr., described racism by relying on the same concept of intergroup animosity and disdain. He favorably cites one book’s definition: “the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to hereditary inferiority and another group is destined to hereditary superiority.” In his own voice, King was more polemical than clinical, but described racism similarly, as “the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission.”

Such characterizations are fully congruent with the idea that the civil rights movement, of which King was the most prominent leader, was dedicated to purging racism from Americans’ political and social relations. In his famous 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, for example, King called on America to “make real the promises of democracy” by granting blacks their “citizenship rights.” At the same time, he wanted to replace discord with “a beautiful symphony of brotherhood,” wherein “all of God’s children will be able to ‘work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to work for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”

By these standards, to assert that white people have no culture, or that the world could get along fine without them, is an expression of racism, reflecting antagonism against members of a particular racial group, which is held to be inferior to one’s own and others. By contrast, to question the proposition that diversity is always a national strength, to point out the countervailing benefits of mutual understanding, shared assumptions, and cohesion, is to commit no offense other than offering a contestable proposition. Doing so is very different, however, from expressing discrimination or prejudice against a racial or ethnic group, particularly since Tucker Carlson was clearly preoccupied with the role cultural and linguistic unity play in strengthening a society.

Created Unequal?

Nevertheless, in the eyes of social justice leftists, who are coming to dominate American liberalism’s thoughts, words, and deeds, Carlson is a racist for questioning diversity, but Sarah Jeong is not a racist—is, indeed, an anti-racist—for repeatedly disparaging white people. Despite the fact that hostile thoughts and sentiments about other groups are central to dictionaries’ definitions of racism, Jamelle Bouie pronounces the presence or absence of these at-
titudes irrelevant to the question of whether a person is a racist.

How to account for this new use of “racism”? The linguistic change tracks political change. As Black Power advocates rejected the civil rights movement goals of integration, brotherhood, and equal citizenship, King spent the final years of his life on the defensive. Following his assassination in 1968, the conviction that racial politics needed to be about other, bigger things—difficult to specify but morally urgent—came to dominate leftist and academic analysis.

A related phenomenon was the “persistence of racial inequality and racial discrimination in an era of declining overtly racist attitudes,” in the words of sociologists Matthew Clair and Jeffrey Denis. If the civil rights movement had proven more virulent and subtle than previously assumed. Activists and scholars began to reject the older understanding of racism, “a set of overt individual-level attitudes,” according to Clair and Denis, in favor of a broader sense encompassing “implicit biases and processes that are constructed, sustained, and enacted at both micro- and macro-levels” in ways that “perpetuate racial inequality.” Efforts that took shape in the 1970s, particularly Critical Race Theory, dissolved the distinction between activism and scholarship, eagerly embracing this broader understanding of racism. In its view, as summarized in Critical Race Theory: An Introduction (2001), by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, “racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status. Racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best schools, and invitations to parties in people’s homes.”

In Developing New Perspectives on Race (1970), the academic psychologist Patricia Bidol-Padva appears to have been the first to distill these thoughts and sentiments into the declaration that racism equal prejudice plus power. This alternative definition, a sharp departure from the older understanding still employed by most Americans, has gained wide acceptance within social science academic disciplines, especially in the more recently created “victimhood studies” departments. For social justice leftists indoctrinated in this viewpoint, it is now self-evident that racism has nothing to do with a person’s attitudes about racial groups, and everything to do with where one stands on questions of redistributive justice among such groups.

The words of one blogger reflect the resultant bullying certitude: “Your first step is to accept that ‘a hatred or intolerance of another race’ is not the definition of racism. The dictionary is wrong. Get over it.” (“When I use a word,” said Humpty Dumpty, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”) Sarah Jeong’s advocates accused the people who attacked her of “bad faith” and merely “feigned outrage,” in the belief that those calling her a racist would have to be “willfully ignorant” of what that term now connotes.

Some of her defenders drew out broader implications of these critiques. For journalist Tiffany Drayton, writing for the pop culture website the Daily Dot, the Jeong contretemps was, as they say, a teachable moment. In a system of white supremacy, she instructed, “which is what America was founded on and continues to be, it is impossible to be truly racist against white people.” Americans of European ancestry have the power in this country, and no one else has enough to threaten them, meaning that whites are unique in possessing the capacity to be racist, while non-whites are

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precluded by historical circumstance from committing that offense. “While it is wholly possible to brand Jeong’s language inappropriate, disrespectful, and in bad taste,” Drayton writes, “it is impossible to equate it to white racism.”

In short, those people belonging to any non-white group cannot possibly be racist toward whites, while white Americans are unique in their capacity to be guilty of racism. But there’s more: whites are not only singularly capable of racism, but people unable, despite the most earnest, protracted efforts, to be innocent of it. This is the contention of Robin DiAngelo, author of the new book *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. Despite two decades spent running workshops for corporations seeking to make themselves more diverse and inclusive, DiAngelo considers herself a racist. “As a result of being raised as a white person in this society, I have a racist worldview,” she told an interviewer. “I have deep racist biases. I have developed racist patterns, and I have investments in…the system of racism that has served me so well.”

Whiteness is not a demographic category for DiAngelo, but a moral affliction. To be white in America means “not being held accountable for the pain that you cause people of color,” while also “being relentlessly reinforced in superiority.” For this secular version of original sin, there is no incarnation, resurrection, and redemption, only life-long self-examination, atonement, and renunciation.

In the assessment of journalist Cathy Young, one of Sarah Jeong’s critics, the controversy over her Twitter history shows how leftist politics is coming to be dominated by “identitarian dogma—the view that the morality of almost any given situation depends on the participants’ place in the oppression/privilege hierarchy.” This view accords with the holy war against racism declared by DiAngelo, who believes that there is “a profound anti-blackness in this culture. In the white mind, black people are the ultimate racial other.” Different minorities, such as Korean Americans, also have it bad, owing to the malevolence of white racism, but not as bad as blacks. The severity of any group’s oppression depends on the extent to which it is “white-adjacent.” These views comport with those of another Jeong defender, the *New Republic*’s Sarah Jones, who insisted that “punching up” is satire, while “punching down” is bigotry. Because Asian Americans are less powerful than European Americans, Jeong’s tweets really were satirical, but her adversaries on Twitter and during the subsequent *New York Times* controversy really were bigots.

A good place to begin evaluating the social justice Left’s redefinition of racism is to point out that power is far too variegated and complex to align so neatly with a simple racial hierarchy. By any measure, a Korean-American journalist with a J.D. from Harvard, who joins the editorial board of one of the world’s most influential media outlets, is a powerful person. The same cannot be said of the online adversaries who trolled her, or the white working-class Trump voters she berated as “literal Nazis.” Jeong, like the social justice leftists who deride the idea that her anti-white tweets were racist, wants things both ways, to exercise power while retaining the moral authority and expressive latitude that come from claiming oppression. An unemployed factory worker in the Rust Belt, by contrast, is obliged by his vast white privilege to self-censor constantly, lest some unguarded remark betray his bigotry and fortify the power structure that victimizes non-whites. If he proves too obtuse to recognize this duty, or too hateful to discharge it, that’s only further proof of racism—his and America’s.

More generally, tendentiousness and bad faith pervade the effort to replace the old understanding of racism with the new one. It is a renunciation of intellectual honesty.
and responsibility to posit that someone's words and beliefs should be evaluated, not according to whether they are factually accurate, logically sound, or morally admirable but, instead, on the basis of whether the person putting forward the idea is privileged or oppressed. The illogic of this position leads the social justice Left to demand that people ignore plain facts in front of them. It would seem, for example, that if the Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan is not an anti-Semite, then that term is meaningless. His public remarks, which include "Hitler was a very great man" and "You [the handful of Jews who control the United States] are the synagoge of Satan, and you have wrapped your tentacles around the U.S. government," and you are deceiving and sending this nation to hell" amount to game, set, and match in that particular tournament.

But if racism equals prejudice plus power, then does the same qualification apply to anti-Semitism? For activists Melissa Harris-Perry (formerly of MSNBC) and Linda Sarsour (co-chair of the 2017 Women's March), it does. They contend that since Farrakhan has no particular power imnological to Jews, his attacks on them are, politically, a nothing-bagel. "I don't thought-police people," is Harris-Perry's blithely non-judgmental stance on Farrakhan. And if another Women's March leader, Tamika Mallory, wants to praise Farrakhan—"Thank God this man is still alive and doing well. He is definitely the [Greatest of All Time]"—well, Harris-Perry isn't going to thought-police her, either.

Indeed, the social justice Left's plus-power stipulation lends itself not only to neutrality about anti-Semitism, but solicitude for it. Many bigots posit that the objects of their contempt are too intellectually limited or morally dissolute to flourish in the world. Anti-Semitism, by contrast, is one of those hatreds visited upon a group of people held to be suspiciously, inordinately successful. As such, the anti-Semite can readily believe himself to be furthering the social justice cause by bravely, satirically punching up against those possessing more power than he.

The obvious rebuke would be to tell the anti-Semite that it is both wicked and stupid to denigrate individuals for being members of particular groups defined by race, ethnicity, or religion. It's equally bad to ascribe moral blame or worthlessness to people because of qualities they have and cannot change, as opposed to choices they've made about what to believe, say, and do. As political scientist Yascha Mounk has written, Jeong's tweets and her allies' unqualified defense of them violate two of liberalism's most important principles:

that individuals should not encounter prejudiced treatment due to the group to which they happen to belong and that we should try to alleviate and oppose rather than to inflict and celebrate harm and cruelty.

There is another difficulty: the social justice Left's understanding of racism, augmented by DiAngelo's concept of white fragility, is unfalsifiable. That is to say that it, like the Marxist concept of false consciousness, is intellectually incoherent and functionally useless. As nicely summarized by Sarah Jeong in a tweet less than three months before she joined the New York Times, "I am not a racist" is now a surefire confirmation of racism.

In other words, dumbass f***ing white people accused of racism can either admit their guilt or, by denying the charge, confirm it. What they cannot do, in the Court of Social Justice, is enter a plea of not guilty and expect even a perfunctory hearing. Given this repudiation of the distinction between being accused and being guilty, a brisk paragraph by Robin DiAngelo, as opposed to an entire book, should have sufficed to explain why it's so hard to talk to white people about racism.

## The Racism Treadmill

**The intellectual dishonesty of the social justice Left's "racism" manifests itself in other ways. The reconceptualization doesn't mean that the old, widely understood sense of the word is simply banished. Rather, it lingers, allowing social justice activists to pretend that they are merely opposed to bigotry and prejudice, like all people of good will, rather than in the vanguard of a movement to effect a radical transformation, one likely to draw fierce opposition if advocated forthrightly. "The social justice left's entire modus operandi," writes Claire Lehmann of the online journal *Quillette*, "is to implement extreme positions using the language of moderate positions."

Massive reparations and expansions of affirmative action, for example, are not measures whose fairness and feasibility can be debated by decent, reasonable people. They are, instead, questions that divide racists from anti-racists, in that opposition to these policies reflects "new forms of racism that... stereotype subordinated racial groups as undeserving and thereby justify existing racial inequalities," according to Clair and Denis's summary of other social scientists' work. "Racism," then, turns out to be opposition to, or merely skepticism about, the entire social justice project. Social justice leftists doubt their ability, for the foreseeable future, to win assent to that project by advocating its merits. Instead, they attempt gains by stigmatizing its opponents.

Strategic ambiguity about the old and new understandings of racism is crucial to this effort. Very few white care to think of themselves as having anything important in common with Bull Connor or Archie Bunker. The bait-and-switch takes place when, out of a desire not to be a racist in the dictionary sense of the term, people are put on the defensive for being racist in the social justice sense of the term. Thus intimidated, they are meant to be made more amenable to the social justice cause. The problem is that bait-and-switch scams stop working when customers know in advance that the merchant is advertising one thing and selling another. As a result of the Sarah Jeong saga, many more people realize that the social justice Left's accusations about their racism employ that term in a dishonest way, one that readily accommodates Jeong's own sulfurous postings.

That is not to say that this duplicity was a well-kept secret before Jeong became famous. White Americans have been accused of racism for so many decades, by so many people, for so many different transgressions, that the accusation's power to compel regret or introspection is now severely attenuated. A precocious Columbia University undergraduate, Coleman Hughes, argues on *Quillette* that the result of this rhetorical excess is the "Racism Treadmill." Because "no amount of progress in reducing systemic racism, however large or concrete, will ever look like progress to progressives," he writes, the consequence is "a Sisyphean politics." Hughes lays out the lamentable consequences of this forensic malpractice:

The Treadmill shows itself in the way progressives appropriate the tragedies of history in order to summon rhetorical gravitas in the present. Carceral policy is not just bad, it's the "New Jim Crow"; posting reaction GIFs on social media that portray black people is "digital blackface"; and, even though three separate analyses have found no racial bias in police shootings, such shootings are said to be "reminiscent of the past racial terror of lynching," as a United Nations report put it. It seems as if every reduction in racist behavior is met with a commensurate expansion in our definition of the concept. Thus, racism has become a conserved quantity akin to mass or energy: transformable but irreducible.

The new, worsened definition of racism is yet another demonstration that progressiv-
ism’s defining flaw is its confusion and/or dishonesty about what exactly we are supposed to be progressing toward. “Progress means getting nearer the place you want to be,” C.S. Lewis wrote, which means that, “If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road.” In that circumstance, the reactionary person is progressive in a way that the progressive one is not.

Rights versus Outcomes

Thanks to the political and moral victories of the civil rights movement, America was on the right road, the one that led to “colorblind individualism,” in the words of the American Interest’s Nils Gilman. The daunting but noble goal was to make America more equal without making it less free and democratic. Indeed, Americans were to become equal in their agency as citizens and in the exercise of their rights, the clear point of calling the campaign for racial equality a “civil rights” movement.

The goal had been laid out in 1863 by Frederick Douglass: “Can the white and colored people of this country be blended into a common nationality, and enjoy together, in the same country, under the same flag, the inestimable blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as neighborly citizens of a common country?” President John F. Kennedy reiterated it in his national address on civil rights one century later. “The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities.”

To answer in the affirmative, he made clear, meant to incorporate all American citizens into one republic, where everyone enjoyed the same rights and shouldered the same duties: “We have a right to expect that the Negro community will be responsible, will uphold the law, but they have a right to expect that the law will be fair, that the Constitution will be color blind.”

It was in keeping with this principle of one standard for all Americans that the 1964 Civil Rights Act repeatedly stipulates that its prohibitions of discrimination on account of race, color, national origin, etc., apply to all persons or any individual. That is, the law pointedly refused to enact gradations of the rights it conferred on the basis of demographic identity or degree of historical victimization.

Fifteen years later, the Supreme Court determined that the law actually meant the opposite of what it said, which was also the opposite of what the bill’s advocates had promised in 1964. In United Steelworkers of America v. Weber (1979), the Court inferred the law’s true meaning from what it took to be Congress’s intended outcome. In the words of Justice William Brennan’s majority opinion, a teleological analysis of the Civil Rights Act revealed that its purpose was to address “the plight of the Negro in our economy” and to open “opportunities for Negroes in occupations which have been traditionally closed to them.” On this basis, the Court determined that a law making it illegal for an employer “to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” looked favorably on policies that reserved for black employees half the openings in a training program, even though blacks constituted far less than 50% of the employer’s workforce.

It was clear, long before 1979, that liberals had wanted to swap out the landmark civil rights legislation’s focus on process in favor of an undisguised emphasis on outcomes. In 1965, for example, President Lyndon Johnson declared the beginning of “the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights,” which would seek “not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and…a result.” It is impossible, LBJ said, to confer equal opportunities on those who have been historically disadvantaged “and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.”

Johnson never made clear what complete fairness did require, and no one has done so since then. As a result, it is important but impossible to know whether the unprincipled consequentialism of the social justice Left betrays or honors the original civil rights movement. Did some liberals bait before 1965, and others switch after, which would mean that the civil rights movement’s inclusive, principled rhetoric was sincere? Or did the same ones do the baiting and the switching, meaning that the lofty rhetoric about equal rights, brothethood, and the content of our character was, all along, a sham?

The Left’s attitude today toward civic equality, inalienable rights, and government by consent of the governed, ranges from indifference to hostility. That Delgado and Stefanic are candid doesn’t make it any less alarming when they state that “critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.” Yes, politics is about who gets what. If that becomes all it’s about, after we jettison considerations of justice, rights, consent of the governed, and national cohesion as quaint relics and pathetic delusions, then our bitter achievement will be the reversal of Carl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum: politics becomes war, carried out by other means. Even as reactionaries sometimes make the best progressives, in certain circumstances conservatives find that they are the best liberals, if not the only ones.

William Voegeli is a senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.
The Claremont Review of Books is an outstanding literary publication written by leading scholars and critics. It covers a wide range of topics in trenchant and decisive language, combining learning with wit, elegance, and judgment.”

—Paul Johnson

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