

## IDEAS

## The Virtue Signalers Won't Change the World

Third-wave antiracism makes sense, and fits into the longer struggle, but it's a dead end.

JOHN MCWHORTER DEC 23, 2018



SCOTT OLSEN / GETTY

**F**EMINIST HISTORY IS typically described in three waves: The struggle to secure voting rights, then workplace rights, and third—roughly—to upend stereotypes. The battle against racism and its effects is often described in a similar three-part timeline, with movements against slavery and segregation, and then—vaguely—the post-civil-rights era.

The ambiguity of that last term masks that third-wave antiracism, as one might call it, and reflects a profound change in methods and attitudes. Just as the first and second waves of both feminism and antiracism transformed social structures, third-wave antiracism may seem parallel to third-wave feminism in moving on to a different form of abuse, psychological rather than institutional. But this focus on the psychological has morphed, of late, from a pragmatic mission to change minds into a witch hunt driven by the personal benefits of virtue signaling, obsessed with

unconscious and subconscious bias. As noble as this culture of shaming genuinely seems to many, it's a dead end.

**I**N THEIR NEW BOOK, *The Coddling of the American Mind* Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt discuss modern antiracism as it exists within the collegiate social-justice culture. (The book is expanded from [the eponymous 2015 article in \*The Atlantic\*](#).) On American college campuses, it is typical to depict unwelcome opinions as injurious to one's sense of safety. In a version of self-defense, it's vogueish to "de-platform" controversial speakers. Occasional unsavory incidents are said to render a university a thoroughly racist establishment. And questions interpretable as exotifying—such as "Where are you from?" to someone born in the United States—are considered as hurtful as bullying.

Crucially, this phenomenon of hypersensitivity extends far beyond campus. The virally popular *Stuff White People Like* blog of 2010 was a wry self-parody of the cultural mores that had settled in by roughly the late 1990s amidst a certain stripe of educated white people. "Being Offended" was one of the cleverest entries, describing a kind of almost recreational quest to take umbrage on behalf of people other than whites. Already, the satirical tone of this entry dates awkwardly: Many of the people it describes would read it today as disrespectful to the urgency of attesting to one's white privilege. As the writer [Meghan Daum](#) has argued, it's now customary for many educated whites to take on a strident, uncompromising, radical tone in the guise of justice and truth. Middle-class adult playdates are as central to this mise-en-scène as dorm lounges.

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Taking the longer, academic view, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, in their 2015 monograph *Inventing the Future*, identify the rise since the 1960s of what they term "folk politics," which reduces the complexity of politics down to human-level grievance, elevating protest over planning and wedge issues over platforms.

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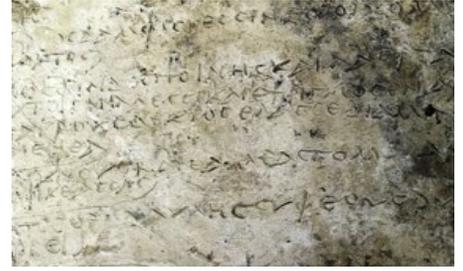
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### Call Them What They Want

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To roll the eyes and dismiss this cultural movement as “crazy” is unhelpful and incurious—as is decreeing it “complex” while hoping the subject changes soon. Although I ultimately find it counterproductive, I think this movement actually does, in the formal meaning, make sense; as I noted, the modern social-justice paradigm can be seen as a legitimate third phase in a continuing struggle.

**T**HE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY was the first major victory in black progress in America. A reading of David Blight’s recent [biography](#) of Frederick Douglass vividly underscores what a titanic struggle abolition was for people white and black, given not only the violent hostility that it regularly elicited, but the bafflement. Many intelligent people found it counterintuitive and even ridiculous that black people could ever be treated as whites’ equals. Yet the battle was worth it: Slavery ended.

Perhaps more familiar is the violence, skepticism, and indifference that civil-rights leaders of the mid-20th century encountered in fighting legalized segregation. Even many educated, temperate-minded people—some of them black—thought Martin Luther King Jr. was a hasty rabble-rouser “stirring that stuff up,” at least until his murder led to his more respectful evaluation in martyrdom. Yet the bloodiness of Selma and Birmingham served a purpose: Segregation was outlawed, and black lives changed profoundly.

Crucial, also, is that religion played a key role in making the case for both of these phases of the struggle. Blight stresses how much Douglass relied in his speeches on the prophetic teachings of Jeremiah and Isaiah, and the stories of Exodus, Job, Lot’s wife, and others, identifying the hypocrisy of a nation calling itself Christian while nakedly oppressing so many of its people.

Racism, quite obviously, has not been vanquished in American life. Might the logical next task be a transformation of psychology rather than sociology, as argued on college campuses and elsewhere? The contemporary left's concern is with the underlying biases that bolster the racism that remains. It seeks, as a way forward, a society not only without racist structures, but without racist thought, which, for one, can foster race-based disparities that eerily parallel those conditioned in the past by overt segregation.

*[ Read: [How well-intentioned white families can perpetuate racism](#) ]*

The new quest, then, will focus to a new degree on how people think. Blight notes that even in Douglass's time, his "message to whites, therefore, was morally change yourselves. The new order was as much for whites to give as it was for blacks to take." That facet of the quest has taken center stage since. The historian Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn has noted that after the 1960s, in civil rights "the desired goal was no longer civic equality and participation, but individual psychic well-being." This would include that of black people as well as nonblack ones, with their racist bias qualifying as a kind of mental imbalance in itself, as thinkers from Douglass through James Baldwin have taught.

The secularism of this new therapeutic approach to racial progress may seem fundamentally dissimilar to the previous two phases. In fact, however, third-wave antiracism is a profoundly religious movement in everything but terminology. The idea that whites are permanently stained by their white privilege, gaining moral absolution only by eternally attesting to it, is the third wave's version of original sin. The idea of a someday when America will "come to terms with race" is as vaguely specified a guidepost as Judgment Day. Explorations as to whether an opinion is "problematic" are equivalent to explorations of that which may be blasphemous. The social mauling of the person with "problematic" thoughts parallels the excommunication of the heretic. What is called "virtue signaling," then, channels the impulse that might lead a Christian to an aggressive display of her faith in Jesus. There is even a certain Church Lady air to much of the patrolling on race these days, an almost performative joy in dog-piling on the transgressor, which under a religious analysis is perfectly predictable.

Add in the tendency to let pass certain wrinkles in the fabric as "complex"—the new religion, as a matter of faith, entails that one suspends disbelief at certain points out of respect to the larger narrative. Beyond a certain point, one must not press too hard when asking a priest why God allows bad things to happen to good people. In the same way, one must not ask, "If black people are strong survivors,

then why do they disallow the utterance of the N-word even in referring to it rather than using it?” And if one does dare to ask, the answer is inevitably heavier on rhetoric than reasoning. Antiracism requires one to treat the word as taboo—blasphemous—in all its manifestations and go in peace, as it were.

When someone attests to his white privilege with his hand up in the air, palm outward—which I have observed more than once—the resemblance to testifying in church need not surprise. Here, the agnostic or atheist American who sees fundamentalists and Mormons as quaint reveals himself as, of all things, a parishioner.

**T**HE PEOPLE ESPOUSING this third-wave ideology are not unintelligent, mentally imbalanced, or working from some nefarious agenda. They want to be on the right side of history. However, upon reflection, and aware of the risk of how an essay like this might read in the future, I suggest it is going nowhere fast.

More specifically, it is a mission creep from the second wave—or “concept creep,” as Lukianoff and Haidt put it, citing the psychologist Nick Haslam. They have defined trauma downward, as it were. Where antiracist progressives once looked to bondage, disenfranchisement, and torture, today they classify as equally traumatic the remark, the implication, the unwelcome question.

*[ Read: [The coddling of the American mind](#) ]*

There are three main reasons that third-wave antiracism is a less convincing project than the first and second waves.

First, to what extent is it possible to alter human sentiment as opposed to actions and behavior? Can a whole society’s inner biases and naïvetés about black people be expunged through preaching? Bias and ignorance remain “under the surface,” from films like *Crash* to the election of Donald Trump. Is there any evidence that today’s religious crusade is making any significant changes in Americans’ deepest thoughts, or ever could?

Second, and more important, is it even necessary to force a revolution in thought? Certainly a people cannot succeed as slaves, or under a system that condemns them to officially segregated and second-class status. However, human history hardly shows that an oppressed group needs the wholehearted love and acceptance of its overlords. Are black hands truly tied because whites are more likely to associate black faces with negative concepts in implicit-association tests, especially when evidence suggests that the results do not correlate meaningfully with behavior? Or because whites aren’t deeply informed about the injustices blacks

have suffered throughout history? Precisely why must whites transform themselves to so extreme a degree for racial disparities to close?

Many will answer with what can be summed up with the grand old mantra, “If you’re white, you’re all right, if you’re brown, stick around, but if you’re black, get back.” The idea is that animus against black Americans—as opposed to Latinos or Asians—is so profound as to stanch striving. But that line is a tad elderly now, and the success since the 1970s of so many Caribbean and African immigrants—richly familiar with racism—has shown its obsolescence. In Ivy League institutions, typically almost half of black students come from immigrant families, despite such students representing less than 15 percent of the general black population of people their age.

Okay, first-generation Americans have, as it’s often phrased, a “pluck” one can’t expect native-born blacks to have as often. But to insist that native-born blacks require whites’ love in a way that Nigerian newcomers do not would seem to claim weakness as a birthright. And upon what basis do modern antiracists preach that a people embrace impotence? In my experience, it is not unusual for a black American person, if free to show his best and live a full life, to not really care whether whites see him as their true equal deep in their hearts.

Some will feel the previous two observations as accommodationist, insufficiently imaginative. However, that objection is less effective regarding a final problem with third-wave antiracism: its immaturity. Third-wave antiracism is a call to enshrine defeatism, hypersensitivity, oversimplification, and even a degree of performance. Lukianoff and Haidt are useful here, in noting the three guiding tenets of the new antiracist culture:

1. What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker.
2. Always trust your feelings.
3. Life is a battle between good people and bad people.

It may be difficult to see the relationship between these tenets, baldly stated, and the commitments of well-intentioned social-justice warriors, as they’re sometimes called. Notably, however, the approved methodology of persuasion is based on the impulses of the child.

The call for “safe spaces” from any failure to be fully understood. The microaggression treated as slashing slander. A black student shouting obscenities at a professor because an email urged reflection before condemning Halloween

costumes as culturally appropriative. Or beyond the campus, how readily many usually measured people call views dissenting from the new orthodoxy on race “white supremacist,” a term generally associated with poll taxes and lynching. Consider also the reductive notion of black people engaged in endless battle against a monolith of “white people,” often benevolent but endlessly racist despite themselves, blissfully unaware of their inherent privilege, incapable of genuine empathy, and tarred as clumsy phonies for any attempt to show themselves as anything but the just-described. The lack of fit between this cartoon and reality is supposed to be fine because black people are punching up, but then King was arguably punching upper and let’s face it, this kind of professional hatred of the Other is exactly what he preached against.

[ *Read: The rise of victimhood culture* ]

The new normal is, “If you don’t like it, cry loudly and then louder, because you’re always right and they’re just bad.” Contrast this approach with that of people lionized today who worked within a racism none could disagree was more implacably overt and hostile than today. The black lawyer and activist Pauli Murray insisted in 1963 that none other than Alabama Governor George “Segregation Forever” Wallace be allowed to speak at Yale. She believed that the speech rights blacks had fought for so hard must be extended to people she found noxious, including on issues as personal to her as race. James Weldon Johnson, the NAACP head and author, insisted in 1934, “I will not allow prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine, and I will maintain and defend its integrity against the forces of hell.”

Under the new regime, people like Murray and Johnson had it wrong and apparently now qualify as antique figures; fostering social justice requires fashioning oneself as vulnerable, injured, and/or broken by things thoroughly “woke” people in the past would have treated as things to be brushed off their shoe.

The contrast here is not simply “complex.” It suggests that the struggle has gone off the rails. The new zeitgeist is under-considered and even condescending, seductive but fruitless, a fashion statement in the guise of a program, and finally, a distraction for a people who have already been through so very much.

**S**OCIAL CONCERN AND ACTIVISM must not cease, but proceed minus the religious aspect they have taken on. One can be fervently dedicated to improving the lot of black Americans without a purse-lipped, prosecutorial culture dedicated more to virtue signaling than to changing other people’s lives.

Progressives can battle a War on Drugs that creates a black market that tempts too many poor black men into lives of crime. They can fight for free access to long-acting, reversible contraceptives for poor women and phonics-based reading instruction for kids from bookless homes. They can stand against Republican attempts to discourage the black vote via a sham concern for all-but-nonexistent voter fraud. The struggle must, and will, continue.

But the black person essentially barred from the polls gains nothing from someone sagely attesting to their white privilege on Twitter and decrying that “no one wants to talk about race in this country” when America is nothing less than obsessed with race week in and week out. One may consider President Trump a repulsive, bigoted excrescence without morally equating anyone who didn’t prioritize his racism enough to deny him their vote in 2016 with those who cheered a lynching 100 years before.

All of the above hinges on feigning claims of injury, on magnifying indignation in a trip-wire fashion, and on fostering a Manichaeian, us-versus-the-pigs perspective on humanity out of *Lord of the Flies*. Racial uplift in modern America does require dealing with matters more abstract than what a Douglass or a King faced. This is a challenge. Progressives shirk that challenge, however, in fashioning a new kind of activism based on performance and display. They should not do less; they should do better.



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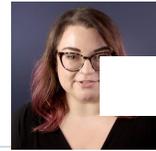
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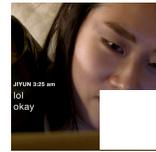
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