

How ‘Antiracism’ Becomes Antisemitism

Demonizing people in racial terms because they’re successful turns out to have consequences.

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At left: Members of Jewish Voice for Peace and their supporters protest in Royal Oak, Mich., May 3.

For decades America’s credentialed liberal elite thought of itself as uniquely immune to the appeal of racial bigotry. The rest of the country—the right-leaning suburbs, the rural places, the Archie Bunkers—were constantly prone, in the minds of America’s intellectuals and enlightened academics, to indulge in racial grievances. But not the university-educated, well-heeled elite. Not the exponents of mainstream-press conventional wisdom. Not the readers of the New Yorker and the Washington Post.

Yet here we are. Over the past 2½ months, Jew-hatred has rocked elite college campuses. Tony neighborhoods in blue cities have witnessed marches calling for the elimination of the Jewish state and protests outside Jewish-owned businesses—this in response not to the accidental killing of a Palestinian by an Israeli soldier, but to the systematic butchering and kidnapping of Israeli Jews by terrorists.

To these expressions of bigotry, high-ranking public officials and university administrators have issued bland disavowals of “violence” and “hatred in all its forms.” The heads of three top universities, testifying before a congressional committee, couldn’t explain why their institutions prosecute every perceived offense against other minorities but can’t condemn calls for genocide against Jews. The Biden administration itself, though so far pursuing a broadly pro-Israel policy in the Middle East, responded to the rash of antisemitic marches and assaults on Jews by announcing a “National Strategy to Counter Islamophobia.”

Past eruptions of antisemitism usually arose from the need to blame someone—anyone—for the cataclysmic failures of a ruling political class. In Russia in the 1880s and ’90s, malcontents equated Jews with Marxists and communists and blamed them for political instability. “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” the 1903 forgery purporting to reveal a Jewish conspiracy to rule the globe, was a gift to any people wishing to account for its ruin without self-criticism. Germans after World War I sought a reason for their military humiliation and economic immiseration.

Palestinian Arabs themselves were carrying out vicious pogroms long before the founding of the Jewish state in 1948—see for example the attack on Hebron in 1929, in which more than 67 Jews, many of them women and children, were murdered. And why? Because the Jews were an easy group to blame: few in number, racially and culturally distinct, highly industrious and successful, and apparently committed to an unsanctioned God. An easy and obvious target.

So far there have been no pogroms in the U.S., only venomous semiviolent protests, individual assaults, libelous social-media onslaughts and willfully misleading news coverage. But the motivation driving today’s Jew-hatred bears some resemblance to those earlier episodes of antisemitic violence. Elite American society has failed in the one aim that gave it definition for more than a half-century: the realization of racial equality.

The trouble started in the mid-1970s, when the reality became clear that the liberal answer to racial inequality—the modern welfare state inaugurated by the Great Society—wasn't working. With each passing decade since, black economic improvement has stalled. As Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom make clear in their book "America in Black and White" (1997), the black poverty rate declined dramatically from 1940 to 1960, less dramatically but still significantly from 1960 to 1970, and hardly at all after 1970. Yet decade after decade, the prescription from right-thinking liberals—elected Democrats, social-welfare agency heads, academic experts in urban studies, liberal intellectuals, entertainment-industry glitterati—remains the same: Double down on '60s-style social-welfare policy, liberalize crime laws, and vilify whites other than themselves.

The electorate intermittently challenged this orthodoxy. In the 1990s New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani rejected liberal policy prescriptions and brought order to a city long thought ungovernable. Ignoring warnings of apocalypse by the liberal political class, Bill Clinton signed the 1994 crime bill and the 1996 welfare-reform act; both crime and welfare dependency receded. But the orthodoxy always reasserted itself, as it did when Barack Obama expanded Medicaid in 2010 and his allies in the media and intelligentsia demonized governors who resisted that expansion as racists.

You could chart this cyclical process of doubling down on liberal race orthodoxy by noting a series of abstract words and phrases invented by liberals to excuse the failure of liberal policy on race. "Disparate impact," a legal doctrine first given expression by the Supreme Court in 1971, holds that nearly any standard applied equally to all Americans—in education, in employment, in housing—adversely punishes some racial minorities. In the 1980s, universities took the high court's 1978 *Bakke* decision to mean they could discriminate against whites and Asians. Thus was born the project of fostering "diversity."

In the 2000s, as black economic prospects improved little, the terms became more absurd—and more openly racist. Liberals complained of "colorblind racism," the idea that disregarding race exacerbated race relations and was, in effect, racist. The terms "unconscious bias" and "microaggression" are premised on the idea that well-meaning people can spread racial animus by using seemingly innocuous words and phrases. In the 2010s, "equity" and "inclusion" joined "diversity" to form an entire industry of consultants and corporate officers whose stated purpose is to foster equality in the workplace but who go about encouraging everyone to think constantly about racial identity.

All these coinages can fairly be understood as attempts by American liberals to explain to themselves why the beliefs on race they had presupposed for decades remained unimpeachable. At each stage, the effort to avoid rethinking the problem and to cast the blame for continuing racial inequality on somebody else—anybody but themselves—began to look and sound like another version of racism. Terms like "white privilege" and "white settler guilt" carried undertones of resentment and loathing. Writers for the

[New York Times](#)

and other organs of, as it's now termed, progressive opinion began using the words "white" and "whiteness" as though they signified a disease.

In the 2010s an assemblage of radical writers—Ta-Nehisi Coates, Robin DiAngelo, Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ibram X. Kendi prominent among them—became celebrities by alleging that American society had been a racist project from its earliest days. Theirs were more elaborate versions of claims by '60s radicals that "Amerikkka" had been a source of oppression since its founding; the difference was these weren't hippie outcasts but tenured professors and award-winning writers, fawned on by journalists too dim to realize the radicals were calling them racist monsters. In a 2014 essay for the Atlantic, Mr. Coates made the case for racial reparations—a policy premised on the idea of punishing people for sins they hadn't committed. He reproached whites for thinking that "if you stab a black person 10 times, the bleeding stops and the healing begins the moment the assailant drops the knife." Well-intended, deliberately nonracist white Americans, in Mr. Coates's analogy, are at once murderers and idiots.

Then, in May 2020, the consequences of these twisted ideas spilled into the open. The death of George Floyd under the knee of a white police officer, recorded in a harrowing nine-minute video, shoved American liberals' failure on race into their faces. But progressives, having by that point sequestered themselves in their homes in a terrified and ultimately vain effort to escape Covid-19, were in no mood for self-criticism. There would be no rethinking the premises of the Great Society. Otherwise-sane people burst into the streets proclaiming the truism that "black lives matter" and denouncing the evils of "systemic racism."

With this latter term, the effort to double down on the logic of the Great Society reached its ludicrous conclusion. Racism, if it's systemic, infects everything. You can deplore it, but if you're part of the system, you're perpetuating it. Everything is racist. The term was, in many ways, logically congruous with the loose accusation of "racism" to which Americans have long been familiar. To earn the "ist" suffix, you must at some level cultivate, or at least be conscious of, the thing named as an "ism." You can't be a royalist if you dislike the monarchy, or a nationalist if you're indifferent to the nation. A communist cares about the commune or community and has a long list of reasons for rejecting individualism. A Buddhist cares about the Buddha, and an atheist can't love God. But in the modern progressive worldview, you can be a racist while abominating racism. You may think a person's race says nothing about his character or competence, and still be a racist.

So everybody's a racist. Or everybody other than the people spreading resentment by the "systemic racism" lie.

The only thing to do is destroy the entire "racist" system. Of course, America's progressive VIPs were never going to tear down the system that had given them status, privilege and income. What the George Floyd protests mainly accomplished was to make the protesters a little more comfortable with hatred of Bad People. In 2020 it was the cops, especially white cops. But hatreds can expand.

At each stage of this ugly evolution, some substantial minority of left-wing commentators and politicians became more comfortable with what looked and sounded like straight-up racial bigotry. That the target of their hatred was white people made their rhetoric and behavior appear harmless. But it wasn't harmless, as anybody might have foreseen.

For several years a variety of academics and writers had argued that Jews are "white" or "functionally white" or "white passing." "White," in this usage, has nothing to do with national or religious identity or genetic characteristics. It signifies allegedly unjust privilege and legacies of oppression. Calling Jews "white" was a way of depriving them of any cover as a racial minority and classifying them with persecutors and exploiters.

As Liel Leibovitz writes in a 2021 essay for Commentary magazine: "The creative genius of Jew-hatred has always been its ability to imagine the Jew as the embodiment of whatever it is that polite society finds repulsive. That's why Jews were condemned as both nefarious bankers controlling all the world's money and shifty revolutionaries imperiling all capital; as both sexless creeps and oversexed lechers coming for the women and the girls; as both pathetically powerless and occultly powerful. . . . And if you decide that there's such a thing as 'whites' and that they are uniquely responsible for all evils perpetrated on the innocent and downtrodden, well, the Jews must be not only of them but nestled comfortably at the top of the white-supremacist pyramid."

In 2021, when Mr. Leibovitz wrote these words, few detected the Jew-hatred smoldering beneath the surface of progressive thought. The perverse refusal to rethink obviously failed policies on race and crime, or to reconsider shopworn assumptions about why African-Americans had not achieved economic parity with whites, had created the need for scapegoats. To blame whites qua whites worked well enough

for a time. But exhibitionist self-hatred is plainly disingenuous and emotionally unsatisfying. The left needed real scapegoats.

What about the Jews? Successful, capitalist, hated by much of the Arab and Muslim world, the Jews—especially Israeli Jews but Jews generally—met the need for a blameworthy Bad People. It was as though the phrase “Never Again,” enunciated endlessly to proclaim the West’s rejection of all the sentiments and ideas that had led to the Final Solution, had become so ingrained in liberal thought that liberals felt they were incapable of embracing the oldest hatred. Never Again . . . but maybe just this once.

The American left, shameful exceptions aside like members of “The Squad” in Congress, has mostly abstained from openly siding with Hamas in the way its counterparts abroad have. But progressives in this country appear paralyzed, unable to condemn the Oct. 7 attack without also condemning “all forms of hatred” and the like. Assaults on Jews go almost without comment in most of the mainstream press. For weeks after Hamas took hundreds of hostages, including Americans, the U.S. news media showed minimal interest in their whereabouts; it was only when Hamas offered to return some of them in exchange for a cease-fire that reports on their plight began to circulate—almost as though the hostages’ usefulness lay exclusively in stopping Israel from just retribution.

Threats against Jews on elite campuses meet with tepid condemnations and little or no action. Democratic Party leaders can’t bring themselves to criticize colleagues who accuse Israel of war crimes in its response to the Hamas attacks.

Before Oct. 7, if you had predicted this sudden explosion of Jew-hatred in elite American institutions, you would likely have been called a crank. But you could have made a cogent case for your prediction by noting the many ways in which the nation’s progressive cognoscenti, over the course of the past 50 years, have steadily embraced more preposterous and menacing ideas to explain their failure in the one area they believed themselves both competent and righteous: the creation of racial equality and harmony. Those ideas no doubt appeared edgy and romantic because their target was white people, and what’s the harm in white people condemning themselves? But like amateur wizards playing with incantations, the magic got away from them and produced devilry.

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