

Commentary

We Got Here Because of Cowardice. We Get Out With Courage

Say *no* to the Woke Revolution

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A lot of people want to convince you that you need a Ph.D. or a law degree or dozens of hours of free time to read dense texts about critical theory to understand the woke movement and its worldview. You do not. You simply need to believe your own eyes and ears.

Let me offer the briefest overview of the core beliefs of the Woke Revolution, which are abundantly clear to anyone willing to look past the hashtags and the jargon.

It begins by stipulating that the forces of justice and progress are in a war against backwardness and tyranny. And in a war, the normal rules of the game must be suspended. Indeed, this ideology would argue that those rules are not just obstacles to justice, but tools of oppression. They are the master's tools. And the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house.

So the tools themselves are not just replaced but repudiated. And in so doing, persuasion—the purpose of argument—is replaced with public shaming. Moral complexity is replaced with moral certainty. Facts are replaced with feelings.

Ideas are replaced with identity. Forgiveness is replaced with punishment. Debate is replaced with de-platforming. Diversity is replaced with homogeneity of thought. Inclusion, with exclusion.

In this ideology, speech is violence. But violence, when carried out by the right people in pursuit of a just cause, is not violence at all. In this ideology, bullying is wrong, unless you are bullying the right people, in which case it's very, very good. In this ideology, education is not about teaching people how to think, it's about reeducating them in what to think. In this ideology, the need to feel safe trumps the need to speak truthfully.

In this ideology, if you do not tweet the right tweet or share the right slogan, your whole life can be ruined. Just ask Tiffany Riley, a Vermont school principal who was fired—fired—because she said she supports black lives but not the organization Black Lives Matter.

In this ideology, the past cannot be understood on its own terms, but must be judged through the morals and mores of the present. It is why statues of Grant and Washington are being torn down. And it is why William Peris, a UCLA lecturer and an Air Force veteran, was investigated for reading Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" out loud in class.

In this ideology, intentions don't matter. That is why Emmanuel Cafferty, a Hispanic utility worker at San Diego Gas and Electric, was fired for making what someone said he thought was a white-supremacist hand gesture—when in fact he was cracking his knuckles out of his car window.

In this ideology, the equality of opportunity is replaced with equality of outcome as a measure of fairness. If everyone doesn't finish the race at the same time, the course must have been defective. Thus, the argument to get rid of the SAT. Or the admissions tests for public schools like Stuyvesant in New York or Lowell in San Francisco.

In this ideology, you are guilty for the sins of your fathers. In other words: You are not you. You are only a mere avatar of your race or your religion or your class. That is why third-graders in Cupertino, California, were asked to rate themselves in terms of their power and privilege. In third grade.

In this system, we are all placed neatly on a spectrum of "privileged" to "oppressed." We are ranked somewhere on this spectrum in different categories: race, gender, sexual orientation, and

class. Then we are given an overall score, based on the sum of these rankings. Having privilege means that your character and your ideas are tainted. This is why, one high-schooler in New York tells me, students in his school are told, “If you are white and male, you are second in line to speak.” This is considered a normal and necessary redistribution of power.

Racism has been redefined. It is no longer about discrimination based on the color of someone’s skin. Racism is any system that allows for disparate outcomes between racial groups. If disparity is present, as the high priest of this ideology, Ibram X. Kendi, has explained, racism is present. According to this totalizing new view, we are all either racist or anti-racist. To be a Good Person and not a Bad Person, you must be an “anti-racist.” There is no neutrality. There is no such thing as “not racist.”

Most important: In this revolution, skeptics of any part of this radical ideology are recast as heretics. Those who do not abide by every single aspect of its creed are tarnished as bigots, subjected to boycotts and their work to political litmus tests. The Enlightenment, as the critic Edward Rothstein has put it, has been replaced by the exorcism.

What we call “cancel culture” is really the justice system of this revolution. And the goal of the cancellations is not merely to punish the person being cancelled. The goal is to send a message to everyone else: Step out of line and you are next.

It has worked. A recent CATO study found that 62 percent of Americans are afraid to voice their true views. Nearly a quarter of American academics endorse ousting a colleague for having a wrong opinion about hot-button issues such as immigration or gender differences. And nearly 70 percent of students favor reporting professors if the professor says something that students find offensive, according to a Challey Institute for Global Innovation survey.

Why are so many, especially so many young people, drawn to this ideology? It’s not because they are dumb. Or because they are snowflakes, or whatever Fox talking points would have you believe. All of this has taken place against the backdrop of major changes in American life—the tearing apart of our social fabric; the loss of religion and the decline of civic organizations; the opioid crisis; the collapse of American industries; the rise of big tech; successive financial crises;

a toxic public discourse; crushing student debt. An epidemic of loneliness. A crisis of meaning. A pandemic of distrust. It has taken place against the backdrop of the American dream's decline into what feels like a punchline, the inequalities of our supposedly fair, liberal meritocracy clearly rigged in favor of some people and against others. And so on.

“I became converted because I was ripe for it and lived in a disintegrating society thrusting for faith.” That was Arthur Koestler writing in 1949 about his love affair with Communism. The same might be said of this new revolutionary faith. And like other religions at their inception, this one has lit on fire the souls of true believers, eager to burn down anything or anyone that stands in its way.

If you have ever tried to build something, even something small, you know how hard it is. It takes time. It takes tremendous effort. But tearing things down? That's quick work.

The Woke Revolution has been exceptionally effective. It has successfully captured the most important sense-making institutions of American life: our newspapers. Our magazines. Our Hollywood studios. Our publishing houses. Many of our tech companies. And, increasingly, corporate America.

Just as in China under Chairman Mao, the seeds of our own cultural revolution can be traced to the academy, the first of our institutions to be overtaken by it. And our schools—public, private, parochial—are increasingly the recruiting grounds for this ideological army.

A few stories are worth recounting:

David Peterson is an art professor at Skidmore College in upstate New York. He stood accused in the fevered summer of 2020 of “engaging in hateful conduct that threatens Black Skidmore students.”

What was that hateful conduct? David and his wife, Andrea, went to watch a rally for police officers. “Given the painful events that continue to unfold across this nation, I guess we just felt compelled to see first-hand how all of this was playing out in our own community,” he told the

Skidmore student newspaper. David and his wife stayed for 20 minutes on the edge of the event. They held no signs, participated in no chants. They just watched. Then they left for dinner.

For the crime of *listening*, David Peterson's class was boycotted. A sign appeared on his classroom door: "STOP. By entering this class you are crossing a campus-wide picket line and breaking the boycott against Professor David Peterson. This is not a safe environment for marginalized students." Then the university opened an investigation into accusations of bias in the classroom.

Across the country from Skidmore, at the University of Southern California, a man named Greg Patton is a professor of business communication. In 2020, Patton was teaching a class on "filler words"—such as "um" and "like" and so forth for his master's-level course on communication for management. It turns out that the Chinese word for "like" sounds like the n-word. Students wrote the school's staff and administration accusing their professor of "negligence and disregard." They added: "We are burdened to fight with our existence in society, in the workplace, and in America. We should not be made to fight for our sense of peace and mental well-being" at school.

In a normal, reality-based world, there is only one response to such a claim: You misheard. But that was not the response. This was: "It is simply unacceptable for faculty to use words in class that can marginalize, hurt and harm the psychological safety of our students," the dean, Geoffrey Garrett wrote. "Understandably, this caused great pain and upset among students, and for that I am deeply sorry."

This rot hasn't been contained to higher education. At a mandatory training earlier this year in the San Diego Unified School District, Bettina Love, an education professor who believes that children learn better from teachers of the same race, accused white teachers of "spirit murdering black and brown children" and urged them to undergo "antiracist therapy for White educators."

San Francisco's public schools didn't manage to open their schools during the pandemic, but the board decided to rename 44 schools—including those named for George Washington and John

Muir—before suspending the plan. Meantime, one of the board members declared merit “racist” and “Trumpian.”

A recent educational program for sixth to eighth grade teachers called “a pathway to equitable math instruction”—funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—was recently sent to Oregon teachers by the state’s Department of Education. The program’s literature informs teachers that white supremacy shows up in math instruction when “rigor is expressed only in difficulty,” and “contrived word problems are valued over the math in students’ lived experiences.”

Serious education is the antidote to such ignorance. Frederick Douglass said, “Education means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light only by which men can be free.” Soaring words that feel as if they are a report from a distant galaxy. Education is increasingly where debate, dissent, and discovery go to die.

It’s also very bad for kids. For those deemed “privileged,” it creates a hostile environment where kids are too intimidated to participate. For those deemed “oppressed,” it inculcates an extraordinarily pessimistic view of the world, where students are trained to perceive malice and bigotry in everything they see. They are denied the dignity of equal standards and expectations. They are denied the belief in their own agency and ability to succeed. As Zaid Jilani had put it: “You cannot have power without responsibility. Denying minorities responsibility for their own actions, both good and bad, will only deny us the power we rightly deserve.”

How did we get here? There are a lot of factors that are relevant to the answer: institutional decay; the tech revolution and the monopolies it created; the arrogance of our elites; poverty; the death of trust. And all of these must be examined, because without them we would have neither the far right nor the cultural revolutionaries now clamoring at America’s gates.

But there is one word we should linger on, because every moment of radical victory turned on it. The word is *cowardice*.

The revolution has been met with almost no resistance by those who have the title *CEO* or *leader* or *president* or *principal* in front of their names. The refusal of the adults in the room to speak the truth, their refusal to say no to efforts to undermine the mission of their institutions, their fear of being called a bad name and that fear trumping their responsibility—that is how we got here.

Allan Bloom had the radicals of the 1960s in mind when he wrote that “a few students discovered that pompous teachers who catechized them about academic freedom could, with a little shove, be made into dancing bears.” Now, a half-century later, those dancing bears hold named chairs at every important elite, sense-making institution in the country.

As Douglas Murray has put it: “The problem is not that the sacrificial victim is selected. The problem is that the people who destroy his reputation are permitted to do so by the complicity, silence and slinking away of everybody else.”

Each surely thought: *These protestors have some merit! This institution, this university, this school, hasn't lived up to all of its principles at all times! We have been racist! We have been sexist! We haven't always been enlightened! I'll give a bit and we'll find a way to compromise.* This turned out to be as naive as Robespierre thinking that he could avoid the guillotine.

Think about each of the anecdotes I've shared here and all the rest you already know. All that had to change for the entire story to turn out differently was for the person in charge, the person tasked with being a steward for the newspaper or the magazine or the college or the school district or the private high school or the kindergarten, to say: *No*.

If cowardice is the thing that has allowed for all of this, the force that stops this cultural revolution can also be summed up by one word: *courage*. And courage often comes from people you would not expect.

Consider Maud Maron. Maron is a lifelong liberal who has always walked the walk. She was an escort for Planned Parenthood; a law-school research assistant to Kathleen Cleaver, the former Black Panther; and a poll watcher for John Kerry in Pennsylvania during the 2004 presidential election. In 2016, she was a regular contributor to Bernie Sanders's campaign.

Maron dedicated her career to Legal Aid: “For me, being a public defender is more than a job,” she told me. “It’s who I am.”

But things took a turn when, this past year, Maron spoke out passionately and publicly about the illiberalism that has gripped the New York City public schools attended by her four children.

“I am very open about what I stand for,” she told me. “I am pro-integration. I am pro-diversity. And also I reject the narrative that white parents are to blame for the failures of our school system. I object to the mayor’s proposal to get rid of specialized admissions tests to schools like Stuyvesant. And I believe that racial essentialism is racist and should not be taught in school.”

What followed this apparent thought crime was a 21st-century witch hunt. Maron was smeared publicly by her colleagues. They called her “racist, and openly so.” They said, “We’re ashamed that she works for the Legal Aid Society.”

Most people would have walked away and quietly found a new job. Not Maud Maron. This summer, she filed suit against the organization, claiming that she was forced out of Legal Aid because of her political views and her race, a violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

“The reason they went after me is that I have a different point of view,” she said. “These ideologues have tried to ruin my name and my career, and they are going after other good people. Not enough people stand up and say: It is totally wrong to do this to a person. And this is not going to stop unless people stand up to it.”

That’s courage.

Courage also looks like Paul Rossi, the math teacher at Grace Church High School in New York who raised questions about this ideology at a mandatory, whites-only student and faculty Zoom meeting. A few days later, all the school’s advisers were required to read a public reprimand of his conduct out loud to every student in the school. Unwilling to disavow his beliefs, Rossi blew the whistle: “I know that by attaching my name to this I’m risking not only my current job but my career as an educator, since most schools, both public and private, are now captive to this

backward ideology. But witnessing the harmful impact it has on children, I can't stay silent.”
That's courage.

Courage is Xi Van Fleet, a Virginia mom who endured Mao's Cultural Revolution as a child and spoke up to the Loudoun County School Board at a public meeting in June. “You are training our children to loathe our country and our history,” she said in front of the school board. “Growing up in Mao's China, all of this feels very familiar.... The only difference is that they used class instead of race.”

Gordon Klein, a professor at UCLA, recently filed suit against his own university. Why? A student asked him to grade black students with “greater leniency.” He refused, given that such a racial preference would violate UCLA's anti-discrimination policies (and maybe even the law). But the people in charge of UCLA's Anderson School launched a racial-discrimination complaint into *him*. They denounced him, banned him from campus, appointed a monitor to look at his emails, and suspended him. He eventually was reinstated—because he had done absolutely nothing wrong—but not before his reputation and career were severely damaged. “I don't want to see anyone else's life destroyed as they attempted to do to me,” Klein told me. “Few have the intestinal fortitude to fight cancel culture. I do. This is about sending a message to every petty tyrant out there.”

Courage is Peter Boghossian. He recently resigned his post at Portland State University, writing in a letter to his provost: “The university transformed a bastion of free inquiry into a social justice factory whose only inputs were race, gender and victimhood and whose only output was grievance and division.... I feel morally obligated to make this choice. For ten years, I have taught my students the importance of living by your principles. One of mine is to defend our system of liberal education from those who seek to destroy it. Who would I be if I didn't?”

Who would I be if I didn't?

George Orwell said that “the further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those that speak it.” In an age of lies, telling the truth is high risk. It comes with a cost. But it is our moral obligation.

It is our duty to resist the crowd in this age of mob thinking. It is our duty to think freely in an age of conformity. It is our duty to speak truth in an age of lies.

This bravery isn't the last or only step in opposing this revolution—it's just the first. After that must come honest assessments of why America was vulnerable to start with, and an aggressive commitment to rebuilding the economy and society in ways that once again offer life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to the greatest number of Americans.

But let's start with a little courage.

Courage means, first off, the unqualified rejection of lies. Do not speak untruths, either about yourself or anyone else, no matter the comfort offered by the mob. And do not genially accept the lies told to you. If possible, be vocal in rejecting claims you know to be false. Courage can be contagious, and your example may serve as a means of transmission.

When you're told that traits such as industriousness and punctuality are the legacy of white supremacy, don't hesitate to reject it. When you're told that statues of figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass are offensive, explain that they are national heroes. When you're told that "nothing has changed" in this country for minorities, don't dishonor the memory of civil-rights pioneers by agreeing. And when you're told that America was founded in order to perpetuate slavery, don't take part in rewriting the country's history.

America is imperfect. I always knew it, as we all do—and the past few years have rocked my faith like no others in my lifetime. But America and we Americans are far from irredeemable.

The motto of Frederick Douglass's anti-slavery paper, the *North Star*—"The Right is of no Sex—Truth is of no Color—God is the Father of us all, and all we are brethren"—must remain all of ours.

We can still feel the pull of that electric cord Lincoln talked about 163 years ago—the one "in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link

those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”

Every day I hear from people who are living in fear in the freest society humankind has ever known. Dissidents in a democracy, practicing doublespeak. That is what is happening right now. What happens five, 10, 20 years from now if we don't speak up and defend the ideas that have made all of our lives possible?

Liberty. Equality. Freedom. Dignity. These are ideas worth fighting for.