



Joe Rogan's Victim Grift

Emily Pothast

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Earlier this week, Joe Rogan was widely mocked for claiming on his podcast that the logical outcome of “woke” discourse is that “straight white men” will no longer be allowed to talk or go outside:

You can never be woke enough that's the problem. It keeps going. It keeps going further and further and further down the line. If you get to the point where you capitulate where you agree to all these demands, it will eventually get to “straight white men are not allowed to talk.” Because it's your privilege to express yourself when other people of color have been silenced throughout history. It will be “you're not allowed to go outside.” Because so many people were imprisoned for so many years.

Many people pointed out the sheer absurdity of a guy who gets paid \$10 million a month to produce one of the world's most popular podcasts complaining about being silenced. Last month, Rogan told his millions of listeners that young, healthy people probably don't need to get the Covid vaccine, sparking significant outrage. Clearly, not being able to freely say whatever pops into his head is not a problem that Rogan actually suffers from. And yet, to categorize him as merely delusional misses the point of publicly making such claims.

Rogan is a performer. He might be worth many millions of dollars in real life, but his persona is that of a rough-around-the-edges working-class type who might be fun to take bong rips with if your idea of fun is getting stoned with a guy who might casually drop the n-word. To his credit, Rogan does a very good job of presenting himself as someone his audience can identify with. According to a 2020 survey, 71% of his audience was male, and their average age was 24. The people who listen to Rogan aren't especially rich—only 19% made more than \$100,000 a year, according to the same survey—but they aren't especially likely to be experiencing economic precarity, either—more than half of his audience reported making over \$50,000 a year. As recently as a few years ago, Rogan's target demographic would have likely seen themselves as upwardly mobile, with an abundance of economic and social prospects. That they probably no longer feel that way is something we must consider if we are to understand the social function that Rogan's narrative of “straight white male” victimhood is serving.

Many people pointed out the sheer absurdity of a guy who gets paid \$10 million a month to produce one of the world's most popular podcasts complaining about being silenced. The effect of neoliberal economic policy over the past several decades has been an erosion of economic prospects for virtually all working and middle-class Americans. Workers are working longer hours for less pay and less job security while the wealth of CEOs has skyrocketed. Given this situation, it would be logical to expect an uptick in resentment toward those who are directly profiting from the disparity. The immediate purpose of “anti-woke” (or “anti-PC”) rhetoric—which has existed under various guises as a right-wing boogeyman for decades—is to help deflect resentment away from the ruling class onto groups that are even more marginalized within the same exploitive system that the resentful are themselves stuck in. “Anti-woke” commentators rely on the fact that dynamics like racism and sexism already exist, using those dynamics to craft stereotypical “social justice warriors” (or “critical race theorists”) who can be blamed for the loss of wealth and perceived status of young white guys while the billionaires lining their pockets at everyone else's expense slip by unnoticed.

As Jane Mayer outlined in her book *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*, “anti-PC” discourse is big business, with billions of dollars of funding readily available to content creators whose work helps preserve the foundational myth of capitalism: that those who are wealthy and powerful fundamentally deserve that wealth and power. This myth exists in tension with the economic reality that people who work hard don't always get ahead. This tension may be obscured, in part, through narratives that blame social justice advocates for preventing average white guys from amassing wealth and power rather than on the inequalities built into the system itself.

This is where Rogan and his \$100 million Spotify contract enter the picture. While Rogan makes a big show of inviting people from across the political spectrum onto his podcast—even endorsing Bernie Sanders's 2020 presidential bid—more often than not, both he and his guests are spouting some form of capitalist apologia (that is, when they're not talking about colonizing the galaxy). For instance, in a November 2020 conversation with Whole Foods CEO John Mackey, Rogan told his audience:

The problem a lot of people have with capitalism is that they attribute capitalism to greed. I don't think there's anything wrong with contributing to a better community — making healthcare more affordable or free, making education more affordable or free. But human beings need incentives to perform.

If anything, the occasional leftist commentary that appears on Rogan's show serves to reinforce the perception that Rogan's own attitudes are middle-of-the-road and therefore represent a voice of reason. This “everyman” persona is used to guide the perceptions of his mostly young audience in directions that are more friendly to what might be termed a more-or-less libertarian agenda. A 2019 survey conducted by the Cato Institute found that young people were far more likely than their Boomer and Gen X forebears to have a positive attitude toward socialism. Not only that, the survey revealed a significant trend toward young people embracing the belief that wealth is more likely to be the result of exploitation than something that is “earned.”

The “straight white male” victimhood narrative can be most readily understood as a reaction against this trend. The greatest threat to capitalism is young people getting wise to the grift; “anti-woke” discourse seeks to draw battle lines within the working class by getting young people—especially those who happen to be white and/or men—to side with the ruling class and against everyone else on civil rights issues. This strategy, which has been openly adopted by the Republican Party, is explicitly aimed at undermining solidarity, and unfortunately, it often works, even among people who consider themselves “leftists.” It has been noted that Rogan’s show especially appeals to people who are lonely. This loneliness directly reflects the feelings of social alienation that occur when lower and middle-class white men are encouraged—at the behest of the shadowy billionaires who fund “anti-woke” discourse—to believe that the battle they need to be fighting is with people of different races and genders within their own social classes rather than taking on those who have rigged the system to their own benefit. Rogan presents himself as an outsider who tackles issues the mainstream media won’t touch; in reality, his weekly audience of millions is about as “mainstream” as media gets. It is in this context that Rogan consistently reveals himself to be an enormously powerful voice for the economic and social status quo. His “anti-woke” narrative isn’t just delusional, it’s debilitating. He is paid millions of dollars a week to sell his listeners the idea that they are victims rather than potential agents of positive change.

Rogan’s audience is large enough that they transform the world if they wanted to. His rhetoric of “straight white male” victimhood seems aimed at making sure they don’t.