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The Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial in Washington, D.C. (Flickr/denisbin, CC BY-ND 2.0)



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January 15, 2018

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A friend recently called my attention to last year's Wriston Lecture at the Manhattan Institute. Delivered by Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and professor of ethical leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business, and titled "The Age of Outrage," the lecture captures so much of what is wrong about contemporary conservative thought and, also, how all that wrongness cannot blind us to the accuracy of some of their critiques of the left.

Haidt starts with a concept drawn from cosmology, the "fine-tuned universe," and how scientists have concluded that a vast array of circumstances had to be just right for life to spring forth, and those circumstances were just right. He then applies it to modern democracy, asking what is required for a "fine-tuned liberal democracy" to come about and to flourish.

After some gibberish about how we humans are all, at heart, tribal primates, drawn to live with our kin and all too willing to kill the other, he opines:

> Here is the fine-tuned liberal democracy hypothesis: As tribal primates, human beings are unsuited for life in large, diverse secular democracies, *unless* you get certain settings finely adjusted to make possible the development of stable political life. This seems to be what the Founding Fathers believed. Jefferson, Madison and the rest of those 18th-century deists clearly *did* think that designing a constitution was like designing a giant clock, a clock that might run forever if they chose the right springs and gears.

It is a commonplace of contemporary conservative thought to take the Federalist Papers as the bible of democracy and, just so, to see James Madison as the principal evangelist of constitutionalism. This is certainly true, up to a point, and that point is in the mid-1790s when Madison abandons his political friendship with Alexander Hamilton and throws in with Thomas Jefferson. And so far from thinking they were building a constitution that would last forever, Jefferson thought that it was morally wrong for one generation to bind a future generation and, just so, the Constitution should be thrown out every 20 years and a new one fashioned.



Jonathan Haidt (NYU Stern)

This misunderstanding of our nation's founders and founding, so common on the right, does not necessarily lead to a misunderstanding of contemporary politics, but it does in this case. Haidt writes:

> So, how are we doing, as the inheritors of the clock? Are we maintaining it well? If Madison visited Washington, D.C., today, he'd find that our government is divided into two all-consuming factions, which cut right down the middle of each of the three branches, uniting the three red half-branches against the three blue half-branches, with no branch serving the

original function as he had envisioned.

Are today's factions "all-consuming"? Is Haidt not aware that there is a civil war going on within both political parties? Does he not recognize, apropos his fixation with tribalism, that in both parties there is a strong libertarian edge, albeit on different issues, and a strong communitarian edge, again on different issues?

His thesis is more clearly stated if he overlooks the complicating fact that most Supreme Court cases are actually decided by a unanimous or nearly unanimous vote, and so he overlooks it.

In his effort to find a sweeping thesis, another nasty intellectual habit of today's conservatives, Haidt, like Samuel Huntington and his "clash of civilizations" thesis and Francis Fukuyama and his "end of history" thesis, reaches indiscriminately too far, overlooking too much conflicting and complicating information, to obtain his fine-tuned thesis.

That said, Haidt is on firmer ground when he cites the reasons for increased polarization in our political life. Among other reasons, he cites the radicalization of the Republican Party under the leadership of Newt Gingrich in the 1990s and subsequently, and the identity politics of the left. When he looks at the way identity politics has shaped, and been shaped by, the academic left, Haidt is still stronger but, again, his conservatism gets in the way.

One of the reasons Haidt is better on the issue of identity politics is that he allows that there are some identity politics that are good and others that are malignant, that it is not necessarily the focus of identity, but whether that focus results in centripetal or centrifugal societal forces being strengthened.

"The civil rights struggle was indeed identity politics, but it was an effort to fix a mistake, to make us better and stronger as a nation," Haidt observes. "Martin Luther King's rhetoric made it clear that this was a campaign to create conditions that would allow national reconciliation. ... Of course, some people saw the civil rights movement as divisive, or centrifugal. But King's speech is among the most famous in American history precisely because it framed our greatest moral failing as an opportunity for centripetal redemption. This is what I'm calling the good kind of identity politics."

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Haidt contrasts King's identity politics with the variety of identity politics prevalent in the academy, and specifically with the idea of intersectionality, the unimpeachable idea that when looking at a complex system, we must attend to interactive effects, not just main effects. It is how this idea is translated into the classroom that creates the problem.

> But what happens when young people study intersectionality? In some majors, it's woven into many courses. Students memorize diagrams showing matrices of privilege and oppression. It's not just white privilege causing black oppression, and male privilege causing female oppression; it's heterosexual versus LGBTQ, able-bodied versus disabled; young versus old, attractive versus unattractive, even fertile versus infertile.
>
> Anything that a group has that is good or valued is seen as a kind of privilege, which causes a kind of oppression in those who don't have it. ... All of the binary dimensions of oppression are said to be interlocking and overlapping.
>
> America is said to be one giant matrix of oppression, and its victims cannot fight their battles separately. They must all come together to fight their common enemy, the group that sits at the top of the pyramid of oppression: the straight, white, cisgendered, able-bodied Christian or Jewish or possibly atheist male.
>
> This is why a perceived slight against one victim group calls forth protest from all victim groups. This is why so many campus groups now align against Israel. Intersectionality is like NATO for social justice activists.

This strikes me as a reasonable explanation for the otherwise unfathomable reality of campus LGBT groups protesting against Israel, among other campus stupidities.

I placed an ellipsis above where Haidt gets it wrong. To him, the reason the teaching of intersectionality is so wrong is because a "funny thing happens when you take young human beings, whose minds evolved for tribal warfare and us/them thinking, and you fill those minds full of binary dimensions. You tell them that one side of each binary is good and the other is bad. You turn on their ancient tribal circuits, preparing them for battle. Many students find it thrilling; it floods them with a sense

of meaning and purpose." He reverts to this conservative fascination with tribe and violence.

The obvious, or I would have thought it was obvious, reason that King's identity politics were morally redemptive, and that the current academic penchant for viewing social relations through the lens of group victimization is politically crippling, is that King invoked the universalist impulses of liberalism and the universalist ambitions of Christian soteriology. Without universalism, liberalism descends quickly into libertarianism, and as we Christians were just reminded on the feast of the Epiphany, without its universalist vocation to preach the Gospel to all nations, Christianity would have remained a sect of Judaism.

The champions of identity in the academic left do not champion these universalist impulses, rooted as they are in anthropological and ethical understandings. As Haidt later notes, students at today's universities are no longer instructed in the humanities, but are instead taught to view all social relations through the lens of power:

> Today's identity politics has another interesting feature: It teaches students to think in a way antithetical to what a liberal arts education should do.
>
> When I was at Yale in the 1980s, I was given so many tools for understanding the world. By the time I graduated, I could think about things as a utilitarian or a Kantian, as a Freudian or a behaviorist, as a computer scientist or a humanist. I was given many lenses to apply to any one situation.
>
> But nowadays, students who major in departments that prioritize social justice over the disinterested pursuit of truth are given just one lens — power — and told to apply it to all situations. Everything is about power. Every situation is to be analyzed in terms of the bad people acting to preserve their power and privilege over the good people.
>
> This is not an education. This is induction into a cult, a fundamentalist religion, a paranoid worldview that separates people from each other and sends them down the road to alienation, anxiety and intellectual impotence.

Haidt links to an arresting and brilliant article in The McGill Daily by Trent Eady, who talks about his time as a queer activist and feminist on campus and how his nagging questions led him to comprehend the complexities of the issues he cared about, and steer clear of the all-embracing doctrinal purity of the protesters.

> I used to endorse a particular brand of politics that is prevalent at McGill and in Montreal more widely. It is a fusion of a certain kind of anti-oppressive politics and a certain kind of radical leftist politics. This particular brand of politics begins with good intentions and noble causes, but metastasizes into a nightmare. In general, the activists involved are the nicest, most conscientious people you could hope to know. But at some point, they took a wrong turn, and their devotion to social justice led them down a dark path. Having been on both sides of the glass, I think I can bring some painful but necessary truth to light.

I encourage everyone to read Eady's essay, which breathes compassion, indeed an ongoing commitment to the social justice concerns he had as an activist, but which also sheds the dogmatism and anti-intellectualism that the movement activists demanded. "I don't hate capitalism or the state as if those were the names of the people who killed my dog," he writes.

Why does all this matter? Because President Donald Trump is daily perpetrating self-inflicted wounds upon conservatism, and the left needs to use this time to be smart, to shed the cultish dogmatism and sectarian victimization of the academic left, and embrace anew those universalist liberal and Christian impulses that have always engaged the better angels of our nature.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about the nexus between religion and politics.]

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