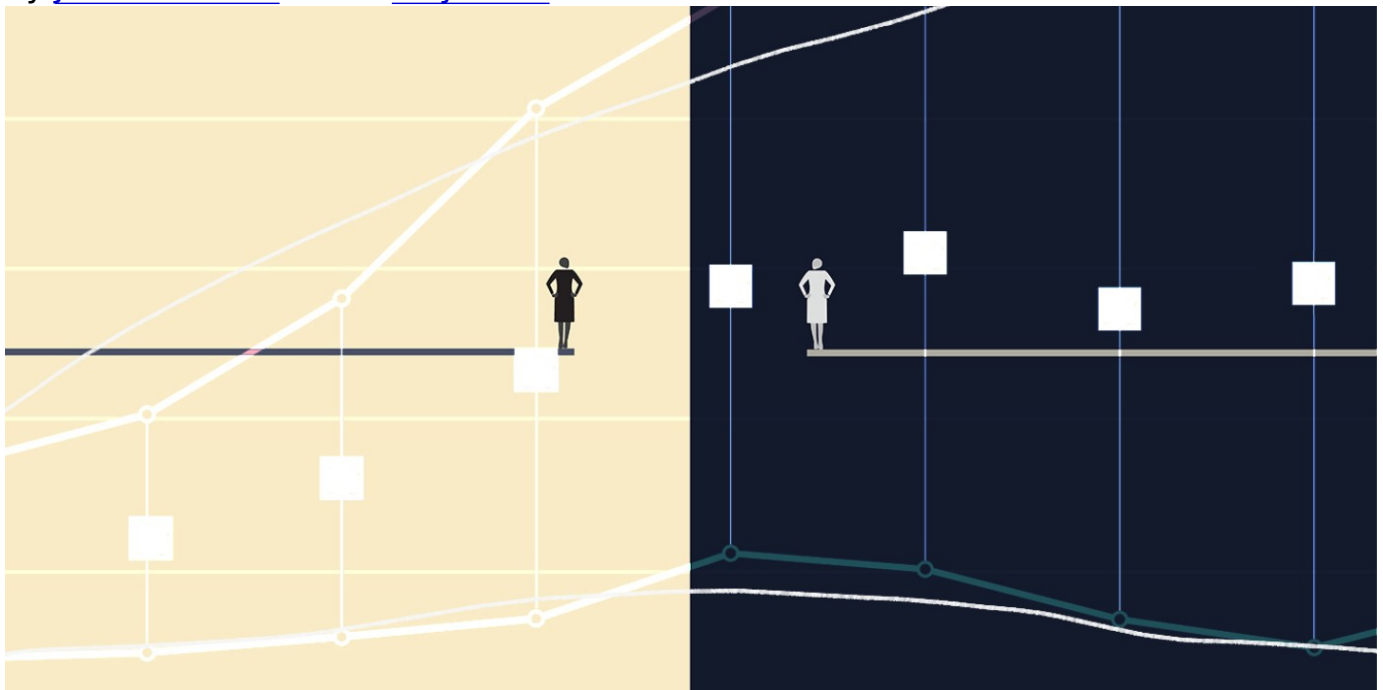


Anti-racism's mission drift

Privileged progressives have turned their attention from structures and systems to sentimentalism.

by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue



Century illustration

The summer seminar promised the kind of elite educational experience top high school students covet. Set on a leafy Ivy League campus, Anti-Oppressive Studies was tailor-made for those who prefer their education privileged and progressive. The professor was as impressive as the students. Educated at Princeton and Berkeley with street cred as a veteran activist and organizer, African American theologian Vincent Lloyd seemed perfectly matched to the occasion.

Yet the students would come to use the seminar's innovative democratic governance to vote their teacher off the island. The seminar's ambitions, especially its attempt to hold together its privilege and progressivism, meant that it could not long bear the weight of its contradictions. Something had to give. Someone had to

go. As Lloyd later reflected, in a *Compact* essay that blew up academic Twitter, “the students had all of the dogma of anti-racism, but no actual racism to call out in their world, [channeling] all of their desire to combat racism at me.”

The story sounds outlandish, as if motivated by agendas and axes to grind. But in our current context it’s entirely plausible, even predictable. Over recent decades American anti-racism has detached itself from the very structures and systems it was meant to address and repair.

Revolutionary anti-racism emerged from 1960s and 1970s freedom struggles against racism, which was then understood to mean the abetting of unjust institutional arrangements related to employment, education, the environment, and so on. Just as soon as the revolution began to threaten the order of things, it was met with breathtaking backlash. The standing political economy (what some call “racial capitalism”) revolves around exploiting the earth and its people for profit, and racism plays the crucial role of justifying matters by gaslighting the oppressed and blaming their oppression on their race. Racism persists because it works: it enables an entire world. Such a world doesn’t work for everyone or even most. That’s somewhat the point.

A world commanded by racial capitalism was hardly going to stand by and let the oppressed challenge its authority. Powerful governments devalued labor, rolled back social services, disenfranchised local power, unleashed campaigns of terror in the name of law and order, waged covert wars in foreign lands, and did whatever a rapidly globalizing market asked. They responded to the cries of the poor by doubling down on inequality, so incentivizing profiteering that revolutionaries suddenly found themselves apologists for the structures and systems they previously decried.

The current anti-racism grew up during this time as a debasement of those prior freedom struggles. Waylaid by the backlash and reaching for a foothold in the future, anti-racism retracted into itself, turning away from structures and systems—and turning on individuals. Instead of focusing its efforts on, say, building broad-based coalitions against racial capitalism, it reduced its field of vision and came after ordinary people. People like the unsuspecting college professor tasked with teaching Anti-Oppressive Studies to students trying to work out the contradictions of their privileged, progressive lives.

One can guess what happens next. Individuals prove unable to realize, or even understand, all that a wayward anti-racism expects of them, which only brands them “part of the problem.” Everything becomes personal, as if the goal of anti-racism were to elicit recitals of White guilt in which people cry rivers of regret over their Whiteness while business goes on as usual. It would be only a matter of time before this hyper-individualized anti-racism came for others.

Detached from practiced commitments and practical goals, anti-racism has become a runaway train hijacked by managerial classes claiming the progressive banner while indefinitely postponing a politics committed to meaningful change. In the hands of vanguard elites, anti-racism turned into a toxic mixture of well-heeled manners, personal grievance, and militant dogmatism—with little purpose or direction. And how could it be otherwise without undercutting the very privilege elites command as a matter of course?

What began as a struggle of and for the dispossessed has devolved into a culture war fixated on harms, microaggressions, and sensitivity trainings. No one can live up to the standard of being sensitive to every possible sensitivity, setting everyone up to fail. More importantly, almost none of this has anything to do with repairing and redistributing structures and systems.

Nothing captures anti-racism’s mission drift better than the explosive growth of its billion-dollar diversity industry, which promises to address inequality by diversifying the faces of gatekeeping institutions—the very institutions that facilitate upper-middle-class mobility precisely by leaving inequality in place. These anti-racist initiatives, often staffed by well-meaning and high-minded people, bring with them all the conviction but little of the power to actually get anything done, at the end of the day achieving so little that one begins to wonder if futility was the point.

All the while inequality widens and injustice deepens. [As just one example](#), in recent decades a massive carceral system has grown to protect a proprietarian regime. Police and prisons are tasked with managing poverty among surplus populations produced by a political economy that both created the underclass and refused to supply the social safety nets necessary to sustain life on the underside of empire. The new anti-racism, hellbent as it is on turning our attention from structures and systems to sentimentalism, is not simply a diversion from racial capitalist domination. It is racial capitalist domination by other means.

The polarization of the current moment can tempt the impression that all critiques of anti-racism come in bad faith. Certainly conservatives, among them a great many Christians, have warred against anti-racism by demonizing critical race theory, dog whistling “wokism” and “cancel culture,” and pitting oppressed people against each other. But fighting conservatives intent on preserving a racist order is not the fight the left needs to wake up to. That fight will go on as it always has. Rather, the fight looming on the left concerns the meaning and purpose of its anti-racism. It’s a fight within anti-racism, a fight for its future, which for left-leaning Christians comes down to the question of what the gospel promises and demands. It’s a fight we’ll see increasingly waged in the classroom.