

# *IDENTITY POLITICS, FREE SPEECH AND THE MERITOCRACY*

James Miller, 2020

## **Identity politics**

Race-based and gender-based political ideology within the student community—and beyond—is rapidly proliferating throughout the United States in the post-2008 world. This shift in political attitudes has become evident through a range of cultural attitudes and activities that are often referred to as identity politics, multiculturalism, diversity, or cultural identity. These political and ideological tendencies are said to be based on the unique, shared experiences of certain sections of the population with a history of discrimination: women, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, gays, lesbians and trans-gender persons. Individuals who fall within these social categories are seen as highly susceptible to being victims of discrimination, persecution and bigotry, sharply distinguishing them from other students. White heterosexual males are said to be the primary bigots and aggressors against these vulnerable categories of students.

Although the civil rights movement and women's rights struggles during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have greatly improved the social and economic situation of women and African Americans, bringing in their wake a deeper social recognition of gay rights, the proponents of cultural identity politics deny or ignore this progress and argue that the objective of social policy on campus should be to protect members of these victimized social categories by means of rules and policies designed to abolish or suppress discrimination, transgressions, insults, offenses, or terminology that causes them psychological or physical harm. The goal is to create cocoons of safe space, locking out the evils that threaten and harm members of these oppressed groups. "Trigger warnings" are said to be necessary to protect students against academic course material which might trigger a catastrophically harmful response. The

difference between psychological trauma and bodily attack is sometimes eclipsed, and a verbal microaggression is equated to a physical assault.

These tendencies have given rise to a “culture of victimhood” and a “cult of safetyism” which have become particularly evident on college campuses, where the majority of students come from economically privileged families. This increasingly anxiety-ridden environment encourages people to define themselves as part of a number of groups surrounded by hostile forces. The world is perceived as rife with ill-defined and subtle threats emanating from people who, perhaps unintentionally, participate in victimizing the members of the oppressed groups by insulting them or making statements that cause them serious psychological trauma.

Jonathon Haidt explains, in an article in the *Guardian* newspaper, April 10, 2016:

In such cultures there are two main sources of social prestige: being a victim or standing up for victims. But victimhood cultures don’t emerge in the most racist or sexist environments – they tend to emerge in institutions that are already highly egalitarian (such as Emory and Yale) and in which there are authorities (such as deans and college presidents) that can be entreated to step in on the side of the victims. In such settings political potency is increased by amplifying the number of victims and the degree of their victimization.

The growth of these moods and ideas has given rise to many incidents in recent years that have involved angry confrontations. The university administrators argue that they have worked with the students to establish new rules of conduct that enhance the protection of students from a potentially hostile educational environment.

### **Limiting freedom of speech**

A majority of the colleges and universities in the U.S. have adopted speech codes that restrict freedom of speech for the students or for outside speakers. At Duke, for example (The Glaring Evidence That Free Speech Is Threatened on Campus, *Atlantic* magazine, Mar. 4, 2016, by Conor Friedersdorf):

... student activists demanded disciplinary sanctions for students who attend “culturally insensitive” parties, mandatory implicit-bias training for all professors, and loss of the possibility of tenure if a faculty member engages in speech “if the discriminatory attitudes behind the speech,” as determined by an unnamed adjudicator, “could potentially harm the academic achievements of students of color.”

At Emory, student activists demanded that student evaluations include a field to report a faculty member’s micro aggressions to help ensure that there are repercussions or sanctions, and that the social network Yik Yak be banished from campus.

Activists at Wesleyan trashed their student newspaper then pushed to get it defunded because they disagreed with an op-ed that criticized Black Lives Matter. Dartmouth University students demanded the expulsion of fraternities that throw parties they deemed racist and forced a student newspaper to change its name.

The protection of the students’ supposed right not to be offended has taken the form of disinviting previously invited guest speakers at the requests of some students:

In 2015 alone, Robin Steinberg was disinvited from Harvard Law School, the rapper Common was disinvited from Kean University, and Suzanne Venker was disinvited from Williams College. Asra Nomani addressed Duke University only after student attempts to cancel her speech were overturned. UC Berkeley

Chancellor Nicholas Dirks participated in an event on his own campus that student protestors shut down. Speakers at USC needed police to intervene to continue an event. Angela Davis was subject to a petition that attempted to prevent her from speaking at Texas Tech. The rapper Big Sean faced a student effort to get him disinvited from Princeton. Bob McCulloch faced a student effort to disinvite him from speaking at St. Louis University. William Ayers was subject to an effort to disinvite him from Dickinson School of Law. Harold Koh faced a student effort to oust him as a visiting professor at New York University Law School. (ibid.)

The principles cited in these initiatives to suppress freedom of speech have been endorsed in a *New York Times* op-ed piece by Ulrich Baer (*NYT* 4/24/2017):

The recent student demonstrations at Auburn against Spencer’s visit—as well as protests on other campuses against Charles Murray, Milo Yiannopoulos and others—should be understood as an attempt to ensure the conditions of free speech for a greater group of people, rather than censorship. Liberal free-speech advocates rush to point out that the views of these individuals must be heard first to be rejected. But this is not the case. Universities invite speakers not chiefly to present otherwise unavailable discoveries, but to present to the public views they have presented elsewhere. When those views invalidate the humanity of some people, they restrict speech as a public good. . . .

In such cases there is no inherent value to be gained from debating them in public. In today’s age, we also have a simple solution that should appease all those concerned that students are insufficiently exposed to controversial views. It is called the internet, where all kinds of offensive expression flourish unfettered on a vast platform available to nearly all.

Baer's argument is that it's legitimate to suppress free speech on campuses since students can access the controversial topics on Internet websites. But such an argument, in principle, justifies banning free speech on the Internet as well—which in the present period is a growing reality. Furthermore, free speech in many workplaces is suffering from the same restrictions as on campuses. Here's an example. A software engineer, James Damore, was fired by Google in August, 2017, supposedly for violating the company's code of conduct regarding the treatment of women. He was not accused of inappropriate conduct. The termination was based on a memo he had written and distributed complaining about the company's policies, which included a statement that biological differences between women and men were partly responsible for the underrepresentation of women in technological and leadership positions. Among other things, he argued:

Note, I'm not saying that all men differ from women in the following ways or that these differences are "just." I'm simply stating that the distribution of preferences and abilities of men and women differ in part due to biological causes and that these differences may explain why we don't see equal representation of women in tech and leadership.

<https://gizmodo.com/exclusive-heres-the-full-10-page-anti-diversity-screed-1797564320>

In recent years actions, with a substantial participation of university students, to suppress or limit the freedom of speech of political speakers and groups has taken a more organized form among young activists. In 2017, we witnessed the violent protests against the appearance of Charles Murray at Middlebury College in Vermont in March, 2017, and of *Breitbart* spokesman Milo Yiannopoulos in Berkeley in September, and the mobilization against the rightists in Charlottesville, South Carolina in August. in the United States the "antifa" movement, which comprises groups such

as Direct Action Alliance, NYC Antifa, Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement, It's Going Down, and others, has been grabbing headlines with their often-violent attempts to deny the right of free expression to individuals and groups they oppose.

### **Hate speech and freedom of expression**

Beginning in the 1970s, in the wake of the transformative social struggles affecting the rights of Blacks and women, academics and intellectuals (including within the U.S. government) saw the need to modernize the prevailing norms of social control over the working population. They needed to institute meaningful reforms in order to preserve their authority. As President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed, in his commencement address at Howard University, June 4, 1965,

The voting rights bill will be the latest, and among the most important, in a long series of victories. But this victory – as Winston Churchill said of another triumph for freedom – “is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

That beginning is freedom; and the barriers to that freedom are tumbling down. Freedom is the right to share, share fully and equally, in American society – to vote, to hold a job, to enter a public place, to go to school. It is the right to be treated in every part of our national life as a person equal in dignity and promise to all others.

In that period of revolutionary change for African Americans, the ruling powers needed to implement measures that granted real freedom, not just empty promises. The time of empty promises had come to an end, and in order to save its place of pride as leader of the nation, the U.S. government was forced to promote genuine desegregation and real affirmative action.

But once the minimum necessary reforms were granted the ruling elite felt the need to apply the brakes so that the processes they had unleashed under the pressure of masses in motion would be slowed down, doled out piecemeal, kept to a minimum. For this they needed political leaders who could convincingly project an image of guardianship over the newly-won rights of oppressed sectors of the population, Blacks and women, while at the same time tacitly fueling the retrograde pressures which were increasingly pushing back against the gains of the progressive movements. Above all, the arbiters of social “justice” had to avoid pointing the finger of blame at the capitalist system. The multicultural and postmodern tendencies in academia served these ends.

Evidence for the collaboration of campus administrations in the suppression of “offensive” speech is provided in Chemerinsky and Gillman’s book. They report, in reference to campus rules outlawing “hate speech” (p. 82),

This history allows us to understand the legal fate of previous efforts to pass hate speech codes. By the early 1990s, over 350 colleges and universities adopted hate speech codes. A number of these were challenged in court, and all to be challenged were declared unconstitutional.

The campus hate-speech codes were proclaimed to be necessary to protect students and faculty from racial, religious or sexist intimidation or harassment, which would create a hostile or dangerous learning environment. But these codes were imposed without regard for the guarantees of freedom of speech. Many of these codes were challenged and found to be unconstitutional. See, for example, the analysis offered by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, <https://www.thefire.org/in-court/state-of-the-law-speech-codes/>

In case after case, courts across the country have unequivocally and uniformly held speech codes at public universities to be unconstitutional. Public institutions of higher learning attempting to regulate the content of speech on campus are held to the most exacting level of judicial scrutiny. Typically, courts find speech codes to violate the First Amendment because they are vague and/or overbroad. This means that because the speech code is written in a way that (a) insufficiently specifies what type of speech is prohibited or (b) would prohibit constitutionally protected speech, it cannot be reconciled with the First Amendment's protection of freedom of speech.

The fact that so many campuses implemented codes of conduct that were in violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution indicates they were all being affected by the same, or similar, influences. These influences, while arising from the imperatives of the ruling class to push back against challenges to its vital prerogatives, emanated directly from the executive branch of the federal government. The governmental claims that its efforts to restrict freedom of speech on college campuses stem from attempts to enforce Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The agency responsible for overseeing this enforcement is the Office of Civil Rights of the Department of Education. In 1994, in a "Notice of investigative guidance," this Office defined its mission as to "effectuate the provisions of title VI with regard to programs and activities receiving funding from the Department." The Office would investigate claims of racial harassment, saying "racial harassment denies students the right to an education free of discrimination." (*Federal Register*, Vol. 59, No. 47, March 10, 1994)

In 1972, Title IX was passed by Congress and added to the other sets of rules to be enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. \$\$\$\$\$\$Title IX applies specifically to educational institutions. In a case that developed in 2015 Title IX was



enforced in a way that illustrates the perversion of democratic rights under the new regime of identity politics. As described in Jennifer Senior’s review of *Unwanted Advances*, by Laura Kipnis in the *New York Times*, April 5, 2017:

Among the educators who recently found herself at the treacherous intersection of free speech and sensitivity politics is Laura Kipnis, a film professor, cultural critic and dedicated provocateur at Northwestern University. Responding to a new campus directive that prevented professors from dating undergraduates, she wrote an essay for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in February of 2015 entitled “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe.” Within days of publication, she was brought up on Title IX complaints for creating a “hostile environment.” She spent 72 days in the public stockade for it, until the university cleared her of any wrongdoing.

... You might be wondering how Kipnis wound up the subject of a Title IX investigation when the law was originally created to address gender discrimination in education. She had the same question, and soon found her answer: In 2011, the Department of Education expanded the Title IX mandate to include policing “sexual misconduct,” an idea so hazily defined it can apparently include publishing an essay — if the content is said to have “a chilling effect” on students’ ability to report sexual malfeasance.

... Once upon a time, explains Kipnis, female students celebrated their sexual freedom and agency. Today, students and faculty alike focus on their vulnerability. This, in her view, is a criminally retrograde story line, one that recasts women as pitiful creatures who cannot think and act for themselves — and it’s a story they seem to have internalized. Armed with Title IX and a new, academically fashionable definition of “consent” — which insists that sex is never truly consensual between adults unless they both have equal power —

women can now retroactively declare they never truly agreed to specific sexual acts, even whole relationships.

The infantilization of university students, brought on as much by administrative dictates as by student demands, is intended to create a cocoon of safety by shutting out any critical discourse that might ruffle the surface of these overly vulnerable minds.

Maurice Williams, writing in *The Militant* newspaper, May 6, 1996, comments,

In a move that restricts many democratic rights, U.S. president William Clinton signed a broad "antiterrorism" bill into law April 24 [the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996]. The legislation strengthens the government's ability to arbitrarily ban or deport those it does not want to allow into the United States. It also places greater restrictions on the rights of prisoners, particularly the right to habeas corpus appeals - often the only recourse for inmates sentenced to death.

... "The bill marks an historic expansion of Federal law-enforcement authority at the expense of civil liberties," Gregory Nojeim, legislative counsel to the American Civil Liberties Union, told the New York Times. Nojeim said the bill virtually ensures that a person wrongly convicted would never "get his day in court to prove his innocence."

Later, in 2011 under President Barack Obama's Department of Education, Title IX was further altered to conform to the assault against the constitutional guarantees of due process. The tendency to classify the woman as the eternal victim and the man as the aggressor corresponds to the idea that women lack the social power that men command. Thus, what might seem to be consensual sex can be construed as the male exercising the patriarchal function of possessing the woman. When men are accused

of sexual assault, the “due process” principle guarantees to anyone accused of a crime all the resources necessary to present a thoroughgoing defense in an appropriate legal proceeding. In a “Dear Colleague” letter sent out by the Department of Education, persons accused of rape or sexual assault on college campuses were denied their due process rights. As Cathy Young, a contributor to *Reason* magazine and Realclearpolitics.com, explained in a *New York Times* op ed column on July 27, 2017,

Much of the dispute revolves around a 2011 “Dear Colleague” letter issued by the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. That letter recommended that sexual assault complaints investigated by colleges under Title IX, which guarantees gender equity in education, be evaluated under the “preponderance of the evidence” standard. This means that if the school believes it is even slightly more likely — as in, a 50.1 percent chance — that an assault accusation is true, it can deem the defendant guilty. This is a far lower threshold than the “clear and convincing evidence” standard previously used by many schools, let alone the “beyond a reasonable doubt” standard used in the criminal justice system.

To illustrate how this works in practice, Cathy Young explains,

To see this bias in action, consider a 2014 case at Washington and Lee University. The accuser initially admitted to a friend that her first sexual experience with the accused was enjoyable, and she had sex with him again a month later. But eight months later, after working at a women’s clinic that dealt with sexual violence and after seeing a therapist, she began to believe that the first encounter was nonconsensual because she had been intoxicated. Following an investigation in which the accused student was discouraged from seeking legal representation, he was expelled. He sued the school, claiming gender

discrimination and that the school's Title IX officer, who carried out the investigation, had said "regret equals rape" at a campus event. (She denies this.)

The rule of using the "preponderance of evidence," in sexual assault cases on college campuses, introduced in 2011, was annulled in 2017 by President Donald Trump's Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos. The failure of university administrations to give due process rights to the accused represented a step toward the presumption of guilt of the accused. As Harvard law professor Jeannie Suk Gerson pointed out in the *New Yorker* magazine of Sept. 8, 2017:

Since 2011, dozens of courts have made clear that schools that do not give accused students a fair process may also be committing sex discrimination under Title IX.

She added:

The rejection of an either/or mentality—one in which the education system is either "for" or "against" victims of sexual violence—was striking also in DeVos's nod to the growing phenomenon of female students who are accused of sexual misconduct on campus, underscoring that a respect for basic fairness and due process benefits both women and men. ... When schools use an unfair process to discipline students, she suggested, even guilty parties can be vindicated later in lawsuits in court. Sloppy campus processes lead to general lack of confidence in the results, and further undermine the interests of sexual-assault victims.

Another issue that has been inadequately addressed is that colleges and universities routinely fail to inform the police in cases of rape or sexual assault. Rape is a crime that should be reported to the civil authorities, but university administrators prefer to sidestep that fact.

## Confrontation at Evergreen State College

In March 2017 students at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, mobilized to protest against the threats and attacks they believed they were experiencing. Excerpts from their list of demands, together with the response of the college president (*italics*), is taken from the *Cooper Point Journal* of May 27, 2017, and reads as follows:

**We demand that no changes to the student code of conduct be made without democratic student consent.**

*We reaffirm our commitment to continuing our work to revise the student conduct code, with significant contributions from students at the center of the process.*

*... Students will work on the code with staff over the summer, as well as work on other strategic initiatives. Students will be paid for their labor. Further consultation will occur with students in the fall.*

*... Students will select the peers that will be involved in the process.*

**We demand the immediate disarming of police services and no expansion of police facilities or services at any point in the future.**

*The Police Services Community Review Board will review police response to calls and complaints received on May 14 and May 23. A timeline for this review will be finalized by the end of next week. As you know, the Review Board doesn't include individuals from the President's Office or Police Services. Many of whom on the board are people of color.*

*... Annual training for police officers will be expanded because of the responsibility they hold and the critical services they provide to the college. The training will include techniques for safe and non-threatening engagement with students, addressing anti-black racism, de-escalation, minimizing use of force, serving trans and queer students, sexual assault response and*

*responding to the access and special needs of students with disabilities. Private funding will be sought to support training.*

**We demand mandatory sensitivity and cultural competency training for faculty, staff, administrators, and student employees.**

*Required training for all staff currently includes a review of the college's non-discrimination policy. We commit to providing cultural competency, sensitivity, and anti-bias training in the training required of all staff. By requiring this training for all staff, we will also ensure that all search committee members are trained. We're launching staff training in the fall and offering it throughout the year.*

**We demand for the coordinator of the Trans & Queer Center to be permanently hired full time.**

*Prior to this week's events, we had initiated the process to appoint Amira Caluya on a permanent basis as Coordinator of the Trans & Queer Center. We expedited this process and confirm that they have been appointed on a permanent basis effective today.*

One theme that emerges from this list of demands and responses is that there is no particular antagonism between the students and the administration. In some areas the students are only requesting a continuation, or expansion, of policies that have already been initiated at the college. In fact, what is revealed here is that there is a common interest between the two groups.

If it is true that students and administration were working toward a shared political regime on campus, then what was the fuss about, in March 2017? The mobilizations on the Evergreen campus at that time were dedicated to the expulsion of a teacher who would not conform to the cultural norms that the students had come to interpret as “compulsory” for everyone on campus, including faculty.

People whose ideas are formed or reflected in these political currents often think of themselves as challenging the various forms of oppression and discrimination against women, Latinos, Blacks, homosexuals and transgender persons. They see themselves as defenders of the marginalized and disrespected. They advocate and implement policies that reduce or eliminate political space for those whom they identify as threatening to members of the oppressed groups. Such policies are intended to exclude or silence those who advance rightist views, but also have the effect of stifling many others who inadvertently use language considered offensive, or terminology that reflects "microaggressions," or other expressions said to be abusive to oppressed groups. They often categorize "whiteness" as a form of cultural identity that impairs the capacity of whites to recognize or care about the suffering of non-whites. Their supposed "white skin privilege" induces the whites to align themselves with the white supremacists, and collaborate in the oppression of the non-white, female or gender nonconforming persons.

According to this political approach, white nationalists, white supremacists, neo-nazis, and fascists are the source of the main forms of oppression in modern society, and speakers who represent these groups ought to be confronted and shouted down—or even physically attacked—when they appear in public. They should not be allowed to speak in public spaces since their views are hurtful to oppressed groups, and cause pain and suffering. The belief is widespread among the adherents of identity politics that speech which is hateful and offensive to women, African-Americans and other oppressed groups should be banned from college campuses and public free-speech areas. In reality, right-wing extremist groups remain a tiny minority with little influence over public policy, and the source of exploitation and oppression in our society lies in the capitalist ruling class and its efforts to divide the working population into warring groups. For many decades after the end of the Civil War, employers hired Black workers to act as strikebreakers whenever Caucasian workers were on

strike. Divide and rule has long been a critical element in their methods of maintaining social and political control. But the rise of the CIO, which went a long way towards uniting workers of all races and colors, greatly diminished the capacity of the employers to use such divisive tactics.

### **Growth of disinvitations and shoutdowns**

News reports describe students shouting down invited speakers and demanding the ouster of teachers who they believe are responsible for the encouragement of racist, sexist or homophobic innuendos or abuse. In an opinion column in the *Washington Post*, Dec. 12, 2017, Jamie Piltch claimed:

From a Yale student yelling at professor and administrator Nicholas Christakis to Middlebury students refusing to allow conservative commentator Charles Murray to speak, there has been a string of headline-grabbing events that has created the impression that college students today are biased against conservatism and free speech.

There is an online database sponsored by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education of disinvitation events sponsored by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education which demonstrates the growth of protests against invited guest speakers on college campuses in recent years.

See: <https://www.thefire.org/how-to-use-the-disinvitation-database/>

On October 18, 2015, an article at [williamsalternative.com](http://williamsalternative.com) by Zach Wood describes the invitation and disinvitation of Suzanne Venker, an opponent of feminism, at Williams College in Massachusetts. See:

<http://williamsalternative.com/2015/10/breaking-through-a-ring-of-motivated-ignorance-zach-wood/>



Wood, one of the sponsors of the invitation, was ultimately forced to withdraw the invitation after substantial pressure from many students. One student posted a note on Facebook saying:

When you bring a misogynistic, white supremacist men's rights activist to campus in the name of 'dialogue' and 'the other side,' you are not only causing actual mental, social, psychological, and physical harm to students, but you are also—paying—for the continued dispersal of violent ideologies that kill our black and brown (trans) femme sisters. You are giving those who spout violence the money that so desperately needs to be funneled to black and brown (trans) femme communities, to people who are leading the revolution, who are surviving in the streets, who are dying in the streets. Know, you are dipping your hands in their blood, Zach Wood.

The ideas put forward in this intemperate accusation against Zach Woods's attempt to provide a little ideological diversity on campus were reflected again in an editorial in the *Williams Record* (cited in an article in the October 22, 2015, article in the *Washington Post*, by Jonathan H. Adler):

Though Venker's speech is legally protected, the College, as a private institution, has its own set of rules about what discourse is acceptable. In general, the College should not allow speech that challenges fundamental human rights and devalues people based on identity markers, like being a woman. Much of what Venker has said online, in her books and in interviews falls into this category. While free speech is important and there are problems with deeming speech unacceptable, students must not be unduly exposed to harmful stereotypes in order to live and learn here without suffering emotional injury. It is possible that some speech is too harmful to invite to campus. The College should be a safe space for students, a place where people respect

others' identities. Venker's appearance would have been an invasion of that space. ...

This disinvasion was initiated and carried through by students, but was quickly endorsed by the administration. The student body (or the most vocal elements within it) and the administration, in this circumstance, shared the same goals.

This emergence of student opposition to "offensive" speech is documented by Erwin Chemerinsky and Howard Gillman in their book *Free Speech on Campus*, p. 12:

We can confirm what the Pew research Center reported in November 2015: this generation of college students is much more supportive of censoring offensive statements about minorities and much less supportive of protecting speech that makes some students uncomfortable. Students are also much less open to countervailing arguments about the need to protect hateful or controversial speech.

Piltch, in the same opinion piece, refers to the transition in the political curriculum which occurred on most university campuses beginning in the 1980s, following on the growth of affirmative action programs which provided students from historically oppressed populations with expanded opportunities to gain admission to universities and colleges. At the same time the lingering impact of the campus radicalization of the 1960s and 1970s, itself interlinked with the movements for civil rights and against the Vietnam war, showed up in a reorientation of the liberal arts curricula towards postmodern literature. The postmodernist political outlook involved the condemnation of previous traditions of teaching in sociology, history and political science, heaving the old classics onto the junk-pile as merely expressions of patriarchal, white, male, Eurocentric bias. As Piltch explains,

The curricular part of these conflicts has largely been settled for years. Multiculturalism rules the day. Many universities have women and gender studies and various ethnic studies departments. Similarly, the Western canon is no longer the intellectual focus of most students' liberal arts education. Instead, students now learn about the importance of diversity and the need to highlight voices that have often been silenced.

### **Origin of multiculturalism**

What is brought to light here is that the transition in the curriculum, academic guidelines, and the push toward diversity in student and faculty populations, referred to as multiculturalism, has been carried through on the heels of the historic gains achieved in the battles for civil rights for the Black nationality, as well as the of the women's movement in the fight for equal pay for equal work and equal access to traditionally male-dominated occupations. Colleges and universities, social institutions that were initially established by wealthy donors and promoters, were—and still are—designed to fulfill the goals of the ruling class to mold the ideas of the youth in a way that would be productive for them. Affirmative action programs were adopted by educational institutions and corporations to provide for the inclusion of more women and African-Americans into the workforce or the university. These gains, at bottom, represent an upsurge of unification of the diverse elements of the working population, and a weakening of the grip of bourgeois ideology on the working class.

Furthermore, the post-WWII labor battles further solidified the unity of all workers in racially-integrated workplaces as the Civil Rights movement affected broader layers of working people, enabling them to overcome the conflicts that had divided them. When evaluating the impact of the mass popular civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, it is critical to see how this movement is a product of the history of the

class struggle in the United States. As Jack Barnes wrote in *Malcolm X, Black Liberation and the Road to Workers Power*, (p. 306):

Those conditions, of course, have changed substantially since 1933 as a result of class battles. They began shifting in the mid-1930s as a product of the labor struggles that built the CIO, growing opposition to fascism and the spreading imperialist world war, and motion toward a labor party independent of the Democrats and Republicans. These changes accelerated in the 1950s with the conquests of the mass civil rights movement and Black liberation struggles, which had their roots in the massive urbanization, migration to the North, and shifts in the composition of the industrial workforce that began prior to World War II. As a consequence of these struggles, and as a component of them, workers in the United States did fight for an important form of social insurance: Social Security. And as a result of the labor battles of the 1930s and civil rights struggles of the 1950s and '60s, they came to see an expanded version of that Social Security, including Medicare, Medicaid, and related programs, as rights.

The civil rights gains have been preserved up to the present time in major social institutions as well as in the consciousness of the immense majority of the population, although the capitalist ruling class and its government have repeatedly tried to blunt the impact and extent of these progressive changes, and have worked to weaken their hold and obfuscate their significance. (“Diversity” has been substituted for “affirmative action” in the language of higher education, as though it were a question of attracting a more variegated bouquet of human ethnic types rather than a reversal of violations of democratic rights.) It is the consciousness of the mass of working people that serves to make these gains a living reality, even though the active phase of the struggles has long since subsided. Because of the advances made by working

people it is no longer socially acceptable to blatantly deny jobs or university admission to individuals because of their sex, color, religion or nationality, even though the institutions which serve the needs of the capitalist minority keep a tight hold on the reins so that these trends don't proceed in any direction that might challenge the authority or ideology of the ruling capitalist parties.

The gigantic wave of mass protests against the police killing of George Floyd in May, 2020, embraced millions of people in cities and towns, and spread to Asia, Africa and Europe as well. In the U.S. and Europe, the majority of participants in these mass demonstrations were Caucasian, once again confirming the historic progressive shift in attitudes of workers of all races in the wake of the gains of the civil rights battles of the 1960s. As Roy Landerson, reporting in the *Militant* newspaper July 6, 2020, concluded:

These protests in smaller towns and villages all across the country are an important reflection of the powerful impact on workers' thinking of the Black-led mass movement that overthrew Jim Crow segregation in the 1950s and '60s and protests since.

To try to counter this fact, the liberal press focused on a small number of mobilizations by armed right-wing groups. "Militia activity has marked protests in places across the country," claimed Isaac Stanley-Becker in the *Washington Post*. He alleges activity by militias in rural areas and small towns is widespread, intimidating organizers to call off actions there.

In reality the breadth of demonstrations across the country over three weeks has been unprecedented. The *Post*'s real intent is to tar working people in rural areas as deplorable

The growth in support for racial equality among workers of all races often came from experiences on the job and in the trade union movement. As Hugh Lessig, writing for the AP, reported March 25, 2018:

<https://apnews.com/12ddd5c3815345448f634f0fa1f35275>

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the vote that created United Steelworkers Local 8888, today a staple of shipyard life. Union members are marking the milestone with events throughout the year.

The vote to authorize the union took place on Jan. 31, 1978. It set off a celebration that was short-lived.

The company, then owned by Tenneco, protested the election results, as did the Peninsula Shipbuilders Association, the yard's old union. It dragged on, and after a year had passed, the United Steelworkers had had enough. On Jan. 31, 1979, exactly one year after that successful vote, the union voted to strike.

The walkout lasted nearly three months, dividing the company, the city and families. But the drive to unionize was rooted in a deeper struggle, according to Lane Windham, author of the book "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide."

By the mid-1970s, women and people of color had "a new sense of rights" from the struggles for racial and gender equity, Windham said.

Those struggles affected the shipyard in a big way. Black workers fought for equal pay, additional promotions and access to the apprentice school through the courts. The fight took several years. It eventually prompted the federal government to tighten standards at the yard, holding up \$700 million in new

contracts until the company signed a conciliation agreement in 1970 that stressed equal promotion, training and recruitment.

In 1973, the company made a major push to hire women, prompted by a changing legal environment, and not wanting to risk its federal contracts “being out of step with government expectations on civil rights,” she wrote. In an interview with the Daily Press, Windham said that women and blacks who entered the shipyard “had the wind at their backs, essentially, from these larger social movements happening in society.”

Experiences such as this occurred on a mass scale among millions of workers, particularly in the industrial unions: auto, rail, steel, etc., allowing them to take a big step forward in their political and social consciousness. The U.S. population more and more began to absorb and reflect the changes that were brought about by the mass struggles for civil and human rights. Martin Luther King’s speech at the 1963 March on Washington, used these words:

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

This dream has been shared, and still is shared by millions of working people. I say “working people,” because this dream is meaningless for the billionaire exploiters living in their hideaway mansions and gated “communities,” waited on hand and foot by servants of all kinds. Capitalists of all skin colors share the condition of belonging to a specially entitled minority whose personal lives have nothing to do with race, religion or nationality. The laws and customs of the country do not affect them. They are above the law; they are the arbiters of custom, the shapers of the rules and norms

that govern the rest of the population. They control the political systems, the educational systems and the mass media. They are the ruling class.

But MLK's dream about how people are judged still holds true for the masses of workers and farmers whose lives are dependent on the course of development of capitalist production, trade and commerce. The workers urgently need to overcome their racial, national and sex divisions—imposed upon them by capitalist politics and culture—in order to unify their efforts to reach a new stage of human cooperation, beyond capitalism. Only in this way can Martin's dream come true. And they will do it through struggle, learning every step of the way how to recognize their allies—workers of all colors and national backgrounds, workers of both sexes—as they come together to battle the obstacles placed in their path by the rulers.

But in this process, which leads toward a society in which people are judged not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character, identity politics serves as yet another obstacle placed in the path of fighting workers by the hardening of the defensive reflexes of a weakening capitalist class, evermore unsure of itself, evermore threatened by the growth of working-class unity in struggle.

Over the past 50 years or so, ever since the capitalist economy in North America and Europe began to feel the effects of a declining profit rate and an inability to maintain healthy increases in the gross domestic product, the capitalists and their advisers began to understand more clearly that it would be increasingly difficult for them to grant the kind of increases in wages and benefits that had been possible in the three decades following WWII. Their drives to break strikes and weaken unions grew accordingly. The bosses introduced a variety of tactics to dilute the protective power of union contracts. As the workplaces became more tightly regimented and as workers increasingly found their jobs more dangerous, the class struggle on the job and through the union movement heated up. The union struggles of the 1970s and 80s in



meat-packing, airlines, coal and forest products industries the wealthy rulers have recognized more acutely the need for a broad-based professional middle-class layer to serve as defenders of capitalist norms and politics. The capitalist culture-molders have long recognized the need for a layer of supporters who seemed to blend in with the oppressed communities; to rise up as if they were heart and soul of the oppressed masses. They would appear as the most militant and dedicated defenders of the rights of the suffering millions. But most crucially, the boss class would need this middle-class layer to deflect and obstruct all tendencies of the working masses to unify and fight for their interests independently of the capitalist parties and institutions. This

But while these millions of workers learned to recognize the need for unity and solidarity between workers of all races and both sexes, there was a retrograde movement on college campuses and among meritocratic professionals and students. How did this current atmosphere of group divisionism evolve? The underlying conditions on college campuses are such today that students of all races and nationalities are growing ever more fearful that they won't be able to acquire the career they had been expecting or hoping for. The ongoing deterioration of capitalist production and exchange—a product of the historical weakening of the foundations of capitalist profit-making—means fewer high-paying jobs for college graduates, except in science, engineering, technology and medical fields, such as nursing and the allied technical fields.

Elizabeth Redden, writing in *Inside Higher Ed* journal, Feb. 18, 2020, says:

The unemployment rate for young college graduates exceeds that of the general population, and about 41 percent of recent college graduates -- and 33.8 percent of all college graduates -- are underemployed in that they are working in jobs that don't require a college degree, according to new data from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

... Recent graduates of programs in education, engineering and nursing have among the lowest unemployment and underemployment rates, while rates are much higher for recent graduates in many fields in the liberal arts and sciences and some professionally oriented fields. The field whose recent graduates have the highest rate of unemployment is mass media (7.8 percent), while the field whose recent graduates have the highest rate of underemployment is criminal justice (73.2 percent)

The students who have chosen careers in the arts, literature, social studies or humanities find themselves jostling against one another as they realize more and more that only a minority of them will actually acquire the job of their dreams. The high cost of college tuition adds to the sense of desperation among many students. Not only do they look forward to a heavy debt load, but they can't be sure they will have the means to pay it off.

Having grown up in the dog-eat-dog environment of capitalist competition, students are aware that there won't be anything served to them on a silver platter in the race for success in the modern workplace. They need the grades, they need the professors' recommendations, they need whatever plaudits they can get to show their readiness to cater to the needs of prospective employers. The lingering traditions of affirmative action for Black and women students creates a springboard some students to build on these traditions to push themselves to the head of the line.

The tendency towards affirmative action for African Americans and women, having been embraced—however reluctantly—by nearly all colleges and universities as a consequence of the powerful fight for Black equality from the 1950s through 70s, and the women's rights movement of the 1970s and 80s, led to the establishment of Black studies (now African American studies) departments and curricula, as well as women's studies departments (now mostly called women's, gender and sexuality studies

departments). These were tangible gains of the movements of social change that ended up creating a new, more progressive, political environment on campus. Once created, this new environment became a battleground for the future of higher education and its role in providing academic preparation for the professions of the 80s, 90s and beyond.

Meanwhile, the workplaces of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were undergoing a shift in employers' needs due to the decline of new investments in the expansion of capitalist manufacturing and trade. Capitalism in the advanced countries began to stagnate and the gross domestic product per capita began to fall. Manufacturing shifted to other countries where the cost of labor was lower. Service jobs in the U.S. rose at the expense of manufacturing jobs. New jobs began to proliferate in the areas of computer science, digital technology, entertainment, internet-based communications and gaming. The entire higher education system began to orient towards training for these growing sectors of the economy. In addition, hospitals and clinics began expanding, fomenting increased opportunities in medical-related fields.

The Aug. 11, 2018, issue of *Forbes* magazine featured an article by Shelcey V. Joseph, who reviewed the results of McGraw-Hill Education's Future Workforce Survey, which showed some interesting results:

### **College graduates don't feel well-equipped to face the real world**

Only 4 in 10 U.S. college students feel very or extremely prepared for their future careers. Women were less confident in their career readiness.

Many reported feeling like their college experience did not provide the critical skills they need to transition into the workforce, such as solving complex problems (43%), resume writing (37%), interviewing (34%) and job searching (31%)

## **There's a gap between student and employer perceptions**

77% of students reported feeling confident in their professionalism, work ethic, teamwork and collaboration skills, while employers felt less enthusiastic—according to the recent NACE Job Outlook Study. In fact, only 43% of them feel recent grads are proficient in these areas.

## **More experience helps with confidence and career readiness**

More than half of students surveyed said increased access to internships and other professional experiences would have helped them feel better prepared.

At the same time, women's studies and Black studies departments shifted towards preparing students for careers in management, administration, communications, education, politics, social work and human resources. For college graduates with these majors, career opportunities in these sectors were increasing throughout the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a few years beyond. But as more youth streamed into the courses offered in these humanities categories, job opportunities reached a peak and began to decline. As mentioned above, workplace job opportunities shifted toward scientific, technical and medical fields.

As previously mentioned, the humanities curricula underwent a shift toward postmodernism in the 1980s. There is close correspondence between the multicultural diversity transition and postmodernist concepts in literature and sociology. The common ground between these two tendencies is the increasing focus on the oppression and exclusion suffered by women, gays and national or racial minorities that have been established over the centuries within social institutions, including academia. Multiculturalism is expressed mainly through changes in admissions policies and restructuring of university departments, while postmodernism is a means of

blunting and distorting the real meaning of social struggles so as to divorce progressive ideas from the movements that gave birth to them.

Postmodernism and deconstruction emerged in post-WWII European academic circles as a reaction against Marxism. The postmodernist philosophers were initially seen as Marxists, or as adherents of principles derived from Marxism. But Marxism implies a challenge to the rule of the bourgeoisie, while postmodernism is a way of mystifying the nature of bourgeois society. The most effective opponents of Marxism have always been those who called themselves Marxists.

Postmodernism, which purportedly embraces the emancipatory abandonment of traditional Eurocentrist, male-dominated and racist literature, obscures the history and significance of all struggles for social change, and even the reality of social change itself, by introducing a vocabulary of terms and expressions whose definitions are dependent not on any customary dictionary, but on the intentions of the author. Perhaps the postmodernists were taking their cue from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. They seem to have taken to heart the principles enunciated by Humpty Dumpty:

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that's all.”

Instead of a clear explanation of social change in capitalist society, postmodernists introduce esoteric neologisms whose significance remains inscrutable or enigmatic. Ideas expressed in postmodern jargon often cannot be discerned just by reading the text itself, but by a process of textual interpretation which the postmodernists say is necessary, but find it impossible to explain because their mode of discourse rules out

ordinary explanations. According to Habermas, textual interpretation requires hermeneutic methods, which themselves are neither straightforward nor easily explained, although some scholars seem to have no difficulty producing massive manuscripts on the theme. See: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism/>

Postmodern authors shy away from explanations in general because clarification is antithetical to the intent of their projects. Postmodernist influences encourage students to spend considerable time mastering the jargon and employing it in papers which generally incorporate some feminist, anti-imperialist or multicultural themes but lack clear ideas. They impress their professors by handing in papers which mimic the style of the texts they have been studying, and employ its terminology, but require very little knowledge about history, literature or society.

To a certain degree, college education under capitalism has always contained elements of superficiality, distortion and posturing, particularly in the humanities: economics, sociology, history and philosophy. This is a product of the growth of the modern systems of higher education under the tutelage of a ruling class which cannot tolerate a scientific examination of its exploitative character. But prior to the emergence of postmodernism, student essays usually had to incorporate elements of coherence and rationality, even while generally remaining subordinate to articles of faith that provide support for the rule of the capitalist class and their dog-eat-dog system. This was the norm under the old regime of the “canon of western literature,” as it was practiced up until the 1970s. Of course, this canon still exists to a large extent in university curricula, and has been modified, but not displaced, by postmodern narratives.

The rise of postmodernism was the expression of a new trend, a rejection of the “western canon” (in history and literature) because of its origins in a European, Caucasian, patriarchal culture. Many students and faculty members, influenced by the sweeping social changes of the 60s and 70s, reached out for a new framework for

interpreting history, something progressive and liberating—and that something often turned out to be postmodernism, which fomented the formation of a cultish erudition that kept *promising* a criticism of social injustice but kept *dissolving* criticism into a morass of impenetrable verbiage. Most students, insofar as they were concerned about course content, wanted course material with a genuinely liberating quality, perhaps a lens to focus on what was critical and vital for historical progress. But what they were offered was yet a new form of bourgeois falsification. Instead of providing insight into history, it obscured reality altogether. Students who only wanted a degree as a ticket to a professional career quickly caught on that learning to master this arcane form of expression could result in PhD degrees and lucrative careers. Other students shifted their academic focus toward more practical or scientific curricula.

Many thousands of college students, influenced by this academic movement, were encouraged to believe that they were not just “privileged” scholars by virtue of their genetic inheritance and their self-perceived facility with advanced ideas, but were destined to join an elevated social tier often referred to as the “cognitive elite.” The members of the cognitive elite generally thought of themselves—and still do—as uniquely qualified to fulfill decisive functions of social leadership and, commensurate with the high social value of these functions, expected to be compensated handsomely.

### **Students under pressure**

But apart from the formative experiences of the new generations going through the struggles of higher education, the youth being raised in upwardly mobile families are being subjected to special pressures. They are being treated by parents and teachers as “specially gifted” children, future members of the cognitive elite. As such, they must be treated as precious resources, fragile and vulnerable, requiring extra careful

handling. As Matthew Lesh explains in his review of *The Coddling of the American Mind*, by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (*Quillete*, Sept. 2, 2018):

When you guard children against every possible risk – do not let them outside to play or walk home alone – they exaggerate the fear of such situations and fail to develop resilience and coping skills. Stresses are necessary to learn, adapt and grow. Without movement, our muscles and joints grow weak. Without varied life experiences, our minds do not know how to cope with day-to-day stressors. Measures designed to protect children and students are backfiring. Fragility is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you think certain ideas are dangerous, or are encouraged to do so by trigger warnings and safe spaces, you will be more anxious in the long run. Intellectual safety not only makes free and open debate impossible; it's setting up a generation for more anxiety and depression.

So, this special handling approach to parenthood has psychologically damaging results. A recent book by psychologist Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy — and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, points to the recent evolution of mental health concerns among university students (as reviewed in the *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 24, 2017:

The American Freshman Survey echoes these same trends for incoming college students. Every indicator of mental health issues on the survey reached all-time highs in 2016. Since 2009, there has been a 51 percent increase in students feeling overwhelmed, a 64 percent increase in those seeking counseling and a 95 percent increase in those feeling depressed. In 2016, for the first time, the majority of incoming freshmen described their mental health as below average.

Further, on this theme, Alina Tugend, writing in the *New York Times* (June 7, 2017), explains,



It is not new that the number of college students who say they are facing mental—and emotional—health troubles has been steadily growing. What is new is that colleges and universities are increasingly focused on trying to understand, through rigorous research, what interventions work best and for the broadest swath of students.

According to the U.C.L.A. Higher Education Research Institute annual freshman survey, conducted since 1966, a record [high of 11.9 percent of the students](#) in the 2016 incoming class reported “frequently” feeling depressed in the past year, and 13.9 percent said “there was a very good chance they would seek personal counseling in college.” And for the first time in the survey’s history, less than half (47 percent) consider their mental health to be above average relative to their peers.

In addition, economic anxiety about the future and the high cost of college now (which can top \$70,000 a year at private schools) puts great stress on students who worry that a grade of B may ruin their career chances or disappoint their parents who are paying hundreds of thousands of dollars.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/07/education/colleges-get-proactive-in-addressing-depression-on-campus.html>

The peculiar sense of entitlement and intellectual superiority of this layer of students on college campuses enhances their yearning for protection from harm or offense. This tends to produce uneasiness when confronted with any potentially offensive expression, or provocative line of argument, that challenges their sense of security and intensifies their knee-jerk reaction against any idea they regard as harmful. This has fed a tendency to demand that the campus administrations provide a guarantee of safe spaces, trigger warnings and protection from abusive or offensive situations. But these

students prefer that the administration collaborate with them to restructure the campus environment, and any intrusion of outside forces, such as the municipal or state police, should be avoided. The entry of outside police into the campus might trigger painful feelings. Instead more campuses are establishing their own, university-only police forces, controlled by the administration. As reported by Melinda D. Anderson in the Sept. 28, 2015 issue of the *Atlantic* monthly:

According to a recent Justice Department report on 2011-12 data, what's been described as the most comprehensive survey of its kind, the vast majority of public colleges and universities—92 percent—have sworn and armed campus officers. Unsurprisingly, they're much less prevalent at private colleges: Slightly over a third (38 percent) of them are equipped with their own law enforcement. Since the 2004-05 school year, the percentage of both public and private colleges nationwide using armed officers increased from 68 percent 75 percent.

The university thus increasingly becomes an isolated arena which develops spontaneously within bourgeois society, and becomes adapted to perform the function of molding the social attitudes of the offspring of the privileged at a time of growing social and moral crisis. At the same time, youth of working families have ever diminishing possibilities for attending institutions of higher learning.

The students with the highest likelihood of graduating from college and going on to higher degrees are those from better-off families, the wealthy or upper middle-class professionals. These also tend to be the one most conditioned by safetyism, and will likely be the most vocally defensive and anxious students. Harvard University sociologist Robert Putnam's book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, relying on several highly-regarded surveys of social statistics, highlights the growing class differentiation and social segregation in the decades since the 1970s.

In the quarter century between 1979 and 2005, average annual after-tax income (adjusted for inflation) grew by \$900 for the bottom fifth of American households, by \$8,700 for the middle fifth, and by \$745,000 for the top 1 percent of households.

While the big majority of non-college-educated workers have seen a stagnation or decline in their living standards, there has been a substantial growth of wealth concentrated in the upper 25% of U.S. households, categorized by income.

As the twenty-first century opened, a family's socioeconomic status (SES) had become even more important than test scores in predicting which eighth graders would graduate from college. A generation earlier, social class had played a smaller role, relative to academic ability, in predicting educational attainment. Nowadays, high-scoring rich kids are very likely (74 percent) to graduate from college, while low-scoring poor kids almost never do (3 percent). Middling students are six times more likely to graduate from college if they come from a more affluent family (51 percent) than if they come from a less affluent family (8 percent). Even more shocking, high-scoring poor kids are now slightly less likely (29 percent) to get a college degree than low-scoring rich kids (30 percent). That last fact is particularly hard to square with the idea at the heart of the American Dream: equality of opportunity.

"Equality of opportunity," is most often used as a hypocritical slogan promoted by the defenders of capitalist exploitation. The drive to maximize profit, rent and interest income for the ultra-rich bears down ever more harshly against the families of working people in the current phase of economic crisis. In order to defend what little they have, working people have always had to use their force of numbers to fight back against the violence and greed of the propertied rich. However much they have

achieved gains in living standards, only a minority of them have achieved equality with the families of middle-class professionals. The strategy of mass pressure and public mobilizations is the basis for victory in all these battles, not only in the trade-union movement, but also in other mass movements—for women’s rights, Black rights and gay rights. These movements have in common a shared interest in fighting against their greatest enemies, the capitalist rulers, who strive to keep the population divided, weak, ignorant and confused. In this sense all movements arising from the masses have demonstrated a working-class basis.

In any case, the growing gap in living standards between the working class and the privileged middle class (exacerbated by the crisis of capitalist profitability and the downward pressure on wages) has promoted an ever-larger class gap in lifestyles and family dynamics. As Putnam points out:

Ultimately, growing class segregation across neighborhoods, schools, marriages (and probably also civic associations, workplaces, and friendship circles) means that rich Americans and poor Americans are living, learning, and raising children in increasingly separate and unequal worlds, removing the stepping-stones to upward mobility—college-going classmates or cousins or middle-class neighbors, who might take a working-class kid from the neighborhood under their wing

“Meritocracy” is traditionally defined as an especially enlightened and talented sector of society that has the capacity to govern due to its heightened capacity to analyze, interpret and judge. In reality, the “meritocracy” that has come to dominate bourgeois ideology, politics and morality in the recent past is simply a privileged social layer. Jack Barnes, in *Malcolm X, Black Liberation and the Road to Workers Power*, Pathfinder, 2009, p. 50, explains the composition of this privileged layer:

... composed of the handsomely remunerated staffs of so-called nonprofit foundations, charities, “community organizations,” and “nongovernmental organizations” (NGOs)—in the United States and worldwide; of well-placed professors and top university administrative personnel; of attorneys, lobbyists, and others.

The lives and livelihoods of these growing foundation- and university-centered strata in capitalist society—who, along with bankers and businessmen, cycle back and forth into and out of government positions—are themselves largely unconnected to the production, reproduction, or circulation of social wealth. Their existence is more and more alien to the conditions of life of working people or other producers of any racial or national background. (

This meritocracy owes its existence to the needs of the ruling class to defend its interests during a period of growing discontent among the workers and youth. But this must be done in such a way that creates the appearance that the meritocrats are entitled to a privileged position and a high income because they know the best way to defend the needs of the most oppressed sectors of society. As Barnes explains:

... this is a self-designated “enlightened meritocracy,” determined to con the world into accepting the myth that the economic and social advancement of its members is just reward for their individual intelligence, education, and “service.” Its members truly believe that their “brightness,” their “quickness,” their “contributions to public life,” their “service,” their “sacrifices” (they humbly point out they could be making a lot more in business or banking) give them the right to make decisions, to administer society on behalf of the bourgeoisie—on behalf of what they claim to be the interests of “the people.” (ibid)

The meritocrats promote an ideological course that favors the continued social and political preeminence of the ruling capitalist class, thus securing their own elevated social status as long as their roles remain useful to the administrative and ideological processes that sustain the dominance of the capitalist rulers. Since the decline of the civil rights and women's rights movements in the 1970s and 80s, the elevated social and economic position of Black people and women has become divorced from the social movements that created the basis for their academic and occupational advancement. They have been integrated into professional middle-class professions for the most part linked to authority or influence. In these positions they can help to divert or blunt initiatives rising from the working people. They can pose as representatives of the oppressed, and put themselves forward as the guarantors of the rights that have been won.

But in a period of crisis and cutbacks their jobs and social position become insecure. As the fears of downsizing, redundancy, of losing status and privilege, play a growing role in their daily lives, it feeds into family life and their relationships with their children. The task of protecting the new generation from any and all danger becomes an irrepressible compulsion. This is the context for the emergence of safetyism within the meritocracy and for identity politics on campus and beyond. As Barnes explains:

The meritocracy, to the contrary, is *not* confident. Dependent on cadging from the capitalists a portion of the wealth created by the exploited producers, these privileged aspirants to bourgeois affluence—a lifestyle they are convinced “society” *owes* them—nonetheless fear at some point being pushed back toward the conditions of the working classes. ... At the same time, and despite their shameless self-promotion, many of them also sense that since they serve no *essential* economic or political functions in the production and reproduction of surplus value, they live at the forbearance of the bourgeoisie. In the end, large

numbers of them are expendable, especially at times of deepening social crisis.  
(ibid)

The meritocrats fear losing what they have gained, so they conform in practice to policies which steer clear of any perspective that might favor the independent organization of the working class—or any oppressed nationality or social group—to struggle for their rights. Their goal is to convince the masses that the existing political institutions, above all the Democratic Party, will help them achieve their desires for a better life.

The deepening capitalist crisis, which cannot be resolved by any political means available to the capitalists, their economists and supporters, becomes an ever more dominant feature of everyday life for all classes. The capitalists' scramble for diminishing profits forces them to intensify competition on a world scale, to divert capital to riskier investments, and to push up the total indebtedness of governments, corporations and families. The spiraling tower of debt guarantees a hard fall and a devastating impact as the next true economic depression approaches. While the meritocracy cannot help but feel the ground slipping out from under their feet, the laboring masses reach out for effective means to help prepare them for the struggles ahead.

At the same time, the forces gathered around Trump, for the most part members the same meritocracy, have learned to make a terminological shift which dispenses with most of the diversity and cultural identity politics that has become so ingrained in their conceptions and rhetoric, and which prevailed during the Obama administration. The Trumpsters have resurrected the flag-waving nationalism and the America-first bombast of previous administrations. But the 'Trump supporters' claim to represent the workers who have been tossed aside and left behind in the carnage of the rust belt is really nothing more than a supplement to diversity politics, only focused on a

different category of the working population. Either way they seek the same privileges and the same remuneration.

The specific features of the meritocratic world view did not emerge suddenly from nowhere, but evolved on the basis of the gains of the civil rights movement, the women's movement and the related struggles of Latinos, Native Americans, and gays and lesbians in the United States. These movements, beginning with the civil rights movement in the 1950s, all represented a striving for equal rights in the context of a relatively high level of capitalist prosperity which increasingly offered the possibility of a better life for all working people. In part, it was the anti-imperialist struggles during and after WWII in India, China, Cuba and elsewhere that showed the way forward for millions all over the world. The trade union movement of the 1930s and 1940s had already shown the possibility of making substantial gains in wages and working conditions, as well as having provided a good example of workers of all races uniting in struggle. But there was a stark contrast between the harsh, unyielding conditions of Jim Crow in the South—enforced by the federal government—and the deepening awareness of the growing opportunities to defeat and abolish Jim Crow, gain the right to vote for Black people, and establish conditions of equality among working people of all races. But a widespread popular struggle was needed.

In the 1960s the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act codified the gains for voting, equal access in housing, non-discrimination in public services and employment, and other rights. Women won the right to abortion. But the struggles of the masses of working people were necessary to make these promises a reality. Under heavy pressure from the working masses the U.S. government doled out concessions with an eyedropper while always striving to appear as the greatest benefactor of democratic rights. Affirmative action policies in college enrollment and hiring in the public sector, stemming from legislation approved in the 1960s, were increasingly



implemented in the 1970s. Often these policies required quotas for “minority” applicants, most often African Americans, but there were affirmative action policies for women as well. Similar policies were pursued in other institutions.

The gains of the civil rights movement transformed social attitudes and practices in ways that were a great advance for the unity workers of all races and nationalities in the struggle to achieve political power and emancipate society from the scourge of capitalist exploitation. But the struggles of women, African Americans and others waned in the 1980s as the gains already won seemed to undercut the need for continued mobilization and protest. The organizations that had been formed and transformed earlier in the democratic battles became conservatized, and the leaders adapted their policies, practices and terminology to norms that had become acceptable to the capitalists and their government. In many areas of social change, the policies and terms continued, but the original progressive content was converted into hypocritical affirmations. Bureaucratic procedures were clothed in the language of democratic rights. Resistance was replaced by conformism.

In the post-civil rights and post-feminist era leaders of trade unions, public services providers, major corporations, government agencies, and community-based organizations increasingly implemented policies that allowed them to posture as the guardians of liberty, the protectors of equality and the arbiters of progress for the “minorities,” women and others. Those who had been oppressed in the past still faced ongoing discrimination and needed protective barriers to mistreatment. As officials and administrators, for the most part members of the privileged meritocracy, they imposed norms of behavior that they insisted were protective of threatened racial, ethnic or sexual minorities. They made use of language—politically correct norms of speech—that became increasingly obligatory in public, together with penalties for language considered politically incorrect. These tendencies became established in the

form of the politics of cultural identity. Prohibitions of free speech were imposed in the name of protecting women and minorities from offensive language—microaggressions—that could potentially be traumatic and psychologically damaging. Trigger warnings—informing readers of dangerous content—had to be imposed on potentially offensive reading material.

Freedom of speech and the right to assemble in public are critically important gains for those elements of the population—workers, farmers, oppressed nationalities and their allies—who represent the only real hope for the future of humanity. Free speech is necessary for the masses as they fight their way forward towards clear conceptions of the problems they confront and what methods can lead to solutions. They need to identify friends and foes in the struggle for a better world. The stifling of free speech, noted in the examples given above, represents the reactionary role of the meritocracy as a major obstacle in the road of the self-organization of the workers and their allies. The meritocracy works in such a way as to preserve the dominant role of the ruling class—made up of the country's wealthiest families—in the government and society. The ideology of the meritocracy is the ideology of liberalism, liberalism updated for the post-civil rights and post-feminist era. Politically the meritocrats are most at home in the Democratic Party, although they play a role in the Republican Party as well.

The meritocrats based in the universities, media and political institutions renounce Marxism as irrelevant and misguided. At the same time, they have no answers whatsoever to the millions of workers, Black, Latino or Caucasian, who feel the effects of the ongoing economic crisis, and who seek some way to redress their grievances and regain some lost ground in democratic rights, wages and working conditions. For the working people who feel the ruinous effects of the long-term stagnation of production and trade, the only answer is to reject the mythologies promoted by the different wings of the ruling-class ideologists, and their political

parties as well. The way forward for these exploited millions is to organize themselves as a fighting movement, rebuild the labor movement, break out of the political grip of the Republicans and Democrats, form their own independent political movement, and defend their class interests as a unified force regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or nationality. This is the path towards a socialist revolution.