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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The Captive Mind and America's Resegregation

Idol smashing and cancel culture are part of a broad ideological project to dominate society.

By Andrew A. Michta

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A worker in New York cleans up a vandalized statue of President George Washington on June 29.

PHOTO: JASON SZENES/SHUTTERSTOCK

Czesław Miłosz, a future Nobel Prize-winning poet who had just defected from Poland, began work in 1951 on a book called “The Captive Mind.” Even as Stalinist totalitarianism tightened its grip on Eastern Europe, many Western European intellectuals lauded the brave new world of Soviet communism as a model for overcoming “bourgeois forces,” which in their view had caused World War II. Living in Paris, Miłosz wrote his book, which was published in 1953, to warn the West of what happens to the human mind and soul in a totalitarian system.

Miłosz knew from experience, having lived through the Communist takeover, how totalitarianism strips men and women of their liberty, transforming them into “affirmative cogs” in service of the state and obliterating what had taken centuries of Western political development to achieve. Totalitarianism not only enslaved people physically but crippled their spirit. It did so by replacing ordinary human language, in which words signify things in the outside world, with ideologically sanctioned language, in which words signify the dominant party’s

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Since the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, nationwide protests, which quickly turned to riots, have been hijacked by the neo-Marxist left, morphing into an all-out assault on American cities and institutions. This assault is underpinned by an audacious attempt to rewrite history that turns specific past events into weapons not only to overpower political opponents but also to recast all of American history as a litany of racial transgressions.

The radicals have turned race into a lens through which to view the country's history, and not simply because they are obsessed with race. They have done so because it allows them to identify and separate those groups that deserve affirmation, in their view, and those that do not. What is taking place is the resegregation of America, the endpoint of which will be the rejection of everything the civil-rights movement stood for.

What is driving the radical protesters and rioters—who are enabled and manipulated by the “digital intelligentsia” in the press and an expanding segment of the political and business classes—is contempt for the freedom of anyone who fails to comport with their image of a just society. In authoritarian systems those in power seek to *proscribe* certain forms of political speech and social activity. Totalitarians claim unconditional authority to reach deep into each person's conscience. They *prescribe* an interpretation of the world and dictate the language with which citizens are permitted to express that interpretation. Authoritarian regimes leave largely untouched the private civic sphere of human activity; totalitarians destroy traditional value systems and reorder the culture. That is why they are harder to overthrow.

The ill-named progressivism that has inspired shrill demands to dismantle police forces and destroy statues is only a small manifestation of a massive project aimed at the re-education of the American population. The goal of this project is to negate the story of the American republic and replace it with a tale anchored exclusively in race categories and narratives of oppression. The nature of this exercise, with its sledgehammer rhetoric that obliterates complexities in favor of one-dimensional “correct” interpretations, is as close to Marxist agitprop as one can get.

Why do American elites, who might be expected to favor preserving the nation that has elevated them, support the effort to dismantle it? Their thinking seems to



of America's past are wreaking destruction on ordinary Americans and *their* history, not on the elites and their ideology. Today's elites as a rule do not believe they have any obligation to serve the public, only to rule it, and so they express little or no disapproval of college students toppling statues on federal land or looters raiding supermarkets. To criticize them would open elites to the charges of "populism" and "racism."

Yet the elites are playing a dangerous game. Such "canceling"—of historical and living figures alike—increasingly mirrors what happened under communism in the Soviet bloc, where the accusation of being out of step with the party was enough to end one's career and nullify one's reputation.

This is about more than statues and history. Those who control the symbols of political discourse can dominate the culture and control the collective consciousness. If you doubt this, ask yourself why there has been so little backlash from ordinary, nonelite Americans. Our sense of self has been progressively deconstructed. We feel in our bones the wrongness of the violence being visited on the nation but lack the language to speak against it.

The resegregation of American society is fundamentally undemocratic and un-American. It envisions a social hierarchy based on DNA. It is also incompatible with individual freedom and constitutional government. Hence the drive to overhaul the U.S. Constitution, rewrite textbooks, and restructure museums by race and sex quotas.

Democracy cannot survive in a society in which winners and losers are adjudicated arbitrarily according to criteria beyond individual control. Any society built around the principle of skin color will become a caste system in which accident, not merit, will allocate value and benefit. Civil society will be buried once and for all.

The current radical trends carry the seeds of violence unseen in the U.S. since the Civil War. The activists ascendant in American cities insist on the dominance of their ideological precepts, brooking no alternative. Such absolutism forces Americans away from the realm of political compromise into one of unrelenting axiology, with one side claiming a monopoly on virtue and decency while the other



Only when the state creates a space for an unbiased debate over history can a discussion truly take place unhindered by ideology and dogma. Only then can a society move toward a consensus on a shared understanding of its past and how its collective memory should be shaped. The U.S. is roiled by spasms of violence and intolerance today because government at all levels—public education systems, states that allow universities to promulgate speech codes and “safe spaces,” court decisions that define constitutionally protected speech as, in effect, everything *but* political speech—has abdicated its duty to protect the public space. Children are rampaging through the cities because the adults have left the room.

America is in the throes of a destructive ideological experiment, subjected to a sweeping and increasingly state-sanctioned reordering of its collective memory, with the increasingly totalitarian left given free rein to dominate public discourse. Miłosz, who died in 2004, would see an American mind bloated by a steady diet of identity politics and group grievance served up by ideologues in schools nationwide. These ideologues have nearly succeeded in remaking our politics and culture; they are reinforced by a media in thrall to groupthink, by credentialed bureaucrats, and by politicians shaped in the monochrome factories of intellectual uniformity that are America's institutions of higher learning.

American society is faced with a stark binary choice. Either we push back against the unrelenting assault of the neo-Marxist narrative, or we yield to the totalitarian impulse now in full view in our politics. It is no longer enough to wait for the next election, or to pin our hopes on a “silent majority” that will eventually stop the madness. There may be no such majority. If there is, its members may no longer be able to articulate what they see unfolding around them. It is hard to call things by their proper names in a society whose elites insist on calling looters and arsonists “protesters,” national monuments “symbols of racism,” and the victims of looting and arson the beneficiaries of “white privilege.” The challenge is massive, but it starts with the simple act of calling things by their proper names.

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