

Defying Tribalism

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Left Is Not Woke

by Susan Neiman.
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For almost all of its thirty-year duration, it seemed quite natural to think of the conflict in Northern Ireland, unfolding just a few dozen miles away from my hometown of Dublin, as an anachronism. The local joke was that when planes landed at Belfast airport, the pilot announced, "Welcome to Belfast. Put your watches back one hour and three hundred years." This was part of the fascination for outsiders of what was otherwise a rather intimate catastrophe. The Troubles seemed a strange temporal regression, a rip in the fabric of European history through which the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had entered into the enlightened, secular present. White Christians who spoke the same language, lived cheek by jowl, and mostly watched the same movies and TV shows were not supposed to be willing to kill each other because their ancestors had taken different sides in the Reformation.

It was not so much the violence itself that seemed archaic—there was plenty of that around elsewhere in different forms. It was, rather, the way violence appeared as merely the starkest manifestation of a tribalized society. Tribalism in this sense (the term being otherwise rather insulting to most tribal peoples) is not at all the same thing as political partisanship. There are three important differences. Tribalism spills beyond the strictly political arena into parallel assumptions about history, geography, economics, and, of course, religion. Unlike partisanship, it makes the ethnic or social group, rather than the nation or the state, the primary locus of belonging. And neither side in this (typically binary) contest truly accepts the legitimacy of an electoral defeat. Being outvoted is understood not as a disappointment but as an existential threat.

These differences were—and to an extent still are—apparent in Northern Ireland, but they no longer look like distinguishing features that mark it as a unique kind of political space in the democratic world. Its holdovers have turned into harbingers. The throwback now feels more like a foretelling. What seemed in the 1970s and 1980s like a very niche retro political fashion is now all the rage.

Max Weber defined a nation as "a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own." But in Northern Ireland it became all too obvious that "a community of sentiment" can be formed and sustained by distrust and dislike of another community's sentiments. Where this feeling becomes definitive, the idea of the state becomes profoundly uncertain. Thus the Troubles are now—and not in a good way—everybody's trouble: there are, in the United States and Europe, powerful forms of mass political identity that do not "adequately manifest" themselves in loyalty to the institutions, laws, and values that make a democratic state possible.



Susan Neiman; illustration by Maya Chessman

Tribalism is attractive to politicians, because in many ways it is easier than democracy. It abolishes democracy's inconvenient demand for accountability: failure to deliver real benefits to one's community is forgivable so long as the other side is faring worse. As we saw in Northern Ireland, awful consequences—up to and including killing, maiming, and economic collapse—don't diminish the power of tribalism. They enhance it, because suffering deepens the sense of victimhood that fuels this kind of politics. Self-harm and self-pity form a feedback loop of endlessly renewable political energy. And this perpetual motion machine is also driven by revenge. If you hurt the other side, they will hurt you back, and when they do they prove themselves to be the incorrigible enemies you always knew they were. Atrocities, even when they are committed by a tiny minority of people, cease to be individual crimes that should be punished by law and become sources either for collective outrage (if they did it to us) or for collective excuses (if we did it to them).

But perhaps the greatest advantage of tribalization is that it solves the problems of identity. The phrase "identity politics" is a misnomer. Tribal politics do not in fact deal in collective identities, which are always complex, contradictory, multiple, and slippery. They reduce the difficult "us" to the easy "not them." They set up some rough (and often arbitrary) markers of difference and then corral real collec-

tive experiences and histories within the narrow limits they define. They draw crude self-caricatures and then use them as passport photographs. The true colors of a community's life may be a dazzling mosaic, but tribalism makes them monochrome: an orange sash, a green flag, a red MAGA hat. The more complicated a real collective identity is, the greater the attraction of these shrunken simplicities.

The question for those of us who identify as being on the left is how we oppose this tribalization of politics. In her bracing and invigorating polemic *Left Is Not Woke*, the Berlin-based American philosopher Susan Neiman sets out a charge of intellectual betrayal:

What concerns me most here are the ways in which contemporary voices considered to be leftist have abandoned the philosophical ideas that are central to any left-wing standpoint: a commitment to universalism over tribalism, a firm distinction between justice and power, and a belief in the possibility of progress.

At the core of Neiman's indictment is her contention that progressive politics has allowed its energies to flow into tribal channels of competitive victimhood in which the Enlightenment ideals enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have given

way to the belief that group identities based on race, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity have the primary claim on allegiance.

It has to be acknowledged that there are good historical reasons for skepticism about the Enlightenment's claims to have articulated values for humanity as a whole. It's not merely that the violence of slavery and colonialism exposed the hypocrisy of many of those who claimed to hold those values. It is that the very idea that one was enlightened justified the domination of those who were not. As Caroline Elkins has shown in *Legacy of Violence* (2022), her rigorous autopsy of the British Empire, the spread of the rule of law (a central Enlightenment project) was the great moral claim of nineteenth-century imperialism. But since the colonized peoples were not yet sufficiently developed to understand it, they could be subjected to what Elkins calls "legalized lawlessness." This was the catch-22 for nonwhite peoples: until the indefinite point in the future when, under our firm tutelage, you have become sufficiently enlightened to grasp the universality of our principles, those universals exclude you.

It's also true that "woke" is an expression so thoroughly absorbed into reactionary rhetoric that it has become a signifier without a signified. When Elon Musk can blame "the woke mind virus" for the poor quality of Netflix shows, the decline of Twitter, the condition of San Francisco, the alleged plot by Yale University to "destroy civilization," the obstacles preventing us from colonizing Mars, and "pushing humanity towards extinction," there's a strong case for concluding that the term can no longer function in rational discourse. Like "political correctness" before it, "woke" has ceased to be a concept and is now a klaxon. It serves both to alarm the right-wing base and to drown out the noise of unwanted voices. To say, as Neiman's title does, that the left is not woke runs the risk of copying the right's tribalist strategy of defining oneself not just negatively but against an increasingly empty insult.

Neiman is well aware of both caveats. Her claim is not that the thinkers of the Enlightenment were individually or collectively free of racist, sexist, homophobic, and Eurocentric prejudices, but rather that "through the restless self-critique it invented" the Enlightenment "had the power to right most of its own wrongs." Though Neiman makes much of Immanuel Kant's attacks on colonialism, she might also have pointed to his ability to change his mind on the subject. In the 1780s he suggested that "our part of the world"—Europe—"will probably someday give laws to all the others," that the people of India were so docile that "if they were to be ruled by a European sovereign, the nation would become happier," and that "[Native] Americans and Negroes cannot govern themselves. Thus, [they] serve only as slaves."

But in the 1790s Kant was forced by his own principles into a radical

revision of these ideas. He saw through the colonizers' pretense of giving "laws to all the others" as a mere justification for rapacity. He accorded full and equal status in law to all people on all continents and asserted their right to defend their ways of life against foreign encroachment. He rejected the claim that there is a hierarchy of civilizations. He strongly opposed slavery and dropped the prejudice that some peoples are incapable of self-government. In a passage from *Toward Perpetual Peace* that Neiman quotes, Kant writes of the colonizing powers that they

oppress the natives, excite widespread wars among the various states, spread famine, rebellion, perfidy, and the whole litany of evils which afflict mankind. China and Japan, who have had experience with such guests, have wisely refused them entry.

Kant's search for universal values led him not toward notions of European superiority but away from them.

Far from using the idea of the universal to bolster colonialism, eighteenth-century thinkers consistently turned the tables by imagining how non-Europeans would look with fresh eyes at imperialist assumptions and find them both idiotic and barbaric. Jonathan Swift's Gulliver explains to his Houyhnhnm master, as though it were common sense, that "if a Prince send Forces into a Nation where the People are poor and ignorant, he may lawfully put half of them to Death, and make Slaves of the rest, in order to civilize and reduce them from their barba-

rous Way of Living." His Houyhnhnm listener can scarcely believe that "a Creature pretending to Reason could be capable of such Enormities."

This trick of imagining how Europe must look to non-Western outsiders was used to similarly devastating effect in, among other works, Lahontan's *Dialogue with a Huron*, Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters*, Diderot's *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage*, and Goldsmith's *Chinese Letters*. Neiman is quite right to insist that universalism was not "a sham that was invented to disguise Eurocentric views that supported colonialism." Rather, "Enlightenment thinkers invented the critique of Eurocentrism and were the first to attack colonialism, on the basis of universalist ideas."

The problem with attacking "woke" is not so easily solved, but Neiman does provide a clear definition of what she, at least, means by it:

It begins with concern for marginalized persons, and ends by reducing each to the prism of her marginalization. The idea of intersectionality might have emphasized the ways in which all of us have more than one identity. Instead, it led to [a] focus on those parts of identities that are most marginalized, and multiplies them into a forest of trauma.

She is not for a moment seeking to minimize those traumas but rather to critique the emphasis on suffering as the most important marker of collective identity.

Just over sixty years ago, in his speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, Martin Luther King Jr. laid bare the pain of racial oppression in America. He said that he and his fellow marchers had come "to dramatize a shameful condition," and he did so relentlessly and unflinchingly. He knew that many of those he was addressing were not only the victims of historic injustice but were "fresh from narrow jail cells" and still bore the wounds inflicted by police brutality. Yet it is striking that King also preached against the adoption of suffering as self-definition. "Let us not," he warned, "seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness." It is a vital lesson: the cup of bitterness can slake the craving for justice, but it can also be addictive.

To define oneself by the trauma of oppression is to remain imprisoned in its narrow jail cell. King was, in his own way, echoing the declaration of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that "I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors." Freedom, for both King and Fanon, meant liberation from the objective conditions of oppression and from the subjective need to define oneself within the terms imposed by those conditions. King, in that speech, called his people "the veterans of creative suffering," a remarkable phrase in which "veteran" replaces "victim" and pain is reimagined as a stimulus for transformation. It ought to be a touchstone for the left.

Perhaps one of the reasons why it ceased to be is the difficulty of finding a language that acknowledges, on the one hand, the specificity of the suffering of particular social groups and, on the other, the universal travails of most people under feral capitalism. Adrienne Rich, writing in 1996, noted:

In the America where I'm writing now, suffering is diagnosed relentlessly as personal, individual, maybe familial, and at most to be "shared" with a group specific to the suffering, in the hope of "recovery." We lack a vocabulary for thinking about pain as communal and public.

Class politics, underwritten by Marxist theory, provided at least one way of doing exactly that: thinking about pain not only as a personal or group experience but as a public condition produced by the ways economies and societies work. It was possible to recognize, for example, that a straight white male coal miner enjoyed the privileges of whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality but also suffered oppression and exploitation as a worker. It was possible fiercely to oppose systemic injustices without suggesting that those who escaped their very worst effects were just as guilty as those who created them.

There are good reasons for the decline of that mindset—the dissolution of the industrial working class in most of the West and the apparent global triumph of consumer capitalism being the most obvious. The effect, though, is that in the absence of a common vocabulary of oppression, suffering can only be "group specific."

The irony, moreover, is that even as the idea of pain as a shared experience recedes, it also becomes universalized in a tribal form. If suffering is the language of identity, every group must learn to use its emotional grammar. Self-pity becomes generalized, and the weaker the excuses for it, the more passionately felt it must be. Even billionaires can be victims—if all else fails, there is always the woke mind virus.

In this politics of pain, imaginary oppression becomes as potent as the real thing. Neuroscience tells us that pain generated by the brain feels just as real and is just as debilitating as that caused by physical injury. Brexit was driven by the notion that Britain was intolerably subjugated by equal and consensual membership in the European Union. Donald Trump animates the idea of a white America tyrannized by poor immigrants and nonwhite people demanding to be treated as equals. The power of self-pity is that it does not require actual oppression—if you always travel first-class, being stuck in economy will make you feel very sorry for yourself. Its utility is that it makes identities, which are always fluid, open, and multilayered, seem closed, static, and simple. All the group needs to hold it together is the conviction that it is being wronged by some real or imaginary enemy.

Neiman suggests that what fills the vacuum where the universal idea of justice should be is power. Here, she argues, much of the left has converged on a position staked out by the far right, claiming that appeals to universal values and common humanity are no more than smokescreens intended to conceal the reality that all of life is a struggle for domination. Again, this is not an unreasonable conclusion to draw from the history of colonialism or even the more recent history of the US and British invasion of Iraq, in which, as she puts it, the "glaring abuse of words like 'democracy' and 'freedom' magnified doubt that such words can ever be uttered in good faith."

Neiman, however, is primarily concerned with the theoretical underpinnings of this radical cynicism. They go back to Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*, whom she wittily calls "that postmodern young man who has survived several millennia" and who argues that "justice or right is really what is good for... the interest of the stronger party." But Neiman's twin targets are more recent: the Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt and the French historian of ideas Michel Foucault. From the obvious truth that claims to be acting according to universal principles of morality and justice are often false, both concluded that all such claims are necessarily hollow. Schmitt, drawing on the eighteenth-century reactionary Joseph de Maistre, warned that "anyone who says the word 'humanity' wants to deceive you." In Schmitt's case, the twist is that "humanity" was invented by the Jews to disguise their pursuit of Jewish interests. For him, the only truth is the eternal binary of friend and enemy. Politics, like war, is "a matter of the most extreme and intense antagonisms."

Schmitt's continuing influence on the right is unsurprising. What is more remarkable is that, from the 1970s onward, this unrepentant Nazi began to be embraced by much of the

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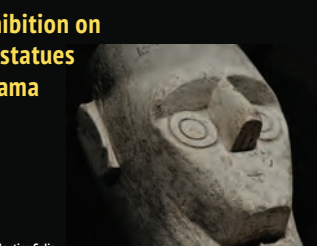
At Columbia University's Italian Academy; includes conferences, exhibitions, and a corresponding book published by Columbia University Press. The Academy also facilitated the loan of a 3000-year-old statue from Mont'e Prama to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.
italianacademy.columbia.edu



A digital exhibition on the gems and temples of Tharros



A digital exhibition on the colossal statues of Mont'e Prama



Images: Nicola Castangia; Valentino Selis

New Left.* This “surprising turn from aversion to appropriation” (as Matthew Specter puts it in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*) was underpinned by the righteous pleasure of unmasking Western rulers and exposing the raw pursuit of self-interest that lies behind their claims to be upholding universal values. It seemed, in this way of thinking, actually better to have a West that engaged in neo-imperial violence (and thus revealed its true nature) than to put up with the emptiness of its democratic pieties. As the Princeton political scientist Jan-Werner Müller wrote in 2003:

Unable to live with the organized hypocrisy and “legal fictions” of the international order, some [on the left] seemed to wish for the great immediate cataclysm, rather than live with the ambiguities of piecemeal progress in a highly complex and highly mediated world.

Foucault’s assault on the idea of universal values was more thoroughgoing than Schmitt’s, rooted as it was in profound analyses of the history of sexuality, of the human body, and of institutions of social control. Foucault reduced the whole world—from the intimate to the epic—to power. He wrote in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), “Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.” For him, as Neiman quips, “it’s power all the way down.”

There cannot be any knowledge that “does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations,” Foucault wrote. So utterly fused are knowledge and power that he conjoins them in his neologism “power-knowledge.” Because there is no point outside of power relations from which they can be objectively criticized, “one abandons the opposition between what is ‘interested’ and what is ‘disinterested.’” From a very different starting point, Foucault ends up in the same place as Schmitt—only war is really truthful: “Isn’t power simply a form of warlike domination? Shouldn’t one therefore conceive all problems of power in terms of relations of war?”

What does a “warlike” conception of power look like in practice? Even if it is not totalitarianism, it must be something like a generalized version of Northern Ireland, in which tribal antagonism devours all sense of mutual obligation and endemic violence becomes an acceptable extension of politics. This is because, in the binary imagination of tribalism, there are only two possible states: to be dominant or to be dominated. Even a genuine revolt against repression and injustice can be understood only as a strategic move by those in the second category to move themselves into the first.

Thus, if we were to return to King’s Washington speech and read it through the lens of Schmitt and Foucault, we would dismiss the soft stuff about “all of God’s children, Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics” being “able to join hands” in a just future. We would understand King’s

dreams of justice and equality, and his appeals to the (very Enlightenment) promises of equality in the US Constitution, as mere masks for the pursuit of Black power. We would pride ourselves on not being taken in by this rhetoric and understanding that what is at stake is merely a reversal of domination in which one racial group seeks to defeat the other. Which is, of course, exactly what the white supremacists (then and now) would have us believe. The left, if it is to take its stand on other ground, must reject this caustic reductionism. It must reconnect to King’s passionate belief that human dignity is indivisible: it is not possible to enjoy it unless it is equally available to all.

Neiman’s short, punchy, and brilliantly articulated argument is essentially a call for those who regard themselves as being on the left to remember the distinction between skepticism and cynicism. The first is crucial to a progressive critique of untamed capitalism. It demands a constant critical awareness of how power and self-interest wrap themselves in virtue, “common sense,” and high ideals.

The second is corrosive and ultimately disempowering. The retreat from universal demands is a form of defeatism. As Neiman writes:

The disappointments [of the left] are real and sometimes devastating. But rather than facing them, theory often reads them into the structure of the universe, creating a symphony of suspicion that forms the background music of contemporary Western culture.

The opposite of progressive hope is not realism. It is paranoia. When all evocations of higher principles are understood to be merely ways of seeking advantage for one group over another, critical consciousness dissolves into a hyperawareness of motives, angles, gambits. Knowledge itself becomes impossible—Foucault is now the common currency of a thousand YouTube videos devoted to showing that nothing you see is real and everything is the product of some hidden power. In an era when accepting the reality of climate change is a universal imperative for

survival, this is a kind of death wish.

The left, at its best, has always pointed to the contradictions and ironies of democracies that claim to be founded on universal rights even while denying, through discrimination and poverty, the benefits of those rights to very large numbers of people. Its proper method is not the reductivity that shrinks everyone down to this or that category but the expansiveness that seeks to extend democracy into the economic lives of citizens. It recognizes that rights have no substance for those who are denied access to the conditions in which they can be exercised—and therefore it demands that society be reorganized so as to assure that universal ideals are not just principles but practices. It is only at its worst that the left has concluded that those rights are rendered so hollow by hypocrisy that they can be discarded or even destroyed. Without the courage to assert the imperative of justice and the urgency of humanity, the left suffers the worst fate that any movement can contemplate: becoming indistinguishable from its enemies. ●

The Anabasis of Godspeed

The sun smote him by night. He was writing a letter to his father in ENGLAND: “Dear . . .” the stars mirrored what he wrote but kept their distance. He shook his jam jar of fireflies blinky blinks and heard heavy cannonade blasting from the direction of HEREIRA. Bursting shells danced on the ridges behind ATAWINEH REDOUBT. He remembered that BELLAM was BETHLEHEM pitching between alms and lust. But he couldn’t remember if Jesus was of NAZARETH or of BETHLEHEM or of GALILEE. A lateral skanking natty dread at the bus depot in GOLDEN GROVE told the boy that Jesus was of no place but here and touched his chest.

It was around this time No. 2292 Pte. Herbert Morris aged 17 was executed for desertion by firing squad composed of 7 WEST INDIAN soldiers and 3 white soldiers. His soul fled to MIDIAN accordingly.

He was called to whitewash the walls of Prestige Funeral Supplies & Service by the seaside in PORT ANTONIO where his grandmother’s body was laid out for the final burial rites. He decreed a calendrical change and her laminated almanac saviour was taken off the kitchen wall. He heard the far-off drum of Miriam as he paced with a sharp ringing in his ears among his grandmother’s croton plants which glittered like sardius like topaz like diamond like beryl like onyx like jasper like sapphire like emerald like carbuncle like gold like a green ringing green of mildewed croton leaves.

They moved from EI ENAB to LATRUN under cover of mist. His classroom was the first one by the opened trenches and pit latrines. Leptospirosis spread rampantly along the blocks of first- and second-form classes where khaki boys go up and down the stairs through a gas cloud of flies. Bivouacked there for two years Godspeed could not see the RED SEA. But he did see Stone Haven the old great house shuddering in the heat from the paroxysm of a broken Quaker romance that took place there in the last century. The romance ended the first missionary position. *Et le temps passait vite très vite.*

Around the year 30 CE in PEREA Godspeed was rocked with fresh cold. Water wrung dry in the rock-cistern. Then with a two-sided cutlass he cut down his father’s trumpet tree and rolled the trunk down into the abyss of the gully. Tumbling forward under enflaming fire to ALEPPO Pte. G. H. Hudson’s brain came off on the bandage which had wrapped his head wounded from shrapnel flying through the Syrian blue.

Godspeed skulled elocution day at Happy Grove and so missed the shrieking out of “And then my heart with pleasures fills/And dances with the daffodils.” Bayonet fighting amid the cactus hedges the metal tangled with the sand’s imperfect memory. He sprinkled spikenard on his head and replenished his jam jar of fireflies in one night. Blinky blinks.

—Ishion Hutchinson

*See Mark Lilla, “The Enemy of Liberalism,” *The New York Review*, May 15, 1997.