

devising new technologies to sustain a violent form of freedom.

By the 1960s, this critique became central to Black radicals' engagement with the Vietnam War. As Jack O'Dell, editor of the journal *Freedomways*, argued in a 1964 essay, the Indigenous genocide of the nineteenth century paved the road to imperial warfare in Vietnam, the same way that chattel slavery charted the course to the brutal policing of the "ghetto." Together, he argued, they were the "major conjunctive highways" of U.S. political life, mapping out a geography of white imperial violence that connected the killing fields of overseas counterinsurgency to those of domestic urban pacification. It was also a geography of freedom's dominion: a freedom that required conquest of native lands and a "free world" that demanded Vietnamese bloodshed and ecocide; a freedom built on the stolen labor of stolen peoples and a freedom from crime and disorder secured through police power. O'Dell's analysis thus demanded a counter-narrative of freedom that looked beyond federal power—beyond the guarantees of national citizenship to the visions of a new world and transnational solidarities forged by white freedom's global victims.

In April 1975, the *USS Barbour County*—named for the Alabama county as well as another in West Virginia—set sail from the California coast alongside its sister ship, the *USS Tuscaloosa*. Both were bound for Vietnam on a mission to evacuate Americans and South Vietnamese allies from Saigon just before its fall, the last official mission of the U.S. military—Tuberville's "strong, hard-nosed, killing machine"—in a war it had arguably lost years before. Both ships had recently made other voyages to the western Pacific, moving marines and materiel between Pearl Harbor, Guam, Okinawa, and Subic Bay in the Philippines, the military outposts of America's informal empire.

No less than settler conquest, chattel slavery, or lynching, the colonization of these places had long been understood through the logic of white freedom. The conquest of the Philippines was required,

Theodore Roosevelt had argued at the turn of the century, in order to secure "the greatness of the Nation—the greatness of the race." It was also necessary for establishing a form of liberty that, for inferior races, could only come through colonial tutelage. Fifty years later, Filipino personnel deployed to Vietnam in service of U.S. counterinsurgency as part of the aptly named "Freedom Company" might have recognized similar justifications for this newest war: imperial violence was necessary for securing freedom for Americans, but also for non-white subjects who were presumed incapable of securing it for themselves. These wars mobilized non-white subjects of empire, from Filipinos to African Americans, as expendable and embodied propaganda for a democratic freedom they were forcibly denied.

This is what's missing from *Freedom's Dominion*—the imperial transit of white American freedom. It is perhaps unfair to demand from Cowie a global history when he explicitly set out to provide a local one. But the global and the local are not so much distinct scales of analysis as they are vantage points. The problem is not that *Freedom's Dominion* tells a local story of white freedom, but rather all that Cowie sets aside as irrelevant for telling it.

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### **In Defense of Universalism**

Susie Linfield

*Left Is Not Woke*  
by Susan Neiman  
Polity, 2023, 160 pp.

*After Black Lives Matter: Policing and Anti-Capitalist Struggle*  
by Cedric Johnson  
Verso, 2023, 416 pp.

In *Left Is Not Woke*, the moral philosopher Susan Neiman attempts a sorely needed intervention against the woke left in the hope of rescuing it from its addiction to identity politics in their most reductive form. Neiman is the author of, among other acclaimed works, *Learning from the Germans*, an account of how a country can come to terms with its barbaric past. Her new book will hopefully be read by those whom it critiques. It is also a missed opportunity. Neiman is an American who directs the Einstein Forum in Potsdam; she has lived in Germany for many years (and has written about the experience of being a Jew in Germany). Despite its essential insights, her book illustrates the great intellectual gap between the left in the United States and Europe—in ways that, frankly, left me profoundly dispirited. And it illustrates the intellectual abstraction that bedevils parts of the left.

Cedric Johnson, an African-American Marxist, is rooted in a different intellectual tradition than Neiman but shares many of *Left Is Not Woke's* concerns. Johnson's *After Black Lives Matter* is a scathing analysis of racial essentialism and woke pessimism, which, he charges, ignore—indeed betray—the heroic struggles and accomplishments of the activists and workers of previous generations. Unlike Neiman, he addresses many of our most polarizing issues, including policing, incarceration, and crime, in forthright, original, and unusually subtle ways, and he goes head-to-head with writers such as Michelle Alexander and Ta-Nehisi Coates. The very existence of this book left me feeling energized and hopeful. But it occasionally descends into a kind of economic reductionism, and therefore also illustrates some of the contemporary left's shortcomings.

Identity politics posit that inherited characteristics such as race or gender endow one with certain perspectives that others might not have. This is obviously true. But the woke left takes this to another level. It claims that identity—usually narrowly defined—gives one a kind of automatic moral and political authority: what philosophers call “standpoint epistemology.”

Only those within a group can determine, or even discuss, its politics, its history, its arts and culture (no appropriation, please!). Subjective experience is mistaken for knowledge and insight. (Ralph Ellison took a different view of this when he wrote, in *Invisible Man*, “Blood and skin do not think!”)

These ideas, Neiman charges, are the very antithesis of what it means to be a leftist. A self-described socialist, she identifies three principles that have guided the left—at least in its best moments: “a commitment to universalism over tribalism, a firm distinction between justice and power, and a belief in the possibility of progress.” Neiman charges that woke politics start by addressing these traditional issues, both moral and political, but then distort them. Woke “begins with a concern for marginalized persons, and ends by reducing each to the prism of her marginalization,” thus creating “a forest of trauma” where wounds, real and imagined, are lovingly cultivated. Woke focuses on hierarchies of inequality but then descends into a kind of zero-sum power contest in which “the concept of justice is often left by the wayside.” (She blames Michel Foucault for much of this.) Worse, it recreates ethnic hierarchies within its own movement by insisting that the (often self-appointed) oppressed should constitute the vanguard—which, like all vanguards, is immune from criticism and debate—while others should obediently follow along as allies. It is hard to see how a politics of equality, how a society of equality, can be created through the reification of inequality.

All this matters. We are living in a time when the right is ascendant in countries from Turkey and Israel to Poland and India, and when Trumpism, white nationalism, attacks on reproductive rights, and assaults on democratic institutions are terrifyingly potent in the United States. Academic freedom and the right to speak, read, and think freely are undermined by blatantly unconstitutional “anti-woke” initiatives launched by the right and by enforced diversity, equity, and inclusion codes by the left. (The legal scholar Randall Kennedy has recently described the latter as a “regime” with “a big problem, and that

big problem is . . . coercion.”) Some might say that, given all that, intra-left fights are a destructive diversion. I think the opposite is true. “It’s not small differences that separate me from those who are woke,” Neiman writes. “They go to the very heart of what it means to stand on the left. . . . Today’s left has deprived itself of the ideas we need if we hope to resist the lurch to the right.” Neiman and Johnson both argue that the woke left is, in effect, aiding rather than weakening the right.

The heart of Neiman’s book is her defense of Enlightenment universalism and its corollary: solidarity based on shared principles and interests rather than on ethnic or national membership. Solidarity is about forging deep ties of equality with people who don’t look—and aren’t—like you. Hannah Arendt described it best, I think, when she wrote that solidarity is a principle, not a feeling, through which we “dispassionately” establish “a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited.” It isn’t based on pity or guilt—or even, in Arendt’s view, on compassion.

The key insight of the Enlightenment—and this is what has traditionally distinguished the left from the right—is that we have deep connections, and obligations, to the “other” simply on the basis of being human; it is hard, indeed impossible, to understand the nineteenth-century anti-slavery movements, or the modern concept of human rights, without this. It was the right that insisted that only those who belong to my nation, my religion, my race were fully human and therefore worthy of respect, of freedom, of life itself—as evidenced by institutions like slavery, Jim Crow, and South African apartheid. The hope of the left—and of modernity—was that we could, at least in part, create selves, and societies, which would incorporate multiple identities, multiple cultures, multiple ideas, multiple ways of understanding the world, rather than being docile prisoners of inherited characteristics. (This is not color-blindness but, rather, a rejection of *simplified* identities.) All this has been turned on its head by the woke left, which views virtually every

issue through the narrow prism of race or gender: its very own form of fundamentalism. It distinguishes between “bad” tribalism (MAGA in the United States, populist anti-immigrant parties in Europe) and its own “good” version, which it sees as anti-racist, despite glaring similarities between the two.

Neiman seeks to refute recent “Enlightenment-bashing”—the attack on the dead white European men (and occasional women) who revolutionized the world—and reconnect its thinkers to the internationalism that defined them. Like Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book *Cosmopolitanism*, she notes that many Enlightenment thinkers were immersed in, and inspired by, non-Western cultures and, more important, that they sharply criticized their own. Most of all, though, she notes that it was the Enlightenment, emerging “from a blasted landscape, on a continent soaked with blood,” that “introduced the very idea of humanity” and “insisted that everyone . . . is endowed with innate dignity.” This is, Neiman argues, “the theoretical foundation for the universalism upon which all struggles against racism must stand.” Without that, you can say that racism is bad, but you can’t really explain why.

Key chapters in *Left Is Not Woke* focus on Foucault, with his rejection of normative values; on Carl Schmitt, a Nazi whose antipathy to liberalism has made him a hero to some in the academic left; and on evolutionary psychologists, some of whom argue that ruthless selfishness, not collaboration, is our true evolutionary inheritance. All this is valuable but, like the chapter on the Enlightenment, also points to the flaws of *Left Is Not Woke*. It is true that the attacks on universalism were birthed, decades ago, in the postcolonial and postmodern academic left. But I doubt that those who seek to defund the police or abolish prisons are thinking about Spinoza or Locke. The intellectual leaders of contemporary woke politics are writers like Ibram X. Kendi, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Michelle Alexander, along with an army of well-paid DEI consultants and university deans.

The real division between what I would call the traditional left and the wokesters

boils down, bluntly, to different analyses of racial inequality and the importance of class. It is “anti-racist” ideology and its close cousin, DEI—and the ways in which they influence issues like educational merit, affirmative action (race or class?), policing, crime, immigration, reparations, and free speech—that are the dividing lines and points of contestation. Unlike Johnson, Neiman has virtually nothing to say about them; her areas of concern preoccupy those in a relatively rarified academic bubble but have little political impact on the ground. The problem isn’t that she focuses on ideas but, rather, that she focuses on ideas that that have, sadly, become irrelevant in the American context. Perhaps she has been away from America for too long.

Identity politics, especially in their racialized version, have become the subject of withering criticism by an ideologically heterogeneous (dare I say diverse?) array of black intellectuals. They include John McWhorter, Glenn Loury, and contributors to the *Journal of Free Black Thought*; all are usually, and lazily, labeled “conservative,” though I don’t think that term actually fits. Critics coming from the left, some of whom are Marxists, include Adolph Reed Jr., Touré F. Reed, Barbara J. Fields, and Cedric Johnson. Like Neiman, they abhor racial tribalism, and they stress the left’s traditional adherence to creating movements of interracial class solidarity. “Interests, not corporeal identity, are the fundamental basis of political life,” writes Johnson, a political scientist who teaches at the University of Illinois Chicago, in *After Black Lives Matter*. “Liberal antiracism disappears any left politics that might prioritize the experiences of the laboring classes.” In general, these writers analyze racial inequalities, and racism itself, in relation to capitalist exploitation; they are more interested in political economy than in white fragility. Like Neiman, they are academics, but their critiques are firmly located within our current, most contested political conflicts.

*After Black Lives Matter* challenges many of the anti-racist movement’s

orthodoxies and leading writers, and puts forth a vision that is wider and deeper than theirs. Johnson never underplays the reality of racism or the “racially unjust carceral expansion,” but he believes that the uber-focus on race has distorted our understanding of history. For instance, against the widely held belief that New Deal policies such as Social Security were racist because they excluded farm workers and domestics, he points out that the majority of workers in these categories were, at the time, white. (Capital opposes labor, not just black labor.) But his more crucial argument is that anti-racism, and the racial essentialism upon which it rests, simultaneously obfuscate class conflict and preclude class solidarity. Anti-racism takes our eyes off the prize.

Like James Forman Jr. in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Locking Up Our Own*—and in refutation of Michelle Alexander’s popular theory that contemporary policing and incarceration are a new form of Jim Crow—Johnson argues that the “policing regime is not derived from and maintained through white supremacy.” On the contrary, harsh criminal laws stemmed from the enormous demographic changes that transformed our cities and our country in the early post-Second World War decades, including suburbanization, deindustrialization, the demise of New Deal social democracy, and the formation of “surplus populations.” Anti-crime statutes reflect, in part, “the interests and felt needs of working-class, urban African American and Latino constituencies, whose residents desired peace and an end to the unacceptable levels of drug-related and violent crime that still define urban life for millions of Americans. . . . Crime was not simply the stuff of white nightmares and racial panic.”

Instead of *Black Lives Matter*’s obsession with racialized police violence (which, Johnson points out, is also the bane of the white subproletariat), he advocates building a mass democratic movement that would put forth “a shared vision of the good society” that challenges capitalist exploitation and would advance “a broadly redistributive left politics centered on public goods.” Reaching out to as many people as possible rather than

concentrating on those in the enlightened inner circle is key. For instance, to revive our cities and make them sites of shared resources rather than of enormous wealth and great poverty, Johnson urges the formation of a broad-based coalition that would include everyone from “urban dwellers who are most deeply impacted by crime and policing” to gentrifiers and union activists.

The woke left’s antipathy to any form of policing, prisons, and even prosecutors oddly echoes the aversion of the far right to the so-called deep state. One of Johnson’s most original contributions is to remind readers that the government—from the Union Army’s occupation of the post-bellum South onward—has often *protected* citizens who struggled for the rule of law and equal rights. “Coercion,” Johnson writes, is “a necessary aspect of political life, especially in regard to securing social justice. . . . A longer historical view problematizes any simplistic demand to dismantle police departments. At various moments in this nation’s history, *state coercion was necessary to secure racial justice.*” Johnson attempts to bring utopian abolitionists down to earth: “It seems rather naïve to think that a complex, populous urban society can exist without any law enforcement at all, especially in those moments when forces threaten social justice and even the basic democratic rights of citizens.” (Think of January 6.) His approach to crime and policing contrasts with the simplifications of the anti-racist left: “While increased policing is clearly not the answer, neither is the countercultural response, which amounts to DIY policing ill-suited to achieving public safety . . . or, worse, produces a head-in-the-sand dynamic where we pretend that crime and violence are not real issues or will magically disappear when police disappear.” He rejects vitriolic cop-bashing: Johnson views the police as upholders of capitalist class relations *and* as alienated workers.

An end to police brutality, racialized and other, is urgent; Black Lives Matter’s initial demand for equal protection under the law was deeply democratic and deeply American. But there is simply no historic evidence that an anti-policing program

can become the basis of a mass movement. (The Black Panthers tried this, and it didn’t work out well; Johnson caustically critiques Black Power nostalgia in his 2022 book *The Panthers Can’t Save Us Now.*) People wake up in the morning thinking about a lot of things other than the police: whether their kid is getting a good-enough education, or where they can find a better job, or how they can pay off their medical bills. The enormous amount of energy that the woke left places on policing as a kind of ur-evil is misplaced. Johnson aims for something more radical *and* more pragmatic than an anti-police movement:

Against the most millenarian impulses of abolitionist discourse, this book calls for a different kind of abolition, one that focuses more directly on the fundamental problems of working-class exploitation, joblessness and immiseration, and is achievable within the discrete political terrain of early twenty-first century American society. We must abolish the class conditions that modern policing has come to manage.

Johnson ends his book by astutely analyzing the unfortunate parallels between today’s woke movements and the ultra-left of the 1960s and early ’70s (epitomized by, but not confined to, the Weathermen). Hastily giving up on the hard work of forging a broad democratic movement, the ultra-left became “seduced by the lure of black vanguardism and Third Worldism as some fast track to building a popular left.” Johnson praises, especially, Marshall Berman’s 1971 “Notes Toward a New Society,” which castigated the ultra-left’s hopelessness, antipathy to the white working class, denial of the American people’s “decency,” and “desperate longing for any world, any culture, any life but our own.”

These bad habits, Johnson charges, are alive and well: “Black Lives Matter demonstrations have repopularized the same problematic dynamics of black vanguardism and white deference” and “confused the very basis of political work—which is always shared interests rather than moralism or corporeal identity.” The

difficult challenge for today's left is to move beyond large demonstrations, social media diatribes, and guilt-tripping, and to build, instead, a "majoritarian opposition" that can "produce a society where racism has lost its power, poverty is unthinkable and police killings are only the subject of museum exhibits."

I hope that a lot of people read this powerful, bracing book. Yet for all its merits, and they are impressive, *After Black Lives Matter* also manifests some of the problems that bedevil the left, woke and otherwise. This is most apparent in Johnson's discussion of culture—or, rather, in his vehement refusal to do so.

In 2014, the Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson published an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called "How Sociologists Made Themselves Irrelevant." Patterson is the author of, among other seminal works, *Slavery and Social Death*—in my view, the most profound work on the subject—and *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*. He served for seven years as an advisor to Michael Manley, the socialist prime minister of Jamaica, where Patterson was born and raised. In the *Chronicle* piece, he lamented the fact that, in reaction to culture-of-poverty analyses and in particular to the 1965 Moynihan Report—which has been furiously assailed (including by Johnson) for its presumed racism—fearful sociologists had shied away from discussing "the cultural dimensions of poverty, particularly black poverty." In the process, Patterson observed, sociologists had made themselves irrelevant to public-policy debates, which were subsequently dominated by economists and hyper-structuralists.

Patterson averred what everyone knows: that culture—"attitudes, beliefs, and values"—matter, "a lot," in the lives and the communities that people create. To insist otherwise is to defy common sense and everyday experience. Indeed, I suspect that every person reading this essay knows that their parents, extended family, friends, schools, and wider community were highly influential forces in their lives. To deny this truth to others—to see them only as

victims of ironclad systemic forces—is to treat them as what Patterson, quoting the late sociologist Harold Garfinkel, calls "cultural dopes." This denial is, in my view, one of the main reasons that the left is increasingly unable to speak credibly to a wide public about issues like education and crime.

There are several aspects about the situation Patterson described that are strange. Many people who condemn the Moynihan Report haven't read it. While it identified single motherhood among poor African Americans as the key problem, it tied this to industrial contraction, structural unemployment, and vicious geographic segregation. It was designed to spur vigorous new governmental social policies and interventions (the report was subtitled, "The Case for National Action"). It insisted that legal desegregation was not enough. It demanded equality of outcome, not just of opportunity, just like today's equity advocates. Far from victim-blaming, it condemned the "racist virus" of white society and decried "three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment" of black Americans at the hands of whites. The report remains mysteriously powerful; it seems to have traumatized six decades of liberals and leftists, who still quake in its aftermath. Johnson disparages it several times in his book.

The relationship between family formation (among all races and ethnicities), poverty, and social ills like crime and low academic achievement is indisputably complex; Moynihan no doubt overemphasized it and used highly polarizing language. But that doesn't mean the relationship is imaginary. Yet the topic is as taboo for the left as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is for Ron DeSantis.

Though Johnson is an admirably fearless thinker, when it comes to culture he is one of the "nervous Nellies" whom Patterson decried. Time and again Johnson scornfully rejects the possibility that cultural values—which can include attitudes toward sex, parenthood, marriage, education, crime, work, leisure, religion, politics, art, literature, and a million other things—have any connection to the life prospects of what the renowned sociologist William



President Barack Obama at an event about the importance of responsible fatherhood and mentoring in Washington, D.C., in 2010 (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Julius Wilson called “the truly disadvantaged.” Johnson mercilessly mocks Barack Obama’s talk of the importance of fatherhood and of instilling educational achievement in children. Yet Johnson himself describes conditions that, while intimately connected to racism and class inequality, can’t be explained solely by them and won’t be solved by the public works programs and strong unions that he rightly champions. Here is his description of the Job-like life of Laquan McDonald, a Chicago teen killed by police officer Jason Van Dyke in 2014. It shows the confluence of multiple factors:

His [fifteen-year-old] mother Tina Hunter was a ward of state when McDonald was born. She lost custody of her two children in 2000,

and McDonald was shuffled between eight different homes, mostly those of relatives. He was abused by foster parents outside his family and by his mother’s boyfriend, and was later diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Refusing medical prescriptions . . . he used marijuana to self-medicate since he did not have the skills to cope with his life’s stressors. He had been sentenced to juvenile detention some seventeen times, and had received ten school suspensions . . . His adolescence was spent in multiple schools, juvenile detention, drug rehabilitation, probation supervision and electronic monitoring, individual and family counseling and psychiatric hospitalization. Court records

referred to him as “resilient,” however, and, like most, he was more than his troubles.

What makes Johnson’s culture-phobia especially odd is that writing about, and critiquing, culture has been a large part of left movements for the past 100 years. The Bolsheviks scathingly criticized the backwardness (no quotation marks needed) of the Russian peasantry. The early Zionists vowed to negate the culture of the diaspora, which they associated with political worldlessness, religious obscurantism, and fearful passivity. (“The stiff-necked tribe has become the tribe of slaves,” the nineteenth-century socialist-Zionist Bernard Lazare lamented.) Leaders of the anticolonial and revolutionary movements—Atatürk, Mao, Gandhi, Nasser—waged war on “native” feudal customs, especially those that oppressed women: foot-binding, child marriage, purdah, dowry, bigamy, suttee, and the veil. The pan-Africanist revolutionary Amílcar Cabral, when assessing cultural practices, warned against “indiscriminate compliments; systemic exaltation of virtues without condemning faults; blind acceptance of the values of the culture, without considering what presently or potentially regressive elements it contains.” He was not, apparently, a fan of “authenticity.”

There is a rich tradition of public intellectuals on the left—W.E.B. Du Bois, Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, and C.L.R. James, to name just a few—who plumbed the complex interplay—sometimes contradictory, sometimes surprising, sometimes self-defeating, never over-determined—between political-economic forces and the cultures that people create in response to them. The cultural squeamishness of today’s left, which often results in a kind of economic determinism, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its political consequences have not been good: we have allowed conservatives, both intellectuals and politicians, to, in a sense, “own” this terrain.

There’s a lot of despair—and a few rays of hope—in our country at the moment. Recently, screenwriters, actors, and auto workers walked off their jobs and won

impressive gains; conversely, 900 Alabama coal miners ended their (largely ignored) two-year strike in defeat. Our democratic institutions are terrifyingly fragile and under relentless assault; Donald Trump, who uses increasingly fascistic language, may become our next president. Though the Supreme Court’s affirmative action decision has received a lot of attention, a greater crisis lies in the fact that millions of American students of all ethnicities are functionally illiterate: unprepared for college, skilled jobs, or civic participation. An enormous transfer of wealth to the very richest Americans continues unabated. Our planet is burning. Susan Neiman and Cedric Johnson write from a shared sense of desperate urgency about the crises we face. Their books raise the question: where is the left that can speak, honestly and in ordinary language, to the needs, hopes, and fears of our fellow citizens?

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