

Defining White Supremacy Up . . . and Academic Freedom Down

Seth Forman

In a world where reason prevails, Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth's article appearing in *The New Republic*, "When Professors' Speech Is Disqualifying,"¹ and the book from which it is excerpted, *It's Not Free Speech*,² would not require serious attention. Both article and book implausibly decry a surfeit of "white supremacism" on college campuses and suggest that yet another diversity drag-net duplicitously labelled "academic freedom committees" be established to put an end to it.

But reason does not prevail in Bérubé and Ruth's tendentious onslaught against academic freedom, so attention must be paid. The book is a scurrilous attack on three esteemed scholars embedded within a broader effort to marginalize liberal values, including academic freedom, which the authors say has allowed white supremacy to thrive on campus.

Bérubé and Ruth seek "to bring the arguments of critical race theory [CRT] to bear on the concept of academic freedom," and install a new vision that prioritizes the voices of the oppressed while supporting an "equality . . . that is not devoted to a false universality but rather sees color, gender, differing ability, etc."

What Bérubé and Ruth don't acknowledge is that academic freedom based on CRT is no freedom at all. According to CRT, dominant groups use language to define knowledge and subjugate others. Controlling what is said and ensuring that the voices of the "powerful" are not "reasserted" is an essential element of social justice scholarship.³ As adumbrated by Bérubé and Ruth, CRT and

1 Michael Bérubé, Jennifer Ruth, "When Professors' Speech Is Disqualifying," *The New Republic*, March 22, 2022.

2 Michael Bérubé, Jennifer Ruth, *It's Not Free Speech: Race, Democracy, and the Future of Academic Freedom* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022).

3 Helen Pluckrose, James A. Lindsay, "Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody Kindle Edition" (Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), 201.

Seth Forman is managing editor of *Academic Questions*.

“academic freedom committees” would redefine some of the most robust tools of social research as “white supremacy,” disqualifying them from academic discourse and drastically narrowing the universe of acceptable ideas.

What really bothers Bérubé and Ruth is that there is still that “rare but recognizable faculty member who is an ideologue who opposes efforts related to diversity and inclusion and trumpets his contempt for racial-justice work.” These people are “rarely disciplined,” and a mechanism controlled by CRT-minded faculty is needed to cancel scholars who challenge this “social justice” narrative.

Amy Wax of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Bruce Gilley of Portland State University, and Lawrence Mead of New York University are three such scholars. All three have become favorite targets of social justice activists primarily for their belief that much of the West’s power and prosperity is owed not to its greed or bigotry, but to its unique package of beliefs, habits, and customs and that this has formidable policy implications.

To one degree or another, all three scholars subscribe to the notion that culture—behavior, attitudes, values—is distinct from race and accounts for some portion of group inequality. In taking the view that culture is mostly learned, not inherited, and that it is mutable, not permanent, Wax, Gilley, and Mead are heirs to a liberal and optimistic outlook that presumes human agency and the availability to all of attitudes and behavior crucial to human development. Notable twentieth century scholars who have worked in this tradition include Samuel P. Huntington, Oscar Lewis, Seymour Martin Lipset, Lawrence Harrison, Nathan Glazer, David Landes, Lucien Pye, and Stephan Thernstrom. Today, Wax, Gilley, and Mead are part of a significant cadre of scholars, some inside the university and some out, who continue to see great significance in cultural differences, including Francis Fukuyama, Niall Ferguson, Robert Kaplan, Robert Putnam, Thomas Sowell, and Orlando Patterson.

Bérubé and Ruth believe this entire school of social thought should be disqualified from academia. As CRT advocates, they believe that race determines how people perceive the world and experience power, and that culture is determined by race. Scholars who say some cultural traits lead to better outcomes than others are therefore engaging in “white supremacy,” which “continues to hang on in a revanchist branch of social science that attributes white supremacy to ‘cultural’ rather than to biological differences.”

Bérubé and Ruth make no effort to back their claim that culture is derivative of race or its corollary, that all members of racial groups think and act the same. Instead, they accuse Wax, Gilley, and Mead of arguing that “black people are biologically or culturally less capable of self-government than others.” A dizzying amount of verbal subterfuge ensues in their quest to demonstrate the truth of this calumnious falsehood.

For example, the authors are perplexed that Amy Wax, without sanction, “can call for a ‘cultural distance nationalism’ whose core belief is that ‘our country will be better off with more whites and fewer non-whites.’” But this is malicious wordplay. At a speech to the National Conservatism Conference in 2019, Wax explained that the core idea of cultural distance nationalism is “the understanding that people’s background culture can affect their ability to fit into a modern advanced society and to perform the roles needed to support and maintain it.”⁴ The comment Bérubé and Ruth lifted out of context came from Wax’s assessment of why this theory has been so badly neglected. She believes it is precisely because the left has made it politically unpalatable for conservatives to espouse, a “toxic topic” that lies “outside the Overton window in polite society”:

Europe and the First World, to which the United States belongs, remain mostly white for now; and the Third World, although mixed, contains a lot of non-white people. Embracing cultural distance, cultural distance nationalism, means, in effect, taking the position that our country will be better off with more whites and fewer non-whites. Well, that is the result anyway.”

Cultural distance nationalism may not be everyone’s cup of tea, but it is obvious that the words “in effect” used in this context refer to the practical, unintended outcome of such policies, as distinct from their purpose or merit. If there was any doubt that Wax was not describing her preferred demographic distribution, she said so directly in the very next sentence:

So even if our immigration philosophy is grounded firmly in cultural concerns, doesn’t rely on race at all, and no matter how many times

4 The Editors, “Here’s What Amy Wax Really Said About Immigration,” *The Federalist*, July 26, 2019.

we repeat the mantra that correlation is not causation, these racial dimensions are enough to spook conservatives.

Bérubé and Ruth know that when Wax refers to “culture” she is not thinking about race, but they can’t allow her that view. Culture is a proxy for race, they decree, and instead of proving this dubious racial “essentialism,” they simply declare Wax a white supremacist.

This pattern of condemning Wax for holding beliefs she doesn’t hold is accompanied by an irritating lack of candor. “Let us be clear,” they assert, “We are not saying that widely held political positions on the right, like opposition to affirmative action or immigration, are grounds for determining a faculty member’s unfitness.” Yet they do declare Wax unfit precisely for her commonly held positions on both affirmative action and immigration.

Bérubé and Ruth believe it is a “strange idea of academic freedom that has permitted her [Wax] to make claims in public . . . about the academic achievements of Black law students at Penn that her own dean characterized as ‘false.’” This is a reference to an interview Wax gave to Brown University economist Glenn Loury, in which Wax brought up the “mismatch” theory, which says that racial preferences in America’s law schools result in black students performing poorly in programs they are not well-prepared for. “Here’s a very inconvenient fact, Glenn,” Wax said during her conversation with Loury, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a black student graduate in the top quarter of the class and rarely, rarely in the top half.”

Wax was blunt, perhaps insensitive, but not without a purpose: her straight talk, and the public response to it, demonstrates that politically correct speech controls are preventing the honest discussion of a harmful policy, and that if black students “were better matched, it might be a better environment for them.” This is a sentiment shared widely among those who study black social mobility, including black Columbia University linguist and *New York Times* columnist John McWhorter. In his 2021 book *Woke Racism*, McWhorter laments that affirmative action dehumanizes black students, leaving them “in over their heads nationwide.”⁵

As for Wax’s law school dean, Ted Ruger, he never produced the data to corroborate his view that Wax was wrong. But relevant data exists. In their book

5 John McWhorter, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2021), 106-107.

Mismatch: How Affirmative Action Hurts Students It's Intended to Help, and Why Universities Won't Admit It (2004) Richard Sander and Stuart Taylor found that of the 2,000 students attending elite law schools, 52 percent of blacks were in the bottom tenth of their class, with 8 percent of blacks in the top half. Clearly, Wax had not conjured a vindictive myth.

The authors give much the same treatment to Bruce Gilley, a political scientist from Portland State University, who has been viciously attacked for noticing that almost every former European colony now provides fewer civil rights and legal protections, and less prosperity than existed under colonial rule. Gilley has been vilified for making this case in his 2017 article “The Case for Colonialism,” which suggested that colonialism in many parts of the world was, on important measures, beneficial to the colonized.

Bérubé and Ruth don't offer a refutation of Gilley's thesis, except to claim “the overwhelming majority of experts” in the fields in which Gilley works “do not find his claims in these areas remotely credible.” This is not the impression one gets from perusing Gilley's ten thousand word bibliography published in 2020,⁶ a document neither author appears to be aware of.

More egregiously, Bérubé and Ruth accuse Gilley of having “doubled down” by writing a “proslavery” article in 2019 suggesting that being enslaved by the British Empire was a positive experience for those who suffered it. Well . . . not exactly.

In his provocatively titled article “Was it Good Fortune to be Enslaved by the British Empire?,”⁷ Gilley stated, “For those who came ashore at Jamestown and in the centuries that followed being enslaved under the British empire was about as good as it got.” In the article Gilley surveyed global conditions around 1619, the year the first Africans arrived in Jamestown, in order to bring context to the discussion of American slavery. He noted the start of the Thirty Years' War in Central Europe that would take eight million lives, the bubonic plague ravaging India, the millions dying from famine in Ming China, and Scottish settlers freezing and starving to death in New Scotland (Nova Scotia). The twenty-odd Africans in Jamestown themselves were already enslaved before their journey to America, likely the plunder of seemingly endless African wars.

6 Bruce Gilley, “Contributions of Western Colonialism to Human Flourishing: A Research Bibliography,” ResearchGate, Version 3.0 (2020), doi:10.13140/RG.2.2.16960.56328.

7 Bruce Gilley, “Was it Good Fortune to be Enslaved by the British Empire?” National Association of Scholars, September 30, 2019.

In other words, life for most around the world was nasty, brutish, and short, but at least the Africans in Jamestown landed where it was possible to imagine a moral revolution becoming viable.

Now, it is certainly possible that the indignity and brutality of American slavery was worse than any of these other travesties. But at the very least, Gilley points out, the system of private ownership capitalism meant most masters of slaves in the British colonies had an interest in keeping slaves healthy, providing ample if low-quality food and housing, comparable to that of European peasants.

None of us would choose to have belonged to any of these groups . . . But if one were forced to make a choice, a plausible argument could be made for the good fortune of the “20 and odd Negroes,” not just compared to the other unfortunates but also compared to the millions of slaves of African and Arab owners that they left behind.

This was no exercise in comparative victimization. The article is an attempt to combat the obsequious presentism that guides contemporary discussions of the American past, used mostly to denigrate the United States and accuse it of a singular kind of malevolence. Gilley makes clear that, throughout most of the world, until Britain and the United States started to question its morality in the late eighteenth century, slavery was just not considered a uniquely inhuman event.

The authors understand Gilley’s aim, but their goal is to twist Gilley’s meaning in order to disqualify any scholarship that suggests the problems of poverty and inequality are complex and multicausal. This is nowhere clearer than in their treatment of NYU political scientist Lawrence Mead. They start by attacking Mead’s article “Poverty and Culture,” appearing in *Society* in July 2020 and, after it was withdrawn, republished in *Academic Questions* in the spring of 2021. The article sparked calls for the cancellation of Mead, who argues, in that article and elsewhere, including his book *Burdens of Freedom* (2019), that cultural differences between mainstream society and the generationally poor offer a more robust explanation for inequality than “systemic” racial discrimination. The main cultural difference Mead identifies is the individualism associated with the descendants of European background, and the less individualist, or “collectivist,” backgrounds of most non-Europeans, who make up

a disproportionate share of the long-term poor. Mead, a noted policy expert widely credited with an outsized role in the successful “welfare-to-workfare” reforms of the 1990s, is concerned that people from non-Western countries who come to the United States, and U.S. blacks, who originated from Africa, retain collectivist proclivities that make entrepreneurship, innovation, and market-place competitiveness less abundant.

But instead of assessing Mead’s ideas, Bérubé and Ruth berate his basic competence, a strategy the backfires on them utterly. The authors chide Mead for, of all things, including Hispanics in the groups he considers non-Western. “But you might be surprised to learn that Hispanics—who, last we checked, came to the Americas from Spain—are part of the ‘non-West’ in which minorities originate.” They should check again. Bérubé may be a literature professor and Ruth a “film studies” professor, but is their knowledge of the Western hemisphere so vacuous that they don’t know the Spanish set up an indigenous ruling class in their American empire, preferring to govern from afar? Did they never learn that, unlike Britain, the Spanish conquered existing empires and utilized the indigenous political and economic systems already in place? Racially, in 2020, only 20.3 percent of U.S. Hispanics identified as “white alone,”⁸ a category that implies European ancestry. In other words, politically, culturally, and demographically it makes perfect sense to count Hispanics from former Spanish colonies as “non-Western.”

Bérubé and Ruth then go on to mock Mead for describing Africa’s culture as collectivist. For this they rely on only one source: a 3,500 word blog by Swarthmore Africanist Timothy Burke, who, in response to Mead’s thesis, identified several “individualist” African societies throughout the centuries. Turning on their considerable charm, Bérubé and Ruth write that Mead’s contention is “embarrassing for anyone with the title of professor.” But shouldn’t anyone with the title of professor know to consult more than one source before making sweeping critical judgements on another’s work? Shouldn’t they also possess the basic understanding of Africa as a large enough continent with a long enough history to find exceptions to almost any rule?

Primitive or traditional societies are almost by definition more collectivist than advanced ones due to the exigencies of physical survival. Harry C. Triandis, a psychology professor at the University of Illinois and past president

8 U.S. Census Bureau, “Table 4. Hispanic or Latino Origin by Race: 2010 and 2020.”

of the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology, wrote the entry for “Collectivism” in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*: “Collectivism is a cultural pattern found in most traditional societies, especially in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. It contrasts with individualism, which is a cultural pattern found mostly in Western Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand.”⁹

And it’s not as though Mead doesn’t have his own authoritative sources, including Geert Hofstede, Richard Nisbett, and Ronald Inglehart, who argue for the West’s unique individualism. The most recent work to add scholarly girth to Mead’s thesis is anthropologist Joseph Henrich’s *The WEIRDest People in the World* (2020), which argues that the “Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic” populations are “individualists,” outliers not only among the other civilizations in the world today, but past civilizations as well.¹⁰

While they don’t call for Mead’s immediate firing (at 78 years of age they suggest “retirement does not seem out of order for him”), Bérubé and Ruth insist that his “line of argument should no longer be taken seriously in academe.” In fact, they declare the whole idea that an “enterprising temperament . . . chiefly explains why the West has dominated the globe in recent centuries”—an idea so “entrenched in the Samuel Huntington ‘clash of civilizations’ school of thought”—simply doesn’t meet today’s academic standards. After all, the old standards were set “by an academy consisting almost exclusively of white men.” In Bérubé and Ruth’s CRT world, the truth of an idea has little to do with what it says, but lots to do with the race of those who said it.

There is little room for opposition in an academy run by CRT and other postmodern ideologies, which teach that all challenges to them are evidence itself of racism. Bérubé and Ruth’s book is a product of an academy whose ideological range on the topics of identity and inequality is already so narrow that contrarian views are seen not simply as wrong, but as morally corrupt. After Hitler’s defeat in World War II, the idea that it is culture, not race, that determines the success of a society triumphed over the scientific racism that predominated in academic circles, laying the intellectual groundwork for the moral revolution that led to legal equality. If CRT and those who espouse it succeed

9 H.C. Triandis, “Collectivism and Individualism: Cultural and Psychological Concerns,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2015.

10 Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (Harvard 2020).

in disqualifying such an idea from legitimate academic debate, it is hard to imagine any idea that is safe.