

Tackling racism

The new ideology of race

And what is wrong with it

[Leaders](#)

The Economist Jul 9th 2020

America's problem with racism can be divided into two parts. One contains all the myriad injustices that still blight African-American lives a century and a half after the end of slavery. The other is the way that factions on the right exploit racial division as a political tool. An example of the first occurred on May 25th on a shabby street corner in Minneapolis, when George Floyd was killed by a white policeman. An example of the second occurred on July 3rd, at Mount Rushmore, against the monumental backdrop of the country's greatest presidents, when Donald Trump sought to inflame a culture war centred on race to boost his chances of a second term. To be successful, a campaign for racial justice needs to deal with both.

Leaders like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King used vigorous protest and relentless argument to push society towards their vision of equality of opportunity and equality before the law. Most Americans still hew to that classical liberal ideal as do many of those who marched with justified anger over the killing of Mr Floyd. But a dangerous rival approach has emerged from American universities (see [article](#)). It rejects the liberal notion of progress. It defines everyone by their race, and every action as racist or anti-racist. It is not yet dominant, but it is dynamic and it is spreading out of the academy into everyday life. If it supplants liberal values, then intimidation will chill open debate and sow division to the disadvantage of all, black and white.

The premise underpinning this ideology is correct: that racial inequality is shockingly persistent. Even though attitudes to race have improved, the quality of African-American lives has not kept pace. A third of black boys born in 2001 will probably spend time locked up, compared with one in 17 white boys. In 1968 black households earned around 60% as much as white households, and owned assets that were less than 10% of those of a typical white family. They still do.

This ideology also has some valid insights. Racism is sustained by unjust institutions and practices. Sometimes, as in policing, this is overt. More often, in countless small put-downs and biases, it is subtle but widespread and harmful.

But then the ideology takes a wrong turn, by seeking to impose itself through intimidation and power. Not the power that comes from persuasion and elections, but from silencing your critics, insisting that those who are not with you are against you, and shutting out

those who are deemed privileged or disloyal to their race. It is a worldview where everything and everyone is seen through the prism of ideology—who is published, who gets jobs, who can say what to whom; one in which in-groups obsess over orthodoxy in education, culture and heritage; one that enforces absolute equality of outcome, policy by policy, paragraph by paragraph, if society is to count as just.

It is tempting to see such ideas as nothing more than overheated campus radicalism. And, true enough, they have not yet taken over a political party. When people speak of ending white privilege, most of them have good things in mind like inclusion and justice. But ideas are important, and the spread of campus terminology into newsrooms and boardrooms invites in ideologues. Their approach is already taking a toll. In universities research agendas are being warped. Outside them, public shaming and intimidation have been curbing debate.

The pity is that these ideas will not solve America's problems with race. They will not eliminate inequality because they are a poor way to bring about beneficial change. Unless you can freely analyse causes and question orthodoxies you will not be able to solve problems. And unless you can criticise people and practices without fear of being called out, you will not be able to design effective policies and then go on to refine them.

The new race theory blocks progress in another way, too. The barriers to racism can be dismantled only when they are exposed—and so they must be, however painful. But the false idea that ingrained racism will forever block African-Americans at every turn is a barrier in its own right.

And, by focusing on power and division, this ideology only creates more space for some on the right to exploit race as a tool. A fundamental belief in power above persuasion frustrates coalition-building. Essential allies are not carried along, but forced along. When every transaction at work, at home, or at the school gate is seen through a prism of racial power, no encounter between different races can be innocent.

The new ideology of race is not just wrong and dangerous, it is also unnecessary. Liberalism can offer a fairer, more promising route to reform. It asserts the dignity of the individual and the legal, civil and moral equality of all people, whatever the colour of their skin. It believes in progress through argument and debate, in which reason and empathy lift truthful ideas and marginalise bigotry and falsehood.

Liberalism thrives on a marketplace of ideas, so diversity has a vital role. New voices and experiences enrich the debate. Liberalism does not fight power with power, which risks replacing one abusive regime with another. Instead it uses facts and evidence, tested in debate, to help the weak take on the strong.

Liberalism is all about progress, including about putting right its mistakes—and there have been many, especially over race, including finding reasons to accommodate imperialism and slavery. That is one reason why, in the 250 years in which it has been influential,

humanity has seen unprecedented material, scientific and political gains, as well as a vast extension of social and political rights. Progress on racial inequities has been part of this—as in South Africa, where liberals joined forces with the trade unions and communists to sink apartheid.

Liberals can help in America, too. Much of the material gulf between African-Americans and whites can be bridged with economic policies that improve opportunity. You do not need to build a state based on identity. Nor do you need tools like reparations, which come with practical difficulties and have unintended consequences. Economic policies that are race-neutral, which people qualify for because of poverty, not the colour of their skin, can make a big difference. They have a chance of uniting Americans, not dividing them. If the mood now really is for change, they would be politically sellable and socially cohesive.

Our Briefing lays out what some of these policies might look like. Top of the list is tackling the housing segregation that is central to America's racial economic inequality. The reform of zoning laws and the grant of rent-assistance vouchers are the chief ingredients. That would bring many benefits, improving public services and lessening violence. More integrated housing would integrate schools too and, given America's locally financed education, mean that more would be spent on black children. Affordable measures, including advice and modest cash grants, have been shown to boost graduation from college. A third tool is the tax system. The earned-income tax credit tops up wages of working adults. A child allowance would cut poverty. A baby bond would help shrink the wealth gap.

In the past liberals have helped bring about change when society faced a challenge to the status quo, as when reforms limited child labour and won women the vote. If America has reached such a moment today, it must not resort to identity politics—and suffer intolerance, intimidation and division. Instead, for reform on race that works, it must look to liberalism.

This article appeared in the Leaders section of the print edition under the headline "The new ideology of race"