

The New York Times defends Sarah Jeong after racist tweets come to light

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The *New York Times* found itself at the center of a controversy last week when racist tweets posted between 2013 and 2015 by Sarah Jeong, a new member of the paper's editorial board, began circulating online. The *Times* defended Jeong, as did several of her ostensibly left-wing colleagues and supporters.

The posts in question are indefensible, a series of vitriolic tirades against white people. Jeong, who is Asian-American, tweeted with apparent relish, "Oh man it's kind of sick how much joy I get out of being cruel to old white men." In another tweet, she wrote, "Dumbass fucking white people marking up the internet with their opinions like dogs pissing on fire hydrants." A third tweet consists simply of "#CancelWhitePeople." There are others.

Had Jeong made the same comments about any other group, had she publicly fantasized about the sick joy derived from her cruel treatment of "old African-American men," for example, her career would be over and the very paper that hired her would be dragging her name through the mud. But Jeong engaged in a form of racism entirely permissible, and even quite lucrative, in the pseudo-left circles in which she moves and for which the *Times* speaks.

In a statement defending Jeong, the *Times* explains that she has been the victim of online harassment as a young Asian woman. "For a period of time," writes the *Times*, "she responded to that harassment by imitating the rhetoric of her harassers." After "candid conversations," the statement goes on, Jeong came to see things differently: "She regrets it, and the *Times* does not condone it."

Jeong followed up with her own statement, writing on Twitter, "As a woman of color on the internet, I have faced torrents of online hate, often along this vein..." She then shared two deplorable racist and homophobic messages in which physical threats are made against her.

She continues, "I engaged in what I thought of at the time as counter-trolling. While it was intended as satire, I deeply regret that I mimicked the language of my harassers. These comments were not aimed at a general audience, because general audiences do not engage in harassment campaigns. I

can understand how hurtful these posts are out of context, and would not do it again."

The cover story presented by Jeong and the *Times* is simply not credible. Nothing about these tweets reads like satire. They are racist comments that contain all the viciousness one has come to expect from those affluent, upper-middle class layers obsessed with race and gender. The *New York Times* plays a leading role in disseminating and legitimizing such views.

It apologizes for Jeong's anti-white rants but shows no such solicitude for people caught up in the #MeToo witch-hunt, for the most part on the basis of unverified allegations of sexual harassment or abuse. There the *Times* generally takes the position that the accused is guilty by virtue of having been charged.

Identity politics, which claims society is organized for the benefit of so-called cis-gender white men, strips racism of its social and historical content and obscures the class nature of society.

The politics of race and gender are used as a wedge by a section of affluent African-American and other minority professionals to gain leverage against their white or male competitors in the marketplace in order to obtain a greater share of the wealth controlled by the top ten percent of society.

These politics acquire more venom and become more aggressively right-wing under conditions in which clear signs of the reemergence of class struggle begin to appear. The most noxious expression of this has been the #MeToo campaign spearheaded by the *Times*. As this hysterical, anti-democratic campaign makes clear, these upper middle-class layers are prepared to employ the most right-wing, anti-democratic maneuvering to open up new and lucrative pathways for themselves.

They are in large part ruthless social climbers, seething with petty resentments and professional jealousies, who cynically cloak their ambition with a phony concern for racial and gender equality. In reality, the more diverse corporate boardrooms they demand will do nothing to

improve the lives of workers, whatever their ethnicity or sexual orientation.

Moreover, identity politics are used by these layers in an effort to sabotage the development of an independent movement of the working class against capitalism. Widespread class solidarity uniting workers in a common struggle across all ethnic, national and linguistic boundaries, and the development of socialist consciousness, present a direct threat to the material interests of these layers.

When several right-wing commentators seized on Jeong's anti-white rhetoric to launch a campaign against her and against the *Times* for their own reactionary political reasons, a number of voices from the pseudo-left spoke up to defend her. Their justifications of Jeong's tweets are revealing.

Among Jeong's more outspoken supporters is Zack Beauchamp, who wrote a lengthy piece on the controversy for the online news and opinion journal *Vox*. Beauchamp and Jeong are colleagues at the Vox Media site the *Verge*.

Beauchamp writes that referring to "white people" as Jeong did is a kind of shorthand among those on the "social justice left." It captures, he says, "the way that many whites still act in clueless and/or racist ways. It's typically used satirically and hyperbolically to emphasize how white people continue to benefit (even unknowingly) from their skin color, or to point out the ways in which a power structure that favors white people continues to exist."

Perhaps Beauchamp knows where teachers, UPS and Amazon workers who happen to be white can line up to receive some of the benefits owed to them by the existing power structure.

According to Beauchamp, Jeong "is commenting on the ubiquity of (often uniformed[sic]) white opinion on social media—a way of pointing out how nonwhite voices often don't appear or get drowned out in social media discourse."

But who, precisely, is silencing Sarah Jeong? She graduated from Harvard Law School, where she edited the *Journal of Law & Gender*. As a journalist, her byline has appeared in the *Atlantic*, the *Washington Post*, *Forbes* and the *New York Times Magazine*. In 2017, she was profiled in *Forbes* magazine's list of "30 under 30," its annual tribute to influential entrepreneurs and taste-makers under the age of 30. Next month she will join the editorial board of the *New York Times*, where she will oversee the paper's coverage of technology and the Internet.

To Beauchamp, she is only a young Asian-American woman, a representative of an oppressed minority who is well within her rights to savage the white people who are her ostensible oppressors.

Beauchamp also rejects the argument that replacing Jeong's references to white people with similar references to one or another minority group more clearly brings out the

racist nature of her remarks. This, he argues, sets up a false equivalency. The difference again, writes Beauchamp, is the "underlying power structure in American society," which benefits white people.

In the *Vox* piece, he responds to a question from conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan, who asks, "Would Beauchamp, I wonder, feel the same way if anti-racists talked about Jews in the same manner Jeong talks about whites?" Beauchamp denies the validity of Sullivan's point, but adds, "Andrew knows I'm Jewish and sensitive to the real problem of anti-Semitism on the left."

These words link to another of Beauchamp's articles for *Vox*, claiming to explain the "UK Labour Party's anti-semitism crisis." It is a piece that seeks to legitimize the right-wing smear campaign accusing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his political allies of anti-Semitism.

The arguments of Beauchamp, Jeong and their co-thinkers on the pseudo-left are meant to intimidate and silence any opponents of middle-class identity politics. Critics of Jeong will be labeled "alt-right" racists just as critics of the #MeToo witch-hunt are labeled rape apologists.

But workers of all backgrounds, who do not share the preoccupations of Beauchamp and the rest, know they do not benefit from the existing "power structure." On the contrary. They are brutalized by it. It is *their* voices that have been drowned out for too long.

As workers enter into struggle they will have to be made conscious of the true class nature of society and learn who their political enemies are. This makes the conscious and unrelenting exposure of the promoters of identity politics all the more important.



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