

# John McWhorter's *Woke Racism*: An argument about how to secure privilege

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In 2021, Penguin Random House published John McWhorter's *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Betrayed Black America*. The book, whose author is a well-known professor of linguistics at Columbia University and columnist with the *New York Times*, became a bestseller and received significant media attention when it was released.

*Woke Racism* takes aim at contemporary identity politics, including ideology like Critical Race Theory (CRT). He exposes the racialists for the inanities and nastiness of their ideology, as well as for the mob-like atmosphere they whip up. McWhorter is observant. His commentary is often perceptive, at times amusing and frequently scathing. He sticks his neck out and takes positions that are generally unpopular within his own social milieu—academia and the op-ed pages of America's leading liberal newspaper.

However, McWhorter's overriding objection is not that racialism is deeply anti-egalitarian and aimed at dividing the working class, but that it hinders, as opposed to advances, the meritocratic aspirations of minorities trying to climb to the top rungs of American capitalism.

The author touches on the privileged status of the race-obsessed, but he analyzes neither the historical origins of racial ideology nor the class interests it serves. Therefore, when it comes to proposing ways to combat racialism, he finds himself at a dead end. McWhorter concludes his book with a number of “pragmatic” proposals whose content, whatever his intentions, are of a right-wing character, careening in the direction of libertarianism.

*Woke Racism* argues that “Third Wave Antiracism” and its attendant Critical Race Theory are neither anti-racist, scholarly nor a theory, but rather a puritanical religion that is propagated by an “Elect” and that shares all the worst features of zealotry. This ideology, McWhorter writes, “teaches that because racism is baked into the structure of society, whites’ ‘complicity’ in living within it constitutes racism itself.” He writes,

Under this paradigm, all deemed insufficiently aware of this sense of *existing while white* as eternal culpability require bitter condemnation and ostracization, to an obsessive, abstract degree that ... leaves millions of innocent people scared to pieces of winding up in the sights of a zealous brand of inquisition that seems to hover over almost any statement, ambition, or achievement in modern society.

McWhorter issues a number of indictments against this new religion: “It is losing innocent people their jobs. It is coloring academic inquiry, detouring it, and sometimes strangling it like kudzu” (p. 5); “It is an obsessive, self-involved, totalitarian, and an utterly unnecessary kind of cultural reprogramming” (p. 15); “It is gruesomely close to Hitler’s racial notions in their conception of an alien, blood-deep malevolent ‘whiteness’” (p. 15).

McWhorter rejects the label “white supremacism” as a description of modern-day reality, pointing out that it both minimizes the brutality of race relations in the past and ignores decades of social change. He argues that rather than America being in constant denial about race and racism, the country suffers from an obsession with it. Millions of dollars, for example, have poured into the Black Lives Matter industry.

*Woke Racism* takes on the absurdities of antiracism “education” and cuts down to size leading racialists. McWhorter aptly characterizes “diversity training” as “the mouthing of vacuous mantras” (p. 17). He denounces the racialist “Elect” as apocalyptic “inquisitors” who are “persecuting people for not adhering to their religion” (p. 20), “ban heretics,” and believe that whiteness is “the original sin,” which can only be overcome by “worship, by people embracing the self-mortification of the inveterate sinner” and accepting “the teachings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ibram Kendi, and Robin DiAngelo” (p. 33). He argues that “[w]ithin the Elect hierarchy in which whites are Satan on top, sainthood increases with all other people as you move down the hierarchy of intersectional opposition” (p. 53). He describes DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* as reading “in the present tense like a bizarre exercise in mind control created by someone bent on manipulation and getting paid” (p. 65).

McWhorter points to the deep subjectivity and self-obsession upon which the racialists base their claims. Richard Delgado, one of the progenitors of CRT, “began teaching non-whites to base their complaints about injustice not on something so ‘rigid’ as objective truth” (p. 62). In this “fragile, performative ideology” that rejects Enlightenment rationalism, an “oppressed race’s ‘story’ constitutes truth” (p. 63). Furthermore, “what the person ‘feels’ is what they have been taught to ‘feel’ by a paradigm that teaches them to exaggerate and even fabricate the ‘feeling.’” (p. 163).

McWhorter recounts public shamings, wrecked careers and destroyed lives. The dean of nursing at the University of Massachusetts Lowell was fired for writing that “black lives matter, but also, everyone’s life matters.” In 2020, a business professor at the University of Southern California was removed from teaching a course because he was explaining to his class the significance of the expression “nay-guh” in Mandarin Chinese, a “filler word” or hedging term that plays a similar role as “um” in English. A group of black students claimed they were offended by the sound’s similarity to an American English racial epithet and launched a campaign denouncing the professor as a racist. He was removed from the class.

At one point, McWhorter presents a table that summarizes the patently self-contradictory tenets of “Third Wave Antiracism.” The elect must “show interest in multiculturalism” but also not “culturally appropriate. What is not your culture is not for you, and you may not try it or do it.” Romance is a minefield: “If you’re white and date only white people, you’re a racist,” and yet “[i]f you’re white and date a black person, you are, if only deep down, exotifying an ‘other.’” So is friendship: “Support black people in creating their own spaces and stay out of them,” and yet

“[s]eek to have black friends, if you don’t have any, you’re a racist.”

Yet, despite all his incisive observations, McWhorter, a self-described “liberal Democrat” who also spent several years working at the right-wing Manhattan Institute, does not get very far. Or rather, where he ends up is pretty unsavory.

McWhorter concludes his book by arguing that rather than joining in the religious mania of the racialist Elect, “saving black America for real” requires three things: 1) legalizing narcotics, 2) using a phonetic-based method for teaching in the schools and, sounding very much like Booker T. Washington, 3) promoting vocational training as opposed to attending a four-year college as the route to success. These delusional prescriptions have no progressive content.

According to *Woke Racism*’s author, “even more potent drugs such as heroin should be available, albeit regulated, to those who seek them.” With the selling of illegal drugs having been removed as a means to survive in black communities, McWhorter argues, black men who fall into this underworld will “get legal jobs” and the prisons will not be filled up by people incarcerated for “murders or theft that are themselves connected to drug sales.”

The Centers for Disease Control report that 187 Americans die every day just from opioids, which began as products of a legal and regulated prescription industry that has secured massive profits for the pharmaceuticals. The opioid epidemic has ravaged communities across the country—left children orphaned, individuals broken by addiction, homes wrecked by violence. As for McWhorter’s belief that the transformation of the sale of illegal drugs into an over-the-counter market might lessen the prison population, this is naive in the extreme. As is the case in the opioid epidemic, an illegal drug trade would flourish alongside the legal one, and, in all events, America’s heavily militarized police forces would find new justifications for their predations in working class neighborhoods. Legalization of narcotics would do nothing to resolve the despair that leads to drug abuse, much less resolve the social crisis in the cities.

On the question of reading, McWhorter objects to the use of a “whole word” method in schools. He insists that an exclusively phonetic approach in which students sound out words would be more effective and has been proven to “raise the test scores of black kids vastly.” The other teaching style is more suited to “middle-class kids from book-lined homes.” Whatever the value of phonics, and it is legitimate to raise the issue, McWhorter sails past the social and economic reasons for so many children growing up in homes without any books to begin with.

His last “solution” to the “societal inequity” is to “get past the idea that everybody must go to college.” Instead, people “can make a solid living as electricians, plumbers, hospital technicians, cable television installers, body shop mechanics, and many other jobs.”

Speaking in the abstract, no one would insist that “everybody must go to college.” That’s a red herring. The essential issue here is McWhorter’s thoroughgoing acceptance of the status quo, including the current educational system, rooted in class oppression, and the myriad means by which the working class is denied access to culture.

McWhorter, who has a Ph.D. and teaches at an elite university, certainly does not anticipate that he or his children will be living off the salary of a “hospital technician” or “body shop mechanic.” His position on “college” reflects the degree to which he has digested and transmits ruling class ideology—workers have no need for literature, philosophy, history, art, writing and, of course, reading. Their role is to be exploited, and no one needs to be able to read Plato (or about Plato) in order to fulfill that function.

The dispute between McWhorter and the racialists is a conflict between two layers within the black petty bourgeoisie over how privileges should be secured and justified. Neither advocates the slightest challenge to capitalism.

McWhorter notes, for instance, that the racialists’ demand that admission standards be altered for minority students does nothing to address the underlying issue, which is that large segments of these populations, and students in the US overall, “underperform” educationally. Tinkering with race-based admissions policies to exclusive law schools can be done without lifting a single finger to improve the country’s public education system. Focusing on the excessively high numbers of expulsions and suspensions at black-majority schools as examples of “institutional racism” does not, for example, address the problem of the high levels of violence within these communities. These are, as far as they go, fair points.

However, what McWhorter wants is not a program that would really address the underlying *causes* of these social problems, but rather to stop promoting ideas of “victimhood.” He finds the racialists’ demand that blacks be evaluated according to different standards than whites to be embarrassing, because he believes it reinforces a sort of black “inferiority complex.” McWhorter implies that black individuals should adopt a “can do” attitude—to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, thereby lifting the fortunes of the race. His is a Booker T. Washington-style conception of “racial uplift.”

McWhorter’s political orientation becomes clear when discussing the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project and its “creator” Nikole Hannah-Jones. He says relatively little about the substance of the newspaper’s massive effort at constructing a historical lie. McWhorter, who sprinkles his book with small doses of anti-communism, makes, for instance, no mention of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which led the campaign to destroy those lies.

Although McWhorter rejects the idea that the US was founded on racism and observes that Hannah-Jones received a Pulitzer Prize in commentary for claims that are “simply false” and for substituting “indignation” for “accuracy,” his primary concern is that her promotion is actually a form of “utter diminishment.” He writes, “White people patting her on the head for being ‘brave’ or ‘getting her views out there,’” he says, “are condescending to a black woman who deserves better, even if the zeitgeist she has been minted in prevents her from knowing it herself.” (p. 109).

In short, McWhorter’s main concern is that the self-advancement campaign of people like Hannah-Jones is based on things that are so egregiously stupid as to be humiliating. He would like there to be less, as he describes it, evident “dummity.”

But the idiocies of the racialists are not simply the musings of misguided, pitiable individuals. They manifest the interests of a grasping upper-middle-class layer that rejects egalitarianism and lives in mortal fear of a mass movement from below that will unify the population across racial boundaries. Individuals in this layer sense, therefore, that their prospects for “improvement” lie in the promotion of racial animus as a means of shoring up a capitalist system that is collapsing all around them.

They do not want to be judged on the basis of any universal standard of achievement, as McWhorter suggests ought to be happening. They want to get “theirs.” Having witnessed over the last two decades a massive growth in the amount of financial wealth sloshing around in the top 1 percent, they seek access to their share by taking advantage of, sowing confusion about, and abusing the history of the struggle for equality and against racial oppression in the US. The combination of black nationalism, identity politics and postmodernism that characterizes the outlook of today’s racialists—which McWhorter touches on in his book—is a class position.



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