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Citation: Pace, I. (2024). The roots of academic irrationality. *The Critic*,

This is the accepted version of the paper.

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The roots of academic irrationality

How ideology came to dominate the intellect — and rigidity subordinated scepticism

ARTILLERY ROW

By

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8 January, 2024

The Critic

The [Congressional hearings of 5 December 2023 on antisemitism on campus](#) (see [here](#) for a transcript) brought concerns relating to many Western universities to a wider public, fuelled by many campus responses to the Hamas pogrom of 7 October 2023. [US social psychologist Jonathan Haidt suggested](#) it might have been “the Waterloo” for the “cultural revolution that swept across the academy in 2015-16”. Some of us have been arguing for some time about the pernicious effect of ideologies of “decolonisation”, critical race theory, the substitution of activism for scholarship, and the unholy alliance between these ideologies and more commonplace managerialism. These have brought bureaucrats and ideologues together in opposition to academic freedom and free speech, viewpoint diversity, or even conceptions of knowledge and truth, all of which are now being discussed by many others in a wider public sphere. To see the Presidents of Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Pennsylvania — Claudine Gay, Sally Kornbluth and Liz Magill respectively — each fail to give an unequivocal response to the bald question by representative Elise Stefanik, as to whether calling for the genocide of Jewish people constituted bullying and harassment, was shocking for some to hear.

At the time of writing, Magill has subsequently resigned, her departure arguably hastened by [the threatened withdrawal of a \\$100m endowment](#). Gay has departed too, amid [serious charges of plagiarism on her part](#), including in her 1997 PhD.

Watching or reading the transcript of the longer exchange does make clear that Stefanik was trying to trap Gay into agreeing that calls for *intifada* and those for the genocide of Jewish people are synonymous, and therefore that acceptance of one means acceptance of the other. This is not accurate. [The definition of genocide adopted by the United Nations](#) remains the most significant and meaningful, and should be consulted whenever the term is used over-casually. The term *intifada* in general is generally accepted as meaning an uprising, or rebellion. There is no intrinsic reason why this need be violent, let alone genocidal. In a Palestinian context, the first *intifada*, which lasted from 1987 (the 20th anniversary of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip following the Six-Day War) to 1991, involved throwing stones and also Molotov cocktails, though the second *intifada* (2000-2005) was much more violent and involved numerous suicide bombings.

This is not to say that some of those calling for *intifada* are not calling for genocidal murder, and certainly those openly supporting Hamas are supporting [a movement whose genocidal intent has been clear from their foundation](#). The responses of the three university Presidents, and the idea that calls to genocide are affected by

“context” (generally to do with whether a threat of violence is “imminent”), [have been coherently defended from an extremely strong free speech position articulated by members of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression \(FIRE\)](#), whilst pointing out the double standards which are involved, when speech codes are applied to much milder expressions and sentiments. Indeed, [FIRE gave Harvard the worst ever score with respect to their rankings of institutions for free speech.](#)

But [a new Harvard-Harris poll](#) shows a massive 60 per cent of 18-24 year olds in the US think that the Hamas killing of 1200 Israeli civilians and kidnapping of another 250 “can be justified by the grievance of Palestinians”; while *at the same time*, 66 per cent do believe that these attacks are “genocidal:”. Furthermore, 66 per cent of this age group view “Jews as a class” as “oppressors”. When this is the case, there is little way in which Jewish students or others can feel safe on US campuses which are sure to be predominantly populated by this age group. It is the clearest evidence of an epidemic of antisemitism, of a type to which the responses of Gay, Kornbluth and Magill are far from adequate.

The situation appears at present to be less bad in the UK, at least according to [a poll taken in late October](#), though the questions are less specific. Nonetheless, [a poll from 2021](#) suggested antisemitic views were quite widespread and [a recent poll](#) shows a quarter of British Jews have experienced antisemitic abuse since the beginning of the conflict in October. Commentators have focused on antisemitic views in universities [in the UK](#) (see also [here](#)) and [the US](#) — it was widespread claims of the latter which led to the Congressional hearings. What I wish to do in the remainder of this article is to trace some of the intellectual developments which have made this state of affairs possible, and in the second part consider their manifestation in practice, and offer some ways forward.

Professor Doug Stokes, in his book [Against Decolonisation: Campus Culture Wars and the Decline of the West](#), begins with theories of decolonisation which emerged in the early post-war era from Frantz Fanon (1925-1961). This view is to me somewhat more cogent than the views presented by [Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay](#), and by [Yascha Mounk](#), which prioritise ideologies associated with postmodern thinking. Fanon, born in Martinique and deeply involved in the Algerian War, has come to be seen as in many ways the founding thinker of such a movement. Stokes also considers associated Marxist thinkers, including Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, including Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), whose work entails a shift in emphasis from class to culture, viewed as an important force dampening the possibility of revolutionary consciousness and consequent activity. These are argued by Stokes to have been incorporated by French post-structuralist and postmodernist thinkers in a manner which eschewed a Marxist emphasis on social class, leading to post-colonial and decolonisation theories. Law professor Katy Barnett, [in a recent article](#), also shifts the primary focus back to early postcolonial theory, especially that of Fanon.

Fanon’s 1952 [Black Skin, White Masks](#), written at a time when literal “decolonisation” was only in its infancy, presents a stark dichotomy between “black” (which at this point in history would have included North Africans) and “white” (only once in the book does he also mention the term ‘yellow’). He reflects at length on the experience of black people in France, the racist attitudes they encounter, their sense of being an

outsider to the dominant language and culture and the need to adopt “white masks”. But Fanon also engages seriously with antisemitism, citing in particular [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) on the subject, whilst differentiating antisemitism from other forms of racism because of black people are “overdetermined from without”, becoming slaves “not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance”.

Yet it was Fanon’s 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth* which made abundantly clear the link between decolonisation and violence. From the outset, he says that “decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives”, and asserts the necessity of “a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists”, in the face of “a language of pure violence” in capitalist countries, in which “the military ensure the colonized are kept under close scrutiny, and contained by rifle butts and napalm.” He goes on to argue that:

Challenging the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints. It is not a discourse on the universal, but the impassioned claim by the colonized that their world is fundamentally different. The colonial world is a Manichaeian world. The colonist is not content with physically limiting the space of the colonized, i.e., with the help of his agents of law and order. As if to illustrate the totalitarian nature of colonial exploitation, the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil.

Only a pacifist eschews violence altogether; liberation from colonial oppression has in various cases only been possible through violent confrontation, and violence was employed by resistance movements opposing the Nazis and their allies. The dehumanisation of colonial subjects described by Fanon was a very real phenomenon, as was the wider hypocrisy of Western liberal values which could co-exist with colonisation.

Yet Fanon’s view, even if one accepts its validity when fighting colonial rule, offers little way forward after liberation, and asserts an absolute and Manichean (a term of which he is fond) difference between “white values” and those of the “colonized”, with only contemptuous sentiments towards “certain colonized intellectuals” who “have established a dialogue with the bourgeoisie of the colonizing country” (a description which today might apply at least to the writings of Fanon, as they are cited regularly by some Western middle-class intellectuals).

As [Helen Dale and Lorenzo Warby](#) (cited by Barnett) have pointed out, Fanon’s analysis is blind to any form of historical colonialism and dispossession carried out by non-European powers. In particular, it neglects the various Arab and Muslim Empires which colonised and enslaved large parts of Africa prior to French colonisation, in which context Dale and Warby provide examples of the dehumanising language in Islamic thought from this period. If one categorises the world in terms of “peoples”, some have switched between colonised and colonisers at different times in history. For seven hundred years most Spanish and Portuguese lived in the Al-Andalus region, part of the vast Umayyad Empire, but after 1492 would go on to colonise large areas of the Americas. With a reverse chronology, the ancestors of subjects of British, French, Italian and Ottoman colonial rule in North Africa and the Levant once belonged to political entities which controlled large swathes of Africa and Asia.

Fanon's view is informed by a particular and idiosyncratic reading of Marxism. He does include some meaningful reflections on the possibility that money spent on arms research could instead hugely raise the standard of living in underdeveloped countries, and the development of trade unions in former colonised countries. But he appears to glorify violence, "a cleansing force" for its own sake, as it "hoists the people up to the level of the leader", and suggests that after liberation "the masses allow nobody to come forward as 'liberator'", a ludicrous claim after the experience of Pol Pot, Assad father and son, Saddam Hussein, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, Idi Amin, and many others.

Fanon claims that European states which achieved national unity in the twentieth century were "in roughly the same economic situation". This was not true in 1990, let alone 1945. His view of "European opulence" as "built on the backs of slaves" and something which "owes its very existence to the soil and subsoil of the underdeveloped world" has often been challenged. His lionisation of the peasantry mirrors Maoist thought, and is married to a very negative view of urbanisation and industrialisation, at odds with Marxism. Genuine prosperity achieved in some former colonised nations (especially in East Asia) is not explainable via Fanon's model. All things European are despised (with the United States presented as "a monster where the flaws, sickness, and inhumanity of Europe have reached frightening proportions"), and all progress is said to require the rejection of European models. Dale and Warby's characterisation of the book as an "angry rant" is apt. One searches in vain to gain anything out of it that might imply the means for a more peaceful and cooperative post-colonial world.

Fanon's view of seemingly endless and irreconcilable conflict between Europe and North America, and the rest of the world was mirrored in an American context in the work of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X [declared in 1963](#) that "the white world" was "a wicked world, ruled by a race of devils", compared "(black) sheep" to "(white) goats" and prophesied "the end of 'White-ism'". He was of course responding to the grievous racism in at least parts of the United States of the time, but prescribed radical separatism as a response. [He also indulged in extensive antisemitism](#), claiming Jewish people "control 90 percent of the businesses in every Negro community", that Jewish people "sap the very lifeblood of the so-called negroes to maintain the state of Israel", that Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement was in order to "control and contain the Negro's struggle", and even said of the Holocaust "now everybody's getting wet-eyed over a handful of Jews", "only 6 million", and that Jews "brought it on themselves". Comparable sentiments have resurfaced through the Nation of Islam's history.

In 1970, African-American lawyer [Derrick A. Bell](#) (1930-2011) published his *Race, Racism, and American Law*, which is a founding text of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which forms some continuities with the ideas of both Fanon and Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Bell had worked on desegregation cases, but [came to question](#) the wisdom of these, at the behest of some opposition to desegregation from black clients. He wrote of civil rights lawyers "serving two masters", once again presenting black and white interests as irreconcilably opposed. Later, [as traced by Mounk](#), Bell would deny the value of seeming victories of civil rights in general and posit that racism was "an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society", a view he maintained fairly consistently up until his death in 2011. For him and other CRT ideologues, race was fundamental to everything, there could be no productive

reconciliation between groups constructed as opposed, and racism became a type of “original sin” for white people. Only subscribers to critical race theory can be enlightened. Primacy is given to accounts of lived experience over any other measures of truth, from which comes the idea of “situated knowledge”; there is no possibility of scholarly or other neutrality. It is an ideology which allows for little individual rather than group agency. The question of where it leaves Jewish people is highly vexed, with [some commentators](#) suggesting they are constructed as “hyper-white” and also that Jewish people should refuse to be defined racially.

Equally relevant to the present day is Herbert Marcuse, who became something of a guru to the sixties student protestors (in contrast to the aloof attitude of other Frankfurt School members). In his 1965 *A Critique of Tolerance*, Marcuse included a section on “Repressive Tolerance”, in which he claimed that “liberating tolerance” means “intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left”. Marcuse is in no doubt of the existence of “objective truth”, but also appears to believe only he and his comrades are in a position to ascertain it. He believes in censoring cases where “the other side” is demonstrably “regressive” and looks for “minorities intolerant, militantly intolerant and disobedient to the rules of behaviour which tolerate destruction and suppression”. It is clear that Marcuse’s ideology is fundamentally totalitarian and anti-democratic, and could only lead to a society more repressive and intolerant than that it seeks to replace. The rhetoric is echoed very clearly in cases such as [an attempt to prevent conservative writer Heather Mac Donald from speaking at Claremont McKenna College in 2017](#), when it was claimed that allowing her to speak was “amplifying her voice and enhancing her credibility.”

Another important Marxist figure in this context is Louis Althusser (1918-1990), strongly associated with “structural Marxism”, a rather deterministic view which marginalises the role of human agency (which Marx himself asserted at the beginning of his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852)*), emphasising how state institutions work to the benefit of capitalist society. In his 1970 essay “[Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses](#)”, he asserts that the “educational apparatus” has become the “dominant Ideological State Apparatus”, replacing the Church in this respect. Althusser only refers to the “School”, not the university (though some French higher education institutions are called “Schools” anyhow), but there is little reason to think that his formulation is not equally applicable to tertiary education, and [a whole range of subsequent thinkers](#) have argued such a thing. Althusser strangled his wife in 1980, and was declared unfit to stand trial due to insanity; the possibility that his earlier work might thus also be tainted is less often entertained.

Alongside Fanon’s prescription of seemingly endless violence, Marcuse’s wish for censorship of dissenting views and Althusser’s reduction of education to ideological indoctrination, a few other thinkers are relevant to the present-day situation. One is Edward Said, and his highly influential 1978 book *Orientalism*, considering Western literary, artistic and other representations of the “Orient” (generally relating to North Africa and South-West Asia), which he claimed were “based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged”. Said, though far from the first to consider this subject, drew extremely broad conclusions, such as that “every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally

ethnocentric”. Apart from the irony of making such blank assertions about a whole continent in the context of a book claiming precisely to critique representations of other peoples, Said’s [polarised formulation, presenting all things Western as the source of the world’s problems](#) (despite having had an elite Western education himself, teaching in Western institutions, and being in his work far more focused on English than Arabic or other Asian literature), has been subject to intense criticism ever since its publication, including from various Arab scholars. Many have observed Said’s cavalier and simplistic readings of heterogeneous writers, an exclusive focus on British and French orientalist work in order to make claims about the whole of Europe, neglecting parallel phenomena from German, Hungary and Russia, not all of them equally tied to imperialism, some shaky understanding of Middle Eastern history and a lack of any empirical data with which to contrast representations. To be fair, some of Said’s later writings modify *Orientalism*, and others have modified his thought in productive ways which recognise its limitations, but this polemic has been the influential book, especially upon postcolonial thought in academia.

The final key thinker is philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler, one of a range of thinkers identified by philosopher Kathleen Stock in her book [Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism](#) as central to the development of gender-identity theory, and perhaps the most significant. In her 1990 book [Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity](#), Butler argues that gender constitutes a series of performative actions which express and constitute identity, rather than relating to biology. Butler has become progressively more militant in this respect, and in [a 2021 Guardian article](#), she went so far as to say that gender-critical movements “are not just reactionary but *fascist* trends, the kind that support increasingly authoritarian governments.”

Many other subsequent writings, including those of [critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality](#), [Robin DiAngelo’s popular book on White Fragility](#), and [Ibram X. Kendi on anti-racism](#), have all been repeatedly dissected in recent times. All can fairly be said to be direct descendants of the body of work detailed above. As mentioned before, various of these earlier figures’ thought did develop in different directions, not always fully acknowledged, but many contemporary social justice activists tend to fixate on a few features rather than a deeper engagement with broad bodies of work and the numerous critical perspectives they have generated. A range of recurrent tropes can be found: a fetishisation of difference and concomitant positing of permanent antagonism between different groups in society (especially ethnic groups), the eschewal of scholarly truth and knowledge, presented as Western conceits, the centring of race and gender identity as primary concerns, and an extremely narrow historical purview, by which the whole world constructed almost exclusively as “West versus the rest”.

In the second part of this article, I will consider how these ideas have fed into the academic industry around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and suggest some ways forward.