

David Brooks, “America is Facing 5 Epic Crises All at Once” -from *The New York Times*, June 25, 2020

There are five gigantic changes happening in America right now. The first is that we are losing the fight against Covid-19. Our behavior doesn't have anything to do with the reality around us. We just got tired so we're giving up.

Second, all Americans, but especially white Americans, are undergoing a rapid education on the burdens African-Americans carry every day. This education is continuing, but already public opinion is shifting with astonishing speed.

Third, we're in the middle of a political realignment. The American public is vehemently rejecting Donald Trump's Republican Party. The most telling sign is that the party has even given up on itself, a personality cult whose cult leader is over.

Fourth, a quasi-religion is seeking control of America's cultural institutions. The acolytes of this quasi-religion, Social Justice, hew to a simplifying ideology:

History is essentially a power struggle between groups, some of which are oppressors and others of which are oppressed. Viewpoints are not explorations of truth; they are weapons that dominant groups use to maintain their place in the power structure. Words can thus be a form of violence that has to be regulated.

Fifth, we could be on the verge of a prolonged economic depression. State and household budgets are in meltdown, some businesses are failing and many others are on the brink, the continuing health emergency will mean economic activity cannot fully resume.

These five changes, each reflecting a huge crisis and hitting all at once, have created a moral, spiritual and emotional disaster. Americans are now [less happy](#) than at any time since they started measuring happiness nearly 50 years ago. Americans now express [less pride](#) in their nation than at any time since Gallup started measuring it 20 years ago.

Americans look around the world and see that other nations are beating Covid-19 and we are failing. Americans look around and see state-sponsored violence — rhetorical and actual — inflicted on their fellow citizens. America doesn't seem very exceptional.

In times like this, you've got to have a theory of change.

The loudest theory of change is coming from the Social Justice movement. This movement emerged from elite universities, and its basic premise is that if you can change the cultural structures you can change society.

Members of this movement pay intense attention to cultural symbols — to language, statues, the names of buildings. They pay enormous attention to repeating certain slogans, such as “defund the police,” which may or may not have anything to do with policy, and to lifting up symbolic gestures, like kneeling before a football game. It's a very apt method for change in an age of social media because it's very performative.

The Social Justice activists focus on the cultural levers of power. Their most talked about action is canceling people. Some person, usually mildly progressive, will say something politically “problematic” and his or her job will

be terminated. In this way new boundaries are established for what has to be said and what cannot be said.

The Social Justice activists sometimes claim that if you don't like their tactics then you are not fighting for racial equity or economic justice or whatever. But those movements all existed long before Social Justice affixed itself to them and tried to change their methods.

The core problem is that the Social Justice theory of change doesn't produce much actual change. Corporations are happy to adopt some woke symbols and hold a few consciousness-raising seminars and go on their merry way. Worse, this method has no theory of politics.

How exactly is all this cultural agitation going to lead to legislation that will decrease income disparities, create better housing policies or tackle the big challenges that I listed above? That part is never spelled out. In fact, the Sturm und Drang makes political work harder. You can't purify your way to a governing majority.

The Social Justice methodology is ultimately not a solution to our problem, it's a symptom of our problem. Over the last half century, we've turned politics from a practical way to solve common problems into a cultural arena to display resentments. Donald Trump is the ultimate performer in this paralyzed arena. If you think the interplay of these five gigantic changes is going to fit into some neat ideological narrative, you're probably wrong. If you think we can deal with a racial disparity, reform militaristic police departments and address an

existential health crisis and a prolonged economic depression by taking the culture war up another notch, I think you're mistaken.

Dealing with these problems is going to take government. It's going to take actual lawmaking, actual budgeting, complex compromises — all the boring, dogged work of government that is more C-SPAN than Instagram.

I know a lot of people aren't excited about him, but I thank God that Joe Biden is going to be nominated by the Democratic Party. He came to public life when it wasn't about performing your zeal, it was about crafting coalitions and legislating. He exudes a spirit that is about empathy and friendship not animosity and canceling. The pragmatic spirit of the New Deal is a more apt guide for the years ahead than the spirit of critical theory symbology.