

We Have Never Been Woke

The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite

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The Great Awakening(s)

Over the past several years, there has been a dramatic shift in discourse and expressed attitudes about prejudice, discrimination, and disrespect. More striking than the intensity and rapidity of the movement was its breadth. Although race was a central axis, discourse and beliefs around immigration status, gender, and sexuality experienced similar and roughly simultaneous transformations.

Documenting these changes, colleagues David Rozado, Jamin Halberstadt, and I analyzed twenty-seven million news articles published in forty-seven media outlets over the past half century. We found that, beginning in the early 2010s, there was a major rise in the use of terms referring to various forms of prejudice and discrimination.¹ Bias and oppression along the lines of race, gender, or sexuality—and even discrimination against religious minorities (Muslims, Jews)—all experienced rapid and simultaneous increases in salience. Similar patterns held for television news broadcasts. Statistical tests suggested that these shifts were not independent of one another but instead seemed to be products of some deeper, underlying change among the people who produce the news.

Academic research followed the same trend. Analyzing thematic patterns since the turn of the century across six of the most expansive scholarship databases, Rozado and I identified a dramatic and simultaneous increase in research studying discrimination along the lines of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability status after 2011.² Google nGrams show equivalent changes in published books: there were huge and simultaneous

spikes in discussions of racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and related terms that began after 2011 and continued through the end of the dataset (2019).³

Artistic outputs moved in a similar direction. As early as 2014, cultural critics began to note that overtly political—and politically and morally uncomplicated—art was beginning to dominate the cultural landscape in symbolic capitalist circles.⁴ In the aftermath of Donald Trump’s election, this trend seems to have been exacerbated.⁵ Diversity, representation, and politics were core themes for museum exhibitions throughout the 2010s.⁶ Art education trended in the same direction: statistical analyses of art pedagogy journals showed a significant spike in focus on “identity” issues after 2010 and running through the rest of the decade.⁷

Diversity, representation, and identity became core priorities of the entertainment industry too. With respect to feature films, for instance, roughly 14 percent of major studio films released in 2012 included an LGBTQ character, and only half of those passed the Vito Russo test. By 2020, nearly a quarter (23 percent) included identifiably LGBTQ characters, and nearly all (90 percent) of those movies passed the test.⁸ Simultaneously, the percentage of films with nonwhite leads quadrupled over the decade to the point where the percentage of films with white leads now roughly mirrors the percentage of whites in the general population. The diversity of supporting roles also increased radically over this same period. By 2020, nearly 30 percent of films had primarily nonwhite casts. Over this same period, the percentage of movies with female leads likewise doubled and is now approaching parity with the percentage of films with male leads.⁹ The number of films passing the Bechdel test radically increased after 2010 as well. Of the thirty highest-grossing films of 2006, only 27 percent passed the test. In the period between 2013 and 2019, 76 percent passed.¹⁰

Representation in television and streaming shows followed a similar trajectory. The share of regular and recurring LGBTQ actors more than doubled from 2012 to 2020—including a rapidly growing presence in children and family programming. LGBTQ representation also grew more diverse. By 2020, a majority of LGBTQ characters on the small screen were nonwhite.¹¹ Overall, the share of scripted television shows with nonwhite leads more than doubled from 2012 to 2020, and supporting casts grew radically more diverse as well.¹²

However, entertainment outputs didn’t simply grow more diverse, they also grew more overtly political.¹³ And it wasn’t just the themes that shifted but also the mode of discussion. In the words of cultural critic Molly Fischer,

entertainment outputs increasingly adopted “a tone along the lines of an after-school special,” despite a dearth of viewers who would be “simultaneously surprised and receptive to such lessons.”¹⁴ Those in the entertainment industry who failed to toe the preferred institutional line on cultural and political issues increasingly faced professional sanctions. Content out of step with the preferred narratives grew increasingly difficult to produce.¹⁵

The advertisements that accompany (and typically subsidize the production of) these cultural outputs simultaneously grew more diverse along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality—and more explicitly political in their themes and content—from 2012 through 2021. The changes were particularly pronounced in advertisements for symbolic economy-aligned industries such as education, technology, telecommunications, nonprofits, and entertainment (TV, music, film), and in ads targeting strong Democrat-voting regions (such as symbolic economy hubs).¹⁶

Collectively, these changes in symbolic economy outputs happened in tandem with radical attitudinal shifts among the primary producers and consumers of these outputs: highly educated white liberals. After 2011, there were dramatic changes in how highly educated white liberals answered questions related to race and ethnicity.¹⁷ These shifts were not matched among nonliberal or non-Democrat whites, nor among nonwhites of any political or ideological persuasion. By 2020, highly educated white liberals tended to provide more “woke” responses to racial questions than the average Black or Hispanic person; they tended to perceive much more racism against minorities than most minorities, themselves, reported experiencing; they expressed greater support for diversity than most Blacks or Hispanics.¹⁸ White Democrats also became significantly more likely to perceive others in their social circles as “racist,” even as nonwhite copartisans moved in the opposite direction (and white non-Democrats were flat).¹⁹ On “feeling thermometer” questions, white liberals shifted so much that they now tend to view all other racial and ethnic groups more favorably than their own. There is no other combination of ideology and race that produces remotely similar results.²⁰

Critically, race is not the only axis on which these dramatic trends were apparent. They are visible in questions related to gender and sexuality as well. For instance, from 2010 to 2020 Democrats became 16 percentage points more likely to insist that abortion should be legal under all circumstances. There was more movement in this ten-year span than in the entire preceding time series, going back to 1975.²¹ Over this same period, white liberals became much more likely to self-identify as “feminist,” and self-identified “feminists” grew much more likely to identify as strong Democrats. Moreover, although

white liberals' views on "identity" issues shifted far more than their positions on economic matters, dramatic shifts were apparent in expressed attitudes on poverty as well.²² As an example, between 2011 and 2017, Republicans grew 1 percentage point less likely to say that the government should do more to help the needy even if it exacerbates the national debt. Democrats shifted 17 percentage points in the opposite direction.²³ On dataset after dataset, question after question, this same pattern emerges: a rapidly growing polarization between highly educated white liberals and virtually everyone else in society from 2011 through 2021.

As symbolic capitalists' attitudes about the social world changed, their emotional states moved in tandem. There was a rapid and asymmetrical increase in Democrats experiencing anxiety, depression, and other forms of negative affect after 2011—including and especially among those who are highly educated, white and identify as liberal—perhaps driven by increased awareness, concern, and discussion about social injustices (and heightened worry about actual or perceived complicity in said injustices or impotence to meaningfully address them).²⁴

The political and ideological alignments of highly educated white Americans shifted significantly over this same period too. Since 2010, rapidly growing shares of highly educated whites have aligned themselves with the Democratic Party. And within the Democratic Party, there has been a dramatic rise in the share of highly educated and white voters who identify as "liberal." It is particularly highly educated *white* voters within the Democratic Party who have undergone this ideological shift. Black and Hispanic Democrats with college degrees, for instance, remain far less likely to self-identify as "liberal" than white peers and saw far less movement over the span of time in question.²⁵ There was also systematic variation along gender lines: the shifts were far more radical and sustained among women than men.²⁶ Across the board, however, highly educated whites underwent dramatic changes in their political and ideological identification. As an indication of how far they've shifted: in recent polling, college-educated white voters have shown a stronger preference for the Democratic Party than racial or ethnic minority voters. This is unprecedented in the record of polling going back to the mid-1960s.²⁷

In addition to shifting how they talk and think about social justice issues, and adjusting their political and ideological alignments, highly educated white liberals also became much more militant in advocating for their preferred social agenda. Highly educated white Democrats, for instance, began to contact elected officials and donate to political campaigns and causes at much

higher levels after 2010, and in a way that was not mirrored by nonwhite copartisans.²⁸ In response, the preferred political party of these constituents shifted dramatically as well. Work by economist Sahil Chinoy shows that there was an aggressive (and asymmetrical) leftward shift in the Democratic Party platform beginning in 2012 and persisting through subsequent cycles.²⁹

Here it's worth emphasizing that, although polls and surveys tend to break up the electorate in terms of characteristics like race, income, education, or political and ideological identification instead of identifying them by the work they do, it's probably more precise to think of the shifts as being driven by symbolic capitalists in particular, rather than whites, liberals, or highly educated voters more generically. Much-discussed phenomena like the growing urban-rural divide, the diploma divide, and the gender divide are all proxies for a more fundamental schism between symbolic capitalists (and the communities they congregate in) versus those who are more socioeconomically or culturally distant from the symbolic economy—a schism that has grown significantly wider in recent years.

Symbolic capitalists lie squarely at the intersection of the populations whose ideological and political perspectives have changed most since 2011 (highly educated white liberals). As will be detailed at length in subsequent chapters, symbolic capitalists are overwhelmingly white. This is not just a function of baseline U.S. population characteristics: relative to other American workers, symbolic capitalists are disproportionately likely to be white. They nearly unanimously possess at least a BA. Politically and ideologically, they are overwhelmingly Democratic and liberal. All said, the lion's share of symbolic capitalists are highly educated white liberals, and Americans who happen to be highly educated white liberals are quite likely to be symbolic capitalists. The particular slice of Americans who primarily comprise the symbolic professions underwent idiosyncratic and dramatic political and ideological transformations after 2011, and this significantly and uniquely transformed the outputs and the operations of the symbolic professions over this same time period (relative to other occupations).

In a 2019 essay, *Vox* analyst Matthew Yglesias popularized the term “the Great Awakening” as a shorthand to refer to the rapid shifts in the expressed views of white liberals on identity issues after 2011.³⁰ This is the term I will use here to collectively refer not just to the shifts in expressed attitudes among symbolic capitalists but also to the simultaneous and likewise dramatic changes in protest activity, ideological and political alignments, and symbolic economy outputs.³¹ These trends are often analyzed and discussed in isolation. However, it's likely more revelatory to analyze them as different facets

of a single overarching social phenomenon that started in late 2010 and began to decline around 2021.

Point of Origin

One of the most striking aspects of the rapid shift in discourse and norms around “identity” issues is their timing: they don’t seem to be a response to anything in particular that happened “in the world” with respect to race, gender, or sexuality at time of onset.

For instance, given that the shifts on race became increasingly pronounced through 2012, one might assume they were straightforwardly a response to the February 26 murder of Trayvon Martin. However, it is harder to explain why we see similar changes in discussion and public attitudes with respect to sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism—all at roughly the same time as we observe the spikes related to race.

The shifts with respect to sexism and misogyny were clearly not a response to #MeToo. They preceded the emergence of #MeToo by a few years and may help explain why the movement was able to achieve the impact it did—why it was able to find such a receptive audience when previous efforts to elevate the issues of sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination were less successful gaining traction.

In a similar fashion, changes that were *already underway* leading into 2012 may explain why the murder of Martin—and the subsequent slayings of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice—resonated so strongly when previous incidents of state violence against African Americans (including other incidents caught on film) did not. That is, rather than the shift in racial attitudes being a response to, for instance, Black Lives Matter (BLM), instead, *antecedent shifts* among symbolic capitalists may help explain why BLM was able to attain such prominence in 2013, and to rise to such heights in the years that followed.

In light of this timeline, it should go without saying that the ongoing Great Awakening was *not* a response to Trump. Instead, Trump seems to have emerged on the political scene in the context of already-heightened social tension around identity issues, and may have been ushered out of office by the same. Research by my colleagues and I found that the shifts in media discourse and public attitudes continued unabated six months after Joe Biden was sworn into office—underscoring yet again that the shifts were not “about” Trump.³²

Instead, if we are trying to pinpoint the beginning of the Great Awakening, it seems most accurate to say it began in September 2011, with the emergence

of the Occupy Wall Street movement. This claim may be shocking to some readers. In the popular discourse, the Occupy movement is often discussed as being in tension with, or even antithetical to, identitarian approaches to social justice. Some have gone so far as to claim that the Great Awakening was cooked up by superelites and corporations in order to divert attention away from the broad-based and class-focused movement that Occupy Wall Street allegedly represented.³³ In reality, however, Occupy and the identitarian movements that succeeded it are more contiguous than contradictory.

E Pluribus Unum

From the outset, a key mission of symbolic capitalists has been to rein in capitalism run amok (thereby rendering the prevailing order more beneficent, efficient, and stable). Although mainstream symbolic capitalists have consistently aligned themselves with the “Left,” in practice their efforts have been largely oriented toward saving capitalism from the capitalists rather than overthrowing the system entirely. In pursuit of this objective, millionaires and billionaires have been a consistent foil for symbolic economy professionals. Superelites whose fortunes are tied to material extraction and production are subject to particular scorn. Across the board, however, symbolic capitalists have consistently condemned superelites as selfish, short-sighted, and insufficiently deferent to people like ourselves.

As sociologist Max Weber emphasized, elites who hold social status in society on the basis of attributes like their knowledge, skills, or institutional rank tend to be resentful and disdainful toward those who enjoy a high social position primarily on the basis of their business success and accumulated wealth. It has always been our strong conviction that society would be vastly improved if people listened to and admired the millionaires and billionaires *less* and valued the perspectives of intellectuals *more*. These sentiments are heightened, Weber argued, when symbolic capitalists find their own status or socioeconomic position threatened or particularly precarious.³⁴ During these periods, we become much more likely to rail aggressively against capitalism and the superrich—often cloaking our struggles for wealth, status, and power as social justice advocacy—although our passion for revolution tends to rapidly fade once our own objectives are met:

In truth—let’s be honest with ourselves here—this belief in the cause, as subjectively sincere as it may be, is almost always a “moral legitimization” for the desire for power, revenge, booty, and benefits: the materialist

interpretation of history too is no hansom cab to be hailed at will, and it doesn't stop for the agents of revolution! But then, after the emotional revolution, comes the return to traditional everyday life; the hero of the believers, and even the belief itself, disappears or becomes even more effective as a conventional slogan in the political philistine's or functionary's arsenal.³⁵

Taking symbolic capitalists' rhetoric at face value during these periods of heightened unrest, it would be easy to mistake us as genuinely populist or egalitarian. However, the methods and constitution of the movements we take part in typically suggest a different story: they tend to be campaigns by and for one faction of elites against another. Occupy Wall Street was no exception.

In reality, Occupy was not class oriented. It was a movement that, if anything, helped *obscure* important class differences and the actual causes of social stratification. As David Autor aptly put it, "The singular focus of the public debate on the 'top 1 percent' of households overlooks the component of earnings inequality that is arguably most consequential for the 'other 99 percent' of citizens: the dramatic growth in the wage premium associated with higher education and cognitive ability."³⁶ That is, precisely what Occupy helped us *avoid* talking about is how symbolic economy institutions and their employment practices are some of the main drivers of contemporary inequality, and how people like *us* are the primary "winners" in this arrangement. Conveniently for symbolic capitalists, rather than focusing on concrete policies to rectify inequalities, the Occupy movement's approach to social change was intensely academic and, in the name of "inclusivity," was outright hostile to politics *per se*.³⁷ Rather than advocating for concrete policies that could tangibly assist the marginalized and disadvantaged in society, or developing some actionable platform that could help promote broad-based prosperity, the movement was primarily focused on villainizing those above symbolic capitalists on the socioeconomic ladder.

Contrary to depictions of Occupy as a broad-based movement, symbolic capitalists were its primary base. For instance, despite the diversity of the city, participants of Occupy demonstrations in New York were overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white. They were nearly uniformly liberal in their political orientations. They were also relatively affluent: roughly three-quarters (72 percent) of participants came from households above the 2011 New York City median. A plurality came from households that brought in over \$100,000 per year. Seventy-six percent of participants had a BA degree

or higher, and a majority of the rest were currently enrolled in college. Those who had jobs hailed overwhelmingly from the symbolic professions. Only about a quarter of employed participants had blue-collar, retail, or service jobs.³⁸ Across the rest of the country, the picture was basically the same. Occupy protests were concentrated largely in symbolic economy hubs, and there were low rates of participation across the board for those who were *not* college educated, white, and liberal.³⁹

The composition of Occupy was broadly continuous with the “identitarian” movements that followed. For instance, analyzing the post-2016 #Resistance protest movements such as the March for Science, the Women’s March, and the March for Racial Justice, sociologist Dana Fisher likewise found that the demonstrators were majority white, disproportionately female, extremely well educated (with more than 70 percent possessing a bachelor’s degree, and many others pursuing a college degree), and overwhelmingly left-leaning. Whether we analyze by sheer number of events or by participants, or if we look at attendees per capita, #Resistance protest events were overwhelmingly concentrated in knowledge economy hubs, just like Occupy protests were. The average adult age of the demonstrators was thirty-eight to forty-nine years old. Far from being a project of passionate young people, the #Resistance movement comprised primarily midcareer professionals associated with the symbolic economy.⁴⁰ The Occupy crowd, but a half decade later.

Consequently, instead of thinking about Occupy Wall Street and post-2011 identitarian shifts as competitors, it’s probably more accurate to view them as different phases in the same Awakening. As the initial (Occupy) movement fizzled out, roughly the same constituencies began mobilizing alternative modes of social justice discourse, largely toward the same ends. Many who spent 2011 shouting “We are the 99 percent” spent 2013 proudly declaring that “Black Lives Matter,” identified as part of the #Resistance under Trump, began telling #MeToo stories in 2017, and became “trust the science” stans from 2018 through the COVID-19 pandemic. It’s all been part of the same wave of activism among mainstream symbolic capitalists.

Alternative Facts

There have been many alternative theories to explain the rapid cultural shifts and heightened social unrest that began after 2010. One popular narrative attributes the tumult to new digital technologies allowing ordinary people to circumvent elite gatekeepers, coordinate, and share information and ideas in hitherto unprecedented ways.⁴¹ A popular variation on this argument

interprets the Great Awakening as a product of women, minorities, LGBTQ Americans, and young people having a greater ability to “talk back” to established authorities as a result of the aforementioned technological shifts alongside changing demographics in the United States. Resistance to “wokeness” is described as backlash against historically marginalized and disadvantaged populations making gains in society. These narratives are comforting to symbolic capitalists. However, they have glaring problems.

Again, the most dramatic shifts in norms, discourse, and political activity occurred among highly educated and relatively affluent white liberals. They were not reflected among poor or working-class people or nonwhites of any political persuasion to anywhere near the same degree. Geographically, wealthy symbolic economy hubs were the main sites of mobilization. Looking at occupations, there have been massive changes to journalistic outputs and the operations of many newsrooms since 2011. There were major shifts in the themes of academic research and teaching. Nonprofit and advocacy organizations experienced constant and explosive conflict over what their priorities should be and how best to advance them.⁴² Advertisers, PR firms, and consultants made significant adjustments to their strategies and communications. Art and entertainment outputs underwent massive transformations. New rules, procedures, trainings, and positions proliferated rapidly in HR departments. However, there were no comparable social justice-oriented shifts in how waitresses serve food, how truck drivers deliver freight, how beauticians cut nails, how construction workers build houses, how grocery store clerks ring up food, how plumbers unclog toilets, and so on (excepting some additional rules and training imposed by the aforementioned corporate HR administrators, often to the chagrin of “normie” workers). The Awakening was primarily constrained to the symbolic professions. And within those professions, the shifts were led by the most prestigious institutions (later emulated by others),⁴³ and conflicts were consistently more pronounced in elite spaces than in less prestigious firms and institutions. These realities are difficult to square with depictions of the Great Awakening as a “bottom-up” movement.

Narratives attributing the Great Awakening to young people are just as problematic. For example, there was a significant uptick in demonstrations at college campuses nationwide that began in 2011 and continued to build over subsequent years.⁴⁴ We now know that the unrest unfolding on campuses was not unique to institutions of higher learning. Most other spheres of the symbolic economy were undergoing contemporaneous transformations. The changes were *especially visible* at colleges and universities early on because

these are institutions filled with huge numbers of symbolic capitalists and aspirants thereto. That is, they contain exceptionally large concentrations of the elites who were undergoing the shifts. At the time, however, many instead attempted to explain the tumult affecting colleges and universities in terms of the unique characteristics of “kids these days.” As the discourse continued, there came to be a particular focus on Gen Z, who, relative to previous cohorts, were held to be especially sensitive to offense, intolerant of resistance or dissent, and politically progressive and engaged, but also overly impatient and idealistic.

However, Gen Z was clearly *not* responsible for the identitarian shifts in mainstream media reporting, published books, academic journal articles, or arts and entertainment programming that kicked off as Occupy was winding down. At the time these shifts began, the *oldest* members of Gen Z were just sixteen years old—they were not producing these cultural outputs, let alone serving as gatekeepers of what gets published or not. These teens and preteens were not the demographic most advertisers, media companies, and publishing houses were trying to reach, nor were they the main constituents that Democratic Party decision makers were trying to appease as they shifted their messaging and priorities (they weren’t even old enough to vote, let alone having the discretionary income and autonomy to donate and volunteer for campaigns). Instead, it was millennials and younger members of Gen X who led the Great Awakening—people who were in their twenties through forties at its outset. Consequently, although it may be empirically true that contemporary young people have unique experiences, characteristics, and preferences that set them apart from previous generational cohorts in nontrivial ways, these differences are not particularly relevant for understanding most of the post-2011 social, cultural, and institutional transformations.

Technological changes can’t explain the Great Awakening either. Facebook became available to the general public in 2006. Google acquired YouTube in that same year. Twitter began taking off in 2007, contemporaneous with the release of the first iPhone. All said, social networking sites and smartphones existed for years before the Awakening began—and the erstwhile rebels who made effective use of these technologies were often, themselves, highly educated and relatively affluent. They were disaffected elites or elite aspirants rather than “normies.” The cofounders of BLM, for instance, all had BA degrees from top-notch universities. Two out of three had advanced degrees on top of their BAs. One could go on and on.

Rather than empowering ordinary people to circumvent elite gatekeepers, it may be that the primary way digital technologies and platforms

contributed to social unrest was by making it easier for counterelites to spread their messaging and attain a following. Yet, as Evgeny Morozov powerfully illustrated, the specific technologies and platforms broadly credited with sparking revolutions are also widely used by established authorities to surveil dissidents, suppress resistance, and otherwise preserve the status quo.⁴⁵ Put another way, one could just as easily point to the technologies in question to explain why status quos persist instead of why they change.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the technological account, however, is that it implies (1) the post-2011 Great Awakening would not have happened in the absence of the technologies in question and (2) events like this did not happen, and indeed could not have, before these technologies existed (because the shifts are, themselves, products of the new technologies and platforms). Both these implicit premises are demonstrably false.

Not the First, Not the Last

While there is a tendency in some circles to assert that we live in “unprecedented” times, in fact, there have been multiple other Awakenings in the twentieth century that played out quite similarly to the current period of rapid normative and discursive change. We can isolate these periods using many of the same types of metrics we used to substantiate the current one.

For instance, highly educated white voters moved aggressively toward the Democratic Party after 2011. Political scientists Matthew Grossman and David Hopkins showed that there were similar shifts in the political identification of highly educated whites in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, and in the mid-1960s through the late 1970s.⁴⁶ Looking at trends in white racial liberalism from 1954 to 2020, political scientist Zach Goldberg identified three periods of significant attitudinal shifts among white liberals: one that crested in the mid-1960s, one in the early 1990s, and another that had yet to crest as of 2020.⁴⁷ Looking at Google nGrams, political scientist Eric Kaufmann found that there were *three* major spikes in literary discussion around racism, sexism, and homophobia: one beginning in the mid-1960s, one in the late 1980s, and another in the early 2010s.⁴⁸ Quantitative analysis of academic publications from 1980 to 2018 reveals a dramatic uptick in discussions of “trauma” and other terms related to victimhood starting in the early 1990s, with another spike after 2010.⁴⁹

This is all resonant with what my colleagues and I discovered in analyzing media articles: although our dataset did not go back to the 1960s, we found evidence of a dramatic shift in discourse and public attitudes

related to a broad range of “identity” issues that peaked in the early 1990s⁵⁰ (in addition to the spike that began after 2011). Sociologist Leslie McCall likewise identified a dramatic spike in media coverage of socioeconomic inequality in the early to mid-1990s.⁵¹ Political scientists Dennis Chong, Jack Citrin, and Morris Levy subsequently illustrated that there was a major spike in media conversation around free speech and equality in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s followed by another spike beginning after 2008 and proceeding through 2021.⁵² Moreover, they highlight, major national longitudinal surveys show contemporaneous and rapid declines in tolerance for speech perceived to demean or offend members of historically marginalized and disenfranchised groups during these periods—at least for a certain subset of the population. Explaining their findings in the *New York Times*, Chong noted that “the most pronounced declines [in tolerance for offensive speech] over time have occurred among white, college educated liberals.”⁵³ Writing in 1994, sociologist Steven Brint observed that “episodic surges of reformist activity” seem to “affect middle class professionals” more than anyone else in society.⁵⁴

It is important to underline just how episodic these surges are. As philosopher Oliver Traldi has pointed out, the contemporary debates about identity politics, free speech, and “political correctness” on college campuses played out nearly verbatim in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁵⁵ In a book written at the tail end of the last Awakening, Barbara Ehrenreich describes how responses to student activists in the late 1980s and early 1990s were virtually identical to how “radical” students were portrayed in the 1960s. One excerpt is worth quoting at length, as it underscores how little has changed from the time of the boomers—not just relative to the 1990s but even today (emphases mine):

Psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim likened the student rebels to Nazis. Then—liberal professor John Sibling called them “the new Fascisti.” Nathan Glazer *compared them not only to Hitler but to Lenin and Stalin*. Daniel Bell described the students at Columbia as “*impelled not to innovation but to destruction*.” Irving Kristol, not yet a conservative, called them “rebels without a cause—and *without hope of accomplishing anything* other than mischief and ruin.” Nor did the howls of outrage come only from the liberal center of the political spectrum. . . . Socialist Irving Howe dismissed the student movement as “romantic primitivism,” motivated by a “*quasi-religious impulse*.” . . . Edward Shils described the students as “a uniquely indulged generation.” . . . If they were “acting out” it was only

because they had been acted upon—in the wrong way—by their *indulgent parents*.⁵⁶

Sound familiar? Again, this is Ehrenreich writing in 1990 about how student protesters *in the 1960s* were received. She found startling continuity between the culture war narratives and battle lines of the 1960s and the 1990s. It was even more startling to reread this text in the 2020s and observe how little has changed in our cultural scripts over the last sixty years.

All said, few elements of the current Awakening are actually unique to the present. Consider the phenomenon of “cancellation” within left-aligned spaces. Although often discussed in connection with online platforms and smartphones, it’s a practice that goes back decades. In the 1960s, for instance, it was called “trashing,” but the dynamics were the same, as illustrated powerfully in a 1976 article in *Ms.* magazine by Jo Freeman:

Trashing has reached epidemic proportions. . . . What is “trashing,” this colloquial term that expresses so much, yet explains so little? . . . It is not done to expose disagreements or resolve differences. It is done to disparage and destroy. The means vary. . . . Whatever methods are used, trashing involves a violation of one’s integrity, a declaration of one’s worthlessness, and an impugning of one’s motives. In effect, what is attacked is not one’s actions, or one’s ideas, but one’s self. This attack is accomplished by making you feel that your very existence is inimical to the Movement and that nothing can change this short of ceasing to exist. These feelings are reinforced when you are isolated from your friends as they become convinced that their association with you is similarly inimical to the Movement and to themselves. Any support of you will taint them. Eventually all your colleagues join in a chorus of condemnation which cannot be silenced, and you are reduced to a mere parody of your previous self.⁵⁷

Contemporary tensions around “grievance studies,” “words as violence,” “victimhood culture,” and affirmative action are likewise mostly reruns of debates from the late 1980s and early 1990s—themselves largely rehashes of debates from the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁵⁸ “Asymmetrical multiculturalism” (the tendency of white intellectuals to hold their coethnics in contempt while celebrating romanticized views of minorities) is not a product of the post-2010 period either. Instead, as political scientist Eric Kaufmann has shown, this impulse towards “white bashing” first became prominent in the 1920s.⁵⁹

In fact, many elements of the contemporary Awakening date back roughly a century. Looking at mentions of “antiracism” in Google Books, we can see

four major spikes: one in the early 1930s, one in the late 1960s, one in the late 1980s, and one in the early 2010s. Similarly, with respect to feminism, many have described the current moment as part of the “fourth wave.”⁶⁰ The third wave was in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The second wave was during the 1960s through the early 1970s. And the *first* wave peaked toward the 1920s and crested through the early 1930s. In many respects, this initial Great Awakening was far more intense than any that followed. It also happens to be the most neglected in contemporary discussions about these periods of rapid sociocultural change, even though it shares almost all the same characteristics of later uprisings.

For instance, writing in 1929, toward the tail end of the first Great Awakening, George Orwell highlighted how the predominant social justice movement of the time, while ostensibly egalitarian, was primarily a product of professionals (the “middle class” in the parlance of the times). Social justice discourse, he argued, was often used by elites as a means of self-enhancement. Their approach to talking and thinking about these issues was alienating to most nonelites, to the detriment of the genuinely marginalized and disadvantaged in society. Orwell’s description of the tone and character of this period of heightened “social justice” activism should be immediately familiar to the contemporary reader (emphases mine except where indicated):

The first thing that must strike any observer is that Socialism in its developed form is a theory confined entirely to the middle class. The typical Socialist is not, as tremulous old ladies imagine, a ferocious-looking working man with greasy overalls and a raucous voice. He is either a youthful snob-Bolshevik who in five years’ time will have been converted to Roman Catholicism; or, still *more typically*, *a prim little man with a white-collar job*, usually a secret teetotaler, and often with vegetarian leanings, with a history of Nonconformity behind him, and, above all, with a social position that he has no intention of forfeiting. . . . Most middle-class Socialists, *while theoretically pining for a classless society, cling like glue to their miserable fragments of social prestige*. . . . Sometimes I look at a Socialist—the intellectual, tract-writing type of Socialist, with his pullover, his fuzzy hair, and his Marxian quotation—and wonder what the devil his motive really *is* (emphasis in original). It is often difficult to believe that it is love of anybody, especially of the working class, from whom he is of all people the furthest removed. . . . When I listen to these people talking, and still more when I read their books, I get the impression that, to them, the whole Socialist movement is no more than a kind of *exciting*

heresy-hunt—a leaping to and fro of frenzied witch-doctors to the beat of tom-toms and the tune of “Fee, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of a right-wing deviationist.”⁶¹

It should be emphasized, however, that despite the many similarities between each of these movements, each Awakening has been importantly different from those that preceded and followed in various ways. For instance, the current Awakening is occurring in an age with the internet, smartphones, and social media, all of which do change symbolic exchange in profound ways (even if they aren’t the *cause* of the latest Awakening). After the 1960s, anti-war protests were decoupled from subsequent uprisings for reasons that will be explored. LGBTQ rights, while part of the agenda during all periods of Awakening, have grown increasingly pronounced over time. The position of symbolic capitalists in society has evolved with each Awakening too, and as a result, turmoil within the symbolic professions has differential impacts on the rest of society across different historical periods. But for all of these significant differences across cycles—and they are significant—there are also patterns that repeat. By comparing cases and looking at elements that persist across cycles, we can gain insight into why and under what circumstances these movements begin, how and why they fizzle out, what (if any) changes they tend to leave in their wake, and whether (and how) one Awakening informs the next.

Colleges and universities play a central (and ever-growing) role in the symbolic economy. They also contain especially large concentrations of the people who tend to undergo dramatic normative and discursive shifts during Great Awakenings. For these reasons, institutions of higher learning provide nice sites for comparing one episode with another. Moreover, because “kids these days” narratives have been perennially popular⁶²—while scholars and journalists are much less consistent about turning the analytical lens toward professionals like themselves—there is a particularly robust media and scholarly record of student protest activity that can help shed light on the timing of these Awakenings and their correlates. As a function of these realities, the walkthrough that follows will be heavily focused on student activism. However, it deserves to be emphasized that students were *not* the primary drivers of these movements.

To be sure, young people broadly embraced social justice movements when they were already underway, serving alternately as foot soldiers and scapegoats for older elites. However, they are rarely the instigators or leaders of these revolts. Consider the quintessential period of student activism, the

1960s. As psychologist Jean Twenge illustrated, the activism and counter-culture movements of that period were *not* driven primarily by baby boomers. Instead, they were led by people from the Silent Generation who were in their mid-twenties through thirties at the time the Awakening took hold.⁶³ Similar patterns hold across all Awakenings, from Orwell's time through the present. Hence, although we will spend a lot of time discussing student protest movements in the pages that follow, readers should bear in mind that the patterns observed among college students are symptomatic of trends among symbolic capitalists writ large. After briefly walking through these episodes, we'll zoom back out to reinforce this point.

The First Awakening

As the symbolic professions were being consolidated, and their position elevated, educational and certification requirements were increasingly used as barriers to lock out minorities, immigrants, and the poor. Meanwhile, upper-middle-class whites began enrolling in colleges and universities at significantly higher rates. For instance, between 1920 and 1930, the share of Americans with a BA doubled (from 2.3 percent to 4.9 percent); the share possessing an MA tripled (from 0.24 percent to 0.78 percent); the percentage of Americans possessing a PhD quadrupled (from 0.03 percent to 0.12 percent). Moreover, the share of young adults enrolled in higher education institutions in 1930 was nearly 50 percent higher than it was at the outset of the previous decade (rising from 8.9 percent to 12.4 percent of Americans aged nineteen to twenty-one).⁶⁴ With the economy booming from 1922 through 1929, graduating cohorts of students flourished and successfully secured the cushy positions that had been set aside for people like them in the symbolic professions. Jobs grew at a rate that easily kept up with the increased production of degree holders.

Then, the Great Depression hit. Suddenly, many who had taken for granted a position among the elite, who had felt more or less entitled to a secure, respected, and well-paying professional job, found themselves facing deeply uncertain futures—especially because layered on top of the economic insecurity were profound geopolitical concerns.

In 1917, the United States issued a draft for all men twenty-one through thirty—and it successfully defended the right to forced conscription in the Supreme Court a year later. That draft campaign was short lived because an armistice was reached between the Allies and Germany in November 1918, bringing an end to World War I. However, now that the government had

secured conscription authority, in the event of a subsequent war, it seemed likely that a draft order would be issued from the beginning rather than at the end of fighting (and indeed, it ultimately was—conscription for World War II began in 1940, before the United States had even officially entered the conflict). At the outset of the Great Depression, war seemed to be breaking out in Europe again, and it seemed increasingly likely that America could be pulled into the fray. Consequently, rather than enjoying the secure and comfortable lives they had imagined for themselves, aspiring elites were facing the prospects of downward social mobility (as a result of the Depression) and possible deployment into a war.⁶⁵

The anxiety, frustration, and looming socioeconomic humiliation of elite aspirants quickly curdled into rage against existing elites and the society that failed them. As one college magazine editorial bluntly put it, “Educated for jobs that do not materialize, students will grow resentful towards the existing order and will use the learning they have acquired to overthrow it.”⁶⁶ At campuses across the country, students increasingly began attaching themselves to various protest movements: some supported the New Negro movement in campaigning for civil rights; other students aligned themselves with feminists who were likewise seeking greater professional opportunities and more social influence; the first gay rights advocacy organizations were also formed at this time;⁶⁷ still others took part in Socialist and Communist organizing; and antiwar protests were especially popular.

Of course, there was a certain irony to the radical rhetoric that students increasingly began to espouse given that most were attending university in the first place for the staunchly *inegalitarian* purpose of exploiting the barriers that had been set up to exclude non-white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) (and women) from the symbolic professions in order to secure those jobs for themselves. And again, their primary grievance—the explicit impetus for their rebellion—was that the elite futures they felt entitled to were failing to materialize. The core demands of the student protesters were, likewise, largely self-oriented. They wanted more aid from the universities so they could more comfortably pursue their studies. They wanted job guarantees upon graduating, or greater job placement assistance. They wanted greater freedom on campus to do and say what they pleased. They wanted to avoid being drafted into war. These are all quite reasonable things to desire—but they are not exactly altruistic.

In any case, colleges and universities attempted to curb student unrest through censorship, the imposition of new rules, and disciplinary actions against perceived agitators. These efforts generally backfired, reinforcing the

sense in many students' minds that the ruling class was corrupt, out of touch, unable to rise to the moment, and in need of replacement (by people like themselves). Student disillusionment had grown so pronounced that, at the time of the 1932 election, large numbers of students supported the Socialist candidate, Norman Thomas, over progressive Franklin D. Roosevelt. Among growing numbers of college students, Roosevelt was derisively viewed as a liberal establishment candidate aiming to *preserve* the system rather than overturn it. They didn't see a big difference in choosing the Democrat or the Republican: either way, the status quo would persist. Because the left-aligned vote was so split between the Socialist and Democratic candidates, FDR lost decisively among the college crowd to sitting Republican president Herbert Hoover. On many campuses, FDR came in below Thomas as well.⁶⁸

By the time FDR ran for reelection in 1936, however, the situation had completely changed. College students and younger college graduates had become one of Roosevelt's strongest constituencies—and they remained so throughout his political career. The irony, of course, is that the students' description of FDR in 1932 was apt. He *was* an establishment candidate. He may have been the *ultimate* establishment politician insofar as his policies and leadership saved liberal capitalism and defanged the appeal of socialism in America (he preserved the establishment better than some of his more moderate opponents likely would have).⁶⁹ The political coalition he built set the paradigm for the next half century of Democratic Party politics. That is, he literally *became* the establishment in a deep sense. And all of that was just fine with the students in the end. Contrary to their radical rhetoric, they wanted relatively high-status jobs and socioeconomically comfortable lives far more than they wanted to *actually* overthrow the existing order. And the Roosevelt administration provided what they wanted.

By the time FDR stood for reelection for the first time, the New Deal was well underway. Major expansions of the government bureaucracy provided elite workers with stable, respected, and well-paying positions. The administration made significant investments in science and technology. Social workers and social scientists were deployed to assist with the design and administration of government aid programs.⁷⁰ The perceived oversupply of engineers found work planning and guiding the massive infrastructure projects funded by the federal government. And as the economy began turning around, professional jobs in the private and nonprofit sectors began reappearing as well.

By the time the 1960s rolled around, the formerly discontent students were well established in the symbolic professions. They had started and raised

families in the post–World War II era of relative peace and prosperity. Civil rights and feminism did not consume their efforts or attention much. Socialism and communism no longer held much purchase with them. The “radicals” of the 1930s became the establishment that protesters would later rebel against in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, some of the most prominent student protesters of the 1930s evolved into some of the most vocal critics of students in the 1960s.⁷¹

The Second Awakening

In many respects, universities were much changed in the 1960s as compared with the time of the first Great Awakening. The post–World War II GI Bill covered tuition and provided a generous stipend to returning veterans, many of whose jobs had been filled while they were overseas. Millions took advantage of the opportunity and, because the government was picking up the tab for tuition, they aggressively targeted the most prestigious private schools.⁷² The targeted universities, however, were keen to maintain their elite status and to avoid being inundated with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who were often ill prepared for academic study, and whose values and culture were out of sync with their “traditional” constituencies. Elite colleges increasingly relied on the SAT to screen candidates, restricting admission to students with the best scores (whom they assumed would be primarily well-off WASPs and a small number of exceptional people from other backgrounds whose presence would genuinely enrich the school).⁷³ Before long, standardized testing became a near-universal aspect of college admissions. An institutional hierarchy developed based on how “selective” universities were with respect to their admission policies.

Less selective universities eagerly embraced GI Bill recipients and were able to radically expand their faculties and facilities.⁷⁴ As World War II vets cycled out of these institutions, they gradually began admitting more women to maintain enrollments. “Coeducation” became the dominant model over the course of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷⁵ Simultaneously, in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* cases, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the “affirmative action” executive orders,⁷⁶ colleges began admitting significantly more nonwhite students.

At the time, tuition was inexpensive or free at most institutions of higher learning. The main costs families had to cover were occasional fees, books, school supplies, lodging, and food. These were nontrivial costs, to be sure, but well within the reach of most middle-class families—and many schools

had generous support programs to assist those who hailed from more modest means. If one was not trying to attend an elite school, admissions were relatively open. Nonetheless, many who *could have* attended college chose not to, because there wasn't really a need. There were still plenty of good jobs that didn't require a degree, especially for men—and those opportunities grew over the course of the post–World War II boom. Hence, despite admitting many more minorities and working-class students than they used to, colleges and universities were still dominated by upper-middle-class WASPs, including rapidly growing numbers of WASP women. Nonetheless, as the schools diversified, there were increased tensions and clashes related to gender, race, and class.

Some student organizations from the first Great Awakening were still present on campus, such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS; formerly the Student League for Industrial Democracy). However, their influence and membership had waned significantly from their heyday. Although SDS leadership theorized universities as key sites of social revolution, there was no student movement to speak of. The SDS's 1962 national conference, convening its eleven chapters nationwide, had a total of fifty-nine registrants.⁷⁷ Some new campus groups were formed, most notably the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960. However, SNCC focused its actions primarily *outside* the campus—organizing sit-ins, freedom rides, marches, and voter registration drives in support of the broader civil rights movement. There were occasional localized outbursts focused on campus-specific issues, such as the Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964. However, organizers had no ties to the SDS or any other national group and were explicitly hostile toward politics per se. As cultural historian Louis Menand put it, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement “was not a war for social justice. It was a war against the university administration.”⁷⁸ It was a war that only gained traction once *faculty* got involved, and its effects were largely confined to the University of California system.

Through the early 1960s, on-campus student activism was not particularly pronounced. Most students were focused on getting degrees and securing the still-plentiful opportunities of the post–World War II economy. And then an expansion of the war in Vietnam, and an economic downturn, changed everything.

The 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution granted President Lyndon B. Johnson wide latitude in escalating the conflict in Vietnam. Beginning in March 1965, the United States shifted its focus from supporting and advising South Vietnamese forces to actively trying to crush the Viet Cong via a ground war.

Many more troops began to be deployed into the theater, and by the end of the summer, the United States had doubled its monthly draft calls. Yet, even after the White House eliminated exemptions for married men without children, college students remained exempt from being drafted so long as they remained enrolled full time in good standing. And when drafted, recruits with college degrees tended to get the best assignments (doing less grueling or risky jobs, and farther from the front lines). As a result of these policies, men who were able to gain admission into college and cover its costs began enrolling in much higher numbers—especially following the Higher Education Act of 1965, which expanded student loans available to students.

However, states contemporaneously began cutting the aid *they* provided to students, effectively shifting the responsibility of funding to individual borrowers and the federal government. Schools simultaneously became more selective in their admissions (in order to cope with the large influx of applicants) and began raising their tuition and fees (to capitalize on the increased federal grants and loans provided to students). This rendered it more difficult for many to attend or persist in college.⁷⁹ Moreover, the same year the government passed the Higher Education Act, the Johnson administration changed its rules with respect to the draft: college enrollment would no longer provide an automatic deferral. Instead, students would be compelled to take the Selective Service Qualification Test, and colleges would be obligated to rank their pupils in terms of their academic performance. Only those who came in above a particular cutoff would be guaranteed a college exemption. The rest were entered into a new draft pool, and thousands would be called each month.⁸⁰ *This* led to the nationwide student protest movement.

The driver was not the Vietnam War itself, which had been ongoing for roughly a half decade prior with little student resistance. The driver was not the civil rights movement, which had been long ongoing, and indeed had begun to *lose* momentum by this time, as it shifted north (more on this soon). The driver was not women's liberation. Although track for the "second wave" of feminism was already being laid by this point, and momentum being built, there was no major national feminist movement just yet. The driver was not the gay liberation movement, which kicked off *after* 1965 and grew increasingly confrontational, public, and assertive in the years leading up to the Stonewall Uprising.⁸¹ Instead, middle-class students became "radical" precisely when their plans to leave the fighting in Vietnam to minorities and the poor by enrolling in college and waiting things out began to fall through. It was at *that* point that college students suddenly embraced antiwar activism,

the Black Power movement, feminism, postcolonial struggles, gay rights, and environmentalism in immense numbers.

Upper-middle-class students and affluent students, for their part, were not terribly worried about the draft itself. They had many options to avoid combat irrespective of their college enrollment or employment status, and they exercised them aggressively. Many families leveraged professional connections to doctors or psychiatrists to gain medical deferments. Others hired attorneys and obtained exemptions for their children via the legal process.⁸² Nonetheless, the massive influx of students into college created adverse conditions for elites too. They faced much more intense competition to get admitted into their preferred colleges, not just at the undergraduate level but in graduate school as well (as growing numbers of students tried to maintain their student exemptions as long as possible by pursuing postgraduate degrees). Within colleges, class sizes grew and resources were spread thinner. Worse, the newcomers aggressively targeted the specific courses of study elites had been relying on to secure their own sinecures.⁸³ And upon graduating, these neophytes aimed for the specific jobs that children of elites had been counting on to provide *themselves* a good life.

The draft provided exemptions for many symbolic professions—doctors, engineers, scientists, teachers, and so on. This may have been designed in part as a hedge to protect children of affluent families from the draft postgraduation, but it ended up radically increasing the levels of competition aspiring symbolic capitalists faced, both at the university level and in the professional realm. And then it started becoming tougher for *anyone* to get a job.

Even before the expansion of the draft and the surge in college enrollments, the post–World War II economy was showing signs of faltering. In the years leading up to widespread student protests, there had been a stall in the growth of symbolic capitalist jobs. The share of professional-managerial jobs in the total economy, which had been growing rapidly from 1952 to 1962, stagnated from 1962 to 1968. The number of professional-managerial jobs per college graduate had been falling consistently since 1958.⁸⁴ College graduates were increasingly forced to work outside their field, or in jobs that did not require a degree at all.⁸⁵ In 1958, roughly 6 percent of PhDs graduated without specific career prospects; by 1974, that number had risen to 26 percent.⁸⁶ Worse, those who got jobs were making considerably less than they used to. It became a “buyer’s market” for skilled labor: by 1969, salaries had begun falling for degree holders at all levels and across fields.⁸⁷ With the comfortable careers they had been counting on now called into question, upper-middle-class youth joined their middle-class peers in indicting the system. As with

the first Awakening, it was a combination of a draft expansion and an economic downturn that seemed to trigger the widespread uprising.

Then came Richard Nixon. Although Nixon expressed admiration for student activists of the previous Great Awakening, he believed young people “these days” were getting it all wrong: “As I look at the ‘student revolution’ in the U.S.—back in the Thirties, the student rebel had a cause, a belief, a religion. Today the revolt doesn’t have that form.”⁸⁸ This is a common trope. Again, in the 1990s, many of those condemning student activists praised (or themselves participated in) similar movements in the 1960s, when people apparently mobilized the “right” way or for the “right” causes. As we will see, this nostalgia seems to be driven largely by inaccurate narratives participants come to tell about what their own (earlier) student movements accomplished. The uncomfortable reality is that these Awakenings are more alike than most recognize, and in ways that are unpleasant to contemplate.

In any case, Nixon despised 1960s counterculture. More importantly, he believed that domestic unrest undermined America and its leaders on the world stage and emboldened their Cold War enemies. Consequently, Nixon set out to break the student protest movement from the outset of his 1968 campaign—and he believed he could do this by ending the draft. Implicit in this strategy was an assumption that, despite their talk about revolution and social justice, student protesters were, in fact, mostly concerned about avoiding military service. They were attempting to deflect attention away from their selfishness and cowardice (as he saw it) by painting themselves as allies for the marginalized and disadvantaged, but once they no longer had to worry about being deployed, they would just get on with their lives—and leave others to do the same.

Hence, although Nixon disdained the antiwar movement, he campaigned in 1968 pledging to end conscription and bring a dignified end to the conflict in Vietnam. Upon taking office, he promptly ordered investigations of how to transition the U.S. military to an all-volunteer force (and thereby end the specter of the draft indefinitely). He began a drawdown of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, suspended draft calls during the fall of 1969, and, in December of that year, announced that the United States was formally pursuing an end to the conflict. Young people reacted to these measures just as Nixon anticipated they would: Among recent high school graduates, male enrollment in college rose from 52.3 percent in the year before the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to a high of 63.2 percent in 1968. By the end of Nixon’s first year in office, that number had dropped to 60.1 percent. By the time the transition to an all-volunteer force was completed in 1973, male enrollment had sunk to a

lower level than before the draft-induced surge: 50 percent.⁸⁹ The people who were attending college primarily to avoid the draft stopped enrolling or dropped out, gradually choking off protest movements' supplies of new recruits (even as the existing activist populations continued to cycle out of college and into their "adult lives").

Protests nonetheless briefly increased in 1970 following Nixon's escalations in Cambodia, and in the wake of national guardsmen opening fire on student protesters at Kent State.⁹⁰ However, as Todd Gitlin aptly put it, "the post-Cambodia uprising was the student movement's last hurrah. Activism never recovered from the summer vacation of 1970. During the academic year of 1970–71 there were fewer demonstrations than the year before; in 1971–72, fewer still. . . . Demonstrations declined at the old centers of protest, and press coverage declined precipitously."⁹¹ Polls and surveys show that between 1970 and 1974, there was a major drop in the percentage of students who were interested in politics or activism or who held "radical" views, and a sharp increase in students whose primary goal or objective in school was setting themselves up to find a good job and earn a comfortable salary.⁹² Many major student organizations such as SNCC and the SDS began to fall apart due to infighting.

Unfortunately for Nixon, his presidency came to an end around the same time as the protest movements were collapsing. At the time he left office in 1974, the economy was rough. The United States was still recovering from the 1973 OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil crisis, stock market crash, and resultant "stagflation" recession. However, by the following year, the economy began to recover.⁹³ As enrollments declined, competition eased for professional jobs, and college students turned their focus back to building their careers. The Awakening was not just on the decline, it was over. Writing in 1979, Arthur Levine and Keith Wilson observed,

The aura of revolution no longer exists. The "Student Movement" of the 1960s is receding into the pages of history and many activists have settled into their own struggles with adult life: Sam Brown is now director of ACTION in Washington, Gary Hart became a U.S. Senator, Eldridge Cleaver found religion, Jerry Rubin announced he was finally growing up at 37, and last we heard, Mario Salvo was getting a PhD in Los Angeles. . . . The student movement of the 1960s collapsed almost as quickly and unexpectedly as it had begun. There is little evidence of 1960s-style student protest on campus today.⁹⁴

The Third Awakening

By most measures (public opinion polls, media trends, Google Books nGrams, levels of student activism, etc.) the Great Awakening of the late 1980s through the early 1990s was significantly smaller than the others. It was shorter as well: the first two Awakenings persisted for more than a decade. The current (fourth) Great Awakening likewise lasted roughly a decade. However, the third Great Awakening lasted for about half the usual cycle—perhaps because the crisis elites faced was less severe, and they were able to be appeased much faster.

In a nutshell, universities, especially state schools, were hit hard by austerity in the 1980s. They responded by raising tuition and reducing student aid. Consequently, aspiring elites were increasingly forced to go into debt, and to take on ever-larger quantities of debt, in order to secure their credentials for professional jobs.⁹⁵ However, even these measures were not enough for many universities to remain solvent—especially given declining male attendance in the post-Vietnam period. Schools needed more students who could both meet their “meritocratic” admissions standards and pay tuition in full (or, ideally, pay *more* than the standard tuition). They turned to recruiting, and increasing admissions of, international students.⁹⁶ Postgraduation, these foreign-born professional aspirants were often willing to accept significantly lower salaries for “high-skill” work than their American-born competitors. Unsurprisingly, employers came to prefer these candidates on the job market. In many high-skill sectors, most of the new jobs produced began going to foreign-born workers.⁹⁷ Native-born students who landed jobs often had to accept lower wages than they would have in the recent past.⁹⁸

Then came a series of exogenous economic shocks. There was the savings and loan financial crisis of 1986–1995. There was a “mini crash” of the stock market in October 1989 that led to a recession followed by anemic growth. The same Republican-led austerity wave that gutted university budgets also led to a decline in the availability of government jobs.⁹⁹ Simultaneously, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, corporate consultant firms like McKinsey helped oversee a wave of mergers and restructuring in the corporate world. These institutional transformations resulted in the elimination of enormous numbers of “middle-management” jobs and other formerly secure and well-paying positions, led to the outsourcing of many functions overseas, and encouraged a general emphasis on doing more with less in order to maximize return on investment for corporate shareholders.¹⁰⁰

It was a bleak picture: aspiring symbolic capitalists had to go into more debt to get professional jobs, for which competition had grown much fiercer. Those who managed to land work had less job security, higher workloads, and lower pay relative to previous years. Indeed, the real earnings of college graduates dropped consistently through the late 1980s. Nonetheless, the divide between college and noncollege incomes grew because everyone else was faring even worse!¹⁰¹ Rather than being a means for upward mobility, their credentials primarily served to guard against downward mobility. Symbolic capitalists (and aspiring symbolic capitalists) responded with a new wave of “radicalism”—ostensibly in the name of racial equality, feminism, gay rights, and environmentalism. Once again, however, the movement died out as the market was able to accommodate the apparent primary concerns of “radicalized” elites.

In 1990, there were major changes to U.S. immigration laws that established quotas on temporary visas for high-skill workers, even as it streamlined the process for these workers to achieve permanent residence.¹⁰² This reduced employer capacity to rely on contingent high-skill laborers whose continued presence in the country was indexed to the whims of their employers (who could overwork, underpay, and otherwise mistreat them—deporting anyone who raised a fuss). There continued to be displacement of native-born workers at the hands of more permanent immigrants, particularly with respect to STEM jobs, but wages for these positions stabilized and began to rise.¹⁰³ That is, the native-born workers who remained in these roles generally found themselves in a stronger economic position than they were before the reforms.

There was a contemporaneous increase in jobs requiring a degree, albeit created primarily by “degree inflation” (reclassifying jobs such that they now require a degree when they didn’t previously) that deprived people from more humble socioeconomic backgrounds of the few stable and well-paying jobs that remained to them.¹⁰⁴ And as the 1990s rolled on, there was a proliferation of what anthropologist David Graeber called “bullshit jobs”¹⁰⁵ that helped replace some of the white-collar positions that had been cut during the peak season of mergers, acquisitions, and downsizing.

Here, it is important to stress that the social coordination processes through which phenomena like these transpire are not yet well understood. There was an acute overproduction of elites. It began creating social unrest. Employers began to envision new (somewhat extraneous) roles in their organizations and reclassified existing jobs to set them aside for degree holders. However, it is unlikely that many, if any, employers *consciously* changed

or created these jobs specifically as a means of addressing elite overproduction and its destabilizing effects. Nonetheless, this is what they did. Beginning in 1993, incomes for BA holders began to take off again. Meanwhile, incomes for most others remained stagnant or declined relative to 1990 levels over the coming decades.¹⁰⁶ This latter fact, however, seemed to be of little consequence to symbolic capitalists. As their own fortunes began to rise, social justice concerns receded into the background.¹⁰⁷ The Awakening died out once again as symbolic capitalists eagerly embraced Bill Clinton, his worldview, and his agenda.

The Fourth Awakening

By the end of the Clinton years, the United States was once again beginning to overproduce elites. Between 2000 and 2019, the American labor market added twenty-two million workers over the age of twenty-five with at least a BA. However, only about ten million jobs were added that required a college degree. There were more than twice as many graduates as there were jobs for graduates.¹⁰⁸ Although the wages for degree-requiring jobs continued to climb (even as nondegree wages stagnated), this was cold comfort for the growing number of graduates who found themselves unemployed or underemployed. This situation reached a breaking point after the 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession.

Law degrees, for instance, were long perceived to be a surefire bet for enjoying a comfortable professional life. However, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, tens of thousands of young people had the same idea to ride out the recession in college, and to continue into law school specifically, resulting in a bubble that burst in 2010. JD graduates had a difficult time finding jobs in the legal profession and faced unfavorable terms with respect to salary, pay, and working conditions because employers had all the leverage in negotiations.¹⁰⁹

Likewise, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, there was a major shift away from humanities and into STEM fields.¹¹⁰ However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, technical majors were producing about three times the number of graduates as there were job openings in the field per year (with the exception of computer science, which was not yet producing enough graduates to fill demand).¹¹¹ STEM unemployment rates are low—but this is primarily because graduates typically end up working in jobs outside the fields they got their degrees in. Moreover, the pay, job stability, and working-condition returns that graduates receive on their

STEM education diminished as growing numbers of Americans flocked to these fields.¹¹²

Government jobs have also long been viewed as a pathway to a secure post with good pay and excellent benefits. However, government jobs at the federal, state, and local levels saw consistent attrition in the period leading up to the latest Great Awakening. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic (and any austerity measures that may follow downstream), federal employment had reached its lowest share of total employment since 1952; state and local governments were down to the levels of the mid- to late 1960s.¹¹³

Rather than “safe” choices like law, STEM or government, others decided to follow their passions and went into significant debt pursuing elite credentials in journalism and the arts, only to find that there were few jobs to be had—not even for those with graduate degrees from top programs.¹¹⁴ A decade after the onset of the Great Recession, more than one in four 2008 newsroom jobs had been eliminated.¹¹⁵ The jobs that remain tend to have much less security, and often lower pay and benefits, relative to decades past. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a new round of significant layoffs, furloughs, and pay cuts at media organizations across the spectrum.¹¹⁶ Although the situation began to stabilize in 2021,¹¹⁷ good media jobs remain scarce and extraordinarily competitive.

For those interested in a career in academia, the odds grew especially bleak. According to National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics estimates, 30 percent of those awarded PhDs in 2020 graduated without employment commitments of any kind—not in the private sector, not as postdocs, and not as contingent or tenure-track faculty.¹¹⁸ Strikingly, this marked a significant improvement over recent years! For PhD students who *did* graduate with jobs, most landed positions outside academia (e.g., for industry, nonprofits, or governments). Moreover, the vast majority of people who were hired as faculty in any capacity were hired on a contingent basis—with much lower pay, benefits, job security, and future prospects as compared with tenured or tenure-track faculty.

In short, symbolic capitalists and aspirants to the symbolic professions were increasingly going into enormous debt, not just to secure a BA, but often to pursue graduate degrees as well. However, they were receiving diminishing returns on these investments and uncertain life prospects.

A 2021 analysis by the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity estimated that as many as 16 percent of recent college graduates—particularly those who majored in the “wrong” fields—may actually receive a *negative* return on their college investments (relative to if they had spent that time

acquiring vocational certifications or working full time and building a career in a position that does not require a degree).¹¹⁹ According to 2020 estimates by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 41 percent of employed recent college graduates are working in positions that don't require a degree (and again, many jobs that *formally* require a degree don't actually require advanced training in practice; many of these jobs did not require a degree in recent years; and many people who work in jobs that "require" a degree hold credentials in fields unrelated to their jobs).¹²⁰ Analytics firm Burning Glass likewise estimated that, as of 2018, 43 percent of recent college grads were underemployed. It projected that two-thirds of these underemployed graduates (or 29 percent of all recent college graduates) would likely remain underemployed five years after graduation—and three-quarters of those who are still underemployed five years out (an estimated 21 percent of all recent college graduates) were likely to remain underemployed a full decade after graduation.¹²¹

Growing numbers of BA holders exited the symbolic economy altogether and attended community colleges to learn skilled trades.¹²² Indeed, the *unemployment* rate for degree holders has remained lower than for less educated Americans primarily because graduates have been increasingly snatching up decent jobs that do *not* require a degree when they failed to secure a position that *would*.¹²³ Of course, this leaves non-degree holders with still fewer prospects—hence the growing socioeconomic divide in recent years between those who possess a degree and those who don't. In many respects, this divide is again being driven more by diminishing prospects for those with *less* education than by growth in prosperity among college graduates. That is, although the return on investment for education seems to be growing in *relative* terms, it may actually be shrinking in *absolute* terms.

All said, nearly half of upper-middle-class children born in the 1980s failed to replicate their class position by age thirty.¹²⁴ Most of these downwardly mobile elites were not in real danger of being *poor* (according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, only 4 percent of degree holders live below the poverty line).¹²⁵ Nonetheless, there is often significant frustration at the step down in wealth, security, and status they enjoyed as children and expected to be able to provide for their own families as adults. Once again, these anxieties were channeled into a Great Awakening. Frustrated symbolic capitalists and elite aspirants sought to indict the system that failed them—and also the elites that *did* manage to flourish—by attempting to align themselves with the genuinely marginalized and disadvantaged.

Around 2022, however, evidence began to emerge that the structural conditions that gave rise to the post-2010 Awakening might be easing.¹²⁶ Looking at trends in symbolic economy outputs (journalism, books, scholarship), expressed attitudes, “cancel culture” incidents, Democratic Socialists of America membership, symbolic capitalist protest activity, and institutional responses to employee activism, it appears as though the Great Awakening that began in 2010 started to subside at around the same time socioeconomic indicators began to improve.¹²⁷ At time of writing, most measures of the Awakening remain significantly elevated relative to their pre-Awakening baselines, but downward trends are clear.

The Next Awakening

Although there are signs that the current Great Awakening may be winding down, the seeds seem to already be sown for the next one. Looking at the Bureau of Labor Statistics projections of which jobs are expected to see the most growth from 2020 to 2030, for example, few of the projected high-growth jobs are likely to pay well or require college degrees.

The twenty occupations listed in the following table are projected to account for nearly half (47 percent) of all new jobs created over the next decade. All other occupations are individually projected to contribute less than 1 percent of all new jobs over the next ten years.

Critically, most of the jobs that are anticipated to grow rapidly over the next ten years pay below the current U.S. median income. Seven out of ten occupations with the highest numbers of projected new jobs require no college degree (although a handful require some specialized postsecondary training and licensing—which college graduates would have to acquire just like everyone else). Literally none of the top twenty occupations require advanced degrees. And most of the jobs outside this list do not currently, and are not anticipated to, require a college degree of any sort either.

Put another way, you know those “hot” fields college recruiters and media folks are talking about? There likely will not be a ton of positions available in absolute terms anytime soon.¹²⁸ Moreover, although outsourcing and automation hit blue-collar jobs hardest in previous eras, rapid advances in AI are projected to primarily disrupt highly paid white-collar work in the coming decades.¹²⁹ As things currently stand, the “jobs of the future” are going to be relatively low-paid service positions providing various amenities for retirees and college graduates who *did* land cushy professional roles. As for

TABLE 2.1. Occupations Projected to Produce the Largest Numbers of New Jobs, 2020–2030

Occupation	Percentage of all new jobs projected to be created, 2020–2030	College degree typically required (Y/N)	Median annual wage, 2020 (USD)
Home health and personal care aides	9.5	N	27,080
Cooks, restaurant	4.7	N	28,800
Fast-food and counter workers	4.4	N	23,860
Software developers, software quality assurance analysts, and testers	3.4	Y	110,140
Waiters and waitresses	3.4	N	23,740
Registered nurses	2.3	Y	75,330
Hand laborers and freight, stock, and material movers	2.2	N	31,120
General and operations managers	1.9	Y	103,650
First-line supervisors of food preparation and serving workers	1.6	N	34,570
Passenger vehicle drivers (excluding public transit)	1.5	N	32,320
Market research analysts and marketing specialists	1.4	Y	65,810
Bartenders	1.3	N	24,960
Security guards	1.3	N	31,050
Medical and health services managers	1.2	Y	104,280
Cleaners: maids and housekeepers	1.2	N	26,220
Medical assistants	1.1	N	35,850
Cleaners: janitorial and other	1.1	N	29,080
Management analysts	1.0	Y	87,660
Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers	1.0	N	47,130
Exercise trainers and group fitness instructors	1.0	N	40,510

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023d.

Note: Overall, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that roughly 11.8799 million new jobs will be created between 2020 and 2030. The percentage in the first column represents the share of these jobs each occupation is projected to contribute. For context on wages, the overall median annual wage in 2020 was \$41,950.

everyone else, they won't need to learn to code, but to learn to care. And they probably won't make much money doing that either.

Of course, the fact that the prospects seem so bleak for non-symbolic economy positions is likely to intensify competition for elite credentials and for jobs within the symbolic professions. As the "losers" in this competition grow increasingly numerous and increasingly frustrated, they will likely seek to co-opt existing social justice movements in order to enhance their own position, and the cycle will begin again.

Having walked through each of the Awakenings, we are now well positioned to identify some threads that run between them. Let's start with what seems to be the main driver of these rebellions: elite overproduction.

Elite Overproduction

In a 2010 issue of *Nature*, ecologist-turned-historian Peter Turchin famously predicted that the forthcoming decade would be defined by social upheavals, with a number of adverse social trends reaching their peak around the year 2020.¹³⁰ Characteristics he was observing in the U.S. economy and culture at the time seemed very similar to trends in the lead-up to the Civil War and the periods of unrest in the 1920s and 1970s—that is, the first and second Great Awakenings. In that *Nature* essay, his coauthored book published the previous year, and a follow-up scholarly paper published in 2012, Turchin emphasized "elite overproduction" as a core driver of this historical and predicted instability.¹³¹

Elite overproduction occurs when a society produces too many people who feel entitled to high status and high incomes relative to the capacity of that society to actually absorb elite aspirants into the power structure. Under these circumstances, growing numbers of frustrated erstwhile elites grow bitter toward the prevailing order and try to form alliances with *genuinely* marginalized populations in order to depose existing elites and install themselves in their stead.

Typically, Turchin argues, these attempted alliances prove unstable because, at the end of the day, elites mostly just want to be elites. Consequently, their interests, worldviews, and priorities tend to be far out of step with those they are ostensibly advocating for, and this becomes increasingly obvious and problematic to all parties over time. Due to these internal tensions, rebellions generally fail to produce revolutions. More typically, existing elites find ways to incorporate and co-opt enough of the alienated elite population to break the uprisings.¹³² The newly expanded elites then

collaborate to secure their position from others, while offering placating concessions to constituencies that the former counterelites tried to mobilize during their insurrection.¹³³ However, these concessions are usually designed to ensure that the fundamentals of the political-economic system remain roughly unchanged—an outcome that the newly integrated elites are now just as invested in as the old guard.

As growing numbers of former rebels are co-opted into the establishment and disengage from the struggle, it becomes harder for those elite aspirants whose ambitions remain unfulfilled to continue exerting pressure on institutions or commanding social attention for their chosen causes. Exhausted after years of futile conflict, most elite aspirants who failed to enhance their position before the uprising passed its peak eventually resign themselves to a lower station in life than they'd expected or hoped for.¹³⁴ The unrest comes to a close . . . until the next time conditions are ripe.

Diverted Movements

Elite overproduction disposes large numbers of elites and elite aspirants toward indicting both the prevailing order and the more established and successful elites at its helm. However, possessing a motive for carrying out an insurrection doesn't entail the opportunity to effectively launch one.

A key obstacle faced by frustrated elites is that the fortunes of people like themselves tend to rise and fall countercyclically to the rest of the population.¹³⁵ Hard times for most people are usually pretty good times for elites, and the "winners" in this arrangement tend to want to keep the good times rolling as long as possible. Conversely, hard times for elites are usually relatively good times for everyone else, leading most other Americans to care even less about elite problems than they otherwise would. Public concern about social justice issues tends to recede into the background during these periods as well,¹³⁶ constraining the ability of frustrated elites and elite aspirants to leverage social justice discourse in the service of their own ends.

However, there are occasional moments when the trajectories between elites and nonelites are partially collapsed—when things have been bad and getting worse for ordinary folks for a while and are suddenly fraught for symbolic capitalists too. *These* are moments when Awakenings tend to occur.

Here's how things tend to play out: many who had come to expect secure and well-renumerated work in the symbolic professions instead end up facing uncertain prospects and downward mobility. This anxiety curdles into frustration toward those who *are* enjoying success and apparent security.

However, insofar as they've been enculturated into mainstream symbolic capitalists' preferred modes of talking and thinking about the world (and competing for status and power), they don't lead with lamentations about poor employment prospects for professionals like themselves. Instead, they start by emphasizing how bad things are for everyone else, including and especially the marginalized and disadvantaged. The frustration, humiliation, and anxieties of these elite aspirants are expressed in terms of socialist, feminist, antiracist, or queer critiques of the prevailing order.

During these periods of shared immiseration, precisely because things have been bad and growing worse for most others in society for a while, there is often momentum already building behind various movements to address social problems. Narratives indicting the prevailing order and the people at its helm are already taking off. Perennial campaigns, such as women's rights movements or racial justice movements, which generally fall into abeyance patterns during times of prosperity, begin gaining new traction among a broader swath of society.¹³⁷ Elective affinities between the claims and aspirations of these social movements and the ostensibly altruistic claims of the symbolic professions lead many disenfranchised elites to attach themselves to these campaigns in order to reclaim their sense of dignity, agency, and purpose, and to push for desired concessions or social reforms.

However, these newly mobilized symbolic capitalists are rarely content to be mere foot soldiers or subordinates in social movements. They're elite aspirants, after all. And in virtue of their ostensibly superior knowledge and skills, they often see themselves as uniquely well suited to determine the ideal aims and tactics of movements. Despite being latecomers and numerical minorities, these erstwhile elites are often well positioned to dominate campaigns they affix themselves to—frequently to the consternation and at the expense of those who had been “doing the work” before it became a cause célèbre. And as symbolic capitalists become conspicuous faces and voices of social movements, they generally define and pursue the cause in ways that flatter their own sensibilities and serve their personal interests. This is commonly to the detriment of the genuinely marginalized and disadvantaged in society because the preferences and priorities of symbolic capitalists tend to be demonstrably out of sync with those of the people they are ostensibly speaking for and advocating on behalf of.

As a trivial example, consider recent high-profile campaigns to rename schools in honor of those whom contemporary symbolic capitalists find praiseworthy instead of the “problematic” historical figures whose names are currently plastered across buildings nationwide. These campaigns were

carried out in the name of racial justice. However, if nonwhites who live in the affected communities had been consulted about *their* top concerns, it would have been clear that the name of the local school would not rank anywhere near the top of their priorities.¹³⁸ Although they might not be *opposed* to naming the school in honor of, say, Rosa Parks instead of Jefferson Davis, parents of ethnic and racial minority students who attend these schools would identify many concerns that are more salient with respect to their kids' lives and education than the name on the building. Yet, rather than addressing *those* concerns, or even bothering to find out what *those* concerns are, mainstream symbolic capitalists focus on securing symbolic victories over right-aligned symbolic capitalists—who satisfyingly respond with indignation and outrage at these maneuvers because, again, they share the sense that something “big” is at stake here. And should mainstream symbolic capitalists emerge victorious, we declare the name change some kind of “win” for racial justice and move on to the next culture war battle. Yet little has changed for the families whose kids attend these schools. They face the same struggles as ever. Their life prospects have not been meaningfully changed one way or the other. The concerns that parents and other community members genuinely find pressing remain largely unaddressed.¹³⁹

Likewise, Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* has been largely credited with helping launch “second-wave” feminism. The text purported to highlight the plight of “women” in the 1950s—languishing as suburban housewives, struggling to find meaning or fulfillment in their domestic duties, and desperate for fulfillment outside the home. In fact, most women in America have *always* worked—including at the time Friedan was writing.¹⁴⁰ It was a relatively small share of families who could afford to have women stay home without bringing in money or directly supporting business efforts, and who gained prestige from being able to sustain a “kept” wife. It was a very particular slice of America who could afford to enjoy the comfortable suburban existence that Friedan and others described as stifling. As bell hooks put it,

Some white, middle-class, college-educated women argued that motherhood was a serious obstacle to women's liberation, a trap confining women to the home, keeping them tied to cleaning, cooking, and child care. Others simply identified motherhood and child-rearing as the locus of women's oppression. Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, lack of jobs, lack of skills or education, and a number of

other issues would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood. Black women would not have said motherhood prevented us from entering the world of paid work because we have always worked. From slavery to the present day . . . that work gave meager financial compensation and often interfered with or prevented effective parenting. Historically, black women have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacist ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing.¹⁴¹

That is, less privileged women often struggled *to be able* to spend time with their families, and to carve out space to be a wife or a mother instead of just a worker. The dilemmas Friedan described were fundamentally “problems of privilege.” And those afflicted were generally quite keen to keep their privilege: Despite railing against suburban life, the women who sympathized with Friedan’s critique were generally disinterested in living in the kinds of households or communities these “other” women lived in (nor in having “others” move into their own neighborhoods). Nor did they have any interest in taking on the kinds of jobs these “other” women worked in. They wanted well-compensated and socially respected professional jobs, befitting their social status. And they ultimately achieved that goal by offloading unwanted domestic responsibilities onto *other* women—lower-income women, typically immigrants and women of color. Nonetheless, elite women sought to conflate their own interests with the interests of “women” writ large. The campaign to enhance the position of upper-middle-class women was (and continues to be) carried out in the name of feminism *per se*.¹⁴²

As a function of divides like these between symbolic capitalists and the rest of society, rather than promoting genuine change, the widespread embrace of various causes by symbolic capitalists often correlates with a leveling-off or decline in progress, increased polarization around the issues being championed, and growing alienation from the affected movements among former supporters.¹⁴³

The More Things Change

Despite their intense focus on social justice issues, Great Awakenings have rarely generated positive outcomes for the genuinely needy or vulnerable. With respect to racial equality, for instance, political scientist Robert

Putnam shows that gains for African Americans began around 1860—that is, before *any* of the Great Awakenings, and indeed, before the Civil War (the war may have been launched to halt those gains). After the war, Black gains proceeded apace through the 1960s. Gaps between Blacks and whites continued to close. There was a steady increase in rights and protections for African Americans, in Black institution building, in Black political power, and in interracial solidarity despite campaigns to halt this progress.¹⁴⁴ There was no apparent impact from the first Great Awakening on any of these trends—for better or worse. Likewise, the civil rights movement notched most of its successes *before* the second Great Awakening began¹⁴⁵—and stalled out thereafter. That is, the second Great Awakening was not responsible for the civil rights movement and its victories. It may have derailed them. From the mid-1960s through the present, the racial story in America has largely been one of stagnation and declines. Black-white income disparities in 2016 were roughly identical to what they were in 1968.¹⁴⁶ Gaps in wealth and home ownership between Blacks and whites have actually grown *larger* than they were in 1968.¹⁴⁷ Rates of incarceration among African Americans, and racial disparities between Blacks and whites in incarceration rates, while declining, remain higher than they were in 1960.¹⁴⁸

Critically, as a recent National Bureau of Economic Research paper by economist Erik Hurst and coauthors shows, the growing centrality of the symbolic professions played a central role in halting racial progress.¹⁴⁹ As a result of major changes to the global economic order beginning in the late 1960s, the significance of symbolic hubs, professional and business services, and symbolic capitalists more broadly rose dramatically.¹⁵⁰ In this same period, following the civil rights movement, prejudice-based discrimination in most job markets declined.¹⁵¹ However, skill- and education-based discrimination increased dramatically, as did the returns on having the “correct” credentials and talents. Because education was (and continues to be) unevenly distributed across racial lines, the practical effects of these new “meritocratic” forms of reward and exclusion have been comparable to overt racial discrimination in many respects. Hence, racialized socioeconomic gaps persist, largely unchanged, even as overtly bigoted attitudes and behaviors have become far less common and increasingly taboo.

According to Putnam, the trajectory of women’s equality tells a similar story.¹⁵² At the end of the nineteenth century, women in the United States began making significant gains in terms of rights and protections, and gaps between men and women on a range of dimensions began to close. These patterns did not accelerate as a result of the second Great Awakening, as

many perhaps assume. Instead, they *slowed* beginning in the mid-1960s. And on many measures, women have been *losing ground* relative to men since the 1990s (i.e., the third Great Awakening).¹⁵³

Women's progress, however, has not seen the same level of reversals as African Americans'—in large part because well-off whites have a direct stake in women's rights that they generally lack with respect to racial equality. (Roughly half of all white people are women, after all—and even white *men* have a stake in increasing the earnings or prospects of their wives and daughters.) Nonetheless, Putnam argues, feminist gains since the 1960s have primarily benefited upper-class whites, especially professionals. Far from promoting general egalitarianism, increased gender equality in the United States has correlated with growing socioeconomic inequality.¹⁵⁴ More women are graduating college and attaining professional success. They are partnering with others who have equivalent socioeconomic prospects to their own, or higher, and opportunity-hoarding to maximize the chances that their kids will replicate their own elite position. Meanwhile, most nonelites across genders are experiencing stagnation and declines.

Overall, Putnam shows, the century from 1860 through 1960 was defined by steady and broad-based gains in socioeconomic equality, civil rights, trust in social institutions, religious attendance, union membership, and other forms of civic participation. There have been shocking reversals across all of these dimensions since—to the point where America in 2020 eerily resembled the United States of the Gilded Age in many respects. In short, the transition to the symbolic economy in the 1960s—and the ascendance of symbolic capitalists—has been accompanied by stark *declines* in equality, social cohesion, and civic participation. The first Great Awakening did little to enhance the pre-1960 “upswing,” and subsequent Awakenings seem to have done even less to halt or reverse the post-1960s declines.

Instead, since the second Great Awakening, protest movements have grown significantly more professionalized and less disruptive, and they're increasingly driven by relatively affluent people rather than the genuinely marginalized or disadvantaged.¹⁵⁵ As we've seen, this trend continues through the present day, with movements like Occupy and the #Resistance protests driven primarily by symbolic capitalists and concentrated in symbolic capitalist hubs. The fact that these movements are, at bottom, by and for elites with little to no benefit for ordinary people is often recognized by the folks whose interests symbolic capitalists purport to represent. For instance, when asked in 2022 whether the most recent “racial reckoning” has led to changes that are improving the lives of Black people, nearly two-thirds (64 percent)

of Black respondents answered in the negative. Female, lower-income, and less-educated (i.e., less advantaged) African Americans were especially unlikely to perceive positive changes.¹⁵⁶

Here the reader may wonder, even if the story seems bleak in looking at laws or socioeconomic statistics, surely the Awakenings are responsible for changing public attitudes, right? There are two key things to note in response to this question. First, it is not clear that changing discourse or attitudes actually *matter* if they don't manifest "in the world" via beneficial changes in behaviors, relationships, policies, or allocations of resources. In any case, it is empirically unclear that the previous Awakenings *did* have any broad-based and long-term effect on public attitudes—let alone any *positive* effects.¹⁵⁷

For instance, as political scientist James Stimson observed, the Great Awakening of the 1960s–1970s *did not* usher in a liberal age. In fact, it marked the culmination of a long-running leftward trend in public opinion and corresponded with a significant rightward lurch in public attitudes that persisted through the early 1980s: "The liberalism we see of the 1960s is the liberalism that produced the Kennedy administration and then fueled it, in full force at the outset of the civil rights movement. It is not the liberalism of the youth revolt or the anti-Vietnam War protest. These came later, after the political impetus of liberalism was spent."¹⁵⁸

Attitudes on gender, race, and sexuality, meanwhile, have been on a pretty steady liberalizing trajectory for as far back as public opinion on these questions is available—both across generational cohorts and within them.¹⁵⁹ Rapid changes in expressed attitudes *among white elites*—or bursts in publications of books, media articles, academic essays, and so on corresponding with the Great Awakenings—do not seem to have had any enduring effects on the trend lines of public opinion writ large. Media "agenda setting" can raise the salience of certain issues—for instance, in the midst of each Awakening we see dramatic spikes in the share of Americans who view racial tensions or racism as the most pressing problem facing the United States—however, attitudes like these quickly revert to their antecedent baselines once symbolic capitalists start talking about other things again.¹⁶⁰

All said, Awakenings seem unrelated to significant changes in law or allocation of resources.¹⁶¹ They probably aren't responsible for durable and broad-based attitudinal shifts on "culture" issues either.¹⁶² The shifts that were clearly responses to Awakenings tended to fade alongside those Awakenings. Trends that preceded the Awakenings continued on unaffected by them.

Social Justice Sinecures

Although Awakenings do not seem to be responsible for generating major transformations in society writ large, they often *do* produce significant and durable changes within symbolic capitalist institutions. Many of these changes are symbolic in nature—for example, new speech codes and performative gestures to show that one is “up” on social justice. However, other changes are more substantial—for instance, new hiring and recruitment practices that provide new opportunities for aspirants who identify as members of historically marginalized groups, or new deference practices that can enhance the clout of symbolic capitalists who identify with particular groups. Yet, rather than enhancing the position of those who are significantly disadvantaged in society, these opportunities primarily benefit elites from the target populations.¹⁶³

Symbolic capitalist spaces tend to be highly parochial. An especially small share of people from minoritized populations tend to make it into the symbolic professions—generally people who are “privileged” in other ways. As a function of these realities, benefits from changes in symbolic capitalist institutions that occur during Awakenings tend to accrue primarily to those *who are already relatively well off or well positioned*. Illustrative of these realities, the most significant and enduring material legacy of the Great Awakenings has been the proliferation of what I have taken to calling “social justice sinecures”: well-renumerated symbolic capitalist jobs explicitly oriented around helping organizations conspicuously conform with the latest fads in social justice signaling (thereby reducing their vulnerability to subsequent attacks by frustrated elites and elite aspirants).

Corporate HR departments and their ever-expanding rules and administrative processes began proliferating after the second Great Awakening.¹⁶⁴ They have leveraged every subsequent Awakening to expand their institutional influence. For instance, post-2011, there has been a rapid enlargement in many symbolic capitalist institutions of bureaucrats and policies aimed at regulating even “sexual conduct that is voluntary, non-harassing, nonviolent, and does not harm others.”¹⁶⁵

The second Awakening likewise corresponded with the birth and proliferation of administrators to curate and manage diversity at postsecondary institutions, elite K–12 schools, and increasingly the private and nonprofit sectors.¹⁶⁶ These positions have also seen major expansions in the aftermath of each Awakening. Their ranks have swelled to the point that, today, many colleges and universities have nearly as many noninstructional staff as they have undergraduate students, and in some cases more.¹⁶⁷

Diversity specialists typically make about \$75,000 per year. Chief diversity officers typically pull in around \$120,000, although there are diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) administrators at many universities who earn up to \$400,000 per year (putting them well into the top 5 percent of all income earners in the United States).¹⁶⁸ Alongside diversity managers, diversity-related training consultants similarly emerged in the aftermath of the second Great Awakening, became a staple of the American institutional landscape following the third Great Awakening, and received incredible sums of money during the current period of elite agitation—particularly in the wake of George Floyd’s murder.¹⁶⁹ To help people compete for these positions, universities increasingly see a lucrative opportunity in providing BAs and graduate certification programs in diversity studies.¹⁷⁰

It’s critical to note the gender dynamics at play in the proliferation of these roles. Again, Awakenings happen in the midst of elite overproduction. Since the tail end of the second Great Awakening, a majority of college students and graduates have been female. That is, the elites being overproduced are increasingly women. And the people occupying these new “diversity and inclusion”-oriented positions are *overwhelmingly* women. These positions are serving as new sinecures almost entirely for female aspirants—providing well-paying and relatively prestigious work for women who might otherwise be excluded from the symbolic professions. As cultural critic Mary Harrington observed,

“Administrative bloat” has been a remarked on feature of higher education for some time. . . . Less remarked on is the sex breakdown of the growing proportion of administrators. A recent diversity and inclusion report by the University of California indicates that women make up more than 70 per cent of non academic staff. . . . And that support system has an increasingly symbiotic relationship with student activism, which over my lifetime has (on both sides of the Atlantic) shifted noticeably away from a focus on material conditions toward something more like the bureaucratic regulation of personal identity and interpersonal interactions. A 2015 look at student protesters across 51 campuses showed the most common demands—alongside greater diversity among faculty—were diversity training and cultural centres. In turn, this focus requires a ballooning staff tasked with managing identities, or variously supporting or disciplining types of relationship. . . . In practice, then, as pursued within universities, one byproduct of student activism is something akin to a “jobs for the girls” scheme, in which a heavily female student body drives

demand for . . . feminized non-academic administrative roles, which in turn helps create an environment geared toward women, and so on. Young alumnae graduating from this ecosystem might be expected to carry its insights out into professional life. And indeed, according to America's Bureau of Labor Statistics, HR (a career whose employees are 71 per cent female, according to one industry report) is one of the fastest growing occupations in the country. Within that field, the fastest growing sub discipline is diversity and inclusion. . . . And a principal task of diversity professionals is increasing the job opportunities available for women, and especially of women engaged in diversity work.¹⁷¹

Indeed, not only are these positions overwhelmingly staffed by women, DEI programs are especially likely to be championed, implemented, and protected by female managers (relative to male peers).¹⁷² Relative to comparable symbolic capitalist positions, DEI professionals are especially likely to be non-white as well.¹⁷³

Now, it's not a *bad* thing to provide relatively well-paying and socially prestigious jobs for already-advantaged women and people of color. The world would not be a better place if these professionals were unemployed or underemployed instead. Nonetheless, it is unclear what (if any) *good* is being accomplished by this ever-expanding constellation of social justice sinecures beyond providing practitioners with gainful employment. Many of the programs associated with these DEI roles (such as diversity training) are demonstrably ineffective with respect to their stated goals.¹⁷⁴ The proliferation of diversity bureaucrats has corresponded with a significant *increase* in social inequality and *decreases* in social solidarity, as highlighted in the previous section. Moreover, as we will see, the spaces where these workers exert the greatest influence (i.e., the symbolic professions, symbolic hubs) are among the *most* unequal and parochial in the contemporary United States—and they've been growing *more* exclusionary, hierarchical, and detached from the rest of society over time. The world, in short, does not seem to be a more equitable place due to the ever-growing DEI-industrial complex.

However, as a function of perverse incentive structures within these fields, unfortunate social trends may nonetheless be good for business. A lack of progress or worsening conditions are not typically interpreted as evidence that DEI-oriented positions and programs are unnecessary or unhelpful. Rather, they often serve as a pretext to demand still *more* institutional power and resources for DEI professionals. These maneuvers are accepted because, generally speaking, the proliferation of these positions works well

for incumbent elites too. These sinecures divert people who might otherwise be aggressive competitors or underemployed rebels into legitimizing management and institutions instead (hiring these workers, formally complying with their rules and processes, assigning their training programs, etc. shows that an institution “cares” and is “committed” to “doing something” about various forms of inequality and exclusion—including in court as needed). The proliferation of rules and regulators also allows institutions to expand discipline and surveillance over their workforce—and in the name of social justice, no less.¹⁷⁵ To be clear, it is unlikely that employers expand DEI positions with these explicit considerations in mind. However, these seem to be the main institutional functions DEI professionals serve *in practice*, and this may help explain why so many institutions have been eager to expand these positions despite their demonstrated inefficacy at achieving their stated goals.

Theories of Failure

Awakenings tend to be driven by elite overproduction, and they tend to collapse when a sufficient number of frustrated aspirants are integrated into the power structure or come to believe their prospects are improving. But this is not the kind of story we like to tell ourselves about why these social movements occur and why they taper off. Instead, as these periods of unrest begin to wind down, theories of failure are generated—accounts of why “the revolution” didn’t succeed as anticipated—typically detailing how the aims and methods of activists should be adjusted to be more successful downstream. Robust debates ensue as to which account best explains what went wrong and what lessons can be learned. The most successful theories of failure end up informing the character of the next Awakening in important ways.

The original theory of revolution that symbolic capitalists gravitated toward was Marxism. Karl Marx’s core project was to explain why the liberal revolutions that deposed aristocrats, the church, and monarchs somehow culminated in the exploitative and hierarchical relationships that defined the industrial period. Marx sought to illustrate how the bourgeoisie (roughly, symbolic capitalists and business owners)¹⁷⁶ shifted from being a revolutionary bloc ostensibly committed to widespread freedom and prosperity—advocates for a society where the circumstances of one’s birth need not dictate the path of one’s life—into a class dedicated to unending capital accumulation at the expense of the rest of society. The bourgeoisie oversaw an age of unprecedented innovation and productivity; they established institutions

that operated at an immense scale and were increasingly complex and interconnected. Vast wealth was created at a rapid pace. Yet very little of this wealth “trickled down” to the workers, whose labor undergirded the whole system. *They* were working harder than ever, under increasingly harsh conditions, while being paid subsistence wages (at best). In the process of articulating how and why the capitalist revolution turned out as it did, Marx also formulated an alternative model of activism: revolutionaries should focus on mobilizing exploited workers against the bourgeoisie; they should emphasize interdependence, collective action, and the common good over individualistic (“bourgeois”) conceptions of rights, freedoms, and prosperity.

Communist ideology became increasingly popular in America during the first Great Awakening—at least among symbolic capitalists.¹⁷⁷ For instance, membership and chapters of the Communist National Student League expanded significantly on campuses nationwide. Indeed, the organization ultimately cannibalized rival Socialist organization the Student League for Industrial Democracy at the tail end of the first Awakening.¹⁷⁸ However, Marxism was far less popular among the working class. Labor unions and workers’ movements tended to favor alternative forms of socialism (and syndicalism) over Marxism *per se*.¹⁷⁹ Consequently, it may be worth briefly clarifying how an ideology that centered the working class as the key to social justice could emerge as a revolutionary framework for highly educated professionals in particular—not just in the United States but also in Europe and prerevolutionary Russia and China.¹⁸⁰ Understanding this can provide important insights into how symbolic capitalists select and co-opt ostensibly “radical” frameworks in the service of their own ascendance and hegemony.

Although Marxism is widely associated with a call for “equality of outcomes” today, Marx himself disparaged equality *per se* as an absurd political goal.¹⁸¹ Although a core goal of communism was to ensure work and remuneration was allocated to “each according to his ability, each according to his needs,”¹⁸² as Marx repeatedly observed, abilities are not equal! Nor is the level of value that each worker produces. Marx’s foundational critique of capitalism was that it was a system in which virtually no one actually got what they deserved. Capitalists produce little but extract “surplus value” from those who *do* produce via their monopoly over the means of production (that is, capitalists get far *more* than they deserve by coercing others into accepting *less* than they deserve). The goal of communism, at bottom, was to reset social relations so that all were *appropriately* rewarded for the value they produced. On Marx’s account, inequality would be less dramatic following the communist revolution, but it would not be the case that everyone was *identical* (nor would that

even be desirable to Marx). Although “private property” as we understand it today would be abolished, people would still have “individual property.”¹⁸³ Differences would emerge with respect to that individual property on the basis of different preferences and aspirations, different passions and interests, different capabilities and lines of work, different ways that people choose to leverage individual property, and so forth—and those differences would be morally legitimate. As Marx explains in *The Communist Manifesto*, when “capital is converted into common property, into the property of all members of society, personal property is not therefore transformed into social property. It is only the social character of the property that is changed. It loses its class-character . . . we by no means intend to abolish this personal appropriation of the products of labor . . . all that we want to do away with is the miserable character of this appropriation.”¹⁸⁴

Of course, the latter part of the maxim, “according to his needs,” suggests nonmeritocratic redistribution as well. However, it is important to clarify who would be “needy” under communism. In a world where people were compensated according to the value they produce, Marx theorized, there wouldn’t necessarily *be* “working poor.” And in a world where people were no longer alienated from their labor, there wouldn’t be people who chose not to work and tried to live parasitically on society. Marx argued that the desire to be productive, to create, to add value—these are fundamental human drives currently blunted by capitalism and the alienation it produces. Communism, he argued, would set those drives free—leading to radically increased prosperity. People would *want* to work. They would become far *more* productive, far *more* innovative—because they would finally get what they deserve for the value they produce and would be freed from coercive and dispiriting labor relations. Pretty much the only people who would be “needy,” then, would be those who literally *cannot* work (i.e., the very old, the severely mentally or physically ill or impaired, orphaned children, victims of natural disasters). And it would not necessarily be the task of *the state* to provide for them. Marx believed that in a world where people’s relationships were less exploitative, where society was less self-oriented, and where there was an understanding that all wealth flows fundamentally from the earth itself, which no one actually *owns* (or, better, which we all own in common), people would look out for one another. Marx did not envision a permanent welfare state, perennially seizing and reallocating income according to citizens’ apparent needs. Instead, he argued, the state would eventually “wither away.”¹⁸⁵

That is, Marx envisioned a world where hard work, innovation, and ambition are valued and nurtured, where people can be anything they want to be

(commensurate with their talents), and where all receive their just rewards for the value they produce. None of this is out of line with mainstream symbolic capitalist ideals. Indeed, as Marx repeatedly emphasized, communism was not orthogonal to capitalism—it was to evolve organically *out of* capitalism, retaining the best aspects of the bourgeoisie revolution while correcting for its excesses and shortcomings. This was part of the appeal among symbolic capitalists.

Marx also described his social vision as more objective, scientific, and rational than others conceived before or since (and more “grounded” as compared with those of “utopian socialists” like Saint-Simon).¹⁸⁶ His patron and frequent collaborator, Friedrich Engels, would go so far as to argue that people who mastered Marxian analysis could gain the same power over the social world that the natural sciences afford us over the material world.¹⁸⁷ This was obviously a seductive proposition for people (like symbolic capitalists) who define themselves in terms of their intellect and erudition. And the revolution itself, on Marx’s account, would ultimately be premised on the emergence of people who understand society as it really is (i.e., epistemic elites) and are simultaneously committed to social justice (i.e., moral exemplars) uniting the proletariat and then *leading* them to take control of the state.

Many contemporaries of Marx viewed this latter element as a fatal defect of his thinking. Mikhail Bakunin, for instance, argued it was unreasonable to expect the emergence of some alliance of noble leaders who would seize control over the state and all the nation’s wealth, and then redistribute it all fairly, taking nothing extra for themselves, their families, their friends, their own communities, or their allies—and who would then voluntarily dismantle the state and live among their fellow citizens as equals.¹⁸⁸ More likely, those who took control of the state would find justifications to give themselves more than others, find reasons to perpetuate and expand the state indefinitely, and target anyone who challenged these maneuvers as traitors and enemies of the revolution. No one, Bakunin argued, is or could be immune to these temptations: “If you took the most ardent revolutionary, vested him in absolute power, within a year he would be worse than the Tsar himself.”¹⁸⁹ Bakunin’s arguments have proved highly prescient virtually everywhere people have attempted to establish an ostensibly “Communist” state.

Nonetheless, symbolic capitalists, from the first Great Awakening through today, have imagined themselves as *just* the kind of people whose wisdom and beneficence allow them to transcend the myopia and selfishness of common folk and serve the greater good. We are *just* the kind of people who

could avoid being corrupted by wealth or power—which is why, we argue, a larger share of wealth and power should be consolidated in *our* hands as opposed to others’. With this in mind, it is not hard to understand why symbolic capitalists would find Marxism particularly appealing, nor why the working classes may have been wary of it.

Critically, as part of his “scientific” approach to socialism, Marx believed that slavery, patriarchy, and violent conflict were ultimately fated to be outgrown alongside capitalism. Although he lauded these predicted developments, he viewed organized efforts to advance causes like pacifism, feminism, and antiracism *per se* to be dangerous distractions.¹⁹⁰ On Marx’s view, campaigns such as these were tantamount to expending immense energy and resources on treating symptoms at the expense of curing the disease. If the communist revolution was successful, these other forms of exploitative relationships would be abolished alongside capitalism. Meanwhile, to the extent that ameliorative campaigns on these other issues were successful, they could render the status quo more bearable and forestall the “real” revolution. Marx also perceived that a focus on issues like race, gender, and sexuality tended to divide workers against one another, to largely the same effect: delaying the revolution. In order to keep U.S. Socialists united and focused tightly on the issue of class struggle, Marx endorsed the purging of feminists, sexual freedom advocates, pacifists, and antiracists from the American branch of the International Workingmen’s Association.¹⁹¹

Nonetheless, by the time of the first Awakening, Marx had been dead for some time, and many who embraced his ideas had found ways to reconcile communism with other forms of advocacy. As Orwell lamented at the time of the first Great Awakening, “One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words ‘Socialism’ and ‘Communism’ draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, ‘Nature Cure’ quack, pacifist and feminist in England.”¹⁹² Marxism, in turn, would come to inform and transform many other struggles that Marx deprioritized, such as feminism, antiracism, and anticolonialism. Developments like these are not unusual. As we will see, Awakenings often mobilize ideas in ways, and in the service of ends, that their progenitors neither anticipated nor approved of.

Ultimately, the communist revolutions many were anticipating in the United States and western Europe did not occur as planned (or at all). As the first Awakening came to an end, a theory of failure emerged and eventually rose to prominence: critical theory. The term itself was formally introduced by Max Horkheimer in his 1937 *Traditional and Critical Theory*. That book,

and much of his subsequent work, sought to explain why “the revolution” failed to materialize during the first period of Awakening. Rather than seeing successful worker-driven movements toward social liberation (as Marx had predicted), the twentieth century seemed to be defined by the rise of fascism, totalitarianism, and later, globalized capitalism. The divisions between states and markets were increasingly blurred. Workers had not united and risen up against their bosses but instead remained bitterly divided along the lines of race, nationality, religion, and so on. Rather than a unified struggle against capitalists, there was a world war, with workers primarily on the front lines killing each other (and another such war on the horizon). The prospects for meaningful resistance or productive revolution seemed increasingly bleak. “Critical theory” sought to work out where “conventional theory” (more specifically Marxism) went wrong, and to figure out how, and in what sense, its emancipatory project might still be possible.

Critical theorists ended up settling on culture and institutions of cultural production as the most important fronts in the struggle. That is, symbolic capitalists identified *themselves*, *their* institutions and outputs—*not* the workers, *not* the business owners—as central agents in creating a better world. By winning the culture war, they could create the conditions for “the Revolution” to occur—they could empower “the people” to understand their oppression and rise up to emancipate themselves. As C. Wright Mills put it in his “Letter to the New Left” (a 1960 essay that popularized the idea of a “New Left” in the United States and helped set its agenda),

We are frequently accused of being “utopian”—in our criticisms and in our proposals; and along with this, of basing our hopes for a New Left politics . . . upon the intelligentsia in its broadest sense. There is truth in these charges. But must we not ask: what now is really meant by utopian? And: Is not our utopianism a major source of our strength? I do not quite understand . . . why they cling so mightily to “the working class” of the advanced capitalist societies as *the* historic agency, or even as the most important agency, in the face of the really historical evidence that now stands against this expectation. . . . Who is it that is getting fed up? Who is it that is getting disgusted with what Marx called “all the old crap”? Who is it that is thinking and acting in radical ways? All over the world—in the bloc, outside the bloc and in between—the answer’s the same: it is the young intelligentsia.¹⁹³

Critical theory would ultimately provide the means for the “young intelligentsia” of the 1960s to distinguish itself from its Marxist forebears and articulate a new social vision.

Put another way, although formulated at the end of the first Great Awakening, critical theory didn't really have its "moment" until the second Great Awakening. This kind of trajectory is not unusual. Successful theories of failure are usually influential within their domain at the time they are put forward, but don't become particularly prominent among symbolic capitalists writ large until the next Awakening, as elites who want to call for "radical" change begin grasping at ways to distinguish their current campaigns from previous (failed) efforts. Again, these frameworks are often interpreted and deployed in ways that the theorists themselves would be uncomfortable with. For instance, although the 1960s New Left associated itself with the aims and methods of critical theory, most of the foundational critical theorists (e.g., Theodor Adorno, Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas) were highly critical of the New Left and aligned student movements. They did *not* view the "radicals" as understanding or applying the insights of critical theory particularly well. They were not particularly optimistic that the activists were poised to radically change society *for the better*.¹⁹⁴ Perhaps with good reason: by the mid-1970s, the second Awakening was sputtering out. It was again clear that the "revolution" would not be occurring anytime soon.

At the tail end of that Awakening, the Combahee River Collective (CRC)—an association of Black lesbian feminist socialists—put forward a new theory of failure to explain why "the Revolution" had not yet arrived. The problem, they argued, is that feminism, racial equality, gay rights, and socialism have typically been pursued as separate, if allied, campaigns. The CRC argued that this approach was doomed to failure. A socialist revolution that was not *simultaneously* a feminist and antiracist revolution would be insufficient to ensure people like *them* experienced liberation (the same held for a feminist revolution that was not simultaneously antiracist and socialist, and so on). Moreover, they explained, the encouragement of altruism in many of these movements had a pernicious effect on people who were especially marginalized or oppressed *within* a disadvantaged group. *Their* concerns and perspectives were consistently overlooked, their needs chronically unmet, as they perennially subordinated their own demands for the sake of the "greater good." For instance, it was considered threatening to the cohesion, momentum, and legitimacy of "the cause" to talk about the unsavory racial dynamics of the feminist or gay rights movement, or homophobia and misogyny that often manifested themselves in the Black Power movement. People who sought to address these issues were often told that, while their concerns may be legitimate, they were things that could be attended to after the "main" objective had been achieved. A better path to

liberation, the CRC argued, was to embrace “identity politics” (a term they have been credited with coining): “We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work. This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.”¹⁹⁵

By working to ensure liberation first and foremost for oneself, and for others like oneself—allying with others if and only insofar as there were overlapping interests—those who face multiple forms of marginalization or oppression would no longer have to choose to fight one form of oppression at the expense of the others. Nor would they have to pursue racial, gender, sexual, and socioeconomic justice as separate domains. By grounding their politics in their own specific identities, and the challenges they personally face, people could form coalitions to address multiple dimensions at once. They could come to more deeply understand (and, in turn, help others understand) how different forms of oppression are interrelated by looking at the concrete ways they intersect in their own lives, and in the lives of their allies. By being forthright about the pursuit of their own interests, allies would no longer need to deceive themselves or others about their true goals and motivations—rendering alliances more effective.

Of course, the idea that focusing on one’s own interests can promote the greater good more effectively than “working to end somebody else’s oppression”—at least superficially—is not far removed from Adam Smith’s famous argument in favor of capitalism: “He intends only his own security . . . he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”¹⁹⁶

Many certainly seem to have synthesized the CRC’s argument with Smith’s. Elites, especially those who identify with historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups, increasingly define the relentless pursuit of their own self-interest as a “radical” act. High-end consumption is redefined as an act of “self-care” or “self-affirmation”—as a feminist or antiracist “victory”—because they (elites who are women, nonwhite, LGBTQ, neurodivergent, or disabled) are “worth it” and “deserve it.”¹⁹⁷ Likewise, elites from historically

disadvantaged groups who accumulate ever more power or influence in their own hands are described as somehow achieving a “win” for those who remain impoverished, marginalized, and vulnerable. As discussed in the introduction to this book, behaviors that would be recognized as exploitative, oppressive, or disrespectful if carried out by people who are white, heterosexual, or male are often interpreted as empowering, righteous, or necessary when carried out by “other” elites and elite aspirants. As CRC founding member Barbara Smith has repeatedly emphasized, this is all very far from what they intended with their statement.¹⁹⁸

In any case, the CRC’s theory of failure was hugely influential for the third Great Awakening—including (perhaps especially) with respect to third-wave feminism. Debates around “identity politics” also took off in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the CRC’s ideas went increasingly mainstream. The waning of the third Awakening, in turn, gave rise to a new theory of failure that has grown especially prominent in the midst of the current period of tumult: critical race theory.

Critical race theory was born from the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement. At the time said movement was coming into its own, in the midst of the third Great Awakening, the civil rights movement had stalled out in the face of assassinations, riots, internal tensions, and growing public frustration; Nixon won two landslides, then Ronald Reagan unseated Jimmy Carter in yet another landslide in 1980. The GOP would control the White House for the next twelve years. How could one reconcile the fact that public attitudes had apparently moved so much on race, but racial inequalities remained so pronounced? How could one explain the rightward electoral swing following the successes that did occur in the civil rights movement? Most importantly, how could the cause of Black emancipation proceed in the current landscape, where mass mobilization seemed implausible? Critical race theory sought to answer questions like these.

The pioneers for critical race theory were largely *not* armchair theorists—they were lawyers. The ideas they developed were intended to be put to practical use (and indeed *were* successfully put to use in the courtroom). Their ambition was to use the very legal institutions that were designed to oppress and exploit in order to empower and liberate—to subvert laws written to serve the interests of the powerful in order to instead constrain their influence and undermine the status quo. Rather than focusing on the economic sphere (like the Marxists) or the cultural sphere (like the critical theorists), the CLS movement emphasized the laws and codes as an ideal site of struggle. Rather than mass movements or culture wars, their tools were lawsuits and legislation, or

the amendment of contracts, institutional rules, codes of conduct, standard operating procedures, teaching and training materials, and so on.

That is, in their focus and their methods, the CLS movement and critical race theory were quite distinct from “critical theory” per se. Indeed, if you read the movement’s foundational texts, beyond occasional references to Antonio Gramsci, there is little “critical theory” present;¹⁹⁹ the authors draw on other, largely unrelated, sources. However, as the frameworks developed by the CLS movement jumped out of the legal sphere and began interacting more directly with third-wave feminism, postcolonial activism, environmental advocacy, the gay rights movement, and queer theory, bridges were increasingly built between critical race theory and critical theory as such . . . and also with many other ideas and causes. Indeed, CLS movement cofounder Kimberlé Crenshaw has lamented how ideas associated with the movement have been taken to some weird places, and used in ways she and her peers did not intend and wouldn’t endorse.²⁰⁰ This is, of course, the perennial joy and terror of putting ideas out into the world and seeing them “catch on”: after a point, they take on a life of their own and are no longer “yours” to control.

From our current historical vantage point, it is unclear what theories of failure will emerge and gain prominence as the fourth Awakening winds down—let alone which of these theories future symbolic capitalists will ultimately find useful in their struggles. However, we can be confident that future frustrated elites will try to distinguish their own efforts from the failed campaigns of the past by leaning on a narrative that currently exists or will soon be produced about the limitations of the current Awakening and how they can be transcended downstream. If a preferred theory of failure does not naturally flatter the priorities and worldviews of said elites, it will be reinterpreted so it can serve this purpose.

Culture Wars

In his 1976 *The Coming of Post-industrial Society*, sociologist Daniel Bell highlighted how changes to the global economy were leading to the emergence of a new social order—one driven by a “knowledge economy,” dominated by technical elites, and highly stratified on the basis of factors like intellectual acumen and academic credentials.²⁰¹ Meanwhile, he argued, the labor and assets of those who traded in material goods and services would become increasingly devalued, leading to growing tensions between the technocrats and everyone else. Exacerbating these tensions, Bell argued, was the

widespread embrace among intellectuals of what essayist Lionel Trilling referred to as “adversary culture.”

Within the new elite class, people gained status through delegitimizing and denigrating institutions, traditions, values, and ways of life associated with the middle class. This, Bell argued, would lead to further mistrust of and resentment against the new elites—as the “common man” was being marginalized not just within the economy but within the culture as well. Moreover, Bell noted, there were two deep tensions in the cultural project of these new elites.²⁰² First, adversary culture was itself unmistakably a product of the very bourgeois culture it condemned and was, therefore, unlikely to present a true threat to the prevailing order. Indeed, although these new elites continued to view themselves as outsiders and subversives, they were themselves, increasingly, “the man.” This leads to the second core tension: insofar as these new elites were successful in advancing adversary culture, they could ultimately end up destroying the foundations of their own authority (i.e., trust in science, expertise, rationality, meritocracy, universities, the press, etc.). The dynamic Bell described becomes especially clear during Awakenings.

Frustrated erstwhile elites often attempt to delegitimize and displace establishment rivals (to make room for themselves) by indicting symbolic capitalist institutions and successful symbolic capitalists as too cozy with the wealthy and the privileged—and by presenting *themselves* as more authentic or effective champions for minoritized populations and the poor. Incumbents generally respond to these campaigns by trying to show that they are just as committed to eliminating inequalities as their critics or are even *better* allies for the marginalized and disadvantaged. That is, they try to meet or outflank their critics on “social justice” issues—creating a new consensus position among symbolic capitalists that is more symbolically “left” than before the Awakening. This, in turn, creates an opportunity for the opponents of mainstream symbolic capitalists to enhance *their* credibility, notoriety, and influence.

Again, symbolic capitalists are generally much farther to the left on “culture” issues than most Americans—and Awakenings drive them to stake out positions that are even farther out of touch with the rest of their countrymen. And as symbolic capitalists become more aggressive in trying to impose their values and priorities on others—and confronting, denigrating, marginalizing, or sanctioning those who refuse to get with the program—the differences between them and everyone else don’t merely grow larger, they also become much more salient. Moreover, during these interelite struggles, symbolic capitalists tend to be very publicly divided among themselves, with a faction of frustrated and aspiring elites explicitly disparaging more established symbolic

capitalists and their affiliated institutions, often while they are themselves engaged in discourse and performative displays that strike most “normies” as extreme, unappealing, and ridiculous. Consequently, both established elites and frustrated aspirants often end up mutually discredited in the eyes of much of the public by the time Awakenings have run their course.

Right-aligned symbolic capitalists—anti-wokes and conservatives—often try to exploit and exacerbate both the divisions within mainstream symbolic capitalists and the growing gulf between the mainstream consensus position and the rest of society. They attempt to lump insurgents and incumbents together as corrupt, out of touch, and out of control. Right-aligned symbolic capitalists and their allies paint themselves as populists who will restore order, sanity, and dignity to the country and its institutions—or, that failing, defund, dismantle, and disempower them. What starts out as an intermainstream struggle often devolves into a left-right struggle.²⁰³ Awakenings and culture wars, therefore, tend to travel hand in hand—and dramatic leftward movements within symbolic capitalist institutions are usually followed by “red waves” at the ballot box and beyond. Terms that were once the subject of inter-Left disputes, such as “identity politics,” “political correctness,” and “woke,” are appropriated by the Right as cudgels to attack *everyone* left of center and come to be used in almost exclusively pejorative or ironic ways.

These conservative shifts that follow Awakenings are often uncharitably described as “backlash” against progress. However, readers should recall that, since the 1960s, progress toward egalitarianism has largely stalled out on most fronts—with the relationships between Blacks and whites, rich and poor, roughly the same as they were sixty years ago. There is no meaningful relationship between Awakenings and material gains for marginalized and disadvantaged populations, nor is there a meaningful connection between Awakenings and durable attitudinal changes among the general public. If anything, there has been an *inverse* relationship between Awakenings and material “progress” from the second Awakening forward.

It is actually somewhat intuitive that Awakenings could correspond with a perpetuation or exacerbation of inequalities given that these uprisings are fundamentally “about” frustrated elite aspirants trying to secure superior social positions. But what this means with respect to interpreting the culture wars is that, when Americans shift right in the aftermath of Awakenings, they are generally *not* reacting against material changes that benefit marginalized populations at the expense of the majority group. Those have been few and far between and don’t cleanly correlate well with Awakenings in any case. The “backlash” instead seems to be about growing alienation among “normies”

from elite culture and elite institutions, whose outputs shift far more during Awakenings than any laws or relative material circumstances between groups.

We see these dynamics clearly in the data on public trust in experts. The General Social Survey began collecting these data in 1973, so we can only see the aftereffects of the second Awakening (not the antecedent baselines) and the most recent two episodes. Looking at trust in the scientific community along ideological lines,²⁰⁴ we see a few important periods. In the aftermath of the second and third Great Awakenings, we see significant drops in public trust in scientists. Toward the tail end of Awakenings, trust among moderates and liberals tends to recover. However, conservative trust seems to have been more durably shaken after 1986, leading to increased polarization around science: liberals became significantly *more* trusting of scientists after 1994 (as the Awakening was ending), while conservatives continued a more modest decline and moderates joined them.²⁰⁵ This polarization was exacerbated after 2010, and again starting in 2018. Political scientist Matthew Motta has argued that these latter shifts seem to be a product of the March for Science, wherein large numbers of scientists, engaging *as* scientists, more or less overtly declared themselves to be opposed to Trump and aligned with his political opposition—maneuvers that further increased (already high) trust in scientists among liberals while exacerbating declines among conservatives.²⁰⁶

We see the same patterns when we look along partisan (Democrat, Republican, independent) lines instead of ideology: after the late 1980s, there were consistent declines in Republicans' trust in scientists. After 1991, Democrats' trust in the scientific community began to increase, and it continued to rise steadily through 2016. After Trump was elected president, there was a *massive* upward shift in Democratic support for scientists. The share of Democrats expressing "a great deal" of confidence in the scientific community rose by more than 20 percentage points in the next five years.²⁰⁷ On the other side of the aisle, declines in trust in experts among Republicans began after 1987. From then through the early 1990s, Democrats, independents, and Republicans were all trending together: Americans across the board were growing more skeptical of the scientific community. However, after 1991, Democrats began shifting the other direction, while Republicans persisted on roughly the same steady downward trajectory from 1987 through 2018. After 2018, however, there was an accelerated decline in Republican confidence in the scientific community—7 percentage points over the subsequent three years. Nonetheless, Republican declines in trust in the scientific community were less than half the magnitude of Democratic *increases* over roughly the same span of time.

Across the board, trust in experts tends to decline during Great Awakenings. In their aftermath, however, attitudes tend to polarize. Left-aligned Americans shift from critiquing mainstream symbolic capitalist institutions to trying to bolster their legitimacy. Trust among right-aligned Americans, meanwhile, is often more durably eroded. One regular response to this erosion of trust is to construct alternative (right-valanced) infrastructures for cultural production. These often persist long after Awakenings and anti-Wokenings have run their course and durably undermine the authority and reach of mainstream symbolic capitalists.

For instance, in the aftermath of the second Great Awakening, many on the right concluded that academia was a lost cause and sought to establish an alternative ecosystem for right-aligned intellectual pursuits, beginning with the establishment of the Heritage Foundation (1973) and the Cato Institute (1977).²⁰⁸ In the wake of the third Great Awakening, there was a perception that a right-aligned intellectual sphere was not enough, and there were moves to establish right-aligned media, beginning with a major push for conservative talk radio and culminating with the 1996 establishment of Fox News.²⁰⁹ In the midst of the current Awakening, there have been repeated attempts to establish right-aligned social media spaces, from Parler to Truth Social to Elon Musk's "anti-woke" takeover of Twitter and Peter Thiel and J. D. Vance's major investments in Rumble.²¹⁰

In each Awakening, the already-large gap between symbolic capitalists and the general public tends to rapidly expand and is made highly salient. This creates a perceived market for alternative institutions of cultural production. Born out of the culture wars, these new institutions tend to have an existential stake in perennially sowing mistrust in mainstream symbolic capitalists and perpetuating the culture wars. They build symbolic capital for themselves, capture audience share, and grow their revenues by depicting mainstream institutions as biased, exclusionary, censorious, and out of touch. To the extent that mainstream symbolic capitalists actually do come to approximate these right-wing caricatures during periods of Awakening, they produce and empower their own gravediggers.

Coda: White Liberals

In a prescient series of essays for *Radical America* in 1977, Barbara and John Ehrenreich defined the professional-managerial class (the term they coined for symbolic capitalists) as "salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor

may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations.”²¹¹ In layman’s terms, the major role they play in society is to keep the capitalist machine running (in the present and in perpetuity), maximize its efficiency and productivity, and justify the inequalities that were required in order to achieve these ends. This posed a bit of a problem for symbolic capitalists, who, as the Ehrenreichs noted, were generally aligned with the New Left. They sympathized with radical feminism, the Black Power movement, environmental activism, the weakening of sexual taboos, socialism, the antiwar movement, and so on. However, they also had bills to pay and, as time went on, families to support—and there were lots of lucrative and new opportunities for those who were willing and able to partake in the globalized knowledge economy.

Toward the end of the second Awakening, the primary way most resolved this tension without nakedly “selling out” was to insist that they would use their new influence within “the machine” to help the disadvantaged. That is, they would be subversive “cogs,” who would engage in a “long march through the institutions” and leverage them toward alternative ends.²¹² They would learn to uplift those who were suffering, and empower those who were marginalized, through the very systems and institutions that would have otherwise exploited and oppressed them. Notice, however, that in defining their own flourishing within the “system” as a means of increasing their capacity to help the desperate and vulnerable, symbolic capitalists provided themselves with a powerful justification for climbing as high up the ladder as they could and accumulating more and more into their own hands: the more resources they controlled, and the more institutional clout they wielded, the more they would be theoretically able to accomplish on behalf of the needy and vulnerable (and the less capital would be in the hands of the “bad” elites). “Doing well” was redefined as a means of “doing good.”

From the outside, it often seemed as though symbolic capitalists were relentlessly engaged in a rat race to enhance their own social position. However, the Ehrenreichs noted, they typically did not think of themselves as being oriented toward such banal ends. Granted, the promised reallocation of the assets and opportunities amassed—ostensibly on behalf of the downtrodden—would likely never come (and indeed, some four decades after the Ehrenreichs published their essays, we’re still holding our breath on that). However, symbolic capitalists could nonetheless generate a sense of “progress” toward their egalitarian commitments by pushing their institutions to take *symbolic* actions with respect to empowering women and minorities, validating LGBTQ people, protecting the environment, and so forth.

The second key strategy adopted by the symbolic capitalists to reconcile their “day jobs” with their political beliefs was to try to live in accordance with their New Left values *personally* (that is, to find ways to signal their own individual commitment to feminism, antiracism, environmentalism—including through “just” consumption), and to encourage their peers to do the same. In the process, they turned the campaign for social justice “inward”—into a psychological and even spiritual project. The status quo may persist, largely as a result of their own work no less. However, symbolic capitalists could still think of themselves as virtuous in light of how they carried themselves in the private sphere and by conspicuously demonstrating the purity of their own hearts and minds.

Over the course of their essays, the Ehrenreichs powerfully explain some of the “pull” factors that led symbolic capitalists of the 1970s to disengage from social justice activism. However, there were also “push” factors that led them away from direct action during the second Awakening. Exploring those is perhaps an ideal way to both close out this chapter and transition to the themes of the next.

In the news media of the 1960s (as remains the case today in some respects), racism was depicted as primarily a problem of “backwards” rural and southern areas.²¹³ However, as civil rights leaders began to see major breakthroughs in the South, they decided that their work was not yet done. At the invitation of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, a Chicago-based civil rights body, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) launched a campaign against the de facto segregation in northern schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces in 1965. They began by trying to move Black families into predominantly white neighborhoods in Chicago. Rather than being welcomed with open arms by enlightened urban northerners, they were violently resisted at every turn. Here, it is worth quoting King at length:

Bottles and bricks were thrown at us; we were often beaten. Some of the people who had been brutalized in Selma and who were present at the Capitol ceremonies in Montgomery led marchers in the suburbs of Chicago amid a rain of rocks and bottles, among burning automobiles, to the thunder of jeering thousands, many of them waving Nazi flags. Swastikas bloomed in Chicago parks like misbegotten weeds. Our marchers were met by a hailstorm of bricks, bottles, and firecrackers. “White power” became the racist catcall, punctuated by the vilest of obscenities. . . . I’ve been in many demonstrations all across the South, but I can

say that I had never seen, even in Mississippi, mobs as hostile and as hate-filled as in Chicago. When we had our open housing marches many of our white liberal friends cried out in horror and dismay: “You are creating hatred and hostility in the white communities in which you are marching. You are only developing a white backlash.” They failed to realize that the hatred and the hostilities were already latently or subconsciously present. Our marches merely brought them to the surface. . . . We were the social physicians of Chicago revealing that there was a terrible cancer. . . . We were the social psychiatrists, bringing out things that were in the subconscious all along. . . . As long as the struggle was down in Alabama and Mississippi, they could look afar and think about it and say how terrible people are. When they discovered brotherhood had to be a reality in Chicago and that brotherhood extended to next door, then those latent hostilities came out.²¹⁴

As King explained in his 1967 address to the American Psychological Association, this vicious reception among the people who were supposed to be “allies”—among those who had been cheering the civil rights movement *elsewhere*—this stalling-out of progress in the section of the country that was supposed to be *easier* than the South led to deep rage in the Black community.²¹⁵ The SCLC’s message of nonviolence, forbearance, faith in humanity, and interracial cooperation increasingly rang hollow. Riots broke out. Increased repression followed. Black militias gained in prominence, encouraging African Americans to defend themselves against white aggression.²¹⁶ Black nationalist movements grew.

As scenes of unrest played out in *northern* streets (rather than comfortably far away in the South), media coverage of King and civil rights demonstrations grew overwhelmingly hostile.²¹⁷ Despite previously holding King up as a national hero, the Johnson administration cut off contact and access altogether when King began to criticize the Vietnam War. In 1967, with President Johnson’s blessing, the FBI launched a new campaign, COINTELPRO–BLACK HATE, seeking to “disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities” of King, the SCLC, and many other civil rights organizations and activists.²¹⁸ Public opinion quickly soured as well: at the time he was assassinated, King had a 75 percent *disapproval* rating according to polls.²¹⁹

Seeing the establishment turn so rapidly on a person who had bent over backward to accommodate them—who had consistently extended the benefit of the doubt to whites and encouraged others to do the same—the sense

grew in Black organizing spaces that white liberals could not be trusted. They may even be worse than right-wing opponents, many argued. Reactionary conservatives, for instance, would directly tell you how they felt and what they were after. You could plan around that; you could work with that (even if what they had to say was often horrifying or offensive). It was much harder to deal with people who pretended to be on board but were unwilling to make meaningful sacrifices and constantly deflected blame for social problems onto others. It was much more difficult to work with people who wouldn't resist the movement *per se*, but instead try to hijack it to suit their own interests. It was far tougher to tolerate someone who would not only lie to others, but who couldn't seem to be honest with themselves about what they were trying to accomplish and what their ideal endgame was. As *Ebony* magazine editor Lerone Bennett Jr. explained at the time,

White friends of the American Negro claim, with some justification, that Negroes attack them with more heat than they attack declared enemies. . . . Oppressed people learn early that the problem of life is not the problem of evil but the problem of good. For this reason, they focus their fire on the bona fides of avowed friends. . . . The white liberal is a man who finds himself defined as a white man, as an oppressor in short, and retreats in horror at that designation. But—and this is essential—he retreats only halfway, disavowing the title without giving up the privileges, tearing out, as it were, the table of contents and keeping the book. The fundamental trait of the white liberal is his desire to differentiate himself psychologically from white Americans on the issue of race. He wants to think, and he wants others to think, he is a man of brotherhood. . . . What characterizes the white liberal, above all, is his inability to live the words he mouths . . . he joins groups and assumes postures that permit him and others to believe something is being done. The key word here is *believe*.²²⁰

King grew increasingly disillusioned as well, arguing toward the end of his life that “Negros have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says, and they have taken white America at their word when they talked of it as an objective. But most whites in America in 1967, including many persons of goodwill, proceed from a premise that equality is a loose expression for improvement. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap—essentially, it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects to retain it. Most abrasions between Negroes and white liberals arise from this fact.”²²¹

The year before King uttered these words, SNCC issued a position paper arguing, “More and more we see black people in this country being used as a tool of the white liberal establishment. Liberal whites have not begun to address themselves to the real problem of black people in this country. . . . Previous solutions to black problems in this country have been made in the interests of those whites dealing with these problems and not in the best interests of black people in the country. Whites can only subvert our true search and struggles for self-determination, self-identification, and liberation in this country.”²²² Ultimately, SNCC would vote to expel whites from the organization entirely. Reporting on the purge in *New Republic*, journalist Andrew Kopkind noted at the time, “What galls SNCC people most is the way white radicals seem to have treated SNCC as some kind of psychotherapy, as a way to work out problems of alienation and boredom and personal inadequacy.”²²³

James Baldwin would find himself frustrated by the same. In 1972, he observed that even when white liberals tried to engage critiques by frustrated African Americans, they seemed to convince themselves (and tried to convince their interlocutors) that *other* white liberals were the problem. They sought to maintain themselves as an exception and aligned themselves fervently with Black Power and civil rights as a kind of indulgence (in the Catholic sense) for their *ongoing* sins: “It seemed very clear to me that [white liberals] were lying about their motives and were being blackmailed by their guilt . . . struggling to hold on to what they had acquired. For, intellectual activity, according to me, is and must be, disinterested. The truth is a two-edged sword—and if one is not willing to be pierced by the sword, even to the extreme of dying on it, then all of one’s intellectual activity is a masturbatory delusion and a wicked and dangerous fraud.”²²⁴

Baldwin, like King, began his public career as a firm believer in the possibility of racial reconciliation. While unflinching in discussing the horrors of the past and present, he was optimistic that the future could be better than the past. And he was beloved by white liberals for these characteristics. However, witnessing the growing infighting within the Black community, seeing the public turn against the civil rights struggle, and particularly in the wake of King’s assassination—Baldwin’s work increasingly reflected frustration and disillusionment. His trademark “critical patriotism” became less evident. As a consequence, his perspective grew increasingly out of step with his (symbolic capitalist) primary readers in the post-second Awakening era, who wanted to pat themselves on the back for the gains made in the civil rights era, hagiographize King (who was broadly despised at the time

of his death), pretend King's mission had been more or less accomplished, and get back to business.²²⁵

Of course, some Black leaders never grew alienated from white liberals because they never trusted them to begin with. For instance, in 1963, before the second Great Awakening was even fully underway, Malcolm X declared,

In this deceitful American game of power politics, the Negroes (i.e. the race problem, the integration and civil rights issues) are nothing but tools, used by one group of whites called Liberals against another group of whites called Conservatives, either to get into power or to remain in power. . . . The white liberal differs from the white conservative only in one way: the liberal is more deceitful than the conservative. The liberal is more hypocritical than the conservative. Both want power, but the white liberal is the one who has perfected the art of posing as the Negro's friend and benefactor; and by winning the friendship, allegiance, and support of the Negro, the white liberal is able to use the Negro as a pawn or a tool in this political "football game" that is constantly raging between white liberals and white conservatives. Politically the American Negro is nothing but a football.²²⁶

Baynard Rustin, however, argued that the focus on white liberals' sincerity or consistency was ultimately a dead end, as were attempts to try to carve out special considerations for members of historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

I believe that the Negro's struggle for equality in America is essentially revolutionary. While most Negroes—in their hearts—unquestionably seek only to enjoy the fruits of American society as it now exists, their quest cannot objectively be satisfied within the framework of existing political and economic relations. . . . "Preferential treatment" cannot help them. . . . Sharing with many moderates a recognition of the magnitude of the obstacles to freedom, [many] survey the American scene and find no forces prepared to move toward radical solutions. From this they conclude that the only viable strategy is shock; above all, the hypocrisy of white liberals must be exposed. These spokesmen are often described as the radicals of the movement, but they are really its moralists. They seek to change white hearts—by traumatizing them. Frequently abetted by white self-flagellants, they may gleefully applaud (though not really agreeing with) Malcolm X because, while they admit

he has no program, they think he can frighten white people into doing the right thing. To believe this, of course, you must be convinced, even if unconsciously, that at the core of the white man's heart lies a buried affection for Negroes—a proposition one may be permitted to doubt. But in any case, hearts are not relevant to the issue; neither racial affinities nor racial hostilities are rooted there. It is institutions—social, political, and economic institutions—which are the ultimate molders of collective sentiments. Let these institutions be reconstructed today, and let the ineluctable gradualism of history govern the formation of a new psychology.”²²⁷

We're now sixty years after Rustin penned those words, and his warnings about the futility of focusing on the hearts and minds of white liberals seem to have been quite prescient. Symbolic capitalists' rhetoric and expressed attitudes have grown markedly more progressive during each period of heightened concern about social justice. Institutions and allocations of resources, however, remain highly inegalitarian. Since the dawn of the twentieth century, symbolic capitalists have undergone four Great Awakenings. In practice, however, we have never been woke.