

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments September 2020

The mob comes for the art world

On “purity spirals” and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The New Criterion • Roger Kimball introduces the September issue

When we left you in June to enter our annual state of aestivation, Nikole Hannah-Jones, the principal author of The New York Times’s malignant fantasy known as “The 1619 Project,” had just won a Pulitzer Prize. The world was looking forward to the end of the shutdown caused by the Chinese virus—remember “Fifteen Days to Slow the Spread”?—and the return of normality.

We are still waiting. As we write, many cities across the country are engulfed by riots, which many in the media persist in describing as “peaceful protests.” Our favorite example of this gambit was provided in late May by msnbc’s Ali Velshi, who stood in front of a burning police station and assured viewers that the “protesters” were “not, generally speaking, unruly.” For her part, Hannah-Jones was more candid. “It would be a honor,” she said, were the 2020 riots to be called “the 1619 riots.”

According to the Narrative, the riots/protests were in response to the death of George Floyd at the end of May. In fact, the death of Floyd was at most the pretext for the orgy of politically correct racist grandstanding that continued and indeed accelerated throughout the summer. The cause was anti-civilization animus, stoked by the same fires of anti-American hatred that made the 1960s and early 1970s so cataclysmic. In their columns below, James Bowman and James Panero have more to say on the sociology and larger civilizational implications of this phenomenon.

Here, we would like to minute how the union of racist hysteria and obeisance to the dictates of “woke” identity politics has plunged the art world, and, by extension, the world of culture generally into a destructive purity spiral.

We take the phrase “purity spiral” from the journalist Gavin Haynes. “A purity spiral occurs,” he writes, “when a community becomes fixated on implementing a single value that has no upper limit, and no single agreed interpretation. The result is a moral feeding frenzy.”

Students of history will know all about this species of perverted gustatory over-indulgence. The French Revolution is one locus classicus. In that macabre carnival, the more extreme

Montagnards consumed the (somewhat) more moderate Girondists before turning to consume themselves. No citizen, not even Robespierre himself, could be sufficiently virtuous to satisfy the inexorable demands of revolutionary zeal.

In every case, Haynes notes, what we see is “a bidding war for morality turned into a proxy war for power.” Thus it invariably happens that the purity spiral is also a search for enemies, a concerted effort to divide the world between the tiny coterie of the blessed and the maddening crowd of the damned. The game, Haynes writes, “is always one of *purser-than-thou*.”

Writing in *New York* magazine this summer, the commentator Andrew Sullivan noted the prominent role that language—that is, the effort to police language—plays in the economy of coercion. “Revolutionaries,” he wrote, “also create new forms of language to dismantle the existing order”:

The use of the term “white supremacy” to mean not the kkk or the antebellum South but American society as a whole in the 21st century has become routine on the left, as if it were now beyond dispute. . . . The word “racist,” which was widely understood quite recently to be prejudicial treatment of an individual based on the color of their skin, now requires no intent to be racist in the former sense, just acquiescence in something called “structural racism,” which can mean any difference in outcomes among racial groupings. Being color-blind is therefore now being racist.

And there is no escaping this. The woke shift their language all the time, so that words that were one day fine are now utterly reprehensible. You can’t keep up—which is the point. . . . The result is an exercise of cultural power through linguistic distortion.

Exactly. And where does it end? Well, for Andrew Sullivan it ended with his leaving his position at *New York*. Candor and wokeness do not mix.

Haynes focuses on two niche activities, the world of knitting and that of young adult fiction. Are there any more unlikely candidates for corruption by wokeness?

But that is just the point. *Everything* is susceptible to the demands of the purity spiral. You can never be revolutionary enough, Comrade, or sufficiently Green, or fervid enough in your “anti-racism.” How dare you pretend that knitting is exempt from the demands of racial hectoring! How dare you think that you can write about the experience of a black teen if you are white!

The examples that Gavin Haynes describes are plenty surreal. And a look at the day’s news is full of examples of the purity spiral at work. First it was statues of Confederate soldiers. Then it was the statues of imperfect abolitionists. Then it was Lincoln himself.

Some years ago in this space, we quoted the historian Nigel Biggar, who, speaking about the clamor over a statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College, Oxford, predicted this process of repudiation inflation. “If Rhodes must fall,” he said,

so must Churchill, whose views on empire and race were similar. And so probably must Abraham Lincoln. While Lincoln liberated African-American slaves, he doubted they could be integrated into white society and favoured their separate development—their apartheid—in an African colony. If we insist on our heroes being pure, then we aren't going to have any. Last year the shine on Mahatma Gandhi's halo came off, when we learned of his view that Indians were culturally superior to black Africans. Should this blot out all his remarkable achievements? I think not.

Purity spirals end only when forthrightly confronted and exposed. Efforts at conciliation, like the habit of appeasement, serve to increase their ferocity. Haynes notes that purity spirals involve a process he terms “moral outbidding . . . which corrodes the group from within, rewarding those who put themselves at the extremes, and punishing nuance and divergence relentlessly.” The key to disrupting them is to find strategies to short-circuit that metabolism, disrupting the pipeline of rewards.

Everything is susceptible to the demands of the purity spiral. You can never be revolutionary enough.

This summer, word came that Keith Christiansen, perhaps the single most distinguished curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was beset by the mob. His tort? Commenting via his Instagram account on a drawing of the French archaeologist Alexandre Lenoir. Lenoir devoted himself to saving French monuments from the all-consuming maw of the French Revolution. “How many great works of art have been lost to the desire to rid ourselves of a past of which we don't approve[?],” Christiansen wrote. “And how grateful we are to people like Lenoir who realized that their value—both artistic and historical—extended beyond a defining moment of social and political upheaval and change.”

Uh oh. “Beyond a defining moment of social and political upheaval and change”? Clearly Christiansen was just asking for it, for it is axiomatic in the world of the purity spiral that there is *no* beyond or outside “the defining moment of social and political upheaval.” The spiral is total. According to a story in *The New York Times*, although Christiansen “appeared [only “appeared”?] to be arguing for the preservation of monuments, he also struck some as insensitive and tone deaf.” “This is disgusting,” wailed another comment, “not acceptable.”

In our view, Christiansen had two viable choices. He could simply have ignored the criticism. Or he could have responded with a two-word Anglo-Saxon imperative whose second word is “you.” He did neither. Rather he took down the post and closed his Instagram account. In other words, abject capitulation. The Met's director, Max Hollein, hopped onto the self-abasement cavalcade, tugging on his metaphorical forelock and whining that “There is no doubt that the Met and its development is also connected with a logic of what is defined as white supremacy.”

This is preposterous. The Met is a magnificent repository of masterpieces from around the globe. It has no need to apologize for its existence. And of course, it is not just the Met. The curatorial staff at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum issued a letter to the museum's management decrying "an inequitable work environment that enables racism, white supremacy, and other discriminatory practices." Unhappy ex-staffers at the New Orleans Museum of Art have issued an open letter castigating its "plantation-like culture" and racist attitudes. Ditto the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh. Gary Garrels, the senior curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was forced out after remarking during an online meeting that "we will definitely still continue to collect white artists." Not to do so, he said, amounts to "reverse discrimination." It would, of course, but the mob didn't care.

Hooligans and anarchists, seizing on the spurious excuse of the death of a black man in police custody, have rampaged across the country destroying property, attacking the police, and terrorizing ordinary citizens. A statue of Teddy Roosevelt or Abraham Lincoln has nothing to do with the death of the unfortunate George Floyd. Neither, for that matter, does a statue of Robert E. Lee or Andrew Jackson. An innocuous comment by an eminent art historian about a figure from the past whose actions helped to preserve the material deposit of civilization is not "disgusting," it is salubrious and illuminating. To pretend otherwise is to play into the hands of the zealots and enable them to ride the purity spiral another turn or two higher.

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