

# The New Criterion

Features June 2023

## The diversity myth

by Peter Thiel

*On multiculturalism as misdirection.*

*Editors' note: The following is an edited version of remarks delivered at The New Criterion's gala on April 27, 2023, honoring Peter Thiel with the tenth Edmund Burke Award for Service to Culture and Society.*

I was involved in a good many campus and culture wars for almost a decade, in the late Eighties and early Nineties when I was at Stanford. I started a conservative student newspaper, The Stanford Review, back in 1987. Four years is an eternity in a college context, but we managed to keep the paper going for all that and more—it's still intact, thirty-five years old or so at this point. Of course there was ample craziness and silliness and stupidity and wickedness on the college campus for us to report on.

Some of that craziness, however, had a much greater and more cosmic resonance. One of the very big debates at Stanford in the late Eighties was about the "Western Culture" course. This was a sort of formational program, a year-long course all Stanford freshmen were required to take. Jesse Jackson led a protest at Stanford with the famous chant, *Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Culture's got to go*. This was a commentary on the course and the particular books studied, but then also on the entire civilization covered by the course—somehow a very local and a very universal thing at the same time.

I thought I might start with a reading from the book that David O. Sacks and I wrote a few years after this, *The Diversity Myth* (1995). The first chapter talks about the abandonment of the great books at Stanford and describes one of the titles chosen to replace them in the wake of the protests. It is a play by Aimé Césaire called *A Tempest*, a retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in which Caliban becomes a kind of revolutionary hero. The magician Prospero is portrayed as an evil imperialist. The book culminates in a tirade by Caliban, and I'd like to read a few lines because I think it captures the temper of those times, which seem at once like a long, long time ago and not even yesterday: "And I know that one day my bare fist, just that, will be/ enough to crush your world. The old world is falling apart!// And by the way . . . you have a chance to get it over with: you can fuck off."

So the conceit that my friend David and I had in *The Diversity Myth*—and we ran with it for 250 pages—was that all that’s needed is to describe what’s going on in the ivory tower, that to reveal the dangers will be enough to defuse them. Our readers could ask for themselves: *Well, how does this compare with Shakespeare? Is this a step up? Is this a great book? Is this really multicultural? Is it really about non-Western cultures? Or is it just sort of a tendentious left-wing anti-Western crusade?* You would present these kinds of arguments, the idea went, and that would somehow be enough to win the debate. You just speak the truth to power, and it will unravel the whole mess.

And of course, a lot of *The Diversity Myth* just documents incredibly silly stuff: an assignment to make an Aztec newspaper from the year 1524; the shift in curriculum requirements to include courses like “Issues in Self-Defense for Women” and “The American Drinking and Drug Culture,” the latter culminating in a capstone “class party” where students were encouraged, of course, to drink and do drugs; student-life initiatives like the “Condom Rating Contest,” where prophylactics were scored in categories such as “taste” and “sense of security”; or the refusal of the Stanford administration to cover over the “glory holes” cut into bathroom stalls in the library and cafeteria.

We put so much work into rehashing these insanities that the project came to resemble shooting fish in a barrel. One of my smarter liberal friends said, “Maybe it’s all true, but isn’t it kind of pornographic, Peter? You just give us a bunch of pornography here, and it doesn’t really change anything.” And there’s something to that. Part of the challenge was to explain why anybody who didn’t go to

Stanford would want to read this book. The somewhat canned answer was, well, ideas have consequences, and these ideas are going to spread from the university to the rest of society. If you don’t pay attention here, the genie’s going to get out of the bottle.

This was dismissed as a very, very contrived argument back in 1995, though it doesn’t seem that way now. When I look back on *The Diversity Myth*, almost three decades later, I still think that almost every point we made was right. There’s very little that’s wrong, which is both gratifying and depressing. Simply being right about particular issues—and all of you here who have been fighting these battles for decades know this—hasn’t made a dent in the broader diversity agenda. Back then, “multiculturalism” was the catchall term for this baggy, monstrous ideology; today, it calls itself “woke” and fights for “diversity, equity, and inclusion.” The problem has only metastasized. We did not make a difference. Is there something that we missed altogether in this debate? What is really going on?

To frame this question, I’ll refer back to something I think has held up fairly well from *The Diversity Myth*—the title. It’s an ambiguous title. You can put the stress on one of two words. If you stress “diversity,” it means that diversity is not real, a fiction. There’s no real

---

We put so much work into rehashing these insanities that the project came to resemble shooting fish in a barrel.

multiculturalism; it's monocultural. The agenda is not non-Western; it's anti-Western. At Stanford, for instance, multicultural initiatives were funded by slashing the budgets of the university's foreign-language departments. You don't have diversity when you gather people who look different but talk and think alike. It's not enough to hire the extras from the space-cantina scene in Star Wars.

But there was always a secondary meaning to the title, in which you put the stress on the word "myth." Rather than dismiss "diversity" out of hand, let's just accept that we have no idea what it means. It's like a shibboleth, some kind of idol or false god that our society worships. It's extraordinarily hard to pin down—in fact, the Stanford administrators tasked with defining "multiculturalism" in the 1990s did so in the vaguest terms imaginable, as if protecting cult mysteries. What is clear is that we are encamped at the altar of diversity, venerating and honoring it as the highest thing.

So the question we should ask is this: in worshiping diversity, in making it the highest value, what is it that we are missing? Is this an exercise in attention redirection, a kind of magic show in which you're watching the magician and don't notice the gorilla jumping up and down in back of the stage?

---

**Diversity becomes a kind of divertissement, distracting our attention from the things that really matter.**

There's a latent premise in this line of questioning. When you observe, as we did, that what's going on is both very evil and very silly, it sounds almost self-contradictory. How can something be both very silly and very evil at the same time? The answer is that what's going on is very silly, but the silliness

is distracting us from very important things. That's the nature of the evil. Diversity becomes a kind of divertissement, distracting our attention from the things that really matter.

What I'd like to do is delineate a few areas in which diversity is making us ignore the real issues that we should be paying attention to. I want to suggest that, at least on a public-policy level, all these debates about diversity, identity politics, multiculturalism, the woke religion, etc., should be treated like debates about homelessness. Homelessness is a mess. It's a problem. And at the same time that it is a very real problem, it is a giant machine to redirect attention from all the other problems across America toward a narrow aspect of big-city dysfunction. When homelessness is forced into every policy conversation, it leads to circuitous, dead-end reasoning—*We're never going to fix homelessness until we fix the schools, but we're never going to fix the schools, the police, or even the roads until we fix homelessness*. It becomes an all-purpose excuse for ignoring what's really going on. So let me, in quick succession, list a few of the deeper issues obscured by our diversity obsession today.

Start with the university. It's easy to focus on all the insanity in the humanities. But if you remember what universities themselves believe—that all their serious work, their cutting-edge research, is done in the sciences—the focus on the humanities begins to resemble an attention redirect, stifling the hard questions about what is actually going on in the sciences. Are they progressing as advertised? Are we still living in an accelerating world in which science is fundamentally healthy and critical, with diversity of thought? It shouldn't have required covid to be able to ask these questions, to notice that "science" has somehow gotten to be a very, very diseased thing. Most imagine a scientist to be an independent researcher who thinks for himself, and this figure may still appear in children's books, but in practice the occupation mostly entails the enforcement of a fixed set of dogmas.

A few years after *The Diversity Myth* came out, a Stanford physics professor, Bob Laughlin, got a Nobel Prize. And he began to suffer from the supreme delusion that, now that he had a Nobel Prize in physics, he also had academic freedom and could investigate anything he wanted. Now, there are a lot of controversial topics in science. You could have a heterodox view on stem-cell research, or you could be a skeptic of climate change or Darwinism. But Laughlin hit on a topic that was far more taboo than any of the above. He had the idea that most of the scientists were doing no work at all. They were actually stealing money from the government, just creating all these fraudulent grant applications. Laughlin had done a lot of work studying the physics of super-high temperatures (superconductivity and the like), and he once told me that, of the roughly fifty thousand papers written on the subject, maybe twenty-five of them were any good at all.

Laughlin's team started with the biology department at Stanford, launching a sort of inquiry into what, exactly, it was doing. They didn't actually publish the results—they just had a public hearing and generally denounced all the professors as having stolen money from the government. The generous conclusion would be that the department wasn't fully fraudulent: just an incredibly incrementalist exercise in groupthink that wasn't really moving the dial forward. This was a line of thinking that was completely, completely taboo. I don't need to tell you how the story ends.

This question of scientific and technological stagnation is in some sense the Achilles heel of the universities. It's hard to uncover. Right now the humanities are transparently ridiculous. You might think of the humanities as the Department of Motor Vehicles. And the physics department is sort of like the self-proclaimed rocket scientists at the National Security Agency. The crypsis makes their

activities look more intelligent and more advanced. But my belief is that the dmv is probably better run than the nsa. The fact that you don't have a clue what's going on at the nsa gives you a hint as to which of the two is worse. Something like this is going on with the sciences more broadly.

---

This question of scientific and technological stagnation is in some sense the Achilles heel of the universities.

There are two basic debate techniques you can have when you're arguing with someone. You can go after the enemy at the weakest point, which in the college context is the humanities: it's ridiculous, and you're most likely to come away with a sort of tactical victory. But the other strategy is to go after the enemy's strongest point: to say there's no real science going on, that string theorists aren't making the fundamental breakthroughs that we're told, and that physicists have otherwise been twiddling their thumbs for fifty years. And if you can win that point, it's game, set, and match.

**M**y second candidate theory—and this is where I have some sympathies with Marxist and Randian types—amounts to an economically reductionist line of questioning. It's the classic *cui bono*: Who's actually benefiting from this stuff? How does it all play out? An old-school Marxist critique of what we call "cultural Marxism" would say that all these identity politics, the whole diversity agenda, has only served to divide the working class. People are supposed to focus on their real economic interests, and they've been diverted into all these other questions. So from a classically Marxist point of view, *dei* initiatives are a fundamentally reactionary form of politics. A historian might point out that, since the diversity agenda took off in the 1970s, it has coincided with a massive increase in inequality in this country. Correlation, of course, doesn't prove causation. But were they somehow linked?

And if we drill a little deeper, we might conclude that inequality in the United States has largely been driven by real-estate interests and corrupt land-use agreements—in short, mismanaged cities of one sort or another. If urban slumlords have benefited from citywide diversity initiatives to the tune of trillions of dollars, shouldn't the Marxists be asking questions about how it all worked out?

A thought experiment might flesh this crazy theory out just a little bit more. If you were sitting here in Manhattan back in 2007, or in San Francisco, and you told me the average rent would double in the next sixteen years, I would say that's completely impossible. People would just move. They'd figure out some other place to go. But maybe you countered, *well, let's say rent is going to double anyways*—and then asked, *how would that be possible?*

It would be inexplicable without recourse to a kind of ideological superstructure, inflicting some version of Stockholm syndrome.

If you're a gay person, you might be told that if you ever move from Manhattan to Hoboken you'll be beaten up by bat-wielding thugs right away. If you're a woman living in a rat-infested apartment in San Francisco, where the rent is going up and up while you fantasize about a nice suburban house in Reno, Nevada, you might hear that, well, if you ever dare to move to Reno, you are going to be chained to your bed and forced to carry a baby to term. The only logical explanation is that a crazed, ideological intensification has distracted us from what's really going on.

Of course, real-estate interests can't be the sole driver of this phenomenon. Think of all the woke corporations embedded in New York's economy. Was their capitulation to *dei* a form of insanity?

Or was the woke tax the relatively lesser cost for them to pay? Focusing on the economic consequences of the diversity agenda—the real-estate analysis is only the tip of the iceberg—may be reductionist, but it is revealing.

In the university context, such an inquiry might explore why student debt has gone up from \$300 billion in 2000 to \$2 trillion today. The cop-out answer is that the \$2 trillion of student debt went to pay for \$2 trillion worth of lies about how great education is. In my view this reading is too generous. How much of that \$2 trillion actually went to education as opposed to room and board? If you analyze the universities in economic terms, you might even conclude that the dorms and residences are the profit center driving an elaborate real-estate racket. And this is not to mention the web of offices and administrators tasked with overseeing not education but “student life.” Scale this model up, and you begin to understand why it’s so hard to exist outside of a big city in the United States—a vast country with swaths of empty space and lots of affordable housing—and why those deplorables who leave the reservation are viewed with such disdain.

**B**eyond science and economics lies the question of wokeness as a religion. On one level it is a distraction from religion: God is the biggest thing there is, it might be observed, and thinking about diversity makes us forget about God. This is true as far as it goes, but on a deeper level the multicultural agenda is very entangled with the Judeo-Christian tradition. That tradition is strongly identified with the side of the victim; much of the Bible presents moral reversals in this vein, in a sort of antimythological move. The Cain and Abel story, in which the murderous Cain is duly punished for the sin against his brother, is the flipside of the story of Romulus and Remus, in which the slayer Romulus is celebrated from the point of view of the city he goes on to establish. The Jews are the marginalized people in the desert. Christ, of course, is the ultimate victim.

---

The two are not identical, but they are so closely related that we might call wokeness a particularly Christian temptation.

The so-called woke religion is a perversion of this Judeo-Christian tradition, but nonetheless closely adjacent to it. So when we describe it as a religion *tout court*, we’re doing it somewhat of a disservice—we need to be far more specific about the ways in which it emulates or differs from Christianity. The two

are not identical, but they are so closely related that we might call wokeness a particularly Christian temptation.

In responding to the religious woke impulse, there’s a kind of Nietzschean, anti-diversity move that I find incredibly tempting in an emotional sense. It boils down to a strongman argument—think of Bronze Age Pervert and other internet types—that says, well, the West may in fact be chauvinist, racist, sexist, and all the other things it’s accused of being, but we should embrace that rather than apologize for it.

It's a very Nietzschean argument, as I said, but there's also a very Nietzschean counterargument, perhaps more biographical than philosophical. At the end of his life, when Nietzsche was going insane, he said something along the lines of, "God of the Jews, you have won." By this remark he meant that the modern West would be a world ruled by the victim.

In one sense Nietzsche's intuition was correct. When modern man stares into the abyss, it's the abyss of the unforgettable victim, now barely clinging to its Judeo-Christian heritage. But was the development Nietzsche foresaw inevitable? Or did it depend on the tacit acceptance, on some level, of certain distortions to the Judeo-Christian tradition, which Nietzsche and his successors fundamentally misunderstood?

That such considerations have been largely confined to remote corners of the internet gives you some sense of how our fixation on diversity has distracted us from a more pressing theological crisis. However we arrived at this point, the categories we started with are now all quite backwards. The progressive, theologically liberal types, backed by institutional support and intent on dispensing their vision of social justice, have come to resemble the nasty money-changers in the temple. And then the most regressive fundamentalists—stubbornly persisting in the belief that, well, yeah, everybody's sort of guilty and everybody did some bad things in the past, but we have to forgive one another because otherwise we're never going to move on—are spat upon like Samaritans.

**B**ut for those of you who think that science, economics, or even religion are distractions from politics, and that these big-picture questions are not necessarily the best things to focus on while we man the ramparts—let's ask, then, how do ideas like diversity, multiculturalism, and political correctness distract from healthy political discourse? The idea I always come back to, one that strikes me as very suggestive, is the etymology of the term "political correctness" itself.

By the 1980s, political correctness was something conservatives used as an epithet to describe deranged dittoheads on the left. If you go back to the 1970s, it was actually used by very progressive people as a term of self-congratulation. But if you go back to the

1950s, and strip away all the connotations that accrued over time—if you were a "politically correct" person in 1950, it meant that you followed directions from Moscow as a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. The totalitarian impulse, with its extraordinary demands on the individual conscience, is baked into the very notion of political correctness. We should think about that. Striving for diversity, especially diversity of thought, can be good. But anyone who prizes liberty—conservatives, libertarians, classical liberals, and the rest—must never lose sight of the cosmic battle against atheist communism.

---

Striving for diversity, especially  
diversity of thought, can be good.

My goal here has been to concretize all these concerns, not with the aim of providing answers, but simply of asking questions. I'm not saying that my Henry George-inflected real-estate analysis is

the absolute truth, but we do need to ask how much of college “tuition” is diverted to real-estate interests. Or take TikTok: surveillance questions aside, we should ask how communist China might benefit from an AI engine that deranges and polarizes our society. And if we’re focused on diversity questions—*Are we supposed to be overly sensitive to various people of East Asian descent? Are we being too sensitive or not sensitive enough?*—they divert our attention from the far more important communism question, which belongs front and center. So in conclusion—and this is a simplification, perhaps a distortion, but I think you know what I mean—it would be healthier that, whenever someone mentions dei, you just think ccp.

---

**Peter Thiel** is a technology entrepreneur and investor.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 41 Number 10 , on page 4

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2023/6/the-diversity-myth>