

When Harvard and Yale Want To, They Act With Alacrity

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In the last decade, top officials at Harvard and Yale exploited accusations of systemic racism in the country and at their institutions to remake scholarship and teaching at their universities. Yet recently they have dodged and dithered in the face of well-documented charges of antisemitism, racial discrimination, censorship, viewpoint homogeneity, and politicized curricula. This suggests that administrators and faculty at Harvard and Yale doubt that such ailments are ailments or, if ailments, that they impair education, or, if ailments that impair education, justify risking their comfort and convenience to remedy.

In August 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, then-Harvard Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Claudine Gay sent a memo to the “FAS community.” Three months before, Minneapolis police officers killed convicted felon George Floyd while subduing and arresting him. This sparked months of nationwide protests involving looting, arson, and clashes with the police. Focusing on the protests and overlooking the violence, Gay announced in her memo that “a second pandemic is unfolding, one with deeper roots in American life.”

This “second pandemic” had global significance and immediate ramifications for Harvard, declared Gay. “People across the world have risen up in protest against police brutality and systemic racism, awake to the devastating legacies of slavery and white supremacy like never before,” she wrote, adopting the perspective of Black Lives Matter and Critical Race Theory. “The calls for racial justice heard on our streets also echo on our campus, as we reckon with our individual and institutional shortcomings and with our Faculty’s shared responsibility to bring truth to bear on the pernicious effects of structural inequality.”

Now was the time to act, Gay insisted: “This moment offers a profound opportunity for institutional change that should not and cannot be squandered.” A political scientist and college dean, Gay did not urge her colleagues to study the moment – to evaluate the national mood, investigate the validity of the protesters’ grievances and the costs of their violence, and analyze the assumptions, evidence, and reasoning informing popular discourse. Instead, she summoned Harvard to link arms with the protesters. “The national conversation around racial equity continues to gain momentum and the unprecedented scale of mobilization and demand for justice gives me hope,” she stressed. “In raw, candid conversations and virtual gatherings convened across the FAS in the aftermath of George Floyd’s brutal murder, members of our community spoke forcefully and with searing clarity about the institution we aspire to be and the lengths we still must travel to be the Harvard of our ideals.”

Apparently, Harvard's arts-and-sciences faculty spoke uniformly and was of one mind about the political and educational significance of the protests tearing the country apart. Gay and they did not recognize an obligation to examine rigorously the protesters' opinions that racism was systemic in America, that more than 150 years after its abolition, slavery's legacy remained devastating, and that white supremacy was woven into the country's norms, practices, and laws. Rather, according to Gay, Harvard's duty was to ratify the protest movement's radical critique of the country, and to reorient Harvard's scholarship and teaching around transforming the nation in line with the protest movement's far-reaching demands.

That reorientation, Gay explained, "demands scholarship that affirms the relevance, significance, and worth of diverse cultural backgrounds and histories." As if Harvard had not engaged in such affirmation for a generation or more, she added that "preparing our students for leadership in today's globalized yet profoundly unequal society, requires an education that includes the voices, stories, and lived experiences of those too long pushed to the margins."

To harness Harvard to the pursuit of progressive social justice, she planned to invest tens of millions of dollars to hire and train more faculty focused on race, color, and ethnicity:

This fall, we will reactivate the cluster hire in ethnicity, indigeneity, and migration, with the goal of making four new faculty appointments. In order to accelerate our progress, however, I am also establishing the Harvard College Visiting Professorship in Ethnicity, Indigeneity, and Migration to recruit leading scholars of race and ethnicity to spend a year at Harvard College actively engaged in teaching our undergraduates. Beginning in 2021-2022, the FAS will appoint up to two new visiting scholars each year, based on recommendations from academic departments. Finally, to seed new research directions and develop the next generation of scholars, we will also invest in the academic pipeline. The Inequality in America postdoctoral fellowship program, which currently recruits two new fellows each year, will be expanded in the coming year to recruit two additional early career scholars whose work focuses specifically on issues of racial and ethnic inequality.

Gay also announced initiatives to create "a more inclusive visual culture," increase "leadership opportunities for staff of color," and "appoint the inaugural Associate Dean of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging for the FAS."

All this, Gay emphasized, was only the beginning of restructuring Harvard around an ideology that placed systemic racism, structural inequality, and white supremacy at the heart of America.

The Harvard Corporation so admired Gay and the overhaul of Harvard scholarship and teaching she launched in the summer of 2020 that three years later it appointed her university president. Her presidency, the shortest in Harvard's history, came to an inglorious

end after six months amid her maladroitness handling of pro-Hamas and anti-Israel protests on campus following Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, massacre in southern Israel, and her lackluster response to the harassment and intimidation of Jewish students.

Few were the Harvard professors who had sounded the alarm in 2020 or even publicly expressed skepticism about Gay's transformative project. Yet her ambitions obscured that racial justice was a contested term: Plenty of respectable figures, if not Harvard professors, hold that law and morality require both government and institutions of higher education receiving federal funds to operate on a colorblind basis. Rather than commissioning studies to determine whether and to what extent America and Harvard suffered from systemic racism, Gay assumed the truth of that progressive shibboleth. She did not take into account the violence – causing an estimated more than \$1 billion in property damage and injuring more than 900 law-enforcement officers – that marked the George Floyd protests. Consequently, it seems not to have occurred to Gay that a reasonable person could have concluded that the summer of 2020 protests obliged the university to invest in the hiring and training of faculty to study, and reorient the curriculum around, constitutional government, the rule of law, and the virtues of freedom.

Gay's subordination of Harvard College to progressive orthodoxy followed in the footsteps of then-Yale University President Peter Salovey.

On Oct. 30, 2015, Erika Christakis, an expert in early childhood education and then-associate master of a Yale residential college, suggested in an email to students that there should be room for Halloween costumes that are "a little bit obnoxious ... a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive." This outraged some students, who insisted that her job was to provide a "safe space."

On Nov. 3, signaling that students had rightly condemned Yale for failing to regulate Halloween costumes, President Salovey and Provost Ben Polak announced a "five-year, \$50 million initiative to increase faculty diversity." Yale would "provide \$25 million in central resources over a five-year period for faculty recruitment, faculty appointments, and emerging faculty development." It would also "support the appointment of faculty targets of opportunity who would enrich diversity or contribute on another dimension of strategic importance to the university."

On Nov. 5, in a scene caught on video, dozens of students surrounded Nicholas Christakis – Erika's husband, a sociology professor, and the residential-college master. They demanded that he apologize for his wife's email, accused him of racial insensitivity, cursed, and screamed at him to resign.

Following the students' emotional outbursts and public berating of Nicholas Christakis, Salovey announced additional initiatives in a Nov. 17 email to the Yale community to deal with what he indicated was the university's complicity in perpetuating discrimination.

“Educating our community about race, ethnicity, diversity, and inclusion,” he wrote, “begins with the university’s leadership.” Despite having risen to the academy’s highest ranks, Salovey insisted that he, like his colleagues, needed remedial education in racial justice: “I, along with the vice presidents, deans, provosts, and other members of the administration, will receive training on recognizing and combating racism and other forms of discrimination in the academy.”

Few were the Yale professors who objected openly to Salovey’s inflammatory description of the university or to his insertion of schemes of advocacy and indoctrination into Yale’s intellectual life and governance.

It was not because unexpected events clarified systemic racism in America that Gay in 2020 and Salovey in 2015 acted with alacrity. Rather, captive to fashionable and reductive ideas that assert the omnipresence of racism, inequality, and white supremacy, they capitalized on controversies to entrench campus dogma. That very dogma impedes action today at Harvard and Yale to remedy antisemitism, race-based admissions and hiring, censorship, viewpoint homogeneity, and politicized curricula.

Overcoming elite universities’ entrenched dogma – not by censoring views about systemic racism, but by demoting them from articles of faith to debatable opinions subject to tests of empirical evidence and rational argument – is essential to reclaiming liberal education in America.

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