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Stanford Academic Freedom Conference

by Elizabeth Weiss

On November 4th and 5th, 2022, I was honored to be included as a participant in the Stanford Academic Freedom Conference. While there, I had the opportunity to hear diverse perspectives on how serious the attacks on academic freedom currently are, coupled with the multitude of different ways to counteract censorship in the academy.

Prior to the onset of the conference there were accusations that this would be a “hermetically sealed event,” closed to the press (to avoid having to answer difficult questions), and closed to dissenters. Although the organizers invited those of varying perspectives, as is the case so many times, those who would be considered progressive, woke, or who would disagree with invited speakers declined invitations. As organizer John Cochrane, a Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution and at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, said in his opening remarks:

We also made a special effort to reach out to many of the people who have criticized some of our speakers; among others Stanford faculty

who publicly denounced Jay Bhattacharya and Scott Atlas. The non-response and refusals from this group was astounding, and surprising to us. If this group does not seem “balanced” to you it is by refusal to participate, not by lack of invitation.

When reporters, bloggers, and other writers on social media started to write up negative stories about participants—such as accusing Amy Wax, the Robert Mundheim Professor of Law at the University of Pennsylvania, of being racist, trying to shame Steven Pinker, the Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, for being acquainted with Jeffrey Epstein, or—my personal favorite—stating that I am “arguably the spiritual leader of this collection of white supremacists, racists and Trump-lovers”—even before the conference began, some junior faculty (perhaps worried that even listening to the speakers could threaten their careers) pulled out of attendance, a chilling reminder of how freedom to listen to other perspectives is being stifled.

Even without the attendance of these dissenters on the panels and in

the audience, the conference was full of debate and alternative viewpoints. If those watching the livestream didn't see debate and disagreements, it is because they have forgotten what civil disagreement looks like!

Although academic freedom and freedom of speech overlap, there are some distinct differences. Freedom of speech is a protected right enshrined in the U.S. Constitution that guarantees citizens a wide berth in what they can say and write; the First Amendment covers the public sector and, thus, public universities are accountable for violations of freedom of speech. Although academic freedom is slightly different from free speech, the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld its importance. According to FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression), an organization that was present at the conference and a crucial advocate for academics concerned about academic freedom:

Academic freedom gives faculty the right to teach, research, and speak about matters of public concern without being punished—even where their views, findings, or methods are controversial. Educators on college and university campuses must be free to speak their minds, ask tough questions, and facilitate learning without the threat of institutional censorship, coercion, or intimidation.

Academic freedom, however, cannot be held by non-academics, and private institutions can curtail academic freedom more easily. Eugene Volokh, who was the Gary T. Schwartz Professor of Law at University of California, Los Angeles before leaving for Stan-

ford's Hoover Institute as a result of UCLA's attempt to curtail his speech and the writer of the popular law blog *The Volokh Conspiracy*, helped the attendees understand the variations in the law and what constitutes a legal violation of free speech and academic freedom. He walked us through when courts are likely to intervene, such as when a professor has been punished for his writings, and when they won't, such as when the issue revolves around grading. He further explained that although social media, op-eds, and speeches are protected by the First Amendment, scholarship can be trickier, in that it is "generally protected, but hiring, tenure, promotion decisions are necessarily content-based, often even viewpoint-based." A protection arises, however, with state contract law, which applies to both public and private universities; when a university has explicitly written in their official documents that they support academic freedom (as most universities do), they can be sued for breach of contract.

Volokh has written about my legal case against SJSU; in the first instance, he could not foresee how it would go forward due to repatriation laws, but upon seeing the amended complaint that my lawyers at Pacific Legal Foundation filed on my behalf, he saw the case differently—specifically, I've sued because of retaliation for speaking out against these laws, rather than not following the laws. Generous with his time, Eugene told me of his mother's hardships in Kiev and how these hardships enable us

to put things in perspective to cope with censorship and attacks on our freedoms.

Prior to the panels, which addressed specific topics regarding academic freedom, there were two keynote speakers: Jonathan Haidt, a psychology professor at New York University's Stern School of Business, and Peter Thiel, a Stanford graduate, entrepreneur, co-founder of PayPal, and Partner at Founders Fund. Thiel was one of the first speakers and a donator to the conference. He set the tone of the conference by urging us to "steelman" (instead of strawman) our opponents' arguments to understand and try to resolve issues surrounding controversial cases. Thiel argued that one should not depend on strawman arguments—as the woke often do by using *ad hominem* attacks. Let us not sink to their level and rather look at the best arguments against your perspectives and try to answer these issues.

This conference had a goal—to look for solutions to improve academic freedom. We were asked to discuss possible solutions even prior to attendance. Thus, a large number of talks specifically dealt with this issue. However, there were a couple of participants who thought that there was no real problem to address. Specifically, Noah Diffenbaugh, a Senior Fellow at Stanford's Woods Institute for the Environment, said that he thought all was well in climate studies at Stanford and in key journals, such as *Geophysical Research Letters*, which he used to edit—suggesting that there was no threat to academic freedom that he could see. He read a few reviews that he received for

his own submissions to imply that critical reviews are common, not the result of an attack on academic freedom, and said that he too gets them. But critical reviews, even unreasonable or lazy ones, are not the same as cancellation. For instance, in my own case, I submitted a case study of an anomaly on a Californian Indian skull prior to my knowledge that a cancel culture campaign was brewing against me. The reviewers recommended publication, but the editors overturned this decision. Having editors veto the decision of reviewers to publish a manuscript has never happened to me before. Although I cannot be certain the manuscript was rejected because of my views on repatriation, the editors who rejected the manuscript also called for the banning of my book *Repatriation and Erasing the Past* (2020).

Diffenbaugh's technique of pointing to something ordinary as a comparison is a common tactic to downplay the problem; the same was done by Hollis Robbins, Dean of the College of Humanities at the University of Utah, to which FIRE's CEO Greg Lukianoff responded by providing data showing the number of those experiencing cancellation far exceed (at the time of the conference that number was 537) those who were targeted in the McCarthy era; of course, there are also a far greater number of academics now and, thus, the percentage rise is difficult to assess. Plus, there are many cases that never get reported.

Several key questions emerged at the conference:

1. Is the attack on academic freedom coming from the left or the right?
2. Who is to blame for the loss of academic freedom?
3. What can be done to combat this censorship?
4. How can one best cope with the stresses of being attacked by a cancel culture mob?

Early on in the conference, especially on the first day, it appeared that the message from the panelists and keynote speakers was that the threat to academic freedom was mainly coming from the left side of the political spectrum. Jonathan Haidt, speaking via Zoom, noted how politically imbalanced the various disciplines were; even the most conservative discipline in the academies have one conservative to every five liberals. In anthropology, my own area of study, the ratio was zero Republicans per 56 Democrats. This imbalance may be due to hiring preferences or DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) statements that work more as a political litmus test than as a query to see if the future professor is interested and capable of teaching a diverse student body.

Attacks on academic freedom in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, such as in biology, mainly revolve around current trendy liberal causes, such as an attempt to erase binary sex in favor of a whole slew of gender identities. Jerry Coyne, who is a Professor Emeritus of Biology at the University of Chicago, writes the blog *Why Evolution is True*, knows

firsthand of these attacks. Left-wing woke warriors have accused him of being racist and transphobic for explaining biological concepts of sex and ethnicity. He, of course, has also dealt with religious creationists from the conservative-right, but as in my own situation, if the attacks come from the right, it is unlikely that academics will proceed to cancel you—rather you'll be celebrated! My pro-evolutionary views were only criticized when they were in opposition to the liberal agenda of indigenous identity politics. Ironically, many right-leaning religious groups are on the side of supporting repatriation laws on bones (perhaps in the belief, for some, that repatriation involves questions of religious freedom, or, perhaps for others, in the understanding that scientific evidence supports the peopling of the Americas thousands of years prior to the Bible's timeline of a 6,000-year-old Earth) and, thus, Mormons, Mennonites, and Baptists played a key role in supporting these now progressive positions. But the saturation of academia with leftist ideology and personnel puts left-wing activists in a powerful position to silence academics with views they find controversial.

Gad Saad, Professor of Marketing at Concordia University and a frequent host on Joe Rogan's podcast, has mocked many trendy left-leaning and progressive views, such as the nonbinary sex issues and the "indigenous knowledge is science" mantra. Contradicting such views has led to cancel campaigns against a variety of scholars. In his talk,

Saad stated that there is no indigenous astronomy, just as there is no Jewish Lebanese astronomy, there is only astronomy. Watching him during the conference, it seemed to me that he resonated with those who viewed the left as the main attackers of academic freedom. Others, too, viewed censorship from the left as the main problem. Douglas Murray, author of *War on the West* (2022), talked of how the liberal obsession with cultural appropriation, such as Halloween costume policing and hair discrimination, was another attack on the West and played out mainly in the walls of academia.

Many of those who argue the view that the left is the problem are themselves liberal, like Lee Jussim, a Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Rutgers University, and Jerry Coyne. Coyne, who shares a love of cowboy boots with Steven Pinker and me, was told that he shouldn't participate in the conference because it would stain him as a right-winger. In his talk, he also mentioned that because of his liberal perspectives, being called a racist really hurt. Perhaps most poignantly, Amy Wax announced that:

The goal of the progressive left today, and we've heard about this on the prior panel, is to destroy and demolish our legal system with its safeguards, procedures, and practices, a system that is the envy of the world. Why? That justice system is oppressive and bigoted. A cover for hatred, for racism, for white privilege. Our legal system represents whiteness, and whiteness has to go. It has to be replaced.

But replaced with what? Well, with some corrupt, unprincipled, arbitrary, unpredictable, fact-free system driven by identity politics, by preference, by power, by tribalism. The goal is to take our carefully constructed first world legal system and send it back to third world status. And the only upside I can see of this project? Well, it might alleviate our immigration problem. Why would people want to come to us for the same miseries and injustices they have at home? That's the mystery.

Yet, not everyone agrees with the perspective that it is a leftist attack on academics and especially conservative scholars. Frances Widdowson, who was fired from her position as associate professor at Mount Royal University in the department of economics, justice and policy studies since 2008, describes herself as a Marxist, and said that those against academic freedom are fascists and authoritarians. Frances has used satire to mock much of the woke movement—from misgendering fatigue to the ever-expanding LGBTQIA2S+ acronym to the indigenous knowledge tropes. For this, she has been vilified, attacked, and sacked. Currently, she is in arbitration with Mount Royal University fighting to get her job back.

It's interesting that she views these attacks as authoritarian, and therefore coming from a right-wing playbook, especially considering that those who complained about her and those she mocks would self-identify as liberal progressives. Frances's point, however, is that they believe in the importance of hierarchies, but have reversed the order—indigeneity is superior to whiteness; rather than classic left politics that

look at ways to remove hierarchies and deals with class structures.

Others, such as Steven Pinker and Nadine Strossen, a fellow at FIRE and a past national President of the American Civil Liberties Union, said that the attacks on academic freedom are non-partisan. Steven Pinker was the first to greet me at the conference with a warm smile and handshake; he spent his evenings listening and talking to some of the younger crowd at the conference in a manner that brought back happy memories of when I was a graduate student and professors such as Napoleon Chagnon would regale us with stories, knowledge, and a sense of purpose. Nadine Strossen emphasized that “an attack on academic freedom anywhere is an attack on academic freedom everywhere” and provided examples where progressive academics were cancelled. Yet, after her talk, I asked whether these attacks were more often by even more left-leaning academics, which she confirmed was the case.

My own perspective is that attacks on academic freedom come from both the left and the right, but it is the attacks from the left that can cause the most problems because they are from within the academy. Plus, the current trend of identity politics seems to have flourished from their post-modern origin in which victim narratives and who tells the story is more important than whether or not the story is accurate. Thus, the most effective attacks on academic freedom are from left authoritarians with a postmodern identity-driven political perspective.

However, this does not mean that I am supportive of legislation that tries to silence woke ideology. Like Gad Saad in regard to Holocaust deniers—he supports their freedom to say these awful and demonstrably untrue things.

Another question was who is to blame for this culture of cancelation. Many argued that deans and other university administrators were to blame for not enforcing the principle of academic freedom. The view was that administrators—from chairs to presidents—are more often just bureaucrats who do not want to deal with these issues. The one dean at the conference, Hollis Robbins, confirmed this view. She implied that attacks on academic freedom were minor and that the system to uphold freedoms was working, since solutions are nearly always achieved within the university. She, furthermore, did not seem to sympathize with those complaining about the indoctrinating nature of DEI training sessions. Instead, Robbins stated that she too had to go through the training and then went on a tangent regarding heatstroke training. But, heatstroke training—i.e., what to do if someone experiences a heatstroke—isn’t ideological (or at least it isn’t if it is done correctly). For her to use this comparison demonstrates a willful ignorance of the problem—perhaps because she supports the DEI agenda.

Clearly, presidents, provosts, deans, and chairs are part of the problem. Indeed, a survey by Samuel J. Abrams of Sarah Lawrence College in the summer of 2018 found not only that college ad-

ministrators are more liberal than faculty and students, but that the increasing corporatism of academic life has put them in positions to determine the academic content on campuses. The liberal to conservative ratio of college administrators, according to Abrams, is 12 to one.

In my case these administrators all played a role in the retaliatory actions against me without trying to understand the complex issues, without reaching out to me to talk, and throughout hypocritically assuring me and others that the university supported academic freedom. Deans and provosts will say they support academic freedom, even if they act differently. I don't think that this is just because they're keeping their nose to the grindstone, working on next semester's budget and scheduling—i.e. pushing papers, as suggested by many of the conference attendees. I think that many of them believe in censorship of controversial views; they promote a monoculture by putting on the “right” talks, supporting the “right” professors, sending out inane email messages on abortion, gun control, Islamophobia, and critical race theory.

But, professors are to blame too. The blame ranges from those scared to speak up, to those working actively to censor alternative talks, to those encouraging students to sign petitions against professors. The people who wish to remain anonymous, in my opinion, are the least to blame—they are genuinely frightened—and not without cause. Editors of journals are also to blame for keep-

ing out diverse perspectives; and these editors are often professors. I think that Amy Wax put it quite well in a personal correspondence with me that “the cowardice and selfishness of senior profs—truly some of the most privileged and pampered people on earth—is staggering.”

Jonathan Berk, a professor of finance at Stanford University, was a vocal audience member who challenged speakers with difficult questions and comments. During the session “Academic Freedom in STEM,” Berk asked how much of the problem was coming from charlatans; people not smart enough for these fields deciding to go into “diversifying science” jobs. It's been my perspective that this is a real problem and has arisen due to the push to diversify difficult fields of study or fields of study that appeal to a narrow range of people. Not many females, for instance, want to go into nuclear physics, so to get more females in the field you create “physics lite”—those in physics departments who look at why there aren't more females and blacks in the field.

Peter Thiel noted that as long as the woke agenda stayed in the humanities, it may have flown under the radar screen. But now, as it enters STEM, the U.S. will lose our competitive edge and important structures will start to crumble. This is already occurring. But what if it gets worse and bridges start to collapse because people are promoted in these fields due to their identity rather than merit—will they just call it a result of

structural racism, as suggested by one of the attendees?

Jordan Peterson's perception was perhaps most controversial. Peterson, a clinical psychologist and professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, said that cancel culture mobs are led by Machiavellian narcissistic personality types, which tend to be a female range of traits. Peterson, who did not attend the entire conference, is a mesmerizing speaker and his dialogue with Douglas Murray was fascinating, even though Peterson was in-person and Murray was live-streamed in. In my own case, female attackers far outnumber males and they do seem to fit Jordan Peterson's description, but this may be just my experience. As Steven Pinker pointed out in his talk on rationality, we are better at finding fault in opinions that we disagree with!

Finally, let's talk about students. It's true that they are far more liberal than even their professors. After all, they've been indoctrinated by K-12 teachers trained mainly in public universities, as Amy Wax pointed out in reaction to Steven Pinker's comment that there's hope for a rational future because new babies are born every day.

However, I think John Rose, the Associate Director of the Civil Discourse Project at Duke University, who teaches a class on controversial subjects, made a very good point that the students can be the solution. I think that if students are introduced to different viewpoints that are taught by professors who are not being attacked, then they can be taught to think critically and not want

to silence others. But, this is a big *if*. Greg Lukianoff pointed out that critical thinking actually decreases in college students—we are making them dumber! The one student speaker, Mimi St. Johns, an undergraduate student at Stanford University, noted that she lost friends because she was critical of DEI in engineering. I think in many ways undergraduate student opinions may be more varied; by the time they are ready for graduate school, the alternative thinkers have been weeded out. As universities are now, why would a non-woke student even want to attend—they'll be bombarded with speech codes and propaganda: being told to avoid using the word "guy" because it excludes females; propaganda, such as posters that say "we all belong here" with a hijab-wearing female smiling; and emails outlining the type of Halloween costumes that cannot be worn.

Much of the conference also revolved around attacks on academic freedom. There were a variety of solutions suggested. Dorian Abbot, an associate professor in the Department of Geophysical Sciences at University of Chicago, specifically called for the adoption of the Chicago Principles and the Kalven Report, both statements that support academic freedom and attempt to de-politicize the university as an institution. Yet, others noted that these adoptions are only good if they are upheld. Abbot also encouraged joining committees and fighting within the institutions—he filed nine Title IX complaints in regard to sex-determined scholarships. Title IX prohibits

sex-based discrimination in education programs that receive federal funding. The university removed the sex criteria for nearly all of these scholarships.

Some suggested even stronger legislative actions—i.e., anti-critical race theory measures. However, I think that these steps will backfire if the political situation reverses. Other suggestions included filing either class action or single person lawsuits. This is far easier to accomplish in public universities in the U.S., where they must abide by the First Amendment. Tyler Cowen, a Professor of Economics at George Mason University, argued that public universities were more welcoming to free speech than private institutions. As a professor at a public institution who sued her university for retaliation, I would suggest that the atmosphere in public universities is stifling to controversial perspectives, but that there is a greater ability to take legal actions, due to the responsibility that they uphold the Constitution. It is also easier if the university explicitly states in writing that they support academic freedom, than if the university does not have this in the faculty handbook or in the job contracts. Yet lawsuits take time and money; fortunately, organizations such as FIRE and firms such as the Pacific Legal Foundation have grown to take on far more cases—*pro bono*. However, as Frances Widdowson can attest, a lawsuit can also take over one's life!

There were debates over how much social media should be utilized in the fight for academic freedom and on moving beyond the gatekeepers of the

traditional media and academic publications. Some, like Jay Bhattacharya, a Professor of Health Policy at Stanford who was the target of a cancel culture campaign for his criticisms against COVID-19 protocols, argued that social media helped him get the word out about the Great Barrington Declaration, an open letter that criticized the governmental response, such as lockdowns, to COVID-19, and make public the cancel culture attack against him. Others have shied away from this tactic.

I think that any tactic to counteract the attacks on academic freedom must deal with the lack of diversity in universities. To create truly diverse institutions—with diversity of opinions being key—some attendees suggested affirmative action based on politics, but I think this is highly unlikely. Niall Ferguson, a Milbank Family Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, asked if it is reasonable to conclude that a university staff that is 98 percent liberal-left would carry out such a policy, even if mandated. “Viewpoint” preferences might also have the effect of strengthening the liberal case for affirmative action, consisting as it does of hiring on something other than merit. Another tactic suggested was to make it clear that diversity, especially of conservative perspectives, would be welcome with a sample statement, similar to the multicultural statements that are so ubiquitous. But even if diversity of opinions, socioeconomic status, and geography are added to diversity statements, the likelihood is that hiring decisions won't

change. Plus, due to the lack of these groups in graduate programs, the likelihood of hiring these people is extremely low. One audience member stated that candidates with red-state and lower socioeconomic status profiles were not competitive in the last job search that he was engaged in.

One interesting suggestion was to brand-shame universities that interfered with academic freedom in the same way that cigarette companies were shamed. However, universities are not beholden to profits and market economies in the same way as for-profit companies.

In the “Academic Freedom: Practical Solutions” session, the panel looked like a Likert scale, from Richard Lowery, an associate professor of finance at University of Texas in Austin, the frowning-faced pessimist, to, on the other extreme, Peter Arcidiacono, the William Henry Glasson Professor of Economics at Duke University. Due to the live-streaming of the conference (which had been added to quell accusations that the event was not open and transparent to critics), Lowery was unable to talk openly about his legal situation. For his part, Arcidiacono argued that we should love our foes and try to make them see us as people. Yet this Christ-like tactic is not for everyone.

Some of the talks featured slides, and my favorite slide was that from Scott Atlas, a Robert Wesson Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, who was horrendously attacked after he provided President Trump with advice on COVID-19 regulations. When he mentioned all

those who abandoned him at that time, he showed a picture of a skeleton and noted that those who don’t stand up for colleagues are missing their backbones.

More devastating than even the post-traumatic stress disorder cases that Jordan Peterson discussed in his talk is the case of Mike Adams, a criminology professor at the University of North Carolina, who committed suicide in 2020. In the final session, “The Cost of Academic Dissent,” which I was a part of, we had an empty chair on stage to illustrate that cancel culture resulted in Adams taking his own life. Joshua Katz, who was a professor at Princeton University and is now at the American Enterprise Institute and a National Association of Scholars board member, started his talk by stating that the cost of cancel culture was the death of Mike Adams, his and Frances Widdowson’s firing, and Amy Wax and me under siege.

The attack on academic freedom was analogized as war multiple times throughout the conference. And, as Amy Wax noted, “you may not be interested in war, but it is interested in you.” To fight this war, we must speak up and some—such as Gad Saad and Frances Widdowson—have used satire effectively as a weapon. But, beyond the use of satire, I and others argue that to cope with the stresses of a cancel culture attack, you need to retain a sense of humor. After all, many of the attacks are beyond absurd. For example, as a result of my position on repatriation of skeletal remains, one colleague suggested that the only acceptable photos of bones are ones

where the people who are photographed gave signed permissions—even when these people died hundreds of years before cameras were invented! And, at my university, the president barred any photography of the Native American collections, not only of skeletal remains, but even of the boxes containing them! And, even x-rays have been declared “sacred” and will be given to the Native American tribe who will burn them!

The final question to emerge was whether our institutions are too broken to fix; are new institutions the only solution? Niall Ferguson made the prediction that University of Austin (a nonprofit university built to combat the censorship mentality of established universities) will be able to compete with top-tier schools within five years. Others were skeptical of these claims. Frances retold an analogy of Peter Boghossian’s that the woke ideology’s hold on the university is either rabies or cancer. Boghossian quit his lecturer position at Portland State University after the administration ruled that he “violated ethical guidelines on human-subjects research” when he submitted hoax-papers (which he later revealed to be hoaxes) to demonstrate the absurdity of identity politics. If it is cancer, you treat it, but if it is rabies then you need to put the animal down. Her perspective is that you think it may be rabies, but you act like it is cancer.

Amy Wax mused in a post-conference email that the best tactic might be to go back to 1971:

[G]et down to brass tacks—as in directly criticizing their own deans or administrators, or calling out student groups for their absurd and bullying behavior, ignorance, and childishness, or insisting on the COMPLETE abolition of the DIE [she was satirizing the DEI acronym] bureaucracy and a return to how things USED to be—no Title IX, no Dept. of Ed., one dean of students and one secretary.

Although the conference hit upon a great number of topics, I’d have liked to see more addressed on the importance of general education (GE) classes, especially in public universities. Although STEM may be more protected from the most insane ideas of cancel culture, GE classes—taken by all students—enable the indoctrination of even STEM students, regardless of the rigor of their engineering and chemistry classes. Ethnic studies were nearly dead and buried in universities, but in California they were resurrected through a new GE requirement for all the California State University campuses: Ethnic Studies. Public universities are the schools of the masses that will train the next generation of K-12 teachers; California Governor Gavin Newsom also passed an ethnic studies requirement for graduating from high school that will start in 2030.

Another factor not discussed was the differences between those fields that require materials and those which don’t. It is unlikely that newly established universities will be able to help those in physical anthropology (who need skeletal collections to reconstruct the past) anytime soon. Fields that require materials and equipment, I think, are espe-

cially vulnerable to attacks on academic freedom because those who dissent can be removed or locked out of labs and curation facilities—halting their research indefinitely.

Finally, throughout the conference, the issue of race was just skirted around. Yet, it is the antiracism agenda that can be said to be the birth of the modern attacks on academic freedom. Frances was accused of being racist for criticizing the BLM movement. Amy Wax was accused of being racist for pointing out differences in achievement. I was accused of being racist for not supporting the use of the “Cite Black Authors” database, as opposed to citing the best quality research, regardless of the person’s race. Ilya Shapiro, Senior Fellow and Director of Constitutional Studies at the Manhattan Institute, was accused of racism for his tweet regarding the selection of a black Supreme Court justice over a different minority Supreme Court justice who he thought was better qualified. This kowtowing to antiracism is always coupled with white guilt, a concept that professors lap up. White guilt won’t be ameliorated until equity occurs, according to the theory. But equity, or proportional representation of races in all fields, is impossible. So, unless we figure out a way to accept inequitable outcomes, we will not escape DEI, cancel culture, wokeness, and attacks on academic freedom. As Amy Wax stated:

The elephant in the room at this conference, the one subject that has not come up is race. The centerpiece of wokeness is that all disparities, all group disparities, are due to racism, racism,

racism, racism. If people on the Right want to embrace meritocracy, and fight wokeness and be colorblind, they have to have an answer to that. They have to face up to the fact that the meritocracy will produce different outcomes by group. And they can’t shrink from that, and I think that is where I see them stumbling.

And, if you think the attack on academic freedom is unrelated to race, the woke are all too happy to show you otherwise, with their allegations of systemic and institutional racism, and their statements reflecting the belief that any behavioral differences that reflect badly on racial minorities are the result of white supremacy. Thus, I’d like to call for a second conference that deals with this thorny issue explicitly.

Elizabeth Weiss is Professor of Anthropology at San José State University. She is also a Faculty Fellow at the HxA Center for Academic Pluralism (2023-24) and a NAS board member. In the summer 2021 issue of AQ, Weiss co-authored with James W. Springer, “Repatriation and the Threat to Objective Knowledge.”
