

How to explain systemic racism to non-liberals like me

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Opinion by Megan McArdle Columnist

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Why is covid-19 killing more black people than white people in America?

For many on the left, the answer is easy: “systemic racism.” That answer drives conservatives bonkers. Covid-19 comes from a virus; it does not care whether victims are white or black and, indeed, doesn’t have eyes to distinguish.

Conservatives, I understand why you feel this way. But on this issue, the left is, well, right.

Already, your blood pressure may be rising at the idea that the left might have something to teach you. Mine certainly does when people suggest I’ve missed something important. But give me 600 more words to prove that systemic racism exists and hurts people. If you’re not convinced by then, you never have to read me again.

Let’s start with what “systemic racism” is, which is *not* “systems full of racists.” Black people aren’t dying in such numbers because all or even most white people around them hate them and want bad things to happen to them. But they probably are dying because we enslaved their ancestors.

I say “we” even though my personal ancestors never, as far as I can determine, enslaved anyone or even set foot in the South. But I am a U.S. citizen, and the United States legalized slavery, even to the extent of helping some whites pursue runaways into free territory. “We,” as a nation, did that. They, as a people, suffered.

All modern Americans inherit a legacy stained by that suffering. But black Americans also inherit the suffering, which did not end when slavery was abolished. It went on and on, through the legal strictures of Jim Crow and through rampant private discrimination, which still unfortunately continues in diminished form.

Well-designed studies show that discrimination against various signifiers of “blackness” persist in our labor markets. That’s one reason black Americans are disproportionately concentrated in lower-skilled, lower-paid service and manufacturing jobs that require their physical presence, and where many of them were exposed to the coronavirus, while the whiter office workforce safely telecommuted this year.

Note that this could happen *even if the people making discriminatory decisions have no particular animus toward black people*. All it takes is a slight preference for people whom they perceive to be “like me.” That even slight preferences can cascade into dramatic effects is illustrated by something that many of us on the right complain about a lot: the left-wing

skew in mainstream cultural institutions. The enduring legacy of slavery is a uniquely stubborn and pernicious problem in American history, of course, but some of the social dynamics operate similarly.

That is to say, media and academia aren't leaning ever further left because a bunch of lefties got into a room and decided to oust the conservatives. Mostly it happened because human beings tend to think that others who agree with them must be especially fine people. That "affinity bias" influences hiring decisions, often unconsciously. The fewer conservatives there were, the more pronounced the skew came, a process that sped up as it advanced.

Now, of course, there is a muscular young generation that is explicit about wanting to "cancel" conservatism. But that's a new phenomenon, and the tilt is decades old. If anything, the causation is reversed: Only when almost all the conservatives were gone did it become feasible to say that universities, magazines, awards ceremonies and the like should be explicitly left-wing projects. And if they do succeed, the skew will become self-maintaining; no one will voice a commitment not to hire conservatives, because conservatives won't apply to places they see as hostile to their interests, their ideas, their selves.

If you understand how those institutions could arrive at a stable, no-conservatives equilibrium even without overt hostile action, then you understand part of the social dynamics behind systemic racism. The way small decisions cascade into major social forces is how Americans who profess no racial hatred — and declare their implacable hatred for racism in all forms — could nonetheless end up contributing to patterns of residential, educational and employment segregation that left the average black American with fewer opportunities for well-paid office work than the average white person.

In a world with covid-19 racing around, that disparity isn't simply unjust; it's deadly. I think the public health experts who condoned protests against racial injustice, but not those against lockdowns, dangerously risked their credibility. But one part of their message was indisputable: Systemic racism kills.

One can acknowledge this without endorsing every solution advanced by social justice activists. But if you think that it is a major social problem when large numbers of people are pushed to the margins of important aspects of American life — well, then you should believe that it's a problem even when you aren't one of those marginalized. And if you believe in the ideals of the American founding . . . in the American Dream . . . then you should believe that we must keep working at this problem until we've finally kicked it.

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