Opinion
NCR Voices

Protesters stand with a sign reading "Racism Is Our Longest Plague" in Washington Aug. 28, 2020, during the "Get Your Knee Off Our Necks" Commitment March on Washington 2020 in support of racial justice. (CNS/Reuters/Tom Brenner)

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Wednesday, I began my review of John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira's new book *Where Have All the Democrats Gone? The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes*, discussing the ways economic decisions by Democratic party leaders began the process of alienation between the party and its working-class base. Today, I will look at the more controversial second half of the book, which analyzes how the Democrats' increasingly radical approach to social and cultural issues further alienates the very working-class voters they need to win elections.

Judis and Teixeira acknowledge that President Joe Biden has at least begun to get the Democrats' economic policy back in line with the interests of working-class voters. More is needed on the economic front, to be sure, and the authors remind us: "To take new steps, the Democrats would need to create an enduring majority."

The other part of Biden's appeal to working-class voters through the years has been his relative moderation on social and cultural issues. And here is where his administration has sometimes dragged Biden to untenable extremes. The authors identify four sociocultural issues where they think cultural radicalism has made the Democrats unpalatable to working-class voters: race, immigration, issues of sexual and gender identity, and climate change.

Judis and Teixeira provide a concise history of the tensions between reformers and radicals on racial issues, for example, the different approaches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the NAACP vs. Stokely Carmichael's Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party and Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam in the 1960s. They delve into the mixed results from the civil rights victories of the 1960s and the War on Poverty, highlighting the incisive and careful work of William Julius Wilson on race and class.

The controversy arises when they look at the reemergence of more radical scholarship and activism that "burst forth in the 2010s," citing three converging antecedents: the rise of "young, black intellectuals and activists" in prominent publications and organizations; a "ferment among the college-educated young reminiscent of the sixties" that led to a "moralistic radical politics" especially among young white, college-educated voters; and the "the ubiquity of social media," which made possible the creation of "a global virtual community of protest;" and, finally,

the "conjunction of the prospect of Trump's reelection with the pandemic." They correctly note: "Trump's extremism provoked extreme responses."

Seizing the moment, "a group of intellectuals were writing widely read and highly acclaimed essays and books that refined and advanced the radical arguments that black power advocates and critical race theorists had made decades before." Ta-Nehisi Coates, Robin DiAngelo and Ibram X. Kendi would become leading exponents of more ideological approaches to race that were a far cry from the religiously inflected values that Americans of all races had learned from Dr. King.

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Ideological approaches inevitably tend to be monocausal, and therein lies their explanatory deficiency: If you look at history, or society, or policy through only one lens, after a while, you can't distinguish between your glasses and reality. Recently, DiAngelo stated that an example she cites of the "perfect convergence of white supremacy [and] patriarchy" is Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" in the Sistine Chapel. It is mind-numbing that someone, anyone, could look at those magnificent frescoes and see only an ideological talking point.

"The most important institutional affirmation of this racial radicalism came from the New York Times," Judis and Teixeira assert. They point to The New York Times' magazine's problematic "1619 Project," which aimed to center the experience of Black Americans in American history even when that experience was not the central part of the story. This was especially the case with the introductory essay by the project's creator Nikole Hannah-Jones which, as I have noted previously, contained the preposterous claim that maintaining slavery was "one of the primary reasons colonists decided to declare their independence." Many historians noted the problems with the essays. A Black scholar who was asked to fact-check the project by the Times reported that her concerns, including her flagging that just quoted claim, were ignored. "The magazine quietly, and without the usual acknowledgement, then fudged its claims," Judis and Teixeria note.

The following year, staff at The Times objected to the paper's publishing an op-ed by Sen. Tom Cotton, and forced editorial page editor James Bennet to resign. The newspaper apologized. There was a lot to disagree with in Cotton's essay, but disagreement is what editorial pages are all about.

Whatever one thinks about more radical approaches to racial issues on the merits, it is hard to ignore the backlash they create, and their consequent lack of political viability. Most Americans oppose racial discrimination. The authors say America's future objective should be "to eliminate, as King proposed, the perception of racial difference. Cultural and ethnic differences will endure, but will not carry invidious implications that lead to discrimination. What's disturbing about the current racial radicalism is that through its language, theories, and demands for strict proportionality, it reinforces the perception of racial difference as a natural fact and appears to rule out as a possibility and as an objective its eventual disappearance." It is difficult to argue with that conclusion.

Activists protest in Atlanta, Georgia, on behalf of children seeking gender reassignment treatments or surgeries on March 20, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Megan Varner)

The chapter entitled "Sexual Creationism" will similarly generate a lot of heat. The authors note, rightly, that the movement for transgender rights "grew out of the women's and gay rights movements" and, like them, began with advocacy for "protection against discrimination in employment, housing and school admissions suffered by people who were born as one sex but now claim to be the other." If the story ended there, the usual suspects that opposed women's rights and gay rights might fight a losing rearguard action, but the story didn't end there. The transgender movement "buttressed by national organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the ACLU that are part of the shadow Democratic Party, has expanded its agenda well beyond the prevention of discrimination."

Judis and Teixeira note the fight over "gender-affirming care" as well as the conflicts between the achievements of women's rights and protections and the claims of some transgender activists. Most importantly, they recognize that the "transgender movement has also sought to transform the very language by which people refer to sex and gender, introducing such expressions as 'pregnant people' and 'vagina owners.' " They cite the famous Senate hearing at which Sen. Josh Hawley and Berkeley Law professor Khiara Bridges talked past each other, speaking to their respective bases which defended their performances. As The Washington Post's Megan McArdle argued, "Unlike a Rorschach test, however, this one has a right answer, and the progressives have it wrong. Moreover, the fact that they can't see just how badly this exchange went for their side shows what a big mistake it was to let academia and media institutions turn into left-wing monocultures."

Bingo. The example of this convoluted gender language that always seems most suspicious is the phrase "gender assigned at birth" as if there were some grand conspiracy within the medical profession to enforce gender norms in maternity wards. In fact, most doctors, upon delivering a child, look down and proclaim, "It's a boy" or "It's a girl." The idea that gender and sex are both socially constructed and disconnected from biology, which the authors rightly credit Berkeley professor Judith Butler with inventing, is an idea that strikes most people as nutty. The demand that ordinary people conform their language to these academic tropes is exceedingly counterproductive. That Butler's ideas have gained currency in Catholic theological circles is bizarre.

A woman in Detroit carries a mask of President Donald Trump as people march in the street to celebrate on Nov. 7, 2020, after the media announced Democrat Joe Biden had won the presidential election. (CNS/Reuters/Emily Elconin)

The chapters on immigration and climate change are similar in analysis. The adoption of more radical views on immigration by the Democrats has backfired even with some Hispanic voters, but it is also not difficult to see how a different kind of political campaign, aimed at harnessing biblical language and the immigrant stories of American icons, could ameliorate some of the political backlash. One wishes that on this, and the other controversial issues, the authors spent a little more time putting forward non-radical alternatives.

On climate change, Judis and Teixeira argue persuasively that groups like 350.org, founded by environmental activist Bill McKibben, adopted a tone that was "explicitly radical and apocalyptic," and which has not proven persuasive to the American people. Proposals like the Green New Deal have lacked the pragmatic framing Franklin Delano Roosevelt used in rolling out the original. However much some

climate activists and experts understand the ecology of the cosmos, they do not always grasp the human ecology of politics.

A concluding chapter looks at the way definitions of liberalism and conservatism have evolved through the years. The authors highlight polling data that demonstrate the degree to which large majorities of both political parties eschew extremist positions, of both the left and the right, on cultural issues. They state their governing thesis succinctly: "America needs a Democratic Party that is liberal on economic issues and moderate or conciliatory on cultural issues." They applaud the need for continued efforts to combat racism and prevent discrimination. They advocate for actions to address climate change and do not demonize migrants once. Judis and Teixeira do not question anyone's motives, and they sympathize with those who are impatient at the slow progress we humans make in addressing the problems we face. The authors are not Trumpians or even conservatives.

Their conclusion is akin to the diagnosis offered by Lee Drutman back in 2017, noting that roughly a quarter of the 2016 electorate was conservative on both economic and social issues and a similar percentage was liberal on both. These quadrants are the base of the two parties. But those who are conservative on economic issues and liberal on social issues, the tack chosen by Clinton and Obama, were only 3.8% of the electorate in 2016 and those who fit the Judis-Teixeria prescription, more conservative on social issues and liberal on economic ones, were 28.9 % of the electorate. I dubbed this last, potentially decisive quadrant, "Pope Francis voters." They are not courted by Democrats because of the role of the Democrats' shadow party, groups like NARAL, the Human Rights Campaign Fund and the ACLU, in dictating party policy.

What Judis and Teixeira have done is confront the brittle orthodoxies of the loudest voices of that shadow party. Those voices are magnified on social media which, during the pandemic, gave them a disproportionate reach and influence. The authors do not give conservatives a pass, but note that there are plenty of books about Trump and Trumpism. This book serves a different purpose: "Democrats, we believe, need to look in the mirror and examine the extent to which their own failures contributed to the rise of the most toxic tendencies on the political right."

This book is that mirror. It should be read by anyone who wants to defeat Trump and Trumpism, as well as anyone who thinks liberalism's best days always come from its repudiation of radicalism and academic orthodoxies, and its embrace of ideas about human nature and society that meet the standard of common sense.