

Scholar: White Guilt is Responsible for Our Toxic Politics

AP released [a poll](#) this week showing that Americans are deeply divided.

Those seeking to better understand why might consider reading Shelby Steele's recent [op-ed](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*. Steele, a senior fellow at Stanford University's [Hoover Institution](#), argues that "white guilt" has created in the American system "a mock politics based on the pretense of moral authority."

What does Steele mean by "white guilt" and what is the "mock politics" to which he speaks?

"White guilt is not actual guilt. Surely most whites are not assailed in the night by feelings of responsibility for America's historical mistreatment of minorities...."

White guilt is not angst over injustices suffered by others; it is the terror of being stigmatized with America's old bigotries—racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia.

To be stigmatized as a fellow traveler with any of these bigotries is to be utterly stripped of moral authority and made into a pariah. The terror of this, of having "no name in the street" as the Bible puts it, pressures whites to act guiltily even when they feel no actual guilt. White guilt is a mock guilt, a pretense of real guilt, a shallow etiquette of empathy, pity and regret.

It is also the heart and soul of contemporary liberalism."

Steele says that contemporary liberalism is primarily a moral framework, not a political one, an "identity" that "[offers] Americans moral esteem against the specter of American shame."

I'd encourage readers to read in full Steele's thoughts on the matter. (Note: [the article](#) is pay-wall protected.)

What to make of Steele's claims?

If Steele's thesis is true, it would help explain why politics has become so [personal in nature](#). If people see their own political philosophy—their own moral *identity*—as one opposed to "racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia," it stands to reason that many will believe that people with opposing views are in favor of these things.

The result? People who present social science with which they disagree are not just wrong, they are "[white supremacists](#)." If a scholar suggests data sets on sexual violence against women on college campuses are ambiguous or misleading, his data is not challenged; he or she is [denounced](#) as a blasphemer.

The irony, of course, is that this kind of identity politics seems to undermine the very roots of America's multicultural ethos. *E pluribus unum* ("Out of many one") did not become our nation's motto until the 1950s, but the spirit of the phrase has been present since the dawn of the United States. The motto appeared on American currency before the Constitution was ratified, and though the nation never fully lived up to the full promise of that spirit, it was—and is—a true ideal.

This spirit, however, is undercut by a philosophy that rejects the individuality of persons. By embracing a worldview that separates people into groups along lines—gender, race, sexual preference, culture, etc.—a sort of postmodern [tribalism](#) appears to be unfolding.

Some prominent voices in liberal circles have questioned the wisdom of such a course. Columbia University professor Mark Lilla, for example, [noted](#) in the *New York Times* that identity politics is eroding the foundation of American liberalism.

“The standard liberal answer for nearly a generation now has been that we should become aware of and ‘celebrate’ our differences. Which is a splendid principle of moral pedagogy – but disastrous as a foundation for democratic politics in our ideological age. In recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism’s message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing.”

The problem? There is no off switch for moral movements.

America’s fatal flaw has been the persistence of cultural, political, and ideological systems that have, at times, denied certain people individuality and equality because of their color or sex.

It is a monumental irony that we seem intent on repeating the mistake to absolve the original sin. But as they say, “History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.”