

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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Guest: John McWhorter
Professor of Linguistics, Columbia University

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KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by professor of linguistics at Columbia, John McWhorter. He and I have been having an interesting discussion about linguistics off-camera. We'll have to do a linguistics conversation sometime on camera, but I guess that's not our topic today, or not our main topic today, unfortunately.

But John, thanks for joining me. I should also mention John, we'll get to what we're going to talk about in a second, but John hosts a very interesting podcast about linguistics called Lexicon Valley about language, not about linguistics, but about language. Maybe that's a better way of saying it, which is of interest to people who are just interested in how language has developed, and different languages around the world. I recommend that. It's not political at all. Is that right, John?

McWHORTER: It is not about politics. It's about language and linguistics. It's a language geek's podcast. Yeah, it's a whole other side of me than I think a lot of people have reason to know exists. But yes, it is my labor of love.

KRISTOL: Good. Yeah. My wife who's a Classicist has read some of your writings on language, and she is a big fan of them. And she told me we have to do a podcast on that, so we'll do that. We'll do a conversation on that later, but we should talk about a somewhat more political subject today, which I guess is wokeness and its history, its implications, and the broader, how to think about that whole topic. You've written, among your many books, the bestselling book recently *Woke Racism*. Let's discuss that. What is it? How much of a problem is it? What do we do about it, et cetera? I'm very struck by the term. I mean, since you are a linguist, maybe say a word about why are we all talking about "wokeness"? So what is it we are talking about when we talk about wokeness?

McWHORTER: Well, the term begins in Black slang, and it meant "to be awakened to certain political realities that threaten or concern the Black condition." And it's first recorded in the thirties. Most likely people had been using it before then. It's an easy metaphor. Are you awake to certain things, which it would be easy to not perceive, and therefore be sleeping through?

Then *The New York Times* happened to document it on the Black street in 1962, but that doesn't mean that the term was invented then. It has been used since, and it was still percolating around underground. It jumped the rails in the early teens through a couple of pop songs, and became general mainstream slang. And what it was, was a replacement term for "politically correct". Politically correct became the slur. And it got to the point that you couldn't call yourself politically correct in a neutral way.

I remember in college, that was in the '80s, early '80s, was around the last time that you could still say with a straight face, "I'm politically correct," and it wasn't a laugh line. But by the end of the '80s, PC was something that was thrown at you like a shard of glass. And of course that happens. And so of course there had to be a replacement term, and the replacement term was "woke". Woke was exactly what was meant by politically correct 30 years before.

But the truth is my book is called *Woke Racism*. And when that title was formulated, I wasn't thinking of the woke as necessarily a slur. I didn't mean ridiculous people who take these things too far. I meant somebody who sees themselves as politically correct, who doesn't understand that they're being racist under any definition. But by the time the book came out, "woke" could no longer be neutral either. It's really undergone a really massive transformation just in the past couple of years. So yeah, "woke" starts out as being the new politically correct, and now it already is a shard of glass just like PC became.

KRISTOL: It's a shame, it seems to me in a way, because the original meaning, original maybe is too strong, but the mid '30s when it gets used in popular discourse by Marcus Garvey, before that even, "Awake America" that kind of thing, is sort of a reasonable meaning and an intelligible one.

I mean that there are things that one has been blind to. I think the idea there, was not just that you should learn more about something or change your mind about something, but that there were things one was so accustomed to in society. And I think discrimination against Blacks was sort of the heart of that. And for slavery, of course, and then segregation and so forth, that people took it for granted, including maybe decent people, otherwise decent people, and that they had to be sort of awakened.

And I do think we've all had that experience of taking something for granted and then thinking maybe a year or five years later, "Geez, that was really not right. And why did I take that for granted?" In that respect, the exhortation to awake, to awaken or to wake up or to be woke isn't crazy in a sense.

McWHORTER: No, no, not at all. I mean, the problem with it is that it always carried an implication that what you were supposed to wake up to was absolute fact. Now, in 1962, it was fact that racism permeated society in such a way that very few black people were able to fully realize themselves. I don't think any of us would dispute that that was the way things were in 1962.

To call it woke in say 2012 was a little bit more facile because the reality is much more complicated. Systemic racism does exist, but there's a question as to what its effects are, not to mention what exactly it consists of. And the idea that there is some ineluctably true leftist reality that you should awaken to, and if you don't, you're asleep and possibly morally perverted in some way, already that was sloppy in 2012. But you know, we human beings are sloppy, and they're always going to be certain political biases.

But yeah, it was a delicate term because to say woke meant that you were presuming that there was a certain definite thing to be woke to in the same way as politically correct, often was said with a bit of an arched eyebrow. The person on the left would say politically correct, knowing that somebody who was a conservative might feel differently. The idea being that everybody was winking among each other and implying that we know that we're really right, although that's a rather nervy thing to say.

Woke had even more of that in it. And so here we are with it today where I think so many people are against, particularly severe version of wokeness that emerged, especially starting in about 2020, that we can't even pretend now that these things are some sort of wisdom that all people must awaken to. Now there's a debate as to whether we're going to pretend that these things are truths or not.

KRISTOL: Yeah. So woke went from being “wake up” to kind of “shut up.” We're not allowed to have a more complex discussion about this complex phenomenon. Isn't that right? I think, yeah.

McWHORTER: Yeah. The idea became we have found the solution to everything. And if you don't understand that, you are behind, you are unenlightened, you are immoral, you possibly have sinister ulterior motives. It'd be nice if somebody found that answer to everything. I mean, you can go through a whole class in philosophy or political science, and you can be frustrated that by the end of the term, you haven't found that ultimate answer. But the fact is these people have not found it, if anybody has. They're not even close. I think Kant is a lot closer than they are.

And so we have to understand that there's a certain kind of person who thinks that they found the ultimate answer. It's often partly because they haven't been ushered into thinking about the wide range of possible arrangements of human society that there are. And we have to stop letting people like that scare us by calling us white supremacists on Twitter, into agreeing with the sorts of things that they would prefer. That's the problem, because these people, as naive as they can be, have a tool which became default among "Westerners" starting in 2009: it's social media. If they don't get what they want, they call you a racist on social media. And this is not something that they do as a deliberate ploy, they think of it as their duty. They think it's their duty to call out what they consider white supremacy to be.

Because we've made so much progress in our society and are so ashamed of racism, and justifiably so, what this ends up meaning is that 99 out of 100 people bow down to this particular kind of wokeness because they don't want to be called racist in the public square. But that means that this kind of person thinks that they're going to run the country. They think that they are going to run things. They get no indication that there could be any kind of intelligent pushback to the sorts of things that they think. And in the meantime, they end up having disproportionate power simply because of what social media allows them to do to people. So we need to stand up to them.

KRISTOL: And how much of wokeness is about race? I mean, this is used more broadly now on the right, certainly, to attack all kinds of other fashionable attempts to impose or curtail debate for fashionable left wing causes in general, I suppose. But is it mostly about race really?

McWHORTER: Yeah, race has been the fulcrum of it. The "racial reckoning" that started in the summer of 2020. And it's interesting that it was racial issues that made wokeness into, I hate to say it, but the scourge that it's become. Not trans issues, for example; not issues having to do with sexism and sexual harassment, which are very important. But it was this racial reckoning that got to the point that corporations that have nothing to do with issues of power differentials are putting out these statements of allegiance; and you're applying to be a physicist, and now you're required by many universities to show that in your research as a physicist you have combated power differentials and fostered diversity.

All of that started when race became part of the question, which, once again, this is the complexity of social history, which the people I call the elect can't seem to see, it's all about race, and that's an indication of progress. That shows how concerned a great many Americans are to be on the right side when it comes to racism. None of this would've happened in 1975. We've made a great deal of progress, but ironically, it ends up creating a certain kind of new racism in that we have a situation where people do things not because they agree, but because they're afraid. We've got to get out of this particular circle.

KRISTOL: And you called it a scourge. I suppose the counter argument might be, “Look, among people who aren't bought into sort of the imposition of wokeness, but who, let's say, look, there's some excesses. As you say, it's a sign of progress in a sense, more sensitivity. People go overboard. That always happens in these kinds of situations and moments. It's mostly in the universities. It's mostly a certain amount of hectoring and people get beyond it, when we work through this naturally in two or five or eight years or something like that.”

McWHORTER: Yeah. And the answer to that is if the exact same amount of episodes were taking place, of killings of black men by cops, it would be treated as a national epidemic, a scourge. It would be treated as an indication of what America's all about. And one way we know that is that that's exactly the case. There are various incidents where cops make mistakes, or sometimes cops are just malevolent, and they kill men of all colors, actually. The media highlights the cases where they kill black men. And all of the anecdotes taken together are interpreted as meaning that essentially lynching still continues in the United States. Well, if that's the case, if that's the way we're going to generalize, then frankly, there have been many more cases of these "excesses," especially since about May 2020, and it bears talking about. Too many people getting fired, too many people getting sanctioned for things they wouldn't have gotten sanctioned four or five years ago. Too much mendacity, too much emptiness and hot air.

Definitely, it is a major cultural phenomenon. And for people to stand by and not comment about it, really because they don't want to get called racist on Twitter is not the way it should be. Now, certainly I am an academic and I'm a writer. I work in the media. So of course these things are particularly salient to me because these things did start in those places.

But it's by no means undergraduates on college campuses in 2015. We're far beyond that. Something happened in the Spring of 2020, where it became basically all of America's thinking and artistic culture. And I find it interesting to imagine the question arising in say France, as to why that matters. I can imagine talking to a French intellectual on a talk show. "Why does it matter that the arts and the media and the universities and the culture of the intelligence is being taken over by something that doesn't make any sense out of a reign of terror." No French intellectual would say, "Well, these things don't really matter, and we should really just be talking about Le Pen."

No, these things matter. Now I'm not saying this about you, Bill, but many people ask me, "Why are you even upset about any of this?" And I say that we're back to Richard Hofstadter. That it's partly an indication of the anti-intellectualism of America in general that anybody would think such things didn't matter.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting. I mean, it's certainly maybe stronger and more pervasive in the universities, but you think it's — We're not talking about it. I think political correctness was mostly, remained a university phenomenon, right? I mean, "tenured radicals" and all that stuff. I mean, the conservative critique of it was at least mostly about what happened at university. Some of it spilled over to corporations obviously, but it does feel like —

McWHORTER: Upper West Side and those cocktail parties, I mean, frankly, people you're connected with talk about it. But yeah, those circles. Right. Yeah.

KRISTOL: And what you're saying is that wokeness is one of, A, ideas matter. And B, these ideas are having an effect beyond what people feel comfortable saying in class at college, which is itself important obviously.

McWHORTER: It's now at the point that you're afraid to say anything at an ordinary backyard gathering in an upper middle class neighborhood. It's at the point where our entire thinking culture is being taken over by a conglomeration of pious gestures in the name of battling power differentials, as opposed to actual engagement with the world.

The problem is there's this idea — this is what seems so bizarre about these people and so frightening, but it can be hard to put your finger on what the issue is — to them battling power differentials, and especially ones involving the power of white people is supposed to be the central activity that anyone is engaged in intellectually, artistically or morally: battling power differentials. Most of us would think that that was one of maybe 15 things that a human being might concentrate on.

These people think of that as the one thing, everything has to revolve around that. And you can't talk them away from it. But that particular idea, that battling power differentials must be everything, is constricting, it's narrow, and frankly it's unintelligent. It refuses to take in the whole spectrum of things. It's, frankly, in many ways, it's the badge of somebody who isn't very curious. We talk about Trump's incuriosity. If all you're interested in is battling power differentials, I frankly think you're not a very curious person. And yet that incurious person calls you a white supremacist on Twitter, and so you pretend to agree with everything that they put forward. That's just is not the way our culture should be. In that sense ideas matter, because it's more than just people sitting around philosophizing, it's what we're taught to think about at all, and we need a change.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I also think you could argue if one were more on the left than I am, or I imagine you are, that if we're more concerned about power differentials, economic inequalities and so forth, I don't think the focus on wokeness is helping that. I mean, that's to say there's plenty of arguments you could make that the tax code should be more progressive, or that policing should be reformed or a million things.

Framing it all as, "if you don't agree with this particular position, you're not woke, you're sort of a racist, even if you don't think you're a racist. And incidentally you have to spend a lot of time confessing to your racism or to the racism all around you before you could even address these differentials." If I were a Social Democrat, much more of a Social Democrat on the left, I'd be very unhappy about this. I mean, it's not helping the cause of equality in the more normal sense. And I would say that's even true of race, don't you think? I mean, it's not helping.

McWHORTER: Yeah. This is one of the major problems with the new development. It's supposedly a political program. It's supposedly designed to create change in the world, but you can't help noticing that the people who are most heatedly behind this sort of thing aren't terribly concerned with actually watching change happen or making it happen. Or if you tell them that there is evidence of change, or that there has been, they resist it. It seems almost inconvenient to them to allow that there's been any kind of progress on these sorts of questions.

And it's because, supposedly this is politics, all of it mimes what old time civil rights leaders did. But what this really is, is a personality type. What this really is, is people showing that they are goodly, which is what human beings do in all kinds of societies, and always have. They're showing that they're good people. They're showing that they know that systemic racism exists. And that's really the only thing. It's not really about anything else, because if it were, if people were really concerned who were of this ideology about changing the world, they'd be impatient to get out and change it. They'd be more interested in what used to be called grassroots politicking. The idea that you sit around and "do the work of understanding the subtleties of your inner racism" would seem like a waste of time. People would be champing at the bit. It would be hard to get people behind that. Instead, people enjoy that sort of thing because it's a kumbaya circle. It's about making yourself feel good, and this is whether you're white or you're Black.

So my book is not about everybody needing to just get over themselves and stop thinking so much about racism and pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. It's not that book. I'm saying that there are things that need to be done, but it is not sitting around and making yourself feel good by examining your inner racism, or, if you're Black, teaching white people about their inner racism. Or going around pretending that things are a lot worse than they are and portraying yourself as a victim, especially if you are a relatively successful affluent person who's living a life that would be envied by pretty much everybody else on the planet. It's not helping.

So yeah, we have a problem because this kind of wokeness doesn't change people's lives. It's idle. And I think it needs to be called out, and that needs to be called out by somebody who's Black. And of course there are people who will say that I'm not Black properly, I'm not really Black, et cetera, but that doesn't stick as hard as a white person being called a racist. And so hopefully some of it will cut through.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I hope so. I do feel like we could use some old-fashioned Marxists around saying, "Look, why are all these super wealthy Hollywood types and big corporations pretending to be...?" Maybe one should be tipped off that this isn't entirely a constructive movement for social change by the fact that an awful lot of people who are doing very well from the status quo are parroting it, right? It's the kind of argument Marxists used to make, with some truth I think, decades and decades ago, a century ago. Marx himself does occasionally. But now it's, yeah — we need a little more of that sort of what you can call Marxism, but also kind of what's actually happening on the ground.

I mean, I guess one thing that strikes me, I would like to see police reform and I've got to say that I don't think framing it all as wokeness and the kind of extremism of some of the rhetoric of wokeness has helped that cause. And you mentioned George Floyd and the year and a half since then. Now I don't want to also excuse the people on the other side who don't want reform, who like certain aspects of current policing and whatever, but you can get into a vicious cycle, right, where it's wokeness and authoritarians on the right and woke types on the left and they each benefit from each other I think really.

McWHORTER: Yeah. I find myself almost nostalgic for the Occupy movement because there was a certain theatricality about that, but it did change the conversation. There was a way of looking at things since then that we would not have if we had not basically been taken by the collar by those young people and their spending long times outside. It was political theater that served a kind of purpose, whereas with this, it's hard to see that that's what's going on.

So a certain kind of person will say that, "Well, there have been some excesses, but at least we're having a racial reckoning." But the thing is the terms of this racial reckoning are so exaggerated, and so narrow, and so punitive that I'm not sure we're being left with anything but fear. It's just people learning that they have to pretend to think certain things because they don't want to get called out and pilloried in the public square.

That's not what happened with Occupy, but because race is an issue of personal goodness, you show that you're a good person by showing that you're not a racist, it ends up being a different kind of predicate with this movement.

But, yeah, I'm not sure what it's building. The kind of person who cannot be reached, it's who I call "the elect" in the book, this is the wokest of the woke, they would say that they're accomplishing something, but I'm not sure what it is. I agree with you completely on that.

KRISTOL: That's an interesting question I should ask, yeah, what would the metrics of achievement be here? It's like affirmative action, which I was partly a supporter of and partly a skeptic of and when it got into quotas I thought it did some damage, but also maybe did some good things. But there at least, when everyone thinks of it, there were sort of concrete things you could say: that the percentage of students went from 2% African American to 10%. Or physicians and people in medical school and so forth. It wasn't a ridiculous thing to think that not all groups were being represented at all levels and there probably was some discrimination. There's certainly history behind that and we should go take an extra step to try to rectify that, and then we can just debate whether those steps are warranted or not, and it does conflict at some point with equal opportunity for individuals perhaps and preferences.

But anyway, there were actual things that could happen on the ground that you could look up 10 or 20 years later and say, "Well, that, we did change things." I do wonder what would the change be that if wokeness were to succeed, if it were to move beyond the universities into the culture as much as you say and into corporation — I want to come back to how pervasive it is — but sort of if everyone became woke, what would — I mean, this is an honest question, not really a rhetorical question, what would be different?

McWHORTER: Well, I think that the woke idea is that you're going to create this thing that we now are trained to call "equity" as opposed to equality, where, in all endeavors, people who are not white are

represented at least proportionally to what they constitute in the population and maybe even more. And the idea is that the reason it's not that way now in any endeavor is because of racism of some kind. And if it's not outright bigotry, which it almost never is these days, then it's something more abstract called systemic racism. Now, whether that systemic racism was initiated in the past or whether it's carried on in the present is something we're not supposed to ask too many questions about, but it's racism.

So the idea is that because racism must be the reason that there are, for example, fewer Black people in physics than there would be if there were this strict proportional representation, then you force equity. And you force it even by changing what are thought of as mainstream standards if necessary, because what's important is to have the equity.

Now the problem with this is that if someone says, "When I see imbalances, when I see under-representation, what I see is racism,"— that unfortunately is Ibram Kendi's mantra — if somebody says that, the simple truth is nine out of 10 people listen to that and know that that is a grievously oversimplified take on this thing called sociology, anthropology, politics, social history, simply the passage of time and how things morph from one decade to another. History would not be a substantial field if anything came down to things that simple. All discrepancies of that kind are not due to something called racism. It's dumbed down social science. Everybody knows.

But if the person says that and they're Black and they have a certain stage presence, we're in a moment where people will pretend to agree. Next thing you know, you're forcing equity by, for example, actually putting forth the idea that it's imposing white standards on Black students to teach math in the traditional way, that it is imposing white standards on Black people to expect Black people to be on time or to get the exact answer or to engage in the complexities of European music theory, which apparently now is racist, et cetera.

And so that's the issue. It would be this strict equity, but anybody who thinks that the lack of equity is always due in a particular time slice to something called racism is oversimplifying social history in a way that's apparent to almost anybody, and yet we pretend that that makes sense because we're guilty and we're afraid. It won't do.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's very interesting. And I think there are two separate things sort of you're describing going on there. One is to look at an under-representation of some group in some advanced field and say that's a problem. Maybe it's due to racism, maybe it's due to the effects of previous discrimination and inequalities, but one solution to that would be, "And therefore we're going to redouble our efforts to teach physics," let's just take this, "in inner city schools." So to make sure kids learn math and are better prepared, maybe better prepared even than they're more privileged counterparts, we'll spend more money in those schools.

That would be a more traditional form of, let's just call it liberal in a broad sense activism to rectify inequalities, which may have their source in past systemic racism or present even, but whatever their source, it can be rectified presumably by these kinds of efforts.

That's really very different from changing what we mean by learning math or learning physics or denigrating science as being white science or whatever. And I think that latter is so much more the spirit of the current woke effort than the more traditional, which had its own issues and complexities obviously. Is it fair to spend twice as much, and should we have preferences and scholarships and so forth for kids from underprivileged backgrounds? But maybe we should, maybe not too much, but maybe partly. But that's a very different kind of debate and discussion than the woke sort of let's therefore pretend these aren't real disciplines or people don't need to know them.

McWHORTER: It's striking how people miss this because of the potency of showing that you're not a racist. That's so important to a certain kind of person. And so you have that Black kids tend not to do as well on standardized tests as other kids. Latinos have the problem too. It's worse for Black kids and it's

been shown again and again. The reasons for it are partly historical. The reasons for it are partly cultural. And by that, I mean linguistic culture, how children are spoken to, orality versus literacy. All of it is rather complicated. It has nothing to do with IQ, but it's there.

Now, there are two ways of looking at this. If you are a civil rights leader in 1962, you're drinking a martini, you've got cat eye glasses and there's no color yet. Everything's in black and white. You can tell because of the pictures. You're one of them and there's this test problem. And you say, "Well, how can we get our kids to be better at the test?" I can just picture Roger Wilkins or somebody saying that. That's what Martin Luther King would've said, how can we get our kids better at the test?

KRISTOL: And make sure the tests are fair, that they're not biased and so forth. Yeah.

McWHORTER: Right. Whereas now the idea is, "Okay, if there's that disparate result, I see racism, and so we're going to get rid of the test because the test is racist."

Now, you're not supposed to ask how the test is racist. Some people will say, "Well, it's biased." And that's something that they heard somebody say in 1977. Those tests haven't been biased for decades. They're not biased. Or if they mean that somehow inherently it's biased in that it's requiring Black children to demonstrate their abstract intelligence on a little test, what do you mean it's biased? Because that's very close to saying that Black kids aren't as bright. And of course, if you're saying Black kids aren't as bright, that extends rather gracefully to Black people because Black kids grow up to be adults.

So if the kids are not doing well on the test, and the reason is that the test is biased, and the test is biased because it's wrong to subject Black people to tests of abstract cognitive skill, next thing you know, you have somebody like Charles Murray who will write a whole book arguing that Black people just apparently aren't as bright.

Well, the thing is someone like former Mayor Bill de Blasio here in New York City is basically saying that, in taking these tests away from our elite public schools, yet we're not supposed to talk about that. What we're supposed to do is show that we're not racist by getting rid of the tests because Black kids have trouble with it. But yeah, what about saying how do we make the Black kids better at the test? How do we get Black families more aware of the free services that help the kids get better at the test? There's also an issue there. A lot of Black families in underserved neighborhoods don't know about those services.

But no, you're not even supposed to bring it up. When I bring these things up, I'm labeled "the interesting writer who's a contrarian," et cetera. Why is this not basically and fundamentally in the discussion? It's because of the tenor of our times. Yeah, there's a problem with that.

KRISTOL: And so much of it does seem to be about people wanting to show they're virtuous and profess their anti-racism as opposed to — I mean, in principle, you could do that and also be very serious about seeking —

McWHORTER: You could. Right.

KRISTOL: — solutions to various problems. And of course the professing at some point becomes an obstacle to the solution because you're asking everyone else to then profess their guilt when people even really aren't guilty of anything much, maybe of slightly neglecting some problems, but they'd be much easier allies to get, don't you think?

I mean, this is where I do think it really hurts liberalism in the old-fashioned sense. It'd be much easier to get more allies for a lot of these things if one weren't hectoring people that, even though they think they've been good people, and they have been good people, and they've personally behaved in a decent way and then joined organizations that try to encourage others to behave in decent ways, they're still racist. I do think that part of it just infuriates people and with some good reason.

McWHORTER: Yeah, it's so tempting. It's a human trait to exaggerate your victimhood if you're not really a victim. It's something that happens only if you're not really suffering. There's a psychological condition, not a mania, but a condition. Psychologists know it as the victimization mindset where you exaggerate because it gives you the pleasant feeling of being a survivor because you're this victim: you have racism when you step outside of the house every day. And more to the point, it can feel good to accuse people of some tort, of some moral perversion.

Unfortunately it can feel good if you're a Black person to call white people racist because then you're good and they're bad. That's human. We all remember that kid in school, the tattletale. It's race neutral. I think Black America is encouraged to OD on that kind of psychology. And yes, I can see white people get tired of it. And the proper response that someone like me as a Black person is supposed to have is "they're tired of it because they're racist." But no, it might be that calling people racist has gone as far as it's going to go in terms of creating change on the ground.

But few people seem to be concerned with that because the issue has not really changed. The issue is about how individuals are feeling, and people having a warm sense of group membership, and that's on both the Black and the white side of this. And yeah, it's bad politics. You have to forge alliances. And a certain kind of elect person feels if forging alliances would mean giving up on this particular focus on battling white power, if we have to stop paying so much attention to that, then we don't need any allies. Well, what constructive politics. Great. Where are you going to go from there?

KRISTOL: Yeah. And I do think a lot of the people who get most annoyed at others are white people, not Black people actually, who are trying to, I don't know, raise themselves above you morally by saying that they're more alive and they're more woke. Literally that's the term, right? More woke than you are.

McWHORTER: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Well, let's talk about the — I want to talk about two things maybe, the political side of it in the sense of how much this is damaging, let's call it mainstream liberal policies, which I would sort of call moderately conservative policies all the way over to moderately liberal policies.

But let me talk about the universities first. I just want to come back to that. You're there, you're teaching at a major university. I'm not. I mean, we could all sort of speculate about how pervasive it is in corporate America and in the culture as a whole, and also how long-lasting that's going to be. Maybe it'll fade, maybe it'll get deeper and less opposed. But what about the universities?

I mean, in the real world of the university right now, how much of an obstacle is this to actual free discussion, free debate, free inquiry? I mean, that is what the universities are about uniquely, more than corporate America. So it's more of a problem if it's really preventing the faculty or students from reading things, from discussing things, from even, in some indirect way, thinking about certain things. How much should one be alarmed?

McWHORTER: It's a problem, and I think that the typical student can see through this sort of thing. And people are intelligent. And so the typical student knows that there's a bias in what kind of courses are offered and what their professors talk about.

But nevertheless, there is certainly that tilt. It's much stronger than it used to be. And so back when people were complaining about "tenured radicals" 25, 30 years ago when I started teaching, it was clear to me even at say Berkeley, Berkeley, which is where I first had a long term teaching job, that that kind of person was one at the table, but I didn't feel like the campus was being taken over by that sort of thing.

But things have certainly changed. I have had a couple of students independently, who graduated in the late mid-teens, contact me and say that they are seeing some of my statements in the media, and they

would say that when they were at Columbia, their primary — both of them said this independently— the primary lesson they learned was to shut up about certain issues that they didn't agree with. And both of them are Democrats who loved Hillary Clinton. These are people who are left of center.

Oh, I'll give you one, and this is going to be misinterpreted, but I think it's useful to put it out there one time. This is a personal thing which really doesn't bother me, and nobody will believe that it does. But I started teaching at Columbia in 2008. So that means it's been now 14 years. I've never been gone. I'm on campus.

Now, the Black faculty at Columbia, they know I'm there. Frankly, it would be hard to miss. They know I'm there, and yet in 14 years that I've been running around that campus, I have never once been asked to speak in a class about my area of expertise, even linguistics. Maybe they don't want to hear from me about race. We can talk about that. But what about the non-race stuff that I do? I have never been asked to serve on a panel. There are endless panel discussions at Columbia about race, and you see the usual names. I'm right there on campus, I'm never asked. Other people who are right there on campus are. And in general, there has been an absolute frosty silence.

Now, to be honest, I have a busy life. I've got plenty to do. I couldn't care less. I don't have time to eat breakfast, but I can't help noticing that I am a non-presence. Now, among other departments, I get asked to do a little of this and a little of that, and people are happy to see me. I guess they're all racists or something. But when it comes to the Black faculty, because my views are not the proper ones — it's the only possible reason — I am completely ignored.

Now, that means that if the students know anything about me, they get it online. Nowadays I'm harder to hide, but the fact is that the — And I doubt if they sit and agree on this explicitly, but there's clearly a tacit idea, "Don't have him around or exposed to the students anymore than necessary."

Now, to tell you the truth, if one were to pull the camera back, and I don't walk around thinking about these things, but I'm a linguist. I know about Black languages. One of my specialties is creole languages. I am part of a community of about 150 working creolists. I know more about those languages than almost anybody in the world, that's my profession, and yet nothing.

Now, I'm not alone. I'm sure there are other politically incorrect people on various campuses who would tell the exact same story. Glen Lowry is one of them. Now, I'm not saying that I'm muzzled or canceled. I'm doing this. The internet basically changes that whole predicate. I don't feel suppressed, but still, that aspect of the campus culture, that's typical. It's not just about me, and that is a sign of the times. That is a narrowness of things.

And especially given that I'm not a Republican, I'm not a conservative. Nevertheless, because I'm not woke, woke, woke, I'm wrong, and they don't want to expose their charges to my filth. That's not right.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that isn't right. It's depressing. How much of it is, I'm struck, it seems to be back in the "tenured radicals" days, they were people worried about professors being biased, as you say, and administrators imposing certain things, or preferring certain points of view. Am I wrong that now a lot of the problem is actually the students' experiences from other students, and that's the sort of social media problem?

One thing I used to reassure some of my conservative friends about 25, 30 years ago is look, it's unfortunate. This is political correctness that's making our higher education less good than it should be. That's an opportunity cost, the students aren't studying things they could be studying because they're studying silly, trendy things. But at the end of the day, a lot of it is water off a duck's back. These students leave college, they go out into the real world, five years later they think, "Well, that was kind of — half my glasses in college were kind of stupid," but they're not shaped by this.

I do feel that somehow the combination of, I don't know, the pressure from your peers, the social media question, I don't quite know what to put my finger on what it is, that it's not so much water off a duck's back anymore, or maybe it is. And maybe five years from now, we'll just get students who'll look at this and say, "Well, I wish I had known more about Professor McWhorter at Columbia, but no one ever told me about him. I had to learn about him on social media afterwards, so I missed a chance to learn some useful, some interesting things, but I didn't —" I don't know.

How constricting is it, I guess in the real world of undergraduate or graduate, I suppose?

McWHORTER: This is the thing. What's changed is that social media makes it so that, that way of looking at the world is something you continue to be exposed to after you leave campus. And so in my memory, I start teaching in the mid '90s. In my memory, there were often hard leftist undergraduates. That was a type, and I always considered them interesting if I was having a discussion class, because I wanted to hear from that side of things. I would even tell them, "You are the most left person in the room. I want to know what you think, teach us things."

Often, that person would leave campus and to caricature, they would start smoking a pipe and start living this Ozzie and Harriet life. Not always. Some of those people went off to become grassroots activists, but usually they went away. And when you heard from them later, they kind of joined the real world.

That is less the case now because social media lets you stay in a certain bubble. And I can definitely say I'm not one for seeing things in dramatic terms in terms of how social history works. But something happened very abruptly in 2013. It was that year, not 2012, not 2015.

2013, I started finding it harder to get a discussion going amongst students about things that matter, about things that are interesting. At the time, I didn't know that four years before that in 2009 was when Twitter and Facebook had become default. I lived through it all very gradually like the rest of us, but it was in '09 that it went from you being on Facebook to your mother being on Facebook. It was in '09 that it became, "Oh you are not on Twitter?" As opposed to, "What is Twitter?" Which I remember asking somebody in 2007.

And so you've got that. And then a few years go by, and suddenly I have one student who's all but dressing me down in a class. Not quite, I don't want to overdramatize it, but it's the only time I've ever felt, "Wow. I am almost inclined to be mean to this guy, and I'm going to hold my tongue." That happened in 2013, and there's a reason.

And so yeah, it's no longer just hot heads on campus, educating us as to Marx's theory. It's become a way of thinking that people keep with them because of the nature of social media. And that's scary. I wrote plenty of things in 2015 about how things were going crazy on campuses. But this, I didn't write a book about it. I wrote a book about this because now, it's just out in the real world and keeping Black people from getting ahead, which is what really worries me.

KRISTOL: And on campus, I think — I do a little teaching in the summer for the various programs and a little bit during the academic year too. And I also saw a change that my political science friends tended to ascribe it to Title IX, and I think that was a little more on the gender issue actually. And so, there were legal consequences now for — not just as they should be, for genuine sexual harassment and so forth. — but for saying something that made people feel uncomfortable.

McWHORTER: Right.

KRISTOL: But I think you make a good point about social media. Of course, it's a double-edged sword, that people will come to this conversation through Twitter and so forth. So it's a good thing in the sense that it liberates people from the constrictions of campus, but it affects on-campus.

I'm struck talking to students, to get back to my point about this summer, how much I would say to them, "Are you worried about saying things in class?" And I would say these students who are pretty, very intelligent and pretty self-selected types, they want to come to a conservative program in Washington, so many of them are slightly, not really conservative, but not left, let's say. They're the type who would speak up in class and wouldn't worry about it.

And in the early days, they would tell me, "Oh no. Yeah, there're some problems, but I say what I think, and we have a lot of students who say what they think, and it's healthier than you would think watching Fox News." At some point, people started to say, "I am careful what I say." And I would say, "Really? Are you worried about the professor giving you a lower grade?" Occasionally, people would say, "Yes," but often, it was, "No, I'm worried about another student putting what I say or mischaracterizing what I say on Twitter or Facebook, or whatever, and then it goes viral. And suddenly, I'm dealing with this thing. And two years later, I apply for a job conceivably, and this thing is out there."

Then I was sort of slow, and I said, "Yeah, that would really constrain discussion in class, and that's really unfortunate." And the student says to me, "Well, no, it's not just in class. I could say it in the dorm. I could say it in the dining room." So the degree to which every — This is where the kind of censoriousness of wokeness, I think really becomes a constraint on people's, on free speech and free discourse, and free discussion, which is probably pretty bad, right?

McWHORTER: Well, you're making me nostalgic actually, for 10 years ago. What a middle-aged thing to say, but yeah, I'm thinking of a class I did in 2011, and it was on political theory and philosophy. And there was in the class, about two-and-a-half, there were about two-and-a-half stridently leftist students, and they would be a little bit censorious at times. I hate to say frankly, the Black one in particular, but none of it was a problem. They were the way they were. I kind of thought the class was learning from them. Sometimes, they learned a little bit from each other, and that was just the way it was. I didn't consider that to be a problem that there were some stridently leftist students in the class, but then a few years later, that kind of person started feeling comfortable, shouting everybody down, and/or everybody was scared of that person because of what you were talking about.

Suppose it gets around not only on social media, but whatever the campus student online vine is. And next thing you know, your life is over, and that's where you get my students writing me now and saying, "I learned to shut up." And yeah, if that's not a problem, I'm not sure what is.

There're some people who will listen to us saying this and say, "Who cares?" Well, I'm sorry. I care about university culture. I don't consider that trivial because these are people who are being educated to take their place in the world and help create change. Well, if you're told that anything you think beyond a certain, very narrow calculus about overturning power differentials is moral perversion, you might end up going out and not doing anything. You might go out and just work for Bear Stearns, and that worries me.

KRISTOL: Or you might think that — I think this has been true to some degree, and I don't want to cite it at all onto "the left caused Trump," or "it's responsible for Trump" or something like that, or Trumpism or right wing authoritarianism. But you might think, "Gee, people are throwing around these moralistic terms awfully loosely, and maybe there's... I'll just kind of indulge in a little anti-moralism or amoralism, or disdain for people who think there are some moral basis for these things."

And I do think there's a real vicious cycle that the misuse of the claims of morality can lead to a denial or degradation of legitimate claims of moral concerns, right? And so, I wonder what happens in the real world. I do think a lot of the right wing discourse on this is a little simple, and it's not yours, but in the sense of "they're brainwashing the kids and they're all going to come out as left wing social justice warriors." There might be some truth to that, but I think a lot of it is the perverse effects of wokism can be bad for the country in all kinds of other ways. Not that it's literally moving people to the left.

McWHORTER: Yeah. I think that a lot of it will just be that it's teaching people to be quiet. It's teaching people to pretend to believe things that they don't believe.

KRISTOL: Cynical, maybe, yeah.

McWHORTER: And you end up just settling, and that's a perversion. That's a perversion of any conception of a healthy public culture. And I think that really, the solution just is, and I'm seeing this happening and I'm happy to see examples of this week by week. That kind of person just needs to be stood up to.

And it's funny, I would feel like I was being burdened if I were white, because on the one hand, as a white person, I'm supposed to examine myself for being a racist. And I get that, and that's important beyond a certain point, don't be a racist. But now the idea is also, if you don't want the country to be run by these simplistic culture warriors, then you have to stand up to people, including Black ones, when they tell you to base your entire consciousness on something so simplistic and punitive, and idle, and self-directed.

You have to tell them, no, and they're going to yell loud on Twitter. And yet you are responsible, if you really aren't a racist, for telling those people, "No, we're not going to do it your way. And you can scream all you want to." It's kind of like herd immunity. There has to be a critical mass of people standing up to the elect before there can be any real change. They need to sit back down. And I don't think that they need to jump out the window. They want the rest of us to jump out the window. I think they just need to sit down.

I miss the time when people like that were seated with the rest of us and we could learn from them. But sometime, two springs ago, they stood up and started shouting and throwing furniture. They've got to be told to stop that.

KRISTOL: And how optimistic or pessimistic are you about — I don't know, let's say it's the next decade in that respect. On the one hand you've got — you're in New York, you've got a new Mayor who, part of this campaign really was along the lines you were saying, but also a liberal, someone who is not any kind of right wing Republican, gets elected on this, and seems to, in his first couple of days being a mayor, continued on these themes.

But how much do you think the kind of America, in its traditional way, will sort of deal with this problem and kind of get past it? And how much do you think liberals will stand up? Because that is important, I think. You do have people on the right screaming and yelling about it, have an interest in doing so in some sense.

Whereas I think it's very important that the mayor of New York, elected in New York City, himself, obviously Black and a former cop who made his name really complaining, I think probably correctly about real abuses in the Police Department. Are you a little encouraged? Are you still pretty worried? Pessimistic that this unfortunately has a long way to go? How hard is it to combat it? Say a word about all that.

McWHORTER: I'm encouraged actually, and I'm beginning to feel confident in saying that. I think that for example, Mayor Adams is a beacon. Black people, and "Real," Black people, as some people sometimes say, like him, and got him into office. And his views on policing, his views on standardized testing are the ones that I think good liberals agree about.

And I think I'm not remotely going to make the claim that one book that one person writes does all the heavy lifting, but I think my book is part of a general climate of teaching people from what I'm hearing from readers. And frankly, I'm getting an avalanche from readers of *Woke Racism*, to the point that I can't answer all of the mail. And I'm glad, but what I'm hearing is —

KRISTOL: What kind of readers are these, would you say? Are they [crosstalk] or from all over?

McWHORTER: It's exactly the people I was trying to reach, which is people who are center, or left of center, or maybe moderately right, but especially center and left of center, who thought of themselves as on the side of the angels, and then suddenly are being screamed at by these radicals, and being told that they're moral perverts.

That kind of person, including a lot of Black ones, are writing me and saying, "Your book helped me to understand what these people are. And I understand that I need to stand up to this kind of person, and I'm trying." Some people have said that it's really hard, I can imagine. Some people are saying that they can't because of the nature of their employment, but some people have been telling me stories of how they stood up and how somebody joined them. And I think that, that is what we need.

To tell you the truth, Bill, I think, and I really hope I'm wrong, but from where I stand as an academic, including watching things going on in my own field, I fear academia is lost. I feel like a whole generation of people in the humanities and social sciences are coming in and getting jobs, and setting the ideological agenda. And very soon, they're going to be graying and making all of the hiring decisions.

And once academia, or humanities and social sciences, are run by people 50 and older of those politics, there's nothing to be done because they won't hire anybody who isn't like them. I'm not sure that can be reversed. Maybe I'm too close to it to understand that ideological changes of the same kind that mean that teen pregnancy is down and people don't smoke anymore will change academia, but I'm afraid it's lost.

The future that I'm seeing is that academia and the humanities and social sciences is going to be this peculiar, rarefied little world that most even intelligent curious people will find uncongenial. That's maybe one way that you can have an academic setting, especially with online culture, there are other ways of engaging in the life of the mind. And people are going to start realizing, I think, that the university is only one.

But in terms of the rest of the world — because the university, unlike what I feel like in my life, the university is only one sliver of the world — I think there's a pushback.

I think that what happened is that everybody went... Nah, I hate saying crazy because nobody is crazy. But in the spring of 2020, everybody was stuck inside, a particularly egregious murder of a Black man happened, and everybody was stuck inside and wanted a reason to come together and be communal. And, frankly, to get outside. I completely understand that. It was a weird cocktail of factors, and it meant that suddenly the radical woke kind of person was allowed to run the show and set an ideological agenda for the entire country.

I think we tend to forget how much of all that happened on Slack and in the chat sections of Zoom. It wasn't real, human interaction. Now, here we are two years later, and I think people are beginning to realize, "Wait a minute. Get rid of the standardized tests? Wait a minute. Defund the police? Wait a minute. Why did we fire that man a year ago?" Et cetera. That's happening. It's not going to happen in academia, unfortunately, at least my academia. But I think it's going to happen elsewhere, and ultimately maybe that'll do. Maybe we can have an alternate academia online.

KRISTOL: Now that's so interesting. What did we say? When I started this seven, eight years ago, CONVERSATIONS was to let young people see discussions that they might not be seeing on college campus, and see points-of-view and professors. And not just points-of-view, but actual, hopefully educational discussions.

And I do think — I've always said this to conservative friends — you can try to fix academia, and God knows we should try, we should promote good people and found new universities, and that can be done as well, but a lot of education can happen outside of the official institutions —

McWHORTER: Especially these days.

KRISTOL: Especially these days. This is where the internet is such a double-edged sword. It's made so many of these problems worse, as you said earlier, but it's also brought us huge opportunities.

K through 12 is a little different story because everyone has to go through that. I suppose the universities will maintain their gatekeeping function, and so you sort of hate to have kids waste four years in a sense. Maybe it won't be four years anymore. Maybe it'll be two or three, and maybe even the gatekeeping can decline. And other places can — Why can't you take these courses online and get the credit if it's taught by someone reputable? You, I think, did teach courses. I remember Susan was listening, my wife said —

McWHORTER: I do three courses —

KRISTOL: For the Teaching Company, didn't you? Is that what it's called? I can't remember.

McWHORTER: Yeah. I'm working on The Great Courses, and I'm doing a course on the history of the Alphabet and Writing for them right now. So, yeah, that's a way of becoming educated, to take The Great Courses.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean, it hasn't been for most of human history. That to be educated, one had to go to an institution of higher education. And, indeed — I did ten minutes of research on this, and I should do more — but a lot of what happened in the 18th Century, a lot of what the *encyclopedia* in France was about, The Royal Society in England was about, was they gave up on the institutions of higher education. They were dominated by whatever they were dominated at the time —

McWHORTER: Scholastics.

KRISTOL: Scholastic stuffiness, Hobbes denounces that. You know that. And they started new institutions, the kind of equivalent of think tanks, and maybe this CONVERSATION really, which didn't take place in universities and which had a big effect, for better and worse, I suppose, in some ways. But, you know —

McWHORTER: Podcasts. Yeah. I really —

KRISTOL: Don't you think?

McWHORTER: I think that really is a plausible model. I have argued for 20 years that fewer people should go to college anyway, even if it were working. I think that that post-GI Bill model, where you're supposed to spend four years pretending to like Shakespeare, after you go to high school, I think that's arbitrary. I think many fewer people should do that. There should be 13 grades, and then most people should just go out and go to work. That model appeals to me even more now because of what's happening in the humanities and the social sciences, in academia in particular.

KRISTOL: Which I guess we can maybe close with this then, which gets back to the question of how much, if we have an academic problem, it's unfortunate, but it's maybe manageable from the overall point of view of a healthy pluralistic, liberal democracy committed —

McWHORTER: Possibly.

KRISTOL: — to free discussion and serious works of intellect and so forth. I guess this is where the question of how much the woke spirit spills out beyond the academy and starts to color everything we do, and really damages intellectual inquiry even beyond Morningside Heights. I suppose that's a very important question, right? And I guess we don't really know the answer to that yet.

McWHORTER: We can't know, but I think it is the duty of the truly concerned citizen to resist that sort of thing flowing too far from the campus. Because a lot of it, frankly, holds back people who actually need help. It's an ideology that appeals, with the big words, with the passion, with the artful sarcasm, et cetera. But it's very oversimplified. It's deeply inwardly focused rather than being truly focused on making change in the real world.

I mean, there's a basic idea behind the new woke idea, which is that you have to do all of this prayer, all these gestures, all of this internal self-examination before you can have change out in the real world. No one explains why. It's a nice idea that you have to do all this and you're preparing to go do something, which, frankly, is suspiciously less fun than the thing that you're engaged in right now.

But the truth is, there's no demonstration that all of this gesticulating has to happen before you go out and do the real and, frankly, less exciting work. Nobody would have known why that was 50 years ago. And if somebody says, "Well, they got that work done. But to get further, we first have to sit in a Kumbaya circle and think about our complicity." Why? And if you actually ask people to demonstrate the logic behind that, frankly, there is none. It's just that people kind of enjoy sitting in the Kumbaya circle.

And so, yes, we've got to make sure that that way of looking at things does not spread far beyond the hallowed halls of the campus, an environment which I deeply love. It's the only one that I ever have felt truly comfortable in, but it's changing beneath my feet. And so, yes, the rest of the world cannot go that way.

KRISTOL: And I hope conservatives watching this maybe think a little bit about their reaction in the sense that the Right reaction to Left wokeness isn't right-wing piety, particularly, and, "Oh, my God. How can you question the Founding at all? It was perfect." But rather, the kinds of things we've been talking about, you've spoken about so much, not just in the book, but over the years.

I mean, what really would help make sure we have upward mobility and opportunity in the U.S.? What really would help kids who do grow up in disadvantage circumstances — whether they're immigrants from 1983, whose parents came here and weren't educated and worked extremely hard at menial jobs — what helps them the most?

And this is where I think the discussion about crime, testing, all these kinds of things that, as you say, Mayor Adams actually did talk about, would be so much more helpful, I would say, than the culture war engagement. Some of the culture war stuff is legitimate, of course, and arguing about the American Revolution is — I'm personally interested in it, and there's a reasonable middle ground, I believe, between sort of the, "How dare one question these Founders?" and the 1619 project. And, in fact, a lot of people have tried to articulate that.

But I do think, as a practical matter, this is, I guess I'll close maybe with this. You're an observer of politics, you keep some distance from it I think. But I do feel like the national forces of liberalism, broadly speaking — and pretty centrist liberalism, like the Biden administration — they seem, maybe I'm wrong, but I feel like they could do a lot more along the lines of Mayor Adams, along the lines of the mayor of San Francisco and along the lines of educators who are really working hard to help less advantaged kids do better.

And along the lines of fixing problem barriers to advancement economically as well, as opposed to being intimidated from addressing some of these things because of the woke elements of the Democratic party. Maybe I'm exaggerating that intimidation, I don't know.

McWHORTER: Well, the opinions seem to differ on what the cause and effect there is. And I completely respect that. I don't think that the data are all in, but it certainly seems to be the case that if the central Democrat establishment were to focus more on, say, the Eric Adams kind of perspective: "here is what we're going to do for people in suffering communities, these concrete things. And we're not terribly interested in the posturing and the language policing, et cetera. Here are policies that will help people out on the ground." Then it would help peel away voters who go Republican, maybe partly because of the charisma of a particular leader.

You know, Trump. You and I feel the same way about Trump, but I think we both know that he makes a great speech, in his way. Well, you wouldn't be as swayed by that if Democrats were actually offering something very concrete and really seemed to be concerned with what you are. That is definitely there.

Now, I think that problems with gerrymandering and the electoral college and large states like Wyoming, nothing can address that from issues of what Eric Adams is talking about. But in order to work around the edges, yeah. I think that mainstreaming this strident kind of wokeness that says that if you don't agree with us, you are a moral pervert. How possibly could that help any party?

So, for example, the 1619 project. The book itself, if you actually go through it, it's a really worthy proposition. The idea that everything that ails the Black community today is traceable to slavery and Jim Crow and that therefore reparations are necessary, I don't agree with that argument. I have many bones to pick with it. However, I respect that argument's airing.

What I don't respect is the implication from some quarters that if you don't agree with the basic propositions in that book, you are a racist, you are a white supremacist, your ears are closed, you want to deny the sins of America's past. That's where it goes wrong. The idea that we've put out this book, and if you don't agree, you are a pig. That's got to stop.

However, the book should be there. The extreme right-wing critique of that book, that it questions the Founding and therefore is a polluted and ungrateful and unempirical and nasty piece of work. No. That won't do. I don't agree with a lot of its premises, but it's an interesting and valid piece of argument.

That's how we do things in a mature country. We have constructive arguments. That's what that book is. However, there are people behind it who are implying that if you aren't behind those arguments, it's not that you see the world in a different way, it's that you are a terrible person. That won't do either. So we have some problems on both sides.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's really well said, and I think it's a good note to end on. I'm impressed by your hopefulness actually, which I kind of agree with you, you know?

McWHORTER: Ask me tomorrow, yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I know. We'll do this again in a year and see if anyone just made [inaudible].

When we talked off camera, we were talking about how, though, for all of Eric Adams and the mayor of San Francisco, former mayor of Philadelphia, all Blacks elected in liberal places who have said, "We need to be serious about crime. We also need to be serious about reforming policing." But somehow, nationally, why doesn't Joe Biden have them to the White House for a round table with a bunch of other people as well? Including focusing on the problems of policing.

McWHORTER: London Breed and Michael Nutter. That's right.

KRISTOL: It just feels like that's such an obvious way for Democrats and liberals to make clear they're concerned about what lots of people out there who aren't racist are concerned about, and broaden the coalition. But I don't know if there would be pushback or not. That's an interesting question.

Well, let me ask you this then, as a concluding thing. You wrote the book, you knew what you were getting into, you've been involved in these debates for quite a while, different kinds. You said you've been gratified by a lot of the reactions that you've gotten from people. How about on the pushback side? Has it been worse than you expected? A little less than you expected? Is this a lesson that maybe the woke bark is worse than the woke bite? I don't know.

McWHORTER: Yeah. I want to say very quickly that inviting those mayors to the White House would be the right thing to do. But isn't it sad that the White House is more likely to determine who they're going to invite and what they're going to do for the cameras, based on an idea that what they need to do is show that they understand that Black people have a terrible past in this country, and that the things that happened in the past are the reason for our problems in the present? What they're going to do is show that they understand systemic racism, rather than featuring Black people elected by Black constituents, doing good things for Black people. Yes.

KRISTOL: And white constituents.

McWHORTER: And white ones! That's the problem.

As far as *Woke Racism* and the pushback, I guess it's been long enough now that I can have a sense of it. And part of the reason for my optimism is — and watch some horrible thing happen tomorrow — but there hasn't been the amount of pushback that you might expect.

I go back 22 years on race commentary at this point. And I wrote a book called *Losing the Race*, back in 2000, which was roundly condemned. I got physical hate mail, because back then people would actually send you mail. The book was really slammed. One school had a whole weekend symposium that was all about condemning this book, *Losing the Race*. I learned that through the grapevine, and that was typical.

With *Woke Racism*, that's not the case. And I think it's partly because I make it very clear in the book that whether you like it or not, I'm arguing for the Black community. This is not about teaching white people to not think about Black people at all. It's just how to think about Black people. And I think that I get the feeling, with all due humility, that it's hitting a chord. That a great many people who are truly concerned about these things don't get the way things started going in about May 2020.

So there have been the indignant reviews. *The New York Times* did a nice one, *The Washington Post* published this nasty screed that I haven't read, but there you go. And there will be some more of those, and then there are an equal number of reviews of it that are positive.

I don't spend as much time on Twitter as I did even six months ago, because I've got other stuff to do. But there are people on Twitter who hate it. Frankly, more who like it. And the crucial thing is, a great many of them are Black. There's always a myth that only white people like my work. That's not remotely true. And the Black ones are not all Caribbean and African immigrants or children thereof; nor are they all Ward Connerly bowtie-wearing Republican conservatives. They're all sorts of black people. And so I don't feel that the book is being condemned the way some people may have expected to be. But I knew it wouldn't.

When I wrote it, I was thinking, "This is something that a great many people of all colors are going to understand and believe." I didn't write the book in order to be despised. I'm used to being despised, but this was not one written for that. So, yeah. And maybe tomorrow I'm going to lose my job or something because the book is considered so terrible, but I don't think that's going to happen. I think that the book is saying something that most people understand. And it's not an anti-Black book. It's an anti hyper-woke

book, because hyper-wokes are hurting Black people. I don't think that's such an incendiary thing to say, and that's what *Woke Racism* is trying to argue.

KRISTOL: I don't think it's so incendiary either, but as you say, God knows what will happen tomorrow. But no, let's hope not. And let's continue this discussion at some point in the future. Thank you, John, for —

McWHORTER: We will!

KRISTOL: — for joining me today. And we'll also have to do something on linguistics and language. I think that's very —

McWHORTER: Yes! My home.

KRISTOL: And remind people. The podcast they should listen to is?

McWHORTER: Lexicon Valley. It's a podcast about language. It's at booksmartstudios.org you can find it. And there are two other podcasts, it's a little family. One of them with Amna Khalid, called Banished, about cancel culture. And one of them with Bob Garfield, who everybody knows from NPR, called Bully Pulpit. And then there's mine, which is Lexicon Valley. I've been doing it for five years, and you'll hear all sorts of stuff about my personal life and my love of show tunes, and you will learn about linguistics. That's Lexicon Valley.

KRISTOL: Good. Liberal education thrives. Maybe not always in the universities, but outside. That's fine.

McWHORTER: Hopefully, yeah.

KRISTOL: John, thanks so much for joining me today, and thank you all for joining us on CONVERSATIONS

McWHORTER: Thank you, Bill.