

*This article is a shortened version of a Joe Rogan interview of Johnathan Haidt about two approaches to addressing racism in the United States It provides us with one perspective for understanding the approaches being used in Unitarian Universalism to address this issue.*

## **Jonathan Haidt Discusses Two Versions of Identity Politics: “Common Enemy Politics” and “Common Humanity”**

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I’ve followed Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt closely for many years... He is the author of several excellent books, including *The Happiness Hypothesis*, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* and *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Haidt’s thought process crosscuts the prevailing two wings of political thought in the United States. In this extended interview with Joe Rogan, Haidt dissects many topics, including identity politics. He urges that this phrase encompasses two separate approaches, “Common Enemy” and “Common Humanity Politics.”

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### **Haidt – Rogan Interview**

JH: You have to look at different games being played. Yale was a place that taught me to think in lots of different ways and it was constantly blowing my mind when I took my first economics course. It was like wow, here’s a new pair of spectacles that I can put on and suddenly I see all these prices and supply. I never learned to think that way, where I learned about Freud in psychology or sociology. A good education is one that lets you look at our complicated world through multiple perspectives. That makes you smart. That’s what a liberal arts education should do. But what I see increasingly happening, especially at elite schools, is the dominance of a single story, and that single story is life is a battle between good people and evil people, or rather good groups and evil groups, and it’s a zero-sum game. So, if the bad groups have more, it’s because they took it from the good groups, so the point of everything is to fight the bad groups. Bring them down create equality and this is a terrible way to think in a free society. That might have worked you know in biblical days when you got the Moabites killing the Jebusites or whatever, but you know we live in an era in which we’ve discovered that that the pie can be grown a million-fold. So, to teach students to see society as a zero-sum competition between groups is primitive and destructive.

JR: In your book, you actually identify the moment where these micro aggressions made their appearance and they were initially a racist thing.

JH: Yeah. The idea of a micro aggression really becomes popular in a 2007 article by Derald Wing Sue at Teachers College. He talks about this concept of microaggressions. There are two things that are good about the concept, that are useful. One is that explicit racism has

clearly gone down—by any measure explicit racism is plummeted in America across the West—but there could still be subtle or veiled racism.

JR It's ultimately for everyone's sake, I mean, even for the sake of the people that are embroiled in all this controversy and chaos. It would be fantastic across the board if there was no more sexism, there was no more racism, there was no more any of these things. It would be wonderful. Then we could just start treating humans as just humans. Like this is just who you are you're just a person. No one cares. What a wonderful world we would live in if this was no longer an issue at all.

JH: Beautifully put.

JR: How does that get through?

JH: We were getting there, okay? That's what the twentieth century was. We were shaped by the late 20th century. The late 20th century was a time in America in which, you know, earlier on there was all kinds of prejudice. I mean, when I was born, just right before you were born, it was legal to say you can't eat here because you're Black and so that changed in 1964-65. But it used to be that we had legal differentiations by race and then those were knocked down. But we still had social [discrimination] and it used to be that if you were gay that was something humiliating. It had to be hidden. If you look at where we were in 1960 or '63, when I was born and then you look at where we got by 2000, the progress is fantastic on every front, so that's all I mean when I say we were moving in that direction.

And to your point about wouldn't be great if there was none of this, we just treated people like people? Okay, yeah that was the 20th century idea: let's get past these tribal identifications. What is so alarming to me now is that on campus—it began on campus but it's spreading elsewhere—and again not everywhere on campus—it's mostly in the Grievance Studies departments, they're teaching students the opposite. They're teaching students: Don't treat everyone like a person. People are their identities and you can tell somebody's identity by looking at people, so you know if they're good or bad. This, I think, is the opposite of progress.

JR: The differences between us are really fascinating, the difference is between men and women, I think are some of the more interesting explanations for human behavior, and not meaning that people must be defined by their gender, defined by their sex, and but it is interesting when you look at these gigantic groups. Why certain people tend to gravitate towards certain occupations or certain types of behavior or certain hobbies. It is really fascinating.

JH: Yeah, that's right. And if we were playing the truth-seeking game—if all we cared about is trying to understand things—we would do the research and we'd figure out what do people like? Do left-handers versus right-handers have different preferences? Probably not as far as I know. Do boys and girls have different preferences? Yeah, they're really big. Do men and women enjoy different things? Yeah, so we could say our goal is to create a free society. This is what the word "liberal" traditionally meant: A society in which people are free to construct a life that they want to live. And so, if you're born one race or another, that should not in any way be a limitation. And in the 20th century, we made a lot of progress towards that ideal.

JR: You keep saying we DID, meaning that you're implying that it ended. The progress hit a wall.

JH: Yeah, I shouldn't imply that, because overall I think the trends are unstoppable. I don't want to say that things are reversed. I agree.

In chapter 3 of *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Greg [Lukianoff] and I look at identity politics. There are all these loaded terms. If somebody says social justice warrior, [they think they] know a lot about them. We don't do any of that. We say there are people on campus who are very focused on identity issues and on injustices based on identity, and that's great. There's a lot to be concerned about and they're right to do that. Now, how do they do that? There's two different ways.

You can either do what we call common enemy identity politics, where you say life is a battle between good groups and evil groups. Let's divide people by race, you know, straight versus everyone else. Men versus all the other genders and white versus everybody else. So, you look at the straight white men. They're the problem. All the other groups must unite to fight the straight white man. That's one of the core ideas of "intersectionality." What we say in the book is that this leads to eternal conflict.

Much better is an identity politics based on common humanity. We don't say to hell with identity politics. We say you have to have identity politics until you have perfect justice and equality. You have to have a way for groups to organize to push back on things to demand justice. That's fine. But, you do it by first emphasizing common humanity. That's what Martin Luther King did. That's what Pauli Murray did. That's what Nelson Mandela did. This wonderful woman, Pauli Murray . . . she was a gay, black, possibly trans civil rights leader in beginning the 40s . . . She says, when my opponents draw a small circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them. I shall shout for the rights of all mankind. And this is, again, what Martin Luther King did. He's relentlessly appealing to our white brothers and sisters. He's using the language of American. Of Christianity. Start by saying what we have in common and then people's hearts are open. We're within a community. Now we can talk about our difficulties. So, it's the rise of common enemy identity politics on campus in the Grievance Studies departments, especially, that I think is an alarming trend.

JR: Another thing that's alarming to me is the redefining of terms like sexism and racism. Or that sexism against men is impossible. Racism against white people is impossible. They're redefining that these prejudices only exist if you're coming from a position of power. That's really weird. It also it opens up the door to treating people as an other. Literally, the people that are the victims of racism are now using racism against other people and feeling justified because of it and in having a bunch of people that will agree with them that this is in fact not racism. That this is pushing back on white privilege and saying all these different weird things. They feel really comfortable in saying these openly racist generalizing things about white people or about white men or about, you know, fill in the blank. Whatever group that you're attacking. And it's really strange. It's really strange to see,

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