

Fair Observer

Monthly



July 2024

Fair Observer^o
Independence, Diversity, Debate

Fair Observer Monthly



July 2024

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA
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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has more than 2,500 contributors from 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

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Are ETFs Now Cannibalizing Mutual Funds, and Is That Good?

Alex Gloy
July 02, 2024

Mutual funds have been around since 1924 but money has been flowing out of them and into exchange-traded funds (ETFs). These funds largely replicate the market and outperform most mutual funds. Yet there are hidden risks to ETFs as well to the market as a whole, if not to individual investors.

Mutual funds let you pool your money with other investors to "mutually" buy stocks, bonds and other investments. They're run by professional money managers who decide what to buy — stocks and bonds in various markets — and what to sell. They also decide when to buy and sell assets on behalf of their investors.

Mutual funds began in the US a century ago. This financial instrument in 1924 was popular with our parents' generation. Their advantages include diversification, professional management, affordability, daily liquidity, variety of choices by region, sector, company size or investment style and automatic reinvestment of dividends and capital gains.

However, most mutual funds come with considerable up-front sales charges as well as annual fees, eating into returns over longer periods. Making matters worse, up to 96% of all active US equity funds underperformed their benchmark over a 15-year period, as described in this earlier article. They underperform the market.

The emergence of ETFs

A relatively new type of fund has been cannibalizing mutual funds in recent years. Known as exchange-traded funds (ETFs), the first such fund was launched in Canada in 1990. In 1993, the first ETF was launched in the US. ETFs took time to catch on before growing rapidly in popularity. They seek to track an index, which is typically weighted as per market capitalization, in order to capture the risk and return of a given market. ETFs comprised only 1% of total fund trading in 2000. The crash of the dotcom bubble in 2001 boosted the popularity of ETFs, and a graph on the popular site Investopedia reveals that they have really taken off since 2010.

Since most mutual funds underperform the market and ETFs are largely so-called passive investment vehicles that replicate the market, why would someone pay higher fees for an inferior performance?

Before we carry on, it is important to understand what active and passive investment means. "Active" describes the process of actively selecting a few stocks, hoping their performance would beat a broad index, like the S&P 500. "Passive", on the contrary, involves simply replicating the performance of said index. Once funds are invested according to the weights prescribed by the index, the manager can fold his hands and remain passive.

Why do ETFs perform better and what are the risks?

Why are an increasing number of investors switching to so-called passive investment vehicles? Since there is no need to do any security research, passive ETFs can do without hiring expensive analysts. This allows them to charge much smaller fees and outperform the mutual funds.

The State Street Global Advisors SPDR S&P 500 ETF Trust (symbol “SPY”), with more than \$500 billion in assets, charges annual fees of less than a tenth of one per cent, ie <0.1%. By contrast, Capital Group’s “Growth Fund of America,” the largest active US equity mutual fund, carries an expense ratio of 0.63% — more than 6 times as much as “SPY.” In addition, investors in the active fund need to digest a front-load of up to 5.75%.

Unsurprisingly, passive ETF have been cannibalizing active mutual funds over the past years. Conversely, since 2017, US equity mutual funds had only one month of net inflows, and 87 months of outflows.

According to fund analytics firm Morningstar, active US equity funds saw outflows of \$290 billion over the past 12 months, while their passive counterparts enjoyed inflows of \$320 billion. Passively managed equity vehicles now make up more than 60% of the total funds invested in markets.

As the share of passively managed investment grows, so does their ownership of individual stocks. In some companies, passive investors are already in the majority. Take Central Garden and Pet (symbol “CENT”), for example, where 60% of shares are owned by passive vehicles. Those funds are not interested in the fundamentals of the company such as sales, earnings or dividends. The company might announce terrible results, and passive investors would not sell a single share. It could, theoretically, be approaching bankruptcy, and, as long as the company remains in the index the fund tracks, the fund would not sell.

Passive investment vehicles are insensitive to price. They are always fully invested. If fresh money comes in, the funds buy no matter what. Regular contributions to retirement accounts (“401k”) lead to a continuous stream of money

driving index members share prices regardless of fundamentals.

As more investors become price insensitive, you expect to see more “crazy” price movements, leaving rational investors scratching their head. A rally induced by the recent index inclusion of Super Micro Computer (symbol SMCI) serves as an example. The company’s stock price rose from \$284 at the end of 2023 to \$1,229 on March 8, 2024, shortly before its inclusion into the S&P 500 Index on March 18. It has since lost around 37% of its value.

Erratic price movements could lead to the impression fundamentals did not matter anymore. Inexperienced investors might be tempted to bet on so-called “momentum” stocks, or worse, options, with quickly eroding time value.

Of course, indiscriminate inflows could reverse. An aging population of investors might want to cash out of stocks, realizing their capital gains. Persistent outflows would lead to selling, with the sellers, again, being insensitive to price.

So, are ETFs a cure, or rather a curse in disguise?

Low-fee, passive index ETF are the most efficient investment vehicle available to individual investors. For each individual the decision to move into passive ETF is, undoubtedly, rational. However, individual rational behavior doesn’t guarantee a rational outcome in aggregate. For investors as a group, the outcome might be detrimental.

[Fair Observer’s interns, working as a team, edited this piece.]



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Sadly for Modi, His God Does Not Vote

Mauktik Kulkarni
July 04, 2024

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi lost seats in last month's election because Indian voters and members of the Hindu nationalist paramilitary RSS called out his narcissism. Modi's misogyny and megalomania should worry other stakeholders.

The dust is now settling on one of the dirtiest central election campaigns in recent memory. Indian Prime Minister Modi made liberal use of some of the vilest language ever employed by an Indian prime minister. Still, perhaps the most dangerous claims by Narendra Modi were about not being biologically born to his mother and being sent by his god to serve India.

Even in a mature democracy like the United States, this level of narcissism, misogyny, and megalomania are not uncommon. Donald Trump, with a similar set of traits, will seek the highest

office in the United States for the third time this November. However, unlike Trump, Modi's vice-like grip on most democratic institutions make his messianic assertions a monumental challenge for India.

Narcissism

Three of India's most populous states voted decisively against Modi this year in a stunning rebuke to his narcissistic leadership.

In Uttar Pradesh, by far India's most populous state — with a whopping 80 seats out of the Lok Sabha's 543 — Modi thought that he could launch ambitious reform schemes without paying attention to their effects on real people. His Agnipath scheme eliminated opportunities for young citizens to spend their career in the armed forces, replacing them instead with a four-year tour of duty after which a soldier would retire without a pension. Certainly, reform is much needed, given the rapidly changing nature of warfare. But Modi rammed the scheme through while ignoring the dismal job prospects young graduates would face due to his whimsical economic policies.

In Maharashtra, Modi assumed that he could redirect investments to Gujarat instead of letting the state administration attract investors, boost economic activity and create well-paying jobs. Marathas demanded reservations for their community and farmers suffered under adverse climactic conditions. These events should have served as warning signs to Modi about his failing policies. Yet in his make-believe world, there is no acknowledgment of failure, let alone ownership.

Modi's treatment of West Bengal was perhaps the most egregious example of his narcissism. By meddling in the state's affairs through the centrally appointed governor and selectively unleashing investigative agencies on opposition politicians, he thought he could subvert the mandate Bengal

gave to their immensely popular Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. When that yielded limited success, he thought he could get away with blocking funds due to the Bengalis from the central government.

Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fared dismally in all three states this year. Modi might have thought that he could rule the entire country like the state of Gujarat (his backyard) with no accountability, but voters in these states sent him a timely reminder about owning up to his failures.

As if the setback at the ballot box were not enough, even Mohan Bhagwat, the head of BJP's ideological fountainhead Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), subtly asked Modi to tone down his arrogance.

Misogyny

Despite these setbacks, Modi survives as prime minister. While the BJP lost its majority in parliament, the National Democratic Alliance coalition of which it is a part still controls the Lok Sabha. Perhaps they were able to survive this well because of the lack of an aspirational vision from the opposition.

On the other hand, Modi's claims of building some mythical new India notwithstanding, the mixed message from this election indicates that his tenure, with some successes and some failures, is similar to almost all the previous administrations, especially in one important way: misogyny. Modi's enablers, funders and blind followers, especially in the developed world, must now reckon with Modi's attitude toward women.

India can take pride in having had women elected as Prime Minister and Presidents, but we remain a heavily patriarchal society.

Since Modi was a foot soldier of the RSS — an organization that considered the patriarchal law code Manusmriti one of the guiding documents for Indian society — before entering politics, his treatment of women should not surprise anyone. He lied about abandoning his ex-wife for decades, acknowledging her existence only at the time of filing an election-related affidavit. He failed to address his own home ministry playing an active role in releasing the Hindu convicts sentenced for murdering the family of and then raping a pregnant Muslim woman. He used foul, tasteless language against Mamata Banerjee. He shielded BJP leaders accused of sexual assaults against women.

Sadly one can find these traits in politicians around the world, including opposition parties within India. It does not make Modi exceptional. However, his recent assertion, conveniently made after his mother's passing, that he believes he is not biologically born to her, was truly exceptional and should worry even his most ardent supporters. The standard-bearer of a country making such bizarre and anti-women statements should concern those who live in more equal societies, root for women's empowerment in India, and still unabashedly support Modi, especially when he is not the only person in the BJP to lead the country.

Megalomania

Lastly, it is high time the Indian mainstream media reflect on the way they have been feeding Modi's megalomania.

Megalomania is more than just narcissism. As a narcissist, Modi thought that he was bigger than his own supporters. As a megalomaniac, he seems to think that he is bigger than India's democratic institutions themselves.

Barring Indira Gandhi, who employed slogans like "Indira is India" and went on to declare a state of emergency, Indian Prime Ministers before Modi

had the gravitas and humility to appreciate their role as democratically elected leaders. However, after ten years in power, Modi started believing that he was sent, to use his own words, by the Parmaatma — the divine, universal Self of Hindu philosophy — to serve those who have faith in him. With Pakistan next door, we don't have to go too far to witness how invocation of god in discharging your duties towards a republic can destroy a system of representative democracy.

Modi sidelined the other institutions of the state and focused all attention on himself. One would think the Indian press, being the fourth pillar of democracy, would have demanded press conferences and posed tough questions to a democratically elected leader. Instead, most of the mainstream TV media caved and made a beeline for the scripted crumbs thrown at them by the self-appointed vishwaguru, or the master of the universe.

Since the central government's advertising is the main source of revenue for most of the Indian media outlets, they have done the government's bidding for decades. However, after the 1991 reforms and the subsequent entry of the private sector in broadcast media, India did see a steady growth in news channels holding their leaders accountable. Even a cursory look at the TV news coverage in the decade preceding Modi's first national victory in 2014 would drive that point home. Yet it seems that most of these outlets abdicated their primary duty after 2014.

This was left to a handful of online outlets and civic-minded YouTube influencers — battling frivolous lawsuits, BJP's online troll armies, attacks from friends and family and, in some cases, even jail time and death threats — to show the mirror to Modi. People in India and abroad who cared about Indian democracy kept hammering home the real issues facing India. As this author had pointed out as early as mid-2020, it was

obvious to anyone following Modi's use of public morality and religious tropes to defend inane economic policies that India was well on its way to losing its demographic dividend.

Luckily, Indian voters realized sooner than the media honchos sitting in comfortable offices on the government's dime that one cannot eat religion for dinner. Modi's megalomania might make him believe that he is serving God, but the voters need jobs for two square meals. They need due process and constitutionally mandated fundamental rights for a dignified life. And they need leaders accountable to them — not metaphysical entities — to achieve those goals.

Visionaries like Babasaheb Ambedkar, who led the drafting of India's constitution, enshrined universal adult franchise to guard against the narcissism, misogyny and megalomania of leaders like Modi. Still, the 2024 elections are only a minor course correction. India remains more likely to squander the potential demographic dividend by getting older before it gets richer. And it is anybody's guess whether Indian media will learn their lessons. Nonetheless, thankfully for India and sadly for Modi, his god does not vote.



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Pune, biophysics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University, he has played a key role in a few health care and tech start-ups.

Heatwaves and Humanity: The Devastating Impact on Our World

S. Suresh
July 05, 2024

The record-breaking heat waves of recent years have had a devastating impact on human life, particularly affecting the elderly and people with low incomes, who are the most vulnerable to heat-related illnesses and fatalities. There is an urgent need to address the growing inequity between the rich and the poor in the face of increasing heatwaves and potential future challenges posed by climate change.

The summer solstice (the longest day in the northern hemisphere) on June 21 heralded the beginning of yet another hot summer for the planet. Heat records were being shattered across the globe even before the summer of 2024 got going.

2023 was the hottest year on record, besting the previous record set in 2016. With the dissipation of El Niño, a phenomenon relating to warmer-than-average waters of the tropical Pacific Ocean, there is some hope that 2024 may not be a back-to-back record-setting year. Yet that remains to be seen, as May 2024, the hottest May on record, marked 12 consecutive months of record-breaking warmth.

Scientists and meteorologists face a challenge. They have invented ominous-sounding phrases like “polar vortex,” “bomb cyclone” and “atmospheric river” to showcase extreme weather phenomena driven by global warming and climate changes. In comparison, “heat wave” sounds so tepid, so lukewarm, to talk about a phenomenon that is killing humanity by the hordes.

Record deaths

The death toll from the record-setting heat of 2023 in the US was more than 2,300, the majority occurring in the state of Arizona. Arizona’s capital, Phoenix, sweltered in the heat for a continuous 19-day period, with practically no relief even during the nighttime, when temperatures stayed north of 32°C (90°F). The statistics were equally staggering in Europe, where France saw more than 5,000 lives lost to the heatwave. The death toll across the European continent is expected to surpass 55,000.

One would expect the numbers to be significantly higher in the Indian subcontinent, the world’s most populous region. However, the data presented to the Indian lower parliament, Lok Sabha, in July 2023 was 264, an unbelievably low number considering India's harsh heatwave.

The summer of 2024 has already resulted in hundreds of heat-related deaths in India and Saudi Arabia, where the temperatures have been reaching scorching levels. Mecca, the seat of the Hajj pilgrimage, saw temperatures rise above 52°C (125°F), where more than 1300 people have died on account of heat. New Delhi saw temperatures soar above 50°C (122°F) in May, prompting authorities to issue a red alert. In India, the peak heat season is three months before the arrival of the southwest monsoon in June. During this period, the death toll in India has topped 100, while more than 40,000 people have fallen victim to heat stroke.

Heat, the human body and aging

Extreme heat affects human beings at many levels. At the low end is heat exhaustion, typically accompanied by headache, dizziness and sometimes fainting. A heat stroke is more severe and occurs when the body temperature goes above 39°C (103°F), resulting in cognitive dissonance,

delirium and even loss of consciousness. The shift from exhaustion to stroke happens when a person stops sweating, a critical aspect in regulating the body temperature.

Extreme heat also affects the functioning of many organs in the human body. Breathing in hot air can cause lung-related complications, accentuating asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). If accompanied by dehydration, it can impair the functioning of the kidney, resulting in renal complications. The cardiovascular system shifts into high gear, trying to regulate the internal body temperature, causing increased stress on the heart.

The most vulnerable to heat exhaustion, heat stroke and heat-related organ failures resulting in death fall into two categories: the old and the poor.

Nearly 75%, or about 3,700 of the 5,000 deaths in France were people aged 75 or older. Climate Central estimates more than 12,000 people die in the United States from heat-related causes, far above the 2,300 number mentioned in the Associated Press analysis of Center for Disease Control and Prevention data. Climate Central estimates more than 80% of heat victims to be over 60.

As people age, they tend to develop chronic health conditions and their ability to tell how hot it is or how dehydrated they are also declines. Coupled with their cognitive dissonance and a less-than-optimal functioning cardiovascular system, it is no surprise that across the globe, the majority of heat victims tend to be older people.

Survival of the richest

The second demographic that bears disproportionate hardship from the heatwaves is the poor.

Delhi is experiencing the same conditions that Phoenix did last year when the nighttime temperatures stayed dangerously high for several days. When the brutal heat of the day persists through the night, the human body has no chance to refresh and reset for a new day.

National Public Radio (NPR) featured the tragic stories of several poor New Delhi residents living in windy conditions and being short on water while the temperatures soared to 49.5°C (121°F). Nothing can be more heartbreaking than the death of Ina Khan, a six-month-old baby who just died in her nap. The only shelter her low-income family could provide her was a blue plastic sheet over a dusty scrap of land. On that fateful day in late May, Ansar Khan pacified his crying daughter with some milk, and the family took a short nap while the unrelenting heat scorched the air around them.

Ina Khan would never wake up from her nap. “It was all over in half an hour,” Khan told NPR.

Near the same makeshift shelter where Ina died, Salma lost her two-day-old baby to Delhi’s punishing heat.

Salma never even got a chance to name her baby.

Taranum, who is marginally better off than Salma or Ansar Khan’s families, said in an interview with NPR, “I can’t die. We are homeless. Who will take care of my daughters?”

Taranum considers herself fortunate compared to Salma and Khan simply because she and her three daughters have an assigned bed in a homeless shelter for women and children.

Stories similar to Taranum, Khan or Salma are unlikely to come from someone well off and with access to running water and air-conditioned comfort.

Each year, we are vying to break the record-setting heat of a recent one, helped by climate change, resulting in more severe heat waves occurring more frequently. A 2020 study by McKinsey forebodes a dystopic future for India, with some parts of the country becoming unlivable without air conditioning.

In Hindi, the phrase “Roti, Kapda aur Makan” captures the bottommost section of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs — food, clothing and shelter. In the face of growing inequity between the rich and the poor and impending doom, where parts of the earth may become uninhabitable without air conditioning, one has to wonder if the phrase needs to be changed to “Roti, Kapda, Makan aur Hawa,” adding air to a human’s basic need.

The safety net society offers the poor falls far short of Maslow’s basic needs today. Sadly, if that does not improve regarding real shelter from heatwaves, survival of the fittest would essentially become survival of the richest.

[[Liam Roman](#) edited this piece.]



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Copenhagen Now Brings a Risky Right-Wing Shift in Asylum Policy

Susi Meret
July 06, 2024

At a Copenhagen conference, the Danish Social Democrats re-proposed their plan to transfer asylum seekers to third countries. Italy and Albania plan to receive migrants from the Mediterranean and quickly process them. This outsourcing comes with humanitarian, legal and political concerns, casting doubt on its long-term sustainability.

On May 6, 2024, Denmark’s capital of Copenhagen became the site for the Copenhagen High-Level Migration Conference, an international hearing on asylum and immigration. It was attended by over 250 delegates, including ministers and representatives from international bodies like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Kaare Dybvad, the Minister of Immigration and Integration and the conference’s principal organizer, articulated the main goal of fostering “sustainable solutions” for EU asylum policy future plans, that should spark transnational collaborations with third countries — countries outside the EU. Essentially, this involves delegating the management of spontaneous asylum seekers to non-Schengen partners outside the EU, where their applications would be processed in EU member countries’ funded reception centers.

Notably, the interior ministers from Italy, Austria, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands

were among the prominent participants at the conference. They represent administrations with right-wing and predominantly EU-skeptical views.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen inaugurated the conference with a stark critique of the prevailing EU immigration and asylum frameworks, labeling them “dysfunctional.” Drawing parallels with the 2015 crisis, she underscored that the recently ratified EU Pact on Migration and Asylum sets the groundwork for substantial reforms, but is not enough on its own. She advocated for expanded, robust agreements to enhance further international cooperation with third countries and forge more enduring solutions.

“Policy learning” and Italy and Albania’s risky plan

A clear aim of the conference was to foster “policy learning” practices among participants. Italy, led by right-wing Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, serves as an example for other European leaders to follow.

The Italian government and Albania, led by Prime Minister Edvin Rama, have negotiated a five-year asylum deal. The plan is to build asylum processing facilities under Italian jurisdiction in Albania. They will receive asylum seekers coming via the Mediterranean route, and accelerate processing and repatriation of those whose asylum is declined. The plans are now already in the implementation phase.

By financing and remaining in control of these facilities, the Italian government aims to sidestep potential breaches of international conventions. The Rwanda plans promoted by Denmark and the UK have in fact faced difficulties due to international conventions that prohibit deporting asylum seekers to countries where their fundamental rights cannot be assured.

The Italian–Albanian contract highlights however the high costs of outsourcing asylum processes. They are projected at a minimum of €30 million (over \$32 million) annually for basic operational expenses, with total costs far surpassing the initial estimate of €650 million (over \$694 million). These financial burdens necessitated substantial cuts in other critical public welfare areas, such as education, health, public transport.

Several factors underscore the major costs, precariousness and inadequacy of such agreements. The contract is rather ambiguous. It will be difficult to monitor the centers’ humanitarian conditions, and there are high risks of corruption during the construction and management of the facilities. Additionally, political instability in Albania might cause the country to withdraw from the contract altogether.

The Social Democrats on asylum outsourcing

But with Rome and Tirana’s plan in the background, the Copenhagen event served as a strategic platform for Denmark to re-propose its contentious scheme to transfer asylum seekers to a non-Schengen third country. The plan was influenced by similar initiatives in the UK that faced legal rejection from the Supreme Court over concerns of refoulement and severe violations of international law. It was previously negotiated in Rwanda in 2021, under a preliminary agreement by former Immigration Minister Mattias Tesfaye and Rwandan Foreign Minister Manasseh Nshuti. The plan followed the legislative changes to the Immigration and Repatriation Acts endorsed by the Danish Social Democrats (SD) and right-wing parties in June 2021. It has now stalled.

The conference signaled a reinvigorated attempt by the Danish SD and representatives of other EU countries to discuss and explore joint strategies for externalizing asylum reception and processing.

This approach reflects a broader policy trend among EU right-wing populist and conservative governments; they commend the SD asylum model and recommend its replication and expansion. Additionally, the European Parliament elections, which tilted the political spectrum further to the right, suggest these viewpoints may gain prominence over the next five years.

Politicians are increasingly discussing and employing the outsourcing of asylum processing to third countries, but the practice raises significant humanitarian, economic, legal and political concerns. The great financial burden and potential political instability in these countries underscore the risks of such approaches. These factors cast serious doubt on the viability and long-term sustainability of these so-called solutions to asylum. They also suggest a strategic turn by the Danish SD towards more neoconservative and nativist right-wing positions, influenced by electoral dynamics and dissatisfaction among certain voter groups.

This shift also raises vital questions about the compatibility of such policies with established EU democratic and humanitarian values and the core ideals of social democracy. The Danish SD's decision not to endorse the Party of European Socialists (PES) Berlin Declaration, which commits to resisting far-right influences in the European Parliament, marks a transformation within the party. It could exacerbate differences within the broader European political family.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]

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Keir Starmer – My Prime Minister, Member of Parliament and Friend

Martin Plaut
July 09, 2024

Keir Starmer is more than just the current leader of the Labour Party. He is my neighbor and friend, a good lawyer, a doggedly determined worker and a tenacious fighter for what's right.

On July 4, Britons went to the polls. They gave the Labour Party 411 seats in the 650-seat House of Commons and thus elected Keir Starmer (or Sir Keir Starmer, to give a title he never insists on) as prime minister.

Keir's election has changed Britain's trajectory and — hopefully — its standing in the world. As many others have said, after the ignominious prime ministerships of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, we at last have adults running our government. It is an event that I have been hoping and working for since 2014 when he sat at my dining table for the first time.

Let me explain. Keir and I live within the same constituency — Holborn and St Pancras, in central

London. In that year, our local member of Parliament, Frank Dobson, announced he was standing down, opening the way for a new MP. Our constituency is a safe Labour seat and highly desirable.

Our local party had three excellent candidates (as well as several also-rans) to choose from. They included the chair of Camden Council, our local administration. She was a woman, and we were keen to have more gender balance in Parliament. Then there was the chair of our own Labour Party — a fine young Asian lawyer, and we also wanted more ethnic diversity. And there was a very popular local doctor. We would have happily backed any of them.

Then, out of the blue, up popped Keir Starmer. Very few of us knew him. In his former role as Director of Public Prosecutions, he ran key cases across the country. It was a position that prevented him from being a member of any party. In November 2013, he stood down and rejoined Labour, of which he had been a member since his youth.

When Keir decided to stand for Frank Dobson's seat, he began ringing local party members, asking to come and see them. And so it was that he arrived at my home for coffee.

Now, Keir is someone who listens more than he talks. But there is something about the way he does it that is entirely engaging. You know he is really listening, taking in your every word. Within 10 minutes I thought: "He's not just our next MP, he's our gift to the whole Labour Party."

I have got many things wrong, but this was one I was right about. Keir took months off and embarked on an intense campaign of meeting and listening to as many local party members as possible. I went with him, knocking on doors, sitting in kitchens.

It was a strategy that none of the other candidates adopted. They spoke to party officers and relied on their local reputations. But Keir's strategy paid off in spades. When the selection meetings took place, party members whom we had never met before came out in droves. Keir won hands down.

The fact that he was selected against apparently insuperable odds should tell us something. Our new prime minister is intensely competitive, intensely strategic and intensely hardworking. Once he adopts a course, he follows it, no matter how difficult it may appear. His focus is extraordinary.

As his semi-official biographer Tom Baldwin records, Keir lived in a North London flat as a young man. It had a rotting floor and was above a sauna and massage parlor. One friend's father was hesitant to visit the building as he feared others would think it was a brothel. One day, thieves broke in. Keir was so buried in his work as an attorney, concentrating on the arguments, that he didn't notice.

There are many stories of hardship in Keir's early days as a barrister supporting radical causes, but perhaps one stands out. It is the McLibel story. In 1986, a group of environmental activists distributed a six-page amateurish leaflet entitled, "What's wrong with McDonald's: everything they don't want you to know." It accused the giant corporation of a long list of evils, from producing unhealthy hamburgers to clearing the Amazon rainforest. McDonald's decided to take them on and brought a libel case that, in time, the company would deeply regret.

Most members of the penniless activist group gave up and paid a small fine. But two — Helen Steel and David Morris — refused, and the case went to court. It was to become the longest libel trial in British history, with experts flying in at

their own expense from around the world to support them. But behind the scenes, they had another supporter. Keir Starmer gave them free legal advice for ten long years. Without it, they would hardly have won the final settlement which found that both sides had arguments in their favor.

There are many stories of this kind. Keir seldom refers to them. But a word of warning to anyone who gets to know our prime minister: don't take him on at football. I have played against him in an unofficial game we used to have among Labour activists. He's as tough as they come. I am a South African, and the only way I could survive was to use the tactics I knew from my early days playing rugby. He was a little taken aback, as I broke all the rules, something that Keir would never do.

I doubt that he will have time for this for a while, but one thing you can be sure of: He will continue his support for Arsenal — our local North London football side — and for the English team, no matter how well or badly they play.

Passionate, radical and doggedly determined, as well as astute and knowledgeable. That is the man that I have come to know and to respect.



Born in South Africa, **Martin Plaut** is currently senior research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and holds the same post with King's College London. He studied at the Universities of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Warwick before joining the Labour Party as secretary on Africa and the Middle East. In 1984 he joined the BBC, working primarily on Africa. He became Africa editor at World Service News, retiring in 2013.

Do Celebrity Endorsements Help or Hurt Politicians?

Ellis Cashmore
July 13, 2024

Endorsements have been integral to consumer culture. Some individuals can pitch for almost anything and make it sell. But selling inanimate material objects is one thing; selling living sentient beings is another. Do voters actually take notice when popular entertainers speak in favor of a politician? Or does it fall flat as performative and harm the politician's credibility?

“I am not here to tell you how to think,” Oprah Winfrey told a 10,000-strong crowd at the Iowa Events Center in downtown Des Moines. “I am here to tell you to think.” It was December 2007, eight months before Barack Obama was selected as the Democratic presidential candidate and 11 months before he won the US presidency.

It was the most potent celebrity endorsement of a political candidate in history. Distancing herself from partisan politics, Oprah insisted she was acting out of a sense of obligation: “I feel compelled to stand up and speak out for the man who I believe has a new vision for America.”

She closed with gravity, drawing on Ernest J. Gainer's 1971 novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, which tells the life story of a woman born in slavery at the end of the American civil war. The book recounts how each time a new baby was born, its mother would take it to Jane Pittman, who would hold the baby John-the-Baptist-like and wonder aloud whether the child would be the

deliverer of black people: “Is you the one? Oprah refined the grammar, changed the context and answered affirmatively that Obama was indeed The One.

Rarely, if ever, has a single affirmation been so pivotal: It was less an endorsement, more a proclamation. But is a thumbs-up from rapper-turned-country music star Kid Rock going to make much difference to Donald Trump’s chances at this year’s presidential election? For that matter, is anyone’s endorsement going to make an impact? I can think of one, but more on that later.

More than entertainers

Politicians have attracted endorsements from popular entertainers since the 1950s. Republican President Dwight Eisenhower, in 1952 and 1956, recruited the likes of Bing Crosby and Ethel Merman at a time when the popular assumption was that Hollywood stars were communist sympathizers.

Frank Sinatra re-recorded “High Hopes” complete with the line “Vote for Kennedy” as part of JFK’s successful presidential campaign in 1960. Around the same time, Britain’s Labour Party leader Harold Wilson received conspicuous support from the Beatles. Twenty years later, Sinatra donated \$4 million to Republican Ronald Reagan’s successful presidential campaign.

Jane Fonda threw her weight behind Democrat George McGovern in the 1972 presidential

campaign. Fonda’s endorsement aligned with her opposition to the Vietnam War.

Celebrities, including athletes, have been conspicuous in every postwar US presidential campaign, though basketball star and shoe endorser Michael Jordan famously remained absent from a Senate race in 1990 explaining —

when invited to endorse Harvey Gantt, an African-American Democratic candidate in North Carolina — “Republicans buy sneakers too.”

Bill Clinton garnered support from celebrities, including Barbara Streisand and Whoopi Goldberg, during his presidential campaigns in 1992 and 1996. The value of Michael Jackson’s endorsement was arguable. While Jackson was an immensely popular and influential figure with a vast global fanbase, Jackson faced allegations of child sexual abuse. (He was eventually cleared.)

Since Clinton, celebrity endorsements for presidential candidates are a required part of campaigns. The 1990s witnessed an expansion of the roles of showbusiness entertainers: Perhaps they felt the need to demonstrate they were more than entertainers and held solid beliefs, values and commitments. Politicians enthusiastically gave them a platform and what evidence there is suggests they benefited.

Risky business

In 2016, Trump counted Mike Tyson and Kanye West among his celebrity endorsers. While Tyson was a convicted rapist, having African Americans among his cohort presumably lent Trump credibility among blacks. Black voters make up about 11–12 percent of the US electorate and Trump lobbied for their votes, though he managed only 8% of black votes in both 2016 and 2020.

While West, or Ye, as he prefers, had previously favored Democrat candidates, his approval couldn’t have done Trump any harm. Today, Ye is kryptonite (the fictional green mineral that weakens Superman). His flip-flopping was one thing, but his antisemitic remarks in 2022 persuaded sportswear manufacturer Adidas that it should cancel his best-selling “Yeezy” line, valued at \$250 million per year.

Adidas's experience with Ye may have chastened political candidates. Popular, black and seemingly multitalented — he designed his own clothes range — Ye imploded with an unexpected stream of invectives. He did have a history — having described slavery as a “choice” in 2018 — so Adidas must have known he was a risk. As are many other celebrities, of course. Many rose to prominence after scandals and know how to ride them like surfers conquering waves, transforming controversy into a vehicle for even greater fame.

Consumer culture

Endorsements have been integral to consumer culture, which began properly in the economic prosperity following the end of World War II in 1945. Hollywood stars appeared in advertising campaigns, and their effect on sales was encouraging enough to persuade ad agencies to pay for their services.

Today, they pay mightily: in 2015, LeBron James signed a multi-year deal with Nike valued at \$1 billion. James used his platform, including social media and public appearances, to express his support for Joe Biden and his running mate, Kamala Harris, in 2020. Political candidates don't pay endorsers, of course.

The value of celebrities to advertisers is reflected in sales: Some individuals, including Oprah, Jordan, George Clooney and Jennifer Aniston, can pitch for almost anything and make it sell. On the other hand, Rihanna didn't work for Nivea, which dropped her in 2012. Often, the relationship is symbiotic, with celebrities enhancing their reputations by associating themselves with popular brands.

However, selling things, inanimate material objects, is one thing; selling living sentient beings is another. Politics, like every other aspect of society, has been penetrated by celebrity: Votes are

cast as much for people as what those people stand for. Ideals, values, policies and commitments will always feature in the mix when voters decide. As will relatability: Politicians strive to make voters think they share their concerns, identify with their problems and understand their feelings. When they can't do it, they hope their endorsers can.

Convictions or self-aggrandizement?

Oprah was so influential she shooed off disbelief. Her blessing was strong enough to convince, even empower voters. But she was extraordinary. Other celebs elicit a note of cynical perspicacity. Voters suspect them more than respect them.

I have only inference and extrapolation to back up my claim. A recent research project, in which I was involved, centered on sports fans' reactions to athletes, clubs, sponsors or entire sports leagues that push boundaries and make pronouncements on causes, such as war, racism and LGBTQ+ issues. A swath of fans detected their sermonizing was largely self-aggrandizement, as if saying, “We want you to take us seriously and accept that we truly believe in this cause [whatever it is].” If their gestures and pronouncements do little else, they prove athletes know how to read the room: They are aware of voguish attitudes and values and adapt themselves to suit them.

It may be fallacious to use the same logic for voters. Or it may be instructive. If the latter, celebrities see elections as pretexts for posturing and, ever-eager to provide an illusion of depth to further their ambitions, they offer their support. In this sense, presidential elections offer painless opportunities to burnish any celebs' profundity. At least, if we follow the logic. Joe Biden's alarming performance in front of 51 million American viewers recently may give prospective endorsers cause for thought. How much burnish is there in associating with a faltering politician?

What about Taylor?

The endorsements ringing for Biden sound like cracked bells: Barbra Streisand, Julia Roberts, George Clooney (since retracted, however) and others, including Robert De Niro, have all made their allegiances known before. Apart from the aforementioned Kid Rock, Donald Trump has only a handful of celebs, most of pensionable age, in his corner.

The unique figure in modern cultural history is, of course, Taylor Swift. She bridges many gaps, between pop and art, poignancy and jubilation, intensity and matter-of-factness. Is the gap between entertainment and politics one she aims to traverse? With 283 million followers on Instagram, she's not hard to imagine running for the presidency herself. There's even a conspiracy theory about her political ambitions. In the meantime, no human being has more

influence. Her endorsement would match Oprah's.

Some celebs have genuine convictions and nail their colors to the mast without considering whether publicizing their political preferences will affect their careers. Others are primarily concerned with boosting their reputations. I sense that voters think they are all in the latter camp. So, why are politicians so keen on having them in their corner?

Oprah and Taylor are sui generis: They are both unique, albeit in their different ways and capacities to galvanize voters. No one else presently comes close and, while this year's presidential candidates clearly welcome support from any quarter, the support of celebs is probably worthless and, if the message of our skeptical sports fans is any gauge, counterproductive.

[Ellis Cashmore's latest book is [Celebrity Culture](#), 3rd edition.]



Ellis Cashmore is the author of *The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson, Elizabeth Taylor, Celebrity Culture* and other books. He is a professor of sociology who has held academic positions at the University of Hong Kong, the University of Tampa and Aston University. His [first article](#) for *Fair Observer* was an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016.

Defending Women's Rights: The Urgent Need for Equal Rights Amendments

Antonia Kirkland
July 16, 2024

The Dobbs decision and recent legal actions in Arizona, such as the temporary reinstatement and subsequent reversal of a pre-1901 restrictive abortion law, have severely disrupted women's access to reproductive health services. Recent wins in Nevada and Pennsylvania, where restrictions on state health insurance-funded abortions were overturned, highlight the critical need for federal and state Equal Rights Amendments (ERAs). These amendments would strengthen reproductive rights protections, ensuring the U.S. aligns more closely with international human rights standards by grounding these rights inequality rather than privacy.

As a US citizen, New Yorker, and international human rights lawyer committed to advancing legal equality globally, I have found recent developments regarding reproductive rights both heartening and alarming.

In light of the 2022 US Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson*, which overruled *Roe v. Wade*, the need for federal and state Equal Rights Amendments (ERAs) has become increasingly crucial. The decision emphasized that federal constitutional protections extend only to rights deeply rooted in the nation's history and traditions.

However, by grounding reproductive rights in the right to equality rather than privacy, the federal ERA's incorporation into the Constitution would help protect these fundamental human rights from being denied. Using the 14th Amendment and its substantive due process clause, which has traditionally been used to argue for privacy rights, including reproductive rights, has proven to be precarious. This approach relies on the often-debated and fluctuating interpretation of substantive due process by the Supreme Court. By instead anchoring reproductive rights in the federal ERA, which explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sex, these rights would be more robustly protected as fundamental aspects of equality.

There has been a distressing regression in women's rights in recent years. In *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, eliminating the federal constitutional right to an abortion. In Arizona, a long-dormant restrictive abortion law was reintroduced and then reversed, leaving women and girls uncertain about their reproductive health rights. These decisions have eroded women's ability to access sexual reproductive health services and maintain bodily autonomy equally across the nation.

In 2024, women's rights activists had some victories in Nevada and Pennsylvania, where limitations for state health insurance-funded abortion care were struck down by district and state supreme courts, respectively, offering hope.

These developments underscore the urgent need for Equal Rights Amendments (ERA) at the federal and state levels. Only constitutional entrenchment of gender equality will establish irrefutable protections for us all.

What is the ERA and what does it have to do with abortion rights?

The federal ERA is a simple constitutional amendment. It seeks to end sex discrimination and guarantee the rights of all people within the most important legal document in the United States.

The main text of the ERA simply and eloquently states, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

The initial decision by the highest state court in Arizona allowing for the possibility of the reinstatement of a draconian law from 1864 severely restricting abortion access underscores the vulnerability of these rights without explicit constitutional legal protections. The court's decision stated, "Because the federal constitutional right to abortion that overrode [this statute] no longer exists, the statute is now enforceable...."

The positive application of state-level equal rights amendments has led to protecting reproductive rights, particularly for economically vulnerable people, and to state-level accountability.

Nevada's recent judicial ruling striking down limits placed by the state on Medicaid for abortion provides reassurance, demonstrating the power of

state constitutional equality provisions to serve as a defense against state agency overreach and limitations on reproductive rights. Similarly, Pennsylvania's Supreme Court decision striking down the discriminatory legislation that restricted Medicaid coverage of abortion is a testament to the vital importance of state-level protections that can be derived from an equal rights amendment.

This election year, with just a handful more co-sponsors needed to bring the federal ERA to a vote in Congress affirming its validity, it is time to take action to help secure reproductive rights and substantive equality. We also need to ensure that any sex-discriminatory acts will be challenged and reviewed with more scrutiny at the judicial level.

Working as a lawyer across the globe has reinforced my understanding that legal frameworks, including international treaties, national constitutions, and customary law, play a crucial role in safeguarding fundamental rights. The protection of all women's human rights, including the right to sexual and reproductive health and rights, requires a multi-faceted approach that encompasses both state and federal levels.

The US has international legal obligations to guarantee equality and reproductive rights.

Women's struggle for reproductive autonomy is not confined to any one nation, and constitutions must reflect international human rights law and standards, including the right to sex equality, broadly defined.

At the end of 2023, for example, the UN Human Rights Committee strongly recommended that the United States, which is a State party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, "should redouble its efforts to guarantee protection against sex and gender-based discrimination in its Constitution, including

through initiatives such as the Equal Rights Amendment."

The Human Rights Committee also strongly recommended to the US that it "should take all measures necessary at the federal, state, local and territorial levels to ensure that women and girls do not have to resort to unsafe abortions that may endanger their lives and health." The Committee elaborated that specific measures the US should take should include providing legal, effective, safe, and confidential access to abortion throughout the US territory, ending the criminalization of abortion - including for medical staff, eliminating inter-state access bans on abortion, and expanding access to medication abortion.

It's time to prioritize equality in the US.

Every year, the United States hosts an annual international gathering at the United Nations to discuss the state of gender equality worldwide. Ironically, without constitutional equality or full access to sexual reproductive health, the US is noncompliant with international standards and must implement these measures to finally be on par with 85% of the rest of the world where these measures already exist.

Next March, at the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), we should be able to proclaim to the global community that the US is moving towards compliance. This includes states considering measures on Equal Rights Amendments (ERAs) and reproductive rights, such as my home state of New York, where the ERA will hopefully remain on the ballot this November. These strides will bring the US closer to meeting international standards and shedding its outlier status.

I urge lawmakers and advocates to prioritize the incorporation of the federal ERA and adopting and implementing state ERAs to help ensure that sex

equality and reproductive rights, as universal human rights, are upheld throughout the United States. Anything less would be a disservice to and a violation of the principles of equality, non-discrimination, justice, and human dignity that we strive to uphold globally.

[Tara Yarwais edited this piece.]



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ensure that the human rights of women and girls are upheld by governments throughout the world and that they are given equal treatment and protection.

How to Make Social Media Fun Again

Elizabeth Tate
July 16, 2024

Social media was once enjoyable. Users could connect, interact and learn about the outside world. Big Tech corporations have mutated their platforms to cause addictions, guide users to chosen content and shove sneaky advertisements under their noses. Can we unite against our toxic platforms to make social media fun again?

Once upon a time, Instagram was fun. When I first joined the platform in 2012 (at the questionable age of 13), Instagram was a far cry from what it is today. There was no sleek white interface, and nothing on the site was that sad shade of beige. The app had no video-sharing capability. The term “influencer” hadn’t entered the mainstream cultural lexicon. Only the savviest of marketers were discussing the promotion of “user-generated content.” Instagrammers weren’t shilling tummy-slimming tea, hair products or Stanley Cups.

Instagram was a place where ordinary non-celebrities flocked to retrofit their personal photos with filters and special effects. Unaltered by recommendation algorithms, users’ timelines chronologically displayed posts made by their friends and families. There were grainy black-and-white photos of dogs, sepia snapshots taken at breakfast tables and blurry images featuring neighborhood flowers. The Instagram of yore was a place to see and be seen through an artistic (though now admittedly cringeworthy) lens. The site was creative and social. Sadly, that was about to change.

The degradation of social media

In 2013, Instagram introduced video sharing and a new model for advertisement. Users’ feeds were now populated by ads disguised as regular posts, save for their small “sponsored” tags. Advertisers gained access to user data and advanced analytics tools.

The advertising model as proposed back then has since further evolved. Today’s Instagram advertisements appear as carousel posts, influencer partnerships, shoppable photos and story slides. Advertising content is highly personalized and seamlessly integrated. The influencer era has

demolished the amateur and authentic look of earlier Instagram.

Modern users post only their most polished content, causing their followers to feel inadequate. Instagram is now a comparison machine and an ideological echo chamber. Now that content is evaluated by metrics of engagement, users are only shown subject matter likely to hold their attention. Often the most captivating pieces of content are those that are sensationalist or polarizing. The platform's endless scroll feature promotes compulsive use.

When I deleted my Instagram account a decade after creating it, the platform barely resembled the social media site I joined. The other major social media platforms — Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, etc. — have undergone similar changes. Researchers and media outlets are beginning to examine the adverse effects social media can have on mental health, particularly for young people, as well as the erosion of the public's ability to engage in civil discourse.

I support the concept of social media as it was originally conceived. I grew up in a culturally isolated small town in the southwestern United States: Sand Springs, Oklahoma. As a little girl, I was hungry for information, desperate for knowledge about what the rest of the world might be like. Social media cracked my village wide open and gave me a glimpse of the global stage. It was a cool way to interact with the people I already knew and gain insights into topics I had never considered. Social media was fun. Now, it's gone too far.

What was once a tool for a unique form of social engagement became an addictive force with unintended consequences for my life. I spent hours gazing into the black mirror of my cell phone, aware of the passage of finite time yet compelled to continually scroll for more vapid content. I lost

my privacy, my self-confidence and the sense that I was in control of my life. I decided enough was enough; to regain these precious things, I deleted my social media accounts. I'll only rejoin the major platforms if they undergo significant changes that make them fun again.

Crafting ideal, fun social media

On my fantasized social media sites, users have control over their data. These hypothetical platforms are built upon a Decentralized Social Networking Protocol (DSNP), which establishes a shared social graph independent of a centralized platform. They prioritize privacy, security and user autonomy. Traditional social media platforms require users to relinquish control of their data the moment they accept the platform's terms and conditions. (When I deleted my Instagram account, I lost the records of all of the content I created and interactions I had with other users and third-party platforms over those ten years. Much of this data is still retained in a Meta Platforms data center, but I have no access to my own information.) A DSNP-based platform would allow me to move my data from platform to platform. I wouldn't have to sacrifice my information or lose my social connections or content. My data would be encrypted and I could interact more directly with fellow users of the platform without so much outside interference.

Social media as facilitated by Big Tech corporations relies on the use of mysterious algorithms. Everyday users are largely unaware of how these systems function. In a healthier social media experience, users can peek behind the curtain to discover how content is curated, ranked and presented to them. Users can then make informed decisions about the kinds of content they engage with and have greater control over what they see.

Recommendation algorithms create social media feeds that are largely homogenous. Contrary to popular belief, I don't want to see the same kind of content on repeat. Less reliance on recommendation algorithms would allow social media users to design their own feeds, rather than view that which the platform has decided for them.

The ideal social media platform is not designed to be addictive. There is no endless scroll feature; users eventually reach the end of the line. That's because the goal of fun social media is not to capitalize on human weakness and maximize users' eyeball time to drive advertising profit. Rather, it is to inspire, inform and connect users. Social media could be great if platforms were honest.

We must reject destructive social media

In the US, all nicotine products are sealed with a warning label. Social networking sites should adhere to a similar requirement. US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has reached the same conclusion. Consumers have a right to know that excessive social media use may lead to depression, anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, cyberbullying, harassment, addiction, exposure to misinformation, distorted perceptions of reality, polarization, body image issues, disordered eating behaviors, exploitation or extortion, privacy breaches, insomnia and strained real-life relationships. Consumers also have a right to access information about coping with these risks.

There are wonderful individuals doing wonderful work to promote Big Tech accountability and legislative reform. But it will take more than those efforts to change the social media landscape. Historically, legislative action lags behind technological progress. Without legislative motivation, Big Tech corporations currently face little pressure to positively transform their services.

Why would they change? Consumers are consenting to use platforms as they are, despite their dissatisfaction. The current major social media models are hugely profitable. If you were Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Besos or Elon Musk, would you make drastic changes to your existing product to the tune of billions of dollars in lost revenue?

Social media could be fun again. But for that to happen, everyday social media users must be brave enough to reject the existing systems and embrace something new.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Elizabeth Tate is a writer, speaker and government consultant specializing in communications and organizational change. She holds a master's degree in psychology.

Elizabeth does not remember a time before high-speed Internet. Much of her work explores the influences of modern technology on the human psyche and the lived experiences of Generation Z. She lives in Washington, DC.

Female Student Athletes Face Down Monumental Challenges in the Field

Vivien Abraham
July 18, 2024

Female college athletes share similar struggles. Coaches often prioritize players' success over their well-being, urging them to play through injuries and discouraging them from showing vulnerability. Mental health is a serious issue as

well; the exhaustion of balancing academics and sports practice takes an emotional toll on athletes. A lack of communication breeds distrust among them. What should college institutions do to fix their hostile athletic environments?

My collegiate tennis journey started in April 2018. The head coach of the University of Missouri tennis team contacted me in Hungary, offering a scholarship and a spot on his team. It was a dream come true for a young tennis player like me. However, it was tough leaving my family and friends to start a new life in the United States, over 5,000 miles from home.

During my recruitment visit a few months prior, I was astonished by the campus's beauty and the awesome athletic facilities there. What I did not see, though, were the tensions between the head coach and the team. These became clear a few weeks into my freshman year.

Being an international student was challenging, especially in my first year. The ongoing conflicts and stress at the tennis facility compounded the difficulty. But despite the chaos, I found comfort in my studies and tennis performance. I won singles and doubles matches in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), one of the most competitive conferences in the nation.

At the beginning of my junior year, I became a dual-athlete. I was excited to have the opportunity to compete both on the tennis and track teams. But my athletic endeavors led to injuries and then surgeries. During those hard times, I discovered who my true supporters were. Sadly, the authority figures, including the new head coach, were not among them.

I chose to stay on the tennis team. Not only was I stripped of my position as team captain, I ended up being completely removed from the team in my senior year. The National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) permits new head coaches to cut any players they choose, something we college athletes were not told. He could not state any reasons for his decision, just that he wanted his own recruits. To emphasize this, he threw my belongings from my locker into a trash bag. My replacement evidently had been lined up before our discussions began.

When I reflect on my experience, I immediately think about its broader implications. It raises important questions about the support systems for student athletes, especially in dealing with the complexities of college sports. Power between coaches and players is unbalanced, and athletic scholarships are unstable. These things show a need for more transparency and accountability.

Realizing this gap in the narrative, I took action. I focused my Master's thesis on different communication methods and their effect on mental health among female college athletes in the US's most powerful conferences. I interviewed players from various sports. Participants ranging from national champions to rookies experienced the same issues. It was eye-opening.

I advocate for improvements that prioritize young athletes' well-being and success. Although an inappropriate higher decision cut my tennis dreams short, I am determined to use my voice and story to drive meaningful change in college sports. Resilience is more than just recovering from setbacks. It is about turning adversity into action and creating a better future for all who follow.

During my interviews, I found institutional and communicational problems. College athletics within the prestigious Power Five conferences provide a platform for athletic excellence and

potential careers. Unfortunately, these programs also impose demanding schedules, complex coaching dynamics and major psychological pressures on their participants. My research illustrates the critical roles coaching dynamics, mental health support, communication and trust play in collegiate sports, with special consideration given to gender-specific challenges.

Young athletes struggle greatly

The daily trials of competitive sports wear players out physically and mentally. The problem begins when the demands exceed the expected level athletes sign up for. A constant, false perception that “more is always more” permeates collegiate athletics — for example, that just one more hour of practice would invariably improve the outcome of any game. Further, my interviewees often felt a “resting is the enemy” mentality bearing down on them. These outlooks combine to create a taxing experience where sore muscles and weary minds come standard.

Given these demands, it is understandable that coach–athlete relationships, which are a cornerstone of collegiate athletics, often prove difficult. “We had to read his mood every day and try to please him,” one participant said. There is a constant need to navigate coaches’ behavior, which, depending on their personality, can be unpredictable. Those who act uncaringly contribute to their players’ mental strain, and ones who overvalue performance frequently ignore the strain altogether.

The latter underscores a pervasive issue: Athletes feel undervalued beyond their on-field contributions. Gender-specific challenges magnify these difficulties. As an interviewee succinctly put it, “Our female coach was invested in us as people, whereas the male coach was strictly business.” Many coaches are cold and unempathetic.

Furthermore, dismissive attitudes prevail. One interviewee recalled this, saying, “I don’t care what’s going on in your personal life, or your mental health. Deal with it.” This reflects the premium placed on portraying mental fortitude over real emotional health.

Sadly, student athletes’ mental fortitude diminishes when they contend with extreme practice schedules in Power Five athletics. “Sports would take up about six to seven hours of my day,” one participant noted. Indeed, extended practice hours leave little time for personal life and self-care. Many of my interviewees desired a different approach over the “no pain, no gain” style currently in use.

As it stands, the intense training and competition of Power Five conferences can exhaust student athletes. Injuries and a demand to perform despite physical limitations were common themes in my interviews. Participants described how their coaches would ignore bodily risks and urge injured athletes to play through the pain. Many obliged so they would not jeopardize their scholarships.

Student athletes know that balancing academic and athletic commitments is no small feat. Those who strive to excel at both frequently battle mental fatigue, including stress, burnout and a loss of passion for the sport. A player remarked, “Basketball became like a job, and I forgot how to have fun.” These draining commitments overshadow life experiences, making it a challenge to maintain a sense of identity off the field.

Mental health is a major issue

Players’ physical bodies work in tandem with their mental health to keep them solid. Unfortunately, collegiate sports endanger that, too. Mental pain carries significant stigma. Several facets of daily life, such as beauty and representation, clash with athletic expectations, causing anguish.

Regarding the former, unrealistic beauty standards worsen body image concerns among female athletes. A participant said she worried about looking “like a man” and felt undeserving of food based on caloric intake. This is somewhat common among those with muscular builds, who sometimes restrict their meals or develop eating disorders.

As for the latter, minority athletes face additional challenges in predominantly non-diverse institutions. “The coaches didn’t really know how to converse with me about certain things,” one interviewee shared. Some participants struggle with the lack of representation and cultural understanding that they experience. This lack of awareness creates barriers to open communication, a crucial topic my next section addresses further.

Many interviewees highlighted the lack of accessible mental health resources at their institutions. “We had a single sports psychologist for the entire athletics department,” one participant recalled. As a result, she had difficulty getting appointments due to limited availability. This is a common problem in schools with smaller budgets.

Teamwork requires communication and trust

Mental health is supported by open communication and trust. These two things are linked with effective teamwork. Alas, my interviews revealed just how anemic these relationships can be with coaches and within teams themselves.

Interpersonal issues among teammates can create communication barriers. One participant told me there was “a lot of jealousy” within the group. It complicated her role in team communication and undercut team unity.

Expressing difficulty is a major problem in collegiate athletic communication. An interviewee told me, “I didn’t want to admit that I was

struggling because I was a strong leader and didn’t want to show my teammates I was going through hell.” Student athletes generally feel forced to maintain an image of strength. They fear any show of vulnerability is a sign of weakness and could lead to judgment from teammates or consequences from authority.

This unwillingness to confide in coaches forms another barrier. One participant admitted, “I felt like [the head coach] would remove me from competition or dismiss my experiences.” Many expressed concerns that discussing mental health issues could disappoint others or be met with societal stigma, which would affect their playing time or team dynamics.

Based on the statements of my interviewees, I learned that they encountered a complete lack of direct communication channels and were not taught how to express their struggles. One participant revealed, “Our head coach didn’t want to have any one-on-one meetings with us.” That showcases a breakdown of individual guidance, treating all players as a singular entity. Another admitted, “I never learned how to communicate a challenge.” This comment highlights the need for training in effective emotional expression.

That is more important than it sounds. Without strong communication, trust cannot form between people. Unsurprisingly, trust issues were a recurring theme across my interviews. Athletes were hesitant to open up to authority, specifically staff or mental health professionals, about their issues. Some participants felt uncomfortable talking to a sports psychologist connected to the head coach. After all, word could get out and bring repercussions.

Student athletes need greater support

My interview insights illuminate the intricate network of communication channels and support

structures student athletes need to stay strong through their collegiate journeys. Team camaraderie, loved ones, mental health professionals, coaches and more bolster them to manage their pain. But to improve the collegiate sports environment altogether, real changes must be made.

Team camaraderie and a sense of “sisterhood” among female teammates serve as a fundamental pillar of mental health support. Participants underscored the significance of team members as invaluable supporters who understand and share their challenges. “My teammates were some of my biggest supporters... We’re all going through the same struggles,” one interviewee affirmed. This bond creates an atmosphere of trust; athletes can openly express their vulnerabilities and find solace in their shared experiences.

Family, particularly parents and siblings, emerged as an essential source of guidance and emotional aid. Student athletes emphasized their unique roles: Fathers often served as sounding boards for challenges and decisions, while mothers provided empathetic listening and emotional reassurance. An interviewee reflected, “My parents were always there for me... Just answering the phone, and whenever they couldn’t answer, they called back later that night.”

Mental health professionals, notably sports psychologists, played a pivotal role in supporting student athletes’ well-being. Regular sessions provided a safe space for them to share their concerns and explore coping strategies. The accessibility of this aid varied across institutions, influenced by factors like funding and staff resources.

Supportive coaching staff who demonstrated empathy and genuine care for their players’ well-being produced a better environment — one that prioritized holistic growth and mental health

alongside performance. “Our female coach, if you were injured or were going through something, she was willing to point you in the right direction... She was more accommodating,” one participant said. Female coaches in particular understood and aided athletes’ mental needs.

Beyond coaches and mental health professionals, athletic trainers and academic advisors were also vitally supportive. Advisors went beyond their academic role, offering confidential support for players dealing with personal dilemmas. Interviewees emphasized their role as a confidant, providing a crucial support network. Some described their advisor as “a friend,” while others observed players spending time in the advisor’s office to receive emotional support.

Similarly, athletic trainers, primarily focused on physical health, provided psychological help. Participants noted how their trainer also acted as a confidant. This illustrates the integral role these relationships play in athletes’ overall well-being. Other interviewees echoed this sentiment, underscoring the importance of building a strong student–trainer bond.

A number of universities actively addressed mental health issues through initiatives such as mental health education sessions. Some collaborated with professionals in this field. These efforts aimed to cultivate a supportive environment where student athletes felt comfortable addressing their troubles rather than hiding them.

All these positives must be emphasized for every player’s benefit. Mental strength is intricately intertwined with the facets of a student athlete’s collegiate experience. Their mental health should be placed at the forefront to generate a more uplifting experience, enabling them to thrive in sports and everyday life.

To ensure their continued triumph, college institutions should implement several beneficial practices. They should emphasize coaching education and adjustability; most coaches are only former athletes themselves, having not passed formal training to become responsible mentors. Coaches must know that many strategies can bring victory, but they do not work for every player. Coaches can bring out the best in their pupils by understanding their individual needs and tailoring their mentoring styles to each person.

Additionally, institutions should add accessible sports psychologist services, enhanced mental health education and diversity and inclusivity initiatives. These resources help players manage daily difficulties. They should foster peer and family support, and produce an atmosphere of open communication.

By following my recommendations, student athletes, coaches and athletic departments can collaboratively make a positive change. Doing so would equip players with the tools they need to manage the complex challenges they may encounter. In turn, they would be healthier and more successful in Power Five college athletics.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



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One Big Reason Why Replacing Biden Won't Save the Democrats

Ella Valentine
July 21, 2024

The Democratic Party has to first repair the inflicted damage to the American people before thinking about a replacement for aging President Joe Biden. The forgotten issue of workers' rights could be pivotal in delivering a Democratic success, but nobody is listening.

In the days following the US presidential debate between former President Donald J. Trump and President Joe Biden, Democrats across the country began questioning whether Biden is up for the job a second time around. Given the president's state of mental acuity, many Democratic voters believe they have a better chance of keeping the White House if their nominee isn't Biden, according to a recent CNN poll. But would replacing Biden be enough to save the Democrats from what seems to be an inevitable failure? It's not looking very likely.

While picking a new nominee could boost the energy within the Democratic Party and perhaps inspire a little more hope, it would also be a very expensive mistake. Replacing a candidate only months before the elections would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to the party. But there is a much bigger question driving the decision: Is there a viable candidate within the party?

None of the proposed candidates are well-positioned to win

Vice President Kamala Harris, California Governor Gavin Newsom, Michigan Governor

Gretchen Whitmer and Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear have all been mentioned as potential replacements after Biden's poor debate performance. It is unclear who is more likely to undertake the challenge. It is also unclear if any of these candidates have any chance of winning against Trump when he is a clear leader in the latest polls.

Harris is the obvious replacement for Biden despite her concerning approval ratings. Another point of concern is her relative invisibility during the four years of Biden's term. After a 2020 campaign where the Democrats proudly pranced her around as the first female vice president — and one of color at that — Harris became disposable. Given her lack of publicity, voters won't know what she stands for and who she is as a person. Would they trust someone they don't know? It's highly doubtful.

Newsom, meanwhile, has been among the most prominent Democrats in the past few years. He is popular for being a loyal defender of Biden and for his persevering fight against Republican ideals. Nevertheless, a large part of his reputation is negative given the current state of California. Roughly half (49%) of all unsheltered people in the country are in California. The state also had the largest increase from 2007 to 2022 (42,413 people or a 30.5% increase). Twenty years ago, Newsom pledged to end homelessness in San Francisco while serving as the city's mayor. It is fair to say he hasn't kept his promise. Choosing a presidential candidate who has been responsible for the nation's largest homelessness spike will not convince voters to save the Democratic party.

Whitmer, who was elected to her post in 2018, was also among the women considered to serve as Biden's running mate in 2020. She has since shown her political strength and as such is widely respected in Michigan and within the Democratic Party. Additionally, Whitmer has launched her

Fight Like Hell PAC, which supports Democrats running for federal office and serves to defend working people and protect their most fundamental rights.

Whitmer shared an emotional and personal account of her sexual assault survival in 2013. Since then, she has been known for her relentless fight for safe abortion. This stance would make her popular among female voters. However, choosing her as Biden's last-minute replacement may not give her enough time to campaign for herself. Introducing a less familiar face so close to the election would be a risky move. Perhaps if she had had more time to build her campaign, she would have done very well against Donald Trump.

Beshear is currently serving his second term as governor of Kentucky. Since his election in 2019, he has attempted to defend citizens' right to privacy and has helped families rebuild after tornadoes and flooding affected Kentucky. Beshear's "Better Kentucky Plan" aims to prioritize increased pay for public school teachers, rebuilding infrastructure and expanding access to the Internet. Beshear has also emphasized expanding healthcare access and tackling the opioid crisis.

He has kept a predominantly positive image, but it would still not be enough to face the former president and win. Donald Trump is one of the most popular faces in the world. Even if he is one of the most hated, too, undecided voters will often opt to choose a familiar face, even a controversial one.

Democrats' troubles extend past the presidential position

Regardless of which candidate would make the best replacement for Biden, the Democrats' struggles span far beyond finding a new face to carry the party through 2024. The list of top

problems the nation is facing today includes inflation, health care affordability, drug addiction and gun violence. Healthcare affordability is an increasingly vital issue to voters. Sentiments that gun violence and crime are problematic have also increased since last year.

A survey by the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group asked Democratic-leaning working-class voters to rank their top five issues. The results were as follows: health care, social security, Medicare, the economy and jobs. However, liberal white-collar professionals listed their top issues as the environment, climate change, health care, education and racial equality. Only one issue made both lists.

By comparing the rankings, we can see a great divide between groups. While crime was listed sixth for workers, professionals placed crime way down in position 17. Workers listed the economy as their number four concern, while professionals only saw it as 12th. For professionals, climate change was a top issue in this election — for workers, it didn't even reach the top ten.

What's more striking is that only the white-collar priorities of the party were represented in Biden's campaign. In his victory speech, Biden stated his ultimate intentions: "To marshal the forces of science and the forces of hope in the great battles of our time. The battle to control the virus. The battle to build prosperity. The battle to secure your family's health care. The battle to achieve racial justice and root out systemic racism in this country. The battle to save the climate. The battle to restore decency, defend democracy and give everybody in this country a fair shot."

Of the top-priority issues for Democratic working-class voters, Biden only explicitly referred to healthcare. The gap between the party elite and the working-class people it claims to represent is vast. Even if the Democratic party

chose another candidate, workers would likely still be voting against their interests.

The undeniable truth is that neither blue-collar workers nor their interests are even on the Democrats' radar. What struggling Americans want is jobs, health care, decent schools, safe neighborhoods and somebody — anybody — in Washington willing to listen. But why would they listen? Democrats today represent the richest House districts in the country, and over half of federal legislators are millionaires. Yet the only way the Democrats can secure a win is by paying less attention to white-collar issues like LGBTQ, climate change and environmental issues and focusing more on the fundamentals: food, healthcare and jobs.

[[Cheyenne Torres](#) edited this piece.]



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Disappointing Results for South Africa's ANC May Unlock Historic Change

Jan Hofmeyr
July 24, 2024

For three decades, the African National Congress (ANC), once led by Nelson Mandela,

has governed South Africa. Usually, the party could count on the unwavering loyalty from its supporters. Even when the country's socio-economic development stalled, or its presidents faced crises, the ANC maintained its grip on power. However, with a historic election in May and a series of financial challenges ahead, 2024 might be the year that disintegrates this political reality. This major power shift can warrant both risk and positive reform.

South Africa finds itself in uncharted waters as its people contemplate a future without a dominant African National Congress (ANC). This party has steadily thrived since the post-apartheid order. For three decades, the ANC's electoral dominance and abundance in social capital, which came with being Africa's oldest liberation movement, combined as a force that permeated almost every public facet of the country. However, for the first time since 1994, the ANC lost its overall majority in the general elections on May 29, and probably for good.

The 2024 edition of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), which examines the developments in South Africa up to January 2023, reflects below-50% support for the ruling party in public opinion polls. Referencing grand corruption in the state's management of public finances and, by extension, its ability to govern effectively, the index notes growing discontent among citizens. Amid ineffective growth, high unemployment and rising levels of poverty, South Africans have steadily lost faith in the once celebrated liberation movement-turned-ruling party over the past decade. The extent of its fall from grace, however, surprised most.

The end of a triumphal era

The ANC's final election result came in at 40%, on the lower end of the 2024 BTI projections, and marked a 14-point decline from its previous margin in 2019. The official opposition, the center-right Democratic Alliance (DA), remained stagnant at 22%, while the far-left Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) saw a 1-point decline from 11% to 10%. The newly-formed Umkhonto we Sizwe Party of former President Jacob Zuma managed to garner 15% of the election and became the third largest party in parliament overnight. Although locating itself to the left of the ANC, the party lacks a coherent policy platform. Its campaign largely relies on the charisma of Zuma in the KwaZulu-Natal province, which contributes close to 80% of its votes.

This result obliterated some foundational assumptions that shaped South Africa's political landscape over the past 30 years. The ANC's powerful rule and its ability to frame the national discourse led opposition parties and key, societal figures in business, labor and civil society, to align themselves with the party's positions. For some, this meant developing an identity related to the party or its factions. With such influence, the ANC has increasingly blurred the lines between party and state over the past decade and a half, eventually claiming the center of South African politics. As a result, the recent election has questioned whether the center will hold without its predominant force.

Instability on the horizon

In the short term, the answer is yes. Despite damage from ANC state capture, the executive and legislative arms of the state still function, albeit far from optimally, in executing their respective mandates. As the latest BTI country report on South Africa confirms, the rule of law, underpinned by an independent judiciary, remains

supreme; the National Treasury continues to be cautious of populist pressure inside and outside of the ruling party, and an independent Reserve Bank has maintained its resolute stance in protecting the country's currency. There is also reassurance in the ANC's graceful acceptance of a devastating election outcome as a fair reflection of the South African people and their will. These are necessary conditions for a stable transition towards a consolidated democracy.

For the long term, a stable center is not guaranteed, requiring focus and commitment to change. Over the past decade and a half, the key metrics for the intractable, interrelated challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment have all been decreasing. Despite this, pressure and desperation from many South Africans mounted on all arms of the state for a solution. However, a majority of South Africans have recently expressed on the Afrobarometer Survey that the state is failing to react accordingly. In fact, close to two thirds have indicated general dissatisfaction with how the democratic system responds to their needs. A further erosion in trust towards the country's governance can, therefore, be expected, should the state fail to halt the country's socio-economic decline. This will have a profound impact on the country's strategic outlook in the short to medium term.

In light of this dilemma, a cohesive economic strategy for inclusive growth should be developed as the central effort of the new government of national unity (GNU), formed in wake of the election. The idea of a GNU has been broadly welcomed as a noble response when the country remains deeply divided along racial and economic lines. However, a marriage of convenience between ten parties with diverse constituencies also poses obstacles for achieving a consensus. As such, the country's political landscape is bound to have inevitable bouts of uncertainty and volatility in the coming months. With the 2026 local

government elections looming on the horizon, parties of the GNU should take an incentive to create an enabling environment for reform.

This turning point will depend on whether these parties are mature enough to understand the current opportunity, as their predecessors did in 1994 when the country transitioned to democratic rule. Can these parties rise above the acrimonious polarity, devoid of policy substance, that has harmed the most vulnerable for decades? Are these groups able to articulate a shared vision, providing the stability needed to set the country back on a path to prosperity? Their recent track records suggest not. However, this won't be the first time South Africa has defied the odds.

[[Jamie Leung](#) edited this piece.]

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This Is Why the Russian People Chose Imperialism for Survival

Valery Engel
July 26, 2024

Russia's anti-Western sentiment has become a unifying ideology that justifies its aggressive foreign policy. However, traditional values promoted by the government struggle to resonate with the populace, raising questions

about the narrative's long-term viability. While systemic collapse offers no easy solution, finding a new national identity beyond anti-Westernism is crucial for a more stable future.

The vast Russian Federation, spanning two continents with over 180 ethnicities and a multitude of religions, presents a complex governance challenge. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia became a democracy. Yet it has not transitioned to a multiparty, liberal state. Instead, it became an authoritarian system led by President Vladimir Putin. What would it take for Russia to change course? Scholars debate reform's viability, with some suggesting systemic collapse might be a precondition for change. Its sheer scale and ethnic heterogeneity seemingly render Russia ungovernable without a strong, often authoritarian central authority. This implies that an assertive central power is the only mechanism to maintain national cohesion.

Russia's history reveals remarkable resilience. Over eight centuries, it has faced potential collapse several times, not only recovering but also expanding its territory in some instances. This resilience evokes the image of the Nevalyashka, a traditional Russian toy that rights itself. It underscores a profound tenacity within the state and society, enabling repeated rebounds from near collapse. The 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union's dissolution was a significant test of this resilience. Defying predictions, Russia maintained its territorial integrity.

After this collapse, anti-Westernism emerged as a powerful unifying ideology, drawing on cultural memory to create a sense of common purpose. Additionally, the absence of strong regional rivals during the turbulent post-Soviet years allowed Russia to navigate this critical juncture without significant external threats.

This stability, however, has come at a cost. The unifying anti-Western ideology has also fueled Russia's contemporary imperial ambitions. It drives an increasingly aggressive foreign policy aimed at reasserting global influence. This transformation reflects a broader historical pattern: the need for internal cohesion and national survival often propels Russia towards expansionism and authoritarian tendencies.

The soul of Russian identity

Shared characteristics and unifying values act as the glue that binds people together into a nation. Two different kinds of values can underpin national unity: cultural and historical values shared by an ethnic majority, or unifying values that transcend ethnicity. In other words, nations form on either an ethnocultural or supra-ethnic basis.

Immigrant states like the United States are the prime examples of supra-ethnic unity, but not the only ones. Switzerland, for instance, has functioned as a supra-ethnic state since the 16th century, solidifying its national identity around the concept of neutrality in the 19th century. Similarly, Pakistani religious nationalism unites the people of the multinational state of Pakistan.

Unlike Western European nation-states like France, Italy and Germany, Russia was founded as a multi-ethnic empire. Thus, it built its unity on supra-ethnic values. These take the form of a unifying, often religious ideal; a shared goal; a grand vision for the future or a regional mission.

Early 20th-century philosopher Georgy Fedotov argued that Russians lacked the “arrogant consciousness of a superior race” that plagued, for example, the British in India. Instead, they readily communicated with their subjects and even blended with them. This openness allowed local aristocracies to integrate into military and administrative roles across the empire. This

facilitated a soft Russification across the nation's vast territories.

Russian philosopher Nikolay Danilevsky encapsulated this process in his theory of Russian civilization, which emphasized granting privileges to local elites and partially emancipating peoples on the empire's outskirts. These combined factors were crucial for creating a unified Russian nation over the centuries.

Throughout its history, Russia has relied on unifying values for national unity, but these have undergone significant shifts. Initially, Orthodox Christianity served as a cornerstone, reinforcing the Tsar's authority and binding the population through shared faith. As the empire expanded, absolutism emerged as a unifying force, fostering a sense of collective identity among its diverse peoples.

The Soviet era offered a stark contrast, emphasizing proletarian internationalism and a global communist revolution. It aimed to unite citizens under the banner of Marxism-Leninism. However, the October Revolution shattered the Tsarist order, and the 1991 Soviet coup attempt, which led to the Soviet Union's collapse, destroyed the unifying values with which the revolution replaced it. The transition to a post-Soviet world left a significant ideological vacuum.

This ideological vacuum contributed to the USSR's collapse in 1991, which fractured into 15 independent states. Three key factors were at play. First, Russia, the linchpin of the USSR, initiated the break-up by declaring its withdrawal from the union alongside Belarus and Ukraine. Second, the USSR lacked unifying values by the early 1990s. Disillusionment with communism was widespread, and the "sacred mission" of the first socialist state held no sway. Nationalist movements arose across the republics, dominating public discourse and pushing for independence. Finally, by the late

1980s, national elites emerged within the Soviet republics. These elites prioritized the independent development of their nations over loyalty to the central union.

Russia's state-declared values have their limits

The maintenance of this ideological unity as important today as it always has been. The Russian government takes an active role in promoting traditional values like religious adherence, especially to the Russian Orthodox Church, and family loyalty to foster national unity. These actions form part of their strategy to bolster societal cohesion and national identity.

However, there are challenges, like the perceived gap between the publicly declared values and the actual experiences of many Russian citizens. This gap has its roots in the Soviet era, a time when the state required citizens to outwardly conform to state-sanctioned ideologies, regardless of their private beliefs. This historical backdrop impedes the government's efforts to authentically resonate their promotion of traditional values with the people, limiting their success.

Different Russian thinkers proposed various ideas on traditional values: the old Orthodox concept of "Moscow as the Third Rome," Danilevsky's vision of Pan-Slavism encompassing both politics and culture, Fyodor Dostoevsky's idea of cultural synthesis and most recently, the emphasis on traditional values actively promoted by the Russian government. The current state presents loyalty to conservative traditions as the unifying force for all Russians. The Russian government promotes the view that these traditions, including religious customs and universal values like patriotism, dignity and service to the Fatherland, are ingrained in the people. In recent years, the Russian state has also actively incorporated homophobic narratives into this concept.

However, a study by the Institute of Sociology of the Federal Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Higher School of Economics suggests that traditionalism may not be a unifying force for Russian society. The study found that traditional values occupy a middling position on the value scale of Russians compared to other basic values like self-enhancement, security and benevolence, using a scale of values developed by Israeli sociologist Shalom Schwartz.

These latter values became more important during the COVID-19 pandemic. People also prefer autonomy to traditional values. Rounding out the list are individualistic values: enjoying life (hedonism) and a desire for risk and novelty.

In recent years, hedonism has surpassed power as a value. The value of power significantly decreased after the suppression of democratic protests in 2019. People seem to have concluded that it is safer and easier to delegate responsibility for their well-being to existing power structures. However, the role of traditional values remained relatively stagnant, even declining slightly between 2006 and 2021.

By the early 2000s, Russians transitioned from focusing on survival to embracing consumerism. Rising incomes fueled spending. When income growth stalled in 2014, household debt surged. Sales channels became hubs for socializing and spending. Increased income and access to credit allowed working-age Russians to move beyond basic necessities, pursuing goods and services associated with status. Rising incomes empowered consumers to prioritize an improved quality of life, even as social stratification widened. As the older generation scarred by the Soviet Union passed away, a new generation emerged, longing to experience life.

Despite the image that political and religious leaders attempt to promote of Russia as an

Orthodox nation, Russians lean secular. True religiosity involves ritual observance, not just belief or celebrating major holidays. A Romir Research Group survey with Gallup International/WIN Association's Global Barometer on Hope and Despair shows that 55% of Russians identify as religious. However, only 9% of those who called themselves Orthodox in 2007 followed all rituals and participated in church life. Even more concerning, 21% lacked knowledge of communion, a core Christian practice.

A 2010 Public Opinion Foundation survey found only 4% of self-identified Orthodox Christians regularly attend church. Notably, this "churched" demographic skews heavily towards elderly women. Similarly, in 2022, only 7% of those identifying with various faiths considered themselves truly religious. This is not surprising given Russia's history of over 70 years of state-sanctioned secularism.

Traditional values often emphasize collectivism, prioritizing the family, community and social harmony over individual needs. However, a study reveals a slight decline in the importance Russians place on collectivism. Interestingly, Russia leads Europe in individualistic values — prioritizing personal self-assertion — which directly contradicts the claim that collectivism defines Russians. This stands in stark contrast to countries like Sweden and France, which are known for their strong collectivist tendencies. Family values also appear less important in Russia. The high divorce rate (73%) and poor demographic situation suggest a weaker emphasis on family compared to the rhetoric.

This disconnect between words and actions echoes the Soviet era, where public pronouncements often masked private beliefs. People swore allegiance to communism, but lacked understanding of Marxist theory or faith in those

ideals. This pattern of performative pronouncements seems to have persisted.

Anti-Westernism is a Russian national idea

With traditional sources of purpose in decline, Russia increasingly relies on anti-Western sentiment to unify its people. This ideology is a form of xenophobia that repudiates Western values and aspires to resurrect past glories. It permeates the social fabric, shaping Russia's assertive foreign policy and imperial ambitions. Anti-Westernism manifests in geopolitical maneuvers and a confrontational stance in international relations, fostering tension with the West.

While unlikely to secure complete national cohesion on its own, this external xenophobia has forged a shared identity, a feat that eluded preceding ideologies such as Russian Orthodoxy, Marxism-Leninism and the floundering liberal reforms of the late Soviet era. Filling the ideological vacuum, this narrative provides a unifying identity that resonates with the populace.

A large segment of Russian society actively opposes the West or advocates for a sovereign development model. A 2022 All-Russian Public Opinion Poll reveals that a significant 54% of Russians explicitly express hatred for Western values. An additional 27% hold similar views on Western development, forming a periphery of the core anti-Western group. This peripheral group differs by allowing a minimal inclusion of Western values in Russia, as long as it does not alter the national identity. Combined, supporters of sovereign development constitute a staggering 81% — the overwhelming majority of Russian society.

A wide range of social and ethnic groups in Russia support this ideology, including many wealthy people who often saw their wealth increase during the war. They hold a xenophobic

worldview, rejecting everything Western and foreign in general. This ideology stems from 19th-century Russian Slavophilism and gained further momentum under Stalin's repressions and his anti-cosmopolitanism campaign. They view Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika — the policy of restructuring the economic and political system — and the 1990s' liberal reforms as a national betrayal, considering Russian liberals agents of the collective West.

However, their ideology extends beyond anti-Westernism. It also emphasizes great-power status for Russia, a strong central government for order and development and social justice. While not pure great-power chauvinism — for ethnic Russians are not the only supporters — this ideology harbors disdain towards national minorities within Russia, without being outright racist or classically discriminatory.

The Russian Empire's centuries of Orthodox intolerance towards foreigners, along with the Soviet era's active promotion of anti-Westernism under the guise of anti-capitalism, have ingrained a deep-seated xenophobia in the Russian psyche. Both societies started with grand ambitions of global dominance: Moscow as the Third Rome and the USSR as the bastion of peace and justice. This perspective reflects the historical path of Chinese society, which has also grappled with its own form of xenophobia and a complicated relationship with Western influence. However, they eventually fell into narratives of victimhood, pointing fingers at the West for their problems. The claim is that the West has robbed Russia. In a similar vein, China has frequently attributed its historical struggles to foreign meddling, further reinforcing its parallel with Russia's narrative.

The 1990s after the Soviet collapse saw a rise in external phobias in Russia. People feared the uncontrolled Western market and a foreign culture that supposedly threatened to destroy their

traditions. They also harbored anxieties about NATO's alleged expansionist aims. Ironically, this last fear was a key factor in keeping many regions, especially those with ethnic minorities, from seeking independence like the former Soviet republics.

By then, the USSR's disintegration had played out. Russians witnessed the rise of non-citizenship laws in Latvia and Estonia. These targeted not just the old Soviet elite from the Russian-speaking minority, but the entire Russian-speaking population. They saw the turmoil in Tajikistan, which escalated from civil strife to a full-blown war fueled by Islamic radicals.

Similarly, Georgia's independence led to civil war in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, along with a severe energy crisis that gripped Georgia and Armenia. It forced people to resort to fireplaces for warmth even in apartment buildings. Furthermore, Soviet collapse severed economic ties between republics, sparking fears of a similar break if Russia fractured. This worried many Russian regions already grappling with economic reforms.

By the early 1990s, Russia's population was even more ethnically diverse than other former Soviet republics. Regional leaders were often Russian-speaking representatives of the old Soviet elite. For instance, in modern Tatarstan, ethnic Tatars only make up 52% of the population. It was even lower back then, at 48.48%. This ethnic diversity, coupled with the economic hardships, discouraged both the general population and regional elites from seeking separation from Russia.

Regional leaders in the early 1990s, aware of their dependence on Russian resources like hydrocarbons, sought autonomy within Russia. Resource-rich regions, for example, could not function without Russian infrastructure and materials (like the Nizhnekamsk refinery needing

Tyumen oil for processing). Their goals were clear: secure a strong position in the new Russian Federation, gain economic independence and maintain stability, while avoiding the pitfalls found by some former Soviet republics. Society as a whole, wary of the uncertain future promised by local nationalists, preferred the familiar socio-economic reality of the early 1990s Russian Federation.

Chechnya was an exception. It saw federal authorities take a hands-off approach. Bordering Russia directly, this republic held the potential to export energy resources independently. Further fueling separatism, the Chechen Revolution and rising nationalism in the early 1990s led the Russian-speaking population to vacate, removing a key obstacle to independence. Historical memory, particularly the Stalinist deportation of Chechens in 1944, also played a role.

In the 1990s, Russia saw a rise in active anti-Western sentiment alongside existing passive phobias — less overt forms of anti-Western sentiment that were already present in Russian society. Russians rejected their label as the Cold War loser, believing their goodwill averted a major conflict. They resented the West's gloating and the US's push for its policies and values. They saw NATO's eastward expansion from 1994 as a direct challenge.

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia intensified anti-Western attitudes. It transcended geopolitics, becoming a civilizational clash. Yugoslavia, a historical ally with religious and cultural ties, was under attack. This marked a turning point; the West was no longer a savior and the US was no longer an arbiter. Russia stood alone. Many harbored resentment beyond Serbian solidarity.

The US then strained relations further. It unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002 and deployed missile

defense systems in the Czech Republic and Romania, rejecting Russia's proposal for a joint system. Russia viewed these actions as hostile, particularly after it closed its Lourdes radar station in Cuba and Cam Ranh Bay base in Vietnam earlier in 2002.

Western foreign policy fueled a growing sense of betrayal in Russia. The populace saw these decisions as dismantling the legacy of the Soviet Union. From 2003-2004, Color Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine coincided with intensified separatist activity in the Caucasus, culminating in the Beslan school hostage crisis. This allowed the Kremlin to abolish regional elections in Russia. It embraced securitization in Russian domestic politics. This tactic involved framing restrictions on democratic rights as essential security measures.

Following the Color Revolutions, Georgia attempted to retake South Ossetia in 2008. This triggered a Russian military intervention and recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Russia also saw this as a response to Western recognition of Kosovo's independence.

This emphasis on anti-Westernism gained significant traction in the wake of Ukraine's 2014 pro-Western Maidan Revolution. Viewing this event as a US-backed coup, Russia retaliated by annexing Crimea and covertly supporting separatist movements in eastern Ukraine. This ignited a full-blown political confrontation with the West, marked by crippling sanctions and a significant deterioration in diplomatic relations. The culmination of these tensions arrived in February 2022 with Russia's large-scale military intervention in Ukraine, a move that shattered the fragile European security architecture and raised the specter of a wider conflict.

Russia's military interventions mark a steady escalation of aggression. This culminated in open hostility not just towards Ukraine, but the entire collective West. Russia's new ideology casts it as a virtuous nation surrounded by enemies. This anti-Western, xenophobic narrative fuels support for the Kremlin's aggression. While collapse would not solve this, it could spark a civil war like Yugoslavia's — now with nuclear weapons.

[[Ali Omar Forozish](#) and [Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



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International Affairs: An American's Guide to Sex and Love Abroad

Blake Madden
July 27, 2024

A young American shares her romantic experiences from time spent traversing the globe. She offers a more personal take on international affairs along with some words of wisdom.

Picture this: You are walking along a palm-tree-lined beach in South India, curry-scented breezes drifting lazily under the sweltering 35° C sun (that's 95° F). As sleepy afternoon turns into electric night, you head to a rooftop party, where you run into a frustratingly endearing Frenchman, classic mustache and all. Three days later, you've squeezed your way onto a rickety Indian train carriage, headed to an inland island in the state of Kerala.

To absolutely no one's surprise, you are hand-in-hand with the aforementioned Frenchman, who just so happens to have a pack of cigarettes and the most flawless jawline of all time. A three-day fling ensues, during which he utters the irrevocable words, "Je t'aime." We must allow the French their romantic flair, of course.

A tad ridiculous? Perhaps. Classically French? Absolutely. This brings me to today's topic: a comparison of nationalities in terms of relationships, romance and sex.

From the Martian mountain tops of Bolivia to the pristine shores of Australia, I've enjoyed the company of Chileans, Estonians, Sri Lankans and Frenchmen; Russians in all their astuteness; Colombians and their sensual *joie de vivre*. As far as intimacy goes, Americans may not be the most notorious of nationalities, but I assure you, we can certainly fall prey to its modalities.

Back in my post-grad days of sun-bleached hair and wide-eyed wonder, I spent many months gallivanting about Latin America. My time there taught me that, if a showering of love and adoration is your type of seduction, Latin countries are the place to be. However, while, "Cómo eres guapa, qué lindos son tus ojos," is certainly flattering, I should warn you that it is also the most unoriginal pickup line in the Spanish-speaking

world. Latin men will make you feel like the most attractive woman on earth — and they'll make tomorrow night's gringa feel the same.

Now, don't let this dissuade you from joining a local in a little salsa number on a bartop. It is ridiculously good fun, and there are few places as thrilling as the hot and heavy ambience of Medellín's reggaeton clubs. I will warn you though, if you are more of a "relationship type," maybe think twice before taking one of your many dance partners home.

Let's return to Mr. Perfect Jawline from the beginning of this analysis. My first experience with French men was in Paris on a last-minute spring break trip. I was in a hazy, smoke-filled underground club a few steps away from the Arc de Triomphe with a friend from Cologne. I remember being in the smoking room. Two lanky French boys came up to me, insisting on sharing a cigarette. I reminded them I was American and that we didn't really ruin our lungs like that in my country — perhaps our one selling point.

Escaping the stuffy lounge, I ended up on the dance floor decorated with hypnotic indigo strobe lights. Twenty seconds into a dance with one ridiculously handsome but awfully presumptuous Frenchie, hands went much too far and I immediately raced to find my girlfriend in the bathroom. Unfortunately, I have found boundary-crossing and immensely sexualizing behavior to be common themes in my interactions with the French. Don't get me wrong, they can be ridiculously sensual and wonderful in bed. Just make sure that's where you want to end up because, honestly, that's probably where they'll take it.

Of course, we cannot forget the Brits. Those darling, playful, mischievous flirts. I adore them, truly, and have found them the easiest to connect with, likely due to our relatively similar

backgrounds. That being said, I've also found English boys to be well aware of their charm and to use essentially the same nearly foolproof strategy with any girl they might fancy. Embarrassingly, I must admit it usually works.

I must note one thing about the English: In my experience, "foreplay" doesn't seem to be in their vocabulary. It took me one too many gin-and-tonic-fueled nights to realize this. On one such occasion, I remember asking my rather attractive, if deodorant-averse, companion what he liked. His response? A moment of silence, then a short string of unintelligible words that, upon reflection, sounded much more like a grunt. When it comes to Brits, take my word for it and save yourself from a handful of rather disappointing one-night stands. Apparently, their navigational skills are limited to nautical endeavors.

Of Argentinians and Italians, I have nothing but positive remarks. Perhaps I associate them with each other due to their historical ties, but they do seem to be similarly playful and genuine. When it comes to lovers of cornetti and facturas, they have my stamp of approval.

Finally, this would not be a respectable analysis of international affairs if I left out the Dutch. Oh, how I love the Dutch. Consistently sociable, well-spoken and some of the most stunning people you will rest your eyes upon. Don't get me wrong; they certainly have their flaws, the most common of which is cockiness. But if you can find the good ones, of which there are many, they are just nice. Predictable. Nothing wrong with that — in fact, it can be rather refreshing sometimes.

I will close with some words of advice before you diversify your own research in international affairs. Of my many one-night stands, two-week flings, even six-month situationships formed across vast oceans and towering mountain ranges, I have developed a few recommendations for

romantic endeavors abroad. If superb quality of life and a happy marriage are what you seek, I recommend the Dutch. If you'd like your partner's hairline to last the length of the relationship, perhaps it is best to avoid the English. If you want to be swept off your feet, head to Costa Rica or Colombia — just don't expect to be the only one your partner is charming.

With that, I send you off into the world. May your endeavors be fruitful — figuratively — and remember, most hostels have cameras.

Until next time,

Blake ♥



Blake Madden is a world traveler and freelance writer. She has a special interest in politics and global affairs, and she loves a good debate. Blake has chosen to use a pen name.

Reasons Behind Radicalization: The Erosion of Hope and Identity

Tara Yarwais
July 29, 2024

Radicalization is a poorly understood concept. It is often conflated with terrorism or even sadism. However, in the modern scholarly understanding, radicalization is not necessarily connected to any actual radical behavior. Clarifying this concept would allow for a better plan of attack concerning countering terrorism as a whole and shed light on how we got here —

to a world riddled with terrorist groups where nowhere, not even the US Capitol, is off limits.

It seems like we encounter a new terrorist group regularly these days, effectively forcing us to play a never-ending game of Wac-A-Mole. This constant battering keeps us in catch-up mode, attempting to put out fires when we should be preventing them in the first place.

To understand how terrorism begins, we must first understand radicalization. Radicalization is the process by which individuals or groups adopt an ideology that employs or supports violence, including acts of terrorism, to achieve a particular political or ideological goal. The concept of radicalization has evolved, but scientifically understanding and defining it remains a struggle.

Historically, researchers have biased research on radicalization. Early researchers focused on the correlation between radicalization and specific instances of terrorism or pervasive violence, highlighting the impact of detainment on individuals who, although not overtly violent, could potentially become radicalized during their incarceration.

In response to Islamist terror attacks in the early 2000s, like the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the 2004 Madrid train bombings in Spain, researchers turned to Muslim radicalization. Over time, several movements and ideologies took the spotlight. At one point, even the green movement was the case study for radicalization. Most recently, the literature has focused on the effects of the internet and social media.

At the heart of this constantly changing focus lies a conceptual confusion. Radicalization is not terrorism. It precedes terrorism and may not even necessarily lead to it. A new generation of

researchers now looks at radicalization as a separate process, abstracting from violent outcomes, if any are even present, to focus on the psychology of radicalization. These researchers seek to explain how radical groups arise and why they receive sympathy from the broader public.

A case study of radicalization: Hamas

While various theories attempt to explain radicalization cohesively, the core issues remain the same. If you take everything from someone, there isn't much left to lose. Depriving individuals of life's essentials — food, water and shelter — and compounding their suffering with personal losses such as those of loved ones, homes and land, while simultaneously providing a specific entity to blame — be it the state, a racial group or a specified community — creates fertile ground for radicalization. Individuals may become swayed to believe that extremist actions are justified or feel compelled to participate in such activities in this environment of despair and attribution of blame. Extremist groups exploit this vulnerability to offer individuals grappling with despair a sense of purpose and belonging.

Consider the case of Hamas. Hamas is undeniably a terrorist group, yet one which enjoys significant support, at one point having 72% of Palestinians approving of them. This support cannot be solely attributed to antisemitism or hatred towards Israel; Palestinian Muslims have had a long history of peaceful life with both Jews and Christians. However, Palestinians and people worldwide cannot forget the last 80 or so years of pain.

Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel and Israel's subsequent bombardment and invasion of Gaza have created the perfect cocktail for them since. Let's break it down. Famine has become unprecedentedly rampant in Gaza and death from dehydration is becoming a serious fear.

Palestinians have lost loved ones, including premature babies. Palestinians have dealt with the Israeli government bombing homes and 690 educational institutions. Given the circumstances, it's not surprising to see an increase in support and membership for Hamas - a voluntary group that employs direct violence against the Israeli government.

Israel's invasion and even talk of settlement in Gaza have already backfired. Jerusalem is increasingly isolated diplomatically, and various bodies such as the UN, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court have rebuked it and its leaders. Simultaneously, support for Palestine has risen among non-Palestinians, mainly Western youth. With direct access to the horrific conditions of Gazans through social media, more and more people are starting to sympathize with Hamas. They no longer see it as just a terrorist group. However, Hamas is not the only example of radicalization, nor is the outcome of their efforts.

Truthfully, no matter how different the outcome, case and group, the radicalization process remains consistent. Juxtapose the case of Hamas with ISIS in Iraq. The invasion of Iraq stands as one of the greatest blunders in American foreign policy. This resulted in the devastation of the country in pursuit of nonexistent weapons of mass destruction. With the Iraqi government remaining weak and seeking assistance from the Kurds they once disdained, especially, given its once characterization by Arab nationalism. The aftermath of the Iraq war has left millions dead, homes destroyed and necessities in severe shortage.

Terror organizations often exploit conditions of isolation and discrimination, fueling hatred towards specific groups and motivating individuals to join their ranks. Islamic State (IS) utilized the loss experienced by Iraqis left with nothing to recruit more followers to their extremist ideology,

gaining more followers since their founding in the 1990s.

Unlike previous groups, like al-Qaeda, IS had a global reach, specifically in recruitment, disseminating its anti-Western ideology through the internet and propaganda. Individuals susceptible to extremist beliefs based on their social, economic or political circumstances undergo a process of self-radicalization drawn by the allure of the group's ideology. Thus, incidents like the San Bernardino attacks, where 14 people were killed and 21 injured and ISIS praised the shooters as supporters, were direct outcomes of IS's radicalization efforts.

The perception of oppression can be just as potent as actual oppression, and it is not always based on the actual oppression. The clearest example is the January 6 attack on the United States Capital Building. Storming the Capitol required substantial support, with groups like the Proud Boys playing a significant role. Founded to polarize America, the Proud Boys employ violent rituals to train members. The attack, televised internationally, was made possible by the group's reinforcement of violence within its ranks. The most significant talking point was taking the country back, insinuating the loss of land and country, and being very vocal about their loss of identity.

While their grievances may not be entirely valid, individuals deprived of support and privilege find solace in groups that provide a sense of belonging and assign blame to immigrants, women or liberalism. Isolation breeds susceptibility to self-radicalization, making marginalized individuals vulnerable to extremist ideologies propagated by groups like the Proud Boys.

Radicalization and its relation to terrorism

As noted above, radicalization doesn't always lead to terrorism. Most of Hamas's international sympathizers do not take direct action. Even women who supported IS and went so far as to travel to its territory and marry IS fighters were not violent; they were radicals, but not terrorists. Even government officials like Marjorie Taylor Greene can express radicalization, and this Republican congresswoman voiced support for the January 6 attack on the US Capitol.

Focusing on how we got here shows that each case is not unique and does not require handling differently, even though it may seem so. The magnitude of each group's violence, or lack thereof, is not connected to their success in garnering support and membership. Still, it is relevant to their capabilities of forming a real movement. To effectively counter terrorism, we just need a comprehensive approach that emphasizes preventing the rise of future organizations, meaning heightened attention to both counter-radicalization and counterterrorism strategies.

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction, but in some cases, the reaction outweighs the original incident. Thus, we must consider every action we take to counteract terrorism of any kind because how many more terrorists are we creating in the process? Every counterterrorism operation should include an understanding of the consequences of the loss of life. Otherwise, on October 7 and January 6, Islamic State and al-Qaeda and even new cases will continue to develop as our past continues to haunt us.

Addressing radicalization requires an approach that goes beyond reactive counterterrorism measures. Let us take a comprehensive approach to counterterrorism that focuses on preventing future organizations' success. We need to pay more

attention to radicalization as well as counterterrorism tactics.

[[Liam Roman](#) edited this piece.]



Tara Yarwais is a Kurdish American. Born in Baghdad, she immigrated to the US in 2007. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology at Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee, and a master's in terrorism, security, and far-right extremism at Richmond University, London, England. It was during her graduate studies that Tara discovered her love of writing.

My Vindication: A Tale of Blackness, Womanhood and Self-Advocacy

Alana James
July 31, 2024

My life was too mundane. So, I filled the banality by becoming an advocate for black women. Join me in a brief examination of my own identity as well as the stereotyping, colorism, misogyny and standards society imposes upon black women.

At some point during this year, I decided I was too comfortable. Not "comfortable" as in content, but "comfortable" as in stable; "comfortable" as in living a uniform, balanced-to-a-T lifestyle.

I realized I hated being “comfortable.”

At first, this “comfort” was because of my career. I had a remote job and a steady schedule in which I could complete work, watch videos on YouTube and Twitch, hangout with my cat, Po, and occasionally go out with my boyfriend.

I soon found myself uneasy in the comfort of my routine. I felt stunted and caged in. I began to spiral; I wondered if I relied on overworking to feel productive, romanticizing struggle, and if I would ever feel fulfilled with my life, regardless of success. For months, I stewed over one question: “Is this it”?

If not, what is “it,” then?

If so, what do I want from this life?

The latter question is what truly galvanized my thinking. I began to sketch an answer.

Redirecting my life

As per the advice of my mother, I strive to not center my life on work. Yet even with such a master “work-life balance” as mine, I realized I had no idea what to do with the “life” part. Where did I want to go in this life, and who did I want to be when I arrived? I had no answer. I felt lost.

A few ugly breakdowns and virtual therapy sessions later, I concluded I wanted to be confident and proud of myself. For me, this translated into being a more vocal advocate for black women like me. Yes, I hoped to help right the wrongs inflicted upon me, but I also hoped to testify to those who try to disregard black women’s struggles.

So I decided to make myself “uncomfortable” by outwardly advocating for myself and my truth. This was long overdue, I’ll grant, but later is better than never.

As a result, you’ll likely hear me going into what my partner calls “Ted Talks” about the fraught dynamics black women endure — because my experiences of discrimination are shaped by the intersection of my black and female identities.

My journey with identity and stereotypes

Often, I feel the pressure to conform to a mold due to the categories I fit into on paper. As a result, whether I align with expectations or not, I am left feeling like a performer on a stage, seen as an embodiment of my identities — an archetype of all black women — as opposed to the actual person I am.

So here is my truth: I am not an archetype. I am an example of a black woman, one of many.

Yet even still, I can wield this typecasting to the advantage of other black women. I have a phrase that illustrates this tactic saved in the notes app of my phone: “The way you regard me is the way you regard every black woman after me. Through fighting for myself, I fight for others who are like me.”

I don’t know if it’s a poem, a philosophy, or a promise. Regardless, it remains the primary motivator for my advocacy.

But my battle with stereotyping has also been with myself.

“Black is not a monolith.” That’s a phrase I’ve been hearing more over the years — and I need to hear it. While grappling with internalized racism, colorism, fetishization and all the other ills that are often canon in the black experience, I realized that, as I discovered who I was as a black woman, I began to project my newfound identity onto others.

One example can be found in my relationship to hair. I’d gone through the whole perm thing in

middle school, and, in high school, it was followed by the “big chop” — inflicted by a white stylist unaware of how to cut black hair. After this racially-charged mishandling of my hair, I became emotionally attached to my natural hair. Today, you’ll catch me rocking styles that embrace my natural hair and never defile it.

Yet as I developed a sense of pride in my hair, I found myself distressed when I rarely noticed family members parading their natural hair. Most preferred their hair straightened.

So I conversed with fellow black women, and with work I broadened my dogmatic viewpoint to this:

I just want black women to be happy.

To sincerely advocate for the liberation of all black women from stigmas, expectations, limitations and struggles, I must also stand for those who differ from me in their expressions, ideas and paths.

Therefore, I’ve made it a point to learn from others by hearing their stories and truths. Through doing so, I am able to discover who I am through who I am not. By exposing myself to the diversity and vibrance in my community, I open my life up to the beautiful idiosyncrasy of humanity.

I’ve made it a point to listen, but also to ensure I’m heard. Therefore, I’d like to present you with three topics I now confidently advocate for.

Code-switching

Code-switching is when one adjusts one’s style of speech and expression in different settings in order to be treated with dignity. Code-switching traditionally occurs in spaces where black individuals feel they must alter their behavior to appease, and therefore obtain opportunities from,

white individuals in power. However, code-switching can also just represent different forms of self-expression and socializing.

When I code-switch, I do so because I align with different communities and have developed a comfortable form of communicating with members of these environments. If you do not belong to my community, please do not speak in a particular way to try and mimic how you assume I — and other members of the community — sound.

This includes using “sis”, “girl”, “fam”, or — and I vividly remember an older white lady trumpeting this piece of slang — “bomb diggity”. Recently, in a discussion on Threads, I shared my memories of non-black persons employing phrases such as “Baby Daddy” and “Side Chick” only when referencing black individuals.

To quote the rapper Megan Thee Stallion, “Don’t call me sis, ‘cause I’m not your sister.”

Please stop. It’s not hip or funny, and it makes me uncomfortable.

Though, let it be known that I’m attempting to limit my code-switching and instead speak with my authentic dialect. My success and opportunities shouldn’t be limited by my speech patterns. My voice is that of my communities and loved ones, and they and I both deserve to be heard and succeed as our unadulterated selves.

Period.

Black women, self-protection, and blame

Speaking of Megan Thee Stallion, let’s go back to her shooting, for a moment.

In December of 2022, after she and the rapper Tory Lanez got into an argument while leaving a

party together, Lanez shot at Megan's feet, resulting in her hospitalization and surgery.

I'm still not over the male response to her shooting.

Megan's prosecutors asserted that after the shooting, Lanez had launched a "weaponed misinformation" campaign to turn public opinion against Megan. For example, in one of his songs, the rapper Drake implied Megan had lied about being shot.

But the misogyny did not stop with Drake. Online users harassed Megan with a deluge of sexist, violent comments and threats.

In the wake of the incident, I called out men left and right, putting them in their place when they spoke with blatant illogic.

It was truly infuriating to hear men try to justify how a woman getting shot was not the shooter's fault but her own, due to her proximity to the criminal. But it wasn't surprising.

In the months following the assault, Megan became a keystone figure in the movement to Protect Black Women.

This past summer, I was able to see Janelle James perform at a comedy club while visiting my hometown. She did a bit about riding in Ubers as a woman, describing safety-measures such as farting to make oneself seem undesirable. She also jested about how people would likely respond if she fell asleep in the Uber and woke up to being sexually assaulted:

"I know how people are. As soon as you tell your friends, 'I woke up in the back of the Uber with a dick in my mouth,' what they gonna say? 'Why you fall asleep in a Uber? Are you stupid?'"

She even goes on to joke that she would probably blame herself, for sleeping with her mouth open.

Funny, right?

I laughed, as did most of the other women in the room. I cannot speak for them, but I was laughing because she had climbed on stage and said such a truth.

Women are often told we should know better than to be in a bad situation, and in consequence, we assume responsibility for acts of violence exacted upon us. We are expected to always be on the defense, cautious and expecting of the so-called "obvious" dangers that lurk just around the corner. Admonishing women for their perceived "failure" to protect themselves overshadows placing accountability and consequences on perpetrators of violence.

My take: Stop blaming women for others' intolerance and transgressions.

That shit's embarrassing.

Societal standards, social media, and marketing skin color

Racism is real. Colorism is real. Texturism is real. To debate their existence is to disregard black individuals who have been discriminated against, degraded and humiliated for no reason other than their physical appearance deviating from the "standard" of caucasian features.

In addition, we can and should legitimately critique black women who cater to such "standards" for profit, not turn a blind eye to or encourage them under the guide of "supporting all black women." That's not supporting black women, that's supporting a black woman.

All the while, other black women and girls wonder how they look to others — because they don't look like someone who conforms to racist societal ideals.

I've often noticed identity-wounding ideas and ideals being hyped up on social media platforms, perpetuated under the facade of supporting black women despite the harm they impose upon that precise community. These trends may be examples of performative activism, ignorance or a combination of the two phenomena.

“Supporting black women” has become a trend and a path to social ranking. I all too often see people advocating for black women simply as a malicious marketing tactic to get people to engage with their content.

Sometimes, however, this pernicious strategy is not even employed successfully.

In 2022, TikTok content-creator Veronica Shaw, otherwise known as Chef Pii, launched her Pink Sauce, and it went viral. She began to fulfill orders for the sauce. When customers raised concerns over the product's health safety, Shaw leveraged her blackness to wrangle internet users into purchasing her worryingly opaque and non-FDA approved sauce. Her financial success was quickly marred by controversy.

In other cases, social media creators prospered by adhering to society's racial criteria. I remember when I first heard about Pinkydoll, a TikTok influencer who gained attention by simulating an NPC, or Non-Player Character, in her livestreams. At first, I didn't have much of an opinion on her content. The moment I truly tuned in was after realizing she had been using a filter to make her skin lighter.

With Pinkydoll's secret publicly exposed, there came a torrent of opinionated netizens. While

some concentrated on her being a catfish, others were struck by her profit-oriented appeal to colorism. Some disliked how others were solely focused on her skin tone, while still others accused her of masquerading — or “light-fishing” — as biracial.

My opinion? Instead of abiding by discriminatory social dynamics and the crumbs given to a particular paradigm of a black woman, let's demolish these racial disparities altogether.

I'm not going to disparage Pinkydoll simply for obtaining money in a calculated — and ultimately fruitful — approach. I understand doing what you have to in given circumstances.

All I'm saying is I'd rather the circumstances change so black women don't have to alter themselves simply to be on equal footing with the rest of society.

This concludes my “Ted Talk.”

[[India Nye Wenner](#) edited this piece.]



Alana James moved from Columbus, Ohio, to New York City in 2018. In 2022, she graduated from New York University with a BFA in dramatic writing, minoring in psychology. Alana was an assistant editor at Fair Observer. She currently resides in Harlem.

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