NYT 9/26/23

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| **‘Elite capture’** |
| Three progressive movements have risen to prominence over the past 15 years and vowed to create a fairer America: Occupy Wall Street, #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. |

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| All of them have had an impact. Occupy popularized the idea of the 1 percent and the 99 percent. #MeToo led to the firing (and sometimes jailing) of sexual predators, as well as the hiring of more women in prominent jobs. Black Lives Matter led to policing reforms in some cities and the hiring of more Black Americans in prominent jobs. |
| Still, none of the three movements have come close to achieving their ambitions. |

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| Congress has not passed any major laws to reduce economic, gender or racial inequality, such as a wealth tax, universal pre-K or nationwide police reforms. Instead, taxes on the affluent are near their lowest level in decades, and the number of killings by the police remains [largely unchanged](https://nl.nytimes.com/f/a/jDcSzlOktDsK4jjw7g6Pqg~~/AAAAAQA~/RgRm9UQRP0TnaHR0cHM6Ly93d3cud2FzaGluZ3RvbnBvc3QuY29tL2dyYXBoaWNzL2ludmVzdGlnYXRpb25zL3BvbGljZS1zaG9vdGluZ3MtZGF0YWJhc2UvP2NhbXBhaWduX2lkPTkmZW1jPWVkaXRfbm5fMjAyMzA5MjYmaW5zdGFuY2VfaWQ9MTAzNjgyJm5sPXRoZS1tb3JuaW5nJnJlZ2lfaWQ9OTUzMjU5MDAmc2VnbWVudF9pZD0xNDU3MjYmdGU9MSZ1c2VyX2lkPTJlMjM2YWU3NTE3NTRkOTZhZjgzMzQ5N2U1ZjRkMmMyVwNueXRCCmT6Eb8SZQ2E7CZSG2ZyYW5rc3Rhcm9wb2xpNTA2QGdtYWlsLmNvbVgEAAAAAw~~). “The term ‘reckoning’ was invoked again and again, and yet we don’t seem to have reckoned with any of our problems in any meaningful way,” Fredrik deBoer, [a popular Substack newsletter writer](https://nl.nytimes.com/f/a/6abLZoTDEAZO-JikDHcoKw~~/AAAAAQA~/RgRm9UQRP0S5aHR0cHM6Ly9mcmVkZGllZGVib2VyLnN1YnN0YWNrLmNvbS8_Y2FtcGFpZ25faWQ9OSZlbWM9ZWRpdF9ubl8yMDIzMDkyNiZpbnN0YW5jZV9pZD0xMDM2ODImbmw9dGhlLW1vcm5pbmcmcmVnaV9pZD05NTMyNTkwMCZzZWdtZW50X2lkPTE0NTcyNiZ0ZT0xJnVzZXJfaWQ9MmUyMzZhZTc1MTc1NGQ5NmFmODMzNDk3ZTVmNGQyYzJXA255dEIKZPoRvxJlDYTsJlIbZnJhbmtzdGFyb3BvbGk1MDZAZ21haWwuY29tWAQAAAAD), argues in a new book. |
| What explains these disappointments? In part, it’s simply that political change is fantastically difficult and often takes decades. But the degree of difficulty is only part of the story. |

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| The movements also bear some responsibility for their disappointments. Above all, they made decisions geared more toward changing elite segments of American society — like academia, Hollywood and the national media — than toward passing new laws and changing most people’s lives. |
| That’s the central argument of deBoer’s book, “[How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement](https://nl.nytimes.com/f/a/3vslcihwEmrBuQJXmrMnJw~~/AAAAAQA~/RgRm9UQRP4QEAWh0dHBzOi8vd3d3LnNpbW9uYW5kc2NodXN0ZXIuY29tL2Jvb2tzL0hvdy1FbGl0ZXMtQXRlLXRoZS1Tb2NpYWwtSnVzdGljZS1Nb3ZlbWVudC9GcmVkcmlrLWRlQm9lci85NzgxNjY4MDE2MDE1P2NhbXBhaWduX2lkPTkmZW1jPWVkaXRfbm5fMjAyMzA5MjYmaW5zdGFuY2VfaWQ9MTAzNjgyJm5sPXRoZS1tb3JuaW5nJnJlZ2lfaWQ9OTUzMjU5MDAmc2VnbWVudF9pZD0xNDU3MjYmdGU9MSZ1c2VyX2lkPTJlMjM2YWU3NTE3NTRkOTZhZjgzMzQ5N2U1ZjRkMmMyVwNueXRCCmT6Eb8SZQ2E7CZSG2ZyYW5rc3Rhcm9wb2xpNTA2QGdtYWlsLmNvbVgEAAAAAw~~).” It has helped me think about American politics, and I want to devote today’s newsletter to these issues. |

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| **Radical and practical** |

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| The most successful political movements tend to share a few features. They start with activists whose goals can seem so audacious as to be unrealistic. (Otherwise, there would be no need for a movement.) Over time, the movement’s leaders make careful decisions about how to accomplish at least some of those goals. They appeal to public opinion. They collaborate with unlikely allies. They work the system to change the system. |
| It was true of the civil rights movement, which combined radical aims with patriotic symbols and nonviolent protest. More recently, the gay rights movement accomplished rapid change partly by emphasizing traditional values like marriage and military service. The lessons also apply to the political right: Abortion opponents [spent decades](https://nl.nytimes.com/f/newsletter/PFbp6pO6lJDrs2pWrOw2TQ~~/AAAAAQA~/RgRm9UQRP0TbaHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubnl0aW1lcy5jb20vMjAyMi8wNi8yNS9vcGluaW9uL3JvZS1hYm9ydGlvbi1wb2xpdGljcy5odG1sP2NhbXBhaWduX2lkPTkmZW1jPWVkaXRfbm5fMjAyMzA5MjYmaW5zdGFuY2VfaWQ9MTAzNjgyJm5sPXRoZS1tb3JuaW5nJnJlZ2lfaWQ9OTUzMjU5MDAmc2VnbWVudF9pZD0xNDU3MjYmdGU9MSZ1c2VyX2lkPTJlMjM2YWU3NTE3NTRkOTZhZjgzMzQ5N2U1ZjRkMmMyVwNueXRCCmT6Eb8SZQ2E7CZSG2ZyYW5rc3Rhcm9wb2xpNTA2QGdtYWlsLmNvbVgEAAAAAw~~) patiently taking over the Republican Party and making the case that voters have a right to choose their own policies, state by state. |

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| Recent progressive movements have tended to be less strategic, explains deBoer, a self-described leftist. Occupy celebrated its lack of structure, including its lack of concrete goals. “Demands are disempowering since they require someone else to respond,” one Occupy protester told The New York Times in 2011. Black Lives Matter refused to name leaders, contrasting its approach with the old top-down civil rights movement. #MeToo, befitting its hashtag, never quite became an organized movement. |
| None of the three created a mass organization with a long-term plan — as labor unions, civil rights groups, evangelical Christians and other successful movements did in past decades. |

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| Occupy and Black Lives Matter also allowed unpopular positions to shape their public image — and weaken them. For instance, polling shows that most Black Americans support major changes to policing but *not* less policing. Much of Black Lives Matter, however, focused on cutting police funding. One organizer wrote a Times Opinion article titled “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police.” |
| The recent movements have instead had more success changing elite institutions that tend to be filled by fellow liberals. The winners of prestigious cultural awards have become more diverse. Media organizations now capitalize Black when describing somebody’s race. President Biden has made Juneteenth a federal holiday. Universities emphasize identity in their curriculums. |

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| **Symbols over substance** |
| These are real changes, but deBoer notes that they have little effect on most people’s lives. They instead reflect what the political philosopher Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò calls the “elite capture” of social justice campaigns. “Today,” deBoer writes, “left-activist spaces are dominated by the college-educated, many of whom grew up in affluence and have never worked a day at a physically or emotionally demanding job.” For that reason, these spaces prioritize “the immaterial and symbolic” over “the material and the concrete,” deBoer argues. |

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| (That point is related to a continuing theme of this newsletter: [the class inversion of American politics](https://nl.nytimes.com/f/newsletter/oOSNjIFjqzjsm0pb3j4NXA~~/AAAAAQA~/RgRm9UQRP0TYaHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubnl0aW1lcy5jb20vMjAyMy8wNi8yMi9icmllZmluZy91cy1wb2xpdGljcy1jbGFzcy5odG1sP2NhbXBhaWduX2lkPTkmZW1jPWVkaXRfbm5fMjAyMzA5MjYmaW5zdGFuY2VfaWQ9MTAzNjgyJm5sPXRoZS1tb3JuaW5nJnJlZ2lfaWQ9OTUzMjU5MDAmc2VnbWVudF9pZD0xNDU3MjYmdGU9MSZ1c2VyX2lkPTJlMjM2YWU3NTE3NTRkOTZhZjgzMzQ5N2U1ZjRkMmMyVwNueXRCCmT6Eb8SZQ2E7CZSG2ZyYW5rc3Rhcm9wb2xpNTA2QGdtYWlsLmNvbVgEAAAAAw~~).) |
| DeBoer’s writing can be withering, as the best polemics often are, and few people will agree with all of his arguments. But his central point is important, whether you’re part of the political left, center or right: Calling out injustice isn’t the same as fighting it. |

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| “The spirit of 2020 was always a righteous spirit, and the people and organizations that powered that moment had legitimate grievances and moral demands,” he writes. “What we need is practicality, resilience and a plan.” |

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