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The Convenient Projection of Samuel Freedman on Kevin Roberts: Unpacking the Biases of Progressive Paternalism

The Convenient Projection of Samuel Freedman on Kevin Roberts: Unpacking the Biases of Progressive Paternalism



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In a recent article for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (*LARB*), Samuel G. Freedman, a respected journalist and professor at Columbia University, turned his attention to Kevin Roberts, President of the Heritage Foundation. Ostensibly a critique of Roberts, “The Inconvenient Scholarship of Kevin Roberts” (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-inconvenient-scholarship-of-kevin-roberts/>) inadvertently reveals more insight into the author’s perspective than that of its intended subject.

The piece exemplifies a phenomenon I call “Progressive Paternalism,” or PP: a condition observed in certain intellectual circles where conservatives are perceived through a filter of unexamined biases. PP manifests as a tendency to

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project negative characteristics onto conservatives—traits that are, in fact, more indicative of the critic's own psychological state.

Key symptoms of PP include heightened anxiety, emotional volatility, irrational fear, and an unshakeable belief in distorted impressions of perceived adversaries. Engaging in rational discourse with someone exhibiting PP is difficult because they are firmly convinced of the reality of their misconceptions about ideological opponents.

PP is common in left-leaning punditry. Assuming moral and intellectual superiority over their subjects, individuals with PP ascribe their preoccupations to conservatives rather than directly engaging with conservative principles or paradigms. Consequently, their critiques often divulge more about their biases than the subject's ideas, obscuring potential commonalities and nuanced understanding and creating a false dichotomy between critic and subject.

Because PP frequently involves ideological blinders, critics suffering from it end up embodying the condition they criticize. So, accusations of racism, bigotry, sexism, or other isms, for example, often unintentionally expose the underlying ism of the accuser. This form of ism is particularly insidious because it is concealed beneath professed commitments to social and cultural advancement. A racist who acknowledges his prejudices and is open about them is less nefarious than one who is unaware of his racism and believes he's actively opposing it.

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Freedman's piece shows how PP manifests in public discourse. He presents what he frames as a "transformation" in Roberts, tracing a trajectory from the latter's academic roots to his current role as a prominent conservative luminary. Alarm bells ring early, as Freedman refers to "Roberts's doppelgänger, his alternative self," suggesting a split within Roberts's thinking or a divide between two incompatible personae. This move implies a fundamental dissonance: either one identity must be the *true* self, with the other relegated to strategic performance, or Roberts has undergone a radical metamorphosis.

But what if Roberts has remained generally consistent throughout his career, such that the perceived inconsistency instead exposes a flaw or error in the perspective of the accuser?

Claiming his purpose "is not to play 'gotcha,'" Freedman details Roberts's scholarly background, noting his well-regarded research on slavery in America that earned praise from his apparently non-conservative colleagues and mentors. Freedman challenges Roberts's claims of academic marginalization, then traces Roberts's career trajectory from a

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"Harvard Law School Students Pass Referendum Urging University To Diversify From Israel" — *Harvard Crimson*, 3/14/25

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(<https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-a-university-fights-an-authoritarian-regime>)

state research institution to founding a classical Catholic school, presiding over Wyoming Catholic College, and helming the Texas Public Policy Institute.

Young whites “went woke” because doing so was requisite for initiation and inclusion, a mark of separation between them and the uneducated or uninitiated. Ironically, then, those who positioned themselves as woke ended up perpetuating the racism they claimed to oppose.

From here, Freedman tumbles into PP, constructing a broader narrative about conservative figures with academic pedigrees who condemn higher education purportedly for political advantage. He attempts to illustrate that Roberts’s career parallels the “mutation of the Republican Party from conventional conservatism to a hostile, hateful brand of pseudo-populism.” Strong words, but they fall flat when Freedman, without a hint of irony, follows them with a telling rhetorical question: “How can the Kevin Roberts who wrote with incision and sensitivity about the humanity of enslaved Black people be the same Kevin Roberts who, in the Project 2025 introduction, likened the United States’ ultimate rejection of slavery to his hoped-for rejection of ‘wokeism’?”

That Freedman cannot see the consistency in Roberts’s positions here is astounding.

The signifier woke, once linked to an awareness of racial injustice and the historical realities of racism, underwent a transition in its signified. Affluent young whites at elite institutions, such as the one where Freedman teaches, reappropriated what originally represented a critical consciousness. Within this new context, woke no longer signaled a focused engagement with racial struggles but rather a set of “luxury beliefs,” performative stances on issues like environmentalism, gender fluidity, and identity politics. This shift promoted a false moral equivalence between these mostly symbolic concerns—serving as a coded signal of elite status or prestige—and the real, lived experiences of racism faced by blacks. The signifier thus became detached from its original referent, resulting in a superficial alignment with social justice.

Embracing or brandishing wokeness was necessary to enter into elite society and prestigious institutions. Young whites “went woke” because doing so was requisite for initiation and inclusion, a mark of separation between them and the uneducated or uninitiated. Ironically, then, those who positioned themselves as woke ended up perpetuating the racism they claimed to oppose.

Of course, the same Roberts who wrote with “incision and sensitivity about the humanity of enslaved Black people”—again, to quote Freedman—also critiques wokeism. Why

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wouldn't he? Wokeism diminishes the black experience, using black history and rhetoric to serve the interests of aspirational whites whose ideologies do not truly align with the needs of black communities. The struggle against wokeism is a contemporary challenge to the subjugation of blackness. Failure to see that is evidence of the blinding effects of PP.

Attempting to bolster his allegation that Roberts has transformed, Freedman quotes former colleagues and mentors offering statements that, rather than substantiating a change in Roberts, allow for the possibility that Roberts's views have remained constant. "Maybe it *wasn't a transition*," submits Crandall Shiflet (italics added). "Maybe he held some of these ideals when he was a graduate student." Adds Matt O'Hara: "[E]ither I didn't really know him, or there was some kind of transformation" (italics added). James Sidbury remarks that Roberts "was always very open about his political ideology." These testimonies provide minimal support for the accusation that Roberts has transformed, instead raising the probability that he is the same person he has always been.

Conservative graduate students often navigate a complex academic environment, adjusting their beliefs to institutional expectations. Undoubtedly, many feel compelled to select research subjects acceptable to left-leaning faculty without compromising their core values.

Freedman acknowledges that Roberts identified as a Republican and a Catholic during his doctoral studies. Thus, Freedman demonstrates acute signs of PP by contradicting the data he elicited.

Freedman seizes upon Roberts's assertion that he selected topics during his graduate studies—most notably, the comparative history of enslaved families in the Atlantic World—that were "politically correct." He attributes this choice to ambition, not political pressure, implying that overt coercion played no role in Roberts's decision-making. Anyone who has completed graduate or doctoral studies understands that advisors typically guide rather than dictate, encouraging students to pursue their own intellectual passions rather than mandating predetermined research agendas.

However, this reality doesn't negate another: conservative graduate students often navigate a complex academic environment, adjusting their beliefs to institutional expectations. Undoubtedly, many feel compelled to select research subjects acceptable to left-leaning faculty without compromising their core values. This precarious balancing act can result in marginalization and the urge to conform.

My experience as a conservative pursuing degrees, including a doctorate, illustrates this predicament. After encountering what I perceived as political discrimination from my initial

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(<https://amgreatness.com/2025/03/11/morning-greatness-judge-blocks-trump-admins-efforts-to-deport-pro-hamas-campus-protest-leader>)

doctoral dissertation advisor, resulting in years of stalled progress, I had to advocate for myself. I finally completed my dissertation in mere months by involving the university ombudsman and switching advisors. Without such intervention, I might have abandoned the program.

As a licensed attorney completing doctoral work in a humanities discipline, I was uniquely equipped to defend myself through legal and administrative channels. But I can only imagine how many similarly situated conservatives, feeling disempowered and unwelcome in their departments, were unable to finish their degrees. After all, if I didn't complete my doctorate, I could always practice law. Others wouldn't have that backup plan.

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Despite my obstacles, I found a network of support among faculty. My new dissertation advisor, deeply influenced by anti-foundationalist and postmodernist critical theory—which treats truth as a form of representation and truth claims as necessarily contingent—did not exhibit the kind of moral certainty or normative foundationalism that might provoke a reflexive opposition to my more conservative views—which, I should mention, were entirely unrelated to my dissertation focus—namely, the judicial dissents of former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Freedman's depiction of Roberts as enjoying institutional support in higher education—complete with expressions of bewilderment at apparent contradictions—reflects a common limitation in journalism: drawing sweeping conclusions from partial views of institutional happenings. Just as he generalizes about Roberts's experience without intimate familiarity with the department's daily operations, quotidian faculty interactions, or the subtle currents of faculty politics, he might similarly mischaracterize my experience through a distanced lens. Department life consists of countless small moments, unofficial conversations, and unrecorded interactions that affect one's standing and sentiments far more than the formal milestones visible to outside observers.

When Freedman cites activities like publishing prospects or surface-level collegiality as evidence of genuine inclusion, he misses the nuanced ways academic culture can signal belonging or exclusion. An outsider glimpsing formal achievements and public interactions simply cannot capture the lived experience of navigating departmental politics day after day.

Freedman fixates on a conversation in which Roberts allegedly told his colleague Matt O'Hara that he was leaving academia because he "felt out of place as a conservative." Freedman, attempting to parse this exchange, draws a strained distinction between feeling out of place and feeling persecuted. But this misses the obvious: What professional courtesy should someone tell a colleague when departing an institution? Surely not "I'm leaving because I'm being persecuted!" Such a declaration could burn bridges and poison

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"As NC's teacher pipeline dwindles, education colleges are getting creative" — *WRAL News*, 3/07/25

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(<https://jamesgmartin.center/2025/03/the-classroom-must-change/>)

future references. Roberts's measured explanation of feeling "out of place" reads less like evidence against his current claims and more like the diplomatic phrasing any sensible academic would use in a farewell conversation.

Freedman simply assumes that conservative positions must conflict with black interests, betraying a profound ignorance of both conservatism and black culture.

Ironically, Freedman undermines his own argument by quoting Elizabeth Horodowich, who insists that "nobody in the department would have subscribed to" even Roberts's Bush-era compassionate conservatism and declaring that "someone with the radical views he has now" couldn't have felt at home there. This testimony inadvertently reinforces Roberts's account of his departure: it confirms both his ideological isolation at the time and reveals his colleagues' tendency to brand dissenting views as "radical"—a loaded term Horodowich deploys without explanation or justification. Far from discrediting Roberts's narrative about feeling out of place, this characterization of his views as beyond the pale, both then and now, only strengthens his case about the department's ideological homogeneity.

Freedman's first claim—that Roberts revised his professional history—collapses under scrutiny. His second claim—that Roberts "contradicted his own scholarship" on blacks and slavery—reveals something far more troubling: a perfect illustration of PP. Freedman simply assumes that conservative positions must conflict with black interests, betraying a profound ignorance of both conservatism and black culture. This seemingly reflexive equation of conservatism with anti-black sentiment ignores the deep currents of cultural conservatism within Black communities, particularly among black men—with whom, it bears noting, Trump has made electoral inroads. Freedman's stance exemplifies how progressive assumptions can blind observers to obvious sociological realities, leading them to see contradictions where none exist.

Freedman's argument descends into the darkest manifestations of PP when he implies an inherent link between conservatism and support for slavery, a leap that reveals the condition's characteristic symptoms: heightened anxiety, emotional volatility, and an unshakeable commitment to distorted perceptions of ideological opponents. This affliction extends beyond Freedman himself, as evidenced by his citation of Professor Jamie Bronstein, who betrays the same cognitive distortions. Bronstein's statement that Roberts once did "good scholarship" and "didn't give the vibe of being far off politically" culminates in the telling revelation: "You wouldn't think someone could cover enslavement and be so conservative."

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"Trump Expected to Sign Executive Order Abolishing Dept. of Education" — *American Greatness*, 3/06/25

This remarkable assertion—that conservative scholars are somehow incapable of studying or condemning slavery—shows how PP warps rational thought. The sheer illogic is staggering: how does one reach the conclusion that philosophical conservatism precludes critical engagement with historical slavery? Such reasoning reveals far more about the psychological projection and unfounded fears of its holder than it does about conservatives or their actual beliefs. It's a textbook example of how PP constructs elaborate phantoms of its opponents, completely divorced from reality. And it exposes a subtle yet pernicious racism, arrogantly supposing that conservatism is necessarily racist while disregarding the agency and judgment of black conservatives who have thoughtfully chosen their political beliefs.

While a comprehensive explanation of conservatism's foundations lies beyond my scope—and would likely be unnecessary for readers of this publication—Freedman's peculiar emphasis on Roberts's Catholicism and Opus Dei connection demands attention—though not for the reasons he implies. Rather than serving as evidence of some sinister bent, these religious affiliations actually illuminate Roberts's approach to racial issues. Catholic doctrine, anchored in the profound concept of *imago dei*, insists upon the inherent dignity and worth of every human person as created in God's image. This theological foundation demands respect for human dignity and bodily integrity as moral imperatives, not mere political preferences.

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Indeed, Freedman might benefit from reading Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, which articulates how Catholic social teaching addresses human dignity and racial justice. The encyclical powerfully proclaims that all humans possess equal dignity regardless of race, asserting that “racial discrimination can in no way be justified” precisely because it violates the fundamental truth that all persons bear God's image. This teaching flows naturally from centuries of Catholic theological reflection on human nature and dignity—a tradition that shaped Roberts's worldview but remains apparently invisible to critics who cannot imagine conservative religious belief coexisting with genuine concern for racial justice.

Far from undermining Roberts's engagement with racial issues, his Catholic faith provides its philosophical underpinning. The PP delusion that religious conservatism must somehow conflict with racial equality reveals more about PP prejudices than about Catholic social teaching or conservative thought. That Freedman sees tension where there is actually deep coherence suggests he might benefit from examining his own preconceptions rather than questioning Roberts's sincerity. It was perhaps *because* and not despite his conservative Catholicism that Roberts, in Freedman's words, “took it as a kind of mission to individuate enslaved people, to give them names and actions.”

(<https://amgreatness.com/2025/03/06/morning-greatness-trump-expected-to-sign-executive-order-abolishing-dept-of-education/>)

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Freedman's performative outrage over Roberts's assertion that the "abolition of slavery aggravated pervasive racism across the country" reveals his own shallow grasp of historiography while pandering to an audience unfamiliar with academic historical scholarship. By yanking this quote from its context and melodramatically reframing it as a defense of slavery—"Think about that for a moment," he blusters, "the United States would have had less of a race problem had slavery persisted"—Freedman demonstrates precisely the kind of presentist thinking that professional historians work to avoid.

The irony is that Roberts's observation represents a mainstream historical understanding, one articulated by scholars from W.E.B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction in America* through contemporary historians like Eric Foner. This well-documented phenomenon—that the end of slavery provoked new and intensified forms of racial control through Jim Crow laws and institutionalized segregation—is hardly controversial among serious scholars of the period. White Southerners, having lost their system of racial domination through slavery, quickly constructed new mechanisms of subordination through legal and political structures.

Freedman's apparent shock that such an observation appeared in a "reputable academic" imprint betrays his own acontextual reading of history. His incredulity would be more appropriately directed at his own misreading rather than at Roberts's conventional historical analysis. In attempting to paint Roberts's work as beyond the pale, Freedman has instead revealed his own distance from historical scholarship. This failing clarifies how PP can lead otherwise intelligent observers to misread straightforward historical analysis as radical commentary when it appears under a conservative byline. Worse, it shows he's willing to distort history to serve a contemporary political agenda rather than pursuing genuine historical understanding—and hence to commit his own form of racial exploitation, manipulating black experiences to advance ideological objectives.

More evidence of PP resides in Freedman's dramatic declaration that Roberts has abandoned his scholarly integrity regarding slavery. His primary evidence? Roberts's endorsement of "popular sovereignty" in Project 2025. Freedman immediately leaps to associate this concept exclusively with antebellum slavery debates, particularly the Kansas crisis of the 1850s, where popular sovereignty indeed became entangled with the westward expansion of slavery. But this tunnel-visioned reading evinces a profound historical and theoretical myopia. Popular sovereignty as a political concept has an intellectual lineage stretching back through the Enlightenment social contract theorists—Rousseau, Locke, and Hobbes—and even further to medieval political thought. By attempting to chain Roberts to one particular, fraught historical moment without evidence that this era informed his usage, Freedman commits the cardinal sin of presentism: projecting contemporary political anxieties onto historical concepts while ignoring their broader intellectual context.

Freedman's interpretive leap—that Roberts's support for popular sovereignty must somehow signal sympathy for slavery-era politics—exemplifies how PP can lead to hysterical

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"UMinn proposes 'Race, Power, and Justice' course mandate" — *College Fix*,



claims. The assumption that any invocation of popular sovereignty must necessarily invoke its most controversial American application reveals more about Freedman's ideological preoccupations than Roberts's actual beliefs. Such selective historical interpretation to support a political argument is strong evidence of PP at work.

Freedman's rhetoric reaches its most frenetic, moreover, when he characterizes Project 2025 and conservative positions as a "right-wing assault"—note the calculated shift from "conservative" to the more inflammatory "right-wing" and the suggestive violence of "assault"—on "Black history, DEI ["diversity, equity, and inclusion"] programs, and affirmative action." This portrayal lacks substantiation and betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the philosophical principles underlying opposition to race-based policies. It also suggests that the many black conservative intellectuals who critique these programs and policies are complicit in anti-black racism, which they no doubt believe they're opposing rather than enabling.

The critique of DEI and affirmative action arises not from any "assault" on black history but from a profound philosophical tradition that finds its modern expression in Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of a society where character, not skin color, determines judgment. This vision builds upon Aristotelian ethics, emphasizing that moral judgment correctly applies to voluntary actions chosen knowingly and deliberately. Aristotle understood that virtuous character manifests through intentional actions, not immutable, surface-level characteristics (like skin color).

The masses are seeing through the façade of elite expertise and questioning whether institutional authority has indeed served their interests or merely disguised ideological manipulation as professional guidance.

Today's DEI framework inverts this classical understanding by prioritizing unchosen racial and ethnic identities over individual agency and merit. Rather than judging actions and intentions, the proper subjects of moral evaluation, it reduces complex human beings to demographic categories within a simplistic oppressor-oppressed binary. What Freedman seems unable to grasp in his PP state is the deep irony of his position: by defending racial preferences, he advocates for race-based discrimination. His argument rests on a stunted moral framework that has forgotten Aristotle's crucial insight that virtue inheres in voluntary actions, not genetics or lineage. The result is a paradigm that reduces the rich complexity of human moral life to crude identity politics, whereby group membership trumps individual merit and emotional narratives of victimization override reasoned moral judgment.

3/03/25

(<https://www.thecollegefix.com/umninn-proposes-race-power-and-justice-course-mandate/>)

"New Ed. Dept. Guidance on Race and DEI Tells Colleges Which Programs It Might Consider Illegal" — *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3/02/25
(<https://www.chronicle.com/article/new-ed-dept-guidance-on-race-and-dei-tells-colleges-which-programs-might-be-illegal>)

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Freedman's accusation that conservatives "claim that they are the true victims of racial discrimination" misses the point entirely. The principled opposition to race-based policies isn't about claiming victimhood; it's about advocating for a return to sound moral principles that assess individuals by their chosen actions. His disregard for these philosophical foundations reveals how PP can blind even Ivy League professors to the more profound ethical implications of their positions. Freedman may be sincerely committed to opposing racism, but his philosophical assumptions and policy positions—seemingly the result of PP—might ultimately entrench the racism he wishes to contest.

LARB remains a vital forum for cultural commentary—one to which I have contributed numerous times. The publication itself is not my target; the shortcomings of Freedman's article, however, reflect a recurring issue in academic and journalist rhetoric (namely, PP) that deserves further scrutiny.

Freedman's PP may be a form of class anxiety—not economic, but academic. His disdain for Roberts mirrors the broader intellectual establishment's reaction to figures like J.D. Vance (J.D., Yale University) or Josh Hawley (B.A., Stanford University; J.D., Yale University): They view them as class traitors who, despite their education, reached "incorrect" populist conclusions.

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Such figures pose a particular threat because they challenge a cherished narrative: progressive views naturally follow from intellectual sophistication. They disrupt the comforting belief in a consensus among the cognoscenti that truth inherently aligns with leftist thinking. Perhaps this explains why Freedman can't accept Roberts's current views as a natural evolution of his earlier scholarly work on slavery. Instead, Roberts must be discredited to preserve the perceived authority of the elite institutions that shaped him.

If that's the case, then the real subject of Freedman's essay isn't Roberts at all but the apparent threat to institutional authority. Suppose Roberts is a "man of the people" who can mobilize the masses against elites. In that case, figures like Freedman face an existential threat: the possibility that ordinary citizens might finally discover the intellectual cover for decades of cultural condescension and social engineering. The true source of Freedman's anxiety may be the dawning realization that the masses are seeing through the façade of elite expertise and questioning whether institutional authority has indeed served their interests or merely disguised ideological manipulation as professional guidance.

This revelation—that the intellectual class might be held accountable for its longstanding practice of moral gatekeeping and social control—could explain the increasingly desperate PP attempts to discredit conservative scholars who dare challenge progressive orthodoxy. Perhaps, then, PP isn't

just a cognitive bias but a defensive mechanism, protecting not just ideas but the institutions that have long claimed a monopoly on moral and intellectual authority.

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Image: “Kevin Roberts speaking with attendees at the 2022 AmericaFest at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, Arizona” by Gage Skidmore on Flickr (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/gageskidmore/52587429527>)

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