In a recent article, I suggested that people who are strongly critical of social justice movements rarely actually seem interested in speaking with or trying to understand those infamous “campus social justice activists.” I began with a column by David Brooks, whose effort to “empathize” with campus protesters consisted of saying “well, I guess I’d be indoctrinated too if I was a young person today…” But I also cited an article by Scott Alexander, which criticized contemporary left use of the term “racism,” saying that it amounts to believing that “people who disagree with you are motivated by pure hatred,” that they are “monsters who desire only hatred and death.” Alexander wrote in the article that this use of “racism” is uncharitable and unfair, and that it “frees you from the obligation of trying to understand other people.” In response, I said that this perspective on what leftists think was itself uncharitable, and did not make a serious effort to try to understand other people.

Alexander says that he feels “pretty fricking betrayed” by my criticism. This is because he recently offered to collaborate with me on a project in which adversarial parties would discuss and try to productively resolve their political disagreements. It seems deeply unfair of me to say that he doesn’t try to have dialogue with those he disagrees with, given that he actually offered to have a public dialogue with me about our disagreements!

But that shows exactly what I’m talking about. I have no doubt that writers like David Brooks and Scott Alexander enjoy talking to “people who disagree with them.” I am sure that Alexander would be charitable and fair-minded and polite to me, as he was in his email. But my whole point is that this fair-mindedness and charity is applied selectively, that I get it as an educated white guy who enjoys arguing, but the “social justice warriors” are treated as “beyond reason” in the same way that they are accused of treating others as “beyond reason.”

When Alexander contacted me to propose collaborating, he said he had chosen me in particular because I was “somebody who often has different opinions to me, but also seems to share enough of my basic assumptions to be work-with-able.” My worldview is similar enough to Alexander’s own that I am worth having a dialogue with. This is because we are about half an inch apart: I am a consequentialist libertarian socialist and he’s something of a consequentialist libertarian social democrat. The broad category “people you disagree with” includes everyone from People Who You Agree With On Literally Everything Except One Tiny Procedural Point to People Who Believe The Opposite Of Every Single One Of Your Beliefs. The fact that someone is willing to talk to some “people they disagree with” proves only that they are not Stalin. (Actually, that may be unfair to Stalin, who once had an adversarial dialogue with H.G. Wells.) So I am not suggesting Scott Alexander has total intolerance for disagreement, I am suggesting that he need to extend his principle of charity to people who are slightly more different from himself than I am.

Alexander vigorously denies that his article was unfair to left anti-racists. First, he denies that he didn’t actually listen to leftists, saying that he “cited various examples of leftists” voicing the positions he criticized. The original article is long, so it’s possible that I overlooked something. But I can only find him citing one “leftist,” namely a single anonymous twitter user. The rest are his own articulations of the left’s position, with no actual citations or quotes. This is precisely the point I was making in my article. Instead of adopting the rigorous approach he would use towards other positions, quoting arguments from books and articles and websites and interviews, he lets the social justice left be represented by random twitterers and his own
projections of what people would say if he did talk to them, which he doesn’t. In my article, I pointed out that critics like Brooks and Alexander make no attempt to find the most sophisticated articulations of the social justice position, and rarely if ever quote writers of color. This is entirely true and I invite you to read Alexander’s article and look for the part where he actually engages with the people he is viciously dismissing as lazy and irrational.

Next: Alexander says that I misrepresented his article, because I accused him of failing to respond to an argument that he does, in fact, respond to. I said that the social justice position on racism was not that it is the pure product of individual hatred, but that it is a systemic and often unconscious set of biases woven deep into the social fabric. Alexander says I must have missed Part II of his article, in which he spent 2,000 words responding to this position, which he called the definition of racism “by consequences.” He says:

“Definition By Consequences: Anything whose consequence is harm to minorities or promotion of white supremacy, regardless of whether or not this is intentional. … I know that Definition By Consequences is the really sophisticated one, the ones that scholars in the area are most likely to write around. But I also think it’s uniquely bad at capturing the way anyone uses the word “racism” in real life. … By this definition, many racist things would be good. Suppose some tyrant wants to kill the ten million richest white people, then redistribute their things to black people. This would certainly challenge white supremacy and help minorities. So by this definition, resisting this tyrant would be racist. But obviously this tyrant is evil and resisting him is the right thing to do. So under this definition, good policies which deserve our support can nevertheless be racist. “This policy is racist” can no longer be a strong argument against a policy, even when it’s true… Definition By Consequences implies that racism can never be pointed to as a cause of anything, that racist policies can often be good, that nobody "is a racist" or "isn’t a racist", and that sometimes the KKK trying to terrorize black people is less racist than them not trying to do this. Not only have I never heard anyone try to grapple with these implications, I see no sign anyone has ever thought of them. And now that I’ve brought them up, I don’t think anyone will accept them as true, or even worry about the discrepancy…. I think this is probably because it’s a matte-and-hailey, more something that gets trotted out to win arguments than anything people actually use in real life.

In order to accept that Alexander has responded here to the position, we have to accept that “anything is racist whose consequence is to harm minorities” is an accurate characterization of definition that “scholars in the area use.” He cites no actual “scholars in the area” who use this definition, and it is one I haven’t heard. He rightly points out that formulating it this way would be absurd, because if someone tried to do something racist but ended up furthering the cause of anti-racism (David Duke’s presidential campaigns might be like this), they would not be racist. He believes that scholars must have just been oblivious to how self-evidently absurd their definition is (“I see no sign anyone has ever thought of them”) and concludes that this must therefore be an argument that people say without actually believing.

But this is not how scholars talk about it, and the reason Alexander thinks it’s idiotic and absurd is because he has casually given a silly definition rather than trying to fair-mindedly and charitably appreciate their writings. (By the way, something I have learned the hard way: if many intelligent people have been thinking about a question for a long time, be careful before announcing that they are obviously idiots who have overlooked something you have figured out in ten seconds. Especially be careful if you haven’t spent any time reading their work before doing this. You may be right, but it’s best to make sure.) The usual approach is to draw a distinction between racist “consequences” and racist motivations and explain the ways that both matter differently. It’s true that if you adopted a pure consequences approach you would, as Alexander says, quickly run against common usage: it would mean that David Duke wasn’t a racist. But scholars don’t adopt a pure consequences approach: instead, they speak of individual racism and systemic racism. And they have given good reasons why “systemic racism” is an important concept, and we can’t simply see a binary between
"racism is disparate results" and "racism is hateful motivation." They point out that if you adopt the
Alexander approach, and confine discussions of racism to talk about individual motivations, you also get an
absurd result: it means that there is no more "racism" in a society where people’s life outcomes are
conditioned by their race, where people of some races tend to have far more advantages than people of other
races, and where those things are partly a product of a long prior history of "motivational" racism.
Furthermore, if you confine discussions of racism to "hatred," there can be no discussion of the influence of
subtle racist biases and harmful stereotypes. So long as nobody feels hate, nothing racist can occur, even if
you are in a world where a person's race is constantly working to their disadvantage. Scholars realized that this
didn't make sense, because race matters a lot, and systemic racism was developed as a way to understand how
there could be "racism without racists." (Or, to use his murder parallel, why the world has a lot of murder in
it despite the fact that very few people desire murder for murder's sake. Alexander scoffs at the idea that there
could be a "subconscious bias" that "murder is good," but I don't think that's self-evident: perhaps humans
do enjoy violence even if we'd like to think we don't, just as we may naturally tend to dislike people different
from ourselves even if we aren't conscious of it! Alexander is right that a view that focuses on conscious
motivation is silly, which is precisely why scholars of race don't focus on conscious motivation just as
criminologists don't focus on murder-ists.) Like any concept, systemic racism is imperfect and I am sure
social justice critics like Alexander will have fun poking holes in it (instead of, like a charitable person, trying
to refine it). But it's not just the idiotic idea that racism is solely about consequences and therefore the Klan
aren't racist if their actions don't produce consequences. And the fact that Alexander reduced all sociology of
race to that position shows exactly my point: he was not, and is still not, interested in engaging in ideas that
challenge his "basic assumptions."

Finally, Alexander says that I am wrong to say that "people who disagree with you are motivated by pure
hatred" and "they are monsters who desire hatred and death" is an unfair characterization of the left's
position on racism. First, let me just say that this discussion is always going to be difficult, because the world
is made up of billions of people, and saying "That's not what leftists say" is always a risky gamble, because it's
almost always true that you can find some people who have said exactly what you say people aren't saying.
Alexander nails me beautifully, by pointing out that articles in my very own magazine have said as much! This
week, in a truly excellent article on Ann Coulter, my colleague Brianna Rennix wrote that Ann and her
acolytes are "monsters who literally believe that non-American lives, especially non-white non-American lives,
are worth less than dirt." Boy, did I feel silly!

But here I have to make an embarrassing confession: sometimes I, and other writers for our magazine, use
words in ways that are not strictly literal in every sense. We livew up our prose with hyperbole for rhetorical
effect. So, for example, if I say "I cannot imagine anything more callous than watching a family get deported
and feeling nothing," I may not literally mean that I am incapable of conceiving of anything more callous, just
that, well, it's very callous. If I say Martin Shkreli is a snake, which he is, I do not mean to deny his humanity
or accuse him of having no legs. (I am reliably informed that he does have a forked tongue, though.) Writers
use exaggeration because it helps drive the point home. In the Coulter passage in question, Brianna showed,
using rigorous argumentation, that Coulter's position is totally indifferent to the terrible human consequences
it advocates. She wants to show that this is monstrous! Now, once again, a bit of a confession (don't tell
anyone): Brianna is actually a very empathetic person who could sit down with a person deeply hostile to
immigrants and see their human side, and her article is an effort to explain why ordinary and good people can be convinced
by anti-immigrant propaganda! A fair reading of it, which we know Alexander does not like to give, would actually show that while Brianna uses strong and biting language, she has a deep compassion for those who come to xenophobic positions after reading people like Coulter. (Coulter herself is actually a monster though.)

Alexander accuses me and other leftists of engaging in what he calls “motte and bailey” arguments. (He is constantly calling things motte and bailey arguments.) We insist “Hey, we don’t think racism is made by monsters” and then we write articles going “Death to the monstrous Republican Party!” (Or we write books about the president called *Anatomy of a Monstrosity.*) Alexander thinks we are operating in bad faith, lying about what we actually believe. In reality, I think this is just a product of Alexander’s lack of charity: instead of saying “Okay, do they really believe that Republicans are monsters?” and maybe asking them, he says “Aha! You think people you disagree with are literally monsters!” It is not a genuine attempt at understanding, as we can see from the way Alexander managed to construe a nuanced article arguing for greater empathy with xenophobes as some irrational leftist screed against evil racists. Instead of trying to get to the root of what the social justice activists actually believe by talking to them and forgiving them an exaggeration or two (and understanding why they might be emotional about things that cause great pain), he will find their most extreme bits of rhetoric, and deem their positions unworthy of the serious treatment he would give to those who share his assumptions. As I wrote in my article, this tendency is common among critics of campus activist culture, and it is hypocritical.