

This essay reviews six recent books on woke ideology and argues that wokeness is not a mirage or distraction but is real and constitutes a major problem for the Western left.

REVIEW

Fredrik deBoer, *How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement* (Simon & Schuster, 2023)

Richard Hanania, *The Origins of Woke: Civil Rights Law, Corporate America, and the Triumph of Identity Politics* (Broadside Books, 2023)

Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (Penguin Press, 2023)

Susan Neiman, *Left Is Not Woke* (Polity Press, 2023)

Umut Özkırımlı, *Cancelled: The Left Way Back From Woke* (Polity Press, 2023)

Christopher F. Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything* (Broadside Books, 2023)

The Cargo Cult of Woke

Christian Parenti

How did the Anglophone left become the cargo cult of “woke,” in which participants believe that social justice and perhaps even revolution can be achieved through the performance of safety-oriented rituals of political etiquette? The year 2023 produced a passel of books on wokeness; some were very insightful, and many were not.¹

1 From the Left, broadly defined, came: Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap*; Susan Neiman, *Left Is Not Woke*; Umut Özkırımlı, *Cancelled*; and Fredrik deBoer, *How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement*. From the Right came these notable titles: Christopher F. Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution*; and Richard Hanania, *The Origins of Woke*.

Woke ideology is condemned by the Right and supported or tolerated by most of the Left. Adherents of wokeness parry criticism of, for example, cancel culture with assertions that there is only “accountability culture.” Others on the Left privately bemoan wokeness and its safety obsession but in public remain quiet for fear of attack from woke online mobs. Alas, wokeness is real. In many quarters, it is hegemonic. It is authoritarian and profoundly anti-intellectual. For example, at the 2023 annual joint meeting of the American Anthropological Association and the Canadian Anthropology Society, executives unilaterally canceled a previously approved panel called “Let’s Talk About Sex Baby: Why Biological Sex Remains a Necessary Analytic Category in Anthropology” on the grounds that it would “cause harm to members represented by the Trans and LGBTQI of the anthropological community as well as the community at large.”²

Woke ideology is left in form, professing concern for the downtrodden, but right in content, because it is compatible with economic exploitation — Susan Neiman makes this point clearly in her book *Left Is Not Woke* — yet leaves its political economy underdeveloped.

Woke ideology is even used to legitimize American militarism and empire. This was hilariously illustrated in the Central Intelligence Agency’s 2021 woke-themed recruitment campaign called “Humans of the CIA” that featured a cringeworthy monologue by a Latina CIA employee who dropped flawlessly woke riffs like

I am a cisgender millennial who has been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. I am intersectional, but my existence is not a box-checking exercise.... I did not sneak into CIA. My employment was not and is not the result of a fluke

² Kathleen Lowrey, “How Anthropology Canceled Sex,” *Compact*, October 13, 2023.

or a slip through the cracks.... I used to struggle with imposter syndrome, but at thirty-six, I refuse to internalize misguided, patriarchal ideas of what a woman can or should be.³

Despite the ubiquity of both woke culture and critiques of it, definitions of wokeness are rare. Here is a rough sketch of a definition. Woke ideology has six features:

1. It is a self-consciously left oppositional politics that seeks to transform society through the moralizing micropolitics of politicized etiquette, thus a fixation on the politics of language and symbols; cultural appropriation and misnaming are cardinal sins, and centering historically oppressed groups is essential.
2. It sees the world through reductive and essentialist identity politics that fixates on the categories of race, gender, indigeneity, sexual orientation, physical disability, mental health diagnoses, immigration status, and sometimes even socioeconomic status.
3. Woke discourse is imbued with a therapeutic mentality expressed in safety-obsessed incantations about harm, trauma, healing, care, and “doing the work.” This leads to an excessive focus on subjectivity, which itself becomes an unacknowledged methodological individualism that posits personal struggles as political struggles, and vice versa.
4. Wokeness has a deeply anti-intellectual concern with moral and political hygiene that constantly draws a distinction between the politically clean and unclean, friend and enemy, good and evil; certain people, places, books, ideas, and consumer products must be avoided.

3 Central Intelligence Agency, “Humans of CIA,” March 25, 2021, [youtube.com/watch?v=X55JPbAMc9g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X55JPbAMc9g).

5. Woke culture is often operationalized through a horizontal, vigilante methodology that seeks to censor offending utterances and personages by means of “calling out” via public denunciation, condemnation, and harassment, and by pressure on and appeals to employers, corporations, and state agencies to silence, fire, deplatform, and otherwise punish wrongdoers. Thus the woke worldview is bound up with censorious and authoritarian “cancel culture” and the social media ecology in which that form of activism is most often enacted.
6. Most important, woke politics eclipse and displace old-fashioned universalist class politics — the struggle over who produces wealth, how, and for whom. Woke discourse will make occasional reference to class struggle and political economy. But more often, woke lefties explicitly condemn class politics as racist, sexist, or reductive.

The woke mentality erases class politics even as its adherents sometimes present fealty to wokeness as the necessary precondition for class struggle. Thus does the Marxist-left edge of woke discourse succumb to an endlessly receding horizon of political preconditions. The working class, it is argued, will only unite and fight after people of color, trans people, gay people, women, and mentally ill people have had their specific issues “centered” by the Left.

Ignored in this proposition is the fact that the majority of problems faced by all subsets of the working class are common to the class as a whole and can only be ameliorated when the working class comes together and fights as such. This is not to say that there are no legitimate concerns other than class concerns; nor is it to say that working-class economic victories heal all injuries and right all wrongs.

However, compared to the hyper-variegation of woke politics, universalist class-first politics offers distinct benefits. First, the vast majority of everyone's material needs are common: work, shelter, education, health care. Coincidentally, policies of economic redistribution are best achieved by heterogeneous masses operating in large coalitions. True mass movements are only possible when people unite on the basis of common economic interests and do so *despite* their divergent cultural and ideological views. Finally, nothing overcomes prejudice better than diverse groups of people struggling toward their common self-interest.

The greatest irony of mass politics based on universalist demands is that, when victorious, universalist politics disproportionately benefit the most vulnerable among us. If black trans people suffer disproportionately from inadequate housing, high unemployment, and lack of health care, then universal provision of such needs would disproportionately benefit black trans people. We see this reality at work in the administration of Social Security benefits in the United States. All income earners contribute, and all senior citizens receive payments. Both millionaires and poor people receive social security, but it is the poor who benefit disproportionately because they disproportionately suffer from the lack of money.

Another benefit of universalist programs is their political stability. Unlike politically unpopular means-tested programs aimed at subsets of the poor, universalist programs are widely popular. Indeed, Social Security is the "third rail of American politics" — and attempts to cut and privatize it have mostly failed despite significant effort.

THE CRITIQUES OF 2023

At least six critiques of woke politics were published in 2023. The best book under consideration here is Yascha Mounk's materially grounded intellectual history *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*. Mounk notes the shift from vertical social conflict between the owning classes and the working classes to horizontal conflict between various identities within classes. He describes this transition as inspired by five prominent thinkers: Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Derrick Bell, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Interestingly, Mounk notes that many in this group eventually "expressed serious misgivings about the way in which their work has transformed the left."

From the ideas of these thinkers has come "the rise of a new set of academic centers and departments devoted to studying questions of identity." This happens under the "triple influence of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and critical race theory." All of this ultimately produces what Mounk calls the identity synthesis, his term for the woke mentality.

Useful is Mounk's discussion of how "intersectionality" — which began as an insight into identity formation — became a debilitating political fanaticism. Because proponents of intersectionality see forms of injustice as linked and mutually reinforcing, it has

tempted some activists to place a very high entry barrier on anybody who wants to participate in a political movement. If somebody wants to join a feminist movement committed to intersectionality, these activists now also expect that person to agree with a set of specific positions about such varied topics as the nature of race discrimination, the injustices suffered by disabled people, and the conflict in Palestine.⁴

4 Mounk, *The Identity Trap*, 122.

The woke left obsession with baroque notions about safety and purity is profoundly alienating to many regular folks who want or need to fight injustice in their corner of the world and have wandered into a left-wing meeting.

Lest woke excesses seem disembodied, Mounk offers numerous examples of openly bigoted discrimination masquerading as anti-racism and social justice. A black mother in Atlanta is told by a black school principal that her seven-year-old daughter should be in “the black class.” In New York City, “one of the most renowned early education institutions in the country,” the Bank Street School for Children, separates students into a “Kids of Color Affinity Group” and an all-white “Advocacy Group.” This is done to “raise awareness of the prevalence of Whiteness and privilege,” and, astoundingly, to encourage white students to “own” their “European ancestry.” What could possibly go wrong with that? Particularly objectionable is an elite private school in Rhode Island that divides (i.e., segregates) five-year-old children into race-based affinity groups because the teacher believes that a “play-based curriculum that explicitly affirms racial identity” is especially important “for the youngest learners.”

One wants to simply say that elites are crazy and move on, but even some public schools are following the trend. Evanston Township High School, outside Chicago, offers calculus classes reserved for students who “identify as Black.” A school district in Wellesley, Massachusetts, hosted a “Healing Space ... for our Asian/Asian-American and Students of Color, *not* for students who identify only as White.”

Central to the rise of this phenomenon is, of course, that embarrassing peep show known as social media. As Mounk explains, “The growth of social media inspired the rise of a popularized version of the identity synthesis that transformed the ideas of serious thinkers into simplistic memes and slogans.” And before

long, the quest for outraged clicks “turned legacy media outlets into loudspeakers for this new ideology.” Mounk’s history of woke contagion begins on Tumblr, moves to online publications like *Vox* and *Everyday Feminism*, which helped pioneer “explainer journalism,” and from there to mainstream outlets like *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*.

As social media use proliferated between 2010 and 2020, the “great awakening,” as *Vox* called it, swept the mainstream. Opinion essays with previously unthinkable titles like “Can My Children Be Friends With White People?” (the implicit answer was no) became common in publications like the *New York Times*. Mounk reports that between 2011 and 2019, the share of articles using the term “racist” increased by 700 percent in the *New York Times* and 1,000 percent in the *Washington Post*. Lest we attribute all this to Donald Trump, police body camera footage of the killings of black men, and the murderous rampaging of racists in Charlottesville, Virginia, it is notable that the exponential growth started several years before Trump’s presidential campaign, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Unite the Right rally. The *Times* and the *Post* also saw tenfold increases in the use of woke terms of art like “systemic racism” and “institutional racism.”

Having established the mainstream embrace of woke ideology, however, Mounk never explores how it helps to reproduce modern capitalist society. He goes to the edge of a complete explanation but stops where a full class analysis would begin. Mounk does develop a series of well-reasoned, sometimes classic and sometimes novel, arguments against woke ideology. His refutations of woke arguments are careful, respectful, and thorough. To his credit, Mounk devotes a whole chapter to explaining how woke-ness is not Marxist.

LEFT IS NOT WOKE

Early and prominent among the 2023 crop of anti-woke books was *Left Is Not Woke*, by philosopher and self-described lifelong leftist and socialist Susan Neiman, who makes a solid case for the return to universal categories and a politics based on them. As she puts it, “This is a philosophical book, though it’s not only meant for philosophers.” Neiman never defines “woke,” but she describes it well.

It begins with concern for marginalized persons, and ends by reducing each to the prism of her marginalization. The idea of intersectionality might have emphasized the ways in which all of us have more than one identity. Instead, it led to focus on those parts of identities that are most marginalized, and multiplies them into a forest of trauma.⁵

Neiman goes on: “*Woke* emphasizes the ways in which particular groups have been denied justice, and seeks to rectify and repair the damage. In the focus on inequalities of power, the concept of justice is often left by the wayside.” And “*Woke* demands that nations and peoples face up to their criminal histories. In the process it often concludes that all history is criminal.” Neiman notes that wokeness is confusing because it “expresses traditional left-wing emotions: empathy for the marginalized, indignation at the plight of the oppressed, determination that historical wrongs should be righted.” She defends the enlightenment and progress and, like other authors, sees Michel Foucault, an amoral relativist, as the godfather of woke leftism.

Almost all the books considered here note the role of Foucault and post-structuralism more broadly, as well they should. That tsunami of relativist French theory crashed down upon academia

5 Neiman, *Left Is Not Woke*, 5.

in the 1980s and by the early '90s had flooded it with a kind of refurbished philosophical idealism. This drowned the materialist politics of many boomer and Gen X scholars. The flood finally crested with the Sokal affair of 1996, during which a group of radical scholars associated with the journal *Social Text* unwittingly published a hoax essay by physicist Alan Sokal in which he, using postmodern mumbo jumbo supported with gratuitous citations of the journal's primary editors, argued that there was no such thing as objective reality beyond subjectivity. Luckily, as the post-structuralist tide receded, irreverent millennials began to revive American Marxism. To counter the self-righteous tribalism and amoral relativism of wokeness, Neiman ranges widely, deploying critically minded defenders of universalism as diverse as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Denis Diderot, Immanuel Kant, Amílcar Cabral, Todd Gitlin, and Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò. *Left Is Not Woke* is ultimately a somewhat confined intellectual history that leaves unaddressed matters of political economy and coercion. Neiman offers little on the subject of how woke ideology serves the reproduction of capitalism. Nor does she explain how this weird idea became a mass cultural phenomenon, animating even many people who have never attended college. Intellectual histories that seek to explain wider material reality can end up like the joke about the drunk looking for his lost car keys only directly under the street lamps because, as he explains, "The light is better here."

Umut Özkırımlı, a political scientist of nationalism who describes himself as a democratic socialist, has written *Cancelled: The Left Way Back From Woke*. As Özkırımlı sees it, the fact that so many leftists participate in, support, or turn a blind eye to cancel culture, often "out of fear of getting 'cancelled' themselves shows that there is something rotten in the state of the Left today, a kind of moral cowardice that needs to be tackled head-on." For Özkırımlı, identity politics started as a positive good. He spends a chapter

discussing Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's interviews with the original members of the Combahee River Collective, a reading group of woman of color intellectuals who held seven socialist-feminist retreats in the late '70s and are credited with being the first to use the term "identity politics."⁶ Somewhere between the Combahee River Collective and the multimillion-dollar rise of infamous woke hustlers like Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo, identity politics went astray. But where?

For Özkırıklı, "the birthplace of the identity economy is the university campus." He relies on this "most popular answer" but worries that doing so potentially plays into anti-intellectualism and right-wing assaults on the university. Indeed, the university, with its anti-communist traditions and its embrace of pseudo-radical post-structuralist theory, is part of the problem. But overemphasizing the role of academic literature seems a bit like looking for the lost car keys only under the streetlight. Özkırıklı, who is Turkish and teaches in Barcelona, gives us a version of cancel culture as viewed through the internet. While the internet is central to its proliferation, woke ideology and subculture have an original address: the United States of America. Wokeness is decidedly a US export. Any author who is a mere visitor to these shores and relies on the internet to experience woke ideology will have a hard time actually grasping its pathology.

Finally, there is Freddie deBoer's breezy, sometimes sloppy *How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement*. A self-described left activist from a communist family, deBoer attempts a class analysis but only partially delivers one.⁷ The most promising chapter

6 The Combahee River Collective was named for a massive Union Army raid to free enslaved people that was guided by the self-emancipated formerly enslaved woman turned high-value Union Army intelligence operative Harriet Tubman.

7 This was also the problem with deBoer's previous book, *The Cult of Smart*, in which he unwittingly recycled reactionary claptrap about IQs, intelligence, hered-

in his book addresses the “nonprofit industrial complex.” As he correctly notes, “Nonprofits play a disproportionate role in our political apparatus, our educational systems, and our basic civic functioning, but most Americans putter along without pausing to think too much about them.” Alas, deBoer gets stuck at the level of the Weberian critique of bureaucracy. Max Weber is not actually mentioned, but a blogger of Weberian sensibilities is. The officialdom, in this reading, becomes a class dedicated to a self-serving perpetuation of the bureaucracy that is their bread and butter rather than to the mission of the bureaucracy. That might be true, but it misses a greater problem: the role of the ruling class as operationalized via the major philanthropic foundations.

Indeed, the central relationship in the history of woke subculture is that of the American ruling class to the Left. Despite all that is written about philanthropy, very little has addressed the issue of ruling-class power. The relationship of the nonprofits to the foundations is one of direct subordination. When foundations announce their funding priorities, they are instructing nonprofits as to which issues and viewpoints are fundable and permissible. For example, when foundations like the Wallace Global Fund and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund announced that they would fund

ity, and identical twin studies. Amazingly, deBoer leans heavily on these identical twin studies without ever even mentioning the man who did more than anyone to promote the IQ test in the English-speaking world, Sir Cyril Burt, who translated the Stanford-Binet test (designed as a diagnostic tool) from French and used it to argue that “intelligence” is hereditary rather than a product of conditioning and education. In Burt’s view, disparate racial and class social outcomes were hereditary. For this work, he was knighted by the queen of England. In 1974, Burt was exposed as a fraud. Leon Kamin — a psychologist who was red-baited out of Harvard, black-listed, and driven to Canada for his communist leanings — discovered the fraud. Not only did Burt fake most of his sample of identical twins separated at birth, he also seems to have invented two nonexistent collaborators. See chapter 5 in R. C. Lewontin, Steven Rose, Leon J. Kamin, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) and chapter 6 in Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

fossil fuel divestment campaigns on college campuses, climate activists who wanted to instead agitate for green procurement policies did not receive funding and thus made little progress. If your organization depends on foundation funding and you stray from the agenda of your key funders, money will dry up, and your organization will go out of business.

The foundations also do much to push woke workplace culture upon the raft of nonprofits they fund. When young activists engage with funders, they learn that what is done is naming pronouns, listing land acknowledgments, and prioritizing long pseudo-therapeutic retreats at which infighting, wrecking, and dissension are inadvertently encouraged. Foundations passively and explicitly transmit language and thus concepts that must be parroted if grants are to be received — identity politics is in; universalist mass-base class politics is out.

RIGHT-WING BOOKS AGAINST WOKENESS

The obvious next stop for an explanation of the origins of woke ideology is the larger history of left social movements. From the milieu of the Republican Party comes Christopher Rufo's *American Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything*, which casts wokeness as a continuation of the New Left's failed revolution.

Many left readers will bridle at the mention of a right-winger like Christopher Rufo. But the intellectual world of the Left grows weak and anemic if it cannot digest and confront the arguments of the Right. The type of sanctimonious avoidance that causes left intellectuals to brag openly about not reading their political enemies is itself an expression of woke secular religiosity. The Right is *haram*; do not touch it, lest you too become unclean!

Interestingly, Rufo does not suffer from similar problems in that he has clearly consumed a fair bit of left literature. In fact, he claims to have once been a leftist. His father is Italian and comes from a family containing communists with whom the young Rufo spent much time during frequent trips back to Italy. In podcast interviews, Rufo has described his Italian relatives as “unreconstructed Gramscian communists.” Indeed, there is something of the right-wing Gramscian about the institution-attacking Rufo.

The defeat of ‘60s radicalism, according to Rufo, caused many of the New Left’s more sophisticated activists and intellectuals to begin a “long march through the institutions,” specifically the universities, schools, newsrooms, courts, and public bureaucracies. Along the way, they “developed intricate theories along the lines of culture, race, and identity, and silently rooted them into the entire range of America’s knowledge-making institutions.”

The primary intellectual villains for Rufo are Herbert Marcuse, Angela Davis, Paulo Freire, and Derrick Bell, because these figures established the disciplines of critical theory, critical praxis, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory, which, in the subsequent half century, multiplied into a hundred subdisciplines and devoured the university, the street, the school, and the bureaucracy. Together they represent the intellectual genesis of the revolution. Their ideas, concepts, language, and tactics shaped and now suffuse the politics of the present.⁸

For Rufo, Marcuse nudged the Left away from the working class in calling for a coalition of radical intellectuals and lumpenized, racialized, and gendered “others.” Davis, in her role as celebrity fugitive as a result of her connection to the botched prison break of George Jackson, which ended in a deadly shootout at the Marin

8 Rufo, *America’s Cultural Revolution*, 3.

County courthouse and Jackson's eventual murder at San Quentin prison, gave woke culture its maximalist revolutionary fantasy quality.⁹ Freire catalyzed the total politicization of education and language at every level and, like the previous two, helped shift the left focus from economic exploitation to the more nebulous question of social oppression. And finally, Derrick Bell embodies pessimistic race reductionism.

Certainly, the New Left had some crazy ideas. But it also had good ones. Why did the bad ideas triumph? Rufo cannot explain, because his account omits any discussion of how the state used lawfare and violent repression to undermine the more class-oriented parts of the social movements of the '60s and '70s. Nor does he discuss the earlier repression of the McCarthy era: the Taft-Hartley Act's handcuffing of organized labor, the systematic purging of Marxists from institutions ranging from universities to public high schools and trade unions, the extirpation of radicals from Hollywood, the criminal conviction of communist politicians like Benjamin J. Davis Jr under the Smith Act. Rufo also fails to discuss the complementary role of politicized philanthropy in helping to misguide and co-opt those parts of the Left that survived other forms of attack. As a result, his argument too suffers from the drunk-under-the-streetlight problem. This is another story in which academics and their ideas have an unrealistically large amount of power.

DOWNSTREAM FROM LAW

What else might help explain the origins of woke culture? An important piece of the explanation is offered — surprisingly enough — by the odious, admitted former racist Richard Hanania

9 The best book on those events is still Jo Durden-Smith, *Who Killed George Jackson? Fantasies, Paranoia, and the Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

in *The Origins of Woke*.¹⁰ As Hanania puts it, “Long before woke-ness was a cultural phenomenon, it was law.” However repellent his larger perspective may be, Hanania manages to tease out an important part of the puzzle. In his telling of it, woke politics emerge as an unintended by-product of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The problem, he argues, is not that the Civil Rights Act is too strong but, rather, that in certain ways it is too weak. The law uses vague definitions and relies upon a self-funding system of enforcement via the civil courts, in which plaintiffs and lawyers can sue institutions that discriminate and receive payment for both damages and legal fees. All of this, argues Hanania, has given rise to the self-perpetuating, society-wide growth of woke bureaucracy and indoctrination.

The point becomes clear when Hanania compares the United States, where quotas in the redress of discrimination are explicitly illegal, to France, where there exist hiring quotas for the number of disabled people a firm must employ. (Note that France does not have hiring quotas regarding race, gender, or religion but does have quotas for the number of women represented in various levels of government.) The French disabled-worker quotas are set and enforced by the Ministry of Labor. The law is clear, explicit, and enforced by the state. Thus it does not generate much special private sector bureaucracy. Firms know the hiring quota, so

10 Hanania has published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, has given talks at Stanford University and before the Yale Federalist Society, and runs a small right-wing think tank called the Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology. In the summer of 2023, he was doxed in the *Huffington Post* as the anonymous author of many years’ worth of explicitly racist blog posts. In response, Hanania wrote an apologetic essay entitled “My Journey Out of Extremism,” in which he copped to the charges and disavowed his old views. He claims he is no longer a racist. Be that as it may, his blog posts and podcast commentary still feature favorite racist themes: race and IQ, race and crime, et cetera. Nonetheless, in the spirit of “a ruthless critique of all that exists,” parts of Hanania’s argument demand attention.

they do not waste time on retreats to establish their “values,” set “benchmarks,” or review “timelines.” They do not spend money on educating managers, who hire consultants to educate workers, who then sue managers and one another, as is the fashion in America.

In the United States, by contrast, discrimination by private sector firms is not only a matter for the Department of Justice but also of civil litigation. Hanania notes that the vast majority of *Fortune* 500 firms have at some point since 1964 paid out large settlements for various types of discrimination: “Bank of America (\$210 million), Coca-Cola (\$200 million), Novartis (\$183 million), Morgan Stanley (\$150 million), and Abercrombie & Fitch (\$90 million).” As a result, private sector firms respond to the threat of potential lawsuits by investing in greatly expanded human resources bureaucracies. According to Hanania, “In 1968, only 1 in 558 American workers were employed in human resources. By 2021, that number had risen to 1 in 102, including 1 in 184 men and 1 in 68 women.” Along with actual HR departments, there are now also phalanxes of diversity consultants, curriculum specialists, workplace DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) trainers, and legal consultants. Because quotas are illegal, this entire bureaucratic ecosystem of in-house and fee-for-service managers, trainers, “thought leaders,” and clerks devote themselves to anticipating potential problems. Thus has post-1964 civil rights bureaucracy done much to produce the material basis for evangelizing DEI entrepreneurs like Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo, who inculcate woke culture wherever they can.

Another comparison helps illustrate the point. France has strict hate speech laws that make it illegal to publicly express hatred of a person or group because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, race, biological sex, sexual orientation, or disability status. In the United States, by contrast, only speech that incites imminent and direct violence against specific people or groups is outlawed. In

other words, in the United States it is legal to scream, “Kill all members of that demographic group!” However, it is illegal to say, “Kill that specific member of the group now.”

On the job, this means that legal speech can easily lapse into illegal discrimination. One bigoted joke on the job is legal. Many such jokes open an employer to massive legal problems because, under the vagueness of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, offensive jokes can be construed as part of a larger “pattern of discrimination” that results in “disparate impacts” for protected groups of workers. How many offensive jokes are too many? That is for the armies of managers, lawyers, and diversity consultants to determine.

Obviously, the safest path for an employer is to prevent litigation and prepare an anticipatory defense by intensely policing workplace speech and culture. An employer sued for discrimination will have a stronger case if the company can point to a consistent track record of investing in anti-discriminatory education and monitoring. As a result, American firms spend lavishly on the services of consultants such as the now very wealthy DiAngelo.

Not surprisingly, DEI consultants see the problem, to which they are the solution, everywhere. Thus has the idea of structural racism, taken from the social sciences, morphed into the woke notion of systemic racism. The terms sound the same but mean different things. “Structural racism” refers to disparate racial outcomes often unintentionally produced by structures, like public education systems that are themselves partially dependent on the local tax base, which is linked to real estate property values. “Systemic racism” means that bigotry is everywhere, in everything: that everyone is a racist.

Hanania, of course, wants to roll back as much civil rights law as possible. However, the facts he presents can lead to the opposite conclusion. Perhaps we need more, and more explicit, civil rights law. Perhaps we need hiring quotas based on race, gender,

biological sex, sexual orientation, disability status, psychological status, and national origin. Creating such laws would require an honest public discussion about the extent of different types of discrimination and the specific forms of redress to be implemented. What we have instead, as every academic who has ever been on a hiring committee knows, is a creepy, dishonest, intellectually and politically corrosive pantomime that generates phantom problems and ignores real ones.

CONCLUSION: THE WOKE PMC AND ITS STRUGGLE FOR POSTS

Woke ideology is now central to the workplace culture of the professional-managerial class (PMC). It comprises an arsenal from which members of the PMC can draw weaponry and armor to wield in their Hobbesian war for posts within the precarious white-collar labor markets of late neoliberalism.

The moment of post-civil rights activism in the late '60s and early '70s, when key woke tropes first arose, coincided with growing corporate consolidation of the economy. As the old petty bourgeoisie of independent professionals and shopkeepers declined, the new professional-managerial class expanded. For example, if a grandfather had owned a rural general store, his son or grandson might now have a business degree and be part of a regional management team at a fast-growing chain of megastores.

As the PMC grew in prevalence, it also desegregated. By the 1970s, the days of the all-white, all-male office began coming to an end. But even as the PMC grew in size, its members faced increasing precarity.¹¹ Starting with the Volcker Shock of 1980,

11 Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional Managerial Class," *Radical America*, March-April 1977; Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

American capitalism became increasingly volatile and unequal. Financial booms and busts and ruthless restructuring meant whole industries fell and rose and fell with new rapidity. Textile manufacturing, for example, was almost entirely deindustrialized and moved offshore. Television manufacturing almost completely departed the United States. The list goes on. At the same time, new forms of financial services proliferated. According to one analysis, “in 2006, the financial services sector contributed 8.3 percent to US GDP, compared to 4.9 percent in 1980 and 2.8 percent in 1950.”¹²

Many industrial cities, like Detroit and St Louis, fell into seemingly permanent ruin. Others, like Pittsburgh, waged brutal decades-long campaigns to reinvent themselves along the “eds and meds” model. The victors emerged as regional health care, research, and education hubs. Supporting these new core industries manifests through inevitable cultural renaissance, new food purveyors, graphic designers, theaters, and museums. Neighborhoods that in the late 1970s had seemed on the verge of death were reborn as gentrified quarters for the aesthetically literate and generally liberal-leaning members of the professional-managerial class.

But amid this ongoing maelstrom of capitalist creative destruction, the PMC have increasingly found themselves in a gladiatorial struggle for jobs. As paths to upward mobility have become more vulnerable to macroeconomic downturns and corporate rationalization, the intraclass struggle for employment and advancement among the PMC has become ever more ruthless. Indeed, for the precarious PMC, mastering the repertoire of woke tropes has become an important part of getting ahead. Catherine Liu notes that,

12 Robin Greenwood and David Scharfstein, “The Growth of Finance,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 3.

as a class, the PMC loves to talk about bias rather than inequality, racism rather than capitalism, visibility rather than exploitation. Tolerance for them is the highest secular virtue — but tolerance has almost no political or economic meaning. The Right is well aware of liberal preening, and it has weaponized popular resentment against this class of alleged hypocrites.¹³

This is part of what Adolph Reed means when he refers to anti-racism as “a class politics.” Not only is it a class politics in the sense that it divides the working class, but it is the politics of a class — the managers of race relations and the racialized brokers who ventriloquize for racially oppressed communities. The woke ideology of anti-racism serves the interests of the ruling class in the same ways official racism did: it divides the working class and provides a platform for a sub-elite of racial brokers whose work is, as Reed has put it, to manage “race relations.”¹⁴ But the logic goes beyond just race to included all manifestations of the “identity synthesis,” even when an identity is based on feelings alone.

Today the undeniable reality is that the class-oriented left’s endless concessions to the demands of ever more ramified identity subsets do not and will not add up to class politics. Nor, like bread crumbs in the forest, will concessions to wokeness lead back to class politics. And so it is that woke politics — claiming the banner of social justice and even revolution — achieves the opposite and inculcates the very sensibilities it purports to attack. ☞

13 Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 8.

14 Adolph Reed Jr, “Splendors and Miseries of the Antiracist ‘Left,’” *Nonsite.org*, November 6, 2016.