

Wokeness Will Always Be With Us

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Pundits these days often declare that wokeness has had its moment, that 2020 and 2021 were its peak and it's now an increasingly distant memory. This is shortsighted. Wokeness is still with us, as livid as ever, and I suspect it always will be. The only question is where it will strike next?

By wokeness, I refer not to its original meaning of being informed about larger societal structures that preserve power for a certain (white) elite. Awareness of what is often called structural racism is one thing. Something else is the strain of wokeness so many would like to eulogize — call it High Woke — with its three distinguishing traits. One is the idea that dismantling structures that favor whiteness and its power must be society's primary focus, a North Star, rather than one of many. The second is the commitment to punishing those insufficiently devoted to the program. The third is resistance to fact and logic when they are inconvenient.

High Woke was around before 2020. I encountered it in academia occasionally in the 1990s, when it troubled enough people to inspire [claims](#) that universities were being taken over by “tenured radicals.” But it hadn't achieved anything like the purchase it would in the late 2010s. In 2008, Christian Lander's parody “[Stuff White People Like](#)” could still waggishly treat being offended as one of educated whites' anthropologically defining traits.

A decade later, however, more than a few would have classified that joke as heretically dismissive. In 2019, Meghan Daum's book “[The Problem With Everything](#)” deftly captured a growing sensibility among many on the left, stoked by the corraling power of social media. It was a newly prevalent High Woke, stipulating prosecutorial radicalism as an ethical imperative. Liberals not on board increasingly found themselves seen as differing not only in opinion but in ethical fiber.

George Floyd was murdered in May 2020. By that summer, High Woke had gone mainstream. What was typically referred to as a racial reckoning reshaped disciplines, colored language, determined hirings and ruined careers. Professors across the country [wrote me](#) in terror about their fear of losing their jobs. I lost count of how many people told me of suddenly intransigent co-workers condemning peers and even superiors as moral quislings.

Here was the era that brought [the firing](#) of the data analyst David Shor after calling attention to an academic study — by a Black scholar — showing that in the past, violent Black protests in an area tended to make it more Republican. The president and board chairman of the Poetry Foundation [resigned](#) after the statement they wrote in the wake of the George Floyd murder was judged too brief. And it was normal to read [stories](#) like the one about what happened to the University of North Texas musicologist Timothy Jackson, who edited The Journal of Schenkerian Studies, devoted to the work of foundational music theorist Heinrich Schenker. Jackson published one issue critically evaluating a curious claim by the Black musicologist

Philip Ewell that because Schenker was openly racist, by extension his music theory, along with modern music theory, was racist, too. Hundreds of music scholars and students condemned the issue as racist itself and called for Jackson to be removed as editor and possibly suffer other consequences.

This High Woke heyday happened because of a chance cocktail of factors. The way George Floyd was killed was horrific. That summer, Americans were isolated indoors because of Covid, eager for connection with others, and racism was a cause to unite around. We were interacting with others mostly through Zoom and other digital intermediaries, which encouraged the dehumanization of those in disagreement.

If there had been no lockdown, there would have been no racial reckoning — or at least not of the kind we had. By 2022, with the lockdown over, this unusually potent manifestation of High Woke lost some of its main enablers — Zoom and also loneliness. David Shor found other employment. Timothy Jackson sued for defamation and recently told me he's pleased with the outcome.

But if the rampant defenestrations were blissfully bygone, we can be sure that wokeness will persist as a life force.

High Woke is not crazy. It is one way for people to gain something it's natural to want: a sense of moral superiority and group membership. It is a kind of substitute religion, with white privilege as original sin, cancellation threatening the heretic, and the idea of America at last coming to terms with racism as the End of Days.

There is no reason that something this captivating will disappear, having once been allowed such sway for two years, and with social media ever ready to spread its gospel. It pleases its adherents too much, and scares too many with its glowering threats of condemnation, ostracizing and unemployment.

As such, the tone of the nationwide campus protests against Israel's war on Gaza is not just something that happened a few years after the glory days of High Woke — it is more of High Woke. The embers were ever aglow in 2022 into 2023; the invasion of Gaza after the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks gave wokeness new oxygen. I believe this is much of why the pitch of these protests has been so high and persistent, in comparison to protests against Israel in the past. It is hardly unreasonable to object to aspects of Israel's conduct. However, a prominent element in the current opposition is something more than mere protest, driven by High Woke's key three elements.

A sense that the creation of Israel was a "white" imposition upon "brown" people is why protesters are moved so much more by Gaza than Ukraine or South Sudan. In lexical space, the terms "settler colonialism" and "white privilege" circle in intimate orbit. We see the punitive impulse in [claims](#) that Zionists "don't deserve to live." As a demonstration of High Woke undercover but alive before October 2023, Ta-Nehisi

Coates's book "[The Message](#)," written before the Hamas attacks, explicitly disavows engaging the complexity of the mightily knotty situation in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, instead terming it "apartheid" akin to South Africa's gruesome policy of yore. Coates's interviews on the book did not suggest that his take on the invasion of Gaza was different. There is a similar abbreviation of reflection in those who seem to support Hamas when it butchered 1,200 human beings.

And so it will go. We will regularly grapple with a vocal minority trying to drown out discussion with their prosecutorial conviction that when power is the issue, differing opinions are immoral. And what's even sadder is that in response, we will also always have eruptions of the right-wing version of High Woke, infused with the same obsession with white power except in defense of it, lustily punitive, and opportunistically unreasoning. Much of our national conversation will be fueled by these two strains driving each other.

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