

What Does It Mean to Be “Woke”?



By Steven Yates

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One Ex-Academic's Investigation

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is carrying on his personal war against “wokery” in his state, with nationally publicized efforts against “woke” corporations such as Disney and race-conscious courses in Florida colleges and universities. Thus far DeSantis has weathered the heat, standing up to something that clearly has a great deal of cultural power these days.

But what does it mean to be “woke”? The governor’s office was recently asked. It’s a fair question.

His general counsel, Ryan Newman, [responded](#). “Woke” is:

The belief there are systemic injustices in American society and the need to address them... To me, it means someone who believes that there are systemic injustices in the criminal-justice system, and on that basis, they can decline to fully enforce and uphold the law.

Awkwardly expressed, but essentially the right idea. Differential treatment under the law can be justified so that (for example) the book can be thrown at white Jan-6rs while the blacks who rioted following George Floyd’s death can be handled with kid gloves even though the latter were far more violent and did far more actual damage. Black Lives Matter was

joined by more than a few white Antifa members.

If you're "woke," you give leftists a pass, regardless of skin color.

DeSantis stated, during his election night speech:

We reject woke ideology. We will never, ever surrender to the woke agenda. People have come [to Florida] because of our policies.

He has described Florida as a place where **woke goes to die**.

In a speech back in December, 2021, he'd said:

What you see now with the rise of this woke ideology is an attempt to really delegitimize our history and to delegitimize our institutions, and I view wokeness as a form of cultural Marxism... They really want to tear at the fabric of our society.

What you'll hear if you are able to buttonhole a modestly articulate "woke" activist about what he or she believes, you'll get something like the first statement above, invoking a difference between *systemic* as opposed to *systematic* racism and discrimination. This distinction long predates Michael Brown (shot to death by a police officer back in 2014) or George Floyd (allegedly murdered in 2020).

Systematic implies *action*, e.g., individual acts of discrimination, a refusal, say, by white men to hire or serve blacks, or hire women, out of racism and sexism respectively. Actions against which laws were passed back in the 1960s.

Systemic implies *structural*: large-scale ways society and its institutions have been *arranged*, perhaps from the *beginning*, so that the results are unjust differential treatment regardless of any living white person's actions or intentions.

"Woke" appeals to the latter. Were it true, laws would be all

but useless against it.

According to Merriam-Webster, African-Americans began using the term *woke* among themselves back in the mid-1900s. It referred to awareness of prejudice and potential violence they faced.

The term slowly crept into public discourse via social media. It became current after the uprisings following the Brown shooting in Ferguson, Mo., and even more so after the death of George Floyd.

Conservatives have hijacked the term, at least in part, weaponizing it against the liberal-left on a variety of issues including the vaxxes and the climate. They spoke of the “woke mob” on Twitter (e.g.): ugly, apt to “dogpile,” calling for censorship and cancellation.

In a sense, *woke* is just the latest word for identity politics, which replaced the earlier (and very sullied) political correctness, the commonly used term back in the 1990s.

The idea of structural discrimination was hinted at in LBJ’s Shackled Runner argument, delivered back in the mid-1960s when the ink on the Civil Rights Act was barely dry. Blacks faced challenges whites did not face because of the past; their situation was equivalent to trying to run a race with one leg shackled.

Most people back then saw discrimination as an action. Fair-minded people thought it morally wrong. Economists argued sensibly that when restaurants refuse to serve blacks, they reduce their customer base. And if, say, an enthusiastic and well-qualified woman with a good track record applied for a top-level job, and was refused an interview out of misogyny, the employer hurt his own company.

None of this gets at the *systemic*, though, which is what

“woke” is about.

My own research into this (much of it done years ago) points at a single Supreme Court decision, a gamechanger that deserves to be as well-known as *Roe v. Wade* for its long-term effects on the body politic.

This is the landmark *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* decision (1971).

The case came up because North Carolina based Duke Power used high school diplomas and intelligence test scores as criteria for employment. Black applicants for jobs with Duke Power were far less likely to have diplomas or be able to score well on the tests used, and thus had been limited to the company's Labor division. So they sued under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The suit held that such criteria and tests did not measure anyone's ability to do the job, and were nothing more than efforts to circumvent anti-discrimination law. The plaintiffs argued that would-be workers suffered because black public education in North Carolina was substantially inferior to that of whites. They were thus negatively impacted by such requirements.

The Supreme Court agreed, with then Chief Justice Warren Burger writing:

The Court of Appeals' opinion, and the partial dissent, agreed that, on the record in the present case, 'whites register far better on the Company's alternative requirements' than Negroes... This consequence would appear to be directly traceable to race... Because they are Negroes, petitioners have long received inferior education in segregated schools... What is required by Congress is the removal of artificial, arbitrary, and unnecessary barriers to employment when the barriers operate invidiously to discriminate on the basis of racial or other impermissible classification.

Congress has now provided that tests or criteria for employment or promotion may not provide equality of

opportunity merely in the sense of the fabled offer of milk to the stork and the fox. On the contrary, Congress has now required that the posture and condition of the job-seeker be taken into account. It has – to resort again to the fable – provided that the vessel in which the milk is proffered be one all seekers can use. The Act proscribes not only overt discrimination but also practices that are fair in form, but discriminatory in operation. The touchstone is business necessity. If an employment practice which operates to exclude Negroes cannot be shown to be related to job performance, the practice is prohibited.

The concept of *disparate impact* thus entered our legal and political lexicon: practices could be “fair in form” (i.e., they don’t discriminate *systematically*) but “discriminatory in operation” (i.e., they discriminate *systemically*).

Another way of saying this: the Court shifted the meaning of *discrimination* from *actions* to *outcomes*. If a workforce did not have a politically acceptable ratio of blacks to whites, or percentage of black workers, based on their percentage of the population, structural discrimination was presumed even if no specific actions could be identified.

Still another explanation: an elusive *equality of opportunity* could only be measured by *equality of outcomes*.

Bureaucratic bean counters have had a field day ever since, as employers were compelled to keep careful records of the race/ethnicity and sex of every employee and every job applicant. To claim that there was no reverse discrimination would simply be a lie. Diversity as a hiring criterion was born. Law schools began the practice of racenorming to ensure that they had enough black students (black applicants competed only against other black applicants to get the required 10 percent ratio).

These new policies proved to be extremely hard to implement,

as I documented in my *Civil Wrongs* (1994) which looked at occupations from academia to the construction industry. Pushback was inevitable, moreover, and the later Supreme Court of the late 1980s either upheld lower court decisions or handed down new ones that began to roll back the disparate impact doctrine (*Croson*, *Ward's Cove*).

The narrative war of the time was between those who saw stubborn and lingering racism in this rollback, versus those who believed white males were now targets of discriminatory retaliation for states of affairs that preceded their birth, which was hardly just.

Political correctness grew out of this – a sustained effort by the left to control the narrative by claiming moral high ground and silencing the opposition, especially the educated and well-informed opposition that was rising in academia and included black and female scholars.

Thomas Sowell, for instance, argued at length in numerous places, *we don't see a multi-ethnic society anywhere in the world where each ethnicity is represented in positions of power or influence in exact proportion to its percentage of the population*.

In other words, measuring equality of opportunity by equality of outcomes is irrational in theory and impossible in practice.

Absent massive social engineering, *it just can't happen*. The only way to further it is to reduce freedom for everybody, including minority ethnicities.

Not that leftists didn't try. Those positioned under the affirmative action umbrella already included minority leftist activists and radical feminists; soon it would include gay, lesbian, and transgender activists, all claiming oppression by a dominant "hetero white masculinist" culture and writing dissertations about "intersectionality": oppression crossing

boundaries of race, ethnicity, and gender identity.

Yet for reasons Sowell had calmly pointed out, the ratios (e.g., of blacks to whites in academia) refused to budge. There just *had* to be massive systemic discrimination, however difficult it was to point to besides resorting to arguing from a supposed legacy of slavery and the Three-Fifths Compromise.

Hence critical race theory, which also had its roots in the 1990s, and whose purveyors contended that blacks were far more likely to be spied on in malls, followed through stores, accosted by police, stopped when driving erratically, etc.

To conservatives (who by this time almost never said it openly for obvious reasons), the reasons for this were obvious: blacks commit more crimes than whites, ranging from petty shoplifting to crimes of violence.

To leftists, this is *racist* (I can almost hear their hissing voices, writing this!). All I can say by reply is: *check the data!*

I do not say this with any glee or sense of satisfaction whatsoever. It actually makes me quite sad that we've had this situation for as long as we've had, and not only failed to make any progress but are clearly going in the wrong direction.

Dr. King spoke of a world in which we would all be judged not by the color of our skin but the content of our character. Race blindness was the ideal of those of us who grew up in the 1960s.

Identity-politics – unlike the liberalism of the pre-Griggs world – reinforces race consciousness. It isolates each race/ethnicity within its own universe of presumed oppression, which came to include obviously unintentional “slights” such as not looking a black man in the eye when he walks past. *Anything* critical of *anyone* in *any* “protected group” soon

became *verboden*, in academia and media. Whites who refused to lower their heads and fall in line, moreover, are motivated not by “mere” racism – the term *white supremacy* was weaponized by the left to associate any pushback with the KKK – but by “hate,” “rage,” and whatever other pejoratives could be invoked.

Woke is just the manifestation of this mindset.

My argument back in the early 1990s: either conservatives seize the moral high ground and forcefully oppose political correctness, or it will soon overwhelm every institution in the country.

Look around you. Has any institution of significance not been affected? We see *woke* in leviathan tech corporations like Google. The entertainment industry is permeated with it, as is corporate media generally. We see it in the military, where Gen. Mark Milley pondered how he wanted to understand “white rage.”

Finally there’s academia. Universities and academic disciplines where this started are now in *ruins*: especially humanities and social sciences. The woke crowd controls these departments on campuses, it controls administrations where their efforts go under such acronyms as DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion); it thus controls hiring committees (no conservatives need apply!). The woke mindset controls national organizations of academics. It controls university publications, academic and other major presses, and prestige refereed journals. Perhaps worst of all, it controls funding sources for academic research.

Freedom of inquiry thus no longer exists inside (or outside) the walls and halls of ivy. Critical thinking in the affected disciplines no longer exists. From the students’ point of view – and remember that students today are going massively into debt to the tune of five or even six figures to attend even

public universities and/or obtain professional credentials sought by employers – *there are no reasons for attending a university other than to study a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) subject.*

Even STEM is no longer safe! Mathematics has come under the purview of “woke scholars” contending that the subject is white-male-heterosexually biased ([this](#) is just the most recent case I’ve seen).

I don’t think dislodging these people is possible at this point. There are too many people involved, most of them are safely tenured, they are too well interlocked, and they have too much cultural power. The occasional Ron DeSantis who surfaces may be our best hope of exposing what is going on to the light of day. Should he decide to run for president, though, it should be clear: these people will send their media attack dogs after him as strongly as they did against Donald Trump – possibly more so since DeSantis is far more focused and lacks Trump’s tendency to shoot from the hip. (If DeSantis runs, moreover, he’ll also have to fend off attacks from Trump himself and Trump loyalists.)

It’s simple. We need our *own* educational institutions. A few exist already, but we need *more*. Parents whose teens are approaching college age, ex-academics who fled (as I did), horrified university alumni, employers with direct experience of the mass illiteracy now being churned out, all need alternatives to turn to.

The new institutions need to emphasize, first, liberal arts learning *as a way of living in a civilized society*, securing a solid foundation that will precede scientific / technical and vocational training. Their purpose will be to turn out educated citizens, not mindless followers. *Educated* here includes realizing that *language* is dangerous when captured, manipulated, and weaponized, that cancellation and censorship are *never* justifiable, and that *concentrations of power are*

always dangerous. Wealth, based on sound values and properly used, is a good thing. But in the wrong hands, it just *enhances* power. Witness Bill Gates.

The new institutions need to start up elementary schools (or the equivalent), as well as offer university-level courses. By the time a cohort reaches college age these days, it's too late. For as Frederick Douglass once said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

If there is no way to make this happen, I think it likely that the U.S. will cease to exist within the next couple of decades. I've not factored into *this* discussion *other* converging challenges: another orchestrated plan-demic with more tyrannical lockdowns and the potential collapse of viable health care systems, vaccine passports, possible travel restrictions related to the supposed climate emergency (which in all likelihood does not exist), CBDCs and purposeful impoverishment of America's "masses," the continued invasion on America's southern border to further dilute the "majority-white" culture, or other devices globalists might have at their disposal we don't know about, all leaving us with less control over our lives and destinies, whatever our race or ethnicity, gender identification, what-have-you.

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E-Mail Steven Yates: freeyourmindinsc@yahoo.com

ANNOUNCING: an online course/tutorial entitled **The Philosophy of Responsible Freedom**, directed by Jack C. Carney with myself as chief partner: a Zoom-based intellectual encounter between an atheist (Carney) and a Christian (Yates) exploring the history of ideas using [Academy of Ideas](#) videos and supplementing them with the thoughts of others. Carney is an autodidact in areas ranging across psychology, psychiatry, and anthropology who emphasizes the importance of human

relationships in a world where loss is omnipresent (he also teaches English online). I am an author and trained philosopher with a doctorate in the subject who taught philosophy courses in years past, walked away from academia, still writes philosophy emphasizing the need to identify, clarify, and evaluate the success (or failure) of worldviews in civilization, stages of civilization, the quest to build free societies, and how worldviews either enhance or hobble responsible freedom. Course/tutorial outline [here](#). For more information or to get on our email list: freeyourmindinsc@yahoo.com.

Steven Yates's latest book *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory* (2021) is available [here](#) and [here](#). His earlier *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic* (2011) is available [here](#).

While admittedly the real world can be scary enough, he has also written a novel of cosmic horror. *The Shadow Over Sarnath* will be published soon.

The [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com) campaign I have been running improved a little last month, with one new Patron since my last article. The reality remains: people are exiting such sites, often for reasons beyond their (or my) control. I might still have to return to pursuing copywriting, copyediting and ghostwriting clients as a source of income in this era of roaring inflation.

Thank you, "Joe Biden"!

This would mean reduced visibility on NewsWithViews.com. It might even mean a "farewell" piece soon, even if only temporarily. Those are the breaks. I am *not* independently wealthy. To reverse this while there is still time (i.e., before a new client accepts my offer), please consider pledging today by going [here](#) and signing up.