

“Woke” Will Be the West’s Downfall



By Steven Yates

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Conservative writers, when challenged, have trouble defining what it means to be Woke.

Bethany Mandel, co-author (with Karol Markowitz) of the recently published [*Stolen Youth: How Radicals Are Erasing Innocence and Indoctrinating a Generation*](#), struggled with the term in an [interview](#) on *The Hill*, hosted by Robby Soave and Briahna Joy Gray. When pressed for a definition of Woke by the latter, what she said was:

“Woke” is, sort of, the idea that– “Woke” is something that’s very hard to define ... it is sort of the understand that we need to totally reimagine and redo society in order to create hierarchies of oppression ... [struggles] ... it’s hard to explain in a fifteen-second soundbite.”

Soave tried to help her out.

“It’s one of those things that ... you definitely know it when you see it... It’s the tendency to punish people, formally or often informally, for expressing ideas using language specifically that is new, that no one would have objected to five seconds ago, so it is easy to come with examples like punishing people for using the wrong pronouns, or identifying structures of that kind...”

These are more the *effects* of Woke, and not a definition of it.

In a [recent article](#) I quoted Florida governor Ron DeSantis's general counsel Ryan Newman's attempt to define the term:

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.

This should help us see a bit more clearly what is going on here, and why conservatives have trouble pinning it down. But before elaborating, it might be helpful to see what those who are sympathetic to the idea mean by it. For example, Damariyé L. Smith, PhD, Assistant Professor of Contemporary Black/African American Rhetoric and Media Studies at San Diego State University [had this to say](#):

So there's a lot of things in language that have the same meaning, but just have a different terminology. I would argue that woke really starts around the early 1960s and '70s with the Black Power movement and civil rights issues of the time. It wasn't just called woke, it was called consciousness. And so consciousness or this idea of staying woke was about Black people, in particular, thinking about and questioning what are the ways in which our government is not necessarily protecting us as citizens, not just in the South, but everywhere... Somewhere around 2012 and 2014 we started seeing stuff about "staying woke" because again, at this time, you have cell phone videos of people capturing police brutality. I would say around 2013 is when you kind of really start seeing that term being used more especially under the umbrella of Black Lives Matter. When social media becomes bigger and bigger and bigger, people start to pay more attention to it.

In other words, it's not a new term or concept, but what's new

is its public currency. Social media is indeed responsible for a lot of that currency.

The term or concept has obviously (as did affirmative action) spread beyond race/ethnicity. It is now used by radical feminists and members of the Alphabet Soup Mafia (LGBTQIABCXYZ+++).

Emory University professor of political science Andra Gillespie [stated](#), referring to those using the term negatively:

“If you ask people what woke is, I think what they mean is they want to stand against people who are engaging in some type of advocacy for marginalized people... It’s kind of this lumping together of anybody whose views could be construed as being progressive on issues related to identity and civil rights.”

One wonders who is more marginalized now that the white working class is struggling with substance abuse and falling off the economic cliff, but never mind that just now. There are doubtless several dozen other comments floating around. The most compelling one I’ve seen is [this one](#), from one Freddie DeBoer (credentials not given) which I have from a [philosophy blog](#) I look at every few days. *Warning*: it’s not light reading. But don’t be intimidated. We’re going to dissect it. All italics are the author’s:

“Woke” or “wokeness” refers to a school of social and cultural liberalism that has become the dominant discourse in left-of-center spaces in American intellectual life. It reflects trends and fashions that emerged over time from left activist and academic spaces and became mainstream, indeed hegemonic, among American progressives in the 2010s. “Wokeness” centers “the personal is political” at the heart of all politics and treats political action as inherently a matter of personal moral hygiene – woke isn’t something you *do*, it’s something

you are. Correspondingly all of politics can be decomposed down to the right thoughts and right utterances of enlightened people. Persuasion and compromise are contrary to this vision of moral hygiene and thus are deprecated. Correct thoughts are enforced through a system of mutual surveillance, one which takes advantage of the affordances of internet technology to surveil and then punish. Since politics is not a matter of arriving at the least-bad alternative through an adversarial process but rather a matter of understanding and inhabiting an elevated moral station, there are no crises of conscience or necessary evils....

... Central to woke discourse is the substitution of older and less complicated versions of socially liberal perspectives with more willfully complex academic versions. So civil rights are out, "anti-racism" is in. Community is out, intersectionality is in. Equality is out, equity is in. Homelessness is out, unhousedness is in. Sexism is out, misogyny is in. Advantage is out, privilege is in. Whenever there's an opportunity to introduce an alternative concept that's been wrung through academia's weird machinery, that opportunity is taken. This has the advantage of making political engagement available only to a priestly caste that has enjoyed the benefits of elite university education; like all political movements, the woke political movement is captured by the urge to occupy elevated status within it.

I think that if you give that a close reading, you'll see two things.

First, as I've insisted from the get-go, this did not begin yesterday. I've been warning about it for over 30 years now, since it was called simply *political correctness*, the pejorative that began to be used back in 1991.

Statements that "the personal is the political" started to be used around that time by radical feminists who, in professions like mine anyway, were reaping the lion's share of affirmative

action benefits.

Second, and more importantly, you'll see what amounts to an admission that Woke, however it started, is a fundamentally totalitarian impulse.

Note that near the end of the first paragraph, *persuasion* and *compromise* are rejected.

To *persuade* is to try and convince another person that something you believe is true, using arguments and evidence. Although the term *persuasion* doesn't necessarily exclude psychology (a lot of marketers are very good at this), it *does* suggest that the use of *force* is verboten.

Compromise has been part of the warp and woof of civil discourse in America for as long as there's been an America. Compromise means that each side in a disagreement puts *self* to one side, rises to the occasion, and agrees to give up a little of what it wants in order to gain something that would be better for everyone. This does not mean abandoning principles. The country's Founders all wanted a Constitutional republic with limited government based on "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," but they did not agree on every detail how to obtain it. Volumes of their debates over various passages in the Constitution show this clearly. They compromised among themselves to make the document work as best as any product of human minds and hands could, and get as many states as possible to ratify it. The consequences of not doing so: everyone would soon fall back under rule by the British.

For ensuing decades, compromise between competing political parties and less structured groups continued to be the mainstay. Fortunately, each group wanted the country to work. The only exceptions here were the secessionists of the South who believed they were being more truthful to the principles of American founding documents, and that defenders of the Union had betrayed those principles.

Now we're back to that, in spades. It's doubtful that both sides in any of our current disputes really want the U.S. to continue to work.

Compromise, like persuasion, implies that intimidation, bullying, and if these fail, brute force, are off the table.

But according to the above author, under the regime of *woke*, "Correct thoughts are enforced through a system of mutual surveillance...." Departures from an "elevated moral station" are to be "punished" and "there are no crises of conscience or necessary evils...."

What follows is a contrast between the humane liberalism many of us grew up with, replaced with the extreme-leftism that began to infest academia in the 1980s – not the 2010s which saw a ratcheting up of something that had been there all along, waiting for a triggering event. The first such event was the Michael Brown shooting in 2014, after which campuses exploded. Then came George Floyd's death in 2020, after which the country itself nearly exploded.

Most important in the piece above is the ending: only a "priestly caste" really understands any of this. The concepts have been "wrung through academia's weird machinery" to which very few (white male) conservatives are privy. Well, obviously not, as conservatives are nearly an extinct species in academia: we've all either taken early retirement or left in disgust.

What makes Woke an easy word to use but difficult for conservatives to define is its embeddedness in the hard-left conceptual machinery that now controls academia, the legal profession, much so-called journalism, and a lot of corporate leviathans from Disney to Google.

One result is that a lot of job descriptions now include requests for applicants to state how they can contribute to the university's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion program

(what we might call the Unholy Trinity of Wokeness).

Consider the relevant portion of this one:

...The College of Arts and Sciences *is committed to building and supporting a diverse, inclusive, and equitable* community of students and scholars. [Redacted] University is an equal employment and affirmative action employer and a provider of ADA services. All qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment based on individual qualifications. [Redacted] University prohibits discrimination based on age, ethnicity, color, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, genetic information, marital status, national origin, disability status or protected veteran status. Applications from women and minority group members are especially encouraged.

A full dossier will include a cover letter, CV, dissertation abstract, writing sample, at least three letters of recommendation, a research statement, a teaching statement, a *statement on fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion in and out of the classroom*, and evidence of teaching effectiveness, such as teaching evaluations.

The italicized statements completely contradict and render null and void the statements that “all qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment based on individual qualifications.” *This, and “fostering [the unholy trinity of] diversity, equity, and inclusion...” are not compatible goals!*

But in contemporary academia, war is peace! Freedom is slavery! Ignorance is strength! Etc. Orwellian linguistic gymnastics consumed higher education long ago. The above is not an aberration. It is now standard. I still receive solicitations for applications for teaching positions, a list from which I never unsubscribed. I’ve seen dozens of calls for Woke-supporting statements.

There’s a sense in which Woke is no more – and no less – than

an affirmation of the Unholy Trinity of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, applying not just to race but “gender” and the Alphabet Soup Mafia, now including the idea that *children* should be encouraged to “question” their “gender identity” which seems to me to border on child abuse. (Even sex education in schools was once governed by standards of age-appropriateness.)

Here, though, is the conception of Woke I also came across recently that is my personal favorite. It is from a letter to the editor (fancy that, that a letter writer should articulate this with greater clarity than an academic with a PhD). I’ve removed the person’s name since I’ve no reason to think that he planned on becoming a public figure:

... here are a few examples of wokeness and its absurd consequences: A Supreme Court nominee who cannot define a woman. A biologically male athlete proudly displaying the medal he won competing in women’s sports; the women he defeated being advised to shut up. Lower college admission standards. The near disappearance of humor from late night TV. The demotion of Elon Musk from media darling to pariah. Overuse of the term “conspiracy theory” by people who imagine oppression everywhere. The suppression of rational discussion of the COVID pandemic and vaccines. Hyperventilating about perceived fascism while advocating for censorship of those who disagree.

The danger of being woke is that it permits only a single viewpoint and diverts attention from real problems. Practical solutions require trade-offs. In the end, we must work together. That requires dialogue and respect for the views of others, not wokeness.

Compare this with the lengthy statement from Freddie DeBoer, and you are looking at the totalitarian implications of Woke. Its expanded version, from race/ethnicity to every other group that can wear the mantle of victimhood in our Age of

Entitlement, will be a major contributing factor to the West's downfall if it is able to continue unabated. The only American in a position of authority whom I know of that is challenging Wokeness forcefully in his own state is Florida governor Ron DeSantis, and he may be overreaching – because he underestimates the cultural power of what he is up against. [Disney recently outmaneuvered him, after all.](#)

We need to return to promoting equality under the rule of law, as it was promoted back in the 1960s. We need to affirm that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with either diversity or inclusion, so long as they are voluntary and not coerced. "Equity," on the other hand, cannot be accomplished without massive social engineering including thought control via censorship. I don't know to what extent any of this is still possible in the 2020s New Normal. But once we understand what Wokeness really is, we should see it as a central part of the path to the West's downfall, into ever-increasing degrees of totalitarianism.

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Issue #3 of *Truth, Freedom, Validation* is now available, with its offer of a method and a system for achieving your Biggest Goal over the next six to eight months. To gain access, go [here](#). (You can read it, and future issues, for just \$1/month!)

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: freeyourmindinasc@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 later this year.