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CRITIQUE OF POSTCOLONIAL UNREASON

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Abstract:

This paper critiques postcolonial unreason, or more specifically, the liberal ideology of wokeism in the United States, with its many facets from cancel culture to identity politics. Wokeism is distinguished from wokeness--the latter is defined as a dialectical materialist praxis. A genealogy of leftism in the U.S. is unpacked to contextualize the debate. The irrational epistemology of wokeism is revealed from Marxist and psychoanalytic perspectives. Postcolonial unreason is contrasted with the historical reason of decolonial thinking.

Keywords

Woke, identity politics, decolonial thinking, radical subjectivity.

CRÍTICA DE LA IRRACIONALIDAD POSCOLONIAL

Resumen

Este artículo critica la irracionalidad poscolonial o, más concretamente, la ideología liberal del wokeísmo en Estados Unidos, con sus diversas facetas, desde la cultura de la cancelación hasta la política de la identidad. El wokeísmo se diferencia del *wokeness* – este último se define como una praxis materialista dialéctica. Se presenta una genealogía del izquierdismo en Estados Unidos para contextualizar el debate. La epistemología irracional del wokeísmo se revela desde perspectivas marxistas y psicoanalíticas. La irracionalidad poscolonial se contrapone a la razón histórica del pensamiento decolonial.

Palabras-clave

Woke, política de identidad, pensamiento decolonial, subjetividad radical.

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The Genealogy of Leftism in the U.S.

Over the last five years, exacerbated by the universal anxiety surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, liberals and conservatives in North America have published numerous books on the most recent culture war: woke—an empty signifier in essence, which functions as an umbrella term for anything from cancel culture to identity politics. In this essay, I wish to evaluate whether *woke being* and *decolonial thinking* are structural elements of *radical subjectivity*. While cancel culture (like woke) is difficult to define,¹ identity politics is often conflated with the concept of intersectionality as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw² when, in fact, its genealogy can be traced back to a revolutionary statement from 1977 by the Combahee River Collective. Radical identity politics stemmed not only from a Black feminist standpoint but also from a Marxist perspective: “Although we are in essential agreement with Marx’s theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.”

Barbara Smith, the leading author of the Combahee River Collective statement, famously endorsed Bernie Sanders in 2020 and wrote an article about it for the Guardian to make the case that radical identity politics is not reducible to Imaginary identifications with charismatic and diverse ‘masters.’ Radical identity politics, which I also consider non-identity politics, arises from Real identification with the symptom of (post)leftism: the failure of radicalism or socialist politics and the success of liberalism/conservatism or cultural politics. Cultural politics affords all sorts of postmodern criticisms within capitalism but lacks a meta-critique of capital itself. Olúfemi O. Táíwò gets into the history of how the liberal elite captured (and deradicalized) identity politics, which maps onto the genealogy of leftism I unpack below.³

In essence, this essay traces the genealogy of leftism in the U.S. (old left → new left → post-left) and how *post-leftism*—a concept broader than post-left anarchism—today realizes itself through *performative* politics centered around the *affective* (as opposed to *intellectual*) hystericization of master signifiers. *Master signifiers* are signifiers that are often repeated and taken for granted as to their signification. Examples in the context of U.S. culture include signifiers like ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom,’ which can be invoked to justify imperialism. *Hystericizing* master signifiers amounts to questioning them or showing that their meaning is unstable or context-dependent. As such, meaning (or the signified) is not as self-evident or commonsensical as ideology would like us to think. Master signifiers draw their power from this ideological mechanism.

As we shall see, according to post-leftists, postcoloniality is affirmed, and psychoanalysis is negated, but this is done undialectically or without reason. As Kwame Nkrumah demonstrated,⁴ postcolonialism amounts in practice to neocolonialism (or economic colonization), and he regarded it as the last stage of imperialism—the latter being the highest stage of capitalism, according to Lenin.⁵ In other words, we can consider the *material decolonization* of Asia and Africa between 1945 and 1960 as incomplete, for it is

¹ cf. Clark, *Drag them; NG, Cancel culture*.

² Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex*.

³ Táíwò, *Against decolonization*.

⁴ Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism*.

⁵ Lenin, *Imperialism*.

political decolonization without *economic decolonization*. Consequently, postcolonial criticism in the academy, particularly in the Global North, is mostly focused on questions of culture, or *ideological decolonization*. This is important, too, for it involves the work of *psychic decolonization*, which must be complemented with *social decolonization*. The problem, of course, is how these phenomena are shaped by the political economy of global capitalism. These are the postmodern conditions that transform postcolonial criticism into postcolonial unreason.

Wokeism is a symptom of the irrational regression from new leftism to post-leftism, a postmodern retreat from modernity. The new left's sense of defeat has been increasing exponentially since the collapse of the Soviet Union, or what right Hegelian thinker Francis Fukuyama (1989) called "the end of history...the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." Post-leftism, in my view, is *pseudo-leftism*. I also consider it *faux radicalism* because *wokeism is the liberal emperor's new clothes*. The solution is not a nostalgic return to old or new leftism but a sublation of both. Perhaps #altwoke leftism is the answer to wokeist post-leftism? I ask this question tongue in cheek. According to the #altwoke manifesto:

AltWoke injects planning back into left-wing politics. AltWoke supports universal basic income, biotechnology, and radical energy reforms to combat climate change, open borders, new forms of urban planning and the liquidation of Western hegemony. AltWoke sees opportunity in disaster. AltWoke is the Left taking futurism away from fascism. David Harvey is #altwoke. Situationist International is #altwoke. Lil B is #altwoke. Jean Baudrillard is #altwoke. Kodwo Eshun is #altwoke, Mark Fisher is #altwoke, Roberto Mangabeira Unger is #altwoke. Edward Snowden is #altwoke.⁶

What Is Left?

To begin with a polemic, Neiman bluntly titles her recent book in a provocative manner, "Left is not woke" or "Left \neq woke",⁷ to facetiously display her central argument on the cover. But what is 'left' and 'woke,' and how do they relate to my 'critique' of "postcolonial unreason"? For Neiman, leftism is an umbrella term encompassing socialism, a radical politico-economic position to the left of liberalism (centrism) and conservatism (rightism)—the two key ideologies of global capitalism since the French Revolution. Today, it is hard to know what one means by the term 'left' since, in the U.S., for example, conservatives consider liberals leftists—in reality, both liberals and conservatives are ruthless capitalists.

Still, conservatives are currently identifying as *anti-woke capitalists*. In contrast, the liberals are supposedly *woke capitalists*. Given this infighting among global capitalists, what can we (radicals) contribute to this debate on 'woke' through ideology critique? What is the dialectical materialist move here? Before I answer these questions, we must unpack the signifier 'left' since it is doing a lot of heavy lifting for Neiman and should not be taken for granted among radicals.

Leszek Kolakowski defines the Left as "a movement of negation toward the existing world"⁸. He then adds, "The Left is defined by its negation, *but not only by this*; it is also

⁶ Anon, #AltWoke manifesto.

⁷ Neiman, *Left is Not woke*.

⁸ Kolakowski, *The concept of the left*, p. 146.

defined by the direction of this negation, in fact, by the nature of its utopia".⁹ Neiman, however, distances herself from Kolakowski's utopianism when she writes that political and social rights, or human rights, are not utopian aspirations. Perhaps the difference between them lies in Kolakowski's statement, "A utopia is a necessary component of the revolutionary Left".¹⁰ In other words, while Neiman may identify as a *social leftist*, she may be weary of *revolutionary leftism*; hence, she uses a vague signifier like 'left' instead of 'socialist.' It is worth noting that Marx and Engels were both critical of utopian socialism and in favor of scientific socialism. In the words of Frederick Engels, "To make a science of socialism, it had first to be placed on a real [i.e., economic or material] basis"¹¹ as opposed to an ideological one, as in the case of both capitalism and utopianism.

Radicalism

Immanuel Wallerstein contributes to this debate through the lens of his world-systems analysis by qualifying leftism as radicalism, which he defines as "the third of the great ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" premised on a collective desire for fast "progressive social change".¹² Radicals (i.e., authoritarian and libertarian socialists) were the leaders of proletarian "antisystemic movements" until 1967, when a paradigm shift occurred, displacing the old left. To get a sense of the infighting that resulted from this displacement: new leftists consider old leftists to be class reductionists, and old leftists consider new leftists to be anti-Marxists.

The Spectacle

Guy Debord captured this displacement of the old left with his concept of *the spectacle*,¹³ which remains relevant today since we are dealing, in essence, with questions of mediated representations, or "a social relation among people, mediated by images." It is worth noting that representations need not be reducible to fantasies or Imaginary identifications, and this was precisely Said's central argument in *Representations of the Intellectual*: "Intellectual representations are the *activity* itself, dependent on a kind of consciousness that is skeptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment; and this puts the individual on record and on the line. Knowing how to use language well and knowing when to intervene in language are two essential features of intellectual action".¹⁴ In other words, Symbolic representation is a radical possibility against the lure of the spectacle.

1967: New Leftism

In the Global North, 1967 indexes the accumulation of three student movements (the sit-in movement in 1960, the free speech movement in 1964, and the anti-Vietnam war movement in 1965) and prefigures the international student movement in 1968, but in

⁹ Kolakowski, *The concept of the left*, p. 146, emphasis.

¹⁰ Kolakowski, *The concept of the left*, p. 148.

¹¹ Engels, *Socialism*, p. 53.

¹² Wallerstein, *World-systems analysis*, p. 96.

¹³ Debord, *Society of the spectacle*.

¹⁴ SAID, *Representations of the Intellectual*, pp. 27-28, emphasis in original.

the Global South, particularly in the Arab world, it is a year of anti-colonial defeat remembered with shame as the *naksa* (setback). When Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, lost the Six-Day War, Israel came out not only victorious, but it rubbed its triumph in the faces of its Arab enemy states by occupying their territories: the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Palestine), the Sinai Peninsula (Egypt), and the Golan Heights (Syria). So the metaphorical displacement of the proletariat coincided with the literal displacement of Palestinians.

As such, 1967 announced the death of not only old leftism in Euro-America (and, by extension, the vacuousness of Soviet communism) but also that anti-imperialist socialism (e.g., Arab socialism) in the Global South had no legs to stand on. Che Guevara was captured and executed by the Bolivian military the same year. It is within this worldwide context that we can interpret the terror tactics used by new left groups, such as the Red Army Faction and the Palestine Liberation Organization. These were desperate (and ultimately, counterproductive) attempts at resuscitating the non-existent spirit of revolution. The revolution was not televised; however, what was televised as a 'counterculture'—between the Detroit riots and the so-called "summer of love"—was the spectacle of the hippie movement, which, as time shows, was nothing but bohemian bourgeoisie. For new left radicals, primarily university professors and students, class was no longer the central fulcrum of antisystemic movements. In the face of the above-mentioned defeats, class was strategically decentered and ostensibly complexified by an emphasis on race and sex (i.e., culture).

1991: Post-Leftism

The post-left moment began in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event that put an already defeated left into an identity crisis. This post-left identity crisis is responsible for wokeness decaying into wokeism and for leftism being conflated with liberalism. The post-left moment also marks the ideological shift from the red scare (Communism) to the green peril (Islamism). Socialism was no longer seen as a worthy enemy of global capitalism; hence, the full-throttle shift toward culture war epitomized by Samuel P. Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis: the west v. the rest.¹⁵

The New Proletariat

The displacement of old leftism amounts to the displacement of the proletariat, thereby inverting the division of labor: intellectual labor displacing manual labor as the new site of exploitation (or oppression) under new and postleftism. The new proletariat are racialized and sexually oppressed students. This inversion was central to the development of wokeism, the irrational or anti-intellectual version of wokeness, which is compatible with liberal capitalism. The error, of course, is assuming that workers are mostly 'white' and, therefore, 'evil' (i.e., racist, patriarchal, colonial, settler, etc.) or that 'white' = 'evil.' This error conflates the ideology of whiteness—an invention by the U.S. elite in the 17th century to divide and conquer a diverse proletariat—with the Euro-American

¹⁵ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*.

working class. One of the sources for this error is J. Sakai's *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat*.¹⁶

Colonialism v. Coloniality

The traumatic legacies of genocide and slavery in the U.S., of course, must be wrestled with today, particularly in terms of their colonial afterlives. Hence, I distinguish colonialism (the material practice of over-exploiting non-European peoples and resources) from coloniality (the psychic remainder of that global capitalist practice, which functions as the instrumental logic of modernization). In my view, rejecting colonialism and coloniality in the name of wokeness is legitimate. However, rejecting modernity (European or otherwise) in toto is an irrational and anti-intellectual feature of wokeism. The antimodern retreat from historical reason and the romanticization of a fantasmatic premodernity characterizes the fascistic dangers of wokeist ideology, particularly when its perfect compatibility with liberal capitalism is never questioned. This is why the (post)left is divided and conquered by the liberal status quo—cf. Chris Cutrone's *The Death of the Millennial Left*.¹⁷

Cultural Marxism and Anti-CRT Hysteria

The problem with conservatives is that they conflate wokeness with wokeism and leftism with liberalism, thereby flattening the political field. Their hysteria is fascist through and through. They claim that there is a cultural Marxist conspiracy. They believe that the origin of this conspiracy is Frankfurt School scholars (e.g., Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, etc.) who infiltrated the U.S. higher education system to destroy America (and the west by extension) through their critical theoretical attacks on Christianity, capitalism, and traditional family values.

The latest target in their conspiracy is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which conservative politicians are successfully banning from K-12 curricula in Republican states based on the claim that CRT teaches children that America is inherently racist. Of course, it does not help that Nikole Hannah-Jones stated in her *1619 Project*: "Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country".¹⁸ Nonetheless, the anti-CRT conspiracy repeats an older Nazi conspiracy by the name of cultural (or Jewish) Bolshevism, wherein Jews and Communists are conflated and scapegoated as the enemy of Western civilization. While wokeism must be critiqued, anti-wokeness must be rejected for its anti-Semitism, anti-Blackness, and anti-radicalism.

Collective Liberation and Unconscious Wokeness

Conservatives are fighting Imaginary radicals because liberals are faux radicals. Our fight, as radicals, must be on the lines of the Symbolic and the Real, which concerns the question of collective liberation. What do we, as comrades, want? Is our desire aligned with our politics? Also, what is it that we enjoy together? *There is no political economy*

¹⁶ Sakai, *Settlers*.

¹⁷ Cutrone, *The Death of the Millennial Left*.

¹⁸ Jones, *Introduction to the "1619 Project"*, p. 21.

without a libidinal economy. Under liberalism, these questions are hyper-individualized, but this is false because it is no longer a question of the subject's singularity of being but rather their egoistic illusion of individuality.

When woke being is a substitute for social being, the outcome is false consciousness. For liberal capitalists, the unconscious is negated and overstuffed with ideological fantasies that drive us to consume while believing that we are unique. The ideal liberal consumer today is a faux radical individual who believes that they are 'woke' without any reflection on their social being and how that determines their consciousness as well as their unconscious. As such, both the liberal ideology of wokeism and the conservative ideology of anti-wokeism produce false consciousness—the kind of consciousness needed for capitalism to continue in operation. Unconscious wokeness, a revolutionary meta-consciousness engaged in decolonial thinking, is the missing third.

Herbert Marcuse and Angela Davis

One of the most prominent leaders in the new left movement was Herbert Marcuse, who envisioned students as the new proletariat: "a considerable part of the student population is prospective working class—'new working class'".¹⁹ One of his students included a former affiliate of the Black Panther Party and an ex-member of the Communist Party USA, Angela Davis. Davis is a brilliant scholar and activist, but in many ways, she embodies, in her social being, a major coordinate in the "matrix of domination"²⁰ as a Black woman from the South (Alabama) with humble yet radical roots. Embodying, in other words, an intersectionality of two struggles: racism and sexism. As such, if Marcuse were the mastermind of new leftism, Davis would be the poster child of new leftism in the U.S.

Oppression Olympics

What makes Davis brilliant, in my view, is that she never overlooks the centrality of class in her analyses as a Marxist feminist, and she does not reduce intersectionality to an Oppression Olympics of competing marginalized identities—a liberal error par excellence and may be considered as the core of wokeist ideology. Oppression Olympics was introduced by Elisabeth Martínez in 1993 during a public conversation with Davis. Martínez prefaced her rejection of Oppression Olympics with the following statement: "no competition of hierarchies should prevail." Davis agreed and added, "we need to be more flexible in our thinking about various ways of working together across differences." Davis would later characterize her position as an "intersectionality of struggles," a radical framework of solidarity across class, race, and sex.²¹

Woke Being or Social Being?

So what is the problem with staying or being 'woke' then, in our so-called new (or post) leftist context? For Neiman, the problem is not with staying or being 'woke,' but rather with woke capitalism (i.e., wokeist ideology), "which hijacks demands for diversity in order

¹⁹ Marcuse, *An essay on liberation*, p. 43.

²⁰ Collins, *Black feminist thought*.

²¹ Davis, *Freedom is a constant struggle*.

to increase profit." In other words, for Neiman, liberal capitalism has been capitalizing on diversity through Oppression Olympics to maintain the liberal status quo—a post-leftist strategy of flirting with the spectacle of radical aesthetics without any ethical commitment to socialist politics. In other words, post-leftism is a performative politics of affects—or, to use contemporary slang, a politics of vibes. It is vital to distinguish now between two forms of woke: (1) wokeness as a dialectical materialist praxis and (2) wokeism (or woke capitalism) as a liberal ideology.

A Genealogy of Wokeness

In the history of the U.S., wokeness is an antiracist praxis developed primarily within the African American community as a way of resisting racial segregation after the Emancipation Proclamation. Jamaican activist, Black nationalist, and Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey is often credited with popularizing this praxis in his speeches, such as when he said the following in 1917, "The Negroes of the West Indies have been sleeping for seventy-eight years...These people want a terrific sensation to awaken them to their racial consciousness",²² or this statement in 1922, "I come to the people in the role of the reformer and say to them, 'Awake! the day is upon you, go forth in the name of the race and build yourselves a nation, redeem your country Africa, the land from whence you came and prove yourselves men worthy of the recognition of others'".²³

As such, the praxis of wokeness informed the antiracist efforts of civil rights activists, notwithstanding the diversity of their political approaches, from the nonviolent resistance of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to the militancy of the Black Panther Party. The adjective 'woke' had a resurgence recently in popular culture, particularly in the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, with the release of Childish Gambino's (2016) song "Redbone," which was used in the opening scene of Jordan Peele's (2017) film *Get Out*. The chorus of the song begins with the phrase, "But stay woke," a variation on Martin Luther King Jr.'s words in his "World House" speech given in 1968: "today our survival depends on our ability to stay awake...to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change".²⁴

King asks his listeners "to remain awake through great periods of social change".²⁵ King's message is radical; his vision is of an internationalist "world house" free of the "triple evils" of "racism, materialism, and militarism".²⁶ King later qualifies this vision by adding, "This revolution of values must go beyond traditional capitalism and Communism".²⁷ When he indexes 'Communism,' King refers to the Soviet Union, an authoritarian regime run through a state capitalist economy.

The materialism King negates can be understood as a form of *colonial idealism*, an unconscious drive to colonize nature and exploit 'savages' in the name of modernization. He says, "Violence has been the inseparable twin of materialism, the hallmark of its grandeur and misery. This is the one thing about modern civilization that I do not care to

²² Garvey, *Selected writings and speeches of Marcus Garvey*, p. 43.

²³ Garvey, *Selected writings and speeches of Marcus Garvey*, p. 108.

²⁴ King, *Where do we go from here*, p. 181.

²⁵ King, *Where do we go from here*, p. 181.

²⁶ King, *Where do we go from here*, pp. 196–97.

²⁷ King, *Where do we go from here*, p. 197.

imitate".²⁸ As such, I would argue that King's rejection of materialism negates the instrumental reason of modernization: colonial idealism. This opens up the possibility for dialectical materialism as a decolonial method for critiquing capitalist ideology (wokeist or otherwise). I will say more on this in the conclusion.

Therefore, wokeness, as an internationalist praxis of solidarity among the proletariat, the racialized, and the sexually oppressed of the world, is essentially anticapitalist, antiracist, and antisexist. It is also antimilitarist, which is not to say that it is necessarily pacifist or nonviolent. However, the question of revolutionary violence is complex and requires justification: "Power needs no justification as it is inherent in the very existence of political communities; what, however, it does need is legitimacy...Violence needs justification and it can be justifiable, but its justification loses in plausibility the farther away its intended end recedes into the future".²⁹

Critical Consciousness

Wokeness is also related to a key neo-Marxist conception: critical consciousness—similarly, consciousness-raising was a praxis pioneered by U.S. feminists (e.g., New York Radical Women) toward the end of the '60s. In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx famously stated, "It is not the consciousness of men [or women] that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness."³⁰ The primacy of social being points to the fact that the human subject is essentially both psychosocial (because they are interdependent with the Other, that is, any representative of Symbolic authority) and divided (between ego and unconscious); in other words, the materiality of a human subject's social existence determines their psychic division.

As such, wokeness qua critical consciousness or decolonial thinking is, in a way, a meta-consciousness of social being. This meta-consciousness is radical subjectivity, a negativity critical of ideology, that is, fantasies and discourses that justify any oppressive system (e.g., exploitation under capitalism, racism under white supremacy, or sexism under patriarchy). Therefore, whereas woke being is a function of wokeist ideology, an ego identification, decolonial thinking is an unconscious wokeness stemming from this meta-consciousness of psychosocial dialectics: divided subjectivity (ego v. unconscious) and the class struggle (bourgeoisie v. proletariat).

The concept of critical consciousness (or *conscientização*) is attributed to Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire. Freire's new leftist intervention, particularly with his publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970, was meant to theorize the dynamics of oppression in a general sense beyond capitalist exploitation. The classroom, especially the relationship between the teacher and the student, became a microcosm of how oppression operates in society, thereby mirroring the oppressor-oppressed dynamic, positions that used to be occupied by the bourgeoisie and the proletariat under old leftism. The goal was to theorize this oppression in an effort to practice liberation from the bottom up, in the classroom, and beyond. We see an echo of Marcuse's thesis that students are the new proletariat.

²⁸ King, *Where do we go from here*, p. 68.

²⁹ Arendt, *Reflections on violence*.

³⁰ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

The Wokeist Distortion of Critical Pedagogy

The wokeist distortion of critical pedagogy is that the student (like the customer) is always right. According to this decadent logic, the Great Books of the Western World must be burned since they are written mostly by “dead white men.” Also, the oppressed, in wokeist ideology, are assumed to be inherently pure or morally superior, which can sometimes justify cruelty against anyone who is perceived as an ‘oppressor.’ However, upon carefully reading Freire, his thesis is that *liberation is for all*: oppressors and the oppressed.

The problem of oppression is that it dehumanizes everyone; the solution cannot be sub-oppression or Oppression Olympics. The solution is radical humanism, and the path is dialogue. Radical humanism is a Freudo-Marxist conception of the human subject as negativity: a divided subject. The desire for liberation arises from the stifling alienation of our social being by language and labor. Through dialogue and critique, the subject can separate from the alienating demands of the Other (the Symbolic order of exchange) to explore the negativity of their unconscious desire.

Wokeness as Divine Enjoyment

Traversing the ideological fantasies of global capitalism (i.e., those of liberalism and conservatism) opens up the possibility for the *radical-subject-as-drive*: wokeness as divine enjoyment or the enjoyment of comrades in solidarity against social injustice. Walter Benjamin’s example is that of the general strike.³¹ Wokeism, conversely, is mythic enjoyment, a sadomasochistic enjoyment (*ressentiment*) that disavows the materiality of oppression and violence under global capitalism. Exploitation and imperialism, for instance, get covered over by wokeist liberal fantasies. Tokenism, homonationalism, pinkwashing, and so on suture the Real suffering of workers at home and Palestinians abroad.

On the other hand, wokeness would not cancel the Great Books; rather, the dialectical approach is to critique the Eurocentrism of the Great Books to expand the list toward *the Great Books of the World*. Greatness must be sublated wherever we find it; in other words, (Euro)modernity is not the problem and must be affirmed. What must be negated is Eurocentrism and its colonial idealism (and not modernity). One should be able to read Freud generously yet hold him accountable for any racist or sexist views. One should not stop here, and this is why it was important for me to read Freud alongside Said,³² for example.

Wokeness is a dialectical materialist praxis; it sublates the best of modernity and its alterity. The praxis is collective liberation through radical humanism. Historical reason drives this praxis, which is why we must be wary of the faux radicalism of wokeist anti-intellectuals along with their antimodern discourses and regressive fantasies. Deplatforming racists is legitimate, but judging everyone as guilty of racism until proven innocent is absurd (i.e., dehumanizing). This is the absurdity of wokeism as a liberal

³¹ Benjamin, *Critique of violence*.

³² Beshara, *Freud and said*.

ideology within global capitalism—what we can also call “the destruction of reason” following Lukás (1952/1981).

A Critique of the Wokeist Ideology

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels define ideology with this powerful statement: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force”.³³ Wokeism is currently a ruling idea in the U.S., an idea of the liberal elite, for it is a way of dividing and conquering progressive working-class voters. But, as I said before, wokeism is not only an alienating discourse; it is also an ideological fantasy. We can even call it “the new American dream,” and it works as a liberal fantasy because it is about reinforcing our identity as individual consumers and not as a collective movement. It plays on the narcissism of the American consumer, who disavows the material reality of exploitation and imperialism and desires to see diversity fetishized and represented in the commodity form as an aesthetic token of ‘progress.’ In this sense, woke capitalism is a variation on American exceptionalism. U.S. liberals feel exceptional in their wokeism.

A good example of wokeism is the ADOS (American Descendants of Slavery) or FBA (Foundational Black Americans) groups. Unlike the radicalism of the Black Panther Party or the All-African People’s Revolutionary Party, ADOS and FBA over-identify with American nationalism and liberal capitalism. Consequently, in their aversion to internationalist politics like pan-Africanism, they look down on non-American Africans, particularly when it comes to the charged topic of reparations. So, we must ask ourselves: What is the Real contradiction sutured by the wokeist ideological fantasy? Class struggle. The rallying cry, “Workers of the world, unite!” from the *Communist manifesto*,³⁴ is crucial to invoke here because, contrary to wokeist nationalism, socialism is about proletarian internationalism. However, there is no proletarian internationalism without unconscious wokeness. The international proletariat must first realize the commonality of their social being as workers before developing the critical consciousness necessary for their international unity as divided subjects of Totality and Exteriority.

Criticism v. Critique

To move beyond the liberals’ bourgeois criticism of wokeism as a discourse, we first must distinguish between criticism and critique. Citing Reinhard Koselle’s *Critique and Crisis*, Wendy Brown writes, “critique emerges in ancient Athens as the jurisprudential term *krisis*...[which] integrates polis, rupture, tribunal, knowledge, judgment, and repair at the same time that it links subject and object in practice”.³⁵ As such, the genealogy of critique reveals it as a dialectical methodology.

Brown adds that Marx distinguished “criticism [particularly of religion as illusory or false consciousness], ‘mere criticism’ or ‘critical criticism,’ from critique”.³⁶ She argues, “This is the move that really secures the conviction that critique is secular in the Western

³³ Engels; Marx, *The German Ideology*.

³⁴ Engels; Marx, *Communist manifesto*.

³⁵ Asad; Brown; Butler; Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?*, p. 9, emphasis in original.

³⁶ Asad; Brown; Butler; Mahmood, *Is critique secular?*, p. 11.

critical theory tradition".³⁷ Brown continues, "For Marx, then, there was a great difference between criticism of religion as illusory and a *critique* of the *conditions* that produce religious consciousness and that religion can be seen to express".³⁸

With Immanuel Kant,³⁹ who inspired the title for my essay along with Gayatri Spivak,⁴⁰ we can also think about the dogmatic metaphysics of wokeism. However, wokeism is far from pure reason, for while it constitutes a priori judgments (e.g., judging Marxism or psychoanalysis based on no experience with the literature), it does not deserve to be considered a form of reasoning. Wokeism is a counter-Enlightenment and postmodernist symptom of Totality. Wokeism is mostly irrelevant in the non-European world; it is very much a Euro-American phenomenon that correlates with the identity crisis of (post)leftism after the supposed end of the Cold War.

Therefore, it is not enough to criticize the discourse of wokeism, which functions as a religious illusion today (cf. McWhorter, 2021), from a liberal bourgeois position. We must also critique the wokeist ideology to "(1) apprehend the real order of things, (2) explain why this real order is not manifest but requires critique to be revealed, and (3) explain what kind of human future is adumbrated in religious illusion".⁴¹ This order of things is Real in a Lacanian sense, too. It is the libidinal order of surplus enjoyment, made possible by the capitalist generation of surplus value. In other words, the kind of enjoyment afforded by the wokeist ideology is sustained by the liberal capitalist order of exploitation. This Real order of things is not manifest because it is the unconscious, the level of the wokeist fantasy, which sutures the enjoyment of the wokeist consumer, who is more interested in aesthetic representations of diversity vis-à-vis the commodity form (i.e., the spectacle) over ethical and political commitments (e.g., intellectual representations). This is precisely what I term faux radicalism. I must share a personal example here to illustrate the material conditions that lead to the performativity of wokeist consciousness and the actualization of its central affect: *ressentiment*. According to Butler, "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a cultural sustained temporal duration".⁴²

The Personal Is Political?

At this point, I must mention an incident that occurred years ago during a conference on Islamophobia—a topic that I wrote my doctoral dissertation on. After presenting my paper on Islamophobia as a fundamental fantasy, a conference participant was very angry with me during the Q&A for citing the work of Slavoj Žižek. This was in 2016, around the time of the Left Forum controversy, when some post-leftist activists attempted unsuccessfully to deplatform Žižek.

Back then, Žižek was mainly criticized for his published views, particularly for *In These Times*, on the immigration crisis in Europe. Some on the left considered his opinions on immigration to be racist. Since then, Žižek has been criticized for his writings on

³⁷ Asad; Brown; Butler; Mahmood, *Is critique secular?*, p. 11.

³⁸ Asad; Brown; Butler; Mahmood, *Is critique secular?*, p. 12, emphasis in original.

³⁹ Kant, *Critique of pure reason*.

⁴⁰ Spivak, *A critique of postcolonial reason*.

⁴¹ Asad; Brown; Butler; Mahmood, *Is critique secular?*, p. 12.

⁴² Butler, *Gender trouble*, p. 15.

transgender people and the Gaza genocide. I was unsure how to respond during the Q&A since the attack was very emotional and boiled down to a demand that I apologize for citing the master signifier 'Žižek,' which I did not do. In 2017, I wrote my response to the conference participant as a critique of Žižek. My essay was published as a book chapter a year later. The title of the chapter is *Decolonizing Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalyzing Islamophobia*. This research led to my doctoral dissertation and first book.

In short, I did not think that Žižek was or is racist, but I thought that some of his political analyses were sloppy as a function of his Eurocentrism, which he proudly embraces. For example, I thought Islamophobia was under-theorized in his commentaries, even though he wrote excellent accounts of anti-Semitism in a number of his books. This was my first experience with cancel culture, which one scholar defines as "*collective strategies by activists using social pressures to achieve cultural ostracism of targets (someone or something) accused of offensive words or deeds*".⁴³ I was expected to cancel Žižek; otherwise, the implication was I would be *canceled by association*.

Years later, I would experience similar emotional responses at conferences, particularly when the topic was controversial, such as Ye (formerly Kanye West). I see such affective responses as a function of *wokeism* and do not regard them as decolonial interventions because the latter is a praxis grounded in historical reason. That is not to say that affect is useless or has no place in radical politics. Paulo Freire, for example, conceives of *liberation as an act of love*.⁴⁴ However, when I refer to affect, I think of its relationship to transference in particular, which is legitimate in a clinical space, but should not be the basis for how we relate to one another in the social sphere. Transference outside of the clinic is dehumanizing because the Other is reduced to an object, a fantasy-screen for all sorts of projections.

Parasitic Criticism v. Mutualist Critique

Postmodernity/postcoloniality is a parasitic criticism of modernity/coloniality from within Totality. Transmodernity/decoloniality is a mutualist critique from without—that is, Exteriority. Let us take the works of Enrique Dussel and Aníbal Quijano as two important representatives of decoloniality. They are rigorous scholars in philosophy and sociology, respectively; their decolonial projects aim to negate coloniality and affirm alter-modernity—i.e., non-European modernity, which is exterior to the Totality of Euromodernity. Dussel's concept of transmodernity sublates Euromodernity and stretches it to include alter-modernity. In other words, decoloniality is not a pre-modern fantasy. This essay defends *decolonial thinking* against its destruction by wokeist ideology.

Wokeness v. Wokeism

For clarification, Michael Karson distinguishes between wokeness and wokeism. According to Karson, "Awareness of unfairness in the treatment of others [i.e., wokeness]...makes the world a better place and us better people".⁴⁵ In liberalism, wokeness is translated through an *ethics of equity*, which is realized through Diversity,

⁴³ Norris, *Cancel culture*, p. 148, emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p. 45.

⁴⁵ Karson, *The psychology of "Wokeism"*.

Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The conservative Jungian polemicist Jordan Peterson characterizes such a liberal approach “equality of outcome” and argues instead for what he prefers to call “equality of opportunity”.⁴⁶ For him, there is no distinction between liberalism and radicalism; the two political groups are lumped together as “the left”—a mysterious representative of Symbolic authority behind numerous conspiracies in Euro-America that the right is obsessed with. Peterson does not seem to recognize that the leftist Other (like the leftist subject) is lacking.

At a crass level, the rejection of wokeness/wokeism ranges from an aversion toward anti-racism, particularly in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the 1619 Project, to the gender-critical feminist criticism of (trans)gender ideology. Gender-critical feminism is often considered transphobic and labeled by trans activists as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism (TERF). Aside from the obvious stance of white supremacists against anti-racism, some social justice advocates (e.g., FINKELSTEIN, *I'll burn that bridge when I get to it*) regard the business of anti-racism to be “an extortion racket”,⁴⁷ particularly in light of reports about the BLM foundation's accusations of fraud. Adolph Reed Jr.'s critique of anti-racism is more compelling:

The contemporary discourse of ‘anti-racism’ is focused much more on taxonomy than politics...This view, however, is mistaken. The post-war activism that reached its crescendo in the South as the ‘Civil Rights movement’ wasn't a movement against a generic ‘racism’; it was specifically and explicitly directed toward full citizenship rights for black Americans and against the system of racial segregation that defined a specific regime of explicitly racial subordination in the South.⁴⁸

At a more nuanced level, there is, of course, the now infamous Harper Magazine's “Letter on Justice and Open Debate,” which was published in 2020 and had 153 signatories, a list that most notably included Noam Chomsky.⁴⁹ Several authors wrote the letter, but the representative of the group has to be Thomas Chatterton Williams, who regards cancel culture—in an interview for the New Yorker (as cited in Chotiner, *Thomas Chatterton Williams on Race, Identity, and “Cancel Culture”*)⁵⁰—as a bad faith and mob-driven practice of rendering folks with normative identities (i.e., straight white men) insecure.

Williams, the son of a southern Black man, is making a liberal argument for free speech (and against the politicization of identities). For Williams, the cancel culture mob exists for the most part on Twitter (X). Similarly, in her resignation letter from the New York Times, Bari Weiss blamed the social media platform now owned by tech tycoon Elon Musk:⁵¹ “Twitter [X] is not on the masthead of The New York Times. But Twitter [X] has become its ultimate editor.” Reducing cancel culture to discourses on Twitter (X) does not take into account the material effects of cancel culture on society beyond the Internet or social media specifically. As an educator, my paramount concern is how cancel culture manifests in the classroom and whether it has any relation to critical pedagogy. Williams and Weiss also do not see the fantasmatic dimension of cancel culture, which I am curious about as a radical psychoanalyst committed to ideology critique.

⁴⁶ Peterson, *Equity*.

⁴⁷ Finkelstein, *I'll burn that bridge when I get to it*, p. 62.

⁴⁸ Reed, *No politics but class politics*, pp. 45–46.

⁴⁹ Harper's Magazine, *A Letter on Justice and Open Debate*.

⁵⁰ Chotiner, *Thomas Chatterton Williams on Race, Identity, and “Cancel Culture”*.

⁵¹ WEISS, *Resignation letter*.

A Lacanian Discourse Analysis of Wokeism

Karson (2021) continues, in a way echoing Peterson's (2019) paranoid delusional sentiment, *Equity: When the Left Goes Too Far*: "On the political left, wokeness sometimes drifts into *wokeism*—a system of thought and behavior characterized by intolerance, policing the speech of others, and proving one's own superiority by denouncing others" (emphasis in original). While I find Karson's distinction between wokeness and wokeism helpful, I disagree with his political analysis, which folds liberalism into radicalism.

If anti-woke is the conservative master's discourse, then wokeism is the liberal university's discourse. Wokeness, however, is the hysteric's discourse. For Jacques Lacan, "discourse is bound up with the interests of the subject".⁵² See Figure 1 of the Four Discourses and Figure 2 of the Four Subject Positions. *Intellectual hystericization*, according to Lacanian discourse theory, produces critical knowledge (e.g., Marxism and psychoanalysis), or the science of dialectics: the political economy of the social and the libidinal economy of the psychic. Analysis and hysteria are radical (i.e., anticapitalist) positions from which we can scientifically critique ideology. It is no coincidence that Lacan says the following in Seminar XVII: "What is characteristic of the two of them, Freud and Marx, is that they don't bullshit".⁵³

Figure 1 - The Four Discourses

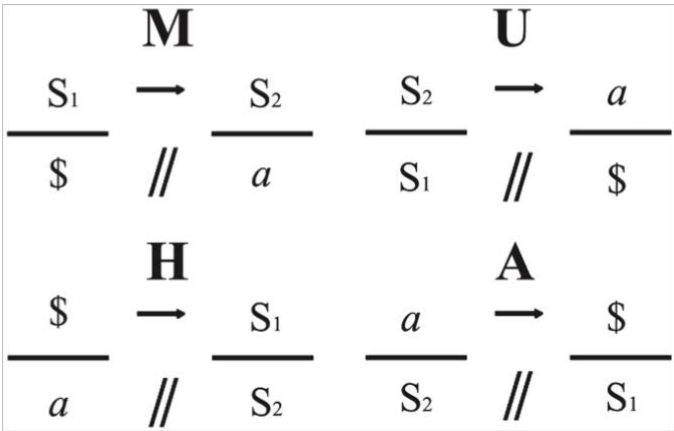


Figure 2 - The Four Subject Positions.



⁵² Lacan, *The other side of psychoanalysis*, p. 92.

⁵³ Lacan, *The other side of psychoanalysis*, p. 71.

On the other hand, the university manufactures the ideology (e.g., wokeism) necessary for sustaining the mastery of global capitalists (S_1). After all, culture war is of benefit to the ruling class since it is a distraction from class conflict. Hystericization (\$) is a means (a praxis) but not an end: it is not a substitute for the revolutionary politics of class struggle. In the aftermath of the May 1968 student movement, Lacan famously said, "What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one".⁵⁴ This is what happens when *performative* or *affective hystericization* (S_2) becomes a political end in itself, as is the case with liberal identity politics, wherein identity is fetishized in the commodity form (a). Lacan's statement is an apt observation on the shift from old leftism to new leftism, predicting the regressive future of post-leftism. According to wokeism, it is considered 'radical' to *affectively hystericize* Freud by performatively canceling him and replacing him with a new charismatic and diverse 'master.' This, of course, assumes that Sigmund Freud himself was European, a question that Edward Said found to be far from straightforward.⁵⁵

Intellectually hystericizing (or critiquing) Freudian psychoanalysis would conversely amount to challenging some of the field's master signifiers (e.g., the phallus), which has been happening a great deal since Freud's time, and that is part of the scientific process (i.e., dialectics). Illustrative examples include *Black Skin, White Masks*,⁵⁶ *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*,⁵⁷ and *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*.⁵⁸

Hystericization is a praxis that challenges master signifiers (e.g., capital or the phallus); it is not the business of canceling 'masters' (e.g., Marx or Freud). Affective hystericization conflates Imaginary masters with Symbolic signifiers. Intellectual hystericization critiques master signifiers through sublation; affective hystericization is the negation (disavowal) of 'masters' through cancelation. The postcolonial unreason of liberals is very close to what Žižek terms "cynical reason"⁵⁹—a form of ideological bad faith, which is ultimately aligned with the instrumental reason of global capitalism.

The Irrational Epistemology of Postcolonial Unreason

By framing the postcolonial unreason of liberal wokeism as an irrationalism, I am invoking Georg Lukács's point about how irrationalism comes about in capitalist society as the bourgeoisie's reactionary answer to material problems that arise from the class struggle.⁶⁰ So what is the irrational (or reactionary) epistemology of postcolonial unreason? First, there is Judith Butler's claim "that identity is performatively constituted",⁶¹ which implies not only an identity politics, but also a *performative aesthetics of melancholic identification*. For Butler, identification is "crucial to a notion of performativity that emphasizes the way minority identities are produced and riven at the same time under conditions of domination".⁶² In psychoanalysis, identification (with the analyst) is an

⁵⁴ Lacan, *The other side of psychoanalysis*, p. 207.

⁵⁵ Said, *Freud and the non-European*.

⁵⁶ Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*.

⁵⁸ Voloshinov, *Freudianism*.

⁵⁹ Žižek, *The sublime object of ideology*.

⁶⁰ Lukács, *The destruction of reason*, p. 9.

⁶¹ Butler, *Gender trouble*, p. 33.

⁶² Butler, *Gender trouble*, p. 192.

impediment that must be overcome. In ego psychology, that kind of identification is the goal of therapy. Butler's account of identification aligns with ego psychology's: "it must be possible to enact an identification that displays its phantasmatic structure".⁶³ Butler finds the Imaginary fantasy of wholeness guaranteed by what she terms "melancholic identification" more compelling than the sense of subjective loss (i.e., unconscious desire) afforded by the Symbolic order of language and law. Butler writes, "The mask [i.e., the performative persona, ego, or being] thus conceals this loss, but preserves (and negates) this loss through its concealment. The mask has a double function which is the double function of melancholy. The mask is taken on through the process of incorporation which is a way of inscribing and then wearing a melancholic identification in and on the body".⁶⁴

Second, this performative aesthetics of melancholic identification is not a view from nowhere, but from a specific standpoint: *the new proletariat*, that is, "marginalized lives" in the words of Sandra Harding.⁶⁵ Harding argues, "Hegel was not a slave, though he argued that the master/slave relationship could better be understood from the perspective of slaves' activities. Marx, Engels, and Lukacs were not engaged in the kind of labor that they argued provided the starting point for developing their theories about class society".⁶⁶ Class struggle stems from an objective social problem (exploitation) and cannot be reduced to being considered merely the subjective standpoint of the proletariat. A liberated, or classless, society implies the humanization of all, and not the humanization of a select group of people. The proletariat is not a special interest group, they represent the universal category of alienated subjectivity. The psychoanalytic imperative is for us to traverse our Imaginary fantasies, which are alienating us, as opposed to wearing them as performative masks of melancholic identification.

Third, the performative aesthetics of melancholic identification from a marginalized standpoint is translated through affect theory as cultural politics. Sara Ahmed distances herself from Marx's critique of capital to develop her cultural politics of emotion.⁶⁷ She writes, "emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation. I am using 'the economic' to suggest that objects of emotions circulate or are distributed across a social as well as psychic field".⁶⁸ Later in the book, Ahmed notes, "To think of emotions as a cultural politics is to attend to *what comes up*".⁶⁹ These are some of the postmodern coordinates of postcolonial unreason's irrational epistemology, which can be contrasted with the historical reason of decolonial thinking, whose rational epistemology is grounded in the critical method of dialectical materialism.

Instead of celebrating the idealism of cultural politics, we ought to critique the materiality of political (and libidinal) economy. Affects do matter, but they cannot not be substitutes for dialogue and critique. They can, however, drive both on our collective quest for truth and justice. Affects are not a stand-in for the Real either because affects are deceiving—anxiety being the only exception. As Lacan notes in Seminar X, anxiety is "*that*

⁶³ Butler, *Gender trouble*, p. 41.

⁶⁴ Butler, *Gender trouble*, p. 63.

⁶⁵ Harding, *Rethinking standpoint epistemology*.

⁶⁶ Harding, *Rethinking standpoint epistemology*, p. 59.

⁶⁷ Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*.

⁶⁸ Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*, p. 45.

⁶⁹ Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*, p. 212, emphasis in original.

which does not deceive".⁷⁰ Ahmed is interested in the "the object of feeling",⁷¹ but for Lacan, the object-cause of anxiety is, of course, the object-cause of desire (a)–that bit of the Real, which the subject fantasizes about vis-à-vis the Other.

From (Post)colonial Unreason to Unconscious Wokeness

Conservatives engage in affective hystericization, too, but foreclosure is their form of negation. Their brand of irrationalism is *colonial unreason*: Bruce Gilley's, *The case for colonialism* being the most concrete example.⁷² The outcome of the conservative anti-CRT hysteria is the banning (or foreclosure) of CRT from K-12 school curricula in several Republican states, such as Idaho, Texas, Oklahoma, Iowa, and Tennessee. This is, of course, reminiscent of Nazi book burnings in 1933. "Postcolonial unreason" is a provocative misnomer, a paradox that points to the Real symptom of (post)leftism today: the failure of socialism and the success of colonialism. Decoloniality is embracing and working through this failure via historical reason toward the horizon of transmodernity.

Lacan considered mastery to be the other side of psychoanalysis,⁷³ which implies that analysts and hysterics (revolutionaries) are both radical or anticapitalist positions from which one can critique the Totality of modernity/coloniality: the apparatus of global capitalism. By apparatus, I mean that global capitalism is not only an oppressive ideology comprising liberal/conservative discourses and fantasies, but also a violent materiality expressed through exploitative means and relations of production. In other words, analysts and analysands are comrades. As such, we may speak of transmodernity/decoloniality as *an unconscious wokeness*—a revolutionary critique of coloniality and anti-modernity. Unconscious wokeness (i.e., decolonial thinking) sublates historical reason: Euromodernity and non-European alterity.

However, Marco Malaguti, a research fellow at the Machiavelli Center, would disagree with me and insist:

Wokeism is therefore configured, in Hegelian terms, as the synthesis of the opposition between liberalism and Marxism, which inherits from the former the individualistic-solipsistic Lockean and Stirnerian utopia of the Subject as an autopoietic entity and builder of itself, and from the other the praxis of superstructural revolution to be implemented with targeted interventions within the structure.⁷⁴

Criticisms of the Discourse of Wokeism

In my view, leftists (a term I use interchangeably with radicals and socialists) should embrace wokeness—defined as critical consciousness or decolonial thinking. Furthermore, leftists should critique wokeism as the current liberal ideology of global capitalism. Books critical of wokeism on the liberal side include John McWhorter's *Woke*

⁷⁰ Lacan, *Anxiety*, p. 116, emphasis in original.

⁷¹ Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotion*.

⁷² Gilley, *The case for colonialism*.

⁷³ Lacan, *The other side of psychoanalysis*.

⁷⁴ Malaguti, *Wokeism, child of the union of Maoism and post-Marxism*.

racism,⁷⁵ Norman Finkelstein's *I'll burn that bridge when I get to it!*,⁷⁶ and Susan Neiman's *Left is Not woke*.⁷⁷

On the conservative end, there are Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay's *Cynical Theories*,⁷⁸ Alan Dershowitz's *Cancel Culture*,⁷⁹ Mark Levin's *American Marxism*,⁸⁰ Gad Saad's *The Parasitic Mind*,⁸¹ Christopher Rufo's *America's Cultural Revolution*,⁸² and Xi Van Fleet's *Mao's America*.⁸³ Interestingly, Van Fleet argues, in an interview for Fox News, that "wokeism is...Maoism with American characteristics".⁸⁴

As I will explain later, liberal authors tend to focus on criticizing (as opposed to critiquing) wokeism. Therefore, they fail to see how wokeist ideology is part and parcel of liberalism. In other words, liberal criticism does not go far enough because capitalism is the limit of bourgeois criticism, which is why the class struggle is negated or, more precisely, disavowed in liberal analyses. Furthermore, we can say that liberals are critical of the discourse of wokeism, but their criticism has no material (or economic) basis. This is because liberals are ideologically invested in the fantasy of wokeism; this investment concretizes in the form of false (or alienated) consciousness: "I know very well that wokeism is an ideology, yet nevertheless I am captured by the fantasies of liberal capitalism and will therefore focus my criticism on the discourse of wokeism." The Harper's Letter is a case in point here.

Their conservative counterparts—for the situation can only be described as a *narcissism of minor differences among U.S. capitalists*—lean on the side of rejecting wokeness in toto as a cultural Marxist conspiracy, thereby justifying their anti-Semitism, anti-Blackness, and anti-radicalism. The conservatives' negation of historical and ongoing forms of oppression amounts to the foreclosure of the Other.

It is worth noting that Gad, a Canadian marketing professor with Lebanese Jewish roots, is a former Mossad agent. That is not to say that all conservatives in North America are pro-Israel to the extent of becoming spies, for there are numerous anti-Zionists on the Christian right (e.g., Candace Owens and Nick Fuentes); however, it is fair to characterize anti-woke conservatives as *antisemitic Zionists* since most of them support the state of Israel and its colonial policies against the Palestinians while also believing that wokeness is a Judeo-Bolshevik plot engineered by Frankfurt School scholars since the mid-1930s. Echoing the scholarship of historian Paul Hanebrink, Samuel Moyn writes for the New York Times:

The wider discourse around cultural Marxism today resembles nothing so much as a version of the Judeobolshevik myth updated for a new age. In the years after the Russian Revolution, fantasists took advantage of the fact that many of its instigators were Jewish to suggest that people could save time by equating Judaism and communism—and kill off both with one blow...according to the Judeobolshevik myth, the instigators of communism were the Jews as a whole, not some tiny band of

⁷⁵ Mcwhorter, *Woke racism*.

⁷⁶ Finkelstein, *I'll burn that bridge when I get to it!*.

⁷⁷ Neiman, *Left is Not woke*.

⁷⁸ Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*.

⁷⁹ Dershowitz, *Cancel Culture*.

⁸⁰ Levin, *American Marxism*.

⁸¹ Saad, *The Parasitic Mind*.

⁸² Rufo, *America's Cultural Revolution*.

⁸³ Fleet, *Mao's America*.

⁸⁴ Fleet, 'Wokeism' is Maoism with American characteristics.

thinkers, conniving as a people to bring communist irreligion and revolution worldwide...As in Judeobolshevism, cultural Marxism homogenizes vast groups of shadowy enemies and assigns them a secret design to upend society. As in Judeobolshevism, those supposedly under threat are invited to identify themselves with "the Christian West" and surge in self-defense before it is too late.⁸⁵

In a June 2024 episode of InfoWars, Alex Jones claimed, "*The global banking cartel* [which is often code for the Rothschild family] has used one tried and true process to create wars, rob us of our currency, and eat away at *our substance* [Ripper's "precious bodily fluids"?]. This process of control over the masses is called [drum roll] *the Hegelian dialectic*" (emphasis added). Consequently, right-wing paranoid delusions are not worth considering for scholarly examination since one of the conservatives' main theses for proving the cultural Marxism conspiracy is that *Critical Race Theory (CRT) is nothing but a racial variation on the "cultural Marxism" of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory*; in Lindsay's words: "Critical Race Theory is race Marxism".⁸⁶ In essence, for conservatives, woke is Marxist, Jewish, and Black as opposed to capitalist, Christian, and white. As such, I will focus in this essay on the liberals' bourgeois criticism of wokeist discourse and the radical alternative (the critique of wokeist ideology), which includes publications such as Niles Niemuth, Tom Mackaman, and David North's *The New York Times' 1619 Project*,⁸⁷ adrienne maree brown's *We will not cancel us*,⁸⁸ and Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr.'s *No politics but class politics*.⁸⁹

The Personal Is Political: Part Deux

Last year, I was invited to teach a graduate-level course on psychoanalysis at a private institute of higher education on the West Coast. My syllabus included readings from Freud, Fromm, Marcuse, Lacan, Fink, Žižek, Danto, Khan, Gherovici, Webster, and Zupančič. The course was organized around the issues of social justice, ideology critique, and sexual difference to address Marxist and feminist critiques of psychoanalysis as well as relevant topics today, such as racism and sexist oppression.

I suffer from degenerative disk disease and scoliosis, and I traveled to teach this course even though my physical condition was not optimal. I mention this because, as will become apparent, the students were cruel to me, and when I told them about my excruciating back pain, they said, "Maybe that was a sign that you shouldn't have come here." Here I am, a racialized subject from the Global South working at a public institution in the U.S. and the author of a book on *Decolonial Psychoanalysis*, and yet I was treated with so much contempt. So what exactly happened?

The class had around a dozen students. There was tension in the air from the beginning, which was confusing. Still, I later learned from the department chair that rebellions at this institution are common because the students are hysterized by wokeist ideology to be suspicious of 'masters.' Not to mention that the students also pay a hefty sum to attend this institute, which treats them as righteous consumers, wherein the student (customer) is always right. Within the first half an hour of class, one of the students

⁸⁵ Moyn, *The alt-right's favorite meme is 100 years old*.

⁸⁶ Lindsay, *Race Marxism*, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Mackaman; Niemuth; North, *The New York Times' 1619 Project*.

⁸⁸ brown, *We will not cancel us*.

⁸⁹ Michaels; Reed, *No politics but class politics*.

started crying. This immediately shifted the energy in the room from anxiety to anger. I asked the student why they were crying. Then they said that they had not done the readings and would not do them because they were 'poison' for their body.

The premise of this 'decolonization' metaphor is that Freud, Fromm, and Marcuse are "dead white men," and therefore, psychoanalysis is 'colonial' and 'poisonous.' Psychoanalysis indeed has colonial features, which I and other scholars have critiqued, but to think that the praxis of psychoanalysis is ontologically colonial is irrational. I found the student's attitude fascinating because it was an a priori judgment based on crass ignorance.

When addressing the passion for ignorance, Lacan distinguished between crass and learned ignorance—the latter being the Socratic form: "I know that I do not know." Subsequently, the other students identified with the crying student and turned against me as the enemy (a 'master') since my syllabus caused a student to cry. I realized later from conversations with another instructor that the students at this institute expect group process, and they prefer affective exercises, such as sitting in a circle outside of class to have some sort of metaphysical experience. The students accepted this other instructor after they cried in front of them and became openly vulnerable. As someone who practices psychoanalysis and is an academic, I uphold the boundary between the clinic and the classroom. I was hired to teach a course on psychoanalysis and not to facilitate a group therapy session.

The students refused to learn about psychoanalysis and associated it with evil, and that was the negative transference I had to work with, this projection of evil onto me—the evil of whiteness and patriarchy as master-signifiers. I felt dehumanized as an Egyptian with indigenous roots on my father's side and as a sexual trauma survivor. In other words, I do not identify with either whiteness or patriarchy. Perhaps this is what Finkelstein means when he defines cancel culture "as the turning of a person into a non-person".⁹⁰ I was considered a non-person because I was perceived to be contagious, a thing infected with the 'poison' of psychoanalysis. Interestingly, in 1909, Freud referred to psychoanalysis, in conversation with Jung on their way to the U.S., as 'the plague.'

I reiterated to the students that psychoanalysis must be critiqued from a place of love, but to do so, we must engage with the texts. The modernity of psychoanalysis (a dialectical science of the unconscious) must be delinked from its coloniality (e.g., its scientific racism/sexism). After all, one should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The students felt impatient. They wanted to learn about decolonial psychoanalysis from me, but they were not interested in how I got there, and I kept insisting that we must begin with Freud. I was shocked by the students' anti-intellectualism. This is the sort of faux radicalism that wokeist ideology produces, an irrational attitude invested in liberal capitalism through the surplus enjoyment of spectacular commodities that 'look' or 'feel' radical.

An excellent illustration of the wokeist idealism that underlies the affective death drive of identity politics is the following critique of the *1619 Project*:

The methodology that underlies the 1619 Project is idealist (i.e., it derives social being from thought, rather than the other way around) and, in the most fundamental sense of the word, irrationalist. All of history is to be explained from the existence of a supra-historical emotional impulse. Slavery is viewed and analyzed not as a specific

⁹⁰ Finkelstein, *I'll burn that bridge when I get to it*, p. 355.

economically rooted form of the exploitation of labor, but, rather, as the manifestation of white racism. But where does this racism come from? It is embedded, claims Hannah-Jones, in the historical DNA of American "white people." Thus, it must persist independently of any change in political or economic conditions.⁹¹

At one point, I invoked Marxism, and one student (who is also a yoga instructor) defended capitalism as a system within which individuals can do 'radical' or 'decolonial' things. At another point, I tried to argue that Freud was not 'white,' but Jewish, and I explained the anti-Semitic milieu of Vienna at the time, yet the students did not seem to care about Freud's experience with racism as a racialized subject. Critique involves serious intellectual work. The students' performative refusal of psychoanalysis (as a radical act in and of itself) was completely founded in *ressentiment* vibes. This faux radicalism is what I also call postcolonial unreason.

In her critique of wokeist ideology, Ayishat Akanbi explains the cruelty that results from death-driven affective politics of *ressentiment*:

Wokeness has robbed many a people of compassion and replaced it with moral superiority. Compassion and empathy is paramount to any social movement and to any form of progress. Once you have compassion and empathy you can often see that you have a lot more in common with people than you do apart and it's the system under which we live in that forcefully tries to group us on our differences. What is radical is kindness. What is radical is understanding...wokeness does run the risk sometimes in reducing very complex issues. Wokeness tends to be quite reactionary instead of responsive.⁹²

Akanbi uses the word wokeness, but her critique aligns with what I call wokeism in this essay. She refers to "wokeness 2.0" as "the second stage of the anger," wherein "the focus is a lot more inward." This is crucial, particularly since wokeism often manifests as group identification followed by negative transference against the one who must be canceled. For Akanbi, "the root cause as to why [wokeists] act in the ways that [they] act often is insecurity." The projection of insecurity is the source of wokeist dehumanization, wherein the Other is merely a virtual punching bag.

Compare this West Coast experience with my place of work, a public institution in the Southwest dedicated to underserved (i.e., working-class) students, primarily from Indigenous and Hispanic backgrounds. In contrast to the bourgeois students on the West Coast, my students are very curious to learn and work hard to advance themselves. This is because their social being is rooted in the materiality of class struggle as opposed to the ideology of wokeism. Freire drew a parallel between the oppressor-oppressed and teacher-student relationships, not to say that this is a universal (and unchanging) truth inherent to social reality and pedagogy. Rather, his point was that the classroom should not repeat these dehumanizing and oppressive dynamics that exist under global capitalism. Instead, teachers and students can work together dialogically to solve material and ideological problems thereby transform social reality.

⁹¹ Mackaman; Niemuth; North, *The New York Times' 1619 Project*, p. 8.

⁹² Akanbi, *The problem with wokeness*.

Decolonial Thinking v. Postcolonial Unreason

Decolonization is not a metaphor, as Tuck and Yang (2012) argue; however, decolonization is a metonym. To metaphorically consider psychoanalysis as a form of 'poison' is not a decolonial position but an irrational one: a tearful student's Imaginary 'poison' garnered empathy, but my Real back pain was ignored; this is an ideological function of idealism being valued over materialism. Decoloniality is rational, for it is not the negation of modernity. That is a gross misreading, which animates Olúfemi Táíwò's critique of postcolonial unreason in *Against Decolonisation*.⁹³ Decoloniality sublates modernity, delinks it from coloniality, and integrates Euromodernity with non-European alterity

Decolonization is a metonym because it must displace both coloniality and anti-modernity; it is not supposed to condense modernity with coloniality, which is the error of the wokeist approach. Just as coloniality is the unconscious of modernity, anti-modernity is the unconscious of postmodernity. Decolonization is a move beyond the instrumental reason of modernization and the irrationalism of anti-modernity.

Decolonial thinking embraces historical reason, which is the use of reason in the service of liberation. Psychoanalysis is an important tool for decolonial thinking because its method of interpretation is grounded in reason, especially in the face of the Unconscious. The experience I shared above made me appreciate the Great Books tradition because reading will always be better than not reading. The Eurocentrism of the Great Books must be challenged, which is easy to do by expanding its reading list to include masterpieces of literature from the non-European world. Let us remember that it was the Nazis who burned (or canceled) books that were considered too dangerous to read. Whereas conservatives are banning books that argue the U.S. is inherently racist, liberals (i.e., faux radicals) refuse any book not written according to the guidelines of wokeist ideology. This is postcolonial unreason, which is irrational, faux-radical, and essentially fascist (cf. Wolin, 2004). As such, conservatism and liberalism are two sides of the same capitalist coin; the difference between them is that one side is anti-woke while the other is wokeist. The solution to anti-woke and wokeist irrationalism is wokeness, that is, critical consciousness or decolonial thinking.

By Way of Conclusion: Wokeness as a Dialectical Materialist Praxis

Wokeness, or decolonial thinking, has the potential to be revolutionary. As critical consciousness, wokeness is an awareness of the exploitation that drives capitalist ideology in its liberal and conservative guises. Wokeness also strives to end this distress through dialectical materialism, a liberatory praxis grounded in social justice. Comrades desire a classless society—a libidinal economy not premised on surplus enjoyment or the enjoyment of the few (the bourgeoisie). Wokeness names the possibility of an enjoyment-to-come: the divine enjoyment of the many (the proletariat). Wokeness is dialectical in its

⁹³ Táíwò, *Against decolonization*.

awareness of the interdependent relationship between theory and practice, ideology and materiality, subject and Other, ego and unconscious, etc. Wokeness is material in its traversal of the capitalist fantasy. It is not enough to criticize wokeism as a discourse from a liberal standpoint. A radical critique of wokeist ideology entails traversing the capitalist fantasy of liberalism. Wokeness, as a dialectical materialist praxis, theorizes wokeism while practicing critical consciousness—a revolutionary meta-consciousness of our social being.

Non-Identity Politics

We must listen to Walter Mignolo's (2007) advice and move from a politics based on identity to *an identity based on politics*. Liberal identity politics can never be radical because it is an Imaginary politics of sameness, essentially a fascist politics grounded in ego identifications. For conservatives, it is MAGA, wherein 'greatness' is a substitute for bourgeois whiteness. For liberals, it is tokenism and rainbow capitalism. So what of the proletariat, regardless of their race and sex? They have been thrown under the bus by liberals and deceived by conservatives. Finkelstein, who has been canceled by the powers that be for his scholarship on Palestine, states it clearly:

The cancel culture of my childhood targeted, in the name of anticommunism, popular leftist movements rooted primarily in class politics. The new cancel culture still targets class politics but this time round in the pseudo-radical name of identity politics...Whereas class politics has historically focused on a massive redistribution of wealth from the haves to the have nots, identity politics focuses on the proportional inclusion of ever-multiplying identities (racial, sexual, etc.) in the uppermost tier of a social structure left largely intact in all its steep gradations. The primary vehicle of this politics is the Democratic Party, the mass base of which was once the white working class, but which is now in transition to becoming an identity-based party, in which identity displaces class as its organizing principle and base constituency.⁹⁴

Non-identity politics is grounded in desire and enjoyment instead of identification. As comrades in solidarity, we would ask ourselves: what do we commonly desire—despite our differences—that would drive our collective enjoyment? Davis (2015) means this by the intersectionality of struggles: comradeship and solidarity. We have different identities, but how do our struggles intersect? Non-identity politics is a democratic and revolutionary politics of difference, wherein the goal is the humanization of all: oppressors and the oppressed—the classless society as a liberated society. Two caveats remain: (1) beware false generosity and (2) beware sub-oppression.

False Generosity

According to Freire:

Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to "soften" the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their "generosity," the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as

⁹⁴ Finkelstein, *I'll burn that bridge when I get to it*, p. 369.

well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this "generosity," which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty.⁹⁵

The above quote can be easily applied to any settler colonial context, whether in Israel or the U.S., wherein Palestinians or Indigenous and Black folks are the oppressed, respectively. The solution to this problem is not to say that the oppressed are morally superior or pure humans and that the oppressors are simply evil. "True solidarity with the oppressed"⁹⁶ is possible for Freire. It is a radical act of love. True solidarity "means fighting at [the] side [of the oppressed] to transform the objective reality which has made them these 'beings for another'".⁹⁷ The American abolitionist John Brown is a great example of someone who practiced true solidarity with the oppressed.

Sub-Oppression

The second caveat is the problem of sub-oppression,⁹⁸ which results from the oppressed internalizing oppression, thereby becoming sub-oppressors in the Oppression Olympics. For Freire, this results from an undialectical mistake: identification with the oppressor. Our praxis must be more ethically sound than the status quo: socialism is not worth its weight in gold until the contradictions of capitalist exploitation have been traversed. In other words, liberation is not the upside down of oppression. The revolutionary move is not to replace the oppressors in power with the oppressed in power, which is the error of state capitalism under the USSR; rather, what is revolutionary is ending the oppressive system and actualizing a liberatory model of power.

From Cancel Culture to Sublation Culture

For Finkelstein, "The *woke politics* underpinning cancel culture is a reinvention of what used to be called *political correctness* or p.c."⁹⁹ or "political correctness 2.0".¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Finkelstein adds, "Cancel culture is the civic form of McCarthyism".¹⁰¹ This is a curious statement in light of the essence of McCarthyism: anti-radicalism.

In her MA thesis on the topic, Loydie Solange Burmah defines cancel culture as "a socio-cultural phenomenon that features diverse, complex communication processes whereby individuals create and assert forms of punitive justice against others whose behaviors, attitudes, characters, etc., are deemed problematic".¹⁰² Burmah relates the concept of cancel culture with wokeism by stating, "Intertwined with authentic objectives of restorative justice (or radical activism) are acts of *performative 'wokeness'* in which individuals capitalize their social media platforms by creating posts meant to provoke user engagement".¹⁰³

⁹⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p. 44.

⁹⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p. 49.

⁹⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p. 49.

⁹⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p. 45.

⁹⁹ Finkelstein, *I'll burn that bridge when I get to it*, p. 28, emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁰ Finkelstein, *I'll burn that bridge when I get to it*, p. 60.

¹⁰¹ Finkelstein, *I'll burn that bridge when I get to it*, p. 60.

¹⁰² Burmah, *The curious cases of cancel culture*, p. 3.

¹⁰³ Burmah, *The curious cases of cancel culture*, p. 5, emphasis added.

Performative 'wokeness' is a helpful way of thinking about wokeism, particularly because, as Burmah argues, "it pays to act woke"¹⁰⁴. She continues, "many individuals are capitalizing on mass engagement to advance their agendas for financial gain and high social status"¹⁰⁵. So, there is an element of bad faith at work in wokeism, which speaks to the link between the libidinal and political economies of liberal capitalism and the forms of performative and affective enjoyments they afford.

In her critiques of cancel (or call out) culture, adrienne maree brown encourages us to shift our critical consciousness toward community accountability and transformative justice.¹⁰⁶ brown regards cancel culture as socially destructive. For brown, "Call outs elicit both a consistent negative and dismissive energy, and a pleasurable take-down activation, regardless of what the call out is addressing" (p. 12). She continues, "Call outs don't work for addressing misunderstandings, issuing critiques, or resolving contradictions" (p. 30). brown argues that "call outs need to be used specifically for harm and abuse, and within movement spaces they should be deployed as a last option" (p. 34).

The kind of cancel culture I would support would be a *sublation culture*: for example, canceling student debt, canceling U.S. military aid to foreign countries engaged in crimes against humanity, or even negating Freud's false beliefs (e.g., on race) while affirming the truth of the Unconscious. Revolution is not about the cancelation of individuals; it is about the cancelation of a socially unjust system. We all internalize this system, which is why fantasmatic purity is an illusion.

According to brown, the offensive person should participate in "community accountability processes" (p. 34), wherein they can acknowledge any harm they may have caused and authentically apologize for it. In essence, brown is advocating, like Freire, for dialogue. To provide an absurd example, I organized an academic conference in 2019, and one of the participants anxiously asked me on the second day of the gathering to kick out all white attendees and limit the conference to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) only. Of course, I refused, but this is the sort of irrationalism that masquerades as radicalism. As such, faux radicalism (i.e., liberalism) is wokeism. It pretends to be radical through performative wokeness when it is liberal through and through. Radicals must reject this (post)leftist irrationalism. brown writes, "Transformative justice is relational, it happens at the scale of community" (p. 34).

With Marx and Freire, I would add that transformative justice is dialectical—a negation of the negation—and dialogical—that is, problem-solving. For Freire, the problem to be solved dialogically through critical pedagogy is, of course, *oppression*. For Marx, the negation that must be negated is *exploitation*. In sum, a liberated society is a radical humanistic one free from oppression (exploitation, racism, sexism, etc.). But this freedom entails a dialectical and dialogical praxis, particularly among the oppressed: "to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well"¹⁰⁷. The oppressed, or the proletariat, are not special. Historical and material conditions determined their social being as oppressed. The key is for them to use their critical consciousness to revolt against the dehumanizing forces of oppression instead of celebrating the diversity of their oppressed social being. To stay woke (and not merely be a wokeist ideologue), we must engage in decolonial thinking as a dialectical materialist praxis whose key features are dialogue, critique, radical humanism, and historical reason.

¹⁰⁴ Burmah, *The curious cases of cancel culture*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁵ Burmah, *The curious cases of cancel culture*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁶ brown, *We will not cancel us*.

¹⁰⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p. 44.

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