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The cost of turning a blind eye

We should neither blindly support current emancipatory movements nor yearn for past ideologies and instead try to look beyond simplistic binaries

'"Woke" is just the latest battle cry of the right, after "political correctness", "identity politics", "gender ideology" and "cultural Marxism" — let's not fall into their trap.' One hears such warnings tirelessly from activist scholars committed to social justice and the subordination of knowledge production to political goals.

'Woke' is indeed a new enemy of the right. While social-justice activists point to the origin of the term (being woke, awaken to discrimination), its opponents criticise the representation and language focus of current leftist struggles and authoritarian tendencies. Those critics are in turn labelled 'anti-woke'.

The warnings contain another important truth: the conservative and illiberal right not only reacts to (for them) unpleasant developments but also constructs interpretations, often in a polarising and catastrophist way, to mobilise support, open up new constituencies and connect to transnational ideological networks. I have myself warned that 'anti-woke' liberals, left-wingers and feminists in the West are falling for the Hungarian leader, Viktor Orbán — who is pursuing a strong 'anti-woke' agenda while he and his propaganda machine are 'cancelling' those deemed disloyal.

It's not all black and white

In the last year or two, it has seemed in several Western European countries that a book or a long-winded article is published every week denouncing 'woke' — much of it cheap, indignant polemic. There is, however, a danger that any such criticism is placed in the right-wing corner.

Activist scholars speak of 'strange bedfellows', 'coalitions that seem surprising at first glance', 'blurring boundaries' and 'discursive bridges

between the far right and the civic mainstream' and the evergreen 'useful idiots of the right'. But just as the increasingly clear feminist, liberal and left-wing and, indeed, medical voices against the most extreme demands of trans activism (such as puberty blockers for minors without enough research on potential side-effects) make it no longer tenable to dismiss any associated criticism as 'anti-gender politics', one cannot reject all criticism of 'woke' as mere efforts to preserve privileges.

Yet, David Paternotte and Martin Deleixhe, two Belgian scholars who have recently announced a new field of research similar to anti-gender research, believe the notion of 'wokism' normalises conservative and extreme-right discourse in the public sphere. But even they warn that if those who want to research 'anti-wokism' adopt the terminology of the protagonists, there is a danger of accepting its binary opposition (*they* are against 'woke', so *we* should be for). Progressive actors have a range of views on the associated issues and the authors question uncritical identification with a 'woke' attitude when certain of its manifestations require fuller discussion.

Status struggle

To get a handle on this, including its class dimension, Rob Henderson's concept of 'luxury beliefs' helps. Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu and Thorsten Veblen, these are 'ideas and opinions that confer status on the upper class at very little cost, while often inflicting costs on the lower classes' and which 'undermine social mobility'. Attacking marriage or calls for 'defunding' the police – positions one finds among progressive elites – are examples: these are institutions vital for the protection and mobility of members of the lower classes, whereas the upper classes can afford to live without them.

Recognition of non-binary identities and, in this context, the focus of 'queer feminist' actors in the West on language and linguistic recognition in the last decade seem to fulfil a similar function. Emerging in the Anglo-Saxon countries in the past 10 years, mainly the United States and Great Britain, this has been exported through hegemonic institutions via the culture industry and amid global inequalities in the social sciences. An interpretive invitation through which the better-off can increase their status, it provides a means of distinction: one is so open that one recognises *all* genders, in contrast to the masses caught up in old patterns of thought. Following Bourdieu, Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser call this an 'exclusive inclusivity', which semantically includes but socially excludes.

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The moral philosopher Philipp Hübl has dedicated an entire book to this status struggle stemming from the inflation of moralistic discourses. The human demand for social recognition also includes a striving for social status: in addition to wealth, knowledge, skills, relationships and attractiveness, morality has recently come to count towards status goods. Digital media provides the platform for constant engagement in reputation management.

But these morally articulated claims do not promise any improvement for the social problems of the worse-off. On the contrary, important concerns lose focus if the objection is immediately raised: this is too binary. When violence against women becomes violence against FLINTA (female, lesbian, intersex, non-binary, trans and agender), then the circle of those affected is indeed named more broadly, but the cause (patriarchal structures) remains unidentified.

Or take the care crisis. Those who carry it on their backs are women: unpaid at home and in poorly paid jobs with lousy working conditions on the labour market, in the West they are disproportionately migrant women from the Global South and Eastern Europe. If renamed cis (i.e. privileged) women in the name of inclusion, and if two sexes are not enough to describe the problem inherent in patriarchal structures, then the language needed to articulate and adequately address this shocking state of affairs is taken away.

Individual vs. group issues

In addition to the connection between ideas and status, it is worth exploring the functions of 'woke' interpretations and strategies in terms of individual and group psychology. That is if one does not want to be satisfied with comfortable explanations confirming one's own do-gooding — that any resistance to 'woke' demands is 'group-related enmity' (sexism, racism, transphobia and the like), a product of the 'abnormalisation of social justice'.

Esther Bockwyt offers useful analytical tools. She does not pretend that 'woke are the others, and we the normal ones can reveal them'. But she describes psychological mechanisms present in all of us – even those of us who are critical – favouring also greater understanding and self-reflection.

The ‘woke’ movement at times offers a socially displaced interpretation of individual psychological problems and thus the responsibility to deal with one’s own needs is relieved. Bockwyt certainly recognises social grievances and inequalities that must be combated but social struggles are sometimes misused as individual coping strategies. Objectivity with regard to consideration of offence can then no longer exist but rather all others should follow what gives psychological relief to oneself and one’s own group.

With such denial of intersubjective criteria for injury and discrimination, the possibility of a shared reality is lost.

With such denial of intersubjective criteria for injury and discrimination, the possibility of a shared reality is lost. Moreover, if one must always believe those who feel the disadvantage, the other can do nothing but remain silent or face collective punishment. This is a sinister side of the ‘woke’ movement — its repressive potential, the bullying and other techniques adopted to silence opponents.

In psychology a therapeutic process is at best open-ended: it cannot dissolve into ‘affirmation’ if the therapist is to help the client recognise and question their own dead-ends and recurring unhelpful narratives. Our feelings are not always the best advisers, yet, the progressive movement often seems to claim that not only are feelings legitimate but they are always to be believed — if one comes from a minority position. The proponents of such ‘standpoint epistemology’, however, could return to one of its founding mothers, Donna Haraway, who in her classic text declared that the positionings of the subjugated were not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction and interpretation — they were not ‘innocent’ positions.

Bockwyt draws from social psychology the ingroup-outgroup dynamic, too, in which the outgroup is presented as homogeneous and a friend-foe scheme is built, while groupthink is practised and demanded. This is certainly not limited to the ‘woke’ movement but it is characteristic of them too. It often leads to ‘us vs them studies’ in academia, such as this widely quoted article identifying any opposition to ‘woke’ as a counter-hegemonic discourse to ‘fighting fascism, condemning discrimination and contesting hate speech’.

A different approach

Ondřej Slačálek has recognised that progressive’ demands are presented as if nothing more than an application of basic liberal principles, such as equality, which cannot have any legitimate opponents: ‘This revolution

pretends not to be a revolution; it is a self-denying revolution.' Yet, the human need for recognition is abused in extreme forms of this activism as emotional blackmail: I can *only* exist if others validate my identity. It is something completely different to want to be seen as equal and treated equally as a woman or a lesbian or someone from an ethnic minority.

If everyone should not only treat me equally but also *perceive* me the way I want (as a man or a non-binary person in a female body for instance), fellow human beings are called upon to give up their own perceptions. Of course, it is possible to argue about competing political projects, diagnoses and remedies in a democracy, but to claim critical views of this politicisation of perception are right-wing talking points can trigger justified anger. It would be better to try to understand the anger than to brand and seek to eradicate the sceptics.

A relational approach, which Slačálek represents, is more helpful: instead of 'us vs them studies', we should analyse the arguments about 'woke' and 'cancel culture' *as debates and struggles*. The discursive field is complex, with different positions, and there may also be interplays. We are therefore better served – analytically as well as politically – by not falling for the efforts of the polarisation entrepreneurs (whether right-wing or progressive).

Research in this arena should neither defend current emancipatory movements, with all their goals and strategies, as beyond critique nor should it long for the 'good old days', whether of conservativism or positivism.

Many on the liberal and left-wing sides who are critical of 'woke' phenomena invoke a return to a positivist understanding of science and a rational conception of the public sphere that delegitimises affect. While the complete denial of facts or placing them in quotation marks – to which some critical social scientists are committed – has certainly not helped the reputation of the discipline, one cannot put the toothpaste back in the tube.

Research in this arena, or more broadly, critical thinking, should neither defend current emancipatory movements, with all their goals and strategies, as beyond critique nor should it long for the 'good old days', whether of conservativism or positivism. It seems more promising to acknowledge the emancipatory core and – precisely in order to rescue it – to examine critically current developments, which cannot be pressed into a dichotomous logic.

In recent decades, critical theories have done a great deal to comprehend

how emancipatory demands have offered false diagnoses or false cures, turned into their opposite or legitimised an unequal *status quo*. They can be used for that again. After all, progressive movements are also products of their time and their contexts.

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