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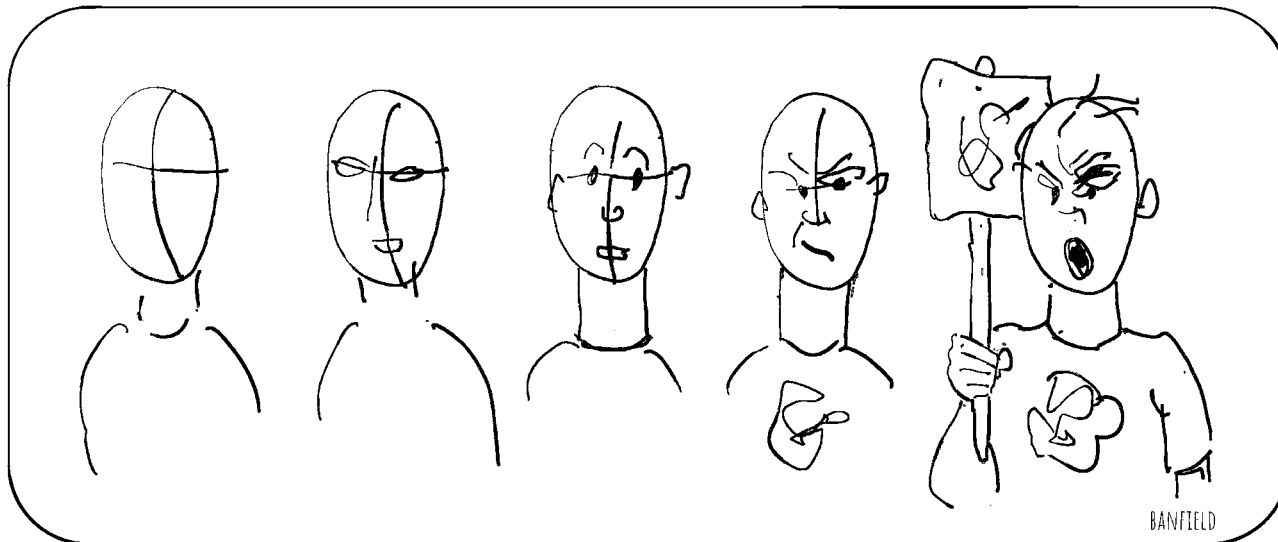
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## MORE THAN A FEELING

*I Feel, Therefore I Am: The Triumph of Woke Subjectivism*, by Mark Goldblatt.  
Bombardier Books, 192 pages, \$16.99 (paper)



THE TERM “WOKE” PERMEATES THE news today. In conflicts over K-12 education policy; diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education; or environmental, social, and governance principles in relation to investment strategies, the w-word seems never more than a clause or two away. “Woke” began as meaning something akin to “aware of racial prejudice,” but has morphed in recent years to carry much more ideological freight. It now refers to a commitment to a set of radical and progressive ideas on a host of issues, not merely those connected directly to racism. In our polarized time it has become a shibboleth.

Thankfully, a number of recent books help us navigate the meaning and significance of wokeness. Helen Pluckrose, James Lindsay, Christopher Rufo, and Douglas Murray have each made signal contributions in this area. *I Feel, Therefore I Am* is Mark Goldblatt’s addition to the literature.

The philosophically astute Goldblatt, a teacher at the Fashion Institute of Technology of the State University of New York, approaches his subject by setting a handful of the woke pathologies of our day against the background of the “turn to the subject” in Western thought. The first chapter provides a philosophical genealogy of wokeness. It begins with René Descartes, moves through the development of idealism by Bishop Berkeley

and Immanuel Kant, and ends with the triumvirate of what Goldblatt calls “postmodernism’s stooges”: Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault. Goldblatt highlights some of the egregious implications of the thought of these men, especially how it leads to skepticism about objective truth both in regard to the inadequacy of language to express truth and the suspicion that truth claims are ultimately manipulative bids for power, not disinterested statements about reality. He also notes the misuse by humanities professors of concepts such as Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and Einstein’s theory of relativity. Ironically, he might have been able to use a little Foucault here to point out that, in using these principles to give their ideological fantasies a veneer of scientific credibility, such professors are themselves engaging in a form of power play.

GOLDBLATT EXAMINES CRITICAL RACE theory (CRT), #MeToo, and transgenderism in subsequent chapters. In each case, he offers examples of the absurd claims that their proponents make. He presses hard on CRT’s underlying assumption that racism can be a feature of non-conscious systems (hence the “systemic” adjective that now routinely precedes the term “racism”). His focus is on claims about standardized testing

as “racist” and the now-notorious chart and exhibition at the Smithsonian where “hard work” and other commonsense virtues were identified as pathologies of “whiteness.” He also highlights the bait-and-switch according to which race is a social (political) construct when convenient but an essentialist fact of life when not.

On #MeToo Goldblatt is properly nuanced. He acknowledges that the movement brought to light some horrific abuses of power and position, of which Harvey Weinstein’s are the most notorious. He indicates clear sympathy for victims of genuine sexual crimes. But he also underscores the irony and hypocrisy of the Hollywood establishment that gave #MeToo its cultural power. The same Hollywood that exposed Weinstein enabled him. The same stars outraged by Weinstein worked hard to rehabilitate Roman Polanski—child rape apparently being less than a firing offense.

On transgenderism, Goldblatt has a field day. The obvious nonsense that is transgender ideology would be the stuff of a Marx Brothers movie were it not leading to the government-authorized mutilation of bodies too young to be legally tattooed, and to the hounding and thuggish bullying of those who refuse to conform to the new pronouns. In a sense, this is low-hanging fruit—men pretending to be women and going from middle-of-the-pack



athletes to world champion contenders merely by adding “s” to their third-person nominative pronoun.

**G**IVEN THIS, GOLDBLATT’S BOOK IS A helpful collection of material that can be found elsewhere but probably not in such a concise and pointed form. Yet at the end of the book, I was left with a few questions.

First, the author never explains how or why the subjectivism of the Enlightenment idealists and the radical methods of deconstruction and post-structuralism became, in a sense, the *intuitions* of the culture. I can see how Derrida’s destabilizing games might lead a college student to wonder if anything can ever have a stable meaning, or if the world really is just a linguistic construct, in much the same way that I can understand why David Hume’s critique of causality might have given a student in 18th-century Scotland pause for thought. But Hume’s skepticism did not become the general intuition of the Edinburgh of his day. Is Foucault, for example, the *cause* of a crisis or a *symptom*? The fact that the three postmodernist thinkers Goldblatt highlights are all products of a France (or, in Derrida’s case, a

French colony) that had endured the humiliation of the Occupation is surely relevant to understanding their thought and its plausibility and reception. Are they merely responding to a loss of meaning or are they responsible for the loss? I do not know—but it seems odd to examine them without raising the question. Yes, they influenced CRT—but why has CRT become so popular? Not because people have been reading Foucault or Derrick Bell. Why did #MeToo take off when it did? And why do otherwise sane and intelligent people now have no idea how to define what a woman is? Is it the result of subjectivism or, for example, the way in which technology has reshaped our imaginations in cyborg/transhumanist directions? These are important questions to ask because the answers will point us toward a solution. Maybe not all of what presents itself in political form is political in its origins. Highlighting the absurdities and contradictions of these various schools of wokeness will not take us far if we do not ask questions of plausibility and reception.

**T**O RAISE THIS SET OF QUESTIONS points to another puzzling aspect of Goldblatt’s book. Who is the target audience? One thing that makes the book

an entertaining read is its swagger and devil-may-care writing. I confess that I found the use of salty language irritating—a book undergirded by such evident learning does not need profanity and obscenity to carry its argument—but, setting that aside, the knock-about style indicates that this book aims to strengthen or reassure those already in fundamental agreement that wokeness is bad and therefore to be opposed. That is a worthy ambition for an author. Anything that gives solid arguments to those who instinctively feel wokeness is wrong is helpful. But there are many people who need such arguments expressed in a gentler form simply because they are genuinely confused. Perhaps a gentler critique, while less fun to read and surely less fun to write, would prove more effective among those we might call the “swing voters” on these issues.

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