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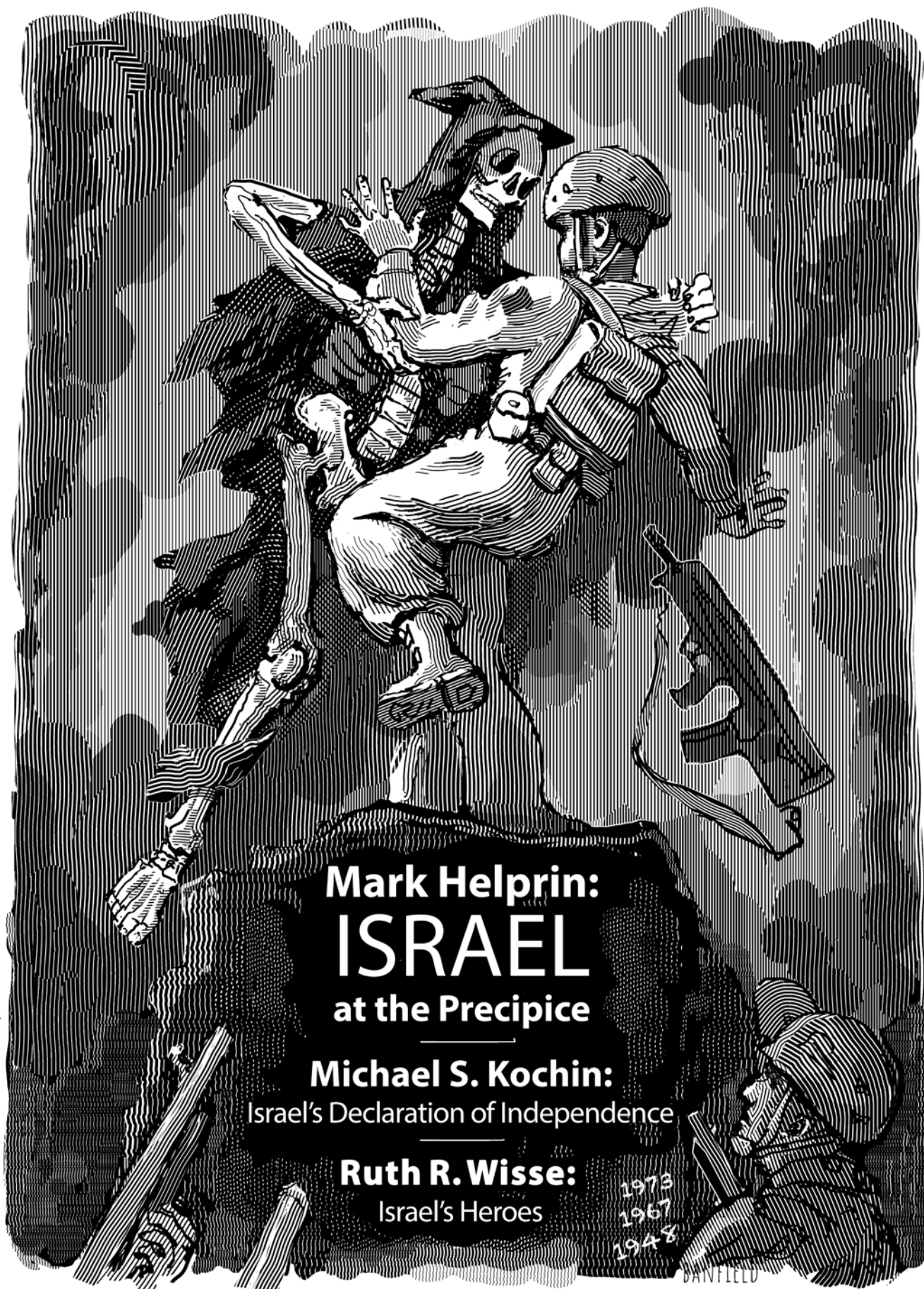
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Essay by William Voegeli

## THE WOKE'S ON THEM

*The Left after Hamas.*



FOR A TIME, IT APPEARED THAT THE race for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination might become a contest over which candidate was woke ideology's fiercest opponent. "Florida is where woke goes to die," Ron DeSantis declared in his January 2023 inaugural address, two months after easily winning re-election to a second term as that state's governor. By May, when DeSantis announced that he was a presidential candidate, businessman Vivek Ramaswamy had already been in the race for three months, having positioned himself as the *bête noire* of all things woke. His book, *Woke, Inc.: Inside Corporate America's Social Justice Scam* (2021), delivered the red-meat rhetoric promised by its red-meat title.

No votes will be cast until the caucuses and primaries begin in January, so it remains possible that DeSantis's or Ramaswamy's campaign strategies will be vindicated. But the preliminary signs are not encouraging. In public opinion surveys, both men have struggled to break free from the pack of other candidates, all of whom register in single or low double digits. Meanwhile, former president Donald Trump regularly scores above 50% in polls comparing him to the GOP field. One reason for this lead is that Trump retains the instinctive ability to avoid messages that are non-starters and employ ones that Republi-

can voters want to hear. "I don't like the term 'woke,'" Trump said at an event in Iowa this summer. "It's just a term they use—half the people can't even define it. They don't know what it is."

He has a point. Even making allowances for the fact that political campaigns are not academic seminars, the anti-woke candidates have struggled to clarify what it is they deplore, and why it's a menace. "Basically," Ramaswamy wrote in his book, "being woke means obsessing about race, gender, and sexual orientation. Maybe climate change too. That's the best definition I can give." DeSantis's was not much more illuminating. "Woke is an existential threat to our society," he told a reporter in June. It is "an attack on truth. It's a form of cultural Marxism [that] subordinates merit and achievement to things like identity politics."

The anti-woke campaigns' inability to gain traction suggests that voters are uncertain what the term means, and dubious about what difference it makes. Perhaps the whole fracas is merely a preoccupation of the chattering classes, augmented in the age of social media by the twittering auxiliaries. "Ron DeSantis speaks as though he is at some think tank luncheon," a "Trump insider" told *The Spectator's* Freddy Gray. "His campaign is run by dorks for dorks."

### Plundered Weapons

THERE'S AN ADDITIONAL COMPLICATION: many progressives used "woke" earnestly before conservatives began deploying it scornfully. In 2020, *Vox's* Aja Romano traced the term to black popular culture in the 1920s. It became entirely, explicitly political in 2014 after a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, shot and killed a black teenager, setting off demonstrations around the country. Two years later, the BET cable channel aired a documentary, "Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement." The 2019 book *Stay Woke: A People's Guide to Making All Black Lives Matter*, by Tehama Lopez Bunyasi and Candis Watts Smith, relied on the same sense of having been, as one activist told Romano, "asleep to particular kinds of injustices and oppressions in the world, and now you've been awakened to it." These origins explain complaints like the one voiced to Romano about "woke" having "been plundered into conservative and right-wing discourse as a means of mocking and satirizing the politics of those on the other side."

There was, however, a necessary intervening step before conservatives could claim "woke" for their own purposes: people who wanted nothing to do with conservatism first made clear that "woke" had passed its sell-



by date. In 2017, NBC's *Saturday Night Live* broadcast a parody ad for woke jeans: "size-less, style-neutral, gender-nonconforming." The following year, Sam Sanders of National Public Radio urged listeners to "put woke to sleep." There is a life cycle, he explained, for words that "begin with a very specific meaning, used by a very specific group of people." Since those early adapters cannot copyright their neologism, the term becomes widely employed, then appears in corporations' press releases, and ends up being something Aunt Marjorie goes on about over Thanksgiving dinner. By that time, an expression that started out as a badge of being a savvy insider has devolved into evidence that the person using it is hopelessly behind the curve.

To make his case, Sanders turned not only to the dictionary but to one of its lexicographers. The Merriam-Webster definition of "woke," he related, is "aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)." Emily Brewster, a Merriam-Webster editor, told Sanders that the trajectory of "woke" was following that of "politically correct," which her dictionary had defined as the "belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated." Though the latter term started out as a "sincere" attempt "to think about how the words impact an audience," Brewster said, "politically correct" later turned into "a cudgel, a mockery," and a "linguistic weapon."

Little surprise that conservatives' success in repurposing "politically correct" and "woke" has angered the people those boomerangs ended up striking. In progressives' rebuttals, one discerns their belief that conservative warnings against political correctness and woke ideology are made in bad faith—conservatives are just using new terms to say what they always say: leftist political projects are as absurd as they are malign. *Washington Post* columnist Philip Bump asserts that "woke" has become "meaningless as anything but a pejorative." As presently employed, he wrote, it refers to whatever "the Republican base doesn't like and finds unsettling, framed in hyperbolic terms." Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez complained on Twitter in 2021, "'Woke' is a term pundits are now using as a derogatory euphemism for civil rights & justice." Joe Walsh, a one-term Tea Party congressman who later quit the GOP out of revulsion against Donald Trump, tweeted earlier this year that "being woke just means being empathetic. And tolerant. And willing to listen. And open to learning."

## The Way of the Woke

**G**IVEN ALL THAT, THE QUESTION IS whether the advent of woke has changed anything. Has some important element been added to the Left-Right argument? Or do the same old debates merely sound different because they're expressed in new terminology?

Three recent books, by authors variously situated on the left half of the political spectrum, explicate the woke phenomenon and argue that it has, on balance, hurt rather than helped the Left's cause. *How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement* is by Fredrik deBoer, a self-described Marxist with a widely read Substack blog. "This book is not about 'wokeness,'" deBoer announces near its conclusion. "I'm not interested in spending a lot of time chewing through social justice language

different groups." (His belief that "woke" has become "deeply polarizing" leads Mounk to employ his own term, the "identity synthesis.")

Both men believe that the woke way of thinking and speaking has become, as the woke themselves might say, hegemonic. In a 2023 Substack essay, deBoer wrote that woke-ness "has become the dominant discourse in left-of-center spaces in American intellectual life." Mounk agrees: the identity synthesis has "gained tremendous influence" in the Anglo-sphere and "gone on to transform the left."

Finally, Susan Neiman believes that the danger posed by woke thinking to leftist politics has become sufficiently serious to require a book devoted to showing that *Left Is Not Woke*. Neiman, who describes herself as a non-Marxist socialist, is an American who in 2000 became director of the Einstein Forum, a German think tank, having previously been a professor of philosophy at Yale University and Tel Aviv University. Her book's title distinguishes leftism and wokeism, but also conveys the concern that many people assume the two are basically the same. "What's confusing about the woke movement," she writes, "is that it expresses traditional left-wing emotions: empathy for the marginalized, indignation at the plight of the oppressed, determination that historical wrongs should be righted."

Like deBoer and Mounk, Neiman believes that woke ideology represents a new development that has rendered left-wing political movements less coherent, less compelling, less comprehensible, less equipped to attract political support, and less likely to achieve their objectives. What makes wokeism not only different from but inimical to leftism, Neiman believes, is that its commendable aspirations and sympathies are "derailed by a range of theoretical assumptions that ultimately undermine them."

### Radically Egalitarian Transformations

**F**IRST THINGS FIRST. WHAT IS LEFTISM as such, considered apart from woke ideology? DeBoer, Mounk, and Neiman give every appearance of being on board with historian Michael Kazin's "classic definition," which he offered in *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (2011). Leftist movements, Kazin wrote, are those "dedicated to a radically egalitarian transformation of society." The social ills leftists want to correct, the injustices they want to rectify, are disparities of wealth, power, and dignity. To be on the left is to insist that such disparities are *not* inherent in the nature of things, nor are they necessary for prosperity, domestic tranquility,

#### Books discussed in this essay:

*How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement*, by Fredrik deBoer.  
Simon and Schuster, 256 pages, \$29.99

*The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*, by Yascha Mounk.  
Penguin Press, 416 pages, \$32

*Left Is Not Woke*, by Susan Neiman.  
Polity Press, 160 pages, \$25

*The Origins of Woke: Civil Rights Law, Corporate America, and the Triumph of Identity Politics*, by Richard Hanania.  
Broadside Books, 288 pages, \$32

or norms." What he does attend to, however, is explaining how the most recent trends in leftist politics, all of which are either derived from or consonant with the woke turn, have been self-defeating.

Yascha Mounk, a Johns Hopkins University political scientist and contributing editor for *The Atlantic*, is author of *The Identity Trap*. Born in Germany, educated in Britain and America, Mounk was a member of Germany's Social Democratic Party until 2015 and became an American citizen in 2017. He appears to be a modern liberal, the sort described by deBoer as "left-of-center but right-of-left." In *The Identity Trap*, Mounk designates as his political lodestar the belief that humans "can make common cause in pursuit of universal ideals like justice and equality." The woke ideology, Mounk argues, "undermines progress toward genuine equality between members of



and national security. The progress progressives seek is never-ending progress toward greater equality.

Woke thinking departs from the broader left project not by rejecting egalitarianism, but by its radically egalitarian transformation of *leftism*. Mounk and Neiman both lament the influence of postmodernism, summarized by one of its leading thinkers, Jean-François Lyotard, as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” There are conflicting accounts and opinions, but postmodernists insist that there can never be *authoritative* ones. In Mounk’s summary, postmodernism’s defining feature is the “recognition of the falsity of...grand narratives,” such as the Enlightenment faith in reason and progress or the Marxist belief that a worldwide socialist revolution is destined to succeed.

It follows, he says, that those under the sway of postmodernism “are forced to reject the most fundamental assumptions that ground our practices and institutions, from the veracity of scientific findings to the value of democracy.” The woke “identity synthesis” of postmodern ideas—which in Mounk’s explanation sounds more like an identity mish-mash—results in a stew that is arbitrary and nihilistic. He cites one academic who praises “skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and

meritocracy,” and another who applauds the “disavowal of Western rationality.”

Examining Michel Foucault, the most influential and beguiling postmodern thinker, Neiman argues that his animating belief—that power is enveloping, implacable, and pervasive—is a reiteration of the position taken by (or ascribed to) the Athenian Sophist Thrasymachus 2,500 years ago. What we call justice “is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger,” Thrasymachus maintains in Plato’s *Republic*. In “every city the same thing is just, the advantage of the established ruling body.”

Similarly, the postmodernist believes that justice—or, as he/she/ze would insist on putting it, “justice”—is not something you can see, only something you can see through. As a result, it cannot be a goal to strive for or a standard to judge by. For the postmodernist, Thrasymachus barely scratched the surface. Not only justice but science, art, rationality, coherence—meaning—reflect and advance the interests of the stronger. “Power was woven into the very fabric of our language, thoughts, and desires,” Neiman writes, summarizing Foucault. “It’s power all the way down,” which renders the idea of justice “increasingly quaint.”

Left may not be woke, but the woke are instinctively leftist. Their belief that power is all-important leads to defining politics entirely in

terms of redressing power imbalances. The objects of their solicitude are the ones leftists have been worrying about for centuries—the poor, the marginalized, victims of discrimination, to the exclusion of those who don’t fall within the favored identity categories. For instance, the power imbalance between Jack Phillips and the Colorado Civil Rights Commission, which has taken legal actions against his Masterpiece Cakeshop because Phillips refuses on religious grounds to bake cakes for customers celebrating a same-sex wedding or gender transition, is of no more interest to the woke than to anyone else on the left.

Neiman warns, however, that the woke are seeing a tree branch while sitting on it. Without standards of justice that transcend time, place, and a specific group’s interests, “there is no argument against racism, merely a bunch of tribes jockeying for power.” The woke, notwithstanding their talk about subverting hierarchies, end up embracing ideas and rhetoric that fortify those hierarchies. “If the demands of minorities are not seen as human rights but as the rights of particular groups,” Neiman asks, “what prevents a majority from insisting on its own?” After all, she points out, the world’s most successful practitioner of identity politics, drawing on the world’s strongest claim to victimhood, is Israel’s nationalist president Benjamin Netanyahu. Despite the

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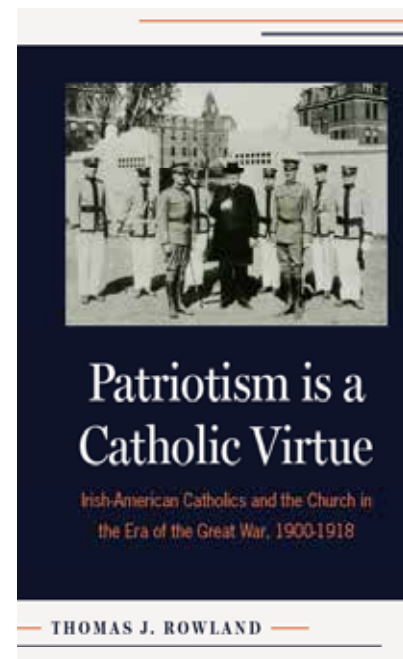
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woke assumption that the coalition of the Left is made up of the oppressed and their allies, while the coalition of the Right consists of the oppressors and their apologists, there's no compelling reason in the woke scheme to care about one group rather than another.

### Sanewashing

**H**OW ELITES ATE THE SOCIAL JUSTICE Movement has nothing to say about Foucault or postmodernism, since deBoer's analysis of today's Left emphasizes the political and sociological over the philosophical. But he makes clear that the ideas Mounk and Neiman examine have been instrumental in the American Left's recent history of squandered opportunities. DeBoer charges that social justice politics, a term he prefers to "woke," has saddled the Left with a vocabulary that baffles and offends millions of Americans who were not immersed in it as students at selective colleges. The forbidding terminology is sometimes employed in lieu of a policy agenda, as with Occupy Wall Street and #MeToo. Other times, social justice warriors talk themselves into advancing counterproductive proposals like defunding the police and abolishing prisons, as with Black Lives Matter. The latter ideas, deBoer tells us, escaped from intra-Left discussions without first undergoing "sanewashing," the crucial process whereby "radical ideas are gradually watered down to be more appealing to the wider public." The result is to fail, again and again, to enact politically feasible measures that would help, in particular, those people that leftists claim to care about.

Woke ideology, in short, exacerbates a chronic problem identified by George Orwell in 1941: "All left-wing parties in the highly industrialized countries are at bottom a sham, because they make it their business to fight against something which they do not really wish to destroy." Like Orwell, deBoer is a leftist whose unsparing criticism of other leftists' inanities and hypocrisies causes him to receive more favorable attention from conservatives than from progressives. He felt it necessary to declare in a Substack essay, "I'd rather woke politics win than conservatism."

Citing public opinion surveys that show white Democrats to be considerably more progressive than black ones, deBoer argues that "white psychodrama" explains how the racial reckoning of 2020 led to so much rhetoric and so little change. White liberals, that is, live in dread of being considered racists, desperate to "demonstrate that they are 'one of the good ones,'" in deBoer's words. At the same time, they feel guilty about being "part

of the dominant class," but rarely feel guilty enough to advance any reform that would render them less dominant. Woke politics, with its demands to "do the work" of confessing and atoning for participation in a structurally racist system, while mastering a forbidding and constantly revised vocabulary when discussing race, is tailor-made for producing a leftism that is both smug and inconsequential. Social justice politics allows elites, in deBoer's assessment, to satisfy an unspoken, unacknowledged desire: to manage their feelings of guilt over America's inequalities without ever reducing America's inequalities.

*How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement* chronicles the way leading media outlets (*The Atlantic*, *National Geographic*, and *The New York Times* among them) endorsed, excused, or equivocated about violent protests in the weeks following the death of George Floyd in 2020. National Public Radio broadcast a warm, respectful interview with the author of *In Defense of Looting* (2019). A *Na-*

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*tion* magazine essay, "In Defense of Destroying Property," argued that "too many lines have been crossed, too many innocent people murdered, too many communities overpoliced and otherwise neglected to expect anyone to react 'reasonably.'" In a response that could have come from Susan Neiman or Yascha Mounk, deBoer writes that "this attitude is a good example of the condescension that bloomed in 2020, when many left-leaning people decided that the Floyd protests were too fragile to be treated with adult discrimination and judgment."

### Division of Labor

**T**HE NEED FOR ADULT DISCRIMINATION and judgment is a good summary of the criticism lodged by leftists who prize realism and incremental progress against those who are full of passionate intensity. It is a debate that predates the current use of the word "woke." Responding to

activists who were demanding bolder health care proposals from the Obama Administration in 2009, Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel complained, "I'm sure there are a lot of people sitting in the shade at the Aspen Institute... who will tell you what the ideal plan is. Great, fascinating. You have the art of the possible measured against the ideal."

From another angle, though, the relationship between the grownup Left and the zealot Left looks more like a division of labor than a difference of opinion. "Reformers from above always needed the pressure of left-wing movements from below," Michael Kazin concludes in *American Dreamers*. The radicals' "utopian impulse...has always been a boon to those who pursue more limited gains." Refuting Kazin's argument would require clear instances of left-leaning pragmatists rejecting, categorically and successfully, radicals' efforts to shift the Overton Window, which differentiates politically viable policy options from those serious people dismiss.... I can't think of any, either.

The case that there is less to intra-Left debates than meets the eye gains support from *The Origins of Woke: Civil Rights Law, Corporate America, and The Triumph of Identity Politics*. Its author, Richard Hanania, is a political scientist and founder of the Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology, a new conservative think tank. Like deBoer, Hanania is one of Substack's most visible political writers.

To explain what's at stake when they take apart leftist thinking, conservatives have been invoking the title of Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* since its publication in 1948. For Hanania, however, the dominant flow between words and deeds is in the opposite direction: agendas need and eventually get rationales. You'll learn more about political movements and ideologies by focusing on their core objectives than by dissecting their first principles. Philosophers and essayists exaggerate the significance of philosophical theories, he suggests, because doing so makes philosophers and essayists seem more important than they really are. In a favorable review of *The Origins of Woke*, blogger Steve Sailer agreed: conservatives' default assumption, usually mistaken, is that dangerous leftist policy demands must have "a highly intellectual ideological backstory, ideally involving something that Adorno said to Gramsci and Marcuse in the New School for Social Research cafeteria in 1946."

Hanania cites as an example the fact that before 1978 defenders of affirmative action scarcely even alluded to the importance of diversity in student populations or workforces.

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The use of preferences to boost the enrollment and employment of historically underrepresented groups was, rather, justified in terms of redressing unjust disparities, not as a way to secure the blessings of heterogeneity. That year, however, diversity became the ad hoc linchpin of Justice Lewis Powell's opinion in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the thread by which affirmative action survived in a Supreme Court where four Justices opposed it, four supported it, and one—Powell—wanted to curtail it without either condemning or endorsing it. Immediately following the *Bakke* decision, the number of newspaper articles discussing the importance of diversity in higher education went “from a trickle to a flood,” according to Hanania, an instance of “the invention of a concept in real time.” Diversity instantly became “the standard justification for affirmative action policies.” Diversity is not much of an idea and affirmative action was not its consequence. Rather, diversity was “a post-hoc justification for a political compromise that was historically contingent.”

More generally, according to Hanania, everything about the woke ideology that matters was in place decades before any American had ever heard of Michel Foucault or postmodernism. “Long before wokeness was a cultural phenomenon, it was law.” As he sees it, the “central pillars” of wokeness have a more direct and obvious relation to the civil rights regime constructed in the 1960s than to postmodern philosophers whose writings go out of their way to be unintelligible. The most important of these pillars was the principle that *discrimination explains everything important about disparities* in various groups' educational or economic attainments. Civil rights activists and bureaucrats began using this axiom to elevate the socioeconomic standing of blacks, Hispanics, and women in the 1960s, half a century before Ibram X. Kendi codified the same thinking in *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019).

### Liberal Principles, Leftist Values

LEAVING ASIDE POLITICAL THEORY'S importance to political practice, Hanania's argument pushes back against Yascha Mounk and Susan Neiman's assessment of woke thinking—supporting the case that woke ideology is better understood as an extrapolation from, rather than a repudiation of, leftism. Mounk and Neiman lament that woke ideology subverts the leftist cause by framing it as the pursuit of group rights rather than the work of securing human rights. But even as they criticize the woke for rejecting

the Left's supposedly clear, compelling standards, Mounk and Neiman lend support to the idea that the woke are on to something: the standards the Left relies on *are* relative to historical circumstances.

In *The Identity Trap*, for example, Mounk repeatedly uses the term “universal values and neutral rules” to describe the fundamental commitment of pluralistic liberal democracies, a commitment that the woke are all too willing to trample. “Advocates of the identity synthesis,” he tells us, “reject universal values and neutral rules like free speech and equal opportunity as mere distractions.” But though the term “values” pervades our speech both left and right (“family values”), the fact remains that a value is a subjective preference, an idiosyncrasy, not an objective reality that brings any moral weight to bear against those who happen to dislike free speech or equal opportunity.

Neiman, similarly, endorses the view of Thomas Keenan, a Bard College literature professor, that human rights “are better treated as things we claim rather than things we have.” But if rights are not *things we have* a right to—free speech, free exercise of religion, life, liberty, etc.—then it is hard to see on what basis some people can claim a right and other people can decide whether or not that claim is valid. Elaborating Keenan's point that, in her words, rights “lack of metaphysical grounding is a source of their power,” Neiman posits, “To claim that someone's rights have been violated is to understand her suffering as an injustice, not simply a matter for pity.”

The denial of rights' metaphysical grounding, however, leaves open the possibility that any form of suffering could, if examined with sufficient ingenuity and determination, stand revealed as an injustice that violates some right claimed by, or on behalf of, a sufferer. The assertion that rights are not what they are, but only and whatever we say they are, is quite old. One of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal agencies, the National Resources Planning Board, came up with a “New Bill of Rights” in 1942, which included the right to “rest, recreation, and adventure; the opportunity to enjoy life and take part in an advancing civilization.” Upgrading everything that would be nice to have to the status of a *right* necessarily risks downgrading everything that reason and tradition have long established as rights—such as private property or freedom of association—to things that are merely nice to have, luxury items that can be excised from the civic budget when there are more pressing needs. Woke activists' growing willingness to suppress opinions and cancel speakers they find “problematic” violates liberal principles but upholds leftist values.

Last year in these pages, John M. Ellis demonstrated that postmodernism, the catalyst for woke thinking, has a far weaker claim to bold, iconoclastic originality than is commonly assumed (“What Does Postmodernism Really Amount To?” Spring 2022). Rather, postmodernism “has taken within itself a number of well-worn ideas that already had a long history: skepticism, cultural relativism, the shortcomings of rationality,” as well as Marxism's “identification of power as the most important aspect of the relations between people.” Postmodernism was taken seriously because it offered a solution to the crisis created by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991: after a 74-year test drive, radical leftism had failed spectacularly, producing oppression and stagnation in one-party states running centrally planned economies.

How could leftists explain and justify their cause in the aftermath of this debacle? Ellis argues that postmodernism's arcane language solved the Left's post-1991 public relations problem. Banalities could be presented as profundities by radicals who “dressed up their wooden thought in what they hoped would pass for dazzling, supersophisticated language.” Better still, the recondite verbiage disguised the fact that postmodernists had no fundamental quarrel with Stalinism. They faulted Communism's mass murderers for being, above all, unsophisticated, which implies that “Marxism only reaches its full intellectual glory in the faculty lounges of Western universities,” in Ellis's phrase. It also suggests that Stalin and Mao would have been less murderous if they had been more sophisticated. But it does not commit to this proposition, leaving open the possibility that the sophisticated Marxism of the faculty lounge will be no less violent than what has gone before.

### By Any Means Necessary

EVENTS CAN SOMETIMES IMPART GREATER clarity than logic and rhetoric. The Hamas attack on Israel in October, and the response to it on campuses, in demonstrations, and through social media, have brought about a crisis on the left. The relationship between wokeism and leftism was, in the books by deBoer, Mounk, Nieman, and Hanania reviewed here, a discussion item. The Hamas raids turned it into an action item.

The most provocative expressions of support for the Hamas actions are, by now, notorious. Yale University anthropology professor Zareena Grewal tweeted, “Israel is a murderous, genocidal settler state and Palestinians have every right to resist through armed strug-



gle.” When a journalist insisted that no civilian, anywhere, should be the target of violence, Grewal replied, “Settlers are not civilians. This is not hard.” Thirty-one student groups at Harvard University issued a statement that held “the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all the unfolding violence.” A writer for Soho House and Teen Vogue, Najma Sharif, tweeted, “What did y’all think decolonization meant? vibes? papers? essays? losers.”

Such responses elicited dismay from others on the left who had not realized that so many members of their coalition were possessed by that degree of revolutionary zeal. “A Left That Refuses to Condemn Mass Murder Is Doomed,” wrote Eric Levitz for *New York Magazine*. *The Atlantic*’s Helen Lewis deplored “The Progressives Who Flunked the Hamas Test.” In a *New York Times* column on “the need for a decent Left,” Michelle Goldberg quoted the writer Joshua Leifer regarding the many progressives who endorsed Hamas’s depravities: “I think what surprised me most was the indifference to human suffering.”

It should not have been so surprising. Under other circumstances, Leifer, a contributing editor to *Jewish Currents* and an editorial board member of *Dissent*, showed greater equanimity about omelets and broken eggs. “The specter of civil disorder is one of the few forms of leverage social movements have over state power,” he wrote in *Jewish Currents* three years ago regarding the George Floyd demonstrations in New York. “Protesters will once again need to call the city’s governability into doubt if they are to achieve the change they desire.” And if disorder and ungovernability also lead to human suffering? Well, since there’s bad trouble and good trouble, there must also be bad indifference to suffering and good indifference.

Najma Sharif’s rhetorical question showed a fanatic’s integrity. Where *did* y’all think this was heading? From the outset, Black Lives Matter has affirmed its solidarity with the Pal-

estinian cause. A 2016 platform released by the Movement for Black Lives coalition called Israel an apartheid state, and said America’s support made it “complicit in the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people.” That stance is consistent with one BLM chapter’s decision to affirm its commitment to the Palestinian victory over Israel by tweeting a silhouette of a paragliding Hamas terrorist. “Black folks and Palestinians both know what it feels like to be oppressed and experience white supremacy,” according to a statement by the chair of the Young Democrats of America’s black caucus, issued the day of the Hamas assault. “I fully support the Palestinian people and the uprising happening in Gaza right now.”

Only a willful obliviousness could leave veterans of 2020’s racial reckoning astounded that some of the people they marched with would welcome terrorists’ savagery. The George Floyd protests featured signs and chants of the Malcolm X slogan, “By Any Means Necessary.” What part of *any* did progressives not understand?

At the root of the solicitude for Hamas is the woke refusal to be incredulous about its own metanarrative. The woke, deBoer wrote on Substack, “speak and act as though there are no hard political questions and no such thing as a moral dilemma.” This follows directly from “the Manichean worldview that every conflict, every issue, boils down to a simple question of who is the more oppressed party,” in the words of novelist and *UnHerd* columnist Kat Rosenfield. Based on this reductionism, the woke have grown comfortable urging the oppressed to “punch up” at their oppressors. And we now know, says Rosenfield, that the last full measure of devotion to those categorized as oppressed is to shrug or applaud when they decide to rape up, kidnap up, torture up, and behead up.

Michelle Goldberg thinks that the woke endorsement of Hamas brutality could lead to a “fracture” on the left, a prospect she

compares to the repudiation of Communism by some leftist intellectuals in 1956, following revelations about Stalin’s crimes and the Soviet Union’s invasion of Hungary. After the Hamas raids, Yascha Mounk wrote in his Substack publication, *Persuasion*, that “mainstream institutions” must “stop uncritically embracing organizations, like BLM, that openly glorify terrorists.” By the same token, the Democratic Party should “cease to tolerate in [its] midst members of organizations, like the [Democratic Socialists of America], that equivocate about the moral permissibility of mass murder.” These are indeed useful benchmarks for assessing how serious the American Left is about protecting its moral integrity. With the 2024 elections less than a year away, however, purging parts of the leftist coalition poses political dangers.

The harder challenge, though, is that excising the worst elements of that coalition raises painful questions about why those elements were, in Mounk’s phrase, uncritically embraced for so long to begin with. It was fair to ask after 1956 why many New Dealers had been willing to link arms with American Communists, who claimed they were merely “liberals in a hurry.” And it is fair to ask after 2023 why many modern progressives could not muster the courage or clarity to repudiate wokeism *before* the Hamas attacks, even though woke disdain for liberal democracy has long been clear. Left may not be woke, as Susan Neiman argues, but it certainly seems *susceptible* to woke. The business of differentiating the woke ideology from the leftist faith, and insisting that the woke renounce their heresies, cannot successfully proceed without confronting the possibility that the woke were led astray, not by rejecting the Left’s fundamental ideas, but by taking them all too seriously.

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