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# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

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## AHEAD OF THE CURVE

*Sleepwalking Into Wokeness: How We Got Here*, by John O'Sullivan.  
Academia Press, 423 pages, \$45



AS DONALD TRUMP CONTINUES TO lead an aggressive counterrevolution against wokeness, it is a worthwhile exercise to understand just how we reached such a pitch of derangement in the first place. There have been many fine treatments, mostly rooted in philosophical analysis of the roles played by postmodernism, the Frankfurt School, the 1960s, and nihilist will to power. John O'Sullivan offers a new synthesis by bringing his keen journalist's eye to the matter in his latest collection of essays, titled *Sleepwalking Into Wokeness: How We Got Here*.

It is a feast of a book, filled with sparkling prose, usable descriptive phrases, and sharp judgments about figures ranging from Bill Buckley and Ronald Reagan to Margaret Thatcher and Frank Johnson (O'Sullivan's editor at *The Telegraph* when he joined their editorial page 50 years ago). As in most anthologies of previously published material, the topics range widely. But as the book's title indicates, by far the majority of the 41 essays included bear on questions bound up with the popular term "wokeness." All the key aspects of the woke cult receive some attention, as do closely related issues of gender identity, racial obsession, immigration, populism, nationalism, and the specter of post-liberalism.

What's particularly notable is how early O'Sullivan, who since 2017 has served as the

president of the Danube Institute in Hungary, saw it all coming. Some trends, such as identity politics, attracted his close attention as early as the mid-1990s. And though he predicted from the outset that wokeness could not survive genuine democratic accountability or attain the consent of the governed, he also warns that the furies of wokery could come screaming back if the Left returns to power, as they have in Britain.

THOUGH THE ESSAYS ARE ARRANGED topically, they are best treated chronologically for review purposes. O'Sullivan foresaw the character of our current identity politics as early as 1996, writing in "Mistaken Identities" for *The New Criterion* that the post-modern project of forging personal identity *ex nihilo* had reached the final frontier of denying human nature: "Even nature is no longer seen as a constraint upon identity because literally nothing is impossible for someone determined to become his own creator.... A plastic identity is, in principle, arbitrary and limitless.... Once identity becomes a matter of choice or conscious decision, however, a Rubicon has been crossed."

It has been fashionable of late to describe universities, where the theoretical basis for identity politics rules supreme, as "gain-of-function laboratories" for identitarianism.

O'Sullivan anticipated this too: "This modern theory of identity has broken out of the laboratory and, as in a 1950s science-fiction movie, is stalking through the town, inserting itself into the heads of regular citizens, and transforming them into other-directed aliens." But O'Sullivan also perceived at this early stage that most identities in the alphabet soup would be precarious and unstable, that many of the self-identified would be angry and unhappy (or worse), and above all, that the new identity spectrum would of necessity be aggressively adversarial to traditional or historic identities, assuring that the whole scene would be one of constant conflict. This was before the spread of the now-trendy term "cisgender," which is implicitly intended to delegitimize normal heterosexuals. (Indeed, Elon Musk has limited use of the term on X, describing it in a nice bit of linguistic jiu-jitsu as a "heterophobic" slur.)

O'Sullivan was obviously correct that identity politics would serve as the propellant for a long-running culture war, just as he observed, in the aftermath of the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, that legalized same-sex marriage would "not end the controversy but merely extend it to a range of other controversies over whether the equality right of gays trumps or is trumped by the civil rights of religious people and institutions." I am tempted to order a cus-



tom confection from the Masterpiece Cake-shop for O’Sullivan’s next birthday.

Throughout, he stresses that one particular identity is consistently downgraded: that of American citizen. Here O’Sullivan may provoke some disagreement as he demurs from the argument that America is primarily a “propositional” nation. He announces more than once in this essay collection that he is “against propositionalism.” Nevertheless, he is not critical or disdainful of the Declaration of Independence and its cognates in American political thought, as are some American conservatives. He thinks, rather, that “what shapes Americans and American national identity is the richness of the entire culture, not merely its conscious political expression.”

**T**HE QUESTION OF WHETHER AMERICA IS properly understood as a propositional nation, or a cultural-historical nation, is more often discussed in connection with the recently live issues of nationalism, populism, and immigration. O’Sullivan is right, however, to fix our attention on the connection between the inherently fractious nature of identity politics and the erasure of American identity. This is equally true of other national identities, as the same debate is raging in all of Europe. But it should be more obvious or urgent in the case of America, given its creedal foundation in the self-evident truth that all men are created equal. Our individual rights, and republican government itself, depend upon a specific nature and common identity—not separate, indeterminate, and opposed identities.

Fast forward more than 20 years to O’Sullivan’s other sustained treatment of the woke revolution in this collection, a July 2020 essay comparing the West’s cultural revolution to China’s infamous and destructive cultural revolution of the 1960s. He was not the first to make this comparison: perplexed journalists at *The New York Times* ran a news story about Chinese intellectuals who supported Trump in 2020 because they saw him as the only person standing up against the same kind of ruinous movements that wracked China. O’Sullivan looks past the underlying philosophy of Maoism and focuses on its concrete political expressions. The first of these was conflict among the political and cultural elites, which in America originally manifested itself in the controversy over “multiculturalism” but soon metastasized into identity politics. This in turn supercharged the legal machinery of civil rights in the U.S. and re-oriented it away from reducing discrimination toward achieving equality of result, no matter how coercive and unreasonable the means. This led to a dramatic expansion of the equalitarian bureaucracies that had been around for decades already, turning the bureaucrats and their activist adjuncts into a veritable Red

Guard (think Antifa and Black Lives Matter). There followed selective law enforcement, and a compliant news media that joined the lies.

“Compliance to what, however?” asks O’Sullivan. “The BLM movement’s actual political programme goes beyond racial fairness and legal equality to resemble a catch-all for anything the quasi-Marxist Left can force moderate Democrats to swallow for the sake of office.” He thought the woke revolution was still in its early phase at this point, its outcome indeterminate. But he leaned toward the view that wokeness could not permanently succeed in any regime with deeply rooted democratic and liberal traditions: “Those traditions will almost certainly be strong enough to contain a Woke regime long enough for an election to punish its preordained chaos, failure, and authoritarianism.”

Writing ahead of the 2020 election, O’Sullivan thought Trump might succeed in halting wokeness if he won re-election, but erred in thinking that if Joe Biden won, he’d “try to recruit and control the revolutionary Left and to dilute their policies.” To the contrary, the reputedly “moderate” Biden capitulated completely to the woke Left. All the same, O’Sullivan’s final argument was ultimately vindicated in the last election: “Elections trump revolutions,” he wrote, predicting that at some point the voters would deny their consent to woke rule. The fact that Democrats fell mute in the face of Trump’s 2024 campaign slogan that “Kamala Harris is for they/them; President Trump is for you” serves as one indicator that wokeness could not stand up to genuine democratic accountability.

**I**N THE LATE 1990S, WHEN THE CONSENSUS among leading Western thinkers was that the “end of history” moment assured benign progress everywhere, O’Sullivan noted multiple reasons for skepticism, all of which were subsequently borne out. Following the political scientist Samuel Huntington, he expected that Islam would become more radical and anti-Western, that challenges to democracy would come not from an existing or new ideological rival but from within democracy itself, and that the failure to control immigration or even recognize its salience would be a force multiplier for all of these issue vectors. (He even used a term lately more popular with CRB readers, referring to a “cold civil war in the West.”) As he correctly notes in one of the later essays in the collection, from 2022, “the collapse of Communism replaced one foreign enemy with a dozen domestic ones, liberated and energized by their loss of a disreputable patron. Radical leftism went native, and in doing so, it became more successful.”

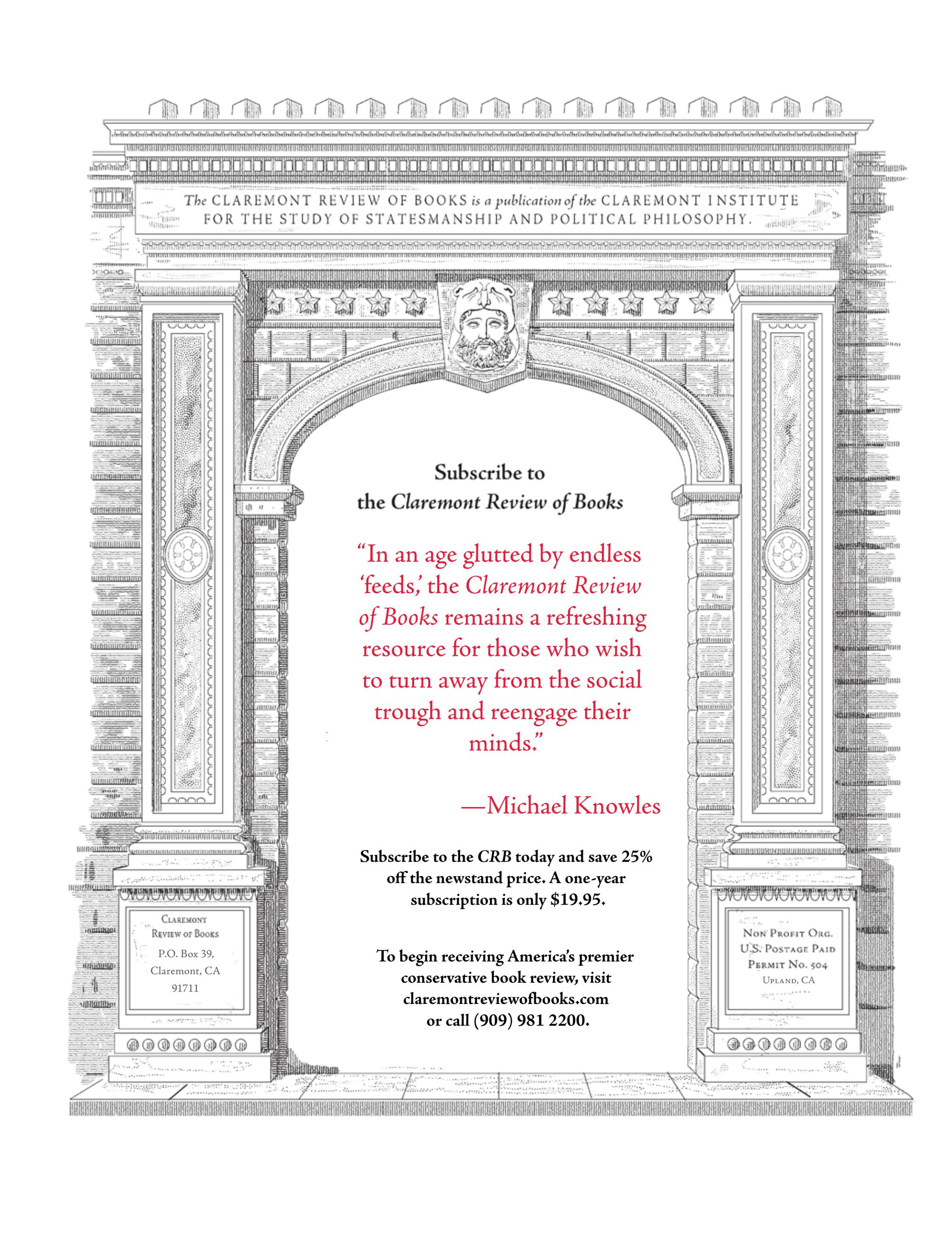
O’Sullivan discerned that a nagging sense of self-doubt in the West lurked beneath all the triumphalism about the “end of history,” block-

ing honest debate about immigration or cultural identity. In 2001 he noted one telling marker: Jean Raspail’s prophetic 1973 novel, *The Camp of the Saints*, which dramatized the spreading doctrine of “antiracism” sweeping all before it, was placed beyond the pale of respectable opinion. O’Sullivan discerned the first stirrings of what would become Brexit, as more and more issues were steadily excluded from acceptable public debate: immigration, race, the power and reach of the European Union, the economic effects of globalization on the working class. The elite consensus both here and in Europe resists acknowledging legitimate dissent, and O’Sullivan predicted by 2014 that the voters would soon begin to make their voice heard: “Liberalism without democracy” is an apt description of the system of government towards which the West has been moving since 1989, and populism the resistance to it.”

**H**E DIDN’T HAVE TO WAIT LONG. THE Brexit vote, he writes, was “Mrs. Thatcher’s last victory and the fulfilment of Thatcherism,” explaining that the seeds of the Brexit surprise were sown starting in the early 1990s when Thatcher was still in office. Despite Brexit and its political sequels, though, the ruling class has dug in its heels against the people. Since this collection was published before Trump was returned to office and the clueless Tory Party ejected from power in Britain, it has become evident that the incumbent political center will not go quietly. Technocratic liberals in France, Germany, and Romania have all attempted through lawfare to disqualify their political opponents, while Britain has adopted a startling regime of censorship that would have shocked George Orwell. But not O’Sullivan. Back in 1989, when Britain’s authoritarians were still more ridiculous than effective in their attacks against Thatcher, he warned that, once installed for real, Britain’s thought police would not be as charming and polite as its legendary street police officers.

Meanwhile, in the U.S., even as DEI programs, pronoun proliferation, gender-bending, race-mongering, and other key aspects of wokeness are being rolled back, the persistence of the Left’s antinomianism should alert us to the danger that much of the woke regime could snap back into place quickly with a bad election cycle down the road, say under an Ocasio-Cortez Administration in 2032 or 2036. The fate of wokery is therefore best considered within a larger scope that includes the issues of immigration, globalization, nationalism, sovereignty, populism, and “democracy.” O’Sullivan has many useful insights into all of these domains, and many warnings that we would still do well to heed. He has always been ahead of the curve.

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