Acad. Quest. (2023) 36.1
DOI 10.51845.36.1.10

Review Essay

Where to the Woke?

On Critical Race Theory: Why it Matters and Why You Should Care, Victor Ray, Random House, 2022, pp. xxxix + 176, $26.00 hardback.

How Woke Won: The Elitist Movement That Threatens Democracy, Tolerance and Reason, Joanna Williams, John Wilkes Publishing, 2022, pp. 265, $14.95 paperback.

Safe Enough Spaces: A Pragmatist's Approach to Inclusion, Free Speech, and Political Correctness on College Campuses, Michael S. Roth, Yale University Press, 2019 (with updated front matter), pp. 160, $12.05 paperback.

Matthew Stewart

Brookings Institution Senior Fellow and University of Iowa Professor Victor Ray openly describes himself as an activist scholar "committed to antiracism." (xv) He is equally clear that he completed his primer on critical race theory with a sense of urgency. He wants to combat what he sees as mischaracterizations and misunderstandings of this academic field that have created what he sees as a "moral panic over antiracism in the United States" and made critical race theory "a perfect target for contemporary racist backlash." (xv, xxiv) The revolutionary aspirations of critical race theory are admitted to more quietly, but Ray at once acknowledges "its roots as an insurgent intellectual framework" even as he charges "leading critics of critical race theory [with] . . . operating in bad faith" for their resistance. (xxiv, xxvii) High marks, then, for transparency of authorial motives.

Matthew Stewart is associate professor of humanities and rhetoric at Boston University and the author of *Modernism and Tradition in Ernest Hemingway's* In Our Time (2009); mstewart@bu.edu. His last review for *Academic Questions,* "Are the Millennials Really That Dumb?," appeared in the Summer 2022 issue.

High marks also for lucidity. Although wary readers may steel themselves at the very sight of the words *critical* and *theory* in the title of a book authored by an academic housed in a trendy field of study, Ray does not indulge in academic obscurantism. He writes clearly and the work is cogently organized. Readers who are unfamiliar with the major concepts that have coalesced into critical race theory will find clear definitions provided here in chapters devoted to structural racism, colorblind racism, intersectionality, identity politics, interest convergence and several other key concepts, including racialized organizations, which Ray claims as his own "relatively recent addition to critical race theory," and which claims to analyze the particular ways that organizational structures discriminate against minorities. (94) The book is superior to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's introductory textbook *Critical Race Theory* (2017), which tries to cover even more ground in fewer pages, and whose chapters contain a good deal of classroom-oriented paraphernalia such as lists of discussion questions.

Ray posits that race is not a meaningful biological category but is and always has been a social construct. He argues that these socially constructed racial categories are invariably linked to the unjust maintenance of power hierarchies. Many of his examples from the past are unimpeachable. "The mythology of biologically meaningful racial differences serves not as a valid explanation for inequality," Ray writes, "but as an alibi for crimes in progress." (16) At their worst, these crimes have included cruel treatment of American Indians, race-based enslavement, and eugenics projects. Less drastically they have included exclusionary practices such as redlining and blackballing. Ray alleges that employers' reluctance to hire applicants with black-sounding names and so-called mass incarceration are contemporary examples of racially motivated crimes in progress.

Insofar as the book describes the past, it remains largely reliable. I suspect that most college students, for example, know little about redlining, and therefore have no understanding of its long-term deleterious ramifications in a country wherein real estate ownership plays a large role in building individual and familial wealth. While I certainly do not agree with Ray that serious critics of critical race

theory can be dismissed for operating in bad faith, he is correct that some of the objections coming from the general public do amount to denials of American history. There is a segment of the public that wants to airbrush what students learn.

On the other hand, Ray can be accused of tarring the present. His description of 2022 America is partisan, and his analysis of the present is tendentious. When alleging black people's lack of "agency," for example, Ray brings out plantations and Jim Crow as evidence, but the floundering cities that have been governed under several decades of black leadership are nowhere to be seen. Ray reminds us that Malcom X was told by a teacher that black boys could not become lawyers. This would have taken place in the 1930s, not the 2020s. In the interval the country has experienced decades of affirmative action, outreach programs, educational initiatives, catch-ups, head-starts, PSAs and a barrage of messaging that race and gender are no bars to anything a child may wish to achieve.

In Ray's description hateful cultural relics, obsolete attitudes, and long-dead practices all remain powerfully alive. Very little has been accomplished. "Critical race theorists reject the mythology of racial progress," he writes. (50) Following the thinking of Derrick Bell, founder of critical legal theory, Ray implies that racism is so embedded in the American soul and so woven into the social fabric that it can never be eliminated. Interest convergence theory, Bell's intellectual progeny, declares that black people are only allowed to make progress if their bid for justice coincides with white interests. Thus, the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case (1954) was not indicative of a moral awakening in racially divided America. Rather, *Brown* served the interests of a white power structure by countering Cold War Soviet propaganda that cited Jim Crow inequalities in hope of fomenting anti-American opinion in developing countries. (63-64)

For the critical race theorist, such interest convergence rarely occurs, and structural racism is the norm. "Racial subjugation is an ongoing project where many mainstream institutions continue to discriminate against people of color," Ray writes. (59) As an example, he examines so-called voter suppression laws. A thorough critique of his presentation is beyond the scope of this review. Briefly, though: what

Ray calls "purges" of voter rolls could more neutrally be described as governmental efforts to ensure their accuracy. Requiring an ID of one and all in 2022 would not seem exceptionally burdensome to the tens of millions of people in countries that have such a requirement; the closing or moving of polling places would have to be looked at case-by-case and may often get down to the difficulty of finding sufficient numbers of poll workers. Indeed, a slew of data shows that minority turnout continues to increase—dramatically in some cases such as in much-maligned Georgia—even after the decisions in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) that Ray finds deplorable. (This case relieved states of certain regulatory burdens that had been in place since the 1965 Voting Rights Act.) Moreover, those rebutting the claims of voter suppression have provided concrete evidence that the laws and requirements in states accused of voter suppression ("red" and Southern in the main) are often more lenient and generous than those in states that get a pass ("blue" and Northern in the main)!

Ray refers to critical race theory as an academic niche, implying that it is not affecting American institutions (he repeatedly alleges a moral panic to be taking place) and is merely the province of a handful of academic experts in the subject. His job as one of these experts, then, is to set the record straight on what these terms mean. There is an evasive underplaying at work here. While it is true that critical race theory professors per se comprise a small segment of the faculty, what is genuinely noteworthy is the degree to which critical race theory-inspired thinking has entered the cultural and media mainstream. I can think of no other social science or humanities theory whose key terms, intellectual strategies, and worldview have been translated into the regular experience of millions. The ideology has become part of human resources training, K-12 school curricula, media reportage, organizational board meetings both public and private, and it has taken on a life in the institutions that those boards oversee. At some universities and cultural institutions, it overshadows all else. Ray's underplaying of the field's influence is now a common move by its advocates who find advantage in claiming that critical race theory isn't happening.

This political and rhetorical move would not surprise Joanna Williams, who understands that progressive and social justice theories and the "studies" departments that have spawned them invariably seek to depict themselves as oppressed if not powerless. This "Victim Studies" stance is one of the characteristic maneuvers of wokeness, the now familiar umbrella term whose characteristics can be identified even if a precise definition of it cannot be formulated. Williams's starting point is this: major institutions across the West have accepted the basic premises of the worldview expressed by woke and have adopted practices in line with those suggested—or *demanded*, a popular word in woke manifestos—by its elite spokesmen. Accepted can be too weak a word: trumpeted is often the case. Woke transformations and disruptions can be seen in school curricula and extracurricular activities, in museums and libraries, in the media, in criminal justice and the law, in athletics, in the corporate world and the world of NGOs and nonprofits. Defunding police, cashless bail laws, mixed gender athletics, racially preferenced medical care, and pronoun mandates are just a few examples of contemporary woke intrusions on public life. What began in the university has spread widely, even into the highest levels of government, so that we see national leaders keen to profess their woke bona fides and to enact items from the wokerati's wish list. Although woke's origins may be a bit further in the past than many realize, the movement has been sweeping and it has been rapid.

Many NAS members will know of Williams, who has made a presentation to the organization, and whose previous book *Academic Freedom in an Age of Conformity* (2016) will be of interest to readers of *Academic Questions*. She is a former academic in the UK, active with the British think tank Civitas, founder of the think tank CIEO, and a productive journalist in various venues, most notably *Spiked Online*. Those unfamiliar with that web site may gather an idea of its willingness to engage fearlessly in polemics from a sampling of their typically straightforward article titles: "Trans Ideology Has No Place in Our Schools" and "No One Should Be Forced to Declare Their Pronouns," for example. While her publications and professional affiliations are

mostly British, the present book draws widely upon U.S. examples as well.

Williams's study is both anatomy and analysis of woke and its practitioners, useful both as a compendium and a means to organize the inchoate thoughts that its readership will bring to the book. She treats major themes and topics fully and explains them in relationship to one another: identity politics, including the obsession with race and gender; cancel culture, censorship, and censoriousness; political correctness and the culture wars; wokewashing corporations; wokeness in schools and universities. She exposes woke for the top-down, anti-democratic force that it is and laments the wedges that it inevitably drives between people. With its insistence on group-defined differences and its illiberal penchant for scolding, shaming, and silencing, it is bound to drive away people who are sympathetic with traditionally liberal social goals. Look no further for an example than the carefully ignored studies showing that DEI and antiracist training sessions are counterproductive.

Even though the book makes very few concessions, it is not driven by a single thesis. The closest the study comes to this is in its repeated observation that woke has so often "pushed on open doors." Woke's easy victories occur in large part because institutions have lost their sense of purpose. The center has not held and the best lack all conviction? That would seem to be a large part of the problem, as leaders of socially vital organizations and departments have substituted woke's shibboleths for their own proper sense of mission. Those who oppose it silently are unwilling to pay the cost of opposing it aloud. Williams would agree that nowhere is this acquiescence more evident than in the elite levels of tertiary education. In this sense woke has become something more powerful than Political Correctness 2.0.

Clearly woke aligns very tightly with identity politics, and Williams includes thorough discussions of progressive theories on race, gender, and intersectionality. She also analyzes the lack of interest that woke thought leaders display regarding social class. "The woke are primarily obsessed with just two characteristics," she writes, "race and gender. Rather than seeing individuals or [social] classes, they see identity groups that they label 'black,' 'white,' 'man,'

'woman,' 'cis,' or 'trans'." (195) Contemporary progressives not only ignore class issues, but they actually despise the working-class men and women who were once the focus of the championing left. Now these *lumpenvolk* are deplorable Trump voters and Brexit supporters who are apt to believe that it is unfair to allow a strapping biological male to be crowned an NCAA Women's Swimming Champion. Williams traces these developments in one of the book's best chapters, "From Class to Identity." The Union Hall has been replaced by the diversocratic Corporate HR Department and the university center for DEI. And in an overlapping change, gestural and performative social-media activism has replaced action-based politics: the picket line has given way to the Twitter feed.

The influence of academic theories on woke is unmistakable, and there is a lesson here for all those who ten years ago thought that these erstwhile fringe theories would remain inside the academy. Terms that were once the intellectual playthings and social markers of the academic activist avant-garde are now the stuff of the *New York Times-Washington Post*-NPR worldview. They are no longer topics of discussion; rather, they are accepted as axiomatic by those with large sums of cultural capital. And yet woke remains unpopular with ordinary citizens, as Williams shows in her final chapter, "Is the Future Woke?" Woke has not caught on but it has captured. It has captured institutions even though it is neither popular nor democratic. It is a top-down, not a bottom-up world view. Pockets of resistance to woke can be found within institutions, but it is mostly ordinary people—of all races and both sexes—who are fighting back.

While Ray and Williams analyze concepts and terminology spawned in universities and while they each devote some discussion to higher education, they both move well outside the confines of the university to address society-wide phenomena. In effect, they are interested in what the university has done or will do to the wider world. Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University, flips the script in *Safe Enough Spaces*. He centers his discussion firmly inside the university while occasionally arguing that broader society has affected the way that students and faculty behave. For Roth, these elements of broader society seem to consist almost entirely of the

lies, prevarication, and moral ugliness of Donald Trump and diehard MAGA supporters, which serve as a backdrop to the student struggles and campus turmoil that he examines. He acknowledges little else outside the university apart from social media, which deserves more thorough treatment than he gives to it.

My intention in setting up this essay was to engage one pro-woke book, one anti-woke book, and one book that I anticipated would seek a middle ground. It is easy to spot the key word in the title: *Safe* Enough *Spaces*. And in case the spirit of compromise implied in the word *enough* doesn't register, the subtitle openly promises a pragmatic view of campus contentions. Notably, the title does not go so far as to promise a blueprint for peace negotiations in the culture wars or even to offer solutions to campus disputes; rather, it promises an "approach," a vague word that seems to promise a better understanding of hot-button higher-ed topics.

The strength of pragmatic arguments invariably gets down to cases, and Roth often disappoints by evading specifics. The book repeatedly piles question upon question without sufficient attention to providing answers—or even hints. When the going gets tough, the author asks yet more questions. The reader would like to see more answers. If fighting racism with racism Ibram-Kendi-style, "antiracism" holds no promise, and if anti-woke critics are short on recipes for dealing with the forces that are everywhere at work, is a search for the middle ground the best alternative? If middle ground is the desideratum, *how* is it to be reached? While the book fails to provide answers to these questions, Roth seemed to have achieved a golden mean in a nationally publicized incident at his own university. His recounting of this story says more than the well-meant bromides scattered liberally through the text.

Roth was leading Wesleyan in 2015 when student activists binned copies of the *Argus,* the student newspaper. It had run an op-ed partly critical of Black Lives Matter. The incensed students also demanded that the newspaper publish an apology; they advocated a boycott; they asked for defunding of the paper; and they initiated what amounted to a campaign of harassment while listing the usual "demands" for racial auditing, mandatory diversity training, and the like. (In an

apparently ex-post-facto softening towards the activists, Roth does not list all these student actions in the book, leaving out, for example student complaints that *Argus* journalism "neglects to provide a safe space for the voices of students of color.") In view of the immediacy and fullness with which university officials have lately capitulated in similar circumstances, one can applaud Roth for doing as he should have done. He defended the newspaper against censorship and wrote a letter to all students that included the phrase "there is no right not to be offended." He also told students that they cannot "demand ideological conformity." (72)

Nor is Roth wrong to point out that protests are also protected speech or to note that he listened carefully to students' complaints in hopes of understanding their point of view. The outcome would seem, then, to be an excellent case study in the triumph of pragmatism even in the face of inflamed emotions and a national press spotlight: uphold press freedoms, declare that ideological heterodoxy is permitted, while also re-assuring all students, including the protestors, that they are welcome at the university and have every right to espouse their opinions but no right to silence others.

And yet Roth's retelling of the event includes sloppy thinking and sly rhetoric that bedevils the book. For example, he scolds journalists for covering the Wesleyan story rather than covering the slashed budgets at local and regional newspapers throughout the U.S. But his complaint is wrong in two ways. First it is factually incorrect. The slashing of newspaper budgets was widely covered by the media. Second, Roth constructs an obvious false dilemma. There is no reason that both stories cannot be covered.

Roth also wonders why the Wesleyan protestors drew criticism at a time when "legislators were calling for arming college students." (73) Another false dilemma, of course, and one that manages to suggest the false while suppressing a larger truth. Again, these legislators *were* reported upon, or Roth would not know about them. There is nothing in the coverage of Wesleyan to suggest that critics of its would-be student-censors could not make distinctions between censorship and gun violence. Moreover, the Wesleyan story was not *sui generis* but was one of many examples of student-led efforts to censor,

suppress, or de-platform. It is the legislators who were the fringe story in 2015, not the activists who were advocating censorship. In subsequent years we have not seen firearms being handed out at college registrations. We have seen journalists fired and canceled and their stories quashed for not conforming to ideological expectations. Such suppression has occurred even at well-funded legacy media such as the *New York Times*. While casting about for equivalencies that tend to excuse the activists, Roth misses the point that Wesleyan's incident was one among many that not only set progressives at odds with conservative critics but also revealed a set of disagreements and confusions within the broader political left that has yet to be resolved.

I hope that the reader has not found the previous paragraph to be an exercise in logic chopping or mere nit picking. To repeat, the value of pragmatic arguments can only be judged case-by-case so that contextual details and manner of presentation are crucial. This close analysis also typifies the price Roth often pays for his efforts to be a see-all-sides sort of guy. The first of the book's three chapters is dedicated to describing the move, "From Access to Inclusion," that is sweeping through universities. Roth certainly understands the issues involved, but he delivers the chapter in a style that combines hands-off reportage with occasional dollops of mission statement mush. The chapter displays a dogged refusal to openly state a clear opinion or frank judgment; even so, Roth's general approval of DEI initiatives comes through clearly enough. "The 'benefits of full belonging' have replaced the more straightforward goal of increased access," he writes, and "there is something salutary about schools focusing on providing the very best educational experiences for all their students." (39, 34) Roth is using the word *all* here strictly along the familiar lines of race, ethnicity, and gender identity that obsess administrators.

To be fair, I should note that Roth does not want to be seen as a pushover or advocate for easing intellectual rigor. He periodically asserts the value of education as a challenge to students rather than an affirmation of them just as they are. Nonetheless, there are passages wherein Roth is overly sympathetic to student grievances, or wherein he maddeningly withholds judgment after summarizing a particular

instance of campus uproar or vexatious protest. One sees this in his extended rehearsal of events at Reed College, an institution whose progressive spirit precedes woke. In an effort to accede to student protests, Reed faculty worked through several new versions of a long-standing introductory course on ancient cultures—several versions because students were not easily satisfied. "The result," Roth reports, was that "a foundational class on the ancient Mediterranean was gone, replaced by 'modules' centered on 'a set of humanistic problems framed geographically and temporally'" that included units on Mexico City and 1920s Harlem. Did this overhaul represent a loss? A gain? A wash? After devoting four pages to describing the ins and outs of the case, Roth doesn't say, but blandly summarizes that "students didn't just want access to a course concentrating on great books. . . . They also wanted to . . . see themselves as included in the class." (32) Remarkably a college president withholds judgment about nineteen-year-olds designing the curriculum.

The third chapter on "Free Speech and Intellectual Diversity" is the strongest, particularly regarding the latter topic. On page 112 the reader encounters the book's first forthright criticism aimed at the campus left: "there's no denying that there is a serious problem of political bias on college campuses, particularly in the humanities and interpretive social sciences." Roth indicates his support for viewpoint diversity, and it is not hard to believe him when he describes the safe-enough atmosphere that he aims to achieve in the classes that he still teaches. As for campus speech, one welcomes the plain declaration that "the free market approach to speech is not the solution." Even if one disagrees with the statement, one at least knows where Roth stands. But even in this strongest of chapters, Roth cannot entirely resist sophistry. He notes the complaints that conservative speakers are being censored by remarking that this complaint is as "paradoxical . . . as Fox News complaining about conservative voices being silenced by the mainstream media." Even if one accepts that Fox's existence balances the totality of mainstream media discourse, his analogy is not apt. Yes, conservative complaints get airtime once someone has been shut down. But that does not change the fact that there was a cancelled campus speaker, a disinvited luminary, or a drowned-out

visiting lecturer behind these complaints. That is the actual silencing. But Roth underplays this problem as well, even though his book was clearly composed during the heyday of campus disinvitations. He seems to think that most (nearly all?) of those who were silenced were nothing more than attention-seeking agitators.

About the Chicago Statement, he says that this bracing 2014 document promulgating the principles of free expression and defending academic freedom emerged at "a time when many campuses *were perceived as* having experienced a chilling effect on discourse." (95 my italics) What would Foundation for Individual Rights in Education make of Roth's sleight of hand? What does Roth make of FIRE's extensive list of shutdowns and suppressions and their findings on the relative unhealth of free speech at our colleges and universities?

Roth's good-hearted description of classrooms and campuses that manage to combine intellectual rigor with a welcoming openness and hospitality does contain a usefulness. Many students will feel gratitude when this manner of conduct is promoted. But Roth's "approach" sidesteps the enormous fact that his pragmatism, consistent with a traditional liberal ideology, is not compatible with the demands of critical race theorists, who will see his "affirming hospitality" as severely deficient and probably a subterfuge intended to maintain white supremacy. Critical race theory proponents Delgado and Stefancic put the matter plainly: "Unlike traditional civil rights discourse . . . critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law."[1]

The same goes for other woke factions that seek radical transformation, not accommodation or compromise. And it certainly serves no one to understate the power of woke, whose "values," Williams writes, "have been taken on board by the most powerful and influential section of society and have come to dominate our most important institutions." (2) On the day that I finished this article, the British press reported that the university oversight board known as the Quality Assurance Agency, has advised that all university

1 Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd edition (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 3.

departments and courses must actively work to "decolonize." This includes, for example, the charge that mathematics curricula "should present a multicultural and decolonised view of mathematics, statistics and operational research, informed by the student voice."[2]

2 Louisa Clarence-Smith, "Universities Told to Teach About Colonialism and White Supremacy Even in Computing Courses," *The Telegraph*, Nov. 15, 2022.