

The Rise of ‘Woke’: Is Kaufmann’s Account the Best?

by Jacob Williams

The Third Awakening, Eric Kaufmann, Bombardier Books, 2024, pp. 418, \$20.00 paperback.

Writing about “woke,” like disliking face masks or thinking only men have penises, immediately marks you with the stigmata of being right-wing. The fact that no neutral term exists for the subject of Eric Kaufmann’s new book, *The Third Awakening*, itself supports his preferred explanation of woke, which locates the genesis of this bizarre ideology in the usually unexamined taboos of progressive polite society, rather than the ideas of a cabal of Marxist revolutionaries plotting to overthrow America.

The last few years have seen a spate of books purporting to explain woke, which Kaufmann defines as the sacralization of historically-marginalized identity groups (xii). Richard Hanania’s *The Origins of Woke* and Chris Rufo’s

America’s Cultural Revolution, both released last year and ably reviewed by Mark Bauerlein in this publication’s Summer 2024 edition (“The Woke Effect”) represent two competing explanations. Hanania joins Christopher Caldwell (with both leaning heavily on the work of legal scholar Gail Heriot) in emphasizing the role of civil rights law, while Rufo, like Yashcha Mounk, Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, and John McWhorter, blames the radical theories of the post-1960s New Left.

It is hard to think of anyone better qualified to write about woke than Kaufmann. Not only is he one of a tiny number of political scientists who have spent decades studying the cultural left dispassionately, but Kaufmann is also unafraid of getting his hands dirty in political debate, playing an instrumental

role in the passing of Britain's extremely rigorous new law on academic freedom, now sadly delayed by the new Labor government.

Woke is part of a broader phenomenon of "cultural socialism" (8), which prioritizes equal outcomes and psychological harm-protection for marginalized identity groups above competing values, producing free speech limitations and "cancel culture," as well as deculturation signified by the toppling of public statuary and vandalization of historic buildings (9-13). Kaufmann promises us a "high-level unified field theory of the culture war" (xiv), a "comprehensive liberal-democratic political theory" (xii), and a "vision of a post-woke world" (xiv)—complete, of course, with a 12-point plan for getting there. Bold claims indeed, but does Kaufmann deliver?

An immediately apparent difference between Kaufmann's methodology and that of the rival thinkers mentioned above is that Kaufmann uses *data*. I counted over sixty charts, graphs, and graphics of various kinds across the book's 418 pages. Many of Kaufmann's nearly six hundred citations are references to rigorous empirical studies in political science and social psychology, a significant portion of which were conducted by Kaufmann himself. This deftness with quantitative analyses allows Kaufmann to expose the limitations of rival theories of woke with grace and ease. Plausible-sounding qualitative just-so stories are out, science is in.

Thus, we learn that woke is not a direct outgrowth of civil rights bureaucracy as Hanania claims, for when enforcement was scaled back under Reagan, corporate diversity initiatives continued to expand (111), while countries with more flexible civil rights regimes have seen similar transformations in corporate culture (112-14). Judges, officials, and corporate officers less attracted to cultural socialist ideas would have interpreted the demands of compliance differently.

Woke cannot be attributed simply to the explosion of Millennial and Gen Z mental illness blamed on social media and overprotective parenting by Jean Twenge,¹ and which, according to Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, is the pathological side effect of a preference for emotional safety over resilience, and thus forms the psychological foundation of cancel culture.² There is little correlation between protective parenting and woke attitudes (255), while the increases in mental illness, LGBT-identification, and left-liberal ideology that the young have experienced all seem to be explained by the growing valorization of victimhood. (254)

Thus, the full story appeals to the social construction of emotions: a culture of transgression and normlessness produces both anomistic anxiety and cultural socialist attitudes. The message is more important than the medium, for East Asian societies have seen a similar growth in social media use to the West but do not appear to be going woke or

witnessing a mass psychic breakdown (257).

Nor is woke a direct substitute for individual religiosity, as Joshua Mitchell's *American Awakening* has claimed.³ European secularization set in decades before woke arrived on the scene (223). Religiosity does not directly lead to a rejection of cultural socialism, unless it is mediated by another factor, such as a strong sense of national identity or conservative ideology (228). In Europe, where Christian identification has a strong ethno-cultural element, there is a correlation between being Christian and being less woke, but this doesn't hold (once controls are introduced) in America (226). Of course, the most vital churches in America are generally conservative ones, and as George Hawley points out, Christian identification is increasingly becoming a cultural marker of the political right,⁴ but it's the political conservatism that does the anti-woke work, not the religiosity per se.

Materialist theories of woke, which view the trend as an outgrowth of a progressive ideology that rationalizes the power of a managerialist "new class" arising from the divorce of ownership and control, are perhaps the only ones left standing after Kaufmann's analysis has performed its demolition job. The new class hypothesis, popularized on the right by both neoconservatives like Irving Kristol and their paleocon rivals like Sam Francis and Paul Gottfried, and today supported in an updated form by Musa Al-Gharbi,⁵ has a certain plausibility in explaining the inability of

the woke to declare victory: racism, like matter, can be transformed but never destroyed, for then the critical theorists and HR professionals would be made redundant.

Kaufmann's own theory of woke is genuinely innovative. Rather than focus, like Rufo or Lindsay & Pluckrose, on the supply of radical ideas, he shifts our attention to the demand side and asks why, for instance, applied versions of critical theory found such receptive audiences among elites—and, since around 2010, among the masses too. The difference is that while other writers analyze the rational logos of left-radicalism, Kaufmann addresses the emotional mythos of left-liberalism: the theoretical contortions of Angela Davis or Judith Butler matter rather less than the emotional cluster of myths and symbols that characterize left-liberalism as a lived social phenomenon (4).

This cluster gives what Kaufmann describes as our "moral topography" its third, vertical dimension (if anti-black racism represents the Himalayas, fat-phobia is a cluster of modest foothills),⁶ which explains the varying depth of affective attachment to different aspects of cultural socialism's theoretical structure.

The "shared values, stigmas, and heroic ideals" (3) of left-liberalism generate a ratcheting concept and mission creep over time, as condemnation once targeted at intentional discrimination is stretched to cover more and more ambivalent or contestable forms of animus or mistreatment (70-1). Above all,

the “big bang” of the “race taboo,” whose moral energy was later extended to gender and sexuality, generated an anti-racist public morality with no guardrails against overreach into unequal treatment of the supposedly privileged or suppression of any dissent from unfalsifiable theories of structural oppression as allegedly equivalent to blatant racist slurs (34-40). Well-meaning liberals became terrified of resisting extremists because they would have to risk violating their own most sacred taboos. Thus, the radical ideas festering in academia were pushing on an open door.

All this is highly plausible, indeed convincing. Even now, most academics are center-left, not far-left, and have reservations about cancel culture (131). We are witnessing not the culmination of a long march through the institutions but the West’s hegemonic left-liberalism skidding off its non-existent guardrails. Kaufmann’s taboo-based account explains, better than logos-centric views that search for a master-key in the works of radical thinkers that would render everything the woke do coherent and consistent, the relative absence of “doctrinal hair-splitting” among the woke, and the bottom-up, spontaneous waves of fervor that provide its energy (18). If woke is a religion (and even critics of the notion concede that it has at least some features of religion), it is, as Kaufmann points out, more Pentecostal than Calvinist (18).

After explaining woke’s origins and functioning, Kaufmann does not shy away from telling us what is to be done.

His 12-point-plan is pitched as a moderate effort to build a majority coalition of cultural liberals and cultural conservatives against the cultural socialist juggernaut, whose hegemony in elite institutions far outweighs its popularity among the electorate. It involves political neutrality requirements for public institutions (345), more aggressive and effective lobbying against CRT and gender ideology in schools (347-50), and an effort to transform our explosive cultural taboos into a proportionate “moral jurisprudence” (353).

The most innovative proposal is “equivalent action”: noting that anti-discrimination law already covers political views in the EU and in 11 states, Kaufmann suggests that any organization that wishes to use DEI initiatives to promote equal outcomes must take equivalent steps to ensure political viewpoint diversity (346-7). In other words, you can have affirmative action for racial minorities and women as long as you do the same for Trump-supporters. Or you can have no affirmative action at all, but you can’t pick and choose. If enforced, this would have extraordinary effects on universities and other bastions of progressive monoculture. In one sense, this creates a win-win for the right, since either DEI gets rolled back or viewpoint diversity advances. It would, however, also permit affirmative action to continue in cases where it is perceived that intentional discrimination against minorities persists. But given the amount of unacknowledged discrimination against Asian students

revealed by *SFFA v. Harvard* earlier in 2024, there is no guarantee that the true victims of discrimination will ever obtain relief.

Kaufmann believes the hour is late, but not too late. If the right can mobilize the majority of voters who decry cultural socialism by raising the salience of the culture wars, borrowing from the playbook of Youngkin or DeSantis (294), it can force the left to listen to its moderate voices and not its progressive activist fringe. But the clock is ticking.

Kaufmann swiftly disposes of the gaslighting lie that cancel culture is a right-wing myth: it may only be a small number of academics who are fired, but the majority of right-leaning scholars feel obliged to self-censor their views.⁷ Surely, a textbook case of a “hostile environment” under an equivalent action regime?

Kaufmann also makes short shrift of the notion that woke is, as Al-Gharbi has claimed, “winding down” (though there may have been a modest pushback since 2020). Indeed, the most disturbing chapter in Kaufmann’s book (Chapter 8, “Youthquake”) shows just how utterly indoctrinated and prejudiced the youngest generations now are. Seventy-five percent of college students think staff should be reported for offensive comments (231). Under-twenty-fives are ten times more likely to think J.K. Rowling should be dropped by her publisher than over-65s, and more than twice as likely to think Google was right to fire James Damore (234-5). This

is almost certainly a cohort effect, not a result of age (237-9).

The culprit is not crystal clear, and though the transmission of cultural socialism through social media is important, schools play a significant role: over 90 percent of U.S. schoolchildren are exposed to at least one critical social justice concept,⁸ and exposure is sharply correlated with changes in political ideology.⁹

All this raises an important question. Kaufmann is concerned about the division among critics of woke between interventionists like himself and libertarian skeptics of government action (343). We might justly wonder whether woke is on track to radicalize until it seeks to use the coercive power of the state to enforce total obedience. Will its adherents be content with entrenching their hegemony in elite institutions, or will they ultimately find it intolerable that belief in traditional gender roles or color-blind equality is taught even in marginal conservative holdouts? Would a woke vision of the future resemble a gender-neutral shoe stomping on a human face forever—an endgame involving the mass removal of children from gender-critical homes, the forced closure of conservative religious schools or churches that do not conduct same-sex weddings, and the repeal or rewriting of the First Amendment to permit draconian hate speech legislation? How many of those who think J.K. Rowling should be cancelled also think she should be locked up?

The answer is not clear from the data Kaufmann cites, but if it could be shown that the generational rise of woke ultimately threatens the First Amendment itself a few decades and court-packing incidents down the road, he would have a knock-down argument against the David French-ist position. If, as Rod Dreher claims, the logic of woke really does demand a shift in gear from our current “soft totalitarianism” to a harder form,¹⁰ then non-intervention is suicidal.

In the meantime, passivity is not an option. The generational gradient on woke is so steep that there are only a few election cycles left until DeSantis’s common-sense view that young children shouldn’t be taught radical gender ideology in public schools becomes a net vote loser in a majority-woke electorate. And if that happens, all bets are off. As Kaufmann warns us:

As [Gen Z] become the median employee in elite institutions and obtain positions of power, they are likely to upend the country’s classical liberal and patriotic creed. The senior liberals who are behind the modest anti-woke correction in the mainstream media will have left the scene as part of the inevitable generational turnover of institutional leadership.

A key message of this book is that this fate can only be averted if democratically-elected administrations, aligned with the Constitution, implement sweeping and sustained reforms to the country’s meaning-making institutions—especially public schools and universities. At a deeper level, lasting change is only possible if our moral order ceases to revolve around the sacred totems of historically marginalized race, gender, and sexual identity groups.” (xiii)

Progressives would have us believe that the culture war, which their activist allies started, is a trivial distraction from the real business of making small changes to GDP or inflation rates. The “don’t stoke the culture wars” line is appealing to useful idiots among business conservatives afraid of upsetting woke capital, and the left know that if they can keep cultural issues non-salient and prevent the right from mobilizing, they will win by default through cohort replacement. (302)

Kaufmann’s unified theory of the culture war is compelling, his post-woke vision attractive, and his 12-point-plan appealing and feasible to implement. Where his book is lacking is in its normative political theory. If a robust alliance between conservatives and classical liberals is to be forged, it will need an account of its deep moral commitments. Kaufmann offers a “utility-optimizing” (8) philosophy that aims to promote “full-spectrum human flourishing” (xii) and permits the balancing of equal outcomes and harm-protection with other values like negative liberty, family stability, and national cultural wealth. Yet utilitarianism has long been found unattractive to most philosophers, not least because of its difficulty in accounting for individual rights. Free speech is fragile if it rests only on a potentially falsifiable claim that it is the rule most likely to maximize welfare.

Here, Kaufmann is vulnerable to the appeal of postliberal writers, whose star on the political right appears to be rising. Thinkers like Patrick Deneen, Adrian Vermeule, and Yoram Hazony claim that woke is an inevitable result of the teleology of liberal individualism it-

self. The claim would be hard to prove or disprove empirically, but Kaufmann does not give enough attention to what has made their radical diagnosis appealing to many conservatives. While woke is not a substitute for individual religiosity, it does appear to offer a new version of what Peter Berger called the “sacred canopy” for societies whose public Christianity has either collapsed or become merely *pro forma*. Woke’s nexus of taboos, its symbols and flags, its calendar of high holy days dedicated to marginalized groups—all seem intended to imbue collective life with meaning and to sacralize a progressive conception of the political community.

Our urge to give political life deep meaning may yet be an ineradicable one, and Kaufmann’s mythos-based account of woke would certainly comport with a postliberal thesis about the human need for sacrality. Kaufmann would be well-placed to break down some of the postliberal arguments into testable empirical claims. Vermeule is a stirring rhetorician—“sear the liberal faith with hot irons,” anyone?—and without a truly compelling philosophy behind anti-woke liberalism, there is a risk that more young conservatives will be seduced into squandering their energy on impractical projects like the new Catholic integralism.

The marriage of convenience between traditionalist conservatives and classical liberals certainly has mileage, but when the left accuses its opponents of seeking to restore Jim Crow or enforce 1950s gender roles, a strong retort

will require a compelling, worked-out vision, not just a re-statement of what the right is against. Utilitarianism is unlikely to provide this, in part because of its lack of appeal to religious traditionalists.

Kaufmann has written a book that explains woke more thoroughly than any other. He has answered Lenin’s question with aplomb and told us exactly what is to be done about this growing threat to liberty. The underlying “why?” may have to await an anti-woke Marx.

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