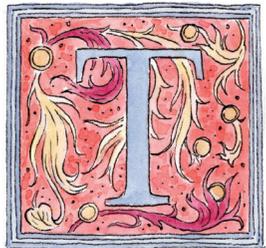


Can the Good Guys Win the Culture War?



HIS IS NOT in my interest to observe: Multiple pieces in my nonfiction collection out this fall, *Abominations: Selected Essays from a Career of Courting Self-Destruction*, take issue with what began as “political correctness gone mad” in the 1990s, but was more recently tagged “identity politics,” morphed into “cancel culture,” and morphed again into “Wokism” (a dizzying linguistic turnover that took place across only five years). By the time the collection was being copy-edited, I found a few of these essays’ observations over-obvious.

Mind, they were anything but obvious at the time: that progressives have become illiberal, authoritarian, and hostile to free speech; that left-wing speech codes corrupt readable, original prose; that a taboo against “cultural appropriation” binds the artistic imagination and potentially reduces fiction to memoir. While these and similar assertions remain sound, readers in 2022 are unlikely to fall off their chairs. Perhaps such centrist truisms are

well on their way to lame—a prospect that cheers me no end.

What my audience may fail to note is the dates. I staked out uncompromising opposition to the ludicrous “cultural appropriation” prohibition in September 2016—barely a year into the current period during which identity politics has been revved into overdrive. I enjoyed little ideological company when I told an audience in Brisbane that month,

Not only as writers but as people, surely we should seek to push beyond the constraining categories into which we have been arbitrarily dropped by birth. If we embrace narrow group-based identities too fiercely, we cling to the very cages in which others try to trap us. We pigeonhole ourselves. We limit our notion of who we are, and in presenting ourselves as one of a membership, a representative of our *type*, an ambassador of an amalgam, we ask not to be seen.

On the other side of the U.S. election, a fellow traveler emerged. In a widely circulated *New York Times* op-ed, later extrapolated in *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, Mark Lilla warned that the Democratic obsession with the oppression Olympics was partially responsible for Trump’s victory—a warning the party still fails to heed.

Lilla was very much an exception. In the short six years since, however, the population of commentators, politicians, and activists challenging the rigid, reductive tyranny of Wokism has gone through the roof. Anti-Wokism might rightly be accused of having become an industry—of which I am unapologetically a part, and from which I derive considerable personal benefit, thank you. Demand for my copy on these issues exceeds my ability to supply.



Because larger social patterns are discernible only in retrospect, whether we’re past the apotheosis of Woke is not yet easy to detect.

Yet after an exhausting, beleaguering era of gender-bending and race-baiting, maybe it's time to celebrate the fact that the good guys in the culture war have been getting their licks in.

Douglas Murray's scathing dissection of Woke sanctities, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* (2019), sold like hotcakes. Bloomsbury gave itself a big commercial shiner by allowing its febrile left-wing staff to bully it into passing on Murray's next book, this year's *The War on the West*, a raging bestseller in both the U.S. and Britain. Despite booksellers' efforts to suppress its availability (I know, that makes a lot of sense), Abigail Shrier's *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (2020) has racked up handsome sales, even scoring recognition as *The Economist's* Book of the Year. Although Helen Joyce's equally hard-hitting *Trans* (2021) was subject to the same blackballing, her nervy critique of a heavily land-mined topic found a large, enthusiastic audience. Robin DiAngelo, eat your heart out. There's money in anti-Wokism as well.

The ranks of the reasonable have grown so populous as to be impossible to cite in full. Some backlash commentators are overtly conservative: Joe Rogan, Ben Shapiro, Victor Davis Hanson, Jordan Peterson. Other outspoken voices have emerged from the left: Meghan Daum, Bret Weinstein, Glenn Greenwald, Jonathan Haidt. Refusing to jump on the post-Floydian gravy train that has enriched Ibram X. Kendi and Ta-Nehisi Coates, several black opinion formers have proved influential, particularly Glenn Loury and Coleman Hughes. (The black linguist John McWhorter is a special case—a fine social observer whose cooptation by the *New York Times* seems to have taken his edge off.) Ayaan Hirsi Ali is one of the few vocal critics of Islam, while Woke World draws a protective circle around the religion and won't hear a word against even Muslim terrorists. On Substack, Matt Taibbi, Andrew Sullivan, and Bari Weiss are making a tidy living off subscriptions (including mine). Their counterparts in the U.K.—Toby Young, Frank Furedi, Brendan O'Neill, David Goodhart, Julie Bindel, Rod Liddle, Eric Kaufmann—are also thriving.

The intrepid Heather Mac Donald has published a series of

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lengthy, impeccably researched, and brilliantly written exposés about the wildly exaggerated perceptions of police killings of unarmed black suspects, the self-immolating fixation on diversity in classical music, and the literally lethal affirmative action run amok in the American medical establishment. Christopher Rufo has mounted what began as a one-man campaign against critical race theory in public schools and the biologically warped, sexually explicit gender ideology these schools are imposing on bewildered children.

Prolific contrarian outlets such as *Quillette*, *City Journal*, the *Babylon Bee*, *Spectator World*, the *New Criterion*, and *Persuasion* in the U.S., as well as *Spiked Online*, *The Critic*, the *Daily Sceptic*, *UnHerd*, and *The Spectator* in the U.K., have all grown substantial readerships during this benighted era, suggesting that the relationship between Wokism and resistance to it is becoming ironically symbiotic. I can personally attest to the volume of commentary battling identity-politics propaganda, because reading a mere fraction of this material occupies hours of my day.

Multiple high-profile victims of cancellation have landed on their feet. Pushed out of the University of Sussex over her views on gender, Kathleen Stock is now a founding fellow of the new University of Austin, which is formally dedicated to the “fearless pursuit of truth” as opposed to the pursuit of “your truth.” J.K. Rowling's scandalous defense of biological sex can't have cost her 20 pence. Woody Allen's memoir, boycotted by hysterical editorial assistants at

Hachette, went on to make a small publisher's fortune. Railroaded out of Princeton on a pretext after objecting to an open letter that characterized "anti-blackness" as "foundational to America" as well as to the university, Joshua Katz has garnered so much more publicity than the average humanities professor that he can surely write his own ticket at a range of lucrative center-right think tanks.



There's more than a glimmer of hope on the popular level, too. In a YouGov poll from July 2020, 56 percent of Americans thought cancel culture was a "big problem." Given the fraught nature of the past two years, that proportion must have risen since. In a November 2021 Harris poll, 71 percent of all American voters agreed "strongly/somewhat" that "cancel culture has gone too far." Surprisingly, that included 70 percent of Democrats.

For me, the most promising development in recent times is what's allowable to say in print without being immediately disappeared. The Overton window has widened from a mere crack in the wall to a goodly slit. It's now commonplace to read that the organization Black Lives Matter is financially corrupt. That, while he certainly didn't deserve to be murdered, George Floyd was no saint but a violent petty criminal. That the agenda of "antiracism" is itself racist. That diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are self-serving generators of unproductive, grossly overpaid make-work jobs, and that DEI has become an industry unto itself (far more so than anti-Woke publishing). That "unconscious bias training" backfires: Rather than reeducate bigots, such courses create them.

The issue most belatedly permitted public scrutiny is the long-sacrosanct matter of transgenderism. When the Left first fetishized the practice of cosmetically swapping sexes, beginning in 2012, nary a soul uttered a discouraging word. I'm not proud of this, but for a good four years I kept my own journalistic mouth shut, despite an accelerating discomfort with a cultural infatuation

that seemed unhealthy. Writing anything negative about the fad for medically sanctioned mutilation appeared to be career-ending.

At last, in 2016, I wrote an essay entitled "He, She, and It" for *Prospect*. "We are told that a trans woman may have been born a man, but 'feels like' a woman," I submitted. "I do not mean to be perverse here, but I have no idea what it 'feels like' to be a woman—and I am one." Having explained that my own deep sense of self has no sex, I advanced tentatively, "I realize I am getting myself into trouble here. Nevertheless, the whole trans movement does seem awfully to do with clothes. ... 'Feeling like' a woman seems to imply feeling like wearing mascara, stilettos, hair extensions, and stockings," a superficial version of femininity that I found alien.

Real progress: Those passages are not nearly as dangerous today as they were in 2016. More recently, several other authors have observed as I did in that essay that the gender "spectrum" on which young people are now obliged to locate themselves is wholly dependent on crude stereotypes of what constitutes male and female behavior at its poles. Sensing a subtle shift in the political winds—a shift that courageous authors such as Abigail Shrier and Helen Joyce have influenced—these days I'm more daring still.

In a *Spectator* column this past July, I compared the notion of being "born in the wrong body" with the Victorians' credulous belief in phrenology—the study of the shape of the head as an indication of the mind within. I ventured, "Personally, whenever I'm confused about which sex I am, I pull down my pants." A couple of years ago, I'd have tippy-toed around this subject, and I'd never have felt free to be so flip. While the editors did anxiously shove that column as far to the back of the magazine as possible, perhaps in the hope that most readers would never get to it, in the wake of its publication, I've yet to walk out the door and get shot.

Events beyond mere commentary are beginning to reflect a rebellion against far-left orthodoxy. In the U.K., the Tavistock Clinic's Gender and Identity Development Service (GIDS) will be shut down for being "unsafe" for children, thousands of whom have been put on

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an unquestioning conveyor belt of “gender affirmation,” replete with puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and irrevocable surgery. Toby Young’s Free Speech Union keeps clocking up wins for people fired over minor infractions of Woke doctrine. Red states in the U.S. are cracking down on critical race theory and radical gender ideology in public schools. The world’s governing body for swimming has all but banned male-bodied participation in women’s meets, protecting the integrity of female sport in defiance of frenzied trans activists who would gleefully destroy it. When staff threw a hissy fit over Dave Chapelle, Netflix didn’t remove the comedian’s controversial performance from the platform but ensured that the huffy employees were first in line for layoffs.

Yet, lest we get too excited, let’s not kid ourselves. Writers for this niche market are preaching to the converted. The opposing teams of the culture war seldom mix, and practically no one reads the other side’s stuff. Anti-Woke turns of the wheel on the scale of the GIDS closure are rare. A pseudo-religious dogma consumed with race and sexual preference, in denial of biology, and determined to caricature all social relations as a hierarchy of oppressors and the oppressed, has been percolating from universities outward since the 1990s, if not the 1960s.

This dismal, conflictual ideology has infested the highest levels of academia, elective government, the military, the civil service, the arts, charitable foundations, and private corporations — and that is not, for once, a conspiracy theory. The takeover has enjoyed widespread success in defiance of the fact that, were this dogma’s tenets put to folks plainly — white people are born irredeemably evil; historical guilt is heritable; our sex is not between our legs but in our minds; the West is so corrupted by racism and an ever-lengthening list of “phobias” that the only solution is to plow our countries into the mud and start again — most publics would reject them wholesale in horror. While celebrities such as J.K. Rowling will survive intact, and writers like me can capitalize on the urgency of fighting back, most of this movement’s victims are ordinary people with no voice who get chewed up and spit out for small perceived heresies.

In the U.S., too, anti-Woke advocacy gets entangled in party politics, although nothing about standing up for freedom of expression and bog-standard American meritocracy is necessarily Republican. Worse, we anti-crusade crusaders get entangled with Trump. (The prospect of, say, The Donald vs. Kamala in 2024 plunges many a moderate voter who opposes progressive identitarianism into a coma.) Any association with Trump weakens the anti-Woke counternarrative.

Critics have indeed made inroads, but the grip of this bizarrely self-hating catechism is fierce. Biden conditioned priority for Covid treatments on race. A private dormitory in Berkeley for “people of color” bars white visitors from its common areas, and no one bothers to point out that the practice is flagrantly illegal. Liberal media relentlessly promote and fawn over non-white, non-straight profile subjects, contributors, and artists. Now that we’re into a third year of this shameless post-Floyd pandering, I’ve given up wondering when the moral showboating will ever peter out. The fate of the distinguished law professor Amy Wax is on a knife-edge over her dogged defense of Western culture and citation of politically inconvenient facts; should the University of Pennsylvania succeed in ejecting her,

tenure is effectively abolished for the ideologically noncompliant. During this last summer's *Roe v. Wade* turmoil, news anchors consistently referred to "pregnant people" or "people who can become pregnant" or, repellently, "birthing people," because the trans lobby has turned "women" into a dirty word. No less than the Royal Air Force has frozen the recruiting of white males, privileging racial and sexual quotas over Britain's military security.

This crap isn't over. Not by a long shot.



If the crap isn't over, the fight against the crap can't be over, either. The proportion of the public promoting this bleak, dehumanizing, and viciously unforgiving doctrine is absurdly small. According to the Pew Research Center, only 6 percent of Americans can be classified as "progressive left" ("very liberal, highly educated, and majority White; most say U.S. institutions need to be completely rebuilt because of racial bias"). Yet these self-righteous fanatics are bullies. They have succeeded in imposing a reign of terror that, even without guillotines or firing squads, is inspired by the same moral and intellectual impulses that drove the Jacobins, Stalinism, and Mao's Cultural Revolution. (Alas, most of the younger breed are ahistorical, so even comparisons to Cambodia's Year Zero don't faze them.) They have intimidated too many of the rest of us into cowering in fear, keeping our heads down and just hoping that these awful people eventually go away. They won't. Seldom do human beings willingly sacrifice power.

To reach for an expression now supposedly unacceptable but happily applicable to resilient males and females in equal measure, we all have to *man up*. That means we stop obeying fake rules. We do not say "birthing people" because PBS implicitly tells us to do so. My fellow fiction writers should take a hard second look at ostensible no-nos such as "you mustn't use food to describe the skin color of 'marginalized peoples.'" Oh, yeah? Who says? Really, who came up with this absurd prohibition against writing that a

Pakistani has an "olive complexion," and why are we obliged to pay this self-nominated contingent any mind? The only thing that gives teeth to a silly made-up taboo like that is obeying it. Were literary novelists simply to laugh in the face of confected restrictions and carry on culturally appropriating their hearts out, the "rules" would be revealed as nothing but a pack of cards.

Rejecting the "rules" extends beyond language to content, and it isn't merely a matter for commentators and artists. Who says we can't criticize the fad of transgenderism, or affirmative action, or mass illegal immigration? We preserve freedom of speech by exercising it. Not only journalists but regular members of the public have to get braver: In social settings, let's express what we genuinely think. If we find the soaring rates at which young people are neutering themselves disturbing, we shouldn't bite our tongues. If we find the increasing racialization of political discourse destructive, we should say so. If we find the proportion of black people in the Arts section for a third year in a row bizarrely over-the-top, we should make a joke about it—because it *is* funny. And it's in groups populated with the "progressive Left" that speaking our minds counts. We imply that we're not afraid of them.

The targets of cancellation campaigns should also stop apologizing. These public apologies are almost always insincere, and they backfire into admissions of guilt. There is no clemency on offer from this movement, so it's pointless to ask for it. One of the reasons I'm still standing is that I have never apologized for an ever-loving thing I've said or written—on principle.

Most crucially, people in positions of authority have to start acting as if they're really in charge. I myself have prevailed as a writer because the folks who publish me have backed me up. That's altogether too rare. "Cancel culture" has been enabled by widespread cowardice at the top. For folks to be losing their jobs over tiny infractions of made-up rules, someone in an upper tier of management has to sack them. Publishing higher-ups, CEOs, university presidents, foundation directors, and museum boards have to stop quailing before Twitter and go back to acting like grown-ups. Man up! *