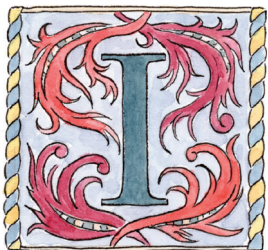


How We Got Here: An Intellectual Journey

You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

—Deuteronomy 25:19



IN OUR ERA of cancellations and topplings, censorious declarations and virtue signaling, recantations and exorcisms, it's almost possible to feel nostalgic for the days when PoMo reigned supreme.

PoMo? Yes, or more formally, postmodernism—a set of suppositions about the world that once inspired the academic priesthood and shaped the cultural landscape. In its early phase, postmodernism rode in on the iconoclasm of the 1960s, rejecting reason as the fundamental arbiter of matters great and small. For PoMo, truth is an illusion; it is merely a form of opinion. “Objectivity,” for PoMo, is a prejudice. “Truth,” for PoMo, is a sociological phenomenon. The literary scholar Stanley Fish compared the establishment of scientific truth to a game of baseball: The outcome is determined by the game's rules. The spirit of postmodernism allowed no absolutes, no transcendent principles,

no moral compasses, except for one: that there were no absolutes, transcendent principles, or moral compasses.

In the arts, postmodernism combined camp and comedy and irony and playfulness and even a bit of nihilism, creating an attitude of knowing negativity. In 1971, when Philip Roth first visited Czechoslovakia—then under Soviet domination—he was struck by how different that literary world was from his own. He noted, “I work in a society where as a writer everything goes and nothing matters,” while for a Czech writer, “nothing goes and everything matters.” Everything goes and nothing matters: Such was postmodernism, the spirit of the late-20th century.

PoMo didn't lose ground until the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath made its arguments seem somewhat quaint. Today, they seem almost grotesquely dated. No overarching standards? Nonsense! Race and gender are so fundamental that they govern cultural and political debates and guide the drumbeats of the media. No hierarchy of values? Ridiculous! Now, if you violate any of the fundamental principles of Woke religion, you are subject to a ceremonial exorcism requiring formulaic apologies and professional exile.

So absolute are Woke truths that they are projected back into history. Narratives and monuments must measure up to contemporary assessments: Educational curricula are upended, just as statues are toppled. Why bother reading Jefferson or Madison, who held slaves even as they posed as advocates of liberty? Why bother with any texts derived from an un-Woken world? That includes the works of Shakespeare (the author Geraldine Brooks recently attested that half her students at Harvard had never read a single play by the Bard). The King James Bible, too, has been stripped of the position it once had as a foundational text of English culture. Even in science and medicine, in which ideas can have mortal consequences, professional training is increasingly being guided by highly paid Woke consultants, who want to make sure not only that these professions “look like America” in distributions of race and gender, but that their practices are molded to fit Woke principles as well.

During the decades of postmodernism, I was active as a daily music critic and then as a broader-based culture critic for the *New York Times*. One thread that ran through my experience of thousands of concerts, opera performances, books, and museum exhibitions was how deeply postmodernism was entrenched in our culture—almost to the point of invisibility. Again and again, I would tease out the themes or attitudes governing these cultural activities, and I would suggest that a reconsideration was necessary in order to reconstitute a more coherent—and enduring—set of values and principles, ideals and ideas. In my criticism, I even endorsed a kind of Platonism, the backbone of my book *Emblems of Mind: The Inner Life of Music and Mathematics*: Human understanding is doomed to be inherently flawed, but there are truths to be found, which we devote ourselves to approaching over time.

Be careful what you wish for, I suppose: A rejection of PoMo's relativism and a return to an absolute seems to be precisely what happened—just not in the way I had envisaged.



How has such an inversion in the way we think about the world taken place, and with such rapidity and fervor? A close look at PoMo's approach may help illuminate the change and may even reveal some cracks in the new orthodoxies.

The first necessity is to consider PoMo's close cousin “postcolonial studies”—or PoCo as it has been casually dubbed. It is closely related to PoMo, which for all its relativism had a sharp polemical edge in its unwavering attacks on universality and objectivity. Postcolonial studies headed in a similar direction in its analysis of postcolonial cultures. Societies that had been colonized by European powers, in this view, were not just burdened by misuse of power; they were also burdened by Western claims of “superiority” and “universality.” One definition put it this way: “Postcolonialism is regarded as the need, in nations or groups which have been

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victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images.” The conclusions are stark: No culture could claim an objectively truthful vision of the world. And no culture could claim superiority because none had the “right” or even the ability to judge another. Cultural values are relative. There is no hierarchy. In this way, PoMo and PoCo shared fundamental ideas.

Those ideas included an ardent opposition: a rejection of the values championed by the Western Enlightenment. Enlightenment attitudes, which began to take shape in the 17th century, lay at the heart of modern Western science and philosophy, and they transformed Western societies. The Enlightenment led to the Industrial Revolution, advances in medicine, ideals of democratic governance, evolutionary theory, and exploration of lands as yet unknown to the West. But it also led to imperialism, which for PoCo and PoMo and some historians on the Left was nothing less than the West's Original Sin. So lasting have been its effects, that the 9/11 attacks were often seen as blowback; advocates of PoCo could barely bring themselves to condemn acts of terror without a loud “but” that went so far as to excuse them as “chickens coming home to roost.”

Imperialism amplified the overall indictment: Enlightenment

ideas not only “contaminated” other cultures, they helped make imperialism possible, inventing the tools of conquest and expanding Western demand for natural resources. And because imperial conquests were of regions whose peoples were unknown in the West, they were often accompanied by racism, with its assertions of cultural and biological superiority.

PoCo thus established an identification between Western ideals and racism. The West, in addition to its other sins, is considered “systemically racist,” as is now being asserted. In response, race is not eliminated; it is elevated. But in the effort—as the definition put it—to “achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images,” much is being exorcised: Enlightenment ideas; systems of governance; scientific inquiry; indeed, much of modernity itself.

Yoke these ideas to the PoMo notions that “objective” measures of competence are by definition suspect, as are ideas of “merit.” And lo, we have entered the world of Wokeness, the heir to PoMo and PoCo.

Can we call it Woko?



So Woko ideology is not a reversal of PoMo relativism. It is a fulfillment of it.

On the surface, the Woko enterprise has a sympathetic cast, partly because in the United States the crux of Woko is slavery. There is no need here to reiterate American slavery’s horrors and injustices, its grotesqueries and legacies. And there is much to be said for the ways in which it is addressed, memorialized, and analyzed. But, as filtered through Woko ideology, something peculiar has happened: Slavery is treated as the defining characteristic of Western societies in general and the United States in particular. Its creation is even deemed to be a product of Enlightenment ideals. How? Well, it reduces human beings to tradeable chattel, reflecting the exploitative economy supposedly

shaped by Western rationality. And it asserts a racial and biological inferiority, a ranking based on supposedly “objective” criteria. Woko treats slavery as if it revealed the true essence of the Enlightenment, and it points for evidence to many of America’s Founding Fathers, who argued for freedom and equality while holding slaves.

This denunciation of slavery, righteous and sweeping, would seem to be Woko’s most potent polemical example. The problem is that, like almost everything else denounced during these decades of PoMo, PoCo, and Woko, history is being seen only through the eyes of the recent past. Slavery, far from being a defining characteristic of the West, has been an attribute of every known society. It was a consequence of warfare, trade, conquest, and tribal and racial enmities in every culture, race, geography, and time. Its horrors are as close to a universal aspect of human societies as can be imagined. The distinctive aspect of Western cultures within the past two centuries is not the continuation of slavery, but the *abolition* of slavery.

Abolition as a successful movement is distinctively Western. The elimination of slavery in the West—accomplished after great struggle and cost and trauma and outrage—is one of our civilization’s greatest achievements. And why did it happen here? Because Enlightenment notions of transcendent human equality and universal law helped turn abolition into a necessity. The same values that are under mistaken attack for creating slavery are the ones that made it possible to eliminate it.

This achievement is related to one of the great *scientific* insights of the West: The same principles that govern, say, an apple falling from a tree also govern the orbits of the Moon around the Earth and the Earth around the Sun, and affect the interactions of whirling galaxies. The universe is not divided into different realms; it is a single cosmos, operating according to laws that can be discovered.

The great *human* insight of the West was that the same is true for people: Each differs from the others in important ways, but there is a universal substratum, a human essence perhaps, that allows us to begin to understand others. It was an insight that dovetailed

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with the idealism of Western religions. Paradoxically, even those centuries of imperial conquest and exploration helped, by revealing vastly different societies and shaping new understandings of human diversity. This is also why anthropology—the study of other cultures and societies—developed in the West. The abolition of slavery was a consequence of these insights, applied for the first time across cultures and races and boundaries.

This is a triumph of the Western imagination. We learn to comprehend those who appear different from us by imagining how they, too, perceive the world. This was one reason, beginning in the 18th century, that the novel became a powerful new form of literature in which privileged access is seemingly given to the inner lives of characters.

But with the intellectual and cultural relativism of PoMo and PoCo and the narrow visions of Woko, not even this is possible. If no cross-cultural evaluation is legitimate, neither are claims to comprehend the inner lives of others. As a result, for several generations, readers have been taught that they should be reading about themselves, not others. Hence comes the cry of wanting to see or

read about “people who look like me,” as if there were essential ethnic and racial differences that divide our perceptions and control our imaginations. While there are, surely, aspects of experience that have not been broadly captured in fiction or portrayed on film, that is always changing as the histories of these forms demonstrate. What is different now is this obsessive insistence that what is essential for the novel is not an act of imagination, but an act of racial perception.

Someone who looks like me: By rejecting the Western Enlightenment, Woko supplants a vision of humankind with a vision of identity. If there is no universal, and if every culture has equivalent claims, what we have are not human societies in which our varied experiences come into play but assemblages of jostling identities. Identity is the source of true allegiance. It cannot be challenged. It is an atom: Irreducible and unchangeable by outsiders, every atom claims equality even if all it really knows is itself. The result is a society of conflicting or cohabiting atoms. Identities find common ground not by reason—not by trying to understand the “other” and engaging in conversation and argument based on shared ground—but only in their resentments, their intersectional overlaps. That is why there is such a strange uniformity in the middle of identity politics; every identity is different, but as far as Woko is concerned, they all see the world the same way, bearing the same resentments and struggling against the same oppressive forces.

What kind of historical understanding could possibly emerge out of this vision? Only one that traces contemporary priorities back through time—an act of ahistorical reduction, judging the past by the standards of the present. Cancel the very idea of “universal history.” The only common ground in Woko culture is agreement on what must be opposed: the contamination created by the West. History becomes identity politics cast backward through time. Woko’s vision of a world freed from the West, the Enlightenment, and the complexities of history is really anti-modern, or rather, ante-modern—a world of prehistoric tribal allegiances.

Given all of this, how could cancellation be avoided?

If you deny or question, that is seen as an attack on another's identity, which is supposed to be permanently protected. Criticism is taken personally because that is the nature of identity: The political is the personal. Any challenge is necessarily a travesty because you are asserting some "higher" perspective that transcends identity's claims. That is an existential threat to Woko. And it is treated accordingly.



And now, consider the Jews. Why? Because here is an identity that has weathered the millennia by developing a very different perspective on history and memory. In a Woko world of atomistic identities, surely we should find some archetypal characteristics here. Among Jews there are often regional physical resemblances that have remained stable over centuries. Male Jews have been given an indelible mark of their distinction for millennia. The identity has been maintained during extensive interactions with other civilizations and cultures. And if accompanied by religious observance, it affects every aspect of life. Moreover, as in identities celebrated by Woko, those who embrace this identity have also been singled out over centuries for hostility, massacre, and sometimes enslavement.

No surprise too that, as for any group that makes distinctions between "us" and "not-us," there are episodes of cancellation. In Judaism, cancellation is more like exile from a local community, not a verdict on one's eternal soul. There have also been degrees of cancellation, ranging from a one-day exile to the more complete *cherem*. Famous historical examples include the *cherem* meted out to Baruch Spinoza for "heresies" by the Jewish community of Amsterdam and the 1918 *cherem* reportedly enacted by the Rabbinical Council of Odessa against Leon Trotsky and other Jewish Bolsheviks.

The punishment is rarely and reluctantly used and now seems more symbolic than substantive. Nevertheless, given these

commonalities with Woko identities, and given that Jewish identity is the longest-lasting historical example, you might think that Jewish identity would provoke a certain amount of interest in Woko circles. Yet Jews are not only irrelevant to Woko, they are generally written out of consideration. Usually, they are subsumed in the "whiteness" attributed to Western oppressors and colonizers. Sometimes—worse—through their support of Israel, they are deemed to be prime examples of the West's Original Sin, creating a stubborn outpost of Western colonialism (which indicates how readily PoCo and Woko are prepared to distort history in asserting their principles). Many contemporary Jews proclaim adherence to such beliefs, even though this does nothing to limit the ways in which Jewish identity can be excluded—at times, to the point of virulent hostility.

One reason, perhaps, may be that Jewish identity also creates a challenge to Woko identity. Consider one manifestation of Woko identity construction. In recent decades, several "identity museums" have opened, devoted to the histories of such groups as Asian Americans, Arab Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. To an astonishing extent, these museums tell similar stories, as they recount a history in which oppression is suffered and redemption ultimately attained. The oppression comes from American racism. The redemption comes from the establishment of a proud, politically powerful identity.

This uniformity is bizarre, even within each example. Asian Americans have ancestors from countries as different as Korea, Japan, and China, which have long histories of mutual hatred and warfare. Asian-American identity is a recent creation, based entirely on the belief that the American experience of all these groups is uniform because of racism. Something similar can be said about the Hispanic-American identity: Varied and conflicting backgrounds are put aside for the sake of positing a single political group sharing a common grievance. Even an identity such as "Native American" subsumes vastly different tribes and nations under a single rubric, which is why it is almost impossible now to

find histories of Native Americans that allude to anything other than American oppression, let alone accounts of internecine wars or regional conquests or contrasting beliefs. Today, the notion of “People of Color” is an even more extreme example of a Woko identity that has no substance beyond polemics, so many groups does it gather into one bitter embrace.

These examples of surface identity are joined by one more profound example in the Woko playbook: black American identity. Here the polemical outline of oppression and the importance of identity formation to liberation are far clearer. Black American history incorporates slavery and Jim Crow, complex interactions with American life, and extraordinary influences upon it. But Woko ends up distilling even this complex identity to its narrowest terms, seeing it almost monochromatically as proof of the West’s “systemic racism.” Woko then uses a simplified black American identity as the model for all other Woko identities, rather than treating it as something distinctive, deserving its own careful interpretation.

But to all of these identities and the purposes to which they are put by Woko, the example of the Jews offers a profound systemic challenge. Jewish identity is not created in reaction to the Other or because of a shared fate in encountering the Other. It is based on a set of ideas and beliefs and obligations originating in the Hebrew Bible and the commentaries on it, including a commitment to the land from which the Jews were once exiled, but to which they began to return in numbers beginning in the late-19th century. There is really a different form of memory at work here—and a different kind of self-definition.



This makes it almost inevitable that the Jewish identity would be rejected by Woko. But what about the identity-forming powers of hatred? Over the millennia, hasn’t the experience of antisemitism tended to strengthen bonds among Jews? And doesn’t antisemitism

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conform to Woko notions of systemic racism? Jewish texts recount efforts to destroy Jews, again and again. Every Passover, Jews are instructed to recall what Pharaoh did in enslaving the Israelites, and how the people were then led to freedom. In many ways, the Exodus tale provides the narrative model for today’s identity museums.

The point of the Passover story, though, is quite different. The emphasis is not on the suffering endured. Nor is the end a celebration of the politics of identity. The emphasis is on a process of redemption, which is far from simple and actually imposes obligations on the people. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, Israelite autonomy is always unsteady, troubled, contested—an apt prefiguring of the disagreement and discussion that later characterized Rabbinic Judaism. Throughout the history of the Jews, we find bouts of self-criticism and self-scrutiny, revision and reconsideration, all given context by conviction and remembrance. This spirit leads, in fact, to the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, when Jewish identity and Western identity begin to intertwine.

By contrast, Woko’s narratives of oppression and redemption insist that, redemptive though the assertion of an identity might be, the oppression is the real focus, for it is the oppression that creates the identity, and no end to oppression is in sight. Woko does not primarily concern itself with the redemptive element. Instead,

it resents, attacks, blames, and demands. It overturns, erases, and supplants. We have seen this in recent years as Confederate statues have toppled. Other removals have come about because the objects are interpreted as insensitive or racist—such as the statue of Theodore Roosevelt that once stood in front of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which portrays the conservationist, explorer, and American president on horseback flanked by a Native American and an African tribesman. They guide him forward—figures that were, in the context of the larger surrounding memorial at the museum, originally designed as allegorical representations of two continents. Under Woko guidance they were treated instead as demeaning racial caricatures that had to be erased and forgotten, as should the figure on horseback.

Could things be any different? Perhaps. The first “nation” that the Israelites came in contact with after the exodus from Egypt was Amalek, a nation that immediately attacked the Israelites without provocation, targeting the feeblest among them. Its enmity recurs in the Hebrew Bible, and the extent of its hatred is indeed biblical in scale. In Deuteronomy, the command is to “blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven”—a curse often invoked by Jews when thinking of their most ruthless enemies.

Yet what a peculiar curse it is, because if it were really carried out, no references to Amalek would exist. It would be erased—canceled. The command to blot out is really a command to remember. Thus, Amalek endures the same fate as the villainous Haman (identified as a descendant of Amalek) during the reading of the Megillah scroll for the Jewish holiday of Purim: Noisemakers are used to drown out his name and blot it from the mind. But that makes listeners seek all the more intently for the sound of the name.

In this way, history is not torn up or rewritten. It always shows what is supposedly blotted out. It is impossible to remold the past in the image of the present. History is a domain of wrestling and imperfection in which utopia is promised but not attained. We see, too, that conflict is inevitable, that people and cultures will

challenge one another, but there can be no retreat into relativism. There are distinctions to be made, obligations to assess, and restrictions to be accepted.

The Jewish example suggests that the defining of an identity is not a matter of political expediency. It is a historical project. We come to understand our own identity through self-reflection and study, including by reading about people who don't look like us or think like us.

As for corporations, museums, universities, elementary schools, politicians, media outlets, and community organizations that now swear fealty to a set of banal ahistorical distortions inherited from PoMo, PoCo, and Woko, they are doing a disservice to the very civilization that has made them all possible. It is a civilization that made slavery unthinkable and that offers more liberty and opportunity than any society in human history. We are privileged to live within it. *