Where Wokeness Went Wrong

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Symbolic struggles cannot be a force of resistance to the Trump administration.

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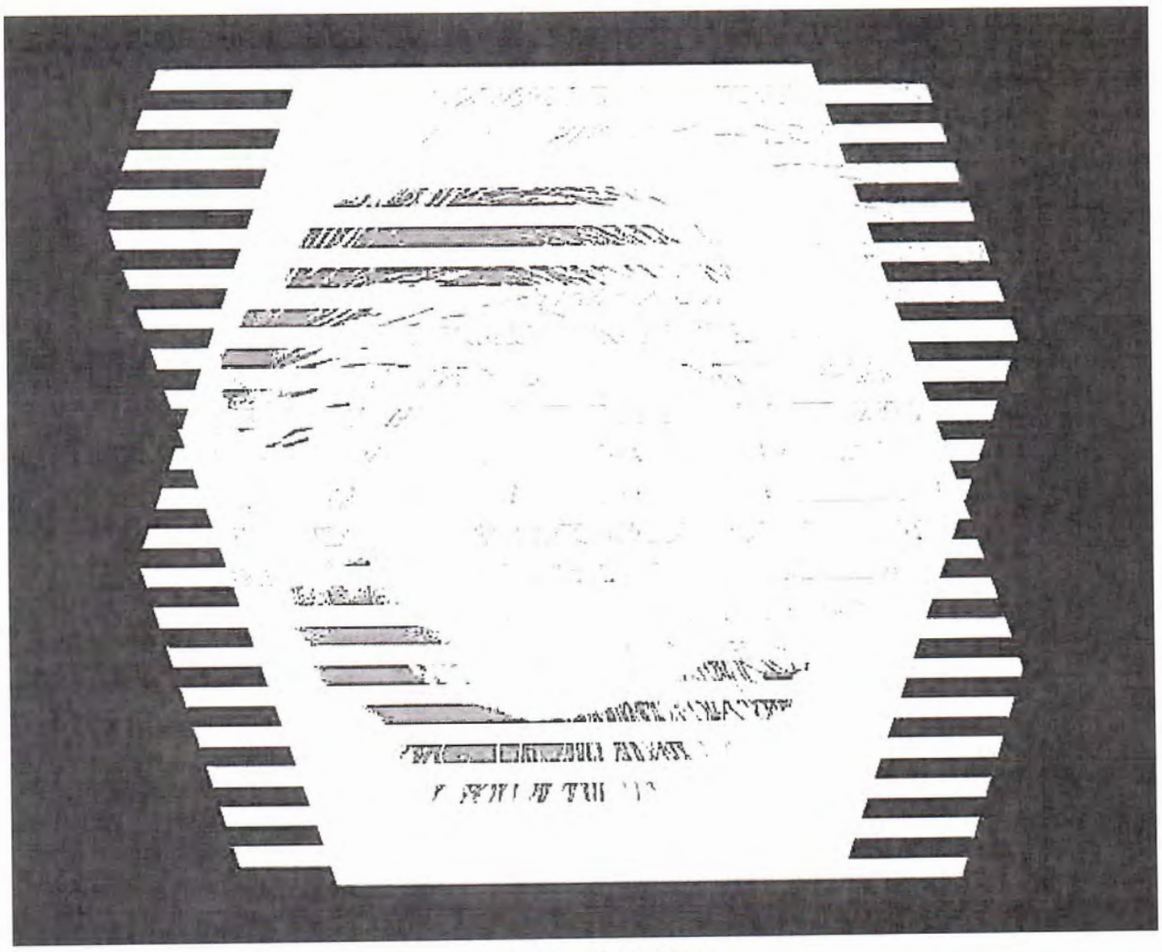

Illustration by Matt Dorfman

Reviewed:

Desire and Fate
by David Rieff, with a foreword by John Banville
Eris, 236 pp., $100.00; $24.00 (paper)

Now that the war on wokeness has gone nuclear, waged with all the resources of an administration that views every struggle against racism, sexism, or homophobia as an affront, it is harder to discuss than ever. Is wokeness simply, as some argue, a phantom invented by conservatives opposed to any

challenge to the established order?[1] Like its predecessor "political correctness," "wokeness" quickly became a term of abuse, complicating the already thorny attempts to define it. Attacks on "woke Marxist lunatics" betray so much ignorance that it's tempting to give up analysis entirely.

Yet analysis is needed, for criticisms of wokeness have come from across the political spectrum. Let's start with what it is not. It isn't cancel culture, which has been around since Plato banned Homer from his republic. That's not an idea but a tactic that can be used by all sides—most drastically by the MAGA right in recent months. Nor is it dogmatic puritanism, which appears in many political movements. John McWhorter's comparison of wokeness to fundamentalist religion is illuminating, but it doesn't claim to be a definition.

Wokeness is hard to define because it's an incoherent concept, built on a contradiction between feeling and thought. It's fueled by emotions traditionally held by the left. *When in doubt, stand by those on the margins: the tired, the poor, the hungry, those yearning to breathe free.* Those emotions, however, are undermined by beliefs that have traditionally belonged to the right. What are called identity politics—misleadingly, since they reduce our rich and various identities to our ethnic and gender origins—assume that you will have real connections and deep obligations only to those who belong to your own tribe, though others may be useful as allies. Calls for justice are sometimes viewed as liberal attempts to impose (Eurocentric) values on others; anyone who claims to be acting for the sake of a universal humanity is deceptive. Finally, apparent steps toward progress are simply subtler forms of oppression. Add to all of this the suspicion that reason is a form of domination that replaced more honest struggles for power, and you have a worldview that is not far from one held by the worst reactionaries.[2] I am not arguing, as is commonly suggested, that wokeness was on the right track but went too far. Rather, by

unwittingly accepting deeply regressive philosophical assumptions, it went in the wrong direction entirely.

In recent years several writers have argued that wokeness, far from being subversive, is completely compatible with capitalism.[3] David Rieff's book *Desire and Fate* goes one crucial step further. Wokeness, he argues, is not just compatible with capitalism but necessary for it to flourish in recent times—a "politics of atonement" that is

> little more than a postmodern version of the indulgences sold by the Medieval Church, an essential moral emollient for a fundamentally ruthless, grasping, and immoral neoliberal academy (and, by extension, its dependencies in culture and its sponsors in the philanthropies).

Strong stuff, but is it already obsolete? Rieff's book was published last November, just over a month before Mark Zuckerberg sacked his DEI team, appointed Donald Trump's fight club CEO pal Dana White to the board of Meta, and called for a corporate culture that celebrates masculine energy, which he seemed to equate with aggression. After Zuckerberg, a breathtaking number of people and institutions rushed to fire their DEI staff and scrub their websites of terms the Trump administration designated as offensive, from "affordable home" to "women." Is Rieff's argument that wokeness is needed to provide moral legitimacy for rapacious capitalism no longer valid? His thesis that corporate wokeness is a form of virtue signaling that allowed company owners to feel good while keeping the Satanic mills turning seems confirmed by the speed with which they've dropped the jargon. In an era when virtue is no longer even aspirational, no signals need be broadcast. If you're big enough, moral legitimacy is not an issue.

The world has gotten worse since Rieff's book went to press, and his message was never exactly sanguine. He acknowledges the good intentions behind most woke efforts,

which are informed by "the belief that not only is being a good person more important than anything else, but that personal goodness is, fundamentally, a political act." Yet he warns:

> It seems obvious that we are entering full-speed a world whose good intentions will destroy what is good about this civilization without improving the many things that are cruel and monstrous about it.

Or as a German saying has it, "The opposite of 'good' is 'good intention.'" If Rieff's warnings seem no longer as pressing when good intentions are too scarce to be our biggest problem, it's still important to understand how wokeness contributed to our reaching this moment.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's first essay, *A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*, argued that the arts and sciences do little but weave garlands of flowers around the chains that bind us. Rieff's charge that wokeness disguises the evils of capitalism with symbolic signaling was true when those calling the shots were embarrassed by chains. Now all the irons are out in the open, and plenty of people will argue that, in view of the right's onslaught on everything it can stigmatize as woke, the time for criticizing wokeness is over. They are mistaken. In one form or another, the phenomenon will be with us until we understand where it went wrong.

Rieff wisely doesn't try to define wokeness, but with fierce wit and a fine balance between anecdote and argument, he presents telling examples of the sort of thing many of us usually excoriate in private, sotto voce, after a glass of wine. For instance, there are many things short of giving back the continent that could be done to improve the lives of Native Americans. Solemnly reciting a land acknowledgment is not one of them. Rieff writes, "The performative guilt of today's professional managerial class bears the same relationship to real shame and real guilt as Astro Turf does to grass."

Rieff is hardly opposed to the drive to diversify institutions that has made societies more inclusive in the past decade. What he's opposed to is, as he puts it, "Diversity Über Alles." Diversity is one good; it just isn't the only one. When it isn't coupled with competence, everybody loses—including those women and people of color whose credentials, everyone knows, were not the decisive factor in appointing or hiring them. He might have added that not only do woke gestures seldom provide real benefits to those they seek to uplift; they often undermine them. Ketanji Brown Jackson is proving to be the sharpest justice on the Supreme Court. But Joe Biden's promise, while campaigning against Bernie Sanders in the South Carolina primary, to appoint the first black woman justice left a residue of doubt about her qualifications. And sometimes competence really is sacrificed to representation. The problem remains for liberals and leftists even when Trump's administration is so glaringly competence-free that it gives fuel to the woke charge that references to competence were never more than an excuse to keep white men (and an occasional blonde woman) in power.

Prioritizing representation over competence is closely connected to preferring subjectivity to truth. It's often startling to hear distinguished scholars who, after giving decisive arguments against myths and falsehoods, recoil from the word "truth." Sometimes they quote Thomas Kuhn or Richard Rorty and proclaim, "I don't believe in truth with a capital T." Who said anything about capital letters? The question is not about metaphysical foundations but about distinguishing facts from lies. After years of hearing the woke praise people for "speaking their truth," why should we be surprised that Facebook has done away with fact-checking? Inadequate as it was, at least it preserved a concept of fact.

Only the French philosopher of science Bruno Latour has been self-reflective enough to offer a public mea culpa for his own contributions to public distrust of matters of fact. With

Republicans using scientific uncertainties to oppose vaccines or measures addressing the climate crisis, he wondered if he had been wrong to help invent the field known as science studies, which emphasizes the political and social dimensions of science. "What's the real difference," Latour wrote in 2004,

> between conspiracists and a popularized, that is a teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of, let's say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu...? In both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say.... Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless.[4]

Marjorie Taylor Greene is presumably unaware of the source of her weapons, but the previous generation of her co-conspirators was not. As Mike Cernovich, the promoter of, among other things, the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, explained, "Look, I read postmodernist theory in college. If everything is a narrative, then we need alternatives to the dominant narrative.... I don't seem like a guy who reads Lacan, do I?"[5]

Rieff acknowledges the progressive intentions that drive many of the woke, and he is neither a defender of an ancien régime nor a free speech absolutist. He doesn't name a political allegiance, and he seems to suspect all of them. He supported the removal of Confederate statues but not the demands to dislodge monuments to Washington and Lincoln, and he writes that "structural racism is all too real and that addressing it is an urgent moral obligation for American society." He's happy to acknowledge that "too much of the critique of Woke is just that: snobbery."

But Rieff is not a moderate, or even a liberal. His critiques of capitalism are eviscerating, even as he writes that "every communist regime that has so far existed has been—at best—an economic and moral disaster." And he thinks that "calls for the moral rearmament

of liberalism sound like nothing so much as whistling past the ideological graveyard." The rot is too deep, the foundation long eroded. Those of us seeking to prevent the worst fallout of a government that has no moral compass at all must not turn back to wokeness now. For among the many things responsible for returning a felon to the White House is this kind of example provided by Rieff:

> The American Medical Association recently issued a document called "Advancing Health Equity: A Guide to Language, Narrative and Concepts."... "We are continually called," it intones,..."to be better as we lead this work toward the pursuit of racial justice, equity and liberation."
>
> One would never know that, for the AMA, this liberation absolutely excludes major reform of the hospital payment system which daily ruins countless American families.

Woke politics are not merely symbolic politics whose symbols are now tawdry, their metaphors worn. Woke politics, Rieff argues, are antipolitics. Fighting for a seat at a table long gone rotten is a poor substitute for systematic change.

Rieff's example speaks to the fact that income inequality and the spread of woke discourse have wildly increased since 2011. This fact, and these kinds of examples, lead him to conclude that class is the ghost at the millenarian banquet. "Without class accounted for," he continues, "the Woke paradigm is like an alphabet with no vowels." As he notes, this has become a common criticism. He quotes the political scientist Adolph Reed Jr.'s quip that "the real project of Woke was to diversify the ruling class." Rieff offers no solutions, but he suggests that the real reckoning with our history needs to focus on class rather than race.

But he also notes that the usual markers of class, like having a relation to high culture, no longer mean anything. So why think that

substituting class essentialism for racial essentialism is a winning strategy? It's increasingly clear that great inequalities of income and wealth poison our societies as well as the earth itself, but reducing human beings to their class identities is even more senseless than any other form of identitarianism. I'm skeptical about reviving the notion of class just at the moment when Ph.D.s may drive Ubers for millionaires who do not read. If the concept of class was clearer in Marx's day, it's barely recognizable in ours. The point is not to add class as another diversity box to be checked but to make sure that justice is done in the real world, not the metaphorical one. As the late Todd Gitlin argued in *Letters to a Young Activist* (2003):

> The goal of [identity politics] is to make sure your category is represented in power, and the proper critique of other people's politics is that they represent a category that is not yours....
>
> Even when it takes on a radical temper, identity politics is interest-group politics. It aims to change the distribution of benefits, not the rules under which the distribution takes place.

Since higher education has always reflected the dominant culture, Rieff focuses much of his critique on the practices and policies that began decades ago in American universities. Schools, he notes archly, have traditionally been expected to teach people things they don't know. Today's students are often encouraged to study themselves, or rather their tribe. Even if your goal is to increase diversity in academia, the strategy is self-defeating. Those trying to improve gender balance in symposia on, say, Chinese literature or the nature of judgment must wade through a slew of female Ph.D.s writing on *Women + X*; those seeking ethnic diversity on a subject other than racism may have to look even harder.

Not long ago universities were the structures that transmitted and reproduced high culture, which Rieff describes as

> difficult, demanding, and often off-putting. It requires single-minded focus in a world where single-minded focus is, along with silence, the rarest of commodities. In contrast, popular culture is easy on the neurons, while popular culture that is also presented as being an artifact of and a conduit toward social justice and inclusion is easy on the conscience as well.

I still remember the scorn with which Stanley Cavell's attempts to teach film in his philosophy courses were initially greeted at Harvard, but Rieff's is not a simple call to turn back the clock. (To judge from his quotes, Leonard Cohen would have pride of place in his house of high culture.) Rather, he is mourning a culture that no longer cares about or knows how to cultivate taste because its battles against snobbery have left it without a notion of taste at all. The right is not wrong, Rieff writes, to see Disney as woke. His problem is not Disney's adoption of what's called inclusive language but the fact that "as long as these underrepresented groups are represented, the identitarian left has little to say about the nature of Disney's product." Whether you object to Disney's hidden imperialism or simply to its ability to flatten every human emotion into treacly kitsch, you're unlikely to sharpen the skills needed to criticize its movies at a contemporary university.[6]

Anyone who has been within spitting distance of an Anglophone university lately will have her own stories to tell. Maybe it's Taylor Swift instead of Shakespeare at Harvard, or the University of Greenwich's trigger warnings that Jane Austen's work contains "gender stereotypes" and "toxic relationships." It may simply be the insistence that you cannot teach/read/write about *x* if you're a *y*. Whichever straw was the last one, ever more colleagues who initially sympathized with many goals of the woke are sick of its violation of the standards they were trained to honor. The more they give up, the closer we are to the doom Rieff believes has already arrived.

Yet remedies are not hard to imagine if more creative resistance and less automated guilt could be mustered. The canon of Western classics is indeed a product of white men, who compose a minority of the world's population. Yet that canon need not be canceled, simply expanded, which would be to the advantage of all. The point is not (only?) that students of color are more likely to learn if the writers they're asked to read "look like them." Far more importantly, everyone benefits by learning, say, what Suleiman the Magnificent or the emperor Jiajing was doing in the years when Henry VIII was busy disposing of his wives. Learning about other cultures is not only a good in itself; you don't begin to grasp the basic assumptions of your own culture until you're confronted with assumptions that are different. Whoever needs another justification for learning more about things they don't know should be reminded that while colonialism is a problem, it's not just a Western one. Powerful nations have dominated weaker ones for thousands of years: think of the Aztecs, the Mughals, the Malians, the Khmer. We will never address its evils properly if we see only tribal conflict, whether North vs. South, East vs. West, or coming from some other direction.

Rieff calls wokeness the lingua franca of the Anglosphere. I wish it were confined there, but though it began in American universities, it swiftly took over a surprising amount of the globe. Books about wokeness have been published in Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, French, Croatian, Korean, Arabic, Farsi, Thai, and—shall I go on? (In all these cases, the word "woke" is printed in English.) Having finally begun to examine their colonial heritage and even to return some stolen loot, Europeans are remorseful enough to respond to the simplest woke arm-twisting. When the young black poet Amanda Gorman became an international success after reading her poem "The Hill We Climb" at Biden's inauguration, seventeen publishers quickly bought the rights. To translate it into Dutch, Gorman suggested a

white, nonbinary Dutch writer whose International Booker Prize–winning work she admired—the right kind of reason for choosing a translator. Then a black Dutch fashion blogger wrote an article saying that Gorman's work should only be translated by a black woman. The white writer withdrew, but the story reverberated across the continent. A Catalan translation had already been completed and paid for, but since the translator was a white man, a new one was hired. A black rapper was found to translate the poem into Swedish, but because of a shortage of black translators, Denmark hired a brown woman who wears a hijab. The German publisher found a very German solution and hired an entire committee of female translators: a black, a brown, and a white one.

These sorts of examples are amusing, and anyone reading these lines can think of others. Sometimes they are harmless, but it depends on the country and the circumstances. In Germany a former Communist drew many voters from the Social Democratic coalition by pointing out the obvious: What good is gender-neutral language to an East German woman whose pension does not cover her rent? Republicans were able to weaponize a widespread dissatisfaction with symbolic struggles to stigmatize Kamala Harris in 2024. According to Harris's main super PAC, Future Forward, Trump's antitrans ads, broadcast shortly before the election, shifted the race in his favor by 2.7 percent for voters who watched them. Harris lost the popular vote by 1.5 percentage points. Most events, like this election, have more than one cause, but "Kamala is for they/them" was a fiendishly clever pitch.

In recent decades Chile and Brazil threw off dictatorships and embraced social democratic governments. Could their political discourse really be hijacked by conflicts over who's allowed to use which bathroom? I was gobsmacked to learn that it could. Chilean politicians told me that woke issues contributed to the failure of the referendum in

2022 to replace a constitution that hadn't changed since the Pinochet regime—for instance, President Gabriel Boric made a clumsy reference to gender-neutral bathrooms for fishermen and women. In the close Brazilian election of 2022, the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro broadcast fake ads saying that his opponent, former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, would impose unisex bathrooms all over the country.

It's tempting to see a grim irony in the fact that as America's international standing wanes, wokeness may be the poisoned chalice we've bequeathed to the world. But I rather think that it was likely to travel no matter where it came from. The international left has yet to recover from the collapse of state socialism in 1991. Unable to imagine an ideal, however tarnished, of a just global society toward which it might strive, it focuses on the injustices it opposes. Wokeness inherits much of postcolonial theory—not to be confused with anticolonialism—an ideology that's easy to abuse. Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and India's Narendra Modi are but two leaders who dismissed human rights as Western concepts. Besides, they add, what gives former colonizers the right to dictate to the descendants of their former victims?

In the final pages of *Desire and Fate* Rieff homes in on his main target: the cultural impulse that drives woke extremes. Building on his father Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966), he contends that we have reached "the triumph of the traumatic." Indeed, at one point he calls it the "dictatorship of the therapeutic." It's a shame that, though he references Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception* (2003) three times, he doesn't discuss the writer to whom Agamben's book is devoted: the Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt. The ways in which central themes of the woke can be found in Schmitt's work—the nonchalant commitment to tribalism, the conviction that appeals to humanity are fraudulent liberal stratagems, the longing for a premodern age—would have provided plenty

of fodder for Rieff's critique.

The new normal, he says, is utter fragility: "Ours is an age in which people routinely, even ritualistically, speak of feeling unsafe when in fact what they are is offended.... This is why Woke is, at its core, an expression of moral and social hypochondria." Rieff hints at but doesn't explicate the connection between this observation and his claim that "we now live in a culture in which not to consider yourself a victim is a pathology...or else, whether you realize it or not, or are willing to admit it or not, it is to be an oppressor." Rieff exaggerates only slightly. What's true is that victimhood now receives the sort of social recognition that used to be reserved for heroism. And since it's easier to become a victim than a hero, there's good reason, in the present economy of psychic attention, to keep your wounds open.

It's startling to learn from Rieff that it has only been a decade since the DSM-V changed its definition of post-traumatic stress disorder, for it feels more settled than that. Whereas earlier diagnoses required a patient's exposure to "high magnitude catastrophic events" like wars or earthquakes or torture, now trauma is a name for most any form of adversity that all but the most fortunate undergo at some point in our lives, "such as learning that a family member had died, or witnessing a fight." This is, among other things, a banalization of the traumas experienced by those, say, forced to watch the murder of their parents or children, or any other form of evil that actually deserves the name. Rieff also calls it a depoliticization of hardship: "Though the reckoning includes demands for economic justice, almost all the energies of the identitarian left are mobilized in the service of psychic justice."

One can wish that this part of the book were longer, but Rieff sees no solutions for the conditions he describes. He calls himself anti-utopian, though he's glad to acknowledge major moral and social transformations of the past: the rejection of slavery, which had been considered legitimate for most of human

history, and the even more recent condemnation of the subjection of women. Indeed he's convinced of the ever-present possibility of change; there's just no reason to suppose it must be change for the better.

This is not the first time Rieff has seemed out of step with the times. His previous book, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies*, appeared in 2016, just before the wave of demands for historical reckoning began to roll in. As one of the writers who contributed to that wave, I have come to share many of his concerns about it, in particular the fear that the wrong kind of focus on past injustices can create more harm than it repairs. Anyone who thinks a sound culture can be built on a history of trauma should look at the current state of Israel.

Still, I'm not ready to share the depth of his despair about this cultural moment. Rieff seems confident that we are living at the end of the liberal democratic order. That confidence is based on a distinction he draws between hope as "a (non-falsifiable) metaphysical category" and optimism, which is empirical. If one is inclined, he says, one can choose to hope, but there's precious little evidence to ground it.

Immanuel Kant drew the same distinction, though he called hope a moral category rather than a metaphysical one, and the distinction is important. Since hope is a moral category, it becomes an obligation. For if we give up hoping, we will be unable to act to avert any of the catastrophes that could bring the world down. Hope is not an inclination or an emotion; it's a duty.

But Kant was almost as good a psychologist as he was a philosopher, and he knew that human beings would have trouble sustaining hope if they didn't occasionally get a sign—something empirical, after all. The sign that worked for Kant was pretty meager: not the French Revolution itself but the promise that distant observers like him saw in it was a reason to

maintain hopes for moral progress. He was writing in 1798. While condemning the Terror, he found a sign of hope in the emotions that revolutionary principles aroused even in those who would never benefit (or suffer) from them.

Let me toss out another sign of hope. Last fall I was invited to lecture on my book *Left Is Not Woke* at a distinguished American liberal arts college that is justly proud of its progressive traditions. Over lunch the next day, several students complained to me about the faculty. "I wish we could just read Dickens without having to think about his relevance to colonialism," said an English major. Said another, "My Shakespeare professor told us there was no more reason to read Shakespeare than anyone else. It's wrong to say he's better than others."[7] Without naming names, I repeated the conversation that evening at a dinner with faculty at the same table in the same restaurant. (Options in the small college town were limited.) They were astonished and began to recite the sort of litany I hear from friends teaching elsewhere: the students demand wokeness, refuse to read books about *x* if it was written by a *y*, and so on.

Millions of people who are not as bold or articulate as Rieff share his unease about wokeness. Trump has been savvy enough to sense that he could use that unease as a wedge to mount an attack on everything white supremacists have always hated. His attempt to dominate the universities in the name of combating antisemitism is another instance of his ability to instrumentalize a real problem for his own nefarious purposes. But neither woke practices nor antisemitism will disappear by pretending they're only right-wing propaganda.

With astonishing speed, many universities have changed their DEI departments to Departments of Belonging, while corporations have chosen to do without any virtue signaling whatsoever. Still, many progressives seem to believe that symbolic struggles can be a force of resistance to this administration. No serious

opposition is possible without a movement that disentangles left from woke. In strengthening such a movement, Rieff's book will prove a valuable tool.

Susan Neiman

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1. See, for example, Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), and Adrian Daub, *The Cancel Culture Panic: How an American Obsession Went Global* (Stanford University Press, 2024). ↩

2. For further discussion see my *Left Is Not Woke* (Polity, 2023), reviewed in these pages by Fintan O'Toole, November 2, 2023. ↩

3. See, for example, Musa al-Gharbi, Kenan Malik, Toure Reed, and Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò. ↩

4. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Winter 2004). ↩

5. Andrew Marantz, "Trolls for Trump," *The New Yorker*, October 24, 2016. ↩

6. See Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck* (International General, 1975). ↩

7. If he isn't, why on earth should twenty-first-century students plow through his texts? As the wonderful title of Fintan O'Toole's recently reissued book suggests, *Shakespeare Is Hard, But So Is Life.* ↩