

# In defence of wokeness



We have been reading an awful lot about ‘wokeness’ recently. Nobody, I notice, seems to be much in favour of it. In fact, the sharpest pens of the right seem to stab at more or less nothing else these days. Stab, stab, stab, they go. Many incisions are made and much ink and sawdust is spilled. So, being a believer in giving peace a chance, I’d like to sit for a moment on the bar stool still pleasantly warm from my colleague Rod’s momentarily departed bottom to offer a word or two in wokeness’s defence. I worry, you see, that it might be a bit of an Aunt Sally.

Thing is, ‘woke’ is a term that you now only ever see used as a sneer. It performs precisely the role that ‘politically correct’ and ‘loony left’ did in the late 1980s and early 1990s — reducing a whole range of positions to the punchline for a rather threadbare joke. Remember when stand-up comics and tabloid columnists saw ‘one-legged black lesbian single mothers’ as a symbol of the hilarious lunacy of ‘political correctness gone mad’ (never mind that such people existed, and I dare say had a pretty tough time of it, and weren’t intrinsically any funnier than the two-legged variety)? We’re near as dammit back there.

One of my late grandfather’s wise sayings was: ‘Nobody ever destroyed a man by sneering.’ The culture wars are now being conducted almost entirely through sneering — and as long as they are, they will remain unwinnable. If you want to crush the left — and, goodness me, why shouldn’t you? — ‘woke’ won’t do it, because it’s not an argument so much as a retreat to the comfort zone — a sort of ideological thumb-sucking. Using ‘woke’ as a catch-all term of derogation may elicit sniggers from your own side, but it betrays a dismal incuriosity about what it is that you’re actually opposing. And ‘know your enemy’ remains good advice. You see supposed intellectuals on the right, for instance, denouncing their opponents as ‘Marxists’ and ‘post-modernists’ without pausing to note that those are contradictory types of thought; just as democratic socialism and anti-capitalism are quite different animals; just as within anti-racism or queer rights campaigning or feminism there are many different views.

You may see these as the order of precedence between a louse and a flea, but it’s

surely worth knowing what you’re disagreeing with before you write the whole passel off as ‘fashionable, self-righteous, virtue-signalling lefties who would have us all singing baa-baa-green-sheep’? ‘Fashionable’, ‘self-righteous’ or ‘virtue-signalling’ — all used in collocation with ‘woke’ — aren’t terms that oppose a position: they instead impute a motive, and rather defensively so at that. To do it as a conjugation: I am principled, you are inflexible, he is self-righteous.

And why wouldn’t you want to be ‘woke’ in any case? In its original sense, as minted in black activism in the States, to be ‘woke’ was to be aware. It was to show just that curiosity about the world that its use as a sneer declines to bother with. One of the basic contentions of the non-loony left is this: a social set-up that systematically gives some people a raw deal doesn’t always make it obvious

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that it’s doing so. We get used to it. This is a contention to which anybody arguing that it’s stupid to ‘cancel’ historical figures for holding views that were widespread in their own age should surely find it easy to subscribe. To take a well-worn analogy, we swim in a world-view like a fish swims in water: the fish doesn’t have a concept of ‘water’ because it’s all the poor thing has ever known. To be woke is to go, aha: this is water.

Caroline Criado Perez’s recent book *Invisible Women* gives some good examples. Men have for so long been treated as the default human specimen that many people, including women, don’t even notice the absurdity of this. So the medical advice on the symptoms of a heart attack describes how men experience it; but it turns out women’s heart attacks manifest differently. Crash-test dummies and seat-belts are modelled on the male body shape; office central heating systems are adjusted to male body temperatures. To be ‘woke’ is to notice this stuff and perhaps want to do something about it.

Reni Eddo-Lodge’s *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* seeks to do something similar in another arena. It’s a

thoughtful attempt to explain what is meant by ‘structural racism’, and why it tends to be invisible to its beneficiaries. And you know what? I was put on to it by my seventysomething white South-African-born father. He said it changed his view of the world. He took the time to read and think about an unfamiliar point of view — and I guess he got woke.

In a broader sense, then, you could say that to be ‘woke’ is to show curiosity about other people; to aspire to enlarge your range of sympathy. It is to take an interest in how the world may look from another perspective. In that respect the aspiration to be woke is in line with the basic project of the Enlightenment: to question received ideas and see if your assumptions are susceptible to disproof. There are good reasons to want to give that a shot, of which self-respect is only one.

Incuriosity will come back to bite you. Think of poor, silly Laurence Fox — who thought that casting Sikhs as soldiers on the Western Front in 1917 was evidence of loony-left political correctness in the film-makers. Turned out there were rather a lot of Sikhs fighting in the first world war. The fact he didn’t think that there were, and couldn’t be bothered to investigate, and looked silly when proved wrong, might have led a subtler mind to wonder whether his impressions of history were a bit simplistic. It might have made him think: this stuff — could it be water?

There are many on the ‘woke’ left who are in its proper sense not woke at all. There’s nothing woke about caricaturing everyone on the right as a ‘fascist’, a ‘phobe’ or what have you. The non-idiotic leftie will know the difference between a Burkean conservative and an acolyte of Ayn Rand. The non-idiotic leftie will see there’s more to an honest reckoning with the past than cancelling everyone who was alive at the time of slavery and didn’t go on a Black Lives Matter march there and then.

But you don’t engage the non-idiotic leftie by tilting Quixote-like at the behaviour of his most idiotic fellow traveller. That tribal incuriosity appears to be everywhere, and the national conversation is much the poorer for it. So let’s all stop sneering and get woke, eh? .

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*Sam Leith and Andrew Doyle on whether it’s good to be ‘woke’.*