

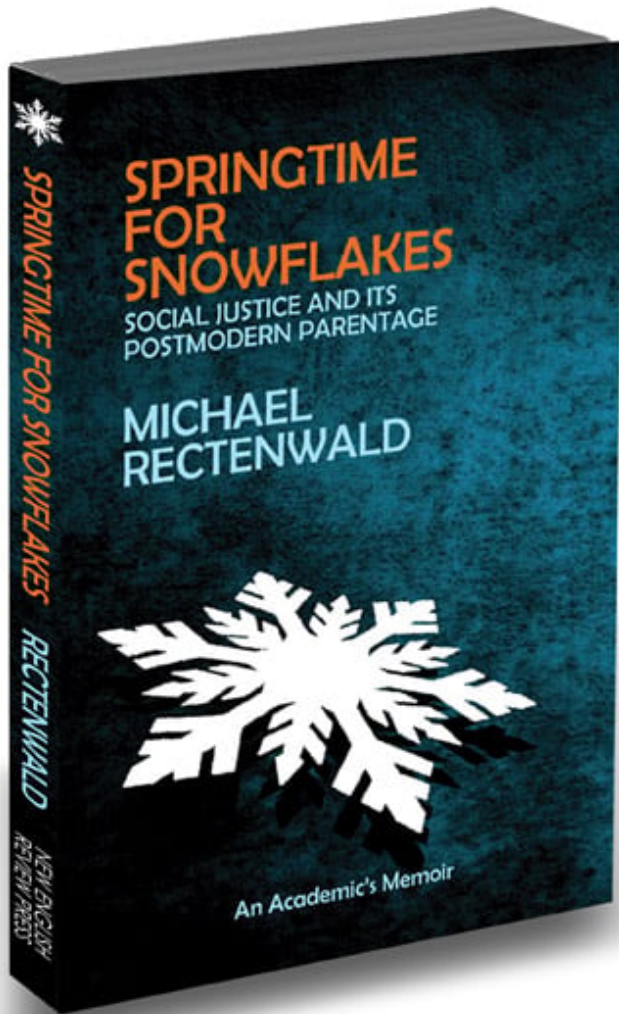
Woke Alright

Springtime for Snowflakes: Social Justice and Its Postmodern Parentage (An Academic Memoir) by Michael Rectenwald
New English Review Press, 2018, 174pp. \$19.99

by [James Como](#), *Cishetero White Male* (August 2018)



Demonstration, Ben Shahn, 1933



We have preceded nearly fifty pages of a Conclusion (Looking Forward) and three Appendices (Best Tweets, Best Facebook Statuses, and Selected Media Coverage, Essays, Talks, and Interviews), but not an index. By the way, to the dinosaurs reading this review (I am one of you), do not sneer: the consequential battle fronts are no longer just textbooks, nor the weapons of handouts and chalk. Ideas have consequences we know, and so do tweets. (Even so, the appendices are overdone: often redundant and static and coming at the expense of

intellectual history and analysis.)

The first few biographical chapters make clear that Rectenwald, though compliant with reasonable requests, is not to be pushed around, is capaciously well-read, has enormous intellectual integrity—and (here the power of Twitter) is himself given to bouts of mischief. He once was what any person-of-the-Right would classify as of-the-Left: a “libertarian communist” and generally a Postmodern man. Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs were friends, and Ginsberg remains an icon. An “earnest Catholic” who went from contractor, to broadcast ad man, to hang-out hippie (with much drug use: mescaline mattered), and finally to the academy, Rectenwald found his way to postmodernism by way of “Literary

and Cultural Theory” in grad school. He tells us that Ginsberg certainly pre-figured postmodernism but would find the “censoriousness and prohibitionist proclivities” of the SJW (Social Justice Warriors) utterly unacceptable.

In a rich chapter (rich enough to make the reader wish for a second), he traces the genealogy of the Social Justice Movement from its earliest antecedents (Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson), through the Frankfurt School, Deconstructionism (the usual suspects), Lacan’s brand of psychoanalysis, and post-Structuralism; on to Louis Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970) and Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), a call to reject the “master-narratives of legitimation.” Rectenwald’s inventory of the assets of “cultural capital” is superbly comic, not least Slavoj Zizek’s greasy hair.

Here, I think, lies the greatest value of this book: this reader got a sound refreshment of what he thought he already knew. A close second is the author’s tactical analysis, by way of which the reader certainly gets . . . “woke” (as they say). We are introduced to what is tantamount to an alternative space-time continuum. Sometimes it’s enough for Rectenwald to merely list items from the fascist vocabulary (e.g. “phallogocentrism”). Always the true-believing, unrelenting religious fervor of SJWs oppresses: Robespierre would be proud.

There is a line—one drawn by Stalin in the Thirties, by Mao in the Sixties, by very many colleges today, by MSNBC—that one *must* cross and that the crossing of which dehumanizes. You *will* check your brain at the door, and you will know it, and

you will do so grinningly, and you will grovel, no matter your prior Left-loyal credentials. He tells us that the Left “righted” him.

The second half of the book is largely an academic autobiography: Rectenwald becomes a True Believer, though one who, even if intellectually committed and deeply informed, manages to retain his professional integrity. But the postmodern sabotage of literature, science, and sexuality (especially Queer Theory, with its attendant accusative branding of heretics) begin to take their toll. When he is vetting candidates for a position in an English department and points out that a certain candidate cannot write, another committee member not only shouts him down—“we don’t teach grammar!”—but becomes obstreperous and postures aggressively. That woman, herself black like the semi-articulate candidate, harasses another, white, candidate. Guess who got the job.

Rectenwald cheers the reader with an account of the Alan Sokal parody, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” that fooled the editors of *Social Text* with its anti-gravity claim: seems it is socially constructed. But he also documents a number of enormities, the greatest of which being the one perpetrated not by Ward Churchill (“little Eichmans” died on 9/11) but by Jean Baudrillard, who described the attack as a “self-immolation” whose victims had been “complicit” in the system’s symbolic demise.

When a colleague openly claims a Rectenward plan as her own, he misdirects an email in which he calls the offender a “bitch.” That is when he is called on the carpet and eventually becomes “the Deplorable Professor.” What

complicated the matter is that the thief had one arm! You can't make this up. He was "besieged," and, to be honest, he seems to become a postmodern man mugged by original sin. That is, until the very last chapter, *The Politics of Postmodern Theory*. There we learn how each one of us can be a target of the SJWs.

"Social justice warriors are 'practical postmodernists,' although they don't know it." That results in the "personalization of the political," requiring "virtue signaling" and the "call out." The personal does *not* flow into the political; rather, "the political is made narrowly personal. . . . The individual person is reduced to a mere emblem of political meaning." Thus, the mass violation of personal and public space to achieve direct confrontation.

Though I have taught as an adjunct here and there (including at New York University and Columbia), I spent my own full-time fifty-year career at CUNY, forty-nine of those at one college, York, with a preponderantly minority and immigrant population of varying origins, preparation, maturity, ambition, and abilities. I experienced little of the combat Rectenwald describes, but identity politics, ideological requirements and correctness had been born, not least in the Foreign Languages Department, where Iberian Peninsula figures (Cervantes!) were no longer required reading. But NYU, Rectenwald's major theater of operations, is far more woke than York. And (no small thing) I missed the full onslaught of the anti-Social Media.

As for those Tweets: here are two personal favorites. The first is all-encapsulating: "The 'academy' has officially gone ape shit. This is now merely mental illness posing as

politics. #Trigger My Ass,” which was linked to an article entitled, “KU bars gorillas from jungle-themed decoration due to ‘masculine image’.” The second is a character sketch to end all sketches: “The social justice ideologues are the contemporary equivalents of the Pharisees. Jesus hated Phariseism because by ostentatiously praying in public the Pharisees virtue-signaled to the crowd even as they sinned against . . . their neighbors.”

In fact, Rectenwald frequently, and rightly, points out the SJW’s febrile religious zeal, a surrogacy for the real thing. Well, then, why not a nod toward that Real Thing, the balm in Gilead? In her new collection *What Are We Doing Here?* Marilynne Robinson, a famously Christian public intellectual, shows how literature has “been made a kind of data to illustrate, supposedly, some graceless theory that stood apart from it, and that would be shed in a year or two. . . . [There is] a virtual army out of the general population who will compete successfully against whomever for whatever into an endless future”

At stake are the truth and livelihoods, of course, which were always fragile. Now, though, a more consequential feature of Western culture is at risk. “Social justice,” Rectenwald reports, “treats the fields of biology, genetics, evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology as anathema.” Thus, the only antidote to the SWJ academic hegemony is to relegate it “to the position of one among many other belief systems” in the university.

Malcolm X famously advised the followers of M. L. King to “look for yourself, think for yourself, then make up your own mind.” Rectenwald has heeded that admonition, and though his

perspective is eyeball close, so that a molehill can look like Everest, warriors in the field have a keener appreciation of bullets and bombs than do those of us spectating from a thousand feet up. The question is, has he lived up to his declared purpose that we read in a tweet: "It is not enough to merely dismiss postmodernism. [It] must be explained, analyzed, and demonstrated to be mistaken . . . One must locate its manifestations in the culture . . . Finally one works to extirpate it." The answer, resoundingly, is, Yes, he has, accessibly, effectively, authentically, which is why this book matters.

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