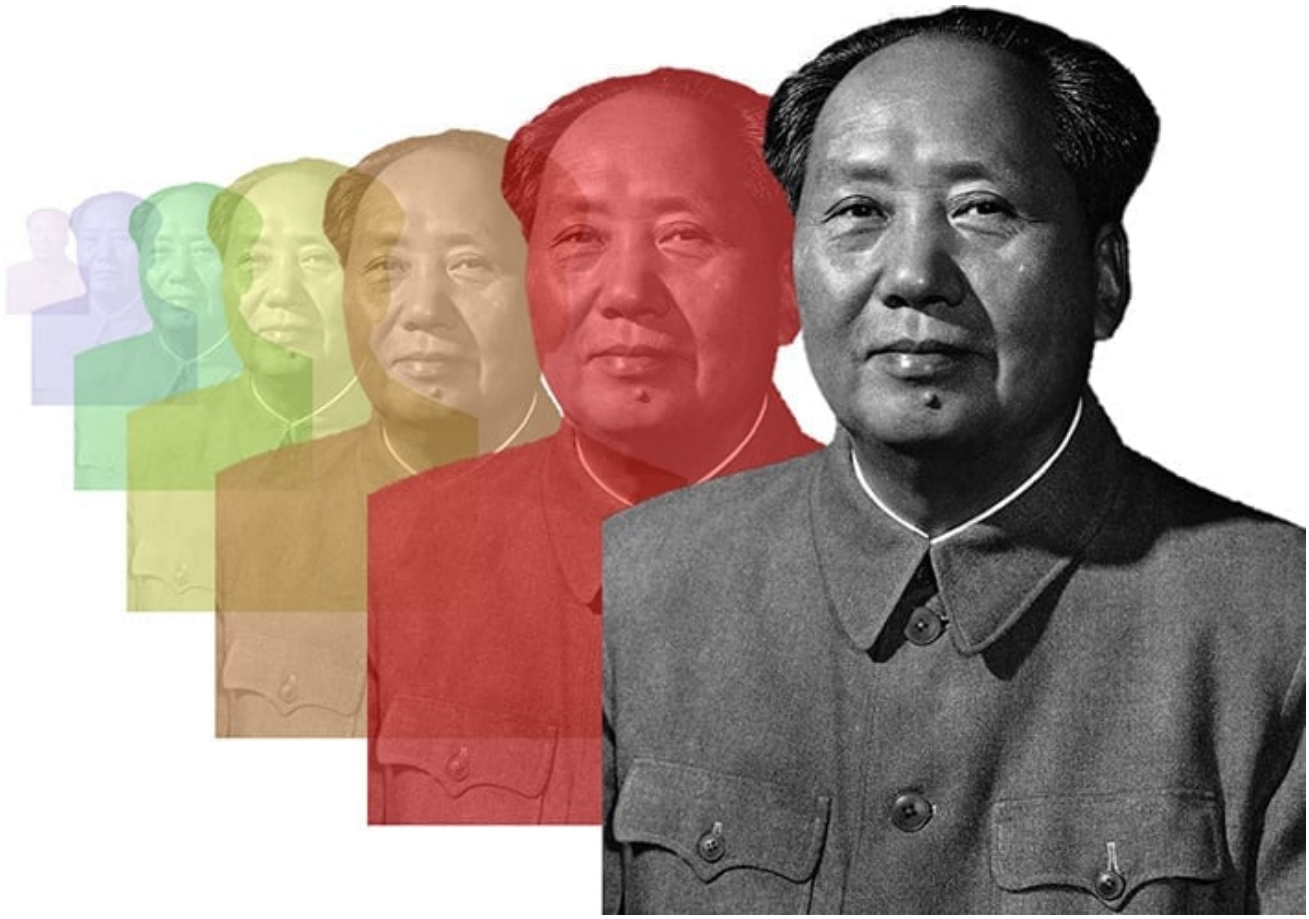
The Maoist Rage of Woke Ideology

Unlike Marxism, wokeness is primarily a “morality” based on an abstract notion of social justice, which takes its inspiration and methods from Mao’s Cultural Revolution.



by Michael Rectenwald

The idea that wokeness is a form of Marxism or neo-Marxism has been floated by many authors and commentators. For example, wokeness has been variously called “adapted Marxism” by Ryan Chapman and “race Marxism” by James Lindsay. The basic premise

of this idea is that wokeness translates Marx's proletarian and capitalist classes into social identity categories. Wokeness retains Marxism's underlying class *ressentiment* and converts it for the oppressor/oppressed dyad. This line of thinking generally locates the roots of woke ideology in the neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, from which critical race theory (CRT) emerged. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for resisting the idea that wokeness is simply a permutated form of Marxism.

In *Springtime for Snowflakes: Social Justice and Its Postmodern Parentage* (2018), I trace woke ideology (or contemporary social justice ideology) from the theories of the Frankfurt School's forerunner, György Lukács, through the Frankfurt School itself, and into postmodern theory, which then mutated into the "practical postmodernism" of wokeness. For example, I note that Lukács's "proletarian standpoint epistemology," as introduced in his book, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), is the probable basis of the social justice or woke belief that each person has their own truth based on their particular type of subordination. Lukács argued that the unique position of the working class within the social order and the relations of production provide the proletariat with a privileged vantage point for discerning objective truth.

This Marxist version of what Ludwig von Mises called "polylogism," or the belief that different groups of people reason in fundamentally different ways, constitutes the root of the social justice belief that every social group, and even each person, has their own truth and that subordinate groups and persons have special access to truth—even though postmodernism simultaneously deconstructs the belief in objective truth. Postmodernist and postcolonial theorists appropriated standpoint epistemology and siphoned it through various identity filters. Wokeness inherits standpoint epistemology from them and holds that membership in a

subordinated identity group grants members exclusive access to knowledge—their *own* knowledge— which is inaccessible to others. Members of dominant identity groups cannot access or understand the knowledge or the experiences of subordinated others. Thus, there is no contesting the latter's "narratives" and "stories," either with reason or empirical evidence.

With wokeness, Marxism's underlying economic theory and its explicit class analysis drop out of the picture entirely. Instead of Marxism's precise (although mistaken) theory of exploitation—exploitation equals the amount of "surplus value" (derived from unpaid labor time) expropriated from workers by capitalists at the point of production—wokeness purveys the nebulous and nearly ineffable notion of privilege, which apparently, despite ongoing efforts, can never be fully annulled or adequately atoned for. In strict Marxist terms, the leveling down or stripping of social superiors of undeserved "privilege" has nothing at all to do with achieving "social justice" or "equity."

Lacking any critical opposition to capitalism as the primary means by which social order is structured, and involving no arguments or strategy for overthrowing capitalism, wokeness renders itself impotent as far as Marxism is concerned. Unlike Marxism, wokeness is primarily a "morality," predicated on an abstract notion of social justice and hierarchical inversion, or at least a leveling down of privileged individuals and groups. But if, as Marx argued, the proletarians (that is, most people) are exploited, robbed of the fruits of their labor and thus essentially of their very lives, then collective action resulting from the recognition of collective self-interest, and not some attempt to realize an abstract social justice, is the only effective means for realizing liberation.

Marx's answer for social quandaries and plaguing inequities did not involve the exposure of an ethical breach but rather a systematic analysis of capitalism's economic and social

structures and overcoming those structures. In short, for Marx, existing social relations—or the class system—depend on a socially organized labor force that operates within a privately owned system of production. According to Marxism, only by overthrowing these social relations and eliminating this ownership system can “equity” be achieved.

Marx’s object was so-called “universal human emancipation,” which is not a mere matter of reducing the privilege of social superiors. In fact, such jockeying for social ranking would have been more appropriate within feudal society, although mostly impossible within it as well. In Marx’s terms, inequity within capitalist society is not due to a surplus of privilege for some and a corresponding lack for others. Such honorific notions are abstractions involving mere ephemeral social signaling. If he were alive today, I submit that Marx would argue that even if the aims of woke social justice could be achieved, the most significant matters of material inequity, exploitation, poverty, and social domination would remain intact.

The leftist turn from economics and toward identity and privilege came long before wokeness arrived on the scene, and it had already been undertaken under the rubric of Marxism-Leninism itself. Upon the Sino-Soviet split in the post-Stalinist era, a decisive shift occurred within Western Marxism. The “economism” of the Third International, which held to the orthodox Marxist view that socialism would inevitably emerge from the economic conditions of advanced industrial capitalism, gave way to Maoist “voluntarism,” which emphasized subjective conditions, the class consciousness and will of the masses. Further, given the revelations from the Soviet Union following Khrushchev’s “secret speech” and the subsequent de-Stalinization, the left grudgingly acknowledged the gulag system, the Red Terror, the Great Terror, and the purges. Stalinism was taken by many to be as oppressive as advanced capitalism.

Nevertheless, many Western leftists refused to relinquish their hopes for a revolutionary communism. They merely sought it through different means and adopted the notion of cultural revolution. The idea of cultural revolution came primarily from the Maoist Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), but it also can be descried in the earlier works of Western Marxists themselves. These included the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School, several of whose members settled in the U.S. by 1933. Of the latter group, Herbert Marcuse conceived of the New Left, cobbled together from various contingents—feminism, the black power movement, environmentalism, and others.

It was these outsiders who represented the real revolutionary potential. The working class in advanced industrial societies had long been co-opted by the capitalist system (thanks to increasing wealth and consumerism) and was no longer useful for the cause. It had become a new labor aristocracy. The current debasement of white working-class Americans by the leftist establishment derives from this belief about the Western working class. It also explains the New Left's adoption of identity politics and its condemnation of wrongthink; it was not the Western working class but rather marginalized identity groups—those on the periphery of capitalism, both socially and geographically—who had the right consciousness and thus true revolutionary potential. The working class could, by this reasoning, be dispensed with. Their travails were no longer the concern of Marxists. This attitude toward industrial workers also coincided with the Maoist adoption of the peasantry as the new revolutionary cadre.

Maoism would become the lodestar for the Western left from the late 1960s to the present. As detailed by David M. Jones and M.L.R. Smith in *The Strategy of Maoism in the West: Rage and the Radical Left* (2022), in France, Maoism shifted leftist interests away from economic determinism and toward a cultural

politics that suited *avant garde* literary and cultural theorists. They found in cultural revolution handles for their own projects. These included post-structuralist deconstruction and semiotic analysis (Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida), second-wave feminism (Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous), psychoanalysis (the *Tel Quel* group, et al.), the "bio-politics" and "micro-politics" of power (Michel Foucault), and even structuralist Marxism (Louis Althusser).

In Althusser's case, because his structuralism removed the human subject from history, Mao's voluntarism should have proven to be a decisive point of difference. But Althusser managed to rationalize his endorsement of Maoism because it challenged the stale economic determinism and conciliatory rhetoric of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist order that characterized post-Stalinism. Like other French leftist intellectuals, Althusser welcomed violent confrontation. Many of these activist literati were sponsored by China's United Front for Cultural Work to visit the People's Republic of China in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

"It was this evolving progressive interest in social justice critical theory and Maoist consciousness raising . . . that established the ideological foundations for a 'woke' assault upon western democratic self-understanding in the twenty-first century," Jones and Smith argued. By Maoism, Jones and Smith referred primarily to the ethos, strategies, and practices of the Maoist Cultural Revolution, which so enthused leftist intellectuals in France and later the United States and beyond.

Even as many of these French intellectuals became disenchanted and lost their revolutionary zeal, especially as the horrors of the Chinese Cultural Revolution became known, their ideas had by the 1980s taken hold of academic departments throughout the U.S. and elsewhere, where they fostered a deconstructive frenzy for dismantling the foundations of Western liberal democracy. Rather than seeking to overthrow the state, these

Maoist-inflected activist scholars and writers sought to infiltrate it—as well as academia, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other cultural institutions. "Indeed, it was Maoists, such as Rudi Dutschke, who advocated the long march of consciousness raising through the state and later through international institutions and non-governmental organizations," Jones and Smith wrote. Influenced by Gramsci, it was Dutschke, a leader in the Socialist German Students Union, who corresponded with Marcuse and coined the phrase "the long march through the institutions." It has been acknowledged by many thinkers that this long march has since been completed.

Already in 2016, after my imbroglio with the wokesters at New York University (see *Springtime for Snowflakes* and *Beyond Woke* for the story), I began tracing social justice or wokeness to moments and movements beginning in the late 1960s. My search for plausible precursors to the privilege-checking, callout, and cancel culture of the social justice milieus led me to post-1968 French feminists, post-structuralists, postmodernists, and deconstructionists, who read Mao's *Little Red Book* and imbibed a Maoist ethos, incorporating ideological purging elements of the Cultural Revolution, such as "struggle sessions" and "autocritique," (or self-criticism), into their lexicon and toolbox. In Chinese struggle sessions, the guilty party, accused of selfishness, ignorance, and the embrace of bourgeois ideology, was pilloried with verbal and often physical assaults by his comrades, until he broke down and confessed his characterological and ideological flaws, and then pledged self-reform, or faced imprisonment and possible death. Meanwhile, autocritique began with the guilty party, who subjected herself to brutal verbal self-inspection and derogation before the jury of her peers.

Now that my hunches have been validated by subsequent scholarship, I can say with confidence that wokeness is Westernized Maoism and not merely an adaptation of Marxism as

such. And several Chinese immigrants to the West, who lived through the period, have attested to this sense. Cancel culture, internet mobbing, the renaming of streets, word policing, changing the definitions of words, and the violent iconoclasm of Black Lives Matter—their penchant for destroying cultural artifacts such as statues and historical monuments—recall the features of the Maoist Cultural Revolution. (The question remains whether this woke hegemony came after a bottom-up march through the institutions, or rather through an elite-led romp within them.)

Mao's insistence that bourgeois ideology persisted in the social body even after the elimination of capitalist social relations and property ownership led to an emphasis on ideological purging, rectification, purification, or the molding of the minds of individual subjects to revolutionary ends, i.e., thought reform. This concentration on ideological revolution within revolution explains the woke hyperpersonalization of the political—the notion that political change occurs within the mind of the individual—and the targeting of individuals for rectification and possible cancellation. The social justice movement gained momentum by hyperpersonalizing the political, or, as the leftist critics of neoliberalism might say, by privatizing politics. It owes this to Maoism, not to orthodox Marxism per se.

As Jones and Smith have shown, from the 1960s on, the cultural work done by Western Maoist-inflected critical theorists and activists came to dominate the West's leading educational institutions. By the second decade of the 20th century, this Westernized Maoism fueled woke ideology, which spread well beyond the confines of university humanities departments and insinuated itself into the politics of everyday life, in every sector of society. As Jones and Smith wrote:

> *From hospitals to policing, to parenting, law enforcement, the arts and primary education, a Maoist practice of cultural confrontation undermined the once solid liberal institutions*

of the West.

Moreover, this Westernized Maoism, like Mao's philosophy that it adopted and adapted, is entirely illiberal and anti-liberal. It is, in short, totalitarian. Yet, to undertake its subversion of Western liberal democracies, Westernized Maoism exploited the paradox of liberal tolerance and used liberal ideals against liberalism itself. It relied on the principles of free speech, individual rights, and tolerance of oppositional views to make its case, and then proceeded to silence and shout down its opponents after it gained ascendency. The solution to this infiltration is the unapologetic reassertion of Western ideas and ideals and the confrontation and elimination of the totalitarian "other" that has savaged them.

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