

The Woe of Woke

by Michael Curtis



Wokeism, which emerged from African American communities because of concern about inequality and concern that considerable sections of the population were ignored or forgotten, has now, fueled by BLM movement and the social media, become mainstream and pervasive affecting politics, education, the media, and entertainment industry, and mainly focused on issues of racial and social justice.

It is useful to start with some examples of American symbols and way of life that are under attack by woke. Tweets by the National Geographic suggested that the Fourth of July 2021 fireworks celebrations were racist because their smoke and air pollution disproportionately affected communities of color. A study by researchers at the University of California's Irving campus suggested that fireworks display should be replaced by drone light shows.

At a broadcast on July 4 aired on PBS, MNPR, and the American

Forces network, the Star Spangled Banner was sung by the opera star Renee Fleming, but the show ended with Vanessa Williams, singer and actress, the first black woman to be crowned Miss America, singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," nicknamed the Black National Anthem, a recognition that Juneteenth had been made a federal holiday by President Joe Biden. This song had first been written as a poem by NAACP activist James Weldon Johnson. Already, the U.S. Olympic athlete, Gwen Berry, gained attention by turning away during the national anthem, and calling herself an "activist athlete."

In the new Marvell comic series, an unpatriotic Captain America slams the American Dream. He says America actually has two dreams, and one lie. The first American dream isn't real. The second one, about a home with a white picket fence is a lie and does not get along with things like other cultures, immigrants and the poor.

In Disney World in Orlando, Mickey Mouse has gone woke. The greetings in the theme park have been changed from "boys and girls" to "dreamers of all ages," and changed from "ladies and gentlemen" to "everyone." Disney has also revamped some of its ideas:

Splash Mountain and Jungle Cruises, are alleged to show native peoples as savages or subservient and illustrating racial and cultural stereotypes.

A major symbol of America is the Statue of Liberty, beacon of U.S. freedom, one visited annually by four million people. However, in an article on July 3, 2021, the art and architecture critic Philip Kennicott, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 2013, argued that Lady Liberty for some Americans stands for hypocrisy and unfilled promises, and is a symbol of the misuse of liberty. The statue he argues has meaning mostly for descendants of European immigrants and less so for Americans whose families originate from other parts of the world. For him, it is a symbol of the misuse of liberty. One irony is

that Liberty was depicted as a woman at a time when women didn't have the right to vote.

An Ohio private school, Columbus Academy, where tuition fees cost \$30,000 a year, sent a letter of July 2, 2021 to two parents telling them that their three children will not be reenrolled at the school. It said the two parents had levelled false and misleading attacks on the school and its leadership, including claims that students were subjected to bomb sniffing dogs on campus, and that they planned to withhold tuition fees until the school met their demands.

Mothers in fact had founded a coalition, campaigning against CRT, political extremism and a culture of fear and administration at the school.

Wokery is alive, if not well, in British education. The 2021 report of the British National Education Union, which has 450,000 members, stressed that the British educational system has been shaped by colonialism and neo-liberalism, and that schools lack honesty and transparency because of the silence around British imperialism and racism in the British educational system. The need to decolonize education is urgent, including more diversity in wall displays and other learning materials to reflect people from ethnic minorities. Also, teachers should have activist training and make white privilege and colonialism visible in every subject and at every stage of education. It also held that British culture is saturated with a longing for return to Empire.

Supporters of the NEU report argue it is an uncomfortable truth that contributions and achievements of black people have been greatly overlooked, if not totally ignored. Decolonizing the curriculum means the contributions of the colonies will not be ignored, and can lead to a more empathetic and fairer society. The NEU report is just the latest decolonization campaign, prompted by the BLM protests, in schools across the country. Opponents of this attitude argue that the phrase

white privilege should not be taught at schools because it is unnecessarily antagonistic, and that skin color should not be used as a proxy for disadvantage.

Yet the woke cancel culture is shown not only in education but also in sport. Two British universities, Hull and Worcester, claim it is racist, discriminatory, and euro-centric to mark down essays for bad spelling, grammar, and punctuation. The intention is to reduce the gap between the proportion of white and black students getting good grades. Proficiency in written English is said to be homogeneous, North European, white, male, elite.

Woke is playing in sport. Lancashire County cricket club has put its players on an enhanced educational course after 50 tweets by them, alleged to be racist, homophobic, misogynist, dating back to 2011 came to light. Three of the offending players were under 18 at the time of the tweets.

Cancel culture is on display in Trafalgar Square, London's most renowned historical public space, venue for political demonstrations, location for sports celebrations, victory parades, is also home to a rolling set of specially commissioned temporary public artworks in four plinths, which have become the intersection of popular approval and political and social thought. The fourth displays the winning artworks in the recent competition. That fourth plinth will contain in 2024 an anti-colonial sculpture by Teresa Margolles, depicting the faces of 850 transgender sex workers which the artist expects will disintegrate in the rain, leaving a kind of anti-monument.

Margolles, a Mexican conceptual artist, specializes in portraying issues such as the social causes and consequences of death. She represented Mexico at the 2009 Venice Biennale where her exhibit was the swabbing of the marbled floors of a palace with the diluted blood of victims of gang wars. Her work in Trafalgar Square will be 850 imprints, imprints, life

masks depicting and made by transgender people arranged in a cubic structure inspired by the form of a skull rack, *Tzompantli*, that was often used to display the remains of sacrifice victims or prisoners of war. It claims to be a reflection of overlooked or underrepresented communities in public art, but critics have suggested it is a load of rubbish, an illustration of woke in central London.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission pulled out of the LGBT, Stonewall, diversity program after differences over transgender activism. It came after Stonewall, the LGBT rights charity in the UK, was accused in June 2021 of advising, incorrectly, about gender-critical academics and misrepresenting the law in the advice it gave to the University of Essex. The university had decided to “no platform” two external professors, Jo Phoenix and Rosa Freedman, after students accused the two women of transphobia over letters they had written to newspapers. The act that could be considered unlawful harassment. The speaking engagements of the two women were cancelled. One of the accusations was that they were part of an “anti-trans social movement.” The university apologized for no-platforming the two female academics, and for the belief of some at the university that gender-critical academics can legitimately be excluded. It was concerned about the balance between freedom of speech and the commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusion.

A central problem is that of diversity. The issue of teacher diversity is troublesome, especially using race or prioritizing race as a criterion for deciding what teachers to employ or retain. One legal case with a major decision is *Piscataway Board of Education v. Taxman*, 1996, when the Third Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the original plaintiff, a white teacher, holding that an ad hoc preference for racial diversity in teacher layoffs, choosing a minority person, violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. The court ruled

that the Board's use of race in deciding on teacher replacement was unlawful. However, the case was never brought to the Supreme Court, and the decision at present is not nationally binding.

It would be helpful if the U.S. Supreme Court had the opportunity to evaluate the wokery and cancel culture present in so many different fields and restore sanity in private and public life.