



DUAL ATTACK ON SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE DELEGITIMIZATION OF “WOKE”/”WOKISM”

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The conference on the Future of Europe (spring 2021 – spring 2022) launched by the European Union was a bottom-up participatory consultation. It was a one-year series of discussions, debates, and collaborations between citizens, politicians, and policymakers on the future of Europe. On the conference website, there are several proposals submitted by citizens and institutions. The Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) Centre for European Studies, a [scientific bastion of the Hungarian illiberal state](#),¹ [submitted the following proposal](#), tweeted broadly under the banner of [#WokeFreeEurope](#):

The EU must be a safe space free of cancel culture. The rampant and noxious “woke culture” must be eradicated, woke terminology (such as intersectionality, unconscious bias, gender assigned at birth) shall be banned, especially in official documents. The Commission must remain neutral, instead of promoting “top-down” minoritarian ideologies, and imposing solutions in areas it has no competency(s). Wokism is at odds with the European way of life, its history and its culture, there must be no place for wokism in Europe! [#WokeFreeEurope](#) (Mathias Corvinus Collegium Centre for European Studies)

The MCC’s proposal is an effort to delegitimize woke/wokism without deliberation and open reference. The term “woke culture” is used as coded language to ridicule social justice. We live in a time of confusion, disenchantment, and—most importantly—serious global social, political, and economic turbulence that raises not just existential insecurities, but also theoretical ambiguities. This short essay is a preliminary contemplation of what is considered woke/wokism, the conceptualization of anti-woke culture, and the effects of its mobilization in mainstream political and media discourse. How can we explain and respond to the political strategies and tactics used in the anti-woke campaign to distort social justice struggles, normalize human rights violations, repress human rights activists, and misrepresent the original conceptualization of “woke”/“wokism,” a movement that has liberatory and emancipatory potential to reckon with historical injustices and provide justice for people who have historically been oppressed, racialized, and excluded from material and symbolic wealth?

1 [Andrea Pető \(2022\)](#) accurately elaborates the history of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) and critiques its embeddedness in the Hungarian illiberal scientific institutional landscape.

The Genealogy of Woke: A Call for Awareness of Racism

The term “woke” originated from black vernacular and is inherently tied to black consciousness and anti-racist struggles. It was first referenced in popular culture during a spoken word section at the end of a recording of the 1938 protest folk song “Scottsboro Boys” by Lead Belly. The song refers to the horrific 1931 court case of nine black youths who were falsely accused of raping two white women and whose lives were destroyed by the deeply racist Alabama justice system (Cose, 2020). At the end of the recording, speaking to folklorist Alan Lomax, Louisiana blues and folk singer [Lead Belly can be heard saying](#), “I advise everybody, be a little careful when they go along through there—best *stay woke*, keep their eyes open.”² In 2014, following the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, “stay woke” became a motto/slogan used for protest and political mobilization against police brutality and racial violence. Widely promoted by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, #StayWoke on social media is a call for being aware of racism, structural violence, and systemic racism (Romano 2020).

Dual Assault on Social Justice

When reading and digesting the arguments against BLM and other so-called “woke” movements—that is, movements for social, racial, and gender justice that use the same conceptual language—it helps to understand the subtle and insidious link between far-rightists, on the one hand, and liberals and leftists, on the other hand.

The terms “woke” and “wokism” originated from a specific historical event and have been deployed by Black Lives Matter to articulate systemic racism. However, it has become prevalent to label U.S. college campus activism as “wokism,” thereby appropriating the term to describe students’ protest efforts to silence conservative/right-wing speakers (Boyers 2019). However, being conservative or right-wing in an academic context does not necessarily mean that someone should be silenced.

The concept of “woke/wokism” has reached Europe, particularly the UK, where it has been used by conservative parties, right-wing media outlets, and even the broader public (Cammaerts 2022). It has also recently emerged in semi-peripheral countries such as Hungary. “Woke” and “wokism” are used by conservative illiberal and far-right leaders and pundits to depict a [threat to the existing European cultural and social order](#) posed by an [ideologically indoctrinated religious establishment](#). Such leaders push the buttons of liberals and leftists by claiming that they endorse dangerous [identity politics](#); they also decry those who stand up for human rights as being swayed by fashionable [whims](#).

There are common threads in these conservative discourses, namely attacking and mocking individuals, groups, institutions, and specific studies that critique gendered and racialized discrimination and structural oppression. Thus, they trap liberals and leftists into delegitimizing and unrecognizing human rights activists’ claims regarding historical and structural injustice. Trapped liberals and leftists either remain silent and indifferent or use the same subtle language, albeit with different emphases, against those who are labelled as “woke” groups, institutions, and studies under the conceptual framework of “illiberalism.”

² This video features Lead Belly's "Scottsboro Boys" from the 2015 box set "Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection." For more information about this album, see <http://www.folkways.si.edu/leadbelly>. The recording is also available on YouTube: "Lead Belly – 'Scottsboro Boys,'" YouTube video, 4:40, posted by "SmithsonianFolkwaysRecordings," July 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrXfkPVIFIE&t=272s>, accessed October 25, 2022.

However, the constructive critiques of and discontent with liberalism articulated by racialized and gendered minorities are neither anti-liberalism nor illiberalism. In the same vein, constructive critique of certain trends in social justice activism is not anti-social-justice or opposing social justice; rather, it is a longstanding unresolved and antagonized dialogue—or, more typically, no more than a lonely monologue. Also, the discontent with the left captured via “identity politics” usually masks class-based, exploitative, and oppressive practices. Nevertheless, the concept of “intersectionality”—as a systemic account of gendered, racialized, and class-based oppressions—is deeply contested and critiqued by the left and perceived as an identity-based “new caste system” or “racial and cultural hierarchies” that place non-white, non-heterosexual people on the top ([Coastonjane 2019](#)).

Examining the articulation of “anti-woke” discourse helps uncover the subtle link between far-rightists and trapped liberals and leftists that creates the dual assault on social justice harnessed by conservative illiberal and far-right leaders.

Hegemonization, Demilitarization, and the Flaws of Liberal Democracy

[Bart Cammaerts \(2022\)](#), in his recent article, provides an enlightening theoretical framework for deconstructing the anti-woke cultural war and understanding its logic and long-lasting impact. He deploys the notion of “metapolitics,” used in fascist discourses linked to the Gramscian “hegemonization” and “the war of position,” as well as the friend/enemy distinction theorized by Carl Schmitt and combined with the theories of deviance and moral panics. The foundation of his theory is based on the Italian Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, which is always described as natural, internalized, and devoid of ideology and bias; it is unquestionable common sense that cannot be challenged, discussed, and debated. The conceptual condition of hegemony is central to the process of normalization. According to Cammaerts, the far right have skilfully used and taken advantage of the leftist Gramscian conceptual framework which they have embedded in Schmittian polarization and the friend/enemy distinction.

In this regard, anti-woke discourse always emphasizes the ideological basis of the social justice movement without being vocal about anti-wokists’ own ideological standing, regardless of their political orientation. For instance, the MCC proposal to the EU highlights “[...]The Commission must remain neutral, instead of promoting ‘top-down’ *minoritarian ideologies*...” (emphasis added). Gramsci, as a neo-Marxian, also envisioned that the capitalist and bourgeois power could not be overthrown by a revolutionary agenda through the use of physical violence; rather, this would require a gradual “insidious struggle” or “war of position” ([Gramsci, 1971: LXVI](#), cited in [Cammaerts 2022: 731](#)).

Following this idea, paradoxically, far-right movements have exploited the leftist Gramscian conceptualization and repackaged fascist ideas as normal and acceptable under neoliberal capitalism. Cammaerts argues that Gramsci’s revolutionary ideas are being popularized at the current historical juncture not by the left, but by the far right, who have achieved a new illiberal authoritarian order.

He draws on the concept of “metapolitics” that has been deployed by the far right (Cammaerts 2022:732). Despite the concept’s genealogy—it emerged in the context of German liberal thought—“metapolitics” is still attributed to Gramsci. For instance, Daniel Friberg, in his book [The Real Right Returns \(Friberg 2015\)](#), explains indisputably that “metapolitics” is a concept strategically aligned with the Gramscian “hegemonization” and “war of position” to create a long-term counterhegemonic worldview, thought, and culture (ideology) that transpose theory into action. This subversive counter-hegemonic conceptualization has been appropriated as a political strategy and tactic of the alt-right in the US and in European illiberal conservative and far-right politics,

whereas the “left-liberals” have failed to take advantage of these subversive left-wing concepts in the way the far right have.

The far right’s subversion of the Gramscian idea of a “long-term hegemonic struggle” to normalize fascist ideology brings us to the “anti-enlightenment constitutionalist and outspoken” controversial scholar Carl Schmitt ([Cammaerts 2022:732](#)). Schmitt grapples with the friend/enemy distinction, which proves to be a central point of politics at our current political juncture. As [Laclau and Mouffe \(1985\)](#) explain in the preface to the second edition of their book (published in 2000), the Jacobian friend/enemy model of politics, which is based upon the “simple competition among interests taking place in a neutral terrain” ([Laclau and Mouffe 2000:XXV](#)) is basically over. They propose a radical rethinking of democracy, encouraging leftists to improve their understanding of the structure of democracy and power relations and even imagine a new democracy. Carl Schmitt’s friend/enemy distinction, without agreeing with his conclusion that liberalism should be discarded, provides a potentially productive framework for understanding the nature of the antagonistic articulation and the discursive production of ideological enemies. As Chantal Mouffe suggests, discussing Schmitt’s work might help improve our understanding of the flaws of liberal democracies ([Mouffe 1999](#)). She advises that “[t]he strategy is definitely not to read Schmitt to attack liberal democracy, but to ask how it could be improved. To think both with and against Schmitt—this is the thrust of our unquestionable common sense endeavour” (Ibid., 6). In this chapter, her contribution to an edited volume published in 1999 by several outstanding thinkers, Mouffe already forecasts the forthcoming sinister hegemonic struggle that leftist liberals have not grasped and have not been ready to pick up. As [Laclau and Mouffe \(1985: 135\)](#) stress in their earlier work, “in order to speak of hegemony, [. . .] it is also necessary that the articulation should take place through a confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices” (cited in [Cammaerts 2022: 732](#)).

Furthermore, Cammaerts powerfully shows how social justice norms have gradually been abnormalized over the last three decades, as previously marginal fascist, authoritarian, extreme-right ideas have “in a relatively short period of time become a strong, powerful and emboldened segment of the mainstream right with ideas and viewpoints once considered deviant and morally repugnant today confidently asserted as the new common sense and increasingly shaping public policy” ([Cammaerts 2022: 731](#)). This assertion, based on Cammaerts’ analysis of anti-woke discourse in the UK, shows that “social justice abnormalization” has been accomplished through a systemic “re-normalization of racist and fascist ideologies.”

“Abnormalization” and Delegitimization of Social Justice

To understand the consolidation of the anti-woke cultural war, I would add another factor: the delegitimization of and political-intellectual attack on human rights values, institutions, and defenders that has flared up over the past decade, particularly in illiberal authoritarian regimes such as Hungary. The constant attacks and administrative restrictions have contributed significantly to the “abnormalization” of social justice, twisting and subverting the moral norms established by the post-World War II human rights canon, with its commitments to human dignity, freedom, and welfare. Human Rights Watch explains in their 2021 World Report that members of the Hungarian government and ruling party are engaged in an ongoing smear campaign against human rights defenders, whom they frequently describe as “Soros agents” who undermine national security ([Human Rights Watch 2021](#)). Not only do they consign human rights defenders to the group of constructed enemies, but they also “abnormalize” and completely distort the moral valence of their work.

[Gráinne de Búrca’s \(2021\)](#) account resonates with this trend. He succinctly explains the mechanisms of the unfolding political panorama supported by rising far-right political parties and movements to undermine and weaken the normative framework of human rights and democratic institutions. These parties and movements advance repressive policies against human rights defenders and vulnerable populations, such as racialized

minorities, LGBTQ people, and others. They capture and control independent institutions and destabilize/eliminate the checks and balances of the legal system, thereby distorting the system of liberal democracy. Regarding the attack on human rights, a cautionary observation is that even constructive critiques of human rights have been appropriated by illiberal authoritarian leaders and far-right supporters. De Búrca summarizes the critique made by prominent scholars, noting that “human rights [stand] accused of being a tool of Western imperialism ([Mutua 2002](#)), an elitist and bureaucratic legal paradigm ([Koskenniemi 2011](#)), a limiting expert discourse which crowds out emancipatory political alternatives ([Kennedy 2002](#)), which limits its ambitions and hides its own ‘governmentality’ ([Brown 2004](#)), an intellectually ‘autistic’ culture ([Koskenniemi 2021](#)), anti-politics ([Marks 2013](#)), and a [powerless] companion to neoliberalism ([Moyn 2015](#))” (de Búrca 2021: 2). While these critiques are an important part of liberal democracy and some of them merit reflection, in an illiberal authoritarian regime these critiques are hijacked and used as tools to undermine the legitimacy of human rights.

The “abnormalization” of social justice by illiberal authoritarian leaders and the far right is thus undergirded by these actors’ misuse and distortion of the critiques of the human rights enterprise articulated by both conservative and progressive scholars. I argue that we must be vigilant about our critiques of so-called woke culture (for instance, gender and critical race theory rendered as woke and intellectual illiberalism) because the anti-woke cultural war might instrumentalize and use these well-intended critiques for the benefit of the far right—that is, to erode the human rights and dignity of gendered, racialized, and LGBTQ people.

While right-wing attacks on woke/wokism are open and excessively confrontational, leftist and liberal ones are more subtle, disguised as a critique of identity-based politics or the race-centered approach, which these scholars argue does not offer an adequate explanation for addressing the root causes of inequalities. These critiques usually dismiss or simply neglect the structuring force of gender and the politics of racialization, which contribute to systemic race-, class-, and gender-based structural discrimination.

Neglecting these forces does not mean that they are not present and operational. They are still with us and profoundly influence our life, yet scholars have not made the effort to understand these structuring forces because they are too concerned with the concepts of structural racism and gender discrimination. Silence and negligence by leftists and liberals can reinforce systemic racism and gender discrimination.

Political Fragmentation and Social Alienation

I started this essay by citing a proposal by MCC, within the framework of [#WokeFreeEurope](#) in 2021, in which they delegitimize and harshly invalidate organizations, activists, and scholars who are working in the field of gender and critical race studies or apply this knowledge to their work and activism.

The MCC proposal clearly identifies themes to be “banned” from EU official documents. Given the space limitations of this essay, I focus on the concept of “contested intersectionality” as one of the basic principles of critical race theory and an important theoretical lens of gender studies. While gender studies, scholars, and activists are embraced and protected by left-liberals, critical race theory is still labelled as “intellectual illiberalism” ([Sajó and Uitz 2022: 978](#)), mainly based on its critique of the liberal legal system—the “rule of law”—which has contributed to the racialization and racial discrimination of various marginalized groups. As noted above, the critique of liberalism is neither illiberal nor anti-liberal *per se*.

Nor is intersectionality illiberal or liberal. Without an extensive and close reading of the genealogy and meaning of the concept, we can read the same recycled, dismissive critiques by right-wing as well as by left-wing scholars and activists (for example, [Sullivan 2017](#); [Csányi and Kováts 2020](#)). In their critiques, there are similarities and

differences. However, one of the predominant threads is that intersectionality is primarily concerned with identities and the question of “identity politics.” A student of the legal scholar [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#), who coined the term “intersectionality,” provided the following explanation during an attack on critical race theory: “[Critical race theory] is not really concerned with shallow questions of identity and representation but...is more interested in the deep *structural and systemic questions about discrimination and inequality*” ([Coastonjane 2019](#)) (emphasis added).

Thus, these kinds of irreflexive critiques might seem legitimate and important, but they do not encourage critical political engagement and respect nor reckon with the historical injustice of racialized minorities. Instead, they rather further polarize the political bloc that should articulate a common “new left-wing hegemonic project” in the way it was envisioned by [Laclau and Mouffe \(2000: xviii\)](#). In other words, critiques of intersectionality and other progressive ideas by left-wingers and liberals can be misused by the far right to support their own political agenda, as in the MCC case cited above. This dual assault on woke/social justice ideas and related activists, scholars, and institutions is strategically deployed by conservative media and far-right forces to neutralize progressive social justice movements such as BLM’s critique of structural violence and contestation of racist, sexist, and anti-LGBTQ views ([cf. Cammaerts 2022](#)). Moreover, it enables political fragmentation and social alienation rather than the collaboration and solidarity of those whose work is based on the principles of human rights and social justice. We cannot afford further polarization!