on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

woke

Joan Wallach Scott

The word 'woke' which originated with Black resistance movements in the United States, has in the last few years been weaponized by the right, in the same way that 'political correctness' has been in the 1980s and 90s. That weaponization has made it impossible to distinguish critical scholarship from dogma, indeed it has conflated the two. If there is censoriousness on the left, it is nothing to compare with the legal power of the authoritarian right.
This censoriousness has to be understood not as something inherent in leftist thought, but as the product of the neoliberal university context from which it emerges.

Keywords: diversity, multiculturalism, neoliberal university, political correctness, woke

The word *woke*, with a long history in Black resistance movements in the United States, has come to international attention only because it has been weaponized by the right ("Woke", 2023). Just as Critical Race Theory, an academic movement originating with legal scholars in the 1980s, has become the whipping child of Republican political operatives, so 'woke' has now travelled the world as a term of opprobrium, signifying the supposed intolerant dogmatism of the left. It's astonishing how successful these appropriations of language can become—'political correctness' is another example from the 1980s and 90s. What began then as self-criticism by certain left groups was taken up by journalists as a warning about 'the Left'; it, too, travelled the world as part of the backlash against all movements for social justice, all critical analyses of discrimination and inequality. The line between critique and dogmatism was erased as conservatives and liberals alike expressed their 'dismay' at expressions of dissent and protest movements to express it (Scott, 1991a). The same is happening now with the undue attention to—the near hysteria about—'woke'.

A word that begins descriptively on the left ('woke' signified awareness of—literally awakening to—racial injustice) becomes, in right-wing redefinition, something to be combatted in the name of freedom of speech. That, of course, is the final irony, since it is the right that seeks to silence critical thinking, projecting its own authoritarian tendencies onto the left. The state of Florida is the prime, but not the only, example of this. There, the Republican governor, Ron DeSantis, as he plans a presidential bid to succeed Donald Trump, has outlawed the teaching of the history of slavery and its legacies, banned books from libraries in the name of protecting children from exposure to the so-called perversions of feminism, homosexuality, and transgender, and replaced the curriculum of a public liberal arts college with one borrowed from a conservative Christian college, whose mission "maintains by 'precept and example' the immemorial teachings and practices of the Christian faith" (Hillsdale College, n.d.). DeSantis refers to his laws as "the stop woke acts", and he boasts that Florida is the state "where woke goes to die" (DeSantis, 2023). The Florida model has been taken up in a number of other states led by Republicans. The supposed left censoriousness they are combatting is nothing compared to the legal censorship practiced by these autocratic politicians.

Of course, there is in the current moment, evidence of some censoriousness on the left. But this has to be understood, I argue, not as something inherent in critical left politics, but as a feature of the neoliberal university we now inhabit. In the U.S., in the years since the 1960s, when minorities and women were admitted into universities that had previously excluded them, critical analyses of structures of discrimination have been replaced by attention to individual experiences as indicators of that discrimination, but also as remedies for it. The early radical demands of these students and faculty for inclusion led to programs in women's, Black, gender, sexuality, and ethnic studies which were theorized in terms of systemic antagonisms (conflicts) that could not be easily resolved. Universities met those demands with the liberal language of diversity and multiculturalism which, for all its recognition of difference, undercut the radicalism of the demands (Gordon & Newfield, 1996). Roderick Ferguson (2012) notes that the "hegemonic incorporation of minorities and minoritized knowledges into dominant institutions was not only part of an affirmation, but a preemption as well" (191). He continues: "differences that were often articulated as critiques of the presumed benevolence of political and economic institutions became absorbed within an administrative ethos that recast those differences as testaments to the progress of the university and the resuscitation of a common national culture" (214). The emphasis on successful integration, on harmonious multiculturalism, on shared liberal values, had the effect of marginalizing those (feminist, Marxist, race-based) analyses of difference that stressed antagonism, but also of intensifying the persisting sense of exclusion the students experienced. The discourses of multiculturalism and then of diversity eventually produced what they sought to contain: student (and faculty) movements invoking the authority of their own experience, not only in their dealings with administrators, but in the classroom as well.

The individualized language of diversity and multiculturalism has university administrators talking about the need to offer respect, comfort, and care to their students, defined now as paying customers, in the regime of what Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades call 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). Students seeking to protest the real discrimination they experience must use the language of individual harm to become legible to the administrators from whom they seek redress. This individualized conception of care has given us victims, microaggressions, demands for 'trigger warnings', denunciations of texts that aren't explicitly anti-racist, the mis-reading of irony for insult, the demand for affirmation rather than interrogation of group identities, the insistence on confirming the certainty of identity and experience, rather than acknowledging their complexity and ambiguity. Other students have joined the fray: Zionists, who object to representations of Israel at odds with that nation's self-image, claim they don't feel 'safe' on campus; and conservatives call for affirmative action to heal their wounds. These constitute a desire by students—right and left—to become agents of their own knowledge, asserting the authority of their experience (self-testimony instead of theorized analysis) in the face of those who seem not to understand it (Scott, 1991b). In this way, they become partisans who attack the very educational processes that might give them the ways to explore the intractable problems of relations of power that 'diversity' pretends to resolve and, in so doing, denies.

The right-wing attack on 'woke' is a diversion from these issues, an attempt to depict women and minority students not as subjects of structural racism and misogyny, but as perpetrators of injustice, Red Guard militants enforcing 'cancel culture' on their teachers and fellow-students. If the right's campaign succeeds, it will only reinforce those structures of inequality that are at the heart of the problem—that, of course, is its aim. These are relations of power that ought to be the focus of academic inquiry and of concern to university administrators and politicians alike.

References

DeSantis, R. (2023, January 3). *'Florida is where woke goes to die': DeSantis celebrates second term* [Video]. Politico. https://www.politico.com/video/2023/01/03/florida-is-where-woke-goes-to-die-desantis-celebrates-second-term-806660

Ferguson, R. (2012). *The reorder of things: The university and its pedagogies of minority difference*. University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816672783.001.0001

Gordon, A. F., & Newfield, C. (Eds.). (1996). *Mapping multiculturalism*. University of Minnesota Press.

Hillsdale College. (n.d.). *Mission – Hillsdale College*. Hillsdale.edu. Retrieved October 31, 2022, from https://www.hillsdale.edu/about/mission/

Scott, J. W. (1991a). The campaign against political correctness: What's really at stake? *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 23*(6), 30–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1991.9940592

Scott, J. W. (1991b). The evidence of experience. *Critical Inquiry, 17*(4), 773–797. https://doi.org/10.1086/448612

Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2009). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Woke. (2023, June 6). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke

Recommended Citation

Scott, J. W. (2023). Woke. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *6*(17). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2023.17.1

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting guidelines.

Joan Wallach Scott

Joan W. Scott is professor emerita in the School of Social Science at the Institute for

Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. She is the author most recently of *Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom* and *On the Judgment of History.*