

# The New Criterion

Notes & Comments March 2021

## *French rejection*

*A Gallic stand against illiberal ideology.*

The New Criterion • Roger Kimball introduces the March issue

The truth about wokeism seems to be invisible to the denizens of that madhouse. Take a step outside, though, and its preposterousness, as well as its malevolence, is shatteringly obvious. This is something we were reminded of recently when the French President, Emmanuel Macron, took a forthright stand against that toxic American import. There is some irony in this, since the flow of that ideological cloaca maxima had for decades moved in the opposite direction, from France to the United States. Sartre, Derrida, Foucault: the very names of those forerunners of wokeism should send a shudder down the spine of any sensible person. Who knows how many American minds they corrupted? But now the garbage scows steam mostly from West to East, hauling a smelly cargo of poisonous race- and gender-obsessed clichés. As a story in The New York Times put it, the French regard wokeism as an “existential” threat: “It fuels secessionism. Gnaws at national unity. Abets Islamism. Attacks France’s intellectual and cultural heritage.” Indeed, Macron’s education minister zeroed in on the source of the problem. “There’s a battle to wage against an intellectual matrix from American universities.” Wokeism reduces every subject, no matter how complex, to a few ideological formulae about race or gender. “For academics playing word games,” as the commentator Glenn Harlan Reynolds says, deploying wokeism can be “fun.” Among other things, it imbues one’s activities with a seductive draught of self-importance and power. After all, the business side of being woke is canceling all that is unwoke. It’s snotty students screaming at their housemasters (oops, can’t say that) about Halloween costumes, New York Times editors firing columnists for uttering a verboten word, department chairs or college presidents dismissing professors for trespassing against some article of an always shifting orthodoxy. Reynolds is right:

But if you’re Macron or any sensible European observer, seeing a United States in which playing the national anthem or displaying the flag is deemed “offensive” and “problematic,” in which professors are suspended or threatened for quoting Supreme Court opinions verbatim when they contain unapproved language and which has seen months of urban riots tearing apart some of America’s biggest cities, how could you *not* say “no thanks”?

This may actually be good news, since American academics, and the people they train, still have a residual inferiority complex regarding cultural and intellectual matters vis-à-vis France and the United Kingdom. Whether that is justified is a question we are not prepared to answer. But Emmanuel Macron's sudden bout of patriotic common sense is a reassuring reminder that the instinct for self-preservation has not been entirely bred out of the French. And if that is so, there is hope for the rest of us, despite the preening tergiversations of protected-class academics like Daniel Padilla Peralta.

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