Waking up from wokeness

On America’s “First Great Awokening.”

We cannot identify who exactly popularized the term “woke.” But we’ve had cause to wheel it out in this space on and off for the last few years, generally when describing some absurd piece of academic or corporate or government obeisance to political correctness. In March of 2019, we devoted much of these “Notes” to the great English satirist Andrew Doyle, the creator of the character Titania McGrath, the “radical intersectionalist poet” who is full of woke showstoppers. Item: “If you don’t think exactly the same way as me, then you’ve clearly got a lot to learn about diversity.” Could Ibram X. Kendi, the author of the bestselling anti-white diatribe How to Be an Antiracist, put the gospel of wokeness any better? Hell, maybe so.

McGrath/Doyle can weigh in deliciously on Jussie Smollett, the actor who staged a racist attack on himself in order to elicit sympathy and boost his sagging career. “It is absolutely essential,” she/he wrote, “that we believe Jussie Smollett. If we don’t, other people who haven’t been attacked might not have the courage to come forward.” Ha, ha, ha. But Kendi puts the claws in the paw with observations such as this: “The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.” Race-based discrimination now, race-based discrimination tomorrow, race-based discrimination forever. Kendi says the quiet part out loud. Two years ago, we said that a quick look around the cultural landscape indicated that we were “in the midst of a sort of negative religious revival.” At the time, we called it “America’s First Great Awokening” and described the phenomenon as “a false awakening sparked by political grievance.”

Terms like “America’s First Great Awokening” are somewhat jocular, of course, tongue-half-in-cheek plays upon real historical developments. But the reality, though absurd, is anything but comic. We offered a brief and incomplete inventory of the absurdities last month in the context of providing an epitaph for the practice of satire. The more “woke” a culture, the less able it is to practice or appreciate satire.

“So what?” you might be thinking. “So satire is going through a rough patch at the moment. Is that such a big deal?” To appreciate why it is a big deal, it is important to bear two things in mind.
The first is that barbaric viciousness often cohabits seamlessly with an absurdity that, seen from a distance, can seem too preposterous to take seriously. In the 1930s, we imagine, it could have been difficult to take the new leaders of Italy or Germany entirely seriously. They were just too over-the-top. Serious men who understood the intricacies of world affairs would soon put the children in their place.

We know how that worked out. The second thing to bear in mind has to do with reality, with the truth about the way things are. The headlines these days are full of warnings about “systemic racism” and government-sponsored “critical race theory” in schools. A few months ago, the President of the United States issued an executive order on “Advancing Racial Equity.” It called for an “ambitious whole-of-government equity agenda” catering to “historically underserved” groups.

Note the term “equity.” According to the dictionary, the relevant definition of “equity” is “the quality of being impartial.” But even a cursory glance at what the administration has in mind shows that the pursuit of “equity” entails the imposition of inequitable treatment. Ibram X. Kendi would approve.

Readers should not be surprised by this semantic sleight of hand. It is a staple in the armory of totalitarian enterprise, a sort of political “gain-of-function” intervention applied to the virus of political correctness. George Orwell gave classic expression to the gambit in Animal Farm. The comrades were used to seeing the slogan “All animals are equal” emblazoned in large white letters on the side of the barn. But then one day they noticed the addition of a codicil: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”

If you object “But that’s not what ‘equal’ means!” then you have a lot to learn about the logic of leftist redress. An element of reversal, of things turning into their opposites, is always at the heart of the program.

So it is with affirmative action, the obvious precursor to the administration’s “equity” wheeze. “Affirmative action” was first announced as an initiative to promote equality, but it wound up enforcing discrimination precisely on the grounds that it was meant to overcome. The whole history of affirmative action is instinct with that irony. The original effort to rectify legitimate grievances—grievances embodied, for instance, in the discriminatory practices of Jim Crow—soon mutated into new forms of discrimination. In 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Committee because blacks were openly barred from war factory jobs. But what began as a presidential Executive
Order in 1961 directing government contractors to take “affirmative action” to ensure that people be hired “without regard” for race, creed, color, etc. soon resulted in the creation of vast bureaucracies dedicated to discovering, hiring, and advancing people chiefly on the basis of those very qualities. War is peace, freedom is slavery, “without regard” comes to mean “with regard for nothing else.”

We think that the best way to understand the diktat about advancing “equity” is to see it as an extension of Barack Obama’s expectation, announced on the eve of the 2008 election, that he was “five days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America.” In his 2004 book Who Are We?, Samuel Huntington enumerated the core principles of the American Creed: liberty, equality, individualism, representative government, and private property. The drive for “equity,” understood now as “being partial to this week’s designated victim groups,” is profoundly at odds with that traditional ideal.

Some well-meaning folks have hailed our new political dispensation as the return of “normality” in American politics. We think it is another step on the road to the destruction (or “fundamental transformation”) of America. It would be pleasant to think that, having left history’s bloodiest century behind, we also left behind the passions that sparked its unprecedented carnage. But time and again history has taught us that the hunger to impose equality from on high is among mankind’s most brutal passions.

As we write, an open letter signed by more than one hundred twenty retired American admirals and generals has just been published. It calls upon citizens to reject racist so-called “antiracism” initiatives like “Critical Race Theory.” “Our nation is in deep peril,” the letter warns. “We are in a fight for our survival as a Constitutional Republic like no other time since our founding in 1776. The conflict is between supporters of Socialism and Marxism vs. supporters of Constitutional freedom and liberty.”

We think this is true. It may seem quite distant from the harlequinade of “wokeness.” In fact, it is all of a piece. Wokeness, like the Marxism it draws sustenance from, is an exclusionary cult. A sliver of humanity is its object of worship. And like Marxism itself, as Leszek Kolakowski noted at the end of his magisterial Main Currents of Marxism (1976), it “has revealed itself as the farcical aspect of human bondage.”

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