



Then–Congresswoman Marcia Fudge with a T-shirt reading "Stay Woke: Vote" in 2018

[IS] OPINIONS

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## The Right Won ‘Woke’

Posted to [Politics \(https://dcjournal.com/category/politics/\)](https://dcjournal.com/category/politics/). September 14, 2023 by [Allen Mendenhall \(https://dcjournal.com/author/allen-mendenhall/\)](https://dcjournal.com/author/allen-mendenhall/).

Media pundits celebrate the alleged inability of conservatives to define “woke.” Consider these representative headlines: “Conservatives hate wokeness. Don’t trigger them by asking what it means” ([The Guardian \(https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/16/woke-definition-conservatives-us\)](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/16/woke-definition-conservatives-us)). “Conservatives can’t define woke — and they don’t care” ([San Francisco Chronicle \(https://www.sfchronicle.com/politics/joegarofoli/article/conservatives-woke-definition-17841408.php\)](https://www.sfchronicle.com/politics/joegarofoli/article/conservatives-woke-definition-17841408.php)).

“Why the GOP is obsessed with ‘woke’ — but can’t define it” ([Salon \(https://www.salon.com/2023/03/16/why-the-is-obsessed-with-woke-but-cant-define-it/\)](https://www.salon.com/2023/03/16/why-the-is-obsessed-with-woke-but-cant-define-it/)).

Such gloating misses the point, namely that *woke* is no longer definable. That’s because conservatives won *woke* for themselves.

By now, most thoughtful people understand that *woke* in its earliest iteration meant an awareness of historical racial injustice. However, activists on the left — mostly affluent young Whites — appropriated the term for different contexts. Once popular on social media, the hashtag and meme #staywoke signaled support for a wide range of progressive causes. It was cool. In 2016, MTV named *woke* one of 10 words every teenager needed to know.

Users of this slang may have grasped its original meaning, which referred to an irrefutable reality: The United States suffers from an ugly history of racism. But what followed from that knowledge — the “therefore” — was problematic: I believe in a history of racial injustice; therefore, I support A, B and C.

What were A, B and C — and so on?

Equity over equality.

The elimination or weakening of standards: trigger warnings, decolonizing the curriculum, eliminating test scores, sensitivity readers, and anything under the “I” prong of DEI that involves admitting people without the requisite skill, talent, knowledge or wherewithal.

—Blaming all problems on White supremacy or toxic masculinity — as if humans have no agency within systems determining our thoughts and actions.

—Substituting race, gender or sexuality for class and economic mobility as organizing principles.

—Belligerent intolerance of opposing viewpoints, which are labeled “hate.”

—The notion that words — mere utterances — can constitute violence.

—Denying due process to the accused in sexual misconduct cases (“believe the victim”).

—Institutionalization of coercive policies: You must bake my wedding cake; you must allow me in your restroom or locker room; you cannot hear that speaker; you must read sanitized versions of classic texts; you must use my preferred pronouns and must not misgender.

This last command requires full initiation into a new mode of discourse with original taxonomies. The University of Wisconsin’s website lists, for instance, the following pronouns: fae, per, xe, ze, zie, xem, xemself, zimself, vis, fearself, eirs, perself, verself. How better to institute a regime of control than to compel compliance with such confusing linguistic constructs?

Wokeness thus adopted spiraled out of control, proliferating ideologies that treated people not according to their deeds, personality, aptitude or behavior but as the sum of their gender, race or sexual identity.

In his famous “Politics and the English Language,” George Orwell argued that politics and the debasement of language are connected. The qualities and characteristics of our language shape the way we think: We’re immersed in discursive frames that affect the rigor of our ideas. The worse the political situation, the more corrupted the language becomes, he

suggested.

Bad habits, however, are reversible, and if we can clear our language of bad habits, Orwell submits, then we can begin the process of political regeneration.

“Silly words and expressions,” he continues, “have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority.”

To neutralize “woke,” which had become a silly word, we had to debase it into a pejorative. Only then could we evacuate meaning from it to clear the lexical ground and build better, more rigorous discursive and cultural standards.

The semantic drift succeeded.

As a pejorative, “woke” is mocking and not used seriously. The left has backed away from it, just as it is backing away from the acronym ESG.

Eventually, “woke” will cease to be serviceable vocabulary. But the language battles will continue.

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## About the Author



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