

Woke Is Old

One of the less charming features of the woke movement is its vocal age prejudice. In conversation, believers have repeatedly appealed to my age and their youth to gain argumentative advantage.

I'm tempted, admittedly, to respond in kind. In reality, the young have *less* insight on political and social issues than their elders.

But per Dale Carnegie, I recognize the futility of insulting people into agreeing with me, however true and relevant the insults may be. What I'd rather challenge, in this case, is the premise that the woke movement has even developed a novel, young worldview.

Yes, its intellectual decorations are novel. Ten years ago, I never heard anyone talk about "microaggressions" or "privilege." The substance, however, is almost exactly what teachers, textbooks, and the media told me back in the 1980s.

Namely: *The sole reason non-whites and females are less conventionally successful is because white males have been treating them so unfairly for centuries.* The Beckerian view that market forces strongly check discrimination was never taught – or even mentioned – in school when I was growing up. For income, the party line was clear: *All* observed white/non-white and male/female earnings gaps are unjustified by productivity. For other forms of success, the party line equivocated between, "White males *haven't* disproportionately contributed to science, technology, and culture" and "This disproportionate contribution solely reflects white male unfairness." And of course, teachers, textbooks, and the media aggressively overlooked Asian and Jewish success even in the face of blatant prejudice.*

This is no hyperbole, and I grew up in moderate Reagan country.

If this worldview has been riding high since the 80s or even earlier, what's changed? Zeal. When I was a kid, these dogmas received constant lip service, but few took them seriously in daily life. It was like going to a liberal Lutheran church: Yes, the Bible is the word of God during the Sunday service, but the rest of the week we're not going to worry about what the Good Book says or whether our words and deeds are consistent with the text.

Nowadays, about 5% of the population have become part-time fundamentalist preachers of the dogmas of my youth. And they punch above weight because our latter-day clergy are urging people to live up to the ideology our society has treated as Gospel for as long as we can remember.

Yes, you could say that the modern woke movement's focus on "systemic" injustice as

opposed to garden-variety injustice is a major intellectual advance. Indeed, I've heard it said. My response: At least the version of this doctrine taught in the 80s was *falsifiable*. Hardly anyone ever *tried* falsifying it, but it was falsifiable in principle. The modern version, in contrast, is a mere fanatical tautology. When anything can be "systemic" or "structural" oppression, nothing is.

Bottom line: Woke is a *revival* movement. Like almost all fundamentalist religious crusades, it presumes the truth of long-standing dogmas, then invigorates them with youthful enthusiasm. If the revivalists took their ad hominem arguments against older minds seriously, they would face severe cognitive dissonance, because it is the older generation that handed them their Gospel.

* The main detail that's changed over time: In the 1980s, teachers, textbooks, and (to a lesser extent) the media still talked about America's long-standing mistreatment of Catholics and Jews – and almost never mentioned gays. Now Catholics and perhaps even Jews are supposed to be perpetrators of injustice rather than its victims.