

Beyond Woke, Michael Rectenwald, New English Review Press, 2020, pp. 238, \$17.58 hardcover.

The University-Industrial-Woke Complex

Daniel Asia

It's been a number of years now that I've been using Harry's for my shaving supplies. Prior to that, I had been using Gillette products. But I became tired of the blades being locked up in the stores where I went to purchase them. I think I also enjoyed a David going after a Goliath, if only in the realm of men's shaving products. I enjoy products coming directly to my door and that the company has a sense of humor. On the shipping box containing my razor blades it says that "my stubble is now in trouble." Little did I know that I was turning my back on the founder of the Gillette company, King Camp Gillette, a writer of three books, all of which espouse corporate socialism. The company was founded in 1902, and the books

written between 1894 and 1924. Gillette seems to have been "woke" before the expression was even coined.

Or so Michael Rectenwald informs us in his book, *Beyond Woke*, a compilation of essays written over the last five years. Some of these writings are academic in tone and some just breezy and light. But they do all pertain to the problems facing academia and our society at large. And by the way, Mr. Gillette makes a few appearances in this book, but we shall return to him in a moment.

Michael Rectenwald is a retired professor of Cultural Studies at NYU who has written books since his, er, "retirement;" like many who question the situation in the universities vis-à-vis free speech, the watering down of the curriculum, the destruction of the professoriate, etc., he was essentially forced out. Like David Horowitz, the *ex-Ramparts* editor and supporter of the Black Panthers until they started killing people, Rectenwald was previously a man of the left, a good Marxist. Not that long ago he woke up and realized that Marxism and the leftist agenda were destroying the university and society at large, and thus became a critic of both. This didn't sit well with

Daniel Asia is an American composer whose work ranges from solo pieces to large scale multimovement works for orchestra and includes six symphonies. Since 1988, Asia has been Professor of Composition and head of the composition department at the University of Arizona in Tucson; asia@u.arizona.edu. He wrote "Where Does the University Go from Here?" for our Summer 2020 issue.

his colleagues nor his administrators, and so retirement seemed appropriate. But he hasn't been resting on his laurels, and instead has taken to resistance through his writings. These run the gamut from tongue-in-cheek, to agitprop, to the scholarly. His picture on the book's back cover looks like a young Jack Nicholson, in dark glasses and T shirt: none of that stuffy George Will regalia of suit and tie for him. No, he appears to still be fighting in the trenches, but now on the other side.

Rectenwald first defines what the word "woke" means. Unlike speaking about woke "to" or woke "from," as one might speak about freedom, he defines the state of being woke as "the emergence of consciousness and conscientiousness regarding social and political injustice." It is a feeling of awareness. He makes the analogy to the Christian experience of being saved. The newly penitent acknowledges his now discovered sin and must find a way to atone for it. Where the religious penitent must do this privately in his relationship to God, the newly woke finds his salvation in seeking to reform and reinvent society and its mediating structures, such as government, communal institutions, and educational institutions. He is part of a group dedicated to the rectification of perceived evils on a grand scale, a societal one. It is a leftist phenomenon

that is generally anti-capitalist and thus pro-socialist, knows of its righteousness, and therefore vilifies free speech and opposing positions. It is anti-racist and, since it views any conventions as complicit in oppression, radically feminist, gender neutral, anti-patriarchal, anti-white, and of course, anti-Western.

What might "beyond wokeness" mean? Staying with our religious analogy, it might be religion in an ecstatic state, which by definition is one beyond reason. Or we might call it super-enlightened. It is found in group action, something like the riots that occurred over the summer of 2020. Violence seems to be sanctioned in promotion of the woke state, as demonstrated by the de-platforming in a violent manner of Charles Murray at Middlebury College in 2017. Individual freedom is given up to group identity, and conventional morality is given up as well.

As Peter Wood did with his book *Diversity* (2003)—provide an explanation and history for this ubiquitous idea—so Rectenwald does for "social justice." This is accomplished with a number of major essays on the matter that provide a fine starting point for charting the history and nature of this hoary idea.

"Social justice" can be traced to the early 1840 writings of Luigi

Taparelli d'Azeglio, an aristocrat who became a Jesuit priest. His was a Catholic response to the nineteenth century problems of urbanization and industrialization (Karl Marx was of course responding to those same new conditions). His response relied on the beneficence of small charitable and philanthropic organizations, and was thus essentially conservative.

But that was then, and social justice now has an entirely different meaning, one that morphs and metastasizes as it ages. And the background foundational material for the new movement is not a Catholic take on how to treat the poor, but rather Marx and Nietzsche. Marx seeks to strip away the supposed unearned privilege of the owners of the means of production and raise the proletariat to a position of supremacy. Nietzsche finds the historical model of the priestly class in Judaism and Christianity at the top of the social hierarchy, even above the natural aristocracy—whether predicated on wealth, power, or stealth—to be nonsensical. Both are predicated on power and its unfair acquisition and display. Both are non-egalitarian. With Marx there is simply an inversion of power relations, and with Nietzsche there is a displacement of one group for another. In neither is equality therefore a desired goal. This is in fact born out in the social justice

realm. In universities, student opinion and administrative opinion is now more important than that of faculty. In other words, the hierarchical and power relations have been inverted, not made more equal.

That this violates religious traditions goes without saying. Like communism and Nietzscheism, social justice is anti-religion and thus secular or atheistic. Power relations have nothing to do with moral codes. The Jewish notion of equal justice under the law, for both rich and poor, is jettisoned for the higher value of restitution and raising the poor or disenfranchised, for whatever reason, above middle America. The beneficial treatment of the poor—the widow and orphan, and the stranger—must now come at the expense, figuratively and literally, of all others in the larger community, as they now have authority above all others. Rectenwald writes, “Social justice ideology will be opposed by believers in true egalitarianism. It’s inversion or reverse ideology is manifest in its ranking procedures and rituals, procedures and rituals under which those who have been at the top must take their places at the bottom.”

The new social justice movement has taken on the authoritarian characteristics of its forbears. Unlike the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s, it shuts down free speech. Social

identity trumps ethical actions of the individual. Social intercourse and societal dialogue is “cultural appropriation.” The complexity of male and female relations and the concepts of love and eros are reduced to the power space of “rape culture.”

Social justice may also be seen as a new moral code that includes new political imperatives. These include: call out culture, self-criticism, privilege-checking, public shaming routines, “no-platforming” of speakers, safe spaces, a ritualized vocabulary for dismissing and condemning opponents, sloganeering, chanting over others, and violence or the threat of violence. It finds these behaviors in various antecedents, including Mao’s Cultural Revolution, religious fundamentalism, the writings of Herbert Marcuse, as well as the deconstructionists Foucault and Derrida. Like most ideologies, while promising greater and greater liberation, in the short term it increases repression and reduces freedom. Rectenwald suggests that social justice can be accommodated within the university and society as long as it is placed as one approach next to others in how we understand the world. I think he is overly optimistic.

Totalitarian ideologies, of which social justice is a variant, do not countenance competition. Its proponents

do not seek dialogue but demand to become the sole lens through which to view the world. They seek obliteration, not the peaceful co-existence, of their intellectual and societal competitors. This does not bode well for a liberal society or its liberal institutions, including the family, houses of worship, and especially universities.

This now brings us back to Mr. Gillette, corporate socialism, and the matter of collusion between the supporters of Wokeness, Social Justice, and Big Tech, particularly social media platforms. Mr. Gillette and his three books are the exemplar of corporate capitalism, in that they purvey the notion of the inevitability of the corporation becoming the new entity that will drive the world and provide for historical continuity. After all, humans come and go, but the corporation can live forever. While this might have seemed overly grandiose for a razor company, it might not be so for companies like Google, Facebook, or Amazon. Gillette believed that competition was an evil that wasted time and human energy and material resources, and that it “results in fraud, deception, an adulteration of almost every article we eat drink or wear.” In his book of 1910, *World Corporation*, he says that this entity will “possess all knowledge of all men, and each individual mind

will find complete expression through the great Corporate Mind.” What certainly seemed hyperbolic and near insane in its grandiose quality is now playing out in corporations like Facebook, Google, and Amazon.

This brings us to Woke Capitalism. Why the symbiosis? These corporate entities are actually not free market advocates but are monopolists. They favor a strong state that can support their “product” or a super state such that they need only work with one party and its rule making capabilities, thus their interest in also breaking down the power of individual states and moving towards globalism. Woke corporations working in tandem with woke politicians hope to “be spared higher taxes, increased regulations, and antitrust legislation aimed at monopolies.” Open borders promote cheaper labor. Most alarmingly, the breaking down of traditional structures of family and other intervening institutions between the individual and the state allows for direct access without any mediation between the corporation and the consumer. A control of competition feeds into the pervasive view of the liberal/environmentalist/climate change movement that wants at all costs to stop the degradation of the earth, even at the expense of free enterprise and individual liberty. President Dwight

Eisenhower warned, “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.” Rectenwald does the same now in this intriguing book regarding the alliance between big government, educational institutions, and the new institutions of private enterprise, in which their collusion in wokeness and social justice threaten our most basic and fundamental liberties.