



Left is not woke

Susan Neiman, Polity, 2024, 189 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5095-6410-1

Robert Diab¹

Published online: 22 September 2024

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited 2024

Among the many books critical of identity politics, or what has come to be called wokeness, a number of common threads have emerged. The most common is the tendency to explain the movement in terms of a wrong turn taken at some point in the recent past.

Richard Rorty, writing in the 1990s, played a pioneering role when he diagnosed a fatal split between a cultural left that had emerged in recent decades and an older reform-oriented political left. He made a now famous prediction about what would happen in the US as the left became increasingly mired in struggles over identity and ceded the terrain of electoral politics to the neoliberal right. As wages continued to fall and the professional class grew more resistant to being taxed, economic insecurity and doubt in technocratic rule would become so pervasive, he warned, that ‘at some point, something will crack’ (Rorty, 1998, p. 90). The ‘non-suburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for.’ To avert this fate, the left needed to shift its focus back to practical politics, oriented around an ethic of solidarity rather than identity, and a greater concern for economic welfare than recognition.

In 2017, in a short book titled *The Once and Future Liberal*, Mark Lilla told a similar story about the left’s fatal abandonment of electoral politics (without citing Rorty), offering a deeper analysis of the cause of this drift. The century had been divided into two ‘dispensations’ or political visions: the Rooseveltian social or collectivist ideal, from the New Deal to the Great Society, and the Reaganite individualist, libertarian, small government ideal. Lilla’s insight was to see a close parallel between the self-centered, atomistic ethos of the neoliberal right and the often equally self-centered, inward-looking, tribal ethos of the social justice advocate. For Lilla, Trump’s takeover of the Republican Party signaled the end of the Reagan dispensation by voters angry and frustrated with the system, not the embrace of a new vision. This would only happen—on the left or right—by somehow reviving an ethic of citizenship and a politics of compromise and mutual respect. Complementary

✉ Robert Diab
rdiab@tru.ca

¹ Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, BC V2C 0C8, Canada



narratives have been offered by Francis Fukayama in *Identity* (2018), and Yascha Mounk in *The Identity Trap* (2023).

Susan Neiman, an American philosopher and director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, Germany, adds an even more expansive diagnosis to this body of work. An Enlightenment historian by training and author of a series of works on moral thought in politics, Neiman sees a greater distance between the ideals at the root of identity politics and the ethos of solidarity and citizenship that Rorty, Lilla, and others implore the left to embrace. For Neiman, the problem is not that wokeness (a synonym for identity politics throughout the book) is tribal and self-centered, but that it is fundamentally conservative and reactionary—that it is not even left. What drives the movement is not just an excessively inward-looking set of tendencies, but a deep cynicism about the ideals of solitary, justice, and progress that runs from the counter-Enlightenment to fascism. Neiman seeks to revive core principles of the left that liberals inherit from the Enlightenment: namely, ‘a commitment to universalism over tribalism, a firm distinction between justice and power, and a belief in the possibility of progress’ (p. 2).

The tribalism at the core of the woke movement rests on a dismissal of ideas about solidarity and humanity as ‘mere rhetoric’ (p. 27); it assumes that universalism was a ‘sham ... invented to disguise Eurocentric views supporting colonialism’ (pp. 38–39). Far from being Eurocentric or colonialist, heroes of the Enlightenment—including Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and Kant—were the very source of these forms of critique. ‘To see this,’ Neiman writes, ‘you don’t need the more difficult texts of the Enlightenment; a paperback edition of *Candide* is enough. For a succinct diatribe against fanaticism, feudal hierarchy, slavery, colonial plunder, and other European evils, you can hardly do better’ (p. 39). Neiman devotes a number of pages to show that various non-white, non-European thinkers, from Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral to Ato Sekyi-Otu and Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò, share the view that ‘universalism is not a fraudulent European imposition’; that ‘far from viewing a colonization as the result of modern Western values... colonization was problematic precisely because those values were ignored’ (p. 56).

Wokeness also rests on a further idea that is profoundly alien to the spirit of the Enlightenment: the belief that conflict among humans is ultimately about power, not justice. Neiman places an enormous degree of responsibility for the currency of this belief on the shoulders of Michel Foucault, still the most cited figure in the social sciences. Surveying salient strains of Foucault’s work in a deeply skeptical spirit, Neiman reiterates what Rorty, Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor, and Jürgen Habermas said of Foucault in their initial assessments of him in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Despite their differences, all of these disparate thinkers argued that Foucault offered fascinating analyses of mental disorder, punishment, and sexuality, but that by reducing all social relations to inescapable power struggles, his politics led to a dead end.

A third key idea the left inherits from the Enlightenment is a belief not in the inevitability of progress, as Hegel and others have claimed, but in its possibility. Once Foucault had become the ‘godfather of the woke left’ (p. 107), however, the belief in progress had not only been rendered permanently suspect; it became a sign of profound naivety. Foucault’s style may have been ‘radical,’ Neiman



asserts, but ‘his message was as reactionary as anything Edmund Burke or Joseph de Maistre ever wrote’ (p. 107). ‘Take a look at the history of an institution or two,’ Neiman writes, ‘[w]hat looked like steps toward progress turns out to be more sinister forms of repression. All of them are ways in which the state extends its domination over our lives’ (p. 107). Rousseau’s critique of progress included concrete proposals for reform—of education, law, government—to reduce repression. Foucault’s primary method was instead to pose questions, and through them to ‘suggest rather than stake out a claim’ (p. 114), subjecting liberal ideals to a withering doubt about the possibility of ever really advancing them.

Neiman contrasts this bleakness with a belief among Enlightenment figures, such as Voltaire, in the possibility of moral progress. It rested in part on his insight that ‘we do not know what our nature permits us to be’ (cited on p. 119). We can only be certain we have made progress if we knew our prior or basic condition. But this is impossible, as Voltaire and Rousseau understood, since every attempt to discern this core nature is shaped by partisan aims and assumptions. This does not mean that human nature is constructed; it is to doubt, rather, that ‘any method could ever determine which parts are constructed and which are not’ (p. 120). Contrary to Hobbes, Schmitt, and Foucault, who would see bellicosity or the will to power as core human traits, the Enlightenment ideal of progress is premised on the belief that human nature is malleable.

Neiman is most persuasive where she exposes the deep incompatibility of identity politics with Enlightenment humanism. Her lesson about the foundational role that eighteenth century ideas of progress have played in the best traditions of the liberal left is useful and timely. Her larger takeaway for the left—that it should regain moral clarity as to its first principles: universalism, justice, progress—is straightforward, but does not seem redundant.

She is on less solid ground in her critique of Foucault, which takes up a good portion of the book. There is much to be disparaged in Foucault’s concept of the modern world as trapped in totalizing systems of disciplinary and biopolitical power. But 40 years after his death, Foucault’s relationship to rights, liberalism, Marx, even spirituality, is still highly contested terrain, suggesting that debate over his work will continue for many years to come. This does not mean that Neiman is wrong that Foucault should be construed as a counter-Enlightenment figure, or that his work cast the ideal of justice into doubt. It is to question whether cynicism about justice in woke politics has a primary intellectual source, or even whether such cynicism defines it.

Despite these reservations, *Left Is Not Woke* stands out among the many contributions to the debate about cultural politics by tracing the philosophical issues at the heart of it to their deepest roots in the birth of the left. And for that alone, it offers a wealth of insight.

References

Fukuyama, F. (2018) *Identity*. Farrar.



- Lilla, M. (2017). *The once and future liberal: After identity politics*. Harper.
- Mounk, Y. (2023). *The identity trap*. Penguin Press.
- Rorty, R. (1998). *Achieving our country: Leftist thought in twentieth-century America*. Harvard University Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

