

On Slogans and Trademarks *

In the last few weeks, I've been hearing the word "woke" used in the context of American politics, a term which has not been generally used in this country. Recent news coming from the U.S. report its use mainly in Republican Party propaganda attacks against some Democrat Party policies. So perhaps it would be better to start by attempting to defining the term. What does "woke" mean?

In some varieties of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), *woke* is used in place of *woken*, the past participle form of *wake*. This has led to the use of *woke* as an adjective equivalent to *awake*, which has become mainstream in the United States. The adjective *woke* originally was used to mean "Stay alert to racial prejudice and discrimination." However, beginning in the 2010s, *woke* came to encompass a broader awareness of social inequalities such as sexism. *Woke* has also been used as shorthand for some ideas of the American Left involving identity politics and social justice, such as WASP privilege.¹

Since the mid-2010s, "Woke" rhetoric has entered mainstream media and are being used in marketing and advertising. Campaigns associated with this trend –labeled by some analysts as "Woke capitalism"– have been generally perceived by consumers as insincere and inauthentic, while simultaneously provoking some cultural backlash. Some scientists like Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill have described "woke capitalism" as a growing trend in which the concerns of historically-marginalized groups (such as in race, gender and/or religion), are used as mascots in advertisements married to messages of "empowerment." On the one hand, this creates an individualized and depoliticized idea of social justice. On the other hand, the omnipresent visibility of minorities in advertising can also amplify a backlash against their equality.²

This transformation of what once used as a call-to-arms by the African-American minority, into a registered trademark in the Madison Avenue melting-pot, is strangely reminiscent of what has happened to similar rallying cries throughout history. Beginning with the famous slogan and banner of the French Revolution "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité" –once the rallying cry of the downtrodden masses against the privileges of the aristocracy and the Church, only to turn into a cute cocarde worn by Napoleon on his tricorne hat.

We were certainly not immune to this degenerative process in the 1960's. The rise of movements such as Black Power and Red Power –which promoted the radicalization of racial minorities and the native peoples– soon fizzled out, aided by the rise of a new Black middle-class and the institutionalization of Multiculturalism. The Peace Movement –which cried "Ban the Bomb!" – never achieved its original goal of global nuclear disarmament, nor the end of imperialist expansionism by the so-called superpowers.

One interesting development that began mainly in academic discussions was the adoption of the terminological standards of **Political Correctness** –miniaturized into **P.C.** for easy listening. The practice of "political correctness" was rooted in a desire to eliminate exclusion of various identity groups based on language usage. According to the Sapir-Whorf, or Whorfian, hypothesis, using sexist language promotes sexism and using racial language promotes racism. The term is used to refer to language that seems intended to give the least amount of offense, especially when describing groups identified by external markers such as race, gender, culture, or sexual orientation. The concept of "political

correctness” has been discussed, disputed, criticized, and satirized by commentators from across the political spectrum since the 1970’s. The term has often been used derisively to ridicule the notion that altering language usage can change the public’s perceptions and beliefs as well as influence outcomes. ³

John McWhorter –an American linguist with a specialty in creole languages, sociolects, and Black English– is a vocal critic of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. In his 2014 book *The Language Hoax*, he declares that, although language influences thought in an "infinitesimal way" and culture is expressed through language, he believes that language itself does not create different ways of thinking or determine world views. ⁴

The best minds of my generation believed that we could all live in peace as equals. Free brothers and sisters of all cultures and races, loving each other communally, singing and dancing in harmony with Nature. But we failed.

Back in August 29th 1969, Ellen Willis wrote in an article covering the famous Woodstock festival: “What cultural revolutionaries do not seem to grasp is that, far from being a grass-roots art form that has been taken over by businessmen, rock itself comes from the commercial exploitation of blues. It is bourgeois at its core, a mass-produced commodity, dependent on advanced technology and therefore on the money controlled by those in power. Its rebelliousness does not imply specific political content; it can be—and has been—criminal, Fascistic, and coolly individualistic as well as revolutionary. Nor is the hip life style inherently radical. It can simply be a more pleasurable way of surviving within the system, ... The truth is that there can’t be a revolutionary culture until there is a revolution.” ⁵

In the end, I think, like me, Willis would agree with what Marx wrote in his 11th Thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it." –*The German Ideology* (1845). ⁶

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke_capitalism

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-correctness>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_McWhorter

⁵ “The Not-So-Groovy Side of Woodstock,” *The New Yorker*, September 6th 1969, reprinted on August 13th 2023.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theses_on_Feuerbach