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Liberal Ideology Can't Be Reduced To A Meaningless Catchprase

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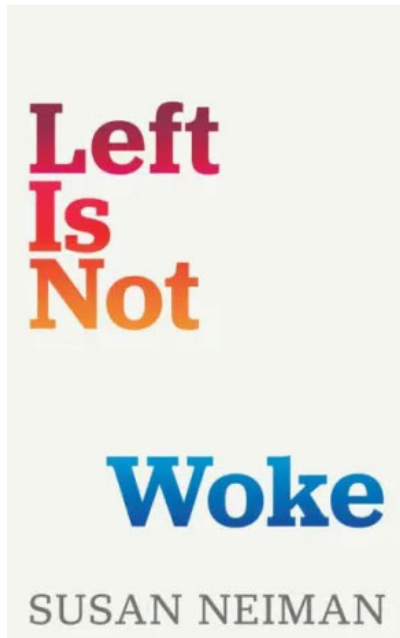
Left Is Not Woke

By Susan Neiman Polity 160 pp.

Reviewed by Jethro K. Lieberman

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Liberal ideology can't be reduced to a meaningless catchphrase.



For some years now, many who identify as politically Left have become noisy detractors of liberal practices. Objections by prominent progressive critics to leading liberal principles — the pursuit of knowledge through observation and rational argument, freedom of speech, and the construction of institutions and practices to alleviate suffering and improve human conditions — often boil down to a perverse claim that because those goals are so often unrealized, they must be subterfuges for more malign purposes and, therefore, ought to be abandoned. This left-wing social and political critique of commonplace liberal values now carries the label “woke.”

Daily headlines provide ample examples of woke claims and policies: “Defund the police”; ignore certain crimes, like petty theft, because the legal process falls disproportionately on particular groups who commit them; abolish due process for a specific class of defendants to make it easier to convict them; prohibit speech that might remind the

less fortunate of their plight; condemn cultural borrowing in art and literature; and reject universalist propositions like free speech for all. (My recent favorite is the claim **reported in a federal lawsuit** filed in June by a former professor of English at Penn State-Abington that the department head directed faculty to teach that “the English language itself is racist” and that those who teach it “are themselves white supremacists.”)

Above all, exile those who publicly disagree with or fail to adhere to these diktats.

Woke adherents propose, many explicitly and some by implication, that Left values necessarily incorporate woke views. Right-wing opponents have gleefully accepted this as the only true claim of wokeism and have beaten liberals over the head with it. Leftists with a more traditional view have shaken their heads in wonderment at much of the new Left orthodoxy.

Is it so? Are Left and woke coterminous? Emphatically not, says Susan Neiman, an expat political theorist now living in Berlin, where she is head of the Einstein Forum. In *Left Is Not Woke*, a sharply

pointed, eminently readable, and admirably succinct polemic, Neiman stomps hard on the thoughtlessness and even frivolity of a political and cultural phenomenon that has agitated, incited, and confused significant portions of the American public.

Herself a progressive who is “happy to be called a leftist and a socialist,” she usefully centers her demolition of woke ideology by identifying, from a welter of policy positions, the three basic propositions that define its (il)logic: the rejection of universalism for tribalism, the dissolving of justice into power, and the denial that progress is possible.

What defines the Left is respect for universalism: a concern for the welfare of all humanity. In its Enlightenment origins, universalism was, says Neiman, an antidote to colonialism, the idea that membership in certain tribes gave you a right to claim power over others. But in the woke worldview, “it’s now an article of faith that universalism, like other Enlightenment ideas, is a sham that was invented to disguise Eurocentric views that supported colonialism.” In its place, woke ideology elevates “tribalism,” the sense that group identity — defined by characteristics (race, ethnicity, sex, religion) taken to be “essential” (and usually immutable) — is what counts. Hence the denunciations against poaching another tribe’s “essence” by “appropriating” that other culture or by speaking in the voice of someone outside your tribe.

But, as Neiman demonstrates, protection against depredations must rest on universalist principles; otherwise, the claim for rights or redress will be taken as just special pleading. It is why woke progressives who oppose, for example, due-process protections for men accused of sex offenses, are mistaken: You do not prevent the injuries that stem from the ignoring of your rights by restricting those rights solely to yourself. In doing so, you merely confirm Pogo’s celebrated line: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

So, too, Neiman puts paid to the woke claim that “justice is nothing but a mask for the interest of the stronger...From the fact that some moral claims are hidden claims to power, you cannot conclude that every claim to act for the common good is a lie,” especially since this “insistence that power is the only driving force goes hand in hand with contempt for reason.” Woke distrust of both justice claims and of reason are now threatening the heart of free speech, one of the glories — and necessities — of modern liberal democracy.

Insisting that free speech is a power grab by cultural and political oppressors, woke theorists thus concur with the anti-Enlightenment Augustinian notion that people are at bottom evil and can never break through the mantle of selfishness that controls their every move — a proposition that provides cover to tyrants across the political spectrum who are all too ready to suppress every tribe but their own.

Finally, the struggle for justice would be impossible without hope for progress. Writes Neiman:

“To stand on the left is to stand behind the idea that people can work together to make significant improvements in the real conditions of their own and others’ lives.”

This idea does not entail the often wrongly associated idea that progress is inevitable. But it does require abandoning the woke cries of fury and despair that things are as bad as they have always been, if not worse. “To suggest,” as many do, “that racism has hardly changed in a century dishonors the memory of those who struggled to change it.”

Neiman’s book is not a blueprint for change but rather a meditation with bite. It is an overdue tonic for disquieted leftists who have come to believe their commitment to a fairer, more equal world condemns them to accept and justify the often outlandish claims and practices of woke culture. As she shows, they need not feel that way. Hers is a signal service, even as she leaves to others the harder task of reorienting progressive politics to sensible norms.

*Jethro K. Lieberman is the author of **Liberalism Undressed** (Oxford University Press, 2012), and writes about many of these issues in *his blog*.*