

CURRENT CONTROVERSIES



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Backlash: The Woke, the Anti-Woke, and Anti-Anti-Woke

BY ROBIN COLLINS

The 2025 Trumpian rampage suggests that backlash against a fervent era of “cancel culture” is gaining traction at the highest levels. Cancel culture refers to the practice of withdrawing support from, or even censoring, individuals or institutions after they have done or said something considered objectionable, often related to issues of social justice.

DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) staffers are being fired, affirmative action policies are being reversed—partly due to a 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision—and even progressive Democrat Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has removed her pronouns from social media.

But wokeness, often described as authoritarian identity politics—

where one’s social identity becomes a primary lens for political engagement—was already on the decline before Elon Musk went at it with his DOGE sledgehammer. The preliminary phases of that trend are what we’ll explore here.

Writer and podcaster Helen Pluckrose, who leans solidly left politically, believes that “wokeness” peaked in 2020 in the US and UK. She argues that there is now a growing rejection of “critical social justice,” (a framework that purportedly seeks to address systemic inequalities but replaces solidarity with identity tribalism), and a noticeable culture war fatigue among the public. Pluckrose suggests we should celebrate, rather than criticize, those politicians and others who have bravely re-evaluated their own positions.

Musa al-Gharbi, author of *We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite*, sees the decline in the use of “woke” language, a decrease in public cancellations, and fewer identitarian academic papers being published as signs of a course correction. He believes both sides of the ongoing culture war have vested interests in maintaining the status quo, and they are now doubling down.

Pluckrose, however, warns that the term “woke” is increasingly being applied to a wider range of actions and beliefs, including genuine opposition to racial prejudice, which complicates the conversation further. She questions whether the shift away from wokeness is truly genuine or simply opportunistic—a trend where people jump on the bandwagon for political advantage.

Even if we are witnessing a “waning”, she cautions that the damage caused by wokeness from 2014 onward is not fully resolved and could continue to harm society for even longer.

CANADA, TOO

Canada tends to lag about two years behind the culture shifts seen in the U.S., so its transition back to what many perceive as normalcy is delayed. The early surge in support for Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre is likely linked to a backlash against Prime Minister Trudeau, who is viewed by many as “too woke.”

Several commentators, such as Paul Wells, have pointed out mistakes made during the COVID pandemic, particularly regarding a broadly supported federal vaccination effort that became contentious after vaccine mandates were imposed.

This led to the truckers’ protest in Ottawa and the controversial use of the Emergencies Act, which was later challenged in Federal court as an overreach and determined to be unreasonable and unjustified. Trudeau’s failure to differentiate between radical trucker leaders and ordinary citizens expressing grievances allowed Poilievre to capitalize on the dissatisfaction with the beleaguered Prime Minister.

However, Poilievre’s moment may have passed as Trudeau has since been replaced and public memory of the protests fades.

A second, more complex issue that shows possible decline in wokeness is the Indian residential school crisis in Canada.

Many Canadians, though not ignoring the predicaments of Indigenous communities, are growing weary of shaming land acknowledgments that do not lead to meaningful change. And a 2023 poll indicated that 80% of Canadians believe they do not bear personal responsibility for past injustices.

However, while allegations regarding “mass” and “unmarked graves” at Kamloops are under closer scrutiny, discussing these topics remains largely taboo. An elected member of the B.C. parliament, Dallas Brodie, has recently been bounced out of her own Conservative Party caucus after defending a lawyer who had insisted the provincial Law Society change erroneous claims in its course material about “an unmarked burial site containing the bodies of 215 children” at Kamloops.

The 2021 Kamloops burials allegations sparked what some describe as a national “moral panic,” resulting in the torching of

dozens of churches, the lowering of flags, the cancellation of Canada Day, the toppling of statues, and the renaming of institutions. This angered many traditionalists and conservatives but also resonated with a broader segment of Canadian society.

Despite this, mainstream media often avoid covering challenges to prevailing narratives about genocide, leading to a lack of public discourse on the topic. A 2023 book, *Grave Error*, which disputes the Kamloops claims, has received little media attention despite becoming a 20,000-copy bestseller, largely by word of mouth.

Pluckrose argues that left-wing parties must acknowledge the harm caused by identitarian “wokeness” and demonstrate a commitment to change in order to rebuild trust. Wokeness has influenced workplaces, universities, primary schools, and both mainstream and social media, fostering a level of anger and distrust that is more personal and visceral than typical political disagreements.

While there are certain signs that wokeness is declining, Pluckrose notes that this cannot be taken for granted. So much distrust and hyper-vigilance remain.

For progressives and liberals to regain credibility, Pluckrose advises them to consistently self-



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correct and admit their past errors. Yet, there is a tendency to persist in their illiberal ideologies, leading to a situation where both the left and the right define themselves through competing missions and don't know when – or how – to quit.

BUT WHAT ARE YOU FOR?

Being “anti-woke” is not a sufficient foundation for a healthy and humane society. What are reasonable alternatives to identity politics and the culture of cancellation?

Pluckrose is known for co-authoring *Cynical Theories*, one of the first serious examinations of modern identity politics and potential solutions to the issues raised. One key suggestion, even under the pressure of what John Stuart Mill described as “the tyranny of prevailing opinion,” is to protect free speech rather than restrict it.

Her co-author, James Lindsay, has since taken a more extreme “New Right” stance, equating the leftist variant of identity politics with Marxism. Pluckrose and political scientist Yascha Mounk, author of *The Identity Trap*, assert that Marxism and postmodernism are fundamentally incompatible. However, Lindsay has claimed that the Democratic Party resembles communist China due to its support for DEI policies, a statement that is obviously an exaggeration.

Katherine Stewart, who has written about Christian nationalism and the New Right, highlights how extreme views on transgender issues may push people toward authoritarian politics. “The overarching message is one of fear. ‘They will come after you; they will change your children’s gender’ ...” What is then confused is opposition to radical trans ideology with the legitimate protection of minority rights.

Yet, there are no clear partisan lines that we must accept in full; the political landscape is complex.

As Arlie Hochschild illustrates in her 2024 study of the Trump phenomenon, *Stolen Pride*, feelings of insult and exclusion can lead individuals to support an anti-elite strongman. Thereby, says Stewart, the critique of DEI becomes a “total war on anti-discrimination laws.”

The so-called “anti-anti-woke” movement represents a response from identity-leftists pushing back against the Trump administration’s anti-woke policies, trying to restore

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their diminishing influence. The situation is complex, and citizens can be forgiven for losing the plot amid the ongoing debates.

AND HOW WILL THIS END?

Those who have deeply considered these issues agree that the solution lies not in silencing opponents but in fostering open, generous conversations during this irrational time. As critical institutions like Medicare face Elon Musk’s “streamlining” measures, public pushback is likely to grow. U.S. elections, including the midterms in 2026, often hinge on a small number of independent voters who can sway outcomes.

Another opportunity lies in refraining from assuming the worst about those we disagree with. While some Christian nationalists may share views with racist white supremacists, they are not the same people, and it is important not to generalize. Not every Trump voter is racist; most just feel marginalized, economically disadvantaged, and

tired of being dismissed.

Yascha Mounk advocates for an inclusive nationalism to counteract rising aggressive nationalism, a challenging task given the subtle distinctions involved.

George Orwell distinguished between patriotism, which he viewed as a positive devotion to a place or way of life; and jingoistic nationalism, which he criticized as overly simplistic and inherently divisive.

In his 1945 essay “On Nationalism,” Orwell noted that nationalists often fail to recognize “resemblances between similar sets of facts.” They judge actions as benign or evil based on who does them. When “their side” does something horrible, their sense of outrage dissipates.

Now that Trump has taken the gloves off, we should recognize the common foundation of values that is essential to our collectivity, which is facing a crisis of democracy. Jonathan Rauch points out that in a recent survey, 60 percent of American university students thought the prevalence of cancel culture prevented them from saying what they actually believed. Such self-censorship is an unhealthy state of mind, especially for a cohort facing many existential global threats.

As Helen Pluckrose points out, very few liberals who oppose wokeness are opposed to the civil rights movement. That very idea “of course is nonsense but [it still] has a pull on the liberal-progressive psyche.” And it has a chilling effect.

But we are likely witnessing the beginning of the end of the woke era. Devotees are kicking and screaming, but self-reflection is advisable. Always correct erroneous ideas, lest you get trumped. ■

Robin Collins writes about peace, climate and politics from Ottawa.