

Review of
Cancelled: The Left Way Back from Woke

Alan Sokal

Department of Mathematics
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT
UNITED KINGDOM
sokal@math.ucl.ac.uk

Department of Physics
New York University
726 Broadway
New York, NY 10003
USA
sokal@nyu.edu

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As a heterodox leftist I was very keen to read Umut Özkırmılı's new book, *Cancelled: The Left Way Back from Woke*. Özkırmılı, a scholar of nationalism and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals, is a committed man of the left: he is an opponent of capitalist neoliberalism and a vigorous defender of the human rights of all marginalized people. But he is dismayed by

how the Left has been sucked into a spiral of toxic hatred and outrage-mongering, retreating from the democratic ideals of freedom and pluralism that it purports to represent.

He discerns unsettling similarities between contemporary right-wing populism and the radical identity politics of the “woke” left, and he wants to help the left find a way back to a “universalist progressive politics” (16) allied to “a vision for coalition-building and a program based on shared values” (8). He sees his book as

a call to all those disenchanted with reactionary populism and radical identity politics to break free from dogmatism and fanaticism, and adopt a new progressive agenda based on our common humanity while respecting our differences. (15)

There is, from my perspective, much to praise in this book: both in Özkırmılı's goal, and in some of the suggestions he makes for getting there. More on that in a moment. Unfortunately, there are also some things that I feel obliged to criticize. Some key issues are discussed too superficially; and some of Özkırmılı's criticisms of other writers are, in my opinion, unfair.

Despite these imperfections, Özkırmılı's book has the merit of being one of the first explicit and thoroughgoing denunciations of “cancel culture” from within the radical left. And this makes it an important starting point for dialogue and debate: not only within the left, broadly defined, but also among fair-minded people of all political persuasions.

Let me start with the positive, for there is a lot. In tracing the origins of “identity politics”, Özkırmılı rightly gives pride of place to the Combahee River Collective of Black feminist lesbian socialists, active in the 1970s, and he quotes at length from their 1977 Collective Statement as well as from more recent interviews with the Collective's founders (68–73). He points out that

The Combahee women were also the first to refer to “interlocking systems of oppression,” long before the term “intersectionality” was coined. (70)

And he stresses that

Their vision was intersectionalist yet inclusive, open to the idea of working across differences. It drew its strength from the lived experiences and oppression suffered by its members, but it did not preclude solidarity with others suffering from different kinds of oppression. . . . Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it was part of a radical political program that was explicitly anti-capitalist. (73)

Özkırmılı goes on to point out the profound contrast with today’s woke left, which fails to see

that cancelling or calling out are also about power and privilege; that radical identity politics is individualistic and narcissistic; that personal therapy is no substitute for collective political action; [and] that performative outrage does not advance the cause of social justice. (14)

— critiques that he will elaborate throughout the book. He understandably disclaims the herculean task of tracing “the causes and dynamics of the transformation of a once radically progressive concept into a faint shadow of its former self” (73), but he gives space to the critiques of radical identity politics put forth by Marxists such as Adolph L. Reed Jr., independent leftists such as Todd Gitlin, and liberals such as William Julius Wilson and Martha Nussbaum (73–76) — critiques that together point the way towards a renewed humanistic Left marked by solidarity in collective struggles.

Özkırmılı also tackles head-on the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) industry. He cites the empirical evidence demonstrating the repeated failures of “diversity training” to achieve its objectives (78–79), and he makes withering and cogent critiques of the versions of “antiracism” proffered by its two main contemporary gurus, Robin DiAngelo (80–86) and Ibram X. Kendi (86–88), as well as by British author Reni Eddo-Lodge (88–91). So far so good.

Going further, Özkırmılı criticizes the vast recent expansions of the concept of “harm”, along with “the fuzziness and arbitrariness of definitions of harm” and the lack of any objective definition of “emotional harm”, “which depends almost entirely on the perceptions of particular individuals or groups” (115–117). He thinks (116) that there is nothing wrong *per se* with the concepts of microaggressions, safe spaces and trigger warnings — a moderate and sensible view that I would cautiously endorse, albeit with the caveat that there are carefully reasoned criticisms of conceptual unclarity in the notion of microaggression, which Özkırmılı does not mention. He draws attention to the empirical evidence suggesting that trigger warnings may in fact be harmful to survivors of trauma (117–118), but above all he denounces “the systematic application of double standards” (119). For instance, a debate at Brown University between two feminists on the issue of campus sexual assault necessitated the creation of a “safe space” for students who might be “triggered”,

equipped with cookies, coloring books, bubbles, Play-Doh, calming music, pillows, blankets and a video of frolicking puppies, as well as students and staff members trained to deal with trauma. [quoted at 117]

On the other hand,

no trigger warnings were issued when a student doing a Master’s degree in Gender (Sexuality) at the London School of Economics (LSE) presented a paper at a conference held in April 2021 which concluded with the following words: “If TERFs think trans* is an endemic threat to feminism, let us be the threat to feminism. . . . Picture this: I hold a knife to your throat and spit my transness into your ear. Does that turn you on? Are you scared? I sure fucking hope so.” (118–119)

(One wonders about the academic standards at LSE.)

More abstractly, Özkırımlı observes that “current definitions of harm, and by extension microaggressions, are premised on a vertical, top-down power dynamic between victims and perpetrators” (119), with the two roles assigned simplistically according to a “victimhood hierarchy” (121) tied to each person’s intersecting demographic identities. Özkırımlı criticizes this approach for being “essentialist”, and he points out that it is

politically flawed, indeed perilous, for it reduces political resistance to symbolic subversion on issues that are relevant to only a tiny and yes, “privileged,” segment of the population. There is a reason why the concept of microaggressions did not catch on among the chronically unemployed and impoverished inhabitants of Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky ... (even though some of these people are among those subject to the worst forms of everyday abuse). Unlike the identity politics of Black queer feminists, which drew its strength from their lived reality, microaggressions were invented and became “a thing” among the relatively well-off and educated members of the middle and upper-middle classes, often with some link to elite Ivy League or Russell Group universities. (119–120)

Özkırımlı views the woke left’s obsession with policing speech as

the end result of a cycle that begins with an expansion of the meaning of harm and erosion of the boundaries between individual and collective, and physical and emotional suffering; it continues with overvaluation of victimhood as a moral status opposed to privilege and the creation of a hierarchy of victimhood; and it concludes by transforming identity, which was originally [in the Combahee women] a tool for justice, into a sacred value in and of itself, a commodity that needs to be safeguarded at any cost. The anti-capitalist logic of [the original] identity politics is replaced by a neoliberal logic which turns *activists into entrepreneurs* ... (122, italics in the original)

And in this he detects disquieting similarities with the contemporary Right, which is also focussed on protecting sacred identities. He quotes from the 2014 study by social scientists Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*:

the way conservative and progressive commentators use outrage unites them. ... Consider practices such as using ideologically extremizing language (e.g., describing someone as “far-right wing” or “far-left wing”), “proving” an opponent is a hypocrite (often with decontextualized quotes offered as evidence), presenting their version of current affairs as the “real story” and other accounts as biased. Taken together, we find remarkable mirroring between conservatives and progressives. There are scripts that could easily be rewritten for the other side by simply replacing the nouns. [quoted at 141]

Özkırımlı comments that “Nothing illustrates the fusion of the Right and the Left into one humongous outrage machine better than what has come to be widely known as ‘cancel culture’ ” (124). He justifiably points out (32–33) the hypocrisy of right-wingers who rail against leftist “cancel culture” but go strangely silent when the censorship emanates from pro-Israel lobbies, wealthy donors, or rightist politicians both in the US and in the UK. Too many people today, on both “left” and “right”, demand freedom of expression for their friends at the same time as they seek to muzzle their enemies. But even hypocrites can be right half the time.

And in this case the hypocrites *are* half right. Özkırmılı recognizes this, at least backhandedly, and he is scathing about the contemporary Left’s intolerance to internal dissent, particularly concerning the excesses of identity politics:

Why do the forebodings of earlier generations of liberal and Marxist thinkers, or indeed Black queer feminists, go unheeded? And, more importantly, why is even the slightest criticism of woke orthodoxies on questions of race, gender, and sexuality immediately dismissed as “enabling the far right,” “cozying up to fascism,” or being on “the wrong side of history”? When did the present-day Left lose its critical edge? (111)

He is also equally scathing about the woke Left’s “almost pathological denialism” (111) in response to reasoned criticisms of its illiberalism. As an example he cites the famous “Letter on Justice and Open Debate”, published in July 2020 by *Harper’s Magazine* and co-signed by “153 well-known intellectuals and artists, including plain old liberals, Right or Left, . . . as well as figures with undeniably radical progressive credentials such as Noam Chomsky, Todd Gitlin, and Cornel West” (124). In Özkırmılı’s view (and mine), it was “a fairly unexceptionable op-ed on threats to free speech” (124). Written shortly after the brutal police murder of George Floyd, the letter began by making clear its liberal bona fides:

Our cultural institutions are facing a moment of trial. Powerful protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for police reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society, not least in higher education, journalism, philanthropy, and the arts.

It then went on (here my quotations are somewhat more extensive than Özkırmılı’s, in order to make clear the reasoning):

But this needed reckoning has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity. As we applaud the first development, we also raise our voices against the second. . . .

The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted. While we have come to expect this on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty. We uphold the value of robust and even caustic counter-speech from all quarters. But it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought. . . .

This stifling atmosphere will ultimately harm the most vital causes of our time. The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation. The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away.

But, as Özkırmılı documents in detail (125–140), trying to wish this critique away is exactly what the mainstream “left” did. Özkırmılı quotes extensively, and then answers, the various evasions that were employed by “progressive” journalists and academics in both the US and the UK:

- The letter reflects elite cis white intellectuals’ irritation at being challenged by previously marginalized voices (125–126).
- Cancel culture does not exist: it is an invention of the Right (127–130).
- Cancel culture exists, but it is about dismantling existing power relations and enabling the speech of the marginalized (130–135).
- Cancel culture, if indeed it exists, rarely has any negative real-life consequences for its targets (135–140).

The bottom line, as American journalist Jonathan Rauch eloquently observed in his book, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, is that there is a profound difference between cancel culture and honest criticism:

Criticism seeks to engage in conversations and identify error; canceling seeks to stigmatize conversations and punish the errant. Criticism cares whether statements are true; canceling cares about their social effects. Criticism exploits viewpoint diversity; canceling imposes viewpoint conformity. Criticism is a substitute for social punishment (we kill our hypotheses rather than each other); canceling is a form of social punishment (we kill your hypothesis by killing you socially). [quoted in part by Özkırmılı at 135]

Though right-wingers may loudly decry leftist cancel culture, the fact is that the vast majority of targets of leftist cancel culture are liberals or heterodox progressives. This is no accident, since the goal is to silence internal dissent, not to silence right-wingers. Furthermore, while the newspaper headlines tell the stories of cancellation attempts against prominent intellectuals who are in fact “too big to be cancelled” — J.K. Rowling, Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins — their real target, as Rauch points out, is

the onlooking audience of much less powerful people who understood that they might be next . . . “This letter wasn’t really about Pinker at all,” wrote a graduate student named Shaun Cammack. “In fact, it has a very specific function — to dissuade lesser-known academics and students from questioning the ideological consensus. . . . There are 575 people opposing Pinker for his views, and in the small world of academia that signals an extraordinarily high cost to dissent.” Pinker would be fine, but the smaller fry would get the intended message, which was to steer a wide berth around disapproved ideas or thinkers.

And those smaller fry who didn’t get the message, or who felt impelled to speak the truth as they saw it despite the likely consequences, often did become unemployable in academia.

In the end, the biggest loser from leftist cancel culture is the Left itself. Most obviously, cancel culture gives the Right an easy target, allowing it to pose — hypocritically to be sure, but profitably nonetheless — as the defender of everyone’s fundamental liberties. Furthermore, the Left’s arrogant censoriousness appalls and alienates ordinary citizens who could be its allies on specific policy issues. But though these are the most obvious negative consequences, they are the least important ones in the long run. The

most serious consequences of cancel culture are internal: by silencing dissent and imposing an ideological conformity, the Left undermines its own ability to rationally debate policy and strategy and to correct its own errors. That was obvious in the former Communist countries, where dissenters could face jail or worse; but it was also evident in the Communist and other Old Left parties in the West, where dissenters faced nothing more than social excommunication. Left movements (and others as well) ought to celebrate their internal dissidents (and thoughtful external critics), not ostracize or vilify them. As John Stuart Mill observed long ago in his famous essay *On Liberty*,

The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

Mill’s brilliant essay — which goes on to analyze in detail both sides of this bifurcation — has lost none of its timeliness a century-and-a-half later.

But now for my criticisms.

Özkırımlı labels Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s important and controversial book, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018), as a “conservative critique” (111), and he refers casually to “Haidt, Lukianoff, [and] other analysts on the Right” (115). And this, despite the fact that he quotes Lukianoff describing himself as “a liberal democrat trying to identify and stop what’s gone wrong in liberalism” (114), and Haidt as declaring that he has

“never voted for a Republican, never given a penny to a Republican candidate, never worked for a Republican or conservative cause. . . . By temperament and disposition and emotions, I’m a liberal . . . but in my beliefs about what’s best for the country, I’m a centrist. I’m now really just trying to step back and study things.” (114)

Özkırımlı gives no evidence that Lukianoff and Haidt are anything other than sincere in their professions of political belief. True, he points out that in their book there is

no mention of structural power disparities between the Right and the Left, the billions of dollars funneled into conservative causes by a network of wealthy donors, [and little mention of] the Right’s own attempts to stifle free speech. (114)

This criticism is accurate, but it misunderstands the subject matter of the Lukianoff–Haidt book, which did not purport to be a comprehensive analysis of the threats to freedom of expression in the contemporary academy, but rather a psychologically informed investigation of the culture of “safetyism”: “how good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure”, in the words of the book’s subtitle. Haidt and Lukianoff may not be as leftist as Özkırımlı or I would like, but it is grossly unfair to call them right-wingers.

Even worse is Özkırmılı’s musing as to whether “Haidt, a social psychologist by training, is simply regurgitating commonplace conservative arguments, lending them a veneer of scientific respectability.” (112) This insinuation evades the key question, which is whether (and to what extent) Haidt’s arguments are valid or invalid. If they are invalid, then by all means blame them on the conservatives, if that makes you happier; but if they are valid, then no amount of sneering about “commonplace conservative arguments” can change that validity. (One might, however, graciously give the conservatives credit for occasionally being right.) Özkırmılı discourses at length on the politics of the debate (112–115), but he barely analyzes at all the content of Lukianoff and Haidt’s reasoning.

And to top it all off, Özkırmılı gives the floor to Yale philosopher Jason Stanley opining that

“Haidt has led the campaign against political correctness, which became the mantra of the Trump movement.” . . . His Heterodox Academy is a “scaremongering rage machine” . . . that targets “oppressed minorities who are vastly under-represented in the academy.” (112–113)

This is not even guilt by association; it is guilt by invented association. Özkırmılı does not endorse Stanley’s deranged accusations, but neither does he criticize them.

Özkırmılı’s analysis of the controversies around J.K. Rowling is also a mixed bag. On the one hand, he makes much — perhaps too much — of a TikTok video “which featured a number of Harry Potter books placed on a burning pyre” to protest “the author’s alleged transphobia” (103). He is rightly aghast that “book burning, a ritual notoriously associated with the Nazis in contemporary times, and widely regarded as a hallmark of censorship and totalitarianism, [could] be appropriated by progressive groups in the name of solidarity with one of the most marginalized groups in society” (104). But he fails to provide evidence that any more than a tiny minority of “progressives” would actually burn Rowling’s books, or even take pleasure at those who do. He rightly observes that many mainstream progressive critics of Rowling, “not unlike evangelical pastors or far right Trump supporters, . . . present her ideas as an existential threat to true believers, one that needs to be symbolically smoldered so that the phoenix of a new, genderqueer, spirit can emerge from the ashes” (107). And he points out the key “problem with woke activism”: “self-imposed censorship [and] voluntary intellectual impoverishment, always hailing from a position of perpetual victimhood” (108). But it seems to me that centering the analysis around book-burning may be a bit over the top.

On the other hand, Özkırmılı is also unfair to Rowling. Apparently trying to be even-handed, he says blandly that “she may or may not be transphobic”, immediately adding that “Rowling herself vehemently denies these allegations, and many in the LGBTQ+ community believe she isn’t [transphobic]; for what it’s worth, I agree with the latter” (107). But he fails completely to analyze the substance of the accusations, or to explain why he disagrees with them. He also fails to clarify how he interprets the word “transphobic”, or to discuss the misunderstandings created by the radically different meanings that people ascribe to that word. Özkırmılı, to his credit, does quote Rowling’s infamous tweet in full:

Dress however you please.
Call yourself whatever you like.
Sleep with any consenting adult who'll have you.
Live your best life in peace and security.
But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real?

— which hardly sounds transphobic, at least if the word is given its usual meaning as fear or hatred of transgender people. But Özkırmılı does not even mention Rowling's subsequent longer essay, in which she explains, eloquently and compassionately, her reasons for speaking out on sex and gender issues. In a sane world, Rowling's detractors would read her essay — not just her 219-character tweet — and then respond, if they wish, by criticizing her arguments. Özkırmılı sincerely wants to lead us towards such a saner world, but it seems to me that he flubbed this particular opportunity.

After rightly criticizing “the fuzziness and arbitrariness of definitions of harm” and the lack of any objective definition of “emotional harm” (116–117), Özkırmılı nevertheless goes on immediately to say, without any further analysis, that

Few would disagree today that legally defined hate speech causes harm and needs to be prohibited ... (117)

— totally oblivious here, it seems, to the fact that the notion of “hate speech” is just as ambiguous and contested as the notion of “harm”. Furthermore, appealing to legal definitions does not help: first of all, because the legal definitions in some countries may be no less vague than the raw concept; and secondly, because not all laws are morally or socially correct. (As an avowed leftist, Özkırmılı ought to know this!) For instance, left-wing social critic and physicist Jean Bricmont has published a carefully reasoned critique of the current French legislation concerning “hate speech”. Bricmont, like John Stuart Mill and countless other liberals and leftists, would strenuously *disagree* that “legally defined hate speech causes harm and needs to be prohibited”. Clearly Özkırmılı thinks otherwise, as he has a perfect right to do; but in that case he needs to define more precisely the “hate speech” that he proposes to criminalize, and to explain why its prohibition would do more good than harm.

Finally, Özkırmılı mentions briefly, but does not pursue, an important issue concerning the intellectual origins of contemporary woke “left” doctrine:

[T]oday's activists ... proudly trace the origins of their politics to the moral [and I would add, epistemic – A.S.] relativism of French postmodernist thought. Yet, bizarrely enough, when it comes to promoting “its truth,” the woke Left is no less absolutist than the Right. (140)

This is, indeed, a profound paradox; I would argue, in fact, that the selective invocation of epistemic relativism to support an absolutist dogmatism (at least on some issues) is *the central* philosophical trait of the Critical Social Justice “left”. Readers interested in pursuing this theme can find a valuable historical overview and analysis in Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay's recent book, *Cynical Theories*.

Last but not least, it seems to me that *Cancelled*, though written by an unabashed anti-capitalist leftist, is not Marxist enough, in that it fails to analyze the class origins of woke ideology. I would put forth the conjecture that wokeness is in fact a quintessential ideology of the professional-managerial class: the class in modern capitalism, first theorized by Barbara and John Ehrenreich (and of which I am a middle-ranking member), that consists of

salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production, and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations. The PMC thus includes such groups as scientists, engineers, teachers, social workers, writers, accountants, lower- and middle-level managers and administrators, etc. — in all some twenty to twenty-five percent of the U.S. population.

The Ehrenreichs argued that

The PMC’s consciousness . . . is shaped by the apparently contradictory aspects of its existence: Both the PMC and the working class are forced to sell their labor power to the capitalist class, to which they share an antagonistic relationship. . . . But the PMC is also in an objectively antagonistic relationship to the working class: . . . in daily life, its function is the direct or indirect management and manipulation of working-class life — at home, at work, at school. Thus the PMC’s objective class interests lie in the overthrow of the capitalist class, but not in the triumph of the working class; and their actual attitudes often mix hostility toward the capitalist class with elitism toward the working class.

That was written nearly half a century ago, but it is, I believe, extraordinarily prescient today. I would argue that woke ideology allows members of the professional-managerial class to portray themselves — and *see* themselves — as virtuous defenders of the oppressed, while primarily advancing their own class interests. Woke ideology serves the PMC’s class interests in at least three ways:

1) For the upper strata of the PMC — those with managerial authority, particularly in corporate Human Resources departments — the woke creed empowers them to regulate the speech and behavior, and aspirationally even the thoughts, of the working class and subordinate members of the PMC.

2) For anyone in the PMC who wishes to play the game, woke ideology can function as a trump card in intra-class competition for jobs and influence. For instance, in academia, “diversity statements” are sometimes being used as a preliminary filtering mechanism for job applicants, imposing a political litmus test through which unsuitable candidates can be rejected *before* the quality of their research or teaching is evaluated.

3) For the lower strata of the PMC — those who may be financially on a par with, or even below, many working-class people with whom they come into contact (compare editorial assistant or adjunct lecturer to electrician or plumber) — woke ideology provides psychological compensations. Just as racism provided a “public and psychological wage” to poor whites in the American South (and to a lesser extent the North) — we may be as poor as the blacks, but at least we are granted the social deference appropriate to members of the superior race — so wokeness provides a psychological wage to underemployed members of the PMC, allowing them to feel not only educationally superior to the working class, but also *morally* superior.

Similar points were made a few years ago in a fascinating article by the iconoclastic conservative Julius Krein. Sounding almost Marxist in its class analysis, and citing without embarrassment the work of left-wing economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, the article dismisses the working class, perhaps too pessimistically, as having “scarcely any political agency in the current system and no apparent means for acquiring any”, and argues that the real class conflict today is between the top 0.1 percent and the next 10 percent, namely, the professional-managerial class (a term that he uses explicitly). Krein is incisive and withering about the contemporary PMC “left”:

Another obstacle for left-wing upper-middle-class radicals is their own debilitating false consciousness, which easily exceeds the confusion frequently ascribed to the working class. Instead of frankly acknowledging their own professional class interests, they project their concerns onto the working class and present themselves as altruistic saviors — only to complain about a lack of working-class enthusiasm later. This blindness often prevents them from recognizing where their interests diverge from the purported beneficiaries of their projects and impedes their ability to effect any larger political realignment.

From the other end of the political spectrum, similar ideas were put forth recently by the Marxist cultural critic Catherine Liu in her book *Virtue Hoarders*, a blistering polemic against “elite PMC workers who labor in a world of performative identity and virtue signaling” and, in so doing, undermine the struggle for “social justice and economic redistribution”:

As a class, the PMC loves to talk about bias rather than inequality, racism rather than capitalism, visibility rather than exploitation. . . . In liberal [and woke left] circles, talking about class or class consciousness before other forms of difference is not just controversial; it is heretical. They call you a “class reductionist” if you argue that race, gender, and class are not interchangeable categories. They pile on with the legalistic deadly term *intersectional* to accommodate the materialist critique of their politics. The PMC simply does not want its class identity or interests unmasked. (8–9)

As an example, Liu cites the disinvitation of Marxist Black scholar Adolph Reed by the New York Democratic Socialists of America: even to hear out his views would be “reactionary, class reductionist and at best, tone deaf”. No wonder that the woke left — with its social base in the PMC — talks so much about race, sexual orientation and (lately) gender identity, and so little about class.

But wokeness does not serve only the PMC. Performative wokeness is also a win-win proposition for the capitalist class itself, as the conservative New York Times columnist Ross Douthat has perceptively pointed out:

Corporate activism on social issues isn’t in tension with corporate self-interest on tax policy and corporate stinginess in paychecks. Rather, the activism increasingly exists to protect the self-interest and the stinginess . . .

True, corporate virtue-signaling on controversial social issues has the downside, for society as a whole, that it

confirms the blue-collar suspicion that liberalism is no longer organized around working-class economic interests, and it encourages cultural conservatives in their feeling of general besiegement . . . [All this] will help sustain the Republican Party even as it lurches deeper into demagogy and paranoia — by making a vote for the G.O.P. the only way to protest a corporate-backed liberal politics that seems indifferent to the working man and an ascendant cultural liberalism that has board-rooms as well as Hollywood and academia in its corner.

But of course so long as this same Republican Party remains itself pro-corporate in its economic ideology . . . the corporate interests themselves stand to lose little from these polarizing trends.

Indeed, they gain either way:

Their wokeness buys them cover when liberalism is in power, and any backlash only helps prop up a G.O.P. that has their back when it comes time to write our tax laws.

Özkırımli devotes a long final chapter (144–175) to outlining his vision for a renewed progressive Left. I can only sketch his ideas here, and refer readers to the book for details.

Özkırımli begins by drawing three lessons from successful progressive activism, quoting Alicia Garza, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter. Firstly,

Most contemporary social movements confuse power with empowerment . . . “Power is the ability to impact and affect the conditions of your own life and the lives of others”; empowerment, on the other hand, “is feeling good about yourself, akin to having high self-esteem.” “Unless empowerment is transformed into power,” she adds, “not much will change about our environments. . . .” The purpose of organizing, Garza concludes, should be to build power. (150)

Secondly,

Power itself cannot be achieved without nurturing relationships and forming alliances. [Unfortunately, Garza points out,] “there is a tendency to build alliances with only those we are the most comfortable with, those who already speak our language and share our views on the world.” . . . [But] “movement building isn’t about finding your tribe — it’s about growing your tribe across difference to focus on a common set of goals.”

Black Lives Matter . . . achieved some of its goals by reaching out to organizations that are not necessarily radical, or even progressive. This did not mean that “we had to be less radical,” Garza says. “It meant that being radical and having radical politics were not a litmus test for whether or not one could join our movement.” (151–152)

And finally,

“You cannot start a movement from a hashtag. Only organizing sustains movements.” . . . It requires knocking on doors, engaging in difficult conversations, listening and putting oneself in other people’s shoes. (152)

In short,

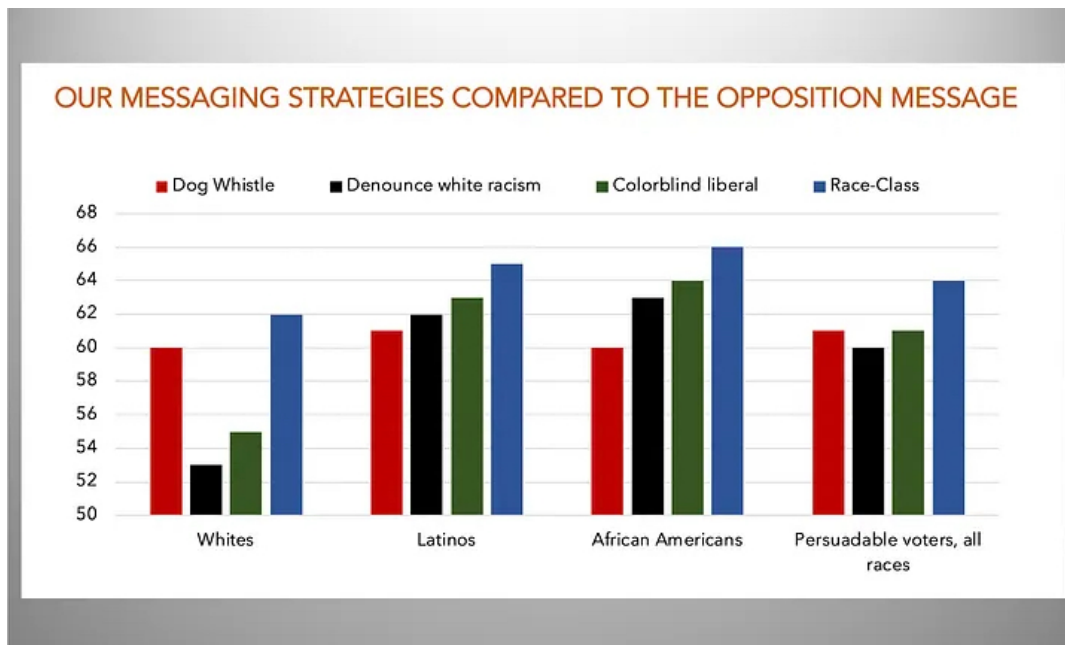
What needs to be done . . . is to follow the advice offered by generations of Black feminist activists and reach out to those who do not think like us, [and] try to convince as many of them as possible to make common cause to achieve change that will benefit the most. . . . [That] should begin with what we share, and not with what divides us; then we need to add layers to it to better address the myriad (interrelated) threats and injustices we face today. (154)

As an alternative to prioritizing race over class (as the woke left does) or class over race (as the traditional left did), Özkırmılı advocates (172–175) the Race-Class Fusion Narrative, an “ambitious, empirically tested” approach pioneered by University of California–Berkeley law professor Ian Haney López and his colleagues. As López explains,

Race-class fusion politics is not do-both. It is not additive. It is a very specific story about race inseparably fused to class. . . . In focus groups and poll testing I and others have done over the last three years, we’ve probed the power of race-class narratives like this one:

“We need to pull together no matter our race or ethnicity. We have done this before and can do it again. But instead of uniting us, certain politicians make divisions worse, insulting and blaming different groups. When they divide us, they can more easily rig our government and the economy for their wealthy campaign donors. When we come together by rejecting racism against anyone, we can elect new leaders who support proven solutions that help all working families.”

This message from July 2020 was more convincing to all respondents — white eligible voters included — than the right’s dog whistle fear message. It also performed better than the Race Left and Colorblind Left messages, including among voters of color. In other words, research suggests that a fusion race-class message is the most persuasive political message available today, right or left.



(It would be useful to have independent replications of these results, especially since the claimed effect sizes are small and very likely within statistical error. On the other hand, small effects, if real, can be decisive in close elections.)

Though developed originally in the American context, Özkırmılı thinks (and I tend to agree) that the principle of Race-Class Fusion is likely to be applicable in other places where racial/ethnic antagonisms divide workers, and he cites (174–175) a promising pilot study in the UK.

Özkırmılı ends his book (176–183) by addressing his likely detractors on the woke left:

I am more worried about accelerating climate change . . . than I am about Canada’s first Federal 2SLGBTQI+ Action Plan . . . I believe it is more urgent to address the problem of legal deforestation . . . than the recognition of “eunuch” as a new gender identity. And I am more troubled by the 1,700 environmental activists murdered in the past decade or the 85 percent of the world population who live on less than \$30 per day than finding the most inclusive pronouns to address each other. . . .

So, does all this mean the issues that the woke Left is preoccupied with are not important? Of course not. Should we postpone dealing with them until other, more urgent, issues are resolved? Not necessarily. Do I think that radical identity politics is distracting us from non-culture-war-related issues? Yes, I do. Do I believe that woke activism is an individual empowerment-driven, narcissistic, middle- and upper-middle-class pastime? Absolutely. And I wonder: why are there so few progressive leftists who shout “the emperor has no clothes”? (182–183)

I wonder too.

The author is Professor of Mathematics at University College London and Professor Emeritus of Physics at New York University. He is co-author (with Jean Bricmont) of Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science and author of Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy and Culture.