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How 'woke' is the campus left?

New books by Yasha Mounk and Susan Neiman challenge trends in progressive politics

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An assortment of recent books has sought to reckon with the [unnamable](#) specter haunting the political left, especially on college campuses. Two of the most insightful, both published in the past year, are by academics who identify themselves as liberals or leftists: the political scientist Yasha Mounk's analytically measured *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* and the philosopher Susan Neiman's more polemically incisive *Left Is Not Woke*. Neiman especially attends to the history of ideas underlying what the cultural critic Wesley Yang has called a ["successor ideology"](#) to liberalism. Adherents of the "woke movement," as Neiman terms it, will likely find the scrutiny unwelcome. Its implications are set to provoke further schisms between liberals and radicals on the left, whose lack of agreement they highlight.

The schism between "woke" and more traditional left-wing attitudes reflects more than a divergence over style or tactics. Neiman argues that the current salience of identity represents a departure from traditional universalist commitments associated with the Enlightenment. This perceived betrayal of principle animates Neiman's project. "Contemporary voices considered to be leftist," she writes, "have abandoned the philosophical ideas that are central to any left-wing standpoint: a commitment to universalism over tribalism, a firm distinction between justice and power, and a belief in the possibility of progress."

Both Neiman's and Mounk's accounts focus on the current preoccupation of the left with structural power imbalances. In focusing on inequalities of power, Neiman observes, "the concept of justice is often left by the wayside." Mounk

offers a somewhat-different take: Justice remains central to the left but subject to a transformation in which identity plays an outsized role. Mounk describes how this perspective differs from liberalism. Whereas liberalism stems from the assumption of political equality between individuals, recent left-wing activism mandates that “members of marginalized groups be treated with special consideration.” Many leftists increasingly take it for granted that members of such groups deserve preferential treatment. Mounk prefers to call this viewpoint the *identity synthesis*, instead of using the more-loaded word *woke*. Though slightly awkward as a term, “identity synthesis” has the benefit of precision: It names a synthesis of themes from various academic discourses, including poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, that collectively characterize the liberal commitment to impartiality as a form of covert oppression.

Both perspectives — whether envisaging a radical synthesis of power and justice or the simple replacement of justice by power — owe much to the work of two thinkers at ideological antipodes: Michel Foucault and Carl Schmitt. Though dissimilar in style and temperament, Foucault and Schmitt have one important commonality. As Neiman argues: “What makes them interesting to progressive thinkers today is their shared hostility toward liberalism and their commitment to unmasking liberal hypocrisies.” Mounk notes that many liberal institutions — including, most obviously, colleges — now manifest a similar aversion to the claims of liberal thinkers (he cites both John Stuart Mill and John Rawls), with their emphasis on individual rights and procedural neutrality. Put simply, the progressive view favors active redress: Dominant groups must be suppressed so that marginalized groups can flourish.

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One source of the appeal this view holds is its simplicity; it offers a clear but rudimentary social physics of cause and effect. Another is its punitive aspect, its promise “to invert a structure of injustice — to inflict on those we take to be the bearers of privilege the disregard they have inflicted on others,” as the writer Garth Greenwell has it. According to Neiman, this “centering” of often-real historical injustices and of bona-fide legacies of harm and neglect leads to paradoxical and perverse outcomes: “It begins with concern for marginalized persons and ends by reducing each to the prism of her marginalization.” Rather than expanding opportunities for solidarity across lines of race and gender, focus on grievance incentivizes a withdrawal into “those parts of identities that are most marginalized.” This myopic emphasis lends the experience of oppression status and authority. As T.S. Eliot remarks in *The Waste Land*: “We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.” In Neiman’s pithy summation, the result is “a forest of trauma.”

Under the rubric of identity politics, Neiman argues, victimhood confers status “as the currency of recognition.” Virtue and merit get tabulated according to race, gender, ethnicity, and national or cultural origin, while behavior and economic status (or class) are rendered less salient. The emphasis on largely immutable characteristics sharply narrows the scope for solidarity while raising the stakes of conflict. Though the interests of marginalized groups can align through the framework of intersectionality, they cannot be reconciled with those of socially dominant groups, whose members are given a choice between [tutelage](#) and banishment. As a 2020 article in [The Nation](#) (“How White People Can Step Up — and Step Back — Right Now”) decreed to the members of supposedly privileged groups: “Listen, learn, and do what you’re asked to do.” Neiman flatly rejects this demand. “I am not an ally,” she declares.

To this perspective Neiman opposes a universalism characteristic of the social-democratic European left, which has long differed from American-style liberalism in invoking a panoply of social rights such as fair labor, housing, and health care that some liberals downplay as mere entitlements. Social democracy generally requires an interventionist welfare state for their provision. What Neiman calls “the woke left,” however, shares with the right a vigorous skepticism of institutions, marked at the fringes by a deep distrust of state power. One highly characteristic instance is the model of [reparations](#) popular with progressives, in which the state would serve not as the means of generalized redistribution through taxation and social spending, but as the mechanism for a direct transfer of wealth from the descendants of slaveholders to the descendants of the enslaved. Another is the rejection of law enforcement and immigration restrictions as systemically racist.

Such views are genuinely radical and worth debating in a liberal context, but it strains credulity to suggest, as Neiman does, that they are historically foreign to the left. *Left* isn’t synonymous with *woke*, but wokeness is of the left. It marks the reemergence of a familiar radicalism associated with the anti-Vietnam War movement, the 1960s counterculture, radical feminism, and militant Black nationalism. Aiming both rhetorically and institutionally to contest liberal legitimacy, wokeness offers a rising generation a flawed but energetic form of solidarity that prospectively unites marginalized groups and their would-be allies. In that respect the present quarrel over wokeness distinctly echoes earlier [factional struggles](#) between liberals and radical leftists.

The philosopher Herbert Marcuse, whom Neiman does not mention, was an early advocate of “positive” discrimination. In the 1965 essay “Repressive Tolerance,” Marcuse went far beyond pressing for the “withdrawal of tolerance from regressive movements” to demanding “intolerance in the opposite direction.” Mounk notes Marcuse’s deep loathing of western democracies, which in his view were radically unfree societies “defined by class domination

and media propaganda.” Marcuse also embraced the theory of state subversion proposed by militant [leftist intellectuals](#) and activists. Mounk references the history of mutual influence and admiration among Marcuse and left-wing radicals of the SDS and the Marxist-Leninist militants of the West German Red Army Faction, whose absence is another curious lacuna in Neiman’s story. One feels that perhaps she does not wish to acknowledge the violent rejection of liberal societies that has characterized some parts of the left.

The emphasis that Neiman places on the ideological roots of wokeness in radical academic discourse, or “theory,” at times diverts readers from a broader socio-historical understanding of left-wing politics. Neiman notes an alignment between wokeness and traditional left-wing projects of resisting oppression, pursuing equality, and righting historical wrongs. But what sets it apart is its “rejection of the epistemological frameworks and political assumptions inherited from the Enlightenment” that she attributes to avatars of theory such as Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha. These thinkers, she says, rejected democratic universalism in favor of an identitarian model akin to tribalism.

This account helps to illuminate what is strange and new about the latest iteration of social-justice activism, including its wholesale appropriation of motifs from reactionary thought such as cultural purity and ethnic segregation. The indictment presented in *Left Is Not Woke* stretches back to illiberalism’s past and includes valuable discussion of how some of the current rhetoric on the left reflects the anti-modernism of counter-Enlightenment figures such as Joseph de Maistre as well as Nazi-aligned thinkers like Schmitt and Martin Heidegger. Neiman’s criticism of the influence of Schmitt (“Nietzsche on a bad day”) packs a particular wallop. She remarks that Schmitt’s rejection of the concept of humanity “is perilously close to the contemporary argument that Enlightenment universalism disguises particular [Western] interests.” This is a striking insight: A left without a concept of shared humanity is a novel mutation. The aim of leftist politics since its inception has always been the liberation of all humanity, not just its worthiest part.

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Fundamentally, the contemporary identitarian left is a movement born of the changing character of liberal institutions themselves, particularly colleges. The diversification of student bodies has led to rising alienation among newly minted elites from hitherto marginalized groups, giving rise to a plethora of identity- and affinity-oriented Bantustans checkering college campuses and to administrators deferentially tiptoeing around the sensitivities of their sheltered constituencies. Though often framed in a prosaic, even bureaucratic, idiom, the

demands of this movement are utopian and often intolerant. In seeking to banish dissenters from their midst once and for all, woke leftists, like their doppelgängers on the right, eagerly embrace tactics of intimidation and suppression.

Neiman's project of reviving a more charitable left feels vital yet also anachronistic at a time when many leftists [openly reject](#) liberal norms. But this development also vindicates the broader narrative. Illiberalism on the progressive left is not simply the result of understandable but misguided passions; it is intrinsic to the character of the movement. Neiman seems unwilling to relinquish the belief that left progressives are morally superior to liberals. Yet she also knows what the Weimar-era critic and historian Henry Pachter once pointed out: "Liberals and radicals usually prosper together." Radical progressivism that seeks to exile liberals from its ranks tends to fall prey to fanaticism and violence. Meanwhile, liberalism depends on radical critics to point out its hypocrisies and failures.

Having explored its philosophical roots, Neiman does not suggest where the woke movement might lead, except to offer a hopeful though unlikely prognosis for a left-liberal mind meld, leading to the revival of a Eurocentric universalism of social rights and political freedoms. Germany, where Neiman resides (which she praises as "an increasingly diverse society with the world's fourth-largest economy"), is upheld as a civic ideal. But Germany also harbors a stridently xenophobic far right with growing political support. Meanwhile many leftists, both in the United States and Europe, have already renounced any universalism with Western origins. No amount of cajoling seems likely to convince them that understanding Kant is part of their struggle.

The story Neiman tells is part of a broader realignment that has been taking place across the political spectrum in many Western nations and beyond over the past decade: a turning away from a democratic conception of political life. This worrying trend goes by a variety of names, including most commonly "democratic backsliding." According to the political scientists David Waldner and Ellen Lust, "backsliding entails deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance." Within liberal democracies specifically, it refers to a qualitative decline in governance and civic institutions, sometimes presaging a turn to authoritarian rule. The left's weakening commitment to democratic norms mirrors a similar trajectory on the right. Both represent a questioning of the West's most distinctive philosophical and political traditions. The question that Neiman helps bring into focus is whether the West will abandon this heritage simply because it has been abused at times or imperfectly realized. As she acknowledges, the costs of what Western democracies have wrought through the spread of their economic and political influence are real and often

devastating. But the alternatives, including fascism and communism, have proved far worse.

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