This is the second book criticizing 'wokeness' that I've read in the past month or so—the other being Musa al-Gharbi's *We Have Never Been Woke* (review)—and though they're very different in focus and purpose, I think it's interesting to compare the two.

One of Huemer's motives for writing *Progressive Myths* seems to be that he thinks our society is unusually good and progressivism is a threat to it. He says in a blog post:

> I'm for *preserving* America and Western civilization, not disrupting them. Trump and the Woke left are both for disrupting our society and undermining its core institutions. Both are sowing discord and undermining social trust in their own ways.[1]

And he says in the book:

> …the *natural* state of human beings is not one of harmony, freedom, and equality. The natural state of human beings is one of strife, exploitation, oppression, and misery. The current state of American society is a historical fluke, marked by its extraordinarily *low* levels of exploitation, oppression, and injustice. Somehow, we have reached a metastable equilibrium of peace and prosperity that earlier generations could only dream of. The key sources of this happy state include such institutions as democracy, free markets, and modern science.
>
> So what should we do now? No doubt, we can still make things even better; there are still some injustices to fight. But perhaps we should take a bit of advice from the Hippocratic oath: First, do no harm. If we undermine our current norms and institutions, the most likely result is not that we will be swept into a paradise of justice and sistery love. The most likely result is that we will revert to something closer to the natural state of human beings, in which a small cadre of the powerful oppress, exploit, and commit violence against the majority.[2]

So on this view, 'wokeness' is a *threat to a relatively good status quo*. By contrast, al-Gharbi's book argues that 'wokeness' is used (or maybe abused) by elites to justify exploitative systems that benefit themselves. On that view, as I interpret it, 'wokeness' is *part of a bad status quo* (or at least, part of a bad aspect of the status quo).

The two books also give different pictures of where 'wokeness' comes from. Huemer thinks people were hooked on the psychological benefits—e.g. "meaning" and "community"[3]—of being part of the civil rights movement, so they wanted to find a way to keep the movement going after it had accomplished its original goals. On al-Gharbi's account, 'woke' ideology is a distinctive cultural characteristic of certain professions that traces back closer to the beginning of the 20th century, and periods of particularly intense focus on political correctness are a reaction to social/economic insecurity faced by (actual or aspiring) members of those professions.

Anyway… I was most interested in Part 1 of this book, which discusses individuals: Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Amy Cooper, Jacob Blake, and Kyle Rittenhouse. Huemer thinks these cases have been widely misrepresented by progressives and the media. (He also discusses the cases of Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, which he agrees are examples of police misconduct.)

Whatever I knew previously about those cases was largely absorbed from the sentiments people express in (my mostly left-leaning) social media bubble. Those sentiments tend to involve: total

certainty about what happened, total certainty that there's a clear villain and a pure victim (and total certainty about which is which), and a conviction that anyone who's *not* certain about these things is morally suspect. I'm always a bit uncomfortable with such certainty, since it seems like the same psychological and social forces drive people on opposite sides of an issue to feel equally certain. The emotion of certainty has no necessary connection with truth. Still, when people who share my values seem confidently united on some issue, it's hard to resist assuming that they're at least in the general vicinity of the truth. After reading this book, though, I do feel like the zeitgeist gave me a seriously misleading impression of some of these cases. I don't know if Huemer's conclusions about them are correct or not, but the facts seem to at least suggest far more ambiguity than it's popular on the left to acknowledge.

I have a criticism of the chapter on Amy Cooper (a white woman who called the cops on a Black man named Christian, whose video of the incident went viral). Huemer includes the following quote by Trevor Noah regarding the incident: "And now here you have this woman who…blatantly knew how to use the power of her whiteness to threaten the life of another man and his blackness." Huemer thinks that quote is an example of a progressive misrepresenting things. He gives some context around the event: that Christian had made a threatening statement to Amy prior to her calling the police, and that Amy mentioning Christian's race repeatedly during the 911 call was due to the 911 operator having trouble hearing her. But Huemer doesn't mention the fact (which you can see in the video) that Amy *told Christian* "I'm going to tell them there's an African American man threatening my life" *before* she called 911. This sure sounds like she was trying to threaten Christian with the prospect that police will mistreat him because he is Black.

This book covers a lot of topics and I'm not prepared to evaluate much of what it says right now, so, I'm not going to rate it.

1. Michael Huemer, "Help Save Western Civilization," Substack newsletter, *Fake Noûs* (blog), September 14, 2024, https://fakenous.substack.com/p/help-save-western-civilization.

2. Micheal Huemer, *Progressive Myths*, 2024, 233.

3. Ibid., 196.

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