

## REVIEW OF *WE HAVE NEVER BEEN WOKE*

One of the first things that stood out to me [about Upper West Side NYC] is that there's something like a racialized caste system here that everyone takes as natural. You have disposable servants who will clean your house, watch your kids, walk your dogs, deliver prepared meals to you. ...

Even the most sexist or bigoted rich white person in many other contexts wouldn't be able to exploit women and minorities at the level the typical liberal professional in a city like Seattle, San Francisco, or Chicago does in their day-to-day lives. The infrastructure simply isn't there. Instead, progressive bastions associated with the knowledge economy are the places with well-oiled machines for casually exploiting and discarding the vulnerable, desperate, and disadvantaged. And it's largely Democratic-voting professionals who take advantage of them—even as they conspicuously lament inequality.<sup>1</sup>

This book is one of the most thought-provoking things related to politics that I've read in a long time. It's about “symbolic capitalists”, which includes “academics, consultants, journalists, administrators, lawyers, people who work in finance and tech, and so on”<sup>2</sup>. This group includes me, as well as Al-Gharbi himself. His core thesis is that their—our—lifestyles depend on “exploiting desperate and vulnerable people”<sup>3</sup> for our own benefit, and that (despite our conscious intentions) much of our social justice discourse only functions to benefit ourselves.

**Symbolic capitalists simultaneously desire to be social climbers *and* egalitarians.** We want to mitigate inequalities while also preserving or enhancing our elite position (and ensuring our children can reproduce or exceed our position). These drives are in fundamental tension.<sup>4</sup>

A few of the points the book makes about symbolic capitalists:

- We like to **cast ourselves as part of the common people** against the elites, since we aren't “the top 1 percent”. But really, we are elites ourselves and our interests aren't aligned with the average citizen's.
- So-called “woke” ideas are mostly only held by us. (Al-Gharbi only intends to use that term to identify an ideology, not to imply the ideology is good or bad.)
- Despite our (sincere) desire for social justice, in practice we mostly use our power to benefit ourselves. E.g., “the regions symbolic capitalists dominate also happen to be the most unequal places in the United States” and “remain heavily segregated along racial and ethnic lines”<sup>5</sup>.
- There was an empirically measurable increase in focus on “woke” ideas starting around 2010 which “may be winding down” since 2021<sup>6</sup>, and there were **three similar cycles** in the 20th century (in the 20s-30s, 60s-70s, and 80s-90s).
- These cycles are best explained by “**elite overproduction**”<sup>7</sup>. Each cycle started when elites faced some socioeconomic difficulty (e.g. an excess of college graduates relative to the available jobs for them) and ended when their problem was addressed. Despite the rhetorical focus on helping disadvantaged/oppressed groups, the cycles don't result in improvements for those groups, except in the form of “benefits from changes in symbolic capitalist institutions” which “tend to accrue primarily to those *who are already relatively well off or well positioned*.”<sup>8</sup>
- We “tend to **take words, symbols, and ideas very seriously** (much more than other Americans).”<sup>9</sup> This is reflected in how we engage with politics: “**we generally concentrate our efforts on the symbolic realm...rather than the reallocation of power and resources.**”<sup>10</sup> This also means our

heavy influence on the Democratic party has “changed not merely the substance of Democratic politics but also the *style*”<sup>11</sup> in ways which may be hindering the party’s ability to communicate effectively with the rest of the population.

- We make declarations of our own guilt with regard to racism, sexism, and other injustices, but we don’t generally **make material sacrifices** to try to rectify those injustices. Example: institutions that make conspicuous land acknowledgments but have no intention of actually paying the tribes for the land.
- We tend to “consecrate” particular people to represent minorities, but only listen to them insofar as they fundamentally conform to our ideology. “[W]hen elites wonder what, say, African Americans think about an issue, their first instinct is not to go and talk to a bunch of ordinary Black folk, nor to conduct a large-sample and representative study to solicit the views of African Americans in the community or nationwide. ... In practice, by turning to these consecrated representatives, elites are seeking out confirmatory narratives under the guise of searching for truth.”<sup>12</sup>
- Focusing on privilege as an attribute of an identity group can paradoxically function to help some members of that group evade responsibility for injustices. “[I]t has become fashionable... to ritualistically acknowledge one’s own privilege... [T]he people engaged in these rituals typically make it a point of insisting that *all* whites share the same privilege, that *all* whites are complicit in white supremacy, and so on. **These kinds of universalizing narratives are convenient for elites**—they allow a white professional in a city like Atlanta to pretend as though they are basically in the ‘same boat’ as a low-income white person who lives in the heart of Appalachia...—as though they both benefit from their race in the same way.... Rather than focusing on who concretely benefits from racialization in America and how, ‘privilege’ talk is instrumentalized in ways that **shift attention to who has the ‘correct’ beliefs, feelings, and public posture.**”<sup>13</sup> (Further: “The plurality of poor folks in America, who just so happen to be white, are conveniently recast as ‘privileged’ people who are owed nothing by the rest of society... This is... a very convenient position for elites to hold: no need to reallocate their money downward to ‘those people.’”<sup>14</sup>)

Al-Gharbi says that “‘systemic’, ‘institutional’, or ‘structural’ interpretations of racism”, though valuable when done correctly, are often “deployed by elites in order to absolve them of responsibility for social problems and to legitimize inaction to address those problems.”<sup>15</sup>

Although appeals to America’s racist and sexist history are often portrayed as some kind of critique of the social order, instead they often serve as an alibi: it’s not *we* who are to blame, but those terrible people in the past (who are all conveniently dead and therefore unable to be held to account).<sup>16</sup>

When we come to **believe “that nothing short of revolution can rectify the situation”**<sup>17</sup>, we end up believing there’s nothing for us to do but “carry on as usual (albeit with occasional pangs of guilt) and regularly condemn the system we profit from even as we continue to actively exploit it.”<sup>18</sup>

1. Musa al-Gharbi, *We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691232614>.

2. *Ibid.*, 8.

3. *Ibid.*, 146.

4. *Ibid.*, 311, bold added.

5. *Ibid.*, 184.

6. *Ibid.*, 97.

7. *Ibid.*, 99.

8. *Ibid.*, 107.

9. Ibid., 39, emphasis added.
10. Ibid., 190.
11. Ibid., 205.
12. Ibid., 301.
13. Ibid., 269–70, bold added.
14. Ibid., 270.
15. Ibid., 283.
16. Ibid., 285.
17. Ibid., 286.
18. Ibid.

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