Wokeness and Myth on Campus

Alan Jacobs

The recent wave of protests at American colleges—in which students express their anger at the presence on their campuses of ideas and speakers that they believe to lie outside the boundaries of acceptable discourse—has elicited endless commentary, but little of that commentary has been helpful. To some observers, the students are admirably alert to institutional racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, and are courageous in resisting those forces. To others, the students' responses merely mark them as "special snowflakes" unable to cope with real-world diversity of opinions. These opposed interpretations of the protests are themselves laid out, fortified, and held with commendable firmness or lamentable rigidity, depending on your point of view. In any case, they lead nowhere and leave no minds changed.

The problem lies in a failure to grasp the true nature of the students' position. If we are going to understand that position, we will need to draw on intellectual sources quite other than those typically invoked. What is required of us is the study of *myth*—and not in any pejorative or dismissive sense, but in the sense of an ineradicable element of human consciousness.

The Technological Core and the Mythical Core

In his book *The Presence of Myth*, first published in English translation in 1989, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski divides our civilization into two "cores." This is his term for two cognitive, social, and ethical networks, "two different sources of energy active in man's conscious relation to the world." One of these cores is "technological," the other "mythical."

The term "technological core" is potentially misleading. Kołakowski is speaking of something broader than what we usually mean by "technological," something influenced by Martin Heidegger's understanding. To Heidegger, and therefore I think to Kołakowski, technology is not the product of science; rather, science is the product of a "technological enframing." Technology, on this view, is not a set of methods or inventions

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but a stance toward the world that is instrumental and manipulative, in relatively neutral senses of those words. The technological core is analytical, sequential, and empirical. Another way to put this is to say that what belongs to the technological core is what we find *to hand*: whatever occupies the lifeworld we share, and is therefore subject to our manipulation and control, and to debates about what it is and what might be done with it. To this core belong instrumental and discursive reason, including all the sciences and most forms of philosophy—everything that reckons with the possible uses of human power to shape ourselves and our environment. The technological core undergirds and produces the phenomena we typically refer to as technological.

The "mythical core" of civilization, by contrast, describes that aspect of our experience "not revealed by scientific questions and beliefs." It encompasses the "nonempirical unconditioned reality" of our experience, that which is not amenable to confirmation or disconfirmation. As will become clearer below, the mythical core describes our most fundamental relation to the world. It is our metaphysical background, the elements prior to our manipulation and control. For Kołakowski, the failure to distinguish between the mythical and technological cores leads to a failure to understand many social trends and events.

Kołakowski brackets the question of whether "nonempirical unconditioned reality" actually exists—that is, of whether metaphysics is fictional. He is interested, rather, in the *impulse* toward connecting with such a reality, which he says is persistent in human civilization, though it takes many forms.

He also wants to understand this mythical core on its own terms. But this understanding can be difficult, for our society "wishes to include myth in the technological order, that is…it seeks justification for myth." And the only way to seek justification for myth is to analyze it into components and reassemble them in a logical sequence. That is to say, myth can only be justified by ceasing to be myth:

> The Gospel phrase, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," appears to an eye accustomed to rudimentary logical distinctions a jumble of words justified at best as metaphor translatable into several distinct utterances: "I am offering you proper directives," "I proclaim the truth," and "If you obey me I guarantee that you shall have eternal life," and so on. In fact, these sorts of conjectured metaphors are literal, do not demand to be understood and to be translated into the separate languages of values and information. One can participate in mythical experience only with the fullness of one's personality, in which the acquisition of information

and the absorption of directives are inseparable. All names which participators in myths have given to their participation—"illumination" or "awakening" or such like—refer to the complete acts of entry into the mythical order; all distinctions of desire, understanding, and will in relation to these global acts is a derivative intellectual reconstruction.

This description is deeply insightful, useful to reflection on many cultural phenomena. But here we need only observe that it helps to explain a great deal of what's happening on certain American college campuses these days.

Wokeness as Myth

The term "woke," for those who have managed to escape it, means being aware of racial, gender, and economic injustice. It is employed today either in mockery of the woke or in ironic reappropriation by the woke, and it is probably irrecoverable for serious use. But "woke" derives from "waking up" to how things are—and that ought to suggest that to commend wokeness is to invite people to participate in a mythical experience.

I cannot say too quickly that in making this claim I am not dismissing such experience. As a person who believes that Jesus Christ is indeed "the way, the truth, and the life," I could scarcely do so. Kołakowski is distinguishing between two ways of being in the world—two ways that we all engage in, though the proportionate influences of the two "cores" will differ greatly from one person to the next. As a philosopher, he is aware of and determined to resist the common inclination to "include myth in the technological order," which is to say, the order of analytical reason. So to say that wokeness should be understood as mythical is not to dismiss or even to critique it, but to try to describe the kind of condition it is.

To describe wokeness in relation to the mythical core helps us understand why it is so fruitless to reply to the passionate student protesters with the commonplace distinction between means and ends: "Yes, I agree that racism (or sexism, or homophobia, or transphobia, or all of them considered intersectionally) is an enormous problem, but I don't think you're addressing it in the most constructive way." The person who says this may think of himself as a friendly, sympathetic, even supportive questioner, one who completely accepts the ends for which his interlocutors stand but has some questions about the best means for achieving them. He is therefore surprised when his questions meet with outrage and resentment.

I should probably translate this into the first person, because I am in part describing an experience I had three years ago when Ta-Nehisi

Coates published his celebrated *Atlantic* essay "The Case for Reparations." Talking with some friends on Twitter, I said that I thought the essay made an overwhelmingly powerful case for the ongoing destructive consequences of the era of slavery and its aftermath in Jim Crow laws and beyond—but also that Coates never actually got around to making a case for reparations as the best way of addressing this tragic situation. What I heard from my friends was, "You're denying the reality of racism." And nothing I said thereafter could shake my friends' conviction that I had simply rejected Coates's essay *tout court*.

Something even more deep-seated is at work when student protesters' interpretations of events, and their proffered remedies for historical or current injustice, are challenged and the students reply, "You are denying my very identity." This response makes sense only within the mythical core, not the technological core. One cannot analytically pick apart a complex, integrated mythical framework and say, "I choose *this* but not *that*" without tearing holes in the web and leaving it dangling and useless. That is what instrumental reason always does to myth.

In *The Presence of Myth*, Kołakowski acknowledges that there are both religious and nonreligious myths, but argues that they operate under identical logic:

> …from a functional point of view they are the same and reveal the labors of the same stratum of mind. They are an attempt in language to transcend the contingency of experience, the contingency of the world. They attempt to describe something that will give a noncontingent value to our perception and our practical contact with the world; they attempt to convey what cannot be literally conveyed, since our linguistic instruments are incapable of freeing themselves from the practical employment which summoned them to life. They therefore speak mainly through successive negations, doggedly and infinitely circling round the kernel of mythical intuition which cannot be reached with words. They are not subject to conversion into rationalized structures, nor can they be replaced by such structures.

The attempt to translate mythical intuitions into "rationalized structures" will therefore be perceived as a kind of violation.

This violation holds even though, to the outside observer, the violated person's mythical intuitions arise out of his or her cultural situation, which is historically contingent and is still subject to change. But to one operating in the mythical core, whether religious or nonreligious, his or her situation will not appear to be in flux but rather to be a matter of

"nonempirical unconditioned reality," to be simply the way things are and will ever be. So, for instance, from within the mythical core it can make sense to think of reading Plato as reading a white person, as participating in whiteness, even though there is no meaningful historical sense in which Plato was white. When "whiteness" has become a mythical reality—and this is just one example among many of the metaphysical essentializing of historical contingencies—then one of the most valuable frames through which to view the response of many student protesters to alien ideas is the concept of *defilement*.

Disagreement as Defilement

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, first published in English translation in 1967, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur works backward from the sophisticated but familiar theological language of sin, exploring the elemental experiences that "give rise" to it. "Sin" is a concept, an idea, but an idea that arises from a more fundamental experience, *defilement*. Before I could ever know that I or someone else has sinned, there must be a deeper, pre-rational awareness that defilement has happened. One thinks here of a moment in Dickens's *Hard Times* when Mrs. Gradgrind is asked whether she is in pain: "'I think there's a pain somewhere in the room,' said Mrs. Gradgrind, 'but I couldn't positively say that I have got it.'"

First we know that defilement *is*, "somewhere in the room"; then we become aware that we have become somehow stained. Ricoeur labels these things we become aware of—in this case, *stain*—"primary symbols." From those elemental experiences and their primary symbols eventually arise complex rational accounts, which might lead to statements like, "I have defiled myself by sinning, and therefore must find a way to atone for what I have done so that I may live free from guilt." But that kind of formulation lies far down the road, and there are many other roads that lead to many other conclusions about what went wrong and how to fix it.

Ricoeur writes as a philosopher and a Christian, which is to say he writes as someone who has inherited an immensely sophisticated centuries-old vocabulary that can mediate to him the elemental experiences and their primary symbols. Therefore one of his chief tasks in *The Symbolism of Evil* is to try to find a way back:

> It is in the age when our language has become more precise, more univocal, more technical in a word, more suited to those integral formalizations which are called precisely symbolic logic, it is in this very age of discourse that we want to recharge our language, that we want

to start again from the fullness of language....Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.

But if you have not inherited such a sophisticated moral language, might you not then be closer to the elemental experiences and their primary symbols? That might help to account for this scene from a 2015 *New York Times* op-ed by Judith Shulevitz, which describes the reactions of Brown University students to a staged debate on campus sexual assault:

> The safe space, Ms. Byron explained, was intended to give people who might find comments "troubling" or "triggering," a place to recuperate. The room was 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. Emma Hall, a junior, rape survivor and "sexual assault peer educator" who helped set up the room and worked in it during the debate, estimates that a couple of dozen people used it. At one point she went to the lecture hall—it was packed—but after a while, she had to return to the safe space. "I was feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against my dearly and closely held beliefs," Ms. Hall said.

For those who have been formed largely by the mythical core of human culture, disagreement and alternative points of view may well appear to them not as matters for rational adjudication but as defilement from which they must be cleansed.

We might further explore this kind of response by appealing to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. *Habitus* includes the set of beliefs (*doxa*) that govern the structure of a culture while remaining utterly implicit. These beliefs yield embodied practices, which "express a logic that is performed directly....without recourse to concepts." Within the ambit of *doxa*, "the natural and social world appears as self-evident." One's *habitus* is, then, the whole field of practices that one enacts, only occasionally becoming aware of the *doxa* to which those practices are so intimately related. Indeed, one becomes aware of those *doxa* only when something calls them into question. When circumstances—usually the appearance of an alien culture—force those beliefs into explicit formulation, then we have not just *doxa* but *orthodoxy*. Orthodoxy, in turn, necessarily implies the possibility of *heterodoxy* or heresy. The formulation of orthodoxy, which arises from the actual or even the merely possible violation of *doxa*, constitutes a profound disturbance of one's *habitus*.

On college campuses, the threat that heterodox speakers pose leads to another increasingly familiar phenomenon: the turn to administrators as the preservers of the *habitus*, the agents of its cleansing. Petitions to university presidents and other academic administrators for changes to a school's hiring and disciplinary policies indicate a strong belief in the power of the already-in-authority to execute the necessary cleansing of the community. This is especially true for students who have identified themselves as marginal, as social outsiders, or as the oppressed. (Just this year, students at William & Mary shut down a lecture by the executive director of the Virginia chapter of the ACLU by chanting, "The oppressed are not impressed.") Let us adapt a point Mary Douglas makes in *Purity and Danger*: "It seems that if a person has no place in the social system and is therefore a marginal being, all precaution against danger must come from others. He cannot help his abnormal situation." We might call this the antinomianism of the excluded: The marginal person cannot be expected to obey the norms of the very society which has oppressed him—in this case, free speech, open debate, and other liberal norms. The appeal to administrative authority, then, is not just a demand that those who bring defilement be punished and expelled, but also a reminder that such expulsion, by bringing marginal persons under the protection of an administrative authority, is simultaneously an attempt to bring them back under the community's norms. The not small irony in this case is that the appeal to administrators to expel the defilers itself violates the community's ostensible liberal norms.

Yet another consequence of the experience of defilement is the archaic, ritualistic character of the protests and demands. Consider the scapegoating and expulsion of Mary Spellman, dean of students at Claremont McKenna College, for no more than a slightly awkward way of phrasing her sympathy for those who experience themselves as marginal, and the insistence of many protesters upon elaborate initiation and training rituals for new members of the community to prevent defiling words and deeds. Douglas again: "Ritual recognises the potency of disorder." The purpose of such rituals for those new to the community is to transform explicitly held belief into undisturbable *doxa*—to restore the absolute security of the *habitus*.

The mythical cosmos of many students today is defiled, befouled, and disordered by the presence of Ann Coulter or Charles Murray or Richard Spencer. Note that I am not describing here people who explain, discursively and analytically, why a given speaker should not be invited to speak; those people are working from what Kołakowski calls the technological core

rather than the mythical. I am describing, rather, those whose revulsion is primarily expressed in actions of protest and refusal, sometimes though not often violent ones, or with words that do not offer any definite assertion.

When students at Middlebury College shout that Charles Murray is "racist, sexist, anti-gay," to reply that Murray, after previously opposing gay marriage, has publicly endorsed it for several years would be to misconstrue the students' mode of speech. Chants and curses, like beating on windows and rocking cars, don't arise from the discursive rationality of the technological core; they arise from the symbolic order of the mythical core, and are a response to its disturbance.

The Crumbling of the Liberal Order

In his 2012 book *The Righteous Mind*, psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that human beings may be moved to moral judgment by several different kinds of circumstances—chiefly those pertaining to harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity or purity—but in varying proportions depending on the person's character and political orientation. Haidt's research indicates that liberals tend to focus on harm and fairness but are rarely moved by questions of purity, whereas conservatives tend to respond to all of these circumstances, and the more conservative they are the more strongly they respond to perceived violations of loyalty, authority, and the sacred or pure.

Haidt's studies, showing that liberals are little moved by matters of purity or sanctity, would seem to cast doubt on the argument I have been making that liberal protesters on college campuses are motivated by precisely this. But I believe that in recent years the landscape has been changing, and that such change has been accelerated by the 2016 presidential election. These developments, and their relation to Haidt's thesis, have been shrewdly explored by Timothy Burke, a historian who teaches at Swarthmore College, and who speaks from a political position akin (though not identical) to that of many of the recent student protesters.

In a complex blog post titled "Trump as Desecration," Burke cites a colleague who argued that Haidt's conclusion that liberals do not have strong responses to violations of the sacred "seemed fundamentally wrong to him." The colleague observed "that people can hold things sacred that are not designated as religious, and that many liberals held other kinds of institutions, texts, and manners as 'sacred' in the same deep-seated, preconscious, emotionally intense way, perhaps without even knowing that they do." Burke expands on this observation:

Why are so many of us feeling deep distress each day, sometimes over what seem like relatively trivial or incidental information (like Trump pushing aside heads of state?) Because Trump is sacrilege.

Trump is the Piss Christ of liberals and leftists. His every breath is a bb-gun shot through a cathedral window, bacon on the doorstep of a mosque, the explosion of an ancient Buddha statue. He offends against the notion that merit and hard work will be rewarded. Against the idea that leadership and knowledge are necessary partners. Against deep assumptions about the dignity of self-control. Against a feeling that leaders should at least pretend to be more dedicated to their institutions and missions than themselves. Against the feeling that consequential decisions should be performed as consequential. Against the feeling that a man should be ashamed of sexual predation and assault if caught on tape exalting it. Against the sense that anyone who writes or speaks in the public sphere is both responsible for what they've said and should have to reconcile what they've said in the past with what they're doing in the present. These are emotional commitments before they are things we would defend as substantive, reasoned propositions.

From these feelings—which Burke calls "emotional" but which, following Kołakowski, it is truer to call "mythical"—arise the upswelling and apparently irresistible tendencies, shared by a great many on the campus left, to mock and curse Trump supporters, or to complain that visible signs of support for Trump are violations of their selfhood that must be expelled from their symbolic lifeworld.

Burke's colleague goes on to suggest that the reason Haidt may have missed liberals' response to violations of the sacred is that they "did not feel deeply trespassed against in this way in their own favored institutional and social worlds, and usually looked upon a public sphere that largely aligned with their vision of civic propriety and ritual." That is, liberals' lack of response to questions of sanctity or purity over the period of Haidt's research might be an artifact of that political moment, contingent on circumstance rather than a deeply embedded matter of temperament. And what we're witnessing now on college campuses is the crumbling, accelerated by the election of President Trump, of those comfortable circumstances.

Mythical Core as Lossy Compression

It is important to try to understand how these reactions function, both psychologically and socially. And though we generally should be skeptical of computer analogies for human cognition and behavior, a recent article by Sarah E. Marzen and Simon DeDeo, "The evolution of lossy compression,"

is very useful in this context. The article argues that all living things need to "extract useful information from their environment," but to do so without imposing overly great cognitive burdens on themselves:

> …evolved organisms are expected to structure their perceptual systems to avoid dangerous confusions (not mistaking tigers for bushes) while strategically containing processing costs by allowing for ambiguity (using a single representation for both tigers and lions)—a form of *lossy* compression that avoids transmitting unnecessary and less-useful information.

The term "lossy compression" comes from the encoding of computers files, typically images, video, or audio. Non-lossy encoding—that is, encoding that captures all available sonic or visual information—results in enormous, unmanageable file sizes. So the challenge for programmers has been to reduce file sizes in ways that lose *some* information (thus "lossy") but retain *vital* information to ensure that audio files don't sound fuzzy or images appear blurry—think of how your streaming Netflix video degrades over a bad Internet connection. Lower-fidelity encodings allow for smaller files that are easier to transfer and store; higher-fidelity encodings offer better quality, at the cost of slower transfer, more costly storage, and more processor resources to perform computations on them, like object and facial recognition. Creating compression algorithms is the art of finding the right balance between the virtues of low and high fidelity.

Marzen and DeDeo find the concept of "lossy compression" a powerful tool for understanding the evolution of perception. The level of fidelity an organism needs when representing the informational density of its environment will vary. "When an organism can tolerate errors in perception, large savings in storage are possible." But what if the organism's environment is threatening, and in complex ways—say, with multiple predators present? Then, the authors argue, given cognitive limitations on storage, such an organism will have to get by with "a small, fixed number of categories (kin versus non-kin, in-group versus out-group)."

Whether or not Marzen and DeDeo have made a compelling argument about the evolution of consciousness, they have at least provided a strong set of metaphors to help us understand how the power of Kołakowski's mythical core can be renewed and intensified in a cognitively complex environment. For it is safe to say that no human beings have ever lived in a more cognitively complex environment than we do. Faced with the constant inflow of information, we grow increasingly reluctant, if not actually unable, to make subtle distinctions.

In circumstances of cognitive stress, the need for lossy compression drives us back toward the mythical core of culture. Thus, when Charles Murray voices support for gay marriage, but does so in the analytical language of social science rather than through ritual affirmation, he becomes "racist, sexist, anti-gay"—simply a member of the outgroup. The discursive complexities of the technological core are more than we can manage; the comparative clarity and immediacy of the mythical become appealing as refuge. And even those of us who think that many of the student protesters have behaved abominably ought to be able to sympathize with the cognitive stresses they must deal with.

A Place for Myth

The urgent question arising here is: Is the university the sort of institution that can accept and incorporate people who are operating largely from within the mythical core, with its lossy perception?

Most of the defenders of the historic mission of the university articulate that mission in terms of "critical thinking," "the free exchange of ideas," and other slogans that place the institution firmly within the technological core. If the university is inherently an institution of the technological core—an institution *constituted* by discursive and analytical reason—then the answer is no; it cannot incorporate people functioning in the mythical core without becoming a different kind of institution. But can the university be conceptualized otherwise?

The only way we could—or should—conceptualize the university as other than part of the technological core is by ceasing to think of "the university" as a single kind of institution. We would instead have to conceive of multiple self-defined institutions of higher education, each of which is free to operate primarily within the technological core or within a single manifestation of the mythical core. This conception could perhaps be seen as an extension of the traditional—if highly contested—accommodation of religious colleges within the general framework of American higher education. For if our application of Kołakowski is right, there is no reason to treat colleges that operate under a nonreligious mythical framework differently than those that operate under a religious one.

But religious colleges have for many decades now had to operate under the constant awareness that Christianity is under challenge, in one way or another, everywhere in the world, and that it is incumbent upon Christians to find adequate responses to those challenges. Certainly that has been my understanding in the three decades I have spent in Christian

higher education. Though we may strive to live and move and have our being from within the mythical core, we know that we are called out from that into the technological core.

Put another way: Though we feel the need to control the cognitive demands placed upon us, to defend against the flood of cultural information by encoding it lossily, we know that our calling is such that we cannot succumb to that temptation, and must strive for higher-fidelity encoding, even at risk to our peace of mind and spirit. But can those living or working in the university whose commitments are wholly this-worldly and political find the same sense of calling when faced with the desecration that is Trump, Charles Murray, Ann Coulter, or Republican colleagues and neighbors?

Such questions will remain urgent because, as Kołakowski contends, the technological core and the mythical core will always come into regular and profound conflict with each other: "The futility of this clash would not in the end be so burdensome were it not that both points of view, incapable of synthesis and eternally in conflict, are after all present in [every one] of us, although in varying degrees of vitality. They have to coexist and yet they cannot coexist." But for Kołakowski, this irresolvable tension is not wholly regrettable:

> …cultural momentum always has its source in a conflict of values from which each side attempts, at the expense of the other, to claim exclusivity, but is forced under pressure to restrict its aspirations. In other words, culture thrives both on a desire for ultimate synthesis between these two conflicting elements and on being organically unable to ensure that synthesis.

The question we must then ask is: Can our colleges and universities be places in which this endless clashing may be accommodated, and the resulting cultural momentum be encouraged, made fruitful? I have my doubts. But if this conflict is to be fruitful, or even just bearable, it will happen only if we understand the cognitive constraints under which we all labor, and only if we acknowledge the reality of life within the mythical core, with all its experiences of defilement and desecration. Cheap talk about "critical thinking" and "the free exchange of ideas" is clearly no longer adequate to the challenges we face.