Review

Left is Not Woke by Susan Neiman

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In the midst of her antepenultimate monograph, *Why Grow Up?* Susan Neiman observed that "The last few decades have seen fierce debate about what is called the canon" (Neiman 2015 [2014], pp. 139-140). There, Neiman held that "though the canon may need to be widened," nonetheless:

> most of its contents hold up, and few things are more misguided than the attempts of some educators to appeal to their students by doing away with classic texts, often in the name of avoiding Eurocentrism. They would do better to look to the Enlightenment, often wrongly thought to be source of Eurocentrism itself. Quite to the contrary, its authors knew how to value both universal principles and particular differences, and they knew how to tell one from the other. They were steeped in classical Western literature, though they were more likely to read Latin than Greek, but they were well aware of how much they had to learn from other cultures. Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* criticized Europe from a Muslim perspective, over Voltaire's desk hung a portrait of Confucius and Rousseau pleaded for knowledge of Africa that was not written by travellers 'more interested in filling their purses than their minds'. A grown-up relationship to your culture is no different from a grown-up relationship to your parents. You must decide which parts of the inheritance you want to make your own – but you have to examine it first. De Beauvoir put the matter eloquently: to abandon the past is to depopulate the world (Ibid.).

Susan Neiman's most recent monograph, *Left is Not Woke,* offers a welcome development of this line of thought. Neiman opens *Left is Not Woke* by characterizing left political commitment, in contradistinction to liberalism, as characterized by a substantive commitment to laying claims to social (economic) rights in addition to and beyond political rights ("Liberal writers call them benefits, entitlements, or safety nets", pp. 1-2). Neiman characterizes this stance as overtly "leftist and socialist" (p. 1). Wokery, by contrast, in Neiman's presentation, "begins with concern for marginalized persons, and ends by reducing each to the prism of her marginalization" (p. 5). Neiman stresses that

> *Woke* emphasizes the ways in which particular groups have been denied justice, and seeks to rec-

> tify and repair the damage. In the focus on inequalities of power, the concept of justice is often left by the wayside.

Woke demands that nations and peoples face up to their criminal histories. In the process it often concludes that all history is criminal (Ibid.).

Not least, in Neiman's view, wokery diverges from more traditional "leftist and socialist" stances to the extent that it has "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" (p. 2). Following an introduction laying out the juxtaposition of a commitment to social rights contrasted with an abnegation of universalism, justice, and the possibility of progress, each of these latter ideas is given a core chapter within Neiman's argument, in which she defends universalism over tribalism (in chapter 2), the distinction between justice and power (in chapter 3), and the possibility of progress (in chapter 4). Along the way, Neiman engages with phenomena such as ascendant tribalism (pp. 6-15, 49-53), the valorization of trauma (p. 18), orchestrated victimhood (p. 16), arguments about cultural appropriation (p. 54), and standpoint epistemology (pp. 18-19), each in their myriad manifestations.

Left is Not Woke began as an Ashby/Tanner lecture at the University of Cambridge, delivered in April of 2022 (where, with full disclosure, this reviewer served on the panel of commentators to critique and comment upon the lecture). The weekend before Professor Neiman's lecture, a fellow commentator on the panel wrote to me and asked, "what are we supposed to say about this? It's great!". The book version of the argument is, if anything, an improvement on the lecture—more thoroughly argued, richer in examples and detail, at once more elegant and more pointed in its prose.

It takes intelligence to recognize intelligence. In the 1970s and 1980s, confronted with the world as it was, one could have done worse than choose to study, as Professor Neiman chose, with John Rawls, Stanley Cavell, Margherita von Brentano and Jacob Taubes.

In a work published posthumously in the late 1980s, Jacob Taubes writes that [quote] "the problem of time is a moral problem, and decisionism means saying that it does not go on infinitely".

"At the latest on the last of days, at some time there is an end. One cannot discuss and discuss, endlessly, at some point there comes a time when one acts…" Taubes writes, "and whoever denies this…does not understand the human situation, which is finite and, because finite, means the human must make scissions, [cuts], i.e., the human must take decisions" (Taubes 1987, p. 62).[1]

How do we get from difference and dignity to reason if we are do so in non-infinite time?

The path spelled out briefly at the outset of the lecture and the book is one of cultural immersion[2]—movies, literature, and the learning of languages allow us to see things from the perspectives of others and to do so with human sympathy (pp. 12, 54, 56); logic serves to cut out the fat and identify the fallacies (pp. 64, 68; cf. 34, 44. 47).

But, do we have the time to watch all movies (p. 53n39), to read all novels (p. 55), to hear all perspectives (p. 1, p. 40)? Or must we make selections? On the basis of which criteria should these selections be made? On the basis of whose criteria should these selections be made?

Perhaps we would have more time if we turned off (or threw off) our cell phones, but we would still face the pressures of time—these pressures impinge upon the creation of courses, curricula, and syllabi.

Even if we tailored a narrow Enlightenment syllabus with the canon from the book—a canon of Bayle, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, and Kant (pp. 32-46)—we might be told to revise our syllabus or have it rejected by the powers that be.

In her discussion of the Enlightenment, Neiman allows that "Some Enlightenment portraits of non-Europeans will grate our ears" (p. 38) whilst conceding that "Like progressive intellectuals everywhere, radical Enlightenment thinkers were only partially successful" in their endeavours to overcome particularity (p. 45). As a second question, the reader wonders if the author could say more about the "cut" of Enlightenment figures—the narrow canon of Bayle, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau and Kant, while occasionally grating, might be comparatively more germane and palatable to regnant sensibilities. If we were to expand our

Enlightenment syllabus beyond these figures, say to Bacon's views of empire,[3] Spinoza's view of power, or Hume's view of conquest, slavery, and "real difference", we might have a more difficult time defending with historical accuracy and scholarly rigor the Enlightenment or the varied and various Enlightenments from all that these Enlightenments are charged with. The reader of the book is keen for the author's view on this question.

Thirdly and finally, the timing of this book raises a question about the world as it is. Writing in *Slow Fire*, a memoir of Berlin in the 1980s, Neiman pointedly and poignantly describes the moment of the atomic horror at Chernobyl and the fear that food in central Europe had been contaminated by the explosion. In the aftermath of Chernobyl, activists keen to boycott products from all manner of regimes, the author narrates, abandoned their scruples (and their boycotts) and sought the produce and nourishment from all corners of the globe (Neiman 1992).

Since the end of February 2022, with renewed onset of invasion and aggressive war in Europe, have we seen the calls to set intellectual and cultural inheritances aflame dim or diminish, in view of crimes far worse than the reading of Kant or keeping Plato on the syllabus? The reader of this important book is readily interested to hear the author's thoughts on this matter.

Many of Neiman's books have a familiar or familial dedication—this is true of her memoir, *Slow Fire*, of her history of philosophy, *Evil in Modern Thought,* of *Moral Clarity* up to her recent book *Why Grow Up? Left is Not Woke* has no dedication and therewith no dedicatee. The absence of a dedication to the book raises the question of audience—to whom is *Left is Not Woke* addressed? Neiman stresses that she sets out to write "clearly, without jargon, in the interest of reaching the widest number of readers" (p. 10). Yet, is Neiman's work addressed primarily to the left, to the woke or to those who might be peer-pressured into conformity with wokery or to some combination of these audiences? If addressed to the woke, does the book offer a fully rational defense of universalism that would be persuasive even to the woke? Does Neiman confront the denial of universalism head-on and convincingly?

In *Left is Not Woke,* the denial of universal reason is not countered with a claim for the universality of reason but with a claim for the universality of pain (pp. 22, 53), for the universal human longing for freedom (p. 53) and for the universality of bones underlying flesh (p. 22). The arsonists of intellectual and cultural inheritance seem inclined to infer that any situated rationalism or situated universalism is thereby a *false* rationalism or a *false* universalism. An answer to this apparent inference is not to be gleaned from *Left is Not Woke*. Yet, might not the author keen to defend the reading of Kant and Plato readily respond that the arsonists falsely infer from the situatedness of reason and the situatedness of universalism that these stances are inherently false or that the situatedness of those seeking the truth somehow challenges the validity of that practice? Might not the concerned author or sceptical reader raise the question of whether one must one accept such inferences? Might not a (Left or non-Left) universalist respond that the mathematician and philosopher in Tehran may access universal reason and mathematical truth no less (and no differently) than the mathematician or philosopher in Berlin or London or Beijing?

The claim that the Enlightenment is not Eurocentric, even if demonstrated, does not amount to an existence proof for universalism (pp. 23, 31, 48, 66). Mathematical reason might seem to offer an existence proof for the universality of reason (one which structures further domains, from music to physics), yet the ready case of mathematical reason is neither brought nor developed within the book, which could have advanced a case for universalism on grounds firmer than universal felt pain and universal longing for freedom (p. 53, 22). *Left is Not Woke* does not fully make the argument that would challenge the calls for cultural and intellectual arson at their core. Perhaps all-too-simply, that argument runs as follows: the situatedness of reason need not imply the falseness of reason, no less than the situatedness (or positioning) of universal truths implies the falseness of universality or truth. None the less, we all come from and find ourselves somewhere and we approach the great works of the past from somewhere—to the extent that all begin somewhere, we may first learn to read Plato and Kant (and Euclid and Einstein) with the aid of dictionaries and translations (to the extent that we are not native speakers of German and ancient Greek) (p. 12). If one wants to attain ra-

tionality and universality within limited and finite time, there are worse places to begin than with the best that has been thought and said.

Left is Not Woke takes its place in the midst of an impressive corpus of scholarly and philosophic books by Susan Neiman which have appeared over the last four decades. This corpus is edifying for its elegance in prose, its intellectual and thematic richness, and for the variety of genres which it encompasses. Neiman has written memoirs, philosophic studies, histories of philosophy, political or public pamphlets, philosophic dialogues and theatrical plays as well as ethical explorations of morality and adulthood. The work extends to *Festschrift* contributions for major twentieth century philosophers (Rawls, Cavell) as well as the primary editions of philosophic and academic *Nachlass* of philosophers whose readership awaits them in a future yet to come (Margherita von Brentano). Amidst and within this rich body of work, where might the reader (and where might the author) orient and position *Left is Not Woke*?

Left is Not Woke was delivered in the days before its author delivered the prestigious Gifford lectures in Scotland. Might the reader situate this book as the first amongst that still unpublished series of Gifford lectures? Neiman's Gifford Lectures, like Shklar's *After Utopia*, explored the post-Shoah shift in Western thought from a valorization of moral heroism to a valorization of moral victimhood, an epoch and an episteme within which we still live and write. Can the reader draw a line between the revivification of moral heroism in the successor Gifford lectures and the Ashby/Tanner lecture on the fall of the Enlightenment delivered days before?

Whatever answer one may ultimately offer these questions, readers of all political persuasions have something to learn from Neiman's thoughtful and thought-provoking book. Absent a specific or familial dedicatee or addressee, Neiman's book is one for all.[4]

NOTES

1 „Spätestens am letzten Tag, irgendwann ist Schluß. Man kann doch nicht diskutieren und diskutieren, endlos, irgendwann kommt doch, daß man handelt. D.h., das Problem der Zeit ist ein moralisches Problem, und Dezisionismus heißt zu sagen, es geht nicht unendlich lange. Irgendwann muß dieser Prozeß im Parlament (nicht in Parlamentsberatungen), vollkommen egal, ob sich der Fürst mit seinen Geheimräten oder ob das Parlement sich unterhält, sie unterhalten sich in der Zeit, und irgendwann mal müssen sie handeln. Und wer das leugnet, ist unmoralisch, versteht nämlich die menschliche Situation nicht, die endlich ist und, weil endlich, scheiden muß, d.h. entscheiden muß." (tr: At the latest on the last of days, at some time there is an end. One cannot discuss and discuss, endlessly, at some point there comes a time when one acts. That is to say, the problem of time is a moral problem, and decisionism means saying that it does not go on infinitely. At some point in time this process in the Parliament (not in Parliamentary counselling), it's wholly a matter of indifference whether it's the Prince with his private counsel or whether it's the Parliament that discusses with itself: there comes a time when they must act. And he who denies this is immoral, indeed does not understand the human situation, which is finite and, because finite, must make scissions, i.e. must take decisions.) For a study of Taubes's thought in the period in which Neiman studied with him, see Zeitlin 2017, pp. 9-39.

2 Compare Neiman 2015 [2014], p. 156: "Living in another culture means working in it, preferably not in the foreign branch of your current employer. Diplomats are usually transferred every few years to prevent their going native. I'm suggesting, by contrast that you do so, as far as it's humanly possible."

3 On Bacon's view of empire, see Zeitlin 2021.

4 An earlier version of this review was published in *Perspectives on Political Science* 53(1):52-54.

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