

How the woke transmit wealth and inequality: book review

Stephen Saunders

We have never been woke: The cultural contradictions of a new elite

By Musa al-Gharbi

Princeton University Press. 431pp. \$60.

*[In this notable societal critique, writes **Stephen Saunders**, the “woke” professional classes emote over justice and equality. While delivering for the top 1%]*

Down Under, we tend to deny the consequentiality of wokeness. America is at war with it. President Donald Trump has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement for net zero emissions, declared an energy emergency, suspended the “alien invasion”, and kiboshed federal diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs.

Preview of the first 45 pages [here](#).

Here, regardless of Election 2025, ordinary voters can expect energy sellout, mass immigration, housing hunger-games, and personal-taxation creep. Both Labor and Coalition affect net zero – but each protects the ruinous gas-export cartel. Labor’s Housing Minister would like house prices to “grow sustainably”. The Coalition, though acknowledging Mr Albanese’s 2022-24 immigration tally to be a staggering 70% higher than Mr Rudd’s record, waffles about “rebalancing” migration and “fixing” housing.

Yet Mr Dutton is demonised as a hard-right mini-Trump. Al-Gharbi offers a reality-check. Reportedly, his book-tour includes Australia. In my dreams, President Laura Tingle (chief political correspondent of the ABC) would showcase him at her National Press Club.

At one time an Arizona shoe-salesman, then switching from Catholicism to Islam, this biracial author of military family has become a New York sociology-prof. Freshly immersed in Big Apple’s “caste system”, he wasn’t surprised by Trump’s 2016 victory. Entitled fellow students were inconsolable.

Recognising protest upheavals (Great Awakenings) of this century and last, he didn’t see these making much difference. Despite “unambiguous” gains for identity-groups, high inequality persists. Hence “we” (the educated and professional classes) have “never” really been woke.

He invokes French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic (cultural, academic, political) capital that can be parlayed into financial capital. He himself is a symbolic capitalist. You too, maybe, if bothering to read him.

For al-Gharbi, history rhymes. The Bible decries performative righteousness. The Puritans had their Elect and Damned. Meritocracy papers over privilege. For all its “banality” wokeness too is significant, and these are some of the indicators:

Identifying as an “ally” of special (disadvantaged) groups, aesthetically embracing diversity and inclusion, validating identity and subjectivity, “recognising” one’s privilege, embracing “unconscious” bias, tightly focusing on special-group disparities.

Ordinary folk “don’t talk or think like this”. Symbolic capital does. Its nominally altruistic professions include journalists, social scientists, economists, urban planners, and human resources.

The top 20%, says the author, are allies of the top 1%. The second allows the first to “opportunity hoard” a handy share of the loot. Contingent upon their managing economy and society pro the 1%.

Like Eric Kaufmann in *The Third Awakening*, al-Gharbi identifies 1960s, 1980s, and 2010s, Awakenings. Even a fourth, ameliorated by Roosevelt's 1930s New Deal. The root cause is elite overproduction. A surge of disaffected youth builds up - wannabe symbolic capitalists. Though protesting passionately - an Awakening - they don't shift the unequal "allocations of resources". Somehow, the economy absorbs them. Rinse and repeat.

In al-Gharbi's view, 1960s US protests only really took off, when middle-class (white) kids no longer got draft deferrals via college enrolment.

His book deploys stats tables and 100 pages of notes and references. To evidence America's latest Awakening, post 2011, he cites exploding BA graduation numbers, suddenly rising media-coverage of discrimination, and heightened white-liberal advocacy around race. Here's what's really driven the discontent: "Nearly half of upper-middle-class children born in the 1980s failed to replicate their class position by age 30."

Seeds for yet another Awakening exist. At Table 2.1, most US jobs-growth through 2030 is lower-paid service occupations, not plum college-track jobs. Implying fiercer competition for slimmer pickings.

Symbolic capitalists, the author observes, are always to the left of Americans generally. Their "social justice sinecures" don't equalise society. Gender equality is up, but socioeconomic equality is down.

In Table 3.3, America's production and services economy dominates in terms of employment and GDP value-add, compared with the knowledge or symbolic economy. Yet symbolic-economy firms "largely own the rest of the economy and often dictate how it operates". Less diverse than other areas of the workforce, they compensate, via DEI hires.

Their obliging professionals exert "immense influence over the shape, character, and trajectory of society". They can outsource their everyday needs such as victuals - even sexual services - to minorities and migrants.

Voting with their feet, US professionals flock to "symbolic hubs" in trendy cities and university precincts, practising assortative mating. Much of the political melodrama and media participation plays out in their coteries, with journalism written "by and for the affluent". Presuming that they've got the facts, they decry "misinformation". Hang on, enjoins the author, they're tribal, dogmatic, and partisan.

US professionals used to swing Republican - now it's Democrat. Compared with society at large, elites in *both* parties tend to be pro-market economically but pro-left culturally. When only 3% of Americans had degrees, it was harder to disengage from common folk. Now a third have degrees. The Australian uptrend is similar.

Symbolic capitalists, argues al-Gharbi, have developed a fancy fourth form of capital - totemic. Their victimhood culture seeks to "directly embody" the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Men, he ventures, like power, caring less why or how others comply. But group- and status-conscious women increasingly dominate the ranks of symbolic capitalists. Their self-esteem wants the masses to conform "for the right reasons".

In the US, black identity can work in a person's favour, more so if it's multi-racial. LGBTQ persons can also scale the elite ranks. This doesn't mitigate hardships among the economically disadvantaged. Special-group high-achievers (not excluding the author) may be taken to possess totemic insight and morality. They can be consecrated as public voices - if they play nice.

Relatively privileged persons may cosplay at black, first nations, transracial, traumatised, even disabled. They do this for a payoff. Racial privilege works for affluent whites, al-Gharbi contends, not poor ones. Awareness of privilege doesn't help the underprivileged, hypocrisy being the "ultimate power move".

Mastering woke tropes signals elite status and enhances “professional flourishing”. The symbolic professions can “cancel” non-elites – the reverse rarely applies. Their policy discourse expands to embrace minority-elites – yet may restrict approval to those voices deemed “credible” or authentic. These are forms of moral licensing and cleansing.

Large American cities, al-Gharbi writes, are more segregated than in 1990. Overwhelmingly, this division derives from “contemporary” practices. Not old racial history, or what might be dubbed Mr Nobody. Analogously, nobody takes the rap, for making Australian housing so unaffordable. “It’s a wicked problem” is a favoured cop-out of governments and their million-dollar mandarins.

“Wokeness,” the author concludes, “does not seem to be associated with egalitarian behaviours in any useful sense.” However, he also acknowledges, any theories (including his own) are children of their time and place, handling “some things” better than others.

In that context, many elite perspectives associated with wokeness look correct. For instance, defining the concepts does speak volumes about power-relations. But then, you can overdo the symbolic gestures. Likewise, you can have a modicum of “critical race theory, postcolonial theory, feminist standpoint epistemology, and queer theory”. But then, you can have too much.

Wrapping up, al-Gharbi pans the symbolic professions for fake altruism, attractive to “ideological, conformist” personalities. Sure, check out the Economic Society of Australia and Planning Institute of Australia.

Awakenings, then, are more about frustrated elite-wannabes than justice. Selfishly, the winners prioritise symbolic standing over material conditions. More woke means less equal. Rather than innovation, wealthy nations are experiencing “stagnation and declines...dysfunction and mistrust”.

Al-Gharbi’s “woke” but self-serving professional classes resonate with the Australian situation (read the TAPRI voter surveys) and he cites similar analyses of other WEIRD (western, highly educated, industrialised, rich, democratic) nations. But, as with Kaufmann, I craved more coverage of environmental (climate) woke. Virtuous commitment to the net zero economy is catnip among the 20% and 1%. How else could this conceit have swept the WEIRD world so soon after its UN endorsement?

Plaudits to the author for an invigorating critique, rigorous yet readable. Its closing sentiments wouldn’t sway Australia’s power-elite: “Equality is not something to be believed in but rather something to be enacted...It’s something we do.”

Stephen Saunders is a former public servant and consultant who writes for independent media on environment and population, politics, fiction and music.