

How the right reads ‘woke’

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(1) Like “politically correct” before it, the word “woke” has come to connote the opposite of what it means. Technically, going by the Merriam-Webster dictionary’s definition, woke means “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)”. Today, however, we are more likely to see it being used as a stick with which to beat people who aspire to such values, often wielded by those who don’t recognise how un-woke they are, or are proud of the fact.

(2) Actor Laurence Fox nailed his colours to the latter mast this weekend, doubling down on his defence of the privileged white male on last week’s Question Time in a *Sunday Times* article under the banner “Why I won’t date ‘woke’ women”. Journalist Toby Young piled in, applauding how Fox was “terrorising the Wokerati”, while the *Sun* last weekend branded Harry and Meghan “the oppressive King and Queen of Woke”.

(3) For those who would broadly consider themselves woke, the word has been weaponised against them. But the Fox/Young brigade often claim the same.

(4) The origins of woke, in this context – as forged by African American communities – date back at least to the 60s, but its 38 is a recent development. For years the word remained largely unnoticed, but fuelled by black musicians, social media and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the term entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2017, by which time it had become as much a fashionable buzzword as a set of values. Some of those who didn’t keep up with the trend felt left behind: if you didn’t know the meaning of woke, you weren’t.

(5) Rather than rejecting the concept of wokeness outright, today’s detractors often claim they are rejecting the word as a signifier of pretentiousness and “cultural elitism”. Criticising “woke culture” has become a way of claiming victim status for yourself rather than acknowledging that more deserving others hold that status. It has gone from a virtue signal to a dog whistle. The language has been successfully co-opted – but as long as the underlying injustices remain, new words will emerge to describe them.

guardian.com, 2020