Briefing | The illiberal left

How did American "wokeness" jump from elite schools to everyday life?

And how deep will its influence be?

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YOU COULD use a single word as a proxy. "Latinx" is a gender-neutral adjective which only 4% of American Hispanics say they prefer. Yet in 2018 the *New York Times* launched a column dedicated to "Latinx communities". It has crept into White House press releases and a presidential speech. Google's diversity reports use the even more inclusive "Latinx+". A term once championed by esoteric

academics has gone mainstream.

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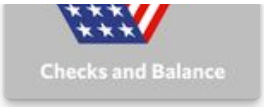
The espousal of new vocabulary is one sign of a social mobilisation that is affecting ever more areas of American life. It has penetrated politics and the press. Sometimes it spills out into the streets, in demonstrations calling for the abolition of police departments. It is starting to spread to schools. San Francisco's education board, which for more than a year was unable to get children into classes, busied itself with stripping the names of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington from its schools, and ridding department names of acronyms such as VAPA (Visual and Performing Arts), on the ground that they are "a symptom of white supremacy".

What links these developments is a loose constellation of ideas that is changing the way that mostly white, educated, left-leaning Americans view the world. This credo still lacks a definitive name: it is variously known as left-liberal identity politics, social-justice activism or, simply, wokeness. But it has a clear common thread: a belief that any disparities between racial groups are evidence of structural racism; that the norms of free speech, individualism and universalism which pretend to be progressive are really camouflage for this discrimination; and that injustice will persist until systems of language and privilege are dismantled.



Checks and Balance from The Economist

Checks and Balance: The great awokening

These notions were incubated for years in the humanities departments of universities (elite ones in particular), without serious challenge. Moral panics about campus culture are hardly new, and the emergence of a new leftism in the early 2010s prompted little concern. Even as students began scouring the words of academics, administrators and fellow students for microaggressions, the oppressive slights embedded in everyday speech, and found them, complacency ruled. When invited speeches from people such as Christine Lagarde, then head of the International Monetary Fund, were cancelled after student activists accused her of complicity in "imperialist and patriarchal systems", the response was a collective shrug.

The complacency was naive. America harboured a "Vegas campus delusion", says Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, an advocacy group. "What happens on campus will not stay on campus." It has not. The influence of the new social-justice mindset is now being felt in the media, the Democratic Party and, most recently, businesses and schools.

How did this breakout happen? Three things helped prepare the ground: a disaffected student body, an academic theory that was malleable enough to be shaped into a handbook for political activism, and a pliant university administration.

First came a new generation of students keenly aware of unsolved social problems and willing to see old-fashioned precepts of academic freedom (such as open debate) as obstacles to progress. Various events—the financial crisis, the election

of Donald Trump, the police killings of unarmed black men, especially that of George Floyd—fed frustration with traditional liberalism's seeming inability to end

long-run inequities. This hastened the adoption of an ideology that offered fresh answers.

The Economist

In a book entitled "The Coddling of the American Mind", Mr Lukianoff and a social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, posit that overprotective parenting in the shadow of the war on terrorism and the great recession led to "safetyism", a belief that safety, including emotional safety, trumps all other practical and moral concerns. Its bounds grew to require disinviting disfavoured campus speakers (see chart 1), protesting about disagreeable readings and regulating the speech of fellow students.

Many students latched onto a body of theory which yokes obscurantist texts to calls for social action (or "praxis") that had been developing in the academy for decades. In 1965 Herbert Marcuse, a critical theorist, coined the phrase "repressive tolerance", the notion that freedom of speech should be withdrawn from the political right in order to bring about progress, since the "cancellation of the liberal creed of free and equal discussion" might be necessary to end oppression. Another

influence was Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator whose "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (published in English in 1970) advocated a liberatory pedagogy in the spirit of Mao's Cultural Revolution in which "the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation".

The Great Awokening

Today the most prominent evangelists for what political scientists such as Zachary Goldberg call the Great Awokening are Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo. Both these scholar-activists have written bestselling books that sketch the expansive boundaries of systemic racism. Both minimise the role of intent, but in different ways. In Mr Kendi's Manichaean worldview actions are either actively narrowing racial gaps, and are therefore anti-racist, or they are not, in which case they are racist. "Capitalism is essentially racist; racism is essentially capitalist," he concludes.

Ms DiAngelo is concerned with the racism of everyday speech. For her, the intent of the oppressor is immaterial if an oppressed person deems the conduct to be offensive. How "white progressives cause more daily harm [to black people] than, say, white nationalists" is the subject of her latest book, "Nice Racism". She sees liberal norms like individualism or the aspiration for colour-blind universalism as naive: "Liberalism doesn't account for power, and the differential in power," she says.

The embrace of this ideology by students and professors might have remained inconsequential had it not been for the part played by administrative staff. Since 2000, such staff in the University of California system has more than doubled, outpacing the increase in faculty and students. The growth in private universities has been even faster. Between 1975 and 2005 the ranks of administrators grew by 66% in public colleges but by 135% in private ones. As their headcount grew, so did

their remit—ferreting out not just overt racism or sexual harassment but implicit bias too. The University of California, Los Angeles, now insists that faculty applying for tenure include a diversity statement.

In 2018 Samuel Abrams, a political scientist at Sarah Lawrence College, published data showing that these administrators are even more left-leaning than the professors: liberals outnumber conservatives by 12 to one. For writing about this, Mr Abrams faced a campaign by outraged students aiming to revoke his tenure. Campaigns by a vocal minority of activists have cast a pall on campus life, he says. "Large numbers of people hate this. They just don't know what to do," he laments. "They don't want the mob coming to them."

An upheaval in mass communication accelerated the trend. On Twitter, a determined minority can be amplified, and an uneasy centre-left can be cowed. "Weaponisation of social media became part of the game. But what I think nobody foresaw was that these tactics could so easily be imported to the *New York Times* or Penguin Random House or Google," says Niall Ferguson, a historian at Stanford's Hoover Institution. "The invasion...was just a case of the old problem: that liberals defer to progressives. And progressives defer to outright totalitarians."

Mr Trump's election added to centrists' unease, leaving the poles to grow ever more extreme. "Anything but far-left progressivism was lumped in with Trump," says one (Democratic) prosecutor in San Francisco. In the protest against Mr Trump's handling of the Mexican border, for instance, the old Democratic line of enhanced border security and a path to citizenship for the long-term undocumented became passé. Progressives proved their sincerity by being in favour of abolishing immigration authorities entirely.

Having grown strong roots, social-justice consciousness has spread most readily to non-academic institutions largely peopled by those who have come through elite universities. As the students who have embraced this messy body of theory leave university, they enter into jobs and positions of influence. The question is whether, outside the ivory tower, the ideology will retain its intolerant and belligerent zeal, or whether it will mellow into a benign urge for society to be a little fairer.

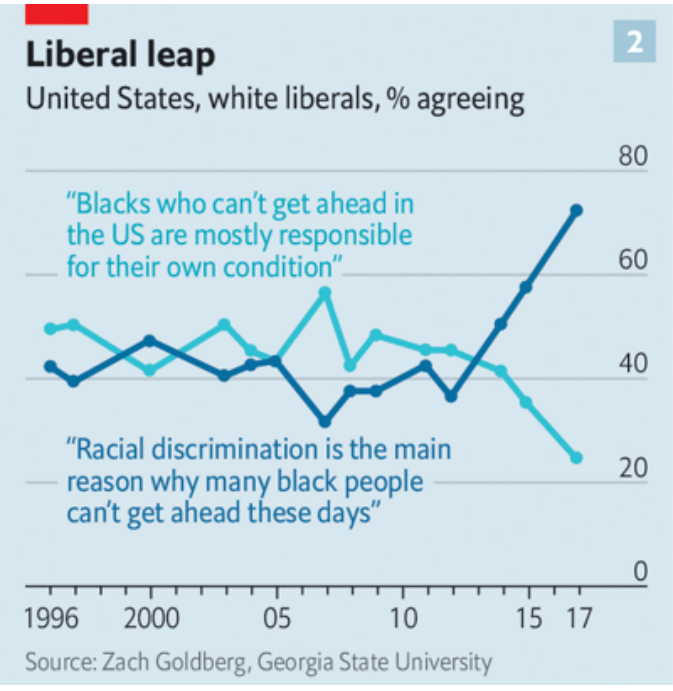
Newspapers are a prime example. The digital revolution has devastated local

Newspapers are a prime example. The digital revolution has devastated local newspapers and crowned new online-only champions. As newsrooms adapted by aping the upstarts, hacks who had risen through the ranks thanks to shoe-leather reporting were replaced by younger staffers stuffed with new ideas from elite universities. One prominent journalist argued for replacing "neutral objectivity" with "moral clarity"—making unflinching distinctions between right and wrong.

The urge to purge

Changes in newsrooms were also related to efforts to increase demographic diversity, on the assumption that this is the only authentic way to give voice to minorities. But the campus zeal for deplatforming voices deemed offensive and defenestrating those found guilty of violating the ethos has also been imported. (James Bennet, who resigned as editorial-page editor of the *New York Times* after one such row, now works for *The Economist;* he was not involved in this article.) Non-journalists on the staff of newspapers, including young engineers, can be even more activist in campaigning against colleagues judged to be producing content at odds with the new vision of social justice.

As with universities, this stridency met little rebuke from the heads of newsrooms. Lee Fang, a left-leaning journalist for "The Intercept", an online publication specialising in "adversarial journalism", was accused by a colleague of racism for posting an interview with an African-American supporter of Black Lives Matter who offered a personal criticism of the group. He was made to apologise.



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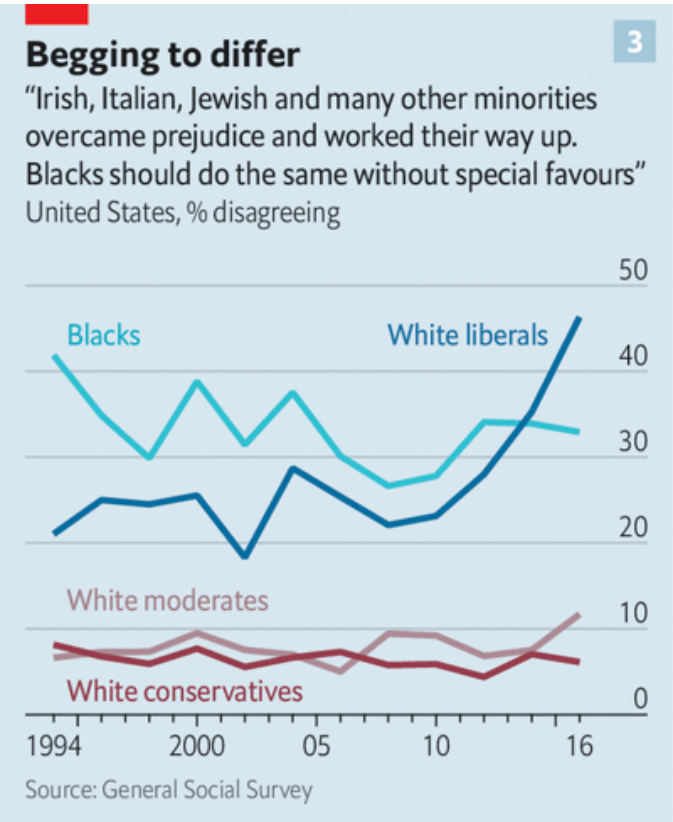
The quiet cultural revolution has also affected the Democratic Party. A decade ago, around 40% of white liberals agreed that "racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days"; today over 70% do (see chart 2). In 2013, according to Gallup, a pollster, 70% of Americans thought black-white race relations were going well; that has dropped to 42%. Among white conservatives and moderates, there has been little movement on such questions.



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In the past decade a far greater share of white liberals than African Americans

In the past decade a far greater share of white liberals than African-Americans came to believe that blacks should have "special favours" to get ahead (see chart 3). Ideas for promoting racial equity that once belonged to the Democrats' left fringe have become mainstream. Cash reparations for African-Americans are supported by 49% of Democrats, for example, and 41% endorse reducing police funding.

Democratic politicians have responded. In 2008 Barack Obama criticised overheated sermons of his pastor, saying "they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America." The pastor's view is now ascendant among Democrats.

In 2016 Hillary Clinton started giving speeches on the need to end systemic racism. By 2020 this movement was the defining fault line of the presidential primary. Joe Biden, an avatar for Democratic consensus, won by taking positions far to the left of Mr Obama, including on matters of identity politics. That is why his administration speaks much more social-justice patois than Mr Obama's ever did. And why it embraces reparations-adjacent policies like the creation of a $4bn fund to pay off the debts of only non-white farmers, and a proposal that 40% of benefits from climate-change investment go to previously disadvantaged communities.

Wokers of the world, unite!

This new political prominence makes the question of what happens to the ideology of social activism as it spreads beyond the ivory tower all the more important. Does it retain its purity and potency? Or does it become diluted?

The corporate world will be a big test. Businesses, particularly those in the knowledge economy, have been grappling with the challenge of how to respond to social-justice consciousness as young employees agitate for change and woke consumers threaten boycotts.

An increasingly common argument is that there is no trade-off between greater diversity and profits. "I'd like to get to a place where we thought that diverse representation was just as important as profitability, because we believed it was linked to so many things that were going to come back and drive value," says Julie Coffman, the chief diversity officer of Bain & Company, a management

consultancy. Others make an explicit business case. McKinsey, another consultancy, has released a stream of reports arguing that firms with greater ethnic and gender diversity have a greater chance of financial outperformance.

Since Floyd's murder, American businesses have issued a dizzying number of equity-related missives and quotas for hiring and procurement. Facebook, a social-media giant, has promised to hire 30% more black people in leadership positions and has set a goal that "50% of our workforce be from underrepresented communities by the end of 2023". Target, a retailer, has pledged to spend more than $2bn with black-owned businesses by the end of 2025. Walmart, another retail titan, has set up a Centre for Racial Equity and says it will give it $100m to "address the drivers of systemic racism".

Importing the language of equity without university-style blow-ups can be difficult. "What you're seeing is Gen Z or young millennials basically engaging in this collective war against the boomers and the Gen Xers who actually run the organisations," says Antonio García Martínez, whom Apple fired in May after 2,000 employees circulated a petition questioning his hiring, citing passages they found to be misogynistic in an autobiography published five years ago. When Brian Armstrong, the boss of Coinbase, announced that workplace activism was to be discouraged, he was inundated with private messages of admiration from CEOs who felt that they could not do the same—and public criticism.

"Corporate wokeism I believe is the product of self-interest intermingled with the appearance of pursuing social justice," says Vivek Ramaswamy, a former biotechnology executive and author of "Woke, Inc.". He argues that Big Tech pursues corporate wokeism because appearing to embrace social justice suits such firms' commercial interests—both in terms of recruitment and appeal to their customers. It performs allegiance to identity politics while simultaneously rejecting the left's critique of capitalism. "A lot of Big Tech has agreed to bend to the progressive left," he says, but "they effectively expect that the new left look the other way when it comes to leaving their monopoly power."

Such hypocrisy is increasingly prevalent. The founder of Salesforce, a tech behemoth based in San Francisco, is known for championing social-justice causes like a surtax to fund homelessness services in the city. Yet the firm itself paid no

federal taxes on $2.6bn in profits in 2020.

Wokeness's next frontier, with the greatest potential to make a mark on the future, will be the classroom. In California's recently approved ethnic-studies curriculum,

which may become a high-school graduation requirement, one lesson plan aims to help students "dispel the model-minority myth" (the idea that to dwell on Asian-American success is wrong). Roughly one-sixth of the state's proposed new maths instruction framework is devoted to social justice. It approvingly quotes from studies suggesting that word problems about boys and girls knitting scarves be accompanied by a debate about gender norms. Last month the governor of Oregon signed a bill eliminating high-school graduation requirements of proficiency in reading, writing and maths until 2024—justified as necessary to promote equity for non-white students.

Woker or weaker?

Such proposals hint at the difficulties of translating some of the theories embraced by the new left into policy. Because disparities are theorised to be the result of largely implicit discrimination, systems must be dismantled. This leads to odd conclusions: that racial test-score gaps in maths can be ameliorated by dialectic; and that not testing for the ability to read is a worthy substitute for teaching it. Material conditions that the old left cared about, such as persistent segregation in poor districts and schools, get little attention.

There are some signs of a backlash. Three members of San Francisco's board of education, including its president, are under threat of a recall election. So is the city's ultra-progressive district attorney. However, the underlying engine—the questionable ideas of some academics, and the generational change they are rendering—is not shutting off. America has not yet reached peak woke. ■

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