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Introduction

Until 2016, I'd spent virtually my entire life in a smallish southern Arizona military town about forty minutes from the U.S.-Mexico border. I started my academic journey at Cochise Community College in Sierra Vista, Arizona. I attended college off and on, working full time throughout, eventually earning a BA and an MA at my local land-grant university. However, I had a hard time finding good work in the town I grew up in. Ultimately, I ended up selling shoes at Dillard's. I was great at it—one of the top salespeople in the store. However, I was passed over for management because I was viewed as overqualified and unlikely to stay, and so I left. In 2016, some thirteen years after graduating high school, I embarked on a PhD in sociology at Columbia University. My program offered a generous graduate stipend—more than I'd ever made doing full-time retail sales or management in Arizona. However, I was also supporting a family of four, and Manhattan is an expensive place to live. Consequently, I continued to work outside jobs while completing my PhD.

Politically, I grew up during the height of neoliberalism. The Cold War ended when I was relatively young. America presided over a unipolar global order, and everything from poverty to AIDS to war itself seemed like it could be solved by the right mix of free markets and technocratic know-how. At the time, Sierra Vista (and Arizona more broadly) skewed decisively "red." However, having come of age in the aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror, I ended up going another direction. I cast my first presidential vote for John Kerry in 2004—and not begrudgingly. It's humiliating to admit in retrospect,

but I *believed* in John Kerry. At that time, I subscribed to what you might call the "banal liberal" understanding of who is responsible for various social evils: those damn Republicans! If only folks in places like podunk Arizona could be more like the enlightened denizens of New York, I thought, what a beautiful country this could be! What a beautiful world! I had already shed a lot of this in the years that followed—but the vestiges that remained got destroyed soon after I moved to the Upper West Side.

One of the first things that stood out to me is that there's something like a racialized caste system here that everyone takes as natural. You have disposable servants who will clean your house, watch your kids, walk your dogs, deliver prepared meals to you. If you need things from the store, *someone else* can go shopping for you and drop the goods off at your place. People will show up outside your door to drive you wherever at the push of a button. It's mostly minorities and immigrants from particular racial and ethnic backgrounds who fill these roles, while people from *other* racial and ethnic backgrounds are the ones being served. The former earn peanuts for their work, the latter are well off. And this is all basically taken for granted; it is assumed that this is the normal way society operates.

And yet, the way things are in places like New York City or Los Angeles—this is *not* how things are in many other parts of the country. For instance, in other American locales, the person buying a pair of shoes and the person selling them are likely to be the same race—white—and the socioeconomic gaps between the buyer and the seller are likely to be much smaller. Even the most sexist or bigoted rich white person in many other contexts wouldn't be able to exploit women and minorities at the level the typical liberal professional in a city like Seattle, San Francisco, or Chicago does in their day-to-day lives. The infrastructure simply isn't there. Instead, progressive bastions associated with the knowledge economy are the places with well-oiled machines for casually exploiting and discarding the vulnerable, desperate, and disadvantaged. And it's largely Democratic-voting professionals who take advantage of them—even as they conspicuously lament inequality.

If relocating to New York put me on the path to this book, the aftermath of the 2016 election radically accelerated my journey. A few months after I arrived at Columbia University, Donald Trump won the presidency. I did not find this surprising at all. I'd spent most of the election cycle, beginning in the primaries, begging anyone who would listen to take Trump's prospects seriously and respond accordingly.[1] However, most of my peers in Manhattan went into election night confident that we were on the "right side of history," and that the election would probably be a blowout. That is, of course, not

what ended up happening. In the days that followed, many Columbia students claimed to be so traumatized by the electoral results that they couldn't do their tests or homework. They needed time off, they insisted. There were a few things that were striking about these demands to me.

First, these are students at an *Ivy League university*—overwhelmingly people from wealthy backgrounds. And even if they didn't come from wealth, they're likely to leave well positioned. After all, Columbia is an elite school (i.e., a school designed to cultivate elites).[2] And this is not a secret. Students choose to attend a school like Columbia instead of their local land-grant university precisely because they aspire to be more elite than most other college graduates (who, as we will see, themselves tend to be far better off than the rest of the population). People from less advantaged backgrounds routinely shed tears of joy when they get into schools like Columbia precisely because they know that they've just received a ticket to a different life. Many from privileged backgrounds respond just as emotionally because admission to a school like Columbia is a critical milestone in reproducing or enhancing their social position.

Hence, even in students' own descriptions about what the impact of the election would be—the poor and vulnerable would be crushed underfoot while elites flourished more than ever—guess what? We're the elites! Realistically speaking, we're the type of people who stood to benefit from someone like Trump in these narratives. We certainly shouldn't be thinking of ourselves as victims, or as the "little guy." But there seemed to be strikingly little recognition of these realities on campus. Instead, many students seemed to view *themselves* as somehow uniquely vulnerable to Trump and his regime, as being especially threatened or harmed. They demanded all manner of accommodations for themselves in order to cope with Trump's victory—and the university eagerly and uncritically obliged.

Meanwhile, there was this whole other constellation of people around the students who seemed to be literally invisible to them. The landscapers, the maintenance workers, the food preparation teams, the security guards. There was no major student movement on their behalf. And these were the people, according to the prevailing narratives, who stood to lose the most from Trump's victory. While those attending classes at Columbia are overwhelmingly wealthy or upwardly mobile, these workers are generally from more humble backgrounds. They are disproportionately immigrants and minorities. Yet the students didn't begin by demanding that *those* people receive a day off, nor by advocating for higher pay and better benefits or protections for *those* people. Instead, they were focused on themselves.

Nor were these ignored laborers—the people with the most at stake in this election (in the students' own narratives)—saying *they* needed time off because they were too traumatized. They weren't painting themselves as victims. Although the classrooms were full of tears in the days that followed, one never saw, say, the janitors making a scene, sobbing uncontrollably about politics as they scrubbed rich kids' messes out of the toilets. They just showed up to work the next day and did their jobs. The juxtaposition was sobering.

And I want to be clear, I'm not picking on Columbia students here. When I left campus, walking around the Upper West Side, or other affluent parts of Manhattan, similar scenes were playing out. The winners of the prevailing order were out on the streets, walking around in a daze like a bomb went off, comforting each other and weeping for the disadvantaged, even as they were chauffeured around and waited on—even more than usual—because they were just too distraught to do anything themselves. And they were able to indulge themselves in this way, of course, because the people who were serving them showed up to work per usual.

New York City was hardly unique in this. Other symbolic economy hubs had similar scenes playing out.[3] And the same drama that I observed at Columbia was unfolding at colleges and universities across the country.[4] This is precisely what I found so troubling, so difficult to shake off: it wasn't about my own school. It was about this broader disjuncture between symbolic economy elites' narratives about the world and the realities on the ground.

These contradictions grew especially pronounced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unrest that followed George Floyd's murder. Even as they casually discarded service workers en masse to fend for themselves—and increased their exploitation of those "essential" workers who remained (so that they could stay comfortably ensconced in their homes)—individuals and institutions associated with the symbolic economy aggressively sought to paint themselves as allies for the marginalized and disadvantaged. Billions were donated to groups like Black Lives Matter (BLM); antiracist literature shot to the top of best-seller charts; organizations assigned antibias training and appointed chief diversity officers at an extraordinary pace. Meanwhile, many inequalities continued to grow[5]—indeed, their growth accelerated through much of the pandemic.

Watching this unfold, I couldn't help but be reminded of Jean Baudrillard's argument that "the Gulf War did not take place."[6] Sure, there were bombings, there were soldiers—but to call it a "war" would be misleading. It was a spectacle. And behind that spectacle was a massacre. And when it was over, the status quo remained roughly intact (indeed, that was the purpose

of the "war"—to protect the regional status quo). Seeing how events played out in 2020 convinced me that the so-called Great Awokening, likewise, did not take place. Indeed, we have never been woke.

Orwell's Demon

On the Upper West Side of Manhattan, one of the most striking scenes that continued to replay itself throughout the summer of 2020 was that, on many Friday afternoons, demonstrators would gather in the medians on Broadway Boulevard holding up signs declaring "Black Lives Matter" and the like. Although there are plenty of Black people who live and work in the area, the people taking part in these demonstrations were overwhelmingly white—academics and professionals by the looks of them. They would shake their signs as cars drove by, and the cars would occasionally honk as if to signal agreement, and the demonstrators would cheer.

However, on several occasions I observed demonstrators engaging in this ritual literally right in front of—sharing the median with—homeless Black men who didn't even have shoes. They were crowding the benches that homeless people were using, standing amid the bags that contained their few worldly possessions, in order to cheer on BLM. Meanwhile, the Black guys right in front of them seemed to be invisible. They were a piece of scenery akin to a bench—an obstruction the demonstrators had to work around, lest they fall over while waving their BLM signs at passing cars. In order to remove these obstructions, many from the same demographic as the protesters, perhaps including many of the protesters themselves, would ultimately band together to purge most of these homeless people from the Upper West Side.

During the height of the pandemic, many vacant hotels were converted into temporary housing in order to reduce COVID-19's spread within New York City's tightly packed homeless shelters. In an area that voted more than nine to one for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 general election, and that would do the same for Joe Biden in the months that followed, in the midst of a global pandemic, and contemporaneous with a racial justice movement that they wholeheartedly supported *in principle*, Upper West Side liberals rallied together to declare "Not in my backyard" to the unsheltered—and they successfully pushed the city to move the poor somewhere else.[7] And by refusing to host homeless people in their own neighborhoods, Upper West Side liberals ended up pushing these populations into less affluent and less white communities. That is, in order to alleviate risks and inconveniences for themselves, they forced less advantaged people, who were already bearing the brunt

of most other pandemic-related risks and disruptions, to *also* deal with any challenges related to hosting large numbers of unsheltered individuals in their communities. And they did all this while evoking social justice discourse—often pretending their primary concern was for homeless people themselves.[8]

Watching scenes like these unfold, I couldn't help but wonder, "Who, exactly, are these street-corner BLM demonstrations *for*? What is the point of it?" After all, there is not really any plausible story in which getting random cars to honk at their signs would lift anyone out of poverty, save anyone from police violence, or get anyone released from prison. There didn't seem to be any connection at all between the cause these demonstrators were claiming to support and the means through which they were choosing to "support" it. There was no relationship between the seriousness of the problems they claimed to be consumed with and the ways they went about advocating for those causes: giddily cheering on the street when people honked at their signs. I found this juxtaposition maddening—especially because contradictions like these seemed to be present virtually everywhere I looked. Once I started seeing them, I couldn't *not* see them. They seemed to lurk over every scene I observed, every interaction I had, every institution I was engaged with, over my own plans and aspirations in life . . .

George Orwell once observed that "writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout with some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand."[9] As a result of the experiences I've just described and many other incidents like them, I became increasingly consumed, possessed even, by a handful of interrelated questions:

- Why is it that the people who benefit the most from what sociologists call systemic or institutionalized racism or sexism *also* happen to be the people most conspicuously concerned with "ideological" racism, sexism, and so on (i.e., people saying, thinking, feeling, believing the "wrong" things about gender, sexuality, race, and other "identity" issues)? How can elites whose lifestyles and livelihoods are oriented around the production, maintenance, and exploitation of inequality still view themselves as egalitarians?
- If the social justice discourse and the symbolic "justice-oriented" actions that contemporary elites gravitate toward seem to have little to do with tangibly addressing social problems—if they don't seem to well reflect the will and interests of the people who are supposed to be "helped" by these gestures—what *do* these conspicuous displays

actually accomplish? What *functions* do they serve? Who actually benefits from these behaviors and how?

- Insofar as social justice discourse is co-opted by elites to serve their interests, how, precisely, does social justice ideology come to serve these alternative functions? How aware are participants with respect to the dissonance between their lifestyles, their behaviors, and their professed beliefs? How do elites reconcile these tensions, to the extent that they perceive them at all?
- Why is it that the "winners" in the prevailing order seem so eager to paint themselves as helpless victims, as marginalized, as vulnerable, and as allies of the same? If it is a genuine disadvantage to be a woman, or a minority, or LGBTQ, or disabled, then why are elites so eager to identify themselves as these very things, or to publicly associate themselves with people who can—even to the point of bending the truth in order to accomplish these goals?
- What's the deal with the so-called Great Awokening? There *seems* to have been a rapid and substantial change in norms and discourse, but is there really a "there" there? And if so, what caused it? Why did it happen when it did? Who was affected and how? Is this period of heightened vigilance around "social justice" issues just a phase? Or is it the new normal?

We Have Never Been Woke is my sociological attempt to answer these questions insofar as I am able, by exploring the historical and contemporary connections between social justice discourse, growing inequality, and the rise of a new elite tied to the symbolic economy.

Overview

This book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 begins by introducing readers to a constellation of elites I refer to as "symbolic capitalists."

In sociological terms, a *capitalist* is not someone who simply favors capitalism, but rather someone who possesses financial resources (capital) that are used to acquire, exert control over, and extract profits from the means of (material) production. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, we can define a *symbolic capitalist* as someone who possesses a high level of symbolic capital and exerts control over, and extracts profits from, the means of symbolic (re) production. If that sounds a little hard to get your head around, don't worry; we'll do a lightning run through Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital in

chapter 1. In the meantime, a less technical way of putting it is that symbolic capitalists are defined first and foremost by how they make a living: nonmanual work associated with the production and manipulation of data, rhetoric, social perceptions and relations, organizational structures and operations, art and entertainment, traditions and innovations, and so forth. Think academics, consultants, journalists, administrators, lawyers, people who work in finance and tech, and so on.

Chapter 1 will argue that what is often referred to as "wokeness" can be fruitfully understood as the ruling ideology of this increasingly dominant elite formation. The genuinely marginalized and disadvantaged in society are not the folks who tend to embrace and propagate these ideas and frameworks. Instead, highly educated and relatively affluent professionals associated with the symbolic economy are most likely to embrace (and enforce) these norms, dispositions, and discourses.

However, symbolic capitalists are not an ideological or political monolith. Many of us are sympathetic to "woke" narratives but do not fully embrace them. Others are explicitly opposed. Some symbolic capitalists (although not many) are even right wing. Chapter 1 will walk through some of these divisions around wokeness to help bring clarity to this highly contested term.

We'll close with a brief exploration of how and why symbolic capitalists associate themselves so strongly with social justice beliefs and causes. As we'll see, the symbolic professions have been legitimized from the outset by appeals to altruism and serving the greater good—especially the vulnerable, marginalized, and disadvantaged in society. This mode of legitimation has given rise to novel forms of status competition among symbolic capitalists.

Chapter 2 will explore how some of these struggles for power and status have played out during the Great Awokening(s). The chapter will synthesize many types of data to illustrate that, since 2010, there have indeed been rapid and dramatic shifts in symbolic capitalists' discourse and expressed beliefs about social justice issues. There have been important changes in our political alignments and behaviors as well. Using these same types of data, however, we can see that the post-2010 Great Awokening is not particularly novel. It's actually a *case* of something.

Since the rise of the symbolic professions, there have been three other Great Awokenings. By comparing and contrasting these episodes, we can gain leverage on questions like, Under what circumstances do these Awokenings come about? When and why do they tend to fade? What, if anything, do they tend to change? Does one Awokening inform the next, and if so, how? And

so on. Moreover, because social justice discourse is rendered much more pronounced and salient during these periods, Great Awokenings also provide excellent opportunities to study if and how symbolic capitalists leverage social justice discourse in the service of their own ends—in the past and in the present.

However, one challenge in analyzing wokeness as a means of elite legitimation and competition is that most symbolic capitalists decline to see themselves as elites. Since the onset of the current Great Awokening, most discourse about "social elites" in symbolic capitalist spaces has instead conveniently focused on the top 1 percent of income earners. Chapter 3 will push readers to widen their analytic lens. The chapter will illustrate that, if we want to understand how almost anything happens in society today, symbolic capitalists have to be a core part of the story. Other elites—politicians, plutocrats, multinational corporations, and others—largely act with and through us to accomplish their goals. Symbolic capitalists are among the primary "winners" in the prevailing socioeconomic order. We are some of the main beneficiaries of the inequalities we condemn. Our lifestyles and our social positions are premised heavily on exploitation and exclusion—particularly with respect to women, minorities, and the economically vulnerable. We resent social elites, yet we are social elites.

Chapter 4, meanwhile, will provide a deep dive into how symbolic capitalists understand and engage in politics. Our socioeconomic position and unique cognitive profiles predispose us toward political preferences and modes of political engagement that are far out of step with most other Americans'. Consequently, as symbolic capitalists have grown increasingly influential, and as we've been increasingly consolidated into the Democratic Party, we have profoundly reshaped that party and the U.S. political landscape more broadly—albeit not in the ways we may like to imagine. By the end of the chapter, readers will have a good sense of why it is that symbolic capitalists' approach to social justice focuses so intensely on symbols, rhetoric, and culture war issues instead of the "bread and butter" struggles that other Americans are most concerned about.

Chapter 5 will explore the moral culture of symbolic capitalists. Among contemporary symbolic economy professionals, it is not enough to merely present oneself as an advocate for the vulnerable and the downtrodden—many of us also try to present ourselves as literal embodiments or representatives of historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups. Chapter 5 will explore what's going on here. It will show that, in presenting themselves as racial and ethnic minorities, gender and sexual minorities, neurodivergent, physically

disabled, or allies of the same, contemporary elites are trying to harness a novel form of symbolic capital.

There is a widespread perception among symbolic capitalists that Americans who are cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, white, and male are responsible for most of the world's problems. Those who belong to historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups, on the other hand, are viewed as particularly moral. They hold special epistemic authority on issues discursively associated with the groups they identify with. They are perceived as more interesting, and perhaps more innovative, than members of historically dominant groups. They are often eligible for special accommodations and opportunities that others covet. In order to lay claim to these benefits, symbolic capitalists have strong incentives to understand and describe themselves as victims, and to associate themselves, directly or indirectly, with minority identity groups. Many stretch the truth to portray themselves this way. Virtually always, these narratives ignore highly relevant but inconvenient realities—including and especially proponents' class positions.

Chapter 6 will highlight some of the ways symbolic capitalists leverage wokeness to obscure unpalatable truths from themselves and others. The chapter will do a dive into the cognitive and behavioral science literatures to illustrate how our sincere commitments to antiracism, feminism, LGBTQ rights, and related causes can actually blind us to the role we play in the social order—including and especially as it relates to exploiting and perpetuating inequalities. It will explore how symbolic capitalists deploy social justice discourse to reinforce their own social position, delegitimize rivals, and deflect blame for social problems onto others.

However, before we dive into any of that, it may be prudent to lay out some of the core assumptions undergirding this text, and some of the literatures the book is in conversation with.

Minority Report

I began my academic career as a philosopher. Many people are drawn to philosophy after encountering work by some great thinker who heroically tackled huge questions and tried to wrestle them to the ground as best they could. These works tend to be thrilling and mind opening—ambitious in their scope and argumentation. But when you become an academic philosopher in the United States, you quickly discover that producing work like this is not something you are practically permitted to do. Your readings will focus narrowly on secular, analytic, Western (white) liberals. The work that gets

published tends to be *extremely* narrow in its focus—for example, here's my interpretation of Martha Nussbaum's response to Joseph Raz's critique of John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. I literally published a paper like that.[10] It's pretty good, as far as these things go. But it's not the kind of work that anyone goes into philosophy to do, I suspect.

Sociology, my current field, is much the same. The discipline started with scholars asking huge questions and producing works that were truly epic in their ambitions (if deeply flawed in some of their assumptions and generalizations). The works themselves were adventurous, with scholars actively building the methodological and theoretical boats they were simultaneously trying to sail in. Today, most work published in the discipline is far narrower in scope, modest in its ambitions, and "safe" in its arguments. Here, too, it's difficult to publish the kind of work that helped establish the field. There are many good reasons for this and some not-so-good reasons. In any case, for my own first book, I decided to go bold. I set out to write the type of text I would love to read. The type of book that might get others excited about sociology and its potential to explain the world around us. For less specialized readers who are eager to get started on that journey, feel free to skip to the beginning of Chapter 1. What follows is a little bit of "inside baseball" to help situate this text for academic audiences.

My education, teaching, and collaborations cut across a range of fields: philosophy, sociology, political science, communications, psychology, journalism. This book draws on research from all these fields and is designed to be accessible and compelling to nonspecialists too. The upside of this ecumenicism is that the book should be relevant and generative for scholars across a range of disciplines. The downside, however, is that it may be difficult for some readers to "place" this work—to figure out what its intended contribution is, and to which scholarly fields. So let me say a little about this at the top.

Methodologically and theoretically, this work draws heavily from an interdisciplinary tradition called science, knowledge, and technology (SKAT). Work in this field tends to be very "meta." SKAT scholars think about cognition, talk about discourse, conduct research on the process of research, analyze others' analyses, theorize about theory, and so on and so forth. The emphasis is less on producing novel empirical studies than on reporting on, contextualizing, synthesizing, and criticizing other research from disparate fields. This integrative work often helps us advance our knowledge (and understand the state of our knowledge) much more powerfully than one-off empirical studies.

This book, to be clear, *will* include lots of original empirical research. It will also bring together academic scholarship from a wide range of fields,

research produced by think tanks, and occasionally, primary reporting by journalists. Putting together this mosaic should allow us to see something new and important that we would not have been able to perceive by examining any of the components in isolation.[11] And seeing the world in terms of this big picture can, in turn, change how people subsequently understand and utilize the research drawn on here, or any new pieces of scholarship that others produce that might help us expand the picture further.

Within my home discipline of sociology, this book is most tightly connected to work on the sociology of elites. Most social research attempts to understand and address social problems by focusing on people at the "bottom" of social hierarchies. Sociologists of elites instead turn the scholarly gaze toward people at the top of the social order, studying their lifestyles, behaviors, expressed beliefs, and so on in a similar manner to how others study the poor, the marginalized, and the disadvantaged. This can be a powerful analytic move. However, as sociologist Shamus Khan has emphasized, research in the field has been undermined by a set of persistent blind spots.[12]

Sociologists tend to focus on elites aligned with industries and political causes distant from our own, while the types of elites that we tend to favor, sympathize with, or receive patronage from are often exempted from similar scrutiny. Moreover, when scholars analyze elites, they focus almost exclusively on folks near the pinnacle of the wealth and earnings distribution. However, the sphere of Americans who can be sensibly discussed as "elites" is much larger than that. Hence, a huge swath of elites tends to be more or less "invisible" in the literature. Scholars also tend to discuss elites in homogeneous terms. Demographically, they are presumed to be whites and men. The growing diversity within elite circles is underanalyzed to the extent that it is acknowledged at all. Socioeconomically, elites are often treated as an undifferentiated mass. In reality, there are many different subsets of elites, each relying on different modes of legitimation and tied to very different institutions. There are many differences in values, priorities, and sources of wealth (and, thereby, material interests) within virtually any stratum of elites, giving rise to myriad forms of intraelite competition and conflict. These differences are too often flattened or ignored.

In defiance of these trends, this book widens the analytic lens considerably beyond the millionaires and the billionaires. However, it also focuses narrowly on a specific elite formation: symbolic capitalists. They have a particular history and occupy a special place in the socioeconomic order. They have modes of legitimation, institutional associations, and perceived interests that tend to diverge systematically from other elites. They have

idiosyncratic tastes and preferences relative to other elites and congregate in very particular places. And so, rather than just labeling symbolic capitalists "elites" and then talking about elites in generic terms, this book will go into the weeds about symbolic capitalists in particular.

Another core aspiration of this book is to analyze the political economy of the knowledge economy. That is, the text will help readers better understand the political affiliations and ideological commitments of symbolic capitalists, and how these relate to their personal financial prospects and to the evolving position of symbolic capitalists writ large in the broader socioeconomic order—here building on a series of important works charting the growth of the symbolic professions and their influence over society.

The institutional clout of symbolic capitalists began to grow rapidly during the interwar period (that is, the years between World War I and World War II).[13] Shortly after the outbreak of World War II in Europe, American political theorist James Burnham published a milestone book, *The Managerial Revolution*, analyzing the ascendence of this new elite formation. Somewhat to Burnham's consternation,[14] his book sparked a genre of important texts, many of which I'll cite in the pages that follow, charting shifts in the global economy and how they relate to the growing cultural, economic, and political power of professionals who traffic in ideas, symbols, and information. Many early works in this literature adopted a critical take on the rise of these elites, their changing role in society, and the ways symbolic capitalists were, in turn, changing society writ large. Later works in the genre have been more sympathetic or even valorizing. Across the board, these books have been written nearly unanimously by white scholars, overwhelmingly white men.[15] *We Have Never Been Woke* is the first major work in this genre, analyzing the symbolic economy writ large, written by an African American.[16] And in terms of the influences drawn on, the dimensions of social behavior this book will focus on, and so on, it's a very different book from the texts that preceded it.

As an example, few works in this tradition or adjacent literatures attend much to what could be called "identity" issues. Conversations about "elite overproduction," for instance, generally undertheorize the gendered nature of this phenomenon. In previous eras, the elites being overproduced were men. Now, they're largely women. This is a highly consequential change that has important implications for how unrest tied to elite overproduction plays out. Likewise, conversations about "brain drain" rarely delve into the gender dynamics at play. Yet it is disproportionately and increasingly *women* being pulled out of communities around the country and consolidated into knowledge economy hubs (while growing numbers of men are

floundering)—generating important consequences for both the communities that highly educated workers are flocking to and the areas they are leaving behind. Although more critical works in the knowledge economy genre have flagged how symbolic capitalists are among the primary "winners" in the prevailing order, few have analyzed the specific ways we profit from and perpetuate gendered or racialized inequalities in particular. Even less attention has been paid in this literature to analyzing how symbolic capitalists leverage social justice discourse in the service of their power struggles, or the extent to which changes in social justice discourse and activism relate to changes in the socioeconomic position of symbolic capitalists. This text will help fill in many of those blanks. In the process, we'll unsettle popular approaches to "identity" as well.

This book takes part in a tradition of Black critique—running from W.E.B. Du Bois through the present—highlighting how liberals exploit social justice advocacy to make *themselves* feel good, but ultimately offer up little more than symbolic gestures and platitudes to redress the material harms they decry (and often exacerbate). Up to now, this corpus of social analysis has been largely disconnected from research on the sociology of elites, the rise of the knowledge economy, or science, knowledge, and technology studies. Moreover, its critiques of symbolic politics have generally been nonreflexive: *white* liberals are subject to intense scrutiny while nonwhites of any persuasion are largely excluded from analysis. For our purposes, this is a problem because an ever-growing share of contemporary symbolic capitalists identify as something other than cisgender heterosexual able-bodied neurotypical white men. And symbolic capitalists are constantly inventing new forms of marginalization and novel ways to lay claim to existing minoritized identities. Consequently, to the extent that elites who identify with some historically marginalized or disadvantaged group are exempted from critique, we will be left with an increasingly impoverished understanding of whom the social order serves and how inequalities reproduce themselves over time. Practically speaking, the only way to get around this problem is to eliminate the exemptions entirely.

Analytic (In)equality

A core objective of this book is to explore contemporary inequality. It may be worth saying a few words at the top about how "inequality" is understood here. Racialized, gendered, and socioeconomic inequalities are often discussed as outcomes. For instance, the Black-white wage gap is viewed

as an *outcome* of some other set of factors. However, as sociologist Andrew Abbott argued, inequality is perhaps best understood as a *process*—one sustained largely as a result of how systems and institutions are structured and reproduced, and the ways in which people act or interact within them across time.[17] Systemic racism, for instance, is not a product (outcome) of people holding the "wrong" beliefs or feelings. It is a function of ongoing *behavioral patterns* and (unjust) *allocations* of resources and opportunities that systematically advantage some, and disadvantage others, within particular contexts. It is not "caused" by the past so much as it is actively *maintained* in the present. It persists because it is enacted moment to moment, situation to situation, *today*.

In equally processual terms, Karen and Barbara Fields defined "racism" as the *action* of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on someone's (perceived) ancestry.[18] This is roughly the definition that we will adopt here. Mutatis mutandis, many other forms of discrimination will be similarly understood. However, it is critical to note that the Fields' definition of racism was *not* focused on the application of double standards that specifically favor the historically dominant group. Instead, *any* racialized double standard is "racist" on their definition, irrespective of its intent or purported beneficiaries.

Consider the myriad cases where policies and initiatives intended to benefit historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups end up primarily serving elites from those groups, while the people from the target populations who actually *need* help end up benefiting far less, if at all. Here one might think that perhaps we could tweak those programs to better assist those from the target group who are poor, vulnerable, and genuinely disadvantaged, while excluding those who are already relatively well off. But of course, if the main goal is to help those who are in need, it isn't clear why a factor like race would be used as a criterion at all. Insofar as people from the target group are disproportionately disadvantaged, helping people who are disadvantaged would disproportionately improve prospects for the target group. However, to extend benefits *specifically on the basis of race* would be tantamount to denying aid to many desperate and vulnerable people on the basis of *their* race (i.e., because they are not a member of the target minority group); this does not exactly seem like "social justice."

As Karen and Barbara Fields put it, "Racial equality and racial justice are not figures of speech, they are public frauds, political acts with political consequences. Just as a half-truth is not a type of truth but a type of lie, so equality and justice, once modified by racial, become euphemisms for

their opposites."[19] Political scientist Adolph Reed Jr. has likewise emphasized that "the proposition that desert on the basis of special injury should be the standard of eligibility for social benefits is . . . the opposite of the socialist principle that everyone in the society is entitled to a reasonable and secure standard of living, consistent with prevailing norms for a decent life."[20]

In this text, efforts to avoid racialized, gendered, and other forms of double standards will be realized in the form of "analytical egalitarianism."[21] The behaviors of whites and racial and ethnic minorities, men and women, and LGBTQ and "cishet" (cisgender, heterosexual) Americans will be discussed in equivalent terms. This is a commitment that is perhaps more radical than it appears to be at first blush.

Often scholars and essayists analyze and discuss the behaviors of people from more and less "privileged" groups in asymmetrical ways. For instance, when racial and ethnic minorities demonstrate a preference to hire, promote, mentor, and otherwise do business with coethnics, this is frequently analyzed in terms of in-group solidarity or building and leveraging social capital, and these behaviors are lauded. When whites engage in the exact same behaviors, they tend to be analyzed in a completely different way—almost exclusively through the lenses of racism and discrimination—and those who engage in such behaviors are pathologized and denounced. Similar tendencies hold for interpreting the behaviors of men as compared with women, LGBTQ versus "straight" actors, and so on: behaviors that are condemned when carried out by the "dominant" group are interpreted differently, and often praised, when carried out by "others." Indeed, even when harmful behaviors by other actors are recognized and condemned, responsibility is often still laid at the feet of the historically dominant group. For instance, hate crimes committed by African Americans are regularly attributed to white supremacy; women's abuse and exploitation of other women (or men) is blamed on the patriarchy. As I've discussed elsewhere at length,[22] while these tendencies may be well intentioned, they are also profoundly condescending—and the tortured explanations they produce tend to obscure far more than they elucidate about why certain phenomena occur, or how social orders persist, and who they serve (or don't).

Critical discussions of "elites" likewise tend to focus primarily on whites and men, especially those who are cisgender and heterosexual. Elites from other groups are often passed over in silence or are explicitly exempted from critique (and even celebrated!). People railing against the "1 percent," for instance, tend to be focused on Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, not Oprah Winfrey or Jay Z (who are also billionaires). That will not be the case here.

Behaviors, lifestyles, and relationships that are exploitative, condescending, or exclusionary do not somehow become morally noble or neutral when performed by members of historically marginalized or disadvantaged groups. Indeed, it is primarily others *from these same populations* who end up on the receiving end of these elite predations. But it deserves to be emphasized that it would not somehow be "better" if the people condescended to, exploited, and excluded were whites, men, or cisgender heterosexuals instead. The problem is not that the "wrong" people are being preyed on; it's the preying on per se.

In "the Discourse," people often seem less concerned about poverty as such, or exploitation as such, than with the fact that poverty or exploitation disproportionately affects people they strongly sympathize with, to the perceived benefit of those they do *not* sympathize with. That is, people don't seem to be concerned with suffering so much as they hate that the "wrong" people are suffering. This book *will* spend significant time highlighting the plight of women, ethnic and racial minorities, and LGBTQ Americans within the symbolic economy. This is not because the suffering of people from these groups matters more than the suffering of those who are white, men, cisgender, or heterosexual. Rather, the goal is to sharpen the contradiction between symbolic capitalists' expressed positions with respect to feminism, antiracism, and LGBTQ rights and how they behave "in the world."

For now, the key point is that elites who are women, men, nonbinary, cisgender, trans, straight, queer, white, minorities, newly affluent or born so—insofar as they occupy similar positions in similar institutions and live similar lifestyles, engage in similar behaviors, and reside in similar places—will be discussed in the same way. Indeed, as Adolph Reed Jr. explained, elites from historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups do not just share similar material interests and lifestyles with their peers from historically dominant groups, they tend to share similar worldviews as well: "As black and white elites increasingly go through the same schools, live in the same neighborhoods, operate as peers in integrated workplaces, share and interact in the same social spaces and consumption practices and preferences, they increasingly share another common sense not only about frameworks of public policy but also about the proper order of things in general."[23]

As a function of this convergence, the expressed will and interests of elites from historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups are often significantly and demonstrably out of step with most others' in the populations they purport to represent. Nonetheless, said elites often portray advancing their *own* interests as somehow being a "win" for the groups they identify

with writ large. As philosopher Olufemi Taiwo points out, these "gains," while comforting to imagine, rarely translate into meaningful uplift for others in the "real world":

> One might think questions of justice ought to be primarily concerned with fixing disparities around health care, working conditions, and basic material and interpersonal security. Yet conversations about justice have come to be shaped by people who have ever more specific practical advice about fixing the distribution of attention and conversational power. . . . Elites from marginalized groups can benefit from this arrangement in ways that are compatible with social progress. But treating group elites' interests as necessarily or even presumptively aligned with full group interests involves a political naiveté we cannot afford. Such treatment of elite interests functions as a racial Reaganomics: a strategy reliant on fantasies about the exchange rate between the attention economy and the material economy. Perhaps the lucky few who get jobs finding the most culturally authentic and cosmetically radical description of the continuing carnage are really winning one for the culture. Then, after we in the chattering class get the clout we deserve and secure the bag, its contents will eventually trickle down to the workers who clean up after our conferences, to slums of the Global South's megacities, to its countryside. But probably not.[24]

Unfortunately, elites from historically dominant *and* historically marginalized groups share an interest in obscuring or ignoring this nonrepresentativeness. Insofar as they affirm their preferred narratives about the world, elites from majority groups have a strong interest in "consecrating" elites of other backgrounds as "authentic" voices for "their people." Elites from historically underrepresented backgrounds have strong material and emotional incentives to understand *themselves* in this way as well. As a result of this overlap, as we will see, elites from historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups end up playing a pivotal role in legitimizing broader elite attempts to enrich themselves and undermine rivals *in the name of social justice*.

Consequently, while we will spend significant time in this text exploring how socioeconomic inequalities are reproduced, racialized, and gendered within institutions, we will *not* spend much time singling out whites, men, cisgender heterosexuals, the able-bodied, and others for unique condemnation. Being an elite from a minority population doesn't negate the fact that one is an elite. Identifying with a historically disadvantaged or marginalized group neither entails nor should be held to imply that one is *personally*

marginalized or disadvantaged—especially not in conversations about elites. Elites are, definitionally, *better off* than most.

By virtue of their social position, elites tend to benefit significantly more than others from inequalities, and actively reinforce and perpetuate those inequalities in order to preserve or enhance their elite status. Nonetheless, elites who hail from historically underrepresented populations often conspicuously denounce those same inequalities, attempt to exempt themselves from responsibility for social problems, and try to deflect blame onto others. Of course, this is precisely what elites from historically dominant groups do as well. It's one more thing they share in common. Indeed, it's something they collaborate on, as we will see.

Coda: We Have Never Been Woke

As symbolic capitalists have grown in power and influence, we have dramatically reshaped the symbolic landscapes of the institutions and societies we preside over. Many of these changes have been unambiguously positive. Overt and casual sadism against members of historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups is less common and less tolerated. There is increased awareness of the potential for unjust bias and discrimination even when people do not harbor ill will against members of minority populations. There is greater representation of nonwhites, women, LGBTQ people, and people with mental illnesses and physical disabilities in virtually all cultural domains. There is greater recognition and accommodation of the unique challenges faced by members of these populations. As the work of Michele Lamont has powerfully illustrated,[25] these changes matter. They have been transformational for how beneficiaries understand themselves and the ways they experience the institutions and societies they are embedded in. Myself included.

However, it hasn't all been good news. Lamont's work has also highlighted that, even as identity-based stigma and discrimination have steeply declined in recent decades, socioeconomic inequalities and segregation have increased just as dramatically.[26] And as formal barriers preventing people from flourishing have been dismantled, there is a growing sense that those who are unsuccessful *deserve* their lot. There is diminished solidarity across lines of difference, and a reduced willingness to make redistributive investments that serve *others* instead of oneself or the groups that one personally identifies with.[27] And, as we will see, most of the benefits from the symbolic shifts highlighted by Lamont have accrued to a fairly narrow band of elites who

happen to identify with historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups. The most vulnerable, desperate, and impoverished in society have not been able to profit nearly as much. In many respects, their lives have been growing worse—including in the symbolic realm. Meanwhile, heightened demographic inclusion has been accompanied by a growing homogenization of identity, and increased parochialism against divergent perspectives (including and especially with respect to minority group members who reject institutionally dominant narratives on identity issues). Put another way, inclusion tends to be little more than skin deep at most symbolic economy institutions.

The problem, in short, is not that symbolic capitalists are too woke, but that we've never been woke. The problem is not that causes like feminism, antiracism, or LGBTQ rights are "bad." The problem is that, in the name of these very causes, symbolic capitalists regularly engage in behaviors that exploit, perpetuate, exacerbate, reinforce, and mystify inequalities—often to the detriment of the very people we purport to champion. And our sincere commitment to social justice lends an unearned and unfortunate sense of morality to these endeavors. As Pierre Bourdieu put it:

> The blindness of intellectuals to the social forces which rule the intellectual field, and therefore their practices, is what explains that, collectively, often under very radical airs, the intelligentsia almost always contribute to the perpetuation of dominant forces. I am aware that such a blunt statement is shocking because it goes against the image of themselves that intellectuals have fabricated: they like to think of themselves as liberators, as progressive . . . and it is true that they have often taken sides with the dominated . . . [albeit] much less often than they could have and especially much less than they likely believe.[28]

This *belief* in social justice advocacy is critical to underline. The pages that follow will illustrate a profound gulf between symbolic capitalists' rhetoric about various social ills and their lifestyles and behaviors "in the world." They will detail at length the ways symbolic capitalists often leverage social justice discourse in the pursuit of their own ends—often at the expense of the genuinely vulnerable, marginalized, and disadvantaged in society. Some readers may be inclined to interpret these behaviors as evidence that symbolic capitalists are being cynical when they align themselves with social justice causes. That may well be the case in some instances, but that is not the core argument of this book.

As Noam Chomsky explained, most people have a tough time consistently endorsing things they don't believe in. To avoid this, most find pathways

toward believing the things they say, even if they didn't believe those things at the outset (and people generally try to avoid issues for which they *cannot* find a way to earnestly toe the preferred line). Indeed, the ability to bring one's own expressed convictions into compliance with the dominant talking points is one of the key attributes many elite institutions seem to filter for:

> It's very hard to live with cognitive dissonance: only a real cynic can believe one thing and say another. So whether it's a totalitarian system or a free system, the people who are most useful to the system of power are the ones who actually believe what they say, and they're the ones who will typically make it through. So take Tom Wicker at the *New York Times*: when you talk to him about this kind of stuff, he gets very irate and says, "Nobody tells *me* what to write." And that's perfectly true, nobody tells *him* what to write—but if he didn't already *know* what to write, he wouldn't be a columnist for the *New York Times*. . . . You think the wrong thoughts, you're just not in the system.[29]

We will discuss this idea in greater detail later on. For now, the key takeaway is that, generally speaking, symbolic capitalists likely believe the things they say. However, most of the time, these sincere beliefs don't meaningfully translate into egalitarian behaviors, relationships, or states of affairs.

It's not particularly revelatory to point out that symbolic capitalists are hypocrites. Everyone's a hypocrite, almost by necessity. Moral principles tend to be austere, categorical, and unchanging while the world we navigate is full of ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity, contingency, and dynamism. All of us are born into circumstances that are not of our own making. As agents, we are fallible in our judgments and limited in our powers. Overcoming our personal limitations requires cooperation and compromise. As a result of these factors, our lives and societies are typically far out of sync with our aspirations. However, this is not to say that the gulf between our professed ideals and our actions doesn't matter. On the contrary, the struggle to bring these realms into closer alignment is a core source of purpose and meaning in our lives. And more concretely, by virtue of the growing wealth and influence symbolic capitalists wield, the extent to which we do (or fail to) act in accordance with our egalitarian ideals is of significant practical importance to virtually everyone else in society—including and especially those who are genuinely vulnerable, marginalized, or disadvantaged.

Here the reader may be wondering, if the purpose of this book is not to condemn symbolic capitalists as hypocrites, insincere or cynical, then what *do* I mean with the declaration that "we have never been woke"?

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour called for a "symmetrical anthropology," insisting that social researchers study and discuss their own societies and cultures in the same way they analyze "primitive" or "premodern" ones.[30] He then proceeded to illustrate the power of this approach by turning the analytical gaze toward modernity—demonstrating that the narratives "moderns" tell themselves about what makes them unique in fact obscure the nature of the "modern world," making it difficult for its denizens to properly understand and effectively address contemporary social problems.

Just as Latour encouraged readers to turn the anthropological lens toward their own societies and cultures, and then proceeded to model this approach (*as* a "modern") himself, *We Have Never Been Woke* is a work by a symbolic capitalist, about symbolic capitalists, primarily *for* symbolic capitalists—looking at our history, the social order we've created, and the ideologies used to justify that social order. It will demonstrate how symbolic capitalists' preferred narratives about social problems often inhibit our ability to accurately understand and adequately address those problems. We will explore how actions undertaken in the name of social justice often exacerbate the inequalities we condemn, even as our ostensibly egalitarian commitments blind us to this reality.

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour sought to collapse misleading distinctions between subjects and objects or culture and nature in order to perceive the more unified systems of action and meaning that we tend to be immersed in, in practice. This work will likewise seek to bridge the symbolic and material dimensions of conflict and inequality in order to better illuminate the stakes and the contours of contemporary social struggles.

Finally, in the same way that Latour encouraged the development of a symmetrical anthropology, this work seeks to encourage and model reflexivity—a social scientific principle stating that general theories should also apply to the theorists themselves, as well as the institutions they are embedded in, the actors and causes they support, and so on. For instance, if we want to understand systemic inequality, we must include academics, journalists, social justice activists, progressive politicians, dutiful bureaucrats, nonprofit workers, and others "in the model" alongside those whom symbolic capitalists are less sympathetic toward (such as Trump voters or the dreaded "1 percent"). By folding ourselves and our allies into the analytical picture in this way, we can get a much richer understanding of how social problems arise and persist, and what can be done about them.

The picture that emerges will be complicated and messy—it won't be something that lends itself easily to stories about "good guys" and "bad guys."

Nor will it generate some kind of clear social or political program, concluding in a set of action steps or policy proposals. This text is not intended to provide people with clean answers, but rather to unsettle much of what is taken for granted. What to *do* about the problems and dynamics raised here . . . *that* is something we're going to have to figure out together.

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