Interview with Musa al-Gharbi

Martin Turkis II

Musa al-Gharbi is an American sociologist, assistant professor at the School of Communication and Journalism at Stony Brook University, and author of the much commented-on book [We Have Never Been Woke](#) *(2024). He recently spoke with Martin Turkis II about the legacy of Myron "Mike" Jaworsky, the impact of Michael Polanyi, the x-phi movement, and varieties of wokeness emanating from both the left and the right, among other things.*

Martin Turkis II: In the biography on your website, you write, "I evolved into a pragmatist inspired by William James, Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, and Richard Rorty. Then, under the tutelage of my thesis chair, I emerged from the program as an experimental philosopher." I want to see if you could tell us a little bit about your engagement with Polanyi's work. Who introduced you to Polanyi? What core ideas or insights made an impression on you? Has Polanyi's work shaped your current methodology in any way? Also, would you be able to explain the x-phi movement and how your current sociological output fits into that approach, if at all?

Musa al-Gharbi: Before I was a fancy nerd, I was at Cochise Community College in Sierra Vista, Arizona. I was taking classes off and on for a long time because I really had no idea what to do with my life. I started studying philosophy during this period because I had a crisis of faith and stepped away from Catholicism. Philosophy, as I saw it at the time, was a way to explore the same questions about the structure and nature of reality, the meaning of life, but without the "God stuff." So I started taking classes in philosophy, and I encountered humanities professor Mike Jaworsky, who absolutely changed my life.

He was a son of working-class Ukrainian immigrants who grew up in New Jersey and achieved significant social mobility as a result of his intellectual acumen. He was part of the Harvard Society of Fellows, he worked at the World Bank, and then due to extraordinary life circumstances, he ended up taking a big step away from all that and ended up in this small town in Arizona, where I grew up, and started teaching classes at the local community college. When we crossed paths, I had no vision for my own life, but he saw something in me and developed me into a scholar.

During this period of wandering, I was taking classes off and on while working in the private sector (it took me six years to get my associate's degree). But even when I wasn't formally enrolled in classes, Jaworsky kept me engaged intellectually. We

did private studies of classics, humanities, and philosophy texts. He worked to refine my grasp of Latin. He introduced me to socialist political theory. He encouraged me to pursue ambitious questions, [undertake] risky projects, and to make uncomfortable arguments in the pursuit of the truth. The stamp of Mike Jaworsky is clear on my work. He's a big part of the reason I eventually graduated from community college, flourished at my local land grant university, and ultimately was able to emulate his improbable journey through the Ivy League.

I'm belaboring this point because Jaworsky just recently passed away, and I'd like to honor him for a moment. My debt to him is incalculable. He was the one who introduced me to Michael Polanyi.

Turkis: It sounds like an amazing apprenticeship with an extraordinary teacher, in the full Polanyian sense. Which of Polanyi's works did you start with, if you recall?

al-Gharbi: The first work of Michael Polanyi I read was *The Tacit Dimension*. This is a book I still love. In fact, I teach interpersonal communication, and we just talked about language. I made time to talk a little bit about Polanyi's arguments on how there are important dimensions of reality, knowledge, experience, and skill that are difficult to translate into verbal communication. This was a really important book that shaped my thinking, particularly influencing how I think about symbols and their limitations.

Another work of his that had a big influence on me was *Personal Knowledge*. I continue to cite this book a lot too…it's part of what drew me into the work I do on sociology of knowledge. His arguments about how the questions we explore, the methods we're drawn to, what we count as evidence, how we interpret that evidence–these are all decisions that play a huge role in what it is that scientists discover, and they're each deeply informed by all sorts of non-scientific factors. We aren't randomly assigned our objects and tactics of study; we *choose* them, and there are often really interesting personal stories and motivations that help explain why people gravitate towards the things they do. I'm always really interested in asking people how they got into their work for precisely this reason.

Personal Knowledge also sensitized me to how the constitution of fields shapes the work that those fields produce. This drew me to my work with Heterodox Academy and helped ignite my curiosity about how people's fundamental commitments and values shape the research they focus on.

The post-critical approach Polanyi advocates for in that book and other work influenced me deeply too. You can see this in my own book, *We Have Never Been Woke*, which likewise resists the impulse that dominates many fields to reduce everything to crass materialism–a tendency Polanyi referred to as "moral inversion."

My book shows that people often leverage social justice discourse in the service of their interests, but it rejects understanding "interests" in purely materialistic or individualistic terms. I likewise explicitly reject any insinuation that mobilizing social justice discourse in the pursuit of these interests implies cynicism or bad faith. A big part of what I'm trying to do in the book is push back against this "moral inversion" that pretends as though the highest ends that people care about are money, physical pleasures, and material goods.

It was precisely Polanyi sensitizing me to this inversion that drew me towards other scholars like Bruno Latour. My own book is a play on his *We Have Never Been Modern*, and, although he was one of the pioneers of "critical" approaches to studying science, he ended up adopting a sensibility that was close to Polanyi's. For example, in his essay "Why Critique Has Run Out of Steam?" (*Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 [Winter 2004]), Latour reflects on how the way he and his colleagues studied science was not only non-charitable but also socially pernicious. We cannot and should not try to portray human beings as fundamentally and primarily oriented towards base impulses. And whatever mode of analysis we choose to adopt, we should apply it consistently and reflexively–interpreting the behavior of ourselves and the groups, causes, and institutions we identify with in the same way as we interpret "others."

Turkis: That's fascinating. Since you came upon Polanyi's works *The Tacit Dimension* and *Personal Knowledge* soon after you experienced a crisis of faith, I'm curious about how the conclusions of those books fell for you. Polanyi ends both works with descriptions of an order emerging from the earliest life and ascending to the level of God–an image which made, for example, Marjorie Greene quite uncomfortable. How did this image of ascendance and the analogy of knowing to a Christian's worship of God resonate with you? Did you find it uncomfortable at that time?

al-Gharbi: No, that didn't make me uncomfortable. I wasn't religious at the time, so any heresy implications were irrelevant to me. My main background in philosophy at that point was with theologians, so zooming out to religion and God didn't trouble me either. In fact, that element of his work might be part of why it continues to resonate with me. I'm in a different headspace now than I was then, but those ideas still connect with me today. In fact, Muslim scholars have long made the same kinds of associations, incidentally, between the pursuit of knowledge and religious worship. I published a paper on this.

Turkis: Are there any other works by Polanyi that have made an impact on you?

al-Gharbi: Yes, *The Logic of Liberty*, particularly Polanyi's emphasis on spontaneous order, on the limitations of centralized decision making and universalistic policies–these were deeply influential on my thinking and eventually drew me to thinkers like James Scott, who wrote *Seeing Like a State*, and others like Hayek, who explored the importance of diversity and freedom, and the limitations of scientific knowledge and technocratic planning.

Turkis: That's really interesting. Can you tell us more about the x-phi movement?

al-Gharbi: The Experimental Philosophy (x-phi) movement argues that, although many dimensions of problems can be fruitfully addressed through thinking from the armchair, others turn in a deep way on empirical facts. It is important for philosophers to distinguish which questions are armchair questions and which are empirical questions–and for the latter, it is important for us to conduct research, perhaps alongside scientists, or to consult the best available empirical evidence and to allow that evidence to inform and discipline our philosophical speculations.

My MA thesis was about epistemological questions–"What do we know? In virtue of what? How can we form more reliable knowledge?" These are partly philosophical questions, but they also turn on empirical realities about how people perceive and process reality. And if epistemologists actually want to make progress on some of these questions, it's important that we work with a solid map of the perception and cognition of actual human beings in the real world rather than idealized agents existing nowhere and nowhen.

The arguments I made in that thesis are part of why I'm a sociologist now. Some questions I was interested in couldn't be answered using just philosophical tools; I needed different methods and data.

Turkis: Are there strong and weak forms of x-phi? Do some proponents say, for instance, that non-empirically testable questions should be abandoned?

al-Gharbi: Yes, there are extreme versions of x-phi like that, but that's not my position. Some questions, particularly fundamental ones, can't be investigated empirically yet. We can either abandon them or take a more theoretical approach to them. But I don't think we should just abandon them. Wrestling with questions that are beyond our current ability to answer is part of how we end up building pathways to make actual progress on those questions. In any event, to my mind, the more extreme forms of the x-phi movement that seek to eliminate these questions are no longer really philosophy.

Turkis: It seems like an analogue of moral inversion, a philosophical eliminativism.

al-Gharbi: Exactly.

Turkis: In another line on your website you state, "I was and continue to be allergic to idealism, secular moralism, Utopianism, and positivism." What do you mean by "idealism" here? Are you thinking in terms of political economy, metaphysics, or something else? I'm asking partly because I'm in the confusing position of being an objective idealist in terms of metaphysics as well as an advocate of what many might call a materialist political-economic program (social democracy). So it's an unfortunate set of terminological labels from my perspective, but I'm curious about what you were getting at with that use of "idealism."

al-Gharbi: I suppose what I meant by idealism is a commitment to abstractions that subordinates the actual world of our experience–an approach that tries to mutilate reality to fit a model rather than abandoning our models if they're incompatible with reality. I see the dangers of this in Pope Francis's [critique of ideology](). He said that one of the best definitions we could give of evil in the world would be sacrificing and immiserating living, breathing human beings in the service of abstractions. This, he said, is antithetical to message of Jesus and (by extension) the will of God.

Turkis:
Your publisher (Princeton University Press) [sums up your book]() thus:

> *We Have Never Been Woke* details how the language of social justice is increasingly used to justify this elite–and to portray the losers in the knowledge economy as deserving their lot because they think or say the "wrong" things about race, gender, and sexuality. Al-Gharbi's point is not to accuse symbolic capitalists of hypocrisy or cynicism. Rather, he examines how their genuine beliefs prevent them from recognizing how they contribute to social problems–or how their actions regularly provoke backlash against the social justice causes they champion.

A powerful critique *We Have Never Been Woke* reveals that only by challenging this elite's self-serving narratives can we hope to address social and economic inequality effectively.

The work presented in your book takes shape in the wake of Trump's first term in office, focusing on the political economy of the educated coastal elite–what some might call the PMC (professional managerial class) or "Symbolic Capitalists," which is the term you prefer.[A]

Now Trump is beginning his second term in office, and his administration (through Elon Musk's Department of Governmental Efficiency) is attempting to cut funding in variety of spheres of governmental action. Often, they are explicitly going after DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) as an institutional manifestation of woke.[B]

[A] Al-Gharbi explains the origins of the term "symbolic capitalist" thus in his book:

In his 1979 book Distinction, [Pierre] Bourdieu introduced the idea of symbolic capital. In contrast with more traditional resources associated with wealth, material assets, and so on, Bourdieu defined symbolic capital as the resources available to someone on the basis of honor, prestige, celebrity, consecration, and recognition. These symbolic aspects of social life are intimately bound up with power and wealth, or with material and political needs and aspirations. According to Bourdieu, the roles people are assigned to on the basis of their symbolic capital (or lack thereof) may actually be more important than more conventional economic forces in determining how power is arranged within a society. And regardless of how inequalities come about, it is primarily through symbolic capital that they are legitimized and maintained...Bourdieu highlighted three forms of symbolic capital: cultural, academic, and political. Each of these, he argued, could be converted into the others under the right circumstances–and symbolic capital can also be converted into financial capital (indeed, this is precisely how intellectual or cultural elites "make a living"). (2024, 24-25)

He then explains:

However, here is a quick definition: symbolic capitalists are professionals who traffic in symbols and rhetoric, images and narratives, data and analysis, ideas and abstraction (as opposed to workers engaged in manual forms of labor tied to physical goods and services). For instance, people who work in fields like education, science, tech, finance, media law, consulting, administration, and public policy are overwhelmingly symbolic capitalists. If you're reading this book, there's a strong chance you're a symbolic capitalist. I am, myself, a symbolic capitalist. (Ibid. 26)

[B] Al-Gharbi traces the historical roots of "woke" all the way back to the abolitionist "Wide Awakes" of the antebellum period. As to its more recent use, he notes that

From 1996 through 2016..."politically correct" became increasingly passé (and "woke" began to be used in its stead)...As these two terms seem to serve similar discursive functions, it is likely that these trends were not independent of one another. Since then, things have played out for "woke" much like they did for "political correctness": within activist circles, the term increasingly gained two meanings. In its initial contemporary usage, the term was used to identify someone who was alert to social injustice and committed to resisting it. Gradually, however, others on the left began to use the term pejoratively to refer to peers who were self-righteous and non-self-aware. "Wokeness" came to be associated in these circles with empty symbolic gestures and ideological dogmatism. Eventually, the political Right seized on this intra-Left disagreement and began using "woke" as a catchall for anything associated with the Left that seemed ridiculous or repugnant1 And this began to take the luster off the term. (2024, 28)

He acknowledges that

There is a sense, then, in which this book arrives at an awkward time in "the Discourse": it is now becoming increasingly difficult for people to refer to themselves, their actions, or their behaviors as

Some have been arguing that woke is now dead; however, the Trump administration has begun its own language control program, scrubbing words out of its ideological favor from its websites and renaming the Gulf of Mexico as the "Gulf of America," etc. As a result, now we're seeing articles about the "woke right." On my commute into work today, I listened to the Q&A from a talk you gave at MIT, where you alluded to the fact that symbolic capitalists on the right also engage in the same types of "woke" strategies and have a similar obsession with symbols. What's going on here?

al-Gharbi: One of the things I argue in the book is that a lot of the discussions about what changed culturally in terms of "woke" after 2010 have been based on vibes, anecdotes, or purely speculative stuff. One of the things I tried to do was discipline that conversation by showing that we can actually measure these shifts empirically. Measuring them is helpful because it also allows us to see more specifically who is changing and try to get leverage on whether something like this has happened before. Why do these things happen, and why now?

So, using a lot of these empirical measures, I observed that in the same way we saw this shift after 2010, we seem to have seen another shift after 2021. The timing here is important because what you'll probably see–and what you already do see a little bit– is people like Trump, Elon Musk, and Christopher Rufo taking credit for ending "wokeness." But in fact, the decline was already happening. Part of the reason these folks were able to launch this counter-revolution is because symbolic capitalists were already moderating of their own accord. So there's this mixed-up causal story. It's important to attend to the timing of that.

But one of the contributions of the book, drawing from Latour and others, is this commitment to analytical symmetry. One way I do this in the book is by applying the same lenses and modes of analysis to us, the knowledge producers, that we typically apply to other people. As Andrew Abbott said, people who produce knowledge often analyze others as being driven by base impulses and crass materialism, as being governed by situations outside of their control or awareness. But then we think of ourselves as Kantian individuals who make deliberate de-

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"woke" unironically (as happened with "politically correct" before)–but no clear successor term has emerged yet.

Of course, the current ambivalence in the meaning, usage, and likely future of "wokeness" raises the question of what I mean by "woke" as used in this text. Let me start by marking what I do not intend: "woke" will not be used as a pejorative or a slur here. Beyond this, and perhaps to the consternation of some readers, I will decline to provide an analytical definition of the term. As Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, it is difficult to define even a relatively simple word like "red" in a nontautological way, such that someone who had no experience of "red" would be able to tell from the definition alone what "red" means, and go on to identify it well in the world... (Ibid. 29)

cisions based on principle. So one expression of my commitment to analytical symmetry was to take these lenses–usually applied to others–and apply them to ourselves. And vice-versa.

I also made sure to apply the same type of analysis to symbolic capitalists writ large, irrespective of whether they personally identify as progressive or whether they identify as conservative or anti-woke. And one of the things that I show in the book is that the ways that anti-woke and conservative symbolic capitalists tend to think about politics is actually very similar to the "woke" folks they decry, and very different from most other people in society. Conservative and anti-woke symbolic capitalists, for instance, also tend to think that ideas and images and symbols are very important–so important that they view debates over wokeness as being of world-historical significance. For them these debates are about the survival of Western civilization, and so they think we need to focus on them to the point where they can subordinate some of the more practical concerns that most other people have when they engage in politics.

An example that I give in the book, and that I like to talk about because it's very satisfying to me, is that in a lot of anti-woke circles, you'll hear people say things like, "You know, Ibram X. Kendi is terrible. I support the Martin Luther King Jr. approach to anti-racism." The obvious response is, "Oh, okay, cool. Well–are you organizing or participating in Martin Luther King-style social movements to end poverty, address war, or mitigate persistent racialized inequities?" And the answer to that question is, of course, "No." They're not *doing* anything. They're sitting in their armchairs, criticizing the woke people, and using that as a stand-in for meaningful moral, political, or economic *action*. This is another way of saying that their approach to politics is pretty much the same as the people they're criticizing–a bunch of online discourse stuff in lieu of doing things "in the world."

You can also see this now that there's a new sheriff in town in terms of how the Trump administration is handling things and some of the things they're prioritizing. So, yeah, an example that I talked about at MIT is the way that progressives–and this is one of the things that annoyed people about progressives during the George Floyd period–dedicated immense effort to changing the names of schools from being named after Confederate generals to naming them after people like Rosa Parks.

Turkis: Or even [Abraham Lincoln](#) in some cases.

al-Gharbi:
Right–even Honest Abe wasn't exempt. And the reason this was annoying to many regular people is because it seemed like a misplaced effort.

Questions like this are especially striking with someone like George Washington, who was genuinely morally complicated. He had [slave teeth](#) in his mouth as part of his dentures, for God's sake. But still, taking a figure like Washington, with all his faults: if the only people who are allowed to be valorized or have institutions named after them are people who are pure and perfect, well, then no one qualifies–not Rosa Parks, not Mother Teresa, not Martin Luther King Jr. You just couldn't name things after actual people. Because actual people are complicated.

That said, what annoyed people about these "woke" rebranding moves wasn't that people loved the Confederates and hated Rosa Parks. It was simply that, if you ask people about what their concerns are in general, in their community, with respect to their kids' educations, or even with respect to the specific schools in question, the name on the front of the building would never come up. It's not something that matters to them much at all, certainly not relative to other things people could focus attention and resources on.

In contrast, symbolic capitalists tend to focus *first* on things like the name of the building. And we (symbolic capitalists) spend all this effort and these resources to changing the name of the building, and then we just dip and move on to the next culture war struggle. People who live in that community still face the same set of problems and difficulties. Nothing changed for them despite our social justice "victory" in changing the name on the building. This is the kind of thing that grates on people: why are we expending so much effort on this symbolic stuff instead of addressing these other, more concrete problems that we have?

And we're seeing this same symbolic obsession on the right in the new Trump era. It is not only *progressive* symbolic capitalists expending significant amounts of attention, time, and resources on these issues but right-leaning symbolic capitalists as well. For example, eliminating the Black Lives Matter square in Washington DC.

In my opinion, Black Lives Matter was a grifty organization that misused a lot of money and didn't necessarily represent the expressed will and interests of African Americans writ large in the United States. BLM probably had a net negative impact on actual criminal justice reform. But setting that aside, the idea that the Trump administration should be dedicating a lot of resources to having a bunch of workers, at non-trivial expense, remove the words "Black Lives Matter" from the physical plaza–I mean, you can argue that the money perhaps shouldn't have been spent to create the Black Lives Matter Square in the first place, in the middle of Washington DC, but at this point that's a sunk cost. It's money already spent. So to spend still *more* to do this kind of erasure project…it accomplishes *what*, exactly, for ordinary people? And then there's the administration's efforts to change Mount Denali to Mount McKinley, or the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America–this is the same kind of annoying, purely symbolic thing that seems important to people like

us (symbolic capitalists), just being executed by the political "right" instead of the "left." They think these kinds of moves are actually significant, that these are worthy ways to dedicate time, resources, and energy, *because they share the same basic mentality as the folks they criticize*.

Or consider the new Defense Secretary: during the Great Awokening, there were efforts to rename military bases that were named after Confederate generals and other, you know, non-ideal historical figures. And so Hegseth said, "You know what? We're going to change the names back." In some ways, he did this kind of subtly, like renaming Fort Bragg after a different person whose last name was also Bragg. In other cases, they just want to roll it back to the original name. But this is a double loser politically, because not only are you focused on this symbolic stuff at the expense of addressing people's material concerns but, if you're changing the name of something back to that of a Confederate general, you're directionally out of step with the public–most of the American public agrees that if we were going to name something after someone, it would be better to name it after Rosa Parks than a Confederate general, right?

So, in this case, you're going in the opposite direction of what most Americans would think is the right one. And you're also focusing on symbols over substance. There's not a big winning constituency in America that thinks Rosa Parks is over-rated and that the Confederates just haven't gotten their proper due. There is just not a huge swath of persuadable voters who would be impressed with the administration prioritizing this kind of thing over addressing other issues. And so these tendencies of the "woke right" will probably start to grate on folks for the same reason that the progressive symbolic obsessions irritated normie voters. Mainly, they have fish to fry that seem more important to them than whether or not a couple of blocks in DC say Black Lives Matter or whether or not a mountain in a place they're never going to go to has a new name.

Turkis: That makes perfect sense. So, in light of your research–which provides a more quantitative and measurable basis to discussions about these kinds of cultural phenomena–where do you see the culture and views on political economy heading?

You've mentioned that prior to the ascension to power of Trump's second administration, there was already a tendency to moderate the woke impulse manifesting itself within the symbolic classes who lean left. Where do you see that going? Is it likely to continue? Is there a chance that the symbolic classes would say to themselves, "Enough of these culture wars. Let's address some material concerns. Maybe social democracy would be a better way to go"?

For instance, in one part of your book you give a list of concrete things that universities could do relatively easily to materially benefit indigenous people, noting that

> [Land acknowledgments] explicitly recognize particular tribes as the "rightful" custodians of the land that higher education institutions occupy, yet they typically offer nothing beyond symbolic gestures to restore the land to the named tribes or to compensate them for its continued use. It would be well within any university's capacities to, for instance, guarantee admission, void tuition, and provide aid to all confirmed members of the named tribes. This would leverage the university to directly aid the dispossessed without significant disruption to university operations or finances. However, most schools who issue land acknowledgments do not even take basic steps like these. If they were more ambitious or dedicated, universities could pay rent to named tribes for continued occupation of "their" land or else provide dividends on their endowments to confirmed members of named tribes, allowing them to share in the wealth generated by the continued occupation of "their" land. Yet most universities seem to have little appetite to render themselves more literally accountable for the debts they claim to owe. Again, the symbolic gesture is made to stand in for any actual restitution–much like individual confessions of "privilege." Institutional lamentations about racism typically function the same way. (al-Gharbi 2024, 287-288)

But universities don't do those things–instead, they make symbolic land acknowledgments. And those concrete things that institutions of higher education could do instead of (or in addition to) land acknowledgments all seem to me to fall broadly into that social democratic tradition in the sense that they offer material educational benefits to a wider range of people.

Do you think that there is a chance that the symbolic classes will shift their focus away from symbolic gestures to something more productive?

al-Gharbi: I think some of these unfortunate aspects of the symbolic classes–the kind of social isolation that separates us from other people who aren't part of our class, the condescending attitude we often adopt towards other people's priorities and concerns, the sense that we know better what everyone should focus on–I think that kind of stuff is probably not going away.

As an example, our identitarianism–the intense focus on race, gender, and sexuality, and so on–goes back a hundred years. The first Great Awokening in the

1920s was very focused on what we would today describe as intersectionality. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* George Orwell says things like, "One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words 'Socialism' and 'Communism' draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist, and feminist in England." Anyone who identified with any niche cause tried to lump all of these missions under the auspices of "socialism," just assuming that all good things naturally travel together without conflict, eventually subsuming the original practical aims of the socialist movement, replacing it with this hodgepodge of purely symbolic and highly controversial "social justice" gesturing.

As I detail in the book, the first Great Awokening, in the 1920s and 30s, included the first social movements for gay rights, the first wave of feminism, the first wave of anti-racism, and so on. A lot of these dimensions of our "social justice" activism go back to the foundation of the symbolic professions. They're probably going to be pretty durable features going forward unless and until there's some kind of radical restructuring of these professions or of how we justify our role in society.

That said, you do see these trends of moderation, where the focus on these themes, and the ways that we engage in advancing these goals, does vary in intensity. So there are periods where we become a lot more militant about mocking, censoring, deriding, and humiliating anyone who disagrees with us about these issues, and where we become really dogmatic and uniform, and things like that. And then there are times and issues where that's less the case, where there's more discussion and nuance, and there's more reckoning with trade-offs and things like that. And so I think we're entering one of those lacunae now.

Going forward, though, one of the things that this book would predict is that this Great Awokening is not going to be the last one. If we find ourselves in another situation where we have an acute overproduction of elites paired with popular immiseration, you might expect to see another Awokening develop. And, interestingly enough, here's a case where some of the moves by the Trump administration might actually hasten another Awokening in the name of fighting "wokeness." If they're laying off large enough numbers of knowledge economy workers and creating a more precarious labor situation for a lot of symbolic capitalists and aspiring symbolic capitalists, and especially if that also pairs with some kind of significant economic collapse or turbulence for normie Americans–perhaps as a result of things like the tariffs or some other sort of inconsistent economic policy–then we might see another Great Awokening sooner than we might have expected. So in that sense the Trump administration could actually be hastening the next Great Awokening, even as it institutionalizes and codifies its own forms of right-wing woke.

Turkis: What kind of time frame would you estimate for that, if it were to come to pass? I know that would be tricky to predict, but what sort of lag time tends to elapse between Awokenings?

al-Gharbi: The gap between the first and the second one was about thirty to thirty-five years, and then the gap between the second one and the third one was shorter. It was about twenty years.

And then from the third Awokening to the present would have been about fifteen years. So actually, it seems like Awokenings are recurring more rapidly as time goes on.

Another thing that's really interesting is that the role of symbolic capitalists in society has evolved across the different cycles. So, for instance, during the first Great Awokening, symbolic capitalists were around 3 percent of workers. Today, we make up about a third. So we're still a minority, but a much larger minority. And not only that, but the level of influence we have over society is much larger, and we're concentrated in a smaller number of hubs and institutions that are all tied together in these tight intersecting webs in a way that was less true before–the nonprofit industrial complex which is interwoven with the media and journalism and academia, for instance.

And so, if you have a destabilizing event that occurs with 3 percent of workers who are dispersed around the country, that hits in a very different way than if you have this hugely destabilizing event that affects a third of workers who have a lot more influence over society than ever before and are also concentrated in these very tight networks of institutions, and so on. These episodes might become more destabilizing as we go. And so, that's another thing to keep one's eye on. If we were looking forward at what to expect for future Awokenings, we might expect them to be more destabilizing or severe than the current one. This will depend on whether current trends persist and symbolic capitalists continue to make up the same or a growing share of workers. If the increasing concentration continues, if the growing influence continues, then we might expect the next Awokening to be even more destabilizing.

Turkis: I'm in public education, and a lot of my students, especially in the honors classes, are aspiring symbolic capitalists. They wouldn't call themselves that, but that's clearly what many are aspiring to be. We read Matthew Crawford's article "Shop Class as Soulcraft." At the end of that essay he advises students graduating from high school to both learn a manual trade and also go to university to pursue a liberal arts education. Do you have advice for young people who are aspiring to be

symbolic capitalists right now? If so, I think it might be quite interesting because you have a much longer and more circuitous road to where you're currently at than most academics. You didn't graduate high school as class valedictorian, go straight to an Ivy League, and then start writing books as a twenty-six-year-old or something. You worked as a shoe salesman, had long breaks in your formal education, etc.

al-Gharbi: Well, I'm always leery about providing advice. But one bit of advice that I would give people is to seriously consider doing work in the trades, in part because in a lot of the trades, you can actually get really stable pay. You can earn a decent living and be able to do a lot of the things that are important to you–if what's important to you is being able to start a family, provide for a family, live a decent, comfortable life, and things like that. If you don't have any huge symbolic aspirations, then maybe a trade would be a better path to a decent life than trying to enter the symbolic professions, which are highly competitive and therefore can be highly destabilizing. I'll also say that doing some of this work in the trades, in the service industries, it's actually, in my mind, per capita, objectively more important.

An analogy I use a lot is this: if an alien came down to Earth and unleashed an electromagnetic pulse that wiped out the bottom 95 percent of academic research, most of us would never notice the difference. But if those same aliens abducted 95 percent of mechanics, we'd notice immediately. Society would struggle to function. You can actually do a lot of good in everyday jobs. Direct and practical good. One thing I really miss–now that I'm a "fancy nerd" instead of a shoe salesman–is precisely this.

When I was a shoe salesman, it wasn't a prestigious job, and the pay wasn't great, but I spent all day, every day, helping people. They came in with concrete problems, and I helped them find solutions. Someone would need shoes for their wedding that matched their dress. A parent needed shoes for their kid starting school. Someone else wanted to get healthy and needed new gym shoes. Real problems, real people–and I could help. And they'd often come back to talk about how what I helped them find actually worked for them. You'd build these relationships over time. I'd punch out at the end of the day having spent the day making people's lives a little better.

I also miss the ability to "punch out." My shift would end, and I'd be done with work...which isn't my reality now. I'm always "on," even in my sleep, mentally processing more complex and often heavy issues. Back then, there was a clear line between work and life, which I think is healthy.

Selling shoes, and the other types of service work I did, wasn't glamorous or well renumerated, but I was helping people all the time. And honestly, I don't feel that way about my work today. I miss that.

Turkis: Well, your current work has certainly helped me to think through some important matters, and I'm sure it is helping others as well. Thank you so much for spending some time talking through these issues with us here at *Tradition and Discovery*.

References

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