

Review - The Wokisme Controversy

Written by Alain Policar

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ALAIN POLICAR, SEP 12 2025

The Wokisme Controversy: The Americanization of Debates on Identity, Race, and Gender in France By Hervé-Thomas Campagne Bloomsbury, 2025

Drawing on his remarkable knowledge of the literature surrounding the woke culture debate, Hervé-Thomas Campagne, professor at the University of Maryland (School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures), expands on the conclusions presented in a previous article. He examined recent French controversies on issues of race, gender, and political identity and showed that debates on the influence of American-style wokism raise essential questions about the nature of contemporary French society, culture, and politics.

In *The Wokisme Controversy*, the author, who is heavily influenced by the work of Jérôme Fourquet and Christophe Guilly, describes a fragmented nation forced to adapt to an increasingly globalized and multicultural world order and confronted with a new form of American soft power that is both fascinating and worrying, among the political elite and throughout the social fabric. H.-T. Campagne, a specialist in Franco-American relations, seeks to interpret the controversy surrounding wokism in light of the ambivalent and unstable relationship with the “American enemy,” according to the title of Philippe Roger’s seminal book (only cited in the bibliography).

The material used is rich and diverse. The works of both anti-woke and woke authors (the validity of this term is not questioned) are cited in detail (although some important works in the latter category, albeit few in number, are omitted). Similarly, the genealogy of the dispute is precisely described, particularly the transition from Islamo-leftism to wokism. And, more unusually, the reader is provided with a rich repertoire of American reactions (both conservative and progressive) to the French controversy.

While the author offers abundant descriptions (no doubt because the book is aimed at a readership outside France), we are left somewhat wanting as regards interpretation. I will limit myself to examining two aspects and, in conclusion, to exploring what is unfortunately missing from the book.

First, the state of French society is not sufficiently nuanced. The only authors cited belong to the “decliniste” school of thought. This school emphasizes “archetypalization” or “ghettoization,” in other words, a France torn apart by individualism and communitarianism. Yet, surveys by Crédoc (Centre de Recherche pour l’Etude et l’Observation des conditions de vie) present a different picture, more of a mosaic than an archipelago. Nevertheless, we can agree with the author’s idea, essential in the context of his investigation, that the republican melting pot, “blind to differences,” has been deeply weakened.

Secondly (and this criticism is more central), while analyzing the controversy over wokism in the context of Franco-American political and cultural relations is an original idea, one might wonder whether it was necessary to devote such lengthy discussion (chapter 3 is, in effect, a book within a book) to it without offering any interpretative hypotheses, except for one: it is when relations improve that the influence of wokism in France is attributed to Americanization. Assuming this is true, it is difficult to understand why a detailed analysis of relations between the two countries is necessary in order to propose this to the reader for consideration. This view of wokism in France as a new form of anti-Americanism would have deserved better substantiation, especially since one of the avenues

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avored by anti-wokists is to attribute crucial responsibility to French Theory. However, as the name suggests, its protagonists, even if their ideas spread to the United States, are French.

The most significant drawback is the absence of hypotheses about the meaning of anti-wokism. Admittedly, the author clearly shows his preference: it is up to France to come to terms with its colonial past, and there is everything to fear from an electoral victory (in the 2027 presidential election) of anti-woke forces. However, he could have gone further and asked why some parties have found it necessary to fight against wokism, sometimes in the name of rationality or even progressivism. And, in doing so, to highlight a paradox: expressions of awareness of injustice and attention to inequality, which are indicators of a healthy democracy, are often viewed with contempt. This paradox highlights a key feature of reactionary strategy: the desire to increase confusion and blur the lines between different categories of discourse.

How did “wokism,” an exclusively polemical term, come to refer to a chimera whose main function is to stigmatize democratic ideals? How did a hetero-designation with elusive contours of meaning come to prevail, leading people to believe in the existence of a new danger? Wokism is impossible to find, not only because no one claims to belong to a movement bearing this name, but above all because the traits supposed to define it are so general that they allow perfectly distinct theories to be grouped under the same label.

Should we consider that anti-wokism fulfills the conditions for a kind of camouflage of its political logic better than previous quarrels (*political correctness*, Islamo-leftism)? Undoubtedly, especially since the undefined scope of the accusation stems from its very nature: it is only valid in terms of the function it fulfills and is in no way intended to describe reality. It serves to euphemize, or even deny, the reality of discrimination or, at the very least, of not recognizing its nature and causes.

Those who resort to the myth of wokism create a bogeyman on which to focus anger, diverting attention from what should really be feared: ecological disaster, the normalization of the far right, and the corresponding prospect of it coming to power. The prosecution of wokism thus appears to be a genuine threat to democracy. Faced with this threat, the author is optimistic, given recent initiatives by public authorities to take ethnic diversity into account. We can only hope that this optimism is well-founded.

Ultimately, wokism, while not an identifiable phenomenon, is a word used to steer the debate away from issues related to discrimination and, perhaps above all, as Bourdieu had sensed, immigration. H.-T. Campagne certainly agrees with this conclusion: it would have been most welcome if he had stated it explicitly. But, to repeat, his book provides a wealth of information for all those who care about Franco-American relations, in other words, most of us.

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Review - The Wokisme Controversy

Written by Alain Policar

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About the author:

Alain Policar is an associate professor of social sciences and holds a PhD in political science. He taught at the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences in Limoges from 1988 to 2014. Since 2008, he has been an associate researcher at the Center for Political Research at Sciences Po (Cevipof). His research focuses on political liberalism, racism, cosmopolitanism, universalism, and anti-wokism. He is the author of numerous opinion pieces in the press (notably in *Le Monde* and *Libération*).