
On Academic Activism: A French Perspective

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In this article, I will try to offer both a French perspective on academic activism and a perspective based on my field of competence, that is, the social sciences and humanities. The social sciences and humanities differ from the natural sciences in many respects, but they also share some common properties, among which the most important is their common institutional belonging to the academic field. Nowadays the impact of wokism has added a common concern for the autonomy and quality of our working conditions.

The Peril for Science has a Name: Wokism

Wokism is a kind of activism. According to its views, all the work done at a university should be oriented towards a political concern for the modification of the social world. But we, researchers and teachers, are paid to produce knowledge and to transmit it. This is a goal that has nothing to do with politics, even if, of course, our productions can be used to support political decisions and political causes – and most of us, including myself, are happy about this, provided of course that such uses are in line with ethical criteria. The academic arena is not the political arena, and there should not be confusion between one and the other.

This is why activism should have no place in the academic world. What I called ‘academio-activism’ in my pamphlet *Ce que le militantisme fait à la recherche* (Heinich 2021a) is an attack on the autonomy of science and a misappropriation of public funds. Indeed, we are not paid by our fellow citizens to be activists in the frame of our academic positions: being an activist or, at least, a citizen, should be part of our civic activity – not of our professional activity. Therefore, this militancy at the university leads to a drastic decrease of the intellectual level, and to the incapacity of so many students today to understand what real research is.

Wokism, being a form of activism, constitutes a new version of a phenomenon widely attested in the academic world during previous generations, namely, the contamination of knowledge by ideology. By deliberately confusing the scientific arena with the political arena, it claims the submission of the scientific aim of the production and transmission of knowledge to a political aim of defence of the ‘exploited’ (Marxist version), of the ‘oppressed’ or ‘colonized’ (Third Worldist version), of the ‘dominated’ (critical sociology version) or of the ‘discriminated’ (woke version): a scope which is perfectly legitimate in the political arena, but contrary to the rules of upholding scientific objectivity in the academic arena.

The success of wokism is largely due to the fact that it defends causes that are rightly associated with progress and justice, but – and this is where it poses a problem – by (1) introducing them into arenas where they have no place; (2) making them systematic or even exclusive grids of perception of the world; and (3) using means that end up distorting them.

This ‘academically-activism’ particularly concerns the social sciences and the humanities – sociology, political science, anthropology, history, philosophy – because these disciplines are by definition much more permeable to ideologies than the natural sciences. And it also concerns, in particular, France, for reasons that I will quickly mention before turning to two assets that French people can use in order to confront it.

The Permeability of French Social Sciences to Wokism

I have attempted to diagnose the modalities and effects of ‘academically-activism’ in two short publications in which I highlighted the different periods of activist influence in universities and, specifically, in the social sciences (cf. Heinich 2021a, 2021b). I drew attention not only to the Marxist moment of the 1950s–1960s and the leftist moment of the 1970s, but also, since the middle of the 1990s, Bourdieu’s ‘critical sociology’ (the turning point being his collective book *La Misère du monde*, published in 1993) associated with the new radical left activism; and finally, more recently – since the end of the 2010s – the ‘woke’ moment imported from the Anglo-American world.

Across the Atlantic, the woke ideology is largely and explicitly inspired by the French thinkers of ‘deconstruction’, who largely fed the so-called ‘post-modern’ turn from the 1990s onwards: Derrida for the deconstruction of discourses, Foucault for the deconstruction of powers, Lyotard for the deconstruction of the notion of truth, etc. Imported for the most part into the literature departments of North American universities, they came back to us as an export commodity under the valorizing label ‘French theory’ (cf. Heinich 2010, 2021c). This fashionable intellectual trend left an extremely powerful and, in my opinion, deleterious imprint on the Anglo-American academic world because it contributed to blurring the boundary between science and opinion, between objective, reliable knowledge and subjective, contextual points of view: a boundary which has to be upheld by what German sociologist Max Weber called the ‘axiological neutrality’ of researchers and teachers – their capacity to suspend their personal opinions in the frame of their academic activity (Weber 1965).

The way was often left wide open for the replacement of academic production and transmission of knowledge by academic activism.

This confusion between academic knowledge and activism, or between science and ideology, gave rise to the idea that it would be legitimate to consider as genuine academic disciplines (such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, . . .), the ‘studies’ dedicated to the description and denunciation of all forms of discrimination, whether they are based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc. Hence the creation and growth of ‘gender studies’ as academic support for feminist activism; ‘decolonial studies’ as academic support for anti-racist activism and the fight against the said ‘Islamophobia’; ‘intersectional studies’ at the crossroads of feminism and anti-racism; ‘gay studies’ as academic support for the fight against homophobia, among which the fight against ‘transphobia’ is becoming particularly visible in the public space through violent actions.

All these ‘studies’ are based not on academic disciplines, with their conceptual frames, methods, and intellectual traditions, but on the study of so-called ‘communities’, defined by the fact that they would systematically suffer discrimination. This means a direct import of unquestioned slogans, and a drastic reduction of the corpus of concepts, of which only ‘domination’, ‘discrimination’ and ‘patriarchy’ remain. As a result, ‘studies’ destroy the traditional architecture of disciplines (sociology, history, anthropology, political sciences, philosophy, etc.) by replacing them with an organization of knowledge centred on the sole notion of discrimination, that is, on a political agenda. Hence the catastrophic loss of disciplinary knowledge, the dramatic reduction of conceptual tool kits and, on a global level, the impoverishment of large parts of the social sciences.

It is this conjunction of French and American trends that has led to the current confusion between the academic and the political arenas: a confusion which paved the way for wokism. It is often said that the ‘woke’ phenomenon comes from the United States. That is true. But it would not have had this success if it had not been grafted onto a form of militancy regarding the relationship to knowledge that essentially came from critical sociology and the political uses of French authors such as Derrida, Foucault and Bourdieu. This is why the French heritage of the theories of deconstruction, combined with a certain Americanophile snobbery, largely contributes to explaining the permeability of the French academic world to this North American influence.

Three Major Differences Between Wokism and Prior Forms of Academic Activism

There is a phenomenon closely linked to wokism, namely, what is commonly called ‘cancel culture’, which also originated on the other side of the Atlantic (Heinich 2021d). Cancel culture legitimizes the prohibition or cancellation of any public speech that is allegedly ‘problematic’ or ‘offensive’ to a minority. Such a conception is unsuited to French law, which frames freedom of expression in such a way that

only courts are qualified to prohibit any discourse, unlike in the United States and Canada, where the constitutional absolutization of this freedom leads to its limitations being taken over by activist groups. However, even in France, this movement has recently given rise to various actions of threat or even violence against the presentation of lectures, training courses or public performances, which have resulted in their cancellation (Heinich 2021e).

Based on the idea that it would be legitimate to restrict the freedom of expression of others if what they say does not correspond to one's conception of the good, cancel culture means a violation of the freedom of expression: violation which, from a democratic point of view, obviously constitutes a major regression. This is an important difference to the activist academic movements of the post-1960s leftism, which fostered all kinds of freedom, be it of expression or of sexual life.

There are two other major differences between wokism and near past activism. The first of these differences is that the 'woke' movement, meaning a systematic awakening to discrimination, is a current form of the Protestant awakening theology (Braunstein 2022). It is important to understand that we are thus confronted with a kind of individual guilt politics. For example, the term 'white privilege' is part of this form of guilt-tripping of individuals and blacklisting of those whose beliefs are not in agreement with the 'woke' movement. This is a kind of religious intolerance or, as my French colleague Pierre-André Taguieff (2022b) put it, 'punitive neo-puritanism'. So, one should not overlook the affinities of this 'woke' movement with a religious and more specifically Protestant sensibility.

The third difference between nowadays wokism and past activism is that, far from being marginal or limited to small groups, it benefits from the support of institutions and, in particular, of European institutions as far as research support is concerned, which is allocated as a priority to anti-discrimination themes, to the detriment of many other research fields. So more and more calls for research projects, at the French and at the European levels, are linked to these themes. Our colleagues who do not wish to work on the new standard topics – gender, intersectionality, racism, homophobia, etc. – have difficulties finding funds for their projects or fellowships for their students. A colleague of mine, a French anthropologist specializing in Islamism, testified that she can no longer get funds for her work because all the research themes focusing on Islam are immediately reinterpreted as 'the fight against Islamophobia'.

And finally, in the United States, the woke movement is driven not only by academic institutions but also by big companies, particularly the GAFAs (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon), which are imposing mandatory training related to discrimination. This is obviously one more big difference with the leftist activism we were used to 40 years ago.

Resisting Wokism (1): The Universalist Tradition

However, France has assets to resist this phenomenon, as evidenced by the number of columns published in various newspapers against wokism (Bergeaud-Blackler

et al. 2022; Braunstein 2021; Rastier 2022;), and the number of books on the topics, some of them by important publishing houses (Biasoni 2022; Braunstein 2022; Salvador 2022; Szlamowicz 2022; Taguieff 2021; Taguieff 2022a; Taquin 2021). This resistance rests on two main assets, as we will now see.

‘Studies’ (gender studies, race studies, gay studies, disabled studies, etc.) and ‘cancel culture’ convey the idea that people should be defined once and for all by identities built on well-differentiated communities, and that the members of those communities should have the right to control what can be said about them or used to represent them, so as to avoid ‘cultural appropriation’. It means that wokism embodies a communitarian conception of citizenship, where individuals are considered not as members of the large ‘community of citizens’ or even ‘common humanity’, but as belonging to restricted ‘communities’, constituted on the basis of essentialized properties such as gender, sexual orientation, religion or skin colour. This ‘identity politics’, as Laurent Dubreuil (2019) named it (or, in French, ‘identitarisme’), akin to a communitarian multiculturalism, arose in the previous generation, mostly in the United States. It focuses exclusively on discrimination by reducing any individual to his or her status as dominant or dominated, discriminating or discriminated, whether by gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. It is thus closely connected to activism through various collective movements: women, gays, people of colour, etc.

From a political point of view, it is an attack on the value of universalism because it reduces individuals to a community affiliation. Wokism imposes the perception, designation and treatment of persons according to a rigid identity frame, whatever the contexts. This means that there is no chance to suspend identity assignments, no possibility to state that, for example, being a woman may be relevant in certain contexts but not in others, and likewise with respect to our sexual orientation or the colour of our skin. Under these conditions, social peace would be achieved through the affirmation of these so-called ‘communities’ (this is the multi-cultural model used in the Anglo-American world) and not through the suspension of affiliations within the civic arena, as is the case with the model of republican universalism proper to the French conception of citizenship.

This is the reason why French universalism, guaranteed by the Constitution, acts as a possible safeguard against woke communitarianism. Let me give you an example. On 21 November 2017, Jean-Michel Blanquer, Minister of National Education, condemned the organization of ‘non-mixed workshops’ (‘ateliers en non-mixité’), that is, meetings whose participants should be only coloured people, or only women, thus excluding white people or males, as well as the use of the terms ‘racialized’ (‘racisés’) and ‘non-racialized’ (‘non racisés’) because, he said, ‘in the name of the so-called anti-racism,’ it ‘obviously conveys racism’ since it sorts people according to their race. The same minister, after the beheading of the teacher Samuel Paty by an Islamist in October 2020, publicly denounced the ‘*Islamogauchistes*’ (Islamist-leftists) tendencies rampant at the University – in which he was supported by a column signed by a hundred academics (including myself) published in the influential newspaper *Le Monde* (Aberdam *et al.* 2020).

The universalist tradition is particularly anchored in the attachment to a value which is consubstantial with it: '*laïcité*', which does not mean 'secularism' nor 'atheism', but rather, the abstention of any commitment to religion in the civic arena. The same Jean-Michel Blanquer affirmed this attachment to *laïcité* as soon as he arrived at the Ministry by creating a 'Conseil des sages de la laïcité' (Council of Wise People for *Laïcité*). This still vivid presence of the universalist tradition, even at the very core of the State, is a reason why the woke phenomenon arouses reservations and even frontal opposition beyond the academic world in which it originated, through associations for the defence of *laïcité* such as the 'Printemps Républicain', the 'Comité Laïcité République' or 'Unité laïque'. In the academic arena, the 'Observatoire des idéologies identitaires et du décolonialisme' (Observatory of Identity Ideologies and Decolonialism), created in January 2021 (Conseil Scientifique de l'association LAIC 2021), has become the main collective which fights against wokism. One year after its creation, it organized a conference at the Sorbonne named 'Après la déconstruction' (After Deconstruction), which marked an act of resistance to wokism in the academic world and was widely criticized as such. The Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer was invited to introduce it, and the President of the 'Comité laïcité république' to conclude it (Hénin *et al.* 2023).

This prevalence of a political sensitiveness to universalism and '*laïcité*', fundamentally opposed to communitarian wokism, has made France a privileged target of the war that Islamists are waging on Western societies, and which was witnessed by the bloody attacks of 2015 (in Paris) and 2016 (in Nice). In such conditions, the Islamist offensive, based on the denunciation of the discrimination of which Muslims would be victims in France, finds obvious sympathies and even complicity among woke propagandists, quick to refuse any condemnation of Islamism in the name of the fight against an alleged 'Islamophobia'. This is the principle of the tendency called 'Islamogauchisme' ('Islamism-leftism'). This collusion between wokism and Islamism, well highlighted by specialists (cf. Vidino 2022), fortunately contributes to slowing down the woke movement in a country which is particularly sensitive to Islamist terrorism.

It should also be noted that, in France, the universalist tradition is present on both the right and the left wings of the political spectrum. On the left, it belongs to the social-democratic, reformist tendency, also called the 'Republican left', which is far less audible today than the extreme left or 'radical left', but nevertheless embodies a very old sensitivity among progressists. This is another advantage, because, unlike in the USA, where opposition to wokism is clearly assimilated to the right or even to the extreme right, in France this opposition is also carried by left-wing personalities, and sometimes manages to express itself in media considered progressive, such as *Marianne*, *Charlie Hebdo*, *L'OBS*, *Franc-Tireur* and others.

However, wokists often allege that fighting for universalism would be a right-wing position, or even worse. But this is a mere strategy not to respond to our arguments: 'You are right-wing, and so we don't listen to what you have to say'. In doing so, they forget or pretend to ignore that in France the republican left defends universalist values, freedom of expression and *laïcité*, together with equality of rights.

One of our battles today is precisely to avoid being assimilated with the right, and to affirm that opponents to wokism can also belong to the left.

Resisting Wokism (2): The Status of a Civil Servant

The conference ‘Après la déconstruction’ that we organized at the Sorbonne would probably have been unthinkable in the United States, where wokism is firmly established and supported by academic institutions. However, French academics benefit from a relative freedom to protest against this combined hold of academic activism and communitarianism, as shown by the abundance of public statements on the subject. This freedom is widely due to the status of *civil servant* bestowed upon French researchers in public organizations and teachers at universities.

Allow me to share a personal anecdote on this subject. Invited in September 2022 to give a keynote at a conference for cultural policy specialists in Antwerp, I chose to address the risks of academic activism (Heinich 2022). My talk was met with contrasting reactions, ranging from the loudest rejection to the warmest approval. Several colleagues from all over the world came to congratulate and thank me, in words that made me cringe: ‘I can’t believe you would say that! It’s the first time we’ve heard someone defend this position in a university!’ I concluded that a public position, which in France requires no more than a little determination, elsewhere would require one to risk tenure, and therefore one’s salary. This probably explains why France is, it seems, one of the countries where resistance to wokism is the most developed.

And indeed, what do French academics have to fear in trying to counter the woke wave? Our young colleagues do indeed risk marginalization, exclusion from funding programmes, and even the slowing down of their careers. Many of whom write to me to share their regret at not being able to publicly support my positions even though they share them, and one can understand their caution. But those who have, for the most part, their careers behind them, do not risk much – the animosity of colleagues for whom they have no esteem anyway, and, at worst, being put on the back burner when their teachings are suppressed, and being ostracized by a left-wing press that thus tramples on its historic values. It is unpleasant, of course, but it is not tragic. The approval of colleagues whose opinion matters to us, combined with our intimate feeling of working for a just cause, more than compensate for these inconveniences.

This is why, in France, we can still oppose wokism through the resistance we owe both to scientific principles and to universalist values.

We Can Resist While Remaining Honest Scholars

However, at the same time, we must be careful not to confuse our own militant productions – for example, the columns I as well as other academics often publish in newspapers – with our scientific output. I am sometimes criticized for criticizing academic activism while doing anti-woke activism myself. But I never publish

committed papers in the same media as my academic productions: what I submit to scientific journals has nothing to do with what I submit to newspapers. This distinction is fundamental, since it is the condition for Weberian axiological neutrality. This is why we have to keep this distinction in mind if we want to fight against the harmful influence of activism in the university without becoming ‘academo-activists’ ourselves.

Meanwhile, as is the case with many colleagues involved in the same concern for the autonomy and quality of science, I try to continue my work as a researcher with all the rigour I can muster. I keep on hoping that it is by publishing good articles and exciting books that we can persuade students that there is something other than the distressing discourse they are offered by ‘academo-activists’. And finally, I try to encourage all my colleagues to spread those ideas, as I am doing here, hoping that reason will finally prevail.

Summary

This article focuses on ‘wokism’ in Academia and the perils it generates regarding the quality of scientific production given its strong collusion with activism and the blurring of the boundary between knowledge and opinion or ideology. This article analyses the intellectual reasons for the permeability of French humanities and social sciences to wokism, together with the assets French scholars possess in order to resist wokism: first, the universalist tradition, opposed to wokist communitarianism; and second, the status of a civil servant and the freedom it offers. Finally, it advocates a firm distinction between academic production and politically committed public positions as a condition to remaining an honest scholar.

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