

What about Free Speech in the West?

Lecture by Ayaan Hirsi Ali at the University of Lucerne, Switzerland, 25th of October 2022

Abstract

Freedom of speech is under increasing pressure in Western countries, says author and political scientist Ayaan Hirsi Ali at the 20th Reichmuth & Co Lecture at the University of Lucerne. What was a free, tolerant, and open society 30 years ago, became much more intolerant and divided. The biggest threat to free speech today comes from "Wokeism", says Hirsi Ali. The key points of her speech were:

- In the past, the western world stood up against intolerance, for example when the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against Rushdie in 1989 and called for his death over purported blasphemy in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. This has changed fundamentally in the first years of the 21st century. According to Hirsi Ali, there were increasing numbers of voices showing a certain degree of understanding for the concerns of radical Islamic minorities.
- Today, the threat to freedom of speech comes from Wokeism. Hirsi Ali says it is a movement that originated in universities in the United States and has taken up the cause of social justice, but only seeks political power. With their theories, the woke want to "expose" power groups and the structures set up to maintain their power. In the process, Wokeism seeks to divide society into hostile factions, Hirsi Ali says. It is already almost impossible to hold a public debate on socially relevant issues in the USA without having to fear losing one's job. Those who refuse woke ideas are threatened with ostracism, shitstorm, and social death.
- To achieve liberty, tolerance, and openness again, the West should reject Wokeism and embody again the ideals of the enlightenment. Hirsi Ali calls for the West to remember its values and fight to preserve a free society. She pleads for questioning woke theories. In other words, not to ban them, but to examine them and refute them argumentatively - in other words, to expose them to freedom of speech.

Speech

Thank you so much, dear René, for such a kind introduction. And thank you to the Institute for Swiss Economic Policy for making this event possible. I am incredibly pleased and thrilled to be here today.

This evening we come together to ponder the question: What about Free Speech in the West?

In 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini, then supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran issued a fatwa against the British author Salman Rushdie for a novel he wrote titled «The Satanic verses». This event sparked a debate between the West and Islam on the boundaries of speech. Margaret Thatcher, back then Prime Minister of Britain is quoted by the British journalist, Charles Moore in her response as having said: « Whether or not we have any sympathy with Rushdie's views is not the point. We must react strongly to any state murder-hunt made against one of our citizens. »

The author Rushdie and the politician Thatcher were on either side of the left/right political spectrum. She points out the irrelevance of political differences and is solid in her conviction that the protection of the author is a matter of principle rather than politics. It is very interesting to look back at the last three decades in the West and to see how attitudes to Free Speech have changed dramatically. Three things stand out in that timeline:

1. First, the threat to Free Speech inside the West in 1989 was perceived to be FOREIGN. Even though many commentators blamed Rushdie for provoking the ire of the Ayatollah the intolerance of speech to the point of seeking to murder the offender was something that came from outside the West. Back then it was thought – maybe even taken for granted – that Westerners had reached almost perfect consensus on the matter of saying, inquiring, writing, publishing, painting, drawing, singing and producing any kind of content one wanted. It was left to audiences to decide what they wanted to pay attention to and what they wanted to ignore.

Sure, there were still controversies on what content might be regarded as offensive. Citizens sued their governments and one another on grounds such as defamation, libel and slander but always accepted the final verdict of the courts. The idea that offensive speech was to be punished with fines, time in prison or capital punishment as in Rushdie's case was thought of in the west as something foreign or something from the annals of history.

Even better, on the matter of fictional output such as movies and novels anyone who felt aggrieved enough to complain to the courts was viewed as a narrowminded loser. Matters of fact [non-fiction works] were reviewed based on such criteria as evidence, logical rigor, and coherence rather than emotional standards. When I came to the Netherlands thirty years ago that was the Western society I found: free, tolerant and prosperous.

2. The second thing that stands out is the response in Western society to the religious intolerance exhibited by some members of the Muslim communities who live in the West. There was the heinous murder of Theo van Gogh; killing of the Charlie Hebdo journalists, the crazed reaction to the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in Denmark and in France; the relentless threats against Muslims who chose to leave their faith like me or who criticized its intolerant and violent components. At first, the native populations of Europe and the US reacted to this intolerance with horror. Most Westerners condemned the people who took offense as intolerant and backward.

It is true that a number of commentators from the media, politics and the universities chastised those allegedly guilty of the provocation and urged the wider society to be patient with their Muslim minorities. In any case the assault on the freedom of speech and conscience of those accused of provocation was seen as NARROW IN SCOPE. Muslims were seen as a minority – new to the west - for whom religious identity is salient and who will one day learn the virtues of freedom and tolerance.

A key feature of this threat was that this particular minority seemed to want to silence only critics of their religion and did not interfere in other matters. The solution to this was seen as simple: steer clear of anything that could possibly antagonize the religious sensibility of any Muslim individual or group. Do that for as long as it takes this minority to catch up with the rest of society. If that is not a perfect solution but a containment strategy then so be it. For some problems there is no such a thing as a perfect answer.

3. Taken together, you could say that western leaders concluded to stand up to: A) any foreign threats to our freedoms and B) to manage the intolerance within the Muslim communities with patience and as needed.

End of story?

But we lulled ourselves into a false sense of security. For while we were distracted by Islamist intolerance, Islamist terrorism and maybe the demands of daily life other forms of intolerance were being seeded and cultivated in our universities, schools, media, healthcare facilities, administrative government, political parties, and large corporations.

The ideology that threatens Free Speech – us - today and has the potential to ruin our societies is a different one. It is not foreign and it is not Islamic. It goes by many names but I will call it Wokeism.

Wokeism, say those who have studied it, is an amalgam of postmodernist theories. I highly recommend the works of British author Helen Pluckrose and American mathematician James Lindsay if you need a primer on what Wokeism is. Specially their book *Cynical Theories*.

Mad minds like Jean Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Michelle Foucault cooked up the original woke potion in France because they were disappointed with the fruits of the Enlightenment. American scholars – many of them black – built their activism against racism, perceived or real, on this shaky house of theories. Legal Scholar, Derrick Bell developed it further and centered it around 'race'. What was 'Critical Theory' became Critical Race Theory. Kimberle Crenshaw (another black scholar) seasoned it with something she called 'intersectionality'.

Aggrieved members of the Gay community expanded these ideas further and intellectual comen and women like Robin DiAngelo and Ibram X. Kendi monetized it. One reason why it is difficult to pin down Wokeism is that their theories of deconstruction are constantly expanded with grievance after grievance. They claim to possess a skepticism that deconstructs existing metanarratives that favor groups who hold power and the structures they set up to maintain that power.

But then the woke reject the skepticism of the scientific revolution: that of the pursuit of inquiring using objective criteria to get to the bottom of things or the truth and then embarking on the process of bringing about the necessary changes. In other words, they have their own metanarrative and its objective is to deconstruct society into pieces. Literally! Race, gender, sexual orientation, disability,...

Sometimes I think this ambiguity is intentional. If you can pin an idea down, you can expose it and accept its conclusions or reject them. But if its meaning keeps shifting with the grievance of the day it becomes elusive.

It is now Social Justice Theory. Weirdly, though, it is not 'theory' at all. For one, you can't treat it like other theories, that is by taking it through the process of scrutiny – falsification or verification.

Another key element is the contamination of language. Wokeism comes with its own lexicon. You may have heard Wokespeak – words like microaggressions, safe spaces, equity, diversity, non-binary, cultural appropriation. It also has its bureaucratic acronyms: DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion); ESG (Environmental and Social Governance), LGBTQ..., and even more sinister ones like: MAPS (Minor Attracted Persons): let that sink in.

But our existing language is constantly policed to become 'purified' of any perceived bigotry and injustice, understood only as the woke understand these things.

The main goal of the woke is to seek unchecked and absolute Power, advancing from the academy and out into the other institutions of society. And into the streets.

In America and the rest of the English-speaking world there is no issue of any significance that we can discuss in any meaningful way without running into Woke sabotage.

Think about the challenges we face. From globalization, national identity and immigration; to inequality; healthcare; radical Islamism; the pandemic; climate change; the threat of authoritarian great powers like China and Russia; new technologies such as AI and the opportunities and threats they introduce. None of these issues is free of wokespeak and in almost every case we tend to bend towards where the arc of wokeness leads.

Wokeism, today, in my view, is a greater threat to free speech in America than the discredited and defeated ideology of White Supremacy. It is a greater threat to free speech in America than Islamism. It is a greater threat to free speech in America than any other contemporary ideology.

I want to make it very clear that Islamism and White Supremacy still pose significant threats to free speech and to the other principles of an open society such as tolerance, pluralism and democracy. An update on Salman Rushdie's plight will disabuse you of any kind of complacency towards radical Islam in general and fatwas in particular. Just two months ago Rushdie was attacked while giving a talk at a literary festival in Chappaqua, New York state. He has lost an eye and a hand. White supremacists have opened fire in places where large numbers of people gather and killed substantial numbers of people.

I am under no illusion that the threat from these 2 sources is over and done with. I just want to make it clear that in the hierarchy of threats to free speech, open debate and tolerance they have been knocked off the top position by the ideology of wokism.

Just think about this: If the federal government were adopting the language of white supremacy; if the police units of some of the most powerful states in the US were adjusting to their demands; if our military was holding white supremacy conscious training sessions; if our most prominent national sports teams were using white supremacy gestures; if Hollywood and other entertainment industries were editing their output or censoring it; and at times running propaganda for the cause of white supremacy; if elementary and high schools or universities were openly teaching the principles of white supremacy. What would we say at this or any other gathering concerned with the health of free speech in American society?

Or think about it this way: What if the federal government were adopting the language of Islamists; if the police units of some of the most powerful states in American society were adjusting to their demands; if our military was holding Islamist conscious training sessions; if our most prominent national sports teams were using Islamist gestures; if Hollywood and other entertainment industries were editing their output or censoring it; and at times running propaganda for the cause of Islamism; if elementary and high schools or universities were openly teaching the principles of Islamism. What would we say? In fact, all of these things have happened but were met with resistance. Completely justified.

Today, in none of these institutions is white supremacy tolerated. Today Islamists in America are tolerated but do not have that kind of powerful hold on our society.

Sadly, however, Wokeism is the trending rotten idea of our time and it is embedded in almost every institution in America. Wokeism and its narratives or theories are dividing us once again into hostile factions. It is weakening our hard earned freedom and faith in one another. It is threatening the future of our children and our planet.

For those of us who recognize it as the threat it is, I believe we have no option but to fight it in just the way we fought the other bad ideologies such as white supremacy and Islamism.

In fact, in a spooky way Wokeism has remarkable similarities with white supremacy; and with Islamism; it is inherently hostile to women and gay people; and worst of all in practice it ruins the lives of those who live with gender dysphoria.

In what way, you might ask? Like white supremacists the woke rank human beings into races with the white skinned people still on top except this time as the top oppressors of all other races. In the Woke rankings, as in the white supremacists' ideology, various shades of skin color are distinguished. Some brown-skinned people the woke tell us are 'white adjacent.' But blacks are still placed at the bottom this time, as ultimate victims.

According to the woke, merit, punctuality, hard work, hygiene, individualism, objective truth, and the notion of lifting yourself up by your bootstraps – all of these things are manifestations of whiteness. That of course implies that mediocrity, tardiness, laziness, filth, tribalism, superstition, and lack of ambition are inherently the traits of non-white peoples.

Colonialism as was practiced by whites (Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands) is scrutinized for all kinds of sins of oppression and condemned but non-white empires (the Han Chinese, the Moghuls, the Muslim empires) and their barbarities are ignored. America's past of holding slaves and America's treatment of indigenous peoples is constantly litigated but black and brown people's role in slavery: in producing slaves, trading them and still perpetuating it to this day is completely ignored. According to the worldview of the woke only white people are capable of reckoning with their history. Only white people are fit enough to be held accountable for their actions. If that is not racism, you tell me what is!!

The woke and the white supremacists are both antisemitic: If you are Jewish, you are categorized by them as white. Never mind that just 77 years ago a serious attempt was made to eliminate all Jews because they were considered pollutants to the white race.

The woke hate the state of Israel and they freely indulge in conspiracy theories about the Jews.

But the woke also have similarities with Islamism. Like Islamists the woke are allergic to free speech, academic freedom and the pursuit of objective truth. Like Islamists they turn their followers into those who command right and forbid wrong. Constantly virtue-signaling, silencing

and canceling those they disagree with; menacing and threatening people with dire consequences to be meted out by the supreme authority of ultimate morality. You might think that perhaps the woke are not yet as violent as the most radical of Islamists. I reckon, it is only a matter of time. So far, in the US we have been treated to the stunts of an outfit called Antifa or Anti-fascists. True to the nature of excelling in woke contradictions Antifa operate in thug-gish groups with face coverings who beat up people, break things and act as the militias of a totalitarian ideology.

The woke are misogynist: the word “woman” is to be so upsetting to them as to erase it altogether. We are now to be categorized as “people who menstruate”, “birthing people” and “chest feeders”. Our hard-won women-only spaces are to be compromised: women only hospital wards, toilets, locker rooms, prisons and domestic violence shelters are to be invaded by men who look like and act like grizzly bears on the flimsy basis that they identify as a woman.

Our elite sports competitions are to allow men to come in and compete on the same basis.

Homosexuals don't fare much better. Their fight for justice is so recent that we all remember it because it is still ongoing and fraught with obstacles. But to the woke they are just another set of pawns in their quest for absolute power. Gays and lesbians are targeted before they even come out of the closet and told they are in the wrong body and must transition in haste only to regret at leisure.

People with actual gender dysphoria – the tiniest of all minorities – are set up against everyone else. The woke have now created conditions in which people with possible gender dysphoria are pitted against women, gays and the wider society. How does this benefit them? That is not the sort of question the woke ask? All they want is power, absolute, unchecked power and if vulnerable individuals are to be sacrificed in the process they don't care.

Ladies and gentlemen, the woke must be subjected to the best qualities of the freedom of speech: they must be checked, questioned, scrutinized, offended and ultimately stopped in their pathetic tracks.