on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

traces of ‘woke’ in 20th-century U.S. history

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In recent years, attacks on wokeness have undermined the scope and methods of history education in U.S. American schools and colleges. Current critiques by conservatives that wokeness curtails American freedom ignores the significance of wokeness in the struggle for Black freedom. This article historicizes ‘woke,’ puts the term into context and elucidates its meaning and significance for the fight against inequality and discrimination in the United States. The article does not offer a comprehensive history of ‘woke,’ but follows individual traces of the term’s use, from references in 1930s folk music to the racism of the Southern criminal justice system, to labour movement rhetoric and policies in West Virginia in the 1940s, and Martin Luther King’s speech at Oberlin College at the height of the civil rights movement in 1965.

Keywords: equality, history, injustice, long civil rights movement, woke

In recent years, ‘woke’ has been appropriated as a slur. Originally denoting attentiveness to social discrimination and wrongs against marginalized groups, the term ‘woke’ has been co-opted to denounce such attentiveness as political correctness gone awry. Reactionary voices (Lilla, 2016) dismiss social justice movements’ demand for recognition of and sensitivity to the ‘other’ as unfitting restrictions on their freedom while conjuring an era before such movements existed with nostalgia. Former President Donald Trump, a potential Republican candidate for the 2024 Presidential election, even evokes a “woke fascism” (Dawber, 2021) as an existential threat to individual freedom and society as a whole. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, another contender for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, has built his whole campaign on anti-wokeness and boasts that “Florida is where ‘woke’ goes to die” (Czachor, 2022). DeSantis brands wokeness as a “virus” infecting the mind and threatening America. With the so-called ‘Stop W.O.K.E. Act’ (with W.O.K.E. as an acronym that stands for “wrongs to our kids and employees”), he professes to “protect individual freedoms” by seeking to ban any training and instruction intended to promote equity and diversity in public schools, colleges, and workplaces (Florida Senate, 2022). In effect, the law censors discussions around race, and also around sex and gender, in the classroom. It prohibits, among other things, school instruction that teaches that people are privileged or oppressed based on race or national origin, with the intention of protecting those who are privileged from feeling guilty. Critics such as Amy Turkel, director of communications of the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, say that the ‘Stop W.O.K.E. Act’ effectively discourages teachers from talking about the history of Jim Crow laws, slavery, or lynching in America: “This dangerous law is part of a nationwide trend to whitewash history and chill free speech in classrooms and workplaces” (ACLU, 2022). Schools and colleges around the country have already cancelled events related to civil rights or courses covering race, and books that are seen as addressing Critical Race Theory have been rejected by the Florida Department of Education. Teachers fear being sued for violating the law. They are monitored by powerful groups like the ‘Moms for Liberty’, who are among the loudest

voices in the culture wars around education and 'woke' in general (Feola, 2023).

History helps to put 'woke' into perspective. Given the fervour of critics, it is time to explore the origins of the term, how it has taken shape historically, which issues it has addressed, and how it has taken shape in the struggle for freedom and participation. Originally a term from Black American English, 'woke' has been added only recently to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2023; Steinmetz, 2017), and a comprehensive *Oxford Dictionary of African American English* is still in progress (Garcia, 2023). Contextual evidence of 'woke' is hard to find, yet some references can be traced much further back in history than the Black Lives Matter Movement, founded in 2012, and Erykah Badu's song 'Master Teacher' from 2007, which are both often credited with originating the term. Since the early 20th century, in fact, Black Americans have been calling on one another to be 'woke' when their physical integrity, economic survival, or political equality was endangered or denied.

Trace 1: Physical Integrity

In 1938, American blues singer Lead Belly recorded his song on the Scottsboro Nine in New York City. When commenting on the case as part of the recording, he advised "the Harlem colored people […] to be a little careful when you go down there [to the American South]; best stay woke" (Belly, 2015). The Scottsboro case was among the most notorious cases of racism in Jim Crow courts. In March 1931, nine young Black men between 13 and 19 years of age were arrested in Northern Alabama, after some of them had thrown a group of white men off a freight train following a fight. As in so many other such cases, the Black men were falsely accused of raping two white women who were also travelling on the freight train. Eight of them were sentenced to death following a trial in Scottsboro, Alabama. The miscarriage of justice was egregious, even by the racist norms of Jim Crow courts, and several civil rights groups took up the cause of the so-called 'Scottsboro Boys'. They appealed the conviction to the United States Supreme Court more than once, which remanded the case back to the lower court. In Powell v. Alabama in 1932, the justices declared that if the death sentences were carried out, the result "would be little short of judicial murder" (Powell v. Alabama, 1932, p. 72; Martschukat, 2004).

Yet Southern criminal courts were recalcitrant, and in 1938, when Lead Belly recorded 'Scottsboro Boys', the majority of the Scottsboro Nine were still behind bars, with their death sentences either upheld or commuted into long prison sentences. Their case epitomized the dangers Black Americans were facing in the South, thus Lead Belly advised his Black listeners from New York City to "stay woke" when crossing the Mason-Dixon-Line (Belly, 2015). 'Woke' in this context is more than a variant of 'awake'. The term indicates a particular mental and sensory alertness to threats to Black Americans, who were chronically in danger in the South. Such awareness that sharpened senses that were essential for survival had already existed among the enslaved, and the reference to seeing and keeping their eyes open was common in the spirituals they sang (Janu, 2022; Smith, 2006). However, from the perspective of today's culture war on 'woke', Lead Belly's 1938 song 'Scottsboro Boys' stands out because the call to awareness is expressed by the explicit figurative use of the term.

Lead Belly, born Hudson William Ledbetter in 1888 in Louisiana, had first-hand experience with the racist criminal justice system in the American South and the Black struggle for survival. He escaped lynching, served sentences in several Southern prisons, among them Shaw Prison Farm in Texas and Angola Farm in Louisiana, and spent time on a chain gang. Many of his prison songs can

be taken as political commentary on Black life in the South. Released from prison in 1934, he worked as chauffeur and assistant to white musicologist and writer John Lomax on his Black music recording trip. Often enough Lomax served instead as manager to Ledbetter, who was well aware of what it took to navigate American society as a Black man. Lead Belly eventually settled in New York City, performing in the politically charged Black music scene of the Harlem Renaissance. He was named a "people's artist" by writer Richard Wright and the embodiment of "the entire folk culture of the American Negro" (Wright 1937 as cited in Lower, 2021, p. 20; Filene, 1991; Wolfe & Lornell, 1999, pp. 200–201). His song the 'Scottsboro Boys', along with his commentary about it, merged personal fears with Black concerns. When the song was recorded, Lead Belly had met four of the Scottsboro Nine personally, most likely when they had appeared on stage in Harlem, touring to raise money for their five companions still in prison (Belly, 2015; George, 2021). By singing about the Scottsboro Nine, Belly merged his own experience with the omnipresent reality of racist subjugation in the South. Being vigilant and woke meant staying alive.

Trace 2: Economic Survival

In March 1943, Black writer and intellectual J. Saunders Redding published a piece in *The Atlantic* on the socioeconomic position and the politicization of Black Americans in the South. In that article, Redding quotes a Black leader of the United Mine Workers (UMW) in West Virginia: "Let me tell you, buddy. Waking up is a damn sight harder than going to sleep, but we'll stay woke up longer" (Redding, 1943).

Redding and the Union man were not blind to the power of racist discrimination in the United States and the American South. Redding was well aware that the place of Black Americans in the Jim Crow South was "at the back door". He described Black workers kept out of jobs and Black school principals and college presidents called "boy" by white farmers. But, as he explained, the "awakening" he was observing meant that "it becomes less the custom for Negroes in the South to accept that place, to grin and bear it" (Redding, 1943). On the contrary, he asserted, quoting from a 1942-article in the Black Virginia newspaper *Norfolk Journal and Guide*—"'the Negro wants a chance to work at any job for which his training and abilities qualify him. He wants to become a member of a union as a craftsman … He wants to vote and participate in his government after meeting the requirements set up for citizens of other races'" (Redding, 1943). Thus, being woke, in the words of J. Saunders Redding and of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, meant to be alert to "'the stigma of implacable Jim Crowism in its barbarous impact upon every phase of life'" (Redding, 1943) and to want it eliminated.

Black mine workers and unionists in West Virginia, whose wokeness Redding wrote about, used their alertness to extraordinary effect. Since 1900, the Southern Appalachian coal industry had been rapidly growing, and the share of Black miners was particularly high in West Virginia. While Black miners were still discriminated against—they were overrepresented in the most dangerous jobs and among so-called hand loaders—, segregation was conspicuously absent. To a large extent, this was due to policies of the United Mine Workers. White privilege and Black precarity certainly existed in the coalfields, but the level of cooperation and solidarity among Black and white mineworkers was remarkable, particularly in light of the blatant racism in most of the American labour movement (Hill, 1988; Roediger, 1994, pp. 134–139; Trotter, 2015). Until the 1920s, coal operators used Black workers as strike-breakers in the strike-ridden coalfields, but the UMW successfully encouraged them to join the union with full privileges instead. Black and white miners were organized in the same chapters, and Black miners also served as local and district officers and in

some cases even as local union presidents. In the 1930s with the Great Depression and the desperate conditions many workers found themselves in, the percentage of mine workers enrolled in UMW reached 90 percent. The New Deal and collective bargaining rights instituted under the National Recovery Act also contributed to the rise in membership numbers. The union secured rising wages for the Southern mine workers. That was crucial for miners' survival during hard times, but it also had unintended consequences for the miners: The rising labour costs precipitated the introduction of labour-saving loading machines. As a result, a substantial number of Black workers were laid off, because they comprised the majority of hand-loaders. However, as the Black UMW leader quoted above explained to writer J. Saunders Redding, Black unionists 'stayed woke' and negotiated an agreement whereby those workers displaced by machines would be the first to be re-hired (Huber, 2006; Lewis, 1987; Northrup, 1943).

When J. Saunders Redding quoted the wokeness of the UMW leader from the West Virginia coalfields, his intent was to show how much the Black position and attitude in the South was changing in the early 1940s. Years before the *Brown v. Board of Education*-decision in 1954, Redding was depicting a nascent movement—the start of what historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (2005) would later call "the long civil rights movement". Since the Great Depression and the 1940s, Hall argues, the southern "civil rights unionism" and the struggle by activists against the ruthless exploitation of the Black labour force in the segregated South marked the first phase of the civil rights movement. For Black activists and unionists, wokeness centering around workplace discrimination promised to translate into increased economic security, more civil rights, and greater equality, going hand in hand with improved housing conditions, education opportunities, health care, and enfranchisement for Black workers and their families (Hall, 2005, pp. 1245–1246).

Trace 3: Political Equality

On June 14, 1965, Martin Luther King visited Oberlin College in Ohio to receive an honorary degree and deliver a commencement address. In his speech, Dr. King did not use the term 'woke' explicitly, even though 'woke' had by then been recognized by the *New York Times* as one of the hip idioms in the Black vernacular (Kelley, 1962). Still, King's speech evoked the metaphor of wokeness, when he called upon his audience to "remain awake through a great revolution" (King, 1965).

It was a particularly important moment for the message, with the Civil Rights Act just signed into law and the Voting Rights Act about to be signed. Given the significance of education in the long struggle for equality, from slaves' efforts to achieve literacy to the founding of Tuskegee Institute and Howard University, from *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to Little Rock and student sit-ins at lunch counters, King's choice of such a prestigious educational institution for his speech on wokeness made his words even more powerful. After all, educational institutions had always been significant sites of most fierce white resistance to desegregation and Black equality (McRae, 2018; Nickerson, 2012).

For King, "remaining awake through a great revolution" was essential for two reasons. First, one simply would not want to sleep through one of the greatest historical transformations in modern history—comparable only to the American Revolution—and miss how "the old order of slavery and racial segregation" was swept away and replaced by "freedom and human dignity." Second, and politically even more important, the great revolution was an ongoing, unending process that required sustained attention. "The problem of racial injustice," King reminded his audience, was not yet

solved. Black Americans were still exposed to hatred, victims of unusual violence, and positioned "at the bottom of the economic ladder." Those open and ready for change needed "to remain awake and to achieve the proper mental attitudes." Being awake, being woke, was the proper mental attitude. It meant belonging to a "concerned generation" that not only saw the manifold injustices in American life, but also sought to change them (King, 1965).

"Everybody: I stay woke" (Badu, 2007)

Long before Erykah Badu recorded her song 'Master Teacher' in 2007, to stay woke was a widely used trope among Black Americans, who were, like Badu in her song, trying to conjure a better world. In this world, they will not be exposed to racist violence, they will not be threatened by the law but protected, their labour rights will be respected, and their political equality will be acknowledged. In this world, both freedom from threats and injustices and freedom to achievement will be safeguarded. Being woke means staying sensitive and alert to any infringement of these freedoms. Over the course of the long civil rights movement, being woke has also come to signify not just an awareness of discrimination and injustice, but a willingness to fight them.

Touting anti-wokeness as protection of American freedom, as major Republican candidates for the Presidential election in 2024 have done, distorts the meaning of the term and ignores the history of racist discrimination until this day. Moreover, it inevitably raises the question: Whose freedom is supposed to be protected by anti-wokeness? Quite obviously, it is the freedom of those who object to "the wind of change" and fear the "idea of freedom and human dignity" (King, 1965) for everyone, to quote once again from Martin Luther King's Oberlin speech. As so often before in American history, the freedom of some builds on the unfreedom of others (Foner, 1994). Laws like Florida's 'Individual Freedom' a.k.a. 'Stop W.O.K.E. Act' have been adopted in similar form in 27 U.S. states. These laws seek to ban critical inquiry and discussions from school and college classrooms and to suppress disfavoured historical topics and narratives. They aim to exclude dissenting voices from the discourse on American politics and history and claim "to protect individual freedoms and prevent discrimination in the workplace and in public schools" (Florida Senate, 2022). Protecting freedom by stopping "woke" means, to put it in the words of late historian Tyler Stovall (2021, p. 5), "to preserve traditions of liberty grounded in whiteness" and to profess an understanding of freedom as white privilege.

Acknowledgements: I am indebted to the Gerda Henkel Foundation for funding the research group *Contested Democracy*, and to David Walker for his editorial advice and insightful remarks.

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Recommended Citation

Martschukat, J. (2023). Traces of 'Woke' in 20th-Century U.S. History. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *6*(17).
https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2023.17.4

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