

Article

Inverted Totems: On the Significance of “Woke” in the Culture Wars

Todd Madigan 

Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC 29528, USA; toddmadigan@gmail.com

Abstract: Early in the 21st century, the term *woke* became ubiquitous within the context of the culture wars. However, the meaning of the term has been notoriously difficult to pin down, and its use as a descriptor of the most bewildering range of phenomena has led many commentators to declare the word meaningless. My claim is that instead of focusing on what *woke* means, we should focus on what it *does*. And in order to demonstrate what *woke* does, I situate it within a novel typology of totems. As a totem, *woke* serves to create and constitute the self-awareness of an otherwise indefinite social identity. But it does so as neither a *traditional totem* (i.e., by representing the group’s own sacred values and beliefs) nor an *anti-totem* (i.e., by representing an alien group with values and beliefs offensive to one’s own). Instead, *woke* is an *inverted totem*, a symbol embodying all that one’s social group is not, thereby representing one’s group negatively. I then argue that in spite of the fact that it is the political right that uses *woke* most vociferously within the culture wars, neither the Republican Party nor any other ideologically conservative institution is the social group symbolized by *woke*.

Keywords: woke; traditional totem; anti-totem; inverted totem; culture wars



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1. Introduction

On 8 November 2022—the night of his re-election victory—Florida Governor Ron DeSantis stood before a cheering crowd of supporters and reveled in his electoral triumph, calling it “a win for the ages.” Beaming, he thanked his voters, he thanked his campaign staff, and he thanked his wife, who smiled and applauded at his side. Then, without warning—immediately after declaring Florida “the promised land” sought by so many Americans from out-of-state—DeSantis pivoted from joyfully basking in sunny success to grimly staring down the Darkest Hour. In a curious parody of Churchill, the governor resolutely thundered, “We fight the woke in the legislature! We fight the woke in the schools! We fight the woke in the corporations! We will never, ever surrender to the woke mob! Florida is where woke goes to die!” ([ABC Action News 2022](#)). And as he completed those lines, his audience erupted in rapturous applause, whistles, and shouts of approval.

This likely was not the first time those gathered to celebrate DeSantis’s win had been exposed to an apocalyptic framing of *woke*.¹ Earlier that year at the Common Sense Society Conference and Gala, DeSantis had cautioned that the goal of *woke* “is to delegitimize the founding of this country, the principles that the founders relied on, our institutions, our Constitution, to tear basically at the fabric of our society” ([Weinberg 2022](#)). He went on to warn that “this wokeness is dangerous, and we’ve got to defeat it on all fronts” ([Weinberg 2022](#)). Of course, DeSantis is just one of a vast number who have aligned themselves against the perceived menace of *woke*; billionaire Elon Musk cautioned in a tweet that “The woke mind virus is either defeated or nothing else matters” ([Musk 2022](#)), and—sticking with the “virus” theme—former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and 2024 presidential candidate Nikki Haley warned that “wokeness is a virus more dangerous than any pandemic” ([Garcia 2023](#)). But what, exactly, is this so-called virus?

To date there has only been a modest amount of scholarly publication on the nature of *woke*.² Some of this scholarship addresses where the term comes from and how it is used

by those who approve of it and its critical social justice implications (Anderson-Barkley and Foglesong 2018; Storm and Rainey 2018; Armstrong 2019; Bunyasi and Smith 2019; Rosenblatt 2019; Brown 2020; Adjepong 2021; Patton 2021); other scholarship focuses on the corporate appropriation of the term (Nair 2019; Vis et al. 2020; Rhodes 2022; Henderson 2023; Riaño and Sorzano 2023), while some evinces hostility toward people or institutions who are identified as *woke* (Landes 2022; O'Hear 2022; West 2022). But this work has done little to answer the burning question of the meaning of *woke* as it is used within the culture wars. What I propose to do in this article is examine the empirical evidence—to conduct a cultural analysis of the use of *woke* in contemporary discourse—in order to come to an entirely new understanding of this social phenomenon.

While *woke* is often associated with a limited range of conservative bugbears, as when New Hampshire's Governor Sununu rails against *woke* cancel culture (Saric 2023), Texas Lt. Governor Patrick describes Critical Race Theory as a racist *woke* philosophy (Zou 2021), or North Carolina Congressman Cawthorn calls multiculturalism *woke* (Keene 2021), its actual usage shows *woke* to be much more expansive. Here is a medley of allegedly *woke* phenomena that have been pointed to by those who are hostile to the concept: Disney (Bohm 2022), the Duchess of Sussex (Mann 2022), jazz (Debusmann 2021), the American military (Myers 2022), M&Ms (Kent 2022), Wall Street (Scott and Hafer 2022), science (Hoare 2021), the United States Women's National Soccer Team (Beer 2021), Santa Claus (Blake 2022), the Google algorithm (Hochman 2022), windmills (Honeycombe-Foster 2022), Pizza Hut (Linder 2022), being pro-Europe (McGurk 2022), Fox News (Gabriel 2023), *Sesame Street* (Cavallaro 2021), the nation's largest defense contractor, Lockheed Martin (York 2021), and math (Francis 2022). And, of course, on the face of it, this is all rather bewildering—laughable, even. But there is another sense in which it is quite serious and has led to grave, real-world consequences. On 22 March 2022, Governor DeSantis signed his Stop W.O.K.E. Act³ into law, a law designed to “fight back against woke indoctrination” (flgov.com, 22 April 2022). In September of that year, Republican member of Congress Lauren Boebert predicted that when the Republicans take back the House, they will “save our nation from the ‘woke’ curse on education” (Boebert 2022). And two months later, Texas Governor Greg Abbott vowed to “pass laws” to stop “woke agendas” in the education system ((Richman 2022), 28 November 2022). On the basis of the war on *woke*, books are being banned, high school advanced placement courses are being cancelled, people are losing their jobs, speech is being criminalized, and, of course, political campaigns are being won.

Still, even with the kaleidoscope of *woke* specimens cited above (and perhaps because of them), we might be left wondering what the term *means*. In fact, this was a question asked in public discourse ad nauseam in the year or two leading up to the 2022 American midterm elections. Here are just a few typical headlines from that period: “What does ‘woke’ mean?” (Ruiz 2021), “What Does ‘Woke’ Actually Mean?” (Sanders 2021), “Wait, the Term ‘Woke’ Means What Now?” (Geraghty 2022), “What Is Woke Really About?” (Hanson 2021), “Wake me up when you know what ‘woke’ means” (Collier 2022). However, asking what the term *means* is not the salient question. Instead, we should ask: what does the term *do*? And the answer to this question, in brief, is the following: *it serves as a totem that delimits, unifies, and strengthens the solidarity of a social group*. But *woke* does this in an unusual way. In the context of the culture wars, it does this as an *inverted totem*, a concept I will develop at length, below. Note, however, that it is not my intention here to establish a new conception of totemic religion. Rather, I will put forward a heuristic built upon some of the ways in which totemism has been framed by social scientists—particularly the framing developed by Émile Durkheim ([1912] 1995). Before presenting my empirical argument, I will lay out an overview of my conceptual framework: a typology of totems.

An early social-scientific exposition of totemism is that of E.B. Taylor, the so-called father of cultural anthropology, who suggests that to understand this phenomenon, “it is necessary to consider the tendency of mankind to classify out the universe” (cited in Lévi-Strauss [1962] 1991, p. 13). Building on this insight, structural anthropologist Lévi-

Strauss asserts that “from this point of view [i.e., Taylor’s], totemism may be defined as the association of an animal species and a human clan” (Lévi-Strauss [1962] 1991, p. 13). In a more generalized version of Taylor’s idea, sociologist Émile Durkheim (Durkheim [1912] 1995) conceives of a totem as the symbolic representation of a social group. Furthermore, far beyond a simple identifier of a particular collection of individuals, the totem is imbued with the group’s shared values, beliefs, and ways of understanding and being in the world. And this cultural permeation of the totem means that totemism involves “not merely a cognitive ordering”, but also, in the words of sociologist Peter Worsley, “affectual and evaluative meaning” (Worsley [1967] 2010, p. 148). For these reasons, totems take on the nature of the sacred (indeed, within Durkheim’s theory, totemism serves as the foundation of all religious life).⁴

Elaborating on this notion of the traditional totem,⁵ a small number of subsequent scholars (e.g., O’Brien 2005; Riley 2019) have formulated the idea of an *anti-totem*. An anti-totem—much like a traditional totem—serves as the symbolic representation of a social group, as well as that group’s sacred values, beliefs, and ways of understanding and relating to the world. However, an anti-totem always represents a group to which one does not belong. And not just any group, but a group that one sees as fundamentally at variance with the sacred values of one’s own group. Finally, to round out this typology, I will develop the novel concept of an *inverted totem*. Inverted totems are similar to anti-totems in that they represent values and beliefs that are inimical to those of one’s own group, but they are unique in that they do not symbolize an external social group. Instead, much like a traditional totem, they represent one’s own group; but they do so in reverse. An inverted totem embodies all that one’s social group is not, and in doing so, it defines one’s group negatively, much as the negative space around a printed image serves to delimit the image itself.

In Worsley’s critique of traditional totemism as theorized by Lévi-Strauss, he points out one of the classical theory’s central weaknesses as an explanatory mechanism, but in so doing, he unwittingly sets up a central feature of inverted totems. Worsley argues that while Lévi-Strauss sees totemism as a group’s means of socially structuring its world and differentiating among collectivities, this conception of totemism fails to capture the numerous instances where “totems do *not* neatly discriminate one clan from another” (Worsley [1967] 2010, p. 146 italics in the original). Worsley goes on to assert that in many cases, the phenomena associated with—or aligned against—a particular totem, rather than forming a rigorously differentiated binary system, actually form what he calls an *unorganized congeries* (Worsley [1967] 2010, p. 148 italics in the original) in which

the totemic “collection” accretes, cumulates, forms agglomerations of items unconnected in systemic logic or in Nature, according to a variety of principles or association. Instead, therefore, of conceiving of the totemic schema as an ordered totality, I have called it “agglomerative, arbitrary, and fortuitous”. (Worsley [1967] 2010, p. 147)

This notion of an *unorganized congeries* sounds very much like a description of the dizzying mélange of phenomena that has been referred to as *woke* within the culture wars. But if all we have to think with are the concepts of traditional totems and anti-totems, we will be at a loss as to how this “agglomeration of items unconnected in systemic logic or in Nature” can “neatly discriminate one clan from another”; we will be blind to the presence of the unifying force of inverted totems.

While a small number of scholars from diverse fields have made the connection between *woke* and religion (e.g., Riley 2019; Lindsay 2020; McWhorter 2021), they have focussed on describing *woke* as a religion. And this holds true even in the cases where the link between *woke* and totemism is made explicit, as in sociologist Alexander Riley’s “Woke Totemism” (2019). However, because the connection to totemism is made without the benefit of the inverted-totem concept, Riley’s analysis is condemned to focusing on the idea that those who identify with *woke* as a traditional totem exhibit “the characteristics of a primitive religion, albeit a confused one” (Riley 2019, p. 1). My central claim is that

woke—as deployed in the culture wars—is an *inverted totem*, representing not those who are accused of being *woke* but rather those who use the term to disparage other people, institutions, and ideological positions.

2. A Brief History of Woke

Although the culture wars have been waxing and waning in the United States for decades,⁶ the term *woke* was brought forward into the fray as a kind of heavy artillery only recently—at the end of the second decade of the 21st century.⁷ In February 2018, conservative *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat fired a shot across the bow with an article entitled “The Rise of Woke Capitalism”, where he bemoaned “the performative wokeness” of corporate America’s “virtue-signaling” to the “activist left”, something he considers tantamount to taking “their side in the culture wars” (Douthat 2018). By January 2020, The Guardian printed the headline, “How the word ‘woke’ was weaponized by the right” (Rose 2020), and in October 2020, Vox offered an article entitled, “A history of ‘wokeness’: Stay woke: How a Black activist watchword got co-opted in the culture war” (Romano 2020). In both these latter articles (as well as countless others), a consistent narrative is told of an expression coopted from the American Black community that was, in turn, perverted beyond all recognition and used by those who are hostile to the term’s original meaning.

The standard origin story of *woke* traces the term across a handful of documented uses by Black Americans throughout the 20th century. There is the lyric “stay woke” by folk and blues legend Huddie Ledbetter (a.k.a., Lead Belly) in his 1938 “Scottsboro Boys”, a song that “tells the true story of four Black youths who were falsely accused of raping a white woman in Scottsboro, Alabama, and subsequently convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to death” (Robinson 2022).⁸ There is the 1962 *New York Times* article, “If You’re Woke You Dig It”, by the Harlem-based writer William Melvin Kelley, which highlights “the phenomenon of Black American slang being appropriated by white people” (Robinson 2022). And there is Barry Beckham’s 1972 play, *Garvey Lives!*, about the early 20th century Black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey; in the play, Beckham has a character explain, “I been sleeping all my life. And now that Mr. Garvey done woke me up, I’m gon’ stay woke. And I’m gon’ help him wake up other black folk” (cited in Watson n.d.).

Despite *woke*’s periodic appearance in popular culture, the term remained little noticed outside the Black community through the end of the 20th century. However, things were about to change. *Woke* was brought to popular consciousness by Erykah Badu’s 2008 recording of “Master Teacher”,⁹ a song that features the refrain “stay woke”, and her subsequent 2012 tweet in support of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot. At the time of Badu’s tweet, the three women of Pussy Riot were facing three years in a Russian labor camp for “‘hooliganism’ and inciting ‘religious hatred’” (Lipman 2012). Badu tweeted “Stay woke” over an image of Pussy Riot during their widely publicized trial, and this led to the hashtag #staywoke, which was then shared widely around the world (Watson n.d.).

Since that time, the term *woke* has circulated continuously through global public discourse, gaining even more media coverage during a number of high-profile Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. In 2014, when police shot and killed an unarmed Black man, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, massive protests erupted. In the midst of those protests (as just one of innumerable examples), Kara Brown published an article in *Jezebel* where she wrote, “We worry about this shit *all the time*. The people in these communities worry about this shit *all the time*. Everyone needs to be worried about this *all the time*. Stay angry and stay woke” (Brown 2014, italics in the original). Then, during the even larger protests for Black Lives in the aftermath of the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020,¹⁰ protests that spread across the United States (and the world) throughout the summer of that year, *woke* surged yet again. An article in *The Economist* called the summer of 2020—pejoratively—“peak woke” (Teixeira 2022).

In addition to the surge in *woke*’s pervasiveness within popular discourse in the early 21st century, something else important happened at this time. Throughout the 20th century,

the meaning of *woke* remained relatively stable. It indicated a heightened awareness of one's precarious social position as a Black American. Then, in the opening years of the 21st century, *woke's* meaning expanded to include an awareness of social injustice more broadly, along with a commitment to oppose that injustice (for example, see [Ashlee et al. 2017](#); [Mason 2018](#); [Bunyasi and Smith 2019](#); [Sobande 2019](#)).

Given what was eventually to transpire vis-à-vis the culture wars, one of the stranger chapters in this brief history of *woke* began on 8 November 2019, when President Trump announced his "Black Voices for Trump" campaign, an effort to increase his share of the Black electorate in the upcoming 2020 election (in the 2016 general election, candidate Trump had garnered only 6% of the Black vote: [Pew Research Center 2018](#)). The "Black Voices for Trump" campaign featured promotional merchandise that included mugs, baseball caps, tee shirts, hoodies, and stickers emblazoned with the single word, "woke", as well as signs and placards asking supporters to text "WOKE" to a dedicated phone number in order to join the campaign ([Fabian 2019](#)). In February of 2020, the campaign announced it would be opening 15 field offices in 6 swing states and that "woke" branded merchandise would be available for purchase at these brick-and-mortar locations. On 26 February 2020, an image of some of the "woke" branded wares was tweeted from @TrumpWarRoom, a Twitter account for Trump's campaign, along with the simple statement: "It's time to get #woke" ([Trump War Room 2020](#)). But by August of the following year (after he had lost the presidency), Trump stood before a crowd of supporters and proclaimed—without a hint of irony: "You know what 'woke' means—it means you're a loser. . . Everything woke turns to shit" ([The Hill 2021](#)).¹¹

The story of "Black Voices for Trump" highlights the abrupt transition of *woke* from its earlier, affirmative usage to its subsequent deployment as an *inverted totem* within the culture wars. Of course, for many people, *woke* still signifies an important positive value ([Koehler 2023](#)), a value that is spelled out by Merriam-Webster as "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)" ([Merriam-Webster n.d.](#)). Nevertheless, by the end of the 2nd decade of the 21st century, the term had been transmogrified in public discourse to the point where it no longer had a commonly shared denotation. Indeed, such was the profusion of *woke* in public discourse after its entrance into the culture wars that by the latter part of 2022, much was being made regarding its breakdown as a coherent classification. In October of that year, CBS News asked in one headline, "GOP leaders are condemning the 'woke left.' But what does 'woke' mean, and why does it spark so much emotion?" ([Dokoupil 2022](#)). In the following month, ABC News reported that "The definition of 'woke' changes depending on who you ask" ([Alfonseca 2022](#)), and in December, an article in *The New Statesman* stated:

Suddenly, *Doctor Who* casting decisions were woke. Bike-parking schemes were woke. Periods were woke. A vegan sausage roll was performatively woke. James Bond—a spy who killed for a living—was double-O-woke. Marvel, breakfast cereal, the Microsoft Word spellchecker: nothing was beyond suspicion of it. ([McGurk 2022](#))

By 2023, articles about the nature of *woke's* meaning were beginning to coalesce around a motif: Adam Serwer writes that "*woke* has become so popular as a political epithet that providing an exhaustive list of definitions would be difficult" ([Serwer 2023](#), italics in the original); David Graham argues that "If wokeness is an explanation for everything, it is also an explanation for nothing" ([Graham 2023](#)); and Amanda Marcotte claims "'Woke' is very much meant to be a word that cannot be pinned to a definition" ([Marcotte 2023](#)). Based on this indeterminacy, Thomas Chatterton Williams, a nonresident fellow at the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute, advises his readers that "The word [i.e., *woke*] is more confusing than useful, and we should make good-faith efforts to avoid using it" ([Williams 2023](#)). However, as I stated above, looking for explanatory power or a stable definition (and despairing when those prove elusive) is misguided, for this is not the point of using the term.

3. The Religious Turn

While many journalists, commentators, academics, and politicians were throwing up their hands in exasperation at the absence of any unequivocal meaning of *woke*, a number of others were taking a different approach: they began describing *woke* as a religion (e.g., Riley 2019; Patterson 2021; Dreher 2021; McCaughey 2022). One of several systematic and sustained arguments in this vein is James Lindsay's 2020 piece in *New Discourses*, "A First-Amendment Case for Freedom from the Woke Religion", where he asserts that *woke* likely meets a legal definition of religion: a "comprehensive belief system that addresses the fundamental questions of human existence, such as the meaning of life and death, man's role in the universe, and the nature of good and evil, and that gives rise to duties of conscience" (citing Ben Clements in the Cornell Law Review, 2020: n.p.). Based on this claim, Lindsay further argues that The Establishment Clause in the U.S. Constitution requires that wokeness "*must not* be given special status by our American government and must be stripped from public spaces, including our federal, state, and local governments and, especially, our public schools, in none of which it belongs" (2020: n.p. italics in the original).

A similar argument appeared in 2021 when Columbia University linguistics and American Studies professor John McWhorter published *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*. And just to make sure we understand he is being literal, McWhorter asserts early in the book that "I do not mean that these people's ideology is 'like' a religion . . . I mean that it actually is a religion" (27). He then proceeds to argue that "the woke" exhibit the qualities he claims would define any other religion: *superstition* (i.e., tenets that require the suspension of disbelief), *clergy* (e.g., Ta-Nehisi Coates, Robin DiAngelo, Ibram X. Kendi), *original sin* (i.e., "white privilege"), *an evangelical impulse* (i.e., the *woke* wonder how benighted Whites might be "reached"), *apocalypticism* (i.e., the great day of judgment when America "owns up" to racism), and *the banning of heretics* (i.e., those who disagree with their *woke* creed must be "called out, isolated, and banned") (28–45).

It is not my intention here to argue the merits of either Lindsay's or McWhorter's claims. Rather, I will simply point out that what they describe as "woke religion" could apply to only the smallest subset of what counts as *woke* in public discourse. Are Lindsay's assertions regarding "the meaning of life and death, man's role in the universe, and the nature of good and evil" or the detailed elements of McWhorter's *woke* catechism apt descriptions of the highest ranking generals in the United States Military, as when Blake Masters, a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate in Arizona tweeted, "Our top generals have turned into woke corporate bozos" (Masters 2021) or when President Trump lashed out at "the woke generals we have" (Thomas 2021)? Do these religious qualities accurately describe the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission ("State Attorney General Can Fight the 'Woke' SEC" reads one headline: Craig 2023)? Are we to accept that a fitting characterization of Pope Francis's religion is actually *woke* (see any number of the portrayals of Pope Francis as "woke", e.g., Stanley 2022; Tyrell 2022)? Of course not. While I believe the analytical turn toward religion is the correct one, if we want to understand the manifestation of *woke* within the context of the culture wars, Lindsay's and McWhorter's assertions miss something fundamental.¹² And that is because they focus on the wrong phenomena, namely, those individuals and institutions they deem to be *woke*. Instead, we would do better to follow the intuition of Alexander Stafford, a conservative British MP, who asserts that *woke* is "very much defined by what it's not" (McGurk 2022). This observation gets us much closer to the argument I want to make.

4. Traditional Totems, Anti-Totems, and Inverted Totems

While much of the commentary on *woke* in the context of the culture wars focuses on *what* or *who* is (or has become) *woke*, my claim is that if we want to understand the term's current role in public discourse, we need to focus instead on those who use the term; or more precisely, what the term *does* when they use it. Ultimately, I want to show that *woke*

serves as an inverted totem, and in order to make my argument, I will begin by constructing a typology of totems, elaborating on classical sociologist Émile Durkheim's seminal framing of the concept in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim [1912] 1995).

In *The Civil Sphere*, cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander explains that “Our distinctive identities, as individuals and collectivities, are central to our projects for life. Identity is meaning, and the meaning of our life gives us vitality. Meaning defines us, and it defines those around us at the same time” (Alexander 2006, p. 14). And according to Durkheim (on whose work Alexander builds), we cannot become conscious of this shared sense of meaning—our collective identity—“without fixing upon a tangible object” (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 238),¹³ an object Durkheim identifies as a *totem*. A totem represents not only the people who comprise a particular social group but also their shared values, beliefs, and ways of understanding and being in the world. And because the totem symbolizes the group in this fulsome sense, it is rightly understood to express a moral power (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 228), one that has a sacred quality to its members. Here is how Durkheim puts it: “while the totem is a collective label, it also has a religious character. In fact, things are classified as sacred and profane by reference to the totem. It is the very archetype of sacred things” (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 118). Without this totemic crystallization of collective identity, it is difficult for social groups to cohere, for society itself is too complex and abstract an entity for individuals to easily bear in mind (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 221). Famously, Durkheim provides the following example of how this works:

The soldier who dies for his flag dies for his country, but the idea of the flag is actually in the foreground of his consciousness. Indeed, the flag sometimes causes action directly. Although the country will not be lost if a solitary flag remains in the hands of the enemy or won if it is regained, the soldier is killed retaking it. He forgets that the flag is only a symbol that has no value in itself but only brings to mind the reality it represents. The flag is treated as if it was that reality. (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 222)

Furthermore, Durkheim argues that when one of our shared values is violated (e.g., a law is broken, a moral proscription is breached, or a custom is flouted), it seems to be an offense against the collective—and hence, the totem—since the collective is where those shared values originate. In response to this offense, society comes together to punish the offender and reaffirm the sacred value that has been contravened. And this coming together is one of the principal means of maintaining social solidarity (Durkheim [1895] 1966, p. 96). This sort of totem elaborated by Durkheim—a totem that both delimits one's social group and represents its most cherished values, beliefs, and ways of understanding and relating to the world—can be thought of as a *traditional totem*. It is also worth pointing out here in the context of the typology I am constructing that totems are indexical; that is, the characterization of a totem's type depends upon the particular social group to which the person making the characterization belongs. This will become clear as we look at the elucidation of anti-totems below.

An *anti-totem* is similar to a traditional totem in that it serves as the symbolic representation of a social group, as well as that group's sacred values, beliefs, and ways of understanding and relating to the world. However, an anti-totem always represents a group to which one does not belong. And not just any group, but a group that one understands as constitutionally opposed to the sacred values of one's own group. For example, as sociologist Jodi O'Brien explains, “homosexuality (along with abortion) can be viewed as a form of anti-totem being used by some Christian organisations as a basis for fomenting religious support and expanding religious presence” (2005, p. 257). Thus, while the rainbow-colored Pride flag is a traditional totem for the LGBTQIA+ community, it is simultaneously an anti-totem from the perspective of many fundamentalist religious groups. Similarly, while Trump's signature red baseball cap¹⁴ is a traditional totem for his supporters, Alexander Riley claims that “The red MAGA hat is an anti-totem” (2019, p. 6) from the perspective of those whom he describes as belonging to “the multiculturalist clan”

(2019, p. 6), for in their minds, the cap is “the source of profane power” and a “sacrilege” (2019, p. 7).

Of course, it is often the case that traditional totems of groups other than one’s own are not considered offensive and, in fact, have little effect on one’s group (e.g., a French citizen might be perfectly indifferent toward the state flag of Connecticut and all that it represents). In these cases, the totems would remain traditional totems from the perspectives of both groups (e.g., the state flag of Connecticut would be thought of as a traditional totem not only by the residents of Connecticut but also by those of France, even though it is not their totem). But an anti-totem is different. One of the qualities that makes another group’s totem an anti-totem is its effect on one’s group. An anti-totem activates one’s group’s defenses, for it is, by definition, an affront to what one’s group considers sacrosanct. So, in the example above, the Pride flag is an anti-totem from the perspective of the fundamentalist religious group because it represents a violation of the religious group’s moral code. And in addition to the perceived affront, this violation simultaneously serves to reinforce the fundamentalist religious group’s shared values and thereby strengthens the bonds between its members. In this way, “Anti-gay activism is not just about politics; it’s a deeply emotional ritual around which to gather, renew faith, and shore up community” (O’Brien 2014).

While Durkheim points to flags as exemplars of totems, flags are, of course, just one of a limitless number of different forms a totem might take. Any concrete phenomenon could, in principle, serve as a totem: a college mascot, a Catholic’s crucifix, a sheriff’s badge, a firefighter’s Dalmatian, or a corporate logo; each of these is a collective representation that symbolizes a group, along with all its beliefs, values, and ways of understanding and relating to the world. And each of these examples has a more-or-less sacred quality to the members of the group. Furthermore, in a literate society, letters and words can also serve as totems. As Riley points out, “Even the acronym [MAGA] has dreaded symbolic power” (2019, p. 6). In other words, the “B” on a baseball cap is just as much a totem to Boston Red Sox fans as a golden statue of the Buddha is to Buddhists.

Besides traditional totems and anti-totems, there is a third type we can delineate: *inverted totems*. Inverted totems are similar to anti-totems in that they represent values and beliefs that are at odds with those of one’s own group, but they are unique in that they do not symbolize an alien social group. Instead, much like a traditional totem, they represent one’s own group, but they do so in reverse. An inverted totem symbolizes everything that one’s social group is not, and in doing so, it defines one’s group negatively, much as the negative space around a printed image serves to delimit the image itself. This notion of a negative definition was elaborated on by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of the twentieth century, and it has been an important concept within the interpretive social sciences since that time. Saussure asserts that “The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains *but by what exists outside it*” (Saussure [1916] 2009, p. 114, italics added). And this, of course, is precisely how I am defining an inverted totem.¹⁵

A classic example of an inverted totem can be found in the context of Christianity. For Christians, while the cross has long served as a traditional totem, the notion of the *world* has served as an inverted totem. As just one of numerous scriptural depictions of this claim, we can look to the First Epistle of John the Evangelist:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life—is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (I John 2:15–17, NKJV)

In this passage, we can see the core elements of an inverted totem. The *world* represents all the values, beliefs, and ways of being that are antithetical to the Christian, and at the same time, it does not represent an alien social group. It does not, for example, represent a non-Christian religion or sect. Instead, because the *world* clearly and comprehensively encompasses everything contrary to Christianity, it provides a trenchant negative delineation

of the Christian social group. By castigating the *world*, Christians proclaim their identity and strengthen the bonds of solidarity between themselves just as certainly as when they wear a cross. However, based on this dualistic conception, where all of social life is divided into Christian and non-Christian, the following question might arise: why is the *world* not simply a traditional totem, one that represents non-Christians? And the answer is that the *world*, which constitutes everything outside Christianity, cannot be thought of as a coherent entity. In the words of Worsley cited above, it is an *unorganized congeries*. In precisely the same way, *woke*—as deployed within the culture wars—is ascribed to such a vast and variegated array of phenomena that it makes no sense to look at that phenomena as comprising any sort of mutuality or underlying coherence. Therefore, that variegated array of phenomena cannot itself have a totem, for a totem represents a social group, as well as that group's sacred values, beliefs, and ways of understanding and relating to the world. This is why for Durkheim, who similarly describes the social world as bifurcated “into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other that is profane” (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 34), there could never be any question of a totem for the profane world.

What perhaps makes the example of the *world*-as-inverted-totem initially more intelligible than my claims about *woke* is that the social group represented by the *world* (i.e., Christians) is well established and has a widely recognized traditional totem. We, of course, already have a cognitive category for Christians and know them by the sign of the cross. But, as I will argue below, neither of these factors is true regarding the social group represented by *woke*. The social group represented by this inverted totem is not well-established, nor does it have a traditional totem, either of which would presumably make conceptualizing the group more straightforward. Indeed, without its inverted totem, it would likely not exist. As Durkheim remarks, there are some social groups so dispersed and lacking in cohesion, that “Take away the name and symbol that gives it tangible form, and the clan can no longer even be imagined” (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 235).

5. Woke as Inverted Totem

As we have seen through the numerous concrete examples provided above, *woke* clearly has a moral salience that seems to resonate strongly with many on the political right, even though it has no fixed meaning in the culture wars and does not denote any clearly articulable set of beliefs and values. For this reason, the claims of Adam Serwer's article, “Woke Is Just Another Word for Liberal” (Serwer 2023) and Jamelle Bouie's assertion that “wokeness [is] a word that signifies nothing other than conservative disdain for anything that seems liberal” (Bouie 2023) are not quite right, for “liberal” has a more-or-less established meaning in this context. Nor does *woke*—as deployed in the culture wars—represent a specific, well-defined, adversarial social group, one that would embrace *woke* as a traditional totem. Unlike in the examples of the Pride flag or MAGA hat, the majority of those branded as *woke*—including the U.S. Military, the SEC, Wall Street, and Fox News—would reject the totemic label. Indeed, according to one poll, “only one third of Democrats are self-described as ‘woke’” (Trudo and Parnes 2021). Of course, one could conceivably point to a much smaller group of people—perhaps those that fit the descriptions offered up by Lindsay and McWhorter in their descriptions of the so-called woke religion—and claim that they constitute a coherent social body. However, as I have been at pains to demonstrate, this is simply not the way *woke* is used in the culture wars, and it is its expansive use within the culture wars that constitutes its principle application in contemporary American culture. This lack of a determinable, alien social group that *woke* might be said to represent is another factor that keeps it from being an anti-totem. Instead, *woke* gestures toward an amorphous, profane social world, one that is home to everything outside the collectivity of the one using the term. This negative definition, combined with a particular sensibility that has been embraced by many on the political right, is something that a small number of observers of culture have put their fingers on. As early as 2021, *Five Thirty Eight* carried a piece arguing that “The term woke has rapidly come to encompass everything and anything conservatives

don't like—anything and anyone they want to discredit" (Bacon 2021) (although, as we will see below, Bacon's limiting this to "conservatives" is mistaken).

An almost pure expression of my claim that *woke* points to an indeterminate, profane social world, one that is home to everything outside the collectivity of the one using the term, is provided by the editorial board of the *Colorado Springs Gazette* when they write, "the woke revolution turns values upside-down. . . In woke culture, good is bad and bad is good" (Editorial Board 2022). Statements like this make explicit my central claim: individuals who disparage people, organizations, and phenomena by labeling them *woke* are actually reaffirming their own beliefs and values, as well as those of an emerging collectivity comprising all those who use the term in this way; in doing so, they are strengthening their own bonds of solidarity. And this observation raises the obvious question: what, exactly, is the social group for which *woke* serves as an inverted totem?

While the political right in the United States—broadly represented by the Republican Party—has been most vociferous in its use of *woke* within the context of the culture wars (cf. Michael Harriot's article in *The Guardian* with the headline, "War on wokeness: the year the right rallied around a made-up menace" (Harriot 2022)), it would be a mistake to think that *woke* is simply the inverted totem of Republicans. As it turns out, there are myriad self-described liberals who are just as vocal in their condemnatory use of *woke*. Sohrab Ahmari catalogs some of them in an article entitled, "The problem with anti-woke liberals": "anti-woke liberals like McWhorter (and Bari Weiss, Douglas Murray, Bill Maher and James Lindsay)" (Ahmari 2022). With some overlap, Victor Hanson offers "Elon Musk, Bill Maher, Matt Taibbi, Bari Weiss, Glen Greenwald, Naomi Wolf, or a Richard Dreyfuss" as examples of "Former and current liberals . . . [who] began questioning the premises of wokeism" (Hanson 2023). British television personality Piers Morgan wrote an entire book excoriating the *woke*, noting at the outset that "The woke crowd particularly loathed me because the informed ones know that I'm actually a liberal" (2020). He describes the genesis of what would become *Wake Up!* in the following:

I began 2020 sitting at my office desk, constructing a book based around a burning desire to try to persuade my fellow liberals to stop behaving like arseholes, even if they think everyone else is, and start behaving like liberals again. (2020)

James Carville, influential Democratic strategist and frequent cable news pundit, claims that "Wokeness is a problem and everyone knows it" (Cillizza 2021), while a no-less-certified non-member of the Republican Party, President Obama, chastised a group of young progressives with the following: "This idea of purity and you're never compromised and you're always politically 'woke' and all that stuff . . . You should get over that quickly" (Rueb and Taylor 2019).

The reason for highlighting this phenomenon (i.e., anti-*woke* sentiment among some of those on the political left) is not to suggest that these liberals are ideologically unified with those on the political right. Rather, it is to show that, taken together, there is a significant number of people—a group that does not neatly map onto traditional, institutionalized political associations—who share thoughts, impressions, and sentiments vis-à-vis the term *woke*, and as Durkheim points out (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 221), this is precisely what defines a totem. It is also why claiming that *woke* is simply a racist dog-whistle (Richardson 2023) is an insufficient explanation of its function in the culture wars; while some people undoubtedly use the term that way, racism seems inadequate to explain both the diversity of what is considered *woke* and the diversity of people who actually use the term in this context.

With this ideological diversity noted, it is nevertheless the case that within the political sphere it is the right that has wielded *woke* as an offensive weapon in the context of the culture wars, for it is the Republican Party that is systematically attempting to co-opt as many of those people (i.e., those who share negative thoughts, impressions, and sentiments vis-à-vis the term *woke*) under its standard. In fact, we can observe this happening explicitly in the high-profile cases of Democratic legislators leaving their party and becoming Republicans. For example, in October of 2022, former Democratic U.S. Congresswoman Tulsi

Gabbard—who ran for president as a Democrat in 2020 (eventually dropping out of the race and endorsing President Biden)—declared, “I can no longer remain in today’s Democratic party” because “It’s now under the complete control of an elitist cabal of warmongers, driven by cowardly wokeness” (Archie 2022). Several months later, in the spring of 2023, there were more who followed. North Carolina state legislator Tricia Cotham made a move similar to Gabbard’s for similar reasons. Commenting on Cotham’s switch, the U.S. Senator from North Carolina remarked that “Voters are leaving the Democrat Party every day because its extreme agenda hurts North Carolina families... Far left Democrats will only fight for a radical, woke agenda” (Mercer 2023). Louisiana state legislator Francis Thompson did the same thing for the same reasons, changing party affiliation from Democrat to Republican, as did West Virginia Delegate Elliott Pritt, whose switch was announced by Elaine McArdle, the West Virginia Republican Party Chairwoman, with a statement that included the following: “The Democratic Party of today is led by Joe Biden and the radical, woke left who continue to advocate values and policies which defy logic and clash with the values of West Virginians” (McElhinny 2023). Of course, these are just a handful of the most publicized cases of a larger trend that the Republican Party is encouraging through the use of an inverted totem. As one Republican Senate aid put it, while they could not define *woke*, anti-woke messaging is “everywhere now” because “it kind of works to say it. And I don’t think people maybe exactly know why . . . It’s just like you see something working and you’re just going to keep going with it” (Smith and Kapur 2023).

6. Conclusions

As a totem, *woke* serves to create and constitute the self-awareness of an otherwise indefinite social identity (Durkheim [1912] 1995, p. 231). But it does so as neither a traditional totem (i.e., by representing the group’s own sacred values and beliefs) nor an anti-totem (i.e., by representing an alien group with values and beliefs offensive to its own). Instead, *woke* is an inverted totem, a symbol of a group that is constituted by the totem’s representation of all the values and beliefs that are offensive to the group.

In closing, it is important to reiterate that neither the Republican Party nor any other ideologically conservative institution is the social group symbolized by *woke*. *Woke* has brought into being a hitherto amorphous and unselfconscious social body that transcends other cultural and ideological boundaries. But by identifying their party as home to this emergent collectivity—if not exactly coextensive with it—the Republican Party hopes to garner support from erstwhile Democrats and Independents who identify with the inverted totem. This strategy has been facilitated by the sense that the connective tissue binding the political right—their shared values and beliefs—has been weakening. Many contemporary political commentators contend that an absence of unity on the American political right has opened the door to the sort of negative self-definition I am arguing for. Political journalist Charlotte Kilpatrick argues that “ever since Trump assumed office, the Republican Party has undergone a realignment that mirrors the former president’s own predispositions, in that it no longer strictly adheres to a religious worldview” (Kilpatrick 2022). National political reporter Steve Peoples claims that among Republicans, “there is no consensus even among the fighting factions about the people, policies or political tactics they should embrace” and that the intra-party divide is the byproduct of “Trumpism”, which he describes as “a political ideology defined by its relentless focus on a common enemy and a willingness to fight that perceived foe no matter the cost” (Peoples 2023). Similarly, political journalist Eric Levitz argues that the “ideological incoherence of the contemporary GOP is unusually severe” and that “Republicans have less trouble articulating what they’re against” (Levitz 2021). He goes on to assert the following:

That Republicans lack any affirmative governing agenda is less a matter of opinion than official record: In 2020, the party declined to put forward a campaign platform of any kind, and its standard bearer never detailed the policies he intended to enact upon reelection. (Levitz 2021)

And when there is a lack of shared values, beliefs, and ways of understanding and relating to the world, it becomes difficult for a collectivity to persist; it becomes difficult to say who precisely is “one of us” and who is “one of them.” As sociologist Kai Erikson argues, “Boundaries are never a fixed property of any community. They are always shifting as the people of the group find new ways to define the outer limits of their universe, new ways to position themselves on the larger cultural map” (Erikson 1966, p. 12). This sort of tectonic shift is what many have argued is occurring throughout the civil sphere, both in the United States and the Anglo-sphere more broadly. And this is precisely where *woke* comes in. *New York Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg argues that “conservatives are relying on fantastical ideas about wokeness to tie together a movement that has otherwise lost much of its *raison d’être*” (Goldberg 2023). But what has been less noticed in the vast amount of writing on *woke* is that it is not just the Republican Party whose collective boundaries are shifting. In other words, *woke* as an inverted totem is not just some new means of delineating the Republican Party or the political right more broadly; it serves instead as the collective representation of a unique group, one that is only now coming into being through the ministrations of an inverted totem.

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Notes

- ¹ Throughout this article I will usually refer to the term in its more iconic form, *woke*, rather than the perhaps more grammatically satisfying form, *wokeness*.
- ² As of this writing in 2023.
- ³ The acronym “W.O.K.E.” stands for “Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees” (flgov.com, 22 April 2022).
- ⁴ My arguments are in no way wedded to or reliant on Durkheim’s assertions regarding totemism as historically practiced by various people groups. See Robert Alun Jones’s (2005) critique of the Victorian Era claims about totemism.
- ⁵ I have added “traditional” in order to distinguish this type of totem from the others I will develop (i.e., anti-totem and inverted totem). And by “traditional” I mean simply that this is the concept that has been traditionally used in the social sciences since it was developed by Durkheim and others.
- ⁶ For example, see *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (Hunter 1991).
- ⁷ While the term *woke* (as used in this article) originated in the United States, it was quickly mobilized in the culture wars throughout the anglophone world and beyond during this period.
- ⁸ Robinson notes that the four were eventually freed after several appeals and trials (2022).
- ⁹ “Master Teacher” was written in 2005 by Georgia Anne Muldrow. For an account of the song and its role in the history of *woke*, see Elijah Watson’s “The Origin of Woke: How Erykah Badu and Georgia Anne Muldrow Sparked the ‘Stay Woke’ Era.” (Watson n.d.).
- ¹⁰ All four Minneapolis, Minnesota, police officers involved with George Floyd’s death have been convicted on various charges ranging from aiding and abetting manslaughter to murder ((Yousif 2023), 5 February 2023). In the case of Breonna Taylor, none of the officers involved with her killing was charged with her shooting death (Oppel et al. 2023).
- ¹¹ On the “Black Voices for Trump” Instagram site, a photo was posted on 25 January 2022, of several people at what appears to be a Trump rally holding mass-produced “Black Voices for Trump” campaign signs, one of which reads “Text WOKE to 88022.” On 25 May 2022, the same photo was reposted on the site, only the new version had been clumsily edited such that the “Text WOKE” sign now reads “Black Voices To Save America.”
- ¹² In fairness, neither Lindsay nor McWhorter were necessarily interested in explaining *woke* as a phenomenon in the culture wars, so I am not here offering a critique of their projects on their own terms.
- ¹³ Regardless of whether this “fixing upon a tangible object” is strictly necessary for an awareness of one’s collective identity, it is certainly a common enough phenomenon.

- ¹⁴ The red baseball cap with “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) emblazoned in white across the front has been the signature emblem of Donald Trump and his supporters since shortly after Trump first wore one in public at a July 2015 campaign rally in Texas (Spodak 2017).
- ¹⁵ A visual analogy of this concept can be seen in the following familiar phenomenon. Imagine a framed photograph that has hung on a wall for a very long time, a wall that receives a great deal of exposure to direct sunlight. After many years, when the framed photograph is removed from the wall, the wallpaper behind the photograph looks new and vibrant, while the faded wallpaper all around the frame is dull and faded. In this case, the faded wallpaper perfectly delimits the form of the missing photograph in the same way that an inverted totem delimits its social group.

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