We Have Never Been Woke

The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite

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The Great Awokening(s)

Over the past several years, there has been a dramatic shift in discourse and expressed attitudes about prejudice, discrimination, and disrespect. More striking than the intensity and rapidity of the movement was its breadth. Although race was a central axis, discourse and beliefs around immigration status, gender, and sexuality experienced similar and roughly simultaneous transformations.

Documenting these changes, colleagues David Rozado, Jamin Halberstadt, and I analyzed twenty-seven million news articles published in forty-seven media outlets over the past half century. We found that, beginning in the early 2010s, there was a major rise in the use of terms referring to various forms of prejudice and discrimination.[1] Bias and oppression along the lines of race, gender, or sexuality—and even discrimination against religious minorities (Muslims, Jews)—all experienced rapid and simultaneous increases in salience. Similar patterns held for television news broadcasts. Statistical tests suggested that these shifts were not independent of one another but instead seemed to be products of some deeper, underlying change among the people who produce the news.

Academic research followed the same trend. Analyzing thematic patterns since the turn of the century across six of the most expansive scholarship databases, Rozado and I identified a dramatic and simultaneous increase in research studying discrimination along the lines of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability status after 2011.[2] Google nGrams show equivalent changes in published books: there were huge and simultaneous

spikes in discussions of racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and related terms that began after 2011 and continued through the end of the dataset (2019).[3]

Artistic outputs moved in a similar direction. As early as 2014, cultural critics began to note that overtly political—and politically and morally uncomplicated—art was beginning to dominate the cultural landscape in symbolic capitalist circles.[4] In the aftermath of Donald Trump's election, this trend seems to have been exacerbated.[5] Diversity, representation, and politics were core themes for museum exhibitions throughout the 2010s.[6] Art education trended in the same direction: statistical analyses of art pedagogy journals showed a significant spike in focus on "identity" issues after 2010 and running through the rest of the decade.[7]

Diversity, representation, and identity became core priorities of the entertainment industry too. With respect to feature films, for instance, roughly 14 percent of major studio films released in 2012 included an LGBTQ character, and only half of those passed the Vito Russo test. By 2020, nearly a quarter (23 percent) included identifiably LGBTQ characters, and nearly all (90 percent) of those movies passed the test.[8] Simultaneously, the percentage of films with nonwhite leads quadrupled over the decade to the point where the percentage of films with white leads now roughly mirrors the percentage of whites in the general population. The diversity of supporting roles also increased radically over this same period. By 2020, nearly 30 percent of films had primarily nonwhite casts. Over this same period, the percentage of movies with female leads likewise doubled and is now approaching parity with the percentage of films with male leads.[9] The number of films passing the Bechdel test radically increased after 2010 as well. Of the thirty highest-grossing films of 2006, only 27 percent passed the test. In the period between 2013 and 2019, 76 percent passed.[10]

Representation in television and streaming shows followed a similar trajectory. The share of regular and recurring LGBTQ actors more than doubled from 2012 to 2020—including a rapidly growing presence in children and family programming. LGBTQ representation also grew more diverse. By 2020, a majority of LGBTQ characters on the small screen were nonwhite.[11] Overall, the share of scripted television shows with nonwhite leads more than doubled from 2012 to 2020, and supporting casts grew radically more diverse as well.[12]

However, entertainment outputs didn't simply grow more diverse, they also grew more overtly political.[13] And it wasn't just the themes that shifted but also the mode of discussion. In the words of cultural critic Molly Fischer,

entertainment outputs increasingly adopted "a tone along the lines of an after-school special," despite a dearth of viewers who would be "simultaneously surprised and receptive to such lessons."[14] Those in the entertainment industry who failed to toe the preferred institutional line on cultural and political issues increasingly faced professional sanctions. Content out of step with the preferred narratives grew increasingly difficult to produce.[15]

The advertisements that accompany (and typically subsidize the production of) these cultural outputs simultaneously grew more diverse along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality—and more explicitly political in their themes and content—from 2012 through 2021. The changes were particularly pronounced in advertisements for symbolic economy–aligned industries such as education, technology, telecommunications, nonprofits, and entertainment (TV, music, film), and in ads targeting strong Democrat-voting regions (such as symbolic economy hubs).[16]

Collectively, these changes in symbolic economy outputs happened in tandem with radical attitudinal shifts among the primary producers and consumers of these outputs: highly educated white liberals. After 2011, there were dramatic changes in how highly educated white liberals answered questions related to race and ethnicity.[17] These shifts were not matched among nonliberal or non-Democrat whites, nor among nonwhites of any political or ideological persuasion. By 2020, highly educated white liberals tended to provide more "woke" responses to racial questions than the average Black or Hispanic person; they tended to perceive much more racism against minorities than most minorities, themselves, reported experiencing; they expressed greater support for diversity than most Blacks or Hispanics.[18] White Democrats also became significantly more likely to perceive others in their social circles as "racist," even as nonwhite copartisans moved in the opposite direction (and white non-Democrats were flat).[19] On "feeling thermometer" questions, white liberals shifted so much that they now tend to view all other racial and ethnic groups more favorably than their own. There is no other combination of ideology and race that produces remotely similar results.[20]

Critically, race is not the only axis on which these dramatic trends were apparent. They are visible in questions related to gender and sexuality as well. For instance, from 2010 to 2020 Democrats became 16 percentage points more likely to insist that abortion should be legal under all circumstances. There was more movement in this ten-year span than in the entire preceding time series, going back to 1975.[21] Over this same period, white liberals became much more likely to self-identify as "feminist," and self-identified "feminists" grew much more likely to identify as strong Democrats. Moreover, although

white liberals' views on "identity" issues shifted far more than their positions on economic matters, dramatic shifts were apparent in expressed attitudes on poverty as well.[22] As an example, between 2011 and 2017, Republicans grew 1 percentage point less likely to say that the government should do more to help the needy even if it exacerbates the national debt. Democrats shifted 17 percentage points in the opposite direction.[23] On dataset after dataset, question after question, this same pattern emerges: a rapidly growing polarization between highly educated white liberals and virtually everyone else in society from 2011 through 2021.

As symbolic capitalists' attitudes about the social world changed, their emotional states moved in tandem. There was a rapid and asymmetrical increase in Democrats experiencing anxiety, depression, and other forms of negative affect after 2011—including and especially among those who are highly educated, white and identify as liberal—perhaps driven by increased awareness, concern, and discussion about social injustices (and heightened worry about actual or perceived complicity in said injustices or impotence to meaningfully address them).[24]

The political and ideological alignments of highly educated white Americans shifted significantly over this same period too. Since 2010, rapidly growing shares of highly educated whites have aligned themselves with the Democratic Party. And within the Democratic Party, there has been a dramatic rise in the share of highly educated and white voters who identify as "liberal." It is particularly highly educated *white* voters within the Democratic Party who have undergone this ideological shift. Black and Hispanic Democrats with college degrees, for instance, remain far less likely to self-identify as "liberal" than white peers and saw far less movement over the span of time in question.[25] There was also systematic variation along gender lines: the shifts were far more radical and sustained among women than men.[26] Across the board, however, highly educated whites underwent dramatic changes in their political and ideological identification. As an indication of how far they've shifted: in recent polling, college-educated white voters have shown a stronger preference for the Democratic Party than racial or ethnic minority voters. This is unprecedented in the record of polling going back to the mid-1960s.[27]

In addition to shifting how they talk and think about social justice issues, and adjusting their political and ideological alignments, highly educated white liberals also became much more militant in advocating for their preferred social agenda. Highly educated white Democrats, for instance, began to contact elected officials and donate to political campaigns and causes at much

higher levels after 2010, and in a way that was not mirrored by nonwhite copartisans.[28] In response, the preferred political party of these constituents shifted dramatically as well. Work by economist Sahil Chinoy shows that there was an aggressive (and asymmetrical) leftward shift in the Democratic Party platform beginning in 2012 and persisting through subsequent cycles.[29]

Here it's worth emphasizing that, although polls and surveys tend to break up the electorate in terms of characteristics like race, income, education, or political and ideological identification instead of identifying them by the work they do, it's probably more precise to think of the shifts as being driven by symbolic capitalists in particular, rather than whites, liberals, or highly educated voters more generically. Much-discussed phenomena like the growing urban-rural divide, the diploma divide, and the gender divide are all proxies for a more fundamental schism between symbolic capitalists (and the communities they congregate in) versus those who are more socioeconomically or culturally distant from the symbolic economy—a schism that has grown significantly wider in recent years.

Symbolic capitalists lie squarely at the intersection of the populations whose ideological and political perspectives have changed most since 2011 (highly educated white liberals). As will be detailed at length in subsequent chapters, symbolic capitalists are overwhelmingly white. This is not just a function of baseline U.S. population characteristics: relative to other American workers, symbolic capitalists are disproportionately likely to be white. They nearly unanimously possess at least a BA. Politically and ideologically, they are overwhelmingly Democratic and liberal. All said, the lion's share of symbolic capitalists are highly educated white liberals, and Americans who happen to be highly educated white liberals are quite likely to be symbolic capitalists. The particular slice of Americans who primarily comprise the symbolic professions underwent idiosyncratic and dramatic political and ideological transformations after 2011, and this significantly and uniquely transformed the outputs and the operations of the symbolic professions over this same time period (relative to other occupations).

In a 2019 essay, *Vox* analyst Matthew Yglesias popularized the term "the Great Awokening" as a shorthand to refer to the rapid shifts in the expressed views of white liberals on identity issues after 2011.[30] This is the term I will use here to collectively refer not just to the shifts in expressed attitudes among symbolic capitalists but also to the simultaneous and likewise dramatic changes in protest activity, ideological and political alignments, and symbolic economy outputs.[31] These trends are often analyzed and discussed in isolation. However, it's likely more revelatory to analyze them as different facets

of a single overarching social phenomenon that started in late 2010 and began to decline around 2021.

Point of Origin

One of the most striking aspects of the rapid shift in discourse and norms around "identity" issues is their timing: they don't seem to be a response to anything in particular that happened "in the world" with respect to race, gender, or sexuality at time of onset.

For instance, given that the shifts on race became increasingly pronounced through 2012, one might assume they were straightforwardly a response to the February 26 murder of Trayvon Martin. However, it is harder to explain why we see similar changes in discussion and public attitudes with respect to sexism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism—all at roughly the same time as we observe the spikes related to race.

The shifts with respect to sexism and misogyny were clearly not a response to #MeToo. They preceded the emergence of #MeToo by a few years and may help explain why the movement was able to achieve the impact it did—why it was able to find such a receptive audience when previous efforts to elevate the issues of sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination were less successful gaining traction.

In a similar fashion, changes that were *already underway* leading into 2012 may explain why the murder of Martin—and the subsequent slayings of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice—resonated so strongly when previous incidents of state violence against African Americans (including other incidents caught on film) did not. That is, rather than the shift in racial attitudes being a response to, for instance, Black Lives Matter (BLM), instead, *antecedent shifts* among symbolic capitalists may help explain why BLM was able to attain such prominence in 2013, and to rise to such heights in the years that followed.

In light of this timeline, it should go without saying that the ongoing Great Awokening was *not* a response to Trump. Instead, Trump seems to have emerged on the political scene in the context of already-heightened social tension around identity issues, and may have been ushered out of office by the same. Research by my colleagues and I found that the shifts in media discourse and public attitudes continued unabated six months after Joe Biden was sworn into office—underscoring yet again that the shifts were not "about" Trump.[32]

Instead, if we are trying to pinpoint the beginning of the Great Awokening, it seems most accurate to say it began in September 2011, with the emergence

of the Occupy Wall Street movement. This claim may be shocking to some readers. In the popular discourse, the Occupy movement is often discussed as being in tension with, or even antithetical to, identitarian approaches to social justice. Some have gone so far as to claim that the Great Awokening was cooked up by superelites and corporations in order to divert attention away from the broad-based and class-focused movement that Occupy Wall Street allegedly represented.[33] In reality, however, Occupy and the identitarian movements that succeeded it are more contiguous than contradictory.

E Pluribus Unum

From the outset, a key mission of symbolic capitalists has been to rein in capitalism run amok (thereby rendering the prevailing order more beneficent, efficient, and stable). Although mainstream symbolic capitalists have consistently aligned themselves with the "Left," in practice their efforts have been largely oriented toward saving capitalism from the capitalists rather than overthrowing the system entirely. In pursuit of this objective, millionaires and billionaires have been a consistent foil for symbolic economy professionals. Superelites whose fortunes are tied to material extraction and production are subject to particular scorn. Across the board, however, symbolic capitalists have consistently condemned superelites as selfish, short-sighted, and insufficiently deferent to people like ourselves.

As sociologist Max Weber emphasized, elites who hold social status in society on the basis of attributes like their knowledge, skills, or institutional rank tend to be resentful and disdainful toward those who enjoy a high social position primarily on the basis of their business success and accumulated wealth. It has always been our strong conviction that society would be vastly improved if people listened to and admired the millionaires and billionaires *less* and valued the perspectives of intellectuals *more*. These sentiments are heightened, Weber argued, when symbolic capitalists find their own status or socioeconomic position threatened or particularly precarious.[34] During these periods, we become much more likely to rail aggressively against capitalism and the superrich—often cloaking our struggles for wealth, status, and power as social justice advocacy—although our passion for revolution tends to rapidly fade once our own objectives are met:

> In truth—let's be honest with ourselves here—this belief in the cause, as subjectively sincere as it may be, is almost always a "moral legitimation" for the desire for power, revenge, booty, and benefits: the materialist

> interpretation of history too is no hansom cab to be hailed at will, and it doesn't stop for the agents of revolution! But then, after the emotional revolution, comes the return to traditional everyday life; the hero of the believers, and even the belief itself, disappears or becomes even more effective as a conventional slogan in the political philistine's or functionary's arsenal.[35]

Taking symbolic capitalists' rhetoric at face value during these periods of heightened unrest, it would be easy to mistake us as genuinely populist or egalitarian. However, the methods and constitution of the movements we take part in typically suggest a different story: they tend to be campaigns by and for one faction of elites against another. Occupy Wall Street was no exception.

In reality, Occupy was not class oriented. It was a movement that, if anything, helped *obscure* important class differences and the actual causes of social stratification. As David Autor aptly put it, "The singular focus of the public debate on the 'top 1 percent' of households overlooks the component of earnings inequality that is arguably most consequential for the 'other 99 percent' of citizens: the dramatic growth in the wage premium associated with higher education and cognitive ability."[36] That is, precisely what Occupy helped us *avoid* talking about is how symbolic economy institutions and their employment practices are some of the main drivers of contemporary inequality, and how people like *us* are the primary "winners" in this arrangement. Conveniently for symbolic capitalists, rather than focusing on concrete policies to rectify inequalities, the Occupy movement's approach to social change was intensely academic and, in the name of "inclusivity," was outright hostile to politics per se.[37] Rather than advocating for concrete policies that could tangibly assist the marginalized and disadvantaged in society, or developing some actionable platform that could help promote broad-based prosperity, the movement was primarily focused on villainizing those above symbolic capitalists on the socioeconomic ladder.

Contrary to depictions of Occupy as a broad-based movement, symbolic capitalists were its primary base. For instance, despite the diversity of the city, participants of Occupy demonstrations in New York were overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white. They were nearly uniformly liberal in their political orientations. They were also relatively affluent: roughly three-quarters (72 percent) of participants came from households above the 2011 New York City median. A plurality came from households that brought in over $100,000 per year. Seventy-six percent of participants had a BA degree

or higher, and a majority of the rest were currently enrolled in college. Those who had jobs hailed overwhelmingly from the symbolic professions. Only about a quarter of employed participants had blue-collar, retail, or service jobs.[38] Across the rest of the country, the picture was basically the same. Occupy protests were concentrated largely in symbolic economy hubs, and there were low rates of participation across the board for those who were *not* college educated, white, and liberal.[39]

The composition of Occupy was broadly continuous with the "identitarian" movements that followed. For instance, analyzing the post-2016 #Resistance protest movements such as the March for Science, the Women's March, and the March for Racial Justice, sociologist Dana Fisher likewise found that the demonstrators were majority white, disproportionately female, extremely well educated (with more than 70 percent possessing a bachelor's degree, and many others pursuing a college degree), and overwhelmingly left-leaning. Whether we analyze by sheer number of events or by participants, or if we look at attendees per capita, #Resistance protest events were overwhelmingly concentrated in knowledge economy hubs, just like Occupy protests were. The average adult age of the demonstrators was thirty-eight to forty-nine years old. Far from being a project of passionate young people, the #Resistance movement comprised primarily midcareer professionals associated with the symbolic economy.[40] The Occupy crowd, but a half decade later.

Consequently, instead of thinking about Occupy Wall Street and post-2011 identitarian shifts as competitors, it's probably more accurate to view them as different phases in the same Awokening. As the initial (Occupy) movement fizzled out, roughly the same constituencies began mobilizing alternative modes of social justice discourse, largely toward the same ends. Many who spent 2011 shouting "We are the 99 percent" spent 2013 proudly declaring that "Black Lives Matter," identified as part of the #Resistance under Trump, began telling #MeToo stories in 2017, and became "trust the science" stans from 2018 through the COVID-19 pandemic. It's all been part of the same wave of activism among mainstream symbolic capitalists.

Alternative Facts

There have been many alternative theories to explain the rapid cultural shifts and heightened social unrest that began after 2010. One popular narrative attributes the tumult to new digital technologies allowing ordinary people to circumvent elite gatekeepers, coordinate, and share information and ideas in hitherto unprecedented ways.[41] A popular variation on this argument

interprets the Great Awokening as a product of women, minorities, LGBTQ Americans, and young people having a greater ability to "talk back" to established authorities as a result of the aforementioned technological shifts alongside changing demographics in the United States. Resistance to "wokeness" is described as backlash against historically marginalized and disadvantaged populations making gains in society. These narratives are comforting to symbolic capitalists. However, they have glaring problems.

Again, the most dramatic shifts in norms, discourse, and political activity occurred among highly educated and relatively affluent white liberals. They were not reflected among poor or working-class people or nonwhites of any political persuasion to anywhere near the same degree. Geographically, wealthy symbolic economy hubs were the main sites of mobilization. Looking at occupations, there have been massive changes to journalistic outputs and the operations of many newsrooms since 2011. There were major shifts in the themes of academic research and teaching. Nonprofit and advocacy organizations experienced constant and explosive conflict over what their priorities should be and how best to advance them.[42] Advertisers, PR firms, and consultants made significant adjustments to their strategies and communications. Art and entertainment outputs underwent massive transformations. New rules, procedures, trainings, and positions proliferated rapidly in HR departments. However, there were no comparable social justice–oriented shifts in how waitresses serve food, how truck drivers deliver freight, how beauticians cut nails, how construction workers build houses, how grocery store clerks ring up food, how plumbers unclog toilets, and so on (excepting some additional rules and training imposed by the aforementioned corporate HR administrators, often to the chagrin of "normie" workers). The Awokening was primarily constrained to the symbolic professions. And within those professions, the shifts were led by the most prestigious institutions (later emulated by others),[43] and conflicts were consistently more pronounced in elite spaces than in less prestigious firms and institutions. These realities are difficult to square with depictions of the Great Awokening as a "bottom-up" movement.

Narratives attributing the Great Awokening to young people are just as problematic. For example, there was a significant uptick in demonstrations at college campuses nationwide that began in 2011 and continued to build over subsequent years.[44] We now know that the unrest unfolding on campuses was not unique to institutions of higher learning. Most other spheres of the symbolic economy were undergoing contemporaneous transformations. The changes were *especially visible* at colleges and universities early on because

these are institutions filled with huge numbers of symbolic capitalists and aspirants thereto. That is, they contain exceptionally large concentrations of the elites who were undergoing the shifts. At the time, however, many instead attempted to explain the tumult affecting colleges and universities in terms of the unique characteristics of "kids these days." As the discourse continued, there came to be a particular focus on Gen Z, who, relative to previous cohorts, were held to be especially sensitive to offense, intolerant of resistance or dissent, and politically progressive and engaged, but also overly impatient and idealistic.

However, Gen Z was clearly *not* responsible for the identitarian shifts in mainstream media reporting, published books, academic journal articles, or arts and entertainment programming that kicked off as Occupy was winding down. At the time these shifts began, the *oldest* members of Gen Z were just sixteen years old—they were not producing these cultural outputs, let alone serving as gatekeepers of what gets published or not. These teens and preteens were not the demographic most advertisers, media companies, and publishing houses were trying to reach, nor were they the main constituents that Democratic Party decision makers were trying to appease as they shifted their messaging and priorities (they weren't even old enough to vote, let alone having the discretionary income and autonomy to donate and volunteer for campaigns). Instead, it was millennials and younger members of Gen X who led the Great Awokening—people who were in their twenties through forties at its outset. Consequently, although it may be empirically true that contemporary young people have unique experiences, characteristics, and preferences that set them apart from previous generational cohorts in nontrivial ways, these differences are not particularly relevant for understanding most of the post-2011 social, cultural, and institutional transformations.

Technological changes can't explain the Great Awokening either. Facebook became available to the general public in 2006. Google acquired YouTube in that same year. Twitter began taking off in 2007, contemporaneous with the release of the first iPhone. All said, social networking sites and smartphones existed for years before the Awokening began—and the erstwhile rebels who made effective use of these technologies were often, themselves, highly educated and relatively affluent. They were disaffected elites or elite aspirants rather than "normies." The cofounders of BLM, for instance, all had BA degrees from top-notch universities. Two out of three had advanced degrees on top of their BAs. One could go on and on.

Rather than empowering ordinary people to circumvent elite gatekeepers, it may be that the primary way digital technologies and platforms

contributed to social unrest was by making it easier for counterelites to spread their messaging and attain a following. Yet, as Evgeny Morozov powerfully illustrated, the specific technologies and platforms broadly credited with sparking revolutions are also widely used by established authorities to surveil dissidents, suppress resistance, and otherwise preserve the status quo.[45] Put another way, one could just as easily point to the technologies in question to explain why status quos persist instead of why they change.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the technological account, however, is that it implies (1) the post-2011 Great Awokening would not have happened in the absence of the technologies in question and (2) events like this did not happen, and indeed could not have, before these technologies existed (because the shifts are, themselves, products of the new technologies and platforms). Both these implicit premises are demonstrably false.

Not the First, Not the Last

While there is a tendency in some circles to assert that we live in "unprecedented" times, in fact, there have been multiple other Awokenings in the twentieth century that played out quite similarly to the current period of rapid normative and discursive change. We can isolate these periods using many of the same types of metrics we used to substantiate the current one.

For instance, highly educated white voters moved aggressively toward the Democratic Party after 2011. Political scientists Matthew Grossman and David Hopkins showed that there were similar shifts in the political identification of highly educated whites in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, and in the mid-1960s through the late 1970s.[46] Looking at trends in white racial liberalism from 1954 to 2020, political scientist Zach Goldberg identified three periods of significant attitudinal shifts among white liberals: one that crested in the mid-1960s, one in the early 1990s, and another that had yet to crest as of 2020.[47] Looking at Google nGrams, political scientist Eric Kaufmann found that there were *three* major spikes in literary discussion around racism, sexism, and homophobia: one beginning in the mid-1960s, one in the late 1980s, and another in the early 2010s.[48] Quantitative analysis of academic publications from 1980 to 2018 reveals a dramatic uptick in discussions of "trauma" and other terms related to victimhood starting in the early 1990s, with another spike after 2010.[49]

This is all resonant with what my colleagues and I discovered in analyzing media articles: although our dataset did not go back to the 1960s, we found evidence of a dramatic shift in discourse and public attitudes

related to a broad range of "identity" issues that peaked in the early 1990s[50] (in addition to the spike that began after 2011). Sociologist Leslie McCall likewise identified a dramatic spike in media coverage of socioeconomic inequality in the early to mid-1990s.[51] Political scientists Dennis Chong, Jack Citrin, and Morris Levy subsequently illustrated that there was a major spike in media conversation around free speech and equality in the late 1980s through the mid-1990s followed by another spike beginning after 2008 and proceeding through 2021.[52] Moreover, they highlight, major national longitudinal surveys show contemporaneous and rapid declines in tolerance for speech perceived to demean or offend members of historically marginalized and disenfranchised groups during these periods—at least for a certain subset of the population. Explaining their findings in the *New York Times*, Chong noted that "the most pronounced declines [in tolerance for offensive speech] over time have occurred among white, college educated liberals."[53] Writing in 1994, sociologist Steven Brint observed that "episodic surges of reformist activity" seem to "affect middle class professionals" more than anyone else in society.[54]

It is important to underline just how episodic these surges are. As philosopher Oliver Traldi has pointed out, the contemporary debates about identity politics, free speech, and "political correctness" on college campuses played out nearly verbatim in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[55] In a book written at the tail end of the last Awokening, Barbara Ehrenreich describes how responses to student activists in the late 1980s and early 1990s were virtually identical to how "radical" students were portrayed in the 1960s. One excerpt is worth quoting at length, as it underscores how little has changed from the time of the boomers—not just relative to the 1990s but even today (emphases mine):

> Psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim likened the student rebels to Nazis. Then–liberal professor John Sibler called them "the new Fascisti." Nathan Glazer *compared them not only to Hitler but to Lenin and Stalin*. Daniel Bell described the students at Columbia as "*impelled not to innovation but to destruction*." Irving Kristol, not yet a conservative, called them "rebels without a cause—and *without hope of accomplishing anything* other than mischief and ruin." Nor did the howls of outrage come only from the liberal center of the political spectrum. . . . Socialist Irving Howe dismissed the student movement as "romantic primitivism," motivated by a "*quasi-religious impulse*." . . . Edward Sihls described the students as "a uniquely indulged generation." . . . If they were "acting out" it was only

> because they had been acted upon—in the wrong way—by their *indulgent parents*.[56]

Sound familiar? Again, this is Ehrenreich writing in 1990 about how student protesters *in the 1960s* were received. She found startling continuity between the culture war narratives and battle lines of the 1960s and the 1990s. It was even more startling to reread this text in the 2020s and observe how little has changed in our cultural scripts over the last sixty years.

All said, few elements of the current Awokening are actually unique to the present. Consider the phenomenon of "cancellation" within left-aligned spaces. Although often discussed in connection with online platforms and smartphones, it's a practice that goes back decades. In the 1960s, for instance, it was called "trashing," but the dynamics were the same, as illustrated powerfully in a 1976 article in *Ms.* magazine by Jo Freeman:

> Trashing has reached epidemic proportions. . . . What is "trashing," this colloquial term that expresses so much, yet explains so little? . . . It is not done to expose disagreements or resolve differences. It is done to disparage and destroy. The means vary. . . . Whatever methods are used, trashing involves a violation of one's integrity, a declaration of one's worthlessness, and an impugning of one's motives. In effect, what is attacked is not one's actions, or one's ideas, but one's self. This attack is accomplished by making you feel that your very existence is inimical to the Movement and that nothing can change this short of ceasing to exist. These feelings are reinforced when you are isolated from your friends as they become convinced that their association with you is similarly inimical to the Movement and to themselves. Any support of you will taint them. Eventually all your colleagues join in a chorus of condemnation which cannot be silenced, and you are reduced to a mere parody of your previous self.[57]

Contemporary tensions around "grievance studies," "words as violence," "victimhood culture," and affirmative action are likewise mostly reruns of debates from the late 1980s and early 1990s—themselves largely rehashes of debates from the late 1960s and early 1970s.[58] "Asymmetrical multiculturalism" (the tendency of white intellectuals to hold their coethnics in contempt while celebrating romanticized views of minorities) is not a product of the post-2010 period either. Instead, as political scientist Eric Kaufmann has shown, this impulse towards "white bashing" first became prominent in the 1920s.[59]

In fact, many elements of the contemporary Awokening date back roughly a century. Looking at mentions of "antiracism" in Google Books, we can see

four major spikes: one in the early 1930s, one in the late 1960s, one in the late 1980s, and one in the early 2010s. Similarly, with respect to feminism, many have described the current moment as part of the "fourth wave."[60] The third wave was in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The second wave was during the 1960s through the early 1970s. And the *first* wave peaked toward the 1920s and crested through the early 1930s. In many respects, this initial Great Awokening was far more intense than any that followed. It also happens to be the most neglected in contemporary discussions about these periods of rapid sociocultural change, even though it shares almost all the same characteristics of later uprisings.

For instance, writing in 1929, toward the tail end of the first Great Awokening, George Orwell highlighted how the predominant social justice movement of the time, while ostensibly egalitarian, was primarily a product of professionals (the "middle class" in the parlance of the times). Social justice discourse, he argued, was often used by elites as a means of self-enhancement. Their approach to talking and thinking about these issues was alienating to most nonelites, to the detriment of the genuinely marginalized and disadvantaged in society. Orwell's description of the tone and character of this period of heightened "social justice" activism should be immediately familiar to the contemporary reader (emphases mine except where indicated):

> The first thing that must strike any observer is that Socialism in its developed form is a theory confined entirely to the middle class. The typical Socialist is not, as tremulous old ladies imagine, a ferocious-looking working man with greasy overalls and a raucous voice. He is either a youthful snob-Bolshevik who in five years' time will have been converted to Roman Catholicism; or, still *more typically, a prim little man with a white-collar job*, usually a secret teetotaller, and often with vegetarian leanings, with a history of Nonconformity behind him, and, above all, with a social position that he has no intention of forfeiting. . . . Most middle-class Socialists, *while theoretically pining for a classless society, cling like glue to their miserable fragments of social prestige*. . . . Sometimes I look at a Socialist—the intellectual, tract-writing type of Socialist, with his pullover, his fuzzy hair, and his Marxian quotation—and wonder what the devil his motive really *is* (emphasis in original). It is often difficult to believe that it is love of anybody, especially of the working class, from whom he is of all people the furthest removed. . . . When I listen to these people talking, and still more when I read their books, I get the impression that, to them, the whole Socialist movement is no more than a kind of *exciting*

heresy-hunt—a leaping to and fro of frenzied witch-doctors to the beat of tom-toms and the tune of "Fee, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of a right-wing deviationist."[61]

It should be emphasized, however, that despite the many similarities between each of these movements, each Awokening has been importantly different from those that preceded and followed in various ways. For instance, the current Awokening is occurring in an age with the internet, smartphones, and social media, all of which do change symbolic exchange in profound ways (even if they aren't the *cause* of the latest Awokening). After the 1960s, anti-war protests were decoupled from subsequent uprisings for reasons that will be explored. LGBTQ rights, while part of the agenda during all periods of Awokening, have grown increasingly pronounced over time. The position of symbolic capitalists in society has evolved with each Awokening too, and as a result, turmoil within the symbolic professions has differential impacts on the rest of society across different historical periods. But for all of these significant differences across cycles—and they are significant—there are also patterns that repeat. By comparing cases and looking at elements that persist across cycles, we can gain insight into why and under what circumstances these movements begin, how and why they fizzle out, what (if any) changes they tend to leave in their wake, and whether (and how) one Awokening informs the next.

Colleges and universities play a central (and ever-growing) role in the symbolic economy. They also contain especially large concentrations of the people who tend to undergo dramatic normative and discursive shifts during Great Awokenings. For these reasons, institutions of higher learning provide nice sites for comparing one episode with another. Moreover, because "kids these days" narratives have been perennially popular[62]—while scholars and journalists are much less consistent about turning the analytical lens toward professionals like themselves—there is a particularly robust media and scholarly record of student protest activity that can help shed light on the timing of these Awokenings and their correlates. As a function of these realities, the walkthrough that follows will be heavily focused on student activism. However, it deserves to be emphasized that students were *not* the primary drivers of these movements.

To be sure, young people broadly embraced social justice movements when they were already underway, serving alternately as foot soldiers and scapegoats for older elites. However, they are rarely the instigators or leaders of these revolts. Consider the quintessential period of student activism, the

1960s. As psychologist Jean Twenge illustrated, the activism and counterculture movements of that period were *not* driven primarily by baby boomers. Instead, they were led by people from the Silent Generation who were in their mid-twenties through thirties at the time the Awokening took hold.[63] Similar patterns hold across all Awokenings, from Orwell's time through the present. Hence, although we will spend a lot of time discussing student protest movements in the pages that follow, readers should bear in mind that the patterns observed among college students are symptomatic of trends among symbolic capitalists writ large. After briefly walking through these episodes, we'll zoom back out to reinforce this point.

The First Awokening

As the symbolic professions were being consolidated, and their position elevated, educational and certification requirements were increasingly used as barriers to lock out minorities, immigrants, and the poor. Meanwhile, upper-middle-class whites began enrolling in colleges and universities at significantly higher rates. For instance, between 1920 and 1930, the share of Americans with a BA doubled (from 2.3 percent to 4.9 percent); the share possessing an MA tripled (from 0.24 percent to 0.78 percent); the percentage of Americans possessing a PhD quadrupled (from 0.03 percent to 0.12 percent). Moreover, the share of young adults enrolled in higher education institutions in 1930 was nearly 50 percent higher than it was at the outset of the previous decade (rising from 8.9 percent to 12.4 percent of Americans aged nineteen to twenty-one).[64] With the economy booming from 1922 through 1929, graduating cohorts of students flourished and successfully secured the cushy positions that had been set aside for people like them in the symbolic professions. Jobs grew at a rate that easily kept up with the increased production of degree holders.

Then, the Great Depression hit. Suddenly, many who had taken for granted a position among the elite, who had felt more or less entitled to a secure, respected, and well-paying professional job, found themselves facing deeply uncertain futures—especially because layered on top of the economic insecurity were profound geopolitical concerns.

In 1917, the United States issued a draft for all men twenty-one through thirty—and it successfully defended the right to forced conscription in the Supreme Court a year later. That draft campaign was short lived because an armistice was reached between the Allies and Germany in November 1918, bringing an end to World War I. However, now that the government had

secured conscription authority, in the event of a subsequent war, it seemed likely that a draft order would be issued from the beginning rather than at the end of fighting (and indeed, it ultimately was—conscription for World War II began in 1940, before the United States had even officially entered the conflict). At the outset of the Great Depression, war seemed to be breaking out in Europe again, and it seemed increasingly likely that America could be pulled into the fray. Consequently, rather than enjoying the secure and comfortable lives they had imagined for themselves, aspiring elites were facing the prospects of downward social mobility (as a result of the Depression) and possible deployment into a war.[65]

The anxiety, frustration, and looming socioeconomic humiliation of elite aspirants quickly curdled into rage against existing elites and the society that failed them. As one college magazine editorial bluntly put it, "Educated for jobs that do not materialize, students will grow resentful towards the existing order and will use the learning they have acquired to overthrow it."[66] At campuses across the country, students increasingly began attaching themselves to various protest movements: some supported the New Negro movement in campaigning for civil rights; other students aligned themselves with feminists who were likewise seeking greater professional opportunities and more social influence; the first gay rights advocacy organizations were also formed at this time;[67] still others took part in Socialist and Communist organizing; and antiwar protests were especially popular.

Of course, there was a certain irony to the radical rhetoric that students increasingly began to espouse given that most were attending university in the first place for the staunchly *in*egalitarian purpose of exploiting the barriers that had been set up to exclude non–white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) (and women) from the symbolic professions in order to secure those jobs for themselves. And again, their primary grievance—the explicit impetus for their rebellion—was that the elite futures they felt entitled to were failing to materialize. The core demands of the student protesters were, likewise, largely self-oriented. They wanted more aid from the universities so they could more comfortably pursue their studies. They wanted job guarantees upon graduating, or greater job placement assistance. They wanted greater freedom on campus to do and say what they pleased. They wanted to avoid being drafted into war. These are all quite reasonable things to desire—but they are not exactly altruistic.

In any case, colleges and universities attempted to curb student unrest through censorship, the imposition of new rules, and disciplinary actions against perceived agitators. These efforts generally backfired, reinforcing the

sense in many students' minds that the ruling class was corrupt, out of touch, unable to rise to the moment, and in need of replacement (by people like themselves). Student disillusionment had grown so pronounced that, at the time of the 1932 election, large numbers of students supported the Socialist candidate, Norman Thomas, over progressive Franklin D. Roosevelt. Among growing numbers of college students, Roosevelt was derisively viewed as a liberal establishment candidate aiming to *preserve* the system rather than overturn it. They didn't see a big difference in choosing the Democrat or the Republican: either way, the status quo would persist. Because the left-aligned vote was so split between the Socialist and Democratic candidates, FDR lost decisively among the college crowd to sitting Republican president Herbert Hoover. On many campuses, FDR came in below Thomas as well.[68]

By the time FDR ran for reelection in 1936, however, the situation had completely changed. College students and younger college graduates had become one of Roosevelt's strongest constituencies—and they remained so throughout his political career. The irony, of course, is that the students' description of FDR in 1932 was apt. He *was* an establishment candidate. He may have been the *ultimate* establishment politician insofar as his policies and leadership saved liberal capitalism and defanged the appeal of socialism in America (he preserved the establishment better than some of his more moderate opponents likely would have).[69] The political coalition he built set the paradigm for the next half century of Democratic Party politics. That is, he literally *became* the establishment in a deep sense. And all of that was just fine with the students in the end. Contrary to their radical rhetoric, they wanted relatively high-status jobs and socioeconomically comfortable lives far more than they wanted to *actually* overthrow the existing order. And the Roosevelt administration provided what they wanted.

By the time FDR stood for reelection for the first time, the New Deal was well underway. Major expansions of the government bureaucracy provided elite workers with stable, respected, and well-paying positions. The administration made significant investments in science and technology. Social workers and social scientists were deployed to assist with the design and administration of government aid programs.[70] The perceived oversupply of engineers found work planning and guiding the massive infrastructure projects funded by the federal government. And as the economy began turning around, professional jobs in the private and nonprofit sectors began reappearing as well.

By the time the 1960s rolled around, the formerly discontent students were well established in the symbolic professions. They had started and raised

families in the post–World War II era of relative peace and prosperity. Civil rights and feminism did not consume their efforts or attention much. Socialism and communism no longer held much purchase with them. The "radicals" of the 1930s became the establishment that protesters would later rebel against in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, some of the most prominent student protesters of the 1930s evolved into some of the most vocal critics of students in the 1960s.[71]

The Second Awokening

In many respects, universities were much changed in the 1960s as compared with the time of the first Great Awokening. The post–World War II GI Bill covered tuition and provided a generous stipend to returning veterans, many of whose jobs had been filled while they were overseas. Millions took advantage of the opportunity and, because the government was picking up the tab for tuition, they aggressively targeted the most prestigious private schools.[72] The targeted universities, however, were keen to maintain their elite status and to avoid being inundated with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who were often ill prepared for academic study, and whose values and culture were out of sync with their "traditional" constituencies. Elite colleges increasingly relied on the SAT to screen candidates, restricting admission to students with the best scores (whom they assumed would be primarily well-off WASPs and a small number of exceptional people from other backgrounds whose presence would genuinely enrich the school).[73] Before long, standardized testing became a near-universal aspect of college admissions. An institutional hierarchy developed based on how "selective" universities were with respect to their admission policies.

Less selective universities eagerly embraced GI Bill recipients and were able to radically expand their faculties and facilities.[74] As World War II vets cycled out of these institutions, they gradually began admitting more women to maintain enrollments. "Coeducation" became the dominant model over the course of the 1960s and 1970s.[75] Simultaneously, in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* cases, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the "affirmative action" executive orders,[76] colleges began admitting significantly more nonwhite students.

At the time, tuition was inexpensive or free at most institutions of higher learning. The main costs families had to cover were occasional fees, books, school supplies, lodging, and food. These were nontrivial costs, to be sure, but well within the reach of most middle-class families—and many schools

had generous support programs to assist those who hailed from more modest means. If one was not trying to attend an elite school, admissions were relatively open. Nonetheless, many who *could have* attended college chose not to, because there wasn't really a need. There were still plenty of good jobs that didn't require a degree, especially for men—and those opportunities grew over the course of the post–World War II boom. Hence, despite admitting many more minorities and working-class students than they used to, colleges and universities were still dominated by upper-middle-class WASPs, including rapidly growing numbers of WASP women. Nonetheless, as the schools diversified, there were increased tensions and clashes related to gender, race, and class.

Some student organizations from the first Great Awokening were still present on campus, such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS; formerly the Student League for Industrial Democracy). However, their influence and membership had waned significantly from their heyday. Although SDS leadership theorized universities as key sites of social revolution, there was no student movement to speak of. The SDS's 1962 national conference, convening its eleven chapters nationwide, had a total of fifty-nine registrants.[77] Some new campus groups were formed, most notably the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960. However, SNCC focused its actions primarily *outside* the campus—organizing sit-ins, freedom rides, marches, and voter registration drives in support of the broader civil rights movement. There were occasional localized outbursts focused on campus-specific issues, such as the Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964. However, organizers had no ties to the SDS or any other national group and were explicitly hostile toward politics per se. As cultural historian Louis Menand put it, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement "was not a war for social justice. It was a war against the university administration."[78] It was a war that only gained traction once *faculty* got involved, and its effects were largely confined to the University of California system.

Through the early 1960s, on-campus student activism was not particularly pronounced. Most students were focused on getting degrees and securing the still-plentiful opportunities of the post–World War II economy. And then an expansion of the war in Vietnam, and an economic downturn, changed everything.

The 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution granted President Lyndon B. Johnson wide latitude in escalating the conflict in Vietnam. Beginning in March 1965, the United States shifted its focus from supporting and advising South Vietnamese forces to actively trying to crush the Viet Cong via a ground war.

Many more troops began to be deployed into the theater, and by the end of the summer, the United States had doubled its monthly draft calls. Yet, even after the White House eliminated exemptions for married men without children, college students remained exempt from being drafted so long as they remained enrolled full time in good standing. And when drafted, recruits with college degrees tended to get the best assignments (doing less grueling or risky jobs, and farther from the front lines). As a result of these policies, men who were able to gain admission into college and cover its costs began enrolling in much higher numbers—especially following the Higher Education Act of 1965, which expanded student loans available to students.

However, states contemporaneously began cutting the aid *they* provided to students, effectively shifting the responsibility of funding to individual borrowers and the federal government. Schools simultaneously became more selective in their admissions (in order to cope with the large influx of applicants) and began raising their tuition and fees (to capitalize on the increased federal grants and loans provided to students). This rendered it more difficult for many to attend or persist in college.[79] Moreover, the same year the government passed the Higher Education Act, the Johnson administration changed its rules with respect to the draft: college enrollment would no longer provide an automatic deferral. Instead, students would be compelled to take the Selective Service Qualification Test, and colleges would be obligated to rank their pupils in terms of their academic performance. Only those who came in above a particular cutoff would be guaranteed a college exemption. The rest were entered into a new draft pool, and thousands would be called each month.[80] *This* led to the nationwide student protest movement.

The driver was not the Vietnam War itself, which had been ongoing for roughly a half decade prior with little student resistance. The driver was not the civil rights movement, which had been long ongoing, and indeed had begun to *lose* momentum by this time, as it shifted north (more on this soon). The driver was not women's liberation. Although track for the "second wave" of feminism was already being laid by this point, and momentum being built, there was no major national feminist movement just yet. The driver was not the gay liberation movement, which kicked off *after* 1965 and grew increasingly confrontational, public, and assertive in the years leading up to the Stonewall Uprising.[81] Instead, middle-class students became "radical" precisely when their plans to leave the fighting in Vietnam to minorities and the poor by enrolling in college and waiting things out began to fall through. It was at *that* point that college students suddenly embraced antiwar activism,

the Black Power movement, feminism, postcolonial struggles, gay rights, and environmentalism in immense numbers.

Upper-middle-class students and affluent students, for their part, were not terribly worried about the draft itself. They had many options to avoid combat irrespective of their college enrollment or employment status, and they exercised them aggressively. Many families leveraged professional connections to doctors or psychiatrists to gain medical deferments. Others hired attorneys and obtained exemptions for their children via the legal process.[82] Nonetheless, the massive influx of students into college created adverse conditions for elites too. They faced much more intense competition to get admitted into their preferred colleges, not just at the undergraduate level but in graduate school as well (as growing numbers of students tried to maintain their student exemptions as long as possible by pursuing postgraduate degrees). Within colleges, class sizes grew and resources were spread thinner. Worse, the newcomers aggressively targeted the specific courses of study elites had been relying on to secure their own sinecures.[83] And upon graduating, these neophytes aimed for the specific jobs that children of elites had been counting on to provide *themselves* a good life.

The draft provided exemptions for many symbolic professions—doctors, engineers, scientists, teachers, and so on. This may have been designed in part as a hedge to protect children of affluent families from the draft postgraduation, but it ended up radically increasing the levels of competition aspiring symbolic capitalists faced, both at the university level and in the professional realm. And then it started becoming tougher for *anyone* to get a job.

Even before the expansion of the draft and the surge in college enrollments, the post–World War II economy was showing signs of faltering. In the years leading up to widespread student protests, there had been a stall in the growth of symbolic capitalist jobs. The share of professional-managerial jobs in the total economy, which had been growing rapidly from 1952 to 1962, stagnated from 1962 to 1968. The number of professional-managerial jobs per college graduate had been falling consistently since 1958.[84] College graduates were increasingly forced to work outside their field, or in jobs that did not require a degree at all.[85] In 1958, roughly 6 percent of PhDs graduated without specific career prospects; by 1974, that number had risen to 26 percent.[86] Worse, those who got jobs were making considerably less than they used to. It became a "buyer's market" for skilled labor: by 1969, salaries had begun falling for degree holders at all levels and across fields.[87] With the comfortable careers they had been counting on now called into question, upper-middle-class youth joined their middle-class peers in indicting the system. As with

the first Awokening, it was a combination of a draft expansion and an economic downturn that seemed to trigger the widespread uprising.

Then came Richard Nixon. Although Nixon expressed admiration for student activists of the previous Great Awokening, he believed young people "these days" were getting it all wrong: "As I look at the 'student revolution' in the U.S.—back in the Thirties, the student rebel had a cause, a belief, a religion. Today the revolt doesn't have that form."[88] This is a common trope. Again, in the 1990s, many of those condemning student activists praised (or themselves participated in) similar movements in the 1960s, when people apparently mobilized the "right" way or for the "right" causes. As we will see, this nostalgia seems to be driven largely by inaccurate narratives participants come to tell about what their own (earlier) student movements accomplished. The uncomfortable reality is that these Awokenings are more alike than most recognize, and in ways that are unpleasant to contemplate.

In any case, Nixon despised 1960s counterculture. More importantly, he believed that domestic unrest undermined America and its leaders on the world stage and emboldened their Cold War enemies. Consequently, Nixon set out to break the student protest movement from the outset of his 1968 campaign—and he believed he could do this by ending the draft. Implicit in this strategy was an assumption that, despite their talk about revolution and social justice, student protesters were, in fact, mostly concerned about avoiding military service. They were attempting to deflect attention away from their selfishness and cowardice (as he saw it) by painting themselves as allies for the marginalized and disadvantaged, but once they no longer had to worry about being deployed, they would just get on with their lives—and leave others to do the same.

Hence, although Nixon disdained the antiwar movement, he campaigned in 1968 pledging to end conscription and bring a dignified end to the conflict in Vietnam. Upon taking office, he promptly ordered investigations of how to transition the U.S. military to an all-volunteer force (and thereby end the specter of the draft indefinitely). He began a drawdown of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, suspended draft calls during the fall of 1969, and, in December of that year, announced that the United States was formally pursuing an end to the conflict. Young people reacted to these measures just as Nixon anticipated they would: Among recent high school graduates, male enrollment in college rose from 52.3 percent in the year before the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to a high of 63.2 percent in 1968. By the end of Nixon's first year in office, that number had dropped to 60.1 percent. By the time the transition to an all-volunteer force was completed in 1973, male enrollment had sunk to a

lower level than before the draft-induced surge: 50 percent.[89] The people who were attending college primarily to avoid the draft stopped enrolling or dropped out, gradually choking off protest movements' supplies of new recruits (even as the existing activist populations continued to cycle out of college and into their "adult lives").

Protests nonetheless briefly increased in 1970 following Nixon's escalations in Cambodia, and in the wake of national guardsmen opening fire on student protesters at Kent State.[90] However, as Todd Gitlin aptly put it, "the post-Cambodia uprising was the student movement's last hurrah. Activism never recovered from the summer vacation of 1970. During the academic year of 1970–71 there were fewer demonstrations than the year before; in 1971–72, fewer still. . . . Demonstrations declined at the old centers of protest, and press coverage declined precipitously."[91] Polls and surveys show that between 1970 and 1974, there was a major drop in the percentage of students who were interested in politics or activism or who held "radical" views, and a sharp increase in students whose primary goal or objective in school was setting themselves up to find a good job and earn a comfortable salary.[92] Many major student organizations such as SNCC and the SDS began to fall apart due to infighting.

Unfortunately for Nixon, his presidency came to an end around the same time as the protest movements were collapsing. At the time he left office in 1974, the economy was rough. The United States was still recovering from the 1973 OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil crisis, stock market crash, and resultant "stagflation" recession. However, by the following year, the economy began to recover.[93] As enrollments declined, competition eased for professional jobs, and college students turned their focus back to building their careers. The Awokening was not just on the decline, it was over. Writing in 1979, Arthur Levine and Keith Wilson observed,

> The aura of revolution no longer exists. The "Student Movement" of the 1960s is receding into the pages of history and many activists have settled into their own struggles with adult life: Sam Brown is now director of ACTION in Washington, Gary Hart became a U.S. Senator, Eldridge Cleaver found religion, Jerry Rubin announced he was finally growing up at 37, and last we heard, Mario Salvo was getting a PhD in Los Angeles. . . . The student movement of the 1960s collapsed almost as quickly and unexpectedly as it had begun. There is little evidence of 1960s-style student protest on campus today.[94]

The Third Awokening

By most measures (public opinion polls, media trends, Google Books nGrams, levels of student activism, etc.) the Great Awokening of the late 1980s through the early 1990s was significantly smaller than the others. It was shorter as well: the first two Awokenings persisted for more than a decade. The current (fourth) Great Awokening likewise lasted roughly a decade. However, the third Great Awokening lasted for about half the usual cycle—perhaps because the crisis elites faced was less severe, and they were able to be appeased much faster.

In a nutshell, universities, especially state schools, were hit hard by austerity in the 1980s. They responded by raising tuition and reducing student aid. Consequently, aspiring elites were increasingly forced to go into debt, and to take on ever-larger quantities of debt, in order to secure their credentials for professional jobs.[95] However, even these measures were not enough for many universities to remain solvent—especially given declining male attendance in the post-Vietnam period. Schools needed more students who could both meet their "meritocratic" admissions standards and pay tuition in full (or, ideally, pay *more* than the standard tuition). They turned to recruiting, and increasing admissions of, international students.[96] Postgraduation, these foreign-born professional aspirants were often willing to accept significantly lower salaries for "high-skill" work than their American-born competitors. Unsurprisingly, employers came to prefer these candidates on the job market. In many high-skill sectors, most of the new jobs produced began going to foreign-born workers.[97] Native-born students who landed jobs often had to accept lower wages than they would have in the recent past.[98]

Then came a series of exogenous economic shocks. There was the savings and loan financial crisis of 1986–1995. There was a "mini crash" of the stock market in October 1989 that led to a recession followed by anemic growth. The same Republican-led austerity wave that gutted university budgets also led to a decline in the availability of government jobs.[99] Simultaneously, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, corporate consultant firms like McKinsey helped oversee a wave of mergers and restructuring in the corporate world. These institutional transformations resulted in the elimination of enormous numbers of "middle-management" jobs and other formerly secure and well-paying positions, led to the outsourcing of many functions overseas, and encouraged a general emphasis on doing more with less in order to maximize return on investment for corporate shareholders.[100]

It was a bleak picture: aspiring symbolic capitalists had to go into more debt to get professional jobs, for which competition had grown much fiercer. Those who managed to land work had less job security, higher workloads, and lower pay relative to previous years. Indeed, the real earnings of college graduates dropped consistently through the late 1980s. Nonetheless, the divide between college and noncollege incomes grew because everyone else was faring even worse![101] Rather than being a means for upward mobility, their credentials primarily served to guard against downward mobility. Symbolic capitalists (and aspiring symbolic capitalists) responded with a new wave of "radicalism"—ostensibly in the name of racial equality, feminism, gay rights, and environmentalism. Once again, however, the movement died out as the market was able to accommodate the apparent primary concerns of "radicalized" elites.

In 1990, there were major changes to U.S. immigration laws that established quotas on temporary visas for high-skill workers, even as it streamlined the process for these workers to achieve permanent residence.[102] This reduced employer capacity to rely on contingent high-skill laborers whose continued presence in the country was indexed to the whims of their employers (who could overwork, underpay, and otherwise mistreat them—deporting anyone who raised a fuss). There continued to be displacement of native-born workers at the hands of more permanent immigrants, particularly with respect to STEM jobs, but wages for these positions stabilized and began to rise.[103] That is, the native-born workers who remained in these roles generally found themselves in a stronger economic position than they were before the reforms.

There was a contemporaneous increase in jobs requiring a degree, albeit created primarily by "degree inflation" (reclassifying jobs such that they now require a degree when they didn't previously) that deprived people from more humble socioeconomic backgrounds of the few stable and well-paying jobs that remained to them.[104] And as the 1990s rolled on, there was a proliferation of what anthropologist David Graeber called "bullshit jobs"[105] that helped replace some of the white-collar positions that had been cut during the peak season of mergers, acquisitions, and downsizing.

Here, it is important to stress that the social coordination processes through which phenomena like these transpire are not yet well understood. There was an acute overproduction of elites. It began creating social unrest. Employers began to envision new (somewhat extraneous) roles in their organizations and reclassified existing jobs to set them aside for degree holders. However, it is unlikely that many, if any, employers *consciously* changed

or created these jobs specifically as a means of addressing elite overproduction and its destabilizing effects. Nonetheless, this is what they did. Beginning in 1993, incomes for BA holders began to take off again. Meanwhile, incomes for most others remained stagnant or declined relative to 1990 levels over the coming decades.[106] This latter fact, however, seemed to be of little consequence to symbolic capitalists. As their own fortunes began to rise, social justice concerns receded into the background.[107] The Awokening died out once again as symbolic capitalists eagerly embraced Bill Clinton, his worldview, and his agenda.

The Fourth Awokening

By the end of the Clinton years, the United States was once again beginning to overproduce elites. Between 2000 and 2019, the American labor market added twenty-two million workers over the age of twenty-five with at least a BA. However, only about ten million jobs were added that required a college degree. There were more than twice as many graduates as there were jobs for graduates.[108] Although the wages for degree-requiring jobs continued to climb (even as nondegree wages stagnated), this was cold comfort for the growing number of graduates who found themselves unemployed or underemployed. This situation reached a breaking point after the 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession.

Law degrees, for instance, were long perceived to be a surefire bet for enjoying a comfortable professional life. However, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, tens of thousands of young people had the same idea to ride out the recession in college, and to continue into law school specifically, resulting in a bubble that burst in 2010. JD graduates had a difficult time finding jobs in the legal profession and faced unfavorable terms with respect to salary, pay, and working conditions because employers had all the leverage in negotiations.[109]

Likewise, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, there was a major shift away from humanities and into STEM fields.[110] However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, technical majors were producing about three times the number of graduates as there were job openings in the field per year (with the exception of computer science, which was not yet producing enough graduates to fill demand).[111] STEM unemployment rates are low—but this is primarily because graduates typically end up working in jobs outside the fields they got their degrees in. Moreover, the pay, job stability, and working-condition returns that graduates receive on their

STEM education diminished as growing numbers of Americans flocked to these fields.[112]

Government jobs have also long been viewed as a pathway to a secure post with good pay and excellent benefits. However, government jobs at the federal, state, and local levels saw consistent attrition in the period leading up to the latest Great Awokening. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic (and any austerity measures that may follow downstream), federal employment had reached its lowest share of total employment since 1952; state and local governments were down to the levels of the mid- to late 1960s.[113]

Rather than "safe" choices like law, STEM or government, others decided to follow their passions and went into significant debt pursuing elite credentials in journalism and the arts, only to find that there were few jobs to be had—not even for those with graduate degrees from top programs.[114] A decade after the onset of the Great Recession, more than one in four 2008 newsroom jobs had been eliminated.[115] The jobs that remain tend to have much less security, and often lower pay and benefits, relative to decades past. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a new round of significant layoffs, furloughs, and pay cuts at media organizations across the spectrum.[116] Although the situation began to stabilize in 2021,[117] good media jobs remain scarce and extraordinarily competitive.

For those interested in a career in academia, the odds grew especially bleak. According to National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics estimates, 30 percent of those awarded PhDs in 2020 graduated without employment commitments of any kind—not in the private sector, not as postdocs, and not as contingent or tenure-track faculty.[118] Strikingly, this marked a significant improvement over recent years! For PhD students who *did* graduate with jobs, most landed positions outside academia (e.g., for industry, nonprofits, or governments). Moreover, the vast majority of people who were hired as faculty in any capacity were hired on a contingent basis—with much lower pay, benefits, job security, and future prospects as compared with tenured or tenure-track faculty.

In short, symbolic capitalists and aspirants to the symbolic professions were increasingly going into enormous debt, not just to secure a BA, but often to pursue graduate degrees as well. However, they were receiving diminishing returns on these investments and uncertain life prospects.

A 2021 analysis by the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity estimated that as many as 16 percent of recent college graduates—particularly those who majored in the "wrong" fields—may actually receive a *negative* return on their college investments (relative to if they had spent that time

acquiring vocational certifications or working full time and building a career in a position that does not require a degree).[119] According to 2020 estimates by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 41 percent of employed recent college graduates are working in positions that don't require a degree (and again, many jobs that *formally* require a degree don't actually require advanced training in practice; many of these jobs did not require a degree in recent years; and many people who work in jobs that "require" a degree hold credentials in fields unrelated to their jobs).[120] Analytics firm Burning Glass likewise estimated that, as of 2018, 43 percent of recent college grads were underemployed. It projected that two-thirds of these underemployed graduates (or 29 percent of all recent college graduates) would likely remain underemployed five years after graduation—and three-quarters of those who are still underemployed five years out (an estimated 21 percent of all recent college graduates) were likely to remain underemployed a full decade after graduation.[121]

Growing numbers of BA holders exited the symbolic economy altogether and attended community colleges to learn skilled trades.[122] Indeed, the *un*employment rate for degree holders has remained lower than for less educated Americans primarily because graduates have been increasingly snatching up decent jobs that do *not* require a degree when they failed to secure a position that *would*.[123] Of course, this leaves non–degree holders with still fewer prospects—hence the growing socioeconomic divide in recent years between those who possess a degree and those who don't. In many respects, this divide is again being driven more by diminishing prospects for those with *less* education than by growth in prosperity among college graduates. That is, although the return on investment for education seems to be growing in *relative* terms, it may actually be shrinking in *absolute* terms.

All said, nearly half of upper-middle-class children born in the 1980s failed to replicate their class position by age thirty.[124] Most of these downwardly mobile elites were not in real danger of being *poor* (according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, only 4 percent of degree holders live below the poverty line).[125] Nonetheless, there is often significant frustration at the step down in wealth, security, and status they enjoyed as children and expected to be able to provide for their own families as adults. Once again, these anxieties were channeled into a Great Awokening. Frustrated symbolic capitalists and elite aspirants sought to indict the system that failed them—and also the elites that *did* manage to flourish—by attempting to align themselves with the genuinely marginalized and disadvantaged.

Around 2022, however, evidence began to emerge that the structural conditions that gave rise to the post-2010 Awokening might be easing.[126] Looking at trends in symbolic economy outputs (journalism, books, scholarship), expressed attitudes, "cancel culture" incidents, Democratic Socialists of America membership, symbolic capitalist protest activity, and institutional responses to employee activism, it appears as though the Great Awokening that began in 2010 started to subside at around the same time socioeconomic indicators began to improve.[127] At time of writing, most measures of the Awokening remain significantly elevated relative to their pre-Awokening baselines, but downward trends are clear.

The Next Awokening

Although there are signs that the current Great Awokening may be winding down, the seeds seem to already be sown for the next one. Looking at the Bureau of Labor Statistics projections of which jobs are expected to see the most growth from 2020 to 2030, for example, few of the projected high-growth jobs are likely to pay well or require college degrees.

The twenty occupations listed in the following table are projected to account for nearly half (47 percent) of all new jobs created over the next decade. All other occupations are individually projected to contribute less than 1 percent of all new jobs over the next ten years.

Critically, most of the jobs that are anticipated to grow rapidly over the next ten years pay below the current U.S. median income. Seven out of ten occupations with the highest numbers of projected new jobs require no college degree (although a handful require some specialized postsecondary training and licensing—which college graduates would have to acquire just like everyone else). Literally none of the top twenty occupations require advanced degrees. And most of the jobs outside this list do not currently, and are not anticipated to, require a college degree of any sort either.

Put another way, you know those "hot" fields college recruiters and media folks are talking about? There likely will not be a ton of positions available in absolute terms anytime soon.[128] Moreover, although outsourcing and automation hit blue-collar jobs hardest in previous eras, rapid advances in AI are projected to primarily disrupt highly paid white-collar work in the coming decades.[129] As things currently stand, the "jobs of the future" are going to be relatively low-paid service positions providing various amenities for retirees and college graduates who *did* land cushy professional roles. As for

TABLE 2.1. Occupations Projected to Produce the Largest Numbers of New Jobs, 2020–2030

Occupation	Percentage of all new jobs projected to be created, 2020–2030	College degree typically required (Y/N)	Median annual wage, 2020 (USD)
Home health and personal care aides	9.5	N	27,080
Cooks, restaurant	4.7	N	28,800
Fast-food and counter workers	4.4	N	23,860
Software developers, software quality assurance analysts, and testers	3.4	Y	110,140
Waiters and waitresses	3.4	N	23,740
Registered nurses	2.3	Y	75,330
Hand laborers and freight, stock, and material movers	2.2	N	31,120
General and operations managers	1.9	Y	103,650
First-line supervisors of food preparation and serving workers	1.6	N	34,570
Passenger vehicle drivers (excluding public transit)	1.5	N	32,320
Market research analysts and marketing specialists	1.4	Y	65,810
Bartenders	1.3	N	24,960
Security guards	1.3	N	31,050
Medical and health services managers	1.2	Y	104,280
Cleaners: maids and housekeepers	1.2	N	26,220
Medical assistants	1.1	N	35,850
Cleaners: janitorial and other	1.1	N	29,080
Management analysts	1.0	Y	87,660
Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers	1.0	N	47,130
Exercise trainers and group fitness instructors	1.0	N	40,510

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2023d.
Note: Overall, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that roughly 11.8799 million new jobs will be created between 2020 and 2030. The percentage in the first column represents the share of these jobs each occupation is projected to contribute. For context on wages, the overall median annual wage in 2020 was $41,950.

everyone else, they won't need to learn to code, but to learn to care. And they probably won't make much money doing that either.

Of course, the fact that the prospects seem so bleak for non–symbolic economy positions is likely to intensify competition for elite credentials and for jobs within the symbolic professions. As the "losers" in this competition grow increasingly numerous and increasingly frustrated, they will likely seek to co-opt existing social justice movements in order to enhance their own position, and the cycle will begin again.

Having walked through each of the Awokenings, we are now well positioned to identify some threads that run between them. Let's start with what seems to be the main driver of these rebellions: elite overproduction.

Elite Overproduction

In a 2010 issue of *Nature*, ecologist-turned-historian Peter Turchin famously predicted that the forthcoming decade would be defined by social upheavals, with a number of adverse social trends reaching their peak around the year 2020.[130] Characteristics he was observing in the U.S. economy and culture at the time seemed very similar to trends in the lead-up to the Civil War and the periods of unrest in the 1920s and 1970s—that is, the first and second Great Awokenings. In that *Nature* essay, his coauthored book published the previous year, and a follow-up scholarly paper published in 2012, Turchin emphasized "elite overproduction" as a core driver of this historical and predicted instability.[131]

Elite overproduction occurs when a society produces too many people who feel entitled to high status and high incomes relative to the capacity of that society to actually absorb elite aspirants into the power structure. Under these circumstances, growing numbers of frustrated erstwhile elites grow bitter toward the prevailing order and try to form alliances with *genuinely* marginalized populations in order to depose existing elites and install themselves in their stead.

Typically, Turchin argues, these attempted alliances prove unstable because, at the end of the day, elites mostly just want to be elites. Consequently, their interests, worldviews, and priorities tend to be far out of step with those they are ostensibly advocating for, and this becomes increasingly obvious and problematic to all parties over time. Due to these internal tensions, rebellions generally fail to produce revolutions. More typically, existing elites find ways to incorporate and co-opt enough of the alienated elite population to break the uprisings.[132] The newly expanded elites then

collaborate to secure their position from others, while offering placating concessions to constituencies that the former counterelites tried to mobilize during their insurrection.[133] However, these concessions are usually designed to ensure that the fundamentals of the political-economic system remain roughly unchanged—an outcome that the newly integrated elites are now just as invested in as the old guard.

As growing numbers of former rebels are co-opted into the establishment and disengage from the struggle, it becomes harder for those elite aspirants whose ambitions remain unfulfilled to continue exerting pressure on institutions or commanding social attention for their chosen causes. Exhausted after years of futile conflict, most elite aspirants who failed to enhance their position before the uprising passed its peak eventually resign themselves to a lower station in life than they'd expected or hoped for.[134] The unrest comes to a close . . . until the next time conditions are ripe.