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A Preliminary Overview of “Wokeism”: Three Major Issues for IR Research

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Summary

Recent political events have brought the word “woke” to the center of public and media attention. What began as a domestic issue in the U.S. has begun to spread to other parts of the globe and become a heated topic of discussion. This commentary suggests that it is time for IR scholars, especially from non-Western countries, to contribute to the discussion. Nevertheless, IR scholars will need to take note that “wokeism” scholarship is characterized by (1) a lack of academic literature using “wokeism” as their keyword; (2) political quarrels over the meaning of “wokeism”; and (3) lack of non-Western perspective. IR scholars may begin approaching the subject using structural, postcolonial, and transnational frameworks of analysis.

Keywords: *woke, wokeism, wokeness, postcolonialism, non-Western IR*

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"Woke" (also "wokeism", "wokeness", and "wokery"; hereafter "wokeism") is originally a Black slang which referred to "(being) well-informed, up-to-date" (OED Editor, 2017). It also refers to Black racial consciousness (Brian G, 2021). Developments in the U.S. have led to an expansion of the word's meaning to "(be) aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues, especially issues of racial and social justice" (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, n.d.). However, "woke" has also become a derogatory term for being "politically liberal (as in matters of racial and social justice), especially in a way that is considered unreasonable or extreme" (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, n.d.).

The heated debate over the meaning of "woke" and public policies tied to the concept used to be an exclusively domestic issue in the U.S. However, it has begun permeating into other countries and becoming their source of concern. In France, the war on woke has reached a level where the French Education Minister heads a think tank tasked with combating "U.S.-imported wokeism" (Caulcutt, 2021). President Emmanuel Macron lamented that France "(has) left the intellectual debate to... those outside of the Republic by ideologizing it, sometimes yielding to... Anglo-Saxon traditions based on a different history". He also referred to "...certain social science theories entirely imported from the United States, with their problems, which I respect... but which are just added to ours" (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2020). Ironically, two years later, Macron appointed Pap Ndiaye, a professor of Senegalese descent who had studied in the U.S. and is a specialist in minority issues, as France's new education minister. However, Ndiaye distances himself from the "woke" – he admits "shar(ing) most of their causes", yet he does not "approve of the moralizing or sectarian discourse of some of them" (Caulcutt, 2022).

Concerns over the transnational transfer of "American social science theories" or its "moralizing" activism style – colloquially called "wokeism" – is also shared by some voices from non-Western countries and societies. In Indonesia, the 2020 #PapuanLivesMatter social media campaign inspired the 2020 Black Lives Matter campaign in the U.S. Some observers caution against appropriating the Black Lives Matter campaign to Papua's case. Concerns have been made over differences in context and historical roots (Dewi, 2020) as well as differences in theoretical standpoint and potentially harmful consequences of such appropriation (Pontoh, 2020). Similar criticisms also arise in India (Kaeshour, 2021; Joshi, 2022) and Russia (President of Russia, 2021). However, the most topical milestone of "wokeism" 's cross-regional and cross-cultural importance may be the organization of an academic conference titled "Tracking Global Wokeism", held in February this year by the Gulf University for Science and Technology in Kuwait. This was the first academic attempt to bring together scholars from diverse countries and disciplinary backgrounds to discuss the compatibility of "wokeism" with non-Western cultures.

IR research on the globalization of American-"wokeism" may be situated best under transnational and globalization studies, particularly as part of the global culture war and identity politics. However, concern over cross-regional and cross-cultural "wokeism" is relatively new. In addition, studies that specifically target "wokeism" are still scarce, fragmented, and divisive. IR and non-Western literature that use "wokeism" as a keyword are also severely lacking. This short commentary aims to lay a preliminary observation on the general landscape of "wokeism" in research articles, grey literatures, and salient books. Hopefully, this short piece can stimulate more discussions on "wokeism" research in IR, especially from non-Western perspectives.

Three Major Issues Within "Wokeism" Scholarship

The first major issue within "wokeism" scholarship is the lack of its usage in academia. International "wokeism" or "wokeism" beyond the U.S. has not been well-studied. Nevertheless, it may be more precise to say that literature discussing what we know as "wokeism" are not well-identified under the "wokeism" keyword radar. Generally, if "wokeism" is mentioned in academic texts, it is only mentioned in passing, usually without much attempt to systematically define it other than mentioning its lexical definition. On the other hand, academic and grey literature that discusses social justice activism, identity politics, culture wars, leftist totalitarianism, political correctness, and cancel culture – keywords commonly associated with "wokeism" – are numerous. However, works that explicitly mention "wokeism", "woke", or "wokeness" in their title and abstract are scarce and scattered across journals of various disciplines.

The second issue is the politically contested meaning of the word. On one side of the debate, some literature holds the popular definition of "woke" or "wokeness (as opposed to "wokeism") as awareness of structural oppression (Grant, 2018; Mirzaei et al., 2022) that implies an ethical imperative (Atkins, 2021) for active participation in social justice undertakings (Sobande, 2019; Sobande et al., 2022) as manifested through one's behavior (Boyce, 2021). For some of them, this definition is prescriptive. The word's current derogatory meaning is the product of appropriation by white people or "weaponization" by opponents of social justice to undermine emancipatory causes (Pilkington, 2022; Zavattaro & Bearfield, 2022). Criticisms of "woke" are reserved for "performative wokeness" done by white privileged individuals and corporates seeking profits, as opposed to being "authentically woke" (Boyce, 2021; Sobande et al., 2022; Sobande, 2022; Sobande, 2019; Rhodes, 2022; see Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022). This group of texts is more widely represented in mainstream academic journals.

The second group of writers refer to "wokeism" as a specific kind of "awareness" and activism practices that the contemporary social justice movement stipulates. There is some consensus among them that the tenets and strategies of contemporary social justice movements have increasingly become fixated with (Critical) Theory and resorted to authoritarianism at the expense of Enlightenment traditions and liberal principles. This is noticeable from what they associate "wokeism" with: applied postmodernism (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020), a new wave of identity politics (see Mitchell, 2020), Third Wave Antiracism (McWhorter, 2021), and "self-identified left" with different principles (Neiman, 2023). These texts are what the public understands as "anti-woke" and salient writings of the topic are more likely to be found in informal sources, such as books by non-academic publishers and YouTube videos. Unfortunately, there is a lack of meaningful engagement between the first and second group of texts, probably due to their definitional discrepancy. This has contributed to a lack of cohesive and cumulative study of "wokeism".

Third, and which may be of particular importance to IR scholars, is that most publications on "wokeism" are still confined to the U.S. Only a small number of literature discusses "wokeism" in the Global South. This is understandable given the historical root of the word. Nevertheless, as the above cases suggest, the word has become known, used, and discussed by societies from other parts of the world as well. So far, sources that discuss "wokeism" beyond the U.S. border are grey literature sources. They mostly discuss "wokeism" in light of postcolonialism and non-Western local knowledge. For example, Lopez-Calvo (2023) referred to "wokeism" as an American cultural import

to Latin America and mentioned its "epistemic imperialism and cultural colonialism". Elsakaan (2023) also contends that Western "wokeism" and "political correctness" are "difficult to integrate (in)to Arab cultural contexts" due to their association with the "imperialistic Western reformist project". Nevertheless, Arabs have their equivalent of political correctness and "wokeism" rooted in Islamic teachings and milieu. Thorslund (2022) wrote a literature review about "woke-washing" in Corporate Social Responsibility of Global North business firms that conduct their operations in the Global South. His paper highlights global power structures, pointing to Western firms' fixation on Western development values in place of the host countries' local knowledge. He also noted decoloniality and border thinking as essential concepts, affirming the potential helpfulness of transnationalism, postcolonialism, and world-systems perspective for "wokeism" research in IR.

Suggestions for Future Research

Lots of questions remain for IR scholars to explore. Can the U.S.' rivals, such as Russia and China, use the "woke" culture wars to aid their geopolitical objectives (Mead, 2022)? How do global market forces shape and spread "wokeism"? How transferable is "wokeism", if it is transferable at all? Is it ethical for non-White, non-Black-American voices from the Global South to claim being "woke"? What role does the U.S.' moral and cultural hegemony play in spreading "wokeism" to other countries? When does a non-Westerner's rejection of "wokeism" count as "(post-)woke" and when does it count as parochial or even racist?

This commentary introduces the topical relevance of "wokeism" study in IR. The challenge for IR (or any social science discipline) scholars interested in studying "wokeism" lies in approaching a body of academic literature that is (1) lacking in the usage of "wokeism" as a keyword; (2) infused with political contestation over the meaning of the word; and (3) lacking in non-Western perspective. This preliminary overview also suggests that IR scholars may start with structural, postcolonial, and transnational frameworks to analyze "wokeism", although this list is inconclusive. Overall, this short piece can stimulate vigorous discussions on IR about "wokeism" in cross-regional and cross-cultural settings.

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