The abnormalisation of social justice: The 'anti-woke culture war' discourse in the UK

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Abstract
In this article, the so-called 'anti-woke' culture war is deconstructed through the notions of metapolitics in fascist discourses – linked to the Gramscian 'hegemonisation' and 'the war of position' – as well as the Schmittian friend/enemy distinction coupled with theories of deviance and moral panics. The appropriation of the neo-fascist culture war discourse by the mainstream right in the UK is analysed discursively, combining political discourse analysis, the discourse-historical approach and discourse-conceptual analysis. The anti-woke culture war by the British conservative party as well as rightwing media will serve to analyse how social justice struggles like anti-racism, anti-sexism and pro-LGBTQ rights are being abnormalised and positioned as extreme deviant political positions. Linked to this, so-called 'cancel culture' is strategically deployed by dominant groups to neutralise contestations against racist, sexist and anti-LGBTQ views. Finally, freedom of speech and the right to offend is weaponised to protect racist and discriminatory language and to position these idea's as valid opinions worthy of democratic debate.

Keywords
Anti-woke discourse, cancel culture, culture war, moral panics, deviance, neo-fascism, war of position

Introduction

In the last three decades, we have witnessed a gradual but consistent return to prominence of extreme right, authoritarian and fascist views, values and politics across the

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world (Rydgren, 2018). Whereas the fascist authoritarian extreme right was a marginal political phenomenon in many democratic countries 30 years ago, it has in a relatively short period of time become a strong, powerful and emboldened segment of the mainstream right with ideas and viewpoints once considered deviant and morally repugnant today confidently asserted as the new common sense and increasingly shaping public policy. It only suffices to refer to current immigration policies, more frequent attacks on independent judicial powers, the undermining and delegitimisation of democratic processes, the increased curtailment of press freedoms, and the criminalisation of protest as cases in point. This has – in part – been achieved through waging a long-term Gramscian war of position geared towards the re-normalisation of racist and fascist ideologies (Cammaerts, 2018, 2020; Hainsworth, 2000; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Wodak et al., 2013).

The focus here is how this normalisation is coupled with a strategic and persistent abnormalisation of those that contest and fight racist, sexist and fascist ideologies. The discursive mechanisms through which this abnormalisation is achieved will be unpacked and exposed by analysing the so-called 'anti-woke culture war' discourse using a combination of political discourse analysis, the discourse-historical approach and discourse-conceptual analysis. Empirically the war on woke discourse will be analysed with respect to the UK political context, but this discourse is prevalent in many other countries too. First, normalisation and abnormalisation processes will be discussed through the related concepts of hegemony and metapolitics or 'the intellectual pathway to revolutionary social transformation' (Paul, 2021: 3). Subsequently, the role of deviance and othering in processes of ideological normalisation and abnormalisation will be theorised.

Hegemonisation, metapolitics and the deviance of the 'enemy'

Central to processes of ideological normalisation is the concept of hegemony. That which is hegemonic is presented as natural, as anti-ideological, as devoid of bias. Hegemony is thus that which most consider to be common sense and thereby rendered unquestionable, beyond discussion and debate. While he did not coin the notion, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci was central in popularising the idea of hegemony and more specifically cultural hegemony into political theory, but also into practical leftwing political strategy (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Gramsci understood that achieving a revolutionary agenda in Western Europe was not going to be possible through a violent overthrow of the capitalist and bourgeois powers that be, but required a more long-term insidious struggle, or a 'war of position' (Gramsci, 1971: LXVI), which represents a 'demilitarisation' of the struggle to render that which is considered unjust and abnormal into something just and normal (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 70). In recent decades, we have observed how a class and identity politics, disconnected from and often positioned in juxtaposition to other democratic struggles relating to gender, sexuality and race, has appropriated the strategy and idea of the war of position to achieve a new authoritarian turn in hegemonic practices; not from the left this time, but rather from the radical right (Eco, 1995).

In the political discourse of the contemporary fascist right, Gramsci's ideas regarding hegemony and war of position are denoted as *metapolitics*. This concept was originally developed by 18th Century German liberal thinkers, who foregrounded it as

'a metaphysical study into the principles of politics, its fundamental grounds, and its ultimate ends' (Bosteels, 2010: 879). In the wake of May 1968, however, the French extreme right, with amongst other authors like Alain de Benoist and Guillaume Faye, picked up the notion of 'metapolitics' to denote a culture war aimed at changing hearts and minds in the long-term. de Benoist (1979: 62 – my translation) observed that 'all the big revolutions in history did no more than transpose into facts an evolution that had already taken place, in an underlying manner, in the minds of people'. As such, the *Nouvelle Droite* movement saw metapolitics as a way to strategically make its 'political discourse ring more and more true' (de Benoist, 1979: 63), or as Faye (2001 [2011)]: 190) put it, to diffuse 'ideas and cultural values for the sake of provoking profound, long-term, political transformation'.

The subversive strategies implied by the extreme right interpretation of metapolitics have been eagerly picked up by the contemporary so-called 'alt-right' movement. In many ways the very notion of 'alt-right' is in se metapolitical as it primarily serves to detoxify fascism and extreme right ideology (Mudde, 2017). Daniel Friberg, a Swedish 'alt-right' ideologue, for example, appropriated the idea of metapolitics and defined it as 'a war of social transformation, taking place at the level of worldview, thought, and culture' (Friberg, 2018: 268).

Metapolitics is thus very much in line with the long-term counter-hegemonic war of position, as envisaged by Gramsci, but geared towards naturalising fascist ideas and ideology rather than leftwing revolutionary ideas. Besides Gramsci, another great influence on the contemporary fascist imaginary is the anti-enlightenment constitutionalist and outspoken Nazi, Carl Schmitt, and especially his contention that the *friend/enemy* distinction and insurmountable conflicts are central to the political (Schmitt, 1932). Following Schmitt, metapolitics is thus not merely concerned with a normalisation of the self and thus of fascist ideology, but it is also invested in a sustained effort to intensify the conflict between the self and its enemies so as to reinforce hegemonisation.

This idea of the political being an ontologically conflictual space, where enemies, alliances, adversaries interact and co-exist, has also been taken-up by discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). From a discourse theory perspective, the production of an ideological enemy occurs through processes of othering. Discursive othering practices serve to 'externalise distance and exclude the other' (Pickering, 2001: 47). This is accompanied by an oyeran discursive strategy of conflictual polarisation characterised by 'positive ingroup description and negative outgroup description' (van Dijk, 1998: 33), but it also involves 'long-term stigmatisation of targetted individuals and social groups' (Krzyżanowski, 2020: 507). Hegemonisation, in other words, cannot be achieved without the active construction of an enemy; of an ideological outside. Building on Derrida's notion of the constitutive outside, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 135) stress that 'in order to speak of hegemony [. . .] it is also necessary that the articulation should take place through a confrontation with antagonistic articulatory practices'.

This is where the notion of deviance comes into the fray, because as Hall (1997: 237 – emphasis added) rightly argued, the construction of clear-cut differences and symbolic boundaries between the self and the other, 'leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatise and expel anything which is defined as impure, *abnormal*'. However, just as the relationship between hegemony and counter-hegemony, the

relationship between normalcy and deviance is also contingent and unstable. Approached from a post-structuralist perspective, power is thus not merely implicated in the punishment or repression of deviance, but also in its very production and articulation (Aggleton, 1987; Foucault, 1998).

One of the most powerful ways of producing deviance and deviants is through the instigation of moral panics, fear and the production of crisis; a process which includes exaggeration and distortion, prediction of dire consequences and symbolisation of acute threat (Cohen, 1973 [2002]). In his classic study, Cohen also highlighted the pivotal role of media and of *moral entrepreneurs* in turning something or someone deviant (see also Lauderdale, 2015). The ways in which moral entrepreneurs attempt to render certain behaviour, ideas or groups of people as (politically) deviant is through processes of signification or labelling, stigmatisation and bedevilment (Cohen, 1973 [2002]; Schur, 1980).

Despite receiving some criticism (see McRobbie and Thornton, 1995), by and large most scholars agree that moral panic analysis is still a productive conceptual framework to study and analyse contemporary instances of deviance production. Critcher (2008): 1139) suggests approaching moral panics as discursive formations while Krzyżanowski (2020: 506) points out that in the context of the normalisation of racism, the strategic production of moral panics is often geared towards the construction of a crisis imaginary, which then subsequently serves to further stigmatise certain groups and phenomena. This can also have long-term impacts and consequences for those groups in terms of fostering negative attitudes towards these groups and legitimate discriminatory actions and policies.

The anti-woke culture war discourse in the UK

Through purposeful sampling, a corpus of texts was collected and constructed that would enable a detailed discursive analysis of the UK's anti-woke culture war (cf. Appendix 1). The focus was on texts produced by political actors active in the mainstream public sphere and political space. The analysis highlights the way in which the anti-woke culture war as metapolitics has permeated and increasingly come to define mainstream public discourse in the UK (but as briefly mentioned above this is not confined to the UK). It focuses on what Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017) have called 'borderline discourses'; where civility and uncivility meet, where mainstream politics and media and an anti-democratic extreme right cross-modulate, and where ultimately normalisation is being achieved.

Since the so-called 'anti-woke culture war' is waged by a variety of political actors – or moral entrepreneurs as Cohen denoted them – it was important to construct a corpus comprised of the voices of politicians from the Conservative party who are the driving political force pushing the so-called war on woke in the UK, but also of journalists from rightwing media who actively mediate and amplify this discourse. In this regard, the start-up of a new national news broadcaster which explicitly calls itself 'anti-woke', was also deemed relevant to include in the analysis. Besides newspaper columns, interviews and a speech in Parliament, a more ideological document entitled *'Conservative Thinking for a Post-Liberal Age'*, which extensively deploys the culture war discourse, was also included. This diversity of genres in the corpus is also indicative of the various fronts on which the anti-woke culture war in the UK is being waged.

Theoretically, whereas Gramsci and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory were influential, as outlined above, a more middle ground – dialectical – position is taken vis-à-vis the tension between the constitutive nature of discourse and of social practices. The empirical focus is also on everyday discourses and their broader implications rather than abstract 'depersonified' discourses (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 20). This has methodological implications, situating this article more in the CDA-tradition. In this regard, political discourse analysis, as developed by van Dijk (1997), was a very productive analytical resource, as was the discourse-historical approach, emphasising contingency and historical context (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). Finally, as the analysis foremost focuses on the strategic use of *concepts* such as 'woke', 'culture war' and 'cancel culture', discourse-conceptual analysis was also useful (Krzyżanowski, 2016).

In line with the conceptual framework outlined above, the culture war against 'wokeness' will be deconstructed as successful attempts to other those that actively counter racist, sexist and anti-LGBTQ views, as well as those that struggle for social justice. Another important aspect of the anti-woke culture war discourse is the cultivation of victimhood through the denouncement of so-called cancel culture and, related to this, the weaponisation of free speech.

From staying woke to wokeness as deviance

'Woke' is a central concept across the corpus in various ways with its frequent collocations including: 'woke culture', 'woke opinion', 'wokeism', 'woke times', 'woke agenda', 'woke elite', 'woke dogma', 'woke ideology', 'woke activists', 'woke mindset', 'woke society', 'woke causes', 'woke broadcast media', 'woke insanity', 'woke mob' and 'woke Britain'.

Before unpacking and contextualising these occurrences, let me first consider the genealogy of 'woke'. Woke is intrinsically tied to black consciousness and anti-racist struggles. It was a black slang word which was first referenced in popular culture during a spoken word section at the end of a recording of the 1938 protest folksong 'Scottsboro Boys' by Lead Belly. The song refers to the gruesome case of nine black youth who were falsely accused of raping two white women and whose lives were destroyed by the deeply racist Alabama justice system (Cose, 2020). At the end of the song, Lead Belly says he met the men and told them to 'be a little careful when they go along through there — best stay woke, keep their eyes open'.[1] As such, woke and staying woke explicitly referred to the need for Afro-Americans to be acutely aware and conscious of the dangers and threats that were inherent to a white-dominated racist America. A similar connotation could be found in a NYT-piece written by the Black novelist William Melvin Kelley (1962) entitled *If You're Woke You Dig It*. In the piece, Kelley does not explicitly define woke, but he prophetically warns for the misappropriation and subversion of the black vernacular by white culture.

Staying Woke or being aware and conscious of racism rose to prominence again in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and especially in the aftermath of the 2014 Ferguson protests when the hashtag #StayWoke was used a lot in conjunction with #BLM.[2] The frequent use of 'woke' and 'wokeness', especially by non-black progressives, also engendered critiques of performative wokeness or performative allyship (Kalina, 2020).

It also represented a shift from being a verb to an adjective and was expanded to include other injustices and forms of discrimination and oppression to do with gender and sexuality.

At the same time, however, 'woke' and 'wokeness' was also weaponised by the right, deturning it from its initial meaning in the struggle for civil rights into an insult used against anyone who fights fascism, racism and other forms of injustices and discrimination as well as to signify a supposed progressive over-reaction. It became, in other words, a convenient shorthand to negate the 'negative ideologization' of the extreme right (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 52). In this regard, we might even say that 'woke' has become a powerful political metaphor which 'creates social reality and guides social action' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 156). This *detournement* also shows in a very blatant way how 'a discourse can always be undermined by articulations that place the signs in different relations to one another' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 39).

If we return to the list of words in the corpus that are commonly associated with 'woke', we can observe how woke is not just a convenient discursive shorthand or political metaphor for being anti-racist, anti-sexist, pro-LGBTQ rights, but it is also consistently negatively attributed to a whole range of phenomena. The anti-woke discourse became an integral part of what in political discourse analysis is called 'semantic and ideological polarisation' (van Dijk, 1997: 28). Fighting fascism, condemning discrimination, and contesting hate speech is thus not a moral disposition any longer, but rather an 'opinion'; not just an opinion like any other opinion, however, but a very dogmatic and highly ideological one, and furthermore those who espouse such 'opinions' are part of an aberrant, crazy, elitist, irrational mob, lacking a sense of humour and out of touch with common sense. This is also well captured by a quote from Andrew Neil, a senior British broadcaster who was the short-lived chairman of GB News, a new self-proclaimed 'anti-woke' news channel. In an interview prior to the launch of the station he stated:

> The original meaning of woke was somebody who was aware of social justice issues and who can complain about that? But it is not about social justice anymore, it is about conformity of thinking. (quoted in The Evening Standard, 8 June 2021)

He also described 'woke liberals' as 'po-faced people who take themselves too seriously' (Neil, 2021), re-enforcing the image of 'woke' as a knee-jerk and overly sensitive reaction.

Social justice struggles such as anti-fascism, anti-racism and anti-sexism or pro LGBTQ rights, are also conveniently labelled, stigmatised and bedevilled as an extremist, authoritarian, intolerant and above all an ideological and thus contestable position. So-called 'woke ideology' is described as 'destructive, totalitarian, divisive, negative and anti-democratic' (Gareth Bacon MP, in The Common Sense Group, 2021: 26). Advocates for BLM, environmentalism and transgender rights are referred to as 'extreme cultural and political groups' who adhere to 'intolerant woke dogma' (John Hayes MP, in The Common Sense Group, 2021: 1 and 16). Columnist Dan Wootton called the England's football players decision to take the knee before each match at the European Championship 'virtue-signalling' and representative of 'trenchant and often extreme positions' (in The Daily Mail, 7 June 2021). This discourse also emanates from the UK government, whose Education Secretary spoke of those contesting racist, sexist or

transphobic voices within universities as 'the intolerant minority' (Gavin Williamson MP, in The Daily Telegraph, 11 July 2021).

The intolerant are thus accusing those that are fighting intolerance of being intolerant extremists. This again is not new and part and parcel of the discursive tactics of the denial of racism, as outlined by van Dijk (1992: 90):

> the person who accuses the other as racist is in turn accused of inverted racism against whites, as oversensitive and exaggerating, as intolerant, generally as 'seeing racism where there is none' [. . .] Accusations of racism, then, soon tend to be seen as more serious social infractions than racist attitudes or actions themselves.

It is here that the instigation of moral panic and the production of deviance emerges – that is, countering racism, sexism, homophobia or transphobia is consistently labelled as deviant, crazy and dangerous, as an imminent threat to 'our' way of living. Columnist Oliver Harvey, for instance, spoke of 'woke insanity' and describes 'wokeism' as 'religious, totalitarian fanaticism' and 'puritan' (in The Sun, 24 June 2021).

The moral panic created around 'wokeness', in combination with the articulation of a clearly defined enemy, subsequently justifies drastic action; the 'woke mob', columnist Douglas Murray writes, 'must be stopped [. . .] It's time to run back at them' (in The Sun, 24 June 2021). Columnist Dan Wootton calls his readers to 'stand up to the mob and be counted' (in The Daily Mail, 7 June 2021). Along the same lines, John Hayes MP expresses the following populist battle cry:

> The Battle for Britain has begun, it must be won by those who, inspired by the people's will, stand for the common good in the national interest. (in The Common Sense Group, 2021: 1)

We can observe here how everything 'woke' is positioned as aberrant, politically deviant, as extremist, as going against the sovereign will of 'the people' and 'the common good', as a threat to 'our' Britain. These motivational frames are also instrumental in the creation of what could be called horizontal out-groups. Whereas populism tends to create a clear vertical juxtaposition between 'the people' and the out of touch 'elite', through negative attributions such as 'the wokerati', 'wokeism' and 'woke insanity', those who are denoted as woke are discursively ostracised from the category of 'the people' (Cammaerts, 2018, 2020). Furthermore, by frequently associating the word 'mob' with 'woke', moral entrepreneurs instigate a moral panic by invoking irrationality, unruliness and vindictiveness, all characteristics which are commonly associated with a mob in public consciousness (McClelland, 1989). Both the reference to 'the mob' and to the 'Battle of Britain' and Britain's self-asserted greatness are historical topoi, mobilising the fear of crowds in the case of the former, and reminiscing the UK's colonial past and WW2 heroisms for the latter. These topoi thus not only serve to 'warn of a repetition of the past' (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 80), but also to glorify it.

Cancel culture and victimhood

The othering and bedevilment of those who fight for social justice is, however, not the only discursive grenade that is being thrown from the right into the metapolitical trenches.

There are also persistent attempts to immunise those with racist, sexist or LGBTQ-phobic views against anyone who dares to contest them, or who chooses not to platform people that espouse such views. Within the 'anti-woke' discourse, the pushback against those who voice racist, sexist, or LGBTQ-phobic views in the public space and the fact that today there are (at times) real consequences if you do so, is referred to as 'cancel culture'.

Concurring with the Schmittian friend/enemy distinction discussed above, James Sunderland MP and David Maddox describe the culture war they are waging as 'a life and death struggle for conservatism faced with the Left's attempts to "cancel" opposing voices' (in The Common Sense Group, 2021: 27). Without necessarily asserting this explicitly, hate speech, discrimination, and racism are positioned as legitimate 'opinions' as any other, worthy of 'democratic' debate, and therefore the pushback against it is illegitimate and 'sinister'.

> disagreement is not now tolerated and any perceived deviation from the narrow 'true path' is ruthlessly crushed. So called 'no-platforming' and the rise of the 'cancel culture' are particularly sinister examples of this approach. (Gareth Bacon MP, in The Common Sense Group, 2021: 23)

Columnist Douglas Murray accuses universities of being 'in thrall to the woke mob' (in The Sun, 24 June 2021). He also argues, with reference to the suspension of Ollie Robinson, an English cricket player, for having posted racist and sexist tweets and the controversy around JK Rowling's anti-trans views and statements, that

> the woke mob doesn't just try to get people into line. It tries to end their careers and stop their livelihoods if they don't obey. It is an insidious movement (Murray, 2021).

Columnist Dan Wootton called the backlash against Ollie Robinson 'a public flogging' and condemned the 'woke culture of extreme virtue signalling followed by brutal cancellations', which he argues 'is becoming a stain on society' (in The Daily Mail, 7 June 2021). This led the then UK's Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden MP as well as Prime Minister Boris Johnson MP, to condemn Robinson's suspension and by extension 'cancel culture'. Broadcaster Andrew Neil (quoted in The Evening Standard, 8 June 2021) also took issue with those who contest discrimination and hate speech in the public sphere:

> Now it is the norm that if I disagree with you, you should be stigmatised, brought before the court of woke opinion, you should lose your job, you should certainly wear sackcloth and ashes and your name should be dragged through the social media sphere.

By positioning this in the context of agreement/disagreement within a democratic debate a moral equivalence between a variety of opinions is being constructed, thereby completely disregarding the inherent ethical dimension of the fight against fascism, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and related hate speech. The topsy-turvy nature of this discourse is also demonstrated through the way in which 'disagreement' is only an entitlement and exclusive privilege of the dominant group, not of those that contest them.

The emergence of GB News, which some have called a British version of *Fox News* (Lewis, 2021), was also met by a somewhat successful campaign by *Stop Funding Hate*[3] to dissuade (some) advertisers from financing the channel. In a media watch segment on GB News (18 June 2021), Andrew Neil lamented that the companies boycotting his channel 'have all taken the knee to Stop Funding Hate'. In line with the instigation of moral panics, he furthermore demonised Stop Funding Hate, whom he accused of being 'far left agitators and cranks that push for advertiser boycotts of any media organisation with which it disagrees'. Here, 'disagreement' suddenly becomes illegitimate, crazy and dangerous.

The quotes above regarding 'cancel culture' and the use of metaphors such as 'public flogging' or the biblical penitence implied by 'sackcloth and ashes' also reveal a deep sense of victimhood that is being expressed. This represents a common discursive tactic in fascist discourses, as Stanley (2018: XXXI) convincingly argues; '[a]ny progress for a minority group stokes feelings of victimhood among the dominant population'. In line with the argument of van Dijk, discussed above, 'racism becomes about white distress, white suffering, and white victimization' (DiAngelo, 2018: 134). Furthermore, and relevant to the analysis here, 'an aggrieved sense of victimization of dominant majorities can be weaponised for potential political gain' (Stanley, 2018: 102), and it clearly is.

Free speech and the right to offend

Besides self-victimisation in the wake of push-back or being called out, free speech as a vital democratic right is also being weaponised in this context. It is used to discursively turn the tables on those who contest hate speech, discrimination and structural racism, sexism and LGBTQ-phobia as it positions them as anti-democratic and as denying others the right to their free speech. Illustrative of this is Andrew Neil's claim that GB News aims to 'expose the growing promotion of cancel culture for the threat to free speech and democracy that it is' (on GB News, 18 June 2021).

The invocation of democratic civic rights, namely freedom of speech and open democratic debate, goes hand in hand here with anti-democratic aims and values; that is, claiming the oxymoronic democratic right to fuel hate, and express racist, sexist and LGBTQ-phobic discourses by considering these as equivalent to other views, opinions and political positions out there, and thus up for 'open' debate. This view of needing to be tolerant of intolerance is implicitly supported by UK Education Secretary Gavin Williamson MP, in an open letter in the rightwing newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* (11 July 2021):

> At the end of the day, this is about respect and tolerance. We should not demonise those who disagree with us. We need to teach students how to disagree civilly, not to 'cancel' or condemn.

In all of this, we can clearly observe empirical examples of what Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017) have called borderline discourses, where the civil is invoked to claim the right to be uncivil. This again is not new, '[f]ascists have always been well acquainted with this recipe for using democracy's liberties against itself' (Stanley, 2018: 50).

In the 'anti-woke culture war' discourse, freedom of speech to be racist and discriminatory is thus coupled with a divine freedom and right to insult and to offend others, which often gets coupled with an older metapolitical discourse from the right of 'political correctness gone mad' (Crawley, 2007). As the argument goes; 'nowadays you cannot say anything any longer, you're not allowed to laugh at anything, whereas in the good old days we could be unashamedly racist, sexist, and/or homophobe, . . . how awful'. In this regard, columnist Douglas Murray calls the 'insidious' woke movement, 'political correctness on steroids' (in The Sun, 24 June 2021).

What is also apparent here is that by focussing on freedom of speech and the right to offend, these moral entrepreneurs are also de-topicalising and thereby de-emphasising the 'bad actions or properties' of the dominant group (in this case discrimination, hate speech, racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia), which is an integral part of the oyeran discursive strategy (van Dijk, 1997: 28).

Some authors in the book published by the post-liberal *Common Sense Group* are, however, more explicit in defending hate speech by delegitimating current hate speech laws as impediments to freedom of speech:

> The right to offend people and debate from different perspectives are at the heart of freedom of speech. Hate speech laws on race, gender and other areas have been superficially fully justified. (James Sunderland MP and David Maddox, The Common Sense Group, 2021: 40)

One might think that the metapolitics of the anti-woke culture war is mainly situated at a symbolic level, but this war of position has concrete impacts on policies. For example, when it comes to education, the then Minister of Equality Kemi Badenoch MP (Hansard, 2020), fulminated against the decolonisation agenda during a debate on Black History Month in Parliament, issuing the following threat:

> I want to be absolutely clear that the Government stand unequivocally against critical race theory. [. . .] We do not want teachers to teach their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt. Let me be clear that any school that teaches those elements of critical race theory as fact, or that promotes partisan political views such as defunding the police without offering a balanced treatment of opposing views, is breaking the law.

The then UK Minister of Equality, whose parents are from Nigerian descent, argues here that white privilege and structural racism are ideological figments of the progressive leftwing imagination, which she deems illegal to teach without giving equal attention to the so-called 'counter-argument'. These threats and attempts to cancel critical race theory were subsequently followed up by rightwing commentators claiming that 'wokeism has *infected* the education system' (Douglas Murray in The Sun, 24 June 2021 – emphasis added), a particularly salient metaphor during a pandemic. Disease metaphors go back a long way in political discourse; they are often melodramatic and assume 'a punitive notion [. . .] as a sign of evil, something to be punished' (Sontag, 1978: 82).

One month later, the UK Education Secretary announced a new Higher Education Bill which he called the Freedom of Speech Bill, giving the Government, amongst others, the

power to sanction universities if they create safe spaces or dare to de-platform speakers with racist, sexist or LGBTQ-phobic views:

> we are taking forward our landmark Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill [. . .] to safeguard and protect the great traditions of our universities, and ensure Britain remains a country where free speech can flourish. (Gavin Williamson MP, in The Daily Telegraph, 11 July 2021)

Here again we can observe how free speech is weaponised and used against those that fight discriminations of any kind and advocate for social justice. This again emanates from the textbook of the fascist right who have been doing this for decades. Titley (2020: 26) eloquently and convincingly documents how the far right consistently generates free speech scandals with the aim 'to create space for racist speech as a beleaguered expression of liberty, and positions the dissemination of racist discourse as a contribution to democratic vitality'.

Conclusion

The analysis above demonstrates that the 'anti-woke culture war' discourse traverses several 'fields of action', including party-political internal communication, shaping of public opinion, propaganda, and crucially law-making (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 38). This last point shows that the oyeran discursive strategy to abnormalise social justice struggles through the production of moral panics, has serious consequences for democracy and social cohesion.

The current success and salience of the anti-woke discourse amongst rightwing politicians, but also broader public opinion, does not come out of the blue. As discussed in the conceptual framework, metapolitics and a war of position is a long-term battle and the ground for this had to be prepared. The older 'political correctness gone mad' discourse, reacting against what British stand-up Comedian Stewart Lee once described as 'an often-clumsy negotiation towards a kind of formal linguistic politeness',[4] was a prelude to what we are witnessing today in terms of the weaponisation of free speech and the abnormalisation of anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-LGBTQ-phobia, etc.

As shown above, this abnormalisation is achieved by strategically instigating moral panics and creating a false sense of crisis with a view of bedevilling social justice struggles as politically deviant, dangerous, sinister, insidious, evil and an imminent danger to British society. This is subsequently coupled with the assertion of a new common sense which normalises that which social justice politics aims to contest, expose, and push back against. In addition to this, a self-asserted victimhood, that is, from a position of dominance and privilege, is expressed; reversing the perpetrator into a victim and turning the victim into a perpetrator.

It is also important though to point out that the current virulent anti-woke metapolitical war of position is also a testament to the relative success of anti-racist, anti-sexist and pro-LGBTQ struggles in recent decades as it constitutes a forceful fight-back against these recent successes. This has caught many activists, who might have thought that their respective struggles for equality and social justice were by and large won, by surprise.

At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that identity politics in a highly polarised and hyper-mediated public space also has its own moral entrepreneurs and its own aberrations, which not surprisingly get consistently amplified in the rightwing media as yet another potent example of so-called 'woke madness'. In the society of the spectacle we live in today it is often through a disproportional focus on these aberrations that moral panics are fed and the anti-woke metapolitical war of position won.

What this discursive analysis also exposes, however, is how mainstream rightwing politicians as well as rightwing mainstream media consciously engage in borderline discourses by buying into and actively propagating the culture war discourse with a view of undermining and reneging social justice struggles. As shown in the analysis, in doing so they are appropriating and aligning themselves with discursive strategies that pertain to or originate with the fascist right. From a democratic and civic perspective this is a worrisome and deeply problematic observation as this appropriation ultimately serves to normalise the fascist right's agenda further through turning its various contestations into deviant, aberrant and irrational behaviour and ideologically biased opinions rather than the strong moral disposition it should be.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

Notes

1. Listen 4'27": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrXfkPViFIE (accessed 25 February 2022).
2. See documentary 'Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement' (2016): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIoYtKOqxeU (accessed 25 February 2022).
3. See: https://stopfundinghate.info/campaign-updates/ (accessed 25 February 2022).
4. Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle, 30 March 2009: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsJ9Pi_9LZM (accessed 25 February 2022).

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Appendix 1

Corpus

- Kemi Badenoch MP (20 October 2020): Black History Month Debate in Parliament. Hansard.
- The Common Sense Group (10 May 2021): Conservative Thinking for a Post-Liberal Age.
- Columnist Dan Wootton (7 June 2021): 'Was this the weekend Britain's cultural and sports elites reached peak Woke . . . or is the worst still to come?'. The Daily Mail.
- Broadcaster Andrew Neil (8 June 2021): 'I have one more big gig in me – I am taking on woke culture'. The Evening Standard.
- Broadcaster Andrew Neil (18 June 2021): Media Watch. GB News Segment.
- Columnists Oliver Harvey and Douglas Murray (24 June 2024): How 'political correctness on steroids' and woke-weaning betrays and brainwashes children. The Sun.
- Gavin Williamson MP (11 July 2021): Imagine a world in which Gladstone had been 'cancelled'. The Daily Telegraph.