CULTURE

Woke 2: electric boogaloo

// BY ERIN MUSE

In January 2022, Tucker Carlson took to Fox News to announce a disturbing development in American culture: the green M&M was no longer sexy.

The candy mascot's signature go-go boots were replaced with sensible sneakers, apparently in pursuit of a more inclusive, less conventionally feminine chocolate. Carlson was unimpressed. The candy company, he suggested, would not rest until every M&M was thoroughly unattractive.

It was a truly peculiar moment in American political history. A multinational corporation had attempted to advance social progress through the footwear of an anthropomorphic piece of chocolate, and a conservative television host had responded by defending his right to find it attractive. The culture war had reached the candy aisle, and neither side appeared inclined to retreat.

In retrospect, the green M&M controversy feels less like the beginning of a cultural revolution than the beginning of its end.

For much of the preceding decade, wokeness had evolved from a language of awareness surrounding racial injustice into an increasingly expansive set of cultural expectations. Universities revised their vocabularies. Corporations discovered social responsibility. Ordinary consumer decisions acquired extraordinary ideological significance. The movement's ambitions were considerable, but its most visible accomplishments were sometimes remarkably modest. A company could demonstrate its commitment to gender equality by redesigning a cartoon character without materially improving the lives of any women.

Conservatives, meanwhile, developed their own dependence on the spectacle. Every progressive branding decision offered another opportunity to announce the decline of Western civilization. The arrangement was remarkably efficient: corporations performed progress, conservatives performed outrage and everyone received publicity.

Online, liberal embarrassment became something of a cottage industry. The formula is familiar: find an especially indignant college student, an ill-advised corporate diversity initiative or an obscure internet argument, remove whatever context might complicate the punchline and present the result as evidence of America's imminent collapse. Entire YouTube compilations have been devoted to the apparent pleasure of watching "SJWs get owned."

Eventually, the spectacle became exhausting. The word "woke" had become a catchall insult for virtually anything conservatives found objectionable. Environmentalism was woke. Hollywood was woke. Even the M&Ms were woke.

Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2024 appeared to mark the end of an era. Corporate America began retreating from the vocabulary it had so enthusiastically adopted. Diversity initiatives were scaled back, progressive messaging became more cautious and Democrats confronted the possibility that the identity politics associated with their coalition had become an electoral liability. More remarkable, perhaps, was the extent to which liberals themselves began accepting the premise that being perceived as woke was something to avoid.

Wokeness, it seemed, was dead.

But political fashions rarely disappear as neatly as their obituaries suggest. They linger in institutions, habits and the occasional lesbian bar in Massachusetts.

In September, Last Ditch, a Covid-conscious lesbian bar in Greenfield, found itself at the center of an unusually intense controversy after announcing that masks would become optional on Saturday nights. The decision prompted accusations that the establishment was abandoning its commitment to inclusivity, and a dispute over the practicalities of drinking in a mask became a much larger argument about disability, public health and ideological responsibility.

The controversy soon escaped the confines of western Massachusetts. On TikTok, the dispute became an object of fascination, ridicule and political anxiety. Some left-leaning commentators were eager to distance themselves from the spectacle, which seemed almost engineered to confirm every conservative caricature of progressive politics. Their reaction was more revealing than the controversy itself: if wokeness once depended on a broad cultural consensus among the left, that consensus appears to have collapsed. The movement has not merely lost favor with its opponents, it has become an embarrassment to its former allies.

With the midterm elections approaching, the sentiment online towards such displays of wokeness was clear: lay low until after Nov. 3.

Nov. 3 has since come and gone. And with Democrats celebrating a so-called "blue tsunami," the question of whether wokeness might return seems suddenly less hypothetical.

Call it Woke 2.

The term, increasingly popular among politicians and pundits, describes the anticipated revival of progressive activism following the cultural backlash against its first iteration.

The sequel arrives under peculiar circumstances. Its predecessor had been pronounced dead, its vocabulary appropriated by its critics, and its former corporate sponsors have spent the past two years quietly deleting evidence of their involvement. A comeback would require some serious rebranding.

But perhaps Woke 2 need not resemble the original. To quote AOC, "Woke 1 was crazy." The first iteration was so preoccupied with demonstrating its own virtue that its most visible achievements often had more to do with public relations than public policy. Its successor has an opportunity to be considerably less performative.

There is something slightly absurd about imagining a movement for social justice as a seasonal phenomenon, returning to public life whenever electoral conditions permit. Yet the anticipation of Woke 2 reveals how thoroughly American politics has confused the popularity of progressive aesthetics with the legitimacy of progressive ideas.

Whether Woke 2 will escape the excesses of its predecessor remains to be seen. Should progressivism become fashionable again, the corporate statements of solidarity may not be far behind. Somewhere, a marketing executive is presumably already contemplating the possibilities.

Perhaps this time, we can leave the green M&M's shoes out of it.

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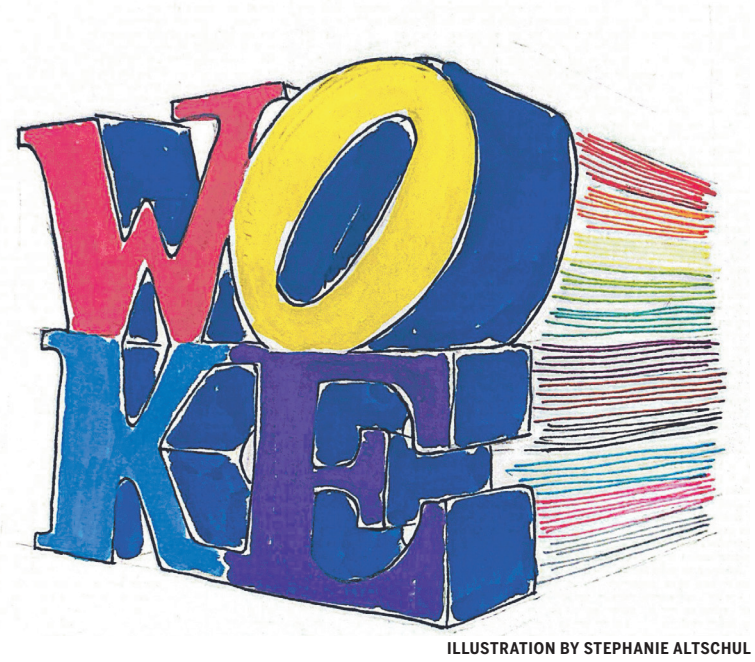


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE ALTSCHUL

SATIRE

The ultimate career guide for Yale's best and brightest

// BY JULIA YAKIREVICH

November marks the outset of recruiting for many investment banking and consulting firms. For some students, this season means nothing. For others, it's a time of stress, rejection and continual hits to one's perceived self-worth. I'm here to offer some solace to anyone on that spectrum, but mainly those with no internship. Think of me as the consultant for (failed) consultants.

Actor: Now, I know the last time you found yourself in the spotlight was your fifth grade play, "James and the Giant Peach." But clearly you've been discounting your acting skills all these years. Think about the performance you've been putting on since you stepped onto Yale's campus: pretending to enjoy the empty thrills of Excel spreadsheets and spending hours formatting decks. You've got a clear knack for acting, and it's time to put those skills to use! If your skills of attempting to convince your friends for the 10th time that investment banking is a totally meaningful thing to do with your life indicate anything, it's that the Academy should start engraving your name onto an Oscar.

Professional matchmaker: Let's be honest, bangs have never suited you, no matter what your mom says, but don't let that hold you back from imitating Dakota Johnson's character in "Materialists." If the thought of handling mergers and acquisitions for the next 50 years of your life sounded amazing, think about how exciting it will be to manage the ultimate merger and acquisition: marriage (for those who can afford your services). You'll still be consulting — thankfully, only for actual investment bankers who don't have time to "waste" on finding love instead of enriching Fortune 500 companies. Does Chris Evans come with the job? I guess you'll have to find out.

Cult leader: Passionate about influencing people with unique solutions? How about redirecting your focus from strategic business decisions to how your followers lead their lives. Let's face it, the corporate New York City lifestyle was never for you. You're better off living on a tech-free, paleo-friendly, anti-establishment commune. Either way, you'll still have control over many people's finances!

LinkedIn ghostwriter: Channel your passion for fake enthusiasm for the corporate world by helping LinkedIn influencers turn their mundane work experiences into thrilling posts. Circling back to the matchmaker suggestion, you'll really be able to move the needle on your clients' professional and romantic lives by helping them connect their engagements to B2B sales.

Theranos employee: If the great humanitarian work in IB and consulting isn't what initially drew you in, maybe it was the sleek corporate style. And fraud? In that case, you might consider offering your many talents to Theranos — I hear they're looking for new leadership!

OnlyFans manager: Speaking of leadership, what about a job that doesn't ask you to waste your time climbing the ranks? You're built to go straight to the top! With "manager" literally in your job title, you'll finally get the respect you deserve. You'll still be working toward satisfying customers and analyzing market trends, while advising your clients on how to maximize their growth and profitability. Sounds perfect, right?

Instagram "create mode" meme maker: Missing the prospect of spending eight hours a day laboring over the right font for your beautifully colored decks? Instagram "create mode" meme maker might just be the job for you! You'll be adding unoriginal text to a color gradient slide that's really only funny to people with over 12 hours of screentime (a group you probably already find yourself in). If you're feeling really frisky, you might go for creating entire carousels!

Astrologer/fortune teller: All that time you spent learning how to predict market value and consumer behavior? It translates perfectly to predicting love life trends and giving life advice. Put that experience to use as a professional online astrologer or fortune teller in the basement of your local boba shop.

Professional fan page runner: If what you really wanted was a job you never clock out of, look no further. As a professional fan page account manager (peep the leadership title again), you'll finally be free of the work-life balance you never wanted! Take your pick: Swiftie, Arianator, BTS ARMY, Beyhive, Barbz (maybe scratch that one) — the options are basically endless. It's a role with influence, and one that offers incredible work from home benefits!

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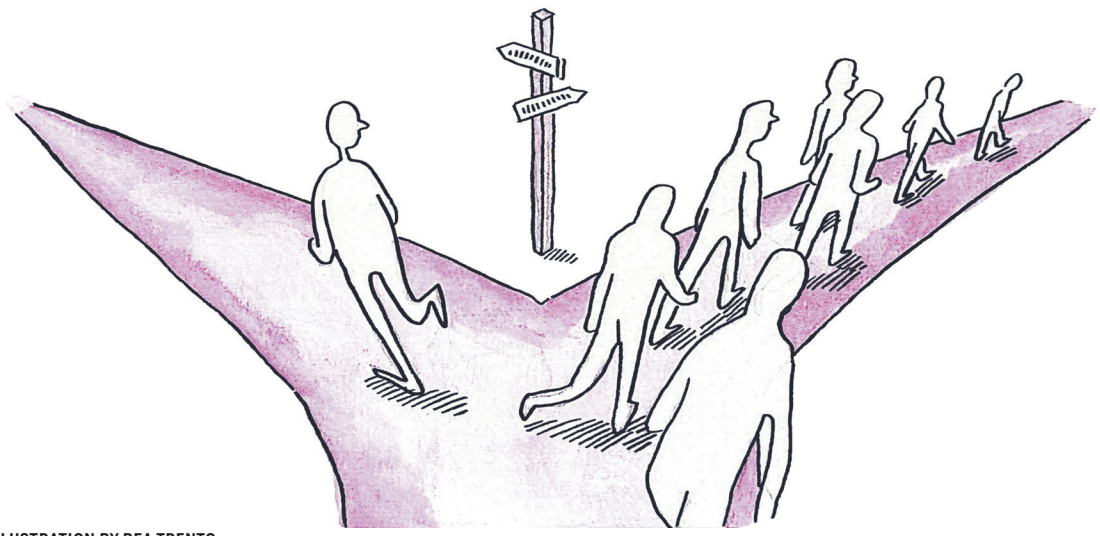


ILLUSTRATION BY BEA TRENTO

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

TOUCH GRASS