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From the Description of ‘Wokeness’ to its Critique. Methodological Remarks on Musa Al-Gharbi’s *We Have Never Been Woke*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2026-3003>

Abstract: This article critically examines the methodology of Musa Al-Gharbi’s *We Have Never Been Woke*, which offers an ambitious sociological account of ‘wokeness’ as a performative ideology deployed by elite symbolic capitalists to consolidate their privilege under the guise of progressive politics. I argue that Al-Gharbi’s account is traversed by an unresolved tension between his methodological commitments that ultimately constrains the critical reach of his analysis. Drawing on both classical and contemporary authors of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, particularly Horkheimer, Adorno, Jaeggi, and Celikates, I show that Al-Gharbi’s exclusive reliance on material-economic explanations leaves the normative and transformative capacity of ‘woke’ concepts undertheorized. Subsequently, I argue that Al-Gharbi’s descriptive account of ‘wokeness’ can be framed as a description of first order ‘woke’ practices that subsequently calls for reconstruction through a second-order self-critique. Relying on Celikates, I conclude that doing so rehabilitates the emancipatory potential of ‘woke’ concepts while exposing their conservative social entanglement, grounding a discourse that moves beyond mere demystification toward a genuinely critical account of ‘wokeness’.

Keywords: woke; critical theory; methodology; Horkheimer; Adorno; ideology

The distance between the widespread use of the term ‘wokeness’ and a clear understanding of what it actually denotes is striking. Originally adopted as a motto within Black activist groups, the term has rapidly expanded beyond the context of anti-racist activism, coming to designate a complex array of different phenomena. It is now routinely associated with other hackneyed unclear terms such as ‘political

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correctness', 'cancel culture', and 'identity politics' (Young 2024). Recent quantitative research suggests that Americans use the label 'woke' to describe deeply different things, that share little beyond their political connotation: politicians and policies, but also colleges, sexual identities, careers, and even consumer brands can be 'woke' (VanDreew et al. 2025; see Johansen 2025).¹

In such a complex and ambiguous landscape, the only safe conclusion is that 'wokeness' constitutes a highly contested, deeply political, and intensely controversial phenomenon. This conceptual opacity generates confusion about who is 'woke' and what the term entails. As a result, attempts to analyse the 'woke' phenomenon remain rare, fragmented, and largely unsystematic. A notable exception is Musa Al-Gharbi's recent book *We Have Never Been Woke* (2024), which offers a rare, ambitious, and analytically rigorous attempt to provide what can be called a *sociology of wokeness*.

In his book, 'wokeness' is presented mainly as a distinct language used by certain groups to superficially support and further advance struggles for social justice. His account is presented as primarily descriptive, although throughout the argument Al-Gharbi also shows his intention to point out the contradictory logic of 'wokeness' and the ultimately hypocritical attitude of many 'woke' liberals. As a result, Al-Gharbi's work seems to blur the borders between *describing*, *explaining* and *criticising* 'wokeness', elaborating on all the levels.

In this paper, I problematise the transition from the description of 'wokeness' to its critique by analysing Al-Gharbi's methodology. I argue that although his depiction of 'wokeness' is solid and his denunciation of it as falsely progressive largely persuasive, the methodology through which these conclusions are reached – specifically, his commitment to a purely descriptive sociology and reliance on material-economic explanations – does in fact *constrain* and even *obstruct* the development of a more thoroughly critical approach to the social phenomenon of 'wokeness'. From this argument follows the possibility of developing a thoroughly critical discourse on 'wokeness' that can deepen and radicalise Al-Gharbi's one, which risks being shallow and slightly misleading.

My analysis is motivated by two apparent problems. The first is a problem of *methodological coherence* within Al-Gharbi's account: while he effectively exposes the contradictions between 'woke' rhetoric and its actual effects, a tension emerges between his commitment to a purely descriptive treatment and the normative

¹ Throughout the paper, I will not use the term 'woke' and any associated terms ('wokeness', 'awakening', etc.) in a derogatory sense. Rather, I refer to it in the same way that Al-Gharbi adopts in his book (Al-Gharbi 2024, 27–33), where 'woke' denotes a specific attitude adopted by progressive movements and a vocabulary of social justice. However, the point of my paper is to contend that Al-Gharbi's definition of 'wokeness' needs to be clarified; this is why I will always be writing 'woke' and other associated terms with apostrophes.

implications he tentatively gestures toward. This tension is most evident in the conclusion, where Al-Gharbi struggles to provide normative guidance on how to avoid false progressivism. While tacitly recognising the normative consequences of his argument, he ultimately limits himself to call for distinguishing the 'babies and bathwater' and to a plea for greater honesty (Al-Gharbi 2024, 296–311).

The second problem lies deeper in the very phenomenon that his account discusses. The ideas constituting 'wokeness' carry an ostensibly progressive and emancipatory orientation.² Yet al-Gharbi shows that, in their concrete effects, they fall short of this promise, tending instead to reinforce social differences, particularly those of class. What remains unasked is what becomes of the critical potential of these concepts themselves. Does their failure to live up to their *prima facie* emancipatory orientation call, as Kaufmann (2025) suggests, for their deconstruction, or rather for their reconstruction? I will argue for the latter, contending that a critical elaboration of Al-Gharbi's methodology can disclose the possibility of a *self-critique* of 'woke' discourses, one capable of rehabilitating the progressive character of 'woke' concepts while overcoming their social reification. I label this second issue the *normative problem*.

In Section 1, I frame Al-Gharbi's methodology and identify its two core tensions, introducing Critical Theory as the conceptual framework needed to resolve them. Sections 2 and 3 address each tension in turn, the first through Horkheimer's critique of pure description, the second through the distinction between Marxian and Mannheimian forms of ideology critique. Section 4 takes a more constructive turn, drawing on Celikates to position Al-Gharbi's account as a first-order description to which a second-order self-critique is normatively required. Section 5 draws conclusions.

2 From Al-Gharbi's argument it emerges that he regards as 'progressive' all those political goals that promote equality and push back against discrimination. Importantly, he insists that equality must be effective and not, as the 'woke' do, merely symbolical. This is a reasonable definition that can command broad consensus. For the sake of the discussion, I adopt the term in the same sense. A more structured argument applies to the word 'emancipatory'. In its (rare) occurrences in the book, Al-Gharbi uses the term interchangeably with 'progressive'. According to Honneth 2018a, the notion of progress has two distinct components: its cognitive content (what we collectively identify as 'progress') and its practical meaning, namely the general idea that change for the better is possible. 'Emancipation' is arguably one of the most celebrated cognitive contents of progress, both today and historically. It can be defined as the recurrent attempt to free oneself from structures of domination. For the sake of the discussion, I treat 'progressive' and 'emancipatory' as having the same meaning. On this view, to argue that 'wokeness' is *not* emancipatory (or progressive) means that it neither promotes equality nor achieves any actual liberation from structures of domination.

1 Framing ‘Wokeness’

In the opening, I suggested that Al-Gharbi’s book presents a *sociology of wokeness*. This claim is supported by his explicit alignment with the tradition that dates back to W. E. B. Du Bois among others (Al-Gharbi 2024, 14; 261); by his adoption of the Bordieuan concept of ‘symbolic capitalism’ (Al-Gharbi 2024, 24–6); and, finally, by the book’s title, a citation of Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1993). Although the main argument does not develop Latourian ideas in detail, Al-Gharbi clarifies that his reference is not merely stylistic but also structural:

Just as Latour encouraged readers to turn the anthropological lens toward their own societies and cultures, and then proceeded to model this approach (as a “modern”) himself, *We Have Never Been Woke* is a work by a symbolic capitalist, about symbolic capitalists, primarily for symbolic capitalists looking at our history, the social order we’ve created, and the ideologies used to justify that social order. (Al-Gharbi 2024, 22)

The core of the book’s analysis is ‘wokeness’ as an *object*. That is, ‘wokeness’ understood as both a set of ideas (and a specific style through which they are presented) on social justice that the elite group of symbolic capitalists³ deployed primarily during the 2010–2022 period (Al-Gharbi 2024, 94–100; see Adler-Bell 2022).⁴

It is while outlining the content of ‘woke’ ideology that Al-Gharbi first introduces his commitment to a purely descriptive, judgement-neutral framework. He argues that his observation that ‘woke’ ideology adopts a strong realism about identity (see Alcoff 2000) carries no implication regarding its rightness or wrongness, and that his account should therefore be understood as a description rather than a critique (Al-Gharbi 2024, 33).

³ According to Al-Gharbi symbolic capitalists are member of the educated upper class, generally white or Asian, predominantly male, religiously unaffiliated (outwardly non-Christian), LGBTQ+ and, most notably, Left-leaning (‘blue’). From the perspective of wealth, they do not belong to the notorious 1 % but compose the remaining 19 % of the upper income quintile, controlling approximately the 45 % of U.S. wealth (Al-Gharbi 2024, 134–41; 170–82).

⁴ I will examine Al-Gharbi’s account of the history of the ‘awakenings’ in 3. On multiple occurrences, he asserts that the ‘woke’ tendency that has shaped recent years is now in decline (Al-Gharbi 2024, 29; 97), the position was also defended in a public essay (Al-Gharbi 2023). While the re-election of Donald Trump has arguably diminished the likelihood of an actual ‘wokeization’ of society, Slavoj Žižek has argued, against Al-Gharbi, that ‘wokeness’ has in fact become normalised and is likely to persist for some time (Žižek 2023). Meanwhile, other commentators have begun to identify a new phenomenon: that of ‘right-wing wokeness’ (Harper 2024; Williams 2025).

A similar declaration of abstention from judgment is reiterated when the author discusses victimhood culture:⁵

The question of whether victimhood culture is 'better' or 'worse' than moral cultures based on honour or dignity is not really a scientific question. It is a subjective and normative evaluation [...]. Whether (and to what extent) victimhood culture is perceived as 'good' or 'bad' would likely depend on a range of factors, including whom we're talking about, what they value, what they're trying to accomplish, and where they fall in a given social or institutional order. (Al-Gharbi 2024, 223–4)

Finally, in the conclusion of the book, Al-Gharbi sidesteps the old Leninist question 'what is to be done?' by reminding the reader that the book's task "is to describe rather than prescribe" (Al-Gharbi 2024, 310).

By explicitly committing himself to the task of offering a purely descriptive picture of society, Al-Gharbi inscribes himself into an honourable sociological tradition, that of Weberian *Wertfreiheit* ('value-freedom'); chiefly the idea that "whenever an academic introduces his own value judgment, a complete understanding of the facts *comes to an end*" (Weber 2004, 21, 1947; Swedberg 2005; Hennis et al. 1994). Al-Gharbi claims to present 'wokeness' precisely as a *fact*, that is, in its objectivity, as a purely empirical and verifiable phenomenon (Al-Gharbi 2024, 11–2).

At the same time, however, the book repeatedly hints at a different order of analysis. This is most evident in its intention to expose the 'woke' ideology by underscoring the "profound gulf between symbolic capitalists' rhetoric about various social ills and their lifestyles and behaviors 'in the world'" (Al-Gharbi 2024, 20). The deep contrast between symbolic capitalists' discourses and their actual lifestyles is carefully documented throughout the text.

To cut a long story short, Al-Gharbi argues that 'woke' elites perform progressive values while their actual practices reproduce the inequalities that sustain their own privilege. This performative politics, spanning diversity rhetoric, identity politics, and victimhood culture, serves to consolidate elite status rather than achieve genuine emancipation (Al-Gharbi 2024, 158–295).

Al-Gharbi offers an historical-economical explanation of the rise of 'wokeness', framing it as the consequence of an economic crisis of 'elite overproduction,' when societies generate more status-seeking individuals than available elite positions

5 Al-Gharbi considers victimhood culture to be a specific and relatively new form of morality, distinct from traditional moral frameworks centred on values such as honour or dignity. He defines it as a tendency to view those who suffer harm as weak and powerless individuals who endure injuries portrayed as both unbearable and long-standing, and who therefore deserve special protection and a distinctive moral status.

(Al-Gharbi 2024, 99–106). Under these circumstances, ‘wokeness’ becomes a defensive strategy: symbolic elites shift leftward and align rhetorically with marginalised groups to restore prestige and secure material advantage.

By unmasking the connection between ideas and their socio-economic origins, Al-Gharbi is effectively attempting a work of demystification. While this attempt is deeply innovative in its content,⁶ its form can hardly be considered new. The critique of ideology is the backbone of Karl Marx’s philosophy and of many that were inspired by him (Marx and Engels 2010; see Larrain 1979; Elster 1986; Žižek 1994; Jaeggi 2009; Ng 2015). To draw a rough parallel: just as Marx argued that beneath the parliamentary wrangling between factions of republican and monarchists in nineteenth-century France stood the problematic transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism (Marx 2010), so Al-Gharbi reads the rise of ‘wokeness’ and the outburst of the culture war as responses to the declining social position of the college-educated elite. The tempted ‘critique of ideology’⁷ constitutes the *explanatory* part of Al-Gharbi’s account.

From my reconstruction it follows that Al-Gharbi’s methodology is twofold, at once committed to a Weberian notion of value-freedom and oriented toward a critique of ideology resonant with Marxism. A critique of ideology in a Marxist vein sits uneasily alongside Al-Gharbi’s claim to present a value-free, purely descriptive account of a social phenomenon. Ideology critique, rooted in the ‘social turn’ Hegel and Marx gave to Kant’s critique of reason, is not simply normatively loaded but also inherently self-referential: it arises from society while seeking to understand and transform it (Ng 2015, 393–5). This constitutes what I previously labelled the *internal* contradiction of Al-Gharbi’s account.

A second, deeper problem emerges from his identification of hypocrisy as the main problematic of ‘woke’ discourses. The gap between what ‘woke’ actors profess in their discourses and their social effects is striking and raises questions about the *sincerity* of such views. Reviewing the book, Michael S. Roth argued through a generalisation – albeit not an overly sweeping one – that it amounts to “documenting 300 pages of hypocrisy” (Roth 2024). Al-Gharbi does not adopt the same harsh stance on ‘woke’ agents, but his entire argument is aimed at exposing the false progressivism

6 A work similar to Al-Gharbi’s is Táiwò’s *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (2022). In the text he argues that élites have been able to direct the originally radical struggle of identity politics to serve their own ends. However, Al-Gharbi focuses more extensively on the broader notion of ‘wokeness’ rather than the narrower topic of ‘identity politics’. Being broader, his analysis is more suitable to be taken into consideration in a critical perspective.

7 Scare quotes are needed because, as I will argue in §3, there are reasons why it cannot be regarded as such.

of their ideology, which serves primarily to emancipate its already emancipated authors.

The need for a normative approach alongside Al-Gharbi's *description-cum-explanation* of 'wokeness' follows precisely from his identification of hypocrisy as the recurring characteristic of the 'woke' mentality. According to Jay, hypocrisy is a legitimate starting point for critique (Jay 2023, 6), but the discussion of it must remain immanent: hypocrisy should not be regarded as self-evidently negative but understood as the manifestation of internal contradictions and, above all, as a failure of self-understanding.

This failure of self-understanding is precisely what Al-Gharbi's methodology struggles to address. 'Wokeness' is treated by him as a social object. Nonetheless, it is arguably a form of *subjective* social self-understanding: Al-Gharbi himself concedes that 'woke' agents are essentially in good faith: they understand themselves as genuinely critical agents yet fail to realise how their ideas backfire against their professed beliefs (Al-Gharbi 2024, 302–5). His rigidly objectifying methodology, however, prevents him from pursuing this insight further.

It is precisely this double nature of 'wokeness' as both an objective phenomenon and a subjective stance that invites a normative reflection going beyond Al-Gharbi. Critical Theory constitutes a solid methodological choice for orienting such an enquiry. As Honneth (2018b) argues, this tradition has maintained a long-standing interest in 'critical conduct', that is, in the actual practices through which social agents criticise society, with a normative orientation toward analysing the dependencies from which agents seek emancipation.

'Wokeness' is, in principle, a critical conduct; yet it may fall short of its intentions due to a lack of understanding of its own position and instrumental function within society. Therefore, the need to bridge the gap between a description-explanation of 'wokeness' and a discussion of its normative implications does not arise externally, but rather from *within*: it is the very consequence left open by its unfulfilled critical intentions.

This is why Al-Gharbi's account needs to be complemented with a normative enquiry so to cover the gap that arises when it is attempted to provide a purely descriptive account of a social phenomenon that is itself normatively oriented. For this reason, I suggest labelling Al-Gharbi's account a *quasi-critique* of 'wokeness': one that stops just short of being a complete *critique*. Again, Critical Theory is invited in the discussion precisely because it has been all along its history a form of *critical social philosophy* that focused both on the static description of society and on understanding the forces that drive its change (Rosa and Schulz 2023; Cooke 2023).

What is at stake of Al-Gharbi's account is not his depiction of the 'woke' society but rather his methodology and the way in which 'wokeness' is framed within

it. Specifically, Al-Gharbi's methodology fails to settle whether 'wokeness', given its pervasive *hypocrisy*, is best understood as an *ideology* or as a mere *lie*. This distinction is not trivial: in the former case, it remains possible to investigate how 'wokeness' might be transformed and overcome; in the latter, the self-referential link between critical reason and its own genealogy is severed, and the analysis can no longer be normatively oriented.⁸

Critical Theory provides the methodological tools to resolve this impasse. According to Honneth, a complete critical-theoretical account grasps the connection between social structures and critical practices and orients itself in an emancipatory direction (Honneth 2018b, 909). Reading Al-Gharbi through this lens makes available a critical, normatively oriented, and transformative perspective that his descriptive account alone cannot reach.

To be clear, it is unfair to an author to judge him against a tradition to which he openly does not belong.⁹ My argument should not be understood as a direct criticism of Al-Gharbi's depiction of the 'woke' society, nor as arguing that he should have written a different book. Rather it is an attempt to cross the division of labour between an empirical-descriptive and a normative theorisation through the conceptual tools made available by a tradition that does not distinguish these two moments (Sangiovanni 2025, 42).

2 'Pure Description' and Dialectical Contradictions

In the previous paragraph I have identified two issues with Al-Gharbi's account. First, an *internal* methodological tension between a commitment to value freedom and his attempt to demystify ideology in a Marxist fashion. Second, a *normative* blind spot on what is left of the critical force of 'woke' concepts after that the hypocrisy of their proponent is registered. The two issues are correlated as it is through the method that Al-Gharbi presents 'wokeness' in this way that leaves little room for envisioning a *transformative critique* of these structures.

⁸ Here, I use the term 'genealogy' in a broad sense, referring to it as: "disclosing the subterranean history of the relationship between reason and self-preservation, autonomy and the domination of nature" (Benhabib 1994, 79). This definition is comprehensive enough to encompass Marxian, Nietzschean–Foucauldian, Freudian, and other forms of genealogy (see Williams 2002; Queloz 2021).

⁹ I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer of the paper for highlighting this issue to me.

In this and the following section I discuss the two commitments of Al-Gharbi's methodology, namely value-freedom and ideology critique, by looking at the foundational thinkers of Critical Theory.¹⁰ In both instances, I will stress how the critique is fuelled by the contradictions within Al-Gharbi's own arguments and argue that this discloses the possibility of correcting Al-Gharbi's framework in a normatively positive sense.

Horkheimer's work is a viable example of how one of Critical Theory's founders regarded both economic reductionism and value-free 'pure description' as irreconcilable with critique. As Borman (2017) has shown, already in his early writings Horkheimer was committed to defending a form of materialism which bore explicitly emancipatory intentions (see Horkheimer 1993, 2002a). Starting from 1935 onwards, Horkheimer's non-substantive and non-ontological materialism merged into his attack on 'traditional theory' and positivism (Borman 2017, 218–9).

In *Traditional and Critical Theory*, he openly sets Marxism against traditional theory's pretence of offering a 'purely objective' depiction of reality: "the Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, pauperization, and break-down are elements in a conceptual whole, and the meaning of this whole is to be sought not in the preservation of contemporary society but in its transformation into the right kind of society" (Horkheimer 2002c, 218). In the same text, Horkheimer also identifies Weberian *Wertfreiheit* as a founding idea that fuelled subsequent positivism (despite Weber himself being, at a closer reading, an anti-positivistic thinker¹¹). Horkheimer alludes to Weber when claiming that the only criterion through which traditional theory informs politics is concerned with the logical consistency of the practical positions adopted. Therefore "a division of labour is

10 There are two reasons why I refer to the Frankfurt School, the first is theoretical and was already mentioned above: a recurring task of Critical Theory is to present social dynamics in a way proper to be grasped for emancipatory purposes; the second is historical: prominent representatives of Critical Theory's first generation, namely Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, recognised the tension between Marx and Weber and initiated Critical Theory as a form of 'post-Marxist' theorising (Garlitz and Zompetti 2023) by disputing against various early twentieth-century intellectual movements (see Jay 1973; Wolin 1987; Freyenhagen 2017; Ramsay 2018; Pensky 2019; Apata 2022).

11 According to Lichtblau 2015; Wilson 2003, Frankfurt School critical theory – especially Horkheimer, Marcuse and the early Adorno – has essentially misinterpreted Weber, reducing his sociology to positivism. On the contrary, Weber's attempt was to develop a methodology able of engaging with the tension between (descriptive) sociology and (reflexive) social theory. In his 1964 course on sociology and philosophy Adorno seems aware of having misread Weber and points out to his student how Weber's sociology entails both a positivistic commitment to bare facts and a strong theoretical reflection – presented mainly in his concept of 'understanding' and his study of rationality (Adorno 2019, 1–18). For the sake of my argument, I will focus solely on his idea of *Wertfreiheit* and on how Horkheimer discusses it.

established between men who in social conflicts affect the course of history and the social theoreticians who assign them their standpoint” (Horkheimer 2002b, 222).

Critical Theory aims at addressing precisely this division of labour that traditional theory presupposes (Horkheimer 2002b, 197):

The scholarly specialist ‘as’ scientist regards social reality and its products as extrinsic to him, and ‘as’ citizen exercises his interest in them through political articles, membership in political parties or social service organizations, and participation in elections. But he does not unify these two activities, and his other activities as well, except, at best, by psychological interpretation. Critical thinking, on the contrary, is motivated today by the effort really to transcend the tension and to abolish the opposition between the individual’s purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built. (Horkheimer 2002b, 209–10)

In this perspective, Critical Theory is not something wholly distinct from traditional theory but a reframing of it, made self-conscious of the broader social and historical totality where it emerges (Horkheimer 2002b, 233; see Jay 1985). Critique does not abandon the “descriptive-explanatory-interpretative theories” (Nielsen 1993, 101) of sociology; rather, it radicalises them by introducing a transformative dimension. The medium through which this transformation is achieved is *dialectics*.

Decades later, while presenting dialectical thinking to an audience of students coming from various disciplines, Adorno stressed dialectics enables a transition toward critical theorising. He claims that dialectics is “science which has been raised to its own self-consciousness” (Adorno 2010, 127), insofar as it forces thought to focus on the contradictions that pervade “the apparent logical character of the world” (Adorno 2010, 73), thereby entailing the disruptive potential of theory outside the narrow confines of facticity.

It is clear how both authors reject the idea of a purely descriptive, ‘traditional’ sociological account. Instead, they insist on the need of complementing it with a critical, dialectical reflection that makes (uncritical) theory aware of its multiple entanglements with the broader social totality. Adorno in particular, takes these insights a step further and clarifies the reason *why* sociology needs to be subjected to critique.

He identifies the critique of traditional thought as the response to the “moral problem” of the “position of thought toward objectivity” (Adorno 2010, 149). In his view, by adhering to a purely descriptive-factual picture of society theory loses awareness of a range of factors that are not directly framed and captured within it. Put differently, a purely descriptive sociology ignores the reciprocal mediation of *continuity* and *discontinuity* in society – two concepts of central relevance in Adorno’s social theory (Adorno 2010, 148–9; see O’Connor 2008).

Critical Theory aims at challenging the *continuity* characterising scientific models by revealing how they are *discontinuous* within the broader social totality where

they are embedded. In brief, according to Adorno dialectics enables us to apprehend society as a whole and to perceive its irrationality. Therefore, the main reason why critique should be embraced lies in the inherently contradicting and only partially rational nature of representations of reality. In O'Connor's words, critique "seeks to release the potential that the criticised position somewhat inhibits" (O'Connor 2013, 50).

In light of this picture of the core principles of Critical Theory, it is possible to return to Al-Gharbi's attempt to offer a purely descriptive sociology of 'wokeness'. Earlier in my argument, I have suggested that Al-Gharbi's account, despite providing a valuable investigation into the characteristics and functions of this contemporary ideological formation, simultaneously inhibits the possibly of engendering a *critique* of the studied phenomenon from its own description.

On the basis outlined afore, my claim appears justified: Al-Gharbi's repeated emphasis on the value-freedom of his method rests on the division of labour between the researcher and the researched topic; therefore, in his methodology 'wokeness' can be studied, described and explained only as an *object* and interpreted as if the interpreter is entirely external to its structures and logics. This is Al-Gharbi's stance on what Adorno calls 'the moral problem of the position of thought toward objectivity'.

The dialectical shift indicated by Adorno from this purely descriptive perspective to a critical-normative one can be accomplished with relative ease. Throughout *We Have Never Been Woke*, the central contradiction lies in the fact that the author of the book (and, to some extent, the text itself) belongs to the very framework of symbolic capitalism under investigation.¹² Therefore, attempts to decouple the description of ideology from its transformation reveal themselves as *abstracts*. The adjective has to be understood in its Hegelian sense, according to which a concept or a thought is 'abstract' when it is separated from both concrete experience and detached from other concepts (Inwood 1992, 29–31). What a pure description of

¹² In Chapter 5, Al-Gharbi recognises precisely how he is himself embedded in symbolic capitalism, declaring that he specified his ethnicity and placed his argument in the Du Boisian tradition in order to leverage his own symbolic 'assets': "I began this book by leveraging totemic capital in order to push readers to listen to me in a different way than they otherwise might" (Al-Gharbi 2024, 261). To be clear, the same argument applies not just to the book but also to this paper and its author, who is nonetheless embedded in an academic system and a certain form of symbolic capitalism. Al-Gharbi is right to point out the deficit in self-understanding and the necessity of recognising the structures that shape our discourses. The question is whether some ground can nonetheless be preserved for maintaining that concepts retain a critical value independently of their origins. Their critical potential would, I argue, apply self-reflexively to the achieved self-understanding of 'woke' agents, thereby enabling a *self-critique* of 'wokeness' (assuming that a sincere commitment to equality and progress is held). I address this more extensively in 4. I am grateful to the editors for raising this concern.

‘wokeness’ makes explicit is not a simple set of ideas but rather an understanding of the very social structure that allows the carrying out of the enquiry itself.

Al-Gharbi seems aware of the contradiction within in his account. On multiple occasions throughout the text, he refers to ‘woke’ symbolic capitalists in first-person plural, enlisting himself among the studied ‘objects’. For instance, while presenting the core idea of the book, Al-Gharbi states that:

Symbolic capitalists are among the primary ‘winners’ in the prevailing socioeconomic order. *We* are some of the main beneficiaries of the inequalities we condemn. *Our* lifestyles and *our* social positions are premised heavily on exploitation and exclusion – particularly with respect to women, minorities, and the economically vulnerable. *We* resent social elites, yet *we* are social elites. (Al-Gharbi 2024, 9; italics mine)

Here, symbolic capitalists (their lifestyle and ideology) appear simultaneously as the *object* and the *subject* of the enquiry.

In light of this duality, a descriptive sociological account of ‘wokeness’ tends toward turning into a normative self-critique of the ‘woke’ elite. Yet, to reach such an understanding it is insufficient to simply add a normative commitment to Al-Gharbi’s descriptive account. His argument does not simply *omit* critique, it *inhibits* it at a more profound level. As I have argued above, it is the incongruous alliance of value-free ‘pure description’ and of Marx-inspired ‘debunking’ materialism that suffocates the possibility of a radical critique of ‘wokeness’. The discussion of the other side of Al-Gharbi’s methodology is the topic of the next section.

3 A Mannheimian Critique of ‘Woke’ Ideology?

Al-Gharbi presents his description of the ‘woke’ ideology alongside what looks like a critique of it, showing its social function in empowering elite social groups. This approach apparently places his work within the tradition of ideology critique. However, given the topic under consideration – namely how ostensibly progressive ideas may have politically conservative effects – it is reasonable to ask where the normative force of ideology critique rests in this case.

Jaeggi argues that ideology critique relies on a form of *parasitical normativity* (Jaeggi 2009, 71). It denounces false consciousness without relying on an external normative criterion; instead, it mobilises immanent standards derived by the criticised object itself. Stated in a formula: the critique of ideology is *normatively* relevant, but not *normativistic* (Jaeggi 2009, 73). By showing the partiality involved in believes, ideas and institutions it highlights their contingency and transformability without necessarily prescribing an outline on how they should be transformed.

Al-Gharbi’s account, however, seems to undermine the possibility of an immanently normative dimension for the critique of the ‘woke’ ideology. Effectively, his

analysis neutralises the possibility of producing ideas, understanding them entirely as the result of symbolic capitalism's structure.

A clearer picture of the issue emerges from Al-Gharbi's discussion of Marx's philosophy. The matter is particularly relevant since, in attempting an ideology critique, Al-Gharbi relies on Marxian frameworks, at least in the spirit rather than in the letter.

Chapter Two of *We Have Never Been Woke* (Al-Gharbi 2024, 67–130) is devoted to exploring the connection between economic crisis in the production of elite people and 'awakenings', namely moments of political turmoil and progressive mobilisation. Al-Gharbi's economic thesis is simple but bold: "Awakenings tend to be driven by elite overproduction, and they tend to collapse when a sufficient number of frustrated aspirants are integrated into the power structure or come to believe their prospects are improving" (Al-Gharbi 2024, 110). He explores a history of the awakenings identifying four of them (in American history) between the early twentieth century and today. Every 'awakening' presents a *theory of revolution* supported by a *theory of failure*, whose function is to explain why a previous revolutionary uprising failed and did produce the hoped results.

According to Al-Gharbi, the first such theory was provided by none other than Karl Marx:

The original theory of revolution that symbolic capitalists gravitated toward was Marxism. Marx sought to illustrate how the bourgeoisie (roughly, symbolic capitalists and business owners) shifted from being a revolutionary bloc ostensibly committed to widespread freedom and prosperity – advocates for a society where the circumstances of one's birth need not dictate the path of one's life – into a class dedicated to unending capital accumulation at the expense of the rest of society. (Al-Gharbi 2024, 110)

However, what interests Al-Gharbi is less interested in the concepts of Marx's philosophy and more in their author. Indeed, he claims that

It may be worth briefly clarifying how an ideology that centred the working class as the key to social justice could emerge as a revolutionary framework for highly educated professionals (...). Understanding this can provide important insights into how symbolic capitalists select and co-opt ostensibly 'radical' frameworks in the service of their own ascendance and hegemony. (Al-Gharbi 2024, 111)

In Al-Gharbi's view, Marx's envisioned future society is perfectly aligned with symbolic capitalists' beliefs and aspirations (Al-Gharbi 2024, 112–3). Similarly, he reads the criticism of utopian socialism in the name of scientific socialism (see Engels 2010) as a strategy by which highly educated elites self-qualify as the true bearers of working-class emancipation (Al-Gharbi 2024, 113).

Highlighting this social function of Marxist theory, Al-Gharbi concludes that “it is not hard to understand why symbolic capitalists would find Marxism particularly appealing, nor why the working classes may have been wary of it” (Al-Gharbi 2024, 114). Furthermore, he mentions Horkheimer’s *Traditional and Critical Theory* as an example of a ‘theory of failure’ that followed Marx’s theory of revolution and emphasised, even more strongly, the role of symbolic capitalists in striving toward emancipation:

Critical theorists ended up settling on culture and institutions of cultural production as the most important fronts in the struggle. That is, symbolic capitalists identified *themselves, their institutions and outputs* – *not* the workers, *not* the business owners – as central agents in creating a better world. (Al-Gharbi 2024, 115)

Regardless of the accuracy of this reading of Marx and Horkheimer, Al-Gharbi’s attempt can be questioned. By rigidly applying the Marxian principle that “the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men” (Marx and Engels 2010, 36) to ‘revolutionary theories,’ Al-Gharbi suppresses their transformative capacity and severs what is *critical* about them.

Obviously, an approach that aims at providing a critique of ideology can hardly avoid *relating* ideas and their socio-economic functions, connecting superstructure and base. Nevertheless, this does not entail *reducing* the former on the latter (Henning 2017). Al-Gharbi suggests that by linking Marx’s theory to symbolic capitalists’ ambition to assure their elite position a critical perspective becomes available. However, this achievement can scarcely be reached if, in doing so, what is authentically *critical* about the critique of ideology – i.e. its parasitic normativity – is eliminated as ideological itself.

Al-Gharbi claims to uncover the partiality underneath classical ‘revolutionary theories’; however, he only focuses on their *form* neglecting the *content*. At a closer look, Horkheimer did not deny the entanglement between critical theorists and its socio-economic context but stressed the possibility of Critical Theory to develop “a single existential judgement” (Horkheimer 2002b, 227) on the totality of society “without denying its own principles as established by the special discipline of political economy” (Horkheimer 2002b, 226). Crucially, Critical Theory does not aim at providing “formulations of the feelings and ideas of one class at any given moment” (Horkheimer 2002b, 214), but rather at offering a vision of a transformative dynamic within the broad totality of the social structure.

If Al-Gharbi’s genealogy of the ‘woke’ ideology falls short of its Marxist form, the question then becomes: what kind of critique of ideology is he *actually* offering? In many instances, Al-Gharbi’s sociology of ‘wokeness’ is reminiscent of Karl

Mannheim's programme of a sociology of knowledge. Although Mannheim appropriated the Marxian concept of ideology (Mannheim 1979), his allegiance to Marxism has repeatedly been called into question (see Abercrombie and Longhurst 1983; Turner 1995; Fischer 2009; Reynolds 2023). In his harsh critique of Mannheim, Horkheimer pointed out that his central claim that "every pattern of thought is 'ideology'" (Horkheimer 2002b, 263) severs the emancipatory force of concepts and collapses philosophical ideas onto the static notion of 'social class'. Contrasting Mannheim, Horkheimer maintained that in every historical epoch the rising class conceptualised the social totality through its philosophy, and that precisely in this capacity philosophical critique remained effectively transformative.

Al-Gharbi's genealogy of 'woke' belief connects deeply with Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. He too holds that every cultural production becomes nothing more than a mere reflection of the social position occupied by the producer. Thus, it can be reasonably concluded that what initially appears as Al-Gharbi's Marx-inspired critique of ideology ultimately proves superficially to be so, lapsing into a form of *reductionism*. Indeed, the attempt to connect ideas with their economic origins can be legitimately defined *reductionist* when they proceed mechanically, leaving no space to acknowledge critical and transformative capability to concepts.¹³

It is precisely due to this excessively broad reductionism that, in the book's conclusion, Al-Gharbi struggles to provide a normative insight on how to overcome the false progressivism of 'wokeness'. In this case too, criticism against Al-Gharbi's method arises from the contradictions latent in his own argumentation. On multiple instances, Al-Gharbi provides solid reasons on the need to avoid an overtly radical reductionism: he often complains about the *misuse* of concepts in contemporary 'woke' discourses. For instance, he argues that "wokeness is clearly not a result of people being indoctrinated into social justice activism through a deep reading of primary texts like these" (Al-Gharbi 2024, 52–3); on the contrary, it is largely composed of catchwords and reference that elite people deploy shallowly to signal their membership in the category of the elite committed to social justice.

Similarly, he observes that theorists often opposed the widespread popularization of their concepts during moments of 'awakening', citing Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the 1960s student movements as an example (Al-Gharbi 2024, 116). Likewise, Al-Gharbi engages with numerous 'woke' conceptual frameworks, arguing – consistently with his broader thesis – that they are falsely

¹³ As Léger 2023 argues the term 'reduction' must be distinguished from 'reductionism'. Reduction refers to tracing causal relations without assuming mechanical continuity, allowing for complex and unpredictable developments between economic base and the ideological superstructure. Reductionism, by contrast, explains whole relations in a rigid, mechanistic way and its often criticised as 'vulgar Marxism' for ignoring dialectical complexity (Léger 2023, 179–84).

progressive and ultimately reinforce the social elite status of symbolic capitalists. Along these lines, he turns at various points to Critical Race Theory, preoccupations with linguistic hygiene, and discourses on ‘systematic injustices’ (Al-Gharbi 2024, 280–287), contending that none of these practices fulfil their ostensible function.

Yet, approaching the conclusion of the book Al-Gharbi feels the urge to clarify that concepts *hold* a critical capacity independently of their social origin:

Many views associated with wokeness seem to be straightforwardly correct, even if they are often taken to excess. For instance, a key insight of the ‘discursive turn’ in social research is that how concepts are defined, and by whom, reveals a lot about power relations within a society or culture. These definitions are not merely reflections of social dynamics (...). They can impose their own independent sociopolitical influence (...). They can render some things more easily comprehensible and others less so; they can push certain things outside the realm of polite discussion and introduce new elements into the language game. This is a genuine contribution to understanding the world. (Al-Gharbi 2024, 297)

But how is it possible to distinguish ‘genuine’ intellectual contributions from ‘excesses’ and to criticise misuses of concepts without according at least a slight degree of independence between the genesis of ideas and their validity? Al-Gharbi’s critique of ideology appears stuck between its strict methodological materialism and the desire for a *transformation* rather than a complete *liquification* (Jaeggi 2009, 71–4) of the concepts under discussion. However, in his totalising depiction of the ‘history of the awakenings’ only the latter appears as a viable possibility.

4 Toward a Self-Critique of ‘Woke’ Discourses

In the previous sections I have presented Al-Gharbi’s methodology, decoupling it in two components: a purely descriptive commitment to value-freedom and an attempt to criticise ideology by means of a materialist framework. The two parts are, respectively, the *descriptive* and the *explanatory* one of Al-Gharbi’s argument. Both trends generate an internal pressure toward the development of *normative* level of enquiry. As I have argued in 2, a descriptive tendency cannot remain neutral when the object it is concerned with is a subjectively held set of normative beliefs; similarly, in 3 I have showed that the explanatory tendency, in turn, raises without answering what remains of ‘woke’ concepts once their genealogy is exposed.

In this section I suggest that the normative level can be reached by addressing Al-Gharbi through Celikates’ work on the pragmatics of critique (2018), arguing that Al-Gharbi’s account can be positioned as a first-order description of ordinary ‘woke’ practices to which a second-order self-critique follows.

'Wokeness' is, after all, a social phenomenon and, as such, it can be studied through a sociological enquiry, precisely the one that Al-Gharbi provides. However, 'wokeness' is also a critical conduct, albeit one that, as Al-Gharbi shows, falls short of its emancipatory orientation. Under which conditions an account of 'wokeness' can disclose a self-critique of the 'woke' ideology?

According to Celikates, generally considered social theories provide a second-order understanding of first-order practices concretely carried out by ordinary agents. In this respect, what distinguishes Critical Theory from other schools of sociology is the ability to not merely provide a description of the self-understanding of social agents but also to challenge it by pointing out how they hold a dysfunctional relation with reality (Celikates 2018, 137–8). In this framework, the concept of "second-order pathology" (Celikates 2018, 124–7; see Honneth 1996; Zurn 2011) designates those conditions that obstruct the development of reflexive and critical capacities within agents' self-understandings.

Celikates summarises this dynamic by identifying two logics at work in Critical Theory: a *logic of competence* and a *logic of obstruction* (Celikates 2018, 166–7). The former concerns the capacity of ordinary agents to develop a self-reflexive understanding of the relation between social agents and the world that is *adequate* – i.e. able of pointing out the unacceptable contradictions in it (Celikates 2018, 157–63). The latter focuses on identifying the social interferences that hinder the development of these competences.

By applying Celikates' framework, in broad terms, both logics are identifiable in Al-Gharbi's account. When he exposes the staunch tendency of 'woke' elites to rely on their beliefs and rhetoric without questioning whether they are actually successful, what is being highlighted is the lack of competence in developing a self-reflexive understanding among symbolic elites. Furthermore, *We Have Never Been Woke* also points to the social conditions that impedes the development of these critical abilities, above all symbolic capitalism and the will to preserve one own's elite status. This obstruction can properly be described as structural, as it is rooted in from objective forms of economic organisation rather than from personal defects or bad faith.

In Celikates' view there is an additional, more fundamental conceptual distinction underlying that between the logic of competence and that of obstruction: the one concerning a *capacity* and its *actualisation* (Celikates 2018, 125). Separating the two is pivotal – Celikates claims – in a critical social theory as this cannot content itself with description and analysis but has also the task to prescribe a direction for the transformability of its studied object.

I have previously suggested that Al-Gharbi's methodology additionally inhibits criticism, it can now be argued that it does so by not correctly distinguishing these

two levels. His overtly reductionist critique of ideology does not allow to distinguish between the capacity for self-criticism of ‘woke’ people and its actualisation. In Al-Gharbi’s account it is unclear whether a ‘woke’ self-critical discourse would authentically challenge its embeddedness in symbolic capitalism, i.e. in the very structure that engenders the social pathology arresting the development of an adequate competence. In his argument, the possibility of attaining a genuinely critical understanding of ‘wokeness’ is jeopardised by the very fact that social agents are prevented from recognising their own implication in its dysfunctions. As a result, the capacity to begin a discussion that interrogates and challenges their own practices is obstructed. Put differently, it remains unclear what could ground the normative possibility of a ‘non-woke’ or ‘post-woke’ discourse emerging from within the framework of ‘woke’ discourse itself.¹⁴

Moreover, Celikates insists on the fundamentally self-reflexive nature of Critical Theory, arguing that its enquiries ought to consider social agents both from an objective and a subjective perspective (Celikates 2018, 172). In his paradigm, the most radical form of critique is one that enables agents to reflexively appropriate the possibility of freedom and overcome the constraints that restrain it (Celikates 2018, 163). If Al-Gharbi’s depiction of ‘wokeness’ fails to generate a normatively oriented discourse, it is due to its unilateral commitment to a purely descriptive attitude that must be overcome if an authentic critique of the ‘woke’ phenomenon is to be articulated.

Approaching the conclusion, a broader picture can be drawn of how it is possible to shift from the description of ‘wokeness’ to its critique. Recalling Horkheimer’s claim that Critical Theory’s concepts have to be modelled like Marx’s one, carrying an openly transformative and emancipatory thrust (Horkheimer 2002b, 218), it follows that a comprehensive Critical Theory of ‘wokeness’ must present a description of the phenomenon that can convert into a normatively loaded understanding of it. Al-Gharbi’s argument is a quasi-critique of ‘wokeness’: it descriptively denounces its false progressivism by showing how, despite nominally contesting social hierarchies and discrimination, ‘woke’ discourses actually reproduce and reinforce them. However, by confining itself to describing what ‘wokeness’ is and to pointing out its contradictions (in a manner that does not allow for the development of any transformation), Al-Gharbi does not authentically *challenge* ‘wokeness’. Ironically, his argument falls victim precisely of the very same inability to produce social transformations that characterises ‘woke’ discourses themselves.

¹⁴ Here I am only focusing on the ‘woke’ ideology and on the possibility of its self-transformation, I am not considering ‘anti-woke’ discourses that simply oppose ‘wokeness’ from the outside. On the idea that the ‘new’ has to be created out of the ‘old’, a core belief of critical theory (see Jaeggi 2018, 190–214).

The question can be reformulated as concerned with a matter of degrees, given that Critical Theory has to operate as a second order understanding of the discursive logics at work in a social phenomenon; Al-Gharbi's 'sociology of 'wokeness' can offer a description of the first-level practices that concrete 'woke' agents carry out.

In this perspective, Al-Gharbi's methodology is not to be regarded as flawed but simply as partial. His limitedness can be offered *adjustments* derived from a reflection informed by Critical Theory. What they have to be was already indicated along my argument and can now be simply restated:

- (1) 'Wokeness' must be approached methodologically as both an *objective* and a *subjective* phenomenon. Objectively, it can be understood as Al-Gharbi rightly does; namely, as a mode of producing particular sets of beliefs, articulated through a distinctive style that employs identifiable concepts and is sustained by particular social groups. Subjectively, however, it functions as a form of self-understanding, shaping how individuals interpret their relation to society and politics.
- (2) 'Wokeness' is rightly treated by Al-Gharbi as *ideology*. Yet, its critique has to be carried out in a *non-reductionist form*. Only thus can the normative-transformative moment be preserved alongside the genealogical-explanatory one.

If such methodological revisions are undertaken, Al-Gharbi's tentative social critique of 'wokeness' can develop into a fully-fledged self-critique of 'woke' consciousness itself. This would take the form of a second-order interrogation arising from the recognition of the inefficacy of prevailing everyday 'woke' discourses, thereby unlocking their own emancipatory potential.

The point becomes clearer with an example. Al-Gharbi identifies Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a primary case of how 'woke' discourses are status-enhancer for their holders rather than dangerous and subversive ideals, as both their supporters and their opponents believe (Al-Gharbi 2024, 270–6). According to Al-Gharbi, the intense debate on whether CRT should be taught in schools boils down to the fact that CRT is a pivotal vocabulary to use for students that want to be part of the "social justice oriented" elite higher-education institutions (Al-Gharbi 2024, 273). Briefly stated, to know CRT provides social status to young students that are attempting to make their way in symbolic capitalism.

Al-Gharbi adds a second reason why CRT fails to have a progressive social-impact and ultimately serves the elite. According to him it is widely evident that the very ideas and frameworks of CRT do not, as a matter of fact, belong to situations of actual marginalisation: "they are not the discourses of the ghetto, the trailer park, the hollowed-out suburb, the post-industrial town or the global slum" (Al-Gharbi 2024, 274).

As accurate as this description may be, the two arguments on CRT advanced by Al-Gharbi are of different kinds. He objects to the theory that in its concrete effects it does not engender any actual social change *and* that it fails *as a theory* because it does not actually connect to the social phenomenon it describes. This ambivalence leads to two very different consequences, from the first one follows that CRT (and generally speaking ‘wokeness’) is ineffective because it is exploited by the elite; from the second that symbolic capitalists are not progressive, despite their conspicuous lip service to equality and diversity, because they limit themselves to the imperfect and uncritical ideas of CRT. The consequence is that, framed in this way, Al-Gharbi leaves entirely unaddressed the question whether the ineffectiveness of CRT entails the need to abandon or rather to deepen its assumptions.

Celikates’ framework offers a way out of this dilemma. If we do not want to take the *bad faith bullet* (as Al-Gharbi argues multiple times to not want to do), then it is necessary to conclude that ‘woke’ agents’ intentions are good and honest in their commitment to CRT. If they fall short of their intentions it is due to their lack of recognition of the status-enhancing function that this framework plays in the social milieu. Once they recognise what logic of obstruction (briefly said, symbolic capitalism) is hindering the development of a truly progressive form of CRT they can correct CRT making it not only aware of the forgotten class dimension but also tackling the problem of how to close the distance between theory and the subject it is concerned with.¹⁵ But a shift in this direction is possible only if changes (1) and (2) are applied to Al-Gharbi’s account of CRT (to retain the example). This entails, first, treating CRT not merely as an object but as a subjective, intentional, good-faith commitment (1); and, secondly, granting its concepts an autonomous critical function, independent of their status-enhancing, conservative role (2).

5 Conclusion: Make ‘Wokeness’ Progressive Again

Speaking in general terms, the objections I have moved to Al-Gharbi’s methodology are not significantly different from what Horkheimer contested to Mannheim’s sociology in 1939: “Sociology is not sufficient. We must have a comprehensive theory of history if we wish to avoid serious errors” (Horkheimer 2002c, 264). By ‘theory of history’ it is meant an account of the material genesis of a social condition that simultaneously addresses the possibility of emancipation within it (Abromeit 2024).

In this paper, I have accepted Al-Gharbi’s substantive conclusion that ‘wokeness’ is characterised by a fundamental contradiction between the ostensibly

¹⁵ Incidentally, the problem of how intellectually complex ideas could be communicated to the less educated strata was massively discussed by Gramsci (see Gramsci 1975, 229–383; Green 2018).

emancipatory narratives that it carries on and the concrete effects that it produces. Indeed, these effects are far from being directed toward equality or social justice and rather serve to the purpose of empowering and reinforcing the status of the social class of 'symbolic capitalists.'

However, what I have contested is Al-Gharbi's method of reaching this conclusion. His sociological reasoning remains largely a description of 'wokeness' that lacks normative force, as it suffocates the possibility of developing a critical understanding of 'wokeness'. It is on this ground that I defined Al-Gharbi's account a quasi-critique of 'wokeness' and argued for the need to develop an authentic critique of the phenomenon by analysing his methodology.

By discussing it through the work of foundational authors of Critical Theory it, namely Adorno and Horkheimer, I have highlighted how Al-Gharbi's argument points to the development of an additional layer, one that is *critical* and normatively oriented. Importantly, this normative concern was not considered as an internal failure of Al-Gharbi's argument but rather as the reasonable consequence of its descriptive-explanatory methodology and of the object of its study. I have indicated two conceptual shifts that are necessary to achieve this new level: first, the need to conceive 'wokeness' not merely as an *objective* social tendency but also as a *subjective* form of self-understanding of its proponents; and second, to adopt a non-reductionist approach in the critique of 'woke' ideology, so as to preserve the normative-transformative moment alongside the explanatory one. Finally, by drawing on Celikates' account, I have suggested that by performing these conceptual shifts it is possible to produce an authentic critique of 'wokeness', shaped as a self-critique of 'woke' discourses made by the very same symbolic capitalists that have so far sustained it.

Acknowledgments: I am thankful to Prof. Maria Russo and Simone Iaffaldano (UniSR) for carefully reading the manuscript and for their precious suggestions.

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