

**CRITIQUING THE BACKLASH AGAINST WOKENESS: IN DEFENSE OF DEI  
SCHOLARSHIP AND PRACTICE**

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## **CRITIQUING THE BACKLASH AGAINST WOKENESS: IN DEFENSE OF DEI SCHOLARSHIP AND PRACTICE**

In the last few years, we have witnessed growing backlash against “wokeness” from numerous actors. Indeed, politicians, social commentators, corporate executives, and academics have all taken aim at the concept. In this *Exchange* article, we respond to the recent criticisms laid against “woke” diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) scholarship and practice from researchers in the field of management, focusing particularly on those claims that have been expressed recently in this journal. We find particularly troubling the potential for anti-woke academic rhetoric to function as intellectual scaffolding for ideological and political efforts that undermine the hard-earned legal and organizational advances in the area of DEI made over the last several decades. We contend that while such work is ostensibly framed within a broader critique of “wokeness”, the arguments put forward by its authors are, in actuality, directed towards challenging organizations as sites where the privileges attached to membership in socially dominant groups are normalized and reproduced. Our discussion addresses three foundational areas of concern: (1) the conflation of “woke” with DEI scholarship and practice, (2) the misrepresentation of organizational DEI efforts, and (3) the under-appreciation of the importance of organizational inclusion for stakeholders. We elaborate on the implications that emanate from this backlash against “woke” DEI scholarship and practice, including the undoing of progressive social policies and the concomitant legitimization of populist rhetoric.

**Keywords:** equity, diversity, inclusion, populism, woke, wokeness

On the surface, the idea of “wokeness” seems hardly controversial—it simply means being aware of, or *woke* about, systemic social injustices (Opoku-Dakwa & Rice, 2023). Yet, the last few years have brought backlash against the idea from several arenas. For example, conservative commentators such as David Brooks have described wokeness to be an ineffectual, and potentially dangerous, approach to addressing ongoing social issues. This sentiment has come to undergird right-wing political discourse in the US, with republican politicians rhetorically invoking “wokeness” to inflame and rally their political base. After being re-elected as Governor of Florida in early 2023, Ron DeSantis declared: “We reject this woke ideology. We seek normalcy not philosophical lunacy! We will not allow reality, facts, and truth to become optional. We will never surrender to the woke mob” (Thau, 2023). Treading a similar current, Texas Senator Ted Cruz has caricatured wokeness as a social movement that seeks to destroy the very foundation upon which the values of American society are grounded (Shepherd, 2021).

In parallel with this “war on woke” in the political arena, scholarly and popular critiques of how corporations are attempting to signal their awareness of systemic social injustices are another path through which backlash against wokeness has materialized (Ramaswamy, 2021; Soukup, 2023). Within our own discipline of management and organization studies (MOS), two of the articles included in the symposium on woke approaches to DEI appearing in this journal—authored by Foss and Klein (2022) and Waldman and Sparr (2023)—are exemplars of a critique that mobilizes anti-woke sentiments to undermine scholarship and practice that have sought to promote and integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into organizations. The articles largely fail to engage with the extensive work by MOS scholars on why DEI is important for organizations and how it may be achieved (e.g., Lucas & Baxter, 2012; Prasad, 2023; Roberson,

2019; Roberson, Moore, & Bell, 2022; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010). Even more disconcerting is that these articles present an anti-woke academic rhetoric that can foreseeably be mobilized as intellectual scaffolding for ideological and political efforts to undermine the hard-earned legal and organizational advances made over the last several decades—for instance, in relation to the development of equality and anti-discrimination legislation and policies. In workplace contexts, these advances have resulted in the introduction of inclusive approaches to staff recruitment and promotion, aimed at improving employment and career progression prospects for members of marginalized and minoritized groups. Moreover, such academic rhetoric, because it comes from respected scholars and is published in a respected academic outlet, can be potentially used to lend scholarly support for the type of unsettling political rhetoric cited above. Therefore, while as an *Exchange* article, our text focuses specifically on Foss and Klein’s (2022) and Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) pieces, we are writing it because we believe that there is a lot at stake here in terms of the risks the intellectual backlash against the so called “woke” approaches to DEI scholarship and practice poses to people, to organizations, and to society.

We argue that while the backlash articulated in Foss and Klein’s (2022) and Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) articles is ostensibly couched in a critique of “wokeness”, it is, in actuality, being targeted at abrogating the past contributions to DEI scholarship and practice that have challenged the demographically inequitable status quo of workplaces. In this backlash, we find there to be a derogatory view of “wokeness” combined with, what appears to be, an imprudent but purposeful conflation between “wokeness” and DEI scholarship. Through employing rhetoric that is dismissive and confusing—indeed, at times, even contemptuous—about DEI scholarship and practice, these articles work to undermine ongoing efforts to challenge organizations as sites

where the unfair advantages attached to membership in privileged groups—e.g., in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural background—are normalized and reproduced.<sup>1</sup> In the workplace, these unfair advantages yield, among other organizational outcomes, promotions to leadership positions and disproportionate access to resources.

The remainder of this article is presented in three sections. In the following, we identify our three areas of concern with regards to Foss and Klein’s (2022) and Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) criticism against DEI scholarship and practice: (1) the conflation of the ill-defined concept of “wokeness” with DEI scholarship and practice, (2) the misrepresentation of organizational DEI efforts, and (3) the under-appreciation of the importance of organizational inclusion for stakeholders. We then discuss the implications emanating from criticism against DEI scholarship and practice, including the undoing of progressive social policies and the concomitant legitimization of populist rhetoric. Finally, we close this article with some concluding remarks about the importance of DEI initiatives to achieve the objectives related to inclusion set out by the Academy of Management as well as the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME).

## **WOKENESS AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

As explained above, in writing this *Exchange* piece we were motivated by the need to highlight the potential damage that propagating “anti-woke” rhetoric, with the aim to

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<sup>1</sup> By privilege, we refer to “a person’s advantage due to their membership in a social group, in contexts where that membership shouldn’t normally matter” (Lowe, 2020: 457). Zulfiqar and Prasad (2021) have further elaborated that privilege becomes a taken-for-granted cultural reality, which allows members of certain groups to benefit from advantages that they did not earn.

delegitimize DEI initiatives and strategies that are currently applied in many organizations, in a well-respected academic journal can cause to management and organization scholarship and practice and, more broadly, to society. In this section, we discuss our foundational concerns with three particular aspects of Foss and Klein's (2022) and Waldman and Sparr's (2023) articles.

### **Conflation of Ill-defined “Wokeness” with DEI Scholarship and Practice**

Both articles take issue with ideas of “woke” and “wokeness” in organizations and they each link the terms with DEI scholarship and practice. As such, it is important to reflect on how these terms are actually defined and used by its authors. The two articles discuss “woke” and “wokeness” in ways that are vague and attributed with pejorative connotations; there is little evidence to suggest that the articles are foregrounded in a balanced definition of the concepts that would be appropriate in the case of a scholarly article and helpful to the readership of this journal. While the articles have a focus on practice—Foss and Klein's (2022) discussion addresses “DEI initiatives in companies” whereas Waldman and Sparr's (2023) paper refers to “diversity strategies”—they both define “woke” with reference to the theories the authors see as underpinning “wokeness” in organizations, namely critical theory in the case of Foss and Klein (2022) and critical race theory in the case of Waldman and Sparr (2023).

At the root of Foss and Klein's (2022) analysis of “woke” DEI initiatives lies what is referred in the article as a broader trend of “companies going woke”, explained as follows:

[W]oke ideas and behaviors are grounded in “critical theory” (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020; Delgado & Stefancic, 2021), the philosophical movement that emerged from the Frankfurt School of philosophy and from French postmodernist thinking. In its current incarnation, critical theory prioritizes subjective personal experience over objective data, emphasizes

group identity over individual characteristics, sees most social relations through an oppressor-victim lens, and conceptualizes racism and sexism in terms of structural inequalities rather than personal prejudices. (Foss & Klein, 2022: 4-5)

These claims eerily mirror the well-recited (and highly controversial) conservative critique cast against, what has been dubbed, cultural Marxism—the foundational ideas that have been attributed to the supposed breakdown of society (Cruz, 2023). Moreover, both citations used in the above explanation of “woke” are problematic, though for different reasons. The second of the two references, Delgado and Stefancic (2021), cites an introductory textbook on critical race theory. The first reference, Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020), cites the book *Cynical Theories: How Universities Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody*. The authors of *Cynical Theories* have been described as “combatants in the culture wars” who “by overstating their case and aiming their weapons at humanities and universities cannot pass themselves off as objective contributors to a search for truth” (Thompson, 2020).

What requires pointing out here, however, is Foss and Klein’s (2022: 5) claim that they use “woke... as a neutral term to describe the phenomenon described in the paper”. Yet, in addition to the grounding of the definition of “woke” on the writings of Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020), which unequivocally ascribes a negative reading of the term, the term “woke” is used in the article with a range of derogatory attributions—as represented by phrases such as “woke ideology” or the allegation that the “woke movement” aims at “replacing capitalism itself with some form of socialism” (Foss & Klein, 2022: 9).

As far as implications for management knowledge and practice are concerned, in Foss and Klein’s (2022) article, there is a conflation of the understanding of “woke” with organizational DEI initiatives, which are explicitly referred to as part of the “woke movement”. Further, the

following examples of DEI initiatives are provided: “diversity training, diversity hiring, making sure that the company logo features the rainbow colors at the appropriate time, and so on” (Foss & Klein, 2022: 20).<sup>2</sup> This suggests a questionable understanding and undervaluing of the work of human resource management professionals and other (middle) managers and employees involved in DEI pursuits, and a haphazard approach to defining a key term upon which the article focuses. Moreover, Foss and Klein’s (2022) article ignores the existence of DEI-related reporting duties and metrics that follow from anti-discrimination legislation. This oversight can perhaps, at least partly, explain why the authors contend that “wokeness serves as a form of entrenchment” for middle managers and, extending from this reason, they “would expect woke middle managers to avoid pressing for transparent accountability metrics” (Foss & Klein, 2022: 23). In fact, the use of accountability metrics by companies—such as gender pay gap reporting—is now commonly mandated by law in the majority of OECD countries (OECD, 2023).

“Woke” is similarly a central concept in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article, although its definition is only provided in a footnote:

“Woke” is catch-all term that has been used in modern vernacular to coincide with leftist movements and ideologies, especially emphasizing identity politics and what is perceived by its proponents to be social injustice. Thus, it is mainly used for referring to *racial and social discrimination and injustice*. (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 175, *emphasis added*)

The first sentence in the above description signals where the authors stand on the idea of “woke”. They associate “woke” with terms such as “leftist” and “ideologies”. They appear to be skeptical about the legitimacy and the value of “woke”; in their view, it represents, “*what is perceived by*

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<sup>2</sup> The authors do not elaborate on what “and so on” stands for within their definition of DEI initiatives.



its proponents to be social injustice” (*emphasis added*). The second sentence is more revealing and we take it to be the definition of “woke” adopted by the authors. At the same time, in another footnote, the authors admit that, “the concept of ‘woke’ is somewhat nebulous” and that “its definition remains at least somewhat open to interpretation” (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 179). While offering this claim, throughout the article, Waldman and Sparr (2023) persistently use the term “woke” and focus their discussion on the distinction between “woke diversity strategies and tactics” and “integrative diversity strategies and tactics”.<sup>3</sup> We find such an interpretation of “woke” to be problematic insofar as it can be read as: (1) an attempt to bifurcate the concept from its historical origins in the Black community to recognize racial injustice, and (2) a purposeful co-opting and weaponizing of the term in an effort to stall social progress (Newman-Bremang, 2023).

A key problem raised by Waldman and Sparr (2023) in relation to “woke” diversity strategies is the belief that such strategies are underpinned by critical race theory (CRT), which, according to them, is antithetical to academic rigor. Waldman and Sparr (2023: 175) assert that woke diversity strategies “should engage more directly with social science in terms of empirical and theoretical frameworks”. We disagree with their argument on two accounts. First, there is no compelling evidence offered that would suggest that the tenets of CRT do not accurately

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<sup>3</sup> We find the use of the term “woke” in relation to DEI scholarship and practice unhelpful, especially in an academic journal that aspires to reach an international audience of researchers, educators, policymakers, and practitioners. The term “woke” is currently ascribed with a variety of meanings and with connotations ranging from positive to pejorative (especially in the political debates in the US; the use of “woke” outside of the North American context is much less frequent). We recommend the use of descriptive, clearly defined, and widely understood terms, as is appropriate within academic literature.

explain social and organizational realities. From its origins, critical race theory provided a framework through which to “understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995: xiii). It allowed researchers to empirically illuminate how, for instance, legal and educational systems are discriminatory to racialized groups and how they function to preserve historically crystallized racial hierarchies (for empirical examples, see Gonzales Rose, 2016; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorazano, 2009). For this reason, Bhopal (2023: 111) has gone so far as to argue that “[w]hite privilege can only be understood in relation to Critical Race Theory”. Citing a plethora of scholarly research on the saliency of white privilege in higher education, she offers convincing and empirically-grounded evidence repudiating the assertion that CRT is not academically rigorous.

Second, diversity strategies aimed at achieving equity of outcomes—which, according to Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article, is one of the characteristics of “woke” diversity strategies—are foregrounded in scholarship that does not necessarily draw on CRT but rather, has been developed by MOS scholars based on rich empirical evidence gathered through research conducted with organizations across the world. Indeed, the lack of clear intellectual connection between CRT and DEI scholarship—which, to reiterate again, has been pursued in different cultural-geographical contexts (including those where issues of race have historically been less salient than in the US), with different theoretical emphases, and in relation to different aspects of diversity—is what we attribute to our underlying concern with the article. For this reason, “woke” is not an appropriate descriptor for what DEI research and practice is or does. Numerous studies have demonstrated how, for example, increasing the gender diversity of corporate boards, whether by quotas or by other initiatives, yields a plethora of positive organizational outcomes—

including promoting corporate social responsibility, enhancing firm performance, and raising the company's focus on pertinent gender equality issues, such as leadership and family care (Cook & Glass, 2018; Kim & Starks, 2016; Latura & Weeks, 2022).<sup>4</sup>

Importantly, in presenting CRT as the basis of “woke” diversity strategies, Waldman and Sparr's (2023) article makes a number of unsubstantiated claims regarding the tenets of CRT (see also Thomason, Opie, Livingston, & Sitzmann, 2023). To begin with, it rejects CRT's assumption that racism persists within organizations and society. However, there is ample evidence from across academic disciplines—not only in sociology, a discipline with which the article appears to take particular issue—that this, indeed, is the case. For example, in relation to the US context, scholars in general science (Rucker & Richeson, 2021), health policy (Serchen, Doherty, Atiq, & Hilden, 2020), and psychology (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021) have routinely identified the existence of systemic racism and have called on policymakers to pursue interventionist efforts to eradicate it.

Further, there is a contention in Waldman and Sparr's (2023: 180) article that when working from a CRT lens, “people seem to be divided into essentially two categories: (a) perpetrators of racism or sexism [i.e., white people, especially white males], and (b) victims of racism and sexism [i.e., minority group members and women]”. However, introducing this kind of essentialized distinction between “perpetrators” and “victims” actually goes against the ways in which CRT conceptualizes members of different groups and their experiences. In their

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<sup>4</sup> While MOS researchers studying diversity have identified the instrumentalist outcomes that are generated by diversity in organizations (i.e., the business case for diversity), they have equally recognized the importance of increasing diversity across organizations for moral and ethical reasons (Rhodes; 2017; Terjesen, Sealy, & Singh, 2009).

widely-cited book, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) identify several hallmarks of CRT, namely beliefs in: racism as being a normal, not an aberrant, facet of US society; race as a social construction; intersectionality and anti-essentialism; and voice or counter-narrative. While elaborating on each of these tenets is beyond the scope of the current article, we must underscore that CRT stands unequivocally against essentializing categorizations such as “perpetuators” and “victims”; and, contrary to the above contention, CRT is not undergirded in appeals to victimization. As Ladson-Billings (2013: 41) explains, “CRT scholars guard *against essentializing* the perspectives and experiences of racial groups” (*emphasis added*). To animate this point, Delgado and Stefancic (2001; 2007) argue that while racism is ubiquitously imbued in the criminal justice system, this system does not respond evenly in distributing justice or penalties to all racial minorities. Namely, societal racism ascribes different values to different minority groups. This is consistent with Prasad’s (2023) discussion of the model minority, and his observation that in the US context, African Americans, as compared to Asian Americans, are subjected to more pronounced forms of social marginalization. This suggests, following the arguments found in Opoku-Dakwa and Rice’s (2023) as well as Thomason et al.’s (2023) *Exchange* articles in this symposium, that there is a fundamental problem with the reading of CRT found in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article inasmuch as it reflects the misrepresentation of the theory rather than a sound repudiation of it or its underlying tenets.

Finally, Waldman and Sparr’s (2023: 180) article contains a criticism of CRT for being “sceptical about the principle of meritocracy”. However, as extant research shows—and as we discuss in more detail below—meritocracy is a system that leads to the perpetuation of existing inequalities, both in society (Khan, 2012) and in the workplace (Castilla & Benard, 2010). In

contemporary organizations, general criteria and categories of merit are often not fit for purpose because they have been socially constructed from within a history of unequal power relations that persists into the present. As such, CRT's view of meritocracy is consistent with the view of meritocracy that has been articulated in research addressing how organizations and society operate, and is by now well-established in discussions on how inequalities are produced and perpetuated (e.g., Sandel, 2020). On the other hand, the understanding of meritocracy presented in Waldman and Sparr's article is antithetical to a just society; indeed, the fundamental Aristotelean principle of justice involves "treating equals equally and unequals unequally in proportion to their relative differences" (as cited in Fallona, 2000: 686). In other words, to treat unequals equally is tantamount to engendering and sustaining discrimination and, concomitantly, injustice.

Specifically, it has been pointed out that the notion of meritocracy functions to enable a discourse concerning the need to have equal access to opportunities, though without accounting for the unearned social and economic advantages that some individuals have over others (Khan, 2012)—and which make equal access to opportunities all but impossible without salient policy interventions. Working from this purview, CRT's "neglect of meritocracy", as observed by Waldman and Sparr (2023: 180), is consistent with established knowledge. In drawing attention to the challenges associated with historically sedimented unequal race relations in the US, it is not the intention behind CRT to be divisive but to develop a comprehensive explanation of extant inequalities, while also addressing the need for nuance, attention to difference in people's experiences, and avoidance of stereotyping. To animate this point, let us revisit the example introduced in Waldman and Sparr's (2023) article regarding what meritocracy in the context of aviation means. In relation to "pilot merit", the authors argue that "men and women are on equal

footing in terms of their ability to achieve merit; for example, by the ergonomics of the cockpit not favoring men over women” (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 180). What remains unacknowledged is accounting for the obstacles that enabled or constrained women and men from assuming the cockpit seat in the first place.

Moreover, contrary to the claim included in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article, current DEI scholarship draws on empirical evidence when recommending that firms ought to set DEI policies and practices in relation to the desired equity of outcomes rather than equity of opportunities. The recommendation to use outcome measures is not underpinned by CRT, but by evidence from MOS research regarding the effectiveness of organizational DEI policies and practices. For instance, according to empirical evidence on gender quotas, legal mandates requiring organizations to have a certain portion of women represented in their workforce, have proven to be an effective mechanism for combating gender inequality (Armstrong & Walby, 2012). Quotas have also been shown to be a helpful starting point for subsequent gender equality initiatives and for making organizational cultures more inclusive, which, as a result, benefits both women and men (Latura & Catalano Weeks, 2022). These indicative studies suggest that, indeed, extant DEI research provides empirically grounded evidence of what works and what does not.

To summarize, both articles are founded on questionable views of “wokeness”. In Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article, there is a conflation of “woke” and DEI scholarship and practice with the aim to dismiss it, whereas Foss and Klein’s (2022) article goes further to lambast both ideas. Both articles lack a meaningful engagement with the extant DEI literature within MOS. This, on the one hand, raises questions about credibility of management knowledge in general and, on the other, allows for the critique presented in both articles to be

framed as one that is targeting “wokeness” rather than DEI scholarship and practice *per se*; thereby, shielding the claims articulated in both articles from the criticism that they are intended—or could be used—to thwart social and legal progress in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Nevertheless, we find this sort of rhetoric damaging across several levels: for management and organization scholarship, for people and organizations, and for the society in which they operate.

### **Misrepresentation of Organizational Diversity and Inclusion Efforts**

Our second concern refers specifically to how organizational diversity and inclusion efforts, and, in particular, diversity strategies, are represented in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article. According to the article, contemporary diversity strategies in organizations can be pursued through one of two “prototypical” ways: diversity-only (the “woke” approach) or diversity-and-unity (the “integrative” approach). However, the authors explicitly state that “the availability of empirical evidence for both strategies is limited (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 186). In addition, they “make no claims as to the relative predominance of these prototypes in the real world, and instead, suggest to investigate their use and effectiveness” (Waldman and Sparr, 2023: 178). The methodological approach adopted in the article is to “identify” prototypical diversity strategies and to offer a detailed discussion of the “underlying basis and assumptions” as well as the “tactics” used in the case of each of these strategies. At the same time, no empirical evidence is provided as the basis for identification of these two strategies. Given that organizational diversity strategies are usually publicly available and accessible via organizational websites, it is surprising that Waldman and Sparr (2023) elected not to carry out empirical research that would involve reviewing a range of “real world” diversity strategies to ascertain

whether what they describe as “woke” diversity strategies can actually be found in any organization.

Despite the lack of evidence that there is such a thing as a “woke” diversity strategy, and despite making no effort to investigate whether it might exist in practice, Waldman and Sparr (2023: 175) assert:

Our thesis is that the *potentially growing use of a woke strategy to diversity* and its underlying theoretical basis (i.e., critical theories such as critical race theory) are at risk of *perceived unfairness and reverse discrimination of majority group members*, as well as confirming victimization and reinforcing biases against minority group members.

(*emphasis added*)

In other words, without offering evidence substantiating that a “woke” diversity strategy exists, Waldman and Sparr (2023) lay criticism against this approach, cautioning against the detrimental consequences it is expected to yield on both organizations and the individuals—including members of both majority and minority groups—working within them. According to another claim found in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article, for employees of the majority group, diversity strategies informed by wokeness foment feelings of unfairness. This sentiment is the corollary of the majority group associating woke diversity strategies with reverse discrimination; namely, that the organization is discriminating against those who, of no fault of their own, happen to come from the majority group. Extending this view further, such feelings of unfairness culminate in animosity and resentment towards the ostensible beneficiaries of the diversity strategy (i.e., members of minority groups). For Waldman and Sparr (2023: 175), “‘a diversity-only’ strategy that is in line with the concept of ‘woke’” is counterproductive to achieving its underlying objective: to establish conditions that would prevent the



disenfranchisement of minorities based on social identity. More specifically, as argued in the article, such a diversity strategy levies punitive consequences against minority groups for it casts them as perennial victims who need to be saved; members of minority groups are positioned as those who are incapable of assuming responsibility for, or otherwise remedying, the conditions under which they find themselves. These negative attributions about “woke” diversity strategies among majority and minority groups culminate in myriad destructive organizational outcomes, including reduced efficiency and performance as well as greater toxic group and interpersonal dynamics. In light of these negative outcomes of a “woke” diversity strategy, it seems logical to also find in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article a call on researchers and practitioners to reject diversity strategies that are predicated on woke ideas and instead advocate for an alternative. This alternative is offered in the form of, what is labelled as, “integrative” strategies.

In the article, the key tenets and tactics underpinning these two approaches to diversity in organizations, are brought together in a table. Unfortunately, we do not have the space here to discuss each of these in detail. Nevertheless, it is important to mention some aspects of these two “prototypical” strategies and highlight that, based on our knowledge and experience with diversity scholarship and practice, what is referred in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article as “woke” diversity strategies, simply does not exist in organizational practice and is certainly not promoted by current DEI scholarship. As such, there is no need to be concerned about the detrimental consequences of a “woke” diversity strategy and to call for an alternative.

Indeed, those organizations that do have an explicit diversity strategy, as a matter of course, ensure that it is aligned with and supportive of the organization’s vision and mission, and there is no empirical evidence of organizations developing a diversity strategy that would be, to use Waldman and Sparr’s (2023: 179) expression, “neglecting the importance of unity”. On the

contrary, having “unity of vision, purpose, and efforts in mind” (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 179) underpins, by default, organizational diversity strategy initiatives. Similarly, organizational diversity strategies are not based on “rejection of meritocracy” but on the understanding that while meritocratic principles are followed, it is also necessary to be mindful of and try to counteract the flaws of meritocracy, which, as previously discussed, are widely recognized in the extant literature—in other words, pursue “acceptance of both meritocracy and valuing of diversity” (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 179). Further, going against the current of the thesis articulated in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article, actual organizational diversity strategies would never advocate “selection based primarily on racial and gender identities” (p. 179), and, in fact, this is not what happens when quota targets are introduced in organizations. In our DEI-related research or practice, we have not encountered evidence of the existence of organizational diversity training based on a “broad-brush approach to identifying majority group members as perpetrators of ongoing racism and gender discrimination”, a “framing of minorities and women as victims”, and a “dogmatic intolerance of other viewpoints” (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 179). Rather, the established organizational approach is very much in line with what Waldman and Sparr (2023) classify as belonging to the “integrative” approach: to focus in diversity training on principles that align with “presenting mechanisms (intentional and unintentional) that can exacerbate discrimination and a hostile work environment, while simultaneously stressing personal responsibility on the part of all organizational members”, “achievement of equity through the targeting of resources and opportunities for improvement to disadvantaged or marginalized groups”, and “openness to alternative viewpoints through dialogue, tolerance, and a paradox mindset” (Waldman & Sparr, 2023: 179).

It is worth noting that the tactics suggested by Waldman and Sparr (2023) as part of an “integrative” diversity strategy echo Herring and Henderson’s (2012) arguments regarding what is necessary to remedy the power differentials in organizations between members of different groups. Specifically, Herring and Henderson (2012: 629), recommend “targeting goods and resources to excluded people” and “advocating for an expansive notion of diversity by pursuing distributive justice that will serve dis-privileged groups.” While Waldman and Sparr do not explicitly state that, under conditions of finite resources, “the targeting of resources and opportunities for improvement to disadvantaged or marginalized groups” will necessarily involve “shifting resources away from privileged groups” (Herring & Henderson, 2012: 629), the similarities between the ideas about an “integrative” diversity strategy expressed in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article and the explanation provided in Herring and Henderson’s (2012) article, written from a critical sociological perspective, are striking.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, it also appears that the “integrative” diversity strategy (Waldman and Sparr, 2023) is rooted in recognition of the fact that there does not currently exist a level playing field that provisions for members of minority and majority groups equal access to opportunities and resources. As such, it is aligned with the rich body of research in the area of DEI in organizations that has offered compelling arguments about how members of minority groups are systematically disadvantaged as a direct result of the power asymmetries attached to the social identities that they occupy (e.g., Adamson et al., 2021; Roberson, 2019; Rosette, Koval, Ma, &

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<sup>5</sup> Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) integrative diversity strategy also maps onto the advanced phases of the five stages of DEI maturity identified by Washington (2022). Indeed, Waldman and Sparr’s description of the integrative diversity strategy, represents how DEI becomes embedded within the organization with internal and external pursuits to support it (Washington, 2022).

Livingston, 2016). The consequences of these systemic disadvantages have been variously labeled and include, among other things, the *risk tax* in the case of racial minorities (Glass & Cook, 2020), the *double bind* in the case of women (Eagly & Carli, 2007), and *double jeopardy* in the case of racial minority women (Berdahl & Moore, 2006).<sup>6</sup> It has also been argued that even those individuals who have been categorized as the model minority—and, thus, hold a relatively more privileged status than other minority groups—encounter structural barriers and discrimination within organizations (Prasad, 2023).

When Waldman and Sparr (2023: 179) speak about the need to acknowledge that “racism and gender discrimination still exist” and to target “resource or opportunities for improvement to disadvantaged or marginalized groups”, they appear to want to rectify unfair organizational realities that historical injustices have caused for minority groups; and, they also appear to recognize that to achieve unity, it is necessary to remedy power asymmetries created by past systems of racial (and other) oppressions. In other words, they seem to concur with the Aristotelean principle that most DEI scholars and practitioners accept and which we alluded to above: “Injustice arises as much from treating unequals equally as from treating equals unequally” (Leyden, 1985: 10).

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<sup>6</sup> The *risk tax* refers to “the risks associated with leading organizations through crisis and the potential career-ending consequences of accepting such positions” (Glass & Cook, 2020: 637). The *double bind* points to how women leaders “if they are highly communal, they may be criticized for not being agentic enough. But if they are highly agentic, they may be criticized for lacking communion” (Eagly & Carli, 2007: 63). *Double jeopardy* captures how “minority women face a double whammy of discrimination...They are discriminated against as both women and as minorities” (Berdahl & Moore, 2006: 437).

To summarize, a “woke” diversity strategy, along with its tenets, tactics, and supposedly detrimental consequences, as presented in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article, is an *imagined* strategy. Somewhat ironically, the proposed alternative, an “integrative” diversity strategy, supposedly rooted in “non-woke” tenets and tactics, largely resembles what “real world” organizations, practitioners, and DEI scholars—including those who explicitly align themselves with a critical perspective on diversity—actually promote.

### **Under-appreciation of the Importance of Organizational Inclusion for Stakeholders**

Our third concern relates to Foss and Klein’s (2022: 2) article and, in particular, the contention that behind what the article refers to as “companies going woke” is only a small minority of organizational stakeholders (i.e., “middle managers, rather than owners, top managers, or employees”). A “woke company” is defined in the article as follows:

A company that supports “woke” ideologies and causes not only through internal practices—prioritizing Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) in hiring and promotion, sourcing from sustainable or diverse suppliers, and donating to socially progressive causes—but also in branding, marketing, and nonmarket strategies. (Foss & Klein, 2022: 3)

This view parallels a broader claim being circulated within the ongoing culture wars.

Specifically, anti-woke commentators—including some on the political left—assert that wokeness is supported by only a small minority of individuals who have outsized influence on social discourse and public policy (Khazan, 2021; Ramaswamy, 2021). According to this perspective, this small minority has hijacked left-wing political movements and has relegated the majority who otherwise believe in commonsense, liberal policies. Political commentator, Bill

Maher, has repeatedly claimed when discussing the US context that wokeness represents a small, radical wing of the Democratic Party, yet it has effectively silenced political centralists and other moderate voices on the left. This view was elaborated on by James Carville, democratic strategist, and someone who played an instrumental role in Bill Clinton's successful presidential bid. In an interview with *Vox*, Carville declared: "Wokeness is a problem and everyone knows it. It's hard to talk to anybody today—and I talk to lots of people in the Democratic Party—who doesn't say this. But they don't want to say it out loud." According to Carville, this self-censorship is the outcome of fears of being "clobbered or canceled" should they openly challenge the ethos of woke advocates (Illing, 2021).

Similar logic has been adopted in Foss and Klein's (2022) article in which the argument is presented that DEI initiatives, such as anti-racist and anti-sexist policies are part of the "woke movement", and that they represent neither the views nor the ideological commitments of the majority of organizational stakeholders, but of middle managers who push through DEI policies and are indifferent to the fact that the majority within the companies do not actually support such policies. The DEI initiatives which are listed as especially problematic are those that, "[s]eek to change how people interact, to reduce the power of ostensibly privileged groups, to 'center' the ideas and activities of marginalized groups, and so on" (Foss and Klein, 2022: 8).<sup>7</sup>

Foss and Klein's (2022) article also presents the argument that the advocacy for DEI policies by middle managers is not the outcome of genuine interest in making companies more inclusive. Rather, these middle managers seek to use such policies to increase their span of control and, thereby, expand and consolidate their own intra-organizational power:

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<sup>7</sup> No further elaboration on what is meant by 'change how people interact' or 'and so on' is provided.

In the context of woke policies, middle managers have specialized knowledge, may control critical aspects of the firm’s internal and external communications, and are often shielded from effective internal review due to the lack of metrics for woke performance. Embracing wokeness can thus provide authority, job security, and career opportunities. (Foss & Klein, 2022: 19)

Such a reading affirms, for those who follow the above argument to its logical conclusion, that individuals advocating for DEI policies are not motivated by a sincere interest in using such policies to catalyze meaningful social change by making organizations more inclusive. On the contrary, they are, above all, motivated by instrumentality and self-interest.<sup>8</sup>

Little empirical evidence is offered to substantiate the assertion that DEI policies are supported by only a small minority of organizational members or that such members are motivated by self-interest. This lack of empirical evidence is surprising given that a dearth of prioritization of “objective data” is one of the criticisms raised in the article towards critical theory and, concomitantly, to “woke ideas and behaviors”. Indeed, advancing such a view begs for empirical substantiation, given that Foss and Klein’s (2022) article appeared at a time when it was confirmed that all Fortune 100 companies have made a public commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Colvin, 2022). Without compelling empirical evidence to support their tenuous position, the article contains a loose meshwork of organizational theories—including agency theory, institutional theory, and intra-organizational ecology—to try to lend credence to

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<sup>8</sup> The accusation that advocates of woke policies are motivated by self-interest is a well-recited claim among individuals propagating anti-woke positions. Studying the anti-woke movement in the UK over the last several years, Davies and McRae (2023: 18) conclude that: “Anti-woke campaigners claim the woke self-servingly imagine racism, particularly structural racism, so they can represent people of color as victims and themselves as saviors.”

the repudiation of DEI scholarship and practice. These organizational theories are not sufficient substitutes for empirical evidence that would validate the contestable assertion that the majority of organizational stakeholders are indifferent or hostile towards DEI.

Finally, it merits highlighting that progressive thinking on social issues related to DEI exhibited by the American population at large over the last several decades suggests that the main argument expressed in Foss and Klein’s (2022) article is inaccurate at best and wholly disingenuous at worst. For instance, polls show that as time goes on, an increasingly higher percentage of Americans support DEI policies to remedy historical injustices experienced by disadvantaged communities. In 2021, a Gallup Poll revealed that favorable opinions of affirmative action programs reached 62%, up from 54% in 2016 and 61% in 2018 (Castronuovo, 2021). Such statistics belie any argument that DEI policies are supported only by a small minority of self-interested organizational members. As Dukach (2022) observes: “It’s increasingly clear that many people—perhaps even the vast majority—are genuinely disturbed by inequities and are motivated to address them [through organizational DEI policies].”

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY**

Thus far, we have illuminated our concerns in relation to Foss and Klein’s (2022) and Walderman and Sparr’s (2023) articles—considering them as exemplars of a critique of “wokeness” aimed at undermining DEI scholarship and practice. As observed in another *Exchange* response to one of these articles, even the shielding of criticisms against organizational DEI policies using the discourse of “wokeness” is imprecise and incendiary (Thomason et al., 2023). Indeed, “wokeness” is invoked as a rhetorical device of sorts—to draw on polemical and ideological imaginaries to substantiate the anti-DEI opinions of the authors when there is a



dearth of empirical evidence to support such opinions. We now turn our attention to considering two interrelated implications engendered by the intellectual backlash against DEI scholarship and practice represented by these two articles: (1) the undoing of progressive social policies, and (2) the legitimation of unsettling populist discourses.

### **Undoing Progressive Social Policies**

A potentially dangerous aspect of such “anti-woke” voices against DEI scholarship and practice in MOS is that they function to undermine the anti-discrimination legislation, and related progressive social policies, that have been developed, throughout much of the world, after many decades of sacrifice and effort at building a more cohesive and just workplaces among members of minority and majority groups. In the US, the current anti-discrimination legislation in relation to race is the result of over 150 years of progressive changes in law and ultimately codified in the Constitution—tracing back to the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) which abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) which made freed slaves citizens of the country, and the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) which granted the right to vote to men regardless of race. The struggle for racial equality did not end there; throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement sought to redress the structural disenfranchisement of Black Americans, which they experienced through institutionalized slavery in the era of the Antebellum South. Nearly a century after the three aforementioned Amendments were enshrined into the Constitution, and as a corollary of the achievements made during the Civil Rights movement aimed at abolishing racial segregation and racial discrimination, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed under President Lyndon B. Johnson, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color,

religion, sex, or national origin. The Civil Rights Act paved the way for the development of subsequent anti-discrimination laws (e.g., laws pertaining to equal employment opportunities).

Given the legislative advances made since the nineteenth-century, in the US it is, at present, prohibited to:

[D]iscriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person’s race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy and related conditions, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. Most employers with at least 15 employees are covered by EEOC laws...The laws apply to all types of work situations, including hiring, firing, promotions, harassment, training, wages, and benefits. (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.)

The US government has charged the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) with enforcing federal laws related to workplace anti-discrimination. The EEOC has articulated its vision to create workplaces that are “inclusive” and “respectful”, and ones in which no one is unlawfully discriminated against. Arguably, what underpins this emphasis on inclusivity and respect—in contrast to a point advocated in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023: 179) article, i.e., the need to focus on a “dynamic presentation of history as demonstrating progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion”—is a recognition among US political leaders that American firms and other types of organizations still have a long way to go before discrimination becomes eradicated and equitable treatment of all is achieved. Indeed, continuous work is needed on the part of all stakeholders within civil society, including firms and management scholars, to ensure that the important accomplishments brought about by anti-discrimination laws and other cognate social policies do not become undone. In this regard, progressive organizational DEI policies have to

be in place to ensure that firms and those who work within them behave in ways that reject discrimination and are consistent with legally defined assurances.

It is important to remember that organizations—including academic institutions where knowledge is generated—are not independent of society; rather, they function as spaces that inform how individuals relate to one another. Within this purview, while workplace organizations are not responsible for creating anti-discrimination, DEI-related laws, such organizations are minimally responsible for implementing the laws that have been enacted by publicly-elected policymakers.

MOS researchers have an important responsibility to ensure that they play a positive role in civil society, especially at the time of numerous and intersecting global challenges presented by a warming climate, the rise of populism, economic inequality, the cost-of-living crisis, and the post-pandemic changes in the world of work. It is our task as MOS scholars to support leaders of firms and other organizations in making a positive contribution to building a more sustainable and just society through the research we conduct and the frameworks and business policy recommendations we put forward. This would translate into rigorous research that aims at enriching and increasing the effectiveness of organizational DEI policies; and certainly not misrepresenting, dismissing, or mocking them. DEI scholarship and practice, like any other phenomenon, should be subject to constructive critique. It is important to critically scrutinize existing approaches to making organizations more diverse, equitable, and inclusive, in order to understand better *what “good” looks like* and *what works* in different contexts, and to develop increasingly more effective DEI approaches.

It is important to recognize that DEI progress is inherently fragile and reversible—it is always subject to being undone. As such it is critical to develop, through engaged DEI

scholarship, ways of retaining focus on, and not jeopardizing, what has been achieved. It is also crucial that in scholarly efforts from this discipline, we remain faithful to the vision of the Academy of Management (AOM), which according to the association's own declaration, is to "inspire and enable a better world through our management and teaching" (AOM, 2017). Obviously, the notion of "a better world" may be interpreted differently by different scholars and may yield competing meanings. Nevertheless, there remains little doubt that the intention of the AOM vision is to establish a world bereft of discrimination based on, for instance, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and ageism. Framing DEI policies and practices in terms of "anti-wokeness" is not constructive for establishing the type of world the AOM aspires to co-create.

### **Validating Populist Rhetoric**

There are affinities between the content and tone of the two focal articles that we critique in this article and the unsettling populist rhetoric being propagated in the political realm. In fact, Waldman and Sparr (2023) quote DeSantis' Stop W.O.K.E. Act as an example of a positive development in the area of policy influence on organizational diversity.<sup>9</sup> This populist rhetoric

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<sup>9</sup> The Stop W.O.K.E. Act prevents faculty from presenting certain viewpoints related to race and sex. In November 2022, a US District judge ruled that the law was in violation of the First Amendment and deemed it unconstitutional. In justifying the injunction, district judge Mark Walker explained: "Our professors are critical to a healthy democracy, and the State of Florida's decision to choose which viewpoints are worthy of illumination and which must remain in the shadows has implications for us all. But the First Amendment does not permit the State of Florida to muzzle its university professors, impose its own orthodoxy of viewpoints, and casts us all into the dark". On this basis, the enforcement of the law in higher education was halted. Regardless of what the future of the Stop W.O.K.E. Act turns out to be, it is no doubt a divisive, controversial piece of legislation, which can hardly be

has undermined democratic institutions and democracy itself (Kerr, Robinson, & Śliwa, 2022; Prasad, 2020). Right-wing politicians in the US and elsewhere—e.g., Hungary, India, the UK—have invoked populist rhetoric to justify their persecution of their own country’s minority populations. Here, we want to point to two particular populist discourses that have emerged hand-in-hand with anti-woke rhetoric.

The first discourse relates to the threat minority groups are perceived to pose to majority groups. Iyer (2022) has captured how opponents representing advantaged groups reject organizational DEI initiatives on three grounds related to perceived threat. They include:

- 1) *Resource threat*—concern about losing access to outcomes and opportunities;
- 2) *Symbolic threat*—concern about the introduction of new values, culture, and expectations, and;
- 3) *Intergroup morality threat*—concern about the group’s role in perpetuating inequality. (Iyer, 2022: 1)

A close reading of the criticisms laid against DEI initiatives in the two articles reveals how they are the corollary of these perceived threats. Within this purview, critics use “wokeness”, ideologically and strategically, as a rhetorical device to delegitimize the case for DEI (Foss & Klein, 2022; Waldman & Sparr, 2023).

The second discourse relates to the prevailing myth circulated within neoliberalism. This myth pivots on the assumption that each individual functions within an objective system in which they have equal access to opportunities and outcomes. These opportunities and outcomes must be seized through determination and hard work. Conversely, this myth posits that

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considered a pro-unity initiative aligned with the principles of positive organizational behavior, which is how it is presented in Waldman and Sparr’s (2023) article.

individuals who are unable to achieve traditional metrics of success are at fault for their own failings (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015; Lazzarini, 2021). Millar (2018), for example, captures how impoverished garbage pickers in Brazilian favelas are held responsible for their own poverty and work circumstances without accounting for how neoliberal arrangements are pivotal in engendering these outcomes. When the neoliberal logic attributes responsibility for failure to the individual, rather than to the highly skewed social and economic structures within which the individual operates, the legitimacy of DEI initiatives is called into question. Indeed, why should organizational DEI initiatives exist to benefit individuals who *chose* not to work hard enough to achieve organizational success on their own?

Both of these discourses parallel the tenor of populist rhetoric that declares majority groups as being under attack by minority interests. Within this line of thinking, DEI initiatives in organizations are one mechanism through which the perceived relegation of majority groups is institutionalized. There is an especially perverse outcome of the intellectual backlash against DEI initiatives which frames them as “woke”, with the intention of misrepresenting, dismissing, and mocking them and their supporters. That is, it is providing scholarly credence to populist rhetoric against minority rights and interests which, as the events of recent years have shown, has been deployed with the specific intent to abrogate democracy. Our responsibility as MOS scholars should be to ensure that our research is not legitimating the populist rhetoric that is rendering the world an increasingly dangerous place for disenfranchised groups.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Organizational DEI policies can be seen as part of the international community’s effort to achieve social sustainability, and they are consistent with several of the UN’s Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs). For instance, SDG 5 seeks to “[a]chieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, while SDG 10 aims to “[r]educ[e] inequality within and among countries” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Given the cultural, institutional, and organizational bases upon which these inequalities are foregrounded, they will only be remedied through interventionist policies that endeavor to undo the discrimination encountered by historically marginalized groups. DEI policies are one important path through which these goals can be achieved within organizational settings.

Scholars have increasingly observed the critical role played by business school research in responding to some of the pressing grand challenges confronting the world (Bapuji, Patel, Ertug, & Allen, 2020; Bebbington & Unerman, 2018; Fotaki & Prasad, 2015; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016), and which the SDGs aim to redress. With the intention of implementing the SDGs and promoting their implementation within firms and other organizations through equipping current and future leaders with SDG-related knowledge and skills, a large number of business schools internationally—including those schools in which many of the “anti-woke” academics are based—have become signatories of the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). This is reflective of the growing recognition among business school academics and leaders that our scholarship ought to improve, for all, the world in which we are living. This would certainly include scholarly focus on how to make organizations more inclusive and equitable for everyone, and how to reduce the growing levels of social and economic inequalities that we are witnessing.

To further animate the argument concerning the need for DEI policies and initiatives, it helps to examine the largest scholarly association of our discipline, the AOM. In 2017, the AOM Board of Governors approved the Academy of Management Strategic Plan. A key value

articulated within it was to “provide a dynamic and supportive community for all of our members, embracing the full diversity of our backgrounds and experiences.” To operationalize this organizational value concerning DEI, the AOM elected to “[c]onduct a thorough analysis of the nature, climate and culture of diversity within AOM” (Academy of Management, 2017). These declarations speak to the fact that organizational DEI policies and initiatives are consistent with the ethos of the AOM. As a community, we must continue to identify trajectories through which to become more *aware*, *compliant*, and *tactical* in an effort to establish *integrated and sustainable* DEI policies (Washington, 2022).

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