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How the Olympics opening ceremony triggered a debate on 'woke ideology' in France

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The "Festivities" scene featured LGBTQ+ activist DJ Barbara Butch, famous French drag queens, as well as singer Philippe Katerine as Dionysos. Screenshot of FranceTV

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France was hurt, divided and in need of a great federating event after recent elections. And Emmanuel Macron framed the Olympic Games as an opportunity to "unite around a France that welcomes the world", calling for a "political truce" during that time.

Conservatives, however, believe that the great moment of national cohesion has yet to take place. From the Republican party to the far-right National Rally, politicians throughout the conservative spectrum have described the opening ceremony's scenes as "insults to the nation" and largely approached the event as a Trojan horse for the "woke ideology".

Often heard in France in tandem with another idiom, "islamo-leftism" (*islamo-gauchisme*), which denounces the alleged proximity of the left with Islam, *wokisme* is increasingly the *bête noire* of a fringe of the political establishment. My research as part of the project funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche, HLJPCenre (History of Law and JurisPrudence, studied from a gender perspective), has already led me to analyse and decipher the use of the terms "woke" and "wokisme".

But what exactly is "woke ideology" - or as the French would call it, *wokisme*?

Insult through awakening

The word "woke" comes from English. From the verb "to wake", the noun qualifies a group of people who have woken up and suddenly taken up the issue of discrimination.

The progressive movements targeted by the term are far from exclusive to the English world, however. In France, conservatives tend to focus their anger on the left's promotion of gender-neutral inclusive language, and championing of minorities as modern excesses. And yet, any Francophile knows that the country is home to a rich feminist tradition starting with Simone de Beauvoir as well as the progressive ideals of the 1789 French Revolution.

Semantic analysis of "antiwoke" discourse reveals that they are using an English term to evade openly discriminating against minorities' protected by so-called woke ideology. The term's catch-all and vague nature is to the benefit of the ones using it, making it easier for them to colour its targets negatively.

Scenes of unease on the Seine

Following a process of moral panic, woke critics often denounce the left's general identity politics without identifying a clear target. The opening ceremony remedied this, with the niece of Marine Le Pen, Marion Maréchal, promptly taking to X to criticize the scene mistaken for a satire of the Last Supper:



On 28 July, the Paris Olympics artistic director, Thomas Jolly, has specified that the Last Supper was "not his inspiration" and the vignette referred in fact to *The Feast of the Gods*, featuring a banquet to celebrate the marriage of Thetis and Peleus.

"I believe it's quite clear, we can see Dionysos arriving at the table. He's there, because he's the god of festivity, wine, and father of Sequana, goddess linked to the river. The idea was to throw a great pagan party linked to the gods of Olympus, Olympus"

By the time Jolly's comments had landed, much of the damage had already been done. Echoing Marion Maréchal Le Pen, the Conference of Bishops of France lamented "scenes of derision and mockery of Christianity".

Even before the event, the Olympic poster was the talk of the town. The "woke ideology" was suspected of plotting to erase France's history:

"On the Paris Olympics' official poster, the cross at the top of the Invalides has been erased and not a single French flag appears. The decision to make our identity invisible is an unacceptable mistake. Wokism must be fought against everywhere without wavering"

However, the edits simply complied with the requirements set out by the Olympic Charter prohibiting religious signs and the favouring of one country over another.

Those who claim to speak in the name of history are often the first to forget it when less convenient: indeed, why could a French artistic director not represent the decollation of Marie Antoinette under the French Revolution? Meanwhile, Da Vinci's *L'Ultima Cena* is not strictly speaking a religious relic, but rather a piece of artistic heritage by a presumably homosexual painter.

More broadly, if we look at the substance of the criticism levelled at this ceremony, what are we talking about? People in love, sometimes in ménages à trois that have been invoked many times by literature and other arts, artists on stage, performances that honour individuals, regardless of their gender, identity, build or haircut.

What's more, "wokisme" is also a movement that gives particular visibility to the place of women in our societies. Those who expressed outrage at the opening ceremony were quiet about the 10 statues representing outstanding French women. Since it is no longer appropriate to campaign against women's right to abortion, few people, if anyone invoked the "woke ideology" to comment upon the gilded statues of Simone Veil, who legalised abortion in France in 1975, and lawyer Gisele Halimi, who campaigned for it throughout her life. In the same vein, there were no public criticisms of the image of Paulette Nardal, who theorised négritude ("blackness"), rising from the Seine, or of the writing of the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Citizen by Olympe de Gouges, a woman long forgotten and resurrected historically by feminist studies.

But what does the law say?

On closer examination, "the woke ideology" seems less radical, if not non-existent as currently described. Behind this 'wokist' accusation are people who open up to others, try to understand particular situations, analyse them and offer possible remedies.

What's more, the very target of criticism is a set of freedoms that are guaranteed, and of which France can indeed be proud: secularism, creative freedom and freedom of expression, guarantees against discrimination, etc. Added together, the ceremony's most controversial segments show that normality remains undefined and that every human being must be considered as such, can express himself as such.

France still has a long way to go before equality is effectively guaranteed. However, we cannot say that these values do not represent France: they are our laws, constitutional achievements or texts debated by the nation's representatives in the Assembly. Equality regardless of skin colour, abortion, 'marriage for all', transidentity, the fight against grossophobia – protected as part of the fight against discrimination, gender equality.

Incidentally, since one of the aims of major events is to bring people together, 'the woke ideology', by offering a platform to diversity would be to thank everyone was able to identify with this show at one time or another. We mustn't forget that issues of gender, sexuality other than heterosexual, gender equality are still potential sources of tension in sport. Sportsmen and women who cannot/willingly display their distance from the social norms of their respective countries, were welcomed to Paris.

Those concerned about the political undertones should refer back to the Olympic Charter:

Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.

Enjoy the games!

La version originale de cet article a été publiée en français.

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- Anti-woke
- Far-right groups
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