Amnesty for ‘Woke 1.0’? The left owes us an apology.

Dace Potas
USA TODAY

Now that progressives are seizing power within the Democratic Party, one of their main hurdles is explaining away 'Woke 1.0,' the pandemic era of American politics in which progressives adopted a slew of ridiculous positions.

When asked in an interview about her own past ridiculous positions, as well as those of Democratic Socialist Wisconsin gubernatorial candidate Francesca Hong, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-New York, explained it away as if it were nothing more than a bad fashion choice. Hong lost her primary race on Aug. 11 to David Crowley, a moderate.

'I have a local city councilman that has this saying, ‘Woke 1 was crazy,'' Ocasio-Cortez said. 'And I think that what’s important is that we have to assess what a candidate is saying now.'

Ocasio-Cortez, Hong and other progressives have struggled to distance themselves from the positions they took during the COVID-19 era, and for good reason: They were the enforcers of Woke 1.0 and the cancel culture that came with it. If progressives want Americans to believe they’ve changed, laughing it off won’t cut it. They need to explain why the pandemic era of progressive politics went too far – and why voters can trust them not to go down that road again.

Woke 1.0 was more than just ‘crazy’

Ocasio-Cortez got the phrase from Chi Ossé, a New York City councilman who used 'Woke 1 was crazyyyy' to rationalize his own past racist statement, 'A cis white man should not be the next speaker of the council.'

Hong, a Wisconsin lawmaker running for governor, has tried a similar whitewash.

'I had some hot takes, some bad takes on Twitter,' Hong told Politico. 'But I’ve evolved, I’ve learned.'

Those 'hot takes' included wanting to 'cancel Thanksgiving' and claiming police 'exist to uphold white supremacy.'

I’m glad AOC and others are now at least willing to admit the COVID-19 lunacy went too far. But Woke 1.0 wasn’t an 'oopsie.' It isn’t something you can just brush off.

To anyone paying attention at the time, woke was a lot more than 'a derogatory euphemism for civil rights & justice,' as Ocasio-Cortez put it back in 2021, when she wanted those positions taken seriously.

Among the excesses of Woke 1.0 was a movement aimed at defunding or abolishing the police, gender reassignment surgery for minors, the insistence that men can menstruate, justification of rioting, racial discrimination in hiring and much, much more.

Not every progressive held each of these positions, but as a collective, they were fine letting them enter the political mainstream. By her own admission, Ocasio-Cortez described Woke 1.0 as an attempt to shift the Overton Window, the range of ideas considered acceptable in mainstream political debate.

'During this time, especially during COVID, there was a huge opening of the Overton Window,' Ocasio-Cortez said. 'We were shut down. There was some of the highest unemployment rates that we have seen because of those shutdowns, and I think that the doors were really open in trying to entertain any and every policy that was going to get us to a better place, and I actually think that the discussions that were had in that time were quite fruitful.'

But it was more than that. Progressives pushed corporate America into diversity, equity and inclusion mandates that indoctrinated employees and built a cancel culture that met dissent with job losses and charges of bigotry.

Even progressives who didn't believe the most extreme positions were incentivized to promote them, since it made their own positions sound reasonable by comparison. Instead of 'abolish the police,' mainstream Democrats arrived at 'defund.' Instead of 'abolish borders,' many arrived at 'abolish ICE.'

To move past woke, progressives need accountability

Ocasio-Cortez and other progressives desperately want you to forget Woke 1.0. But they aren't willing to take the accountability that might convince voters they're actually different now. If they want to move past that baggage, they need to admit they were wrong, explain what was so 'crazy' about it, and say how their positions will change going forward.

It's not enough to wave away that lunacy as if you were swept up in a bad trend – it's a serious indictment of your judgment and character to have advocated for it. Either you actually believed these deranged positions, making you unfit for office, or you took them up for political convenience, which is just as disqualifying.

America's pullback from this orthodoxy has been rapid. Voters didn't hand Donald Trump a second presidential term for one reason alone, but the backlash against the woke era was a significant one.

Support for Black Lives Matter, after spiking in 2020, is now more polarized than it was even before the movement's peak. Defunding the police was never popular – just 18% backed it in 2021, even as progressives like Ocasio-Cortez championed it. And fewer Americans now support biological men in women's sports or gender transitions for minors.

Corporate America has shifted, too. Just a quarter of S&P 500 companies in 2025 weighed gender or race when adding directors, down from nearly half in 2024.

Courts have rejected Nasdaq's push for racial board targets, and Goldman Sachs dropped its own diversity requirements for companies it takes public. Corporations are no longer bowing to the political pressure that forced these superficial requirements in the first place.

Naturally, progressives want to distance themselves from positions that repel the median voter. But in doing so, they shirk responsibility. This wing of the Democratic Party wasn't tricked into these positions; they enforced them, pushing Americans to fall in line or be branded bigots.

People lost jobs for disagreeing with the fashionable take of the day or for old tweets in poor taste. That's the kind of enforcement that let the movement spiral, unopposed and unapologetic.

Failing to explain what they believed then, what they believe now and why they changed is going to haunt progressives with higher aspirations, Ocasio-Cortez chief among them. The Democratic Socialists of America party still calls for 'fully abolishing the police and prison system,' a position many on the left

once held and are now trying to walk back. Both Hong and Ocasio-Cortez previously called for defunding or abolishing the police; both have since backed off.

As it stands, the reversal looks too convenient. The only thing that's changed since 2020 is that voters rejected these positions – and progressives want to look palatable again.

The existence of 'Woke 1' implies that a 'Woke 2' is already in the works. From what I can tell, it isn't all that different in substance, just strategy and rhetoric. Progressive candidates will keep being haunted by Woke 1.0 for as long as they run for office, unless they explain – explicitly why this time is different. Otherwise, voters will see right through it.

Dace Potas, a law student, is an opinion columnist for USA TODAY. Follow him on X: @DacePotas



Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-New York, and other progressives have struggled to distance themselves from positions they took during the COVID-19 era. Eric Lee/Reuters file

© 2016 www.democratandchronicle.com. All rights reserved. Powered by TECNAVIA