

Understanding America's Disturbed Politics: Progressive Means Reactionary

by Eric Rozenman (January 2015)

A potent, double-barreled contradiction undermines American politics. If the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper names, as Confucius supposedly said, right-of-center politicians must find the wisdom, and wit, to clarify for voters between now and 2016 that “progressive” means reactionary, “liberal” denotes conformist.

Like Miller Lite’s early slogan, “tastes great, less filling,” progressive and liberal sound good, implying progress and liberty. But like the old beer pitch, they’re too good to be true.

Today’s progressives are statist. Statists, from pre-Enlightenment monarchs to the post-national technocrats running the European Union, suspect individual liberty. Their “progressivism” inclines toward insulated elites presiding over highly-regulated economic stagnation and illiberal political correctness.

For the original progressive presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the Constitution was less a Madisonian barrier against overweening government than a lever for top-down reform. Their ideological descendants, epitomized by the Obama administration and its praetorian guards in academia and communications media, push tirelessly for a bigger public and a smaller private sphere. They either don’t know or deny that government as society’s arbiter of first, rather than last, resort extinguishes both prosperity and liberty.

In practice this means the Internal Revenue Service persecutes the administration’s political opponents—like President Richard Nixon’s IRS but pre-emptively instead of *ex post facto*. The Environmental Protection Agency, stymied by congressional refusal to pass legislation defining carbon dioxide as a pollutant, does so anyway by regulatory *diktat*. Presidential decrees trump legislative action and existing immigration statutes to embrace millions of illegal aliens.

This is not the rule of law America has preached to less developed countries.

Progressive means bankrupt

Since the original progressive era the more centralized and intrusive the government—even

excluding brutally top-down, scarcity-ridden Soviet-style regimes—the more sluggish the economy. Never mind bankrupt Greece; from France with high unemployment, zero growth and big deficits to virtually bankrupt Illinois, a “progressive” state with billions in unfunded public pensions and unpaid bills, reality asserts itself. Recovery from the Great Recession has been longer and weaker than any previous post-recession return to economic health. That this sluggishness has paralleled record growth in the federal debt from \$10 trillion to \$18 trillion and simultaneous plunge in work-force participation surprises only progressive economists, politicians and their journalistic handmaidens.

The labels progressive and liberal represented separate 19th century political trends that conflated in the 20th. Liberals originally believed in individual rights and hence supremacy of the legislature—“the people’s house.” Progressives imaged they were philosopher-kings and so needed to operate increasingly powerful executive branches over the public’s head—for its own good, of course.

Today’s progressive-liberals deride conservatives as reincarnated “Know Nothings.” But they themselves exhibit the rigidity of the factually challenged. Demographic and economic changes making Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security unsustainable? Progressives demand their expansion and load Obamacare on top. Russia and China reset to traditional expansionism, Iran pursues nuclear weapons under camouflage of negotiations, al-Qaeda not dead but metastasizing? Liberals slash the defense budget.

Liberal certitude is a fun-house mirror image of traditional religion. For those who summer on Martha’s Vineyard, old-time religion—unless genetically modified by “social justice” doctrines (progressivism in the pews)—recalls Marx’s “opium of the people.” Hence candidate Barack Obama’s reference in the 2008 presidential campaign to bitter people who “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them”

Progressives don’t cling to antipathy towards people who don’t think like they do—they hound them out of business and off campus. Just ask Mozilla search engine originator Bernard Eich, who supported traditional marriage, or would-be speakers like Bush administration Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Harvard University President Lawrence Summers, a Democrat but not doctrinaire enough.

Today’s progressives or liberals are more accurately post-liberal, non-democratic leftists. Theirs is a cult of secular fundamentalism and, as with most fundamentalists, they tolerate no dissent.

Liberal inquisitors

God's replacement, a drive-thru variant of the Marxists' "iron law of history," is on their side. Thus President Obama's comforting default position that whomever he disagrees with at the moment, such as Vladimir Putin over Russia's conquest of eastern Ukraine and subversion of the country's west, must be "on the wrong side of history."

The president declares global warming alarmism "settled science" and *The Los Angeles Times* refuses to print contrary opinions. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a would-be inquisitor, calls for "climate change deniers" to be jailed.

Liberals banish the fact that hundreds of scientists disagree. Their reactionary progressivism now finds intolerable Voltaire's Enlightenment declaration, "I do not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Before the 2014 elections nearly all Democratic senators supported legislation that would have mutilated the First Amendment's free speech protection. They aimed to "protect the public" by limiting anti-incumbent campaign spending. Free speech for incumbents, especially themselves, but not for rabble challengers—not matter how rich.

When the president or progressive governors can't get what they want through legislatures or face obstacles in popular referenda, they invoke executive authority or turn to our new aristocracy of regulatory agencies, public employee unions and judges. President Franklin Roosevelt tarred his Depression-era critics as "malefactors of great wealth." Today's progressives have become malefactors of state power. Inconvenient facts like voter rejection will not sway the true believers among them.

President Obama mused, post-election, that while his party may have just lost the Senate and become an even smaller minority in the House, many eligible voters didn't turn out at all. Contrary to indications stay-at-homes either were disinterested or disgusted with both parties, the president divined that many of them must have been on his side but somehow failed to get out and vote. So his determination to rule without the legislature—making repeated, unauthorized changes to Obamacare; maneuvering to close coal-fired power plants; amnestying countless illegals, attempting to reach a nuclear compromise with a duplicitous Iran regardless of congressional objections—intensifies.

Anti-police, anti-court demonstrators in Ferguson, Mo., New York City and across the country, validated by the president and Attorney General Eric Holder, who "understood" their "frustration," blocked traffic, disrupted Christmas shopping and occasionally committed arson,

even before one of the more extreme of their number murdered two New York City police. “This is what democracy looks like!” they shouted.

Actually, it’s what enemies of democratic civic culture have looked like, including those of the 1871 Paris Commune and 1960s U.S. race riots. One reason the Founders established an indirect democracy, a representative republic, was because to some of them democracy meant “mobocracy.” But when government becomes too big, too intrusive, too “progressive” Madison’s offsetting interest groups transform into entitled tribes battling for incompatible privileges.

Conservative Republicans and “Blue Dog Democrats”—the former often ideologically inarticulate, the latter an endangered species—must deconstruct the “this is what democracy looks like!” picture well before Election Day, 2016. They’ll need to expose for voters how, in a post-constitutional trifecta, not only has progressive become reactionary and liberal illiberal, but also the way Democratic Party leadership increasingly has subverted democracy. Were James Madison alive today, one suspects he’d be doing that during the talk-radio time slot between Rush Limbaugh and Mark Levin.

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