

How the Woke Revolution Happened



by Bruce Bawer

The story has been told many times over the years. There are, indeed, many ways to tell it, although a passage from the beginning of Roger Kimball's 2000 book *The Long March: How the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s Changed America* can serve as a more than suitable summary of all of them:

In the Sixties and Seventies, after fantasies of overt political revolution faded, many student radicals urged their followers to undertake "the long march through the institutions."...In the context of Western societies, [this] signified – in the words of Herbert Marcuse – "working against the established institutions while working within them." It was primarily by this means – by insinuation and infiltration rather than confrontation – that the countercultural dreams of radicals like Marcuse have triumphed.

For what it's worth, the phrase "long march through the institutions" – a reference to the long march of Mao's army in 1934 in retreat from the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek – has been attributed by some to the German socialist Rudi Dutschke (1940-79) and by others to the Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937).

In any event, in recounting the American left's long march, who or what should be foregrounded? No two writers have exactly the same answer. Kimball, for his part, chose to focus on a range of individuals and institutions, including Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, the "Beat Generation" writers, Timothy Leary, and *The New York Review of Books*. Two decades later, in a 2000 book that was also entitled *The Long March*, the British writer Marc Sidwell traced the gradual countercultural subversion of the West back to Gramsci before delving into the roles played in that process by György Lukács, E. P. Thompson, and Marcuse in that process. James Lindsay, whose 2022 book *The Marxification of Education* limits its purview largely to the subversion of the academy, puts the Brazilian socialist Paulo Freire (1921-97) at the heart of the story; and my own 2012 book *The Victims' Revolution*, which also confines itself to the leftist takeover of higher education, splits the responsibility for that dire development among Gramsci, Freire, and the Afro-Caribbean Marxist Frantz Fanon (1925-69).

Christopher Rufo's incisive new book [*America's Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything*](#) covers essentially the same territory as Kimball's and Sidwell's books while giving attention, along the way, to the events reported by Lindsay and me. Rufo, now a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, is a remarkable young man (he turns 39 on August 26) who increasingly needs no introduction: during the last few years, he's become a leading voice in the struggle against the mainstreaming at American schools and colleges of critical race theory (CRT), transgender ideology, and the tyranny of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In addition

to writing extensively on these topics (notably at *City Journal*), he's been impressively active on the barricades, leading the effort to have CRT banned from public schools in no fewer than 22 states, inspiring President Trump to ban CRT "training" in the federal government, and rolling back radicalism at New College in Florida, at which Governor Ron DeSantis named him a trustee. The progressive reaction to his activities is summed up in the fatuous headline of a 2021 *New Yorker* hit job: "How a Conservative Activist Invented the Conflict over Critical Race Theory."

In *America's Cultural Revolution*, Rufo confesses that it took him a while to recognize that CRT's ascent was only one aspect of the latest phase in a gradual, decades-long process of far-left cultural infiltration that has targeted not only schools and colleges but also America's other major institutions, including corporations, media, and government. His own subsequent investigations led him to see the whole business as starting with Marcuse, who initiated the process of "sanitiz[ing] and adapt[ing]" the radical ideas that motivated the militant groups of the 1970s "into the official ideology of America's elite institutions."

In order to impose some order onto a sprawling and multifaceted topic, Rufo subdivides his book into four parts. Each depicts a different aspect of the cultural insurgency, which Rufo identifies with a specific prophet of revolution and a particular postmodern perversion of critical thinking, to wit: while Marcuse, with his "critical theory," was a prophet of political revolution, Angela Davis (1944-), with her "critical praxis," was a prophet of race war, Freire, with his "critical pedagogy," was a prophet of academic coup-making, and Derrick Bell (1930-2011), with his "critical race theory," was a prophet of power. Of course this fourfold division is mainly a structural conceit; in reality, the egregious developments that Rufo identifies with these four horsepersons of the apocalypse are *all* about revolution

and *all* about power.

For those to whom Marcuse is just a name, Rufo fills in his backstory: a German Jew who was given refuge in America in the 1930s, Marcuse thanked his new homeland, two decades later, by formulating ways to overthrow it; in the late Sixties, celebrating Mao, Fidel, and Che as heroes of “freedom” while savaging American conformism and consumerism from his faculty perch at UC San Diego, he became the New Left’s #1 guru.

Then the New Left collapsed, UCSD cut Marcuse loose, and he went back to the drawing board.

What to do? Marx had vested his revolutionary hopes in the poor, downtrodden workers, but Marcuse recognized that in postwar America that demographic was, by most historical standards, rich: they owned their own homes, they vacationed in the Caribbean, and they enjoyed every imaginable creature comfort. Rather than recognizing this as a victory for capitalism, however, Marcuse saw it as a gyp: blue-collar Americans, he complained, had been bought off by “the hell of the Affluent Society”; while they might *think* they were free and happy and well off, in reality they were wage slaves, repressed without even knowing it, and hence useless to anyone seeking to foment a good old-fashioned Marxist rebellion.

Where to turn, then? Marcuse was smart enough to see that if blue-collar Americans, damn them, tended to be patriotic and contented, a great many of America’s supposedly well-educated elites were ripe for propagandizing; with disgruntled blacks serving as their foot soldiers, they could, over time, capture major institutions and implement a “dictatorship of the intellectuals.” To be sure, this meant replacing class struggle with race struggle – that is, encouraging whites to feel guilty about their purported racial privilege while encouraging blacks to believe that they stood no chance whatsoever of achieving social equality or economic advancement in capitalist America.

And, damn it, it worked: over the years, as Rufo puts it, "Marcuse's students and followers gained professorships at dozens of prestigious universities," where they dedicated themselves to the noble work of brainwashing. Weathermen terrorist Bernadette Dohrn was hired by Northwestern University; Bill Ayers, who'd planted bombs at the U.S. Capitol and Pentagon (and who would go on to help launch Barack Obama's political career), won a sinecure at the University of Illinois; and Kathy Boudin, who'd taken part in the notorious 1981 Brinks robbery that left two cops (and whose son Chesa would be San Francisco's DA from 2020 to 2022), ended up at Columbia.

And in turn, many of *their* students became professors, and continued the work of indoctrination. Among them was Davis, a graduate student of Marcuse's (and member of the Black Panther Party) who became famous for supplying the guns used in the 1970 kidnapping and murder of a judge, and who, after being acquitted (probably because of the worldwide Kremlin campaign to paint her as a victim of racism), spent several years in Cuba, traveled to the USSR to accept the Lenin Prize, planted flowers at the Berlin Wall in memory of an East German border guard, and ran for president of the U.S. on the Communist Party line. Not least, in a time while serious scholars with humanities and social-science Ph.D.s struggled to find teaching jobs, Davis held the University of California Presidential Chair at UCLA, was a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Syracuse and Rutgers, and ended up as a Distinguished Professor Emerita at UC Santa Cruz. (Davis, observes Rufo dryly, has always displayed "a unique talent for securing the support of the institutions she was revolting against.")

In the 1980s and 90s, the American political center moved to the right. But academia – especially the Ivy League and other elite universities – moved leftward. Did parents notice? If so, they didn't seem to care. Those who did notice usually

felt that it didn't matter – that once students entered the real world, they'd shed their seditiousness. Back in the day, this was true enough: elite graduates who took jobs at white-shoe law firms or Fortune 100 companies used to kick radicalism to the curb quickly enough. But this gradually turned around. Nowadays, as soon as graduates get hired, they set about radicalizing their workplaces. This process started years ago, but as Rufo points out, the nationwide hysteria surrounding the death of George Floyd in May 2020 sent it into overdrive.

One massive trophy for Marcuse's heirs was the *New York Times*. After the 2008 recession, the *Times* unloaded many veteran reporters, replacing them with fresh Ivy grads who "capture[d]" the newspaper for the left – an event that Rufo rightly calls "a pivotal turn in the long march through the institutions." Soon the *Washington Post*, NPR, and MSNBC also fell. The impact of this media takeover, and of the ensuing transformation of these media companies into hard-core propaganda machines, has been incalculable. "In 2009," notes Rufo, "only 32 percent of Democrats believed that racism in the United States was a 'big problem'; by 2017, that number had more than doubled to 76 percent. In 2021, most "very liberal" Americans guessed that police had killed over 1000 unarmed black men in 2019; one-fifth of those said that the number was over 10,000. In fact, the real figure was 14.

Yes, there's a difference between the Black Panthers of yesteryear – who preached violent warfare, mass executions, and the rape of white women as "an insurrectionary act" – and today's woke hand-wringing about "systematic racism" and "white supremacy." But the more you look at then and now, the more superficial the difference seems. In both cases, the long-term objective is precisely the same: total societal upheaval, a wholesale transfer of power, and the replacement of individual liberty with victim-group dominance. A gloved fist is still a fist. You don't really have to kill the

opposition as long as you can get him fired, evicted, and deplatformed.

As I've said, Rufo is covering well-trodden ground here. But to say this isn't to suggest that *America's Cultural Revolution* is in any way superfluous. On the contrary, even now, several years into the woke era, roughly half of Americans still think that woke just means being nice. To quote a meme I saw on Facebook earlier this week, "Woke means awakened to the needs of others. To be well informed, thoughtful, compassionate, humble and kind. Eager to make the world a better place for all people. "The clueless characters who repost nonsense like this have been told a thousand times – and they really, truly believe – that Democrats like Joe Biden, Adam Schiff, Chuck Schumer, and Jerry Nadler are champions of democracy and that the MAGA movement stands for fascist insurrection, toxic masculinity, and white supremacy. These benighted souls desperately need the comprehensive reality check that Christopher Rufo provides in this wise, trenchant, and utterly timely book.

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