

The Real Origins of American Progressivism



Henry David Thoreau's hut in Concord, Massachusetts

by Lee Smith

It's become a habit of late to blame foreign ideologies for what's wrong with America. But the radical ideas driving disastrous policies and actions don't come from communism or fascism, or even globalism. Rather, the sources of America's self-destructive [woke](#) culture are thoroughly American.

According to author and historian Lee Harris, our concept of the "elite" and the ideas they advocate—from [progressivism](#) to racial and climate justice—are as old as America itself.

"Intellectual history is sometimes like archaeology," he says. "You have to dig, and you find artifacts so different from anything we can relate to" to see the connections.

I spoke with Harris for the latest episode of "[Over the Target Live](#)" to learn more about where American ideas originated and to find out where America is going.

Harris is the author of two post-9/11 works studying the causes and effects of radical Islam's war on the West—"The Suicide of Reason" and "Civilization and Its Enemies." His 2010 book "The Next American Civil War: The Populist Revolt Against the Liberal Elite," predicted the rise of the America First movement. Harris saw that the conditions were ripe for a charismatic leader to take the reins of the Tea Party and ride it to the White House.

Harris hadn't identified Donald Trump as a candidate for the job, but he saw the essential issue—Americans were tired of being bullied by an incompetent class of experts that, between the financial crisis and "civilizing" wars in the Middle East, had pushed the country to the brink.

After Trump identified the elites as moralizing losers, they got mad and retaliated, first against the president and then his supporters. What we've been watching, from Russiagate to Jan. 6, is the revenge of an elite that believes it's their birthright to rule their inferiors.

This idea, Harris says, predates the birth of America.

"We can trace it back to John Calvin," he says, "because the Pilgrims after all were Calvinists. ... In Calvin's theory, there is an elect that God has chosen before the world was even created. ... Calvin said if you are the elect, you will live a virtuous, righteous lifestyle." And this, says Harris, "is the seeds of what we're seeing" today with the progressive elite and their virtue signaling.

Harris continues, "The Puritans of Massachusetts ... wanted people who felt God's presence, who actually had an emotional experience." And the point of emotion is so important when we come to our present day, he says.

Conservatives get frustrated dealing with progressives, says Harris, because “they rely on their emotion. They say how they feel. Like, ‘This is a truth for me; this is how I feel a truth.’ And the idea that one should act dependent on how one feels, the emotion one has, is quite different from the idea that there are certain standards of action that are right or wrong.”

Harris follows the thread leading from the 17th-century pilgrims to 19th-century Boston and the origins of the Transcendentalist movement, a social and philosophical current that prioritized subjective feeling over objective reality.

The movement’s leading lights were Ralph Waldo Emerson, a poet and essayist, and Henry David Thoreau, author of “Walden: Or Life in the Woods,” a record of living for two years in Massachusetts woodland owned by Emerson. The two are praised for their “democratic ethos,” says Harris, “but it’s really hard to find it if you read their works. ... There’s no question they felt they were the elect. They were the elite in terms of their educational background. ... But the curious thing about them is how isolated” they were from their fellow Americans.

“There are passages in ‘Walden’ where you would think [Thoreau] is in the middle of Wyoming out there with wolves,” Harris says. “He’s in fact one mile from the center of Concord, which is a very civilized little village. On the other side of Walden Pond, there’s a railroad.”

So were the Transcendentalists truly looking to meld with nature, or were they simply building walls between themselves and their fellow Americans? According to Harris, there’s little evidence they were interested “in what’s going on in the rest of America.” They cut themselves off from American morals, too, and common sense.

For Emerson, says Harris, truth “is something that comes from an inner light.” This is the basis, says Harris, of “Self-

Reliance,” Emerson’s famous 1841 essay. Heroes, or what Emerson called “representative men,” are driven by their own inner truths—no matter how dangerous they might prove to society as a whole.

One of Emerson’s heroes was John Brown, the abolitionist militiaman who led a raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry in 1859. The plan was to take the arms and lead a slave insurrection throughout the South. Had Brown succeeded, it would have affected not only southerners, but northerners, too, says Harris. Northerners “would have been so alienated” by the violence “that the idea of any kind of abolition movement would have died right there.”

But for Emerson, says Harris, what mattered was that Brown “was following his inner light. He had this intuition about what was right and, therefore, even an act as flagrantly illegal as taking over a federal arsenal was the absolutely right thing to do. Thoreau agreed. ... They compared him to Christ. He wasn’t merely a hero. He was just one of the greatest men of all time.”

Modern historians continue to glorify Brown, says Harris, without understanding the catastrophic effect it would have had on blacks and whites alike had his plot succeeded. One recent biography of Brown is called “America’s Good Terrorist.”

“One calls him the father of civil rights,” says Harris. “This is all baloney, and it’s an example of the woke ideology that’s infected able historians.”

Brown’s destructive furies are at the source of elite support for the Black Lives Matter riots and the virtual canonization of felon George Floyd. So is the elite ambition to outpace the masses.

“The self-congratulatory elite like to pat themselves on the back for having advanced opinions,” says Harris. “But so many

of the ideas that used to be regarded as progressive” are now accepted, such as gay marriage.

Thus, in order to stay ahead of popular opinion, progressives chase causes that are unsupportable—“like saying that guys can go into girls’ locker rooms,” says Harris, referring to the transgender agenda.

The woke elite are contemptuous of their fellow Americans, says Harris, but he doesn’t believe the destruction they cause is intentional.

“I don’t for a moment think that these people sit down and say, ‘How can we destroy the economy’” with the climate-change agenda? “They’re actually convinced that they have the answers and that we need them to provide the answers for us, because we are either too stupid or too evil.”

Without a properly functioning press pointing out that progressive ideas will lead to disaster, says Harris, the best-case scenario for America at present is a “wake-up call from reality. But the problem,” he says, “is that oftentimes a wake-up call from reality is devastating.”

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