

Thomas A. Michaud

Anatomy of the Progressive Revolution

The degree to which market economies are grounded on moral norms that are affirmed as metaphysically objective and universal, is the degree to which the market economies can flourish. Without such normative grounds, moral turpitude can corrupt a market economy, ultimately resulting in the economy’s collapse. The actors in the economy lose trust in each other; there is no mutual respect and honesty among them. Without moral norms, market commerce degenerates into gang war types of vicious “combat zones” wherein success means eliminating the competition, both economically and literally.

Throughout history market morality has been due typically to the influence of religion on culture. The moral norms of religion establish a cultural infrastructure for trust, honesty, fair dealing, and moral accountability among persons acting in the market.

There is also a historical non-religious source of market “morality.” This is not a morality that is based on principles of honesty and mutual respect for the value and dignity of others. It is the “morality” of the dictates of a government authority exercising a “command and control” economy, which, in current times in the United States, is manifest in Progressive collectivist economics of socialism. The authoritarian collectivist government aims to establish, regulate, and enforce what is

Thomas A. Michaud — School of Professional Studies, West Liberty University, W.V., USA
e-mail: tmichaud@westliberty.edu ▪ ORCID: no data

“right” for commerce. Morality, in such collectivism, does not grow organically through the influence of religion, but is imposed on culture according to the ideological aims of the governing authority. As history has shown, however, command and control collectivist economies are not as long-lived or beneficial to persons as market economies that grow organically within the religiously nurtured morality of their culture.

The first two sections of this article will describe and contrast the Traditional view of religion as the source of cultural morality that influences politics and economics with the Progressive revolutionary aims to transform culture by imposing the revolutionaries’ ideological “social justice” morality of a collectivist political economy. The vicissitudes of the Progressive revolutionary agenda will be analyzed and critiqued in detail. The third section will expose a worrisome, fundamental philosophical problem with the Progressive agenda, namely the Progressive De-Personalization. This article will then finish with some remarks regarding what is at stake for the future of market-based political economy in the United States.

The Traditional View

Along with many other Traditionals, the late politico Andrew Breitbart believed that politics is downstream from culture, and culture is downstream from religion.¹ To expand on Breitbart’s proposition, culture, especially morality, flows from religion, and politics and economics flow from culture.

Breitbart’s Traditional view of the relationship between religion, culture, politics, and economics has a profound heritage including some

¹ This Traditional view of Andrew Breitbart is referenced in Christopher Chantrill, “An American Manifesto” (October 2017); available online—see the section *References* for details. See also Dan McLaughlin, “Politics Is Still Downstream of Culture” (May 2016); available online—see the section *References* for details.

of the United States' founders. In his "Farewell Address," George Washington, for example, stated:

Of all the dispositions which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports . . . these [are the] great pillars of human happiness . . . [Where] is the security for prosperity, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? . . . [Let] us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of a peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of free government.²

Washington could not be more explicit with his belief that morality flows from religion, and since morality is necessary for a free "popular," democratic republic government, so too is religion necessary. His mentions of prosperity, property and happiness reveal his firm understanding that a free market economy that allows for the pursuit of happiness does require a religiously based morality. His reference to religiously based oaths, such as swearing to "tell the truth, so help you God," further reinforces the need for religious morality to maintain honesty and justice in, and the security of, a free nation.³

Following Washington, John Adams recognized that the republic, freedom, and prosperity depend on preserving a moral citizenry.

² George Washington, "Farewell Address," 16–17. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

³ The significance of religiously based oaths, the so-called "wall of separation" between the public and private realms concerning religion, and other issues pertaining to the importance of religion in a democratic republic are discussed at length in: Thomas Michaud, "Demokracja potrzebuje religii [Democracy Needs Religion]," trans. P. Tarasiewicz, *Człowiek w Kulturze [Man in Culture]* 20 (2008): 101–111.

Adams affirmed that, “It is religion and morality alone which can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand.”⁴

Like Breitbart, Washington and Adams, the late Richard John Neuhaus, a twenty-first-century culture commentator, observed that, “Politics is chiefly a function of culture, at the heart of culture is morality and at the heart of morality is religion.”⁵

To encapsulate these views, the traditional position can be represented as:

RELIGION
MORALITY
CULTURE
POLITICS ECONOMICS

In the Traditional view, morality—norms/standards for what constitutes a good or bad action—flows from religion and grows organically in culture. It is ultimately from religion and morality that persons develop their beliefs as to virtue vs. vice, what is the good/happy life, the importance of the family, the sense of individual accountability, and the personal responsibility for earning and stewarding wealth. The interrelationship between politics and economics is influenced by the culture, which, for Traditionals, results in a political economy that values free enterprise, market commerce, individual achievement, a limited gov-

⁴ John Adams, “Letter to Zabdiel Adams, 21 June 1776.” Available online—see the section *References* for details.

⁵ This well-known quote from Richard John Neuhaus is often cited in “quotable quotes” sorts of sites (e.g., <https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/8122>). Richard John Neuhaus, the founder of the journal *First Things*, also said that: “The first thing to say about politics is that politics is not the first thing” (https://www.azquotes.com/author/10752-Richard_John_Neuhaus). The Traditional Neuhaus clearly did not believe that politics has or should have a greater influential force on society than religion, morality, and culture, unlike the Progressives who maintain that politics is and should be the principal influential force on society.

ernment and individual autonomy. Traditionals highly value citizens as free individual persons whose liberty to pursue happiness and personal flourishing should respect morally all other persons and should be protected, and unabridged by their democratic republic. This Traditional appreciation of the individual person is precisely a main Progressive target for fundamental change as will be explained in the following anatomy of the Progressive revolution.

The Progressive View

The late U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan analyzed the difference between Traditionalism (conservatism) and Progressivism (liberalism) in this way: “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.”⁶ Moynihan recognized that in the conservative, Traditional, view culture is the driver of social success. He also recognized that for liberals, politics rules, so that a culture that is not driven by their Progressive politics is damned and must be reformed to save it from its own backwardness. His insight illumines a basic conviction of the Progressive revolutionary strategy that politics can change culture and make it conform to the ideological ideals for an enlightened, “woke” society. The full Progressive agenda can be represented with the following graphic.

POLITICS
ECONOMICS
CULTURE
(MORALITY)
EDUCATION JUSTICE SYSTEM MEDIA

⁶ The citation for this frequently referenced quote from Daniel Moynihan is: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/116754-the-central-conservative-truth-is-that-it-is-culture-not>.

This graphic can be best explicated by offering a series of points that briefly describe its facets and the relationships among them.

1. For Progressives, collectivist politics is the prime mover for gaining power and control over society with their revolutionary agenda. Progressives' devotion to their ideology is a type of religious zeal. They are indeed zealots, uncompromising ideologues who are convinced that their position has all of the answers even before questions arise. And if their political answers, solutions, do fail or do not yield immediate results, they tend to blame it on the backward Traditionals, the unsophisticated and obstinate religious right, or some constructed "force" beyond their control like climate change or a pandemic.

2. Progressive politics and their agenda itself are devoid of religion. In the name of their supreme value of social justice, religion must be excluded. No influential moral force greater than their ideology can be admitted. The unenlightened morality of Traditional religions must be deconstructed and substituted with their politically constructed "woke" morality: a social justice morality that serves their vision of collective unity.

3. Progressive politics wages its revolution with the weapon of economics. Through socialist dirigisme, economic policies create antagonisms between classes, races, ethnicities, and genders. Progressives' favored groups are those who are oppressed victims by past economic inequalities and inequities. They are given or promised privileged status through various government policies and programs. These groups' allegiance to the Progressive agenda is fortified by such privileges.

4. Progressive economics secures their politics and engenders the change in culture they seek. They contend that without the social justice morality they promise, the nation will be overwhelmed by the many crises it faces. Only their political economic ideology will ensure true social justice. Janet Yellen, White House Cabinet Secretary for the De-

partment of the Treasury, has bluntly stated this alarming warning: “The country is also facing a climate crisis, a crisis of systemic racism, and an economic crisis that has been building for fifty years . . . I believe economic policy can be a potent tool to improve society. We can—and should—use it to address inequality, racism, and climate change.”⁷

5. As indicated, it is social justice morality that Progressives strive to establish as a substitute for Traditional morality in economics and in culture at large. Their social justice morality emphasizes compensatory and distributive justice. Compensatory justice aims to correct the past and present injustices to oppressed groups. They promote government “compensations” such as reparations (financial and otherwise), affirmative action programs, and selective applications of criminal justice in regard, for instance, to rioting, property destruction, and looting. Distributive justice aims to correct inequalities and inequities suffered by oppressed groups in regard to earning and accumulating wealth. Again, government-managed and, if need be, -enforced examples include free college tuition, guaranteed basic income, universal medical care, housing, food/meal programs, childcare, and “tax the rich” progressive income taxation.⁸

6. Progressive politics implemented by their socialistic economics according to their social justice morality, and the interaction of these factors, generate revolutionary changes in culture. These changes are spurred on and spread by facets of culture led by Progressive activists. Public education, and much of private education, adhere to and inject

⁷ Janet Yellen, quoted in *Catalyst: Journal of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights* 48, no. 5 (June 2021): 8. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

⁸ For a thorough critique of Progressive social justice see: Thomas Michaud, “Krytyka sprawiedliwości ‘poprawnej politycznie’ [Critiquing ‘Politically Correct’ Justice],” trans. R. Lizut, in *Sprawiedliwość – idee a rzeczywistość [Justice: Theories and Reality]*, ed. P. Jaroszynski, et al. (Lublin: Fundacja “Lubelska Szkoła Filozofii Chrześcijańskiej,” 2009), 37–44.

Progressive ideology into their curricula and organizational leadership. The revolutionaries want education at all levels, but especially higher education, to be “government education” which promotes the Progressive agenda. For them, as they happily admit, education is indoctrination, since educators and educational contents that oppose “The Agenda” are summarily cancelled.⁹

7. Progressives believe that the justice system has been systematically unjust and must be reformed and saved by their social justice morality. The system must be repopulated with Progressive ideologues in such positions as police leadership, government prosecutors, and judges, especially in the higher courts including the US Supreme Court. With the moral standards of social justice, the legal system must be used, when possible, to reform economic issues, as well as criminal law for economic and criminal law reform, while advocating for and ruling in favor of the oppressed.

8. Education, the Justice System, and the Media interact to form a collective unity that strengthens and advances the Progressive agenda. Their unified collective efforts are indefatigable; they seize every opportunity Progressive politicians create for them in order to sustain a “permanent revolution” that simply does not retreat. The media are an integral factor in the unceasing propagation of the revolution. They spread the message of the Agenda, so that the facets of culture maintain a collective focus. “Media” in this context has a broad meaning. It includes print media, social media, mainstream TV news, and entertainment media, such as streaming TV services (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, Prime, Amazon, and HBO), sports shows (ESPN, CBSSN, and FS1), and

⁹ For more analysis of the Progressive impact on education see: Thomas Michaud, “Postmodernistyczne wyzwania dla katolickiego kształcenia na poziomie wyższym [Postmodern Challenges to Catholic Higher Education],” trans. Agnieszka Lekka-Kowalik, in *Filozofia i Edukacja [Philosophy and Education]*, ed. P. Jarosynski, *et al.* (Lublin: Fundacja “Lubelska Szkoła Filozofii Chrześcijańskiej,” 2005), 45–53.

movie studios. TV series (comedies and dramas) and movies are filled with Progressive propaganda. In fact, if a series offers an alternative, more Traditional perspective, it risks cancellation. The Progressive scions of social media are uninhibited lords of their fiefdoms. “Un-woke” posts and individuals are cancelled if they communicate unenlightened views. The media’s collective prosecution of the “cancel culture” movement has indeed become a potent force in executing the permanent revolution.

9. The concept of “permanent revolution” is fundamental to the Progressive agenda. This Marxist notion was adopted and adapted by Leon Trotsky in the early twentieth century. Trotsky’s words can be paraphrased to express the Progressive aims: The Progressive permanent revolution accepts no compromise. The revolution can end only with the complete liquidation of Traditional culture. The permanent revolution is not a leap by the Progressives but the reconstruction of the nation under the dictatorship of the Progressives.¹⁰ Chairman Mao Ze-dong had similar ideas with his notion of Continuous Revolution, which was the guiding thrust of his Cultural Revolution.¹¹ The Progressives’ revolution is not new to history. Collectivist/socialistic morality, economics and culture have happened before, but never have they entirely succeeded. They have not succeeded in the Soviet Union, or in Cuba, and not even in China, which is refashioning its communism in certain ways to expand its sphere of influence by engaging the global market economy.

¹⁰ The underlined words in this paragraph are from Leon Trotsky’s “The Permanent Revolution” (1929). Available online—see the section *References* for details. The word “Progressive” has been substituted for “Proletariat.”

¹¹ For more on Mao’s notions of Continuous Revolution and Cultural Revolution, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continuous_revolution_theory.

The Progressive Depersonalization

The political is the personal and the personal is the political. This maxim was a slogan of the late 1960s feminist and student movements. It also expresses axiomatically the Progressives' "identity politics," which can be defined as, "Politics in which groups of people having a particular racial, ethnic, social, gender or cultural identity tend to promote their own specific interests or concerns . . ." ¹² Identity politics:

is a kind of cultural politics. It relies on the development of a culture that is able to create new and affirmative conceptions of the self, to articulate collective identities, and to forge a sense of group loyalty. Identity politics requires the development of rigid definitions of the boundaries between those who have particular collective identities and those who do not. ¹³

To offer some additional traits, identity politics is a politic of cultural change. The identity groups develop tribal boundaries, which may intersect with other identity groups that have suffered injustice and oppression, but boundaries absolutely exclude any group of non-victims, the oppressors. The identities define the self within the cultural collective. To self-identify with a collective requires group loyalty, typically a loyalty that replaces any Traditional aspect of culture, such as religious loyalty or patriotic commitment to one's nation.

The wicked irony of "the personal is the political" axiom is, however, that it is precisely the personal, the sense of oneself as an individual, which the Progressive revolution aims to cancel. A society's culture without a strong sense of the individual as essential to the person is bereft of crucial values like individual/personal autonomy and moral responsibility, self-reliance, individual/personal achievement and reward,

¹² This is a paraphrase of the "identity politics" definition from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity%20politics>.

¹³ Jeffrey Escofier, quoted in: Joan Mandel, "How Political Is Personal: Identity, Politics and Social Change." Available online—see the section *References* for details.

and individual/personal property and wealth. These values are of baseline importance to Traditional culture. Erasing and substituting them with ideologically charged collective identities enables the cultural transformation that Progressives desire.

The individual is a locus of rights and responsibilities. Our personal identity is who and what we become as individual persons. We become persons insofar as we respect those rights for others and ourselves, and fulfill those responsibilities. Individuals grow and mature to become persons. Persons retain their individuality while realizing their responsibilities to themselves, families, communities, and nation. Our freedom, self-determination, liberty, ambitions, and aspirations are most perfectly fulfilled in the process of becoming persons.

The Progressive personal identity effectively liquidates the individual. The individual is not something real, the core of our self, but merely an epiphenomenon of our collective group identity.¹⁴ The collective group is the locus of rights and responsibilities. Our right to self-determination is nothing more than acting with and for the social justice sake of the collective. Our prime responsibility is to oppose the social injustice that our group, and all of the other groups with which we intersect, have suffered and are suffering. With the cancellation of the individual person, the Progressive revolution is able to employ strategically its social justice morality to provide opportunity, cover for establishing its socialist economics, and fundamentally transform the culture of the United States to create a new nation that has disposed of its Traditional history. The Progressives' permanent revolution can abide no other outcome.

¹⁴ I must acknowledge my colleague and friend, Curtis Hancock, who used the term "epiphenomenon" to describe the individual in our conversation about the Progressives' fundamental change of the nature of the human person.

Final Remarks

The advancement of the Progressive revolution hinges on redefining the human person. Just as successful market economies need Traditional morality rooted in their culture, Progressives plant their ideological social justice morality in culture and nurture it with identity politics. Identity politics excises the individual and reduces the person to a collective entity, which then can be more easily manipulated by social justice morality and directed by the Progressive state. Socialist economics is a means for Progressive politics to command and control the culture and generate total cultural change. Full transformation of the culture requires widespread acceptance of the Progressive collective view of human nature.

The Progressive revolution aims to change the way in which people understand themselves, understand their very humanity as collective beings. If their revolution ultimately succeeds, it will have ongoing permanence since it will have to correct continuously lingering cultural issues. For instance, criminal guilt must become understood as the fault of some sort of injustice suffered by the perpetrator's collective. Any beliefs in and efforts to earn private wealth and property would have to be rectified by the state. Moreover, even eschatological beliefs in personal immortality, an individual afterlife, would have to be challenged, probably suppressed, by the state.

The Progressive revolution against Traditional society is fomenting a civil war in the United States, albeit a cold war, but a war nonetheless. Effective resistance begins with understanding the revolution's anatomy, and recognizing and rejecting Progressive "woke" political strategies and leaders as abetted by educational institutions, the justice system and the media. Progressives will not abandon their permanent revolution, though resistance can weaken it, perhaps even to the extent

that it becomes nothing more than an annoying facet of the cultural fringe.



Anatomy of the Progressive Revolution

SUMMARY

A cultural infrastructure of shared morality is necessary for the success of market economics. Traditional views maintain that religion is the nurturing source of the morality, which grows in the culture. The Progressive revolution aims to overturn Traditional morality and impose its social justice morality on culture. This article dissects and critiques the multifaceted Progressive revolution in the United States, while contrasting it with the Traditional view. It argues that the ultimate aim of the Progressive revolution is to redefine the human person through identity politics as a collective entity, which essentially liquidates the individual, conforms the person to social justice morality, and establishes socialistic economics.

KEYWORDS

Progressive revolution, economics, morality, religion, traditional morality, social justice morality, human person, identity politics, collective entity, individual, socialistic economics.

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