

Faith in the Future as the Core of Progressivism¹

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Here on Progressive Commons in early June, Ken Rufo posted a simple survey poll, asking what our readers believed to be core progressive "values." Ken's poll and subsequent discussions suggest that progressives today lack a consensus on what modern "progressivism" really means. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it never hurts to re-examine our beliefs, especially if it helps knit progressives into a closer political effort or to attract others to the progressive cause. This essay is an attempt to articulate, at least from my perspective, a core principle shared by progressives, examine how progressivism relates to competing political orientations, and examine how a pluralistic approach might be taken by progressives to better unite ourselves.

The Core of Progressivism

In Ken's poll on progressive core values, "equality" seemed to strike a chord with most readers, leading "accountability" two-to-one. Given a century of egalitarian rhetoric from the left, and massive increases in economic inequality within our society, it does seem natural and "obvious" that equality is a key progressive value.

I would like to suggest, however, that another value lies deeper and closer to the core of what it means to be a progressive. Simply put, progressives are so named because they display a faith in *progress* itself. This might seem either trivial or obvious, so it deserves a bit of unpacking.² Abstracted away from a specific theory of history or political change, I'm using the term *progress* to denote the notion that events trend in a specific direction, either inherently or because of the active efforts of individuals. More specifically, "progress" in the social and political arena is the idea that our collective social life can and should improve along the dimensions of freedom and fairness. Progressives thus believe that the proper job for an engaged citizenry is to take the world as we find it, and make it fairer, freer, and more equal. In short, progressives see the American story as one of increasing civic freedom and fairness (however hard won), and generally look to the future for a continuation of these trends. We are not wistful for a past which, by the evidence of history, often was less fair, less free, and less equal than the times in which we find ourselves.

Equality, by this account, is one of a handful of "metrics" that progressive efforts hope to increase within society, *because* of its ability to create social progress. We work for less inequality, instead of working to justify its increase. Broader access to the benefits of our society, more people who celebrate our differences rather than decrying them as moral

failures, better access to political office and voting for those previously marginalized -- these are a few of the yardsticks by which we measure whether "progress" has occurred within civil and political society. At the level of principles, progressives tend to identify the term "freedom" with *non-dominance*: the notion that freedom consists in ensuring that private individuals are not subject to domination which constrains personal choices or options, whether such domination is collective, or private and individual.³

Much of the above sounds like what Americans have been accustomed to think of as "liberalism" in recent decades -- the "liberalism" of the Warren Court, FDR's "New Deal" and Johnson's "Great Society," for example. The core of each has been a doctrinal or policy program aimed at *change* -- at increases in the opportunity, fairness, or access available to additional groups of Americans. In this sense, modern political "liberalism" is often essentially progressive. But not all liberals are progressive, and not all liberalism is progressive.⁴ It is possible, for example, to support civil rights, approve of healthy levels of taxation to support public works, and still have a view of society and social relations that does not admit to the need for further change, or even believe that social conditions had been better in the past.⁵

Varieties of Opposition to Progressivism

In contrast to progressives, conservatives do not yearn for "progress" as defined here. The archetypal conservative believes that "things are fine the way they are," or possibly even that the past was better than the present, and that our best course of action may be to "restore" conditions as they seem to have existed -- in our parent's day, in the last years of the 19th century, in the days of the Founders, or at some other "golden age." Seen in this light, "progressive" and "conservative" seem to be naturally opposing concepts, far more meaningful than the popular but inaccurate distinction between "liberals" and conservatives.⁶

Another type of "conservative" is not so much a believer that our past was better than the present, but is simply a skeptic that efforts to intentionally create "progress" have created more good than harm. This form of skepticism aims not to commit the same error (as would conservatives who work to reestablish a past "golden age"), but to simply "leave things alone" and allow the "natural" way of things take its course. In this view, which should be recognizable as the core of modern "libertarianism," tyranny usually arises through efforts to "plan" social change -- either to improve upon the present, or to restore a late, lamented past.⁷ Conservatives in general (and skeptics in particular) thus tend to identify "freedom" with *non-interference*: the notion that freedom consists in allowing private choices to stand as much as possible without collective interference, even if these private choices result in the continuation of various forms of discrimination and dominance.

Certainly, conservatives can point to horror after horror in the 20th century, each linked some utopian vision based on a "planned" society and the coercive use of power to achieve it. Not all of the 20th century's planning catastrophes originated on the left, but certainly some of the very worst did. Progressives have grown more sensitive to this dynamic, since World War II, and especially since the final collapse of Marxist regimes

worldwide. One of Orwell's lasting contributions, in fact, was to force the Anglo-American left to focus upon the horrors of Stalinist Russia, dispelling the myth that liberal social hopes depended upon the success of the Bolshevik experiment.

Orwell's warning was doubly effective because it did not issue from a skeptic about the possibility of progress towards a humane society, but from a great defender of social justice. Moreover, his critical method was quite different from other critics of Stalinism. He neither attacked Marxist theory directly (though he was quite capable of doing so), nor did he, like Hayek, argue that freedom and planning were fundamentally incompatible. Instead, as Richard Rorty argues, *1984* sensitized readers:

to a set of excuses for cruelty which had been put into circulation by a particular group -- the use of the rhetoric of "human equality" by intellectuals who had allied themselves with a spectacularly successful criminal gang.

For progressives, this is a particularly important point. Conservatives and skeptics have been particularly successful in painting "the left" with a single brush -- conflating the laudable desire to relieve suffering and foster social justice with the actions of self-serving thugs and with the intellectual and empirical bankruptcy of "central planning" as a tool for economic reform.

Thus, what progressives must explain and defend most strongly is our central value and its continued relevance. "Progress" in relieving suffering and improving the life chances of the next generation is an important social and political goal. Our job, as progressives, is to think carefully about how to achieve these goals without repeating the tragic mistakes of the past. From this premise, all else follows: defending the social safety net, improving the functioning of our constitutional democracy, renewing our commitment to civil rights, and creation of a true "stake hold" in society for all citizens. *These* goals, not the tired clichés of an archaic Marxist "left," are truly representative of today's political progressives.

Many Roads to Progressivism

Unity of goals notwithstanding, progressives arrive at these central values and political commitments from many different paths. The "standard narrative" of modern conservatives seems to be that progressivism is a secular vision for society, and that progressives seek a post-modernist purge of the special place that religion holds for many in our society. Nothing could be further from the truth – progressives include among their ranks many that have deep religious faith but also believe in our ability to create progress towards social justice. More than ever, progressive rhetoric needs to avoid the polarization between secular and religious views of society that is doing so much to benefit conservatives in electoral politics today. This starts with recognizing that there are many roads to justifying our faith in progress and social justice, many ways to reach the same core values.

In defending progressive values publicly, I believe it is critical for us to develop arguments for progressive politics which are *incompletely theorized*.⁸ Incompletely theorized arguments offer a central idea, a central "point", to which people with diverse cultural, religious, and political arguments can subscribe, but leave "incomplete" some of the detailed justifications for the argument. Too often in the past, the left has sacrificed effectiveness and scale in exchange for ideological purity; often, the left has spent more time fighting itself than fighting our true political opponents. This must stop if we are to regain a measure of political success, but consensus cannot occur by insisting upon complete agreement at a philosophical level. Instead, following Jeffrey Stout, we need to make room for the distinctive voices of individuals to differ on *why*, as long as we can come to agreement often enough about *how* and *what* needs to be done.⁹

Certainly, there are as many progressive points of view as there are progressives, but we can also identify several traditions of thought which inform modern progressives. Each forms a source of arguments justifying progressive ideals and policies, and supports the "master narrative" of *progress* within which we conduct our political lives. First, there is a substantial tradition within Christianity which aims at the perfection and improvement of earthly society, as a reflection of core Christian values. This tradition, in many ways, gave rise to the Progressivism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A second progressive "tradition" unites various forms of secular, teleological thought which sees human history as inherently trending in the direction of greater freedom and democracy. This progressive tradition often draws upon a Hegelian philosophy of history, and sees much that is inevitable about the "triumph" of democracy in the wake of Communism's collapse. Finally, a third progressive "tradition" disavows teleology in all its forms and instead draws upon a Deweyan pragmatism to see any and all "progress" as contingent facts of history, hard won when it occurs but never inevitable. This tradition includes John Dewey, Walt Whitman, and more recently the philosopher Richard Rorty, and draws upon a naturalistic, Darwinian (but not *social* Darwinian!) view of humanity and its place in nature.

Conclusion

Each of the progressive traditions I noted above has something to teach us. Others will do a better job than I could in fashioning arguments in support of a renewed progressivism from the first two traditions, and I hope to see such arguments on Progressive Commons. At a personal level, I resonate most strongly with the pragmatic tradition of progressive liberalism, and I close by noting how pragmatism highlighted for me the rarity, and fragility, of social progress in our world.

For me, pragmatism is a powerful perspective *because* it lends itself well to understanding the fragility of the freedoms we enjoy. Orwell's *1984* depicts a crisp example of this fragility, showing us (as Rorty notes):

that it *just happened* that rule in Europe passed into the hands of people who pitied the humiliated and dreamed of human equality, and that it may *just happen* that the world will wind up being ruled by people who lack any such sentiments

or ideas....The triumph of Oligarchical Collectivism, if it comes, will not come because people are basically bad, or really are not brothers, or really have no natural rights, any more than Christianity and political liberalism have triumphed (to the extent they have) because people are basically good, or really are brothers, or really do have natural rights. History may create and empower people like O'Brien as a result of the same kind of accidents that have prevented those people from existing until recently -- the same sort of accidents that created and empowered people like J.S. Mill and Orwell himself.¹⁰

I take this point as the major contribution of pragmatism (and certain aspects of post-modern philosophy) to progressive thought. As progressives, we must stop assuming that liberal freedoms will always exist, or that democracy and liberal freedoms are synonymous, and that our task is simply to figure out how to win elections. Part of our job is to continually re-imagine what “progress” should mean within the changing circumstances of history.

Faith in the future is not only the core of progressivism; progress has long been a quintessentially American virtue, and one that progressives share with many who now gravitate towards conservatism because of the Left’s tendency towards dogmatism. I’ve argued here that in addition to figuring out how to regain political power, and what we’ll do with it, progressives need to figure out how to embrace arguments made by those with whom we might share common ground in believing that progress is possible, but who may feel that the “left” has rejected their traditions and principles. Only by doing so, I believe, will we restore the progressive tradition in this country to being the outlook of a people which faces the future with hope, rather than dread.

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² It might also be assumed that I’m implying the progressives share a “philosophy of history” or other trappings of the Marxist left. I do not mean this at all, nor do I mean to imply that teleology of any kind is a necessary component of progressivism, despite the fact that some contemporary progressives are teleologists. As the latter half of this essay attempts to demonstrate, it is entirely possible to envision a type of “progress” which does not imply that there is an *inherent* direction to history.

³ I borrowed the distinction between types of freedom (non-dominance versus non-interference) from Phillip Pettit’s work on republicanism and the classical political tradition. I believe this distinction between types of freedom is at the core of the difference between progressivism and various forms of conservatism in America today; as such the distinction deserves a far better examination than I’m giving it here. See Pettit, *Republicanism*.

⁴ This, I believe, is the root of Ken Rufo’s point in naming our collective efforts *Progressive Commons*, and insisting that *liberal* and *progressive* aren’t necessarily the same thing.

⁵ A good example might be Senator Joseph Lieberman, who appears to straddle the fence between a traditional economic liberalism and a traditional social conservatism (i.e., a more traditional and less “fundamentalist” conservatism than that visible in the Republican party today).

⁶ Indeed, modern American conservatives bear little relation to traditional, Continental conservatives (who typically wished to preserve the power of monarchs, the aristocracy, or the Church). In contrast, the

majority of American conservatives are actually “liberals” in the broad, 19th century sense – approving of democratic power relations, market economics, at least some degree of individualism, and the lack of hereditary or entrenched aristocracy beyond that which economic concentration creates. In this sense, virtually all progressives and most conservatives in the United States are “liberal”; these groups may be contrasted to a small minority which is “anti-liberal” in the sense that they do support more authoritarian, theocratic, or traditionally aristocratic forms of political organization. Political discussion would be greatly facilitated, in my view, if we operated with more accurate terminology, recognizing that three major groups are operative in the American landscape, with the more conservative two typically in (uneasy) alliance.

⁷ The classic statement of this view is, of course, Friedrich Hayek’s classic *The Road to Serfdom*.

⁸ I borrow this term most directly from Cass Sunstein, *One Case at a Time*, and other works.

⁹ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*.

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*.