

Scott Philip Segrest
U.S. Military Academy, West Point
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The Core of Progressivism

The analysis of progressivism's core Eric Voegelin gave six decades ago in his *New Science of Politics* remains the most illuminating. That core is the Christian idea of history gutted of spiritual substance and turned from its original destination. The original idea, classically articulated by St. Augustine, was that the human history that really counts, of those who love and follow God, is a pilgrim's progress to a perfect city, a journey with no map and no guide but God himself to a mysterious place not of this world. The classic symbolization was Abraham's quest when, on hearing the call, left his old home in Ur of the Chaldeans for a land that God would show him. The great modern ideological formations, Voegelin said—progressivism, utopianism, and revolutionary activism—are all moved by a similar vision, but God has dropped out of the picture, and the process has become a quest for political perfection in this world, to be achieved not by God's but human hands. When the ends and means are clearly laid out, as by Marx, the result is revolutionism; when the final perfect state is stressed, but with no clarity about the means of getting there, the result is utopianism; when the movement is stressed without clarity about the end, the result is progressivism (*New Science of Politics* 186). All these movements involve, along with a new interpretation of history, attempts to create new bases of authority, new human standards, and ultimately new men and a new reality. The four-fold existential structure recognized by the ancients of God-man-society-world remains in place, but the parts have been reinterpreted or sometimes—in God's case—replaced with something else.

Richard Rorty confirmed the thesis thoroughly and profoundly in his lectures on American progressivism published as *Achieving Our Country*, up to and including the religious character of the movement. Rorty's thought is exemplary of progressivism to a degree no other intellectual's I can think of has been: it represents a progressivism fully conscious of itself, fully aware of its presuppositions and implications, and Rorty made those presuppositions and implications explicit. His analysis of progressivism is therefore invaluable for helping us understand the essential meaning of the thing.

The essence of Rorty's philosophic and political project—for him, “philosophic” and “political” are not distinct categories—is the establishment of a new “civic religion” grounded not in God but in a “thoroughgoing secularism” and involving “new conception[s] of what it is to be human,” of human community, man's relation to nature, and human authority. He wants a world “in which nothing save freely achieved consensus among human beings has any authority at all” (*Achieving Our Country*, 15, 18,

38). His vision is “utopian” (his word, p. 18), but not in Voegelin’s sense of the term. There is an imaginary ideal of the kind of society sought—one in which, in particular, “selfishness” and “sadism” (economic and psychological evils, respectively) are things of the past and “diversity” of “self-creation” is embraced—but Rorty assumes society will never cease to evolve, that human happiness will take forms unimaginable to us today and keep taking new forms indefinitely (AOC, 24-25, 76-77, 80-82, 31).

Rorty understands this project as progressivist (he uses the word “Leftist”) and grounds it in a quasi-Hegelian view of history, in “historicism” (Rorty’s word). Historicism in its purest form, the form Rorty adopts, presupposes that nothing is eternal and that there are therefore no constants by which man and history may be measured. It means most fundamentally, Rorty says, “the temporalization of ultimate significance, and of awe” (20), which requires rethinking old conceptions of God and reality, and thus of man and society. “The meaning of human life,” he says, “is a function of how human history turns out, rather than of the relation of that history to something ahistorical” (AOC, 19). Human meaning is not, as Plato and the Christians said, in any sense a product of man’s relation to something eternal. It is alright if some people believe it is, but they should keep such beliefs to themselves because any public embrace of them would get in the way of progressive goals.

It is possible a progressive can believe in eternal ideals toward which we should be progressing, as Lincoln for instance (though he was no progressive in the strict sense) thought we should try to progress toward ever closer approximations of securing everyone’s natural rights (securing their enjoyment, that is).¹ But the progressive tendency is to reject or abandon “eternalized” ideals (AOC, 20) as too restrictive, getting in the way of personal and social self-creation. Religious progressives incline relatively more to the Lincolnian view than the secularists, and God may be for them a powerful motivating factor, but even for religious progressives worldly concerns tend to eclipse any concern for the spiritual formation of society, and indeed the concept of social spiritual formation would be unintelligible to most of them, as it is for moderns in general. Spiritual development for them tends to be radically individualized. Practically speaking, the progressivist Kingdom even for religious progressives is emphatically of this world.

A consistently historicist view of history means either that God is not eternally the same, or that he has no part in human affairs, or that there is no God. Rorty prefers the

¹ Lincoln said in his June 26, 1857 Speech at Springfield, Illinois that the authors of the Declaration of Independence, in declaring all men “created equal” in “certain inalienable rights,” “meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.” From Abraham Lincoln, “The Meaning of the Declaration of Independence,” in *Readings in American Government*, 7th ed., eds. Mary P. Nichols and David K. Nichols (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1976; rpt. 2004)

last option, but in practical terms the effect of any of these assumptions is the same: there are no “fixed standards” by which human beings may regulate their lives (AOC, 34). Rorty himself is certain that to get on with progress we need to learn to “do without God” (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, xliii). The reason is that taking God or God’s servants seriously means accepting human limits.

No past human achievement [Rorty says], not Plato’s or even Christ’s, can tell us about the ultimate significance of human life. No such achievement can give us a template on which to model our future. The future will widen endlessly. Experiments with new forms of individual and social life will interact and reinforce one another. Individual life will become unthinkably diverse and social life unthinkably free. The moral we should draw from the European past, and in particular from Christianity, is not instruction about the authority under which we should live but suggestions about how to make ourselves wonderfully different from anything that has been (24).

Self-creation is the central value, and acknowledging a divine Creator or taking your life as established in a divine “ground” of existence (Rorty’s word, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 167) makes you dependent, makes self-invention a futile and even self-destructive enterprise.

As the title of his lectures suggests, Rorty is especially interested in specifically *American* progressivism, and he recasts the American experiment in progressivist terms. Despite the patent theism of the Declaration of Independence (it references God four times, twice as one involved in human affairs) and its obvious debt to the past (British and colonial political traditions and, on Jefferson’s own account, past political thinkers including not only Locke and Sidney but Aristotle and Cicero—see Jefferson’s 1825 letter to Henry Lee), Rorty appeals to that document ironically as betokening “an Easter dawn” of secularism and a radical futurism. Following Walt Whitman, he makes the significance of the Declaration’s founding of America that it was, in Rorty’s words, “the first thoroughgoing experiment in national self-creation: the first nation-state with nobody but itself to please—not even God. We are the greatest poem because we put ourselves in the place of God: our essence is our existence, and our existence is in the future” (AOC, 22). Indeed, like most American progressives, Rorty does not seem to think much of what America *presently* is, which is part of the reason he and fellow Leftists are so eager to change it. Their talk is always of what it *could be*. “The Left,” Rorty says, “sees our country’s moral identity as still to be achieved, rather than as needing to be preserved. The Right [he says disapprovingly] thinks that our country already has a moral identity, and hopes to keep that identity intact” (31). He clearly wants to preserve Leftist achievements, but these achievements are seen as overcoming old American bad habits, the “selfishness” of the capitalists and the “sadism” of the religious moralists. The America that is—except for the journalists, reform activists, and what Rorty calls the “secular churches” of the elite universities (AOC, 50)—is very religious, capitalist (loosely speaking), and reverential of American traditions.

The loss of spiritual substance involved in the “immanentization” of Christian hope is evident in Rorty’s formulation “our existence is in the future.”² That is, we don’t exist now! When our deeper spiritual urges are not satisfied, our lives, if we don’t give up on them, are in the future. We can only hope that life will come some day, and, because non-existence is hard to bear, we must strive constantly to make that day come. This is part of why Voegelin takes revolutionary activism to be the purest form of modern ideology (*New Science of Politics*, 211). The existential emptiness tends to make people impatient, and people less easygoing of temperament than Rorty are liable to get desperate: the order of things has to change, and we have to change it now!

The existential emptiness in Rorty’s own case took the form of boredom. Reading Rorty, you get the feeling he was bored by philosophical debates and that his constant verbal provocations were in part an effort to keep himself entertained. And yet his idealistic yearnings kept him looking for something more deeply satisfying. So he kept reading, always trying out new perspectives. First he abandoned analytic philosophy (which, to be fair, is boring and humanly unfulfilling by almost any standard except the analytics’), then increasingly he abandoned philosophers for imaginative literature. But his existence was always in the future. I don’t deny that living this way might be pleasant and even exciting, but “living” here needs quotation marks.

In short, the progressive ideologue has lost his soul. Since the soul, or more precisely what Aristotle called the “immortalizing” part of it, was in the old way of thinking what made man man, the progressive has to make a new man.³ With no eternal anchor, this man will be fundamentally changeable. But for changeability to be a really good thing, he will have to be perfectible. There being no “fixed standard” for human perfection (AOC, 34), he will be infinitely perfectible, which sounds pretty good until you realize it means endless, empty, aimless striving, always becoming and never being anything. This is Rousseau’s man and (a kinder and gentler version of) Nietzsche’s “man of the future.”

For political purposes, progressive man needs a new “moral identity” (AOC, 13). But what kind of moral identity? First of all, one not constrained by any notion of “sin.” “The only sin” for Progressive Man—here Rorty quotes Emerson—“is limitation.” “This understanding of evil,” Rorty says (following Andrew Delbanco), “was basic to the Progressive Movement in American politics, and to its confidence in education and social reform” (AOC, 34). But how can there be a positive moral identity if there are no fixed standards and man is constantly changing? Rorty’s answer is the only one logically possible (and here again he is more aware of the logical requirements than most progressives): the right kind of moral identity is one I presently like, and the one Rorty

² Voegelin in *The New Science of Politics* describes the lowering of the paradisiacal end of history from a transcendent beyond envisioned by Christianity to a this-worldly concern in terms of an “imminentization of the Christian eschaton” (NSP, 187, but see also 183-86).

³ As Aristotle put it, “we should try to become immortal as far as that is possible and do our utmost to live in accordance with what is highest in us.” *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b35, trans. Oswalt (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Library of Liberal Arts, 1962).

likes is the one he knows best—the Leftist American version. As he puts it in *Achieving Our Country*, he wants Americans to “[derive] our moral identity, at least in part, from our citizenship in a democratic nation-state, and from leftist attempts to fulfill the promise of that nation” (AOC, 97).

When the substantive hope of faith (see Heb. 11:1) disappears, the replacement hope is invariably political. Human beings need a connection to something greater than themselves, as Rorty admits (AOC, 132), and the only thing greater than the individual man in a world with no God is (unless you become a very radical environmentalist or animal rights activist) human society. The desire for Heaven doesn’t disappear when God is rejected, but Heaven becomes an earthly objective and, there being no God to make it, we must make it. The Kingdom (or Republic) of Heaven becomes a political project. Of this, too, Rorty is fully conscious: “Insofar as human beings do not share the same needs, they may disagree about what is objectively the case. But the resolution of such disagreement cannot be an appeal to the way reality, apart from any human need, really is. *The resolution can only be political* [emphasis added]: one must use democratic institutions and procedures to conciliate these various needs, and thereby widen the range of consensus about how things are” (AOC, 35). A human “need” for Rorty, of course, is not an objective need, only a strongly felt preference. On Rorty’s account there is no human nature as such and so no objective hierarchy of needs, and, of course, one need that won’t be factored in is a thirst for transcendence, belief in transcendence being counterproductive to self-creation. The personal human needs are idiosyncratic, so on the individual level all people need is a private space to pursue their personal hobby-horses (their needs can be no more serious than that). The public needs, on Rorty’s model, are necessarily entirely negative—an end to institutional and psychological tyranny (see AOC, 25), especially economic exploitation and moral discrimination—pointing again to the lack of substance in progressive society: where there is no substance, there can be no positive content. The vacuity of progressive “hope and change,” then, is both necessary and desirable, necessary because no positive content is possible, and desirable because it allows for endless self-creation.

The relative aimlessness of progressivism as compared to pure utopianism or revolutionary activism is in a certain sense its saving grace. Since there is for the progressive no definite worldly End of History, there is less need than utopians or revolutionaries have for ruthlessness and violence against those unbelievers who block the way to Heaven. A progressive Left is more tolerable than a utopian or revolutionary Left. The progressive Left can, at least while continuing to have some political success, be content with melioristic reform. In fact Rorty in *Achieving Our Country* brilliantly critiques the “New Leftists” for their unwillingness to settle for incremental change and their inevitably futile attempts at what Rorty calls—in terms eerily like Voegelin’s—“magical transformations” of society (AOC, 102).⁴ In this sense Rorty is genuinely a pragmatist. “The rhetoric of [the New or what he calls “cultural”] Left,” he says,

⁴ Voegelin speaks of ideologues’ efforts to magically transform man and world in many places. For a striking instance, see his essay “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme” in his *Collected Works*, vol. 12, ed. Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

“remains revolutionary rather than reformist and pragmatic.” Their dreams of “participatory democracy and the end of capitalism” lack any practical sense.

Power will pass to the people, the Sixties Left believed, only when decisions are made by all those who may be affected by their results [and] entrepreneurship and markets...cease to play their present role. When they do, capitalism as we know it will have ended, and something new will have taken its place. But what this new thing will be, nobody knows. The Sixties did not ask how the various groups of stakeholders were to reach a consensus about when to remodel a factory rather than build a new one, what prices to pay for raw materials, and the like. Sixties leftists skipped lightly over all the questions which had been raised by the [disastrous] experience of nonmarket economies in the so-called socialist countries. They seemed to be suggesting that once we were rid of both bureaucrats and entrepreneurs, “the people” would know how to handle competition from steel mills or textile factories in the developing world, price hikes on imported oil, and so on. But they never told us how “the people” would learn how to do this. The cultural Left still skips over such questions. Doing so is a consequence of its preference for talking about “the system” rather than about specific social practices and specific changes in those practices (102-3).

And yet, despite its comparative mildness, progressivism seems inevitably to lead to authoritarian government both in its means and its end result. With respect to means, since the people are too large to meet and act together and are mostly too dim to see the need for or desirability of “doing without God” or remaking traditional government and society, progressive action will have (at least in the beginning) to be the province of the smart people—smart people, of course, if they really are smart, will be progressives—who should be given the means to attack suffering on behalf of the people. If the people don’t like what the progressives want, the progressive agenda, as with the recently passed “Obamacare” program, will have to be forced upon them for their own good. The end may be democratic, but the means, as with communism, have to be authoritarian.

But it is hard to conceive any end-state that is not authoritarian as well. The end-state is not likely to be a hard despotism in which dissent and independent action are crushed with an iron fist, but how it could escape Tocqueville’s soft despotism I cannot imagine. How could “selfishness” and “sadism” possibly be eliminated by political means (assuming they *could* be eliminated, which seems highly dubious) without the government “experts” regulating every detail of our lives? And would the social and economic equality achieved be worth the sacrifice of free will? Indeed, in the end unchecked progressivism would seem destined to kill the very creativity it most craves. So progressive success would come at the cost of humanity not only in the Greek and Christian sense of humanity but in the progressive sense as well. Perhaps the Greeks and the Christians were right after all that really living requires dying to self and that only truth can make you free.

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