

Thomas G. West, University of Dallas
Response to Charles Kesler's speech
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Dr. Kesler raises an important question. What would be the signs of the end of Progressivism? My suggestion is that we are already seeing signs of its demise, but that we don't notice them because on the surface, today's liberalism presents itself as a continuation of earlier Progressivism.

By "earlier Progressivism," I mean the theory and political program of older Progressives such as Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and John Dewey. Their program was partly implemented during the New Deal of the 1930s, and then revived and expanded in Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs of the 1960s. The earlier Progressivism could be said to have reached its zenith in 1964-65, with the Civil Rights Act, Medicare, Medicaid, Food Stamps, and dozens of new federal programs for public housing, federal involvement in public education, federal subsidies of the arts and humanities, public broadcasting, and the like. In foreign policy, the Vietnam War was being fought in the name of the old Progressive ideal: spreading the benefits of Western civilization to the backward parts of the world. The war, Johnson explained, was part of "a worldwide attack on the problems of hunger and disease and ignorance."

In the pre-1965 period, Progressive confidence in its theory and agenda was boundless. Progressives had no doubt that the spread of their power and influence was a tremendous benefit to the world abroad and to Americans at home. Senator Albert Beveridge thought that modern liberalism was part of God's plan, and that the Americans were God's chosen people, destined to spread the blessings of civilization through colonialism in the Philippines and elsewhere. Intellectuals sometimes went so far as to speak of "the apotheosis of man" as the ultimate consequence of Progressive reforms.

But something changed in the 1960s. Just when it seemed that liberalism was triumphant all over the Western world, almost overnight, doubts regarding the superiority or even the basic decency of the West began to infect liberal politicians and intellectuals. The Vietnam War protests showed this most obviously, but the collapse of confidence ran much deeper. America was increasingly labeled as imperialist, racist, sexist, and elitist. What prepared the way for this

crisis of liberal self-assurance, mostly unnoticed, is that liberal theorists had gradually abandoned their earlier faith in American and Progressive goodness. They had given up their belief in its foundation in the idea of Science and in the theory of historical progress.

Take the examples of Iraq and Afghanistan today. In both nations, the U.S. is currently propping up a corrupt regime that incorporates Islamic law in its U.S.-approved constitution. In both states, persecution of Christians is a matter of state policy. Yet the U.S. feels unable to put up more than a token resistance to these policies. The earlier Progressive belief that America knows best what is good for underdeveloped nations, and that we will impose it on them for their own good by force of arms if necessary, is gone. It is replaced by the passive acceptance of whatever laws and customs happen to prevail, even if those traditions lead to policies that Americans would regard as evil.

There are three topics which illustrate nicely this difference between confident earlier Progressivism and postmodern, post-1960s liberalism. These differences can be seen in the new view of three things: science, sex, and progress.

First, today's liberals are ambivalent toward science. The Progressives had infinite faith in Science with a capital S. They had no doubt that Science either had all the answers or was on the road to discovering them. Today, although the prestige of science remains great, it has been greatly diminished by liberal multiculturalism, which sees science as just another point of view. Many liberals go even further: For them, Western science is a way of thinking that is profoundly defective.

Two decades ago, in a widely read report, six leading humanities professors proclaimed that the "ideal of objectivity and disinterest," which "has been essential to the development of science," has been repudiated by "the consensus of most of the dominant theories" of today. Instead, today's consensus holds that "all thought . . . develop[s] from particular standpoints, perspectives, interests." In other words, there is no such thing as truth. There are only "perspectives." Today's intellectuals increasingly dismiss science as a Western perspective on reality, no more or less valid than the folk magic believed in by a Pacific Island tribe, or Islamic customs that cover women in garments that make them invisible in public.

Second, liberalism today has become preoccupied with sex. In the Founders' view, since the protection of the person and property of the citizens depends on the continued existence of the nation, the government is required by its principle of "securing these rights" to promote the

generation and education of children for citizenship. Prior to the 1960s, sex outside of marriage, whether heterosexual or homosexual, was discouraged by government and social custom. Today, sexual activity is to be freed from nearly all restraints. Abortion and homosexual conduct are considered fundamental rights. The monogamous heterosexual family is to be viewed as optional or, in some circles, as oppressive. Sexual liberation is so important that it has been equated by the Supreme Court with the right “to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

The earlier Progressives tended to follow Hegel in such matters, which led them to embrace, more or less, the Founders’ understanding of the family. However, there is a connection between sexual liberation and Progressivism. There was one premise within Progressivism that may be said to have led to the current liberal understanding of sex. That is the disparagement of nature and the celebration of human will, the idea that everything of value in life is created by man’s choice, not by nature or necessity.

Once sexual conduct comes to be evaluated in that light, it is not hard to see that government efforts to link sexual expression to marriage and children--where it is clearly linked to nature’s concern for reproduction--could easily be seen as an unjustifiable limitation of human liberty. John Dewey favored the term self-realization, because for him, the true self was still tied to reason and science. Today’s liberalism replaces self-realization with self-expression, in the name of which all barriers to sexual idiosyncrasies must appear arbitrary and tyrannical.

Third, contemporary liberals no longer believe wholeheartedly in progress. The Progressives’ faith in progress was rooted in their faith in science, as one can see especially in the European thinkers whom they admired, such as Hegel and Comte. When science is seen as just one perspective among many, then the notion of historical progress itself comes into question.

The idea of progress presupposes that what comes later is superior to what happened earlier. But contemporary liberals are reluctant to affirm the superiority of the modern West in any sense. We see this in their disinclination to support any foreign policy venture that contributes to the strength of America or of the West. Instead, they favor those that they believe will benefit other nations but not our own, such as the liberation of Kosovo or Libya.

Liberal domestic policy follows the same principle. It tends to elevate the “other” to moral superiority over against those whom the Founders would have called the decent and the honorable, those who have some claim to wisdom and virtue. In the current view, the more a

person is lacking, the greater is his or her moral claim on society. The deaf, the blind, the disabled, the poor, the ignorant, the improvident, and even (in a 1984 speech of presidential candidate Walter Mondale) the sad—those who are lowest are extolled as the sacred other. Virtues such as courage, moderation, and intelligence were still honored by the earlier Progressives. Now honor tends to be accorded to people or groups because of their status as less wealthy, less strong, and more likely to be oppressed: to women, racial minorities, the poor, and, one is sometimes tempted to think, to just about everyone except white heterosexual males who act as responsible soldiers, husbands, and fathers.

What do these changes indicate about the future of Progressive liberalism? I believe we are now in a situation where liberalism has abandoned its own foundation but has not yet confronted this fact. Liberals today are like the cartoon character Wile E. Coyote, who runs off a cliff but doesn't fall down until he notices that he is walking on air. Do liberals any longer have a reason, other than their feelings, for helping the downtrodden? What made this cause worthy in the older Progressive understanding is that it was supposedly supported by the latest research in social science, research that they were working to embody in public policy. But liberals are no longer sure that science is right, because of the challenge of multiculturalism. The question then becomes, how long can a political movement operate on autopilot, without a convincing explanation, to itself or to others, of why it is morally right to support justice in the liberal sense? Sixty years ago, Leo Strauss predicted that the more liberalism becomes conscious of its own groundlessness, the less people would remain faithful to the liberal cause. Its logical successor, Strauss suggested, is what he called "fanatical obscurantism," by which he meant the turn to increasingly willful and fanatical policies grounded either in nihilistic destructiveness or in irrational religious doctrines. The only viable civilizing alternative in the modern world, if I may speak for a moment as a long-time Board member of the Claremont Institute, is to return to the political theory of the founding.