

The Roots of the Elite Left's Attack on Freedom

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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“The CRT debate is just the latest squall in a tempest brewing and building for five years or so,” wrote Andrew Sullivan earlier this month in “[What Happened to You: The radicalization of the American elite against liberalism.](#)” Sullivan is correct that the left has turned sharply against freedom in recent years. And he vivisects the illiberal ideology about race and justice espoused by many schools, private corporations, and government agencies. However, in dating the origins of the larger tempest, Sullivan is off — depending on how you count — by about 50 years, 100 years, or perhaps 250 years.

Many Americans associate the recent round of the culture wars to the Yale University Halloween costume imbroglio of 2015. That autumn, a university official sparked outrage among undergraduates by suggesting that they should manage their own Halloween parties. Erika Christakis — at the time a lecturer in Yale’s Child Study Center and associate master at Silliman College — [advised](#) students that they were capable, without the aid of university authorities, of using their own good judgment when choosing a Halloween costume and letting classmates know if they crossed the line of good taste or failed to respect the feelings of others.

Some students vehemently disagreed. A vocal group demanded that the university oversee their parties and punish those whose holiday garb offended other students’ sensibilities.

Yale’s faculty said little. But university President Peter Salovey [concluded](#) that the controversy somehow confirmed — despite many years of effort and the expenditure of considerable sums of money to increase minority representation on campus — the persistence of deep-seated racism at the university. He announced the allocation of tens of millions of additional dollars to support racial-sensitivity training for administration, faculty, and staff, and the hiring of a decidedly more diverse — that is, *racially* diverse — faculty.

Student authoritarians — the same should be said of faculty and administration authoritarians — of this generation are the spiritual descendants of the student rebels of the 1960s. Students’ importuning universities to curb campus freedom today may seem like the opposite of students a half-century earlier who rebelled against university-imposed restrictions on freedom of expression, not least student attire. But the former carry forward the work of the latter. In the 1960s, students fought for free speech but as a means to give voice to their cutting-edge progressive sensibility, which included contempt for the logic and achievements of existing institutions and for the wisdom contained in old books and ideas. Today’s students, sustained by

a campus culture in which that progressive sensibility prevails, wish to impose it on everybody — in part, by stifling free speech.

However, it was not university students — either today's or those of the 1960s — who first introduced the idea that progressive moral and political ideas were objectively true, beyond reproach, and should be affirmed by all. That conceit we owe to the founders of the progressive era.

For example, in a 1912 essay, “The New Meaning of Government,” then-governor of New Jersey and soon-to-be president of the United States Woodrow Wilson worked out some implications of the progressive convictions that he had been articulating for decades both as a political scientist and president of Princeton University. Government, he argued, should be “an instrument of civilization and of humanity” managed by a new professional class of highly trained and scientifically adept technocrats. By virtue of their education and impartiality, they would rise above the mere “consent of the governed” in which the nation's founders grounded the legitimate exercise of political power. They would discern “genuine public opinion” — that is, not the preferences people expressed through voting and the choices they made in all the other areas of their lives but the policies that the experts determined would promote the people's better selves and best interests. Through efficient, rational, central administration, the experts would implement public policy that was unlimited by any consideration — including citizens' expressed preferences — other than the experts' authoritative reconstruction of “the purpose of the people of the country.”

On what grounds did progressives suppose that power must be shifted to experts because the people cannot be trusted to identify their own interests, much less the public policies that would advance them? “The Social Contract,” a 1762 treatise by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, gave classic expression to the idea that the will of the people was something other than what the people said they wanted or for which they voted. His point of departure in search of “some sure and legitimate rule of administration” was the proposition that “[m]an is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” Rousseau had in mind the chains of custom and tradition which, he believed, corrupt minds and hearts. A properly organized government, he argued, must see to it that each citizen “shall be forced to be free” of inherited beliefs, practices, and associations. Such coercion, Rousseau emphasized, must only be undertaken by those capable of accurately discerning the “General Will,” which reflects the people's true interests and is “constant, unalterable, and pure.”

In line with Rousseau's thinking, his intellectual and political minions through the centuries have believed that imposing on people what they ought to want reflects the highest expression of freedom and the purest form of democracy. However, these closet — and often not-so-closet — authoritarians tend to overlook Rousseau's stern insistence that identifying and executing the General Will require exceedingly rare intelligence and character.

In “[If you hate the culture wars, blame liberals](#)” — a short, perceptive essay to which Andrew Sullivan refers in his analysis of the left's intensifying illiberalism — progressive Kevin Drum provides evidence that his colleagues on the left would do well to take Rousseau's stern insistence to heart. “*It is not conservatives who have turned American politics into a culture war*

battle,” writes Drum. “*It is liberals.* And this shouldn't come as a surprise: Almost by definition, liberals are the ones pushing for change while conservatives are merely responding to whatever liberals do” [emphasis in the original]. Left-liberals, however, are a peculiar sort of aggressor. While, as Drum observes, “Democrats have been moving further and further away from the median voter for years” on issues such as crime, immigration, and race, they also have been demanding greater and greater submission on the part of the public to progressive moral judgments and policy prescriptions. In other words, the left has adopted the quasi-Rousseauian view that the public is not merely mistaken but must be emancipated from their errors — in the contemporary case through the regulation of speech and the redistribution of privileges and punishments based on race, sex, and gender properly understood.

Drum suggests that many on the left err in seeing conservatives as the “culture-war mongers” owing to a distortion explained by behavioral economics. Since the pain of losing something is greater than the pleasure of gaining a good of similar value, conservatives have reacted more intensely to “‘losing’ the customs and hierarchies that they’ve long lived with” than have progressives to their victories — for example, in the Supreme Court’s recognition of the constitutional right to same-sex marriage; in spread of the idea of gender fluidity; and in the imposition of narrative control in the mainstream media, on giant social media platforms, and within universities. “This,” according to Drum, “produces more outrageous behavior from conservatives even though liberals are actually the ur-source of polarization.”

Drum’s principal concern is electoral. He believes that the Democratic Party’s leftward lurch, especially “the whole woke movement in general,” is in danger of driving away enough “moderate Black and Hispanic voters” to give Republicans the edge. He is right that tempering its positions while exercising “empathy and tact” would go a long way to enabling the left to reach out “to the vast middle of the country.” But he fails to appreciate that the casual disdain for those who depart from the progressive party line has been assiduously cultivated by elite institutions since at least the late 1960s. And that the squall through which he wants to help the left maneuver to safety is part of a tempest that has been swirling for 250 years.

To contain the culture wars, it is necessary to counter the left’s intolerant doctrine that the job of government is to force people to be free. Schools can do their part by teaching students the alternative set forth four years after the publication of “The Social Contract” in the Declaration of Independence. By helping students to understand how a government assigned the limited task of securing rights shared equally by all enables a diverse people to prosper, schools not only transmit crucial facts about American history but also foster the toleration on which free societies depend.

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