

---

# THE FAULTY

## FOUNDATIONS OF PROGRESSIVISM

---

### *A CRITIQUE of the NAKED ELITES*

*By*

*Jay B Gaskill*

#### *I. THE NAKED EMPERORS OF OUR TIME*

Like talent-challenged celebrity wannabes who become famous by copying other artists, and exploiting special stage effects, the progressive political movement types have hijacked liberalism by misappropriating a popular brand and hiding behind facile assumptions.

1. The **brand misappropriation** by political progressives remains unchallenged. It is the shaman-like mantle of science. Human scientific and technical *progress* have given us heat, refrigeration, food processing technologies, transportation, medical and information revolutions, that have raised the quality of the lives of ordinary laborers and artisans to conditions that would have been the envy of medieval royalty. *Progressives* once referred to those enlightened ones who favored progress in this practical sense over superstition. *Political* progressives have been riding under those false colors for decades, and the media mavens who run the popular info-feeds are their clueless stable-hands.
2. There are three seductive, but **faulty assumptions** on which the political progressive movement was founded; purveyed as axiomatic wisdom, these fragile foundations are poised to collapse:
  - A. The notion that the *competence* and *morality* of the government functionaries of the state are so superior that state institutions are *entitled* to seize private assets in order to make better use of them for the ‘common good’;
  - B. The belief that improvements in the human condition are so impeded by *human nature* that state institutions have the right and obligation to reengineer the human personality;
  - C. The claim that human nature is insufficiently altruistic (meaning unwillingness to subordinate our individual interests to the collective ‘welfare of the ‘people’); this leads to the conclusion that altruism must be compelled by law.

Look over the following examples. Do you detect the pattern?

- **Prohibitions** against alcoholic beverages (that memorable progressive failure);
- **Prohibitions** against tobacco use;
- **Bans** on large sugary drinks;
- **Virtual bans on** private firearm ownership (fostering a compliant victim mindset);
- **State-sanctioned** drugs to control child behavior (Ritalin for over-diagnosed ADD);

- **Public funds** for sex change surgery and hormone ‘therapy’;
- **Selective legalization** of compliance-enhancing drugs (thinking of cannabis);
- **Can you come up with more examples?**

We may argue about individual policy merits, but these are all progressive measures; and the list gives away the game. The alteration of the human personality for the ‘public good’ is on the progressive agenda. Apparently, the progressives are the generation that did not read or heed *Brave New World*.

Few among us now seriously believe that the government’s minions, its politicians and bureaucrats, are reassuringly competent or morally endowed, or that they have made wise and effective use of the public treasure entrusted to them.

Fewer still actually believe that basic human nature should be forcibly changed; and fewer still think that the government can even attempt to do so without risking irreparable harm.

While a plurality of us still think that the government can play some altruistic role, almost no one seriously believes that government is better at it than most private charities. Traditional liberals and conservatives now doubt that government is capable of impartially and efficiently distributing resources to the deserving without major political and interest group favoritism.

These were just the obvious points. Before the deeper fallacies of the progressive agenda can be addressed, let’s first examine the healthier movements that came before.

## ***II. HOW TRADITIONAL LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM ARE BEING SIDELINED BY THE ELITES***

Liberalism and conservatism are priceless perennials. Notice how any given era differently employs the terms *liberal* and *conservative*. What we mean by these *terms* changes on matters of war, peace, prohibition and drinking, among countless other issues, depending on time and circumstance.

In the politics of Soviet Russia, for example, conservative communists and liberal communists were polar reversals of their left-right associations in US politics.

The root terms are conservation and liberation. This raises the questions, answered somewhat differently for each age and situation: *conserving what and liberating from what?*

Conservatism and liberalism are universals. Conservatives of all eras tend to conserve legacies, traditions and boundaries, while liberals tend to challenge them. These are liberalism and conservatism as universal active elements in the political process.

Some boundaries can liberate (thinking of the constitutional limits on government power). The dissolution of other boundaries (thinking of the moral boundaries that restrain the powerful) can lead to oppression. A case in point:

The sexual ‘liberation’ of the 1960’s hippy subculture in the USA effectively freed a generation of men from family obligations and sexual accountability. The ‘women’s lib’ elements within the hippy-subculture produced dropouts, single mothers with few work skills. Just how many high powered female executives emerged from the ‘liberated’ hippy subculture? The 21<sup>st</sup> century women who are increasingly evident as heavy hitters in finance and commerce tend to have ‘conservative’, not ‘liberal’ lifestyles.

In a healthy polity (sadly not ours at the moment), liberalism and conservatism operate in a dialogue framed by an agreed moral and constitutional framework. Liberals then challenge arbitrary boundaries, and conservatives defend the essential ones. Both need dialogue as a corrective because both practice policy humility based on the wisdom that unintended consequences are inevitable.

There was a golden era when traditional conservatives and liberals agreed on the military resistance to Nazism, to communism and on the removal of race-based classifications. The dialogue began to break down with the takeover of liberalism by the ideological political progressives.

The progressives have arrived and they can easily be tracked by their spoor: Progressives are the ones that lack humility, decline real dialogue, especially with conservatives, and demonize liberals who challenge them. The progressive ideologues operate well outside the constitutional and moral consensus that united liberals and conservatives on the big issues during the Cold War and the early civil rights struggles.

### **III. DAVID BROOKS – WHISTLEBLOWER**

David Brooks, while praising President Obama's Second Inaugural Address, made much the same point more obliquely, in "*The Collective Turn*", published: January 21, 2013 in the New York Times.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/22/opinion/brooks-the-collective-turn.html>

"I am not a liberal like Obama, so I was struck by what he left out in his tour through American history. I, too, would celebrate Seneca Falls, Selma and Stonewall, but I'd also mention Wall Street, State Street, Menlo Park and Silicon Valley. I'd emphasize that America has prospered because we have a decentralizing genius.

"When Europeans nationalized their religions, we decentralized and produced a great flowering of entrepreneurial denominations. When Europe organized state universities, our diverse communities organized private universities. When Europeans invested in national welfare states, American localities invested in human capital.

"America's greatest innovations and commercial blessings were unforeseen by those at the national headquarters. They emerged, bottom up, from tinkerers and business outsiders who could never have attracted the attention of a president or some public-private investment commission.

"I would have been more respectful of this decentralizing genius than Obama was, more nervous about dismissing it for the sake of collective action, more concerned that centralization will lead to stultification, **as it has in every other historic instance.**

With typical caution and understatement, **Brooks** previewed the same theme last May in "*The Age of Innocence*", published: May 17, 2012 in the New York Times.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/18/opinion/the-age-of-innocence.html?\\_r=1&ref=opinion](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/18/opinion/the-age-of-innocence.html?_r=1&ref=opinion)

"The people who pioneered democracy in Europe and the United States ... knew that if we get the chance, most of us will try to get something for nothing...

"The American founders ... built checks and balances to frustrate and detain the popular will. They also dispersed power to encourage active citizenship...

"But, over the years, this balanced wisdom was lost. Leaders today do not believe their job is to restrain popular will. Their job is to flatter and satisfy it. A gigantic polling apparatus has developed

to help leaders anticipate and respond to popular whims. Democratic politicians adopt the mind-set of marketing executives. Give the customer what he wants. The customer is always right.

“The consequences of this shift are now obvious. In Europe and America, governments have made promises they can’t afford to fulfill. ...

“The American decentralized system of checks and balances has transmogrified into a fragmented system that scatters responsibility. Congress is capable of passing laws that give people benefits with borrowed money, but it gridlocks when it tries to impose self-restraint.

“The Obama campaign issues its famous ‘Julia’ ad, which perfectly embodies the vision of government as a national Sugar Daddy, delivering free money and goodies up and down the life cycle. ....”

#### ***IV. THE RECOVERY OF LIMITS***

The progressive train is running on empty. In one country we read of ‘welfare’ riots, in another we read of asset seizures by the government. Almost everywhere else in the Progressive Imperium elsewhere there are public debt fixes, ‘concealed’ borrowing generated by zero interest ‘loans’ of fiat money... These measures are typically defended in austere economic language as if there were no underlying moral problem; but the increasingly desperate measures are the bitter fruits of moral boundaries ignored.

The starkest of choices now loom over the Imperium: Governments will be forced to back off from the bureaucratic welfare state model in favor of less ‘perfect’ but more individuated, person-to-person solutions; **or to charge head on into the total bureaucratic state.**

Expect no announcement if the bureaucratic state model prevails. You will notice that your most important choices, whether to start or change a business, to get or not get care, to work or not work in a given field or job, become petitions directed at a government agency, bureau or department, or to a tightly regulated ‘private’ one granted the same function. Your life will feel more cramped. You will learn to accept the ‘new normal’. The political system may seem democratic, but every real change in policy will be controlled by bureaucrats. Politicians are for getting ‘favors’ for their constituents. Further structural change? It may be too late. For more insight, you might seek out an Eastern European expat who lived there between 1965 and 1995.

Reasonable minds can differ about particular policies, but conservatives and old fashioned liberals are still standing on one side.

That side may be contentious, as good dialogues are, but the areas of common agreement are powerful because they are essential:

- A fierce commitment to ordered liberty and person-to-person compassion;
- a common moral and constitutional firewall against the nanny whose real name is soft tyranny;
- a common bulwark against the irreversible Brave New World mutation.

On the other side stand the ‘progressive, social justice’ warriors, in whose realm debate consists in condemnation for apostasy and where morality is a vague goal pursued in a fog with no guard rails.

This is the struggle for human compassion and freedom against collective social justice.

Liberalism ran off the rails during the second half of the 20th century when it jettisoned its religious roots (throwing out a great body of received moral wisdom in the bargain). This is a form of disability. Imagine a powerful anti-slavery struggle motivated by 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. The abolitionists were driven by a passion for human dignity rooted in the ancient verities and deep religious traditions.

All this was abandoned in the progressive mutation in favor of cultural and moral relativism. When liberalism lost the restraining power of a moral perspective, it mutated into something resembling a sport or birth defect.

The social sciences (christened 'sciences' in a moment of hubris) have gone through a similar mutation. Taken together, secular liberalism, unencumbered by moral tradition, and the so-called social sciences, similarly unencumbered, mutated into modern progressivism. The transition was like going from a ballerina's graceful *pas de deux* to Frankenstein's monster descending a staircase.

Ironically the hard physical sciences have rediscovered humility (quantum ignorance will do that) just as the faux sciences - the 'social' sciences within the academy - have lost it. But we need much more than humility; we need moral boundaries.

I am reminded of a cautionary observation by Albert Speer. He was Hitler's architect and Reichminister of Defense. Albert Speer was, by all accounts, a civilized man – *before the war*. During the Nuremberg war crimes trials, Speer's life was spared in favor of life in Spandau Prison. After some reflection time behind bars, he was able to confess that: 'Basically, I exploited the phenomenon of the technician's often blind devotion to his task. Because of what seems to be the moral neutrality of technology, these people were without scruples about their activities.' [Albert Speer, *Inside The Third Reich* 1969-1970]

For Speer's technicians we can substitute *scientists, engineers, researchers, artists* and even *physicians* (as in Dr. Mengele)...and now we can include the progressive social scientists who think we can safely remake humanity into a different form.

From 1943 to 1944 the infamous Doctor Joseph Mengele performed human experiments on imprisoned twins at Auschwitz. The twins were injected with dyes into their eyes in attempts to change eye color; some were even sewn together to make conjoined twins. Of about three thousand individual twins, only 100 survived. During the War, at Ravensbruck concentration camp, bones, muscles, and nerves were removed from the subjects without pain management or anesthetics. It is important to note here that the infamous Dr. Mengele thought of himself as a humanist, one unconstrained by 'conventional' morality to be sure, but as someone dedicated to bringing about a better world.

I could go on with this dreary and sickening catalogue, but you get the idea. There are so many paths down to the abyss, and Nazi eugenics was just one of them. The "greatest good for the greatest number" left out a wise understanding of the "good", and gave permission for the Nazis, the Marxists and others to treat those outside "the greatest number" as disposable things. Utilitarian ethics (which is a core progressive value) is a dead end. The abyss has welcomed civilized people into the darkness before and – unless we recover the capacity for individual moral intelligence, and the necessary motivation and courage to become moral agents – we'll soon be there ourselves.

Morality is always about limits. This essay is not the place to restate the fundamental precepts of our common morality, just to remind us that there **is** a common morality; and to recall that we share the moral duty to honor individual human dignity. “To be or not to be” is still the fundamental question for each individual and for each civilization. It is the essential election.

We were endowed with intelligence in order to make intelligent choices; and we were endowed with the capacity to achieve moral awareness in order to use our moral compass, without which we are blind to the moral direction and oblivious to the moral boundaries scattered along our path like land mines.

Traditional liberal intellectuals were the first to warn us of the authoritarian dangers surrounding ‘scientific’ attempts to remake humanity. Orwell’s **1984**, and Huxley’s **Brave New World** (1932) are prominent examples. George Lukas’s 1972 film, **TXH 1138**, a dystopia in which the population is controlled by drugs, is cut from the same cloth. These were creative thinkers who were able to see the risks when the morally-supported firewalls are breached by enthusiastic, well-meaning elites who just want to ‘make a better world’ by employing the engines of government power. But without the whole package, the wisdom traditions, the deep (and dare I say, conservative) respect for moral boundaries, they are the naked elites.

In this case, naked is dangerous, because this is naked power we are talking about.

Real moral choices require clarity. Our vision clears only when we grasp that the moral compass is real; and that it is absolutely necessary for our survival. Then we can see that the moral foundation of progressivism is not a foundation at all, but a vessel without a bottom.

Take heart: We are only one short, intense, old fashioned course in basic morality and in the *civic wisdom* of our nation’s founders from recovering our balance, the moral foundations that sustain it, and the conditions that will allow a fruitful political dialogue.

This is our next challenge in a culture that has been infested with the false notion that moral maxims, precepts, principles and laws are “just made up”. The best the progressives can offer is a vague notion of the general good.

We conservatives and old fashioned liberals can do much better. It is time to wake up, friends. We don’t have all day.

JBG

## APPENDIX

In a symposium on liberalism held last year, sponsored by the ecumenical Christian journal, **FIRST THINGS**, a number of writers and thinkers addressed this topic.. I'll quote extensive passages from just two of them, **Yuval Levin** and **Wilfred M. McClay**.

### **After Progressivism**

**Yuval Levin**

**FIRST THINGS, May 2012**

*YUVAL LEVIN* is the Hertog Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and editor of *National Affairs*.

[In] the first kind of liberalism, liberal institutions were the result of a discovery of new political principles in the Enlightenment, principles that pointed toward new ideals and institutions and toward an ideal society. Liberalism, in this view, is the pursuit of that ideal society.

The second kind of liberalism holds that liberal institutions were the product of countless generations of gradual political and cultural evolution in the West, which by the time of Enlightenment, and especially in Britain, had begun to arrive at political forms that pointed toward some timeless principles in which our common life must be grounded, that accounted for the complexities of society, and that allowed for a workable balance between freedom and effective government given the constraints of human nature. Liberalism, in this view, involves the preservation and gradual improvement of those forms.

... The first is therefore progressive while the second is conservative. The principles that the progressive form of liberalism ... were much like those that liberals who ... believed society had arrived through long experience [at] principles of natural right that define the proper ends and bounds of government. Thus...liberals in America—especially in the republic's early years—seemed to be advancing roughly the same vision of government.

But when ... those principles failed to yield the ideal society ... the more progressive liberals abandoned these principles in favor of their utopian ambitions. At that point, progressive and conservative American liberals parted ways—the former drawn to post-liberal philosophies of utopian ends (often translated from German), while the latter continued to defend the restraining mechanisms of classical liberal institutions and the skeptical worldview that underlies them.

...

### **Liberalism After Liberalism**

**Wilfred M. McClay**

**FIRST THINGS May 2012**

*WILFRED M. MCCLAY* is the SunTrust Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

"Speaking very broadly, there are two basic ways we can understand liberalism. [One] emphasizes the protection and empowerment of individuals and institutions over against encroachment and invasion by the sovereign political power. ... a healthy response to the threat of absolutism... the emergence of ideas of constitutionally limited government...a doctrine upholding the independence and supreme value of the individual person as a free agent who bears fundamental rights that exist prior to and independently of government. Hence it regards the ultimate source of authority for all legitimate forms of government as the

consent of the governed, as expressed in and through representative institutions. For what other source could possibly be compatible with the equality and free agency attributed to each individual person?

"This understanding of liberalism may also extend to encompass a high degree of social tolerance, religious disestablishment, pluralism, individualism, and the like, along with an Enlightenment optimism about the possibility of steady and certain progress in the world, given the proven capacity of human ingenuity to ameliorate the hard conditions of life. This is the liberalism we associate with John Locke, the American Founders, and the John Stuart Mill of *On Liberty* (1859).

"That ... liberalism proved insufficient in the eyes of visionary and committed social reformers, who ... offered a new liberalism that saw the achievement of a high degree of equality as the essential precondition for the exercise of any meaningful political liberty and that was severely critical of individualism ... that underwrites social selfishness...and inattention to the common good. The ... commitment to the primacy of formal rights [ignored] difficulty faced by those who had to exercise their rights under conditions of persistent social and economic disadvantage.

"...this statist form of liberalism ... points to the political thought of the Progressive movement and of much of the New Deal, the Great Society, and the mainstream of today's Democratic party. It understands itself as "positive" liberty, the liberty of the individual who has been empowered to act fully and freely in the world and can fulfill his human potential.

"Of course, means that are pursued relentlessly have a way of turning into ends, and by standing much of the older liberalism on its head in the name of favoring "substantive" outcomes over the maintenance of merely "formal" or "procedural" rights, the newer liberalism has been becoming illiberal in all but name.

...

"... the expansion of state power results not chiefly in greater individual liberty but in the creation of a vast web of clients dependent upon that power and in the sacrifice of a relatively free flow of enterprising energy in a vibrant civil society to a stultifying and inefficient regime of unelected bureaucracies, agency heads, and judges. ...Statist liberalism has thrived by encouraging the comparison of real-world apples with idealized oranges. A more balanced and honest assessment would acknowledge that the alternative to private-sector inequality generally is not the vaunted achievement of "democracy" but the gray reign of public bureaucracies, whose "equality" is administered and enforced by unaccountable officials, with exemptions paid out to the politically connected and the ideologically favored.

"...we live increasingly in a world populated by hipsters and organization men, and in many ways they are the same people. David Brooks' conception of the bourgeois bohemian, or "bobo," pointed to the same conjunction. It is a world in which you are likely to hear snatches of Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side" piped in over the sound system while you prowl the neatly ordered aisles at your gleaming supermarket, carefully checking the fat content of your FDA-inspected meats, picking your produce from the "local" and "organic" bins, and dutifully observing the signs prohibiting smoking and exhorting you to think globally while eating locally. ...



"Liberalism's recognition and elevation of the individual was salutary so long as it could presume a moral order that preceded it, an order it had not itself produced. But now, untethered to any such order, but tightly bound instead to emotivism as its sole moral calculus, it has become more and more chaotic and impossibly compromised..."

---

**Articles by Jay B Gaskill, available on line:**

**Altruism vs. Selfishness**

<http://jaygaskill.com/ReBalance.pdf>

**Compassion vs. Social justice**

<http://jaygaskill.com/CompassionVSocialJustice.pdf>

**Lent, Faust & Social Justice – Them Temptations of Power**

<http://jaygaskill.com/LentSocialJusticeAndPower.pdf>

**Political Liberalism is a Secular Religion**

<http://jaygaskill.com/liberalismasreligion.htm>

**The Core Human Discovery**

<http://jaygaskill.com/CoreHumanDiscovery.pdf>

---



**THE POLICY THINK SITE - [www.jaygaskill.com](http://www.jaygaskill.com)**

**AUTHOR CONTACT:** Mailing address and office phone number are both available from the State Bar of California. For permissions and comments, use email: [law@jaygaskill.com](mailto:law@jaygaskill.com)