

Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism

Post-liberalism must, for philosophical and pragmatic reasons, embrace an emerging liberal-conservative synthesis against the threat of woke cultural socialism. Along the way, this provides the best guarantee that the erosion of bridging and bonding social capital, which is eating away at the fabric of western societies, can be arrested and reversed.¹

A prominent strand in post-liberal thought claims that liberalism has failed, with the roots of our fraying social fabric and cultural malaise lying in developments which reach back to the 18th century Enlightenment and American Founding. Adrian Vermeule, Patrick Deneen and Yoram Hazony argue for a movement to shift from positive liberal values such as equity and individualism to positive conservative values such as public religion. Vermeule seeks not constitutional originalism – the crusade of liberal conservatives for decades – but a conservative activism to replace the progressive activism that has motivated departures from originalism for over 60 years.²

It is tempting to turn the methods of the left back on it to return to a historic state-led national conservatism, as in the injunction of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to the Poles:

When first he opens his eyes, an infant ought to see the fatherland, and up to the day of his death he ought never to see anything else. Every true republican has drunk in love of country, that is to say love of law and liberty, along with his mother's milk. This love is his whole existence; he sees nothing but the fatherland, he lives for it alone [...]. The law ought to regulate the content, the order and the form of their studies. They ought to have only Poles for teachers: Poles who are all, if possible, married; who are all distinguished by moral character, probity, good sense and attainments.³

¹ PUTNAM 2000.

² DENEEN 2019; HAZONY 2022; VERMEULE 2022.

³ ROUSSEAU 2023 [1772].

My inclination is somewhat different. For both ideological and pragmatic reasons, I prefer a liberal post-liberalism. This is not a contradiction in terms. Rather than viewing liberalism *tout court* as the problem, and cleaving to the idea that negative liberal toleration leads inevitably to positive liberal indoctrination and compulsion, I believe we can have the negative liberal baby without the positive-liberal bathwater. Moreover, reinforcing our commitment to procedural liberalism can protect conservative values from erosion by checking positive-liberal attempts to indoctrinate or coerce people toward progressivism and modernist anti-traditionalism.

In place of maximalist post-liberal calls to use the state to install conservative orthodoxy in place of progressive dogma, I believe we should aim instead at a more practical and consensual goal: enforcing institutional neutrality and balance. This even as we are justified, on public interest grounds, in tilting public education toward a positive national self-conception – albeit based on a version considerably more nuanced than Rousseau's vision.

The neutrality strategy opens space for conservative and progressive values to compete on a level playing field in public institutions such as schools or the civil service, without today's anti-conservative discrimination. In the absence of today's slanted institutional terrain, conservatism has a strong chance of winning hearts and minds – it accords better with human nature. This of course requires that conservative values be more effectively nurtured in civil society, which can only happen through the revival of grassroots associations and fraternal societies (i.e. American Legion, Sons of Italy, Orange Order, Daughters of the American Revolution) that have decayed over the past half century.

Against the pessimistic view that the turn toward cultural socialism, expressive individualism and anti-traditionalist modernism is baked into the DNA of liberalism, I hold that liberalism is in fact a thin-centred political ideology that can accommodate a range of variants, including national conservative ones. The East Asian or East European version of liberalism is clearly very different from the French or Anglo-Saxon type. The pathologies which concern those of us in the Anglosphere are less pronounced in non-Anglo societies with similarly procedural liberal systems such as Korea or the Czech Republic.

I do not believe other liberal societies outside the Anglosphere will fall prey to our afflictions to the same degree. Their conservative cultures coexist well with a liberal political infrastructure. Culture, in my estimation, is largely orthogonal to the procedures and constitutional underpinnings of the political-legal order. We spend far too much time on 18th century debates between political liberals and conservatives and nowhere near enough time on the 20th century onslaught of cultural liberals and radicals who have steadily rolled back conservatism's unfocused and scattered cultural resistance.

On economics, I am somewhat agnostic, only that I hold these issues to be less symbolically important. The neo-conservative right, with its emphasis on market liberalism and foreign policy, was an important bulwark against the communist threat of an earlier era. It was correct to identify the pitfalls of state-regulated economies and excessively powerful unions. These disincentivised investment and growth. Economic autarky and import substitution are inferior to more open trade while the record of "picking winners" in industrial policy and Keynesian demand management is chequered, to say the least.

However, I concur with much of the post-liberal critique of *laissez faire*. Unregulated markets have problems and can breed crony capitalism. Globalisation offshores jobs from stable communities, hollowing them out and breeding inequality. Agglomeration effects can lead to regional disparities. A balanced, evidence-led approach based on the evaluation of macro- and microeconomic policies is the soundest way forward in economics.

To reiterate: as a conservative, I am not overly concerned about the ideological aspects of economic policy, which is principally a technical-management issue with many moving parts and external constraints, involving outcomes most people across the political spectrum agree on: more growth in per capita income, less inequality, better public services. These are consensus issues rather than ideological-positional issues. For that reason, my view is that economic ideology is largely, though not completely, orthogonal to what I think conservatism should be focused on at present. The economy may often be the most important issue for voters, but it is not the most important question for defining conservatism.

One of my pleas is for post-liberals to expend less energy on economics, a highly technical task with many external parameters, and more on culture. The latter is a positional issue that starkly divides left from right, and can be swiftly changed by national policy action and contestation. We are in no danger of lurching toward an economically stultifying socialism, but are on the verge of a leftist cultural revolution that threatens the very foundations – both Enlightenment and traditional – of our civilisation.

The progressive left, which dominates the meaning-making institutions of society, has marked out a sandbox labelled “economics”, along with foreign policy, as the spaces in which conservatives are permitted to play. God forbid it strays into culture, which the left currently owns, and progressive commentators hit the roof, engaging in dishonest tactics from defamation (“racist”) to emotional blackmail (“punching down”) to shut down the conversation. Conservatives who accept the framing of the cultural left and confine themselves to “respectable” economic and foreign policy debates while abjuring the “culture war”, family policy, crime, immigration and other cultural issues are little more than the useful idiots of the cultural left.

Many of Britain’s Conservative Party MPs are either motivated primarily by market liberalism or are desperate for the status-conferring approval of the country’s media and progressive establishment.⁴ They are willing to play ball with the establishment and to turn on the cultural conservatives who represent the aspirations of most Tory voters and a majority of the country.⁵

The task before post-liberal conservatives is to put culture first for once, above the safer ground of economics and foreign policy. This means focusing laser-like on political reforms and social movements that can alter the direction of the culture and moderate the power of contemporary taboos – until such time as these have been confined to a reasonable sphere. If conservative politicians and writers in today’s progressive-alarmist high culture are not being called racists and transphobes, they are derelict in their duty.

⁴ BALE et al. 2020.

⁵ GOODWIN 2023.

Conservatives must also dispel the illusion that change can occur without using state power. The use of democratic state power is integral to both liberalism and conservatism, as I will explain, but also matters pragmatically: elected government is the only major culture-shaping institution the right can hope to control. While private action and associational activity is important, the libertarian pipe dream of “creative destruction” and parallel institutions is much more difficult in a broader cultural system that is institutionally anti-conservative. Pragmatically, this means conservatives need to make a far greater effort to intervene in mainstream institutions than has hitherto been the case.

When reputations, alumni and endowments lock in status advantages, as with elite universities, or where the value of a network increases with the number of users to create a quasi-monopoly, as with social media platforms and search engines, only regulation by the state can check progressive bias. Elon Musk’s impact on the social media sphere through acquiring Twitter is incomparably greater than Gab or Parler’s; the effect of the Supreme Court on university admissions, or red state legislators on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion regimes, is far more profound than anything Hillsdale or the University of Austin can muster. School choice can do little but nip at the edges of the school-indoctrination octopus while the banning of Critical Race Theory or gender ideology exerts massive change at the stroke of a pen. This is not to say that new institutions are not important as a way of modelling best practice, but in most policy areas interventionist reform (what Hirschman calls “voice”) matters a great deal more than libertarian “exit” for system-level change.

A LIBERAL-CONSERVATIVE COALITION?

Prior to the late 20th century, most challenges to liberalism came from conservatism, be it monarchist, religious, patriarchal or national. I am struck by the off-key claims of conservative intellectual James Burnham, in his *Suicide of the West*, regarding what he terms the “liberal syndrome”. Be this humanity’s potential for ethical development; the role of reason and discussion rather than

force in solving social problems; the need to adopt an evidence-led approach to evaluating social systems; the value of free speech; of legal desegregation and civil rights; or the importance of increasing the well-being of humanity; I find myself consistently on the liberal side, opposing Burnham.⁶

However, after 60 years of radical-progressive entrenchment, with the detraditionalising egalitarian ratchet cranked far beyond its happiness-maximising optimum, the challenges to liberalism arise mainly from the left. As Colin Wright's "the left left me" cartoon, retweeted by Elon Musk, shows, the left's overreach into cancel culture dogmatism has marooned many old-style left-liberals on the right.⁷ The aim of liberal national conservatism (or post-liberalism) must be to forge a coalition of disaffected liberals and conservatives suitable for an age of progressive extremism.

LEFT-MODERNISM: OUR DOMINANT IDEOLOGY

The dominant ideology of our age is left-modernism. This can be thought of as "equity diversity", linking the idea of cultural leftism – an attack on inequalities based on identity, with modernism, a cultural sensibility favouring expressive individualism, novelty and difference (rather than tradition and commonality). Modernism, according to Daniel Bell, begins with abstract detraditionalised art, architecture and atonal music in the early 20th century – though its post-impressionist precursors go back to around 1880.⁸ It was somewhat linked to the left due to the "liberation" potential of utopianism and Marxism, as well as the countercultural nature of bohemian life going back to the 1840s, but could also find itself paired with right-wing ideologies of transformation, as with the fascist futurism of Marinetti.

The cultural left side of left-modernism, by contrast, traces its origins to the humanitarianism of 19th century abolitionists and pacifists, and is picked up,

⁶ BURNHAM 2014: 125–130.

⁷ WRIGHT 2022.

⁸ BELL 1976.

in the US, by the Liberal Progressive and ecumenist movements of the 1900s–1920s. The Liberal Progressives sought to decentre WASP America's traditions and laud “immigrant contributions” while emphasising the psychological cost of assimilation borne by (mainly white) immigrant ethnic groups such as Italians and Jews.

The bohemian “lyrical left” of the 1912–1917 period in Greenwich Village, New York (known as the Young Intellectuals), notably Randolph Bourne, castigated the Anglo-Protestant tradition as “confining”, unexpressive and boring. This was a more direct form of cultural repudiation than Dewey's Liberal Progressive “Neither Englandism nor New Englandism [can define America]” stance. Early left-modernism mainly championed European urban immigrant groups as against the Anglo-Protestant majority but began to take a side interest in black jazz and African-Americans in the late 1910s. They built on the humanitarian liberals' ethical foundations, but delivered a more aesthetic form of cultural repudiation, turning up the volume as against the relatively subdued claims of the Liberal Progressives and ecumenist mainline Protestant elites.

Left-modernism, the ideological regime in western countries, can thus be subdivided into its modernist component, focusing on novelty and diversity, and cultural socialism, which is moralistic and oriented toward what Jonathan Haidt terms the equality and care/harm moral foundations.⁹

Since the late 1960s, the ego of moralistic cultural socialism has gained the upper hand over its modernist alter, which used to dominate the left-modernist project. Where modernism drives toward transgressions such as paedophilia, prostitution and pornography, cultural socialism's protective ethos perceives these as attacks on vulnerable or oppressed groups (which aligns them with conservatives!). Cultural appropriation and transracial identification are also viewed, unreasonably, as sins by cultural socialists, curtailing modernists' quest for the exotic or for syncretism in pursuit of their life projects of personal reinvention.

⁹ HAIDT 2012.

However, in most other realms, as with the left-modernist attack on bourgeois social mores, prestige hierarchies or ethnic majorities, leftism and modernism stand on common ground against conservatives. From the 1960s onward, left-modernism steadily overturned the liberal-conservative majority sensibility while politically-incorrect modernists such as Norman Mailer succumbed to the restrictions placed upon them by cultural socialism.

The ascent of cultural socialism was accompanied by its religion of wokeness. Woke should be used narrowly to mean the *sacralisation of historically marginalised race, gender and sexual identity groups*. While there may be orthodoxies around climate change, vaccines and other left-coded issues that lead to the social ostracism of dissenters, these are best thought of as progressive beliefs which bear a family resemblance to the dynamics of wokeness but fall outside its remit. Such material questions do not entwine group identity and political ideology in the same way as the totems of race, gender and sexuality.

Contemporary cultural socialism and transgressive modernism are offshoots of liberalism, but only in the same way that nationalism, Marxism or religious fundamentalism are – that is, they draw on some aspects of liberalism while rejecting others. In short, the fact liberalism is thin-centred enough to spawn illiberal offshoots does not mean we should reject the liberal mother ship.

Where economic liberalism and socialism fought each other to an accommodation in mixed capitalism, nothing similar has occurred with cultural socialism, which is currently running unchecked in western, especially Anglo-sphere, societies. Just as economics recognises a trade-off between growing the economic pie and dividing it up more equally, sociology should grasp the trade-off between expanding the wealth of a culture and seeking to redistribute cultural self-esteem and power.

Cultural socialism leads to cultural poverty. Categories such as sex and ethnicity are not primarily, contra Derrida, socially constructed power hierarchies but rather systems of meaning and tradition that produce immense value for most people. Attempts to denigrate white people, erase history and abolish sex binaries, for instance, destroy cultural value while doing more harm than good to disadvantaged groups. As with socialist economics, excessive equity breeds poverty.

FROM THE FIRST TO THE THIRD CULTURE WARS

In what follows, I provide a brief tour of the quantitative rise of cultural socialism since the 1960s. Its unchecked surge has decimated both cultural liberalism and conservatism. Where cultural liberalism and conservatism were once each other's principal antagonists, both are ever more aligned in their revolt against the woke tide. This liberal-conservative commonality must be nurtured into an effective alliance against the most serious threat to western civilisation since the Cold War.

The challenge of cultural socialism strikes along two dimensions. The first, which we can term "cancel culture", is a threat to the old liberal order of free speech, due process, equal treatment and objective truth. The second, which for shorthand I dub "critical race theory", challenges national conservative values such as community, cohesion and majority ethnic and national traditions, identities and memories. More recently, aspects of religion (i.e. the church's role in indigenous "cultural genocide", the right to espouse traditional doctrine on abortion and homosexuality, the sex binary, the family) have also found themselves in cultural socialism's crosshairs.

Cancel culture and critical race-gender theory are the two main fronts in the contemporary culture war. However, it is important to lay out the full chronology of cultural conflict since the 1960s because we are actually in our third culture war, which rests on foundations laid down by the first and second culture wars. These should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, but rather as overlapping processes which crested in different periods.

The first culture war pit social and religious conservatives against "secular humanists" and old-style liberals and feminists. In Europe, Christian Democracy fought a rearguard action against social liberalism.¹⁰ More importantly, the American religious right of the 1980s–2000s championed family values and faith-based welfare initiatives while advocating for the teaching of Creationism

¹⁰ INGLEHART 1990.

in schools and mobilising against abortion and gay marriage. Apart from abortion, its one success, this movement generally failed to achieve its aims.¹¹

The second culture war revolves around immigration and ethnic diversity, and begins in earnest in the 1980s with the rise of the populist right in France, Italy, Austria, Flanders and a few other European countries. Its share of the vote tripled between the late 1980s and early 2000s. In the US, it found its expression in California's anti-illegal immigration Proposition 187 of 1994 as well as Pat Buchanan's near-miss Republican primary campaigns of 1992 and 1996 – which blended first and second culture war themes. The globalist–nationalist divide next caught fire in 2014, with a surge of support (of around 30%) for the French Front National, UK Independence Party and Danish People's Party in the 2014 European elections on the back of record immigration inflows. This reached a crescendo with the 2015 Migrant Crisis, with Brexit and Trump winning in 2016, and record support for populist right parties across Europe. In Austria, the Freedom Party came within a percentage point of winning the presidential runoff while Marine Le Pen notched up unprecedented levels of support, cresting more recently at 43% of the vote.

Where religious conservative–secular liberal humanists defined Culture War I, and nationalist–globalist Culture War II, the divide in the third culture war is cultural socialist – cultural liberal that is, it pits illiberal progressivism against a coalition of liberals and conservatives. The taproots of this divide lie in liberal unease over affirmative action quotas, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s. For a long period, this conflict was marked by a modest back-and-forth cycle in the courts and Congress.¹² Indeed, it can be argued that it was not until the advent of a more conservative court under Trump, culminating in the breakthrough 2023 *Student for Fair Admission vs. Harvard* case, that cultural socialism began to erode in this area.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Official English movement, aimed at bilingual Spanish–English education in schools (“multicultural education”), passed in around half of US states in the 1980s and 1990s. Old-style liberals like

¹¹ ROZELL–WHITNEY 2007.

¹² GLAZER 1987.

Arthur Schlesinger, Allan Bloom, Nathan Glazer and Francis Fukuyama warned against the threat posed by identity politics to national cohesion and individual freedom.¹³ I would also note that early Culture War III speech restrictions against opposition to immigration caused resentment and opened up a political vacuum which populist parties of Culture War II filled.

If Culture Wars I and II generally divided conservatives from liberals and progressives, Culture War III saw many secular liberals move – at least rhetorically – away from progressivism to the conservative side. While remaining in the same tribe and political party as progressives, old liberals increasingly worried about the anti-individualist thrust of multiculturalism, identity politics, cancel culture, critical race and gender theory and affirmative action.¹⁴

THE RISE OF CULTURAL SOCIALISM

The cultural socialism around which Culture War III revolves is primarily driven by a simple affective attachment: “majority bad, minorities good.” It is more emotional, bottom-up, anarchist and leaderless than economic socialism. Its stock in trade has been to leverage the sacredness of race, and its associated white guilt, to expand its moral authority and power. That sacredness exploded into view around 1965 following a set of liberalising attitude changes on race which began in the 1940s in the US and reached a tipping point in the mid-1960s.

Shelby Steele, an African-American liberal-conservative who lived through the civil rights revolution describes this as a cultural earthquake: “The lines of moral power, like plates in the earth, had shifted. White guilt became so palpable you could see it on people. At the time what it looked like to my eyes was a remarkable loss of authority. And what whites lost in authority, blacks gained. You cannot feel guilty about anyone without giving away power to them.” For Steele, the Civil Rights Act involved America and whites in particular admitting their guilt. The only way to redeem themselves was to virtue signal their fealty to white guilt and

¹³ SCHLESINGER 1993.

¹⁴ RAUCH 2021.

anti-racism. What Steele terms “disassociation” from racism, not improving the condition of blacks, is what powered policies such as affirmative action.¹⁵

Paul Krugman, writing in the *New York Times*, describes this revolution in the American moral order that ripped through polite society around 1965: “In our public discourse, overt racism became utterly taboo. And while it didn’t literally happen overnight, it did happen fast.” Krugman recalls black coachmen figurines on the doors of expensive Long Island homes being repainted from black to white in the space of one summer.¹⁶ While Britain was some 15 years behind the US in terms of mass public opinion, elites such as Roy Jenkins were already weaponising and stretching the racism charge by the early 1960s.¹⁷

This revolution in public morality simultaneously swept through the radical left, to the point that progressive intellectuals who had busied themselves with discussion of the New Deal or artistic modernism suddenly threw themselves into a new cultural radicalism based on race. Susan Sontag of *Partisan Review* thereby gushed, in 1966:

America was founded on genocide [...], [had] the most brutal system of slavery in modern times [...]. The white race is the cancer of human history; it is the white race and it alone – its ideologies and inventions – which eradicates autonomous civilizations wherever it spreads, which has upset the ecological balance of the planet, which now threatens the very existence of life itself [...]. This is a passionately racist country; it will continue to be so in the foreseeable future.¹⁸

Left-modernists like Herbert Marcuse abandoned the white working-class, gravitating to the more identitarian registers of black radicalism and Third World socialism. In the wake of communist disappointment with the western working class, the minority lumpenproletariat rather than the white proletariat were the chosen instrument of radical social transformation.¹⁹

¹⁵ STEELE 2006: 497–498.

¹⁶ KRUGMAN 2013.

¹⁷ HANSEN 2000: 150–155.

¹⁸ CARSON–ROBBINS 2019.

¹⁹ Literary Hub 2019.

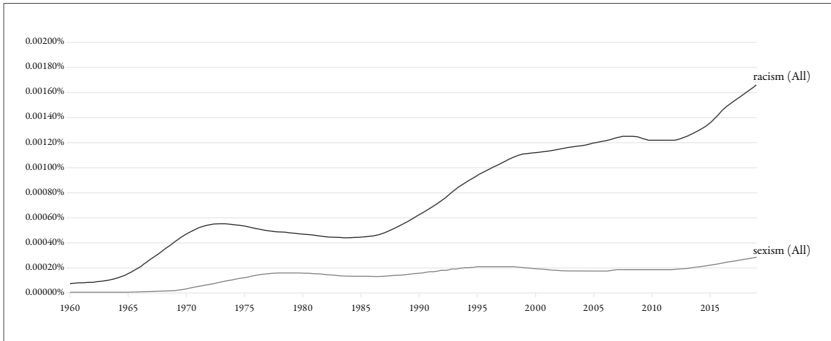


Figure 1. *Frequency of the terms “racism” and “sexism” in Google-indexed books, 1960–2019*

Source: Compiled by the author based on Google Ngram Viewer
(accessed 28 June 2023)

In her pathbreaking 1966 *Partisan Review* piece, Sontag managed a dig at American masculinity, prefiguring the feminist appropriation of the logic of guilt in a bid to ride on the coattails of black sacredness. A magical quality and suspension of disbelief which began with racial minorities was thus stretched to encompass women, and later extended to homosexuals and, most recently, to transgender people. The underlying logic was one of victimhood points for identity groups (“intersectionality”), with white male heterosexuals at the bottom of the new moral hierarchy. Minority victims were the fount of spiritual, intellectual and moral depth while once-privileged majorities occupied the role of the fallen who must beg for forgiveness and abase themselves. White men were enjoined to work off their moral stain through allyship, performative self-hatred and virtue-signalling.

The frequency of the terms “racism” and “sexism” in English-language books in Figure 1 reveals a pronounced pattern in which cultural socialism surges during periodic “awakenings” of emotional enthusiasm. The first great awakening occurred in the late 1960s, the second in the late 1980s, early 1990s and the third in the late 2010s, peaking in 2020–2021. We can track these trends in the content of books and academic articles.

However, the difference with the current awakening is that it has, for the first time, spilled out beyond the campus and literary circles. Big data analyses confirm that the frequency of Culture Wars III news content has caught up with that of academia in a way that was not true during the first and second great awakenings.²⁰ Whereas the discourse around black radicalism in the 1960s and political correctness in the 1980s and 1990s remained largely confined to the campus and literary worlds, the 2010s have swept through youth culture, high culture, pop culture and corporate culture.

YOUTHQUAKE

Young people and the highly-educated were in the forefront of the liberal secularising trends of Culture War I. This was also true, to a great degree, of the globalism of Culture War II. It is thus no surprise that we find these groups at the coalface of Culture War III. Age matters more than education in predicting progressivism in culture wars, especially for third culture war issues. For instance, in Britain, 70% of PhD holders over 60 oppose political correctness while two-thirds of those 25 and under, at all education levels, support it. Consider the question of whether J. K. Rowling should be dropped by her publishers. As Figure 2 reveals, young people are evenly split while hardly anyone over 50 favours cancelling Rowling.

When it comes to cancelling historical figures (i.e. “critical race theory”), the age pattern is likewise noticeable, but there is an important difference. Figure 3 illustrates by examining the way age and ideology interact to condition British support for a) an index comprising the cancelling of three contemporary individuals (Rowling, Stock and Cambridge postdoctoral researcher Noah Carl); and b) an index of two historical figures (removal of Winston Churchill statue and renaming David Hume Tower) alongside a question tapping whether people prefer that history emphasise national shame more than pride.

²⁰ ROZADO 2022: 16–29.

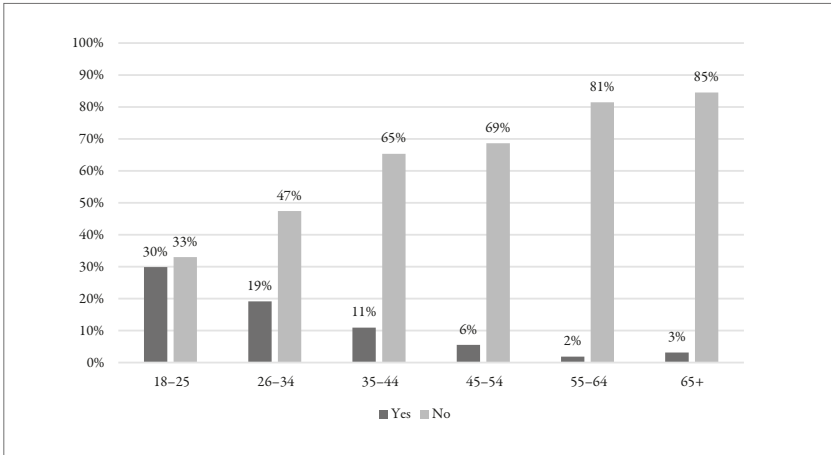


Figure 2. *Should J. K. Rowling be dropped by publishers? (by age)*

Note: excludes “don’t know” responses

Source: Compiled by the author

based on KAUFMANN 2022a: 25

Two things jump out from the charts. First, the vertical distance between the lines for left- and right-wing respondents are much wider in the right-hand chart, which captures people’s support for “critical race” approaches to the past. This tells us that editing problematic historical figures like Churchill out of the British past appeals to nearly 6 in 10 leftists under 35. Yet leftists over 55 also have a 35% chance of supporting these woke positions: there is more than a 30-point gap between older leftists and older conservatives on this question. Thus support for CRT extends well beyond the young.

On the other hand, the left-hand chart shows that leftists over 55 have only a 17% chance of supporting the cancellation of current individuals for speech, quite similar to what conservatives over 55 think. Cancel culture falls flat among older leftists, probably due to their liberal instincts. Critical race theory, by contrast, appeals to twice as many older leftists (though most older leftists also reject CRT).

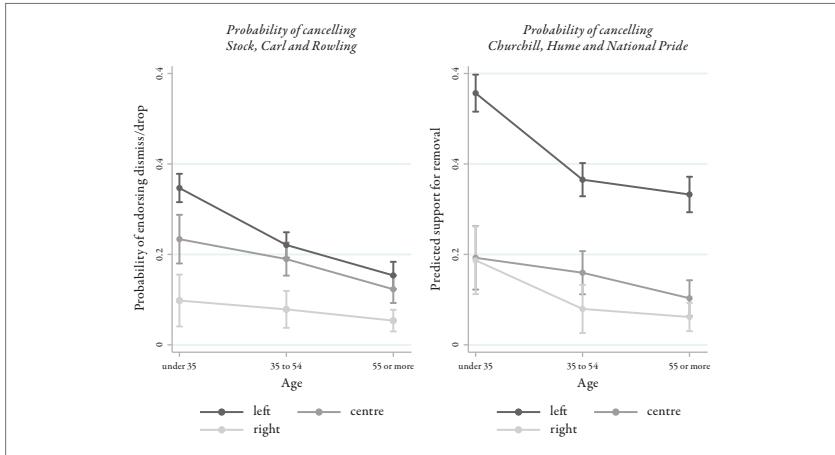


Figure 3. *Age and ideology interaction concerning woke*

Source: Compiled by the author based on KAUFMANN 2022a: 28–29

The second observation concerns similarities between the charts. The upward sloping lines indicate that support for cancellation rises with youth. This holds in both charts, across leftists, centrists and, to some extent, conservatives. Moreover, the distinctive hockey-stick pattern for the top line in each chart, which is statistically significant, indicates that young leftists stand out as especially woke. They are more intolerant than the old, but the gap between young and old leftists is the most glaring. Something unique seems to have occurred within the left over time.

I find precisely the same pattern in the United States. For instance, a majority of Democrats support CRT ideas like teaching that the United States is a racist country built on stolen land, and that whites have privilege. On the other hand, only a few percent of Republicans endorse these notions. While the partisan and ideological gap on history and CRT is massive, it is narrower when it comes to cancel culture, measured as support for firing controversial figures such as Mozilla CEO Brandon Eich or Florida academic Charles Negy. As in Britain, there is a strong age gradient for both cancel culture and CRT,

but what jumps out is how much young leftists differ from older leftists on free speech cases. Thus American leftists 25 and under are a staggering 44 to 59 points more likely to call for the firing of Eich and Negy compared to leftists over 50. The age differences among moderates (26–34 points) and conservatives (8–25 points) are smaller.

Young people in Anglophone societies stand out as being substantially more cultural socialist than their elders. Since many beliefs tend to be imprinted by people's early 20s due to this being the terminus of brain development, there is a strong likelihood that these young people will carry their cultural socialist beliefs with them across their life course.²¹ Already, commentators in the Anglo world have remarked upon the surprising stickiness of youth progressivism and left-wing voting allegiances into adulthood.²² All of which means we are likely to see the kind of cohort-led value change that occurred with the decline of religion and rise of liberal attitudes to sexual mores and race.

In Anglo societies we see a surge of parallel trends among young adults. A large jump in smartphone and intensive social media use, beginning around 2012, coincided with a tripling in LGBT identification, a surge in anxiety and depression, as well as a continuing decline in religion and patriotism. Some like Jonathan Haidt believe this arises because hyperparenting and coddling has produced a fragile, social media-addicted “i-Gen”, who in turn gravitate to victimhood culture and its associated woke ideology.²³

My more sociological outlook instead focuses on the way social media and the new clickbait journalism model served as a cultural technology which allowed pre-existing radical ideas to surge out of academia and radical arts circles into the mainstream of popular and high culture, starting in the mid-2010s. The media, schools and organisations followed up by socialising many young people who had never set foot in a grievance studies seminar into these beliefs. This transmission of ideas from radical academics to major meaning-making institutions then back to impressionable young people is what best explains

²¹ GOEL 2022.

²² BURN-MURDOCH 2022.

²³ LUKIANOFF–HAIDT 2018.

the youthquake. This reflection process transmitted cultural socialist political (i.e. “white supremacy”, patriarchy) *and* therapeutic (i.e. “emotional safety”, “trauma”) ideas to youth and left-wing activists. This explains why I find that young people’s reports about how they were parented does not correlate with their political views but media consumption patterns do.²⁴ In short, I believe it is the message and not the medium that truly matters.

The endpoint of the woke cultural revolution has been to imprint an entire generation from kindergarten to graduate school and beyond. Recent evidence from a survey I have conducted suggests that critical social justice indoctrination works to massively shift young people to the left. Instruction in the law and free speech also works to move them toward classical liberalism, but this kind of instruction is increasingly rare in schools and universities. Only online is it readily available.

THE POLITICS OF THE CULTURE WAR

In the past 60 years, we have repeatedly seen shifts from negative liberal toleration to positive liberal “celebration” or even forced affirmation, as with compulsory diversity statements or pronoun use. Patrick Deneen is correct that negative liberal toleration has led to the elevation of first individualist, then progressive values. That is, we have witnessed a negative-to-positive shift within liberalism, even as the “liberalism” packaging has remained the same. There is perhaps no better illustration of this than Lyndon Johnson’s Howard University speech where he subtly segued from equality of opportunity to equality of results, all later branded under the label “affirmative action”.

However, this is not an inevitable process, as is readily apparent from the trajectory of liberal societies in East Asia and Central Europe.

Liberal democracy offers numerous avenues to reform the system and improve the climate for conservative values. We are only at the beginning of

²⁴ GOLDBERG 2020.

using policy levers to push back. What is apparent is that the illiberalism of cultural socialism, despite trading under the “liberal” flag, is becoming evident even to liberals.

On the one hand, liberal-sounding velvet gloves such as “inclusion”, “anti-racism” or “gender affirmation” continue to fool many centre-leftists and liberals, with most endorsing or going along with “critical” positions on race and gender. On the other hand, surveys show that those on the left – especially older leftists – categorically reject cancel culture. When it comes to firing or no-platforming, there is a large divide between the relatively illiberal far left, who support this more than they oppose it, and the liberal centre left, who heavily oppose it. Centre-leftists in the US and Britain also believe in viewpoint diversity and are less likely to elevate emotional safety above freedom of expression.²⁵ A liberal post-liberalism should be seeking to peel such individuals – often older or male progressives – away from their tribal affiliation to the left.

National conservative stances likewise have some appeal to centrists. When asked whether American or British schoolchildren should be taught that their country is racist and major heroes such as Churchill are villains, opinion on the left fragments while conservatives are strongly opposed to the tune of 70–90%. The same holds for defending the integrity of the gender binary and women’s spaces. Thus on both liberal “cancel culture” questions and conservative “critical race–gender” issues, there is strong electoral potential for right parties to use culture war themes as wedges to win support from centrist liberals and progressives.

This was amply demonstrated by Ron DeSantis in Florida and Glenn Youngkin in Virginia, both of whom campaigned successfully against indoctrination in schools. Youngkin flipped a state that had voted for Biden by 10 points by attacking the incumbent as hostile to parental influence over their children’s education, illustrating the electoral potential of Culture War III questions. In Scotland, the SNP’s often progressive voters were shocked by the Isla Bryson – Adam Graham affair into revising their views, leading to Sturgeon’s ouster. Here is the liberal-conservative electoral coalition in action.

²⁵ KAUFMANN 2022a; 2022b.

CULTURE IS DOWNSTREAM FROM POLITICS

The political events of the 1960s energised the New Left, as intellectuals drew inspiration from black, female and, later, gay protest movements. While cultural shifts can presage political changes, the reverse is also true. In what follows, I follow Chris Rufo's plea for a conservative counter-revolution. Conservatives and classical liberals must understand that they are now outsiders, and will have to engage in a concerted legislative, regulatory and entryist effort to recapture elite institutions.²⁶

In broad outlines, liberal post-liberals must work within the system to reform it. Neither the Benedict Option of quietist withdrawal, nor utopian dreams of installing conservative values in courts and institutions offer the best way forward. A liberal-conservative fusion seeks instead to politically neutralise institutions or, where content is required, as with history instruction and civics, aim for balance – with a slight preference for positive conceptions of the country, justified on public interest grounds. Only this can bring a stable equilibrium outcome.

Thus, instead of aiming to restore public religion and change the valence of activism and indoctrination in institutions, as some post-liberals advocate, we should be seeking to find broad majority consensus around the neutral nation-state. Substantive conservatism can then be built from below to shift the dial of public opinion. This means universities cannot advocate on political issues. It means schools must be prevented from indoctrinating on race and gender, with much tighter guidance and enforcement of the law, backed by direct legislative scrutiny. Violators must be punished, and the media informed so as to warn progressive activists who would defy the law and the democratic majority in pursuit of their messianic moralism.

It means that politically-contentious emblems like the Pride or BLM flag must be kept off government property, with only national or municipal emblems that encompass all voters permitted (as per Norwich, Ontario's new local

²⁶ RUFO 2023.

ordinance). It means critical race and gender courses in university should be defunded (though not banned). Diversity training, with its critical social justice ideology and monomaniacal race-sex-gender cultural socialism, should be abolished. Government bodies must divest immediately from ideological third-party groups such as Stonewall or Advance HE. Equity-driven targets and timetables should be scrapped in favour of unobtrusive measures to enable access to a meritocratic process, not just for race and gender, but for class and political ideology.

“Equivalent action” in which all measures on race–gender must be matched for class and ideology, can help check cultural socialist zeal. Companies which engage in political discrimination, whether in the form of debanking or de-platforming, can be fined and compelled to comply, as appears to be the case with new British de-banking legislation in the wake of Courtts’ discrimination against Nigel Farage. When it comes to liberalism, we must eschew a purely Madisonian emphasis on institutional autonomy in favour of a more Hobbesian approach which protects individuals from corrupt and illiberal institutions.

Where content is imperative and neutrality is not an option, as with the history curriculum or visiting speakers in schools, balance is the watchword, which must be measured and enforced by regulators, backed by regular parliamentary scrutiny. There is a justifiable public interest in attaching young people to their society, hence even as a nation’s sins should not be concealed, the balance of instruction must seek to impart a positive conception of the nation. Not to the extent mooted by Rousseau, but to a greater degree than at present. National sins such as colonialism, atrocities or discrimination must be contextualised by a world-historical consideration of the history of these processes in non-western societies, and of the relatively exceptional western record of ending these practices. The current focus on stories of right-wing excesses such as Nazism and Jim Crow must be balanced by treatments of utopian left extremism, as with the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Stalinism or the Cambodian Killing Fields. Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* should be part of the curriculum. It is the right of the demos to set standards: when it comes to classroom instruction, teachers’ speech is not as free as it is for academics.

Teachers have a captive under-age audience whereas university students are adults who self-select into courses.

Achieving victory in these battles, and on the pivotal immigration question, will require several initiatives that are missing from conservatism at present:

A new focus on culture, rather than economics, as the reason people enter conservative politics. This needs to stem from new pressure groups akin to the National Rifle Association or March for Life who rate Republican politicians on their key issues and ask them to sign up to pledges. The same groups must spring up on culture war issues and immigration. In this manner, market liberals who eschew the culture war or are liberal on immigration – such as Caroline Nokes or Crispin Blunt in the Tory party – can be de-selected by party branches in favour of national conservatives. If national organisations such as CCHQ in Britain remain dominated by economic liberals, insurgent campaigns (i.e. Suella Braverman, Kemi Badenoch) or third-party populist movements will be needed to upend wet party establishments.

Beyond this, elite networks akin to the Federalist Society for the American judiciary must be developed for the bureaucracy. This can intensively mine the small seam of conservative graduates for talent which can be called upon to staff key government positions, many of which fall to progressives by default because no suitable conservative candidates can be found. When it comes to elite institutions, the “people are the policy”. Without committed individuals such as Arif Ahmed on Britain’s new Academic Freedom Directorate the body would simply be neutered to protect the status quo. Where institutional capture is too complete, entire bodies may need to be abolished and new nimble offices created which can reflect the ethos of the government. Where institutions like the education establishment resist, they must be defeated with stamina and patience, unlike in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s when conservative criticism of the history curriculum in the US, Britain, Australia and Canada foundered. These “battles of the books” ranked too low on conservative priority lists and naive politicians placed too much faith in the goodwill of educators.

As the right begins to concentrate on cultural issues, raising their salience with voters, this will start to decide elections and embolden moderate left-wing

politicians to clip the wings of woke or open borders activists. Over time, the aim is to shut down the progressive indoctrination apparatus and begin to re-socialise young people into a pantheon of classical liberal and conservative values.

This cultural focus must also confront the widespread anti-conservative political prejudice in Anglo societies which shapes the environment in which young people are raised.²⁷ No wonder only a minority of young people are willing to date a Republican or Conservative. When it comes to friendship, dating, hiring or patronising a business, the left is far more biased against the right than vice-versa, reflecting a moralising absolutism on race and identity that lies at the heart of the contemporary progressive media and educational establishment.²⁸

Upholding negative liberalism is a project that can break this discriminatory system, releasing young people from the grip of regime ideology and offering conservative values a more level playing field. The energy of such a political movement, in concert with debates online and in the media, can inspire cultural change. Just as seatbelt and smoking laws changed attitudes, a new campaign against the woke left and lax immigration can demonstrate to the undecided that these are unpopular values, thereby powering value change.²⁹

RETURNING TO AN EARLIER TRADITION OF LIBERALISM

A new liberal-conservative synthesis represents a return to an older liberal tradition. The anarchy of the religious wars (extending to the English Civil War) shaped the thinking of early liberals of the 17th century such as Hobbes and Locke. They rightly feared anarchy as much as tyranny, for, as Steven Pinker reminds us, anarchic societies are far more dangerous for humans than authoritarian states.³⁰ Hobbes and Locke thought of government as having an important role as a defender of natural rights such as the right to life,

²⁷ WEST 2020.

²⁸ CARL 2017.

²⁹ For more on this dynamic see SUNSTEIN 2019.

³⁰ PINKER 2011.

liberty and property. By contrast, the liberalism of American founders such as Madison and Jefferson is more squarely anti-government, focused on tyranny. Subsequent movements for women's, black and gay rights rightly inveighed against government oppression to change discriminatory laws. However, when they overreached – as with the student uprisings of the 1960s, which curtailed the rights of conservative professors or military recruiters on campus (or present-day cancel culture) – the anti-government form of liberalism failed to protect the conservatives whose rights had been abridged.

We can think of 17th-century liberalism as tripartite in outlook compared to the narrowly dualist approach of their late 18th-century successors – who grew up in a more secure period when states had deepened and consolidated their monopoly on the use of force within their territories. For Hobbes and Locke, the “war of all against all” and private violence represented a major threat to liberty which government must protect individuals from. In their view, society is made up of three levels, individuals, intermediary organisations and government. Threats to liberty can come not just from government, but from middle-level groups and institutions. Government, if democratically elected, scrutinised by a free media and acting in accordance with the constitution, has a vital role in protecting human freedom against the threat of private censorship.

The source of threats to negative liberalism is increasingly shifting back toward private rather than state forms of tyranny. As George Washington University law professor Jonathan Turley writes with reference to tech censorship and organisational cancel culture, “[t]he dangers posed by private censorship for a political system are the same as government censorship in the curtailment of free speech”. Even if corporate and administrative censorship does not constitute “Big Brother” speech control, it represents multiple overlapping points of “Little Brother” authoritarianism which violates freedom of expression.³¹ In the advanced West, the Hobbesian tradition of liberal thought is more relevant than the Madisonian variant, with its focus on government. Indeed, anti-government libertarians who decry government regulation of woke institutions are the useful

³¹ TURLEY 2022: 571.

idiots of the woke authoritarians who are engaging in a censorship binge by pressuring or commandeering the administrative apparatus of organisations.

Looking ahead, the future of post-liberalism is liberal. While positive liberalism must be rejected, conservatives should draw on a Hobbesian procedural liberalism, forming a coalition with centrist liberals to push back against anti-conservatism in our institutions. This should rebalance them in a way that offers the best chance for a revival of national and social traditions.

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