

CONTEMPORARY PROGRESSIVE  
LIBERALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

It is a truism in the history of political thought that the dominant national ideology of the United States, from the founding of the state, has been liberalism. Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the thesis that the various strands of American political thought could be regarded as variants of liberalism held sway. Over the past nearly two and a half centuries, however, the classical liberalism of the founding era has undergone significant changes, which have intensified since the ‘counterculture’ of the 1960s. Today we are once again living in an era of profound transformation of American liberalism, marked by the increasingly radical demands of progressive identity politics. This has led to serious tensions within the American liberal tradition, in that contemporary liberalism, with its strong leftward shift, has come into conflict with many of the classical liberal principles and values enshrined in the U.S. founding documents (freedom of conscience, freedom of opinion and expression, limited government, checks and balances). The outcome of the struggle between progressive and a more moderate classical liberalism, the nature of the new balance between the two, as well as the extent and form of their impact outside the country’s borders are still in question. Some trends associated with progressive liberalism have certainly emerged on the European continent, but, especially in East-Central Europe, their impact is likely to remain limited due to the different historical context and social environment. At the same time, through its impact on the self-image of the United States, its status as a great power and its perception by rivals, its willingness to act in international politics and the formulation of its goals, progressive liberalism is, to some extent, likely to influence the country’s foreign policy. In the near future, however, U.S. foreign policy thinking is more likely to be primarily shaped by the response to the great power challenge posed by China.

## CLASSICAL LIBERALISM AS NATIONAL IDEOLOGY

Anyone who has read the famous second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, which lists the truths that the American founders believed to be ‘self-evident’<sup>1</sup> or has at least a superficial knowledge of the work of John Locke, widely regarded as the founder of modern liberalism, will find it hard to doubt the statement of American historian Louis Hartz about the essentially liberal or Lockean character of the American political community. Hartz argues in his classic work on the history of ideas<sup>2</sup> that the absence of feudalism, being a defining feature of U.S. history, is responsible not only for the limited American presence of the revolutionary radical trends that developed in Europe in opposition to feudalism, but also for the reactionary trends (in the ideological palette of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: the Marxist socialist and conservative trends) that emerged in response to the latter. The tradition of American political thought analysed in detail by Hartz consists of left- and right-wing versions of the dominant Lockean liberalism, which, despite the existing internal tensions, permeate American society as a whole in the form of a ‘natural liberalism’ conceived as ‘the American way of life’, rather than as an explicit political ideology.<sup>3</sup>

Seymour Martin Lipset, in his equally famous work on ‘American exceptionalism’,<sup>4</sup> describes the United States as a peculiar ‘creedal’ nation, and identifies the classic 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century version of liberalism as the basis of the creed that defines the country, including the Declaration of Independence. Lipset’s research on American exceptionalism was specifically based on the absence or weakness of a socialist or working class party or ideology in the U.S. (which he explained, among other things, by social mobility not limited

<sup>1</sup> Namely, that ‘all men are created equal’, that they have certain inalienable rights, such as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that the purpose of government is the defence of these rights, that the power of government is derived from the consent of the governed, and the right of the governed to resist any government that violates the foregoing.

<sup>2</sup> HARTZ 1955.

<sup>3</sup> HARTZ 1955: 3–11.

<sup>4</sup> LIPSET 1997.

by feudal traditions and the ethnic division of the working class).<sup>5</sup> However, Lipset also adds, similarly to Hartz, that the American political tradition lacks not only socialism but also conservatism in the European sense. He agrees with Friedrich Hayek and others that American conservatives in the tradition of the Founding are in fact 19<sup>th</sup> century classical liberals.<sup>6</sup>

In the nearly two and a half centuries since the Founding, there have of course been significant changes in the ideological composition of the United States. From the 1930s, first with the reforms of the New Deal under President Roosevelt and then with the large-scale anti-poverty programs of the 1960s, the American left saw the emergence of elements of European-style social democracy, and today the growing influence of politicians such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez mark the emergence of openly declared ‘democratic socialism’ on the ideological palette. However, the continuing relevance of the Hartz and Lipset thesis is shown by the fact that a leading figure in contemporary American conservative political theory, Patrick Deneen, also starts from their premise: namely, that the two dominant trends in American political thought represented by the major parties are in fact ‘two sides of the same coin’, namely of Lockean liberalism.<sup>7</sup> Liberal political philosophy, according to Deneen

“has been for modern Americans like water for a fish, an encompassing political ecosystem in which we have swum, unaware of its existence. [...] [The United States is] the first nation founded by the explicit embrace of liberal philosophy, whose citizenry is shaped almost entirely by its commitments and vision.”<sup>8</sup>

However, the conservative proposition of breaking with the liberalism of the Founders – that has failed by now according to Patrick Deneen – is not the subject of this paper. In what follows, we will look at the recent changes in American left liberalism, which, as we will try to show, also represent a sharp reversal of the Founders’ ideals, which until recently were considered unquestionable.

<sup>5</sup> LIPSET 1997: 33.

<sup>6</sup> LIPSET 1997: 36.

<sup>7</sup> DENEEN 2019: 18.

<sup>8</sup> DENEEN 2019: 4–5.

PROGRESSIVE LIBERALISM AS  
A 'SUCCESSOR IDEOLOGY'

Before turning to an examination of contemporary American progressive liberalism, some conceptual clarification seems necessary. So far, we have used the term 'liberalism' primarily in a political philosophical and intellectual history sense, when we talked about the overall 'national' ideology of the United States, covering the political community as a whole. In the following, we will turn to the everyday language of American political discourse, where the term 'liberal' usually refers to *one of the two* dominant political ideologies in the country, the left-leaning political ideology primarily associated with the Democratic Party (as opposed to the right-leaning conservatism associated with the Republican Party).

The central thesis of our paper is precisely the divergence between these two interpretations of liberalism. This distancing – in many cases an explicit confrontation – is of course also reflected in the use of concepts. One of the manifestations of this is the use of the term 'democratic socialism' as an ideological self-description by several political actors on the left, who are no longer marginalised. In our view, however, the 'democratic socialist' tendency can be interpreted at the moment more as a current of left liberalism in the former (party-political) sense, meaning that although it has a significant influence on the ideology of the contemporary American left/Democratic Party, democratic socialism by no means covers the whole of the left, and is perhaps not even the most important, characteristic part of it.

Perhaps the most certain sign of the linguistic-ideological confusion surrounding the transformation of contemporary American liberalism is the widespread use of the term 'successor ideology', the term first used by the American writer Wesley Yang to describe the new ideological formation that is gaining increasing influence among the cultural, media and academic elite.<sup>9</sup> As we find the former term, while in many respects very apt, difficult to incorporate into academic discourse, we will stick to the term 'progressive

<sup>9</sup> YANG 2021; SULLIVAN 2020a; DOUTHAT 2020.

liberalism’ in this paper, which we believe expresses both the liberal roots of the new ideology and its changed nature.

#### FREEDOM VS. EQUALITY

But before we start to examine progressive liberalism, we have one more task. We must try to answer, at least briefly, the question of what might have caused the change in the nature of American liberalism we shall describe below. The question, of course, can be asked in the vein of Patrick Deneen, like this: whether this is really a change in the nature of liberalism, or rather the unfolding of tendencies that have always been inherent in the basic assumptions of liberalism. Deneen is clearly in favour of the latter in his book *Why Liberalism Failed*, cited above, when he writes:

“Liberalism has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded in its effort to create a world of individuals and of a state that becomes ever more powerful as it protects their autonomy and equality. As liberalism becomes more fully itself, it generates endemic pathologies more rapidly and pervasively. Liberalism is not a neutral arbiter but a precommitment to a particular vision of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

A definitive answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. Here we can only attempt to draw attention to a feature of modern liberalism which could easily become the starting point of the phenomena presented later, which is the unstable balance between equality and freedom in the liberal tradition.

Louis Hartz warns in his aforementioned book that Lockean liberalism contains the seeds of conformism, since “natural law tells equal men equal things”. The biggest threat Hartz sees is not the notorious ‘tyranny of the majority’, but the ‘censorship of opinion’ that demands unanimity from

<sup>10</sup> DENEEN 2019: 3.

citizens precisely in the name of the prevailing liberalism. The ‘tyrannical impulse’ lurking deep within the uniformly liberal American political culture can thus make liberalism a threat to freedom.<sup>11</sup>

Alexis de Tocqueville (on whom Hartz draws), considered by many to be the most perceptive observer of American society to date, writes at length about the complex relationship between freedom and equality in modern democratic societies. Tocqueville is in no doubt that the latter of the two, equality, is the “principal passion” of the age, that the citizens of democratic societies have a “much more ardent and tenacious” love “for equality they have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion”.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the love of equality is growing dynamically in democratic societies:

“The hatred that men bear for privilege is increased as privileges become rarer and less great [...] the smallest dissimilarity appears shocking in the midst of general uniformity; the sight of it becomes more intolerable as uniformity is more complete. It is therefore natural that the love of equality grow constantly with equality itself [...]”<sup>13</sup>

The American political scientist Peter Berkowitz, in his analysis of some of the major policy debates of recent decades (abortion, affirmative action, same-sex marriage) and the Supreme Court practice that has usually decided them, has come to the following four conclusions, which are very much in line with Tocqueville’s judgment: 1. the central tenet of American constitutional culture revolves around the concept of ‘equality in freedom’; 2. the Constitution upholds a progressive interpretation of freedom, wherein government, guided by an expansive view of equality, is tasked with continually enlarging the domain of individual liberty; 3. this understanding of individual freedom is inherently precarious, as its expansion, lacking a defined endpoint, generates new demands for further expansion; 4. the perpetual enlargement of individual freedom may eventually lead to

<sup>11</sup> HARTZ 1955: 11.

<sup>12</sup> TOCQUEVILLE 2000: 406–409.

<sup>13</sup> TOCQUEVILLE 2000: 567.

authoritarian and anti-democratic actions that jeopardise freedom itself. Berkowitz's 2005 text became famous for predicting the Supreme Court's enshrinement of same-sex marriage as a fundamental right, which did indeed happen 10 years later.<sup>14</sup>

So, Patrick Deneen might be right insofar as the root of the current problems of American liberalism is to be found within the liberal ideological framework itself. However, this does not necessarily imply, in our view, that recent changes in American liberalism are both inevitable and irreversible, nor that there is any non-liberal alternative (at least in the classical sense) for the American political community. How the latter issues are perceived has a major impact on the likely direction of U.S. policy, including the change in the status of the United States as a great power and its impact on Central and Eastern Europe, including Hungary. We will therefore return to this key, albeit currently very vague, question at the end of this paper. But first, we will try to take stock of some of the defining features of contemporary American progressive liberalism, and show how the distorted balance between equality and freedom leads to an increasingly open confrontation with classical liberal principles.

In the following, we will try to draw the ideological profile of progressive liberalism by describing its relationship to the American Founding; the attitudinal changes that have taken place within the Democratic Party's voter base since the early 2010s, the so-called 'Great Awakening'; its roots in the American academic community; and the critical race theory that is the direct background of some of the current ideological changes. In doing so, we will try to use sources either belonging to the tendency itself, or critical of it, but still belonging to the broader liberal side, avoiding the possible bias of conservative approaches. The only exceptions to this are where a non-liberal author has contributed insights to the discourse on progressive liberalism that we believe greatly advance our understanding of it.

<sup>14</sup> BERKOWITZ 2005.

## 1619 VS. 1776

The founding of the republic, the founding documents (the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution) and their authors, the Founding Fathers, have always occupied a unique place in American political culture, with their imprint everywhere from the architecture of the capital to elementary and secondary school curricula to popular culture. With this in mind, it becomes understandable why the social, political and academic debate surrounding the ‘1619 Project’, published in *The New York Times Magazine* as a special edition on 14 August 2019, has been so intense.<sup>15</sup> August 1619 is the supposed date of the arrival of the first ship carrying African slaves to colonial Virginia, and the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this historic event was the inspiration for the project. But the project’s objectives went far beyond mere commemoration: the nation’s leading daily newspaper, which has a decisive influence on the intellectual discourse, intended, as the introduction to the series of articles states, to do no less than “reframe the country’s history” by placing slavery and its consequences at the centre of the American national narrative.<sup>16</sup> In a commentary on the articles, the editor of the issue explains that the aim is to replace the official date of birth of the country, 1776 (the year of the Declaration of Independence), with a new date:

“[Slavery] is sometimes referred to as the country’s original sin, but it is more than that: It is the country’s very origin. Out of slavery — and the anti-black racism it required — grew nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional: its economic might, its industrial power, its electoral system, its diet and popular music, the inequities of its public health and education, its astonishing penchant for violence, its income inequality, the example it sets for the world as a land of freedom and equality, its slang, its legal system and the endemic racial fears and hatreds that continue to plague it to this day. The seeds of all that were planted long before our official birth date, in 1776, when the men known as our founders formally declared independence

<sup>15</sup> The New York Times Magazine 2019.

<sup>16</sup> The New York Times Magazine 2019.



from Britain. The goal of The 1619 Project is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year.”<sup>17</sup>

The 1619 Project proved to be a great success in many ways. The progenitor, lead author and later face of the venture, Nikole Hannah-Jones was awarded the Pulitzer Prize,<sup>18</sup> the most prestigious journalism award in the U.S., for her work. She and her fellow authors promoted their work through dozens of media appearances, conferences and public meetings, and the educational materials based on the project's content have become official curricula in thousands of primary and secondary schools across the country.<sup>19</sup>

However, the acclaim surrounding the project has been mixed with criticism from the outset. In the 29 December 2019 issue of *The New York Times*, five leading historians, eminent experts of the founding era, published a letter to the editor in which they expressed reservations about the content of the project, while also formulating specific demands for correction. The writers of the letter welcomed the effort to explore the role of slavery and racism in American history. As they noted, the issue has been an important part of all their work, including some who have devoted their entire professional careers to it. However, they were disappointed by the factual errors in the project, which they felt could not be attributed to interpretation or “framing” only. These were seen as evidence pointing to the “displacement of historical understanding by ideology.”<sup>20</sup>

The editorial response accompanying the historians' letter at this stage rejected the demands for correction and stood by the published material in both concept and detail.<sup>21</sup> In light of this, it is somewhat surprising that after a few months, on 11 March 2020, the editors informed readers that, after extensive consultation with other historians, they had corrected at least one sentence in the online version of Nikole Hannah-Jones's introductory essay, indicating that the preservation of the institution of slavery was not

<sup>17</sup> SILVERSTEIN 2019b.

<sup>18</sup> BARRUS 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Pulitzer Center s. a.

<sup>20</sup> BYNUM et al. 2019.

<sup>21</sup> SILVERSTEIN 2019a.

generally among the objectives of the American colonists fighting for their independence, but only among the objectives of ‘some’ of them.<sup>22</sup>

But the controversy surrounding the 1619 Project did not end there. In September 2020, an article in the online magazine *Quillette* pointed out that the material for the project had been altered in several places since its publication, without this being brought to the attention of readers (as is customary for a publication such as *The New York Times*, which places high value on its credibility). The changes concerned the phrases calling 1619 the “true founding” of the country, or “the moment it began”, which, according to the author of the article, have disappeared from the various platforms, in a manner reminiscent of Orwell’s novel 1984.<sup>23</sup> The editor concerned responded to the allegations in another (now the third) lengthy note, where he attributed the changes to trivial changes customary in digital publications and argued, like Nikole Hannah-Jones, who also spoke on the matter, that the suggestion to change the date of the founding of the state had always been understood ‘metaphorically’.<sup>24</sup>

However, as has been pointed out, the debate about the ‘real’ date of the founding is essentially metaphorical in nature, in that the original date, traditionally considered valid, is also primarily a ‘metaphor’.<sup>25</sup> The debate is really about which interpretation of American history to accept and what to think about the principles enshrined in the founding documents, in other words, about the American tradition of classical liberalism.<sup>26</sup> Until recently, the generally accepted interpretation, even among progressive historians (including many critics of the 1619 Project) has been that American history is a story of the ongoing struggle to implement the classical liberal principles (‘equality in liberty’) laid down by the founders. Although these principles were not perfectly lived up to by the founders themselves or by the generations that followed them, they have always been and remain the guiding stars and defining characteristics of the ‘American experiment’.

<sup>22</sup> SILVERSTEIN 2020a.

<sup>23</sup> MAGNESS 2020.

<sup>24</sup> SILVERSTEIN 2020b.

<sup>25</sup> STEPHENS 2020.

<sup>26</sup> SERWER 2019.

It was this historical-ideological narrative that the 1619 Project sought to ‘deconstruct’ or override, as first admitted, but later partly withdrawn in response to criticism (the founding ideals of liberty and equality, when written down, were false, said Nikole Hannah-Jones on the first page of her introductory essay).<sup>27</sup> A historical-political assessment of the 1619 Project, which undoubtedly sheds new light on important parts of American history while setting radically new emphases, is beyond the scope of this paper. What we can say with relative confidence, however, is that it represents a clear break with the assumptions and dominant ethos of American classical liberalism, which until recently has been widely shared.

### THE ‘GREAT AWOKENING’

Although the 1619 Project’s attempt to place the issues of slavery and racism at the absolute centre of the American historical-political experience is debatable in many respects, the deep influence of the former on the development of American society can hardly be questioned. As before, it seems best to turn to Alexis de Tocqueville for guidance on the question. Tocqueville clearly saw that the institution of slavery could not be maintained in a modern democratic society, and that its abolition and the eradication of its consequences would be an almost insurmountable task for the country.

“Slavery contracted to a single point on the globe, attacked by Christianity as unjust, by political economy as fatal; slavery, in the midst of the democratic freedom and enlightenment of our age, is not an institution that can endure. It will cease by the deed of the slave or the master. In both cases, one must expect great misfortunes.”

– he writes, raising the possibility of the “most horrible of all civil wars”.<sup>28</sup> The slaveholding past and the legacy of racial discrimination that survived the Civil War cast a dark shadow over American history, and also on

<sup>27</sup> STEPHENS 2020.

<sup>28</sup> TOCQUEVILLE 2000: 285, 283.

American society today. There is a strong case to be made that the trajectory of American liberalism in recent years has been shaped in large part by this historical legacy.

In 2019, Matthew Yglesias, then a contributor to the website *Vox*, one of the most important forums for progressive liberalism, summarised the changes in thinking and attitudes that radically transformed the ideological profile of the Democratic Party in an article that is still widely quoted today.<sup>29</sup> The essay is entitled *The Great Awakening*, referring to both the widespread name of the new ideology ('wokism') and its quasi-religious character. The main claim of the article is that the most significant change in American politics in recent times is not the rise of a populist right associated with Donald Trump, but a radical shift in the values of the liberal left, especially attitudes towards racism and racial discrimination.<sup>30</sup>

Yglesias dates the beginning of the process to 2014 (during Barack Obama's presidency) and links it to the protests against police violence in Ferguson, Missouri, following the death of Michael Brown, which were amplified by social media on an unprecedented scale (the nationwide expansion of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, which played a significant role in the following years, is linked to this event as well<sup>31</sup>). From about this time onwards, the perception of racial inequality and discrimination among the Democratic Party's base of mainly white liberal voters fundamentally changed. This can be measured by responses to poll questions such as whether further action is needed to achieve racial equality; whether racial discrimination is the main reason why black people cannot get ahead in life; and whether black people have a right to claim special treatment to overcome prejudice (the proportion of respondents answering yes to each of these questions has increased significantly in recent years). Quoted by Yglesias, Zachary

<sup>29</sup> YGLESIAS 2019.

<sup>30</sup> A similar argument has been made by left-wing journalist Kevin Drum in a blog post, when he writes that the 'culture war' that has divided American public life to the extreme was actually started by the liberal side (DRUM 2021).

<sup>31</sup> See especially the unprecedented wave of national protests following George Floyd's killing by a police officer in the summer of 2020, which was captured on video (TAYLOR 2020).

Goldberg points out, based on his research on the subject, that on these issues white liberal voters are not only divided from society as a whole, but in many cases also from the views of the minorities concerned (blacks, or Latinos on immigration, for example) (i.e. they are more likely to support the progressive alternative than members of the minorities affected).<sup>32</sup>

Yglesias also discusses in his article the role of the socio-political elite in the changes described. In his view, it is a two-way, mutually reinforcing process: voters are largely following signals from the elite, while members of the elite are trying to keep pace with the voters or, if possible, anticipate changes in partisan public opinion. As an example of the role of the elite, Yglesias cites the proliferation of the term 'systemic racism', first used by Hillary Clinton in her 2016 election campaign, which has become a standard part of the Democratic Party discourse by the 2019–2020 primaries.

#### THE GREAT 'CLOSING'

One of the most respected journals of opinion in the world, *The Economist*, devoted the front page of one of its recent issues to the threat posed by the 'illiberal left'.<sup>33</sup> The editors' use of the phrase is instructive in itself, in that they refuse to label the movement they refer to as 'liberal', reserving the latter term for the 'classical liberalism' they represent. It is precisely this classical liberalism that they see as being threatened by the new ideology they criticise. Two long essays on the subject are included in the issue, the first of which finds the intellectual roots of 'left-wing illiberalism' on the campuses of the American elite universities responsible for training and recruiting the socio-political elite, from where graduates take it with them to the dominant institutions of economic, cultural and political life.<sup>34</sup>

The phenomenon is not new. The political philosopher Allan Bloom, in his 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind*, blamed the intellectual and moral relativism prevalent in academia for the spread of nihilism in

<sup>32</sup> GOLDBERG 2019.

<sup>33</sup> The Economist 2021a.

<sup>34</sup> The Economist 2021b.

American society three and a half decades ago. In Bloom's view, since the social movements of the 1960s, academic intellectuals seeking to accommodate the demands of various racial and gender identity groups, following the lead of Nietzsche, European poststructuralist philosophy and critical social theory, have rejected the classical philosophical program of the search for universal truth, denying university students the experience of learning the wisdom of the 'great books' of the Western tradition and thus plunging American society into a general crisis of values.<sup>35</sup>

It is no coincidence that the book by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and lawyer-activist Greg Lukianoff, written on the crisis of American universities in the 2010s is entitled *The Coddling of the American Mind*, recalling the title of Bloom's work. However, Haidt and Lukianoff argue that the reasons for the academic illiberalism they criticise are primarily to be found in the 'therapeutic' culture that has long dominated the education of young people in America, which seeks to protect them from psychological harm by creating *safe spaces*, avoiding disturbing topics or readings, and providing them with *trigger warnings*.<sup>36</sup> However, the ever more radical, sometimes violent university demonstrations of recent years,<sup>37</sup> and the street protests in the summer of 2020 seem to support Allan Bloom's analysis – with the addition, anticipated by Bloom, that the wisdom of the classical tradition is being replaced in the minds of young people seeking meaning in their lives by more recent ideas of *social justice*.

The American universities of today are less characterised by the moral relativism of *anything goes* and more by the dominance of a very powerful and rigid system of thought, the name of which is constantly changing (from political correctness to identity politics to woke ideology), but the contours of which are becoming more and more distinct. Looking back from today, the relativising, or (in post-structuralism's preferred term) 'deconstructing' efforts of the past period were primarily aimed at dismantling the existing

<sup>35</sup> BLOOM 1987. Christopher Caldwell's recent book also traces many of the crisis phenomena in contemporary American politics to the socio-political changes of the 1960s (CALDWELL 2020).

<sup>36</sup> LUKIANOFF–HAIDT 2018.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. STANGER 2017.

classical liberal consensus, which has by now been replaced by the new successor ideology. For the latter, the basic tenets of classical liberalism, such as freedom of conscience, opinion and expression, freedom of scientific research and debate, and the principle of tolerance of dissent are merely ideological constructs to conceal and maintain the power relations (systemic racism and white supremacy) behind them.<sup>38</sup>

### CRITICAL RACE THEORY

All of this bears striking similarities, albeit more structural than substantive, with the basic tenets of Marxism (the division of society into oppressors and oppressed, the assumption of antagonistic conflict between them, the ‘false consciousness’ propagated by the oppressors to maintain their own power, the program of radical, revolutionary transformation of society).<sup>39</sup> However, the economically defined class conflict of Marxist theory has been replaced by the irresolvable conflict between marginalised racial, ethnic and gender identity groups and the beneficiaries of ‘white supremacy’. A historical-ideological link between the two schools of thought can also be traced through the significant influence of Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno on American intellectual life, and the Marxist-inspired critical social theory of the European philosophers of the Frankfurt School.

The relevant critical theory in this case is ‘critical race theory’, which has grown out of a branch of critical legal theory, combining a scientific approach with political activism, and which starts from the inadequacy of classical liberal legal institutions in addressing racial inequalities, and aims

<sup>38</sup> A useful summary of the recent changes in American university departments, especially in the social sciences and humanities, is provided in the book *Cynical Theories. How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody* by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay (PLUCKROSE–LINDSAY 2020), who caused an outcry a few years ago by publishing hoax papers in prestigious academic journals. On the earlier scandal see LINDSAY et al. 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. HAZONY 2020.

to reveal and dismantle the hidden structures of racial oppression.<sup>40</sup> The theory was later supplemented by the concept of ‘intersectionality’, which describes an interlocking system of oppression based on different group identities, and extends the insights about racial discrimination to members of other social groups.

For the proponents of critical race theory, empirically detectable racial (ethnic, gender) inequalities are *always*, by definition, the result of discrimination. If neutral (or apparently neutral), colour blind policy solutions (such as standardised university admission tests) do not achieve the desired goal of eliminating racial inequalities, they should be replaced by various forms of affirmative action. In the words of perhaps the most important theorist of the movement, Ibram X. Kendi:

“The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘antiracist.’ [...] The claim of ‘not racist’ neutrality is a mask for racism. [...] The common idea of claiming ‘color-blindness’ is akin to the notion of being ‘not racist.’ [...] The language of color blindness – like the language of ‘not racist,’ – is a mask to hide racism.”<sup>41</sup>

Those who do not share the assumptions of critical race theory, and do not actively work in its spirit to dismantle the hidden structures of racism, are themselves supporting the maintenance of those structures, and are therefore (according to the author, not in a pejorative, but in a strictly descriptive, objective sense) racists.<sup>42</sup>

In response to a question from the online magazine *Politico*, seeking solutions to the social problems facing America from today’s leading thinkers,<sup>43</sup> Ibram X. Kendi proposed a new constitutional amendment and the creation of a new federal authority. The proposal is worth quoting in its entirety because it summarises the political claims of the new ‘anti-racist’

<sup>40</sup> CRENSHAW et al. 1996; DELGADO–STEFANCIC 2017.

<sup>41</sup> KENDI 2019a. 9–10.

<sup>42</sup> KENDI 2019a.

<sup>43</sup> Politico Magazine 2019.



ideology in a relatively concise and credible way – and also demonstrates convincingly its anti-liberal character in the classical liberal sense:

“To fix the original sin of racism, Americans should pass an anti-racist amendment to the U.S. Constitution that enshrines two guiding anti-racist principles: Racial inequity is evidence of racist policy and the different racial groups are equals. The amendment would make unconstitutional racial inequity over a certain threshold, as well as racist ideas by public officials (with “racist ideas” and “public official” clearly defined). It would establish and permanently fund the Department of Anti-racism (DOA) comprised of formally trained experts on racism and no political appointees. The DOA would be responsible for preclearing all local, state and federal public policies to ensure they won’t yield racial inequity, monitor those policies, investigate private racist policies when racial inequity surfaces, and monitor public officials for expressions of racist ideas. The DOA would be empowered with disciplinary tools to wield over and against policymakers and public officials who do not voluntarily change their racist policy and ideas.”<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps one does not have to be biased against the author or critical race theory to observe that the above proposal, while completely ignoring classical liberal principles of individual rights, freedom of conscience and opinion, and limited government based on representation, also contains elements tending towards totalitarianism, especially when read from an East-Central European perspective.<sup>45</sup>

But totalitarian socialism is not the only analogy that springs to mind – and, in the case of the United States, perhaps not the most apt. As several analysts have pointed out, the woke ideology is rich in elements reminiscent of medieval and early modern Puritan religious practice, such as the doctrine of original sin, unquestionable dogmas and beliefs, strict rules of conduct and speech, the requirement of orthodoxy, the practice of

<sup>44</sup> KENDI 2019b.

<sup>45</sup> See also SULLIVAN 2019.

excommunication and proselytisation.<sup>46</sup> The quasi-religious character of contemporary progressive liberalism also reinforces its opposition to classical liberalism, which defined itself at its inception in opposition to state religions.

### CANCEL CULTURE

The specific area where contemporary progressive liberalism most often and most openly comes into conflict with the principles of classical liberalism is the freedom of conscience, opinion and expression. There is now an almost endless list of journalists and public figures who have suffered serious attacks, often resulting in the loss of their jobs or positions, for some ill-judged or offensive statement, sometimes made years ago, or for political views that offend the sensibilities of the new ideology's adherents.<sup>47</sup> The ruthless severity of the reactions to such breaches of the norm (or even just suspicions of them) was the subject of a lengthy essay by Anne Applebaum in *The Atlantic*. The practices and procedures followed in elite cultural institutions and described in the article, which for the author are reminiscent of the former communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe and the China of the Maoist Cultural Revolution, have in common that they are in sharp contrast to classical liberal principles such as the presumption of innocence or the right to a fair trial.<sup>48</sup>

The existence of university cancel culture, already amply documented in anecdotal form,<sup>49</sup> was empirically confirmed by one of today's most respected political scientists, Pippa Norris, who found survey evidence that conservative lecturers and researchers in U.S. and Western European universities regularly feel they have to keep their opinions silent.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> The Economist 2021c; DERESIEWICZ 2017; MCWHORTER 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Just a few examples from the year 2020: DOUTHAT 2020; WEISS 2020; SULLIVAN 2020b; GREENWALD 2020; TAIBBI 2020.

<sup>48</sup> APPLEBAUM 2021.

<sup>49</sup> See for example MCWHORTER 2020.

<sup>50</sup> NORRIS 2023.

In the summer of 2020, dozens of well-known, predominantly liberal intellectuals published an open letter in the pages of the prestigious *Harper's Magazine*, in which they spoke out against the increasingly anti-liberal climate of opinion in the United States. Signatories, who also criticised Donald Trump and the radical right, said that the necessary confrontation with racial and social injustice

“has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity. [...] censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty. [...] Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study. [...] Whatever the arguments around each particular incident, the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal.”<sup>51</sup>

The recurring counterarguments that these cases involve not state sanctions, but private acts, which also fall within the scope of freedom of expression, lose much of their credibility in the light of Ibram Kendi's above mentioned proposal. However, that credibility is not very strong anyway. Liberalism's classic arguments for pluralism of opinion, (among others by John Stuart Mill), defend the maintenance of the possibility of free debate as a guarantee of finding the truth, and it is easy to see that these arguments are as valid for public as for private actors. For many representatives of contemporary progressive liberalism, however, free debate is not a means of discovering the truth, but of silencing marginalised groups and maintaining white supremacy.

<sup>51</sup> A Letter on Justice and Open Debate. *Harper's Magazine*, 7 July 2020. Due to the large number of signatories and their high profile, it would be difficult to single out just a few names, but the full list can be found on the *Harper's Magazine* website.

THE FUTURE OF PROGRESSIVE  
LIBERALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Before concluding our study by attempting to assess the impact of American progressive liberalism outside the United States, it is worth considering the prospects for this ideological movement in the U.S. While we cannot know at this stage how politically successful today's progressive liberal aspirations will prove in the longer term, there are signs that progressive identity politics is far from being supported by the majority of the electorate. The opinion polls drawing very similar conclusions in this respect have from time to time been confirmed by election results as well.<sup>52</sup> A case in point is the November 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election. In a state that has been leaning Democratic for years, where Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election by a convincing 10% margin, the Democratic candidate, previously considered a shoo-in, suffered an unexpected defeat at the hands of his Republican challenger, whose key campaign promise was to end the teaching of critical race theory in primary and secondary schools.<sup>53</sup> The emergence of critical race theory (or more precisely, the curricula inspired by it) in schools, coupled with the restrictions imposed by the coronavirus pandemic, had sparked a nationwide movement of parental protest over the previous year, which, in the peculiarly American tradition of self-government, was embodied primarily in conflicts over local school boards.<sup>54</sup> The election results of 2 November 2021 showed a significant drop in support for the Democratic Party in other states as well.<sup>55</sup> The main reason for the Democrats' poor showing, according to many analysts, was the party's leftward turn and the disconnect between its ideological objectives and the thinking of the majority of voters, including a significant proportion of minority voters.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> MOUNK 2018; LIZZA 2020; EDSALL 2021a.

<sup>53</sup> LERER 2021b; UNGAR-SARGON 2021.

<sup>54</sup> LERER 2021a; GONZALEZ 2021.

<sup>55</sup> MARTIN-BURNS 2021; EDSALL 2021b.

<sup>56</sup> The New York Times 2021; DOUTHAT 2021; PBS News 2021.

The future success of the progressive liberal successor ideology may also be influenced by the growing opposition to it in the moderate liberal centre of American intellectual life, of which there have also been increasing signs recently.<sup>57</sup> Manifestations of this opposition include, among others, the open letter in *Harper's Magazine*, *The Economist's* aforementioned piece on the dangers of the illiberal left, or the new book by the renowned African-American linguistics professor John McWhorter, which criticises the woke ideology from the perspective of blacks in America.<sup>58</sup> It is worth recalling here that the progressive advance of the 1960s in the United States was followed by a 'neo-conservative' turn in the 1970s, in large part initiated by disillusioned liberal intellectuals, which led to the election of Ronald Reagan as president at the end of the decade and the dawn of a new conservative era.

#### THE IMPACT OF PROGRESSIVE LIBERALISM OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES

"Just as American Marxists and neo-Marxists were successful in disrupting and dismantling many of the customs and institutions of their country, they will try to copy their success in other democratic nations. No free nation is exempt from this challenge. So let's not turn our backs and tell ourselves that it can't happen here. Because it can, and it will" – writes Israeli-American political philosopher Yoram Hazony in an essay on what he calls the 'Challenge of Marxism'.<sup>59</sup> We have mentioned before that, while the parallels are undoubtedly real, we are not necessarily sure that the rise of Marxism is the best explanation for the emergence of progressive liberalism. In a similar vein, we believe that while we should take Hazony's warning seriously, there is reason to doubt the inevitability of the prophecy it contains.

<sup>57</sup> SULLIVAN 2021.

<sup>58</sup> MCWHORTER 2021. McWhorter has recently been given a column in *The New York Times*, a bastion of progressive liberalism.

<sup>59</sup> HAZONY 2020.

The most important aspect to take into account when assessing this question is that American progressive liberalism, as we have seen so far, is very closely linked to the country's special, unique characteristics (one could say that progressive liberalism itself is part of 'American exceptionalism'). Foremost among these unique circumstances is the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination going back to the founding of the country (or, as we have seen, even earlier), which provides the crucial component of the moral driving force of contemporary 'anti-racist' politics. However, we must also include here the special nature of the American liberal tradition, with the prominence given to equality and also the highly moralised character of American liberalism inherited from New England Puritanism. Moral movements, often on a mass scale, such as the successive waves of religious 'Great Awakenings' (or, the somewhat more prosaic constitutional prohibition of alcohol introduced in 1920) can be considered constant features of the country's history. A social movement like the one we are witnessing today, which seeks to radically transform American society, while at the same time dividing it to the extreme, was last seen in the 1960s and, as mentioned earlier, it is still having an impact today.

Although the influence of American progressive liberalism has been felt in European politics as well, not least thanks to the influence of American popular culture and the emergence of a global economic-cultural elite (what American economist Tyler Cowen calls the 'international progressive class'<sup>60</sup>), the very different social context and historical traditions make it questionable whether it will be able to develop in Europe in a similar form to the U.S. The chances of this are greater in countries where similar factors (e.g. 'guilt' from a colonial past or other historical reasons, racial-ethnic tensions within the society) are conducive to it,<sup>61</sup> but even there it is less likely to be able to achieve a dominance similar to that achieved overseas, in the absence of the specifically American constellation of factors mentioned above.

<sup>60</sup> COWEN 2021.

<sup>61</sup> ONISHI 2021.

The latter considerations are probably particularly valid for the Central and Eastern European countries with recent experience of totalitarian politics, including Hungary. According to Joseph de Weck and Niall Ferguson's 2019 analysis, while 'Millennials' and members of 'Generation Z', who would be key to the spread of progressive liberalism in Europe, share similarities with their American counterparts, they are less likely to have attitudes associated with woke ideology (such as support for increased state redistribution or open immigration policies). This is especially the case in East-Central Europe.<sup>62</sup> Eszter Kováts, in her 2019 study, while also drawing attention to the role of popular culture in this field, and acknowledging that certain manifestations of woke activism have appeared in Hungary, argues that their weight in Hungarian political-cultural life is still small.<sup>63</sup>

The events of the 1960s and 1970s, mentioned earlier, can also be a good starting point for assessing the impact of progressive liberalism on U.S. foreign policy. The upheavals in U.S. domestic politics, culminating in the impeachment of Richard Nixon and the resignation of the President, contributed significantly to the country's loss of self-confidence and capacity to act on the international stage, which also had an impact on the great power competition with the Soviet Union. The shaking of the traditional faith in the moral foundations of the country, as recognised at the time by Henry A. Kissinger, made it very difficult to mobilise the political support that was needed for an effective foreign policy on the part of the United States.<sup>64</sup>

While the phenomena associated with the ideology of progressive liberalism also appeared in the foreign policy and national security apparatus of the United States – like in other elite institutions with highly qualified staff<sup>65</sup> – and we can find examples of their influence on the objectives and instruments of U.S. foreign policy (even under Republican administrations that would otherwise oppose such aspirations),<sup>66</sup> the most important

<sup>62</sup> WECK–FERGUSON 2019.

<sup>63</sup> KOVÁTS 2019, 325–338.

<sup>64</sup> MÁNDI 2008: 65–79.

<sup>65</sup> KURTZLEBEN 2021; BORGER 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Cockburn 2021; HANANIA 2021.

foreign policy impact of progressive liberalism, if it continues to gain ground, would, in our view, not be the aggressive assertion of such objectives, but the intensification of isolationist tendencies. In foreign policy, the woke Democrats would probably have much in common with the so-called ‘San Francisco Democrats’ described by Jeane Kirkpatrick, one of Ronald Reagan’s most important foreign policy advisors, in a speech at the 1984 Republican National Convention (a term that referred both to the location of the Democratic Party convention of the same year, as well as to the city’s progressive reputation). According to Kirkpatrick, the San Francisco Democrats are those, who “always blame America first”, and who in international conflicts usually take the side of the opponents of the United States. Perhaps the most important line of the speech is a quote from the French philosopher Jean-Francois Revel: “A civilization that feels guilty for everything it is and does will lack the energy and conviction to defend itself.”<sup>67</sup>

However, the unfolding of the current great power conflict with China could also have implications for the future of progressive liberalism in the United States. Louis Hartz, quoted at the beginning of this paper, noted that military and ideological challenges from outside have a particular mobilising force on American society.<sup>68</sup> If we look back again to the experience of the 1970s and 1980s, we can see that the reaction to the Cold War conflict with the Soviet Union contributed greatly to overcoming the social divisions and crisis of the previous decade.<sup>69</sup>

For all these reasons, the turn in U.S. foreign policy thinking in recent years – both at the level of the political elite and the public – with regard to the relationship with China is remarkable. As Peter Berkowitz (who served as the Director of Policy Planning at the Department of State under Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during the Trump Administration), quoted above in another context, points out in a recent article: the Biden Administration’s

<sup>67</sup> KIRKPATRICK 1984.

<sup>68</sup> HARTZ 1955: 12.

<sup>69</sup> The Ukrainian–Russian war that unfolded after the first draft of the manuscript was completed, and the resulting intensified confrontation with Russia, may also play a similar role in influencing U.S. domestic policy.



China policy shows considerable continuity with the Trump Administration's ambitions, in that, in a break with the practice of previous decades, China is no longer seen as a strategic partner but as the most important rival of the United States.<sup>70</sup> The shift in the thinking of the U.S. foreign policy elite coincides with developments in broader American public opinion, which, overcoming the deep partisan and ideological divisions on other issues, has become virtually united in confronting the threat posed by China as a rival superpower.<sup>71</sup>

All this suggests that, if not the foreign policy apparatus, American strategic thinking has so far remained largely free from the encroachment of progressive liberalism. For Central and Eastern Europe, and Hungary in particular, this may mean that while some of the demands of progressive liberalism may appear in U.S. foreign policy, its main guiding principle in the near future is likely to be the rivalry with China, and its expectations towards its allies will most probably be related to this as well. The international impact of American progressive liberalism is more likely to be felt through soft power channels, such as popular culture and the influence of elite thinking, but this may also be limited by the different social and historical context and the uncertain future of progressive liberalism in the U.S. itself. However, in the event of the eventual failure of the 'successor ideology', given the deep-rooted ideological character of American society, it is still unlikely that there will be a breakthrough of traditional European-style conservatism in the U.S., but rather a revival of some renewed form of American 'classical liberalism'.

<sup>70</sup> BERKOWITZ 2021.

<sup>71</sup> GALSTON 2021. It is worth highlighting some of the data from the polls the author has cited: 89% of U.S. citizens consider China an enemy or rival, 67% have a negative opinion of China, 63% rate China's growing economic power as a 'critical threat' to the U.S., and a similar proportion support measures such as excluding Chinese companies from developing U.S. telecommunications infrastructure.

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