

Constitutional Corner: Progressivism, What It Is and What it Believes. Part 1: Progressivism's Roots.

Note: this essay is the first installment in a series exploring Progressivism. The topic is also the subject of our discussion on my weekly radio show: "We the People – the Constitution Matters," broadcast live on Friday mornings from 7-8am on WFYL radio, AM1180. The station transmits from the Valley Forge, PA area but the show can be heard live on the station's website: www.1180wfyl.com, or via a recorded podcast. The topic of each show will provide the basis for the following week's essay.

"I'm a progressive who gets results and I will be a progressive president who gets results," said Hillary Clinton.¹

"I do not know any progressive who has a super PAC and takes \$15m from Wall Street," said Bernie Sanders in response.

Progressive groups had a field day, [some defending Clinton's declaration](#),² [some discounting it](#)³ [for various reasons](#).

So Hillary Clinton claims to be a progressive and Bernie Sanders claims she's not. Who's right?

It is difficult to pin down exactly what progressives believe these days, it's sort of a moving target; which makes sense in a morbid sort of way: if you're for always "progressing," always moving forward, you're always ready to embrace something new. Discarding yesterday's "truth" comes easy, even necessary.

I thank my radio colleague Phil Duffy for pointing me to some [excellent online courses](#)⁴ on this topic, produced by Hillsdale College. [In one such course](#),⁵ Hillsdale College Professor Paul Moreno breaks down the beliefs of progressivism this way:

One: A fervent belief in Statism, a belief that government, at some level, has an answer to nearly every societal problem. If there is a problem: unemployment, low wages, economic stagnation, Americans who can't afford health insurance, whatever; the solution lies somewhere in a government action or government program.

Two: A belief in Historicism, a belief that all lessons from history must be placed in a context and interpreted within that context. This doesn't sound too bad until you discover that this also requires and results in a rejection of any notion of universal, fundamental or immutable

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-35489572>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hillary-clinton-progressive_us_572cca08e4b0bc9cb0469098

³ <http://inthesetimes.com/article/19315/is-clinton-a-progressive-not-if-she-chooses-tim-kaine>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N71Cg-7Oqnc>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3n2R6infY2s>

interpretations of history. Jefferson's self-evident truths go out the window. Those "truths" may have been true in 1776 but they can't possibly be today. 2016 is a different time, a different place, and everything now has a new context. So while the Declaration may be a great document that resulted in our not having to speak proper English, it served its purpose and is now just a historical artifact to be studied by academics, like dinosaur bones.

Three: Support for the Living Constitution. It should come as no surprise to discover that Progressives support the idea of a living Constitution, one that must continually be updated to keep up with the times. Whether those updates take place through amendment, which is hard, or judicial ruling, which is much easier, the Constitution must continually change. If it can't be updated it must be discarded and replaced. Fortunately, Progressives have found the Courts willing to come up with new, expansive interpretations of key clauses that have allowed for expansion of government power without the need for amendment. Original intent? Who cares, those guys are dead.

Four: Support for legal positivism. I won't go into a lot of detail on this this -- I've written on legal positivism in the past and cover it in my Constitution seminar -- but legal positivism boils down to a belief that all law is man-made, no law exists in nature nor was any law created by God. God, if he even exists at all, is irrelevant to the study of law. Legal positivism arrived on America's shores about the same time as Progressivism. They share some common history.

Five: Support for the science of public administration. Government is way too important and way too complicated to leave in the hands of elected officials. Government is, in the words of Woodrow Wilson, a living organism. You need knowledgeable, experienced experts in the science of government to govern properly. This idea produces big, bloated government staffs, with many, many programs to keep things "progressing."

The sixth and final tenet of Progressivism according to Professor Moreno is support for a growing Federal Police Power. States can't be trusted to exert their police power, the federal government must have and use this power as well.

On that note: There are only four federal crimes discussed in the original Constitution. Today there are well over 4500 federal crimes in the statute books, so many crimes that some authors postulate that every citizen commits at least three federal felonies each day. If true, if we are all walking around as potential criminals, who actually becomes the criminal on any given day is whoever the federal prosecutor decides to prosecute that day.

I mean really, need it be a federal crime to disrupt a rodeo? It is, of course. If you disrupt a rodeo, say by unfurling your "John 3:16" banner, you could be prosecuted by the feds. If you carry unlicensed dentures across a state line, you could go to federal prison, if you defame the character of Woodsey the Owl or his message "Give a Hoot – Don't Pollute" you can go to

federal prison. I'm not making this stuff up, look it up for yourself in the hundreds of thousands of pages of the U.S. Code.

Think about it, if it is a crime to kill someone under state law, and it is in all 50 states, why do we also need to make murder a federal crime? But to a progressive, who doesn't trust in state police power, a continually growing federal police power makes perfect sense.

If you go to Wikipedia, you find that, and I quote, "Progressivism is a philosophy based on the idea of progress, which asserts that advancement in science, technology, economic development, and social organization are vital to improve the human condition." Sounds pretty innocuous doesn't it? Who isn't for "improving the human condition, right?"

Progressives trace their philosophy to several nineteenth-century philosophers. Let's start with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher often called the "Father of Progressivism." Hegel was born in 1770 and produced most of his ideas in the 1820s and 30s. He singlehandedly came up with one of the tenets of progressivism: historicism, which I've already defined as a belief that there is no transcendent truth in history, everything in history must be taken in context. Hegel called it "zeitgeist," the spirit of the time. All philosophy is also a product of the zeitgeist, which would mean there is no transcendent philosophy, it is always changing. Taken to its logical conclusion, this means Hegel has nothing to say to today's progressives; ironic.

Another Hegelian contribution is "the dialectic process." Any idea, called a thesis, has its opposite, called an antithesis. These two ideas are polar opposites, thus they are in conflict with each other. But out of that conflict arises the synthesis. For example, the thesis that "lying is bad" produces the antithesis, that "lying is good." Out of this conflict comes a synthesis: "lying is sometimes good." This then produces a new thesis and a new antithesis. Out of these arise a new synthesis. The process repeats endlessly and thus "truth" can never be firmly grasped, it is always in the process of changing into a new synthesis.

Hegel's final contribution, at least that I will discuss, is the basic idea that God is spirit and that spirit is ultimately the human mind. So Hegel believed that Christianity was true, but not literally, only as a metaphor for the human condition. In Christianity, God becomes man in the form of Jesus Christ. But that's Hegel's way of saying that the human mind becomes increasingly rational until finally, at the end of history, it becomes purely and perfectly rational, in effect: it becomes God. "Rational man is the true god, whereas non-rational man is merely man."⁶ The true progressive thus believes in the perfectibility of man. And this carries over into their support for government social programs.

⁶ <http://blog.hillisdale.edu/online-courses/hegel-and-early-progressivism>

Hegel saw America's weak government (of the 1820s and 30s) as a detriment when compared with Germany's very strong government. America's "excess" of liberty was also a detriment; government ought to take charge and direct people in the way they should live.

Hegel's follower, Karl Marx, disagreed with Hegel in several points, particularly Hegel's acceptance of private property. This produced Marx's communist version, where all property is held "in common."

Before Hegel, came France's Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau authored a book called "Social Contract," published in 1762, which was a direct refutation of the theories of John Locke, who the Founders had studied and adopted.

Michael S. Coffman has written a book called "[Plundered, How Progressive Ideology is Destroying America](https://www.amazon.com/Plundered-Progressive-Ideology-Destroying-America/dp/0615630774)"⁷ that contains a nice side-by-side comparison of Locke and Rousseau, from which I've drawn some of this material.

Rousseau, the father of four illegitimate children by four different mothers, based much of his philosophy on the work of Englishman Thomas Hobbes, whose 1651 book "Leviathan" argued that man combined in societies, in communities, and formed governments for protection from a life in nature that was "nasty, brutish, and short." Government, to Hobbes, becomes the "Leviathan" that is all-powerful and omniscient, government that can meet all of man's needs. Government becomes the sovereign and man has few freedoms, if any.

Rousseau refined and built upon Hobbes: mankind must bend to the "general will" of the people, all property should be held in common, not privately, and everyone in society should work towards "the common good," or be forced to. "It Takes a Village" fits right into this philosophy, as does "you didn't build that," along with the idea that children are ultimately the responsibility of the state, not parents.

Rousseau's ideas fed directly into the bloody French Revolution, which cost approximately 100,000 Frenchmen and women, their heads.

All human rights, to Rousseau, are "civil rights," granted by the government; there is no such thing as unalienable or inherent natural or God-given rights, and so government must be powerful enough to define, grant and then protect those rights that it grants.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when European Progressivism came to these shores, but some historians point to the late 1800's, sometimes known as the "Gilded Age" in America. American academics studying in European universities, particularly those in Germany and France, brought these ideas back with them. While the exact "landing point" of Progressivism is hard to discern,

⁷ <https://www.amazon.com/Plundered-Progressive-Ideology-Destroying-America/dp/0615630774>

a likely candidate is Johns Hopkins University, founded in 1876. Some authors suggest Johns Hopkins was formed for the sole purpose of providing a launching point for progressivism in America. In 1883, a young man arrived there to complete advanced degrees. His name: Woodrow Wilson. Every single one of Wilson's professors had obtained advanced degrees from German universities.

Though called the "Gilded Age," there were indeed excesses in America during this period, and progressives fought for improvements in workers' wages and working conditions.

Some historians believe the Progressive Era peaked in the early 1920s with the Presidency of Woodrow Wilson. You wouldn't know that by listening to the rhetoric today. With today's Congressional Progressive Caucus having 71 members (70 of them Democrats and one Independent, Senator Bernie Sanders), it looks to me like progressivism is still alive and well. Groups like [Think Progress](https://thinkprogress.org/)⁸ help keep the movement alive. [This article](http://www.dailykos.com/story/2009/4/4/716698/)⁹ on the DailyKos website tells you where to find news sources with a progressive slant.

Next week, we'll examine that period in the early 1900s when progressivism really took off in America and the damage it caused, particularly during and by the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. In subsequent essays, we'll examine progressivism's influence on American public education, on environmentalism, globalism and economics. Stay tuned, and please consider joining us live as we discuss these topics on Friday mornings 7-8am EDT. I would love to hear your comments and take your questions.

"Constitutional Corner" is a project of the Constitution Leadership Initiative, Inc. To unsubscribe from future mailings by Constitution Leadership Initiative, [click here](#).

⁸ <https://thinkprogress.org/>

⁹ [http://www.dailykos.com/story/2009/4/4/716698/-](http://www.dailykos.com/story/2009/4/4/716698/)