

Regressive Left puts bigotry and militant Islam on a pedestal

By Peter Baldwin, previously a minister in the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. The Australian, 17 September 2016

What does it mean, these days, when someone says their politics are “left-wing” or “progressive”?

This has always been debatable, but in recent times these terms have taken on meanings that earlier generations of leftists would scarcely recognise. Ideas that used to be thought constitutive of left-wing thinking have been turned on their head.

To see what I am getting at, ponder the following thought experiment. Try to imagine how a moderate leftist in the social-democratic tradition (my own position) or a liberal in the American sense might react on awakening today from suspended animation after a half-century.

Say they had just listened to Martin Luther King’s great civil rights speech of 1963 in which he yearned for the day when his children would be judged by the content of their character, not the colour of their skin. Back then, King’s sentiments were seen around the world as the quintessence of liberal progressivism.

Suppose further that the cryogenic experiment were conducted on one of the campuses of the University of California, Los Angeles. Imagine that the subject of our experiment is a member of staff and, needing to be brought up to speed on university policies, is sent on a course on how to avoid “microaggressions”, words or phrases that are deemed subtly racist. Such training recently was made mandatory at the behest of University of California president Janet Napolitano.

Our Rip Van Winkle would be amazed to learn that the dreaded microaggressions included statements such as “When I look at you, I don’t see colour”, or “There is only one race, the human race”. Such sentiments are not even to be uttered, let alone debated, in what would seem to our reawakened liberal like some Bizarro World - alternative reality.

So what has happened? In a nutshell, there has been a comprehensive rejection by progressive academe of the intellectual inheritance from the Enlightenment, the “revolution of the mind” that transformed Europe and North America in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Enlightenment stressed argumentative rationality and the scientific method. It favoured open debate of contentious issues, including the ability to freely critique religious doctrines. It is a universalist vision in which people are seen as members of a common humanity, each possessing rationality and agency, and not just creatures of the particular cultural or religious milieu into which they are born.

Distinguished historian of the Enlightenment Jonathan Israel identifies a subcurrent that he termed the Radical Enlightenment that added a strong commitment to equality of people irrespective of race, gender or class to the intellectual freedoms demanded by the mainstream Enlightenment. Until recently, leftist intellectuals across the board happily would trace their lineage back to this movement. Even advocates of

communist totalitarianism honoured Enlightenment principles by claiming that their “scientific socialism” provided the fullest realisation of Enlightenment ideals.

Today the “Enlightenment project”, as they now style it, is typically disparaged by intellectuals of a progressive bent. The ideal of human universality is discarded in favour of the politics of culture and identity; the value of reasoned debate questioned as argument is seen as just a mask for the exercise of power; the quest for objective truth is replaced by an emphasis on narratives and stories; and the right to strongly critique religion abrogated, albeit selectively.

In his book *The Seduction of Unreason*, American political philosopher Richard Wolin gives a comprehensive intellectual genealogy of this development. He notes “one of the peculiarities of our times is that Counter-Enlightenment arguments, once the exclusive prerogative of the political Right, have attained a new lease on life among representatives of the cultural Left ... As a prominent advocate of postmodern political theory contends, one need only outfit the Counter-Enlightenment standpoint with a new ‘articulation’ to make it serviceable for the ends of the postmodern Left”.

Welcome to the leftist Counter-Enlightenment. In Britain and the US some critics have coined the term “regressive leftism” for this movement. There are two aspects to the regressive Left ideology. The substantive content of the ideology is identity politics, the view that people should be seen in their essence not as members of a common humanity but as bound to a particular identity group.

There is an article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy written by a sympathetic academic that expresses it thus: “... it is qua women, qua blacks, qua lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of ‘universal humankind’ on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect ‘in spite of’ one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different.”

Note that when members of a particular identity group demand respect for “oneself as different” they are not talking about respecting each person’s individuality and agency. On the contrary, they insist that people accept being defined by their identity and that they stick to the accepted script, the particular narrative of victimhood, that pertains to their group.

Members of each victim group are urged to claim ownership of — indeed, to be extremely proprietorial about — all aspects of their culture, including ephemera such as clothing and cuisine. We must all stick to our own cultural reservation. To violate this tenet is to commit the high crime of “cultural appropriation”.

American writer Lionel Shriver delivered a brilliant critique of this mentality and its deadening effect on fiction writing at the Brisbane Writers Festival last weekend, to the horror of organisers, who immediately disavowed her remarks.

And woe betide anyone who breaches this cardinal rule, as dissenters from within Islamic culture such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali have found. At best, they can expect condescension from bien pensant progressive intellectuals, some of whom denounced Hirsi Ali as an “Enlightenment fundamentalist”.

They will be pilloried in progressive media and will face attempts to bar them from speaking on campuses and elsewhere, as when Hirsi Ali was barred from speaking recently at Brandeis University in the US at the behest of a coalition of “progressive” student groups. Then there are the death threats from Islamist extremists intent on punishing the crime of apostasy. The Council of Ex-Muslims on Britain released a report this year detailing how extremist preachers have been given free rein to speak on British campuses while its own leader, Maryam Namazie, a leftist from an Iranian background, has been subjected to sustained efforts — including death threats — to stop her speaking.

These activities consistently have been backed by campus student organisations including, incredibly, feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups.

The de facto alliance that has developed between the Left and militant Islam, the most reactionary force in the world today, is the strangest and most disconcerting political development in my lifetime. If identity politics is the substantive part of this mutant ideology, the compliance and enforcement arm is the system of thought control we nowadays term political correctness.

According to the PC mindset, someone who openly or even privately challenges core tenets of identity politics is not just wrong but morally depraved. Such a person is not to be engaged with argumentatively, but must be vilified, censored and, where possible, pursued legally using instruments such as the iniquitous section 18C of our Racial Discrimination Act and equivalents in other countries.

Given their head, “progressive” politicians will introduce even more restrictive laws. Former British Labour leader Ed Miliband pledged before the last British election to make Islamophobia, which he never bothered to define, an aggravated criminal offence.

Regressive Left activists often claim to be fighting against “fascism” or “the extreme Right”. Ironically, they are the ones who, time and again, resort to classic 1930s fascist tactics such as wrecking the meetings of their opponents and in some cases harassing or attacking attendees.

I experienced this last year while attending a meeting at the University of Sydney that was being addressed by a speaker known to be defensive of Israel, a position now verboten on campuses around the world.

The meeting was disrupted by a chanting mob led by a young woman with a megaphone, the leaders making clear afterwards that they were there not to challenge or debate but to silence.

Some local academics actually defended this behaviour on the ground there was “no inherent right to free speech” if it contravened the progressive world view. There are even calls at Ivy League colleges in the US for the right to “free speech” to be supplanted by the insistence on “socially just speech”. Incredibly, the young woman leading the protest shouted her outrage that a speaker from the virulently anti-Semitic Hizb ut-Tahrir organisation had previously been blocked from speaking at the university.

This sort of coddling of extreme anti-Semitism, thinly masked as anti-Zionism, is one of the most revolting aspects of the regressive Left. American professor of queer theory Judith Butler, described as a “postmodern colossus” and a leading figure in the global boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign against Israel, has insisted that Hamas and Hezbollah be seen as part of the “global progressive Left”. Both these groups have expressed the aspiration to exterminate all Jews; in Hamas’s case it is in its founding charter. Butler received some criticism over this, but her stellar standing in the progressive academic pantheon was undiminished.

And it is not just academics. British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn spoke warmly of his “friends” in Hamas and Hezbollah.

So it is pretty clear what the regressive Left is against. But what is it for, exactly? Its members would answer that they are fighting for “social justice”. Actually, it would be more accurate to say they are for social justice activism. Earlier incarnations of leftist ideology all had some conception of the “good society” they were working for, even if sometimes a terribly flawed one as with the communists.

Go to the websites of radical Left groups bearing names such as Socialist Alternative and you will see that there is no alternative. They do not even attempt to posit one. They are essentially nihilists who stand for nothing. Activism is a goal in itself, not some desired societal end state.

The supreme recent exemplar of social justice activism is the Black Lives Matter movement in the US. This movement is spawning imitators around the world including Australia, according to a recent ABC report.

Academic practitioners of the field known as critical race theory sprang into action to lend theoretical support. The tenor of some of this stuff would have stunned our Rip Van Winkle. There is an article on the website of the Harvard Law faculty that calls for “race-based mobilisations”, language that would not have been out of place in 30s Germany.

For the social justice activists, two kinds of questions are strictly off limits. First, narratives of victimhood must not be challenged, no matter how compelling the contrary evidence.

Hence, the shooting of a young black man in Ferguson, Missouri, was a straight-out case of murder, the victim shot with his hands raised. This version of events has been completely debunked since. But no matter, the critical race brigade sticks to this narrative in its “scholarly” articles, including one by a prominent academic at the Western Sydney University that referred to Ferguson matter-of-factly as a “racist murder” well after the facts were established.

This is not mere sloppiness. Reading this stuff, you quickly realise that for this kind of “scholarship” facts, evidence and the truth are strictly irrelevant.

Which brings me to the second type of unaskable question. Does the activism actually do any good? Has Black Lives Matter actually improved the lives of people trapped in impoverished inner-city ghettos? All the evidence indicates the contrary. Homicide rates in inner-urban areas have risen sharply since BLM started, reversing a decades-

long declining trend. FBI director James Comey has linked this to the abandoning of proactive policing by cops fearful of vilification and prosecution.

Have the prospects for Palestinians to lead a decent life been enhanced by the international BDS campaign that urges them to stick to their rejectionist guns, thereby precluding a settlement with Israel and condemning future generations to repeated conflict?

Have young girls in Muslim communities benefited from the sentiments expressed by feminists such as Germaine Greer, who condemned efforts to outlaw female genital mutilation as “an attack on cultural identity”?

In Britain, hospitals are reporting an average 15 cases of this each day, yet there have been no successful prosecutions despite the practice being illegal since 1984. Where are the feminists on this and on forced marriages? Nowhere, it seems, with a handful of honourable exceptions. It seems that for the regressive Left there is a hierarchy of correctness in which cultural respect is trumps.

The kind of moral catastrophe this can induce is shockingly displayed by events in the northern English town of Rotherham. Across 16 years, 1400 girls, most from dysfunctional white families, were subjected to sexual abuse of organised gangs of sexual predators of Pakistani Muslim background. As two subsequent official reports disclosed, all arms of government that should have protected the girls — the police, social services, schools, the Labour-controlled local council — were paralysed by a dread of being labelled racist or Islamophobic.

I think of regressive leftism as a mind virus, a paralytic disease that is severely inhibiting the ability of Western societies to properly debate some of the most important issues they face. It is suffused with civilisational self-loathing — severely condemnatory of “white” post-Enlightenment Western societies yet prepared to overlook or apologise for the most egregious defects in other kinds of society.

To see what can result from this paralysis, look at Europe as it grapples with the consequences of its leaders’ decision to effectively dissolve its external borders with North Africa and the Middle East.

Consider the enormity of the transformation Europe is undergoing and imagine how it will look in several decades if this continues. Yet Europe’s elites seem incapable of conducting an honest debate about the implications of this, since this would involve asking some tough questions about whether Islam, with its undoubted violent and supremacist aspects, is ultimately compatible with liberal societies. Some of Europe’s leaders actually seem to have become reconciled to the prospect of large parts of Europe becoming Islamised. After all, what could be worse than the existing civilisation that is nothing but a sorry litany of racism, colonialism and oppression? And the biggest losers from this will be the self-styled progressives. What prospect for gay rights under the new dispensation?

This fecklessness and intellectual paralysis would be far less serious if it were confined to the Left proper, but it is not, as exemplified by Angela Merkel’s extraordinarily naive actions in the past year. The impulse to censor and anathematise anyone who challenges the prevailing zeitgeist can be found in parties regarded as centrist or even right-wing. This has created space for the emergence of new political

forces throughout the Western world including Australia, with a surge in support for Pauline Hanson at the recent elections.

I believe the time has come for a fundamental rethinking of the lines of political division. At this historical juncture decent leftists must drop the masochistic obsession with denigrating post-Enlightenment Western civilisation and join with liberals, conservatives and others in a concerted effort to defend it against the unprecedented threats it now faces.

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