

# A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Close

BY FRED ELBEL

Liberalism isn't what it used to be. Liberal intellectuals used to be known as free thinkers. Today progressive liberals are the custodians of an intolerant ideological orthodoxy, particularly within the rigid confines of higher education. Today's progressive liberals are in essence *illiberal* in that they adhere to an inflexible set of ideas in government, politics, and popular culture that increasingly reflects anti-democratic and authoritarian values.

In order to understand how that change came about, a perspective on the historical roots of liberalism is not only helpful, but essential. Kim R. Holmes provides that understanding in his substantive book *The Closing of the Liberal Mind: How Groupthink and Intolerance Define the Left*. Holmes, a Distinguished Fellow and former Vice President of The Heritage Foundation and a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, presents the history of liberalism and how and why liberalism has devolved into the polar opposite of its historical roots.

This book provides more information than the casual reader might be seeking. It presents more than a rudimentary explanation of progressive liberalism; it provides deeper historical context as the basis for further understanding. It reveals philosophical history in order to provide a framework for understanding the present. Yet the book is well-organized, well-written, and quite readable. It is evident that the author has spent considerable time and effort researching and considering his material.

Holmes investigates liberalism from the time of the American and French Revolutions to the present. He writes:

Historically, a progressive liberal was viewed as someone who imbibed the intellectual nectars of both progressivism and classical liberalism. The progressive tradition is easily recognizable. It is the legacy of such prominent progressives from the turn of the twentieth century as Herbert Croly, John Dewey, Teddy Roosevelt,

Woodrow Wilson, and others. The classical liberal tradition is less well known, and as a result our understanding of it is murkier. Classical liberalism is a set of ideas about individual liberty and constitutional government inherited from the moderate Enlightenment.

In America those ideas influenced the Revolution and the founding of the Republic. In Europe they were taken up in the 19th century by such liberals as Benjamin Constant, David Ricardo, Alexis de Tocqueville, François Guizot, and John Stuart Mill.

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## THE CLOSING OF THE LIBERAL MIND

**How Groupthink and Intolerance Define the Left**

By Kim R. Holmes

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Holmes notes how the postmodern left indeed has a unique way of viewing the world that is much different from traditional liberalism:

Progressive liberalism in America today is not at all like what has come before. It is not merely a logical extension of the old progressivism popular at the turn of the twentieth century, or the New Deal liberalism of Franklin Roosevelt and its outgrowth, the "Great Society" liberalism of Lyndon Johnson. It is not even the same as the 1960s New Left. It is something entirely new. It has roots in these old movements, but it has acquired a new ideology all its own. It is a fusion of very old ideas from radical egalitarianism with very new notions of culture and morality. It is the postmodern left... To understand the postmodern left, we first must appreciate what postmodernism is. Originally inspired by French theorists Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard, who worked primarily in the latter half of the twentieth century, postmodernism is not a political philosophy but a way of seeing the world.

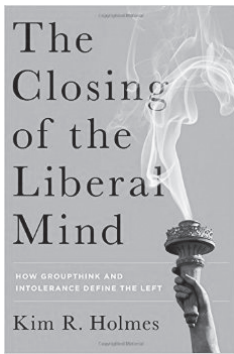
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## A TALE OF TWO REVOLUTIONS

American liberalism and radicalism have differed historically from European liberalism and radicalism. Coming from different philosophical roots, the French revolution was much more socially violent than America's revolution. Holmes writes:

Whereas the moderate Enlightenment jet stream flowed largely into the classical liberalism of the British and the Americans, the more radical ideas of Diderot and Rousseau poured into the more radical traditions of the Germans, Russians, and French—namely, socialism, communism, and modern and postmodern ideas of egalitarianism. One gave rise to the classic liberal revolution of the Americans; the other to the first experiment in modern totalitarianism, the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution.



Another key difference was that the French trusted an authoritarian government, whereas the Americans did not. Indeed, Americans revolted against a domineering, authoritarian government. It should be noted that at the time, those American views were termed liberal—in sharp contrast to today.

An additional difference was that the French and the Americans understood political morality differently. Holmes observes that:

One was a late feudal society of aristocrats and priests while the other was a society of relatively free Englishmen—property owners, small farmers, merchants, craftsmen, lawyers, and doctors. In Marxist terms, the Americans had already had the equivalent of a “bourgeois” revolution by overthrowing the feudal order. Moreover, unlike the French revolutionaries who were anti-clerical in their views, the Americans embraced religion as a positive force in civil society and as a prerequisite for freedom.

These historical differences explain why modern American liberalism has continued to diverge from European liberalism. The postmodern left emerged in America as something entirely new with the New Left egalitarianism of the 1960s. Holmes reflects that it was a strange brew of ideologies:

The New Left had many variations. There was the Frankfurt School of neo-Marxism led by philosophers Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and others who complained that capitalism was a source of cultural oppression. There were radical student movements like the

Free Speech Movement at Berkeley and the Students for a Democratic Society that processed all sorts of radical historical influences, not only neo-Marxism but also American anarchism, the civil disobedience traditions of the radical abolition movement, radical populism, and the cultural critiques of radical progressives like Randolph Bourne.

## SOFT TYRANNY

Holmes points out that the postmodern left is not dictatorial per se at this point in time (although it certainly seems to be moving rapidly in that direction). He calls it a “soft” variety of tyranny and notes that illiberalism can occur on both the far left and far right of the political spectrum.

While there is a long history of illiberalism on the right in America, a leftist illiberalism exists as well. All too often historians underestimate or even ignore it. They assume rather simplistically that left-wing illiberalism is an ideological impossibility—that authoritarian illiberalism can only exist on the right. They are mistaken. There are degrees of illiberalism to be sure, but an anarchist or communist can be every bit as authoritarian and illiberal as a nativist or slave holder.

The postmodern left now clearly embraces coercive practices that include legal means, public shaming rituals, and other efforts to curtail free speech and civil liberties. In many cases, these illiberal efforts undermine the rule of law and American democracy. Holmes gives us a few examples:

*Racial Stereotyping.* The postmodern left turns the civil rights model on its head. It embraces racial stereotyping—racial identity by any other name—and reverses it, transforming it into something positive, provided the pecking order of power is kept in place...

*Double-Standard Bigotry.* It is not uncommon within progressive circles to find the assumption that certain kinds of people are less equal than others. White people are assumed to be racist, for example... a black caucus in Congress is welcome but a white caucus would be dismissed out of hand as racist. The double standard is tolerated because it is seen *in and of itself* as a form of corrective justice.

*Disregard for Democracy...* democracy as we generally understand it is not the only or even the highest principle in American government. More important is the principle of self-government, which assumes constitutional

limits on what government can do... Rights are sacrosanct, but so too is the presumption that laws should be made by legislatures and implemented by the elected executive.

Thus, postmodern leftists feel that they need to control everything in order to protect their narrative of their own relativistic truth. The result is a preposterous and overarching demand for conformity under the guise of liberalism. In other words, as Holmes notes, we end up with a bipolar ideology that embraces “intolerance in the name of tolerance.”

### MULTICULTURALISM

The premise of multiculturalism embodies the antithesis of a uniform, cohesive society. Multiculturalism is the opposite of the traditional progressive vision of community. Holmes observes that multiculturalism is encompassed by two intellectual traditions. One is that anthropology and sociology can observe cultures via the scientific method. Yet since cultures change over time, no such observations can be absolute, and the objectivity of science must confront the ethics of relativism. Holmes points out that the more modern paradigm of multiculturalism has become activist in nature, with the implicit elevation of cultural values of non-American cultures at the expense of Western cultures:

The greatest impact of the multiculturalists has been in changing the notions and standards of civil rights and discrimination law. This influence goes beyond defining legal rights as group rights. It extends into providing elaborate defenses of affirmative action, especially racial and other quotas, against the charge of profiling.

Cultural diversity is practically a sacred principle in the universities and in the entertainment industry, except in the Hispanic and African-American networks, where exclusivity is the rule... Radical multiculturalists have always been beset by a theoretical contradiction. It is derived, in part, from a deceptive claim. While they act as though all cultural values are equal, what they really believe is that Western values are inferior.

### PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PROGRESSIVES AND THE POSTMODERN LEFT

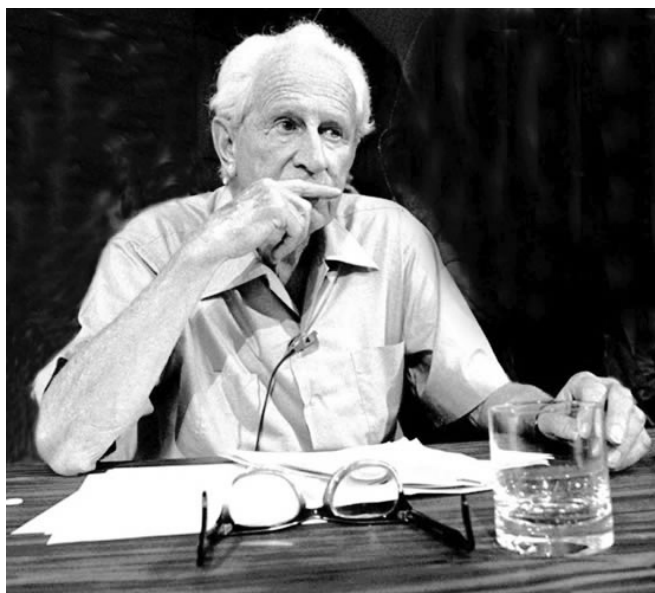
The postmodern left has diverged from traditional progressivism not only with its authoritarian approach to ethical issues but also by embracing “ethical relativism.” Relativism on the surface appears to allow everyone to do what they want. But under the auspices of leftist ethical relativism, individuals are free to create their own truths and foist them on the rest of society—willing or not. One

of the outcomes of this is the rise of identity politics. Transgender driven “potty politics” is a case in point, as are speech codes and “hate speech” censorship.

Holmes notes that a common thread runs through radical identity politics that involves first deconstructing the old morality and then constructing a new one to replace it. He points out the irony in this forced conformism to an arbitrary morality:

It is not the old Marxist notion of class consciousness, which was objectified in society and history. It is rather a new subjective kind of consciousness chosen by the completely free individual. Whatever that persecuted individual decides must not merely be tolerated but fully endorsed by others, often on pain of legal action. The demand for equality is now a mandate for cultural conformity.

Holmes points out that progressives once admired European social democracy. They were supportive of building a new community and could not have imagined the conflict resulting from identity tribes vying for power.



Herbert Marcuse

Progressives were still grounded in American liberalism while criticizing our Founders’ illiberalism—that is, America’s *classical* liberalism. Holmes notes that self-imposed amnesia regarding the foundation of American liberalism is a key aspect of the postmodern left:

There is a lesson to be learned here. The loss of historical memory as to what liberalism was is actually a key to understanding what it is today. The amnesia is quite intentional. It is the very purpose of historical revisionism.

### YET THERE IS HOPE

Allan Bloom remarked in *The Closing of the Ameri-*



*can Mind* (1987): “Freedom of the mind requires not only, or not even especially, the absence of legal constraints but the presence of alternative thoughts. The most successful tyranny is not the one that uses force to assure uniformity but the one that removes the awareness of other possibilities.”

Open mindedness certainly has not become the hallmark of the progressive left. Holmes notes that in the long run this will pose significant damage to America:

Civilizations can survive with closed minds, at least for a time. Rome lasted for centuries after its rulers succumbed to the tyrannies of the empire. But liberal democracies cannot long endure a political culture that refuses to entertain alternatives. Certainly the American republic cannot bear it. The problem is not only the attempts to chip away at the legal protections of freedom of expression, which are bound to increase. More important is the normalization of a political and intellectual culture of mediocrity and dishonesty. Everything becomes aimed at getting and keeping political power. Even academic agendas are set to serve this purpose. All the principles of liberty and freedom that made the country great are

mocked and dismissed as silly fictions.

Holmes notes that today’s liberals have become the Establishment they once loathed, noting that authoritarian—even totalitarian—thinking is an equal-opportunity scourge that can infect the far left as well as the far right. The result is that liberal intellectualism today is effectively dead on the left side of the political spectrum. Postmodern liberals now engage in war on society by attacking *knowledge itself*—the very essence of “deconstructionism.” Holmes observes:

There is something profoundly troubling going on here. The old left, including the hard left of communism, made war on the accumulated wisdom of the ages. It hated customs and traditions. It sought to revolutionize and change social conditions in order to liberate the inner communist that supposedly dwelled in us all. But even Marx felt the need to keep his feet on the ground...

Yet hope is not lost. Holmes believes it is likely that progressive liberals will overplay their hand. Bully tactics only go so far, and beginning with the American Revolution, Americans have demonstrated an overt distrust of bullies. They may soon say that enough is enough. ■

## AN EXCERPT FROM *THE CLOSING OF THE LIBERAL MIND*

**W**hen most people think of intolerance, they imagine a racist taunting a black person. Or they may envision a male chauvinist hurling bigoted insults at women. It seldom occurs to them that intolerance comes in all political shapes and sizes. A protester storming a stage and refusing to let someone speak is intolerant. So, too, are campus speech codes that restrict freedom of expression. A city official threatening to fine a pastor for declining to marry a gay couple is every bit as intolerant as a right-winger wanting to punish gays with sodomy laws. Intolerance exists on the right and the left. It knows no exclusive political or ideological affiliation. It happens any time someone uses some form of coercion, either through government fiat or public shaming rituals, to restrict open debate and forcefully eliminate opponents from the playing field.

There is a word that describes this mentality. It is illiberal. For centuries we have associated the word “liberal” with open-mindedness. Liberals were people who were supposed to be tolerant and fair and who wanted to give all sides a hearing. They cared about everyone, not just their own kind. They wanted to include people in the exercise of liberty, not exclude them. They believed in pluralism. By contrast, illiberal people were hardheaded in their opinions and judgmental about others’ behaviors, hoping to control what other people thought and said and to cut off debate....

Sadly, the kind of liberalism we used to know is fast disappearing from America. All too often, people who call themselves progressive liberals are at the forefront of movements to shut down debates on college campuses and to restrict freedom of speech. They are eager to cut corners, bend the Constitution, make up laws through questionable court rulings, and generally abuse the rules and the Constitution in order to get their way. They establish “zero-tolerance” regimes in schools where young boys are suspended for nibbling breakfast pastries into the shape of a gun. They claim to be unrelenting defenders of science, yet they will run scientists who deviate even slightly from climate change orthodoxy right out of the profession. They are supposedly great haters of bigotry but sometimes speak of Christians in the most bigoted manner imaginable, as if Christians were no better than fascists. They support laws and regulations that over-criminalize everyday aspects of American life, to the point that people can be fined or imprisoned for violating some environmental or other regulation they did not know existed....

American liberals are, in short, becoming increasingly illiberal. They are surrendering to the temptations of the closed mind. ■