

Revitalizing progressivism

Is Trump's triumph an opportunity to take a pro-life turn?

Celia Wolf-Devine | Dec 5 2016 |  5



In the wake of recent electoral defeats, it is essential for progressives to re-think their priorities and not just nail the flag to the mast and go down with the ship. The progressive movement in the United States

was once a powerful force politically with a coherent vision of social justice grounded, largely, in Protestant Christianity and Judaism. Against this background it made sense to talk of progress. Progressive policies are those that move us closer to the Jewish and Christian ideal.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was perhaps the last and greatest in this tradition. He was a strong believer in natural law – namely the conviction that the moral laws of the universe are imbedded in God’s creation as much as the physical laws. And his passion for justice, grounded as it was, in his faith, was able to move people in a powerful way.

Marxists believed that they understood the forces that drive history and could predict the coming proletarian revolution and the advent of the new classless society. Progressive policies, then were those that contributed to the coming of the revolution and the new society it would usher in, while reactionary ones were ones that held us back, trapped in the old oppressive structures.

But few people now believe we can predict the future of history, or that there is any guarantee that it will be good. And this has left many people adrift with only a desire to be on the right side of history, whatever that might be; or a belief that they are on the right side of history, whatever they may be advocating.

Today’s progressives have, for the most part, abandoned the beliefs that motivated earlier progressives and provided a standard by which we could distinguish which changes counted as progress and which constituted deterioration. What we now have is a loosely connected tribe of people who think of themselves as progressive and present

themselves as the rightful heirs of successful earlier social movements like the civil rights movement. But having no coherent vision to unite them, they have lost their focus and been left floundering and vulnerable to pressures from this group or that.

“Progressive” has come to mean what we progressive people advocate. It is to be among the good guys – the ones with the white hats and not the black hats.

Some of the issues addressed by earlier progressives still remain: desire to reduce the gap between rich and poor, the right to unionize, threats to civil liberties, expensive wars abroad, providing a social safety net for the most vulnerable members of society, environmental degradation as it will affect future generations, racial prejudice and erosion of democracy. But into this mix they have added support for “abortion rights.”

This introduces a deep incoherence into the contemporary progressive movement. They champion the vulnerable and marginalized, yet insist on legalizing the deliberate destruction of helpless human beings in the womb. They claim to be inclusive, yet exclude the unborn human who is deeply and intimately connected with us both physically and genetically and who we have a special obligation to care for because we brought him or her into existence.

Being pro-life then is the missing piece to the puzzle that would make progressivism vital and dynamic again, and attract to it those who, though sympathetic with their other goals, have seen through the pro-choice position and care deeply about the unborn who are being destroyed every day and the women whose lives are scarred by abortion.

The proper progressive response to a problem pregnancy is to reach out and do what we can to help both mother and baby. One thing every pregnant woman should have is decent pro-natal care. Giving her the support she needs to carry the baby to term and helping her afterwards in a variety of ways ranging from food and diapers to legal assistance if she wishes to place the child for adoption, help getting the money she is entitled to from the father, helping her find housing, and running parenting classes for new young mothers. These are the sorts of things already done by the thousands of pro-life pregnancy help centers around the country. And to take the progressive logic even further, it should be a high priority to provide jobs for poor fathers so that they can care for their child.

As things stand now, abortion is being used as a way of keeping down the numbers of the poor, especially people of color. The argument has even been made that those who are aborted, being poor, would have been likely to become criminals, and the fact that the crime rate has gone down during the period when abortion is more widespread among the poor is cited as evidence for this. Black women are more than three times as likely to get abortions as white women, and clinics are deliberately located in poor neighborhoods.

Since black and Hispanic women tend in general to be more pro-life, the anguish of going against their own moral convictions makes the abortion even more traumatic. Yet many pro-choice people reason that it is cheaper to provide abortions than to help the poor in any serious way. And what could be less in the progressive spirit than this?

The pro-life movement, in turn, would be profoundly enriched by integrating their advocacy for the unborn with a broader progressive

vision. Shutting them out of the progressive movement has thrown them into the arms of the Republicans where they don't really belong.

Many pro-lifers feel deeply betrayed by the Republicans who ignore their concerns as soon as they get elected and drag us into costly wars and cut back social support networks for the vulnerable, and these people are looking for a new political home. Those of us who care about protecting the vulnerable need to join forces at this critical juncture in our history.

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