POLITICS MARCH 27, 2018


Rhodes Must Fall protester, Hertford College, Oxford, 2016
© David Hartley/REX/Shutterstock

# The problem of hyper-liberalism

## John Gray on a new cult at odds with the progressives of the past

JOHN GRAY

For liberals the recent transformation of universities into institutions devoted to the eradication of thought crime must seem paradoxical. In the past higher education was avowedly shaped by an ideal of unfettered inquiry. Varieties of social democrats and conservatives, liberals and Marxists taught and

researched alongside scholars with no strong political views. Academic disciplines cherished their orthodoxies, and dissenters could face difficulties in being heard. But visiting lecturers were rarely dis-invited because their views were deemed unspeakable, course readings were not routinely screened in case they contained material that students might find discomforting, and faculty members who departed from the prevailing consensus did not face attempts to silence them or terminate their careers. An inquisitorial culture had not yet taken over.

It would be easy to say that liberalism has now been abandoned. Practices of toleration that used to be seen as essential to freedom are being deconstructed and dismissed as structures of repression, and any ideas or beliefs that stand in the way of this process banned from public discourse. Judged by old-fashioned standards, this is the opposite of what liberals have stood for. But what has happened in higher education is not that liberalism has been supplanted by some other ruling philosophy. Instead, a hyper-liberal ideology has developed that aims to purge society of any trace of other views of the world. If a regime of censorship

prevails in universities, it is because they have become vehicles for this project. When students from China study in Western countries one of the lessons they learn is that the enforcement of intellectual orthodoxy does not require an authoritarian government. In institutions that proclaim their commitment to critical inquiry, censorship is most effective when it is self-imposed. A defining feature of tyranny, the policing of opinion is now established practice in societies that believe themselves to be freer than they have ever been.

A shift to hyper-liberalism has also occurred in politics. In Britain some have described the ascendancy of Jeremy Corbyn as the capture of the Labour Party by a Trotskyite brand of Marxism. No doubt some factions in the party hark back to the hard-left groups that fought for control of Labour in the 1970s and 80s in their rhetoric, methods and policies. But there is not much in the ideology animating Corbynite Labour that is recognizably Marxist. In Marx, the historical agent of progress in capitalist societies is the industrial working class. But for many who have joined the mass party that Corbyn has constructed, the surviving remnants of this class can only be obstacles to progress. With their

attachment to national identity and anxieties about immigration, these residues of the past stand in the way of a world without communal boundaries and inherited group identities – a vision that, more than socialism or concern for the worst-off, animates this new party. It is a prospect that attracts sections of the middle classes – not least graduate millennials, who through Corbyn's promise to abolish student fees could be major beneficiaries of his policies – that regard themselves as the most progressive elements in society. But there are some telling differences between these hyper-liberals and the progressives of the past.

One can be seen in the frenzy surrounding the question of colonialism. The complex and at times contradictory realities of empire have been expelled from intellectual debate. While student bodies have dedicated themselves to removing relics of the colonial era from public places, sections of the faculty have ganged up to denounce anyone who suggests that the legacy of empire is not one of unmitigated criminality. If he was alive today one of these dissident figures would be Marx himself, who in his writings on India maintained that the impact of British imperialism was in some

ways positive. Acknowledging that "the misery that was inflicted by the British on Hindostan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindostan had to suffer before", Marx continued by attacking the "undignified, stagnatory and vegetative life" of Indian villages:

> we must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it within traditional rules . . . . England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated by only the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. ("The British Rule in India", *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 10, 1853)

Of course, Marx may have been mistaken in this judgement. Along with most progressive thinkers of his

day, he assumed that India and other colonized countries would replicate a Western model of development. But like other progressive thinkers at the time, he also took for granted that this was a question that could and should be debated. He never believed that colonialism was self-evidently damaging in all of its effects.

There are other features that distinguish hyper-liberals from progressive thinkers of previous generations. Last year's Labour Conference was notable for a fringe event, later condemned by the Labour Party, in which one speaker seemed to suggest that questioning whether the Holocaust happened should be a legitimate part of public debate. This sits oddly with curbs on debate that many of those present would – I imagine – have supported on other issues, such as colonialism. Again, no one at the meeting proposed that the myths surrounding communism – such as the idea that large-scale repression originated with Stalin – should be exposed to critical inquiry. The costs and benefits of European colonialism and Soviet communism are not simple matters of fact; assessing them involves complex historical and moral judgements, which

should be freely discussed. In contrast, suggesting that the Holocaust may not have occurred is a denial of incontrovertible fact. If Holocaust denial is accepted as a respectable branch of historical inquiry, the most infallible symptom of anti-Semitism is normalized. At the same time a key part of the ideology of the alt-right, according to which facts are not objectively identifiable features of the world, is affirmed.

However, indifference to facts is not confined to the alt-right and the hyper-liberal Left. It is pervasive among liberals who came of age at the end of the Cold War. Francis Fukuyama's claim that with the fall of communism the world was witnessing "the universalization of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" is nowadays widely mocked. Yet when he made this pronouncement in 1989, in the summer issue of the *National Interest*, it expressed what most liberals believed, and, for all that has since transpired, most continue to insist that the arc of history curves in their direction. They believe this even though the Middle East is a patchwork of theocracy, secular authoritarianism and states fractured by Western intervention; much of post-communist

Europe is ruled by illiberal democracies (regimes that mobilize popular consent while dismantling protections for individuals and minorities); Russia is governed through a type of elective autocracy; and the US under Trump appears to be on the way to becoming an illiberal regime not unlike those that have emerged in Hungary and Poland. They pass over the fact that parties of the far Right attract growing support from voters in several of the countries of the European Union. In Germany – the centre of the stupendous liberal project of a transnational European state – a recent poll showed larger numbers of the electorate intending to vote for the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD) than for the centre-left Social Democrats. In Italy, Centre Left and Centre Right have been rejected in favour of extreme parties, some of them with links to Fascism. One reason liberal democracy is not going to be universalized is that in some cases it is morphing into a different form of government entirely.

Many who believe liberalism is in crisis have identified the underlying causes as being primarily economic in nature. With some caveats, this is the view of Edward

Luce in one of the better recent books on the subject, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (2017). If the West cannot keep up with the economic and technological advance of China, and distribute the fruits of economic growth more widely, Luce asks, how can it maintain its claim to superiority? In this view, the populist upheavals that have shaken Western countries are clearly a backlash from those who have been excluded from the benefits of an expanding global market. Certainly this was one of the reasons for the revolt against established ruling elites that erupted in 2016. Brexit and the Trump presidency are different in many ways, but neither would have happened had it not been for large numbers of voters having a well-founded sense of being left out. Revulsion against Washington-centric oligarchical capitalism was part of the mood that Trump exploited. But it was not only their marginalization in the economy that the voters resented. They were also responding to the denigration of their values and identities by parties and leaders who claimed to be fighting for social justice. Hillary Clinton's contemptuous reference to a "basket of deplorables" was emblematic. In recent years, no social group has been more freely disparaged than the proles

who find themselves trapped in the abandoned communities of America's post-industrial wastelands. With their economic grievances dismissed as "white-lash", their lives and identities derided, and their view of the world attributed to poor education and sheer stupidity, many of these despised plebs may have voted for Trump more out of anger than conviction. If this mood persists and penetrates sections of the middle classes it has not yet deeply affected, he could yet win a second term. It may not be the economy but a need for respect that decides the outcome.

It is at this point that the rise of an illiberal liberalism becomes politically significant. What happens on campus may not matter much in itself. Anxiously clinging to the fringes of middle-class life, many faculty members have only a passing acquaintance with the larger society in which they live. Few have friends who are not also graduates, fewer still any who are industrial workers. Swathes of their fellow citizens are, to them, embodiments of the Other – brutish aliens whom they seldom or never meet. Hyper-liberalism serves this section of the academy as a legitimating ideology, giving them an illusory sense of having a

leading role in society. The result is a richly entertaining mixture of bourgeois careerism with virtue-signalling self-righteousness – the stuff of a comic novel, though few so far have been up to the task of chronicling it. We are yet to see anything quite as cutting as Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975) or Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December* (1982), where the campus radicals of a generation ago were depicted with dark humour and cruel wit. Despite being on a larger scale than ever before, the campus may be too small and self-enclosed a world to interest many novelists today.

Yet the identity politics that is being preached on campus has effects on society at large. Mark Lilla's *The Once and Future Liberal* (*TLS*, February 9) has been widely attacked for claiming that a Rooseveltian project of building a common identity that spans ethnicities can produce a more enduring liberal politics: any such view, faculty inquisitors hiss, can only be a disguised defence of white supremacy. Lilla's book cannot be faulted on the ground that it harks back to Roosevelt. By attacking a liberal conception of American national identity as a repressive construction,

hyper-liberals confirmed the perception of large sections of the American population – not least blue-collar workers who voted Democrat in the past – that they were being excluded from politics. Showing how the decline of liberalism in America has been mostly self-induced, Lilla's book has performed an important service. If his analysis has a fault, it is that it does not go back further in time and explore the moment when liberalism became a secular religion.

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) may seem an unlikely point of origin for an illiberal brand of liberalism. In the second chapter of that celebrated essay, the author presented a canonical argument for free expression:

> the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of

truth, produced by its collision with error.

For some, all would be well if only we returned to these old liberal verities. But Mill's argument has limitations. It depends on the premiss that truth should be valued as an end in itself – an assumption hard to square with his Utilitarian moral philosophy, according to which the only thing valuable in itself is the satisfaction of wants. What if many people want what Mill (citing an unnamed author) described as the "deep slumber of decided opinion"? In a later work, *Utilitarianism*, Mill suggested that anyone who had known the intellectual pleasure of free inquiry would prefer it over mere contentment: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied," he declared, "than a pig satisfied". If the pig thinks otherwise, it is because the pig is not familiar with the delights of the mind. Mill's certainty on this point is droll. A high-minded Victorian, he was insufficiently familiar with the lower pleasures to make a considered judgement. His assertion that human beings would prefer intellectual freedom over contented conformity was at odds with his empiricist philosophy. Essentially unfalsifiable, it was a matter of faith.

While he never faced up to the contradictions in his thinking, Mill was fully aware that he was fashioning a new religion. Much influenced by Auguste Comte, he was an exponent of what he and the French Positivist philosopher described as "the Religion of Humanity". Instead of worshipping a transcendent divinity, Comte instructed followers of the new religion to venerate the human species as "the new Supreme Being". Replacing the rituals of Christianity, they would perform daily ceremonies based in science, touching their skulls at the point that phrenology had identified as the location of altruism (a word Comte invented). In an essay written not long before the appearance of *On Liberty* but published posthumously (he died in 1873), Mill described this creed as "a better religion than any of those that are ordinarily called by that title".

Mill's transmutation of liberalism into a religion marked a fundamental shift. Modern liberal societies emerged as offshoots from Jewish and Christian monotheism. The idea that political and religious authority should be separated is prefigured in the dictum of the charismatic Jewish prophet who came to be revered as Christianity's founder: "Render unto

Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's". In seventeenth-century England, Milton defended freedom of conscience and expression as a condition of true faith, while John Locke saw toleration as a duty to God. When they claimed universality for these values they did so in the belief that they were divinely ordained. Mill and the secular liberals who followed him did not give up the claim to universality. They made it all the more strongly, and in a more radical form. What this meant for Mill becomes clear in the third chapter of *On Liberty*, "Of Individuality as one of the Elements of Well-Being". Here, freedom no longer refers only, or even mainly, to protection from coercion by the law or other people – a system of toleration – but to a radical type of personal autonomy – the ability to create an identity and a style of life for oneself without regard for public opinion or any external authority. In future, only a single type of life would be tolerated – one based on individual choice.

It is a problematic vision, some of whose difficulties Mill glimpsed. A society that promotes individuality of this kind will iron out differences based in tradition and

history; but since much of the diversity of human life comes from these sources, the result may be mass conformity. Again, in a society of the sort Mill envisioned, other religions and philosophies would be gradually eliminated. But if only one view of the world is acceptable, what becomes of intellectual diversity? This was not a theoretical risk for Mill. He found it exemplified in Comte, whose philosophy he came to believe led to "liberticide" – the destruction of intellectual freedom that comes when everyone is required to hold the same view. A hostile critic of liberalism who valued free inquiry only insofar as it was useful in weeding out irrational beliefs, Comte welcomed the rise of an intellectual orthodoxy with the power to impose itself on society. Mill was horrified by the prospect. He could scarcely have imagined that such an orthodoxy would be developed and enforced by liberals not unlike himself.

Mill's religion of humanity has deeper problems. Like Comte, he believed that humanity is a progressive species, though he diverged profoundly in how he understood progress. And what is "humanity"? The conception of humankind as a collective agent

gradually achieving its goals is not reached by observation. All that is empirically observable are human beings muddling on with their conflicting goals and values. Nor is it clear that many people yearn for the sort of life that Mill promoted. If history is any guide, large numbers want a sense of security as much as, or more than, personal autonomy.

Liberals who rail at populist movements are adamant that voters who support them are deluded or deceived. The possibility that these movements are exploiting needs that highly individualist societies cannot satisfy is not seriously considered. In the liberalism that has prevailed over the past generation such needs have been dismissed as atavistic prejudices, which must be swept away wherever they stand in the way of schemes for transnational government or an expanding global market. This stance is one reason why anti-liberal movements continue to advance. Liberalism and empiricism have parted company, and nothing has been learnt. Some of the strongest evidence against the liberal belief that we learn from our errors and follies comes from the behaviour of liberals themselves.

That modern politics has been shaped by secular religions is widely recognized in the case of totalitarian regimes. Yuri Slezkine's *The House of Government* (*TLS*, December 22 & 29, 2017) is a magisterial account of Bolshevism as an apocalyptic sect, which differed from earlier millenarian groups in the vast territory over which it ruled and the scale of the power it exercised. Whereas Jan Bockelson and his early sixteenth-century Anabaptists controlled only the city of Münster, Lenin and his party ruled over the peoples of the former Romanov empire. By destroying existing institutions, they aimed to open the way to a new society – indeed a new humanity. The Bolshevik project came to nothing, apart from death and broken lives for tens of millions. But the Bolsheviks would not be the last millenarian movement to seize control of a modern state. In his pioneering study *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957), Norman Cohn showed how Nazism was also a chiliastic movement. Mao's Cultural Revolution and Pol Pot's Cambodia can be added to the list. Much of twentieth-century politics was the pursuit of apocalyptic visions by secular regimes.

While liberals have been ready to acknowledge that

totalitarian movements have functioned as corrupt religions, they resist any claim that the same has been true in their own case. Yet an evangelical faith was manifestly part of the wars launched by the West in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. No doubt these wars served geopolitical strategies, however poorly thought out and badly executed, but underpinning them was an article of faith: that slowly, fitfully and with many relapses, humankind was evolving towards a worldwide society based on liberal values. Existing humans might vary greatly in their devotion to these values; some might be bitterly hostile to them. But this was only a result of having been repressed for so long. Sweep away the tyrants and their regimes, and a new humanity would emerge from the ruins. And when it failed to materialize, it was only because there had been insufficient preparation for its arrival.

The true lesson of these wars was quite different. While intervention may be justified in order to prevent the worst crimes against humanity – a genocidal assault on the Yezidis, for example – the freedoms of thought and expression that have existed in some societies in the past few centuries cannot be transplanted at will

throughout the world. Late growths of Judaism and Christianity, these liberties are products of a particular pattern of historical development. At present, they are being discarded in the societies where they originated. The idea that the world is gradually moving towards a universal civilization based on old-fashioned liberal values is as fanciful as Comte's notion that altruism emanates from a bump on the head.

Hyper-liberals will reject any idea that what they are promoting is an exorbitant version of the liberalism they incessantly attack. Yet the belief persists that a new society will appear once we have been stripped of our historic identities, and switched to a system in which all are deemed different and yet somehow the same. In this view, all identities are equal in being cultural constructions. In practice some identities are more equal than others. Those of practitioners of historic nationalities and religions, for example, are marked out for deconstruction, while those of ethnic and sexual minorities that have been or are being oppressed are valorized. How this distinction can be maintained is unclear. If human values are no more than social constructions, how can a society that is

oppressive be distinguished from one that is not? Or do all societies repress an untrammelled human subject that has yet to see the light of day?

The politics of identity is a postmodern twist on the liberal religion of humanity. The Supreme Being has become an unknown God – a species of human being nowhere encountered in history, which does not need to define itself through family or community, nationality or any religion. Parallels with the new humanity envisioned by the Bolsheviks are obvious. But it is the affinities with recent liberalism that are more pertinent. In the past, liberals have struggled to reconcile their commitment to liberty with a recognition that people need a sense of collective belonging as well. In other writings Mill balanced the individualism of *On Liberty* with an understanding that a common culture is necessary if freedom is to be secure, while Isaiah Berlin acknowledged that for most people being part of a community in which they can recognize themselves is an integral part of a worthwhile life. These insights were lost, or suppressed, in the liberalism that prevailed after the end of the Cold War. If it was not dismissed as atavistic, the need for a common identity was regarded

as one that could be satisfied in private life. A global space was coming into being that would recognize only universal humanity. Any artefact that embodied the achievements of a particular state or country could only be an obstacle to this notional realm. The hyper-liberal demand that public spaces be purged of symbols of past oppression continues a post-Cold War fantasy of the end of history.

Liberals who are dismayed at the rise of the new intolerance have not noticed how much they have in common with those who are imposing it. Hyper-liberal "snowflakes", who demand safe spaces where they cannot be troubled by disturbing facts and ideas, are what their elders have made them. Possessed by faith in an imaginary humanity, both seek to weaken or destroy the national and religious traditions that have supported freedom and toleration in the past. Insignificant in itself and often comically absurd, the current spate of campus frenzies may come to be remembered for the part it played in the undoing of what is still described as the liberal West.