

Is Liberalism Dead? (In All Forms), Part 3



By Steven Yates

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[Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#),

Secularized classical liberalism proves to be unstable. Why?

Because while *homo economicus* was better off materially than he'd ever been before, he struggled with deep dissatisfaction. Modern art, modern literature, modern philosophy, modern music, all reflect to some extent a degree of dissatisfaction with industrial civilization and our anonymity within it. Some (especially the young) cast about for something more, had little trouble finding it, and this made the system as a whole vulnerable to infiltration by alien ideologies. That makes probing such ideologies essential to answering: *is liberalism dead?*

Left "liberalism."

Reviewing: an advancing society of *homo economic* calls for the disciplined restraint of personal passions, the willingness to live by rules not created by oneself, social trust that depends on such rules being honored most of the time, and respect for institutions that pass the test of time. These include marriage and family, religion, property, a work ethic.

The twentieth century tore these apart.

Its philosophers (positivists and materialists all) disdained

religion as outmoded superstition. They deconstructed ethical judgments as expressions of emotion or attempts at control. They privatized morality and “scientifically” destroyed the basis for controlling sexual passions (think: Kinsey reports, soft-porn empires such as that of Hugh Hefner who was a Kinsey disciple, today’s performers such as Miley Cyrus who cavort about on stage nearly naked).

Feminists hammered the family as “oppressive to women.” Many blacks denounced the work ethic as “acting white.”

What resulted owes more to Marxian collectivism than anything coming down to us from Frederic Bastiat or John Stuart Mill. Marx opined that *collectivity* is our true essence and that class interests dictate our consciousness. What happened to *homo economicus*? He was simultaneously collectivized and privatized. We’ll explore the first of these below; the second, in Part 4.

From John Locke to Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Marx/Engels.

We should distinguish the British idea of freedom from the Continental idea of freedom. British philosopher John Locke outlined the former in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690s). Paraphrasing: freedom is the freedom of the sovereign, self-owning individual to take action, acquire property, etc. Locke’s view is Cartesian. We’re blank slates (*tabula rasas*) at birth. What is free, owned, and acts, is one’s private autonomous intellect (explored in Part 2) which became *homo economicus*.

A few decades later, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau outlined a different sense of freedom. His *Social Contract* found freedom in the individual *subordinating* his private will to the “general will” of the body politic. One who refuses can be “forced to be free.”

The “general will” is the will of the collective – a *group* of intellects or Cartesian homunculi somehow merged into one.

Collectivism grew on the Continent even as Mill outlined secular classical liberalism in *On Liberty* (late 1800s).

The Hegel/Marx/Engels axis rose.

Classical Marxism: Dialectical Materialism.

This story has been told many times, so I will try to be brief. Marx and Engels held that the drivers of civilization were economic: *your need to produce the means of your survival is a primary encirclement around your entire existence. Class arrangements surrounding how this happens condition your experience of the world and your consciousness.*

Society is divided *primarily* into those who own the means of production (bourgeoisie) and those who own only their labor (proletariat). The state serves the former. Institutions such as the church rationalize these arrangements and mesmerize the proletariat into accepting their lot as God's will. Hence Marx's rejection of religion as "the opium of the people."

Before Marx came German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel had distinguished lordship (*Herrschaft*) from bondservice (*Knechtschaft*). More commonly: *masters and slaves.*

In Marxian jargon, the former became the bourgeoisie; the latter, the proletariat.

Marx got his materialism from Ludwig Feuerbach. Materialism denies the Transcendent (i.e., God), and in Marx's/Engel's hands, the *materialist theory of history* proposed that civilizations are shaped by conflicting material (economic) interests – in which an immiserated class of *Knechtschaften* rises up and overthrows the *Herrschaften* and establishes new arrangements.

Hegelian dialectic: *thesis* generates *antithesis*, and out of the ensuing clash comes a new *synthesis*.

Historically: feisty incipient bourgeoisie strangled feudal

lordship and invented *capitalism*, based on private ownership of the means of production (given state protection in the form of property rights) and capital accumulation. The bourgeoisie would become as bad as feudal lords had been. This would immiserate the proletariat, setting the stage for violent overthrow by a proletariat vanguard.

Capitalism *first* must become globally dominant, so that no society escaped the bourgeoisie's greedy clutches. It would then be overthrown in nation after nation, region after region. That proletariat vanguard would establish *socialism*, rooted in Continental collectivism. Lockean private ownership of the means of production would be abolished.

This process, to include subversion of capitalist states from within as well as incursions from without, would continue until socialism was universal. Since the state protected capitalist institutions, e.g., private property, and since socialism had abolished these, the state's material *raison d'être* would end and it would "wither away," leaving Communism. The *End of History!**

Classical Marxism fails.

Not a single nation or region followed the Marxian trajectory. We know this. I feel embarrassed bringing it up.

Bolsheviks such as Lenin sang Marx's/Engels's praises but established brutal dictatorships. Under Stalin, *actually existing communism* murdered at least 36 million people. When communism came to China, the psychopathic Mao Zedong killed at least twice that many.

But wherever capitalism advanced (U.K, U.S.), material conditions of the proletariat *improved by leaps and bounds*. Many sought to *join* the bourgeoisie, and did so through consistent hard work, thrift, and thinking generationally (they might not make it but their children would).

All one seemed to need to succeed under capitalism was a product other *homo economici* (reabeled *consumers*) wanted and could pay for. Quite unlike Bolshevism and Maoism, no one had a gun at anyone's head. Capitalism placed demands on people, but it didn't *mass murder* them.

This was particularly true where the Christian worldview remained intact: God, family, that work ethic.

What were self-respecting Marxist "theoreticians" to do???

Cultural Marxism and "Critical Theory"; uprooting Christianity.

Seeing their worldview as wrong wasn't an option. They were too ego-invested in it. So they *reinvented it*!

The Frankfurt School did the heavy lifting. Another figure to consult is Italy's Antonio Gramsci. The former operated out of Frankfurt, Germany, at the Institute for Social Research founded in 1923. In the 1930s their efforts bore fruit. They wanted to understand why there was factionalism within leftist movements, why Bolshevism had failed to deliver Utopia, and why Germany had turned to Nazism. Being Jews, they fled their home country for the U.S. where they found academic positions in places like New York University and the New School for Social Research, also in New York City.

There, they formulated *critical theory*. According to the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#):

"Critical theory" refers to a family of theories that aim at a critique and transformation of society by integrating normative perspectives with empirically informed analysis of society's conflicts, contradictions, and tendencies. In a narrow sense, "Critical Theory" (often denoted with capital letters) refers to the work of several generations of philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School. Beginning in

the 1930s at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, it is best known for interdisciplinary research that combines philosophy and social science with the practical aim of furthering emancipation. There are separate entries on influential figures of the first generation of the Frankfurt School – [Max Horkheimer](#) (1895–1973), [Theodor W. Adorno](#) (1903–1969), [Herbert Marcuse](#) (1898–1979), and [Walter Benjamin](#) (1892–1940) – and the leading figure of the second generation, [Jürgen Habermas](#) (b. 1929).

In a broader sense, there are many different strands of critical theory that have emerged as forms of reflective engagement with the emancipatory goals of various social and political movements, such as feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and postcolonial/decolonial theory. In another, third sense, “critical theory” or sometimes just “Theory” is used to refer to work by theorists associated with psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, such as [Michel Foucault](#) and [Jacques Derrida](#) (see these separate entries as well as the entry on [postmodernism](#)).

Unglaze your eyes. Let’s see what we can sort out.

Focus first on *emancipation* (or *emancipatory*). Leftists love such terms. They are fancy words for *freeing* some group. In what sense?

Consider: the Frankfurt School combined philosophy and social science, and later, gave rise to “feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory...”

Recall Rousseau and the submersion of the individual consciousness into the collective, and you should get the idea.

“Emancipation” is freedom from the autonomous self from capitalism and its demands, in favor of submersion of one’s individual will into that “general will,” whose mouthpiece is that vanguard we mentioned? There was, however, a problem. A

big one!

As Max Weber had shown in his major work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (early 1900s), ***economics is not the primary driver of capitalist civilization.***

A (mostly Protestant) Christian worldview is. That work ethic yet again, automatically embraced in the marketplace.

In Marxian jargon, bourgeois class consciousness infected the proletariat. And – *egads!* – it was *Christian!*

The problem for *classical* Marxists was that *political economy is downstream from culture.*

Thus ***cultural*** Marxism: prioritizing *culture* over *political economy* and beginning that “long march through the institutions” to *capture and de-Christianize the culture.*

Critical theory sought ways of doing this, looking for “structures of domination” unnoticed by those immersed in them, and so in “false consciousness” made acceptable through the hypnosis of religion. Only if cultural Marxists could expose all this could they ruin capitalism.

They retained Marxian class consciousness, which saw *homo economici* as experiencing, thinking, acting – and voting – with class, *not* as autonomous selves. *Emancipation* occurs within group identity, *freedom* being voluntary subordination of *self* (Rousseau).

False consciousness also explained anyone in an “oppressed group” who went off message, got out of line, refused to follow the vanguard. Those infected with false consciousness had to be purged, or as we’d say today, canceled.

Christianity being the major source of false consciousness, de-Christianizing culture by marginalizing Christians was the imperative. As they marched through the institutions of arts, music, entertainment, and education at all levels, cultural

Marxists furthered whatever would portray Christians as mean, ignorant, backward, dogmatic, hypocritical, evil, or stupid. Eventually they infiltrated Christian institutions themselves: seminaries.

They drew on Freudian psychoanalysis, the so-called “social gospel,” “higher criticism” of Biblical texts, evolutionary psychology, whatever else was at hand that might prove useful in discrediting the Christian worldview among thought leaders and weakening its hold over the culture even among young and impressionable Christians.

Hijacking Dr. King’s dream; from equality to equity.

Cultural Marxism had inadvertent help because of the worst blunder in America’s past: slavery.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s cultural power (in addition to personal charisma) was his appeal to a transcendent moral order rooted in the Christian worldview. He’d begun as a theologian, after all. His call to extend *equal opportunity* to all Americans, opposing racial discrimination, could be seen as an extension of this: an appeal to that merging of classical liberalism and Christian values.

He was *not* calling to turn the tables on white people. He wanted them on board, and his effort was *working*. Civil rights and voting rights legislation could not have been passed without the support of a lot of well-intentioned white people, a few of whom sacrificed greatly for the cause.

Cultural Marxists hijacked Dr. King’s dream in the mid-1960s.

Herbert Marcuse penned his short essay “Repressive Tolerance” (1965). Anyone who desires to know where differential treatment *favoring* blacks *against* whites (eventually women against men, and other politically-designated oppressed groups against their “oppressors”) came from, this essay is the best place to begin.

Cultural Marxism played up the idea of black Americans being behind white Americans for structural or systemic reasons, the long arm of slavery's influence, and not just individual acts of discrimination. Thus, calls for equal opportunity, nondiscrimination, equality under the law, etc., would continue to "privilege" whites.

Freedom of speech would have the same effect.

The call for equality had to be altered, and free speech curtailed. Thus the start of political correctness, long before anyone called it that.

Thus the replacement of *equality* with *equity* in official jargon. DEI, after all, doesn't stand for diversity, *equality*, and inclusion; but diversity, *equity*, and inclusion.

Now you know why.

Equity assumes that due to the absence of a level playing field – something that has *never existed, anywhere*, under *any* arrangements – some must be given preferential favors in the present to bring about "genuine equality" in the future.

Displaced whites? As the saying goes, you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.

Collectivism *by nature* sacrifices *some* for the perceived good of the *whole*.

Cultural Marxists thus used the supposed legacy of slavery to widen rather than heal existing divisions between blacks and whites. They encouraged the study of this legacy in pseudosubjects like "Afro-American studies," and used myriad other devices to encourage resentment against whites (and white guilt).

Nothing widens divisions more than the perception that some are getting government freebies at the expense of others.

Divided populations, moreover, are easier to bend to the will of those interested in power. Groups look angrily at one another instead of the power-hungry.

A turning point was the *Griggs v. Duke Power* Supreme Court decision (1971) which shifted the meaning of racial discrimination from *actions taken by individuals* to *politically unacceptable outcomes*.

Then came the view that if nonfavored whites criticized such moves, they were motivated by racism. "Liberals" maintained this as loudly as possible. Many still do. They also maintain that those who don't see "systemic racism" are blinded by their "white privilege," i.e., their collective racial (false) consciousness.

See how this works?

Gender ideology.

Arguably, *classical* liberalism was on life support. Its reach was limited to a few think tanks. Cultural Marxism had marched through the major educational institutions and became a dominant force among the young who had no idea of its history or what had come before

Now, something else quite interesting began to happen. Products associated with the new consciousness became marketable. Corporations, smelling money to be made, got on board.

This is why corporations embraced DEI.

For by this time, the now-prevalent mindset had been extended to women, even if statistically, by the late 1990s single career women were doing better economically than single men who were even then losing ground.

Their marching orders: don't speak of sex, a biological category, but *gender*, a social construct. Judith Butler, an

academic philosopher, gave this idea legs in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990). Similar tomes appeared in other humanities disciplines. Academic feminists described this as “third wave” feminism (the “first wave” gave women the right to vote; the “second wave” called for equal pay for equal work).

Suddenly, *gender* was all the rage! It spread quickly to the legal profession, journalism, and corporations.

The traditional family was out!

When another then-academic philosopher, Christina Hoff Sommers, read a paper at a normally tame academic conference in the late 1980s entitled “Feminists Against the Family” which criticized “gender feminism,” as called it, the meeting turned hostile, with taunts, catcalls, and a degeneration into near-chaos.

Sommers had gone off message. She’d displayed “false consciousness.” She had to be canceled. During ensuing years, which included publication of her book *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women* (1994), her life was made miserable. She finally abandoned academia and took a research position at the American Enterprise Institute, one of those think tanks, where (to the best of my knowledge) she’s remained – still writing but without significant influence. Academic philosophers ignore her work.

In the 1990s, homosexuals were pulled in. This occurred via sympathetic depictions of homosexual characters in popular nighttime sitcoms. The march through that institution changed the culture from one repulsed by homosexuality to one fascinated by it.

The fact that Christianity rejects homosexual conduct as immoral drove Christians further to the margins. Worsening the situation was the fact, mentioned above, that discerning Christians realized they couldn’t trust their own dominant institutions. Eventually homosexual “marriage” was

mainstreamed by the Supreme Court in *Obergefell v Hodges* (2015). The mindset had succeeded in subverting American higher education and corporate media well before *LGBTQ+* and *woke* crept into our vocabularies (2010s).

Generation Z (born 1997 to 2012) grew up never knowing anything different!

Other marching orders: despite men's continued loss of economic ground and their descent into substance abuse, health problems, and suicide, if they grouse about their situations, speak of *toxic masculinity*, respond with pejoratives like *misogynist*, or (if they are single and unattached "dateless wonders") insult them as *incels* (short for "involuntarily celibate").

Or just tell them to "man up."

Transgenderism, the Disappearance of Truth, and the Rise of Leftist Illiberalism.

Where was *truth* in any of this? There wasn't any! Truth had been *postmodernized*, one might say. Recall the Law of Three Stages, or actually, Four Stages (see [Part 1](#))? By the new millennium, more and more films and other popular culture products seemed designed to make us question all our perceptions and beliefs about what's real (think of 1999's *The Matrix*). We were in an amalgamation of Third (modernity) and Fourth Stages (postmodernity).

The apotheosis of gender ideology was transgenderism, which tries to obliterate biological sex. Transgenderism is an extension of *gender* as a "social construct." What is "socially constructed" can be *deconstructed*.

One can then speak of gender "assigned at birth," in accordance with it's being something other than chromosomal reality.

Or promote biological males (“transgender females”) participating in women’s sports or entering women’s bathrooms. Or encourage children to question the “gender” they were “assigned at birth” while offering them “gender affirming care” as they “transition” using hormonal treatments, etc.

In this new world order you can be any “gender” you like, and if anyone points out your chromosomal reality, you’ve been “misgendered.”

All of this is highly *illiberal*, despite its association in many people’s minds with what the Democrat Party calls liberalism. (Though in fairness, [even California’s arch-liberal governor Gavin Newsom is now balking.](#))

Classical liberalism saw the *individual* as the primary social unit – that Descartes-originated autonomous intellect, itself a construct, becoming *homo economicus*, making decisions rationally and maximizing utility.

Cultural Marxism identifies us as *groups*: *identity politics*. It distinguishes *oppressor* from *oppressed* (in alignment with the Hegelian categories). One can identify with more than one oppressed group at a time, enabling complex constructs of oppression: *intersectionality*, introduced by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, during those years late 1980s – late 1990s when so much of academia went sideways.

In the cultural Marxist landscape, people don’t make decisions, act, participate in markets, or vote based on individual reason. Rationality is historical and group-situated, not objective or neutral. Treated as an objective source of truth, knowledge, know-how, and moral judgment, individual reason “privileges” the group-situation straight white Christian men (now labeled *cisgender* men).

Who Is this Individual Person?

I don’t recall how the conversation began. It was back in the

1990s, the decade identity politics first sank its claws into academic culture. I'd given a talk on the brand of libertarian thought I then defended. An English professor engaged me in a private conversation. What he said to me, "Yates, you're a straight white guy. Take away your whiteness, your masculinity, your straightness, and what's left?"

When I responded with something like, "Why would I do that? I'm just the thinking person you see standing in front of you, not a set of academic constructs," he looked at me like I was from outer space.

My response was completely outside his conceptual framework.

There's no such thing as even the Cartesian rational intellect, to these people, even then.

To stand against the tide of identity politics was to be in false consciousness, or be on the "wrong side of history."

Such folks must be canceled!

As noted, the problem was that this *sold in the marketplace*, especially to Gen Z (and it's no surprise that within Gen Z, a higher percentage than any previous generation identifies in some way as LGBTQ+, or "nonbinary," or what-have-you)?

It made money. The term: *woke capitalism*.

This made many of the handful of remaining classical liberals shrug and say, in effect, "To each his own."

So long as they aren't bothering me!

Unfortunately, while this may be a good justification for leaving one's neighbors alone, one can't maintain a functional society on that kind of non-foundation.

At least we're now seeing plenty of "false consciousness," as record numbers of blacks and Hispanics voted for Trump last

November. Is Trumpism a possible path back to a stable classical liberalism? Or a sign that all the narratives have collapsed, and liberalism (in all forms) really is dead?

*Marxian concepts can account for why the Soviet Union became a brutal dictatorship instead of a haven for proletarians: the Bolsheviks skipped a step in civilizational development. They tried to go directly from an agrarian-feudal economy direction into socialism, skipping the despised capitalist stage. They misgrasped Marx, who never denied that capitalism was essential. His claim was not that it couldn't produce wealth, only that it couldn't distribute wealth rationally or justly. It was capitalism's inequities, immiserating the proletariat, that would lead to its downfall, a necessary step toward actual Communism.

It follows that, on Marxian terms, the Bolsheviks should have been agitating for capitalism, not socialism. Odd as this sounds. But some would come and correct this mistake.

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In 2012 he moved to Chile. He married a Chilean national in 2014. Among his discoveries in South America: the problems of the U.S. are problems everywhere, because human nature is the same everywhere. The problems are problems of Western civilization as a whole.

As to whether he'll *stay* in Chile ... stay tuned!

He has a Patreon.com page. Donate [here](#) and become a Patron if you benefit from his work and believe it merits being sustained financially.

Steven Yates's book *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic* (2011) can be ordered [here](#).

His philosophical work *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory* (2021) can be obtained [here](#) or [here](#).

His paranormal horror novel *The Shadow Over Sarnath* (2023) can be gotten [here](#).

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