

# THE PROGRESSIVES NEED TO MAKE AN EFFORT IN ORDER TO REGAIN CONTROL OF THE AGENDA

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Corey Robin

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In some ways, the struggle today is quite similar to the struggle of previous centuries. There was always a kind of movement or a progression in previous centuries from the struggle first for religious freedom, and then for political freedom, and then civil freedoms, and then finally for economic rights as well, and I think today the real question on the table is the extension of human rights in the economic realm. I think that really is the fundamental question, and I

think it was for a good part of the 20th century and the 19th century as well. The key difference today, though, is that in previous centuries, I would say up until about the middle of the 20th century, there was an assumption that there was a kind of movement or progression from one sphere of rights to the next, and that history was, essentially, a kind of linear, forward moving process. At times this was questioned, but I think that it was the basic assumption. We have now lived through a tremendous rollback in the extension of those freedoms throughout the last 40 to 50 years, beginning with Pinochet in Chile, and then, of course, with Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and to the rise of what we now call neoliberalism. **The progressive movement forward of our history was disrupted together with the violation of our freedoms. The most serious question of the 21st century is whether or not we can regain our lost freedoms.** I think that the majority of progressive forces see a need for some kind of political or democratic will to reign over the impersonal forces at work in the economic market. At the moment, those forces essentially go unchecked, while many people stand in a very precarious state when it comes to their economic life. They have very little control over their pay at work, their benefits, and particularly outside of Western Europe the benefits, wages, and the things of that sort that people get are very minimal and not much in the way of being able to sustain a fully human life. So, I think for the progressive side the struggle for basic economic rights is

essentially the struggle for social democracy that defines so much of political history in Europe and the United States for the last century. I think for the reactionary forces it is about preventing these progressive forces from gaining control over political imagination in the political sphere. The politics of reaction, since the beginning, have always been about resisting progressive change. **You can pretty much figure out the reactionary agenda, as it is always in reference to the progressive agenda.** I think that the reactionary forces today are basically all those political and economic elements, corporations, banks, conservative parties that are aligned with those corporations and banks, that do not want to see more political regulation and control over the economic realm. Those are the main reactionary forces today. There are, of course, other ones as well, but that has more to do with cultural and social issues. In general, I would say that reactionary forces have grown stronger, and since about the 1970s and 1980s, the agenda has been moving in their direction. I don't know how long this will continue, that's a question I cannot really answer, but I would definitely say that reactionary forces have been gaining more and more control. This does not mean they have not been challenged, that there have not been movements that tried to resist them, just that they are the ones setting the agenda today, and have been for quite some time. And this is what makes things different from the 19th century and the 20th century, as I think progressive forces were setting the agenda then, but now it is the other way around.

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Today, as nationalism raises its head in Europe, and the attitude towards immigrants is becoming worse everywhere, the Tea Party movement is gaining in popularity, and there is now a widespread belief that a new reactionary force may sweep over Europe and the US. I can't agree with this statement. The Tea party is just an expression, a symptom or an iteration of the right wing populism that we have seen gaining power in this country since the 1950s, and reaching its apex in the 1980s. My view on The Tea party and these type of movements is that they are actually far from being resurgent in a new wave forward, and more so signify the last gasp of right wing politics. I think it is probably going to reach an end in the next decade or so. The reason for that, and I want to be clear about this, is that reactionary politics depend on a very powerful progressive movement. That's how they arise, that's what they derive their power from. And the progressive movement has been very quiet and weak for decades now, and until we see a strong vibrant left, I think what you are going to see is a steady decrease in the power of the right.

Nothing is inevitable. There is no teleology here, there is no direction to history or anything like that. **I think that if progressives hope to regain control over the political agenda, they are going to have to make it happen for themselves. It is not just going to happen automatically.** But what I do think is that until you see a very powerful progressive movement, there won't be much of a reactionary response. And by progressive movement I don't just mean the election of a politician; the election of Barack Obama does not signal a revival of a strong progressive force. That's just an election. When I say 'a strong progressive force,' I mean something like the movement

for social democracy in the 19th century, the movement for feminism, the movement for gay rights. Those were powerful, powerful social movements that really got a grip on public imagination. Until we have something like that, particularly on the question of the economy, which we have not had in a long time as the reactionary forces have really had a grip on the public imagination, particularly over economic questions for some time; until we have a progressive counterpart to that, I think you are not going to see a kind of powerful reactionary response, and all you are going to see is a kind of reactionary politics that governs and manages things. And that's where I think we are right now.

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The last issue that needs to be clarified in relation to the problem of the progressive agenda is the issue concerning global governance. I think there is a lot of confusion about this issue, particularly on the left. I think many people in the middle left assume that nationalism or the nation state was a kind of retrograde reactionary form, and that the task of the left has always been to be more internationalist and universalist. And so, coming out of the 19th century, many people assume that anything having to do with nations and states was reactionary, and anything having to do with the international was progressive. And so, now we have a situation where you have the rise of global governance and many people automatically assume that it's associated with the progressive agenda. I think that's a mistake. And let me be clear about this, it is not because **I think the left should ally public nations and states against internationalism, that's not it at all. The mistake is that the right and reactionary forces have always been just as international as the left.** If we

go back to the French revolution we see that it is the moment where we first have this distinction between the reactionary and the progressive, between left and right. The people who were against the French revolution were not nationalists, they were internationalists. Who were the leaders who greatly opposed the French revolution? It was Edmund Burke, who was not even French, and he called for a European counter-revolution. And you see this throughout the 19th and the 20th centuries as well. You know, many of the people who fought the Cold War against Marxism in the third world were internationalists as well. So, there has always been a very strong international dimension to reactionary politics. I don't think global governance per se can be considered progressive. The distinction between the progressive and the reactionary has to do with the question of equality, and whether or not you are advancing the politics of equality and the politics of freedom. So, if those global institutions are about remedying some of the problems in the economic realm and trying to get some control over those problems for the sake of people who are in the middle working classes and the bottom, then that's progressive. If, however, those institutions are advancing the agenda of neoliberalism, of unrestrained capitalism, of imperialism, then that's not progressive. This leads to the question of humanitarian intervention in Libya. I don't think you could call that a progressive agenda per se. I mean, first of all, progressives are very much divided about the politics of protecting population through military power, and it has never been the centerpiece of the progressive agenda. At its core, the progressive agenda is about people on the bottom empowering themselves. ■

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