

The Wall Street Journal, 15 mai

Welcome to the Post-Progressive Political Era

For decades, the right lost almost every battle in the culture. But now the left has clearly gone too far.



A demonstration in Worcester, Mass., May 13. PHOTO: KENNETH MARTIN/ZUMA PRESS

Full text :

The decline of woke isn't merely a "vibe shift." It marks the end of the 60-year rise of left-liberalism in American culture. We are entering a post-progressive era.

Woke refers to an ideology of equal outcomes and emotional-harm protection for minorities. It produced phenomena such as cancel culture, men in women's spaces and the toppling of statues. It energized a suite of policies known as diversity, equity and inclusion, whose roots lie in older racial-sensitivity training and affirmative-action programs. It is now in retreat.

The Trump administration has rescinded executive orders on affirmative action and disparate impact that were more than 50 years old. Universities are no longer allowed to enforce broad, identity-based speech codes, many of which arose nearly four decades ago. Colleges have adopted institutional-neutrality policies and ended mandatory diversity statements. Corporations have cut back on DEI. Today's anti-DEI mood is likely to outlast the current administration, reflecting a deeper shift in the culture.

Culture can change from the top as elites lead public opinion. American elite culture turned against immigration in the late 1880s, then gradually liberalized between the 1920s and '60s. Are we witnessing a similar elite-led shift, this time away from the ideology of equal outcomes and emotional-harm protection that has guided it since the mid-1960s?

The liberal left spearheaded liberation from social mores around divorce, sex and the traditional family. Attitudes toward interracial marriage, women's equality and homosexuality liberalized, making society better. Conservatives lost virtually every battle in the culture, culminating most recently in the growing acceptance of gay marriage.

The success of the cultural left created a sense of progressive inevitability, captured by Ronald Inglehart's important book, "Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society" (1990), which suggested that rising affluence and security propel young and educated people toward liberal-egalitarian cultural views. They in turn change society through generational turnover: one birth, one funeral and one college degree at a time. Left-liberalism was to usher in the end of history as society became more enlightened and empathetic. This confident historicist outlook could be discerned through phrases such as "the right side of history" or references to certain attitudes being out of date.

The cultural left envisioned a grand narrative of progress whose next phase would move from individual rights to group rights, citizen rights to rights across borders, and gay rights to trans rights. But what Daniel Bell termed the left's "chiliastic hopes" appear to have ended in stalemate and polarization. The attempt to push

for next-level DEI policies such as segregated graduation ceremonies, mandatory diversity statements, critical race and gender ideology in schools, or males in female sports has produced an enduring antiwoke reaction. Immigration attitudes have turned restrictionist after decades of liberalization.

Young people are more culturally progressive than their elders, but large-scale college freshman data and exit polls show a substantial rightward shift among young people from 2021-24. In Britain, [YouGov](#)'s tracker finds the under-25s moving sharply right on transgender issues and immigration since 2022. Both elite and public opinion on transgenderism has shifted against the left in the past two years, its first cultural loss in six decades.

The new vibe shift isn't, as with the 1990s reaction to political correctness, confined to the pages of elite outlets like the New Republic and the [New York Times](#). Instead, social media and today's opinion-led media, which helped spread woke ideas off campus in the 2010s, have facilitated a wider backlash that has entered state and federal politics. Op-eds in liberal outlets have criticized diversity training, cancel culture, transgender medicine, DEI administrators and diversity statements.

Confronted by this broad-based rejection, progressive activists have lost confidence and energy. This contributed to the muted and disorganized reaction to [Donald Trump](#)'s election in 2024 as compared with 2016. Indeed, the left's response to Mr. Trump today draws more on traditional idioms like free speech, due process and the Constitution than on the tropes of identity politics.

A further source of progressive malaise is that a series of culturally inflected problems elude progressive solutions. From endemic populism to declining birthrates, youth mental health to working-class social collapse and deaths of despair, the cultural left seems to be part of the problem rather than the solution. While the economic left remains relevant, cultural progressivism is losing influence. When a quasi-religious movement that sees itself as the vanguard of history stops rising, the effect is more profound than when an incremental reform movement is forced to moderate. Like a bicyclist who has stopped pedaling, the results are cataclysmic.

We are leaving the age of progressive confidence, but what will replace it? When the stories that set the direction for society no longer seem relevant, an opening is created for new ideas that can build on criticism of the existing order. How long the transition takes and what replaces progressivism as our cultural lodestar will become evident only in the fullness of time.

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