

‘Cultural Marxism’ Is Not the True Culprit of Our Cultural Decay

“Cultural Marxism” is a bogeyman invoked by conservatives to explain events as varied as the FBI’s trouble with Trump, the evolution of the rock group U2, transgender rights, and the results of the abortion referendum in Ireland.

Anything that explains so many phenomena needs a pretty good explanation itself. Otherwise it begins to sound like the New World Order network of the Illuminati or the Judaeo-Masonic-Bolshevik conspiracy theory peddled in the early part of the 20th Century.

To be sure, “cultural Marxism” does exist; it is not a phantasm. Attempting to insert Marxist themes into culture (another notoriously difficult term to define) are two well-known groups, the Frankfurt School and the followers of Antonio Gramsci.

The Frankfurt School includes a number of eminent German academics associated with the Institute for Social Research at the Goethe University Frankfurt, which was founded in 1923. Many of them fled to the United States before World War II. It attracted dissidents from conventional Marxist thought and – insofar as its very disparate members can be called a school at all – embarked upon scholarly critiques of Marxism, capitalism and modernity. It was not an activist movement.

Antonio Gramsci was an activist. He was a leading Italian Communist in the 1920s who was jailed by Mussolini. In prison – where he died in 1937 – he reflected upon how the state and the bourgeoisie maintain themselves in power. His answer was that they develop a “hegemony”, not through violence but by dominating the culture, from civil society to universities and

institutions. Marxists would bring about the revolution by infiltrating these institutions and creating their own hegemony.

OK. So cultural Marxism is real and has its theoreticians and its T-shirts. Genuine cultural Marxists with nose-rings and weird haircuts are interviewed by the media at Occupy Wall Street rallies. They debate absurd topics at academic conferences. They sell boring newspapers at train stations.

But the question at issue is not whether distant Pluto exists, but whether it – or the Moon – is responsible for the tides in the affairs of men. And with respect to the issues that vex most social conservatives, cultural Marxism is more like Pluto than the Moon. Is it cultural Marxism which steered the Irish towards an overwhelming endorsement of abortion? Is it cultural Marxism which has legalised same-sex marriage? Is it cultural Marxism which has led to the breakdown of the traditional family?

The answer to that is No.

The central issue of Western culture today is how freedom is to be understood. People who voted for the progressive causes mentioned above believe that they are increasing their own freedom and the freedom of their fellow citizens by maximising the range of their choices. Their worldview is best expressed in an often-quoted sentence from US Supreme Court [Justice Anthony Kennedy](#): “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

Now where did this notion come from? Not from Karl Marx. Freedom was a central theme for him – “Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains!” – but it was the freedom of a class, not of individuals.



If we can single out one man who laid the foundation for the freedom of maximizing individual choices, it is Marx's English contemporary John Stuart Mill, utilitarian, libertarian, political economist and feminist. In the wake of the unlamented crash of Communism and Marxist ideology, Mill's libertarian ideas have triumphed. They are the air we breathe. Consider these brief quotations from his classic text, "On Liberty":

The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

Whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called, and whether it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men.

The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.

Do these sentiments sound familiar?

On another note, he also attacks Christianity as immoral and subversive of public order:

What little recognition the idea of obligation to the public obtains in modern morality, is derived from Greek and Roman sources, not from Christian; as, even in the morality of private life, whatever exists of magnanimity, high-mindedness, personal dignity, even the sense of honour, is derived from the purely human, not the religious part of our education, and never could have grown out of a standard of ethics in which the only worth, professedly recognised, is that of obedience.

Also familiar?

Mill's fingerprints are on all the major social changes embraced by Gen X and Gen Y – not his alone, of course – but amongst the many smudges, his are the clearest. If Marx is Pluto, Mill is the Moon responsible for the king tide of liberty as licence in today's West. As an index of his influence, consider the popular London-based website [Spiked](#), founded by Marxist ideologues. Nowadays its articles quote John Stuart Mill more often than Marx.

What's the point of exhuming Mill?

It's more than an academic question. Trends like divorce, abortion on demand and same-sex marriage trouble many people. Is it possible to reverse them? Possibly, but only if one understands what brought them about in the first place.

If their success is attributed to cultural Marxists, it's simply a matter of booting them out of the corridors of power. (Not so simple, of course, if they are well entrenched in a bureaucracy or a political party.) The struggle to change social mores becomes political, not intellectual. There is no need to engage with ideas, to test their truthfulness, consistency and effectiveness. The assumption is that malevolent conspirators have hoodwinked the public. When they are eliminated, the evil spell will be lifted.

But this is not why these social pathologies have spread. A mistaken idea of freedom has sunk deep roots in our culture because it is appealing and appears to make sense. That's why quotes from Mill appear on lots of T-shirts. How we got here from there, the "there" of traditional values, is a puzzle.

But whatever the answer is, John Stuart Mill is part of it. His lucid, eloquent and persuasive notions of libertarianism and utilitarianism swept throughout the world, especially in the Anglosphere. A copy of "On Liberty" is passed to every newly elected president of the UK's Liberal Democrats, for

instance.

If Mill is identified as the principal figure in this cultural heist, the George Clooney of an intellectual *Oceans 11*, we are forced to contest his ideas. And despite their popularity, they can be beaten. Freedom is mankind's most precious gift, but Mill's focus is on "freedom from" and not "freedom for". Mill's "harm" principle is vague and includes only tangible harms. Mill's notion of freedom is inextricably tied to his obnoxious utilitarianism. And Mill's libertarianism atomises individuals, creating a society with ever-weaker social bonds.

Changing the intellectual climate is a task which may take decades, but we have to start somewhere. And the best starting point is interrogating the legacy of John Stuart Mill.

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