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Progressivism: How Many Steps Forward This Time?

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by Victor Morawski

When English philosopher John Locke, who greatly influenced America's Founding Fathers, claimed that mixing our labor with what was formerly common property gave us the right to now call that property our own, he both reaffirmed the Protestant work ethic and provided a philosophical defense of private property rights.

Writing of the rights affirmed by the English ["Glorious"] Revolution of 1688, Locke focused on three: "life, liberty, and the right to own private property." Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence famously broadened the scope of the third to the more comprehensive "pursuit of happiness."

For Locke, it was to secure and protect private property rights that governments were formed. Even the rights to life and liberty, for him, sprang from the property rights that we have to our own body and our own person.

That we have these rights not from government but from our Creator was obvious to Locke and the Founding Fathers. As such they were inalienable ["unalienable" was a printer's typo]. While an alien is separated from his or her homeland, these rights could not be separated from us, not even by government.

When Barack Obama claimed that it was effectively his goal and that of his administration to fundamentally remake America, he did so from the standpoint of Progressivism, a loosely constructed conglomerate of political philosophies which share in common a rejection of the view of our nation's founding documents as given above.

Influenced by the German philosopher Hegel's view that the entirety of human history is in a constant state of flux and development, Progressivism views them not as incorporating timeless and invariable truths concerning fundamental human rights and government's role in protecting them, but as anachronistic documents, culturally bound to their own time and circumstances, inadequate for contemporary challenges.

President Wilson, a Progressive pioneer, suggested applying a Darwinian metaphor to the Constitution: Like an evolving species it needs to adapt to its environment to meet contemporary needs. It is a living, not a static, document.

According to Ronald J. Restritto in an article entitled "The Birth of the Administrative State," it was President Woodrow Wilson who first suggested a way to free American government from

the checks and balances placed on it in the Constitution and pave the way for Progressive reforms: vest more and more real power in the hands of unelected administrators.

He seems to have genuinely held what strikes many as an incredibly naïve belief, namely that administrators who were experts in their own fields, would somehow be above politics and so interested in devoting themselves to serving the needs of the citizenry that checks and balances on their actions would be unnecessary.

Whether Barack Obama accepts Wilson's view, he seems to have learned its lesson well. In appointing one unelected Czar after another to positions of overriding authority in his administration, he has engineered countless end runs around Constitutional safeguards.

While Locke believed that governments should be instituted for the protection of individual rights and liberties, Progressivism has from its inception loathed individualism and its political expression in our founding documents. In "The Meaning of 'Progressive' Politics" Barry Loberfeld quotes Herbert Croly, a Progressive writer, as saying that, "The Promise of American Life is to be fulfilled ... by a large measure of individual subordination and self-denial."

Reading this, one is reminded of Barack Obama's response to a question from an NBC News reporter on why he thought his proposal for a government takeover of the health care system had aroused such widespread antipathy. As Obama put it: "It's an argument that's gone on for the history of this republic, and that is, What's the right role of government? How do we balance freedom with our need to look out for one another? ... This is not a new argument, and it always evokes passions."

No wonder the great concern of center right Constitutional Originalists is that the Obama Administration, with its unchecked Czars, unwavering Congressional support for a large and invasive government – and admitted quest to "balance freedom" — seems to think that it can advance Progressive reforms in far more than merely incremental ways. And if it does, it may finally be able to tip the balance that remakes America into a Socialist state once and for all.

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