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Hillsdale Constitution 101 Week 9: "The Progressive Rejection of the Founding"

[Hillsdale College](#) ^ | 04/16/2012 | Ronald J. Pestritto

Posted on 4/16/2012, 8:02:17 AM by [iowamark](#)

Progressivism is the belief that America needs to move or “progress” beyond the principles of the American Founding. Organized politically more than a hundred years ago, Progressivism insists upon flexibility in political forms unbound by fixed and universal principles. Progressives hold that human nature is malleable and that society is perfectible. Affirming the inexorable, positive march of history, Progressives see the need for unelected experts who would supervise a vast administration of government.

Progressivism is rooted in the philosophy of European thinkers, most notably the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. Progressivism takes its name from a faith in “historical progress.” According to the leading lights of Progressivism, including Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and John Dewey, human nature has evolved beyond the limitations that the Founders identified. Far from fearing man’s capacity for evil, Progressives held that properly enlightened human beings could be entrusted with power and not abuse it.

The Progressive idea of historical progress is tied to the idea of historical contingency, which means that each period of history is guided by different and unique values that change over time. The “self-evident truths” that the Founders upheld in the Declaration of Independence, including natural rights, are no longer applicable. Circumstances, not eternal principles, ultimately dictate justice.

If human nature is improving, and fixed principles do not exist, government must be updated according to the new reality. The Constitution’s arrangement of government, based upon the separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism, only impeded effective government, according to Progressives. The limited government of the Founding is rejected in favor of a “living Constitution.”

Ronald J. Pestritto is the Charles and Lucia Shipley Chair in the American Constitution, Associate Professor of Politics, and Dean of the Graduate School of Statesmanship at Hillsdale College. He is also a senior fellow with the College’s Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship. Dr. Pestritto teaches courses in American politics and political philosophy, with a focus on the political thought of the Progressives.

A senior fellow of the Claremont Institute and an academic fellow of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Dr. Pestritto has served as a visiting scholar at the Social Philosophy and Policy Center at Bowling Green State University. He is the author of *Wilson and the Roots of Modern Liberalism* and *Criminal Law: Punishment and Political Thought in the Origins of America*; editor of *Woodrow Wilson: The Essential Political Writings*; and co-editor of *American Progressivism: A Reader*, as well as a three-book series on American political thought. He has published articles and reviews in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Claremont Review of Books*. He received his B.A. from Claremont McKenna College, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in Government from the Claremont Graduate University.

TOPICS: [Education](#); [Military/Veterans](#); [Reference](#)

KEYWORDS: [abrahamlincoln](#); [civilwar](#); [hillsdale](#); [lincoln](#); [woodrowwilson](#)

Lecture

Professor Ronald J. Pestritto: ["The Progressive Rejection of the Founding"](#) (44 minute video)

Study Guide

[Week Nine Study Guide](#)

Q&A Reminder: You may submit questions from Monday at noon when the new week's material is available, until Wednesday at noon. "Question & Answer" videos will be posted on Thursdays. Like the lectures, these sessions are not live, and are available to view at your convenience.

You may submit questions to constitution@hillsdale.edu, or via [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#). Please include your name, city, and state with your email so we can identify your question. We will do our best to answer as many questions as possible during the time allotted, but we will not be able to answer all questions.

Readings

1. ["The American Conception of Liberty" – Frank Goodnow](#)
 2. ["What is Progress?" – Woodrow Wilson](#)
 3. ["Liberalism and Social Action" – John Dewey](#)
 4. ["Socialism and Democracy" – Woodrow Wilson](#)
-

Get started on readings for Week Ten, "The Recovery of the Constitution."

Readings for Week 10:

1. ["Commonwealth Club Address" – Franklin D. Roosevelt](#)
2. ["What Good's a Constitution?" – Winston Churchill](#)
3. ["Annual Message to Congress" – Franklin D. Roosevelt](#)
4. ["Remarks at the University of Michigan" – Lyndon B. Johnson](#)
5. ["Commencement Address at Howard University" – Lyndon B. Johnson](#)
6. ["A Time for Choosing" – Ronald Reagan](#)
7. ["First Inaugural Address" – Ronald Reagan](#)

1 posted on 4/16/2012, 8:02:31 AM by iowamark
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To: iowamark

Top down, dictatorial government is backward-thinking. These people are more accurately called Regressives.

2 posted on 4/16/2012, 8:10:46 AM by skeeter
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Lecture Summary

Progressivism is rooted in the philosophy of European thinkers, most notably the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. Progressivism takes its name from a faith in “historical progress.” According to the leading lights of Progressivism, including Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and John Dewey, human nature has evolved beyond the limitations that the Founders identified. Far from fearing man’s capacity for evil, Progressives held that properly enlightened human beings could be entrusted with power and not abuse it.

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Key Passages from the Readings

The American Conception of Liberty • Frank Goodnow:

“The rights which [man] possesses are, it is believed, conferred upon him, not by his Creator, but rather by the society to which he belongs. What they are is to be determined by the legislative authority in view of the needs of that society. Social expediency, rather than natural right, is thus to determine the sphere of individual freedom of action.”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 631)

What is Progress? • Woodrow Wilson:

“The laws of this country have not kept up with the change of economic circumstances in this country; they have not kept up with the change of political circumstances...”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 635)

“Now, it came to me... that the Constitution of the United States had been made under the dominion of the Newtonian Theory.” (The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 640)

“The trouble with the theory is that government is not a machine, but a living thing. It falls, not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life.”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 640)

“All that progressives ask or desire is permission—in an era when ‘development,’ ‘evolution,’ is the scientific word—to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle; all they ask is recognition of the fact that a nation is a living thing and not a machine.”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 641)

“Living political constitutions must be Darwinian in structure and in practice. Society is a living organism and must obey the laws of life, not of mechanics; it must develop.”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 641)

“Some citizens of this country have never got beyond the Declaration of Independence, signed in Philadelphia, July 4th, 1776.”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 641)

“The Declaration of Independence did not mention the questions of our day. It is of no consequence to us unless we can translate its general terms into examples of the present day...” (The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 641)

Liberalism and Social Action • John Dewey:

“But the majority who call themselves liberals today are committed to the principle that organized society must use its powers to establish the conditions under which the mass of individuals can possess actual as distinct from merely legal liberty.”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 625)

“The earlier liberals lacked historic sense and interest.”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 626)

“...[T]hey would have known that as economic relations became dominantly controlling forces in setting the pattern of human relations, the necessity of liberty for individuals which they proclaimed will require social control of economic forces in the interest of the great mass of individuals.” (The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 627)

Socialism and Democracy • Woodrow Wilson:

“The thesis of the state socialist is, that no line can be drawn between private and public affairs which the State may not cross at will; that omnipotence of legislation is the first postulate of all just political theory.”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 646)

“For it is very clear that in fundamental theory socialism and democracy are almost if not quite one and the same. They both rest at bottom upon the absolute right of the community to determine its own destiny and that of its members. Men as communities are supreme over men as individuals. Limits of wisdom and convenience to the public control there may be: limits of principle there are, upon strict analysis, none.”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, pages 646-7)

“The difference between democracy and socialism is not an essential difference, but only a practical difference—is a difference of organization and policy, not a difference of primary motive.” (The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, page 647)

“The contest is no longer between government and individuals; it is now between government and dangerous combinations and individuals. Here is a monstrously changed aspect of the social world. In face of such circumstances, must not government lay aside all timid scruple and boldly make itself an agency for social reform as well as for political control?”

(The U.S. Constitution: A Reader, pages 647-8)

Study Questions

1. What is “historical contingency?” What does this concept say about the “self-evident truths” affirmed in the Declaration of Independence?

2. Woodrow Wilson draws a distinction between the Constitution of the Founders and that of the Progressives, calling them “Newtonian” and “Darwinian,” respectively. What does he mean by this?
3. Why do the Progressives believe that the separation of powers and checks and balances were unnecessary?
4. What is the source of rights, according to Progressives?

Discussion Questions

1. Woodrow Wilson remarks that “The Declaration of Independence did not mention the questions of our day.” Is his assertion correct?
2. By the election of 1912, all three major political parties—Republican, Democrat, and Progressive—had adopted Progressive platforms. Why was Progressivism so successful in its early years?
3. Progressives praised democracy while calling for an unelected “administrative” state. How did they reconcile these two concepts?
4. How is the idea of the “living Constitution” apparent today?

3 posted on 4/16/2012, 8:11:04 AM by iowamark
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To: iowamark

:: the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel ::

The codifier of communism.

4 posted on 4/16/2012, 8:20:36 AM by Cletus.D.Yokel (Catastrophic Anthropogenic Climate Alterations - The acronym explains the science.)
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To: Cletus.D.Yokel

This should be a fun week

5 posted on 4/16/2012, 8:55:47 AM by Steve Newton (And the Wolves will learn what we have shown before-We love our sheep we dogs of war. Vaughn)
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To: iowamark

Since *human nature* never changes (as the Founders knew very well), the Constitution will remain valid and relevant... oh, how should I put this...FOREVER.

6 posted on 4/16/2012, 8:59:20 AM by Free in Texas (Member of the Bitter Clingers Association.)
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To: iowamark

The Constitution's arrangement of government, based upon the separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism, only impeded effective government, according to Progressives. The limited government of the Founding is rejected in favor of a "living Constitution."

Oliver Wendell Holmes believed that laissez-faire is not an absolute and is not inherent in the Constitution. Also, social needs must be supreme over all laws and abstract principles, however venerable.

Charles Beard believed that the Constitution is not sacrosanct and merely reflected the selfish desire of the Founding Fathers to protect their own property holdings.

The pragmatists believed that reality is a social product, and logic itself is in continual flux, so why should politics or the Constitution be any different?

7 posted on 4/16/2012, 9:09:18 AM by **mjp** ((pro-{God, reality, reason, egoism, individualism, natural rights, limited government, capitalism}))

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To: **mjp**

The Constitution's arrangement of government, based upon the separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism, only impeded effective government, according to Progressives.

Well, duhh, that's exactly what it is designed to do. Quite effective at it.

Only works well when the government is limited and is only trying to do a few things, with the people and states left alone otherwise.

The problem is that we are trying to run a welfare state administrative colossus with a system designed to do only a few things. Won't work. Doesn't work nearly as well, for this purpose, as the systems in Europe.

We effectively have the choice of returning to a limited government or redesigning our system so it is capable of functioning to run a nanny state. Can't keep on the way we are.

8 posted on 4/16/2012, 9:23:50 AM by **Sherman Logan**

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To: **mjp**

We have to consider the Left as a declared enemy at the same level as those that would attack us with arms. They have been at it long enough to have created serious injury, havoc, and costs to our way of life, our Constitution, and therefore should be declared an enemy of State.

They have their rights to free speech as anyone, but their actions are beyond free speech.

9 posted on 4/16/2012, 9:35:18 AM by **rockinqsranch** (Dems, Libs, Socialists, call 'em what you will, they ALL have fairies livin' in their trees.)

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To: **iowamark; savagesusie; Jacquerie; madison10; Steve Newton; IronJack; DollyCali; Makana; Sergio; ...**

Hillsdale ping!

10 posted on 4/16/2012, 11:11:58 AM by **iowamark**

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To: **rockinqsranch**

Agree. I read the book notes from Wilson. What a despicable, arrogant man. A small team of Freepers could absolutely shred his non-logic on the faults of our founding.

11 posted on **4/16/2012, 1:54:37 PM** by **Jacquerie** (No court will save us from ourselves.)

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To: **Free in Texas**

The constitution would not be valid for a hive of bees, as the inability of most to reproduce, and the genetic identity of the bees would change the optimal survival strategy.

Of course if we were to change so much, we would not be human.

12 posted on **4/16/2012, 9:07:16 PM** by **donmeaker** (Blunderbuss: A short weapon, ... now superceded in civilized countries by more advanced weaponry.)

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To: **iowamark**

“The Progressive idea of historical progress is tied to the idea of historical contingency, which means that each period of history is guided by different and unique values that change over time. The “self-evident truths” that the Founders upheld in the Declaration of Independence, including natural rights, are no longer applicable. Circumstances, not eternal principles, ultimately dictate justice.”

Watched the lecture last night. What a horrible, destructive philosophy progressivism is. Seems thats pretty much the arguments slave states used,,that circumstances (economic, etc.) dictated the need of slavery. So if there is no such thing as natural rights or eternal principles, then at some point in the future progressives would be fine with slavery under the right circumstances.

It also allows such things as eugenics and “after-birth” abortions. Woodrow Wilson was a shining light of progressivism,,and a firm believer in eugenics. Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung also rejected the belief that humans did not have natural rights.

13 posted on **4/17/2012, 5:26:21 AM** by **chessplayer**

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To: **iowamark**

Woodrow Wilson - “If you want to understand the real Declaration (of Independence), do not repeat the preface.”

Right there he rejects the concept that humans have natural rights. Hitler believed the same regarding Jews. Both Wilson and Hitler believed only the State can bestow rights to someone.

14 posted on **4/17/2012, 5:33:37 AM** by **chessplayer**

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To: **Free in Texas**

Since human nature never changes (as the Founders knew very well)

Yep. It's literally in the DNA. But progressives believe human nature can be changed with proper education.

15 posted on 4/17/2012, 5:37:40 AM by chessplayer
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To: **iowamark**

Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung also rejected the belief that humans did not have natural rights.

Correction,,,the 3 above rejected the belief that humans have natural rights.

16 posted on 4/17/2012, 5:44:02 AM by chessplayer
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To: **iowamark; savagesusie; Jacquerie; madison10; Steve Newton; IronJack; DollyCali; Makana; Sergio; ...**

Hillsdale Constitution 101 Week Nine

"The Progressive Rejection of the Founding"

[Q&A Session](#) with Dr. Ronald J. Pestritto (22 minute video)

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17 posted on 4/20/2012, 1:47:36 AM by iowamark
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