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The Progressive Problem

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Progress is our most important product,” Ronald Reagan used to say in the 1950s, when he hosted General Electric Theater, a popular television drama series. Praising progress is like praising motherhood. Who is against progress in science, medicine, and technology? If at a social gathering I said “I’m for progress,” most people would yawn. But if I said “I’m a progressive,” I’d get a very different response. I’d be admired by liberals and looked at with disdain by conservatives.

For Democrats, progressive has become the go-to word in recent years, replacing liberal. The old-school liberal columnist E. J. Dionne talks approvingly of “American progressives.” Chris Murphy, the Democratic senator from Connecticut, says, “We have some work to do to explain to progressive voters why the courts should matter to them as much as it matters to conservatives.”

For those on the right, progressive is now a pejorative term. In a fundraising letter for the Cato Institute, George Will calls Woodrow Wilson “the first progressive president.” This is not a compliment. Victor Davis Hanson, the classicist who writes for National Review, speaks scathingly of “the progressive street,” which he says is “leading fossilized Democrats into a sort of collective madness.”

Though Democrats proudly wear the label progressive, they strongly disagree among themselves about what it means. For some Democrats, all members of their party are progressives. For other Democrats, a progressive is someone who supports a radical political agenda, usually including curbing the power of corporations near the top of the list. More liberal Democrats say they belong to the “progressive wing” of the Democratic party.

A sign of the times in the party is the recent announcement by Yasmine Taeb, a left-wing human rights lawyer, that she will challenge Richard L. Saslaw, the Democratic leader of Virginia’s senate, in next year’s Democratic primary. Saying she wants “to champion a progressive agenda in the General Assembly,” Taeb promises to reject corporate campaign donations, favors a \$15-an-hour minimum wage, and opposes the death penalty. In a dig at Saslaw, who has received campaign funds from Dominion Energy, the state’s largest utility, Taeb said: “Some elected officials are more interested in siding with powerful corporations than the people they represent.” Saslaw claims that he too is a progressive—and he sees nothing wrong with getting campaign funds from Dominion Energy, which charges the lowest electricity rates in the region.

For more than a century, progressive has been a vague term that usually signifies someone who favors big government. The Oxford English Dictionary quotes a British political writer in 1892

who says: “There were Progressives who are not Liberals, but I think there are no Liberals who are not Progressives.” In the 19th century, of course, a liberal was someone who was strongly in favor of a market economy.

The OED also quotes George Orwell, who disliked the progressives of his day because they usually were pro-Soviet. In “Inside the Whale,” Orwell writes: “There are the ‘progressives’ . . . the Shaw-Wells type, always leaping forward to embrace the ego-projections which they mistake for the future.” Writing about H. G. Wells in the New Yorker, Adam Kirsch says Orwell’s 1984 “reads like a dystopian rebuttal to Wells’s sinister utopian fantasies.”

“The program Wells hoped to implement,” Kirsch writes, “was socialist and progressive.” Wells’s progressive agenda included eugenics. “He could write with disconcerting eagerness about which categories of human beings would be put to death in his utopian state,” says Kirsch. Wells was also a great admirer of Stalin, writing, “I have never met a man more candid, fair and honest, and to those qualities it is, and to nothing occult and sinister, that he owes his tremendous undisputed ascendancy in Russia.”

It would probably be wrong to say that contemporary American progressives are as foolish as Wells, but it is fair to say that they have a tropism towards big government and a deep suspicion of the corporate world.

Conservatives undoubtedly relish intraparty quarrels that roil the Democrats, but they too have a progressive problem: They don’t have a good word to describe their anti-progressive stance. The antonyms for “progressive,” Merriam-Webster says, include “backward, primitive, retarded, rude, rudimentary, undeveloped.”

The New York Times recently spoke of “the progressive fervor sweeping national politics.” To counter that fervor, conservatives must try to persuade voters that the progressive agenda—a preoccupation with diversity, proportionality, equity, identity, and affirmative action—is in fact an impediment to progress.

The second “progressive” problem conservatives face is that President Trump is in some respects a progressive. His micromanagement of the economy—protecting the steel industry in the same way that Obama protected the auto industry—is the sort of thing good progressives have always tried. George Will thus criticizes Trump’s “industrial policy, with government picking winners and losers. . . . We now have a trade czar in the White House who says he wants to repatriate our supply chains—which is a good way to make an iPhone cost \$3,000.”

In our volatile political climate, Will is on the same page as the leftist economist Paul Krugman, who points out that “Trump has imposed tariffs on about \$300 billion worth of U.S. imports, with tariff rates set to rise as high as 25 percent.” This is “a tax hike on America,” says Krugman.

“We are all Keynesians now,” Richard Nixon reportedly said. Are we all progressives now? No, but anti-progressives have become a weak force. The former movie actor who said on General Electric Theater that “progress is our most important product” would be deeply dismayed by this turn of events.