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Karen Lehrman Bloch: The Classical Liberal Who's Had Enough

Lehrman Bloch, who is based in New York City, founded White Rose Magazine, a digital magazine that is dedicated to “fighting extremism, reteaching classical liberalism and exhibiting transcendent art and design,” she said.

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In 1993, Karen Lehrman Bloch penned an essay in the September/October issue of Mother Jones titled, “Off Course,” in which she observed that women’s studies classes around the country were being “infected” with ideology. After touring courses at various campuses, Lehrman Bloch found that “in many classes discussions alternate between the personal and the political, with mere pit stops at the academic.”

The story ignited a series of heated exchanges that poured over into the mainstream press, including radio talk shows. It was also Mother Jones’s first venture on the then-nascent internet, and one of Lehrman Bloch’s most important essays. Lehrman further explored post-modern feminism in her book, “The Lipstick Proviso: Women, Sex & Power in the Real World” (Doubleday, 1997).

Over the years, she has worked as an editor, cultural critic and curator, serving as editorial director at Assouline Publishing and an editor and contributor at The New Republic, The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wilson Quarterly. Lehrman Bloch has also been a weekly Jewish Journal columnist (2017-2020). Educated at the University of Pennsylvania and the Sorbonne, she studied International Relations with an emphasis on political philosophy. She has also served as a guest scholar at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, The Brookings Institution and The Cato Institute.

“I WAS DRAWN TO ALL OF THE ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF CLASSICAL LIBERALISM: INDIVIDUALISM, REASON, HETERODOXY, LIBERTY, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, DECENCY.” – KAREN LEHRMAN BLOCH

“I chose to become a lifelong Independent mostly from my deep sense of individualism,” Lehrman Bloch told the Journal. “But I was drawn to all of the essential principles of classical liberalism: individualism, reason, heterodoxy, liberty, freedom of expression, decency.”

Nearly 30 years after entreating readers about the importance of heterodoxy, Lehrman Bloch, who is based in New York City, founded White Rose Magazine, a digital magazine that is

dedicated to “fighting extremism, reteaching classical liberalism and exhibiting transcendent art and design,” she said.

Named after a non-violent student resistance group in Nazi Germany, the magazine’s most recent issue is titled, “Reclaiming Feminism.” In full disclosure, I wrote an essay for the issue that focused on a terrorist’s daughter who funds sex slavery in the Middle East.

White Rose Magazine publishes acclaimed authors and writers, including Thane Rosenbaum, distinguished university professor at Touro University and a regular Journal contributor.

“We are living in increasingly illiberal times — speakers are shouted down, newsrooms peddle propaganda, differences in point of view result in moral banishment and cultural cancellation,” Rosenbaum told the Journal. “People live in fear that what they think or say will end in career ruin or friendlessness. White Rose [Magazine] is a safe haven for free thought, the openness to ideas that is the hallmark of liberalism.”

The Journal asked Lehrman Bloch to discuss her first, great love — political philosophy — and to share insights on how classical liberalism is being subverted.

Jewish Journal: Have feminist values shifted over the past few decades?

Karen Lehrman Bloch: Yes, very much so. The most basic feminist value is freedom—enabling women to become the unique individuals that we are. But in the ‘80s and ‘90s, that was turned on its head. Women were essentially told that feminism was an orthodoxy of thought and behavior. Women were told who to vote for, what to wear, that being a mother was beneath them, etc. Women were re-shackled to an anti-feminist orthodoxy that lacked any awareness of personal responsibility. With rights come responsibility—it’s an adage integral to both feminism and liberalism in general.

JJ: When did you begin noticing a shift between the Democratic Party and classical liberal values, and what were those shifts?

KLB: The major shift began in the late ‘80s/early ‘90s. The party began distancing itself from classical liberalism on one issue after another. There was no truth, post-modernists proclaimed, only our personal truths. There was no morality; all morality became subjective and contextual. With no truth or morality, leftists began creating their own version of reality, one that conformed to what they thought was “progressive,” but what ended up being racist, sexist, antisemitic, pro-violence, pro-censorship, etc.

JJ: Did you feel there was room for diversity of opinion or respectful dissent among your former political circles?

KLB: Sadly, not at all. The big wake-up call for me was the summer of 2014. I began to defend Israel against Hamas and media lies. I stated facts. But that was too much for some of my former friends. Israel had become a hot button issue for Democrats, and my friends, despite their personal views, couldn't be friends with someone who didn't care what "the party" thought of them. In private, many of them would show their sympathy. But their cowardice — especially regarding Israel — their need to maintain "status" went against every aspect of who I am. Our friendships never fully recovered.

JJ: Is classical liberalism dead?

KLB: No, but it's somewhat in hiding. Most of those who still retain classical liberal values won't discuss it publicly. That's beginning to change, but only slightly.

JJ: Were you shocked by the heated pushback against your 1993 essay in Mother Jones?

KLB: What was interesting was that it was so heated despite the fact that it was the cover story of a very liberal magazine. So on the one hand, you would think that it would have motivated readers to think a bit about how things had changed. Instead, especially in the women's studies/activism communities, they were aghast that a liberal publication dared to publish the truth. This was happening to all publications, which is why they stopped publishing facts and began to alter everything to adhere to the ever-growing leftist orthodoxy. Today these publications are unrecognizable.

JJ: What dangerous ideologies are most pervasive in the United States today?

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KLB: Leftism is a fascist ideology. Meaning, unlike classical liberalism, which is based on a set of principles that could lead to different opinions, leftism tells you what to think about every subject and censors those who dissent. What started in the universities has now reached kindergartens. Also, during the past month, we began to observe that extremism on the right is beginning to be normalized. Conspiracy theories about the "Deep State" and the "Rothschild cabal" have been turning up on my newsfeed, most disconcerting from many right-wing Jews. So we're going to begin to focus on that as well.

JJ: How can more Americans actively champion heterodoxy of opinion and ensure that extreme, fringe voices are less magnified?

KLB: A lot depends on how we deal with social media. As a classical liberal, I would prefer that the government's role in this is minimal. But we've already seen that even tech companies have no problem instituting and reinforcing censorship. That's not a good sign that we're going to be

able to self-regulate. I again go back to the underlying ideology: Once classical liberals really do begin to speak up—once the center is restrengthened—the fringe voices will be re-marginalized and tech companies will be forced to adjust to a heterodox reality. We are a long way from that. But we have to start somewhere.