



# MULTICULTURALISM IS NOT PROGRESSIVE

*Posted on September 1, 2018 by Keith F.X. Farneham*



---

Can one believe in Progress and still believe in Multiculturalism? Today, many Liberals identify themselves as both "'Progressives" and "Multiculturalists," but what exactly do these ideas mean and are they truly compatible? It is the purpose of this article to outline how both ideas, Multiculturalism and Progress, are mutually exclusive.

What makes the belief in Progress and Multiculturalism mutually exclusive? The progressive believes that a culture can improve, necessitating the idea that not all cultures are equally good; i.e. that the culture of tomorrow can be better than the culture of today.

On the other hand, multiculturalism believes that the government should sustain the existence of several cultures as opposed to assimilating them. This necessitates the idea that all cultures are equal, otherwise why not just assimilate the inferior cultures to those that are better?

## **Progress: A Brief History**

What does it mean to believe in "Progress"? And why do people call themselves "Progressives" anyway?

Before the Enlightenment, philosophers tended to have a cyclical view of history. Many thinkers saw history through the lens of "Harmonia," the idea that things went through cycles of destructive disharmony and rectifying harmony. For example, Aristotle understood the world in terms of periodic floods, in his work, [\*The Metaphysics\*](#).

But, the modern conception of Progress emerged much later during the Enlightenment in the late 1700's, and reached its maturity of development during the mid 1800's.

The idea of Progress in the modern world originated from the French Enlightenment philosophes [Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot](#) and Marie Jean Caritat, the [Marquis de Condorcet](#). These thinkers were the first to systematically assemble and defend the idea of Progress in the modern world.

Inspired by the Scientific Revolution, Turgot and Caritat believed that the development of technology and science was not cyclical, but rather followed a generally linear path. In other words, science and technology progressed.

In addition, they theorized that the deepest root of scientific advancement was philosophical progress; and that the two co-evolved. I.e. better science discoveries would lead to new theories of the world, and new theories would lead to new scientific discoveries.

Furthermore, these thinkers believed that Liberal states were better able to unleash progress in science and philosophy. Because tyrannical states were dependent on constraining new ideas, progress was a threat to all non-liberal states. Therefore, scientific and philosophic progress was linked to the development of Liberal states.

The idea of progress was that human history was advancing scientifically, technologically, philosophically, culturally, and politically in a generally linear direction. These advancements were tied together in co-dependence and ultimately positive and beneficial for all of humanity.

In summary, the idea of progress was that humanities' cultures could improve and were improving.

It wasn't until the mid 1800's that the idea of progress reached its zenith with the philosopher William Fredrick George Hegel and his follower Karl Marx.

Hegel thought History was set on a great ideological track of progressing ideas. In his mind, the state was the "march of God in the world" as it shook off old ideas for the new. Every conflict was headed to a reconciliation of masters and slaves in an ultimate, liberal, and egalitarian future, which he called the Absolute.

Hegel believed that the Progression of human history was inevitable, and that individuals were incapable of stopping it. For example, one could go back in time and destroy Newton, but could you ever stop Calculus? Could ideas, or their progression through history, ever be destroyed? Hegel didn't think so.

Karl Marx, Hegel's student, borrows the idea that progress is inevitable. To Marx, progress wasn't dependent on ideas, but material. It was not the idea of capitalism that would generate the great Communist revolution, it was the physical manifestation of factories, mass produced materials, and abused workers that would ignite the revolution.

Both Hegel and Marx had very linear notions of human Progress. For example, in [The Communist Manifesto](#), Marx articulated that the stages of history were humanity's progression from tribalism, to feudalism, to capitalism, and finally (so Marx believed), to Communism.

Marx and Hegel are significant because they set forth the idea that progress was an inevitable aspect of human culture, and they emphasized that some cultures were better than others.

The Hegelian understanding of Progress gained unprecedented popularity in the 1800's with the expansion of Europe's "progressive" colonial empires over the "backwards" peoples of the rest of the world.

The Marxist idea of Progress would reach its peak with the rise of the Soviet Union and its mission

to ignite a world revolution. The USSR sought to sweep all backward bourgeoisie ways of the thinking back into "the dust bin of history."

But why would anybody want to be considered a "progressive?"

Part of the reason people want to be known as progressives is because they believe that humanity is progressing to a good place and a better future. If people thought that humanity was getting progressively worse, they wouldn't seek to be known as progressives. On the contrary, it's because the belief that humanity is progressing to the worse, many become conservatives – quite possibly the greatest opponents of "progressives" throughout history.

As shown above, one of the most dominant themes of Progress has the belief that the culture of tomorrow can get better and will be better than the culture of yesterday. This view necessitates that idea that the culture of yesterday is worse than the culture of tomorrow; meaning not all cultures are equal and that some are better than others!

Can we really get anywhere, if we don't leave something behind?

## **Multiculturalism: A Brief History**

[Multiculturalism](#) has been popularized and developed much more recently than the idea of Progress. Because of its fresh state of development, this present-day philosophy is a bit harder to pin down.

One universal idea among multiculturalists is the recognition of the existence of many cultures within a given area. In addition, believers in multiculturalism reject the idea of a "melting pot;" i.e. the assimilation of cultures into a single dominant culture.

Instead of having cultures assimilate into a singular dominant culture, multiculturalists favor allowing minority groups to keep their collective practices. But, multiculturalists vary on how active or passive the government should be in helping minority groups maintain these practices.

Some multiculturalists believe that the government should simply take a laissez-faire policy towards the cultural practices of minorities within their culture. For example, if a minority within the country were practicing arranged marriages, then the passive multiculturalist would desire the government to neither aid the practice nor hinder it.

But many multiculturalists want the government to take a far more active approach in aiding a minorities struggle to keep their cultural practices. The father of contemporary multiculturalism, [Will Kymlicka](#), falls into this camp.

Kymlicka states that the government should have **“group-differentiated rights,”** arguing that universal human rights are insufficient to protect the cultural practices of minorities. He believes that if universal human rights are supplemented with **“group rights,”** then the cultures of minorities within a given state will be better retained.

Group rights could include [special residential rights within a city](#), [payments made to a cultural group](#), and [affirmative action in universities](#), the [adoption of language](#), etc.

Multiculturalism is not as fringe as one might believe; but has already been put into practice on grand scale. For example, [Canada](#) guarantees the protection and advancement of multiculturalism in the [Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988](#). The German state also adopted multiculturalist policies in their push to develop [“multikulti”](#) within the German state.

Multiculturalists, like Kymlicka, argue against the assimilation of indigenous groups and minority nations. Instead they favor the extension of “group rights” to help these cultures attain self-determination. Because of this reasoning, multiculturalism is in many ways nationalistic, rallying nationalities to celebrate their cultures.

But why do people argue for multiculturalism?

Very simply, because they don't believe a culture is particularly better or worse than any other culture. If multiculturalists believed that one culture was superior to another culture, then why wouldn't they just argue for inferior culture to be assimilated by the superior culture?

For example, if you thought Western culture was superior to Middle Eastern culture, then why wouldn't you just advocate for adoption of Western culture? Or the assimilation of Middle Easterners to Western ways of life (especially if you thought that those ways of life were superior)? Why would you advocate for the existence of both if you thought one was a better way of life.

The culture you might advocate for might not even be in existence yet. Let's say you imagine a [Utopian](#) culture that you'd like the world to head towards. If you thought this world's contemporary culture was worse, why would advocate for the multicultural existence of both your Utopian culture and the world's current culture?

To justify being a multiculturalist, you must believe that all cultures are equal. If you believed a culture was superior for humanity, then wouldn't you advocate the adoption of that culture? Likewise, if you believed that a culture was inferior than the others around it, wouldn't you desire its elimination (and the absorption of its followers into the neighboring superior cultures)?

This presupposition of the multiculturalist (that all cultures are equally good) is incompatible with

progressive thought (that the culture of tomorrow can be better than the culture of yesterday).

Can one be a multiculturalist and a progressive? Not a chance.

Because the progressives believe in the improvement of culture, they believe that not all cultures are equally good (otherwise there would be no room for improvement). On the other hand, because multiculturalists believe in the preservation of multiple cultures, they believe that cultures are equally good (otherwise why not just have the inferior cultures assimilate into the best culture).

Because the two camps disagree with the idea that all cultures are equal, we find them clashing on the political battlefield in the following areas: civil rights, governance, and material culture

## Civil Rights

Can you be a progressive champion for civil-rights and be a multiculturalist? As an example, lets dive into Feminism. Don't some cultures treat women better than others?

For instance, does a culture that supports [clitoridectomy](#), has [arranged marriages](#), [performs honor killings](#), [supports sexism](#), practices [Sharia law](#), supports [rape-culture](#), gives [lower wages](#) to women, nurtures the [cult of domesticity](#), doesn't [allow women to drive](#), [objectifies women](#), sets up [child marriages](#), or [bars girls from going to school](#) just as good as a culture that doesn't?

The progressive Feminist answers with a resounding "NO!" To them, these backwards acts of barbarism deserve to be swept into the past because there's no room for this nonsense in the future (at least if tomorrow has any hope of being better than today).

The multiculturalist might play the role of an apologist, taking the stance that these practices and ways of life are [just as valid and equal](#) as any other way of life.

Or more likely, the multiculturalist will point out that none of the contemporary cultures on earth have eliminated all these atrocities. In fact, all the cultures have a different, but equal, combination of backwards and progressive policies.

In other words, the multiculturalist might say that culture is a like a zero-sum game. Maybe you forsake [Sharia law](#) and let women dress liberally, but then they become sexually objectified [anxiety-driven anorexics](#). Is one really better than the other? Can cultures really progress more than others?

And that's really the crux of the issue, isn't it? Furthermore, you can apply it to other civil rights issues beyond anti-Feminist cultures like [homophobic cultures](#), [racist cultures](#), etc.

Can cultures really progress beyond those around them? Are we really capable of progressing for the better? In the end, are some ways of life better than others? Are all cultures truly equal?

## Governance

Another issue that divides the progressive from the multiculturalist is the question of governance. Is one culture's method of governance better than another culture's method of governance or are they all more or less equal in worth?

The progressives would claim that some forms of government are better than others because some cultures are more progressive. On the other hand, multiculturalists claim the ways different cultures across the world govern themselves are all equally valid.

This is because if one culture's way of governance were truly better, then it would call into question why other nations should stick with their relatively inferior forms of governance.

For instance, are the [democratic cultures](#) of the world better than [dictatorial culture of North Korea](#)? Is a culture immersed with [liberal conceptions of Rights Theory](#) just as good a culture with statist undercurrents that revere their central leadership in the [likeness of a god](#)? Are cultures that are imbued with [slavery](#) and drunk with [tyrannical horror](#) just as sober-minded as a culture of [peaceful freedom](#)? Are societies that engage in [tribalist blood feuds](#), and archaic understandings of citizenship as [nothing more than an extension of genetics](#), just as good as cultures that have transcendent understandings of [civic nationalism](#)?

The progressive once again screams, "NO!"

Traditionally speaking, philosophers of progress have a history of crying out against what they saw as inferior forms of governance brought about by different cultures around the world.

For example, it is in the name of progress [Marxists spoke up against tribalism](#). In his work, Karl Marx places tribal as ground-zero, the bottom base line from which all people progress from; i.e. the most backwards form of governance.

Contemporary Marxists, like [Frances Widdowson](#), still speak out in the name of progress, against tribalism and its lingering effects within the indigenous cultures of Canada.

On the other hand, the father of contemporary multiculturalism, Will Kymlicka, opposes Widdowson. He argues that not only should the indigenous not be assimilated, but rather that the Canadian government should strengthen Indigenous cultures.



The multiculturalist might play the role of an [apologist](#), taking the stance that these practices and ways of life are [just as valid and equal](#) as any other way of life.

Or more likely, the multiculturalist will point out that none of the contemporary cultures on earth have truly eliminated [coercement](#), [tyrannical legislation](#), or fully adopted liberty. In fact, all cultures have a different, but equal, combination of backwards and progressive policies.

In other words, the multiculturalist might say that culture is like a zero-sum game. Maybe you forsake [dictatorship](#), but then your nation is [paralyzed by political squabbles](#), [half-heartedly elected goons](#), and an [impotent leadership](#). Is one better than the other? Is there really such a thing as progress in political culture?

And that's really the crux of the issue, isn't it?

Can cultures really progress beyond those around them? Are we really capable of progressing for the better? In the end, are some ways of life better than others? Are all cultures truly equal?

## Material Culture

Another issue that divides progressives and multiculturalists in the question of material culture. Material culture is the physical aspect of culture. Can the material culture of society be better than the material culture of another society?

Is a culture that uses primitive agricultural methods better than one that uses the latest form of mechanized farming? Is a culture with a sharp difference between the material wealth of the rich and the poor better than a culture where there are no rich and poor? Is a culture that uses AR-15 machine guns just as good as one that still uses bows and arrows?

Historically, progressives have claimed that the societies that used more advanced technology are the more developed and progressive. The first philosophers to systematically defend the idea of progress, Turgot and Caritat, claimed that philosophic progress and technological progress worked together.

In other words, technology like computers increase the speed information travels leading to better ideas about the world, better ideas about the world leads to better science and technology.

Overall, this cyclical process creates a progressively better world. Furthermore, one of the cornerstones of progressive thought has been the belief that the distribution of wealth in some material cultures was better than others.



For example, Marxists believe that the material culture in capitalist societies horrifyingly abusive to the poor. They reasoned that a communist culture would be superior because of its much more even distribution wealth.

But the multiculturalist calls all of this into question. They deny the idea that the material culture of one society is truly better or worse than the material culture of another society.

Does better technology really make a better culture? The multiculturalist is not convinced that atom bombs and artificial preservatives is better than bows and arrows accompanied by fresh food.

As for the distribution of wealth, capitalism can be pain, but it better than Stalinist kicking in your doors, Kulak witch hunts, and the forced redistribution of capital? Is there really such a thing as progress in material culture?

And that's really the crux of the issue, isn't it?

Can cultures really progress beyond those around them? Are we really capable of progressing for the better? In the end, are some ways of life better than others? Are all cultures truly equal? These questions modernity has yet to settle.

***The photo shows, "The Kidnapping," by Franz Roubaud, painted ca. 1880s-1900.***

