

Debunking William S. Lind & “Cultural Marxism”

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What is “Cultural Marxism?”

Anyone who has spent considerable time participating in political discussions is bound to run across the term “Cultural Marxism” at one time or another. It is a term typically used by the most extreme elements on the right, such as neo-Nazis and their fellow travelers, but in recent years it has become more prominent within mainstream conservative circles. Up to recently, the term has been little more than an ill-defined right-wing buzzword in the same league as “feminazi,” “gay agenda,” “politically correct” or “community organizer.”

That all changed on 22 July, 2011. On that tragic date in Norway, a neo-fascist terrorist, Anders Breivik, launched a killing spree that took the lives of over 70 people. Breivik has a well-established history in Europe’s far right-wing, and the term “cultural Marxism” was featured prominently in his political writings.

Now more than ever, it is essential that people understand the term “cultural Marxism,” and the way in which it is used by the right as a way to both scare and rally its base into action. In short, understanding the term cultural Marxism is a key to understanding how the right thinks, communicates, and works.

First, to understand cultural Marxism as a phrase is nearly impossible. The phrase itself is meaningless. Next time you find yourself in a discussion where your partner invokes cultural Marxism, ask them to define exactly what that means. Most people don’t even attempt to answer. Those that do give a definition that has nothing to do with Marxism. They may be totally convinced that cultural Marxism is destroying their society, to the point of obsession, yet they stammer and hesitate when asked for a coherent definition.

How can one be so obsessed with something they can’t readily explain? Why does the right even bother using this term if it is nearly impossible to define? The answer to the question lies in the Cold War. Here let us examine the use of cultural Marxism, rather than its intended meaning.

History of Right-Wing Smears

During the Cold War, opponents were smeared with terms like “commie” and “red.” Liberals were often labeled “pinkos,” pink being a lighter shade of red, the implication being that liberals were just peddling sugar-coated communist ideas. Another term, which is still often used today, is “useful idiots,” primarily in reference to liberals or radical leftists who don’t identify themselves as Marxists. The term supposedly came from Vladimir Lenin, who used it in reference to liberals and leftists in other countries who unwittingly did the work of the Bolsheviks.

Not surprisingly, the quote is in fact fake; Lenin never used the term. In any case, one thing was clear in the Cold War, which is that if you wanted to smear political opponents, you insinuated that they were communists. This wasn’t necessarily limited to left-wing targets. The John Birch Society developed a reputation for accusing Republicans and Democrats alike of being active agents of international communism, insinuating that they deliberately delivered China into the hands of Mao and Cuba to Castro, in addition to deliberately losing the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Though the term was often used to describe some rather conservative figures, it was used almost exclusively by conservatives. Communism meant bad, evil, and other.

The use of communist as a pejorative would continue well into the 1990’s, and indeed it has enjoyed a resurgence amid the ramblings of the Tea Party movement and pundits such as Glenn Beck, but more astute conservative ideologues recognized that words such as “commie” and “red” had lost a lot of potency due to the collapse of the USSR and the eastern bloc. Perhaps more problematic was the task of reconciling America’s full-scale embrace of neo-liberal economics and privatization with an allegation that the same country was teetering on the edge of Marxist socialism. How could America be charging full speed toward socialist revolution at the same time it was promoting policies such as NAFTA and GATT, deregulation, and the slashing of welfare programs? Marxist still carried a negative connotation in that era, especially due to the triumphalism expressed by liberals and conservatives alike. Yet it was clear that once idealistic liberals had fully abandoned the left, class politics, and the working class itself in favor of embracing neo-liberal capitalism, accusing them of being communists might cost one’s credibility. Enter “cultural Marxism.”

“Theoretical” Basis of the Term

Cultural Marxism, as best as can be determined, originates in the early 1990's, which also coincides with the beginning of the so-called “Culture Wars.” The term factors heavily in the writings of the original culture warrior, Pat Buchanan, but also those of William S. Lind. In fact it was Lind, one of the lesser-known culture warriors, who defined the term “cultural Marxism” and attempted to write its history. Lind provides a primer on his dreaded cultural Marxism in an article aptly named “What is Cultural Marxism?” Here is his definition:

Cultural Marxism is a branch of western Marxism, different from the Marxism-Leninism of the old Soviet Union. It is commonly known as “multiculturalism” or, less formally, Political Correctness. From its beginning, the promoters of cultural Marxism have known they could be more effective if they concealed the Marxist nature of their work, hence the use of terms such as “multiculturalism.”

The first problem with this definition is that if these cultural Marxists understood that they needed to conceal their Marxist nature, why would they use the term Marxism at all? Later on we will deal with those Lind was accusing, and we will see that they either identified themselves as more or less traditional Marxists, refuting the idea that they were concealing anything, or they at least openly claimed Marxist influence on their work, again discrediting the idea that they were attempting to hide something. There is no evidence to suggest that anyone sought to cover up Marxist ideas under the guise of multiculturalism.

It is also noteworthy that people like Lind and Buchanan, champions of “Western culture,” are in fact “multiculturalists.” They clearly believe that there is some kind of monolithic entity known as “Western culture” or “Western civilization.” While much of European culture draws from the same sources, typically classical Greece and Rome, it also draws influence from non-European sources. The nations of East Asia were heavily influenced by Chinese culture and philosophy, but only an ignorant fool would suggest that “Eastern culture” is monolithic. Then again, pointing out that “Western civilization” is actually multicultural would open one up to accusations of “cultural Marxism,” which shows how useful this term has been in the hands of right-wing culture warriors. However problematic this definition may be, it is incredible practical in that it allows one to use the negative connotations associated with Marxists, “reds,” and “commies,” without having to account for the fact that the target in question may be a proven advocate of liberal capitalism. His economics might be free market neo-liberalism, but he’s a cultural Marxist!

Let us continue with Lind’s error-ridden, and soon to become anti-Semitic, explanation of cultural Marxism.

Cultural Marxism began not in the 1960s but in 1919, immediately after World War I. Marxist theory had predicted that in the event of a big European war, the working class all over Europe would rise up to overthrow capitalism and create communism. But when war came in 1914, that did not happen. When it finally did happen in Russia in 1917, workers in other European countries did not support it. What had gone wrong?

Note that Lind does not give a reference to explain where Marxist theory made the prediction alluded to above. What did happen just prior to the war was a major split within what was at the time known as the social-democratic movement at the end of the Second International. Some social-democrats had taken a pro-war stance, whereas others, most notably Vladimir Lenin, took a principled stand against war. This had a detrimental effect on the movement in this crucial time. The second assertion is only true to a degree. The Bolshevik revolution in 1917 was followed by revolutions in Hungary and Germany, both of which had to be crushed by military force. In the case of the former, Romanian troops invaded and put down the revolution. While revolution did not break out in many countries, the activities of communists in Europe played a role in the failure of the intervention campaign of the Russian Civil War. In the United States, unions went on strike and refused to load ships with arms bound for the White Guards in Russia. Communist revolutions could be crushed in Western Europe via force of arms, but even the victorious Entente powers were unable to strangle the Bolshevik baby in its cradle.

Lind’s conspiracy theory continues:

Independently, two Marxist theorists, Antonio Gramsci in Italy and Georg Lukacs in Hungary, came to the same answer: Western culture and the Christian religion had so blinded the working class to its true, Marxist class interest that Communism was impossible in the West until both could be destroyed. In 1919, Lukacs asked, ‘Who will save us from Western civilization?’

Here Lind actually names names. It is worth noting that neither Gramsci nor Lukacs made an attempt to conceal the Marxist basis of their theory and works, and they identified themselves as Marxists. If they were trying to conceal the Marxist nature of their works, as Lind alleges in regards to his hated “cultural Marxists,” they had an

odd way of going about it. There is also nothing to suggest that they intended to conceal their ideology under the cover of something called “multiculturalism.” Feel free to search Lukacs works for the term “multiculturalism” or “multicultural”; this author was unable to find either. Having dealt with this, we see that Lind makes a claim about Gramsci and Lukacs’ answer to the question of why Europeans outside of Russia didn’t successfully overthrow their capitalist governments. The assertion begs the question, if the Christian religion so blinded the Western European proletariat to their class consciousness, why was it that class conscious workers’ movements were more active in Western Europe prior to the end of the 19th century? After all, the first worker’s revolution was the Paris Commune, not the October Revolution. Did Lind simply forget that Christianity was far more entrenched in the Russian Empire, which was not a secular state and where the Tsar was seen as a representative of God on Earth?

The quote from Lukacs is also presented in a deceptive manner. It appears as though Lukacs is lamenting the fact that those ever-pious Christians and their “Western culture” seemed impervious to Marxist class consciousness. Here is the actual quote, in context:

When I tried at this time to put my emotional attitude into conscious terms, I arrived at more or less the following formulation: the Central Powers would probably defeat Russia; this might lead to the downfall of Tsarism; I had no objection to that. There was also some probability that the West would defeat Germany; if this led to the downfall of the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs, I was once again in favour. But then the question arose: who was to save us from Western civilisation? (The prospect of final victory by the Germany of that time was to me nightmarish.)
– Preface to *The Theory of the Novel*, 1962

Several facts become immediately obvious once we see the quote in context. First, it clearly has nothing to do with class consciousness in Western Europe or the failure of other revolutions after 1917. Also Lukacs clearly makes a distinction between the very Christian Russian Empire, the German and Austro-Hungarian empires, and “the West,” which must refer to the entente powers. As a side note, some other culture warriors from the interwar period would also accuse that “West,” consisting of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, of being multicultural degenerate societies. Lastly, and more importantly on this note, the quote, if Lukacs ever actually said it out loud, was from 1914, not 1919 when the failure of other European revolutions would have been on his mind.

The next bit in Lind’s accusation against Lukacs is a bit revealing:

That same year [1919, which in fact would have been five years after the quote referenced above], when he became Deputy Commissar for Culture in the short-lived Bolshevik Bela Kun government in Hungary, one of Lukacs’s first acts was to introduce sex education into Hungary’s public schools. He knew that if he could destroy the West’s traditional sexual morals, he would have taken a giant step toward destroying Western culture itself.

This was quite an impressive feat, given that the Hungarian Soviet Republic under Bela Kun lasted from March 23rd to August 6th, 1919. Does that still seem like enough time to destroy sexual morality in the historical heart of European culture that is Hungary? Well Lukacs was also a commissar serving in the 5th division of the Hungarian Red Army. Do the math.

As for these alleged traditional sexual morals of “the West,” here are a few facts. A sort of mini-sexual revolution occurred in the 1920s, something which culture warriors would likely be quick to condemn. What they don’t realize is that prior to that revolution, prostitution was far more widespread, and young men were far more likely to have their first sexual experience with a prostitute. So while they may have been proper gentlemen to the virginal girls they were courting, they were preparing for their wedding night with the help of working girls. Given that William S. Lind is a military expert (despite having never served in the military), one would expect him to know about the prevalence of prostitution and how it goes hand in hand with the military.

The Spanish *conquistadors* often used young native girls as sex slaves in Columbus’ time, and the prospect of owning a prepubescent sex slave was a major factor in motivating some Spaniards to cross the Atlantic. Rape of slaves was common practice in the antebellum South. Even the crusading knights which so inspire the likes of right-wingers like Breivik were known to travel with a large company of prostitutes. These are all well documented facts, but people like Lind aren’t fazed by such trivial matters. Afterall, they can just accuse those who gathered them of being “cultural Marxists.” Damn that’s a useful term!

Before we continue with Lind’s idiotic screed, be warned. We’re about to enter anti-Semite territory.

In 1923, inspired in part by Lukacs, a group of German Marxists established a think tank at Frankfurt

University in Germany called the Institute for Social Research. This institute, soon known simply as the Frankfurt School, would become the creator of cultural Marxism.

Note that the founders of the Frankfurt schools never called their theories “cultural Marxism.”

To translate Marxism from economic into cultural terms, the members of the Frankfurt School – – Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Wilhelm Reich, Eric Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, to name the most important – – had to contradict Marx on several points. They argued that culture was not just part of what Marx had called society’s “superstructure,” but an independent and very important variable. They also said that the working class would not lead a Marxist revolution, because it was becoming part of the middle class, the hated bourgeoisie.

Yes, all the names mentioned there were of Jewish descent, some assimilated, some not so much. Was the reader not warned? Anyway, let us make a very important observation about the Frankfurt school. They didn’t just contradict Marx on a few trivial points regarding culture and the superstructure (the body of laws and ideas which arises from a particular mode of production, e.g. capitalism). Claiming that the working class would not lead a socialist revolution is a pretty serious rejection of Marxism. Of course, proponents of the “cultural Marxist” idea aren’t really concerned with what Marxism has to say. It should be noted here that Marx himself acknowledged that under capitalism there can be a rise in real wages which can deaden the class consciousness of the proletariat. This is why he wrote that the minimum wages necessary to “reproduce the worker,” in short to get him or her to come into work the next day, vary depending on the standards of living in a particular country. It is also important to note that by the time capitalism had become dominant in the 19th century, the bourgeois were no longer the “middle class.”

Who would (lead a Marxist revolution)? In the 1950s, Marcuse answered the question: a coalition of blacks, students, feminist women and homosexuals.

Be honest, it’s nice that Lind was so willing to provide us a list of people he hates. What he doesn’t provide is a source to this assertion. Marx’s theory that the working class would lead the revolution was to hold true for any capitalist country; is Lind alleging that Marcuse was speaking only of America? Marcuse was clearly a follower of Marx’s ideas, but his own ideas differed from traditional Marxism so much as to be something other than Marxism. There comes a point when one must ask, “If cultural Marxism contains so much that is contradictory to Marxism, can it still contain the word Marxism at all?” Of course the answer is an emphatic yes, if only because some other name wouldn’t carry the stigma that Marxism has amongst conservatives.

Fatefully for America, when Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, the Frankfurt School fled – – and reestablished itself in New York City. There, it shifted its focus from destroying traditional Western culture in Germany to destroying it in the United States.

Read those sentences very carefully. Hitler’s coming to power drove out his country’s evil Jewish professors, causing them to emigrate to America. Perhaps Lind, like many of his ideological fellow travelers, would prefer that they had stayed in Germany. In any case he alleges that they are actively seeking to destroy Germany, as Hitler would have agreed, and that they set about trying to destroy Western culture in the United States. Apparently Lind believes that both Germany and the United States share one common Western culture; see, he is a multiculturalist!

To do so, it invented “Critical Theory.” What is the theory? To criticize every traditional institution, starting with the family, brutally and unremittingly, in order to bring them down. It wrote a series of “studies in prejudice,” which said that anyone who believes in traditional Western culture is prejudiced, a “racist” or “sexist” or “fascist” – – and is also mentally ill.

The most important response to this passage is that no example is given to substantiate any of these claims. It is true that critical theory criticized institutions such as the family, but then again so did Marx and Engels. Why doesn’t Lind attack Engels’ *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*? Perhaps because he never read it, or possibly never even heard of it? Lind also once again refers to “traditional Western culture,” yet the nature of families throughout European society and history varied greatly. As Stephanie Coontz points out in her book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, most Americans’ understanding of the traditional family is not traditional at all, rather it tends to borrow bits and pieces from different historical eras. Then again, she’s probably a cultural Marxist.

Most importantly, the Frankfurt School crossed Marx with Freud, taking from psychology the technique of psychological conditioning. Today, when the cultural Marxists want to do something like “normalize” homosexuality, they do not argue the point philosophically. They just beam television

show after television show into every American home where the only normal-seeming white male is a homosexual (the Frankfurt School's key people spent the war years in Hollywood).

That the Frankfurt school attempted to meld the ideas of Marx to those of Freud is a fact, and the results of this combination are among the reasons why many Marxists reject the Frankfurt school. The second part of this passage is simply bizarre. First of all, the "normality" of homosexuality has been argued not philosophically, but scientifically, by trained medical professionals. Next, Lind here alleges a direct connection between the cultural Marxist intellectuals and the entertainment industry, as though the two work in concert. Of course the thing about the last sentence which is no doubt literally screaming at the reader is the assertion that numerous television shows portray the "only normal-seeming white male" as a homosexual. Please, count up the number of television shows and films which do this. One would think that if this practice were as widespread as Lind alleges, films like *Brokeback Mountain* wouldn't have drawn so much attention. Let's move on to Lind's final paragraph.

The next conservatism should unmask multiculturalism and Political Correctness and tell the American people what they really are: cultural Marxism. Its goal remains what Lukacs and Gramsci set in 1919: destroying Western culture and the Christian religion. It has already made vast strides toward that goal. But if the average American found out that Political Correctness is a form of Marxism, different from the Marxism of the Soviet Union but Marxism nonetheless, it would be in trouble. The next conservatism needs to reveal the man behind the curtain — old Karl Marx himself.

Here Lind has yet to provide clear definitions for multiculturalism and political correctness, despite using the latter as proper noun as though it were an actual ideology. In reality, the ideology of the Frankfurt school actually diverges so far from Marxism that it becomes something almost anti-Marxist. One could make the argument that the influence of the Frankfurt school ideas on the so-called New Left actually did far more harm to Marxism and class consciousness than good, and the ultimate result of this influence was to sever the left from class based consciousness and materialism, rendering it fractured and ineffective. In that sense, Lind should be praising the Frankfurt school, not condemning it. That, however, is a matter for another article.

In his conclusion, Lind confirms what the author has asserted previously, to wit, that conservatives use the term cultural Marxism because they wish to preserve the pejorative value of "Marxist," and in particular this term helps them avoid difficult questions as to how leaders and individuals who clearly embrace capitalism or neo-liberal economics could possibly be Marxist. Lind's article is instructive as it is one of the few times we see an honest attempt by a conservative intellectual to actually define and explain cultural Marxism. Yet in his attempt to "unmask" it, he only unmasks himself as an ignorant, a bigot, a liar and a hack.

More often than not, the label "cultural Marxism" will be thrown around by conservative rank in file, as well as their more extreme neo-fascist associates. Most of the time, it is a source of amusement when they are asked to explain what the phrase actually means. But as Lind's article proves, this word has a history, and it originated not within the halls of the Frankfurt school but in the minds of extreme right-wing ideologues who wish to provoke an automatic negative response toward concepts like equality, justice and accountability. They do this through the use of meaningless words and phrases such as multiculturalism, political correctness, and cultural Marxism. Next time you encounter someone spouting off about "cultural Marxism," unless you want to amuse yourself by asking them for a definition and watching them squirm, simply refer to the following definition.

Cultural Marxism n. 1. A meaningless phrase used to signal that the writer or speaker has no idea what he or she is talking about.

Sources

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