

# A Psychological Left Turn

by [Lee Douglass](#) (April 2021)



*Right and Left*, Winslow Homer, 1909

**A tug-of-war for the** reins of culture has left many people feeling the need to take sides resulting in partisan tribalism. On each partisan side there have always been extremists, however, it seems that some extremist voices are now gaining in popularity and in normalcy. In the field of psychology, much research has been done assessing the personality traits of the extreme right, or right-wing authoritarianism. Recently, developing research is now assessing left-wing extremism and authoritarianism revealing that there has been a psychological shift on the left from liberalism to an extreme illiberal left-wing ideology which now leads the charge for cultural change on the left. The result of this shift is a manifestation in a growing illiberal left-wing extremism characterized by authoritarianism, a

change in the use of rhetoric, and in the psychological framework of control, from an internal locus of control to now an external locus of control. This shift is not small or trivial. The outcome of such a shift is resulting in a change in culture, from a dignity culture to a victim culture, which further reinforces authoritarian and illiberal traits.

## **Authoritarianism**

[Research](#) has now been done on the personality trait of authoritarianism which was once considered a right-wing trait because usually people who have a tendency toward authoritarian personalities score higher in conscientiousness (a Big Five personality trait more common on the right) and lower in openness (a Big Five personality trait more common on the left). A general definition of an authoritarian is one who advocates for the enforcement and strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom. It is easy to see how extremists on the right fit this category. However, [a recent study](#) by Jordan Moss and Peter J. O'Connor shows that there are authoritarians on the left and right, both being very similar, but the defining difference is the political side taken by the individual. In general, authoritarians typically have tight circles and do not expose themselves to contrary opinions. They feel their views are commonly held and they feel they are the moral majority, thus making them prone to higher amounts of prejudicial behaviors towards others who are not in their in-group. Other authoritarian traits are aggressiveness, and a strict adherence to the social norms they feel should exist. Furthermore, authoritarians do not value dissent which results in censorship, devaluing free speech, and the feeling that dissent is not legitimate, as contrary voices are not taken seriously. As Moss and O'Connor state, there are "political attitudes" or sides, in which authoritarianism manifests. I argue that now there are two of these sides that we now see in society: white identitarianism on the right, and the extreme left who call themselves the

woke, which is my focus. The dark triad traits can be found among the woke more than other groups on the left and now a split in values, rhetoric, and mental frameworks of control can be observed between conventional liberals and the woke.

## **The Split**

To explain the split of leftism, researchers (Moss and O'Connor) have found two groups on the left: the politically correct liberal (PCL) and the politically correct authoritarian (PCA). The PCL group is motivated by compassion, has a desire to avoid offense, and wants to help disadvantaged groups by removing social and emotional barriers. They value diversity, equality, and view inequality as a product of culture. The PCA group is also motivated by compassion, but contrary to the PCLs, they desire physical and psychological safety. Therefore, since ideas can be harmful, they tend to use aggression and force to enact change when PCLs will not. PCAs are more focused on biological differences, have no problem with censorship (since silence is violence and free speech can be problematic), and they expect harsh penalties for transgressors (de-platforming and cancel culture), thus exemplifying the authoritarian traits. Their beliefs are quasi-religious in that their beliefs cannot be reasoned with. They will not hear out contrarian views and will not consider that they may be wrong because they feel they are the moral majority. Furthermore, PCAs have high threat aversions to social differences and contrary ideas, and they value order for their ideas to be implemented, just as authoritarians on the right.

## **The Dark Triad**

Researchers have reported that other commonalities among those with authoritarian personalities score higher on what are called the Dark Triad (DT) traits plus the trait of entitlement. The DT traits are psychopathy (lack of empathy), narcissism (admiration for one's self and opinions), and

Machiavellianism (manipulation and/or exploitation). The strongest DT traits for PCAs are psychopathy and entitlement according to the above research. Researchers also point out that the DT traits may not be personality traits, but rather dispositions that people adopt to meet a political end.

## **Woke and Authoritarianism**

On the left there is a growing assemblage of like-minded people and groups who are very outspoken and to reach their agenda they reject many tenets of liberalism. This group calls itself the "woke" and are much more extreme than traditional liberals. The woke fit the PCA description well. Woke people start off as liberals, and when introduced to critical theory (CT) of any sort, including but not limited to critical race theory (CRT), they will believe that it is necessary to be open minded, exemplifying the Big Five trait of openness. At first CRT seems to be rational and a compassionate belief system which explains disparities in society without blaming any disadvantaged person or group. The mental interrogation goes something like this: "Would a good person believe this?" "Yes." "Am I a good person?" "Yes." Therefore, "I should believe this." The liberal is then introduced to woke literature and speakers who explain and dispense the rules of the belief, leading the liberal down a path of openness and "compassion." To reach progress and to unburden the oppressed, conformity is the highest value and this is where the liberal radicalizes and turns authoritarian.

Extreme left-wing belief systems, such as CT, like extreme right-wing belief systems, rely on conformity based in absolutism. Without total conformity, ideas such as the belief that society is inherently racist and therefore its systems must be replaced, will not come to pass. Racial quotas will not be implemented and reparations will never happen because mass conformity is required. One central claim in CRT is that there is no such thing as "not racist." There are only "racists" (oppressors) and "antiracists" (the oppressed and

those fighting for the oppressed). A classic authoritarian tactic is to oversimplify and split society into groups, with one side being good and virtuous, and the other side having the label associated with evil, danger, and/or oppression. This type of dualistic thinking and the use of false binary choices forces people to take a side and conform if they do not wish to be labeled with an undesired group identity such as "oppressor." Whenever one is forced to choose between only two sides with one side cited and charged with negative social stigmas, including harm, by the group forcing the choice, authoritarianism and absolutism is being imposed on that person. Authoritarian governments attain control using this method of conformity. It gives followers the feeling of having virtue and higher character than those with whom they disagree, giving social permission to denounce the oppressors by any means, therefore causing fear, which is the control factor.

If the end goal is conformity, the tactic used will logically lead to authoritarianism because the only way to reach conformity is to establish a belief as absolute and to accomplish this, fear and in-group/out-group coalitions need to be created so people make the right "choice." The threats and the fear are not overt but rather it is said that if one is to conform, they are doing so because of their "compassion" for others, yet if one refuses to comply, they will be punished and marked with the modern scarlet letter— racists or phobic.

Since wokeism and its disciples will not tolerate being questioned, the belief system is an absolutist belief system, which cements it, or any other philosophy which does likewise, as authoritarian. Moreover, authoritarian belief systems search for certainty. Liberal belief systems search for error and search for the flaws in logic, just as the discipline of liberal science does. One result of wokeism is that PCAs look for differences in people and bad intent

throughout society forcing the woke to scavenge the fibers of our social fabric for microaggressions which is unraveling our society. Conversely, liberals strive to add to the social fabric by finding the commonalities to make society and the fabric within stronger. Such was MLK's philosophy. PCAs, or the woke, value conformity in one's belief, spoken beliefs, and ideology. Traditional liberals, or PCLs, on the other hand value a common goal or a common identity. They have always valued fairness and liberty for all which comes from the shared identity that we are all human and have no more value than the next person. Wokeism rejects this. One's value and status is found in one's oppression and their placement on the intersectional display case. When the woke or PCAs label and cancel others, they are trying to have the final say and are trying to establish personal authority over others.

The irony is that the woke see themselves as so radically compassionate and open that they force their beliefs on others and this is where the DT traits come into play. The woke feel that the oppressed are entitled to beliefs and benefits of which other groups may not take part. Therefore, the idea emerges that people of color cannot be racist, only men can be sexist, and the woke and oppressed deserve the right to act however they desire to the "oppressors," and to those with whom they disagree. In his bestselling book *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X Kendi writes that we must fight discrimination with discrimination. Apparently, we must do to one group what we desire to stop in another group. This idea is supported as being compassionate and if one disagrees, they are racist or are supporting racist structures. Within these beliefs is an element of psychopathy and entitlement.

Jonathan Rauch points out in his book *Kindly Inquisitors* that authoritarians need to have the final say, insisting they are on the right side of history, and they need to have personal authority. Because the woke think they are on the right side of history, they think they are entitled to

have the final say giving them personal authority over others. To think that one has the right to silence another's free speech and de-platform those with whom they disagree, to cancel people and ruin their careers and reputations, and to actively do to one group that which is said to be evil to another group, is a form of psychopathy and entitlement and is done all in the name of openness and compassion which also leads to the conclusion that they have personal authority.

Psychopathy manifests in the acts of censorship, having high penalties for transgressors, and having a high threat level for societal differences (in this case the differences are in ideology and beliefs). Many times, woke people are not open to being challenged and will not debate without resorting to name calling or labeling (using the label of racist and phobic). Such degradation of others comes from a feeling that one's superior beliefs and extreme compassion entitle them to treat others in such bad fashion. Montaigne famously said, "Either we judge absolutely, or we absolutely cannot." To not judge in an absolutist way has always been a value of liberalism, however, PCAs treat this value as a threat. The result is that truth no longer is emergent and cannot be found out through investigation and by challenging bad ideas with better ideas, rather "truth" is now created through the silencing of dissent.

Not all liberals agree with this, which is why there is a distinction between PCLs and PCAs. It seems as though the PCLs ran left-wing politics until recently, with the emergence of PCAs. At first no one made a distinction. But as the PCAs became more radicalized, they also became more aggressive and louder. Traditional liberals, or PCLs, were on the same side as the PCAs and they had the same goals (equality) and motivation (compassion). However, the PCAs seemed more determined and therefore efficient so the PCLs endorsed individuals who have authoritarian personalities and social styles, stood by, and gave power to the PCAs.

Now the PCAs run much of the media, Hollywood, education, and are forming a growing coalition in left-wing politics. For this reason, people view the left as changing when in fact there are two factions and one is being left unchallenged by liberals. If traditional liberals or PCLs truly believe in the liberal philosophy, they must challenge the authoritarians when PCAs flex their muscles in an authoritarian fashion. Otherwise liberals will be grouped with the authoritarian-left which will delegitimize them in general to the conservatives and moderates. The values of the PCLs will become obsolete, and eventually fellow liberals who do not fully agree with the PCAs will be labeled as the enemy by the PCAs. Because this is the pattern of authoritarian movements, liberals will therefore find themselves self-censoring and conforming.

### **Branches of Rhetoric**

The rhetoric of liberals is also changing with the emergence of the woke. According to Aristotle, there are three branches to rhetoric. There is deliberative rhetoric (the call to take action which is future oriented), judicial rhetoric (dealing with justice, charges of accusation, and is oriented in the past), and epideictic (praise or blame and is oriented in the present). Traditional liberals and PCLs place high value on deliberative rhetoric and how ideas and behaviors will affect the future, thus the label "progressive liberal."

Past injustices were noted and denounced but the past was used as a starting point for future change, not as something to obsess over and use as cudgel. MLK's speeches were oriented towards the future, what the future could be like, and he proclaimed what we must do to have a better future. This was a progressive view of life. Now, the woke are more oriented toward judicial rhetoric by obsessing over and making accusations about the past.

Instead of looking to the future, the woke are mired



in the past of wrongdoing, they point it out, and bequeath shame, but have no prescription for the future. The New York Times' *The 1619 Project* is a good example. The project exists to change our historical narrative. According to the project, society is oppressive and racist against minorities which started with slavery in 1619. But unlike liberals, the regressive left has no plan of action as to how an oppressed person should live, navigate through this oppression, or what the future should look like. The woke points to the past, issues and trumpets shame, and cancels in the name of compassion. That is it. Canceling books and historical figures have become a sport and the starting line rejects historical context and inconvenient facts and details. Milan Kundera once said:

*Man proceeds in the fog. But when he looks back to judge people of the past, he sees no fog on their path. From his present, which was their far away future, their path looks perfectly clear to him, good visibility all the way. Looking back, he sees the path, he sees the people proceeding, he sees their mistakes, but not the fog.*

The idea of the fog requires intellectual humility. Because the woke think they are on the right side of history, because they think they are the moral majority, and because of their entitlement, the fog is something the woke will never consider and this is evident by the harsh social judgments of others past and present, and through the act of canceling. Pointing out injustice is not new for liberals, but liberals have always had a vision and a plan of action for the future.

MLK's vision, embraced by liberals and progressives, had a clear end game or goal. When woke people march or kneel for the anthem, to what end? What is the desired goal? How can we measure progress? When do the woke know they have achieved their goal? How can one measure how much of the goal has been achieved thus far? Deliberative rhetoric is absent in discussions with the woke. Liberals would do well to orient

their conversations to the future once more so that an obtainable goal can be exhibited. Change is cultivated when others sympathize with such a laudable goal, but if there is no goal, the epistemology is a path with no end and who wants to travel such paths?

## **A Change in Control**

Although liberals have always sought societal change, they have believed that to achieve changes in society one must appeal to the individual. The locus of control (the way in which people believe they have control in their lives) through which change occurs for liberals is through the individual or through an internal locus of control. For the regressive left or woke, the point of change is through an external locus of control. Instead of thinking destiny can be achieved through the self or by changing society through individual change, wokeism posits that external factors, or society and its systems, need to change. Therefore, an external locus of control is assumed. This assumption, when played out, inherently leads to DT dispositions and the formation of societal factions which tend to become at odds with one another leading to an anti-liberal belief in the self and tribalism. The self is not examined, character is less valued, and behavior is not principled (if to change society one does not need to change oneself).

Because of this focus on an external locus of control, only society is examined, creating a knee-jerk reaction to tear things down, or in woke speak "dismantle structures," because systems are the problem. It is much easier to tear down a structure, statues, burn, riot, adopt DT dispositions, post on social media, or attempt to discredit systems than it is to appeal to people's humanity, one-by-one, through a disposition of compassion and love.

The woke wants to force change and dismantle structures, which is a top-down solution. The liberal

tradition, including MLK's beliefs, used bottom-up solutions by appealing to the individual which is a deep and personal change. This type of change is more effective and more positive because the change that occurs changes a person profoundly from their beliefs and behaviors to their biases, instead of at the surface level of verbal agreements and head nodding.

### **The Outcome: Dignity Culture vs Victim Culture**

The result of the changing left is that culture is also changing. There are different types of cultures such as a dignity culture, a victim culture, an honor culture, etc. The society within the United States, built on liberalism, has always valued a dignity culture whereby people have taken pride in not relying on third parties to settle disputes and conflict. Handling conflict with high character and "being the bigger person" has been valued and one could gain status in the culture for this attitude. Revered were those who could remain respectful, keep their dignity without name-calling in a dispute, were charitable, and could engage with others in good faith. This is the dignity culture that liberalism values.

[Researchers](#) point out that now a new culture is emerging: a victim culture. Victim culture is sensitive to slights and insults like other cultures but it is the response to slights that is different. In a victim culture, offenses are made public because the severity of victimhood is where one finds status and support. Therefore, dramatizing personal suffering is virtuous, and appealing to authority to settle or punish offenders is lauded and encouraged. Within the victim culture, aggressiveness and psychopathy manifest in otherwise good people as the need to shame, name call, and punish arise to achieve status and to signal in-group loyalty to the belief and cause. This is done in order to help define one's worth and value, all while pursuing compassion.

Virtue is bestowed to those who are oppressed or fighting for the oppressed and is why a victim culture is embraced by PCAs or the woke. All one must do to become moral and see one's self as virtuous is agree with the woke ideology. The difficult task of restraint, character, or of treating all people with respect, which is what liberals have always valued, is no longer a value of the regressive left (thus the label "regressive left"). All that is valued is conformity, the purification of society, and agreement which is an authoritarian value.

A victim culture is not a positive culture to embrace. [In a study](#), the consistent perception of one's self as a victim, or The Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood (TIV), can lead to feelings of moral superiority, the desire for revenge, entitlement, negative interpretations of others' motives, perceived offense, and a lack of trust or empathy. These are also traits of the DT which can explain the regressing dispositions of liberal individuals by adapting a PCA attitude. Ironically a victim culture is the result of the PCA values and a victim culture reinforces PCA values making the cause and effect circular. These traits can emerge in good people who are open to new ideas and increasingly get more radical in their compassion for others.

## **Going Forward**

The fathers and mothers of liberalism had much wisdom and sacrificed their reputations and lives so as to be judged by their character. They built something on which society could grow for the better. To repair or to improve is not the goal of CT or wokeism. CT's goal is to problematize, find offense, and to be critical. Nothing more. If one looks to CT to improve society, CT will fail you because it provides no framework from which to build anything. CT can cause one to become cynical, where personal growth, gratitude, and understanding become moot. Seek a philosophy that promotes growth. Grow in wisdom by observing. Expose yourself and

challenge yourself to encounter and entertain new and old ideas. Do not conform to a narrow way of thinking and do not assume you have the world figured out. To do so is narcissistic. To become absolutist in your knowledge and ideas suffocates curiosity, inquiry, and understanding. The world can only become better when we understand one another. Curiosity and understanding will help you find yourself, then commit to changing others from within. A builder of this sort builds something that lasts over time as the lessons you model are handed down through the generations.

Stand up to cancel culture. If you do not agree, say so, and do not allow your voice to be controlled and conformed through silence and fear. Speak up and challenge authoritarian ideas, whether you do it verbally, with a pen, signed, or anonymously, but say something. You may in fact agree with some woke ideas, but when you see the authoritarian tactics, if you value free thought, challenge the method by which your shared ideas are being forced on others. Do not allow your party or your belief system to alter into an unrecognizable ideology. If you do, eventually your tribe will turn on you as it has with so many already. You will be labeled, censored, or maybe canceled and you will wish for the days of true liberalism to return. You will regret not doing more when you had the chance. Turn inward to find strength, find your internal locus of control, and there you will find the courage for the needed change you seek.

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