



Episode 352 – Ostrowski on Progressivism: The Idea Destroying America

Guest: James Ostrowski

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WOODS: This is one of these books that you hear the title, and you feel like you've got to go out and buy it. I think that's been the case with a lot of people. *Progressivism: A Primer on the Idea Destroying America*.

Let me start off playing devil's advocate here. I wonder if it's not statism that's destroying America rather than progressivism per se. The reason I say that is I thought that maybe a silver lining that could come out of two terms of Barack Obama would be the education of the conservative public, that maybe they would come out with a renewed interest in federalism or a limited government or Austrian economics or the Federal Reserve, or in other words, issues that actually mean something, or they might even learn something about the folly of overseas intervention, that it's just as stupid as domestic intervention. Instead, when I look at my Facebook feed—and apparently, I must have added a lot of people indiscriminately years ago—what I see is people whose view of the world is: Obama is a Muslim. Obama hates America. Obama wants to burn the flag, and he's a terrible guy. And that's what they have intellectually to show for two terms of Barack Obama. They have not learned anything about statism or anything, and half of them want to use the state for 27 other things. Why isn't it statism rather than progressivism that's the problem?

OSTROWSKI: Well, I think they are similar. I think progressivism is a subspecies of statism, but I think—I think words are really important. I spend a lot of time in the book trying to focus on what words mean, and I don't know if that's going to be successful or not, but I think progressivism is out there, and I think it has historical roots that do connect the current era with the formal, capital P—Progressive Era. We've got to call it something. If you don't have a name for your adversary, it's hard to defeat that adversary, and I just think that progressivism is a term that's more likely to catch on. I think it's already catching on, not just because of my book, but really over the past few years I think people are using the word progressive more. Murray got the start 30 years ago by talking about it. So I think it's out there, and I think we should just try to use that word to describe this thing we're up against. More than statism, I think it's more of maybe an academic term.

WOODS: All right, so then if we want to be concerned about definitions, go ahead and tell us what progressivism is and then maybe where it comes from—what the origins of it are.

OSTROWSKI: Well, it's not a super-complicated concept, but I think you start out with this knee-jerk reaction of the average person to any particular problem that comes up that there's a government solution, and what I try to do in the book is I come up with an eight-part test, and I really pick that simple mindset apart and try to figure out all the beliefs and sub-propositions it entails. I think they are really interesting because many of these elements or implications of that really simple idea. Progressivists themselves are probably not really aware of it, but the basic concept is this knee-jerk reaction that the government can solve any problem that comes up, but then you get into, well, as opposed to what? And that's why there's a lengthy discussion in the book that progressivism is really a reaction to classical liberalism—the view of limited government and free markets.

So in order to understand progressivism, you have to understand classical liberalism, and I spend a number of pages going back to about 1650 with the help of Murray Rothbard, and Ralph Raico and other great libertarian historians and start out with that because I think that progressivism is superimposed on top of that, and certainly the small-p progressivism that we're talking about now does have its roots in the formal Progressive Era, and I think that you have to go back to that Progressive Era and understand what was happening at that time to understand where we are now, if that makes sense. But I think to get maybe a little ahead of myself, there is a chapter in the book on the origins of progressivism, which is probably a tough task for one chapter in a primer to really deal with, but what I am fundamentally trying to get at in the book is not necessarily the historical origins, but the actual—what I am trying to capture is the mindset of the typical American today towards government, and it's—they probably may not have heard of Rousseau or post-millennial pietism. So in the book I do talk about the origins to some extent, but I am also trying to get into the psychology of why people have this political belief.

WOODS: Where do you think indeed it comes from? I think it comes in large part not, let's say, the people who founded it or who really are the pioneers of thought in it, but for the general public I think it just comes from a reflex that is the result of years and years of indoctrination. If you're being told that this institution has given free or inexpensive medical care to millions of people, has saved the elderly from destitution, has cleaned up the air and the water, has leveled the economic playing field—you just go down the list. Why wouldn't people be progressives?

OSTROWSKI: I absolutely agree with that, and one of the points I make in the book is that progressivism is seeped into our subconscious, and even so-called conservatives I think are in many ways progressive. I think the Republican Party is in many ways

progressive, and this ideology has been around so long, and as you say, we learn about it in school. I went to a private school, a good private high school, but I learned a progressive view of history and economics from the textbooks. It's been around so long that we hardly give it a second thought, and that's one of the reasons I wrote the book, is to try to wake people up and get them just to realize that this is an ideology they have absorbed. Their parents believed it. The Progressive Era came around when my great grandparents were living, and we're born into it, and it's hard to get out of it in spite of the best efforts of the pioneers of the libertarian movement: Murray Rothbard, and Lew Rockwell, and Ron Paul, and others. We're still in the infancy of explaining what this ideology is and how to get out of it.

WOODS: How do you think conservatives have failed in their fight against progressivism? I see conservatives being self-congratulatory all the time about great victories, and they are nostalgic about Ronald Reagan. It just shows that they are not serious. They really are not. And I say this as a former conservative myself. I find so many of them to be juvenile in their outlook. They really think that they've won victories. They have won nothing in the past 100 years. Why have they won nothing?

OSTROWSKI: They have won absolutely nothing, and by the way, according to Kindle, I'm 20% through your recent book, and congratulations on it.

WOODS: Thank you.

OSTROWSKI: And there are some great conservative thinkers: Nisbet, and Kirk and so on. But what I am looking at in a primer format, I am just sort of looking at conservatism as it's understood by the media and the public and conservatives themselves, and I go back to Barry Goldwater in 1964 comes on the stage, and I simply point out that I go through administration after administration, policy after policy, and just point out that, look, you people have not been able to roll back the progressive state. You haven't repealed a single major progressive program that I am aware of. And then I go through maybe some of the flaws of conservatism in quoting Hayek and Mises, and I think words are important. It's good to have a word that has a clear meaning, and unfortunately, I don't think conservative does, and if you don't really know what it means and people are always talking about the numerous factions of conservatism. Well, if you don't know what it means, and it's not really clear, how can you actually accomplish anything? But there's a whole chapter on that, and people will find that really interesting, but that's the main problem with conservatism is it's fuzzy, and if you have—progressivism is a nice, clean clear, utopian, very appealing concept, and you can't fight that with a mish mash.

WOODS: No, exactly right. And, of course, people who are longtime listeners of this program will know that I have many friends, many good friends who are conservative. So I don't mean that as a blanket insult of everybody. I am talking about the people I see

in my Facebook feed who I take to be representative of the general run of conservatives, and it's like they have been defeated 8,000 times over, and they feel like, you know, they are actually holding steady, and yeah, we've had this one bad president we're going to have try and come back from because he's a Muslim.

OSTROWSKI: I was just talking with a friend of mine who is active in the Republican Party, and we were chatting at a basketball game, of course, about politics, and I said, you know, Mike, why do Republicans always back down? And I think it's because they have no really core beliefs. I think that really in many ways Republicans have accepted and conservatives have accepted the progressive state that's been built up by Wilson, FDR, LBJ and so on. So really all it's about is winning the next election and how they do that, well, as I explained in my book, it's the politics of personal destruction. They want you to focus on Obama allegedly being a Muslim or Obama golfing too much or Michelle takes too many vacations, and all the while, you're not thinking about the fact that the Republicans have not rolled back a single progressive program in 100 years.

WOODS: I know it's not fair, it's sort of dirty pool to bring up Mitt Romney because I realize he is not a conservative, but it is typical, unfortunately, of some conservatives that he had no overarching economic philosophy. He was vaguely for the free market, but then he came out for an increase in the minimum wage, which means that he thinks that labor markets don't really make sense. They need to be violently interfered with. And then he said that if we cut the budget too much, we face depression. So he basically thinks we need to have a fairly substantial amount of government spending. So in other words, he is where the progressives were 30 years earlier.

OSTROWSKI: Yeah, I talk a little bit about the book, and I wish I could do more of this, but I really think it's the virus of pragmatism, this notion that there really isn't any fixed truth, and you have to make it up as you go along. That's the philosophical bodyguard of progressivism in its battle with the old tradition of liberalism, which did and does believe that there are truths concerning natural rights, there is truth to be discovered in the realm of economics. And in response to that, these people say, well, you know, that's your opinion. They are pragmatist, and therefore, we can pretty much do whatever we want.

WOODS: Well, let's suppose you're talking to a progressive. It's such an uphill battle. I am glad when former progressives say that something I did changed their minds or something, but I am not aiming there, because I don't think that's where my specialization lies. I think I am better at reaching conservatives. I feel like with conservatives, I have an entry point, because they supposedly believe in limited government, and then I can show how they are not acting that way. Whereas with progressives I just find it so tricky to latch onto anything. And not only that, I have got to overcome a tremendous prejudice about the favorable role that government can play in

people's lives. How do you go about this? Surely you must have conversations with progressives. You wrote a book on it. How do you approach it?

OSTROWSKI: Well, in many ways, Tom, I have had these conversations ever since I got in the movement. I was about 20, and I was a sophomore in college, and many of my conversations have not been successful, but they gave me the fuel and the inspiration to write the book. And I guess the way that I want to deal with it is I want to have people obviously read the book and maybe figure out that, yes, I am a progressive, and I guess these eight elements, some of which make no sense, such as progressives have no theory of costs, and then explain—use, I think, 13 examples of progressive programs—Social Security. I tried to take the big ones—War on Drugs, the drug regulation, and just show how these elements do explain the actual failures of these policies.

But I think overall I guess you could say my view is that progressivism is a false attempt to get control over one's life and, however, if you give it really a modicum of thought, you realize that a typical progressive doesn't have control over their life. In fact, they are the ones controlled by this gigantic and ever-growing colossus that progressivism has created.

WOODS: All right, how about this? How about this objection? Of course, the progressives in saying, look, we just want to help people, that sounds pretty good. The word progressive has favorable connotations, and what they are saying to somebody who isn't a student of political science sounds plausible enough. We've got to help vulnerable people. We have to level the playing field. We have to provide equality. Whatever it is, that all sounds plausible, and it's true that, as you say, the conservatives are giving this muddled response. If people as diverse as Pat Buchanan and Bill Kristol and Colin Powell can all be considered conservatives, the term does not mean anything. And you're right: the conservatives basically wind up just being me-tooers. Well, yeah, I also favor government spending on that program, but a little bit less. What kind of inspiration is that? But on the other hand, here's my objection. What if you did present to the public a really consistent, anti-progressive ideology? I bet you 90% of the public would reject it indignantly.

OSTROWSKI: I think they would, and I actually use the term—the figure 90%. I am thrilled that I think the liberty movement has grown to perhaps 10% of the population, if you look at Ron Paul's vote in the last election. But I really think that we have to be realistic and realize that if you look at polling figures on Social Security—any number of other issues—minimum wage—you will find the vast majority of Americans do take the progressive position. So the notion that I think the typical Republican or conservative thinks: we're going to go out and get a good candidate and win the next election. I don't think so. I think you're going to have to lose a few elections and try to defend a position that is difference from progressivism and explain why progressivism has failed. But they are not willing to lose an election. Murray used to call them right-wing opportunists.

They are very focused on the now, but how many elections have the Republicans won in the last 50 years? But nothing has ever changed. Nothing was rolled back with Ronald Reagan. I know you talk about him in your book, and Murray did as well. In fact, I had Murray at Brooklyn Law School in 1982 during the Reagan Administration. All the liberals were kind of shocked because they thought libertarians were extreme right-wing.

But we do have to focus on changing the mindset. In the book I take dead aim at an issue that I know is near and dear to your heart, and you're working on, which is getting people out of the government schools, the indoctrination centers, and I know you're working hard on alternative curriculum for such efforts.

WOODS: It's true. And, of course, that's one of the key issues in terms of changing things for the future: if you have a good, alternative curriculum that's rigorous and that presents points of view that are suppressed. It's not that they just don't get enough time in the government schools. They are suppressed altogether. This is one of the best things we can do.

I wonder about being able to educate the public through the political system. Of course, Ron Paul did a tremendous job with that, but by and large, the political arena is a terrible place to educate people because we all know from public choice incentives and everything else: people don't vote on the basis of sitting down and rationally evaluating things. They look at the colors on the signs. They listen to the slogans, who looks presidential. That seems fairly hopeless, but if you can educate from the beginning so that people's instincts are in favor of liberty, and they don't need to be badgered about it, well, maybe that might have some effect.

OSTROWSKI: Well, I agree, and as I point out in the book, even if you're trying to run an educational campaign, the media is 95% progressive, and they will always sort of tilt things away or make you sound like a kook or whatever, so I really—and I am a political consultant. I have actually been paid by a number of candidates. But I am very pessimistic about the chances of using electoral politics to advance our movement. I wouldn't exclude the possibility. I am a pragmatist, oddly enough, on strategy and tactics, but I really think we have to look at direct action and obviously education I think is the most important thing and just getting, you know, I wrote the prior book about government schools are bad for your kids, and I think we need to convince people to pull their kids out. We need to win the victory one family at a time and either use a private school, as we do in our family, or homeschool, and that is the number one battle. But as long as people are—politics is fun. It's entertaining. You've been involved in it. I have been involved in it to some extent. It's fun, but some of the things we need to do maybe aren't as much fun, but they will be much more productive in the long run.

WOODS: You have a section in here in which you go through 10 different things that you recommend people do. So I will let people check that out for themselves. Share with us any parting words you have. The book, again, is *Progressivism: A Primer on the Idea Destroying America*. Give us your parting thoughts on this general subject.

OSTROWSKI: Well, I hope people check out the book. I am a busy person. I am practicing lawyer, and I don't have a time to write a book that is a duplication of what's been done. I think there is some good, original material in there, but also building on existing libertarian scholarship. Check it out. Hopefully you will then go on to read more material from people like Rothbard, and Woods, and Raico, and I urge people to support the Mises Institute and LewRockwell.com, both of which have been very helpful to me in putting this book out there, and I am going to continue the fight, and I will have some creative, interesting tactics on LibertyMovement.org as soon as about a month from now.

WOODS: All right, we're going to put all this stuff—that link, the book, other stuff—over on the show notes page for today's episode. This is episode number 352, so the show notes page would be tomwoods.com/352. Jim, thanks for your time today. Best of luck with the book.

OSTROWSKI: Thanks, and good luck with your new book as well.