

Cultural Marxism's Origins: How the Disciples of an Obscure Italian Linguist Subverted America

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You may have heard the terms “Cultural Marxism,” “Critical Theory” or “Frankfurt School” bandied about. And while you might have an intuitive approximation of what these terms mean for America in the 21st century, there’s a good chance that you don’t know much about the deep theory, where the ideology comes from and what it has planned for America – and the world.

The underlying theory here is a variant of Marxism, pioneered by early-20th-century Italian Marxist politician and linguist Antonio Gramsci. Gramscian Marxism is a radical departure from Classical Marxism. One does not need to endorse the Classical Marxism of Marx, Engels and others to appreciate the significant differences between the two. He is easily the most influential thinker that you have never heard of. Whereas Classical Marxism located what has been called “the revolutionary subject” (the people who will overthrow capitalism and usher in socialism) within the broad working class, primarily in what is now the First World, Gramscism takes a very different approach. This approach underpins most of the social unrest that is gripping America and the West today. In a sense, we are living through the endgame of a Gramscian revolution.

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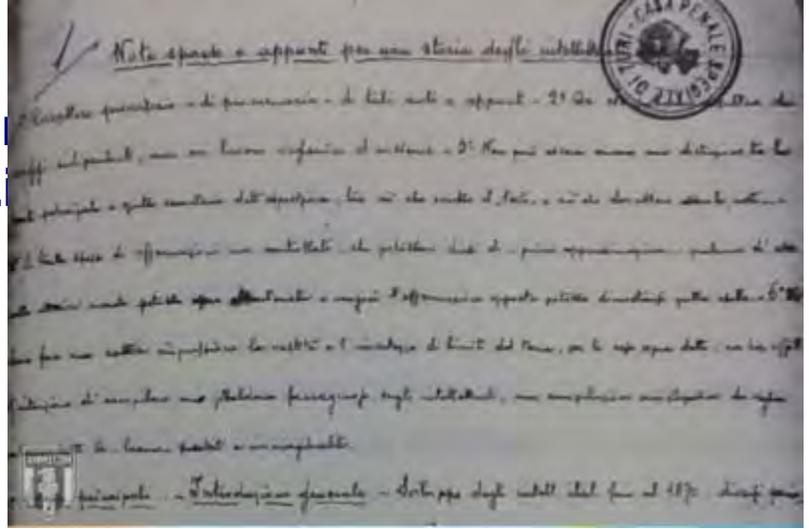
There are two important diversions that Gramscism has from more traditional Marxist thought: First, that economics was the base of culture and politics. Second, philosophical materialism in the Marxist sense where reality is effectively formed by the means of economic production.

For Gramsci, culture was more important than either economics or politics. This was what needed to be changed for there to be a revolution. As such, the weapon to be used for revolution was not the economic might of an organized working class, but a **“long march through the institutions”** (a phrase actually coined by German Marxist Rudi Dutschke), whereby every institution in the West would be subverted through penetration and infiltration.

Throughout this article, we will use the term “Cultural Marxism” as a catchall to refer to this phenomenon, because it is the most all-encompassing and does not limit us to discussing any one specific variation (Gramsci, the Frankfurt School or what have you). Finally, we should briefly mention that, the claims of Dr. Jordan Peterson notwithstanding, Cultural Marxism is ideologically distinct from postmodernism and deconstruction, both of which are hostile toward Marxism. We will not touch on either postmodernism or deconstruction in this article, though they certainly have been influential on the international left.

The Origins of Cultural Marxism

Cultural Marxism's Obscure Italian Link



There is a tiny kernel of Cultural Marxism within Classical Marxism. Namely, that Marx himself was

obsessed with the kinds of detailed critiques that later came to characterize Cultural Marxism – for example, *The Critique of the Gotha Program*, *Anti-Dühring* (which is actually by Engels), *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. This is perhaps best exemplified by the famous remark in *Theses on Feuerbach* that “philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”

Antonio Gramsci, however, seems to be the best place to locate the genesis of Cultural Marxism proper. Gramsci was the son of an Albano-Sardinian low-ranking government official. Without engaging in too much psychoanalyzing, it is probably not a coincidence that the son of a low-ranking civil servant was able to see the power that low-ranking bureaucrats would have if all of them were guided by the proper ideology.

Gramsci attended the University of Turin where he studied linguistics – not philosophy or economics. Health and financial problems led him to leave his studies prematurely, shortly after he joined the Italian Socialist Party. In this period, as well as the period immediately following the Russian Revolution, Gramsci was a fairly standard Communist, though he did occasionally have disagreements with the party line, none of which are relevant to the development of Cultural Marxism. Beginning in 1924, he was the head of the Italian Communist Party. For this, he was arrested by the Fascist government in 1926, and sentenced to 20 years in prison under newly enacted emergency laws. He died in prison on April 27, 1937, at the age of 46, due to a number of untreated health problems.

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It was in prison that Gramsci began formulating the core of his theory, which would later form the core of leftist thought throughout the West. In the *Prison Notebooks*, he broke from Classical Marxism, formulating a new and largely distinct ideology:

- Cultural hegemony is a more important factor in maintaining capitalism than economic or political hegemony.
- Cultural and social education of workers must be performed to create a class of worker-intellectuals capable of combating capitalism.
- Civil society is distinct from political society. The latter rules through domination and coercion, whereas the former rules through normalization and consent.
- A rejection of materialism (the primacy of the material world) in favor of a semi-mystical view of history, as well as a greater degree of cultural relativism.
- Further critiques of economic determinism (the notion that economics is the primary driver of human history and civilization) and philosophical materialism (the philosophical claim that the material world is either the only reality or the most important one).

Later theorists, including the famous Frankfurt School, which introduced elements of Freudian psychoanalysis, antipositivism (the notion that human society cannot be studied using the scientific method) and existentialism, a philosophical movement that posits that “being determines consciousness” and sees humanity as necessarily hemmed in by a variety of forces beyond their control.

There has been an attempt to smear the identification of the Frankfurt School and similar currents as Cultural Marxism as an expression of anti-Semitism and (of course) a “conspiracy theory.” While there are

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certainly anti-Semites who talk about Cultural Marxism, they often do so from the perspective of an obsession with the alleged “Jewish” nature of the intellectual tendency. We reject both the characterization of Cultural Marxism as somehow “Jewish” as well as the notion that its existence is a “conspiracy theory.” Nor do we propose that there is some centralized ideological cabal directing the contemporary left from a Cultural Marxist perspective. It is simply that these ideas have become fashionable among the left over the last 50 or so years.

Whatever one seeks to label the modern ideological underpinnings of the left, it is clear that it has its foundation in the ideas articulated by Gramsci, the Frankfurt School and their intellectual descendents such as Rudi Dutschke and others.

Gramsci’s Children: The Frankfurt School

People often refer to the Frankfurt School as some kind of nebulous ideological current. In fact, it was a discrete group of scholars working together at a specific period of time. While they shared many assumptions and conclusions, they were not entirely homogeneous, mostly in terms of their focus of study.

The Frankfurt School was, in fact, the Institute for Social Research, an adjunct facility of the Goethe University Frankfurt. It was the first fully Marxist research institution at a German university and it was funded through the generosity of well-to-do scion of an Argentine grain merchant, Felix Weil. The Frankfurt School is marked by an interdisciplinary approach. Rather than studying art, culture, politics and philosophy, they studied the interplay between them all from a Marxist perspective.

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During the interwar period, the Institute was moved first to Vienna and then to New York City, where they joined Columbia University, to avoid the rise of fascism in Europe.

György Lukács and Reification

The first important figure for our purposes to come out of the Frankfurt School is György Lukács, the son of a wealthy Hungarian investment banker. He is frequently published under the name Georg Lukács. Lukács was no armchair theorist: He was a leading light in the Hungarian Revolution of 1917, as well as one of the leading theoreticians of the Hungarian Red Terror during the Hungarian Soviet Republic. After the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, he had a falling out with the international leadership of Communism. He later went to the Soviet Union, where he was detained and internally exiled. He returned to Hungary in 1945. His relationship with Stalinism is ambiguous and a hotly debated topic among historians, but he was the primary instrument by which the Hungarian Writers' Union was purged.

His primary contribution to Cultural Marxism is reification, the notion that everything becomes an object under capitalism and that people under capitalism are more like things than human beings. He also said that Marxism would still be valid if it were proved to be false, because it is a methodology of social transformation above all else.

Herbert Marcuse and Repressive Tolerance

Another important figure in the development of Cultural Marxism is Herbert Marcuse. He is often referred to as "the Father of the New Left." It is potentially worth noting that he worked for the Office of

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Strategic Services, which was the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Like Lukács, Marcuse had direct experience in revolutionary movements in postwar Europe. He was a participant in the Spartacist Uprising in Germany, which was an abortive attempt at forming a Soviet-style government in that country. Curiously, some of his work in the late 1920s and early 1930s was a collaboration with Martin Heidegger, who later became the sort of unofficial philosopher of the Nazi regime in Germany. A number of radicals have cited Marcuse as a major influence, including Angela Davis, Abbie Hoffman and Rudi Dutschke.

Marcuse's most important contribution as far as we are concerned is the notion of "repressive tolerance." In his *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Marcuse argues for something that will be familiar to readers of this website: *Tolerance should only be applied to left-wing groups and ideas, while right-wing groups and ideas should be mercilessly suppressed.* Specifically, he advocated for "withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements that promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or that oppose the extension of public services, social security, medical care, etc."

Marcuse is perhaps the most influential of the Frankfurt School thinkers in the United States. Anytime you hear a leftist explain why tolerance actually means intolerance, they're channeling Marcuse.

Max Horkheimer and Critical Theory

Finally, there is Max Horkheimer. The son of a wealthy Orthodox Jewish family, Horkheimer's father owned a series of successful textile mills in Stuttgart. He was drafted at the beginning of the First World

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War, but was rejected on medical grounds and then enrolled in Munich University. By 1926, he was in Frankfurt, and by 1930, he was a professor of philosophy at Frankfurt University. When the Institute for Social Research directorship became vacant, Horkheimer was elected to this position thanks to a mysterious endowment made by an anonymous wealthy businessman.

It was under Horkheimer's watch that the Frankfurt School's raison d'être became fusing the ideas of Karl Marx with those of Sigmund Freud. He was the father of Critical Theory, which is less a "theory" than it is a rhetorical technique of viewing everything - except, of course, Critical Theory - through a critical lens and an eye toward discrediting social institutions. Horkheimer curiously (though perhaps not surprisingly) arrived at Critical Theory while appraising his own role as the scion of a bourgeois family who was ostensibly a proponent of proletarian revolution.

Perhaps the most didactically "Critical Theory" work of Horkheimer is *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Among other things, it argues that popular, mass culture is a sort of mechanized and industrialized means by which authoritarian control is maintained over the broad mass of Westerners.

There are other figures in the Frankfurt School, however to catalog each and every one would make for a much longer text. We present the above three as exemplars of the intellectual tendency and a solid basis for understanding it.

The Long March Through the Institutions

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While it is often attributed to Gramsci – and in a sense, he is the godfather of the notion – the “long march through the institutions” was, as stated above, a phrase coined by Rudi Dutschke, a German Communist activist. The phrase itself is a nod to the “Long March” of the Chinese Communists.

The long march represents another significant shift in thought away from Classical Marxism. In Classical Marxist thought, the state is seen as an instrument of class oppression, which can be conquered and used by the proletariat as a weapon against the bourgeoisie. Classical Marxists did not seek to occupy the existing state and leverage it for their own purposes. Rather, the Classical Marxists believed it was necessary to destroy the instruments of the bourgeois state and construct a proletarian state in its place.

Some key concepts underlying this theory: First, the state is an instrument of *class domination* and, as such, is fundamentally based on economics or what Marx called the infrastructure. Everything else – culture, religion, art, politics – was superstructure or something built on top of the class-based, economic structure.

What’s more, “class” is not defined in relative terms, such as how much income one makes or even how much one owns, but rather on the relationship to production. A poor farmer was probably worse off than

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an urban worker, but was not a proletarian because he owned the means of production, even if these means were meager.

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was, in every meaningful sense, a Marxist revolution. A parallel state based on participatory workers' organizations was led by a self-consciously revolutionary party to topple the existing state and erect a new one in its place. Indeed, Lenin acted on clear definitions from Marx about what constituted "the state": "armed bodies of men," that is to say, police, courts, prisons and the military. The Bolsheviks did not simply take the existing "armed bodies of men" and use them for their own purposes. Nor did the Communists of Eastern Europe. **They destroyed existing institutions and replaced them with their own.**

The bottom line of the difference between Classical Marxism and Cultural Marxism is that the latter sees the state as effectively neutral – something that can be taken over and used for its own purposes – while the former does not. Cultural Marxism is interested not in revolution in the classical 19th-century sense of throwing up barricades, toppling the monarchy and setting up guillotines. Its interests lie in cultural transformations, after which other transformations (political and economic) can take place.

The long march through the institutions is in many ways exactly what it sounded like. Proponents of Cultural Marxism were expected to go out there and ingratiate themselves into every aspect of society. Once there, whether this was in bowling leagues or board rooms, they would push their ideology and attempt to transform society. It wasn't as dramatic or sudden as the revolution espoused by Classical Marxists and their Marxist-Leninist children, but it was considered both more effective and, more to the point, *necessary* for fundamental transformation of society. Once the cultural institutions had been changed, political and economic transformation could be enacted.

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A final note: The change of the “revolutionary subject” is an important topic to consider. Whereas Classical Marxists were quite dogmatic about their belief that it was only the working class who could effect revolution, Cultural Marxists saw the revolutionary subject basically anywhere else, viewing the traditional Western working class as apathetic at best and actively reactionary, bordering on fascistic, at worst. This was not entirely limited to Cultural Marxists – the entire Trotskyist movement split after the Second World War over the question of whether or not the Eastern European states were revolutionary and whether or not peasant guerilla warfare was a path to revolution.

Cultural Marxists, however, saw the revolutionary subject virtually *anywhere but* the working class. Third world peasants, student radicals, the non-aligned movement, racial and ethnic minorities, homosexuals, the mentally ill and transsexuals – all of these and others have been considered the vanguard of cultural revolution around the world by the Cultural Marxists. The shift of the revolutionary subject from workers to virtually everyone else is effectively an attempt to create a political-coalition-meets-religious-cult centered around notions of **victimhood**.

The Weaponization of Critique

The primary weapon of the Cultural Marxists is a constant, neverending critique of Western culture and civilization. It’s not a terrible oversimplification to say that the fundamental premise of the “Critical Theory” arm of Cultural Marxism is “when you think about it, isn’t everything kind of problematic?”

Indeed, there is nothing “deep” about this theoretical tack, it is simply a case of “when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” This rhetorical technique has informed and distorted virtually every

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aspect of Western culture – moving far beyond academia and infecting the mass culture. Air conditioning is sexist. Lawns are racist and so are single family homes. Not wanting to be intimate with someone who is HIV positive contributes to homophobia and the spread of AIDS.

Physical fitness is a fascist impulse and trying to lose weight is a hateful act.

All of these might sound silly and marginal, and in a sense they are. However, it is important to note how dramatically the culture in the West has shifted since the 1950s – and how dramatically it has shifted even in the last ten years, when Barack Obama still opposed gay marriage and no serious person advocated that grown men who “identify as women” should be allowed to share restrooms and locker rooms with pre-pubescent girls. The other important takeaway from this is that the proponents of Cultural Marxism can find a way to tie virtually any topic to some imagined “system of oppression,” then fill in the blanks with the appropriate argument.

In the language of the Cultural Marxists, this is known as analyzing “ruling understandings” or the dominant ideology of a culture. Of course, there is a “dominant ideology” underpinning this method – the notion that every claim or stance requires careful examination from a critical perspective. *Every belief held by Western civilization for the last 100, 200, 500, 2,000 years is subject to a critical analysis, the goal of which is to “expose” the belief as nothing more than a weapon designed to subjugate and suppress members of the coalition of victims that Cultural Marxism seeks to assemble in its war against Western civilization.*

Far from being a neutral form of analysis, Cultural Marxism starts with the assumption that every aspect of Western civilization is some kind of a conspiracy (conscious or otherwise) to keep a certain group of people in their place. This creates what Victor Davis Hansen has called a

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“subjective righteousness.” There is no place for individual responsibility for good or for ill. Rather, there is only the analysis of power. Those who are judged to have it, by the priests of Wokeness (effectively a Cultural Marxist framework), can do no right. Those who attack them can do no wrong.

Eternal truths, no matter how self-evident, are not truths at all, but narratives constructed by a ruling elite to perpetuate their own rule. Absolutely nothing is to be spared from the ruthless line of Cultural Marxism and Critical Theory. This leads to an inversion of traditional values, where the values that have served Western civilization for thousands of years are painted as negative features. The male desire to protect women from danger becomes “patriarchy” and “paternalism.” The drive to attain mastery over the self and the environment that almost entirely defines Western culture is repainted as “authoritarian personality.” The normal desire for marriage and children becomes “heteronormativity,” just one option among many and a bad one at that. An appreciation for the philosophical and cultural achievements of Western civilization is “white supremacy,” an arbitrary system with no goal other than to keep other races down.

There is also this process identified by a semi-famous KGB agent, Yuri Bezmenov:

- **Demoralization:** This is whereby people are made to lose faith in their own culture and their institutions. Society is made to be something that isn't worth fighting for.
- **Destabilization:** During this phase, the culture and society itself are made unstable. A situation is created whereby “anything can happen” and people simply cannot rely upon things to be the same from one day to the next.

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- **Crisis:** The manufacturing of a large crisis about which “something must be done.”
- **Normalization:** The “new normal.” The new way of doing things is normalized through constant propaganda that this is “just how the world is now.”

All of these ideas are likely familiar to you. That is because, when considered objectively, Cultural Marxism has been a resounding success in the Western world.

Is Cultural Marxism a Real Threat?



One of the common responses among the left, particularly those on the center-left, is that Cultural Marxism isn't a real thing or, at the very least, that it has failed to influence culture in any meaningful sense. It's important to point out that it isn't necessary to prove the existence of Cultural Marxist foot soldiers self-consciously infiltrating our institutions to show that Cultural Marxism has influenced American culture and Western culture more broadly. It is simply necessary to look at what their aims are and to see if those aims have been met.

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The radical transformation of society over the last 60 years and the acceleration of this transformation can be attributed to a number of factors, including Cultural Marxism, neoliberalism, the destruction of civil society and the welfare state. It's worth pointing out the degree to which Cultural Marxism has influenced public discourse in the country and, indeed, the broader West. **In Western Europe, for example, Cultural Marxist dialogue is much more explicit and overt than it is in the United States.**

To see the influence of Cultural Marxism, one need look no further than any left online publication. But it's worth identifying the importance of Cultural Marxism in Western universities. The ideas of Cultural Marxism are hardly the purview of economic, political and cultural elites. Indeed, they are pushed on just about any college student from the community college level all the way up to the Ivy League. What's more, there is a strand of Cultural Marxism called critical pedagogy that is all about introducing these concepts to younger and younger children.

Cultural Marxism can be seen in the rise of grievance studies, those areas of "study" which are little more than political parties within the university. This includes ersatz academic disciplines such as women's studies, African-American studies, "queer studies," and even whiteness studies – the last of which, unlike the studies that precede it, is about pillorying and villainizing whites rather than a sort of narcissistic view at their own history. The degrees granted by these disciplines are, of course, totally useless, leading to a mass of young people who are woefully unprepared to enter the job market while simultaneously saddled with massive amounts of debt. Such people are naturally easy pickings for leftist movements seeking to destroy society.

The presence of Cultural Marxism in elementary education is a clear-cut example of the long march through the institutions largely being a

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successful enterprise. The indoctrination of college students produced generations of college graduates who went on to share these ideas with younger and younger children. Nowhere more than in public education has the long march through the institutions been more successful.

Séxual education for very young children is one particularly lurid example of Cultural Marxism. Indeed, teaching children about séx has been a significant issue for doctrinaire Cultural Marxists. But as disturbing as this drive is, it is part of a broader trend of trying to indoctrinate children in the fundamentals of Cultural Marxism and its methodology of “critiquing” Western civilization.

This process of indoctrinating children has accelerated since the beginning of the riots of summer 2020. The National Education Association, one of the most powerful teachers unions in the United States, has a handy page for teachers to get their “education justice” resources from. The NEA website approvingly links to a website that proudly declares itself globalist, “queer affirming,” “trans affirming” and “committed to disrupting the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure.”

Much of this starts from the supposition that everyone, white children in particular, have “unconscious biases,” effectively a form of racial hypnotism whereby people are “racist” without knowing it. Indeed, even the definition of “racism” has been shifted from what is a common sense definition shared by most people to an esoteric one whereby all whites – including babies – are “racist.” This is the philosophical basis of “white guilt” and “white privilege” theory.

Alongside the smearing of all whites as racist, there are attacks on the nuclear family, heterosexuality and biological séx as socially constructed for the purpose of social control and suppression. This might sound like something that will only be taught in schools in California, however, it is important to note that because of the lucrative

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California textbook market – to say nothing of the far-left nature of the teachers’ unions in the United States – that what children in California are being taught today, children in Kansas will be taught tomorrow.

The education system is largely where the rubber meets the road in terms of Cultural Marxism moving from an esoteric academic ideology into something that influences the broader culture. It is not a mistake that a number of educators have been found among the ranks of the rioters. Nor is it a mistake that the rioters are disproportionately young and educated. They have been primed for this by 12 years of public education and another four at the university level – teaching them that Western civilization is an evil construct designed by white heterosexual men for the purpose of enslaving everyone else.

Further, there is Cultural Marxism in the mass media. After all, when one combines Gramsci’s analysis of the importance of culture and Horkheimer’s claims about the controlling nature of the mass media with the long march through the institutions strategy, it makes sense that Cultural Marxists, conscious or otherwise, would seek to infect mass culture with an eye toward subverting traditional Western ideas and replacing them with Cultural Marxist dogma. Much of the conservative revulsion against the values and ideology pushed by Hollywood is in fact a bristling at Cultural Marxist propaganda. Detailing each and every example of this would take an entire book, but we’re sure that you can think of some “favorite” examples of your own off the top of your head.

When this is understood, it’s easy to become discouraged and defeated with regard to the future of the West. There are literally multiple generations of Westerners who have been so thoroughly indoctrinated in the basics of Cultural Marxism through the education system, that they have the same relationship to this world view as a fish within water. There are no easy answers with regard to how to begin reversing

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the course and, thanks to the pervasive influence of Cultural Marxism in our education system, they have largely accomplished their aims of a “long march through the institutions.” Virtually every aspect of society – except for police and their unions – has become dominated by Cultural Marxists, witting or otherwise.

While we can't propose any sweeping solutions here, it is worth noting that the first step toward combating this ideological and cultural menace is being able to identify it, understand it and, above all, call it out whenever it is seen in action. Much like the long march through the institutions, this might not be a sexy “one-and-done” type of solution, but it might well be the only weapon that we have against them.

An important part of combating Cultural Marxism is simply studying social history and the history of ideas. **To take an example of low-hanging fruit, America, the West and white people did not invent slavery, however they did more to eradicate it from the face of the earth than anyone else.** Mental gymnastics are often required to argue against even the most basic refutations of Cultural Marxism and such mental gymnastics often expose the proponents of Cultural Marxism as uneducated, unprincipled or just plain wrong.

Finally, reject political guilt. Those who push guilt do so in bad faith as a form of weaponizing the Western sense of fair play. If the West is responsible for slavery and genocide – which, in limited cases it is, but it is by no means unique in this regard – it is also responsible for vaccines, sanitation and the massive decline in child mortality rates. You are not individually responsible for either the great moral crimes of Western history, nor its great technological successes. The correct answer is a nuanced picture that takes the good with the bad and sees Western civilization as a constant work in progress, rather than a static conspiracy designed to rob everyone but “old, rich, white men” of their due.