

Ideology, Identity Politics, and Politico-Cultural Conflict

Written by Robert Higgs.

The past year's political events, especially the campaign for the presidency as it converged on a contest between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, have illuminated the way in which ideology, with the identity politics that springs from it, drives a dialectical process: political domination creates resentment, which feeds reaction and, on occasion, revolution against a previously entrenched ruling class and its belief system.

The various interest groups and institutions linked with the espousal of political correctness—in short, Hillary's base—had become more and more pervasive and intrusive for fifty years or so. No doubt the members of this ideological bloc took for granted that they could, and would, only march toward greater and greater power over the populace until that glorious day when the last remnants of the old, despised social order, including the belief systems that supported it, would be crushed once and for all beneath the wheel of history that they had insisted on giving a boost lest the inexorable “progress” be slowed or—perish the thought—halted.

Meanwhile, however, the scores of millions of Americans whose ideas and social actions did not comport with the progressive agenda grew more and more resentful, but the political process failed to cough up a champion who would, and could effectively, lead a counter-revolution by the “deplorables” against the detested cultural and political establishment.

Enter Trump, seemingly on a lark, because his manner of speaking and campaigning amounted to little more than thumbing his nose at political correctness and its adherents. Yet, no doubt to the surprise of the Clinton camp, he elicited an enthusiastic and growing response from millions of people united by little more than resentment and, in some cases, hatred of their self-anointed betters. This kind of popular rebellion was not supposed to happen; the deplorables were supposed to recognize that they were on the losing side of a long historical-cultural conflict and act in a way that validated their acceptance of defeat. But the make-America-great-again group was not buying it, and they leaped at the chance to embrace a political leader who would proudly endorse their burning desire to spit out political correctness like a rotten fish.

So the contest for the presidency boiled down not to a clash of alternative public-policy packages so much as to a battle between two groups that identified with glaringly different cultural assumptions and values. In effect, the election was above all a referendum on political correctness. People who had tired of being called every sort of insulting name—racist, sexist, ignorant, backward, religious, in short everything that the Clinton crowd fancied it was not—rose on their hind legs and began to buck vigorously. One

suspects that Trump himself must have been surprised by the magnitude and enthusiasm of the following he attracted. After all, he is not a sociologist, a political scientist, or even an experienced politician. However one might label him, though, he had stumbled onto a cultural time-bomb waiting for a detonator. Thus, he was not so much the man of the hour as he was the right tool for the task a great many people yearned to see carried out.

(For a much longer, more academic discussion along similar lines, see the recent article by Angelo M. Codevilla.)

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