



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Wanted: Scholar to Document Progressive Perversity

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The academy needs a competent and ambitious historian to document the many instances of progressive perversity throughout the centuries. Topics to be examined should include the antisemitism of Erasmus of Rotterdam, the “Prince of Humanism”; the French Revolution, during which progressives guillotined other progressives; the antisemitism of progressives like Voltaire, most French socialist leaders of the nineteenth century, and Karl Marx; communism; and the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, which was an iconic example of progressive perversity.

Progressive perversity has an extensive history over many centuries, and it is high time the phenomenon were subjected to scholarly analysis. A valid starting point for a competent and ambitious historian’s research might be the antisemitism of Erasmus of Rotterdam, often called the “Prince of Humanism.” He lived at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century.

Dutch theologian Hans Jansen investigated Erasmus’s antisemitism, which was extreme even for his time. This “humanist” called Judaism the “worst pest.” He even turned down an invitation to visit Spain in 1517, 25 years after the last non-converted Jews had left the country, because he claimed there was no more “Judaized country” than Spain.

In the history of Christianity, the Reformation can be considered a progressive upheaval though its aim was to return to the religion’s sources. The major reformer and antisemite, Martin Luther, neatly fits the description of a perverse progressive. Luther recommended that synagogues be burned to honor God and Christianity. He advised that Jewish books be confiscated and Jews expelled from Christian countries.

Luther also said no people were as thirsty for money as Jews. He believed that if a Christian met a Jew he should make the sign of the cross because a “live devil” was standing before him. This went far beyond the mainstream antisemitism of his time.

While it would be a mistake to associate progressive incitement exclusively with antisemitism, the phenomenon has often been an indicator of huge misdeeds by individuals and societies.

Voltaire (1694-1778), the great thinker of the Enlightenment, was an extreme antisemite. He once wrote that all Jews were born with raging fanaticism in their hearts, and said the Jews surpassed all nations in bad conduct and barbarism.

The French Revolution, which began in 1789, was a major milestone of progressive perversity. First, the French king and queen and adherents of the old regime were executed. Subsequently, progressives started to send other progressives to the guillotine. For some time this was a daily event. The French Revolution brought about long-term societal renewal – but it was accompanied by mass murder.

During an interview with the late Robert Wistrich, the leading academic antisemitism scholar of our generation, he mentioned *inter alia* many progressive intellectuals who were antisemites. “Among the heirs of the Enlightenment traditions were the early French Socialists of the 19th century,” he said. “With rare exceptions, they laid the groundwork for late 19th century French antisemitism. They included Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon – founder of anarchism and a seminal figure in the French labor movement – and Alphonse Toussenel.”

He went on to say, “Proudhon’s great rival and antagonist Karl Marx penned a work that Marxists always include in the pantheon of his writings, *Zur Judenfrage* (*On the Jewish Question*). Among the many pearls of intellectual inspiration in this work, one finds phrases like ‘Mammon is the worldly god of the Jews,’ or ‘The present Christian world in Europe and North America has reached the apex of this development and has become thoroughly Judaized.’”

Yet all this pales in comparison with another huge milestone of progressive perversity, the Communist Revolution in Russia. Not only were the Tsar, Tsarina, and adherents of the old regime executed, but in later years under Stalin, many communist leaders were themselves condemned to death. They included Lev Borisovich Kamenev (born Leo Rosenfeld) and Grigory Yevseyevich Zinoviev (born Hirsch Apfelbaum) in the show “Trial of the Sixteen” in 1936. Both had been members of the first politburo. That trial started what became known as the “Great Terror.” Trotsky would be assassinated by a Soviet agent in 1940.

National Socialism is generally considered a reactionary movement, but one should note the opinion of Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Baumann. He linked the

Holocaust to structural elements of modern society and civilization. Baumann pointed out that the Holocaust was the product of men who had been educated at the most refined level of Western society, and said Nazism was closely linked to modernity.

There were several progressive elements in Nazism. French philosopher Luc Ferry noted that Nazi laws to protect nature and prohibit hunting were the first in the world “to reconcile a sizable ecological project with the desire for a real political intervention.” The Nazis were indeed precursors of current animal protection movements that are usually considered progressive.

The historian of progressive perversity could devote many pages to contemporary progressives. In our time, progress is partly linked to left-wing politics. Left-wing antisemitism is a major force directed against the State of Israel. We find it among many Greens, Socialists, and Communists. Three now-deceased socialist European leaders compared Israel’s acts to those of the Nazis: Swedish PM Olof Palme, Greek PM Andreas Papandreou, and French President François Mitterrand. The tenacious antisemitism in the British Labour party to a large extent derives from supporters of its extreme leftist leader, Jeremy Corbyn.

For the scholar of progressive perversity who writes this magnum opus, antisemitism would be a good guideline with which to analyze the contemporary world. Academia is the logical place to start identifying perverse progressives. Outside academia, the BDS movement has its main supporters on the left. Other areas to look into are human rights and other NGOs, trade unions, liberal churches, and so on. As the issuer of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN might be considered progressive, even if it is mainly a collection of non-democratic states voting for heavily biased resolutions against Israel.

The NGO conference adjacent to the “World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance” in Durban, South Africa in September 2001 can be considered an iconic example of progressive perversity. Irwin Cotler, former Minister of Justice of Canada, who participated in the gathering, wrote: “For us, ‘Durban’ is part of our everyday lexicon as a byword for racism and anti-Semitism, just as 9/11 is a byword for terrorist mass murder.”

Progressive perversity overlaps humanitarian racism. The latter means criticizing the transgressions of one side in a conflict and closing one’s eyes to the much worse misdemeanors of the other side. The Goldstone Commission was a paradigm of humanitarian racism as it remained silent about the crimes of Hamas, a genocidal terror movement, and focused instead on the faults of the Israeli democratic state.

The challenges for the scholar who writes this history are great. It demands much knowledge and a clarity of view that can span many centuries. Books on the topic,

even if brilliant, will likely be attacked by progressive scholars who cannot stand the truth.

Yet the potential is huge. A scholar who succeeds in this enormous task would become a star historian, all the more so as he or she would lay the foundation for the analysis of the many more perverse progressives yet to come.

*Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center and a former chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He specializes in Israeli–Western European relations, antisemitism, and anti-Zionism, and is the author of The War of a Million Cuts.*