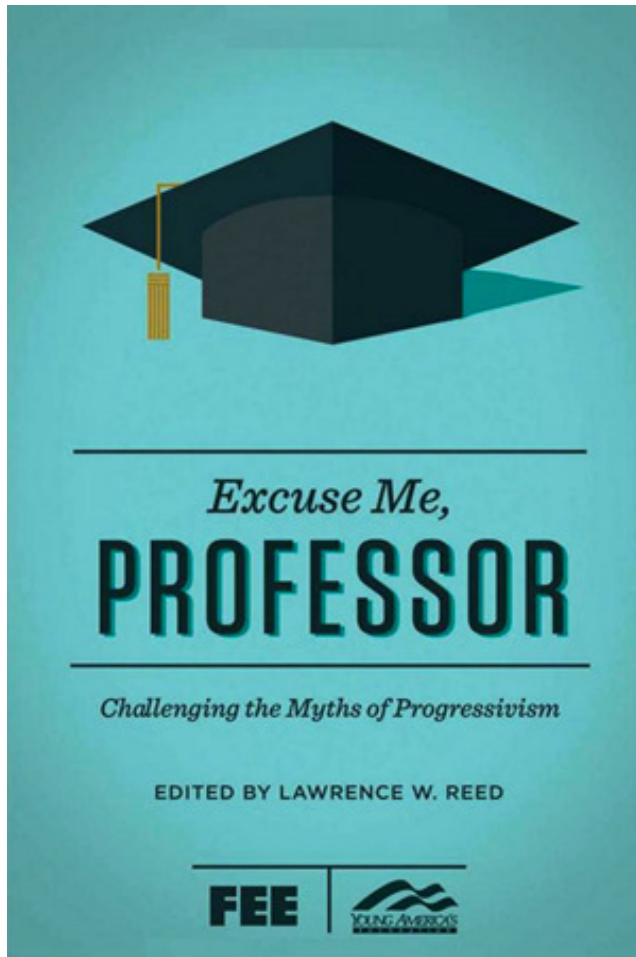


Book attacks ‘progressive agenda’

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“Excuse Me, Professor: Challenging the Myths of Progressivism,” edited by Lawrence W. Reed.
Washington, D.C., Regnery Publishing (A Division of Salem Media Group), 2015. 256 pages, \$17.76.



“Think of this collection as a handy reference guide no matter what your level of education or choice of profession may be,” Ron Robinson, president of Young America’s Foundation, declares in the introduction to “Excuse Me, Professor: Challenging the Myths of Progressivism,” the new edited volume by Lawrence W. Reed. “You don’t need to be an economist or philosopher to understand what’s written here. Progressive cliches are presented, then stripped of their deceptions with compelling arguments for a broad, lay audience. For people who are actively engaged in advancing liberty and combating the fallacies of progressivism, this will be an indispensable addition to your arsenal of intellectual ammunition.”

Reed has a B.A. in economics from Grove City College and a M.A. in history from Slippery Rock State University. He is president of the Foundation for Economic Education, a post he has held since 2008. Prior to assuming his present position, he spent more than 20 years as president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, Mich. He taught economics at Northwood University from 1977 to 1984, where he also chaired the department in the mid-1980s. Reed’s

articles have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, USA Today and the Christian Science Monitor. His previous books include “A Republic: If We Can Keep It,” “Striking the Root: Essays on Liberty,” “The Great Hope” and “Are We Good Enough for Liberty?”

This manifesto – and that’s really what it is – consists of an introduction and 52 relatively concise chapters written by a variety of conservative contributors. It is important to note that all the essays comprising the anthology, with the exception of the final installment, originally appeared as “Cliches of Progressivism,” an online series published in 2014 and 2015 by the Young America’s Foundation and the Foundation for Economic Education. The underlying premise is the notion progressives have created and perpetuated an entire mythology that drives their ideology and political plan for world domination. Each chapter is an attempt to expose a particular fallacy liberals have employed in their never-ending attempt to advance an economic and social program that is inherently flawed,

inconsistent and ultimately counterproductive to maintaining a collective standard of living many Americans have come to see as their birthright.

But the critique goes even deeper. Many of the writers also question the motives of those actively working to take care of the less fortunate among us. There is a sense among many of the contributors that progressives are disingenuous when it comes to the architecture on which their belief system relies. One of their primary strategies seems to be to try and discredit the legitimacy as well as the authenticity of those who do not agree with the conservative worldview. Every attempt to provide direct assistance to the poor and underprivileged is assumed to have an ulterior motive that speaks to the sincerity, and therefore the credibility, of those seeking to help their less affluent neighbors. For example:

“When we hear people fretting about inequality, we should ask ourselves: Are they genuinely concerned for the poor or are they indignant about the rich?” Max Borders explains in “Income Inequality Arises from Market Forces and Requires Government Intervention,” the inaugural chapter.

“Here’s how to tell the difference: Whenever someone grumbles about ‘the gap,’ ask her if she’d be willing for the rich to be even richer if it meant improved conditions for the absolute poorest among us. If she says ‘no,’ they are admitting their concern is really with what the wealthy have, not what the poor lack. If her answer is ‘yes,’ then the so-called ‘gap’ is irrelevant. You can then go on to talk about a legitimate concern – e.g., how best to improve the conditions of the poor without paying them to be wards of the state. In other words, the meaningful conversation we should be having is about absolute poverty, not relative poverty.”

Borders is editor of “The Freeman” and director of content for the Foundation for Economic Education; he wrote several of the essays contained in this conservative primer.

One of the chapters I found most intriguing was “Government Must Subsidize the Arts,” the 34th chapter and one of several written by Reed.

“People who oppose Soviet-style collective farms, government subsidies to agriculture or public ownership of grocery stores because they want the provision of food to be a private matter in the marketplace are generally not dismissed as uncivilized or uncaring,” Reed asserts. “Hardly anyone would claim that one who holds such views is opposed to breakfast, lunch and dinner. But people who oppose government funding of the arts are frequently accused of being heartless or uncultured.”

“Culture arises naturally and spontaneously among people who chose to interact with each other,” he added. “Art is part of that, but it also competes with all sorts of other things people choose to do with their time and money. Claims that arts spending is magically ‘multiplied’ are specious and usually self-serving, and never look at alternative uses of the same money. If art is truly important, then the last thing we should want to do is politicize it or divert it toward those things that people with power think we should see or hear.”

“Excuse Me, Professor” is an all-out assault on what many conservatives obviously see as the “progressive agenda.” And although there is an element of truth to many of the arguments presented, collectively the contributors to this hip-pocket guide to the virtues of a more traditional and somewhat archaic perspective seem to lack a realistic understanding of, and appreciation for, the positions held by their adversaries. Although I disagreed with many of the authors, I did find the effort fascinating for the insights it provides into the conservative thought process.

If you want to know where conservatives are coming from, this is the book for you.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*