



Insight

Thesis, Antithesis, Progress

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Like many college students, I struggled mightily to understand what the hell Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was trying to say in his very dense philosophical texts. Since I don't read German, I wouldn't say that I ever really got there.

But what I got out of Hegel was the Hegelian dialectic. Now, many philosophers now say that the Hegelian dialectic wasn't really Hegel's at all, but Immanuel Kant's. That may be true, but I don't care, because I still call Hegel's dialectic Hegel's.

And from what I remember from my college philosophy class from Hegel is that the march of history starts with a proposition, known as the thesis, and from that proposition comes the counter, known as the antithesis, and from the conflict of the thesis and the antithesis comes the synthesis, which symbolizes progress.

Hegel used the French Revolution as an example. First, you have the revolt against the French monarchy. After the revolution came the Reign of Terror. And only after the Reign of Terror came a constitutional society that values the rights of individual citizens.

I was thinking about the Hegelian dialectic in the context of the current political climate in America.

When Barack Obama won the White last year, expectations were high that he would usher in a new era of post-racial liberal leadership. He was the revolutionary figure who would transform America. He had a willing and compliant and more revolutionary congressional leadership ready to help him push through his legislative agenda.

But over the last year or so, a reaction has been building against this revolution.

According to a new Wall Street Journal/NBC poll, it looks like this revolution is about ready to come to an end, and a counter-revolution is about ready to spring forward.

As the Journal put it this morning:

“Americans are more pessimistic about the state of the country and less confident in President Barack Obama's leadership than at any point since Mr. Obama entered the White House, according to a new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll ... Sixty-two percent of adults in the survey feel the country is on the wrong track, the highest level since before the 2008 election. Just one-third think the economy will get better over the next year, a 7-point drop from a month ago and the low point of Mr. Obama's tenure.

Amid anxiety over the nation's course, support for Mr. Obama and other incumbents is eroding. For the first time, more people disapprove of Mr. Obama's job performance than approve. And 57 percent of voters would prefer to elect a new person to Congress than reelect their local representatives, the highest share in 18 years.”

This is not good news for Democrats in the Congress. It represents real hope for President Obama, though.

In all likelihood, the president will face a Republican-led Congress in 2012. The House will almost certainly go Republican and the Senate is still within striking distance for the GOP.

That means that the president will have a better chance to get better policies enacted that will appeal to a bigger percentage of the American people. He will do so by negotiating a synthesis with political opponents who represent the antithesis of his political views.

Historically, you don't get to progress by negotiating with yourself. You progress by negotiating with your rivals. The best way for the president to stop his steady decline at the polls is to help facilitate a Republican takeover of the Congress.

And he seems to be doing a good job of that, if the polls are any indication.

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