

## BOOKS

### Lives matter

MARY KENNY

#### Left Is Not Woke

SUSAN NEIMAN

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**S**USAN NEIMAN, a former philosophy professor at Yale and Tel Aviv Universities, and now resident in Berlin, offers a useful proposal in this short but very serious book: that the increasing “tribalism” which characterises what is called “woke” ideology is not, or should not be, part of left-wing thinking.

The left, or what she prefers to call the “progressive”, tendency should draw on the traditions of universalism established by the Enlightenment. It should uphold the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights, set down in 1948. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and the LGBT communities, although well intended, have had the effect of splitting society into cultural ghettos. She is concerned that “contemporary voices considered to be leftist have abandoned the philosophical ideas that are central to any left-wing standpoint: a commitment to universalism over tribalism, a firm distinction between justice and power, and a belief in the possibility of progress.”

In addressing this, Neiman, revisits those thinkers who shaped the Enlightenment – Rousseau, Voltaire – and, more critically, those who have followed, such as Michel Foucault (and his flawed definitions of power), Edward O. Wilson and Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt.

**HOW THE LEFT** has changed, and even “abandoned core ideas”, is an important question, although the American experiences aren’t always the same as ours, on this side of the Atlantic. America’s political fault line is often based on race – for understandable historical reasons. This can prompt Americans to underestimate, or set aside, divisions which have characterised European cultures – class, for example. And sometimes religion. In eighteenth-century London, riots were directed against Papists, not people of colour.

Neiman takes a negative view of religion, mostly seeing it as a obscurantist obstacle to progress. Before the era of Voltaire and Rousseau, “Church and State sent messages that progress was impossible”, and “abandon all hope described much of life on earth”. And yet, I suggest, there always have been aspects of religious faith which were aligned with what we would call progressive policies.

Improvement, and self-improvement, were central aspects of Christian education: consider the life of St Angela Merici, who travelled through Italy on horseback furthering the

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PHOTO: ALAMY, JOSHUA WINDSOR

Protests in London

education of girls in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, establishing the Ursuline Order. Consider the early activists against slavery – and for women’s emancipation – who were often evangelical Christians. Consider St Martin de Porres, a black Dominican seventeenth-century priest, whom we revered in Ireland: he started hospitals for the poor (and cared for sick animals).

Neiman does recognise that the idea of every person being endowed with dignity existed in some religious texts; but the Enlightenment based this concept on reason, not revelation. Yet as Tom Holland has pointed out, the Enlightenment drew on Judaeo-Christian roots.

Certainly, there have been philosophers like Joseph de Maistre, who elevated monarchy, authority and papal power over equality. But that’s not the full story. And post-Enlightenment, many ideas cross-fertilised.

Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* was influenced by trades union socialism.

Addressing the question why the Left has fragmented into “tribalism” may need more perspectives of history and sociology. One contributory answer is that venture capitalism became so successful, especially in electronics and technology: even the most idealistic young left-winger is dependent on Silicon Valley’s computerised products (from which follow the gigantic profits of its maestros). Working-class life was drained by the destruction of jobs and crafts that once inspired dedication and pride.

The “tribalism” of identity politics emerged from a well intentioned pursuit of justice for minorities, along with the ruined landscape of a lost sense of community. But Susan Neiman is surely correct to affirm that our common humanity is a greater aspiration than any latter-day tribal identity.