

# The Rise of Right-Wing Nihilism

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Irina Rozovsky for The New York Times



By [David Brooks](#)

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Democratic friends, let's try a thought experiment. Imagine you woke up one morning and all your media sources were produced by Christian nationalists. You sent your kids off to school and the teachers were espousing some version of [Christian nationalism](#). You turned on your sports network and your late-night comedy, and everyone was preaching Christian nationalism.

That's a bit how it feels to be more conservative in the West today — to feel drenched by a constant downpour of progressive sermonizing. What would you do in such circumstances? Well, at least at first, you'd probably grit your teeth and take it while silently seething.

In 2018, I happened to watch the Super Bowl at a sports bar in West Virginia. President Trump was about a year into his first term, and the corporate advertising world was churning out ads with [vaguely progressive messages](#). I watched the guys in the bar sort of hunch over, grim-faced, their body language saying: This is the crap we have to put up with to watch a football game.

The next year I helped organize a conference of people building local communities. We made sure that at least 30 percent of the participants were from red states. But during our discussions, the progressives in the room seemed to assume that everybody there thought like them. They dominated the conversation and left almost no space for other opinions. I watched the red-state folks just hunch over. For three days they barely spoke.

This progressive/conservative disconnect — which is also, frequently, an elite/non-elite disconnect — is a problem across the West. For reasons I don't fully understand, educated elites are more socially progressive than non-elites.

The German economist Laurenz Guenther [studied](#) survey data across 27 European countries. He found that members of Parliament were not more progressive than the general public on economic issues, but they tended to be significantly more progressive on social issues. This was true across nearly all countries, on nearly all cultural issues, among nearly all establishment parties. Guenther writes that populist parties are rising because they fill the gaps that the establishment parties are not representing.

Most of us, when you put us in an environment with a stifling political orthodoxy, just learn to cope. Forest Romm and Kevin Waldman are psychology researchers at Northwestern University. They conducted 1,452 confidential interviews with undergrads at Northwestern University and the University of Michigan.

They [found](#) that an astounding 88 percent of the students said they pretended to be more progressive than they are in order to succeed academically or socially. More than 80 percent of the students said they submitted class work that misrepresented their real views in order to conform to the progressive views of the professor. Many censored their own views on cultural issues — on gender and family issues, for example.

Northwestern and Michigan are not exactly hot houses of wokeness, but these interviews suggest that many, if not most, students feel compelled to publicly lie in order to conform to progressive orthodoxy, even while privately questioning it.

Other people, of course, don't just cope; they rebel. That rebellion comes in two forms. The first is what I'll call Christopher Rufo-style dismantling. Rufo is the right-wing activist who seeks to dismantle D.E.I. and other culturally progressive programs. I'm 23 years older than Rufo. When I was emerging from college, we conservatives thought we were conserving something — a group of cultural, intellectual and political traditions — from the postmodern assault.

But decades later, with the postmodern takeover fully institutionalized, people like Rufo don't seem to think there's anything to conserve. They are radical deconstructors. In a 2024 [dialogue](#) between Rufo and the polemicist Curtis Yarvin, published by the magazine IM-1776, Rufo acknowledged, "I am neither conservative by temperament nor by political ambition: I want to destroy the status quo rather than preserve it." This is a key difference between old-style conservatism and Trumpism.

But there's another, even more radical reaction to progressive cultural dominance: nihilism. You start with the premise that progressive ideas are false and then conclude that all ideas are false. In the dialogue, Yarvin played the role of nihilist. He ridiculed Rufo for accomplishing very little and for aiming at very little with his efforts to purge this university president or that one.

"You are just pruning the forest," Yarvin said dismissively. He countered that everything must be destroyed: In general, Yarvin is a monarchist, but in this dialogue he played a pure nihilist. One version of nihilism holds that the structures of civilization must be destroyed, even if we don't have anything to replace them with. He argued that all of America has been a sham, that democracy and everything that has come with it are based on lies.

The Rufo/Yarvin dialogue was sent to me by a friend named Skyler Adleta. Skyler had a rough childhood but has worked his way up to become an electrician and is now a project manager for a construction firm. He lives in southern Ohio, in a community that is mostly Trump-supporting. He himself generally supports the president. I know him because he is also [a fantastic writer](#) who contributes to Comment, the magazine my wife edits.

Skyler told me that in his community he is watching many people lose faith in the Rufo method and make the leap into pure nihilism, pure destruction. That is my experience, too. A few months ago, I had lunch with a young lady who said, "The difference is that in your generation you had something to believe in, but in ours we have nothing." She didn't say it bitterly, just as a straightforward acknowledgment of her worldview.

Faith in God has been on the decline for decades; so has social trust, faith in one another; so has faith in a dependable career path. A [recent Gallup poll](#) showed that faith in major American institutions is now near its lowest point in the 46 years Gallup

has been measuring these things. But the core of nihilism is even more acidic; it is the loss of faith in the values your culture tells you to believe in.

As Skyler and I exchanged emails, I was reminded of an essay the great University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter wrote last year for The Hedgehog Review. He, too, identified nihilism as the central feature of contemporary culture: “A nihilistic culture is defined by the drive to destroy, by the will to power. And that definition now describes the American nation.”

He pointed to our culture’s pervasive demonization and fearmongering, with leaders feeling no need to negotiate with the other side, just decimate it. Nihilists, he continued, often suffer from wounded attachments — to people, community, the truth. They can’t give up their own sense of marginalization and woundedness because it would mean giving up their very identity. The only way to feel halfway decent is to smash things or at least talk about smashing them. They long for chaos.

Apparently, the F.B.I. now has a new category of terrorist — the “[nihilistic violent extremist](#).” This is the person who doesn’t commit violence to advance any cause, just to destroy. Last year, Derek Thompson wrote an [article](#) for The Atlantic about online conspiracists who didn’t spread conspiracy theories only to hurt their political opponents. They spread them in all directions just to foment chaos. Thompson spoke with an expert who cited a [famous line](#) from “The Dark Knight”: “Some men just want to watch the world burn.”

This may be where history is leading. Smothering progressivism produced a populist reaction that eventually descended into a nihilist surge. Nihilism is a cultural river that leads nowhere good. Russian writers like Turgenev and Dostoyevsky wrote about rising nihilism in the 19th century, a trend that eventually contributed to the turmoil of the Russian Revolution. The scholar Erich Heller wrote a book called “The Disinherited Mind” about the rise in nihilism that plagued Germany and Central Europe after World War I. We saw what that led to.

It’s hard to turn this trend around. It’s hard enough to get people to believe something, but it’s really hard to get people to believe in belief — to persuade a nihilist that some things are true, beautiful and good.

One spot of good news is the fact that more young people, and especially young men, are returning to church. I’ve been skeptical of this trend, but the evidence is building. Among Gen Z, more young men now go to church than young women. In Britain, according to [one study](#), only 4 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds went to church in 2018, but by 2024 it was 16 percent. From the anecdotes I keep hearing, young people seem to be going to the most countercultural churches — traditionalist Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.

They don't believe in what the establishment tells them to believe in. They live in a world in which many believe in nothing. But still, somewhere deep inside, that hunger is there. They want to have faith in something.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/21/opinion/rufu-yarvin-trump-nihilism.html>

This article provoked a flood of comments on the NYT page. It was closed down after 2.7K of them, many of them from outraged progressives angry to have opposition to the likes of Christian nationalism criticized at all with progressivism (in academia especially) accused of having “gone too far” in militating an excessive postmodern orthodoxy. The most preposterous and worst extremes of the version of populism plaguing us are dredged up to justify all resistance and pushback to flagrant silo liberalism, so easy to generate rationally and justify “ethically” on simplistic humanistic grounds. David also gets excoriated condescendingly by the likes of Steve Bannon and JD Vance, both “Catholics” convinced their nihilism is from God Himself. Trump, like the senile old fool he is, has been musing lately about how he hopes he gets into heaven. Whatever Heaven-Eternity is, it is not like these people imagine it to be. Their notions simply would neither work nor fit with such—and can you imagine living in a “heaven” with such people? Spare me, which they would happily do to get rid of the likes of me.

Again, challenge everyone, rather than pick sides, and you end up with everyone mad at you. We are at most a “tribal” people, making the least and worst of it. TJB

*What can Hannah Arendt and Søren Kierkegaard add to this?*

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951, p. 474).

... Kierkegaard's concern about the leveling of the distinctions between teachers and students, fathers and sons, kings and subjects, etc. is not an expression of social conservatism. As his favorable contrast of a revolutionary age with the present age makes clear, what bothers Kierkegaard about the present age is that it neither conserves nor destroys. Rather, it leaves everything standing but cunningly empties it of significance." Nor is Kierkegaard primarily concerned about leveling as a problem for individuals. That problem can be stated ... [p.284] as follows: if the present age has leveled qualitative distinctions, how can I be committed to anything?

The problem of commitment is of particular importance to Kierkegaard because having a commitment and being a self are synonymous for him. Kierkegaard's famous account of the self in *The Sickness Unto Death* defines the self in such a way that to be a self requires commitment:



*The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is the relation which relates itself to itself ... A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of possibility and necessity, of the eternal and the temporal. In short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. Looked at in this way, a human being is not yet a self.*

... human freedom is the freedom of being self-defining. This means that infinite and finite, possibility and necessity, and the eternal and the temporal have no existence independently of my defining them by making a commitment. Kierkegaard calls the act of making such a commitment a "leap." He calls the forms of commitment that result from such leaps "spheres of existence."<sup>7</sup> There are four spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, Religiousness A, and Religiousness B. A person in the aesthetic sphere is committed to enjoyment. A person in the ethical sphere is committed to absolute choice. Religiousness A is the sphere for which "self-annihilation before God" is the object of commitment. In Religiousness B, a particular cause or project is the object of the individual's commitment. Thus, while every human being has the capacity to become a self, I become a self only by leaping into a sphere of existence and making a commitment that defines the factors.

... There is one critical limitation on this freedom, however, a limitation expressed in Kierkegaard's definition of a human being as a "synthesis." When Kierkegaard defines a human being as a synthesis, he is asserting that I must define each pair of factors in such a way that the members of each pair reinforce rather than cancel each other ... *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division 1.* Hubert L. Dreyfus. 1991. MIT Press. Appendix: *Kierkegaard, Division II, and Later Heidegger* (283-4)