

# Nellie Bowles' Gutsy Journey to Wokedom and Back

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Peter Berkowitz

## COMMENTARY

The New York Times, the Washington Post, and CNN greatly influence perceptions of America. In the United States, these flagship operations of the mainstream media reinforce daily their faithful audience's progressive prejudices and shape around the clock the editorial judgments of local publications and broadcasts. Abroad, the Times, the Post, and CNN provide for journalists, intellectuals, and politicians as well as for ordinary readers and viewers an authoritative source of news about – and establish the boundaries of respectable opinion concerning – the United States.

Conservative commentary abounds exposing the mainstream media's partisan reporting and one-sided judgments. Venerable outlets such as the Wall Street Journal editorial page, National Review, and Commentary, a host of blogs and podcasts, and, not least, the indomitable Babylon Bee, provide a steady stream of fact-checking, criticism, and satirizing of the mainstream media's pretensions to report the facts accurately and analyze complex matters fairly. Such are the mainstream media's mechanisms of denial and deflection, however, that few conservative correctives to mainstream-media bias reach mainstream-media consumers.

Since former President Donald Trump left office in January 2021, several noteworthy non-conservatives have provided devastating accounts of the mainstream media's betrayal of journalism's calling. In December 2022, at the prestigious Munk Debates in Toronto, former Rolling Stone reporter and co-author of the Twitter Files Matt Taibbi argued flat out that the mainstream media could not be trusted. In January 2023, former New York Times reporter Jeff Gerth published a lengthy four-part study in the Columbia Journalism Review, "The press versus the president," detailing the numerous errors of omission and commission systematically perpetrated by the mainstream media promulgating the false allegation that Donald Trump colluded with Russia to steal the 2016 presidential election. In December 2023, former New York Times opinion-section editor James Bennet recounted in The Economist in "When the New York Times lost its way" his defenestration by America's preeminent newspaper. Several weeks after the May 2020 killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, Bennet committed his unpardonable sin: His section published an op-ed by Sen. Tom Cotton that, reflecting the sentiments of many Americans, urged President Trump to use his legal authority to deploy troops to preserve public order in American cities roiled by protests.

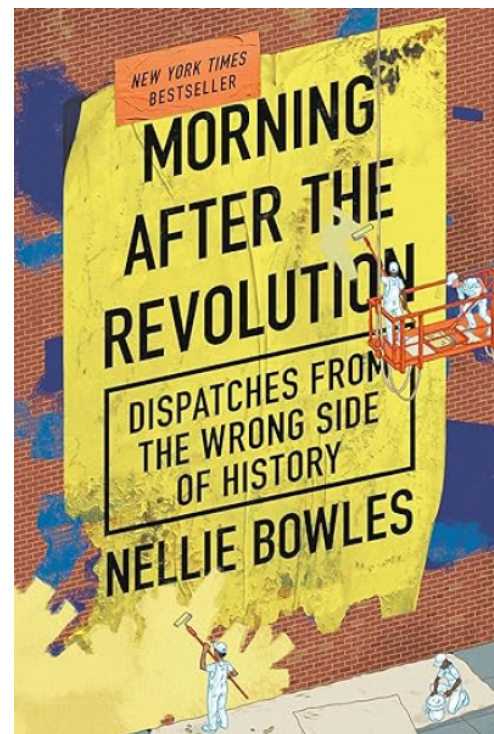
Members of the mainstream media cannot dismiss these chilling reports from renegade former insiders about the subordination to progressive political purposes of mainstream media reporters, editors, and business models as easily as they swat away conservative broadsides. But they can ignore them. Since the mainstream media generally does not much these days engage in self-criticism or report external criticism, these non-conservative voices also seldom reach the mainstream media's customers in the United States and around the world.

Nellie Bowles' spirited, astute, and charming new book – A NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLER – will make it that much harder for members of America's mainstream media to pretend that they have been doing their job, which is to keep citizens informed about events and their meaning. That's because Bowles is not only an award-winning and multi-faceted journalist but also has been for most of her life, as she stresses in "Morning After the Revolution: Dispatches from the Wrong Side of History," a grateful resident of the world of elite progressivism.

The elite progressive palace guard swiftly swung into action. In early May, almost two weeks before the book's publication date, Becca Rothfeld, the nonfiction critic at the Washington Post's Book World, belittled Bowles for "sneering at the alleged excesses of progressivism." That's vulgar fiction. Bowles observes progressivism's excesses in person and reports them with a light touch and sympathy for the progressive spirit.

Born and raised in San Francisco, Bowles ventured into the city's lesbian neighborhoods as a young teenager. Curious and precocious, she aspired to write for the New York Times. After graduating from Columbia University in 2010, she joined the San Francisco Chronicle. In 2017, she landed her dream job as a New York Times correspondent.

Things did not go as Bowles expected. She arrived at the Times as a member in good standing of the newspaper's dominant cancel culture – that is, the rigorously enforced ostracism of co-workers who deviated from the Times' progressive party line. Although "a New Progressive doing the only job she ever wanted," Bowles began to doubt the decency of excommunicating colleagues for dissenting opinions. Moreover, despite explicit warnings from colleagues to keep her distance from the new hire from the Wall Street Journal with the dangerous ideas, Bowles fell head-over-heels for Bari Weiss, "a known liberal dissident on the Opinion side of the paper." Eager to understand the turmoil sweeping the nation – and putting journalistic integrity above fitting in and rising through the ranks – Bowles incurred



colleagues' wrath by reporting about the 2020 "summer of rage" in its complexity and multifariousness, capturing the social-justice protests' incoherence, lawlessness, and reckless dreams of political and cultural revolution as well as their idealistic aspirations to improve the world.

Eventually, Bowles was canceled by a "close friend" who declared her a racist for declining to join the ritual denunciation and banishment of a young colleague whose "violation" didn't seem "so bad" to Bowles. This "was the true end of my time in the movement," she writes. "Reporting on the wrong topics had gotten me close. But it was resisting a cancellation that did me in."

In 2021, Bowles resigned from the Times and married Weiss, who had resigned from the newspaper the previous year. Today, Bowles is a reporter and head of strategy for The Free Press, which she co-founded with Weiss. The flourishing media company – dedicated to "honesty, doggedness, and fierce independence" – has given new life to the notion that the task of journalism in a free society is to report the full story. The Free Press also gives exuberant expression to the traditional American belief that dedication to individual freedom, equality under law, and toleration of diverse opinion does not represent a partisan outlook but rather reflects the spirit of a nation that enables individuals of many different backgrounds and beliefs to live together peacefully, disagree productively, and cooperate fruitfully.

Bowles' book is in part an affecting memoir of her gradual disillusionment with elite progressivism and in part a collection of robust reports from the front lines of a cultural and political revolution that predated by decades the killing of George Floyd and was accelerated by the backlash to it. She manages to share a good deal about her changing perceptions and attitudes while writing with restraint about her personal life and her professional life.

Similarly, her vivid reporting shows rather than tells. Aiming "to capture the furies of the moment, the hottest battles of a few fiery years," she went out on the road. She saw closeup, and listened at length to, the people – the well-meaning, the confused, the preachers of righteousness, the true believers, the narcissists, the hangers-on, the thugs – who, energizing and energized by the summer of 2020 protests, sought to fundamentally transform the United States of America.

She traveled to Portland, Seattle, and Minneapolis. She found "no-cop autonomous zones" in which looting small businesses, burning down buildings, and occupying city streets were justified as the price of achieving utopia.

She observed workshops through which white women achieved fame and fortune by shaming others – largely white women – for their white privilege and by instructing them to atone for their "whiteness" by taking pride in their ability to see everywhere the sinful racism they perpetuate.

She sought out trans rights advocates. They rose in prominence as the Black Lives Matter movement to defund the police – followed by a surge in urban crime – waned. Discontent with ensuring that the American promise of individual rights encompasses the transgendered, trans activists endeavored to impose new dogmas: that the idea of two sexes is a myth, that gender is socially constructed and fluid, that children – even toddlers – should choose their gender.

And Bowles explored how, in their quest to not only tolerate but venerate norm-breaking behavior, San Francisco's progressive elites turned their beautiful city into an urban landscape blighted by homelessness, drug addiction, and theft and how, determined to overcome white supremacy, they declared war on excellence in their schools.

In most cases, Bowles leaves the reader to draw conclusions. She does not lack for convictions, but in an age overflowing with showboat opining, ostentatious moralizing, and partisan posturing, she grasps that less is often more. For all their outrageous excesses but without belaboring the point, she frequently discerns a respectable moral impulse – sometimes deformed almost beyond recognition – animating woke activists. She underestimates the roots, the spread, and the staying power of the revolutionary forces that she deftly describes. But Bowles' engaging accounts of the ignorance, preciousness, vanity, recklessness, absurdity, and fanaticism that mark woke culture will leave readers of diverse political persuasions with a more refined understanding of our challenging times.

Would that members of the mainstream media took the obligations of a free press so seriously and discharged them so gracefully.

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