

# Are We Conservatives? The Paradox of American Conservatism

By David Horowitz

I have been asked to address the question, "Are we conservatives?" to an institution that is a symbol of contemporary conservatism. This fact already tells us something about the subject. I could no more pose the question, "Are we progressives?" to a comparable gathering of the left, for example, than I could ask a crowd of citizens, "Are we Americans?" To raise such an issue in these contexts would be to question an identity and the foundations of a faith.

The ability to ask the question, "Are we conservatives?" tells us first of all that conservatism is not an ideology in the sense that liberalism or the various forms of radicalism are. Conservatism is not an "identity politics," that is, a politics addressed before all else to the issue of what kind of people embrace it. It is not a politics whose primary concern is to place its adherents in the camp of moral humanity, and thus to confer on them the stamp of History's approval.

Because conservatism is not a philosophy that seeks to enlist its adherents in a historical vanguard, it does not have a party line. It is possible for conservatives to question virtually any position held by other conservatives, including, evidently, the notion that they are conservatives at all, without risking excommunication, expulsion, or even a raised eyebrow.

Of course, this latitude has limits. No one would regard as conservative, for example, someone who embraced the levelling aspirations of contemporary liberalism or the utopian agendas of the socialist left. Within such limits, however, the liberality of conservatism (or at least American conservatism) is a generally under-appreciated fact. For an ex-radical like myself to have become part of the conservative community has been an extraordinary privilege, like breathing a free air. In conservatism I have encountered a community where I can engage the issues of the day without anxiously looking over my shoulder to assess the reaction of the politically correct. This, I can tell you, is very different from the intellectual atmosphere that prevailed on the left.

**Beginning as an Attitude.** Although it is not an ideological faith, American conservatism *is* grounded in philosophical convictions (and among conservatives is unique in this respect). It begins, however, the way other conservatisms begin—as an attitude—and only afterward does it become a stance. And when American conservatism solidifies into a philosophical position, it does so from considerations that are ultimately pragmatic (and in this is consonant with what is traditionally understood to be the conservative temper). This is not to deny that conservatives themselves often claim religious principles as the ultimate basis for their convictions. But it is not any religious commitment that makes them conservatives. There are radicals and liberals who have similar commitments and make similar claims.

To say that conservative attitudes derive from pragmatic considerations is to state an obvious but important fact: What makes conservative principles "conservative" is that they are rooted in an attitude about the past, rather than in expectations of the future.

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It is this pragmatic foundation of American conservatism that explains why it can be the common ground of such diverse viewpoints. Conservatives today operate from what are often profoundly different philosophical assumptions and entertain quite divergent expectations of the future. It is, in fact, this indeterminacy about the future that, in my view, is the crucial element that distinguishes conservatism from its ideological opponents.

Indeterminacy about the future does not mean that conservatives are indifferent to possible social outcomes. They would, of course, like to see a future that is relatively more benevolent and measurably more humane than present circumstances. But they can only claim to appreciate those principles and to favor those traditions and institutions that may serve as reasonable and prudential guides through passages that are uncertain, and despite consequences that are unintended. Conservatives do not pretend to be able to shape the social future, and particularly do not offer plans designed to induce human beings to act in ways that are dramatically different from how human beings have acted in the past.

### **Between Past and Future**

The first principles of conservatism, then, are propositions about the existing social contract: about human nature in a social context. They are propositions about limits, and the imposition of limits, and what they both make possible. It is this practicality, this attention to experience and to workable arrangements, that explains why conservatism can be liberal and tolerant toward its exponents in ways that the progressive left cannot.

In contrast to the conservative outlook, liberal and radical ideologies are about desired—and therefore determinate—futures. The first principles of the left are the principles of politically constructing a “better world.” Such a future must be consciously designed by enlightened intelligence. It is thus an essential characteristic of progressivism that it proposes a sharp break with the experience of the past, that its visions entail a rejection of existing social contracts.

“**Socially Just.**” Throughout the modern era, progressives have proposed a contract which guarantees that all of society’s members will be made equal in their economic and social conditions—or at the very least, in their starting points. Futures based on this contract are designated “socially just.” Liberals and radicals differ among themselves about the degree of equality that might be achieved in the name of social justice, or of the means acceptable for arriving at such a state. (The concession involved when liberals refer to “levelling the playing field,” as opposed to levelling the players, results from their attention to previous progressive failures, for example.) But the differences between liberals and radicals are confined first to differences of degree in the results desired, and then to the means by which these results may be obtained. The agenda of “social justice,” and of using the state to enforce desired outcomes, remains the same. It is this shared, utopian agenda that makes it appropriate to refer to both liberalism and radicalism, generically, as ideology of the left.

Since the ideologies of the left derive from commitments to an imagined future, to question them is to provoke a moral, rather than an empirical, response: “Are you for or against the future equality of human beings?” To demur from a commitment to the progressive viewpoint is thus not a failure to assess relevant facts, but an unwillingness to embrace a liberated future. It is to *will* the imperfections of the present order. In the current political cant of the left, it is to be “racist, sexist, classist,” a defender of the status quo.

That is why not only radicals, but even those who call themselves liberals are instinctively intolerant toward the conservative position. For progressives, the future is not a maze of human uncertainties and unintended consequences. It is a moral choice. To achieve the socially just future requires only that enough people decide to will it. Consequently, it is perfectly consistent for

progressives to consider themselves morally and intellectually enlightened, while dismissing their opponents as immoral, ignorant, or (not infrequently) insane.

While the politics of the left is derived from assumptions about the future, its partisans are also careful to construct a history that validates their claims. At the outset of the Cold War, the sociologist T. H. Marshall delivered a famous lecture on the “development of citizenship” in the West. In it he distinguished between the civil, political, and social dimensions of citizenship, identifying each of the last three centuries as a stage in their progress. The revolutions of the 18th century institutionalized civil rights of free speech and religion, and a government of laws. The 19th century extended the rights of suffrage and the political base of freedom, establishing the equality of individuals as participants in the political process that guaranteed their civil rights. The 20th century—then at its mid-point—was witnessing a revolution that would extend citizenship rights to the social and economic realms, by recognizing entitlements to education, health care, material well-being and security as basic human rights.

**Ideological Umbrella.** It should be obvious that this third sphere of citizenship rights embraces the prescriptions of socialism, and that Marshall’s paradigm is merely a liberal formulation of the agenda of the modern left. For two centuries the left has attempted to “complete” the French Revolution by extending political and civil freedom into the social realm in the form of redistributionist claims to economic wealth. Until now, “socialism” has been the ideological umbrella for this project.

Modern—or should I say post-modern, or better still, post-Communist—conservatism begins with the recognition that this agenda and the progressive paradigm that underpins it are bankrupt. They have been definitively refuted by the catastrophes of socialism in the 20th century. The utopian quest for social justice and its redistributionist agenda are implicated in those catastrophes as root causes of the totalitarian nightmare. To propose a “solution” that is utopian, in other words impossible, is to propose a solution that requires absolute coercion in order to succeed. Who wills the end, wills the means.

Post-Communist conservatism, then, begins with the principle that is written in the blood of the social experiment. It was summed up by Hayek in *The Constitution of Liberty* more than thirty years ago: “It is just not true,” he wrote, “that human beings are born equal;... if we treat them equally, the result must be inequality in their actual position;... [thus] the only way to place them in an equal position would be to treat them differently. Equality before the law and material equality are, therefore, not only different, but in conflict with each other.”

**Crushing Individual Freedom.** In other words, the rights historically claimed in the paradigm of the left are self-contradicting and self-defeating. The history of the social experiment of the last 200 years describes the stark implications of that contradiction and the terrible price of those defeats. The regime of social justice, of which the left dreams, is a regime that by its very nature must crush individual freedom. It is not a question of choosing the right (or avoiding the wrong) political means in order to achieve the desired ends. The means are contained in the ends.

The leftist revolution must crush freedom in order to achieve the social justice that it seeks. It is unable, therefore, to achieve even that justice. This is the totalitarian circle that cannot be squared. Socialism is not bread without freedom, it is neither freedom nor bread. The shades of the victims in the endless cemetery of 20th century revolutions cry out from their still fresh graves: The liberated future is a destructive illusion. To heed this cry is the beginning of the conservative point of view.

While opposing the destructive chimera of socialist justice, however, conservatives should not indulge a utopianism of their own. The conservative vision does not exclude compromise; nor should it condemn every attempt, however moderate, to square the circle of political liberty and social welfare. Conservatism does not require that all aspects of the Welfare State be rejected in favor of free market principles. After all, conservatives are (or should be) the first to recognize the intractable nature of the human condition. The perfectly free society is as untenable as the perfectly just society, and for the same reason. We would have to rip out our all-too-human hearts in order to achieve it. Some economic redistribution may be compassionate and necessary, even though (as Hayek has shown) it can never be just.

In short, within conservatism there is room for a “liberal” argument as to how far we need to go in following the logic of liberty and how widely we can extend the social safety net, or best shape the contours of a welfare intending state. But for conservatives, it is the limits of such endeavors that must be recognized at the outset; the bankruptcy and menace of the socialist paradigm that must be accepted and understood.

## The American Founding

The Hayekian paradox—the point from which contemporary conservatism begins—is, of course, only a reformulation of an understanding shared by the architects of the American founding. Thus the incompatibility of liberty with any plan to eliminate inequality and difference is the essential argument that Publius makes in *Federalist #10*. Nor is it an accident, as Marxists like to say, that *Federalist #10* describes the constitutional arrangement as a design to thwart the projects of the left—“a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project.”

It is thus in the constitutional founding that American conservatism finds its philosophical ground. American conservatives define themselves first of all as conservers of the constitutional framework; the philosophy of that framework informs their outlook.

On examination, the constitutional philosophy can be seen to originate in a conservative appreciation of limits as the foundation of rights, of a system of ordered constraints as the basis of agreement. (That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men.) In the constitutional philosophy, the possibilities of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are attainable only through a framework of neutral restraints: in economics, the discipline of the market; in politics, popular consent and the rule of law. This is the formula of liberal conservatism: the individual constrained by a government of the laws; government limited by negative liberties and the consent of the governed. It is the formula of the constitutional founding. It is the wisdom reaffirmed by the catastrophes of the left—of those who rejected this framework as a bourgeois concept and a mass for privilege—from the Jacobin Terror to the 20th century gulags that Marxists built.

The post-Communist left also understands the significance of the Constitution as a bulwark of conservative principles and freedoms. In his book, *Constitutional Faith*, law professor Sanford Levinson poses the question of whether progressives can even participate in the social contract, whether they could “sign” the Constitution today in good faith. In order to justify a half-hearted “yes” for himself, Levinson first depreciates the Constitution as a crystallization of durable truths. The “anti-foundationalist” philosophy of Richard Rorty provides an epistemological vantage. In Levinson’s view, the constitutional framework is merely a “discourse,” a “linguistic system” in which virtually any social agenda can be expressed. It is, in his words, “less a series of propositional utterances than a commitment to taking political conversation seriously,” a conversation, albeit, in which anything can be said.

Far from exhibiting an attitude that is eccentric or extreme, Levinson is here merely expressing the nihilistic temper of the contemporary left. Thus, in *The Future of Liberal Revolution*, just published, Yale law professor Bruce Ackerman proposes a way of reading the Constitution so that a redistributionist agenda (one of Publius's "wicked projects") can be incorporated into its text. Extending this logic, law professor Mark Tushnet of Georgetown argues that one can employ what he calls "constitution-talk" to implement a program of affirmative rights, and indeed, the entire socialist agenda.

Finding a radical flexibility in the constitutional text is the precondition for securing the left's endorsement of the Constitution, because the Constitution was clearly written as a conservative foundation—property as the basis of liberty; the autonomy of the individual and private enterprise as against the tyranny of the state. "Those who are well off..." argues Levinson, "might well be... appreciative of the Constitution's protection of so-called 'negative' liberties, that is rights against oppressive state interference in one's everyday life.... But what reason do persons mired in poverty have to be wildly appreciative of negative rights when what they seek are affirmative protections such as food, shelter, and clothing?... Might he or she... declare that a Constitution lacking a strongly affirmative Bill of Rights is not worth signing, whatever its other strengths may be?"

Thus, the outlook of post-Communist progressives establishes itself in the denial of precisely the lesson that 20th century revolutions teach—that the principles of economic redistribution and affirmative rights, which form the basis of the socialist project, lead to the destruction of prosperity and justice and liberty.

For the conservative, the Constitution is not a convenient discourse; but a repository of pragmatic and durable truths about the conditions of liberty and prosperity in a social order. No one reading the argument of the *Federalist Papers*, which is an argument about the meaning of history, can fail to understand it. The truths embodied in the principles of the Constitution were validated for the Founders by the history of previously existing societies. They have been confirmed in our lifetime by the end results of the 200-year war of the left against the philosophical and political framework of "bourgeois" freedoms—against the idea of negative liberties and the practice of limited government; and by the left's establishment of societies based on its own radical principles of positive freedoms, meaning affirmative rights to food, shelter, clothing, employment, and equality; and the catastrophes they created.

### **But, are we conservatives?**

Well, yes and no. In a famous afterword to *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek explained why he was not a conservative in the European sense. "Conservatism, proper," he wrote, "is a legitimate, probably necessary, but certainly widespread attitude of opposition to drastic change." It therefore cannot "offer an alternative to the direction in which we are moving."

And that is a problem, given the dynamism of capitalist society, the openness of the American polity, and the ascendance of modern liberal ideology over the last half century. I use the term "modern liberal" to reflect that fact that through its cultural dominance, the left has been able to hijack the term "liberal" for its own anti-liberal agendas. The principles and values of the American founding, which form the philosophic basis of contemporary conservatism, are, of course, those of Classical Liberalism. The fathers of modern conservatism—Locke, Burke, Madison—are Classical Liberals. Far from being conservatives, they were anti-Tory exponents of liberal principle, self-conscious defenders and architects of the great liberal revolutions of their time.

While modern radicals have failed in their efforts to expropriate the means of material production, they have succeeded in appropriating enough of the means of cultural production to proclaim themselves liberals and make the label stick. These radical wolves in sheep's clothing fall into two categories. The first and smaller group is made up of the unreconstructed left. Whether calling itself radical feminist, or structuralist, or merely progressive, its agenda remains totalitarian. The second, larger category acknowledges the bankruptcy of the socialist left, and makes a begrudging commitment to free markets, but still does not want to give up the agenda of "social justice"—the idea that government can arrive at a standard of what is just, and that the state can implement such a standard without destroying economic and political freedom.

The liberal ascendance that dominates and clouds the current horizon is, in fact, a popular front of these two groups. Their victories are visible all around us. Under the banner of the Great Society and welfare rights, they have

- ✓ transformed the idea of America from being a covenant to secure liberties to being a claim to entitlement; and therefore
- ✓ vastly expanded the powers of the state and dramatically constricted the realm of individual freedom;
- ✓ eroded the private economy and stifled individual initiative, so that today government accounts for more than 40 percent of the domestic product and the productive citizen pays more than 50 percent of his or her income in taxes;
- ✓ subverted neutrality of the law and the very idea of a national identity by race-based legislation and the concept of group rights.

Nothing, in fact, so dramatically indicates the transformation of the constitutional framework in our time than the fact that anti-white, anti-Asian, anti-Jewish, and anti-European discrimination on behalf of blacks, Hispanics, "native Americans," and Aleutian Islanders(!) is now a sign of liberal enlightenment, while defense of the universalist covenant of the founding is now regarded as reactionary and racist.

So ingrained have the premises of the old left become, in new liberal clothing in post-Cold War America, that conservatives are now the counter-culture. And this is why we must not think only in conservative terms in confronting the challenges ahead. We must think of ourselves as heirs to Locke and Burke and Madison, who faced a similar challenge from the lefts of their time, and we must proclaim with them: We are the "revolutionaries" demanding a universal standard of one right, one law, one nation for all. We are the champions of tolerance, the opponents of group privilege and of communal division. We are the proponents of a common ground that is color-blind, gender-equitable (in both directions), and ethnically inclusive—a government of laws that is neutral between its citizens and limited in scope. We are the advocates of society as against the state, the seekers of dramatic reduction in the burdens of taxation and redress from the injustices of government intervention. We are the defenders of the free market against the destructive claims of the socialist agenda. And we are conservers of the constitutional covenant against the forces of modern tyranny and the totalitarian state.

