

PART I

*Classical  
Conservatism*



## CHAPTER ONE

Understanding  
Traditionalist  
Conservatism*Mark C. Henrie*

IN THE YEARS following the Second World War, a group of writers emerged who became known as America's New Conservatives, prominently including Richard M. Weaver, Peter Viereck, Robert Nisbet, and Russell Kirk.<sup>1</sup> In this case, "new" did not merely indicate a generational transition; these thinkers did not represent a simple return to the conservatism of the 1930s following the emergency of world war. Instead, the New Conservatives articulated ideas and concepts that were virtually unprecedented in American intellectual history. They took their political bearings from a quite novel set of intellectual authorities. Most striking of all, at the very moment of America's historic victory over the most potent totalitarian threat of the century, their writings were redolent with sometimes sweeping doubts about

1. See Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt Against Revolt, 1815–1949* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1949); Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953); and Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953).

the “progress” of the Modern Project—and about the individualism at the heart of modern liberalism’s liberty.

Central to the conservatism of the 1930s was intransigent opposition, on the part of various Republican-leaning social groups, to the “socialism” of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. The possessing classes resisted state-directed bureaucratic administration of the economy in the name of an older form of liberal capitalist social order. Among intellectuals, articulate conservatism in the 1930s was represented by such men as H. L. Mencken, George Santayana, Irving Babbitt, and Albert Jay Nock.<sup>2</sup> With the partial exception of Santayana, each may be said to have subscribed to a version of classical liberalism or libertarianism that emphasized something resembling John Stuart Mill’s individuality, as opposed to social conformity. Without exception, their worldviews were markedly elitist and sharpened by religious skepticism. This last could be seen in Santayana’s genteel atheism, in Mencken’s noisy contempt for American Bible-thumpers, in Nock’s preference for the most coldly rationalist of French freethinkers, and in Babbitt’s quest for wisdom in Hinduism after dismissing his Puritan ancestry. In other words, these prewar conservatives connected not at all with the lived traditions of the vast majority of the American people, except on the single point of the tradition of individualism, whether rugged or not.

Kirk, of course, quickly became the leading figure of the New Conservatism—a position that later received the appellation of “traditionalism” or “traditionalist conservatism.” It was also referred to as “Burkean conservatism,” after the British statesman and writer Edmund Burke (1729–1797). Burke had long been recognized as the font of British and some strands of continental European conservatism, but his influence in America was generally held to be negligible. Although Kirk himself was influenced by some of the currents of thought in the 1930s, and though *The Conservative Mind* purported

2. See Robert Crunden, ed., *The Superfluous Men: Critics of American Culture, 1900–1945* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1999).

to be a “recovery” of a preexisting Burkean tradition in American political and social thought, it is difficult to deny that there was also a large element of invention in Kirk’s account of the conservative tradition. Kirk’s “canons” of conservatism began with an orientation to “transcendent order” or “natural law”—a view that political problems are, at bottom, religious and moral problems rather than the other way around. Whereas the libertarian conservatives of the 1930s usually understood themselves as heirs of various enlightenment dissenters from Europe’s Christian civilization, Kirk was a dissenter from the tradition of dissent, striving to learn from the sidelined champions of orthodox religion. Kirk therefore rejected rationalism, utilitarianism, and egalitarianism. He tied freedom to property holding, but there is no discussion of the “magic of the marketplace” or interest in economic efficiency. He was hostile to the experimentalism of the social scientific mind, and he defended the latent reasonableness of evolved social forms. The three evils that emerge as antagonists throughout *The Conservative Mind* are the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the bureaucratic-managerial revolution of the first half of the twentieth century. Communism is mentioned hardly at all.

Focusing on the French Revolution, Kirk stated emphatically that the overarching evil of the age was “ideology,” and he claimed that conservatism, properly understood, is “the negation of ideology.” As such, conservatism prescribes a “politics of prudence,” a cautious statesmanship founded upon a sensitive understanding of the complexities of *human nature*, the limitations of human history, and the capaciousness of the human good. Of course, liberalism’s ancient boast has always been that it founds itself upon, and best adequates to, *human nature*—once that nature is shorn of illusions and superstition. From the point of view of the liberal mind, one might even say that if ideology were defined as a project for achieving a utopian intellectual abstraction, then it is liberalism that is the negation of ideology.

From Kirk’s perspective, there is a partial truth in liberalism’s

claims: liberty is a genuine element of the human good, and individual human beings are worthy of a respect that is roughly, imperfectly realized in the liberal doctrine of rights. Consequently, Kirk could find significant areas of common ground with classical liberals such as F. A. Hayek (while forcefully eschewing more doctrinaire libertarians) and, up to a point, with the chastened liberals we now know as neoconservatives. But to Kirk, and to the American traditionalists he inspired, liberals ultimately fail to understand the partiality of their core principle. Their account of human nature excludes too much of what can be known, and is known, about the human good. Because their principle of individual liberty is “simple” or “reductionist,” liberals possess no “other” principle that can authoritatively limit the eventual application of their principle to all spheres of human life—this despite their proud boast that liberalism differs in kind from all other political theories in refusing for itself a “comprehensive conception of the good.” Because, for liberalism, the public sphere is limited only by rights, which are the possession only of those great abstractions, “individuals,” the public sphere in fact extends to all human relations. The homogenization of the entire human world on the basis of the contract theory is the dehumanizing threat we ultimately face, made all the more dangerous by the fact that America’s political discourse has lacked any terms that would enable us to recognize the ideological or dogmatic character of liberalism.

Consequently, Kirk’s other great theme, repeated throughout his life, was an appeal to revivify the “moral imagination” through a serious engagement with poetry and imaginative literature. Such “romanticism” would seem to have little to do with the politics of prudence. However, this appeal was a recognition of, and a response to, the enveloping character of liberal presumptions in the thinking of all Americans. Alexis de Tocqueville had observed that censorship was unnecessary in America, because no American could imagine writing a book that would challenge the democratic regime. Kirk recognized the essential truth of Tocqueville’s observation, but he

considered this a stumbling block in the search for the whole truth about people rather than an indication that America was “the regime according to nature.” Kirk’s prophetic call for the cultivation of moral imagination was an attempt to free Americans from liberal ideology so that they could begin to *name* those “other” elements of the human good, which are obscured in the liberal dispensation.

### Reaction to New Conservatism

Kirk’s traditionalism quickly met with, and has long labored under, the accusation that it is, in effect, “un-American.” The American tradition of political thought has always proceeded within the terms of the U.S. Constitution and the Federalist papers—evidently liberal documents. As Louis Hartz so famously argued, America is the Lockean country par excellence, with an aboriginal condition (or original position) closely resembling John Locke’s state of nature and a founding compact reflecting Lockean principles. Consequently, there never has been, nor ever could be, a genuinely conservative party—in the European sense—in American life.<sup>3</sup>

Another important academic response to the New Conservatives was a 1957 article in the *American Political Science Review* by a young Samuel P. Huntington.<sup>4</sup> In attempting to come to terms with the quite unexpected emergence of a postwar American conservatism, Huntington engaged in an exercise in definition, considering three possible ways in which conservatism might be understood. The first alternative would be to follow the Marxist critique of ideologies. From such a perspective, ideologies would be superstructural rationalizations of the political power exercised in the basic struggle of socioeconomic classes. Emerging after the French Revolution’s destruction of

3. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

4. Samuel P. Huntington, “Conservatism as an Ideology,” *APSR* LI (June 1957): 454–73.

Europe's ancien régime, conservatism would then be the apologia for the rule of the feudal nobility. Because there was no feudal class in America's thoroughly bourgeois history, yet there were self-described American conservatives in the 1950s, this "aristocratic" account of American conservatism was unpersuasive.

Second, Huntington considered whether conservatism might be understood as an "autonomous" body of ideas, in some sense a political theory on a par with liberalism or socialism or Marxism. Kirk's list of conservative canons was duly noted, but Huntington dismissed these, for he believed the range of ideas brought together in *The Conservative Mind* was too diverse to form a coherent philosophy in any way analogous to the "great" (or academically respectable) ideologies. Of course, as we have seen, Kirk himself would not have disagreed with the contention that conservatism is not a member of the genus, modern ideology. But whether, by that fact, conservatism relinquishes all claim to an "autonomous" grounding of its ideas is another matter.

Finally, Huntington settled on a "positional" understanding of conservatism—an attitude toward change that endeavors to defend the institutional status quo, whatever the status quo may be. Conservatism "properly understood" would thus emphasize organic development and guard against the revolutionary transformation of any given regime. Such a conservatism would be legitimately Burkean, at least with regard to process if not principles. In America, authentic conservatism would be the conservation and consolidation of the progressive liberal tradition; Adlai Stevenson might serve as the exemplar of such a conservatism. Anything else would be "reactionary" and, thus, "un-American." In many ways, contemporary neoconservatives occupy the role that Huntington prescribed for American conservatives. His critique of any political tendency "more" conservative than this has been reprised by contemporary neoconservatives as well. Most recently, Adam Wolfson intimated, with sensitivity and generous



regard, that Kirkian traditionalists wander dangerously close to un-American activities.<sup>5</sup>

But as we have seen rather pointedly, by placing Kirk in contrast to the prewar libertarian conservatives, there are several ways in which he was actually quite close to the values and aspirations of common Americans untutored in political theory. Today's traditionalist conservatives continue to be closer to many ordinary Americans on religious and moral matters—and on what we might call the “national question”—than are either libertarians or neoconservatives. Traditionalists can be understood as “un-American” only when America is understood definitively as the abstract embodiment of liberal theory. A younger Samuel Huntington thought in such terms.<sup>6</sup> But behold—with his latest book, *Who Are We?*, it would appear that Huntington himself has matured—into a traditionalist.<sup>7</sup>

### Moral Sources

In a recent article in *The Public Interest*, Wolfson observed that traditionalists are animated by wistful memories of “an America of small towns and close-knit communities.” He suggested that while such nostalgia may be charming, there is something fundamentally unreal or impracticable in the traditionalist worldview: we are all cosmopolites now. Norman Podhoretz, another neoconservative author, once boasted that what neoconservatism had signally added to an otherwise philistine American conservatism was a concern for *culture*. When it was pointed out to him that the writers of the traditionalist pantheon were, to a man, concerned with cultural questions above all else, his response was that the traditionalists were concerned with the wrong

5. Adam Wolfson, “Conservatives and Neoconservatives,” *The Public Interest* 154 (Winter 2004): 32–48.

6. Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981).

7. Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

sort of culture: they championed anachronistic, vaguely aristocratic litterateurs who were critical of modern democracy, whereas what was needed was attention to the cultural supporters of America's bourgeois order.<sup>8</sup> Claims concerning "historical availability" are prominent in neoconservative criticism of traditionalism.

Both these objections to traditionalist conservatism help illuminate a significant point of disagreement. In his article, Wolfson claimed Tocqueville as the neoconservative patron, in contrast to the traditionalists' Burke. But most traditionalists would contest this claim, wanting to view Tocqueville as one of their own, as Kirk himself did by including the Frenchman in his genealogy of the Anglo-American Burkean tradition. After all, Tocqueville viewed the emergent modern regime with distinctly mixed feelings, and he sought to *mitigate* democracy through the preservation and cultivation of "aristocratic" inheritances. One such inheritance in America is local government ("small towns and close-knit communities"); another is the "aristocratic" education of American lawyers, who appear to occupy a position not unlike that of the old *noblesse de robe*. Among the other "aristocratic" inheritances that Tocqueville sought to foster in America are the family and the Christian religion.

Wolfson maintained that in the collapse of ancient opinions and rules of life, "neoconservatives seek democratic substitutes for these older modes of living." While Tocqueville did advert to the democratic "substitutes" Americans had deployed in the absence of aristocratic inheritances—notably, of course, the associations—he did not preemptively presume that ancient rules of life were untenable at the first questioning. And while Tocqueville appears to have recognized the superior justice of modern democracy in comparison with older forms of political rule, one must be blind not to see his sense of sorrow at the loss of the human goods known in "aristocracy." In

8. Norman Podhoretz, "Neoconservatism: A Eulogy," *Commentary* 101, no. 3 (March 1996): 19–27; and Podhoretz's response to letters, *Commentary* 101, no. 6 (June 1996): 16.

fact, Tocqueville's peculiarly expansive definition of aristocracy as the universal form of premodern life, in contrast to the modern regime of popular sovereignty or democratic consent, constitutes a theoretical foundation for the universal or "autonomous" character of traditionalist conservatism—contra the young Samuel Huntington.

The traditionalist conservative's first feeling, the intuition that constitutes his or her moral source, is the sense of *loss*, and hence, of *nostalgia*. Those who are secure in the enjoyment of their own are often progressives of a sort, so confident in the solidity of their estate that they do not shrink from experimenting with new modes and orders. This was true, for example, of the French nobility of the ancien régime, who were often avid readers of the democratic theories of the philosophes and who, in practice, rejected their traditional patrimonial duties for the novelties of the court. This was true also of the planter class of the antebellum South, at least in the 1840s. Their writings are filled with an exuberant modernity. The conservative spirit, as such, arises only when loss is at hand or, probably more frequently, when loss has occurred. Consequently, there is always a "reactionary" dimension to such conservatism; the conservative typically arrives "too late" for mere conservation.

While in possession, we take our good for granted and thus often fail to recognize it. But in the face of loss, the human good is vividly revealed to us. We lament the loss of goods, not the loss of evils, which is why lament *illuminates*. Is it not striking that whereas antebellum Southern writers championed both the economic and moral superiority of the "peculiar institution," postbellum Southern conservatives typically did not *lament* the loss of slavery? Rather, the latter lamented the loss of gentility, gallantry, domesticity, and the virtues of yeoman agriculturalists. Although it may be true that nostalgia views the past through rose-colored glasses, such a criticism misses the point. To see the good while blinkered against evils is, nevertheless, *to see the good*. This is a source of knowledge, as well as a moral

source; and here we may begin to glimpse facets of the human good beyond social functionality or mere utility, beyond all our theorizing.

So drenched in the progressive spirit is American political discourse (how could it be otherwise in the *novus ordo seclorum*?) that the backward glance is usually rejected out of hand and with the most facile of arguments. Ever since Burke's solicitous phrases about "Gothick" and "monkish" traditions, traditionalist conservatives have notably looked to the Middle Ages as a source of inspiration.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, one is met with a rejoinder of the sort, "But would you really want to live in an age before modern dentistry?" Southern traditionalists who speak well of the antebellum South almost always stand accused of being racist defenders of slavery. But why should such rejoinders count as definitive when the Modern Project, which is usually understood to have begun in the Renaissance, took as an inspiring model Athens—a society with no access to modern dentistry and built on a foundation of slave labor?

The point of this exercise in comparative nostalgia is not to score debater points but rather to achieve some clarity. Traditionalists do *not* wish to "turn back the clock" to premodern dentistry any more than the lovers of Periclean Athens wish to restore a slave economy. Polis-envy in the Renaissance and among some of our contemporaries serves as an indicator that a thinker is attracted to an ideal of political participation, as well as literary and philosophical originality and, perhaps, leisure, that he believes is unavailable or frustrated in the present. Traditionalist conservatives' kind words about medievalism indicate that they are attracted to forms of communal solidarity—loyalty and friendship, leisure, honor and nobility, and religious "enchantment"—that they believe are unavailable or frustrated in the present. As Tocqueville helped us understand, this list is not idiosyn-

9. It is important to observe that the French ancien régime existing immediately before the revolution was an innovative, and in many ways progressive, early-modern regime, not a medieval one. Consequently, at the time it seldom served as a conservative model—and almost never after the end of the Napoleonic period.

cratic; rather, it corresponds in its particulars to the deficits universally engendered by the modern regime.

For as conservative thinkers over the generations have intuited, and as Pierre Manent argued so persuasively in *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*,<sup>10</sup> the dominant political tradition of modernity did not simply discover a pattern laid up in heaven to contemplate. Rather, Enlightenment liberalism was a *project* that set out to transform the world. Moreover, this multigenerational project was aimed against a particular enemy—namely, the Church and, with it, the social world that Christianity had brought into being in Europe. Thus, the famous “state of nature” that grounds liberal argument is a cunning substitute for the biblical account of Eden. The bourgeois virtues of the commercial republic, in turn, are meant to supersede the classical and Christian virtues, which in some cases now assume the character of vices. The sovereignty of the people as the sole legitimating principle of the liberal regime places in question the sovereignty of God.

The construction of the modern liberal democratic regime has followed a circuitous path amid many, usually unacknowledged contingencies. In different times and places, the partisans of liberal progress have sided with enlightened monarchs, with parliaments, with executive agencies, and lately with constitutional courts. (Both Samuel Huntington and Stephen Holmes<sup>11</sup> objected that conservatives have defended so wide an array of institutions in various times and places that conservatism cannot be said to have a fixed or autonomous character. However, if conservatives have changed their defensive front over the decades, so too have liberals changed their mode of attack.) Still, there are permanent features to the world remade by Enlightenment, and conservative “medievalism” is a catalog of the consistent and pervading sense of *loss* brought on by the achievement of the

10. Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

11. Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Anti-Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

modern regime. Wherever there is a sense of loss, the conservative knows that there lies an indicator of some dimension of the human good.

From this discussion, we can discover something else about the traditionalist's "method." The philosophes cast doubt on the universal applicability of Christian "morals" in light of the diverse folkways of "natural men" whom European explorers had "discovered" (or claimed to have discovered) in their voyages. A common trope of the French Enlightenment was to question even the incest taboo as an unscientific "prejudice" of Christian civilization. But the Enlightened builders of the liberal regime were quite certain that they had discovered principles of political right that *were* universally applicable—and that in time might be applied beyond politics to the sphere of morals. Burke, in contrast, was guided by a kind of certainty in (traditional) morals, by an immediate intuition of the human good, while he viewed with the deepest skepticism speculative theories of political right. Whereas the Enlightenment "builds down" from politics to morals, the conservative "builds up" from morals to politics. Perhaps it would be fair to say that the liberal tradition, even today, has not yet generated a credible account of moral life. Perhaps it would be similarly fair to say that the conservative tradition has not yet generated a credible account of political life.

### **Boxing in Liberalism**

Viewed in this way, it might be said that traditionalist conservatism is *not yet* a political theory but rather a tradition of social criticism that is working its way to a political philosophy adequate to its deepest moral intuitions. There is nothing extraordinary in such a view when we remember that the liberal tradition first reached something like a comprehensive theoretical articulation only in Locke, nearly two centuries after its moral rudiments came to light in the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. We are only little more than two cen-

turies on from conservatism's birth in reaction to the French Revolution. Thus, the specifically *political* teaching of traditional conservatism remains provisional.

With this caveat in mind, one must nonetheless observe that traditionalist conservatism occupies a middle ground. On one side stand what we might call compleat liberals, who hold that some form of the principle of consent and the natural rights of individuals *is* justice, simply. What is more, justice so understood has primacy over all other dimensions of the human good. Any deviation from this principle is ipso facto illegitimate. Where hitherto held in abeyance, it must be pressed forward to completion. Anything—any human institution or rule of life—that we have hitherto valued that cannot stand under the conditions of liberal justice has no “right” to exist; the failure of any human institution when exposed to liberal principles is *prima facie* evidence of the prior existence of injustice in that institution. Thus, nothing genuinely just, and so nothing genuinely good, has been lost in the progress of the liberal regime: there is literally *no* cause for lament or nostalgia. “Let justice be done though the heavens fall.” I take it that libertarianism is the compleat liberalism of the right.

On the other side are compleat reactionaries, such as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald, who entirely reject consent as a political and social principle and whose hatred for the modern regime knows no bounds.<sup>12</sup> The *ancien régime* must be restored in every particular, and there must be no concession on monarchic absolutism. As in the Garden of Eden, liberalism is grounded in a choice to traduce “the rights of God.” Bonald’s rallying cry was, in effect, “Monarchy, monotheism, monogamy: three great things that go great together.” In the end, Maistre was driven to writing obscurantist hymns of praise for the joys of abject obedience, the salutary effects of human sacrifice,

12. Fascism, on this score, would not be continuous with Maistre and Bonald, because in various ways it was enamored of modern technology and actively endeavored to mobilize mass will, or the mass consent on the part of the people.

and the central role of the executioner in upholding civilized order. The great Tory Samuel Johnson, though far from a French retrograde, nonetheless could say with heartfelt vehemence, “The Devil was the first Whig.” (And, indeed, must we not admit there is something of Milton’s Satan in the liberal account of human virtues?)

It has long been conventional for political theorists to observe that Burke was, after all, a lifelong Whig. Because Locke was the political philosopher of the Whig settlement and the founder of the liberal tradition, Burke must be understood, in strong contrast to the continental reactionaries, as having no genuinely *fundamental* hostility to the modern regime. Perhaps, indeed, he might be thought of as the first neoconservative: if not a liberal, then at least a friend of liberalism. But as Kirk noticed in *The Conservative Mind*, Burke—in *Reflections* and afterward—“disavowed a great part of the principles of Locke.” To take just one example, Burke deployed Lockean language about the contract of society only in an effort to explode that language’s Lockean meaning. According to Kirk, conservatism after Burke owes “almost nothing” to Locke.<sup>13</sup>

I believe it is wrong, therefore, to understand the Burkean tradition as a sort of old-fashioned liberalism—or a sort of classical liberalism with some romantic doodads tacked on. It is also wrong to read the Burkean tradition in so strong a contrast to the continental retrogrades. If neoconservatives are aptly described as “conservative liberals”—as I believe they are—perhaps we can best understand the Burkean tradition as “liberal conservatism.” Is this a distinction that makes a difference? I believe it does.

Liberal conservatism recognizes many of the *practical* advantages of liberalism, such as increased economic productivity and social peace. But in also recognizing the goods lost in the modern regime, such conservatism remains open to, and in search of, a revised *theo-*

13. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 7th ed. (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1953, 1995), 27.



*retical* account of political justice as such. Liberal conservatism does not reject the role of individual consent in politics, but nevertheless it retains a conviction that the human world cannot be wholly reconceived or reconstructed on that principle. Practically speaking, this means that liberal conservatives approach the notion of rights with great wariness, precisely because rights are “trumps.” Characteristically, liberal conservatives tend to reify social institutions, seeing these institutions as possessing a species of subjectivity in their own right and, thus, not wholly comprehended by a term such as “voluntary association.” The traditional common law is held in high esteem by liberal conservatives because its complex balancing of principles approaches rather closely to the whole truth about people; modern American jurisprudence is seen as a fantastic simplification of law to fit an ideological abstraction rather than real human beings.

Neoconservatism, or conservative liberalism, also occupies a middle ground. Unlike libertarians who aggressively seek to expand the principle of consent through all spheres of human interest, neoconservatives are the prudent or responsible liberals who understand that the tendency of liberal regimes to totalize their central principle constitutes a danger for the liberal regime itself. Neoconservatives admit that the liberal regime depends on a social capital that it does not itself generate. They therefore seek to restrain the liberal principle in select circumstances in the hope of “saving liberalism.” But it is here that the conservative liberal and the liberal conservative part company. For it would appear, when all is said and done, that the neoconservatives are convinced that the liberal account of political right is in fact final and that their political activity is undertaken on liberalism’s behalf. For the traditionalists, the question of political right remains open, and their political activity is undertaken to defend—for their own sake—human goods that are considered exogenous in liberalism. In other words, traditionalist conservatives endeavor to correct liberalism, not to save it. That is not to say that traditionalists yearn in any way for the “new gods” of postmodern paganism. Quite the con-

trary. The traditionalists' touchstones for the human good all lie in the past, not in some glorious visionary future. When confronted with the ideological monstrosities of our time, neoconservatives and traditional conservatives are certain allies. But until an account of political right appears that does justice to that which liberalism neglects, the traditionalist allegiance to the liberal regime remains decidedly grudging.<sup>14</sup>

Provisionally, therefore, one might describe the traditionalist conservative's political project as one of "containing liberalism" or of "boxing in" liberal justice. As the conservative movement in America crystalized in the 1950s and 1960s, a large, rather impressive, and quite understudied body of literature developed on the question of "tradition."<sup>15</sup> In retrospect, we can now see that "tradition" was a word deployed to indicate those moral contents of life that are eroded under liberalism; these studies were undertaken in an effort to understand the prerequisites for the persistence of those moral contents so that policies and jurisprudential concepts could be developed to safeguard those social structures in which the moral contents of life nat-

14. Paleoconservatives share with traditionalists the goal of seeking to supersede liberalism rather than to save it. But paleoconservatives may be distinguished from traditionalists to the extent that the former are unable to recognize any serious benefits in modernity and reject "mere nostalgia" while seeking to portray themselves as the vanguard of some future dispensation. If the goods of the modern regime prove incompatible with other human goods, complete liberals effectively reject those other human goods in their wholehearted embrace of the regime of rights. For paleoconservatives, the reverse seems to be true: they effectively reject the goods of the modern regime in their wholehearted embrace of . . . something else. Traditionalist conservatives seek, instead, an account of political right that will conserve what is good in the modern regime while also returning to us the lost goods of the premodern dispensation.

15. See, for example, the essays in George W. Carey, ed., *Freedom and Virtue: The Conservative-Libertarian Debate* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1998, 2004). See also the first three volumes of Eric Voegelin's *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), and Stanley Parry, "The Restoration of Tradition," *Modern Age* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1961): 125–38. Voegelin's work provided the most sophisticated philosophical approach to tradition for the postwar traditionalist conservatives.

urally arise. Emphasis was placed on “society” but not on what we know as “civil society.” That is, emphasis was placed on elements of *Gemeinschaft* (organic community) rather than *Gesellschaft* (contractual society). Conservatives have sought to “make room,” both conceptually and practically, for the flourishing of *Gemeinschaft*. Hence, the frequent invocation of Burke’s “little platoons,” as against the modern “grid” that reduces everything to the superintendence of the equal-protection state and the free market. Put another way, the political goal of traditional conservatism might be to keep the “public” realm small—but not in the liberal way, which makes the private (i.e., *individual*) realm large. What is wanted is a large and authoritative “social” realm.

### Public Policy Today

The provisional nature of traditionalist conservatism’s political principles and its wariness of “ideology” often lead to tentativeness in addressing disputed matters of public policy. There is also a strong element of “organicism” in conservative thought—as opposed, it is said, to “mechanistic” liberal social engineering. Gardening provides an apt metaphor for the traditionalist conservative’s approach to statesmanship. Thus, such conservatives often act not so much to “achieve” certain ends but to create the conditions in which social goods may (or may not) flourish according to their nature. What is more, the traditionalist conservative appreciates that *all* political solutions are partial or temporary. There are no final solutions to the human predicament, and there will be no end of history.

### *The Family*

Today, we often find that practical political advocacy reflecting a traditionalist perspective takes place in institutions that have the word “family” in their titles: Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, various state-based think tanks such as the Pennsylvania

Family Institute, and the well-respected newsletter *Family in America*. Although many of these are relatively new institutions, traditionalist conservative concern about the family is not. In his “Letter to a Member of the National Assembly” (1791), Burke wrote: “As the relation between parents and children is the first among the elements of vulgar, natural morality . . . Your masters [the Jacobins] reject the duties of this vulgar relation, as contrary to liberty; as not founded in the social compact; and not binding according to the rights of men.”<sup>16</sup> Burke had already seen that the cult of “rights” would be deployed *not* to shield citizens from obligations to the state; rather, rights would serve as an engine to break down the intermediate associational life of society, including even that primordial social building block, the family.

The contract tradition’s reduction of human beings to autonomous individuals fosters a self-conception that destabilizes the marriage bond. The welfare state then “lubricates” exit from marriage with various substituting benefits. Love, it has been said, is the willingness to belong to another. There is little place for such love in a world of autonomous individuals bristling with rights—the world that liberalism understands as “natural.” The popularity of a therapeutic language of “fulfillment” in contemporary America only exacerbates the weak institutional support that liberal jurisprudence provides for marriage. Traditional religious marriage ceremonies often included a prominent discussion of *sacrifice*, a concept that does not have ready appeal to autonomous individuals.

Traditionalist conservatives tend to see marriage as entering into a status rather than concluding a contract, and they would like to see this reflected in culture, law, and public policy. Thus, they look with approbation on movements, such as Promise Keepers, that work to shape popular culture in a family-friendly way. They would repeal the no-fault divorce revolution if they could—and, indeed, some Catholic

16. Edmund Burke, “A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly,” in *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Daniel E. Ritchie, 50–51 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992).

traditionalists would prefer the laws of marriage that prevailed until recently in several Latin American countries, where divorce was effectively impossible. The experiment with “covenant marriages” is viewed as a step forward, but a very small one. Traditionalists also favor shifting tax burdens from families to the single and childless. Again, George W. Bush’s increased child tax credits are a small step forward.

Traditionalists believe that what liberalism views as “natural” is largely a fiction. They note that labor force participation by married women with children under age six is much lower than is commonly believed—about 60 percent, a sizeable percentage of which are only part-time. There is more of the “traditional family” intact in America, even at this late date, than the media typically report. Thus, traditionalists suggest that finding ways to support mothers of small children staying at home ought to be the norm for public policy rather than facilitating their return to the workplace. Traditionalist conservatives also favor repeal of various antidiscrimination laws that have rendered it illegal for businesses to recognize the differential burdens of (male) heads-of-households through the provision of a “family wage.”<sup>17</sup>

The more hard-nosed traditionalists criticize those policies by which the welfare state comes to stand *in loco patris*, believing that husband-fathers would “naturally” be retrieved among the underclass in the absence of an alternative. There are even some who would entirely overhaul current law concerning child-support awards following divorce. The common law tended to tie the obligation of support to the right to control a child. The current near-universal practice, which grants mothers custody (control) and assigns fathers with financial obligations, yields precisely the opposite result.<sup>18</sup> Here again, the

17. See, for example, Allan Carlson, *From Cottage to Workstation: The Family's Search for Social Harmony in the Industrial Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993); and Allan Carlson, *The “American Way”: Family and Community in the Shaping of the American Identity* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003).

18. Stephen Baskerville illuminates this and other gory details of family law in

state comes to stand *in loco patris*, though it finances its role by garnering a father's wages rather than through general taxation.

The currently controversial question of gay "marriage" is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the liberal conception of marriage—marriage, as Kant put it, as a "contract for the mutual exercise of the genitalia." But the bundle of legal "benefits" (and encumbrances) to which gay couples say they seek access was never a recognition of "love." Rather, these features of traditional marriage were accommodations to the "facts of life"—the fact that it is from the union of one particular man and one particular woman that a new life arises, together with a recognition that children are best reared to responsible adulthood in the setting of a stable, well-capitalized, independent household with a mother and a father. Marriage is *naturally* about children.

### *Education*

It is no accident that when liberalism attempts to think about marriage, it characteristically neglects the children. Children figure in the state of nature of the proto-liberal Thomas Hobbes only as beings that their begetters have chosen not to kill; nor are the "facts of life" evident from the original position of the late-liberal John Rawls. In the great premodern works of political philosophy, an educational program for rearing the young was at the very heart of the account of the *res publica*: education is emphatically a public matter. Indeed, the proper education of the young was *the* political problem for both Plato and Aristotle. But Locke's discussion of education takes place in a separate treatise from his political work. Education must be considered a private matter if a regime of rights, of negative liberty, is to be secured. Rather than a universal fact of human nature, the reproduction and rearing of children is viewed as an anomaly in the terms

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contemporary America in his article "Is There Really a Fatherhood Crisis?" *Independent Review* 8, no. 4 (Spring 2004).

of social contract. Consequently, children are effectively relegated to an externality or assimilated to adult autonomy. What else is liberalism to do with such creatures who appear to be naturally dependent, naturally unequal, and naturally only potentially rational human beings, who naturally belong to their parents, who in turn naturally belong to them? In effect, liberalism must deny some of these essential facts or render them “unnatural,” exceptions to the rule of individualism.

The absence of an educational doctrine cannot easily be remedied, however, because liberalism’s boast is that it chastely denies to itself any thick theory of the good. Thus, it uniquely does not need to indoctrinate its citizens with controversial orthodoxies. But when the liberal state appropriated to itself the business of education with the advent of the “common school,” it seized the responsibility of soulcraft—without really admitting to that fact. Education is, in its nature, value-laden. Liberalism’s principled refusal to speak in teleological terms of a summum bonum, therefore, renders it a much-abashed patron of the schools. For, as every parent knows, children ask *Why?* and continue to ask *Why?* until they come to the end of the matter. A consistently liberal schooling must always stop short of that end, satisfying no one. For most of American history, the common schools surreptitiously reflected shared local values while the central organs of government looked the other way, a reasonable strategy for muddling through a theoretical inconsistency. Lately, however, courts have insisted on enforcing liberal norms on the schools, engendering a demoralization of society from the roots up. If, in the past, the schools stood in loco parentis, reflecting the values and exercising the discipline of parents in the domestic sphere, today the schools represent an ever-earlier exposure of children to the rights-bearing and market-choosing of the public sphere.

The traditionalist response has been to encourage experiments in alternatives of all kinds that might allow schools to reflect comprehensive conceptions of the good. A tuition tax credit was long the

conservative goal, fostering the growth of an alternative, fully “private” (or, more properly, “social” or “domestic”) system. Vouchers now seem a more politically feasible goal, though they also raise anxieties, since nothing yet has escaped the *control* that accompanies state “help.”

Furthermore, traditionalists take hope from the burgeoning growth of home-schooling in our time. As recently as the 1980s, it stirred media comment when a home-schooler would gain admission to an elite university. Today, many university faculty report that their best students are usually the home-schoolers and that there are more of them each year. A cohort of well-mannered, morally serious, and intellectually curious young people is a gift to the country in its own right. But traditionalist conservatives also hope that as we absorb in our social imagination the fact of widespread home-schooling, we will begin to recognize something that was obscured by the progressive ideology of the common school—namely, that a public school is not an arrangement between the state and students but rather between the state and parents. Schools are best understood as providing one way (and not the only way) to serve, or even merely to supplement, the primarily *parental* office, which is simultaneously an obligation and a right, of educating one’s own children.

### *Economics*

Traditionalist conservatives have never made economics a principal area of inquiry. They have taken private property, market exchange, and the price mechanism all as something more or less natural, believing with Samuel Johnson that people are seldom so innocently employed as when they are making money. But traditionalists have advanced no particular doctrinal commitments, and they are sensitive to the artificial abstractions of modern corporate capitalism. During the second half of the twentieth century, traditionalist conservatives did oppose socialism, the growth of the welfare state, and most government regulation of the economy, but they did not necessarily do



so for reasons of classical liberal political economy. Their primary concern was with the *culture* of socialism or of welfarism. In a similar way, many traditionalist conservatives today have begun to voice reservations about the *culture* of globalizing capitalism. Two cheers for capitalism is about right.

The economic theorist with the greatest appeal to the traditionalists has been Wilhelm Roepke, one of the founders of the classically liberal Mont Pelerin Society.<sup>19</sup> A German-Swiss Protestant, Roepke's work proceeded in dialogue with the Catholic social thought tradition, especially the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). Although fundamentally a defender of the free market, Roepke nonetheless embraced talk of a "third way" between socialism and capitalism. He warned of a kind of consumer materialism and social anomie arising from the totalizing reach of market "logic." He thus emphasized the need to embed the market amid strong social institutions and structures—boxing in liberalism in its economic dimension.

To box in the market would mean, first of all, to recognize that there are some things that should not be bought or sold, because to do so would directly violate human dignity or the common good. Thus, drugs, pornography, and prostitution are appropriately proscribed. So too, perhaps, certain biotechnologies. In a more speculative mode, religious traditionalists even raise questions about nursing homes and day care: ought *care* to be placed "on the market"? To embed market logic within a strong social setting also means to recognize human beings as something more than consumers. Thus, no one would disagree that Wal-Mart and free trade spell lower prices and often greater choice for Americans as consumers. But, to take the case of Wal-Mart, is not *something* lost, some kind of social capital, when the proprietors of a small town's chamber of commerce are

19. For a thoughtful introduction to Roepke's life and work, see John P. Zmirak, *Wilhelm Roepke: Swiss Localist, Global Economist* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000).

“converted” into corporate employees? Is not something lost, as well as gained, in the proliferation of broadcast media? Is more choice always better? Does life in a consumer society perhaps promote superficial “lifestyles” structured by purchases and ephemeral fashions rather than “ways of life” structured by lasting commitments?

The limited liability corporation, of course, is one of the engines for economic growth in the modern world, a true prodigy of productivity. But is it not also something highly unnatural that exists only because it is artificially chartered and regulated by the state? There are no corporations in nature: they are fictitious legal persons. Unlike natural persons, they never grow old—which often limits a proprietor’s access to new long-term capital—and they never die—which exacts from proprietary families a sizeable chunk of capital in inheritance tax. Proprietors may be motivated in their decisions by something beyond economic returns: by honorable standing or gratitude in the communities of their economic activity. Corporate management violates its fiduciary obligation to shareholders when it takes such matters into consideration. An economy dominated by the corporate form would seem to make all holders of capital into a version of the despised absentee landlords of old. What is more, the corporation is evidently more susceptible to implementing “politically correct” policies, whereas proprietary firms often exhibit more traditional domestic moral concerns. Withal, traditionalist conservatives have often written in favor of a widespread *distribution* of productive capital and in favor of smaller units of economic production. The question is not whether markets will be regulated; the question is what values shall structure that regulation.

### *Foreign Affairs*

The first conservative literature on foreign affairs emerged from the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. On the one hand, Burke can only be called an extremist in his rhetorically charged calls for Britain to destroy the Revolution altogether and to restore the

French *ancien régime* in every jot and tittle. On the other hand, we find, particularly among continental conservatives, numerous attempts to defend “variety” in regimes, with Maistre going so far as to describe each nation as willed by God in its particularity, each people (defined, for Maistre, linguistically) as possessing a particular providential mission. Consequently, continental conservatives sought to restore the traditional European balance of power. Faced with the ideological claims of a kind of political religion, the conservative responds with concerted action; but the conservative also knows that a society mobilized for war exacts a toll on domestic social structures that cannot easily be remedied. Because both Britain and America are “islands,” they have been blessed historically with not needing large standing armies, with the state aggrandizement that these entail.

In the years immediately following victory in the Second World War, American conservatives, led by Senator Robert Taft, originally clamored to “bring the boys home”; whereas it was liberal Democrats who seemed intent on continuing America’s global role. But minds were changed by growing awareness of the threat of Soviet communism. Communism was a universalist secular religion, a revolutionary movement recognizing no national boundaries. It was only the emergency of communism that convinced the majority of traditionalist conservatives that a highly interventionist foreign policy was required. Having become convinced, they were usually among the most hawkish of Cold Warriors.

However, during the post–Cold War “roaring nineties,” the feel-good Clinton years of splendid irresponsibility, traditional conservatives were nearly united in their opposition to the wars for human rights in the Balkans. They considered that these military actions served no evident national interest. Traditionalist conservatives applauded President Bush’s 2000 election rhetoric about a “humble” America in world affairs. They applauded the withdrawal from the Kyoto Treaty, which had, of course, never been presented to the Senate for ratification: withdrawal was interpreted as a signal that a

“return to normalcy” was in the cards, following the long executive aggrandizement of the Cold War. Withdrawal from the Antiballistic Missile Treaty and the development of missile defense also seemed an admirably prudent long-term investment in national security.

Then came September 11, 2001. Traditionalist conservatives were again virtually united on the need to “take the fight” to al Qaeda in Afghanistan. But opinion became divided on the further military engagement in Iraq. Not least problematic was that, insofar as many traditionalists were religious believers, the Iraq war lacked an evident *causis belli*—an elementary requirement of just war doctrine. (And, indeed, the preemption doctrine articulated as America’s official national strategy seems, at the level of theory at least, impossible to square with even quite permissive readings of the just war tradition.) Most traditionalists were nonetheless willing to support the war on the basis of the “clear and present danger” presented by weapons of mass destruction. Thus, the failure to discover such weapons in Iraq has proven a considerable blow.

Traditionalist conservative confidence in the Iraq policy has not been helped by the Bush administration’s more recent embrace of muscular Wilsonian rhetoric as the justification for American actions. Woodrow Wilson is not a conservative icon. Sensitive to historical limitations and understanding liberal institutions as dependent on preexisting forms of social and cultural capital that are not present in Arab societies, traditionalists do not believe that “democracy”—which is to say, secular constitutional liberalism—is easily exported there. This does not mean that traditionalists do not take pride in America’s having rid the world of Saddam Hussein’s odious regime, nor does this mean that they now wish to cut our losses and withdraw. To abandon those Iraqis who have, at considerable risk to themselves, put their trust in us would be extremely dishonorable. To retreat, moreover, may well prove worse for American security in the long run. However, traditionalists would be reassured by a public rhetoric more closely tied to prudence and to the national interest.

The Wilsonian rhetoric of the Bush administration may reflect a calculation that it is in the nature of American society only to countenance foreign intervention when it is couched in messianic terms. But perhaps it would be easier for an American administration to transform American culture on this point than it is to transform, wholesale, the cultures of Arab societies far, far away.

### Conclusion

The national narratives of most European peoples celebrate their moment of settlement into a particular place, an end to nomadic wandering, and the taking up of agriculture (and Christianity). It is striking that Americans celebrate not our settlement but rather our movement—setting off for the frontier. The liberal narrative of America as a “universal nation” corresponds to this unsettledness: to be a “universal” nation is precisely *not* to be a nation, a *gens*. Traditional conservatives have been endeavoring to *settle* America, to celebrate our arrival and not our departure, our actuality and not our potentiality, to bring Americans to see their national experience both as more particular than universal (which is to say, ideological) and as more in continuity with European precedents than in discontinuity; hence, Russell Kirk’s determined effort to view the American War of Independence as “a revolution not made but prevented” and his Eurocentric account of “the roots of American order.”

At this historical moment, with America incontestably the greatest power on Earth and with American popular culture driving all before it, such a project of self-limitation may seem a fantasy. And yet it was only yesterday evening, historically speaking, that the sun never set on the British Empire. Today, the captains and the kings have long departed. As that most eccentric of American thinkers, the nineteenth-century Catholic convert Orestes Brownson, observed,<sup>20</sup> the American

20. Orestes Brownson, *The American Republic* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003). See especially the lengthy introduction by Peter Augustine Lawler.

regime is the greatest political achievement since Rome; but it is not the city laid up in heaven. Like every achievement within the *saeculum*, its justice is limited and mortal. The sun too will set on the era of American exceptionalism. When it does, those who have placed their fondest hopes in the promises of ideological politics may feel themselves dispossessed and demoralized; but those who have hearkened to the teachings of the traditionalists may find themselves, at last, at home.