2018 Wriston Lecture: The Conservative Challenge in a Populist Moment

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Lecture
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Hoover Institution, Stanford University

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On **October 30**, the Manhattan Institute hosted its annual **Wriston Lecture**, this year featuring **Dr. Peter Berkowitz** (Hoover Institution) talking about the challenges for conservatism in a populist moment.


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Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. He is a 2017 winner of the Bradley Prize. At Hoover, he is a member of the Military History/Contemporary Conflict Working Group. In addition, he serves as dean of students for the Hertog Political Studies Program and for The Public Interest Fellowship, and teaches for the Tikvah Fund in the United States and in Israel.

In addition to teaching regularly in the United States and Israel, Dr. Berkowitz has led seminars on the principles of freedom and the American constitutional tradition for students from Burma at the George W. Bush Presidential Center and for Korean students at Underwood International College at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea.

He taught constitutional law and jurisprudence at George Mason University School of Law from 1999 to 2006, and political philosophy in the department of government at Harvard University from 1990 to 1999.

Berkowitz holds a JD and a PhD in political science from Yale University, an MA in philosophy from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and a BA in English literature from Swarthmore College.

Event Transcript

I'm grateful to the Manhattan Institute for the honor of delivering the 2018 Wriston Lecture. For those of us who believe that serious study of ideas and rigorous empirical analysis go hand-in-hand in understanding politics and advancing the public interest, the Manhattan Institute has long set an inspiring example.

I The Larger Context

Of all the strange and remarkable features of politics in the era of Trump, among the least strange and least remarkable is the alliance that has emerged between conservatism and populism.

That it seems strange and remarkable to many conservatives reflects a certain disconnection from their tradition. The uncertainly and agitation that the alliance introduced into conservative ranks underscores the importance of recovering a lively appreciation of conservatism's origins, major ideas, and perennial task.

I don't mean to deny the improbability of Donald J. Trump having made himself —or having been made — the tribune of conservative hopes and popular anxieties. Nor do I wish to discount the marvel, 21 months into his presidency, of strong economic growth; of historically low unemployment, notably for African Americans and Latinos; and of a Supreme Court with, for the first time in post-World War II America, a majority of justices explicitly devoted to interpreting the Constitution in accordance with its text, structure, and history.

For a brash billionaire Manhattan real estate developer, for a long-running reality-TV star, for a playboy celebrity who over the course of decades hobnobbed with Democratic Party royalty and contributed significant sums to their campaigns — for all that and more, Donald Trump's political accomplishments *are* strange and remarkable.

But Trump did not invent the alliance between conservatism and populism — or, to speak less polemically, between conservatism and the people. Far from it.

Trump rode the wave of a populist revolt sweeping across the West. In liberal democracy after liberal democracy, right-wing politicians made common cause with a disaffected portion of the working class and a perturbed segment of the middle class. A recurring complaint reverberates across non-urban Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Similar grievances roil large swathes of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and Israel. An imperious ruling elite, say many people in many countries, has imposed laws, cultural norms, and social practices that radiate disdain for the people's beliefs and endanger their way of life. From this perspective, elites have conspired across the aisle to promote globalization, free trade, and mass immigration to benefit themselves while ignoring the costs for the less educated and less wealthy.

Meanwhile, many conservative members of the political and intellectual elite believe that progressive elites — who dominate the mainstream media and social media, the entertainment industry, and the universities — despise conservatives.

The scorched-earth tactics unsuccessfully employed to derail now-Justice Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court reinforced a sense shared by committed conservatives and many red-state and purple-state voters. They find themselves bound together by a common political opponent.

Notwithstanding the virulence of today's politics and the strange bedfellows it has produced, the Trump coalition represents a new variation on an old theme.

In fact, the alliance between conservatism and the people — between those devoted to preserving and the people who want their communities preserved — is as old as modern conservatism itself. Its roots can be traced to British statesman Edmund Burke's seminal, prescient, in-real-time critique of the French Revolution. Around 150 years later, the founders of the conservative movement in America — the post-World War II made-in-America conservatism associated above all with William F. Buckley, Jr. — renewed the relationship between the right and the people. That alliance has driven American conservatism's rise over the last 75 years to intellectual influence and political prominence.

Exploring the sources of modern conservatism, and recalling the reasons that American conservatives have repeatedly found their voices in defense of the people against haughty and overbearing elites, has implications for winning elections and governing effectively.

Not the least practical benefit of such understanding is its capacity to calm nerves, steady gazes, firm spines, and cool judgment.

The conservative challenge in the era of Trump calls for nothing less.

II The Roots of the Kinship Between Conservatism and the People

In 1790, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* Edmund Burke threw into sharp relief issues that would define modern conservatism. They revolved around the reconciliation of freedom and tradition. More than two centuries later — amid the wailing and rage that mark the Trump era — reconciling freedom and tradition endures as modern conservatism's perennial task.

In 1790 the challenge was fresh. Not because freedom was new — the desire for freedom is coeval with civilization — but because the idea of a *political* freedom to which each and every individual justly laid claim was still young.

The conservative impulse is also of ancient origin. Before the rise of the modern tradition of freedom in 17th and 18th century England, conservatism had been humanity's default option. It didn't generate a specific body of political thought.

That's because, on the whole, traditions teach that political authority stems from tradition. Traditions reflexively cultivate the disposition to preserve tradition.

It follows that conservatism is not one but many. Conservatisms will be as numerous and varied as are traditions.

But doesn't the disposition to preserve rest on typical convictions?

Yes.

Across time and culture, conservatives usually recognize the unruliness of the passions and the limits of reason. They believe that recondite reflection and abstract theory tend to obscure practical matters; as a guide to politics, conservatives strongly prefer experience and practical wisdom. And conservatives see individuals as social creatures whose character is formed by, and fulfilment is achieved in, family, local community, civic association, national life, and religion.

Burke shared these convictions. They coexisted in his soul with a love of liberty.

Burke is a founding father of modern *conservatism* because he was the first to confront directly the challenge of conserving modern *freedom*. The challenge is simply stated. Tradition teaches to do as forebears have done. Modern freedom authorizes each to do as he or she deems best. But sometimes what we think pleasant or right conflicts with what our forebears thought necessary and proper.

Moreover, the spread of the modern idea that human beings are by nature free and equal furnished individuals with a handy standard for evaluating existing governments — and for finding them wanting.

Burke drew no hard and fast distinction between conserving and reforming because reforming, he grasped, was essential to conserving.

For most of his long parliamentary career — stretching from 1765 to 1794 — Burke was best known for defending political freedom against the abuse of power. He sided with the American colonists in their demand for representation in decisions about their taxes. He espoused toleration for Irish Catholics who suffered under Britain's discriminatory Penal Laws. And he waged an extended campaign against the British East India Company for cruelly subjugating India's indigenous population.

Late in his career, Burke's vehement criticism of the French Revolution shocked and appalled his fellow Whigs. *They* saw the uprising against the old regime as heralding a new age of freedom. Not Burke. He discerned a novel and monstrous threat to freedom.

He had not altered his principles, Burke insisted. Rather, he honored their implications in the struggle against an unprecedented peril.

The French Revolution, Burke argued, aimed at "total revolution." History abounded in attempts to alter governments. But the French Revolution endeavored to overthrow "sentiments, manners, and moral opinions." It wanted to replace religion with "doctrine and theoretic dogma." It sought to emancipate from inherited attachments. For enlightenment's sake, it would refashion culture and conduct. It aspired to perfect politics by transforming humanity.

This, Burke argued, was madness. The revolutionaries' project, he maintained, betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of freedom — and of people.

British freedom, Burke stressed, derived from beliefs, practice, and associations that developed over centuries and lay beyond government's routine purview. This freedom was indissolubly bound up with an awareness of debt to previous generations, of responsibility to fellow citizens, and of obligation to those to come.

The British people did not need a new schooling in liberty because they received an exemplary education from what Burke called "prescription" and "prejudice." Prescription includes authoritative tradition, custom, and law. Prejudice— *pre*-judgment—comprises the accumulated wisdom of community, nation, and faith.

The people learned the ways of liberty in the "little platoon" — family, neighborhood, town, and church. These cultivated the virtues, fostered cooperation, and encouraged respect for rights and duties.

A leading literary light blessed with extraordinary rhetorical gifts, Burke allied with the people against "the political men of letters" — the progressive public intellectuals of his day. A man of immense learning and intellectual refinement, Burke proclaimed, "in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings."

The revolutionaries wanted to purge the people's prejudices. Burke replied that the British "cherish" their "old prejudices." They did so "because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them." Burke had particularly in mind the prejudices — we might say widely shared assumptions or even self-evident truths — that favored freedom.

Burke did not pander to the people. "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason," he wrote, "because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages."

Nor did he conceal the political importance of excellence: "There is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive."

At the same time, Burke championed the people's interests.

He set forth the first great conservative critique of the first great expression of the progressive interpretation of modern freedom. He did so in the name of traditions in and through which the people had governed themselves and prospered. Burke's reconciliation of freedom and tradition proved a harbinger of alliances to come between conservative elites and the people.

III The American Conservative Movement and the People

Like the modern conservatism that Burke inaugurated, the conservative movement in America was forged in response to a crisis. Really, a pair of crises.

Classical liberals and traditionalists, the component parts of modern American conservatism, had their differences. Classical liberals sought to conserve limited government and the ideas that underwrite it. Traditionalists strove to conserve traditional morality, and the local communities that embodied it.

Yet in the 1940s and 1950s, both agreed that the tremendous growth of government engineered by FDR's New Deal, and expansionist communist totalitarianism presented profound new threats to freedom.

In the mid-1940s, London School of Economics professor Friedrich Hayek published a classic statement of classical liberalism. *The Road to Serfdom* — a surprise bestseller in the United States — examined the despotic ambitions of "modern planners." These intellectuals

and technocrats, spiritual descendants of the French revolutionaries, favored "a central direction of all economic activity according to a single plan." Curtailing economic freedom, Hayek warned, would subvert all freedoms.

Classical liberals are not known for their populist propensities. Yet the modern tradition of freedom that Hayek undertook to preserve leaves the people to their own devices, able to make their own decisions about labor, production, and consumption. The protection of economic freedom, Hayek emphasized, established a sturdy fence around religious and political freedom.

In the early 1950s in *The Conservative Mind,* Russell Kirk reconstructed a tradition of thought that emphasized conserving traditional morality. Like Hayek's classical liberalism, Kirk's traditionalism did not emanate from the people. Yet, also like classical liberalism, it shielded the people from elites bent on rescuing the people from themselves. Out of "affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life," and in opposition to "the narrowing uniformity and equalitarianism and utilitarian aims of most radical systems," Kirk condemned the ambition of progressive elites to impose a moral orthodoxy across the land.

Despite their shared opposition to collectivism, classical liberalism and traditionalism — the partisans of freedom and the partisans of tradition — often clashed. The enthusiasm some traditionalists demonstrated for legislating *their* morality offended classical liberals. And the indifference some classical liberals displayed to the moral foundations of free societies scandalized traditionalists.

With the founding of *National Review* in 1955, William F. Buckley set out to unite the conservative factions.

In part, Buckley responded to a practical imperative. In the mid-1950s, any viable conservative governing majority in the United States depended on both classical liberals and traditionalists. The same remains true today.

Nevertheless, for Buckley the marriage between classical liberals and traditionalists was no mere marriage of convenience. It improved both partners.

Limited government, Buckley believed, protected traditional morality. And traditional morality, he maintained, taught the virtues of freedom.

Like classical liberals and traditionalists, Buckley emphasized the threat to the people posed by progressive elites. In the first issue of *National Review,* the Mission Statement proclaimed, "The profound crisis of our era is, in essence, the conflict between the Social Engineers, who seek to adjust mankind to conform with scientific utopias, and the disciples of Truth, who defend the organic moral order." The people embodied the organic moral order.

Thirty years later, Irving Kristol endorsed what he called "the new populism." In a 1985 Wall Street Journal column — at once colloquial, learned, and elegant — Kristol observed that distrust of populism was inscribed in America's founding. The Constitution established a limited government through complex institutional arrangements designed to keep government within its prescribed boundaries. To that end, the sovereign people rule indirectly under the Constitution and at a distance, through elected representatives.

Since the nation's founding, Kristol asserted, "'populism' has not had a good name among American political scientists, jurists, and social critics." Associated with demagoguery, it has been "taken to signify a movement of popular passions to overwhelm the political and legal process by which our democracy has traditionally operated."

But a new populism arose in the mid-1960s, argued Kristol. The people, he contended, were justly dismayed by government's inept conduct of the Vietnam War, by courts that were intruding into social policy, by schools that were abandoning the education and discipline of students, and by a criminal justice system that was losing interest in fighting crime. Consequently, according to Kristol, "The common sense—not the passion, but the common sense—of the American people has been outraged over the past 20 years by the persistent un-wisdom of their elected and appointed officials."

The new populism differed greatly from — indeed, it is nearly the opposite of — the "blind rebellion against good constitutional government" feared by America's founders. The new populism "is rather an effort to bring our governing elites to their senses." For that reason, Kristol observes, "so many people ... who would ordinarily worry about a populist upsurge find themselves so sympathetic to this new populism."

Conservatives' political prospects have risen and fallen with the new populism.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan owed his presidency in part to disgruntled blue-collar Democrats and an energized religious right. In 1992, George H.W. Bush lost his bid for a second term because 19 percent of the electorate — a disproportionate percentage from conservative ranks — voted for populist upstart Ross Perot. In 1994, Newt Gingrich's Contract with America — an agreement with regular voters apprehensive over President and Ms. Clinton's plans to overhaul health care —led to the first Republican majority in the House in 40 years and control of the Senate as well. In 2000, George W. Bush won because left-wing populist Ralph Nader took tens of thousands of Florida votes from Al Gore. In 2010, Tea Party energy fueled a stunning turnaround for the Republican Party, producing a GOP majority in the House of Representatives that stymied Barack Obama's hopes for "fundamentally transforming the United States of America." And in 2016, Donald Trump defied the experts with a promise to make America great again that resonated among disillusioned swing voters in states that formed the so-called "blue wall."

IV This Time Different: Conservers as Restorers

Since Burke, conservative elites have regularly joined forces with the people against progressive elites armed with transformative projects.

Recognizing the historical continuities is crucial, not least to grasping how today's conservative-populist coalition *differs* — and not only because Trump is different.

In 1790, Edmund Burke regarded British morality, civil society, and political institutions as healthy. He sought to protect them from baleful Parisian ideas.

In 1955, William F. Buckley strove to safeguard entwined commitments to freedom and faith that he believed to be alive and well among ordinary people.

In 1985, Irving Kristol found a repository of good judgment in the people and saw their decency and dependability as a bulwark against progressive overreach.

Today the people are restive and in distress. The danger to their communities is not distant and vague. It is not lurking on the outskirts. It has breached the town walls. It has occupied their neighborhoods and infiltrated their homes.

In 2012, in *Coming Apart,* Charles Murray explored the multifaceted crisis assailing America's lower middle class. It is beset by plunging marriage rates, rising births to unwed mothers, erosion in men's industriousness, surging crime, and a steep decline in religious faith.

Add to that the disruptions visited upon the nation's industrial heartland by globalization, workplace automation, and opioids. Then there are the calumnies—racism, sexism, xenophobia — that progressive elites heap on ordinary people. Social media spreads these calumnies like wildfire. This intensifies ordinary people's resentment and distrust of elites.

Preserving and reforming no longer suffice. To conserve, one must also restore.

V Conclusion

The challenge is formidable. It calls for delicacy and tenacity, care and boldness, broad learning and shrewd judgment.

To restore America's beleaguered lower-middle-class communities — indeed, to win the support of all socioeconomic classes and communities throughout the nation — conservative elites must persuade the people that individual freedom, limited government, free markets, robust civil society, and a strong America abroad advance the people's long-term interests. Also, conservative elites must listen more and more carefully to the people, the better to understand their aspirations, discontents, and fears. This will aid in developing policies — informed by the principles of constitutional government — that address the people's immediate priorities, starting with good jobs, which are essential to healthy communities.

To fashion sound policy, liberal democracy in America must be well understood.

A proper liberal education yields that understanding. However — to put matters gently — few of our institutions of higher education transmit knowledge of, and cultivate the spirit of, freedom. Rather, our colleges and universities inculcate the practices and spirit of the tribalism that disfigures our politics.

Conservatives, therefore, must also restore liberal education. That is a long-term undertaking. In the near-term, to fill the college curriculum's gaping holes and counteract its illiberal lessons, conservatives should multiply the supplemental programs they have already established. These include Hertog Political Studies, The Public Interest Fellowship, the Claremont Institute's Publius Fellowship, The Federalist Society, The Alexander Hamilton Society, and the Manhattan Institute's own Adam Smith Society.

That's a an excellent start. These programs expose students to ideas and books that professors typically neglect, disparage, or simply exclude from the undergraduate curriculum. They introduce students to a spirit of inquiry —curious, questioning, and rigorous — that is increasingly rare on our campuses. And they form a network of young men and women who are grateful for the opportunity to grasp the principles of liberty because they have studied the great debates about liberty.

But don't be deceived. Valuable as they are, the conservative-built supplements to college education are *only* a start. Enormous work lies ahead.

After all, after national security and economic prosperity, what could be more important to the public interest than a liberal education, one that prepares students to conserve the advantages of liberal democracy in America, and to undertake reforms to bring it more in line with its finest principles and most enduring promises? Indeed, without such an education, how will citizens fully understand the imperatives of national security and economic prosperity?

It is true that liberal education has always been the province of elites. It is also true that, beginning with Burke, conservative elites have brought their learning to bear on behalf of the interest they share with the people in conserving freedom, including the freedom to conserve local community and national tradition.

In this strange and remarkable moment, lively appreciation of modern conservatism's origins, major ideas, and perennial task furnishes invaluable resources for understanding our politics and advancing the public interest.