

Freedom, Conservatism, and the Common Good

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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“In this character of the Americans, a love of freedom is the predominating feature which marks and distinguishes the whole; and as an ardent is always a jealous affection, your Colonies become suspicious, restive, and untractable whenever they see the least attempt to wrest from them by force, or shuffle from them by chicane, what they think the only advantage worth living for.”

Because of their national spirit, Edmund Burke cautioned Parliament in his 1775 “[Speech on Conciliation](#),” the Americans’ opposition to taxation without representation required “an unusual degree of care and calmness.” The growth of the population and the colonies’ outsized commercial contribution to the British empire by themselves counseled every reasonable effort to compromise. But beyond these exigencies, according to Burke, the “temper and character of the American people” were decisive in the search for a prudent resolution to the dispute: “This fierce spirit of liberty is stronger in the English Colonies probably than in any other people of the earth, and this from a great variety of powerful causes.”

The spirit of liberty in America shined brightly in the generation that produced the Declaration of Independence, prevailed in the Revolutionary War, and ratified the Constitution under which the United States grew to be a multi-religious, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic rights-protecting democracy and world power. More than two centuries later, the formal constitutional protections

of religious liberty, free speech, press freedom, and the rights to peaceably assemble and to petition the government remain in place.

At the same time, established institutions threaten the culture of freedom. Schools, from K-12 through universities, tend to conflate indoctrination and education. Leading media outlets often favor the promulgation of progressive narratives over the accurate reporting of stories. Big Tech social-media platforms reward the vehement and the snide while censoring facts and perspectives that conflict with their workforces' political sensibilities. And, not least, an overweening federal bureaucracy has made a priority of implementing fashionable theories about the supposed moral imperative to discriminate based on race to achieve social justice.

Particularly in such perilous times, one would think that a crucial task of American conservatism — a conservatism rooted in the nation's founding principles and constitutional traditions — is to remind fellow citizens of the blessings of liberty under law. Yet many conservatives join the left in blaming the nation's travails on the principles of individual freedom and the institutions of limited government.

Some of the best-known intellectuals associated with “National Conservatism” lead the right-wing disparagement of the modern tradition of freedom. “[A] project of the [Edmund Burke Foundation](#),” according to its [website](#), “‘National Conservatism’ is a movement of public figures, journalists, scholars, and students who understand that the past and future of conservatism are inextricably tied to the idea of the nation, to the principle of national independence, and to the revival of the unique national traditions that alone have the power to bind a people together and bring about their flourishing.” Set aside the peculiarity of self-proclaimed admirers of Edmund Burke building a transnational movement around an abstraction — “the idea of the nation.” More concerning is the tendency of the movement's leaders to besmirch the dedication to basic rights

and fundamental freedoms that is woven into the fabric of America's "unique national traditions."

In his [plenary address](#) last month at the movement's conference in Orlando, Edmund Burke Foundation Chairman Yoram Hazony stressed that the United States stands at a crossroads because of the success of the "neo-Marxist cultural revolution which has taken over many, maybe most, of the liberal institutions that form the backbone of liberal hegemony in the United States since after World War II." To counter the neo-Marxists, Hazony contends, conservatives must overcome the distinction between "the public" and "the private."

In the 1950s and 1960s, in Hazony's telling, American conservatism followed William F. Buckley Jr. in embracing, under the name "fusionism," the split between those two spheres. "We are going to support freedom — economic, social freedom, individual liberties — everywhere we can almost across the boards," the fusionists reasoned, according to Hazony, while relegating to the private sphere "traditionalism, nation, God, scripture, the traditional family."

Hazony conceded (without saying how or pondering the implications) that fusionism contributed to victory in the Cold War, but he concluded that it "was also a failure." Fusionism "didn't work" because there is "no real separation" between the public and the private. The proof in Hazony's eyes is that "public liberalism" spills over and corrupts "private conservatism." To reverse the nation's precipitous decline, he asserts, American conservatism must reinfuse the public sphere, and particularly the schools, with "God and scripture."

Hazony, however, mistakes an imperfect separation of public and private for "no real separation." And he erroneously implies that the separation was invented in the 1950s by conservatives though it is bound up with the natural-rights thinking that partly constitutes America's unique national traditions. Indeed, the separation between public and private also

stems from the Christian teaching, espoused by James Madison in his 1785 “[Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments](#),” that the exercise of political authority over religion undercuts true piety.

Hazony’s attack on the distinction between public and private involves a variation on a familiar critique of liberal democracy and a common ambition to employ the organs of the state to promote the true and comprehensive vision of human flourishing. Strangely enough, the classic version of Hazony’s discontents with the modern tradition of freedom was put forward in 1843 by Karl Marx in part 1 of “[On the Jewish Question](#).”

The young Marx contrasted “political emancipation,” rooted in liberal democracy’s separation of public and private, with “human emancipation,” which, to achieve the common good, merges public and private. Political emancipation, Marx maintained, fosters false consciousness by swamping the private sphere with the public concern for rights and freedom: At home, citizens dispose of their earnings as they please instead of combating the evils of capitalism; in their places of worship, individuals and their families serve God as they see fit, rather than opposing religion as a snare and a delusion. Only erasure of the distinction between public and private, argues Marx, can overcome such false consciousness and bring about “human emancipation.”

That way lies authoritarianism and worse. Yet in the name of the [common good](#), “natcons,” as they call themselves, advocate the concerted use of government to direct culture, mold families, teach the virtues, and empower religious faith. After all, they argue, law and public policy inevitably shape souls — which is true. Yet the natcons often overlook the great difference between, on the one hand, government that arrogates to itself the right and responsibility to dictate morality and supervise human flourishing, and, on the other, government that maintains an expansive domain in which citizens and their communities retain the right, and shoulder the responsibility, to cultivate morality and promote human flourishing.

The natcons' problem is not that they take America's "unique national traditions" seriously but their failure to take those traditions seriously enough. In the American constitutional tradition, the common good consists in the first place in maintaining a political order that protects all citizens' rights equally. That political order provides a wide democratic space to advance the public interest by, say, rescuing education, elevating culture, putting immigration under law, and reforming trade policy.

The natcons have rightly sounded the alarm about woke ideology and have illuminated the follies committed in freedom's name, permitted under its watch, and encouraged by its uneasy relation with authority. But in their zeal to remoralize American life, they foster contempt for America's distinctive national traditions, which are rooted in individual liberty and limited government. These provide the only sturdy foundation on which Americans of diverse faiths, political perspectives, and moral sensibilities can come together to address the country's daunting challenges.

"I pardon something to the spirit of liberty," Burke told Parliament in 1775 in the effort to prudently resolve the conflict with the American colonies. So should conservatives today.

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