

‘Natcons,’ Progressive Elites, and Illiberal Overreach

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
February 18, 2022

In the “Discourses on Livy,” Machiavelli asks whether the nobles – these days we speak of the elites – or the people are better guardians of freedom. Acknowledging that “there is something to say on every side,” the cunning student of cunning sees threats to freedom emanating from both camps. Critics of the nationalist turn within American conservatism – and the national conservatives themselves – would do well to keep in mind Machiavelli’s supple assessment.

Whereas the nobles, the Florentine observes, are marked by a “great desire to dominate,” the people “only desire not to be dominated.” The nobles can satisfy their lofty political ambitions by excelling as protectors of freedom, but they are prone to curtailing the people’s liberty to extend their own privileges. Since the people generally lack the desire to rule and the means to impose their will, they have an advantage as freedom’s defenders. Yet acquisition of power is liable to foment the people’s restlessness, stir up their greed, and spark a hunger to supervise and control. Both the nobles and the people can safeguard, and both can curtail, freedom – it depends on the circumstances.

[American Purpose](#) – a young “magazine, media project, and intellectual community” that seeks “to defend and promote liberal democracy in the United States” – recently published a short series of essays on the threats to freedom posed by “national conservatism.” Consistent with its centrism and its admirable commitment to hosting a range of voices, the magazine commissioned writings from serious students of American politics who recognize that a healthy liberal democracy draws strength from both left and right. Contributors, however, failed to give the national conservatives sufficient credit for illuminating the place of nationhood, tradition and cultural particularity in a healthy civic

life. They occasionally imputed the excesses of national conservatism to conservatism generally. And they downplayed the extent of the progressive elites' illiberal overreach that has provoked a good measure of national conservatism's illiberal overreach.

In "[Whose Good, Anyway?](#)" William Galston charges the "natcons" with contravening America's fundamental principles and misunderstanding the character of American society. A Brookings Institution senior fellow and Wall Street Journal columnist, Galston especially faults leading national conservatives for calling on government to counter the rising tide of "woke progressivism" by promoting Christianity and by throwing the state's weight behind a common good grounded in a distinctive and uniform conception of human flourishing.

The unalienable rights that the U.S. Constitution aims to secure do have a root in biblical faith, but the Declaration of Independence holds them also to be "self-evident" – that is, truths of reason available to men and women of all faiths and persuasions. The American constitutional order, moreover, is a response, Galston writes, "to the emergence of deep religious divisions" that wracked Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Since America's founding, when the principal religious conflicts in the country were those between rival Protestant sects, differences of opinion about faith have widened and associations have multiplied. Over the centuries, the U.S. Constitution's wisdom of focusing on the securing of individual rights while leaving questions about faith and flourishing to individuals and their communities has become even more salient.

In "[Anton, Deneen, and Hazony](#)," Gabriel Schoenfeld also calls out national conservatism's illiberalism. A contributing editor at American Purpose and a senior fellow at the Niskanen Center, he rebukes new-right arguments that seem to go beyond opposing illegal immigration to opposing immigration. Like Galston, Schoenfeld rejects the proposition that political cohesion in the United States must be built around state support for Christian faith, which would erode the traditional American dedication to religious liberty that protects all faiths while establishing none. And he

exposes the sobering convergence of opinion between new-right polemicists who denounce “liberalocratic despotism” in America and “the philosopher Herbert Marcuse, the anti-democratic guru of the New Left” who, in the 1960s, decried the United States as a form of “totalitarian democracy.”

Corbin Barthold elaborates on the strange affinities between the natcons’ frequently feverish tone and rigid stance and certain hard-left tendencies stretching back to the French Revolution. From his position as internet policy counsel at TechFreedom, Barthold contends in “[The Jacobinism of the New Right](#)” that “the American Right has become a reactionary force.” It is led by figures who, according to Barthold, “crave radical action and condemn dissent” while practicing “a rhetoric of Jacobinism, in which society is rotten, foes are everywhere, and the situation is dire; in which the need for drastic action is urgent, the cause of the righteous is certain, and the hesitancy of doubters is evil.” In their disgust with America as it is and their demand for sweeping change, the new right breaks sharply with one of their heroes, argues Barthold. Central to Edmund Burke’s sensibility, Barthold reminds, was the British statesman’s admonition that “it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society.”

While all the contributors condemn woke progressivism, Barthold comes closest to appreciating the scope of the left’s role in dividing the nation. “In thrall to identity politics, tolerant of the riots that suit them, and addicted to passing ‘transformative,’ albeit unpopular, legislation, the original anti-Burkeans appear utterly uninterested in adopting the political caution that the Right has discarded,” he writes. “Woke corporations, ideologically non-diverse universities, and the mainstream media are trucking in the soil from which the Right’s paranoia grows.” But if Barthold’s description of progressive extremism across politics, business, education, and the media is correct, then the right – far from suffering paranoia – confronts nation-wide public dysfunction provoked by, but invisible to, crucial segments of the left.

Schoenfeld also highlights “perils from a progressivism on the left” that rejects pluralism and free speech. He minimizes them, though, suggesting that the perils are more about right-wing opportunism than left-wing political malfeasance: “In the electoral arena the progressive agenda is a gift to Republican office seekers looking for a foil, just as in the intellectual arena it is grist for right-wing thinkers all too eager to conflate the excrescences of progressivism with the essence of liberal democracy itself.”

Galston gives more reason for hope than his colleagues. He acknowledges that “there are progressives who want to turn the world upside down,” but maintains that “they are not the majority of Democrats.” Contrary to the bleak picture presented by the natcons, Galston asserts that there is a “reasonable center-left with which the center-right could do business” in matters ranging from correctives to “the deficiencies of the market” to countering indoctrination in the schools, devising a sane immigration policy, and recognizing the nation-state as the best vehicle for securing individual rights and citizens’ well-being.

But Galston obscures the bad news about progressivism’s sway, asserting, for example, that “evidence that CRT is widely taught in our public schools is hard to find.” If he means the “complex doctrine created in elite law schools” called critical race theory, then he is correct: K-12 schools generally do not assign the writings of Professors Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado and Derrick Bell.

Yet evidence abounds that “[political correctness is stronger than ever today](#).” Curricula and conduct reveal that schools [around the country](#) teach children to discriminate based on race. And workshops for educators and administrators show that “[under the guise of](#) diversity, equity, and inclusion,” schools indoctrinate students in CRT’s defining ideas: The United States is divided into an oppressor and oppressed class; by virtue of their race, white people are guilty and black people are victims; in understanding politics, facts and logic must be subordinated to victims’ “lived experience”; and free

speech and the examination of a diversity of perspectives must give way to protecting feelings and enforcing social-justice orthodoxy.

This is not to justify right-wing illiberalism but to recognize that it stems in many cases from a defensive overreaction to left-wing illiberalism. To safeguard freedom, we must grasp the threats from both camps and their interconnections.

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