Conservatism and the People

From Burke to Buckley to Trump, the Right has always had a populist current.

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Of all the strange and remarkable features of politics in the Trump era, among the least strange and remarkable is the alliance that has emerged between conservatism and populism. That it seems so striking to many conservatives reflects a certain disconnection from their tradition. The uncertainty and agitation that the alliance introduced into conservative ranks underscore the importance of recovering a lively appreciation of conservatism's origins, major ideas, and perennial task.

This isn't to deny the improbability of Donald J. Trump having made himself—or having been made into—the tribune of conservative hopes and popular anxieties. Nor should we discount the marvel, two years 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 devoted to interpreting the Constitution in accordance with its text, structure, and history. For a brash billionaire New York real-estate developer, for a longtime reality-TV star, for a playboy celebrity who over decades hobnobbed with Democratic Party royalty and contributed significant sums to their campaigns—for all that and more, 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. He rode the wave of a popular 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 nonurban Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa; similar grievances roil swaths of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and Israel. An imperious ruling elite, say many citizens in the United States and other nations, 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 political parties to promote globalization and mass immigration to benefit themselves, while ignoring the costs for the less educated and less wealthy.

Meanwhile, many right-leaning members of the political and intellectual elite believe that progressive elites—who dominate the mainstream media, the entertainment industry, and the universities—despise them. The scorched-earth tactics unsuccessfully employed against 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 that they face a common political foe.

In fact, the alliance between conservatism and the people—between elites devoted to preserving tradition and local communities and the people who want them preserved—is as old as modern conservatism itself. Its roots go back to British statesman Edmund Burke's seminal real-time critique of the French Revolution. About 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—renewed the

For William F. Buckley, limited government protected traditional morality.

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relationship between the Right and the people. That relationship has driven American conservatism's rise over the last 75 years to intellectual influence and political prominence. Not the least practical benefit of understanding that relationship is its capacity to calm nerves and cool judgment. The conservative challenge in the age of Trump calls for nothing less.

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, weaving together freedom and tradition has emerged as modern conservatism's ongoing challenge.

The challenge in Burke's day 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 person justly laid claim was still young. The conservative impulse is also of ancient origin. Before the rise of the modern conception of freedom in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, conservatism had been humanity's default option because tradition generally prevailed. Conservatism didn't generate a specific body of political thought because, on the whole, traditions teach that political authority stems from tradition and cultivates 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 typically rest on certain convictions? The short answer is yes. Across time and culture, conservatives have tended to 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 characters are formed by—and whose fulfillment 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 the 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 us to do as our forebears have done; modern freedom authorizes each to do as he or she deems best. But sometimes what we think is best 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 provided a handy standard for evaluating existing governments—and for finding them wanting.

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

It's thus not so surprising that Burke's vehement criticism of the French Revolution shocked his fellow Whigs. They saw the uprising against the old regime as heralding a new age of freedom. Burke discerned a novel and monstrous threat to liberty. He had not altered his principles, he insisted; he was honoring 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 sought to overthrow in addition "sentiments, manners, and moral opinions." It wanted to replace religion with "doctrine and theoretic dogma." It sought to emancipate society from inherited attachments. For enlightenment's sake, it would refashion culture and conduct. It aspired to perfect politics by transforming humanity.

This was madness, Burke contended. The revolutionaries' project betrayed a fundamental

misunderstanding of freedom and of people. British freedom derived from beliefs, practices, and associations that developed over centuries and that lay beyond government's routine purview. It 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 needed no new schooling in liberty because they received an exemplary education from what Burke called "prescription" and "prejudice." Prescription included authoritative tradition, custom, and law. Prejudice—*pre*-judgment—comprised the accumulated wisdom of community, nation, and faith. The people internalized the teachings of the past and learned the ways of liberty in the "little platoon"—family, neighborhood, town, and church. These institutions cultivated the virtues, fostered cooperation, and encouraged respect for rights and duties.

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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 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.

Like the conservatism that Burke inaugurated, the conservative movement in America was forged in response to a crisis—a pair of crises, in fact. Classical liberals and traditionalists, the component groups in 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 during the 1940s and 1950s, both agreed that Roosevelt's New Deal, which greatly enlarged the federal government, as well as expansionist Communist totalitarianism, presented profound new threats to freedom.

London School of Economics professor Friedrich Hayek's 1944 book *The Road to Serfdom*—a surprise bestseller in the United States—examined the effectively 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 maintained, established a sturdy fence around religious and political freedom.

During the early 1950s, in *The Conservative Mind*, author 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 people from elites bent on rescuing them 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 progressives to impose a new moral orthodoxy across the land.

Despite their shared opposition to collectivism, classical liberalism and traditionalism—or the partisans of freedom and the partisans of tradition—often clashed. The enthusiasm that some traditionalists demonstrated for legislating *their* morality offended classical liberals. And the indifference that some classical liberals displayed about 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: any viable conservative government majority in the United States would depend on both classical liberals and traditionalists—something that remains true today. But for Buckley, the marriage was not one of mere convenience. It improved both partners. Limited government protected traditional morality, Buckley believed; and traditional morality taught the virtues of freedom.

Like classical liberals and traditionalists, Buckley underscored the threat to the people posed by progressive elites. In its first issue, *National Review*'s 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, in Buckley's judgment, embodied the organic moral order.

Thirty years later, Irving Kristol endorsed what he called "the new populism." In a 1985 *Wall Street Journal* column, Kristol observed that distrust of populism suffused 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, " 'populism' has not had a good name among American political scientists, jurists, and social critics," observed Kristol. 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. The people were justly dismayed by their government's inept conduct of the Vietnam War, by courts intruding into social policy, by schools abandoning the education and discipline of students, and by a criminal-justice system losing interest in fighting crime. Consequently, Kristol noted, 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 asserted, "so many people . . . who would ordinarily worry about a populist upsurge find themselves . . . 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—drawn disproportionately from conservative

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The founder of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke was the first to confront the challenge of conserving modern freedom.

ranks—voted for populist upstart Ross Perot. In 1994, Newt Gingrich's Contract with America—an agreement with voters apprehensive about First Lady Hillary Clinton's ambitions to overhaul the health-care system—led to the first Republican majority in the House of Representatives in 40 years, as well as control of the Senate. In 2000, George W. Bush won the presidency because left-wing populist Ralph Nader took tens of thousands of Florida votes from Al Gore. In 2010, populist Tea Party energy fueled a stunning turnaround for the Republican Party, producing a GOP majority in the House that stymied Barack Obama's plans for "fundamentally transforming the United States of America." In 2016, Donald Trump defied the experts with a promise to make America great again that resonated among disillusioned swing voters in states that had previously formed the Democrats' "blue wall." And in 2018, while Democrats produced a House majority by making headway among suburban voters, the GOP, thanks in part to Trump's aggressive campaigning, added slightly to its Senate majority.

Since Burke's time, conservative elites have regularly joined forces with the people against progressive elites armed with transformative projects. Recognizing the historical continuities provides inspiration and perspective. It is also crucial to grasping how today's conservative-populist coalition differs—and not only because Trump himself 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 worked to defend entwined commitments to freedom and faith that he believed ordinary people honored. 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 has breached the town walls. It has occupied neighborhoods and infiltrated homes.

In 2012, in his bestseller *Coming Apart*, social scientist and political thinker Charles Murray explored the multifaceted crisis of America's lower middle class. It is beset by plunging marriage rates, a rise in 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 regularly heap on ordinary people. Social media spread these slanders like wildfire, which intensifies ordinary people's resentment and distrust of elites.

As a result, preserving and reforming no longer suffice. To conserve, one must also restore.

The challenge is formidable. It calls for tenacity, broad learning, and shrewd judgment. To restore America's beleaguered lower-middle-class communities—indeed, to earn the support of people throughout the nation, regardless of socioeconomic class—conservative elites must convince the people that individual freedom, limited government, free markets, robust civil society, and a strong America in the international arena advance the people's long-term interests. Also, conservative elites must listen more to the people to understand better 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 the good jobs 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. Instead, our colleges and universities increasingly specialize in inculcating the practices and spirit of the tribalism that disfigures our politics.

Conservatives, therefore, must also restore liberal education. That's 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 outside universities' purview they have already established. These include the Abigail Adams Institute, the Adam Smith Society (established by the Manhattan Institute, *City Journal*'s publisher), the Alexander Hamilton Society, the AEI Summer Honors Program, the Berkeley Institute, the Claremont Institute's Publius Fellowship, the Federalist Society, Hertog Political Studies, Hudson Institute Political Studies, the Jack Miller Center, the Public Interest Fellowship, and the Witherspoon Institute.

These initiatives expose students to major ideas and classic books that today's professors typically neglect, disparage, or exclude from the undergraduate curriculum. They introduce students to a spirit of free and vigorous inquiry increasingly rare on our campuses. And they form a network of young men and women grateful for the opportunity to grasp the principles of liberty, because they have studied the great debates about liberty.

Yet valuable as they are, the conservative-built supplements to college education are only a start. Enormous work lies ahead. 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 exemplary promises? After all, without such an education, how will citizens fully comprehend the imperatives of national security and economic prosperity?

It's true that liberal education has always been the province of elites. It's also true, though, 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, national tradition, and religious faith. ■

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