THE ROOTS OF A REFORMING CONSERVATISM

Yuval Levin

In recent years, conservatives have fallen into a thoroughly oppositional mind-set in American politics. We have had good reasons for doing so. The agenda of the Obama administration has frequently been moved by a political philosophy hostile to what conservatives seek to defend: ordered individual and economic liberty, cultural traditionalism, personal responsibility, civil society, religious freedom, a commitment to work, a belief in America as the last best hope of mankind. Provoked on one or more of these fronts, conservatives have reacted defensively, making our case against what we have taken to be serious mistakes. This is a necessary and appropriate response to the circumstances. But it is dangerously insufficient.

Its insufficiency is dangerous, first, for the simple political reason that conservatives who want to succeed electorally need to offer voters something more than opposition to someone else’s ideas. It is also dangerous because it contributes to an impression (too often held by some conservatives themselves) that the Right is merely a brake on American life, while the Left holds the steering wheel—or that conservatives just want the liberal welfare state at a slightly lower cost than the Left has in mind.

But our oppositional mind-set is dangerous above all for a deeper reason: it threatens to make us forget what we seek to defend and advance, and so to reduce American conservatism to an outlet for nostalgia or outrage. Nostalgia and outrage are both inherently confused and unfocused forces in political life. They have their uses, but they could never do as organizing principles. The

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organizing principles of a political movement must involve some vision of the good of the whole—that is, some idea of how our society ought to approach its common life and why, which can help persuade the broader public and unify copartisans in the service of shared loves and hopes, not just shared frustrations or resentments.

Today’s conservatism sometimes gives the impression that until fairly recently the organizing principles of American life were obvious to everyone and embodied in the nation’s political practice. If this were true, then conservatives would be defenders of a threatened status quo and so would not have to work very hard to show Americans what we stand for. But it is not true. In fact, the organizing principles of our national life have always been hotly contested. American politics has involved a Left and a Right at each other’s throats almost from the first. And the Left has, in some important respects, been the dominant force in these arguments for at least the last third of the nation’s life. Progressivism has largely defined the status quo, in the process perverting the constitutional system to which conservatives point as the proper ideal.

To advance our cause, then, American conservatives need to offer our vision as a genuine alternative to the status quo. Doing so requires us to make an appeal to the broader public grounded in both a practical and a theoretical case, and therefore to engage simultaneously with the mundane realities of American government and the principles and philosophy that underlie our idea of the proper character of society and politics. It requires, in other words, a political program that draws on a conservative anthropology, sociology, and epistemology, and expresses itself in terms of both political philosophy and public administration.

This means that today’s Right needs both a firmer grounding in the foundations of the conservative tradition in American politics and more practical policy proposals that can speak to the public’s needs and wants.

Some conservatives are now trying to provide (or recover) these two essential supports. This small group of mostly younger writers and thinkers has come to be described as “reform conservatives.” Although this group is sometimes seen as standing in opposition to the establishment wing or the Tea Party wing of conservatism (or both), it is better understood as an extension of the two. Reform conservatism seeks to articulate what unites them and to supply what they are missing, and so to strengthen the American Right, and with it the larger American experiment, by making it more conservative.

The project of these reformers can perhaps be most clearly understood by first reflecting on the character and purpose of conservatism in America—that is, again, on the anthropology, sociology, epistemology, and public policy of the Right. By working our way up from those roots toward the surface of American political life, we can begin to discern the nature of an emerging reform-minded Right and the shape that a rich and effective twenty-first-century conservatism might take.

American conservatism has always consisted of a variety of schools of social, moral, political, and economic thought. But they are nearly all united, in a general sense, by a cluster of anthropological assumptions that sets them apart from most American progressives.

Conservatives tend to see the human person as an incorrigible mass of contradictions: a fallen and imperfect being created in a divine image, a creature possessed of fundamental dignity and inalienable rights but prone to excess and to sin and ever in need of self-restraint and moral formation.
This elevated yet gloomy conception of man, deeply informed by the peculiar, paradoxical wisdom of the West’s great religions, sets conservatives apart from libertarians and progressives alike, and sits at the core of most conservative thinking about society and politics.

It leads, to begin with, to low expectations of human affairs and away from utopianism. In the modern history of the West, conservatism has often manifested itself as an anti-utopian creed, unwilling to believe that timeless human problems could be permanently resolved by some novel insight, clever system, or transformational leader. The most profound and basic human problems recur in every generation because they are intrinsic to the human person—a function of our permanent incongruities and limitations that must be acknowledged, counterbalanced, mitigated, or accommodated but that can never really go away. No social organization of any sort can permanently overcome these problems, because the human being can be understood only as an individual and personal creature, albeit a fundamentally social one. Moral progress must ultimately be achieved through the transformation of individual souls rather than made for them by society as a whole.

The fact that these limits are inherent in humanity also leaves most conservatives persuaded that the experiences of different generations will not be fundamentally different from one another—or, as some have put it, that human nature has no history. Regardless of how much intellectual and material progress any society may make, every new child entering that society will still join it with essentially the same native equipment as any other child born in any other place at any other time. A failure to initiate the next generation of children into the ways of civilization would not only delay or derail innovation but also put into question the very continuity of that civilization. This is why conservatives rarely imagine that our society is on the verge of utopia and frequently (perhaps too frequently) imagine it is on the verge of a breakdown. And it is a crucial reason why conservatives care so deeply about culture.

The sense of man’s fallen nature often leaves conservatives with low expectations. But it is precisely because of those low expectations that we tend to be far more thankful for success in society than we are outraged by failure.

Progressives have much higher expectations. They are more open to the possibility of the perfectibility of man, and they tend to think they have a formula for it, so the persistence of failure infuriates them. When conservatives are outraged, it is generally at seeing something valuable lost; progressives are more commonly outraged at the obduracy of the status quo.

An appreciation of and a gratitude for what works in society, and an inclination to address our failures by building on what works rather than starting over, give conservatives a high regard for long-standing social institutions—those that have been valued by generations of people dealing with the same kinds of basic human problems we now face. It is a key reason why conservatives are traditionalists, inclined to be protective of established ways.

Those customs and institutions that have stood the test of time (which is really a recurring trial-and-error process, generation after generation) are likely to be best adapted to help us address eternal human challenges and meet enduring human needs, and therefore to enable genuine progress. They are likely to possess more knowledge than we can readily perceive and than any collection of technical experts, however capable, can
have. A great deal of society’s wisdom is contained in the structure of such customs and institutions—and so is conveyed not just as knowledge but also as practice.

This understanding of the place and significance of enduring institutions points from the anthropology to the sociology of conservatism. The conservative vision of society—inform ed both by a low opinion of the capacity of individuals alone to address social problems and by a high regard for the rights and freedoms of those individuals—seeks social arrangements that encourage individual moral progress while respecting human liberty and dignity. And it finds these in the mediating institutions of a free society—families, communities, civic and religious groups, markets, and more—that stand between the individual and the state.

An appreciation of these middle layers of society is one of the things that most clearly sets conservatives apart from progressives. American progressivism, from its earliest incarnations, has been characterized by a deep suspicion of and hostility to mediating institutions, which it has viewed as lacking in democratic legitimacy and embodying little more than prejudice and backwardness. Precisely because they are not rationally designed but have rather evolved gradually, as traditions do, these institutions have struck the Left as vestiges of a predemocratic era at odds with the logic of modern politics.

Thomas Paine was one of the earliest exponents of the view, now common on the Left, that society needs to be understood as consisting merely of individuals and government. All the layers in between, he argued in 1791, are remnants of a darker time and have no place in the political life of a free society. Such institutions, Paine contended, only put distance between the individual and his rights, “and the artificial chasm [is] filled up with a succession of barriers, or sort of turnpike gates, through which he has to pass.”

What Paine did not see, but many of his radical successors have, is that defining society as simply individuals and a government that represents their interests leaves no room for common action that is not state action. Clearing out the space between the individual and the state abolishes many of the means by which we exercise our liberty and opens the way to arguments for vast expansions of the role and power of government.

Contemporary progressives surely do see this, and they frequently make arguments for government action that implicitly assume, without expressly defending, this view of society. So, for instance, in his second inaugural address in 2013, President Barack Obama argued that the demands of a changing world make a greater reliance on government unavoidable, because the only alternative is a radical and simple-minded individualism:

For the American people can no more meet the demands of today’s world by acting alone than American soldiers could have met the forces of fascism or communism with muskets and militias. No single person can train all the math and science teachers we’ll need to equip our children for the future, or build the roads and networks and research labs that will bring new jobs and businesses to our shores. Now, more than ever, we must do these things together, as one nation and one people.

Both the view of the past and the view of the present implicit in this argument are wrong. And both share in the same error: a rejection of the mediating layers of society. Those layers have always been central to the conservative understanding of social life. It is an understanding that grounds rights
and duties not in an abstract individualism but in a rich sense of the way in which our social arrangements can, through the generations, lead to a greater understanding of permanent truths. This understanding has been perhaps nowhere better expressed than in Edmund Burke’s response to the radical liberalism of Thomas Paine. In his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, written in 1791, Burke wrote:

Dark and inscrutable are the ways by which we come into the world. The instincts which give rise to this mysterious process of nature are not of our making. But out of physical causes, unknown to us, perhaps unknowable, arise moral duties, which, as we are able perfectly to comprehend, we are bound indispensably to perform. Parents may not be consenting to their moral relation; but consenting or not, they are bound to a long train of burdensome duties towards those with whom they have never made a convention of any sort. Children are not consenting to their relation, but their relation, without their actual consent, binds them to its duties; or rather it implies their consent because the presumed consent of every rational creature is in unison with the predisposed order of things. Men come in that manner into a community with the social state of their parents, endowed with all the benefits, loaded with all the duties of their situation. If the social ties and ligaments, spun out of those physical relations which are the elements of the commonwealth, in most cases begin, and always continue, independently of our will, so without any stipulation, on our part, are we bound by that relation called our country, which comprehends (as it has been well said) “all the charities of all.” Nor are we left without powerful instincts to make this duty as dear and grateful to us, as it is awful and coercive.

This may well be the most important paragraph in all of Burke’s voluminous writings. It sets out the links between a conservative anthropology rooted in the limits of the individual’s power and choice and a conservative sociology that expresses itself in the complex social topography of the life of a free people. It helps us again to see a stark distinction between conservatism and progressivism, on several levels.

It is first of all crucial to see that this conservative sociology begins from family obligations that highlight the inherent limitations of the power of choice in the human experience. An enormous portion of the conservative worldview becomes clearer when we see the importance this view places on cultural continuity as a function of generational transmission—on the inescapable responsibilities human procreation imposes on each generation. An enormous portion of the progressive worldview becomes clearer when we see the degree to which it is shaped by a desire to be liberated from these obligations—and from the implications of the basic facts and character of human procreation. Many of what we loosely call the “social issues” in our politics involve debates about whether such a liberation is possible or desirable—whether the word choice can be poured like an acid over traditional social arrangements, burning all links of obligation and duty and making responsibility merely optional.

And it is no less crucial to see that the social topography Burke describes stands in the way of such radical liberation. The Left has long treated the flattening of society into individuals and a government as a prerequisite for true equality and so for justice, both in principle and in practice. The sociology of
conservatism, which understands society as “spun out” of the family, the community, and the array of mediating social structures, suggests that justice in principle and practice needs to be pursued through our evolved, traditional institutions rather than around them, because those institutions answer to the enduring character of the human person.

The sociology of progressivism proposes as the alternative to society’s mediating institutions artificial social structures created by exercises of technical expertise empowered with state authority—in other words, government programs.

We live amid a profusion of such programs now. They are the pillars of the liberal welfare state, intended to stand in for and to weaken the pillars of our traditional free society. These programs were by no means designed with malevolent motives in mind. Each is expected to answer a real social need that progressives believe can no longer be (and never again could be enabled to be) met by mediating institutions.

By replacing a function of the traditional family, or work, or civil society with a public program, progressives hope to liberate the individual from undue reliance on others. Dependence on people you know is oppressive, this vision implies, because it always comes with moral and social strings. But dependence on larger, more distant systems of benefits and rules is liberating, because it frees people from the undue moral influence of traditional social institutions even as it frees them from material want. A healthy dose of moral individualism combined with a healthy dose of economic collectivism can make for a powerful mix of freedom and equality. And this mix is to be achieved through public programs and institutions that address material problems by applying technical knowledge.

Conservatives have always resisted such gross rationalization of society and insisted that local knowledge channeled by evolved social institutions—from families and civic and fraternal groups to traditional religious establishments, charitable enterprises, private companies, and complex markets—will make for better material outcomes and a better common life. The life of a society consists of more than moving resources around, and what happens in that vital space between the individual and the government is a matter at least as much of character formation as of material provision and wealth creation.

Moral individualism mixed with economic collectivism feels like freedom only because it liberates people from responsibility in both arenas. But real freedom is possible only with real responsibility. And real responsibility is possible only when you depend on, and are depended on by, people you know. It is, in other words, possible only in that space between the individual and the state that the Left has long sought to collapse.

What happens in that space generally happens face to face—between parents and children, neighbors and friends, buyers and sellers. It therefore answers to immediately felt needs and is tailored to the characters, sentiments, priorities, and preferences of the people involved. It treats human persons personally. That kind of bottom-up common life is what makes society tick. Although it can certainly be reinforced by public policy, it could never be replaced with centralized administration, however capable the technical experts who engineer the programs.

The anthropology that yields the sociology of conservatism also leads to the (closely related) epistemology of conservatism, and for all the reasons we have already begun to see.

The Left’s high expectations of the human
person point toward a social vision with great confidence in the capacity of rational design to liberate the individual from burdens and obligations. This vision implies that we can solve or at least mitigate social problems by consolidating knowledge in the hands of the only legitimate institutions of common action—government institutions. Modern science, including modern social science, helps make this possible.

Conservatives begin from a very different premise about human knowledge and power. As already noted, conservatives tend to believe that society’s knowledge, often gained by a trial-and-error process across generations, is contained as much in the forms and structures of its institutions as in the explicit expertise they convey and apply. This is one of the reasons why conservatives respect traditional institutions. Mankind’s permanent moral limitations have close counterparts in mankind’s permanent cognitive limitations, and society’s institutions exist to help us alleviate the painful consequences of these limits—to enable society’s knowledge to be more than the sum of its citizens’ knowledge.

One of the great benefits of life in society (as Friedrich Hayek famously noted) is the ability to apply to our problems and needs knowledge that we do not ourselves possess, and indeed that no one in particular possesses—not even the most knowledgeable technocrats. Conservatives tend not to share in the progressive confidence in technical expertise, doubting that any group of experts could ever have enough knowledge to pull off the feats of management and administration that the Left expects government to achieve. Our anthropological and sociological modesty point us toward profound epistemological modesty.

That does not mean that we see society as incapable of achieving the enormous feats of applied knowledge required of a modern, diverse, dynamic nation. Rather, we think these feats can be achieved through institutions that channel social knowledge from the bottom up rather than ones that impose technical knowledge from the top down. Conservatives, especially in America, are not fatalists, and indeed we are often fairly cheerful about America’s prospects. But we are cheerful and hopeful precisely because we start out with low expectations—because we believe in the capacity of American society to improve itself over time in this dynamic, diffuse, decentralized, and incremental way even while we doubt the capacity of consolidated technocratic management to improve it all at once by following a plan.

That bottom-up channeling of knowledge is what many of our society’s mediating institutions do much of the time, particularly when it comes to solving practical problems. Put simply, it is a process that involves three general steps, all grounded in humility: experimentation, evaluation, and evolution.

Markets are ideally suited to following these steps. They offer entrepreneurs and businesses a huge incentive to try new ways of doing things (experimentation); the people directly affected decide which ways they like best (evaluation); and those consumer responses inform which ways are kept and which are left behind (evolution).

This three-step process is at work well beyond the bounds of explicitly economic activity. It is how our culture learns and evolves, how norms and habits form, and how society as a general matter “decides” what to keep and what to change. It is an exceedingly effective way to balance stability with improvement, continuity with alteration, tradition with dynamism. It involves conservation of the core with experimentation at the margins in an effort to attain the best of both.
That is why conservatives often reach for the language of markets in public policy—not necessarily always for actual markets but for following these three steps to achieve incremental improvements. Presented with a classic public-policy problem, such as how to improve schooling, reduce poverty, or restrain health-care costs, this approach can (1) allow different service providers to try different ways of meeting the need in question; (2) enable recipients or consumers of those services to decide which approaches work for them and which do not; and (3) thus provide clear evidence for which approaches should be kept and which should be dumped.

By contrast, government programs on the model of the liberal welfare state generally do not allow for any of the three steps. Administrative centralization and regulation proscribe experimentation; beneficiaries of services are not the ones who decide what is working and failing; and special interests grow around existing programs, making it hard to eliminate failures.

Conservatives tend to think society is much too complicated to be amenable to consolidated technical solutions that assume we already have all the answers and that government should simply impose them. We therefore believe that public policy should reinforce our long-evolved, decentralized social institutions, help all citizens take part in them, and sustain the space in which they can function.

What has come to be called the conservative reform agenda largely involves different ways of moving from the welfare-state model to the market-oriented model (or mediating-institution model) in different arenas of public policy. That is what school choice involves; it is what the conservative approach to health-care reform looks like; it is what the Right has to say about reforming welfare; and it is where conservative ideas point on the full range of domestic policy questions.

It is not by coincidence that this approach has come to be described as reform-oriented, and it is important to understand that term, too, in the context of conservative intellectual history.

“Reform conservatism” refers to an effort not to change conservatism but rather to change American government in accordance with the sorts of conservative ideas laid out here. It speaks of an approach to public policy that seeks not to decimate government—cutting its size without regard for its purpose—but to curtail it by transforming its character through an understanding both of its proper purpose and of the proper mechanisms of policy and administration.

Such a conservatism will involve itself in the details of public-policy debates and not limit itself to the level of abstraction. Some conservatives recoil from such details, taking arguments about them to be concessions to the technocratic mind-set. But in fact, involvement in such debates is the only way to transform our governing institutions—to imbue them with an antitechnocratic modesty that makes possible continual improvements against a background of constructive stability. In the words of Friedrich Hayek:

Liberty in practice depends on very prosaic matters, and those anxious to preserve it must prove their devotion by their attention to the mundane concerns of public life and by the efforts they are prepared to give to the understanding of issues that the idealist is often inclined to treat as common, if not sordid.4

Indeed, the anthropological, sociological, and epistemological views that give conservatism its shape suggest an approach to
policymaking that takes public problems seriously and that believes the state can play a role in creating the circumstances for their remedy—but that this must almost always be a supporting role and not a leading one. To avoid thinking about public policy altogether and argue only that there ought to be less of it is to let the Left define the role of government in accordance with its own ideas of the human person and society while the Right merely bargains over the size of the errors we make.

In America, such engagement with the details of policy is particularly important because it can also be a means of rescuing the character of our public institutions from the destructive distortions of progressivism. The U.S. Constitution, as both its structure and the writings of its framers make clear, is rooted in just the sort of skeptical view of human nature and human power that characterizes conservatism, and it advances precisely the view that the government (and the Constitution itself) exists to create a protected space within which society can flourish rather than to fill that space or command what happens in it. That is why the Right tends to view the boundaries established by the Constitution as liberating (or as creating a space for us to thrive), while the Left tends to view them as constricting (or as keeping the government from acting decisively and moving the country forward).

American progressives have always been dissatisfied with the modest role assigned to government in our system and have sought innovations in public administration that would advance a more assertive role for the state. A key task of conservative reformers today is to recover the more humble idea of American government at the core of our system. The fact that they must do so by starting with that system as they find it, and championing changes to it, must not be confused with a willingness to abide the progressive presumptions that have distorted it for many decades.

The understanding of reform as a recovery and restoration has been crucial to conservative thinking for centuries. Here, too, Edmund Burke can be our guide. Burke always sought to be associated with the term reform (even launching a weekly student newspaper called The Reformer, dedicated largely to culture and art, as an undergraduate at Dublin’s Trinity College in 1748). The term appealed to him because, in contrast to mere innovation, it spoke of a desire to retain the best of a long-standing practice or institution while addressing the worst—combining, as he put it in 1790, “the two principles of conservation and correction.” The greatest statesmen are those able, he wrote, “at once to preserve and reform.” Burke thought the greatest instances of such reform had occurred during the gravest crises Britain had faced, “at the two critical periods of the Restoration and Revolution, when England found itself without a king.” He continued:

At both those periods the nation had lost the bond of union in their ancient edifice; they did not, however, dissolve the whole fabric. On the contrary, in both cases they regenerated the deficient part of the old constitution through the parts which were not impaired. They kept these old parts exactly as they were, that the part recovered might be suited to them.5

Today’s conservative reformers might find some inspiration in this idea of reform that uses the healthy parts of the constitutional system to serve as a model for addressing those parts that have been corrupted. We are privileged to be heirs to a system of government that was largely well founded and
ordered to begin with. But it has been dis-
torted over time, so that the task of today’s
conservatives is in large part a task of refor-
mation and recovery that would result in a
genuine alternative to the American status
quo. And our understanding of what is to be
preserved and what is to be corrected should
be guided by the anthropology, sociology,
and epistemology of conservatism.

That understanding must also be guided,
finally, by an ideal of human liberty.
And here, too, conservatism has a unique
contribution to make.

The idea of liberty that too often perme-
ates our political debates is rooted in a rad-
cal (or progressive) anthropology that has
too high an opinion of the character and
rationality of man. Progressives and some
libertarians, in different ways, imagine that
by liberating the individual from all outside
constraints we could set free his noblest
instincts and eradicate our greatest social
problems. Both take for granted a human
individual capable of handling an enormous
amount of freedom responsibly.

But such a person rarely occurs in nature.
More often, he is an artifact of a particular
kind of culture, which seeks to shape citizens
capable of living as free men and women—
of aligning their desires with their duties by
understanding both well. When we fail to
see the need for such a culture of moral for-
mation, we imagine that all that is required
for a free society is the absence of corrosive
and distorting moral coercion, and so we
are liable to seek through politics a morally
neutralized public square.

When, instead, we see that our free soci-
ety requires a flourishing private culture of
moral formation for liberty, we are inclined
to prize and to defend the institutions that
enable and engage in such formation. And
these are, once again, the mediating institu-
tions that fill the space between the indi-
vidual and the national state and speak to
the simultaneous nobility and iniquity of the
human person in personal terms.

These institutions have been weakened
in recent decades, both by the effects of
a hostile progressivism and by changes in
American life to which they have not ably
responded. It would be a mistake to imagine
that they stand waiting, ready and strong, so
that we need only roll back the liberal wel-
fare state and they will step in. This would be
to ignore the erosion of families, communi-
ties, civil society, and the market economy
in the era of the welfare state. The mediating
institutions need to be revived, reinforced,
and empowered. This, too, is an important
reason why conservatives need to look to
a particular approach to public policy for
means of ultimately making public policy
less important and less powerful.

A conservatism committed to the future
of the free society—grounded in a sense of
the limits and the dignity of the human per-
son, in an appreciation of the virtues of our
core social institutions, and in a grasp of the
means by which society improves its knowl-
edge and addresses its problems—would
seek to give our mediating institutions more
freedom and power to help them recover
their strength, so that America may do the
same. Every plank of the policy platform
of today’s reforming conservatism seeks to
do exactly that: to inject greater and more
meaningful power into the space between
the individual and the state, and so to help
American society address practical problems
in a way that also reinforces its capacity for
liberty.

The goal of conservatives in national
politics cannot just be to have less of the
same: the liberal welfare state at a slightly
lower cost. The goal, rather, should be to
transform American government along con-
servative lines, into a government that works to sustain and expand the space between the individual and the state; to strengthen the family, civil society, and the market economy and make their benefits accessible to more Americans; to help the poor not with an empty promise of material equality but with a fervent commitment to upward mobility; and to strengthen the middle class by lifting needless burdens off the shoulders of parents and workers.

That kind of government would certainly cost less, but it would do far more than that. It would advance the vision of our founding and build on the best of what America has been and on the foundations of the conservative view of the human person and society. And it would show voters why and how such an approach would improve their lives.

To achieve that, conservatives must first gain a better understanding of exactly what we have to offer. We must make the political appeal of American conservatism—the face we put before the public—significantly more conservative, and therefore both more principled and more practical. We must each be a witness for a vision of the good life worthy of the name.

5 Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), in Writings and Speeches, 8:72.