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What Is Conservatism?

By Ofir Haivry and Yoram Hazony, May 22, 2017

This excerpt is from my new essay in the Summer 2017 issue of the journal American Affairs. *You can read the entire essay [here](#).*

The year 2016 marked a dramatic change of political course for the English-speaking world, with Britain voting for independence from Europe and the United States electing a president promising a revived American nationalism. Critics see both events as representing a dangerous turn toward "illiberalism" and deplore the apparent departure from "liberal principles" or "liberal democracy," themes which surfaced repeatedly in conservative publications over the past year.

Perhaps the most eloquent among the many spokesmen for this view has been William Kristol, who, in a series of essays in the *Weekly Standard*, has called for a new movement to arise "in defense of liberal democracy." In his eyes, the historic task of American conservatism is "to preserve and strengthen American liberal democracy," and what is needed now is "a new conservatism based on old conservative—and liberal—principles." Meanwhile, the conservative flagship *Commentary* published a cover story by the *Wall St. Journal's* Sohrab Ahmari entitled "Illiberalism: The Worldwide Crisis," seeking to raise the alarm about the dangers to liberalism posed by Brexit, Trump, and other phenomena.

These and similar examples demonstrate once again that more than a few prominent conservatives in America and Britain today consider themselves to be not only conservatives but also liberals at the same time. Or, to get to the heart of the matter, they see conservatism as a branch or species of

liberalism—to their thinking, the "classical" and most authentic form of liberalism. According to this view, the foundations of conservatism are to be found, in significant measure, in the thought of the great liberal icon John Locke and his followers. It is to this tradition that we must turn for the political institutions, including the separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism, that secure the freedoms of religion, speech, and the press, the right of private property, and due process under law. In other words, if we want limited government and, ultimately, the American constitution, then there is only one way to go: Lockean liberalism provides the theoretical basis for the ordered freedom that conservatives strive for, and liberal democracy is the only vehicle for it.

Many of those who have been most outspoken on this point have been our long-time friends. We admire and are grateful for their tireless efforts on behalf of conservative causes, including some in which we have worked together as partners.

But we see this confusion of conservatism with liberalism as historically and philosophically misguided. Anglo-American conservatism is a distinct political tradition—one that predates Locke by centuries. Its advocates fought for and successfully established most of the freedoms that are now exclusively associated with Lockean liberalism, although they did so on the basis of tenets very different from Locke's. Indeed, when Locke published his *Two Treatises on Government* in 1689, offering the public a sweeping new rationale for the traditional freedoms already known to Englishmen, most defenders of these freedoms were justly appalled. They saw in this new doctrine not a friend to liberty, but a product of intellectual folly that would ultimately bring down the entire edifice of freedom. Thus, liberalism and conservatism have been opposed political positions in political theory since the day liberal theorizing first set foot in England.

Today's confusion of conservative political thought with liberalism is in a way understandable, however. In the great twentieth century battles against totalitarianism, conservatives and liberals were allies: They fought together, along with the Communists, against Nazism. After 1945, conservatives and liberals remained allies in the war against Communism. Over these many decades of joint struggle, what had for centuries been a distinction of vital importance was treated as if it were not terribly important, and in fact, it was largely forgotten.

But since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, these circumstances have changed. The challenges facing the Anglo-American tradition are now coming from other directions entirely. Radical Islam, to name one such challenge, is a menace that liberals, for reasons internal to their own view of the political world, find difficult to regard as a threat and especially difficult to oppose in an effective manner. But even more important is the challenge arising from liberalism itself. It is now evident that liberal principles contribute little or nothing to those institutions that were for centuries the bedrock of the Anglo-American political order: Nationalism, religious tradition, the Bible as a source of political principles and wisdom, and the family. Indeed, as liberalism has emerged victorious from the battles of the last century, the logic of its doctrines has increasingly turned liberals against all of these conservative institutions. On both of these fronts, the conservative and liberal principles of the Anglo-American tradition are now painfully at cross-purposes. The 20th century alliance between conservatism and liberalism is proving increasingly difficult to maintain.

In this essay, we seek to clarify the historical and philosophical differences between the two major Anglo-American political traditions, conservative and liberal. We will begin by looking at some important events in the emergence of Anglo-American conservatism and its conflict with liberalism.

After that, we will use these historical events as a basis for drawing some political distinctions that will be highly relevant for our own political context.

To read the entire essay, continue here: [*https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/05/what-is-conservatism/*](https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/05/what-is-conservatism/)*.*