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Is ‘Classical Liberalism’ Conservative?

By Yoram Hazony, November 14, 2017

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American conservatism is having something of an identity crisis. Most conservatives supported Donald Trump last November. But many prominent conservative intellectuals—journalists, academics and think-tank personalities—have entrenched themselves in bitter opposition. Some have left the Republican Party, while others are waging guerrilla warfare against a Republican administration. Longtime friendships have been ended and resignations tendered. Talk of establishing a new political party alternates with declarations that Mr. Trump will be denied the GOP nomination in 2020.

Those in the “Never Trump” camp say the cause of the split is the president—that he’s mentally unstable, morally unspeakable, a leftist populist, a rightist authoritarian, a danger to the republic. One prominent Republican told me he is praying for Mr. Trump to have a brain aneurysm so the nightmare can end.

But the conservative unity that Never Trumpers seek won’t be coming back, even if the president leaves office prematurely. An apparently unbridgeable ideological chasm is opening between two camps that were once closely allied. Mr. Trump’s rise is the effect, not the cause, of this rift.

There are two principal causes: first, the increasingly rigid ideology conservative intellectuals have promoted since the end of the Cold War;

second, a series of events—from the failed attempt to bring democracy to Iraq to the implosion of Wall Street—that have made the prevailing conservative ideology seem naive and reckless to the broader conservative public.

A good place to start thinking about this is a 1989 [essay](#) in the *National Interest* by Charles Krauthammer. The Cold War was coming to an end, and Mr. Krauthammer proposed it should be supplanted by what he called “Universal Dominion” (the title of the essay): America was going to create a Western “super-sovereign” that would establish peace and prosperity throughout the world. The cost would be “the conscious depreciation not only of American sovereignty, but of the notion of sovereignty in general.”

William Kristol and Robert Kagan presented a similar view in their 1996 essay “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy” in *Foreign Affairs*, which [proposed](#) an American “benevolent global hegemony” that would have “preponderant influence and authority over all others in its domain.”

Then, as now, conservative commentators insisted that the world should want such an arrangement because the U.S. knows best: The American way of politics, based on individual liberties and free markets, is the right way for human beings to live everywhere. Japan and Germany, after all, were once-hostile authoritarian nations that had flourished after being conquered and acquiescing in American political principles. With the collapse of communism, dozens of countries—from Eastern Europe to East Asia to Latin America—seemed to need, and in differing degrees to be open to, American tutelage of this kind. As the bearer of universal political truth, the U.S. was said to have an obligation to ensure that every nation was coaxed, maybe even coerced, into adopting its principles.

Any foreign policy aimed at establishing American universal dominion faces considerable practical challenges, not least because many nations

don't want to live under U.S. authority. But the conservative intellectuals who have set out to promote this Hegelian world revolution must also contend with a problem of different kind: Their aim cannot be squared with the political tradition for which they are ostensibly the spokesmen.

For centuries, Anglo-American conservatism has favored individual liberty and economic freedom. But as the Oxford historian of conservatism Anthony Quinton emphasized, this tradition is empiricist and regards successful political arrangements as developing through an unceasing process of trial and error. As such, it is deeply skeptical of claims about universal political truths. The most important conservative figures—including John Fortescue, John Selden, Montesquieu, Edmund Burke and Alexander Hamilton—believed that different political arrangements would be fitting for different nations, each in keeping with the specific conditions it faces and traditions it inherits. What works in one country can't easily be transplanted.

On that view, the U.S. Constitution worked so well because it preserved principles the American colonists had brought with them from England. The framework—the balance between the executive and legislative branches; the bicameral legislature; the jury trial and due process; the bill of rights—was already familiar from the English constitution. Attempts to transplant Anglo-American political institutions in places such as Mexico, Nigeria, Russia and Iraq have collapsed time and again, because the political traditions needed to maintain them did not exist. Even in France, Germany and Italy, representative government failed repeatedly into the mid-20th century (recall the collapse of the Fourth Republic in France in 1958), and has now been shunted aside by an EU whose notorious “democracy deficit” reflects an ongoing inability to adopt Anglo-American constitutional norms.

The “universal dominion” agenda is flatly contradicted by centuries of Anglo-American conservative political thought. This may be one reason that some post-Cold War conservative intellectuals have shifted to calling themselves “classical liberals.” Last year Paul Ryan insisted: “I really call myself a classical liberal more than a conservative.” Mr. Kristol tweeted in August: “Conservatives could ‘rebrand’ as liberals. Seriously. We’re for liberal democracy, liberal world order, liberal economy, liberal education.”

What is “classical liberalism,” and how does it differ from conservatism? As Quinton pointed out, the liberal tradition descends from Hobbes and Locke, who were not empiricists but rationalists: Their aim was to deduce universally valid political principles from self-evident axioms, as in mathematics.

In his *Second Treatise on Government* (1689), Locke asserts that universal reason teaches the same political truths to all human beings; that all individuals by nature possess “perfect freedom” and “perfect equality”; and that obligation to political institutions arises only from the consent of the individual. From these assumptions, Locke deduces a political doctrine that he supposes must hold good in all times and places.

The term “classical liberal” came into use in 20th-century America to distinguish the supporters of old-school laissez-faire from the welfare-state liberalism of figures such as Franklin D. Roosevelt. Modern classical liberals, inheriting the rationalism of Hobbes and Locke, believe they can speak authoritatively to the political needs of every human society, everywhere. In his seminal work, *Liberalism* (1927), the great classical-liberal economist Ludwig von Mises thus advocates a “world super-state really deserving of the name” that will arise if we “succeed in creating throughout the world. . . nothing less than the unqualified, unconditional acceptance of liberalism. Liberal thinking must permeate all nations, liberal principles must pervade all political institutions.”

Friedrich Hayek, the leading classical-liberal theorist of the 20th century, likewise argued, in a 1939 essay, for replacing independent nations with a world-wide federation: “The abrogation of national sovereignties and the creation of an effective international order of law is a necessary complement and the logical consummation of the liberal program.”

Classical liberalism thus offers ground for imposing a single doctrine on all nations for their own good. It provides an ideological basis for an American universal dominion.

By contrast, Anglo-American conservatism historically has had little interest in putatively self-evident political axioms. Conservatives want to learn from experience what actually holds societies together, benefits them and destroys them. That empiricism has persuaded most Anglo-American conservative thinkers of the importance of traditional Protestant institutions such as the independent national state, biblical religion and the family.

As an English Protestant, Locke could have endorsed these institutions as well. But his rationalist theory provides little basis for understanding their role in political life. Even today liberals are plagued by this failing: The rigidly Lockean assumptions of classical-liberal writers such as Hayek, Milton Friedman, Robert Nozick and Ayn Rand place the nation, the family and religion outside the scope of what is essential to know about politics and government. Students who grow up reading these brilliant writers develop an excellent grasp of how an economy works. But they are often marvelously ignorant about much else, having no clue why a flourishing state requires a cohesive nation, or how such bonds are established through family and religious ties.

The differences between the classical-liberal and conservative traditions have immense consequences for policy. Establishing democracy in Egypt or

Iraq looks doable to classical liberals because they assume that human reason is everywhere the same, and that a commitment to individual liberties and free markets will arise rapidly once the benefits have been demonstrated and the impediments removed. Conservatives, on the other hand, see foreign civilizations as powerfully motivated—for bad reasons as well as good ones—to fight the dissolution of their way of life and the imposition of American values.

Integrating millions of immigrants from the Middle East also looks easy to classical liberals, because they believe virtually everyone will quickly see the advantages of American (or European) ways and accept them upon arrival. Conservatives recognize that large-scale assimilation can happen only when both sides are highly motivated to see it through. When that motivation is weak or absent, conservatives see an unassimilated migration, resulting in chronic mutual hatred and violence, as a perfectly plausible outcome.

Since classical liberals assume reason is everywhere the same, they see no great danger in “depreciating” national independence and outsourcing power to foreign bodies. American and British conservatives see such schemes as destroying the unique political foundation upon which their traditional freedoms are built.

Liberalism and conservatism had been opposed political positions since the day liberal theorizing first appeared in England in the 17th century. During the 20th-century battles against totalitarianism, necessity brought their adherents into close alliance. Classical liberals and conservatives fought together, along with communists, against Nazism. After 1945 they remained allies against communism. Over many decades of joint struggle, their differences were relegated to a back burner, creating a “fusionist” movement (as William F. Buckley’s *National Review* called it) in which one and all saw themselves as “conservatives.”

But since the fall of the Berlin Wall, circumstances have changed. Margaret Thatcher's ouster from power in 1990 marked the end of serious resistance in Britain to the coming European "super-sovereign." Within a few years the classical liberals' agenda of universal dominion was the only game in town—ascendant not only among American Republicans and British Tories but even among center-left politicians such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

Only it didn't work. China, Russia and large portions of the Muslim world resisted a "new world order" whose express purpose was to bring liberalism to their countries. The attempt to impose a classical-liberal regime in Iraq by force, followed by strong-arm tactics aimed at bringing democracy to Egypt and Libya, led to the melt-down of political order in these states as well as in Syria and Yemen, igniting a tragedy on a vast scale. Meanwhile, the world banking crisis made a mockery of classical liberals' claim to know how to govern a world-wide market and bring prosperity to all. The shockingly rapid disintegration of the American family once again raised the question of whether classical liberalism has the resources to answer any political question outside the economic sphere.

Brexit and Mr. Trump's rise are the direct result of a quarter-century of classical-liberal hegemony over the parties of the right. Neither Mr. Trump nor the Brexiteers were necessarily seeking a conservative revival. But in placing a renewed nationalism at the center of their politics, they shattered classical liberalism's grip, paving the way for a return to empiricist conservatism. Once you start trying to understand politics by learning from experience rather than by deducing your views from 17th-century rationalist dogma, you never know what you may end up discovering.