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# Progressivism, Conservatism, and Democracy

WILLIAM VOEGELI\*

“Conserve” is a transitive verb, one that conveys little unless followed by a direct object. The meaning of *conservatism* then, depends on what conservatives want to conserve: why it’s valuable, therefore meriting conservation; and why it’s vulnerable, therefore requiring conservation.

The answer to that question will vary from one time and place to another. During the Cold War, American conservatives bristled when newspapers referred to the most inflexible, doctrinaire Soviet leaders as the Kremlin’s “conservatives.” But this journalistic shorthand wasn’t absurd: it’s hard to identify a conservative essence discernible in all political settings. A skeptical, wary attitude regarding change is the best available approximation of a unifying element. In one summary, liberals want to make the world a better place while conservatives try to keep it from becoming even worse.

“Conservative” came into use as a political descriptor around 1800, designating the effort to preserve basic elements of Europe’s civilizational heritage imperiled in the aftermath of the French Revolution. This was “throne-and-altar” conservatism. In the United States, which had rejected monarchy and an established church at the outset, the term had little

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applicability for the first 150 years after the Constitution was ratified. When it employed them at all, a nation conceived in liberty treated “liberalism” and “conservatism” as synonyms more than alternatives. President Franklin Roosevelt took to calling opponents of his New Deal “conservatives,” but they rejected the designation, which was understandable since FDR used it interchangeably with “economic royalists” and “Tories,” in the sense of colonists who opposed the American Revolution. New Deal adversaries like Republican Herbert Hoover and Liberty League Democrats like Al Smith considered themselves the true liberals, resisting the New Deal to preserve the constitutional order.

It wasn’t until after World War II that American adherents of a political viewpoint began to describe *themselves* as conservatives. In the mission statement published in *National Review*’s first issue in 1955, founder William F. Buckley lamented that “literate America [had] rejected conservatism in favor of radical social experimentation.” He then distilled mid-century conservatives’ animating grievances:

Instead of covetously consolidating its premises, the United States seems tormented by its tradition of fixed postulates having to do with the meaning of existence, with the relationship of the state to the individual, of the individual to his neighbor, so clearly enunciated in the enabling documents of our Republic.<sup>1</sup>

American conservatism, then, introduces itself by proclaiming its republicanism, a commitment that remains central. But it is equally important that conservatism is oppositional. “Liberalism is the glue that cements the conservative movement,” political scientist James W. Ceaser wrote in 2006, “and if liberalism were to disappear tomorrow, the conservative movement as we know it would begin to disintegrate on the next day.”<sup>2</sup> Take the two together, and American conservatism exists to make clear why and how liberalism jeopardizes the republic, and then to mitigate that danger by opposing liberalism through political argument and action.

The conservatism that emerged after 1945 believed that it knew what to make of liberalism. Even as Popular-Front communists in the 1930s had described themselves as “liberals in a hurry,” conservatives viewed liberals as adversaries who had the same ultimate goals as communists, but were too diffident, deceitful, or self-deluded to say so. F.A. Hayek’s widely read *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) argued that centrally directed

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1. William F. Buckley, Jr., *Our Mission Statement*, NAT’L REV. (Nov. 19, 1955), <https://www.nationalreview.com/1955/11/our-mission-statement-william-f-buckley-jr/> [<https://perma.cc/9ABZ-ARCY>].

2. JAMES CEASER, TRUE BLUE VS. DEEP RED: THE IDEAS THAT MOVE AMERICAN POLITICS (2006), <https://web.archive.org/web/20100713073026/https://www.bradleyfdn.org/pdfs/framingessay.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/3YGM-PRXP>].

command-and-control economic policy culminated in the lost of personal and political freedom. Before dismissing such warnings as overwrought, note that in 1947 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.—not yet 30 but already a Pulitzer Prize winner and connected, prominent public intellectual—wrote, “There seems no inherent obstacle to the gradual advance of socialism in the United States through a series of New Deals.” In language all the more disquieting for its clear intent to reassure, he voiced the hope for “a peaceful transition into a not undemocratic socialism.”<sup>3</sup>

Domestic policy arguments in this context had a clear, predictable structure: liberals would call for the expansion of government’s redistributive and regulatory activities, and conservatives would warn that these activities’ costs would exceed their benefits. Conservatives were at pains to point out that some of the biggest costs would not show up in government ledgers: the unanticipated, disruptive, and socially deleterious consequences of government interventions; the creation of perverse incentives to redistribute wealth through political activity, combined with perverse disincentives to create wealth through economic activity; and the replacement of limited government as a standard with limitless government as an assumption. “With the advent of the New Deal political order,” political scientist Sidney Milkis wrote in 1993, “an understanding of rights dedicated to limited government gradually gave way to a more expansive understanding of rights, requiring a relentless government identification of problems and the search for methods by which these problems might be solved.”<sup>4</sup>

The three decades since the end of the Cold War have posed a different challenge for conservatives, who are no longer sure what to make of liberalism and, as a result, no longer sure of their own *raison d’être*. The old phase of the contest between liberals and conservatives had been like World War I, with a long battlefield that subsumed every skirmish into one protracted fight over the proper scope of government. The new phase is over a less defined, more complex question: the necessary entailments of democracy. It has been fought more like the war in Vietnam, with vague and constantly shifting frontlines that make it difficult for each side to know the other’s location, identity, and objectives.

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3. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Perspective Now*, 14(3) *PARTISAN REV.* 238 (1947).

4. SIDNEY M. MILKIS, *THE PRESIDENT AND THE PARTIES: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE AMERICAN PARTY SYSTEM SINCE THE NEW DEAL* 48 (1993).

In its first reaction to the end of the Cold War, liberalism moved right, a logical step given the inanity of fashioning a Third Way between a clear success, democratic capitalism, and a practical and moral failure, Soviet communism. Bill Clinton announced that the era of big government was over, even as his friend and counterpart, Tony Blair, directed the United Kingdom's Labour Party to explicitly disavow the goal of having the government establish ownership of major industries. Clinton went on to expropriate conservatives' rhetoric and to a lesser extent their policy prescriptions, calling for an unapologetically punitive approach to crime, ending the Aid to Families with Dependent Children welfare program, treating deficit reduction as a serious goal, and even taking steps toward curtailing middle-class entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare.

In the 21st century liberalism has veered left, forcing the most prominent Democratic triangulators of the 1990s—Bill and Hillary Clinton, as well as Joe Biden—to renounce their heresies. The avatar of the resurgent Democratic Left is Bernie Sanders, an aging New Leftist who, over the years, offered kind words about the Soviet Union and its client states.<sup>5</sup>

But the even newer Left that animates the Democratic Party, especially from strongholds in academia, journalism, Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and private foundations, both alarms and confounds conservatives. The list of things it calls into question has grown longer and the items on it more fundamental. They include: whether the United States is basically decent or indecent; whether nation-states as such deserve to be admired and defended, or have outlived their justification; and whether there are any limits to the identifications based on gender, sexual preference, race, or ethnicity that society must honor and support. Conservatives never imagined that even these fixed postulates would be the subject of debate.

And yet, liberalism's postmodern turn did not come out of nowhere. Twenty-first century liberals have been increasingly likely to prefer the self-designation "progressive" and, with it, to embrace the ideas built into that term when it debuted in American politics in the late 1800s. Though "progress" is not a transitive verb, its ordinary use and sense implies getting closer to some intended destination. But progressives, both initially and recently, reject the constraint implied by fixed standards or goals. Honoring the realization of an ever better future requires suspending judgment, permanently, about "the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society," to quote a famous phrase from a 1958

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5. Ken Dilanian and Dan De Luce, *Will Bernie Sanders' Long-Ago Praise of Socialist Regimes Hurt Democrats in November?*, NBC NEWS (Feb. 21, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/will-sanders-long-ago-praise-socialist-regimes-hurt-democrats-november-n1139811> [<https://perma.cc/MU97-5CWR>].

Supreme Court decision.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely because standards are evolving and society is maturing that we cannot use our less evolved, less mature critical standpoints to evaluate and possibly condemn this progress, or to warn (as conservatives routinely do) that we're heading in the wrong direction and need to stop, then turn around. James Ceaser notes that the most progressives can say on behalf of progress is that it requires "taking positive actions to promote greater scope for individuality." He points out that when John Dewey was once pressed to clarify his foundational concept of growth, Dewey replied, "Growth means growing."<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, belief in this indescribable, unassailable concept of progress has not rendered liberals humble or tentative in their opinions. Quite the opposite. Barack Obama's favorite formulation was that ideas he liked were on the "right side of history" and those he disliked were on its wrong side. Repetition did not, however, make these declarations coherent. Because it is impossible to know how those who live in the future will regard our words and deeds, any claim about history's right and wrong sides is unfalsifiable. This means that the confidence that our own views will be esteemed by subsequent generations is the preening of a ventriloquist posing as an oracle. (In *The Devil's Dictionary* Ambrose Bierce defined "admiration" as "Our polite recognition of another's resemblance to ourselves.")<sup>8</sup> Finally, contentions about the right and wrong sides of history are for practical purposes hopelessly circular, since those who make them "do not know the future, and what the future will be depends very largely on just those choices which they now invoke the future to help them make," as C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*.<sup>9</sup>

Though theoretically weak, progressivism's core belief has been politically compelling. No one opposes a better future, of course. The political success has been to characterize progress toward that future as an essential attribute of democracy more than a goal to be pursued *through* democracy. FDR called democracy "a quest, a never-ending seeking for better things" in a 1932 speech.<sup>10</sup> There is, Richard Rorty wrote in 1989,

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6. *Trop v. Dulles*, 356 U.S. 86 (1958).

7. CEASER, *supra* note 2.

8. AMBROSE BIERCE, *THE DEVIL'S DICTIONARY* (1906), <https://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/Bierce/bierce.html> [<https://perma.cc/3K6Y-XCBV>].

9. C.S. LEWIS, *THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS* 118 (1961).

10. Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Campaign Address on Progressive Government at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, California*, AM. PRESIDENCY PROJECT (Sept. 23, 1932), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/campaign-address-progressive-government-the-commonwealth-club-san-francisco-california> [<https://perma.cc/87YQ-PRTD>].

a “sort of social hope which characterizes modern liberal societies—the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences, not just for our descendants but for everybody’s descendants.”<sup>11</sup>

This kind of social hope does not rest on anything more fundamental. It is, rather, the consensus view among the sort of people Rorty took seriously (and who took him seriously)—hardly a compelling case but, by his lights, as compelling a case as he or anyone else could ever make. Nor can this social hope be specified beyond the generalities employed by Roosevelt and Rorty, since amalgamating it to democracy requires discarding any standard of moral excellence in favor of the stricture that all worldviews, lifestyles, and identity expressions are created equal.

Fittingly, progressives believe that democracy’s necessary entailments lie in the future: feats of social generosity and inclusion far greater than any yet achieved. Hence, the frequent use, noted by historian Robert H. Wiebe in *Self-Rule*, of polemics calling for *true*, *real*, or *genuine* democracy.<sup>12</sup> Their point is that the mere democracy of free and fair elections is only the first element of the package-deal democracy must afford. “The cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy,” John Dewey wrote in 1927. For Dewey, as his biographer Alan Ryan explained, “more democracy” did not mean solely, or even primarily, more people voting more often on more public questions. The fundamental imperative was to build a society “permeated” by “a mutual regard of all citizens for all other citizens, and by an ambition to make society both a greater unity and one that reflected the full diversity of its members’ talents and aptitudes.”<sup>13</sup>

The quotidian work of representative democracy was not a sufficient condition for true democracy and, Dewey later insisted, not even a necessary condition. Such arrangements as universal suffrage, recurring elections, and governmental accountability to the governed are of value, he wrote in 1937, only because they have been “found expedient for realizing democracy as the truly human way of living. They are not a final end and a final value.”<sup>14</sup> It follows that should they at some point be found inexpedient for the purpose Dewey considered paramount, elections may have to be discarded to further the democratic way of life.

It is equally fitting for conservatives to believe that democracy’s necessary entailments lie in the past: beliefs, habits, assumptions, and

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11. RICHARD RORTY, *CONTINGENCY, IRONY, AND SOLIDARITY* 86 (1989).

12. ROBERT H. WIEBE, *SELF-RULE: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY* 5 (1995).

13. ALAN RYAN, *JOHN DEWEY AND THE HIGH TIDE OF AMERICAN LIBERALISM* 25 (1995).

14. John Dewey, *Democracy and Educational Administration*, in *THE LATER WORKS, 1925–1953*, vol. 11, at 217–18 (1986).

practices that are not just time-honored but time-tested. Conservatives are sure that Immanuel Kant was wrong—a nation of devils can never successfully constitute a republic. Because families are going to matter more than any other entity to the social and moral development of a nation’s future citizens, conservatives remain implacably dubious about the sexual, feminist, gay rights, and trans rights revolutions. They doubt the viability of a nation where the commitment of wives and husbands to each other, and of both to their children, is at best an idiosyncratically quaint choice on a long menu of lifestyle possibilities, rather than the default option for most people based on human nature.

Conservatives are equally convinced that no republic can flourish as a nation of strangers. In 21st-century America diversity is an undeniable fact, but that does not mean that it bestows benefits only, without difficulties or dangers. To cohere, to have the collective will to make sacrifices for a common future, diversity must exist within a more fundamental unity. This requires a civic culture that prizes patriotic attachment above ethnic or racial identity. It also argues that America’s right as a sovereign nation to declare and enforce immigration policies takes precedence over any foreign national’s claim to reside here. The exercise of that sovereign right points to immigration policies that include and exclude based on what’s best for the existing citizenry, not for prospective immigrants.

As the list of democratic predicates progressivism calls into question has grown, 21st-century conservatives find themselves defending terrain they had assumed was under no threat. This unwelcome surprise is the best way to make sense of conservatives’ growing interest in Hungary’s president Viktor Orbán. There are obvious incongruities: Hungary is a nation with less territory than the state of Indiana and a smaller population than the county of Los Angeles. Yet, as Rod Dreher told the *New York Times* last year, the interest in Orbán springs from American conservatives’ hope that “politics can be a bulwark against cultural disintegration.”<sup>15</sup> In Orbán’s view, as Christopher Caldwell wrote in 2018, “democracy is when a sovereign people votes and chooses its destiny. Period.”<sup>16</sup> The exercise of that sovereign right may well include choosing a nationalist, socially conservative destiny that is, by Richard Rorty or Barack Obama’s lights,

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15. Elizabeth Zerofsky, *How the American Right Fell in Love With Hungary*, N.Y. TIMES, (Oct. 19, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/19/magazine/viktor-orban-rod-dreher.html>.

16. Christopher Caldwell, *What Is Populism?*, CLAREMONT REV. BOOKS (Fall 2018), <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/what-is-populism/> [<https://perma.cc/5LBN-KF86>].



on the wrong side of history, a set of arrangements we are supposed to be progressing from, not to.

Conservatives' effort to conserve democracy by conserving its necessary preconditions raises questions whose difficulties go beyond adapting Hungarian categories to American realities. Conservative opposition to progressive liberalism is a given, and conservative writers have devoted a great deal of attention to explicating the provenance and consequences of progressive thinking. But conservatives have been unable to answer, and less than eager to consider, the question of whether liberalism is a pathogen debilitating democracy or a genetic defect causing democracy to subvert itself. Conservatives argue against liberalism with the greatest confidence when they can portray it as a set of ideological constructs, foisted on America by elites that are both out-of-touch and self-serving, that have proven to be inimical to sustaining an experiment in self-government. There's ample material to work with. Some of it is located at the level of theory, such as examinations of progressivism's synthesis of Hegelian and Darwinian concepts.

Other ideas are closer to practical politics. Affirmative action, for example, has never enjoyed broad popular support, yet has been woven deeper into the American fabric over the past 50 years. California, for example, endorsed a state referendum in 1996 banning affirmative action in public education and contracting, at a time when the state electorate was 74% white. It then voted to retain this amendment to the state constitution by an even bigger margin in 2020, even though California's electorate by that point was only 49% white. Liberalism's more recent self-inflicted wound, the notion that "defund the police" would be a winning campaign slogan, is another instance of the Democratic Party being undemocratic.

Conservative republicanism is harder when there is reason to believe that the danger is posed by proclivities and susceptibilities generated inside democratic life, rather than from external ideologies. Politics cannot be a bulwark against cultural disintegration if the politics is democratic *and* the people broadly accept, or are at least neutral about, the cultural changes. Consider abortion. Since the Supreme Court overturned its 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling in June 2022, the early indications are that re-democratizing the abortion question has been more advantageous to the Democratic Party, which supports legalized abortion, than to the Republicans, who oppose it. In Kansas, for example, an August 2022 referendum on whether to authorize the state legislature to restrict abortion failed by a margin of 59% to 41%—this in a state that Donald Trump carried against Joe Biden in 2020 by 56% to 42%.

Viktor Orbán has good reason to argue that his small, homogenous, economically vulnerable nation is beset by the European Union's ideological preoccupations. With no analogous circumstances, American conservatives

must reckon with the possibility that, as they say at the moment of greatest peril in slasher movies, the phone call is coming from inside the house. Democratic egalitarianism is, as Tocqueville discerned, an unyielding solvent that erodes every social structure it touches. The inner logic of democracy makes it harder and harder to give clear answers to questions about the legal and social status of non-traditional domestic arrangements, or the justifications for excluding prospective immigrants—that is, treating differently and unequally people who want to move to America from those who already reside in it. Conservatives want to preserve democracy's prerequisites, which include a strong feeling of national identity and a vigorous, confident sense of right and wrong. The fear, however, is that these sources of national, social, and moral cohesion are the inheritance of a pre-democratic age, the same sort of fear that motivated throne-and-altar conservatives 200 years ago. Democratic nations, conservatives worry, draw on but do not replenish democracy's preconditions, either taking them for granted or viewing them as embarrassing or odious anachronisms from a benighted time.

American democracy finds itself, as a result, in a strange, precarious place. For the avowed purpose of fortifying and elevating democracy, liberals and conservatives have each elaborated their arguments. But by following their own premises, an increasingly postmodern Left and an increasingly premodern Right have ended up calling into question the worth and feasibility of republican self-government. For progressives, the list of entitlement rights and lifestyle protections required to realize true democracy is so comprehensive and detailed that, were it to be enacted, there would be very little left that democratic government would need to do or be able to change. Those conservatives who feel that their unending mission is to rescue democracy from itself have become increasingly vocal in questioning whether that regime deserves such efforts, a theme emphasized in the writings of Patrick Deneen and Ryszard Legutko. But these conservatives have as much trouble as progressives, who invoke the mandate of History, in explaining why the consent of the governed is an inadequate or unnecessary source of legitimacy, and what should replace it. The increasingly lonely position is the one that supports mere democracy based on what William Buckley called fixed postulates and the Declaration of Independence described as self-evident truths. It is difficult to see how American democracy has a bright future if that position becomes untenable and undefended.

