

cially resisted major destructive trends in Western society. But as conservative intellectuals they, too, cut corners. For the most part avoiding an advanced engagement with philosophy and the arts, they were satisfied with upholding “orthodoxy,” which they did with Protestant-like earnestness.

The kind of intellectual, aesthetic, and moral-spiritual renewal that might have transformed the universities, the arts, the media, publishing, entertainment, and the churches never quite came off. Without a major reorientation of American thought and sensibility, conservative politics was bound to fail.

The neoconservatives reinforced the preoccupation with politics and public policy. They claimed that before their coming to the rescue American conservatism had been intellectually feeble, but, in reality, it had exhibited far greater scope and depth prior to their arrival. Mentioning just a few thinkers of the 1950s and '60s proves the point: Friedrich Hayek, Russell Kirk, John Lukacs, Thomas Molnar, Robert Nisbet, Peter Stanlis, Wilhelm Röpke, Peter Viereck, Eliseo Vivas, Eric Voegelin, and Richard Weaver. Behind several of them stood the perhaps most powerful and prophetic American thinker of the 20th century, the Harvard Professor Irving Babbitt (1865-1933). Instead of fully exploring, developing, and applying the insights of such thinkers, the conservative movement wanted to get down to politics without delay, first by trying to elect Barry Goldwater president. Having a flawed sense of priorities, conservatism would before the end of the 20th century go almost completely off the rails, becoming a captive of party, money, and media celebrities.

To complain about today's terminological confusion is not to imply that the terms used here have single, settled definitions. Words like “conservative” and “liberal” can be meaningfully defined and be useful, but any definition of this type simplifies complex reality. The more philosophical the study of life, the more inadequate such definitions appear. It is partly for this reason that traditional conservatives have insisted that conservatism is not an ideology. Even the best of principles are transcended by the enduring higher purpose of civilization. The means chosen to advance that purpose must change as historical situations change. For example, a conservative would never say, as would some classical liberals (or libertarians), that the legitimate functions of government are always and everywhere the same.

The word “conservative” was always problematic. It seems to imply that conservatism is all about conserving something already achieved. But conservatism wants to conserve the best of the humane heritage because the latter is an indispensable guide to finding and promoting the good, the true, and the beautiful in the present. The spirit of civilization must forever adapt to new circumstances.

Today highly destructive social trends have themselves become traditions of a sort. Hence the spirit of civilization

will have to assert itself in sometimes radical-looking ways, not least in politics. It must free itself of incapacitating habits. One such habit is the increasingly philistine obsession with politics. ■

CLAES G. RYN is professor of politics at the Catholic University of America and chairman of the National Humanities Institute. The most recent of his many books are *America the Virtuous* and *A Common Human Ground*.

Kirkpatrick Sale Only in a flat world do the designations “Right” and “Left” have any meaning, equivalent to East and West, where Stalinists, say, are on the extreme Left and Nazis on the extreme Right. But for those who no longer believe the world is flat, it is best to discard those labels as worthless.

Let's look at a round world instead. There we find that the pole at the top is occupied by authoritarians, with the Stalinists on the left side of the pole, the Nazis on the right side. Nothing much differentiates them but a few small points of ideology and a good deal of rhetoric—they are similar in the essential forms of dictatorial rule, omnipotent government, and single-party power.

And the pole at the bottom, obviously, is the home of the anti-authoritarians of all stripes. On the left side are the various anarchists, against all government but shading into those favoring autonomous communities, on the right the libertarians, favoring only minimal government and free markets. The differences between them are real but not as ultimately important as the similarities—guiding both camps is a rejection of Big Government, centralized power, corporate control, and state authority.

So that leaves the middle of the round earth, where we find all those quasi-authoritarians of many different kinds. On the western rim are those characteristically labeled “liberals” because they favor government big enough to be liberal about doling out considerable public funds for public causes but not so big as to be illiberal in checking individual rights and civil liberties. On the eastern side are those traditionally labeled “conservatives” because they favor a government big enough only to conserve corporate interests and provide corporate cushions but not so big as to interfere overmuch with taxes or regulations.

In that sense, then, “liberal” and “conservative” do have some meaning: they describe the people around the equator of the round world. At some points they are far apart, but there are very few of them at the extremes, and most of them blend from east to west to occupy the squishy middle—Ecuador, say—acting and governing, whatever their rhetoric, with a little bit of both sides—in fact becoming something

rather like the present-day Republicans and Democrats. That's the reason "liberal" and "conservative" mean so little in modern American politics, because there's so little of the genuine original stuff at work: Republican "conservatives" love government as big as it can get, and they pump up the military budget until it takes effectively half of all our dollars (present and past wars included), they love the Security and Exchange Commission's shenanigans, they even agree to have the government interfere in every public school and college; Democrat "liberals" are quite content to let the Bush government trample individual liberties, tear up *habeas corpus*, and spy on citizens with only the merest squawks, going along with egregious tax cuts and standing by as social programs are gutted. It's not that "liberal" and "conservative" have lost their meaning—it's that the two present parties don't represent either one of the labels. That's why they are now so useless—the labels, I mean, but the parties too.

All this says, of course, that what may be needed in American politics are genuine parties of the equatorial Right and Left—a genuine liberal party and a genuine conservative one, as those words once traditionally were meant, truly west and east. At least they wouldn't be the weak and contradictory Tweedledum and Tweedledee we have now.

But, further, it says that what's really needed in American politics is not an attempt to somehow try to restore those old parties, which may indeed be irrelevant today, but a way to bring true vitality and democracy into the system with a thoroughgoing creation of an anti-authoritarian form of government, along the lines of the Jeffersonian principle of that which governs least governs best. Here the people of the south pole can join together, working out ways at local and regional levels to order their politics and economics as may seem best to them, without much regard for a creaky, inept, corrupt, inefficient, wasteful, expensive, and essentially useless national regime.

“Peaceful, orderly, popular, democratic, and legal secession would enable a wide variety of governments, amenable to all shades of the anti-authoritarian spectrum, to be established.”

My way of getting to that point, which might not suit everyone but is increasingly being talked about, is to foster decentralism, including secession, and self-determination throughout North America. I am convinced, believe it or not, that secession—by state where the state is cohesive (the model is Vermont, where the secessionist movement is the Second Vermont Republic), or by region where that makes

more sense (Southern California or Cascadia are the models here)—is the most fruitful objective for our political future. Peaceful, orderly, popular, democratic, and legal secession would enable a wide variety of governments, amenable to all shades of the anti-authoritarian spectrum, to be established within a modern political context. Such a wide variety, as I see it, that if you didn't like the place you were, you could always find a place you liked.

That's when "liberal" and "conservative" become truly irrelevant. ■

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Phyllis Schlafly The designations "liberal" and "conservative" are highly useful, even though a binary Left/Right political spectrum cannot describe the full range of ideological opinions. It doesn't describe libertarians, and it doesn't necessarily predict opinions on issues such as privacy rights, but it is nevertheless still applicable and very useful.

Complaining about the one-dimensionality of Right and Left positions is a bit like complaining that we can't compare apples and oranges. No scale of variables can accurately describe the full range of qualities a fruit can have. Yet when you go the supermarket, apples and oranges are measured by a single number, the price, and consumers do indeed compare prices when they shop. Whatever varied preferences they have about fruits are judged by dollars and cents at the checkout counter.

Likewise, when voters enter the voting booth, they must convert their complex ideologies into a simple (often binary) choice. They can vote for only one candidate for each public office. American political history has produced the two-party system. The Constitution requires that the president be elected by a majority of presidential electors, not just a plurality. Third parties do not get any electors if they cannot win any states.

Other countries have political systems that encourage multiple minority parties that may enable voters to define their preferences more specifically, but that doesn't give them better representation in government or give more power to ideologies that don't fit neatly into binary classifications. The governing majority is achieved by coalitions that may be even more multi-dimensional than the two major parties in the United States. In Europe, a prime minister can take power as the result of a backroom deal with an