

Jeremy Beer

One of the most striking features of cultural discourse today is the inversion of terminology among self-identified “liberals” and “conservatives.” It is not just that the vocabulary of our leading “conservatives” is peppered with the grand abstractions (“freedom,” “democracy,” “progress,” “evil”) always preferred by power-obsessed revolutionaries and ideological zealots. That has been widely noted for some time now. Rather, it is that the terminology historically associated with the conservative impulse has not simply been forgotten or ignored but has been taken up by others—including those who consider themselves progressives or liberals. “Preserve,” “save,” “conserve,” “sustain,” “protect,” “heritage,” “tradition,” “community,” “place,” “decentralized,” “permanence,” “beauty,” “humane”—these former keywords of conservatism have largely migrated to other political quarters.

One comes across this every day, particularly at the local level. In my own neck of the woods here in southeastern Pennsylvania, there are numerous organizations—civil associations, Burke’s little platoons—that appeal to these concepts in explaining their work. And they are not self-consciously conservative. The best example comes from the Brandywine Conservancy, which buys up land and development rights and owns a hugely popular art museum. The conservancy is largely funded and run by political liberals. Yet it seeks to “preserve the natural and cultural resources of the area and has been instrumental in permanently protecting” thousands of acres. The conservancy specializes in “conservation easements,” “historic preservation,” and “water protection efforts.” The organization is also, as one might expect, a leader in the fight against sprawl in this densely populated area. In that struggle it has allied itself with the New Urbanist idea of “traditional neighborhood development.” “Save Your Heritage!” urges the flyer that arrived in the mail the other day, which promotes a lecture that will provide “tools for local historic preservation.”

One might also mention S.A.V.E., which has waged a years-long war to stop the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation from mindlessly expanding a two-lane highway that rolls through Amish farm country and appeals to the concepts of “livable communities,” “permanently preserved open space,” and a “sustainable future” in doing so. Clearly, these are not the nouns and adjectives of philosophical liberalism. Yet the point is not that these organizations or others with similar missions throughout the nation are flawless models, or even that they are pursuing ends as authentically conservative as they sound (though in fact they usually are); rather, it is that, increasingly, they couch their work in an appeal to traditionally conservative concepts.

The tragedy is that the conservative movement cannot take credit for this groundswell of conservative feeling—not here nor, I suspect, anywhere else. These small, local, civic

groups, all of them trying to protect goods necessary to human flourishing, do not appeal to the conservative tradition in making their cases, nor do they attract (for the most part) right-wingers to their causes. The more self-conscious today’s conservative man is of his conservatism, the more likely he is to be suspicious of such organizations. He has been taught to think in terms of ideological abstractions. Say the word “conservation” or, heaven help you, “sustainability,” and he merely flips to the flash card in his head marked “Environmentalism: Bad.” Appeal to tradition or inherited rights, and he reminds you that, In This Time of War, Sacrifices Must Be Made. And, besides being the price of capital-

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ist progress, he has been assured that studies actually show Wal-Mart is good for communities; meanwhile, his own town has lost, oh, half a dozen or more locally owned businesses since the Smiley Face moved in ten miles down the road, finishing the community-killing work started by the federal purse and the federal bulldozer. But what does personal observation count in the face of the great think tanks’ official authority?

The conservers, preservers, savers, and protectors—conservatism once stood for such folks, and such folks were at one time conservatives. But they make bad apparatchiks. They aren’t ideologically motivated and aren’t “thinking big.” They are simply concerned, if often locally prominent, citizens. They may also be sentimental saps, but that’s understandable. As normally functioning human beings, they have formed dear attachments to their social and physical worlds. They like their communities, want to see them thrive and prosper, want to see them made or kept beautiful, want to preserve (or reinvigorate) their sense of their places as unique, and prefer to interact daily with people they know and love—or even hate.

Here is where Russell Kirk was truly exemplary. He ought to be remembered not as “the principal architect of the post-war conservative movement,” as the quasi-official adulation has it, but because he went home. There he restored an old house, planted trees, and became a justice of the peace; took a wife (and kept her) and had four children; wrote ghost stories about census-takers and other bureaucrats getting it in the neck; took in boatpeople and bums; and denounced every war in which the U.S. became involved—especially the first Gulf War, which he detested. And he also denounced

abstractions because he knew they were drugs deployed to distract us from the infinitely more important work of the Brandywine Conservancies of the world.

If there is ever to be truth in our political labeling, we need conservatives who will go home, or at least make homes somewhere, conservatives who will abjure Washington and New York and pick up the struggle in their own burghs to help (re-)build real communities, work to conserve the land and its resources, and ally with their naturally like-minded brethren in order to revive—locally—the religious and historic traditions that might sustain us. In fact, those are the only conservatives we need. ■

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Austin Bramwell In America, it is necessary to distinguish between two senses of the word “conservative.” The first refers to that set of ideas that find their canonical expression in the revolutionary writings of Edmund Burke; the second, to that set of institutions which, after some hesitation in the 1950s (some preferred “individualist” or more recherché labels like “Old Whig”), claimed the term “conservative” for themselves. In distinguishing the two, I do not mean to be tendentious. If the conservative movement is not exactly “conservative,” that is the fault not of the movement but of conservatism. Burke’s writings, however prophetic, do not set forth a timeless approach to political problems. On the contrary, on most questions they offer no guidance whatsoever. One can construct a superficially “Burkean” argument for two sides of any controversy. Was Lincoln “conservative”? The New Deal? Anti-communism? Is gay marriage “conservative”? The Bush tax cuts? The Kyoto Protocol? Is the conservative movement “conservative”? The answer in each case is “yes and no,” or more accurately, “neither yes nor no.”

Of course, Burke does still have the power to scandalize. His interlocutors, believing in the justice of the Revolution, could not imagine that their schemes would come to grief. Burke, by contrast, asking what the actual consequences of their actions would be, exposed truths about the nature of the state that many would still prefer not to hear: that peace depends on unconscious obedience and acceptance of authority; that men can never have equal political power; that hierarchy is inevitable. (To this day, whenever the legitimacy of the state comes into doubt—as in Iraq or in the debate in America over the role of the courts—we ignore Burke at our peril.) Burke mastered, in short, what Max Weber called the “ethic of responsibility,”

namely, the demand that no matter how noble our aims, we always give an account of the foreseeable results of our actions.

This ethic does not flinch from the possibility that evil may come from good and good from evil. Its adherents accept, indeed often embrace, the cruelties of the world. It is precisely this embrace of cruelty—yes, cruelty!—that unites all those that we call “right-wing.” The free-marketeer with his warnings against perverse incentives, the Romantic reactionary with his fulminations against “modernity,” the moral traditionalist with his fear of unfettered appetite, the charismatic nationalist with his call for iron-fisted rule, the cold-blooded diplomat with his distrust of humanitarian motives: all reject the Left’s intuition that, with just a little more effort, the world can be cured of its ills. In facing the melancholy truths of our condition, the Right enjoys a freedom of thought that the Left cannot imagine and, perhaps, utterly dreads.

The conservative movement does remain at least recognizably right-wing. Its alliance with the Bush administration, however, has made it less so. “Compassionate conservatism”; “no child left behind”; “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one”; “Freedom is on the march”; “When somebody hurts, government has got to move”: each slogan reveals a man determined to do what is right and to leave the rest to the Lord. Sadly, rather than reject this attitude, some in the conservative movement have adopted it as their own. In their minds, for example, the ideals that motivate Bush’s Iraq policy justify them absolutely.

More often, however, the conservative movement’s support for the Bush administration has had subtler effects. Embarrassed by the apparent failure of the Iraq venture, moderate Bush supporters acknowledge the difficulties but argue that the situation in Iraq is neither rosy nor grim and that, with this or that change in policy, it may even turn out for the better. Maybe so. Surely, however, not all outcomes are equally likely. Rather than set forth assumptions about what actually drives events in Iraq, pro-Bush conservatives prefer to surround their recommendations in a thicket of “mights,” “perhaps,” “coulds” and “ifs.” When describing the ultimate aim of the Iraq occupation, by contrast, their words become suddenly clarion: “the stakes are high,” “the terrorists must be defeated,” “victory is in sight.” The rhetorical shift is telling. Rather than feeling responsible for the consequences of its actions, it may be that the conservative movement today, in Weber’s words, “feels responsible only for seeing to it that the flame of pure intentions is not quenched.” One may think of this attitude what one will. It is not, however, right-wing. ■

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