

Conservatives and Neoconservatives

1 Right and Left

About forty years ago, *The National Review* featured a debate among its senior editors concerning the intellectual underpinnings of conservatism. Conservatism was considered to have two essential philosophical strands: libertarianism, championed by Frank S. Meyer, and traditionalism, championed on those pages by L. Brent Bozell, Jr. (and, by assumption, editor William F. Buckley). Libertarians believed in human freedom, capitalism, and democracy. Their heroes were Adam Smith, the founders of the American republic, and certain 18th and 19th Century British liberal thinkers. Traditionalists believed in the preservation of certain human values (often Roman Catholic – Bozell and Buckley were Catholics), tradition, and the rule of law. Their great hero was Edmund Burke.

The differences between libertarians and traditionalists have always been considerable. Libertarians believe in a world where free-choice is meaningful (and always possible, to some degree) and that people will, by and large, act in their rational self-interests. Traditionalists believe in a world where people are weak and subject to sinful or harmful impulses, and so must be protected from these weaknesses.

Two hundred years ago, the libertarians (the ‘liberals’) were considered leftists. The rise of Hegelianism, Marxism, and social scientific studies began to point in another direction, however. From the new ‘leftist’ perspective, human behaviour could be understood as being controlled by various external forces. Human freedom was largely a myth, and the betterment of mankind was best achieved by relying on those people who could understand the forces controlling human society and could establish a society where justice would prevail. From hereon for convenience, I’ll refer to this latter group as ‘leftists’.

Of course, this is a simplification of the various political currents, but it can be useful to characterise the essential elements of these basic tendencies. Libertarians believe that the world of human society is basically a self-organising system that, left unfettered by government interference, will eventually self-organise (thanks to the “Invisible Hand”) into an optimal situation. This represents a bottom-up view of system development. It is important to allow the individual elements (individual humans) to make optimal local decisions, and this will automatically lead to a globally optimal state.

The new (since the 19th Century) socially-oriented leftists believe that the political world won’t self-organise to an optimal state (at least not within an acceptable time-span) and needs to be led or guided by an enlightened elite (this elite could be rather large if a wide-spread education system is properly in place). This point of view believes that a rationalist, ‘scientific’ understanding of nearly everything in society is possible. We should, according to this humanistic view, strive to advance that social understanding as much as possible and install leaders who are guided by that understanding.

The traditionalists, because of their awareness of and concern for human fallibility, are strongly opposed to the leftists. They believe that the leftist program leads to catastrophic top-down government mismanagement (e.g. “The Great Leap Forward” in China) and tyranny. It is best to proceed slowly

and cautiously by maintaining a respect for the rule of law and upholding those social values that represent and reinforce the fabric of society. Although the leftists can be said to support the idea of laws, too, the traditionalists criticise the leftists for their constant eagerness to modify the legal structure, which ultimately undermines the respect for and integrity of the legal system.

The traditionalists also don't naturally align themselves **that** closely with the libertarians, either: just think of their contrasting positions concerning abortion. However the libertarians and traditionalists in the U.S. do have one great point of commonality – the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution is a libertarian document, and at the same time represents a bedrock for the rule of law. Both traditionalists and libertarians are vitally concerned to ensure that the Constitution remains largely unaltered and enduring.

So, acknowledging that all generalisations are too simple but can sometimes still be illuminating, we can summarise some of the principal political perspectives this way:

- *libertarians* believe that society can evolve optimally by allowing free, local 'bottom-up' decision-making.
- *leftists* believe that society can be modified best by a 'top-down' approach that is supported by a system-level understanding of the needs of society that can be grasped by human intelligence. In this sense, Plato was a leftist.
- *traditionalists* believe that the proper rules for organised society have already been established in our culture. Society shouldn't change much at all (although it can be somewhat adjusted or tweaked for the better, on occasion).
- One could argue that there is another grouping, the *autocrats*, that rule not according to principle, but according to their own selfish motives. This is the most ancient form; however such a grouping does not represent a major political movement in the modern age.

Note that we are identifying these groupings by their organising methodologies, not by the values that they hold. The libertarians and traditionalists believe in the operational efficacy of a system structure that is 'natural' or has been handed down by God, so to speak. The leftists and the autocrats are *interventionists*, who believe that man can use his own intellect to micro-manage human society. The libertarians and traditionalists can legitimately be placed in the same, non-interventionist camp, because they share the common property that society is or should be structured to run more or less by itself: when humans get in the driver's seat and try to run society, they will fail and cause immeasurable harm.

Both the leftists and the traditionalists (if a monarch is part of the existing tradition) can be criticised for being unable to protect society from the arbitrary exercise of power by autocrats. The libertarians, on the other hand, are specifically concerned with blocking the arbitrary exercise of power.

2 Iran and the Rule of Law

Consider now a political environment far removed from the United States – the past twenty or so years in Iran. I would argue that an examination of these events can shed light not only on the Iranian situation but also on that of the larger Middle East and the United States, as well. Certainly, it is evident that the libertarian point of view has been pretty much left out of the Iranian picture during their history. What has really been going on over the past twenty years has been a somewhat confused struggle between

'leftists' and 'traditionalists'. But identifying who are the leftists and who are the traditionalists is a key element in this discussion.

It is important to recognise, first of all, the degree to which Islam influences everything that goes on in Iranian society. In particular, political life is not secular, but is unavoidably dominated by Islamic currents. Thus Khomeini, or at least many of his most important supporters, were/are the key 'leftists' (something understood by the French press, but not the U.S.). The traditionalists are represented by the traditional Shi'ite Islamic clergy. Their tradition is the Koran and the Sharia law that exists in traditional Islam. Although the overwhelming majority of clergy in Iran are traditionalist, the radical wing (the 'Khomeinists') have had control of some key organisations and therefore have an influence disproportionate to their numbers within the clergy. The Khomeinists attempt to work within the traditional Islamic framework (the 'laws'), but with the intention of having the laws specially interpreted in order to advance their own agenda – a progressive (in their minds) Islamic republic that offers assistance to the poor and dispossessed. Human freedom and civil rights, as understood by Western liberals, are not their main interests, though, so they don't necessary share many of the values of Western leftists. Instead, the Khomeinists are bent on achieving what to them is a just society. The Khomeinists also want to see their vision of society propagated to other Islamic countries. Thus the traditionalist right and the radical left in Iran are located within the Islamic establishment. Westernised humanistic liberalism (including Marxism) is too small to have a significant impact in present-day Iranian society.

Over the past twenty years Iranians have watched their society get ravaged by arbitrary and quixotic decision-making on the part of both Khomeinists and traditionalists whenever members of either of these groups have held positions of power. Because the Sharia laws are ancient and rather vague on certain points, their interpretation in a modern context leaves quite a bit of room for interpretation. This has given decision-makers the leeway to interpret the laws for their own convenience. For example, the Iranian Guardian Council, a traditionalist-dominated government structure, frequently closes down newspapers and makes summary punitive judgements by appealing to such vague 'legal' principles as identifying the guilty party to be "harmful to or not in the interests of Islam".

Because of the problems raised by the arbitrary exercise of power on the part of both traditionalists and the Khomeinist 'leftists', there has been a growing dissatisfaction among the populace concerning the government that they have. The landslide election of President Khatemi was driven by the hopes that he would lead the country in a new and positive direction. Although the people who support Khatemi are sometimes called 'progressives', they are, for the purposes of this analysis, basically another group of 'leftists' again, and Khatemi's primary opponents are the traditionalists. (Thus, for example, Khatemi supports the export of the Iranian Islamic Revolution to Lebanon, to the consternation of his American well-wishers, who don't understand the Khomeinist traditions there.) Khatemi and his people seem to recognise that both the earlier Khomeinist leftist and the traditionalist position can be subject to the damaging vicissitudes caused by the arbitrary exercise of power, and they have made it one of their major themes to attempt to establish a respect for a rule of law. Of course, there is already the Islamic law of the Sharia, so what Khatemi and his supporters really want is the recognition that the interpretation of those vague laws is inadequate: these need to be supplemented by specific *human-designed* laws that can help to improve society. They are thus promoting a program that they hope should be somewhat accommodating to the traditionalist forces, but that would ultimately change the political landscape over the longer term. Thus Khatemi wants the existing clerical-dominated

establishment to acknowledge the right of the (popularly elected) Iranian parliament to establish up-to-date, human-designed laws. Unfortunately so far, Khatemi has made very little headway in his campaign to establish a respect for this kind of rule of law in Iran.

Without a significant right to make new and far-reaching human-designed laws in Iran, the traditionalist clergy can block any efforts to effect social change in Iran. By so doing, however, the traditionalist clergy are contributing to an atmosphere that diminishes respect for *any* law, and this is something that actually works against their ultimate objectives of having an orderly society. In recent years many observers have remarked upon the rise of lawlessness in Iran (the traditionalists blame 'creeping Westernisation' for this).

This points to a deep problem in human society that has been recognised by some traditionalists, such as Burke: it is difficult to establish a widespread respect for law in any society; and if such a respect for law exists, it is very important to guard against any deterioration of that respect for law. This is probably the most laudable political contribution from the traditionalist point of view. Imagine if there were no vehicular traffic laws in the world: would drivers quickly 'self-organise' themselves so that traffic flow is efficient? It wouldn't happen anytime soon. Even when local power outages cut off traffic lights in an area, traffic chaos ensues. The simple existence and general respect for laws helps maintain a healthy society. In this essay we are not discussing how the respect for law may be generated; such respect may come from many directions, left and right, and may range from "Natural Law", through laws enacted by popularly elected legislatures, to decrees issued by dictators. Irrespective of how the laws and their respect were established, though, societies with such legal systems are generally better off than lawless societies.

The importance of the respect for laws is important on many levels and scales. On a worldwide scale, for example, there has been a long, difficult effort to try to establish a respect for international law. Progress has been slow, but in the latter part of the 20th Century significant advances were made. The European community has also made significant progress in connection with their supra-national rules over this period. Unfortunately, the U.S. administration since the election of George W. Bush, has taken a number of steps to degrade the respect for international law. International treaties have been cancelled, the United Nations has been deprecated, and the notion of international cooperation has been generally dismissed. These actions that have consistently undermined the respect for international law have emerged through a collection of policy decisions in the U.S. administration that have been characterised as 'neoconservative'. If this situation continues, the world may revert back to the kind of situation that Khatemi faces in Iran – a lawless international world dominated by the arbitrary exercise of power. The long, painful process of building up a respect for law will have to be started again.

In the context of the larger Middle East, the United States has in the past two years been actively engaged in an effort to combat the 'lawlessness' of terrorism in the region. The U.S. military has been effective in carrying out military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and has overthrown regimes that were inappropriate from our Western perspective, but were not necessarily completely unpopular with the resident populations. We should reflect on why these existing regimes were in fact not as unpopular as they were made out to be in the Western press. Both of those countries had a system of laws that allowed for the ordinary activities of daily life to be carried out. Afghans were by and large thankful that the Taleban militia had overthrown a previous chaotic system of warlords and had proceeded to

establish a largely lawful and peaceful (though repressive) society. Of course, there were aspects of that society that we considered to be unjust, but the existence of lawfulness was an important positive feature, and most of the Afghans preferred the repressive and lawful society to the chaotic and lawless one. Similar phenomena have been observed elsewhere in history: many Chinese view the greatest virtue of the Maoist revolution to be the elimination of the warlords and the establishment of a more law-abiding society in that part of the world. Indeed, the rise of monarchies in late Medieval Europe had a similar beneficial effect in that historical period.

Since the American invasion, Afghanistan has again degenerated into a society of lawlessness and warlords. The situation in Iraq is currently in a state of flux, but we have every reason to expect, given that country's many conflicts and factions, that the country will also degenerate into a warlord society. It is unlikely that either Afghanistan or Iraq will spontaneously 'self-organise' into a lawful, democratic society anytime soon. Thus it seems that the American neoconservative-led interventions have the ability to break the eggs of society, but not the ability to put "Humpty-Dumpty" back together again.

3 Neoconservatives

This leads to the vexing question of where the neoconservatives stand in relation to the foregoing classification scheme concerning political organisational methodologies. The neoconservatives¹ are assumed to have been inspired by former University of Chicago professor Leo Strauss. They include Allan Bloom, Irving and William Kristol, and have a number of followers who are influential in the current Republican administration, such as Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and Abram Shulsky. If we wish to classify the neoconservatives according to the scheme in Section 1, we can say that they are certainly not libertarians, since their followers dismiss democratic processes, the free flow of information, the right to privacy, and other civil rights. It also seems that the neoconservatives are not typical traditionalists, either: although they uphold certain 'classic' values, they are all-too willing to run roughshod over the legal system, a pillar of traditionalist faith. So they don't fit into either of the main conservative groupings.

The neoconservatives, like other conservatives, do appear to want to preserve certain values that they hold dear. However their organising methodology, as demonstrated by their actions, works in the long run against such goals. Despite their aims to preserve their cherished values, they are actually counterproductively contributing to the spread of chaos and disorder around the world in two important ways: their disrespect for legal and constitutional processes in the United States and their support for American military activities that break up lawful (though highly imperfect) societies abroad. Because they have limited appreciation for the rule of law (the one really valuable contribution from the traditionalists), they offer scant support or concern for what to do about societies, such as Afghanistan and probably Iraq, that are descending further into lawlessness. They can disrupt, but they cannot build or sustain.

Now the neoconservative-led U.S. government is pointing its efforts towards Iran. What can be

¹More background information on the neoconservatives can be found at http://truthout.org/docs_03/042003H.shtml, and http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/131/focus/The_PhilosopherP.shtml.

accomplished there? It seems that they are unprepared to accomplish positive results. All they are likely to do is help *undo* the little that Khatemi has been able to accomplish in the direction of building up an appreciation for society based on human-generated laws. What's more they are likely to contribute to a further breakdown of that society, just as they have done elsewhere, and then leave it open to the lawlessness that generally paves the way for warlords and autocrats.

So in terms of the political organisation classification, the neoconservatives appear to represent a new but rather inconsistent form of leftist operation. They believe that a privileged elite which shares their specific values can govern by cynically employing, in Orwellian fashion, any method whatsoever to manipulate the masses in order to achieve their ends. But they don't share the usual leftist interest or belief in rebuilding a society once they have first torn it down. Although their values may overlap with some traditionalist and libertarian conservatives at the present moment, their organising methodology is quite distinct from the conservatives. It's a command-driven system run by a privileged elite for whom the ends justify *any* means. Because of their lack of methodological scruples, however, one could argue that the neoconservatives are not really leftists at all, but should be classified simply as *autocrats* – a pernicious form of government that pursues domination and conquest for merely its own partisan purposes.

Martin Purvis
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