

What Does It Mean to Be a Conservative? – Part 1



By Steven Yates

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[“When ancient opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment, we have no compass to govern us, nor can we know distinctly to what port to steer.”](#) -Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

Doubtless readers expect something on the Trump lawfare verdict in the “hush money” kangaroo court. [What Tucker Carlson wrote on X:](#)

Import the Third World, become the Third World. That’s what we just saw. This won’t stop Trump. He’ll win the election if he’s not killed first. But it does mark the end of the fairest justice system in the world. Anyone who defends this verdict is a danger to you and your family.

Ah, Tucker’s optimism. I’m not sure the Democrats and those working behind them (e.g., in Big Tech) will allow Trump to win. Should I be wrong and Trump miraculously wins in the Electoral College, we’re liable to see Soros-funded “mostly peaceful protesters” taking to the streets again and burning down city blocks.

A close friend of mine sent me this:

“It is all in the instructions!” Phillip Kline, a law professor at Liberty University and former Kansas attorney

general, wrote in a post on X commenting on the jury instructions. “Judge Merchan has thru delay and obfuscation hampered the preparation of a defense, constructed a manner for the jury to convict without agreement on what crime was committed, and paved the way thru allowing irrelevant evidence for mere animus toward Trump to convict! Welcome to the left’s living Constitution!”

Doubtless pundits real and fake will talk the verdict to death. *Convicted felon* is the term being bandied about by corporate media as the latest verbal sledgehammer. Suffice it to say: we had a leftist court, a leftist prosecution, a leftist judge; the jurors remain unidentified but they’re all New Yorkers. Draw your own conclusions. This represents the full hijacking of the legal system in a country that has been subject to periodic lurches leftward for decades. *Why the country has continued to lurch leftward no matter which party controls Congress or the White House and no matter what conservatives say and do is an interesting problem! Whatever happens in November, never has the need for a new articulation of what conservatism was/is supposed to be more badly needed, and I can only hope this is read in that light.*

“Conservatism” today is rife with divisions. The deepest, obviously, is between “movement” (Establishment) conservatives of the past who took their original cue from William F. Buckley – Reagan, the Bushes, the Cheneys, the Romneys, etc.; writers such as George Will and other token conservatives at *The Washington Post* – versus “MAGA” conservatives who reject that past, are represented by figures such as Michael Anton (who penned “[The Flight 54 Election](#)” as *Publius Decius Mus*) and who have pretty much taken over the Republican Party: a sign the “Establishment” wasn’t as established as its members thought. Their grip did not survive the collapse of all their narratives.

The Establishment is obviously still around and has nothing

but disdain for the MAGAs. The MAGAs despise the Establishment.

Then there are *neoconservatives* – the Kristols, Norman Podhoretz; Project for a New American Century types whose *Rebuilding America's Defenses* became a blueprint for the war machine of the 2000s; most of Bush the Younger's appointees; or writers such as Max Boot whose affiliation with the Council on Foreign Relations should tell you all you need to know. There is abundant overlap between the Establishment and these guys, obviously.

The first group is on its way out as it only has one highly visible member under age 60 – Liz Cheney. The second is trying to return Trump to the White House. The third seems hellbent on getting us into World War III.

Now, the million-dollar question:

If they claim to be conservatives, could any of them tell us what they want to conserve?

Back in the day I asked an acquaintance in my age bracket whose views aligned most closely with the third (he'd supported the Iraq War against every criticism I made) who self-identified as a conservative what he was trying to conserve.

I received a blank stare of noncomprehension I never forgot.

So here we are–

2. What Conservatism *Isn't*.

My late father called himself a “conservative Republican.” For him, and for many people whose means of keeping the lights on and food on the table involved Monday thru Friday eight-to-fiving, *conservatism* seemed to mean, “what's good for business is good for the country.” He never said as much, but the idea often emerged from his actions.

And making money. I forget whom I was criticizing, but my dad's response was, "They make money."

I retorted, "So do drug dealers and sex traffickers."

He told me I had a bad attitude.

Al Capone was once quoted as saying, "I'm just a businessman giving the people what they want."

Readers should consult Randall Fitzgerald's *The Hundred-Year Lie: How Food and Medicine Are Destroying Your Health* (2005). It is full of insights on Big Pharma and Big Food, which also make money.

The majority of businesses supply a lot of good and necessary products, obviously. Some of the biggest have served up carcinogens, and drugs linked to violence and suicide as well as environmental damage (e.g., discarded pharmaceuticals contaminating the water table).

What's good for business is good for the country didn't ring true to me in any generalized sense of *just giving the masses whatever it is they want*, and for a long time I rejected conservatism. In college I had my "left-liberal phase." If we're reasonably intelligent and intellectually curious, don't we all? Later, I discovered Libertarianism. But that's for another day.

Conservatism isn't merely "what's good for business." It's not about money. What if global corporations have sold us out by undermining the well-being of ordinary working Americans while they laughed all the way to the bank?

I hope that's not a "lefty" type question.

If so, conservatives need to sort out their relationship to a free-market absolutism that is more associated with Libertarianism. What markets do they want to support, and what must constrain the system so that it benefits instead of

harms?

Nor, finally, is conservatism what advances the interests of defense contractors who serve the war machine, allegedly to “make the world safe for democracy.” That’s to confuse it with neoconservatism again. Conservatism isn’t a furtherance of Empire, as Patrick J. Buchanan explained in one book after another.

So, then, what is it that conservatives should want to conserve?

3. Richard Rorty: Achieving Our Country? Or Restoring It?

Richard Rorty (1931–2007) may be the last American academic philosopher of historical importance (judging from the way academia is circling the drain). In the late 1990s when Harvard was still a mostly respectable place, he delivered a series of lectures there. The response was sufficiently favorable that he turned them into a slim volume published as *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (1999).

Surprisingly, Rorty criticized academic leftists stingingly. He saw them as insular, obscure, micro-specialized, and ultimately pointless in their typically academic retreat from the lives of the ordinary, suffering human beings their ancestors had claimed to speak for. He thought that their overriding disdain for “American pride” was wrongheaded and unhelpful.

Emerging from *Achieving Our Country* along the way, though, was an image of Right versus Left relevant to what conservatives might want to think about conserving.

Rorty maintained that according to the Right, America’s greatest achievements were in its *past*, so that the country’s overall trajectory over the past century (maybe longer) has been downhill. While there are some exceptions to this: *check*.

The Left – or what Rorty saw as best and healthiest in the Left – sees America’s greatest achievements as in the *future*. We have not, that is, “achieved our country.”

The Right is thus driven to restore something *lost*. Constitutionally limited government, perchance?

The Left seeks “progress” toward that future. Hence leftists’ frequent use of *progressive* to describe themselves and what they want.

4. Conservatism and the Transcendent.

Rorty was part right and part wrong.

Conservatism, if associated with ‘The Right,’ *does* look to the past to find our greatest accomplishments. It sees documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These did not come from thin air. Their predecessors included the English Bill of Rights and ultimately the Magna Carta of 1215.

But conservatism doesn’t *just* look at the past. Rorty oversimplifies.

A thoughtful conservative wants something Rorty’s philosophy of ‘neopragmatism’ (like the product of most academic intellectuals) rejects: ***that which is transcendent and eternal, whether exemplified in past, present, or future.***

Or, as conservative philosopher Russell Kirk put it, *a thoughtful conservative perceives an enduring moral order, an order made for us and for which we were made.*

Going back to Aquinas, who lived not long after the insidious King John was forced at sword point to sign the Magna Carta: *God left humanity two books: the direct revelation of Scripture, in which we find Moral Law, and the indirect revelation of His Creation, in which we find Natural Law.*

According to conservatism, there is both a definite human nature and a definite natural order. Natural Law is where they intersect. Our actions, whether as individuals or as a society, either harmonize with Natural Law or they ultimately fail.

Truly great achievements are *timeless* because they glorify God the Creator who is timeless. God's existence is of an entirely different order than our limited spatiotemporal existence. His existence is evident in the workings of nature – their complexity under close study (e.g., the amount of information biochemically encoded into a single strand of DNA) as well as their immense beauty (think of the peaks of a snow-covered mountainscape, a sunset viewed over an ocean under a clear sky, or perhaps a new mother cradling her just-born baby for the first time).

Rorty, it goes without saying, was an atheist and a materialist. He saw both instrumentally, and not as descriptions of anything “interesting.” His ‘neopragmatism’ saw little to be gained, or practical and social problems to be solved, by asking the questions such terms raise. He would have had us stop asking whether there's a God, or ‘what the world is made of’ beyond science's provisional answers.

Leftists – progressives, if one prefers – tie themselves to history, not eternity. Their modern founding father is German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, who originated the ‘master-slave’ (or ‘lordship’ vs ‘bondservant’) dichotomy, in which the two experience the world in very different ways.

Karl Marx cut his teeth studying Hegel. He saw the dichotomy in terms of class (oppressing bourgeoisie versus oppressed proletariat). Twentieth century cultural Marxists such as Herbert Marcuse generalized it to incorporate race; radical feminists expanded it to include gender; homosexuals took it still further. With transgenderism, no longer is there any definitive Natural Law, not in a world where you can be any

“gender” you like.

The Hegelian dichotomy thus haunts us to this day in the present divisions drawn between oppressors (typically straight, non-gender-confused, white Christian males) and the oppressed (everyone else).

Leftists and materialists make a good pair, as do leftists and postmodernists (the relationship between materialism and postmodernism is too complex and obscure to get into here).

Both reject the idea of a transcendent ground for moral valuation outside history and culture. Both see these as human creations, or to use the trendy phrase, “social constructions.” Reality itself is a “social construction.” It’s not that there’s no such thing as *objective reality*, but what we see of it is always viewed through the lens supplied by “oppressor” language and epistemology, or that of the “oppressed.”

Conservatives do not see or speak about *structures* of privilege and domination; they see departures from both Moral and Natural Law by sinful humanity, and societal failure to constrain these departures.

Leftists claim that the “oppressed” experience daily the effects of white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, etc.

Indeed, one of the propositions of critical race theory is of “everyday racism” that permeates American life all the way down to the privileged “Karens” because it is *systemic*.

According to “third wave” radical feminists, misogyny is structurally built into marriage and the family which ‘privilege’ ‘toxic masculinity.’

Speaking generally, leftists (academic or otherwise) now see their job as unmasking all these ‘structures of privilege,’

exposing them to the light of day, and taking all us straight white Christian males down as many notches as possible.

Is it not clear, even taken on its own terms, that this is a recipe for distrust, miscommunication, division, hostility, conflict, and rising social *chaos* – not *progress*? Is it not fundamentally *nihilistic*? Its advocates cannot even *describe* a society they claim would be free of the “systemic racism” they claim permeates America. It’s too all-pervasive!

Surely the America they describe is hardly worth conserving!

Continued in Pt 2: principles worth conserving!

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Steven Yates is a (still recovering) ex-academic with a PhD in Philosophy. He taught for more than 15 years total at several universities in the Southeastern U.S. He authored more than 20 articles, book reviews, and review essays in academic journals and anthologies. Refused tenure and unable to obtain full-time academic employment (and with an increasing number of very fundamental philosophical essays refused publication in journals), he turned to alternative platforms and heretical notions, including about academia itself. In 2021 he moved to Chile. He is married to a Chilean national.

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Steven Yates’s book *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the*

Decline of the American Republic (2011) can be ordered [here](#).

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