

True Liberals Are Not Conservatives

The relevance of F. A. Hayek's essay "Why I Am Not a Conservative," the postscript to his important 1960 book, *The Constitution of Liberty*, is demonstrated at once by the opening quote from Lord Acton:

At all times sincere friends of freedom have been rare, and its triumphs have been due to minorities, that have prevailed by associating themselves with auxiliaries whose objects often differed from their own; and this association, which is *always dangerous, has sometimes been disastrous*, by giving to opponents just grounds of opposition. [Emphasis added.]

Who among true liberal advocates of individual liberty and free social evolution — aka libertarians — would deny the truth of that observation?

Hayek had European conservatism in mind when he wrote his essay, and for years, American conservatives, who still had affection for true liberalism, hastened to point this out. As Hayek wrote:

Conservatism proper is a legitimate, probably necessary, and certainly widespread attitude of opposition to drastic change. It has, since the French Revolution, for a century and a half played an important role in European politics. Until the rise of socialism its opposite was liberalism. There is nothing corresponding to this conflict in the history of the United States, because what in Europe was called "liberalism" was here the common tradition on which the American polity had been built: thus the defender of the American tradition was a liberal in the European sense.

Later in his essay, he elaborated that "in the United States it is still possible to defend individual liberty by defending long-established institutions. To the liberal they are valuable not mainly because they are long established or because they are American but because they correspond to the ideals which he cherishes."

But he noted that "This already existing confusion [over labels] was made worse by the recent attempt to transplant to America the European type of conservatism, which, being alien to the American tradition, has acquired a somewhat odd character." The confusion was compounded, Hayek wrote, when socialists began to call themselves liberals.

Many still suffer from this confusion today. But change has been afoot because the illiberals of the left and right increasingly want no part of true liberalism or the label — and in a way, that's good. Those on the left who call themselves progressives or socialists don't like the label *liberal* (or *neo-liberal*) because they associate it with the current permanent bipartisan prowar regime beholden to special corporate interests (so we liberals still have

work to do), and virtually all conservatives eschew the label because they don't want to be mistaken for libertarians. That's also good.

So Hayek's essay has new relevance for America. Would Hayek have been surprised? He would have distinguished national conservatism from neoconservatism because of the latter's cosmopolitanism. But how could he embrace as bonafide allies people who view imperialist war as a way to create "national greatness" and social solidarity, as the neocons do? Hayek would have agreed with Abraham Bishop who said in 1800 that "a nation which makes greatness its polestar can never be free; beneath national greatness sink individual greatness, honor, wealth and freedom."

Let's look at Hayek's problem with conservatism. For him, the "decisive objection" is that "by its nature," conservatism can do no more than slow down the change that progressives have initiated. That's not good enough: "What the liberal must ask, first of all, is not how fast or how far we should move, but where we should move." He acknowledged that although the liberal's differences with the "collectivist radical" are greater than his differences with the conservative, the latter "generally holds merely a mild and moderate version of the prejudices of his time." Thus "the liberal today must more positively oppose some of the basic conceptions which most conservatives share with the socialists."

Explicitly illiberal American conservatives would take issue with Hayek here, but I think Hayek was right. To the extent that conservatives want to use the state to impose their values — through censorship, immigration and trade restrictions, vice prohibitions, antitrust law, cultural protectionism, and the like — they indeed share conceptions with their enemies on the left. The ends may differ, but the means bear an uneasy resemblance. (The late Leonard Liggio used to say that the original socialism arose as a middle way that promised to use conservative means, that is, the state, to achieve liberal ends, that is, industrial progress and widespread wealth. Later a "new left" turned against industrial progress and disparaged the goal of material abundance for all.)

"The main point about liberalism," Hayek wrote, "is that it wants to go elsewhere, not to stand still." My sense is that in the last few years, elements of the right have come to appreciate Hayek's point. They became fed up with mere holding actions and have resolved to push a "positive" program. Unfortunately, it's a state-saturated program that ought to make genuine liberals sick.

The exception appears to be foreign policy. Right-wing nonintervention seems to have two justifications: first, that the U.S. government is wrong to think it can design the cultures of other nation-states, and second, that the trillions of dollars the government spends on the military and foreign populations could be better used for domestic matters, including "border security." So even in foreign policy the liberal and conservative bedfellows ought to be uncomfortable.

The liberal's wish not to stand still is the crux of the matter.

There has never been a time when liberal ideals were fully realized and when liberalism did not look forward to further improvement of institutions. *Liberalism is not averse to evolution and change*; and where spontaneous change has been smothered by government control, it wants a great deal of change of policy. So far as much of current governmental action is concerned, there is in the present world very little reason for the liberal to wish to preserve things as they are. It would seem to the liberal, indeed, that what is most urgently needed in most parts of the world is a thorough sweeping away of the obstacles to free growth. [Emphasis added.]

Hayek's embrace of a social order that guarantees change may seem to conflict with other things Hayek wrote that seem more conservative. But I think that may be mistaken. I take him to say that although the new is not necessarily the good, people must be free to try new ways to flourish. It is one thing to personally default to tried and true until something new proves itself worthy (because a tradition's value may not be immediately apparent), but quite another to empower the state to impede innovation and entrepreneurship, which is disruptive insofar as it is constructive. (Hence I would change Schumpeter's *creative destruction* to *creative disruption*.)

Hayek proceeded to enumerate several differences between liberal and conservative attitudes. The first, as already suggested, is that "one of the fundamental traits of the conservative attitude is a fear of change, a timid distrust of the new as such, while the liberal position is based on courage and confidence, on a preparedness to let change run its course even if we cannot predict where it will lead." This for Hayek explained the liberal enthusiasm for the free market's generation of spontaneous if unpredictable order, and the conservative lack of enthusiasm for such.

Relatedly, unlike liberalism, conservatism displays "its fondness for authority and its lack of understanding of economic forces. Since it distrusts both abstract theories and general principles, it neither understands those spontaneous forces on which a policy of freedom relies nor possesses a basis for formulating principles of policy." For Hayek, the conservative's "complacency ... toward ... established authority ... is difficult to reconcile with the preservation of liberty."

Hayek could have been describing Sen. Josh Hawley and the thinkers behind national conservatism when he wrote: "In general, it can probably be said that the conservative does not object to coercion or arbitrary power so long as it is used for what he regards as the right purposes. He believes that if government is in the hands of decent men, it ought not to be too much restricted by rigid rules."

Hayek faulted the conservative for lacking — indeed, for disparaging — abstract political

principles, which are the key to peaceful coexistence among people within a society who have different moral visions:

What I mean is that he has no political principles which enable him to work with people whose moral values differ from his own for a political order in which both can obey their convictions. It is the recognition of such principles that permits the coexistence of different sets of values that makes it possible to build a peaceful society with a minimum of force.

And this point of Hayek's is especially pertinent:

Connected with the conservative distrust of the new and the strange is its hostility to internationalism and its proneness to a strident nationalism. Here is another source of its weakness in the struggle of ideas. It cannot alter the fact that the ideas which are changing our civilization respect no boundaries.... It is no real argument to say that an idea is un-American, or un-German, nor is a mistaken or vicious ideal better for having been conceived by one of our compatriots.

Hayek continued that "it is this nationalistic bias which frequently provides the bridge from conservatism to collectivism: to think in terms of 'our' industry or resource is only a short step away from demanding that these national assets be directed in the national interest...."

As he closed his essay Hayek confessed that since the word *liberal* had been corrupted, thanks to the French Revolution and other forces, by "overrationalis[m], nationalis[m]" and socialis[m]," it had ceased to be a good label for his political outlook, which he shared with Tocqueville and Acton: "What I should want is a word which describes the party of life, the party that favors free growth and spontaneous evolution. But I have racked my brain unsuccessfully to find a descriptive term which commends itself." (He found *libertarian* "singularly unattractive" and "manufactured.")

I could go on quoting Hayek's essay — which is not to say I agree with all of it — but I fear that would unduly impose on the reader. So I recommend that the entire essay by the self-described "unrepentant Old Whig" be devoured forthwith.