

Brown furniture, liberal learning, and conversation
are what it means to be conservative

The Conservative Disposition in a Revolutionary Age

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A few years ago the *Wall Street Journal* ran an article about the declining market for what dealers call “brown furniture”—traditional pieces, usually made of wood, that were prized in the past but are now considered burdens. Given the number of times average families tend to move, it’s easy to see why. These items are big and heavy, and they require relatively large spaces. Better to bid a bittersweet farewell to Aunt Virginia’s davenport and to embrace the no-strings-attached, globally inspired, socially responsible furniture offered by Ikea. After all, nearly everything Ikea sells can be packed flat in a box, ready for shipment.

Conservatism in contemporary America is like brown furniture. Its fortunes have been declining for a long time, and it is decidedly out of fashion with most of the intelligentsia. Conservative ideas about social mores, family, place, marriage, government, and orthodox religion are mostly

unwelcome in public discourse. Like brown furniture, these ideas are considered burdensome because they make demands that many people, conservative and liberal alike, fail to live up to. How much more liberating it would be to throw off such old-fashioned constraints and to embrace the freedom of

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radical individuality or the warm solidarity of progressive groupishness!

But the conservative tradition contains hidden resources that endure even when conservatism itself is out of fashion. The core of conservatism, as I understand it, is not a set of policy positions or even moral positions, but instead a “disposition to appreciate,” a desire to preserve traditions whenever possible, and skepticism about radical change. A fundamental assumption is that traditions, whatever their particular failings, embody wisdom that we could not acquire through our own efforts in a single generation, or even in several.

This disposition must be cultivated and nourished, handed down from parents to children. Its foundation lies in the ordinary, day-to-day experiences of people who live as they do because this is how they have learned to live. They use certain objects, eat certain kinds of food, and speak in particular ways to one another. They find their identities in roles that come with duties and rewards: daughter, son, sister, brother, wife, husband, apprentice, and teacher.

The problem today is that many young Americans live in a world defined by identity politics, where “identity” is understood primarily as marked by race, gender, and sexual orientation. Of course these characteristics play a part in making us who we are. But how much more rewarding it would be to imagine identity in all its potential richness. We would then see ourselves not just as men and women, black and white, but as sons and daughters, descendants of those who came before us, and curators of intellectual, religious, musical, and artistic traditions.

Cultivating a conservative disposition is a way of honoring the multifaceted experiences of both past and present, and many young people are hungry for this as an alternative to the progressive, and at times even revolutionary, political scene that surrounds them. If we do not hand down these traditions to

our children, then some will undoubtedly find other sources of meaning, as so many already do in the political activism that has become ubiquitous on college campuses. But an increasing number of people will not take such a flimsy substitute. They are growing tired of this Ikea furniture that they bought at a discount, which is cheap and doesn't last.

Conservatism as a disposition

If we know a person's disposition we can say that he inclines in a particular direction and that we might expect from him certain thoughts, words, and deeds. We know, in other words, what he is “disposed” to do—not because he possesses an ideology or creed that he could recite, but because we are aware of what he loves and values.

Sixty years ago Michael Oakeshott described the conservative disposition as something that emerges from “a propensity to use and to enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or to look for something else; to delight in what is present rather than what was or may be.” This observation, from his famous essay “On Being Conservative,” is neither politically motivated nor self-consciously intellectual. It is a way of being in the world, a vision of self and of one's place in time between striving and fulfillment, past and future.

It also grounds conservatism in the lived experience of human beings. For a disposition is not something that one adopts upon becoming an adult in the way that we might designate “party affiliation” or “marital status.” Any disposition—conservative or not—is what one has learned to become through the mediation of parents, friends, school, church, books, television, teachers of various kinds, and myriad other influences. This point is often overlooked in contemporary discussions of conservatism, where it is sometimes assumed that a person



A metaphor for conservatism today?

could adopt something called “conservative ideology” in the same way one might adopt particular types of progressive ideology. In fact, many forms of conservatism *do* present themselves in terms that rival varieties of progressivism, but they are not what I am describing here. The point is that a conservative disposition is categorically different in kind from any ideology. It is not “family values” or “free-market economics” any more than “environmentalism” or “feminism.”

What is this disposition? It entails self-understanding, a coming to terms with imperfection and mortality, and an inclination to conserve and appreciate what one has. It is also an embrace of freedom and self-determination within established practices and institutions.

These qualities imply nothing at all, by the way, about individual personality. Dispositional conservatism does not mean “strait-laced” or “restrained.” I have known many more raucous, hard-drinking, and eccentric conservatives than liberals. Yet there are also certain limits. If someone has decided to tour the United States with a saving message about politics or self-improvement, we can be pretty sure that he or she does not pos-

sess a conservative disposition. Such a person would have to neglect all the ordinary but meaningful tasks of daily life: thinking, writing, washing dishes, caring for children, gardening, working, seeing friends, cooking, and so on.

The conservative also cultivates, maintains, and enlarges traditions, often by engaging in creative work that emerges from an awareness “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence,” in the words of T.S. Eliot. If traditions are to be anything more than antiquarian relics, they must be renewed continually in the course of daily life. As Josef Pieper observes in *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, the “old truths” are kept present and alive by means of “a living language; through creative rejuvenation and sloughing off the old skin like a snake, so to speak; through a continual confrontation with the immediate present.”

Yet conservatives tend to be skeptical about innovation for its own sake. This skepticism does not originate in stodginess or fear but from a realization that changes almost never go exactly as innovators expect and that actual results are inevitably unknown. There are no guarantees that what

is promised will be an improvement. A total change “is always more extensive than the change designed,” writes Oakeshott, “and the whole of what is entailed can neither be foreseen nor circumscribed.” And since the conservative is not inclined to bemoan his current circumstances, he usually stands on the side of preservation rather than reform.

The person of conservative disposition, then, finds himself (or herself) in a curious “metaxy” or middle ground between moral nostalgia and moral Pelagianism. Moral nostalgia is what Anglicans will sometimes observe in their parish curmudgeon, a person who maintains that “only the 1928 prayer book will do.” Or it is the middle-aged father’s desire for his children to experience the simple, unscheduled summers of his own childhood, having conveniently forgotten the long spells of boredom that actually characterized those summers. It is a sentimentally tinged view, but it has its attractions. For as Edward Shils explains in *Tradition*, the past “is a haven to the spirit which is not at ease in the present.”

Moral Pelagianism, by contrast, is all around us in ever more restrictive speech codes, in the drive for increasingly pure organic foods, and in pursuit of the complete and total reduction of “global warming gases.” It also appears to be the driving force behind every women’s magazine in existence: Simplify your life at last! Lose those final few pounds! Improve your finances with these three tips! This disposition is relentlessly focused on the future and on some supposed state of perfection that, alas, doesn’t exist at present.

While the conservative appreciates the past, he does not idolize it and has reasonable, though not utopian, hopes for the future. This turns out to be a difficult space to inhabit, for nearly everything in modernity militates against it. How, then, can this conservative disposition be cultivated? Only, I think, by living in ways that teach us to

appreciate, reverence, and delight in what is actually present to us. Let me illustrate this point by considering the ordinary ways in which this may happen.

Tangible things

I began by observing that the fortunes of “brown furniture” are at a low ebb. So are the fortunes of antique tea sets, sterling silver flatware, gravy boats, and finger bowls. None of this is deemed necessary for contemporary life. We’re too busy to polish silver, and we don’t like the stuffiness of formal entertaining, if we still entertain at all. The sample place settings containing multiple forks, knives, spoons, and glasses that are reproduced in *The Joy of Cooking*, first published in 1936, appear positively archaic to modern eyes.

But learning to use these objects enables practices of civility that can only be acquired in the engagement. Ordinary table manners are obviously one of these practices, but so is the conversation that incidentally flows from eating together, the consideration of another person’s comfort and happiness, the self-regulation of appetite and speech. To eat a formal meal with people outside one’s own family is to learn respect, forbearance, and appreciation of differences. It even offers a way to acquire the rudiments of civil political conduct, where the goal is not domination or winning but enjoyment and understanding.

Around the table we also learn to venerate the objects that our parents and grandparents show us are worthy of veneration. Certain glasses merit special care; special linens are pulled out only for the most important occasions. We learn what occasions *are* special, and why: birthdays, anniversaries, funerals, and holidays. We observe the ways of the people around us, and we imitate them until these ways become part of who we are. All this supplies a certain rhythm and coherence to our lives.

And though it can easily fall short of the ideal, a lively dinner party can serve as an image for the kinds of ordinary but meaningful interactions that conservatives value. On such occasions we observe the practices of living people whom we know and (often) love. We are not concerned to finish quickly and leave, but to linger. To quote Shils again, for an individual, “the givenness of patterns of social practices and arrangements and of beliefs resides in the visible presence of the performances, attachments, and affirmations regarding those symbolic patterns in the words and actions of *the persons he sees around him*.” And examples of practices like these can be infinitely multiplied, from the ways we welcome a new family into the neighborhood to the meals we eat on particular nights. My grandfather, for example, always celebrated the harvest of the Indiana corn that grew in his fields with a favorite meal: corn on the cob, barely boiled, with butter and salt, accompanied by a fine Scotch whiskey.

Perhaps all this seems a far cry from the political conservatism we’re accustomed to talking about—the kind that is said to have died with the election of Donald Trump—which concerns itself primarily with economics, elections, markets, and public policy. In one sense it is, because the conservative disposition is essentially not political. It is about preserving “impractical” activities that seem to have no notable consequences: friendship, conversation, liberal learning. Enjoyment and appreciation of what one already has offers liberation from the worldly pursuit of money, status, or power.

Yet in another sense this kind of conservatism does have an important connection to politics, because certain kinds of political institutions support this disposition, while others tend to destroy it. A political regime friendly to Tocquevillian “intermediate associations” moderates the potential overreach of centralized power. Associations like these (churches, sewing clubs, study groups, ama-

teur sports teams) also offer a rich variety of experiences not provided by the state or family. And of course, a judicial system that rigorously protects freedom of speech and expression is essential for allowing all sorts of dispositions—not just conservative—to flourish.

*Universities, and other threats to
the conservative disposition*

As attractive as this disposition may appear, almost everything in contemporary politics and culture trends away from it. The widespread progressive view of tradition as fundamentally “infected” with bias, oppression, and injustice implies that the past should not be celebrated but overcome, having been exposed for its misogyny and racism. The committed progressive views a desire to revive old-fashioned practices of social interaction as pointless and anachronistic at best. At worst these practices reproduce the inequality she is working so hard to overcome. “Only the rich had china and silver,” she will observe. “And it was always the women who were doing the serving.”

But just as progressives tend to dismiss the virtues of the past, they also overvalue the future and its promises of liberation and change. Consider a perfect summary of this attitude in an early-2000s advertisement for a technology company: “Welcome to the smarter, brighter, greener, more connected, more responsible, more inspiring, tech-driven, everything-is-knowable, anything-is-possible, no-problem-is-too-big century.” The emphasis here is on the new, different, and iconoclastic, and these sentiments permeate all of contemporary life.

Young people are now told that they must produce “original” research to get into the best graduate schools—never mind that they’ve just arrived at college and barely know their way around the fields they might

want to pursue. A technique called “rapid prototyping,” pioneered by computer engineers, advocates quickly moving from initial idea to implementation without agonizing over perfecting anything at all. College professors are now informed, without irony, that they should work this way too. And of course moral and sexual originality is prized. We celebrate taboo breakers for their boldness. Lena Dunham and Kim Kardashian, for different reasons, have become cultural icons. In the name of emancipation, women are told by prominent feminists like Katha Pollitt that “abortion is part of being a mother and of caring for children, because part of caring for children is knowing when it’s not a good idea to bring them into the world.”

And then there are the seductive temptations of power exemplified in executive orders and in the numerous “mandates” meant to govern our most intimate lives. The redefinition and expansion of Title IX policies through the administrative state tends further to erode traditional standards of courtship and sexual conduct, as if we needed any more encouragement in that direction. The “Dear Colleague” letters to universities produced as “guidance” by the Office of Civil Rights have placed enormous responsibilities upon university faculty and administrators for policing the lives of their students.

Along these lines, perhaps nothing has been more effective in undermining the conservative disposition than the transformation of the American university into an essentially political institution. Universities have long been the gatekeepers of elite culture, but in the past people were somewhat more inclined to consider their college years a respite from politics and career—a chance to study English literature or history or math for its own sake. Now, by contrast, activism has become central to the university. Here is a recent, typical comment in a blog post from the American Council on Education:

“Campus leaders who recognize the *educational triumph in student activism* and pursue the difficult work of building understanding through listening will add complexity and nuance to their students’ emerging views—and honor the longstanding tradition of U.S. colleges and universities *as agents of social change*” (emphasis added).

Many colleges and universities now aim explicitly at a “liberatory educational praxis,” in which oppressed groups gain power to overcome their oppressors and to transform the educational institutions themselves. Paulo Freire, the grandfather of this movement, makes the case for such an education in his 1970 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The pedagogy he advocates has two distinct stages. “In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation.” In the second stage, “in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed,” pedagogy no longer belongs to the oppressed “and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation.” Though it’s hard to know what this “process of permanent liberation” might look like, it’s clear that we have entered a world of political revolution. One wonders whether such permanent liberation might not involve a kind of oppression of its own—the oppression of a reductive ideology crowding out everything that does not fit within its framework of analysis and activism.

Freire’s language is lofty, meant to inspire a political movement. Nearly fifty years later, the vocabulary has altered but the aim is the same. Methods of study like “standpoint theory” and other allied varieties of perspectivism have made the pedagogy of the oppressed an institutional mainstay in university programs like Gender and Sexuality Studies, Africana Studies, Hispanic Studies, and Jewish Studies. Each day’s news in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is full of articles about race, affirmative action, diversity,

inclusion, equity, “campus climate,” protests, equality, intersectionality, and much more.

Conservatives tend to undervalue the fact that young people do want to study issues of race and gender. Questions of race, in particular, stand front and central in the American experience and are well worth academic study. The problem is that students usually approach these subjects as activists, from a one-sided perspective inculcated by a progressive professor. Yet this is to have made up one’s mind before the inquiry ever begins! For example: affirmative action policies have both supporters and opponents. A college class should therefore consider the strongest and best arguments both for and against it. But one can be sure that Clarence Thomas’s views are not welcomed or treated charitably in most university classes about race and politics.

The value of a nonactivist education

Education as activism also places the self at the center of every inquiry. Studies of race, gender, and sexuality are usually concerned with assessing one’s own personal situation or the situation of one’s class. Then the individual or class is considered in terms of social, political, and economic power, which is always perceived as deficient. Next, the questions become how to redistribute power and how to address and remedy structural inequalities. This explains the emphasis on “praxis” in contemporary universities. The focus is always on the future, while past and present are inherently problematic. Something as anodyne as “mom and apple pie” is seen as androcentric and misogynist because it reflects notions of women’s restricted roles and male dominance. The student as activist never loses sight of her personal situation.

All this highlights the central problem with the politicization of American univer-

sities. The notion that our moral and intellectual inheritance deserves repudiation *is directly opposed* to a conservative disposition. If past and present are fundamentally defective, then conservative attitudes of appreciation and gratitude don’t make sense. Why should anyone be initiated into traditions that are bound up with evil?

This question implies a host of difficult philosophical issues, none of which I can examine here: How ought traditions be evaluated? What does it mean to adopt a tradition? What qualifies as a tradition? Can someone accept only part of a tradition? How would we distinguish between essential and nonessential? And what of the fact that progressives are not wrong about the oppression and prejudice that one discovers in many traditions? Conservatives would be naïve were they to assert that wholesale embrace of the past as good, because all traditions are complex webs of inclinations, thoughts, events, impulses, loves, and desires that point in many different directions.

These questions provide all the more reason to defend the traditional university against the politicization it has recently undergone. The obligation of teachers and students alike is to evaluate traditions in all their complexity—not merely to see them through the lenses of contemporary ideologies that can distort as much as they illuminate. Such evaluation cannot be undertaken if we have already made up our minds about the analytical categories we view as important. In the present day, these categories consist of power, oppression, and liberation.

In fact, real liberation may come when we do not see the world in terms of power and oppression at all. Perhaps the most radical emancipation from the concerns of daily life is the self-forgetting associated with the old idea of liberal education. We become capable of entering worlds of experience

both temporally and geographically foreign to us: ancient Greece, medieval Italy, present-day Kenya or China. We study topics and questions that do not emerge from our personal lives. We discover authentic intellectual diversity.

But liberal learning is not just self-forgetting. Nonactivist education also encourages us to pay a different *kind* of attention to our lives and choices. With Aristotle we can consider how habits are formed; with Plato, how little we know even when we are most self-assured; with Homer, what heroism looks like; with Augustine, how to recognize that we are pulled toward temporal and eternal goods at once. These universal insights into human nature have implications for the ordinary, humble activities that all of us engage in every single day. They encourage a type of attention to the self that does not begin and end with questions of power.

Sober reflection in an era of transition

These threats to the conservative disposition are significant, and of course there are others. It sometimes seems that nearly everything in contemporary culture points in the direction of ceaseless activity and change—sometimes in the service of reform, sometimes for no reason at all. We live in a time of moral revolution, where the question of personal identity is very much in flux. Even such “givens” as ordinary family roles and gender are now up for grabs.

What do I mean by revolution? I have in mind something like what Hans Jonas once wrote: “If... a man in his advancing years has to turn to his children, or grandchildren, to have them tell him what the present is about; if his own acquired knowledge and understanding no longer avail him; if at the end of his days he finds himself to be obsolete rather than wise—then we may term the rate and scope of change that thus overtook

him, ‘revolutionary.’” Surely this is the case today, when many older people look at their children’s and grandchildren’s lives with bewilderment.

But these children and grandchildren are not as self-assured as they seem. Many, and perhaps most, have not yet figured out who they are, what they should do, and how they should orient their lives. It remains our responsibility, as adults, to guide them toward an understanding of *all* the possibilities for their lives—not just the possibilities they happen to perceive in contemporary culture. We should also, as Norbert Elias suggests in *The Civilizing Process*, seize the opportunity for sober reflection offered by living in such a period of transition, since we can now see that “the older standards have been called into question but solid new ones are not yet available.”

Once again, Shils has made the essential diagnosis of our current predicament. Human beings, he writes,

at least most of them, much of the time do not fare well in a disordered world. They need to live within the framework of a world of which they possess a chart. They need categories and rules; they need criteria of judgment. They cannot construct these for themselves. This is one of the limits to the ideal of total emancipation and total self-regulation.

Although family, church, and other institutions can help to construct such a chart, even these authorities cannot do it alone. They need the further assistance “of their ancestors; they need the help which is provided by their own biological ancestors and they need the help of the ancestors of their communities and institutions.” Destroying or discrediting “these cognitive, moral, metaphysical and technical charts,” writes Shils, “is a step into chaos.”

This parallels the advice often given to

parents in raising children. Children, we're told, require limits and boundaries. They want to know what is expected of them, and what actions merit punishment or praise. They need to observe models for a good life, so that they can grow into such lives themselves. Children are least content when left to their own devices to imagine what might make them happy. Structure is crucial. This is what Shils's charts provide, and what traditions of all kinds continue to offer. We should welcome this assistance, because as it turns out, adults need stability too.

The essential task for conservatives, then, is to rebuild our culture where it has crumbled and to fortify it where it still stands—in short, to support institutions that in turn support the conservative disposition. What does this look like in practice? We see such rebuilding in the tremendous flowering of alternative secondary schools: the Christian classical-school movement and public charters like Great Hearts Academies, as well as in the homeschooling movement. In all these endeavors, parents and teachers are coming together to hand down the Western intellectual tradition to their children—not with shame or anger, but with admiration. We also see it in certain colleges and universities where a critical mass of faculty affirm the good in traditional liberal arts education and even attempt to be moral guides for their students. A few such colleges are so old-fashioned as to have retained single-sex dorms and even to impose visiting hours!

We see the cultivation of the conservative disposition in all those who teach music lessons, art lessons, ballet, and things like wood shop and metalsmithing. Enduring traditions undergird each of these ordinary activities, and to ignore them is usually to fail. The disposition is there in the family planting a backyard garden, or raising chickens or goats, or teaching children to sew. It appears in the restoration of old houses and old neighborhoods. (In this

respect even New Urbanists and wealthy progressives have a healthy dose of the conservative disposition.) It is certainly there in the preservation of ceremonial items for the next generation: the baptismal cap and gown, the handmade chair, the great grandmother's ring, the special piece of "brown furniture" that has managed to survive multiple moves.

Many Americans feel dispirited by the events of recent years, and are nervous about a future president who claims the mantle of conservatism while displaying almost no signs of the disposition. This is understandable. But if we are looking for moral or spiritual guidance from political leaders of any persuasion, we are probably looking in the wrong place. For although political activity can often harm us, it certainly cannot save us. Social and cultural renewal, if it is to be effective, happens when ordinary people do ordinary things with care and love. In James Davison Hunter's phrase, this requires being "faithfully present" in our own spheres of influence. Or to paraphrase Mother Teresa, "Do what is in front of you!"

This kind of conservatism—a disposition to appreciate and preserve—is a permanent human possibility precisely because it does not begin or end with politics. Its emergence in an individual is neither guaranteed by a good regime nor destroyed by a bad one, but instead exists at a deeper level of culture. This culture must not only be guarded, as Oakeshott says, but "recreated." And the genius "of the poet and the artist, and to a lesser extent of the philosopher, is to create and recreate the values of their society." But one need not be a poet, artist, or philosopher to engage in this important work. Such re-creation is precisely what priests, high school teachers, and grandmothers engage in every day, and it requires the concerted efforts of all of us who are disposed to be conservative. †