Why conservatism died in 2016—
and how it was reborn in service to the nation

Conservatism: Trump and Beyond

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Some events sweep self-comforting old beliefs into the dustbin and expose yesterday's men to ridicule. Just such an event was the election of Donald Trump. Yet even now conservative thinkers seem none the wiser. Their frozen-fixed principles remain unchanged, and they gauge Trump according to how well he comports with them. Even Trump's supporters, for the most part, have failed to understand just what explains Trump's victory and the revolution in conservative thought behind it.

The four pillars of the Trump movement, themes that resonated with his supporters and that were largely ignored by conservative intellectuals, were mobility, jobs, religion, and nationalism. What they gave us was a very different party, one that is socially conservative and economically liberal or middle of the road, the polar opposite of the libertarian's social liberalism and economic conservatism.

In 2012 Barack Obama campaigned on the themes of equality and mobility. Mitt Romney brought forth a fifty-nine-point position paper that no one read. And Obama won. The voters had recognized that we had become a society in which our children

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would have it worse than we did. That had never before happened in this country.

What had made us unequal and immobile were the barriers the Democrats had erected. It was a Republican issue, but the Republicans didn't take it up. Until Trump came along. The Republican establishment denied that we were immobile or said that the swinish multitude had brought its misery on itself. The Trump voters knew better.

Friedrich Schiller said that against stupidity the gods themselves are helpless. And he hadn't even met a Republican!

In our lives we play several different roles, but not the least is man the creator, man the producer. Homo faber. If we forget that, we're not apt to know what the point of a job might be. Is a wage of no greater worth to a worker than an equivalent government handout? Is a worker's contribution nothing more than what he adds to the economy less what we pay him? If that's the case, then the economist is correct to point out that maximizing the number of workers is not the same thing as maximizing the size of the economy, if some work could be done more cheaply with fewer workers. If the size of the economy is all that matters, that is.

John Ruskin saw through the economists in *Unto This Last*. "Among the delusions which at different periods have possessed themselves of the minds of large masses of the human race, perhaps the most curious—certainly the least creditable—is the modern soi-disant science of political economy, based on the idea that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespectively of the influence of social affection." What social affection means is the difference between the worker's earned self-respect and the shame of unemployment, between the purposeful and the purposeless life. It is the companionship of fellow workers rather than the loneliness of the man on the dole shut up within himself.

That is what Trump supporters knew when he talked about jobs. When he announced his candidacy, he said, "I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created." When he complained about our trade deals, he said that our labor participation rate is so low "because China has our jobs and Mexico has our jobs." When he spoke of immigration, he told us that illegal immigrants were taking jobs away from Americans. When he promised to rebuild our infrastructure, he was talking about jobs for workers. When he mentioned his Republican opponents, he noted that "they don't talk jobs." Hillary Clinton despised ordinary Americans, but we supported the candidate who reached out to workers in jobless inner cities, to the unemployed coal miners. We voted for what Trump called the Republican Workers Party.

With the sense of self-worth and purpose, with the social affection, comes the will to resist the temptation of unworthy choices. Culture matters, of course. Children need two-parent families; drug dependency holds people back. But culture can't be legislated, and David Hume wasn't far off the mark when he observed in "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" that "all plans of government, which suppose great reformation in the manners of mankind, are plainly imaginary." The state can't do much to change things, except make them worse, and today the only moral rearmament crusade we need from the government is an economy that gives people jobs. After that we can take care of ourselves.

The NeverTrumper had assumed that the white working class had lost its jobs because it smoked Oxy, because of moral poverty. But there's another explanation. Maybe they smoked Oxy because they had lost their jobs. Maybe it was really about jobs after all and not a sudden loss of virtue. The highest death rates from mental disorders and substance abuse are in the counties with higher unemployment rates and fewer prime-age males

Trump campaigned on a platform focused on jobs for Americans, and as the head of what he called the Republican Workers Party

in the labor force. A 2.6 percent increase in the state unemployment rate is associated with a 29 percent increase in suicides and an 84 percent increase in accidental poisonings.[1]

In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, the University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson gave the same economic explanation for the higher black unwed birth rate. Black families were weaker than white ones because black unemployment levels were much higher than those for white families, particularly in the inner cities from which jobs had fled. Add to that the racial and cultural prejudices of white employers and it's not hard to see why black unemployment rates were double those of whites. As a consequence, black families were more dependent than whites on welfare checks, and more likely to be affected by welfare's perverse incentives.

We're not going to be able to say which came first, the job loss or the drug use, but if it's solutions we're after they'll not come from the enforcement of morals. A state that wants to wean people from opioids might want to regulate their use, but in the end the best inducement to moral living is a good job. From that will follow marriage, mortgages, and children, all the things that make us moral. Trump said he wanted to be remembered as the jobs president, and if he succeeds, for both whites and blacks, the drug crisis will take care of itself. What's not going to be of any help to anyone is the heartless conservatism that blames the victims.

The evangelicals, Catholics, and Orthodox Jews who voted for Trump had not been ignored by the conservative establishment, which favored a limited interpretation of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. Nevertheless, conservatives had erected their own wall of separation between their principles and religious faith. They might have been privately religious, but they thought that this had nothing to do with their political beliefs. They could oppose a state welfare system because they thought that private charity should suffice, though they never thought to extend the same principle to state funding for other matters, such as national defense. They never proposed taking up a collection for aircraft carriers.

The conservative establishment had conceded to secular liberals that religious beliefs

don't belong in the naked public square, with the result that American political debates became thoroughly secular. That has shaped our political landscape. If modern liberalism is in crisis, if it has turned on itself and become illiberal, willing to accept unjust class differences and indifference to the welfare of others, it's because it has abandoned the Judeo-Christian tradition from which it arose. Which is something Trump supporters, being mostly religious believers and on the receiving end of secular liberal contempt, were all too well aware of. But Republican intellectuals didn't get it.

First, conservatism was captured by the economists, with the flashy new tools they brought to their discipline in the twentieth century. We'll give you an intellectual rigor you've been lacking, they said, but along the way they ditched the concern for spreading the wealth around.

Nineteenth-century economists assumed that we pretty much knew what people wanted, and concentrated on material welfare. Do people have enough food, are there jobs for them? Along came the twentieth century's marginal revolution, and economists found they could dispense with a lot of those earlier assumptions, especially the idea that we know anything about what other people want, except as measured by what they buy. If that's so, we have no basis for any judgments about social justice. How can I design a social safety net when other people look like zombies to me?

That might be an appropriately modest assumption for a social scientist who wants to seem scientific, but the scientist oversteps his bounds when he tries to tell us how to live. His academic modesty then becomes an excuse for a heartless welfare regime. And there is no reason to credit him with moral insight. If he were right, we wouldn't be able to say whether the wealth transfer should be from the rich to the poor or vice versa, and we all know better than that. And yet this false *economism* had a fatal charm for a generation of tightwad conservative thinkers.

The economist can tell one how to choose rationally to advance one's interests. What he can't do is teach us empathy or fraternity. He might explain how to build a society in which one might flourish, through bargains with other clever people, through friendships that are wholly transactional, but that's simply the morality of an efficient insurance contract. I will help you because it is in my interest to do so, because I expect a return favor from you. And that's the morality of pay-for-play, of K Street lobbyists, of the corrupt Clinton Cash Machine.

Second, some conservatives became prisoners of *rights talk*, of abstract theories of natural rights and the idea that political and moral issues come down to rights owed to oneself. One part of their moral sense expanded and like a tumor crowded out that part which asks what is owed to others and what a sense of empathy would ask of one.

That's not to deny the appeal of natural rights, which very properly play a role in our moral discourse. A society is to be judged in part on whether it respects democratic rights and the right to practice one's religion. But with a sense of empathy, we'd also care about how other people fare, about the consequences of adhering to a set of rights.

Often there's no conflict. A respect for natural rights usually does make most people better off, as compared to the experience of failed socialist states such as Venezuela. There's also no reason in theory why doctrines of natural rights can't make room for a robust sense of duties to others. John Locke advanced the best-known defense of natural rights, one that greatly influenced America's Founders, and even he thought that a God-given sense of sociability grounds duties to others where these do not conflict with self-preservation.[2] But for too many conservatives, the language of rights became paramount and numbed the concern for how things worked out in practice

for other people. They then deserved Flannery O'Connor's rebuke to Mary McCarthy.

O'Connor had been invited to a chic New York dinner party, meant to introduce the Catholic novelist to New York intellectuals. But McCarthy dominated the conversation, and O'Connor remained silent until late in the evening. Finally someone realized that the guest of honor had not spoken and, in an effort to draw her out, mentioned the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Of course it's just a symbol, said lapsed Catholic McCarthy, but a "pretty good one." "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it," answered O'Connor. If it's a natural right and doesn't leave people better off, to hell with it.

Finally, the *heroic materialism* that defines the deepest beliefs of many conservative thinkers, the East Coast Straussians in particular, celebrates pagan virtues at the expense of sympathy for the poor in spirit, the meek, they who mourn. The conservative who prizes the great-souled over the small-souled man, excellence at the expense of mediocrity, learning above ignorance, might have good taste but is nevertheless apt to have a low opinion of the Sermon on the Mount. If he's honest with himself.

Such people are apt to regard religion in general, and Christianity in particular, as philosophically uninteresting. And I expect they're right. But I am more interested in what religion adds to our beliefs, for there's nothing wrong with Aristotle, or with liberalism for that matter, that the Judeo-Christian tradition wouldn't cure.

The ancient world the Straussians so love, the world of Plato and Aristotle, was anything but secular or free and equal. Religion was everywhere, and families were a repressive church ruled by an all-powerful paterfamilias. There was little room for human rights or individual conscience. And that is where we might have been today, with a culture that prizes the virtues of great-souled men but with little use for the rest of *pauvre humanité*, a culture that divides us up between the moral and cultural heroes on one side and the deplorables on the other. If that's not what happened, it's because of the Christian idea of a voluntary basis for human associations rooted in a Jewish conception of a moral law that transcends family, city, and national laws. Play the parlor trick that Nick Spencer proposes in *The Evolution of the West*, that of imagining the tape of Western history rewound and played again, with other things erased but with the same religious faith, and what you'll get is a set of values not so different from what we have today.

Kant sought to prove the existence of God from the moral law.[3] He had it backward. We more readily can infer the moral law from the existence of God. What I learned from my religion is that we all have souls, that we're all equal in the eyes of God, that the lowest of lives is as precious as that of a conservative economist. Saint Peter was merely a fisherman, and we have it on good authority that John the Baptist was not altogether tidy in his personal attire. But they had other things going for them. Cleverness isn't a substitute for goodness, and well-credentialed sepulchers can't be prettied up with a coat of white paint.

That's something the left, with its egalitarian principles, claims to understand better than the right, and perhaps it does too. What the right had, in place of political egalitarianism, was religion. But what happens when the salt loses its savor, when religious lessons are no longer believed? What one is left with is what Tocqueville—himself a religious skeptic—called the hardest aristocracy that has appeared on earth.[4]

Populism was one of the nastiest of American political movements. It was inevitable, therefore, that Trump would be

called a populist. You should never give your opponents the right to label you, but even some of Trump's supporters have been willing to call themselves populists. They should know better. Trump is an America First nationalist, not a populist.

It's true that, like most populists, Trump thinks that tariff walls that keep foreign goods out of the country might help American workers. But then Abraham Lincoln and William McKinley thought so too, and they weren't populists. It's also true that, like most populists, Trump championed an underclass unjustly held back by an aristocracy of wealth. But then Karl Marx and socialist Eugene V. Debs thought they were doing this, and they weren't populists. We must also admit that, like most populists, Trump decried the influence of money in politics. But then so did Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Warren, and nobody called them populists.

The accusation of populism should thus be understood as a smear meant to link one to out-and-out racists such as "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, a South Carolina senator at the beginning of the twentieth century and one of the vilest people in American political history. But what was behind the Trump movement was nationalism, not populism, and that becomes clear when one recognizes what American nationalism must mean. There is a cultural nationalism in America, but in its diversity American nationalism doesn't leave much room for white nationalists such as Tillman. You can be an American if you don't like baseball and apple pie. You can be an American if you don't enjoy Scott Joplin and Tex-Mex food. You can be an American if you don't like Langston Hughes and Norah Jones. It's just that you might be a wee bit more American if you did like them.

There's another, more profound, reason why American nationalism can't be racist. Because constitutional liberties are the icon of American nationhood and constitutive of our identities as Americans, American nationalism must be a liberal nationalism. For Americans, as Americans, illiberalism is self-defeating, and when Americans have been illiberal in the past, in time they've been seen to be un-American.

At the same time, nationalism can't be employed to divide one group of Americans from another. American nationalism must be egalitarian, and a nationalism that makes second-class citizens out of some Americans, based on their race or sexual orientation, is profoundly anti-American.

In addition to its message about liberty and equality, nationalism also has something to say about fraternity. That might seem a little odd. The French talk about Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Not the Americans. And yet, like the French, American nationalists must distinguish between strangers and brothers, noncitizens and citizens. They must feel a special sense of fraternity with their fellow citizens. That's the logic of nationalism. Otherwise it's a hollow fraud.

The nationalist will prefer fellow citizens over noncitizens. He'll deny to noncitizens rights and privileges he'd grant to fellow citizens. He'd screen potential immigrants based on what they would contribute to American citizens. But what he denies the noncitizen must then be paid for by what he would give to his fellow citizens. If the nationalist wants to reduce immigration from noncitizens, for example, he must argue that this will benefit fellow citizens. By contrast, the anti-national globalist can treat citizens and noncitizens alike. If he is a progressive, he might want to offer the same generous welfare rights to both groups of people. And if the anti-nationalist is a libertarian, he might wish to deny welfare rights to both groups. Nationalism, on the other hand, is about differences, about preferences for fellow citizens. Along with his love of liberty and equality, the American nationalist must prize fraternity.

It was Trump's sense of fraternity that most incensed his opponents. For the liber-

als, it was his solidarity with people they thought deplorable. For the libertarians, who really didn't care much one way or the other about either citizens or noncitizens, it was the safety net he'd offer Americans. For both he was toxic, for all the wrong reasons. But his fraternity brought him to the sweet spot in American presidential politics, the place where elections are won, to social conservatism and middle-of-the-road economic policies.

The left's anti-nationalism dismisses the strongest of reasons to help those in need. It demands universal health care as a right, but this assumes a correlative duty, and such duties are not owed to foreigners. I have no obligation to support an Albanian health care system, for example. The better argument for universal health care is that it's something a nationalist owes to his fellow citizens. But the modern left refuses to rely on nationalist sentiments. It finds nothing to praise in American history, rejects a common American culture, despises its conservative opponents, and then reviles them when they object to the messy Obamacare scheme. Yet if they think that we're all created equal, that we are endowed with certain unalienable rights, that ours is a government of, by, and for the people, then why are they not American nationalists?

Like religious belief, nationalism has a gravitational force that pulls one to the center of the road on social welfare policies. But is religious belief inconsistent with nationalism? Recall the anti-nationalist message in the film *Joyeux Noël*, where the Midnight Mass during the 1914 Christmas Truce brought the British, French, and German soldiers together. The religious believer cannot be indifferent to the suffering of people in other countries. That might imply a welcoming refugee policy, generous foreign aid packages for starving countries, rescue efforts after national emergencies elsewhere. What is not required is an indifference between the welfare of Americans and non-Americans. It's only when governments don't seem to care about their own that people turn inward and stop caring about people in other countries.

Nations can demand too much from a citizen and turn oppressive. So too can families. But that's not an argument against the affection one naturally feels for one's nation or family. There are things we do not understand, observed Matthew Arnold, unless we understand that they are beautiful. So too there are things we do not understand unless we understand that they are loved.

In all these ways, the conservative establishment failed to understand the ideas that elected Donald Trump. But it was the establishment's principles that were wanting, and that were forever repudiated by Republican voters. From the false economism, the circumscribed libertarian principles, the pagan virtues, and open borders globalism, we await the birth of a new conservatism, one that is proudly American and faithful to the dictates of religious belief, which can lead us from the missteps of the modern conservative movement. ✝

NOTES

1. See Eleanor Krause and Isabel Sawhill, "What We Know and Don't Know about Declining Labor Force Participation Rates: A Review," Brookings Institution, May 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ccf_20170517_declining_labor_force_participation_sawhill1.pdf; Justin R. Pierce and Peter K. Schott, "Trade Liberalization and Mortality: Evidence from U.S. Counties," Yale School of Management, November 2016, https://www.bing.com/search?q=Justin+R.+Pierce+and+Peter+K.+Schott%2C+%E2%80%9CTrade+Liberalization+and+Mortality%3A+Evidence+from+U.S.+Counties&pc=MOZI&form=MOZLBR.
2. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960), II.2 para. 6, at 270–71; II.11 para. 135, at 358; and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, para. 116.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6:6–7, at 35–36.
4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), II.ii.20, at 532.