

THE SOAPBOX

The Crisis of American Conservatism

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American conservatism is in crisis. This is perhaps a strange claim to make, given conservatives' commanding control of American government. After sixty years of campaigning to capture the country's political institutions, the Right has succeeded by any conventional measure. Conservatives control the Presidency, both chambers of Congress, the Supreme Court, most state legislatures and governorships. Between past successes, current electoral gains, the perennial incompetence of the Democratic Party, and various efforts to seize control of the election process itself, conservatism may be the dominant force in American political life for the foreseeable future.

And yet the moment still seems an unusually low point for conservative ideology in the United States. The Republican Party, the primary vehicle of conservatism in America, displays none of the virtues and almost all the vices of right-wing politics. Much of contemporary conservative ideology consists of cultural despair, apocalyptic fantasy, conspiracy theories, and paramilitarism. In power, even moderate conservatives are reckless, feckless, and unprincipled. The experience of conservative government combines administrative chaos with ideological vindictiveness in equal measures. How can we explain this strange coincidence, where right-wing political triumph has come at the cost of any capacity for effective, stabilizing governance?

Two choices, as much as aggregate patterns of political argument and behavior can be construed as choices, led American conservatism to its present state. One of these choices is familiar, the other less so. The familiar choice is the enabling of the American Ultraright—what I call *shadowside* conservatism—to advance the conservative cause more generally, which has led to a gradual radicalization of rightist politics, especially since the 1990s. This dynamic, I contend, is a problem that has faced all forms of conservatism across the North Atlantic world since the late nineteenth century. The less familiar choice, somewhat peculiar to the Anglophone world, is the 1970s turn to an ideology that I call *genteel* libertarianism. On their way back to power in the latter years of the twentieth century, American conservatives convinced themselves that a deregulated economy would not only lead to prosperity, but also encourage the resurrection of genteel morality. This genteel libertarianism repeatedly failed to produce a stable prosperity or the resurrection of bourgeois morality and has consequently encouraged the growth of the shadowside. In this sense, it is the *conceptual machinery of moderate conservatism itself* that acts as the catalyst of the contemporary Right's radicalization. Only when they relinquish genteel libertarianism will American conservatives cease to be agents of political instability.

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The Problems of American Conservatism

It is customary to begin any study of the twentieth-century American Right with a nod to Alan Brinkley's classic essay "The Problem of American Conservatism."¹ And for good reason. Published in the *American Historical Review* in 1994, Brinkley's article helped to re-establish the study of conservatism as a historiographical niche. Brinkley's key point was that, despite the leading role conservative politics had played in post-World War II (WWII) U.S. history, conservatives received relatively little attention from American historians. Library shelves ached beneath the weight of books about the revolutions of the sixties, but no similar attention had been paid to the tidal wave of right-wing politics that had transformed America in the 1970s and 1980s. Brinkley attributed these lopsided interpretive priorities to the legacy of the Sixties itself. Most of the people writing history in 1994 were veterans of the 1960s social movements, and their primary interest was in uncovering the deep history of the decade's struggle for social emancipation, explaining why it happened and why it had come up short. Consequently, Brinkley argued, the problem of American conservatism was a historiographical problem generated by a political blind spot. Historians did not like conservatives, so they did not write about them.

The situation of scholarship on American conservatives, of course, has changed dramatically in the quarter century since Brinkley's article. The history of the American Right has become a booming sub-field of its own. We have books on suburban mobilization, books on the conservative mind, books on the business resistance to the New Deal state.² We have studies of evangelical oil executives, the 1920s Klan, and the post-Vietnam white power movement.³ We have cultural biographies of George Wallace, Ayn Rand, and Strom Thurmond.⁴ We know considerably more about the history of the American Right than we did in 1994. The state of conservatism as a political force in the United States has also changed. In 1994, American conservatism was amid one of its many episodes of radicalization. That trend has only continued since the publication of Brinkley's article, eventually culminating in the long, vituperative campaign against Barack Obama's legitimacy and the presidential campaign of 2016.

Squaring the historiographical and political circumstances of conservatism means that we now face a new set of interpretive problems, as journalist Rick Perlstein informed us in the wake of President Trump's surprise victory in 2016.⁵ From the beginning, historians involved in the rediscovery of American conservatism tried to follow Brinkley's injunctions against imprinting one's political tastes on one's scholarship. Just because you are not a conservative, the logic went, it does not mean you cannot write objectively about the Right. Consequently, historians seeking to understand the "Rise of the Right" applied to the conservative movement the same logic they had been encouraged to adopt with regard to subaltern groups and left-wing activists; to inhabit their worldview, to see things their way.

¹ Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 409.

² Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America (Princeton, 2001); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York, 2010); Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (Oxford, 2018).

³ Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York, 2017); Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York, 2019).

⁴ Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge, 1996); Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford, 2009); Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York, 2012).

⁵ Rick Perlstein, "I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong," *New York Times*, Apr. 11, 2017.

As Perlstein tells it, this sympathetic rendering of the conservative movement had the unfortunate side-effect of replicating the story that conservative ideologues liked to tell about themselves. That story went something like this: From William F. Buckley onward, conservatives had purged from their ranks the lunatics, crypto-fascists, and conspiracy theorists as a means of making the right respectable. The New Right that rose to prominence after the Second World War was consequently free of radicalism, united by shared commitments to free enterprise, traditional piety, and anticommunism. Some of this story was true, but as Perlstein points out, much of it was a public relations ploy, a story whose convenient moral was that the New Right could not be saddled with the sins of the Old Interwar Right. The DNA of that legitimating genealogy came right out of the *National Review* itself. The fact is, Perlstein writes, most of the Old Right stuff never went away, and the New Right stuff brought with it new kinds of ugliness. Moreover, the weight of both Old and New Right baggage became greater as time went on, culminating in the raucous and surreal presidential campaign of 2016. Perlstein concludes that historians need to bring the scary stuff back in if we are to make sense of conservatism's recent history. We need to retroject the last decade back across the literature on conservatism if we are to fully understand the trajectory of right-wing politics in America.

Correcting this blind spot points to the new problem of American conservatism, which is a greater issue than merely reframing an established research agenda. American conservatism is no longer the historiographical lacuna it once was, but it is a pressing political problem. The American Right has become a problem unto itself, a problem for the American republic, and a problem for the wider world. American conservatism is everybody's problem now. Put another way, the question that is now before historians is how did American conservatism become such a *destructive* force in U.S. politics? Why did this happen? Importantly, historians cannot and must not say merely that conservatives are the bad guys, that's why. There is nothing inherent about conservative ideology, considered broadly, that says it must be the wrecking ball it has become. If we want to understand conservatism's role in provoking our political crisis, we need to figure out *what went wrong*.

The Conservative Shadowside

The first problem of American conservatism is a problem that faced all right-wing politics in the North Atlantic world across the twentieth century, and that is the troubled relationship of mainstream conservatism to revolutionary conservatism, or what I call *shadowside* conservatism. Conservative ideology, in my view, contains a permanent temptation towards cultural pessimism and an attendant longing for cataclysmic rebirth. This temptation and this longing, and the radicalism they generate, constitute conservatism's shadowside. I do not intend this as a slander. All ideologies contain destructive temptations, shadowside versions of themselves. There is, for example, the progressive's halfway intentional confusion of helping people with fixing them, the revolutionary socialist's willingness to sacrifice others for the sake of a better future. My point is emphatically not that conservatives are the only potentially destructive force in democratic politics, but rather that they tend towards their own peculiar kind of destructiveness, and we have to understand the peculiarity in order to understand conservatism as a whole.

What then are the components of conservative ideology in the modern North Atlantic West? Let us stipulate that for any ideology, we can isolate an animating idea or two that recurs across its various permutations. For conservatism, that idea is "imperiled nobility," that is, the idea that modernity's churn threatens the best things (institutions, ideals, practices, personalities, etc.) in our world with extinction, and that we must act to preserve and protect them. We can, of course, elaborate on this skeletal definition. In practice, imperiled nobility involves a creative process of selecting, idealizing, essentializing, and often backdating certain aspects of a given social world such that they become its indispensable foundations. This process varies across local

circumstances, and so different contexts produce different accounts of nobility in peril (the titled aristocracy, the free market, the “southern way of life”) and hence different sorts of conservative.

In the modern West, conservatism in this sense originates in the years stretching between the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution, when transformative social upheaval became a structural feature of European life. For our purposes, however, the most important phase in conservatism’s ideological evolution is in the *fin de siècle*, for it was there that the fear of imperiled nobility fused with ideologies of European nationalism. Like conservatism, nationalism can be illuminated by attention to its core animating idea, in this case, the nation dispossessed. For nationalist activists in the nineteenth century, states were legitimate to the degree that they embodied the will of a sovereign people defined by shared history, religion, language, or increasingly, “race.” Though ideologies of imperiled nobility and those of dispossessed nations frequently clashed in the 1800s, by the twentieth century affinities had emerged between them on both sides of the Atlantic. From the 1880s onward, and especially after World War I (WWI), European nobles increasingly found their social prerogatives curtailed in the emergent constitutionalist order. Meanwhile, a combination of tumultuous globalization, escalating great power rivalry, and the emancipation of minorities galvanized an increasingly anxious, chauvinistic, and rigid nationalist radicalism (France for the French, etc.).

Consequently, by the early 1900s, conservative and nationalist discourse could coalesce around a declinist narrative of once harmonious societies now disrupted by the corrosive forces of modernity. The violent agitation of the socialist international culminating in the forced abdication and murder of Tsar Nicholas II in 1917–1918 and the convulsions following WWI made the threat to imagined primordial integrity more palpable than ever before. At a more practical level, a synthesis of nationalism and conservatism offered opportunities for new forms of political organization in the age of mass politics. Nationalism offered conservatives a means to gather popular support and capture the energy of a mass social movement, a form of politics often closed off to elites defending their prerogatives, while conservatives offered nationalists elite sponsorship, an advantage frequently unavailable to insurgent democrats.⁶ Out of these affinities emerged the hybrid we call conservatism.

The new conservative synthesis could take both constitutional and revolutionary forms. Some early conservatives integrated themselves into the emerging order of constitutionalist states. They sought to capture the machinery of constitutional politics to produce a distinctively conservative modernity in which the state would sponsor traditional social arrangements and old elites would continue to comprise the leadership class. This is that form of conservatism memorably evoked in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s 1951 novel *The Leopard*: “If we want things to stay as they are, everything will have to change.”⁷ We see such conservatism manifest in such mid-nineteenth-century figures as Benjamin Disraeli and, to a certain extent, in Otto von Bismarck. Other conservatives came to see the modern West as irredeemably decadent, a once-great civilization unraveling before their eyes. On this view, the “true community of the people” (*volksgemeinschaft*) was besieged by aliens: liberals, socialists, communists, immigrants, atheists, masons, bohemians, feminists, homosexuals, and Jews.⁸ These aliens—less a collection of disparate elements and more the many faces of a single malevolent force—had perverted and sabotaged this primordial organic community. The revolutionary conservative mission was to reclaim the primordial order’s rightful ownership of politics and its cultural preeminence before it was too late.⁹

⁶A particularly interesting early case of the tumultuous relations between reactionaries and nationalists can be seen in the Boulanger affair in France. See William D. Irvine, *The Boulanger Affair Reconsidered: Royalism, Boulangism, and the Origins of the Radical Right in France* (Oxford, 1989).

⁷Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (New York, 1958), 40.

⁸Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York, 2004), 104.

⁹I must add here that a mutation also occurred within reactionary ideology in which the celebration of hierarchy and domination was severed from the rhetoric of traditionalism and interdependency. This mutation is manifest most profoundly in the writings of F. Nietzsche. We might call this tendency *avant-garde reaction*.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, then, there existed across the North Atlantic West a revolutionary form of right-wing ideological consciousness, a hybrid of curdled aristocratic reaction and curdled nationalism, a cultural pessimism fixated on decadence and degeneration and longing for a cataclysmic rebirth. I label this form of revolutionary conservative consciousness the *shadowside* for two reasons. The first is that I want to designate a wider category than fascism, a category to which fascism belongs but that is not necessarily coextensive with it. Second, I wish to emphasize that the distinction between constitutional and revolutionary conservatism was a difference not necessarily in kind. Rather, the relation between the two ideologies was fluid and the boundaries porous. The shadowside conjures images of the underworld, and I intend it that way. Some constitutional conservatives secretly dabbled in revolutionary politics while others used the machinery of constitutional government to indirectly pursue the shadowside's vision, while still others simply oscillated between constitutional and revolutionary interpretations of politics.¹⁰

It should be clear looking at the *fin de siècle*, then, that the distinction here is not between a constitutional conservative "good" Right and a revolutionary conservative "bad" (or "populist") Right. Cultural pessimism pervaded the era, and one can find plenty of "mainstream" conservatives (and socialists and progressives too, for that matter) fulminating about race degeneration, cultural decadence, or Jewish influence at the turn of the century. Consider, for example, Theodore Roosevelt's worries that immigration would lead to racial degeneration in the United States or Winston Churchill's infamous 1920 editorial in which he expressed his fears of an international Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy.¹¹ Rather, the difference between the constitutional and revolutionary conservative is frequently, to paraphrase the historian of Puritanism Patrick Collinson, one of temperature.¹² Constitutional conservative consciousness frequently differed from revolutionary to the extent that it lacked the felt sense of living in the final phase of an apocalyptic drama, of the walls closing in and the need for immediate, decisive, possibly violent action. Collective ideological temperatures vary by circumstance, and while at times one can discern distinct "camps" of revolutionary and constitutional conservatives, this is not always easy or even possible. Both forms could (but did not necessarily) subsist in the same factions or even the same individuals, with one or the other predominating depending on the conditions of the moment. These conditions included military defeat, economic turmoil, the enfranchisement of ethno-cultural minorities, rapid changes in norms governing gender and sexuality, and the viability of liberal or socialist politics. The shadowside should not, therefore, be understood as an "extremist" faction distinct from "mainstream" conservative politics, but rather as a permanent temptation for all conservatives.¹³

Herein lies a central dilemma of twentieth-century conservative ideology. In even the most stable constitutional orders, every political faction eventually faces defeat, moments when it appears that power is slipping from one's grasp and the means to retain or regain it seem elusive. These moments multiply and intensify in periods of instability or perceived decline. Across the twentieth century, constitutional conservatives amid such moments continually faced a

¹⁰See the machinations of the German nobility in the Weimar Republic discussed in Stephan Malinowski, *Nazis and Nobles: The History of a Misalliance* (Oxford, 2021).

¹¹For a study of the racial imaginary of Roosevelt, see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2017). Churchill's views on the threat of "Jewish Bolshevism" may be found in Winston Churchill, "Zionism Versus Bolshevism: A Struggle for the Soul of the Jewish People," *Illustrated Sunday Herald*, Feb. 8, 1920, 5.

¹²Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London, 1967), 26.

¹³That is to say that the shadowside is a permanent temptation for conservative ideology in the same way that what James Scott calls high modernism exists as a permanent temptation within socialism and Panglossianism exists as a permanent temptation in liberalism, and both exist as permanent temptations for progressives, social democrats, and Fabians all of varieties. With regards to the shadowside specifically, I am borrowing the term temptation from Fritz Stern. Fritz Stern, *Dreams and Delusions: The Drama of German History* (New York, 1987), ch 6.

temptation to cultivate shadowside consciousness to understand their defeat or, more cynically, to retain or regain power. Confronting defeat at the ballot box or in some misbegotten war, twentieth-century constitutional conservatives blamed traitorous internal enemies, global conspiracies, and incipient moral disintegration. In every instance, the turn to the shadowside proved a perilous strategy. Revolutionary conservatism envisions politics as an existential struggle for survival. It invariably speaks the language of war, of “enemies of the people,” and carries paramilitarism in train. Though not every proponent of shadowside conservatism advocates violent revolution or national cleansing, they nonetheless inhabit an ideological world that seems to offer no long-term alternatives to the permanent elimination of the alien elements besieging civilization. The shadow is fundamentally “monist,” to use Sir Isaiah Berlin’s term, even when it lacks the overt endorsement of violence.¹⁴ Wherever constitutional conservatives have sought to reclaim or maintain power by cultivating the shadows, they have risked eventually being swallowed by its apocalyptic political vision.

The most infamous example of conservatives enabling the shadowside and badly miscalculating their ability to control their new allies took place, notoriously, in the Weimar Republic. Franz von Papen, Germany’s former Chancellor who in 1933 agreed to serve as Adolf Hitler’s Vice-Chancellor, famously, claimed that he had merely “engaged” Hitler to do away with conservatives’ enemies.¹⁵ Ultimately, however, German conservatives found themselves co-opted or destroyed by their erstwhile Nazi allies. Once empowered, the shadowside frequently turned its weapons on the conservatives who supported its rise to power. Though Germany is the most notorious example, it is by far not the only one, with similar cases playing out across Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁶ Certainly, not every alliance turned out as badly for conservatives as did the German one. Spanish conservatives were able to eventually displace their fascist colleagues, and many Italian conservatives survived long enough to see the fall of Mussolini. But the fact remains that revolutionary conservatism has always been a political magic that, once empowered, moderate conservatives have struggled to control.

The Rise of the Shadowside, American Style

Thus far I have discussed the dynamic between constitutional and revolutionary conservatism in general terms, offering an ideal-type model of ideological interaction that I think applies to much of the North Atlantic West in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This is the general structure of the problem, but it also has a specifically American history. Typically, histories of modern American conservative ideology start with resistance to the New Deal state or with the so-called “conservative movement” of the 1950s, especially William F. Buckley’s founding of *The National Review*. I would argue that a fuller understanding requires us to push our analysis back further into the *fin de siècle*. Convulsed by industrialization, immigration, socialist agitation, the spread of “infidelity,” and Black emancipation, the United States saw its own version of revolutionary conservatism emerge in this era. We can see the American shadowside manifest in several events: Southern lynch law, the industrialist Henry Ford’s anti-Semitic propaganda, and the spasmodic pogroms that followed the end of WWI. The paradigmatic expression of the early American shadowside, however, was the second Ku Klux Klan, which in the 1920s deployed the iconography and organizational structure of the original terrorist organization while expanding it beyond its Southern roots and its earlier focus on terrorizing and murdering African Americans.¹⁷ As Klansmen Hiram Wesley Evans famously

¹⁴Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, 1990), 1.

¹⁵Malinowski, *Nazis and Nobles*, 207.

¹⁶For a discussion of the varying outcomes of conservative sponsorship of fascist movements, see Marco Bresciani, ed., *Conservatives and Right Radicals in Interwar Europe* (Milton Park, UK, 2020).

¹⁷See Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*.

put it in the *North American Review* in 1925, the Klan was now fighting for *Americanism*, by which he meant “Native, White, Protestant Supremacy.”¹⁸

By the end of the 1920s, then, the American version of the shadowside was a significant feature of the country’s political culture, both as a recurrent strategy to be deployed by anxious conservatives and as a constant potentiality within conservative consciousness itself.¹⁹ The subsequent story of American conservatism is, in many ways, the story of constitutional conservatives finding themselves tempted by the shadowside while trying to retain control of it. Without narrating that story in its entirety, we can nevertheless identify several vectors of hybridization and radicalization. The first has to do with the New Deal state. Opposition to the New Deal created natural affinities between the revolutionary right and anyone alarmed by the sudden expansion in Federal power, especially leading figures in American business.²⁰ The National Association of Manufacturers and other business organizations certainly felt that the New Deal marked the triumph of distinctly un-American forces. The betrayal of “the free enterprise system” could easily accompany calls for “national rebirth.” The second vector was, of course, the Cold War. The threat of socialism had been one of the most potent engines of conservative radicalization since the mid-nineteenth century. In the bi-polar world of the Cold War, the existential stakes combined with lazy conceptual slippages (conservative/capitalist/right/Godly/United States versus liberal/socialist/left/atheist/Union of Socialist Republics [USSR]) to make conservative radicalization a quotidian feature of American political culture.²¹ The third vector arose from the American chapter of global decolonization that we call the Civil Rights Movement.²² The decade-long struggle between 1954 and 1965 that ended the American Republic’s system of de jure segregation accentuated the tendency among conservatives to take southern home-rule as a microcosm of the struggle between “the true community of the people” and a sinister, alien federal state. Finally, the expansion of a mass culture and an insurgent sexual liberalism between the 1920s and 1960s generated a much greater visibility for non-conformity in matters of gender, sexuality, and personal style that corresponded to shadowside predictions of libertinism and moral collapse.²³

These vectors generated spaces where individuals and groups could migrate back and forth between constitutional and revolutionary conceptions of conservatism. But the period between the 1940s and 1960s nevertheless represents a time of ambiguous relations between the two. Talk of degeneration, subversion, and apocalypse could periodically become useful to constitutional conservatives, as in the panic surrounding the “loss” of China or the Soviet acquisition of atomic weaponry, but it could also be an embarrassing albatross, as when McCarthy went commie hunting in the U.S. military or during Barry Goldwater’s (R-AZ) disastrous 1964 presidential run. That schizophrenic chapter in conservative history ended in the late 1960s, giving way to the consistent foregrounding of shadowside ideology as a strategy of mobilization. Following a decade of cultural revolution and military defeat, the vision of apocalyptic decline appealed to a much broader cross section of the American public. From the 1960s forward, American

¹⁸Hiram Wesley Evans, “The Klan’s Fight for Americanism,” *The North American Review* 223, no. 830 (1926): 33–63.

¹⁹See Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 1983).

²⁰Matthew Avery Sutton, “Was FDR the Antichrist? The Birth of Fundamentalist Antiliberalism in a Global Age,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 4 (Mar. 2012): 1052–74.

²¹One great irony to emerge from these conceptual slippages is that Cold War conservatism developed its own inclusionary tendencies that earlier iterations of the American Right would have disavowed. Southern Europeans and Eastern Europeans, once outsiders in an Anglo-Protestant republic, could become insiders in the context of a struggle between “Judeo Christian Civilization” and “Godless Communism.”

²²It seems to me far more profitable to interpret the American civil rights movement as part of a global anticolonial insurgency than as solely an episode of U.S. domestic history.

²³John D’Emilio, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago, 2012), part IV.

conservative politicians and commentators saw in the shadowside's apocalyptic worldview a tool to reclaim and hold power at the national level. This brings us back to the old *National Review* interpretation of the conservative movement's origins: Buckley and his friends did clean up conservatism, though not quite in the way they usually claimed. The core of shadowside ideology is a conspiracy theory, precisely the same conspiracy theory that led the British far-right paranoid writer Nesta Helen Webster to allegedly answer her door with a revolver in hand.²⁴ The primordial order is besieged by extraordinarily powerful alien forces bent on its destruction. What was cleaned up in the postwar years was the admissibility of explicit antisemitism and (some of) the more overt references to racial degeneration—the elements most readily associated with European fascism—as central elements of right-wing cultural despair. But the source of that despair itself, the world picture of a single tentacular threat to primordial Christian civilization with many aspects—feminism, communism, liberalism, secular humanism, sexual non-conformity, a “rising tide of color”—remained intact.

Despite the Watergate debacle, Republicans dominated presidential politics in the 1980s. The loss of the Presidency in 1992, however, set in motion a final period of radicalization. The expectation among many conservatives had been that Reagan's presidency would inaugurate a period of electoral dominance to mirror Franklin Roosevelt's, and the failure of that realignment to materialize provided an opportunity for conservatives willing to push the Republican Party in radical directions. In 1994, under the leadership of Newt Gingrich, the Republicans claimed both houses of Congress for the first time in fifty years.²⁵ Seeking to cure the Grand Old Party (GOP) of the “habits and demeanor of a minority party,” Gingrich taught mainstream Republicans to go on television and call their partisan opponents traitors and tyrants, precisely the same language that circulated on shadowside media.²⁶ Gingrich's purpose was to advance his career and gain control of Congress, but the project ultimately served to normalize shadowside ideas and rhetoric among ordinary conservatives.

The longer this tolerance of the shadows went on, the more pathetic it became. The Oklahoma City bombing by white supremacist insurgents in 1995 presented constitutional conservatives with an excellent opportunity to repudiate the revolutionary Right.²⁷ In the years immediately preceding the attack, shadowside popular media had run wild. The right-wing celebrity and former Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy, for example, used his radio show to offer tips to would-be insurgents on how to murder federal agents. Shoot them in the head, Liddy advised, to avoid their bullet-proof vests.²⁸ Shortly after the bombing, President Bill Clinton condemned what he called the “hatemongering” of ultra-right AM radio. The response among mainstream conservatives was wounded indignation. “Today some people rush to explain an outrage like the Oklahoma City bombing as an effect of this or that prominent feature of the social environment,” columnist George Will wrote. The alleged connection between right-wing revolutionaries and mainstream conservative rhetoric depicting the federal government as a totalitarian leviathan was a “contemptible accusation.” Further, Will added that the “modern pedigree of the fanatics idea that the government is a murderous conspiracy” belongs to the 1960s.²⁹ Apparently, in Will's view, the fact that the *New York Review of Books* published

²⁴Webster, one of the most influential conspiracy writers of the era, was supposedly concerned that she had exposed a global Jewish conspiracy that was subsequently bent on her destruction. On Webster, see Thomas Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracy: How Delusions have Overrun America* (Chicago, 2019), especially ch 4.

²⁵On Gingrich, see Julian E. Zelizer, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party* (New York, 2020) and Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (New York, 2022), ch 5.

²⁶Quoted in Zelizer, 64.

²⁷Notably, George H.W. Bush resigned his lifetime membership in the National Rifle Association during this period.

²⁸Edward Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford, 2001), 34.

²⁹George Will, “Society's Paranoiacs Do Not Define Us,” *Daily Oklahoman*, Apr. 26, 1995, <https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/1995/04/26/societys-paranoiacs-do-not-define-us/62392911007/> (accessed June 14, 2025).

instructions for making Molotov cocktails in 1969 absolved mainstream conservatives of any complicity in the rising threat of domestic fascist insurgency.

As in other cases across the twentieth century, the constitutional conservative refusal to repudiate the shadowside gradually led to the former's eclipse, a process that reached its final stages during the early twenty-first century. The so-called War on Terror simultaneously legitimated open xenophobia against Muslims and produced the kind of grinding, indecisive military campaigns that invariably catalyze the spread of shadowside ideology. The 2008 election of the country's first African American president coinciding with the worst economic turmoil since the Great Depression further extended the shadows' hold on the GOP. As election day approached, Republican John McCain (R-AZ) was reduced to explaining to his own booing supporters that his opponent Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) was not Al Qaeda's Manchurian Candidate. From there, the situation deteriorated rapidly, as apocalyptic rhetoric became commonplace and one shadowside figure after another threatened mainstream conservative control of the Republican Party. And yet even this deterioration could not break conservatives' addiction to the formula that had served them so well since the sixties. Following Obama's victory, attempting to delegitimize the president, mainstream conservatives seemed willing to tolerate anyone with anti-left credentials, no matter how noxious. In 2009, conservatives even attacked the Department of Homeland Security's efforts to monitor and suppress white supremacist insurgents.³⁰

This dynamic lacks a ready analog among leftist and liberal ideologies in Anglophone countries. There are, of course, revolutionary versions of socialism and liberalism. Yet with some exceptions, liberals, social democrats, and democratic socialists in the Anglophone world have typically seen their own revolutionary shadows as a *liability* since the Second World War. Constitutional liberals and leftists in pursuit of power typically try to distance themselves from revolutionary politics, fretting continually about their proximity to radicals who might stain their reputation. In the 1940s and 1950s, as Jennifer Melton points out, much of the so-called McCarthyism was in fact led by establishment liberals.³¹ Postwar liberals did not want to be associated with communists and actively tried to marginalize them in U.S. politics. As historian Arthur Schlesinger put it in his 1949 pamphlet *The Vital Center*, "every experiment in democratic collaboration with the communists has ended in failure. The communists do not want to collaborate with democrats in any meaningful sense of the word; they want to absorb or destroy them. No cooperation on a common objective is possible because there is no common objective. The record on this point is unanswerable."³²

In American political culture, the Cold War precluded a parallel relationship between constitutional liberals and leftists and their revolutionary shadows. With the North Atlantic West locked in a death struggle with a totalitarian version of "the Left," radicalization as mobilization has tended to be a losing game for constitutional socialists and liberals. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that what political scientists Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein call the "asymmetric polarization" of American politics stems from contingencies rather than essential characteristics of ideological consciousness.³³ Revolutionary socialists and

³⁰Daryl Johnson, *Right-Wing Resurgence: How a Domestic Terrorist Threat is Being Ignored* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA, 2012). The supposed rationale behind conservative outcry was the suggestion that insurgents would seek to recruit veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This was, of course, accurate and reflected a pattern that recurred across the twentieth century. The shadowside has always drawn recruits from disillusioned military veterans struggling to reassimilate to civilian life. See Belew, *Bring the War Home*.

³¹Jennifer A. Delton, *Rethinking the 1950s: How Anticommunism and the Cold War Made America Liberal* (Cambridge, UK, 2013). Interestingly, one finds a concurrence with this view in the writings of the anarcho-libertarian Murray Rothbard.

³²Arthur Schlesinger, *Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1949), 134-35.

³³For Mann and Ornstein, the contemporary discussion surrounding political polarization obscures the fact that conservatives have become far more homogenous and far more radical than their opponents. Thomas E. Mann and

liberals have proven historically every bit as destructive as the revolutionary right. Nor are constitutional liberals and leftists *inherently* less vulnerable to radicalization or the temptation of using the revolutionary Left as the “hard edge” of a moderate establishment. During the 1930s, for example, many American liberals looked for inspiration toward the Soviet Union. A notable few even spied for the USSR.³⁴ During the early 1970s, the floundering Democratic Party leadership hoped to harness the power of the youth movement, another move that it would come to deeply regret.³⁵ But these are exceptions, and the fact remains that, because of the forty-year confrontation of constitutional democracies with the Soviet Union, establishment liberals and social democrats tended to see left-wing revolutionary discourse as hindering their access to power, while right-wing revolutionary discourse has typically *enabled* conservatives’ access.³⁶

Modern Republicanism

So far, this diagnosis is familiar, endorsed even by many mainstream conservatives themselves. Constitutional conservatives gave in to the temptation of using shadowside rhetoric and scorched earth politics to claw their way back into power, but as a consequence revolutionary conservatism came to dominate the American Right. In my view, however, the crisis of American conservatism runs considerably deeper, arising in part from the ideological configuration of the “moderate” Right itself. For American conservatives, especially outside the South, the ideology of imperiled nobility has most frequently coalesced around what is sometimes called the “bourgeois ethos.” A complex reworking of aristocratic civility for life in a market society, the bourgeois ethos emphasized sobriety, domesticity, thrift, honesty, enterprise, and self-discipline.

It is entirely possible to see this ethos as an exclusively moral vision identifying paradigmatic virtues that we are obliged to pursue, come what may. But that is not how the bourgeois ethos operated in the popular culture of the United States since the nineteenth century. Rather, it has almost invariably constituted a metaphysics, part of a providential order in which God commands us to practice bourgeois virtues and, importantly, *rewards us in this life for doing so*.³⁷ The freewheeling marketplace appears as a bourgeois “school of virtue” where exemplary behaviors produce material prosperity and poverty follows vice. Even absent commitments to a transcendent reality, the bourgeois ethos has retained this providential character where unregulated markets reward the bourgeois virtues. I call this view *genteel* libertarianism, since it identifies the emancipated marketplace with the triumph of bourgeois gentility.³⁸

The identity of American conservatism with genteel libertarianism was not pre-ordained. Competing with this vision was an alternative pattern that we might call conservative modernism. Here I mean modernist not necessarily in the “progressive” sense but in the sense of a conservative participation in what historian Nils Gilman calls *social modernism*, the mid-1900s use of the welfare state to expand and bolster middle classes as a hedge against instability and

Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York, 2012), 51–58.

³⁴See Kathryn Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (New York, 2009), ch 3.

³⁵Bruce Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Crisis of the Democratic Party* (Lawrence, KS, 2007).

³⁶There is room for reasonable disagreement as to how much revolutionary discourse hindered moderate liberals and leftists.

³⁷Eugene McCarragher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

³⁸My conception of genteel libertarianism is closely related to the “neo-victorianism” detailed by Gary Gerstle in his *Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order* (Oxford, 2022), ch 5. I’ve chosen my nomenclature principally to illustrate what I take to be the fundamental idea of complementarity between gentility and free market economics.

revolution.³⁹ Conservative modernism, in my sense, sees bourgeois society as a genuine human accomplishment, but one produced *artificially* by politics rather than *providentially* by markets.⁴⁰ Midcentury conservative modernists generally accepted, sometimes grudgingly, the need for public services, but they sought to contain their costs and direct them toward the maintenance of bourgeois society.⁴¹ One may not agree with this framework, but it is a formidable ideological pattern, defensible by rational means and associated with workable policy. By the middle of the 1900s, conservative modernists in the GOP often identified themselves as “Modern Republicans.”⁴²

One motivation underlying Modern Republicanism was a strategic capitulation to the popularity of New Deal programs such as Social Security. Famously, President Dwight D. Eisenhower privately told his brother that any party who tried to do away with Social Security would not be heard from again. This led to accusations from the right that Modern Republicanism was nothing but what Barry Goldwater sneeringly called a “dime store new deal,” but there were also conservatives who saw the New Deal state as a source for social equilibrium, a means to convince ordinary Americans to accept hierarchies of wealth and status.⁴³ The poet and philosopher Peter Viereck was perhaps the most eloquent American exponent of this position. The welfare state, Viereck argued in a series of essays and books, could serve to reconcile Americans to inequality.⁴⁴

Intriguingly, the emergence of Modern Republicanism in the United States corresponds with a parallel mutation in conservative ideology on the opposite side of the Atlantic, namely the preeminence of Christian democratic parties in post-WWII European politics.⁴⁵ Christian democracy’s distinctive concept of social capitalism, opposed to the materialism of *laissez faire* and socialism alike, shaped the formation of the welfare state in France, West Germany, Austria, and several other European countries. Though there was, of course, much diversity between national contexts and within Christian democratic movements, two concepts emerge as crucial. First, Christian democratic politics centered the redistributive powers of the state on the heteronormative breadwinner family, bolstering “traditional” family arrangements through the promotion of family wages, child allowances, and housing assistance. Second, Christian democrats supported codetermination (though, historian James Chappel points out, what they meant by that term was not always clear) in the workplace as an alternative to full-scale socialization. Less reflexively committed to libertarianism than its American counterpart, Christian democracy represented a straightforward approach to aligning conservative ideals with the politics of public welfare.

³⁹Nils Gilman, “The Twin Insurgency,” in *Global Criminal and Sovereign Free Economies and the Demise of the Western Democracies*, ed Thomas J. Bunker and Pamela Ligouri Bunker (New York, 2015).

⁴⁰Here we might see conservative reform as an analog to Geoff Mann’s expansive definition of Keynesianism. Geoff Mann, *In the Long Run We Are All Dead: Keynesianism, Political Economy, and Revolution* (London, 2017).

⁴¹Before the New Deal drove him to ever more doctrinaire defenses of *laissez faire*, Herbert Hoover may have represented one of the more prominent proponents of this variety of conservatism. Ellis W. Hawley, “Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of an ‘Associative State,’ 1921–1928,” *The Journal of American History* 61, no. 1 (June 1974): 116–40.

⁴²See Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party*. (Oxford, 2012), ch 1.

⁴³Goldwater quoted in Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York, 2001), 27.

⁴⁴Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited* (New York, 1962). Angus Burgin notes how the pro-market intellectuals that gathered in the Mont Pellerin society in the 1950s were far more circumspect and far less doctrinaire about *laissez-faire* than later figures such as Milton Friedman. See Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Re-Inventing Free Markets since the Great Depression* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

⁴⁵James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA, 2018). See also Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, *What Is Christian Democracy?: Politics, Religion and Ideology* (Cambridge, UK, 2019).

The fact that Christian democratic parties articulated genuinely conservative grounds for public social provision and the constraint of capital is significant in charting the differing paths of postwar conservatism, because towards the end of the 1960s, the purely tactical rationale behind Modern Republican ideology fell away. During those tumultuous years, one no longer had to accept New Deal politics to compete at the national level. Indeed, by 1968, one could simply run against the Democratic Party's disastrous management of crisis after crisis. There remained, however, the question of ideology. What would a resurgent Republican Party stand for? It could either cast itself, following Viereck, as the dirigiste manager of a conservative New Deal, or alternatively ally itself with segregationists, McKinleyites, business associations, and neoclassical economists in a bid to dismantle Roosevelt's policy revolution. That is, it could either use the opportunity to rehabilitate *laissez faire* or advance a distinctively conservative version of the midcentury welfare state.

Richard Nixon, in his characteristic fashion, did both. The president contemplated a guaranteed basic income and mandated employer-provided health insurance. He founded the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, and avoided conflict with organized labor.⁴⁶ He also nominated extraordinarily conservative jurists to the Supreme Court, vetoed universal childcare, and privately raved about commies, liberals, African Americans, and Jews. Historians still argue about which of these moves point to the "real" Nixon, though it seems just as likely that there was no real Nixon.⁴⁷ A political creature through and through, Nixon could rarely distinguish strategic advantage from political principle or personal antipathy.⁴⁸ But individuals are still sometimes distinct from the historical roles they play. When Nixon came to power in 1968, there were occasional murmurings of an "American Disraeli." Many believed that Nixon could bring order to the fractious United States under a center-right regime. History is made, Nixon once said, by liberal policies and Tory men (though he likely cribbed this line from his advisor Daniel Moynihan).⁴⁹

It is here, in the scattershot governance of the Nixon administration, that one can most readily discern a counter-factual history of American conservatism. Nixon's reluctant embrace of the New Deal welfare state was part and parcel of his attempt to construct an enduring Republican majority.⁵⁰ As the Democrats imploded, Nixon would pursue policies that would protect the economic position of the lower middle class while simultaneously enshrining their folkways as the law of the land. Nixon saw that the road towards a restoration of genteel culture and a long-term Republican majority ran through the welfare state rather than against it. But this shift was much larger than Nixon. Amidst the chaos of the late 1960s, a constellation of political thinkers began to gesture at a more explicit theorization of American-style Christian democracy. A few of these actors, such as Garry Wills, came from the right side of the political spectrum, but most were leftists or liberals. Horrified by the counterculture and the breakdown of social order, figures such as Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan began to reconfigure their politics in ways that merged defenses of bourgeois gentility with New Deal arguments about social security. By the 1970s, this formulation earned the name "neoconservatism," a term that

⁴⁶Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The Last Days of the Working Class* (New York, 2010), ch 3.

⁴⁷See David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York, 2004), especially ch 8. Greenberg points to the ways in which some of Nixon's maneuvers led many historians to portray him as a kind of liberal. My point here is not so much that Nixon represents the "last liberal," but that the reflexive identification among Americans of the welfare state with something called liberalism has obscured intriguing possibilities for interpreting Nixon and the ideological pattern he represented.

⁴⁸Perlstein convincingly argues that to the extent that Nixon possessed a stable core of political principles, he was primarily focused on foreign policy. Nixon had an encyclopedic knowledge of foreign affairs and sought to make his mark on history as a twentieth century Metternich. Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York, 2008), 132.

⁴⁹Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin*, 256.

⁵⁰Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, ch. 3.

bears little resemblance to the contemporary identification with the disastrous foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration. In its original sense, neoconservatism identifies a particular kind of ideological consciousness, the dawning awareness that much more of the social order is at stake in modern democratic politics than one had imagined and that one is attached to the status quo in ways one could not previously have understood. To be neoconservatism in this sense was to see, at least in outline, the connections between the New Deal regime and that elaborate system of social customs and institutions that Andrew Hartman has labeled “Normative America.”⁵¹ It was, in its initial stages, an ideological consciousness that saw the New Deal state as the potential instrument of conservative cultural politics.

If one adopts a comparative, de-provincialized framework, one can clearly see the relations between nascent American neoconservatism and the One-Nation conservatives of Great Britain, the Christian democrats of Germany, or Gaullists of Fifth Republic France. All sought to establish order through the economic subsidy of the lower middle class, to defuse social upheaval through a combination of patriotism, social welfare, and a strong executive branch. In a counterfactual history, Nixon might be remembered alongside mid-century European leaders Macmillan, Adenauer, and de Gaulle. But the Christian democratic formulation did not stick. One of the untraveled roads in twentieth-century American politics is the possible evolution of the Modern Republicanism of the 1950s into an American version of Christian democracy, with the 1970s as the inflection point. By the time of Ronald Reagan’s inauguration in 1981, conservative modernism had been almost completely extinguished as a living tradition of right-wing American politics. Instead, American conservatives, along with their counterparts in the United Kingdom, led the way in a neoliberal policy revolution of deregulation, privatization, and supply-side economics that gradually dismantled New Deal civilization.

How can we account for the smothering of conservative modernism’s potential? Three factors stand out as most important. The first is obvious: the debilitating crises that undermined establishments of every variety across the North Atlantic West in the 1960s and 1970s. New Deal civilization foundered on oil shocks, stagflation, Watergate, and Vietnam as much as anything else. Second, as historians Daniel Rodgers and Gary Gerstle remind us in their own ways, discourses of individuality, liberation, and spontaneity permeated American culture in the wake of the 1960s in ways that did not respect longstanding ideological boundaries and legitimated the idea that markets could succeed where states had failed.⁵² Important as these factors are, a vivid re-imagining of genteel libertarianism’s providential universe, now set against the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, also played an especially important role. During the 1970s and 1980s, thinkers from Irving Kristol to Michael Novak to Jude Wanniski to George Gilder to Charles Murray portrayed the New Deal state as the fellow traveler of cultural upheaval. The accusations are so dreadfully familiar they barely need repeating: Aid to Families with Dependent Children eroded bourgeois family patterns, welfare state “entitlements” discouraged industriousness, high marginal tax rates discouraged beneficial investment, and affirmative action undermined meritocracy. The welfare state, far from an instrument that could be directed to conservative ends, became merely another weapon in the countercultural assault on bourgeois society and its particular virtues.

Identifying the New Deal state with cultural revolution allowed one to see neoliberal political economy and bourgeois morality as two sides of the same coin. As Novak put it in a 1981 article for *Commentary* magazine, “Capitalism is intrinsically related to some core values – to liberty in the sense of self-discipline; to invention, creativity, and cooperation, the root of the corporation; to work, savings, investment in the future; to self-reliance, etc.”⁵³ Unleashing capitalism would, on the genteel libertarian view, resurrect a world where material rewards and punishment

⁵¹Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago, 2019).

⁵²Gerstle, *Rise and Fall*; Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Princeton, 2011).

⁵³Michael Novak, “The Winding Passage,” review of *The Winding Passage*, by Daniel Bell, *Commentary*, July 1981, 72.

tracked personal virtues and vices. Americans would learn to practice bourgeois virtues to better their material condition, and so deregulating the economy would effectively hit the rewind button on American culture and society, taking the United States back to the genteel hegemony that followed the Second World War.

The problems with the triumph of genteel libertarianism proved twofold. Almost immediately, neoliberal economic policy began to generate substantial confounding evidence. Neoliberalism's relentless program of deregulation, privatization, austerity, and supply-side policies generated a profoundly volatile global economy prone to bubbles, rackets, and panics. It also accelerated secular trends toward destabilizing levels of economic inequality and precarity. Americans in the neoliberal era increasingly came to experience the economy as a source of anxiety, alienation, confusion, and anger. Genteel libertarianism was supposed to cement a transparent system in which hard work paid off, but instead Americans saw decades in which their staggering commitments to self-betterment through hard work translated into deteriorating wages, benefits, working conditions, and even opportunities for fulltime employment itself.⁵⁴

Neoliberal economics proved highly adaptable in the face of these setbacks. During the Great Depression, Friedrich Hayek had attempted to recast the crisis as resulting from state mismanagement of a normal business cycle.⁵⁵ In the face of recurrent scandals during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, proponents of neoliberal economics followed this same template, simply redescribing financial sector shenanigans as episodes of governmental blundering rather than deregulated capital run amok. Following the S&L scandal of the late 1980s, for example, the Cato Institute organ *Regulation* argued that Federal Deposit Insurance had exclusively caused the malfeasance.⁵⁶ George Gilder attributed the Enron accounting scandal to a "dangerously deflationary monetary policy" and a "baffling web of often conflicting bankruptcy, tax, regulatory, and securities laws."⁵⁷ Perhaps most memorably, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse, many neoliberal advocates argued that the Housing and Urban Development and Community Reinvestment Act, which had been intended to combat housing discrimination and provide affordable housing for the poor, had precipitated the housing bubble that poisoned the economy. The real cause of the subprime meltdown, they claimed, was that mortgage lenders were *over-regulated*.⁵⁸ In short, whenever it was revealed that emancipated economic actors behaved badly, the stock answer was that they had been pressured by the state into behaving contrary to market signals. In this respect, the neoliberal paradigm fell into the paradox of highly adaptable doctrines—they are so good at defanging confounding evidence that learning from one's mistakes gradually becomes impossible.

But the failure of neoliberal economics to promote stability and security was not the only problem for the genteel libertarian ideal. A still larger difficulty was that allowing business to shape American life did very little to restore the morality that genteel libertarians thought central to the stability of a middle-class society. On the contrary, it revealed the dynamic that Daniel Bell characterized in 1975 as the "cultural contradictions of capitalism."⁵⁹ As Bell saw things, since the early twentieth century, the American economy had been linked not with the old work ethic, but with hedonism and self-expression. The ideal that defined a modern market society was not sobriety or thrift, but pleasure. And Bell was right. By the 1990s, a morality of personal freedom and personal expression was well on its way to defeating the bourgeois ethos

⁵⁴Bradford Delong, *Slouching Toward Utopia: An Economic History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA 2022), ch 15.

⁵⁵Burgin, *The Great Persuasion*, ch 1.

⁵⁶Catherine England, "Lessons from the Savings and Loan Crisis," *Regulation* (Summer 1992), 36–43.

⁵⁷George Gilder, "A Corporate Crime Wave?" *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 11, 2002, A10.

⁵⁸See Adam J. Levitin and Susan M. Wachter, *The Great American Housing Bubble: What Went Wrong and How We Can Protect Ourselves in the Future* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), ch 8, for a useful account of how pro-deregulation writers attempted to reframe the housing bubble.

⁵⁹Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, 1975).

in all the fights that counted, and the freedom of business to define cultural life had proven instrumental in its victory.

Nor was it the case that the freewheeling expressivism of the era following the Sixties uniformly moved towards a “liberal” set of ideals. Rather, the valorization of transgressive personal expression moved in many directions at once. Since the middle of the century, a conservative popular culture of capitalist romance novels, blabbering talk radio, anticommunist gutter journalism, bloodthirsty vigilante films, and Evangelical exposes of Satanic cults had elaborated a distinctively right-wing genre of cheap thrills.⁶⁰ When the markets for talk radio and 24-hour cable news exploded between the 1980s and the end of the century, these brackish waters of conservative popular culture became a fixture of mainstream life, the stuff rank and file conservatives consumed continuously in their homes and during their increasingly lengthy commutes to and from work.⁶¹ The result was a curiously mullet-like bifurcation in conservative consciousness, with Victorian primness in front and reactionary raunch out back. Even as conservatives fulminated about avant-garde artists Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe in the 1980s and 1990s, they gleefully imbibed their own versions of transgressive culture centered on performative “political incorrectness.” Far from bourgeois gentility, the “moral reality” that many conservatives consumed in their popular media was one where ethnic minorities were genetically predisposed to indolence and crime, where feminists secretly yearned for sexual domination, and where virile white men used private firearms to protect civilization.⁶² This shock-jock race to the bottom, not the bourgeois ethos, emerged as the conservative cultural bedfellow to the deregulated economy of the late twentieth century.

It is here that the two problems of American conservatism become inextricably intertwined. Since the revived bourgeois ideal never materialized, despite the triumph of neoliberal political economy, conservatives had to explain why the success of the latter failed to produce the former. The more persistent and dramatic that failure became, the more tangled and absurd were the efforts to explain it away. Genteel libertarianism’s legitimacy rests upon an alleged complementarity between “free markets” and “traditional values.” There can be no cultural contradictions of capitalism, and so one could only conclude in the face of decaying bourgeois hegemony that markets had not been truly freed or that some extraordinary act of sabotage had taken place. As crisis piled upon crisis, the dark vision of the shadowside slowly displaced the sunny confidence of the Reagan era. Cultural despair and conspiracy theory—the logics of the shadow—pressed ever deeper into mainstream American conservative consciousness. Genteel libertarianism always promised more than it could deliver, both in matters of economic opportunity and in matters of cultural revival. Its failure to deliver on either intensified the shadowside and strengthened its hold on American conservatism. In the long run, neoliberal economics meant that Rush Limbaugh and Ayn Rand crowded out Gary Cooper and Adam Smith.

It is not clear, however, that a Christian democratic conservatism would have protected the United States from the disruptions of global neoliberal hegemony. As Philipp Ther notes, continental western European states responded differently to the economic stagnation of the 1970s than the United States and the United Kingdom, where mainstream conservatism rapidly adopted a genteel libertarian character.⁶³ The initial reaction in much of Western Europe, by contrast, was to shore up rather than pare back the welfare state. But the economic sugar high generated by financialization in the Anglosphere, the discrediting of communism after the revolutions of 1989,

⁶⁰See Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York, 2020).

⁶¹Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Right* (Philadelphia, 2016); Hemmer, *Partisans*.

⁶²For the rhetoric of “shock jock” radio in 1980s and 1990s, see also Hemmer, *Partisans*; Gerstle, *Rise and Fall*; and Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis, 2004), ch 11.

⁶³Philip Ther, *Europe Since 1989: A History* (Princeton, 2016).

the threat of capital flight across national frontiers, and recurrent scandals among older political establishments (as in Italy) made various neoliberal formulations increasingly attractive to European leadership classes in the 1990s and 2000s. The more substantive commitments of the European center-right to the welfare state, then, slowed but did not prevent neoliberal social unraveling. And when the crisis years hit after 2008, the shadowside came roaring back into European politics just as it did on the opposite side of the Atlantic.

From one perspective, then, it seems that the chief difference in the late-twentieth-century rise of the American shadowside is merely one of precocious timing. In the late 1900s, politics everywhere crumpled before neoliberalism, and the primary medium-term beneficiary was the radical right. Yet it seems to me that there remains something distinctive about the American case. American conservatism's peculiar trajectory of simultaneous success and radicalization in the neoliberal era arose from the fact that it contained within its internal dynamics the entirety of what Austro-Hungarian economic theorist Karl Polanyi called the double movement of modernity.⁶⁴ For Polanyi, the ordeals of the last two centuries could be explained by a dialectic in which free market utopians sought to liberate economic activity from strictures that had traditionally constrained it, and revolutionary movements arose as the defensive measures of societies seeking to protect themselves from the resulting upheaval. American conservatism combined this double movement into a single ideological complex, relentlessly disembedding the economy with one hand and rebelling against the resultant dislocations with the other. American conservatism is therefore distinctive (though not unique) in its ability to process its failures not as the consequence of error but as the result of sabotage, as well as its tendency to prescribe further economic deregulation as the remedy to the social dislocation that previous deregulation has caused. Put another way, the emancipated market *must* produce a bourgeois revival, and when it does not, the explanation can only be a diabolical conspiracy against bourgeois civilization.

The Crisis of American Conservatism

America, like all constitutional democracies, will always have conservatives. Far too many predictions, also fundamentally monist in character, have assumed the eventual irrelevance of the Right. The appeal to imperiled nobility is, I think, an un-conditioned response to modernity's churn. Conservative ideologies and parties are a constitutive part of the modern democratic ecosystem. And that is a good thing. Further, it seems to me highly probable that conservatism is the likeliest candidate to assume a national leadership role in the early twenty-first century. American liberals are too busy trying to cope with the hollowness of the Clinton-Obama complex of progressive neoliberalism, and the American Left seems semi-permanently trapped in its own internecine struggles. And neither liberals nor the Left has anything in the way of a solution for the pervasive, crushing estrangement that has beset the country since the 1990s, the widespread feeling that Americans inhabit social worlds that cannot in any meaningful way be characterized as communities. Conditions may differ elsewhere (I think they do), but I am tempted to conclude that, with their opponents mired in their own peculiar crises, conservative ideology is poised to dominate American politics by default for the foreseeable future.

All this is to say that Karl Rove was probably correct when he said in 2008 that the United States is a center-right country, in the sense that a considerable number of Americans still embrace bourgeois gentility as the model of the good life and the good society.⁶⁵ The appeal of this bourgeois vision appears to be cross-class and multi-ethnic. Studies of political attitudes among African Americans and Latin Americans, for example, show substantial constituencies of

⁶⁴Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, 1957).

⁶⁵E.J. Dionne, "The Right in the Rearview Mirror," *The American Prospect*, (Aug. 15, 2009), <https://prospect.org/culture/books/right-rearview-mirror/> (accessed June 12, 2025).

self-described conservatives.⁶⁶ The future of the United States may be majority-minority, but increasing demographic diversity will not translate automatically into a diminution of the bourgeois ideal. A significant cross-section of Americans' ideological consciousness still anchors in some collection of commitments to self-reliance, conventional piety, small town life, entrepreneurship, patriotism, heteronormativity, and deference to traditional authority. The nature of these commitments is continually evolving, as are all forms of ideology, but the bourgeois ideal itself appears to still resonate widely in mainstream culture.

Nonetheless, conservatives have not been able to translate the enduring appeal of the bourgeois ethos into a stable governing majority because they have invested themselves so heavily in so many bad ideas. The consequence of those investments is that the United States may still be a center-right country, but American conservatism remains incapable of responsible governance, mired in an alternating pattern of magical thinking and apocalypticism. The difficulty facing American conservatism in the early twenty-first century is thus far larger than its immediate circumstances. It can and will continue to win elections. Indeed, it may, for a variety of reasons, dominate American politics at every level for a generation. The issue, however, is not winning and losing. The real problems run much deeper. Resolving the crisis of conservatism means addressing the interlocking set of strategic missteps and theoretical failures—the reckless cultivation of shadowside consciousness *and* the belief that economic deregulation promotes bourgeois gentility—that created a poisonous dynamic that pressed the American Right in apocalyptic directions. Every time the neoliberal deregulatory regime failed to bring about a revival of the bourgeois ethos, the shadowside increased its power over conservative culture. Recent events may have accelerated the Right's metamorphosis, but it is only the latest chapter in the transformation of American conservatism into an ideology of the revolutionary Right.

At this time, it is difficult to conceive how American conservatives will think their way out of the problems they have created. Repudiating shadowside apocalypticism will be essential for any future American conservatism that wishes to play a *constructive* role in U.S. politics, but it will not be enough. Embracing the shadows was one mistake American conservatives made, but it was not the only or even the most significant one. The more significant error was the one that many mainstream conservatives still regularly commit, embracing the myth of genteel libertarianism, the fiction that “free markets” and bourgeois ideals complement one another. Conservatives must come to realize, as a select few already have, that the road to the bourgeois ideal runs through the democratic welfare state.⁶⁷ At the core of such a realization is an acknowledgement that there is no such thing as “organic culture,” no such thing as “spontaneous order.” Outside the world of cheap thrills, nothing survives for long in the global market society without public subsidy, and so a key question in a modern democracy is what kind of lie would you like to collectively live? That is the reality, distasteful though it may be, and the alternatives are authoritarianism, social disintegration, or both. It is only when self-identified moderate, constitutional, mainstream conservatives admit that you cannot achieve communitarian ends through libertarian means, that they must use the state to *artificially* subsidize ideals that would die out if left on their own that they will be able to escape this trap and become the conservers rather than the destroyers of the American democratic order.

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⁶⁶Angela K. Lewis, *Conservatism in the Black Community: To the Right and Misunderstood* (New York, 2012); Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican* (Princeton, 2015); Geraldo Cadava, *Hispanic Republican: The Shaping of a Political Identity from Nixon to Trump* (New York, 2020).

⁶⁷Bruce Bartlett, “A Conservative Case for the Welfare State,” *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 2012; Matthew Walther, “A Conservative Case for Single Payer health Care,” *The Week*, May 3, 2017; Eric Levitz, “Mitt Romney Has a Child Allowance Plan (and It's Better Than Biden's),” *New York Magazine*, Feb. 5, 2021.