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The Two Crises of Conservatism

April 24, 2021



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For the last few months I've been one of the teachers for a Yale course entitled "The Crisis of Liberalism," about recent challenges to the liberal order from populists and progressives, socialists and nationalists, the further left and right.

As a somewhat sweeping class, it contains a number of stories that by themselves could take up a semester's worth of wrangling. One is about the strange condition of American conservatism, in which two crises, one normal and one existential, are happening at once.

The normal crisis is a party crisis, the sort that afflicts all political coalitions. The Republican Party 40 years ago coalesced around a set of appeals that enabled its leaders to win large presidential majorities and set the national agenda. At a certain point the issue landscape changed, so did the country's demographics, and the G.O.P. has struggled to adapt — cycling through compassionate conservatism, Tea Party conservatism and Trumpist populism without reproducing Ronald Reagan's success.

Seen from this vantage point, the Republican Party's current craziness comes from being in an extended, Groundhog Day version of the Democratic Party's 1980s situation, in which the party's rebuilds keep failing, but our era's greater partisan polarization still keeps the right electorally competitive. In which case you can imagine, eventually, a potentially normal resolution, in which Republicans adapt and win real popular majorities again, or fail and diminish into true minority status until their craziness abates.

But beneath this party crisis there is the deeper one, having to do with what conservatism under a liberal order exists to actually conserve.

One powerful answer is that conservatism-under-liberalism should defend human goods that are threatened by liberal ideas taken to extremes. The family, when liberal freedom becomes a corrosive hyper-individualism. Traditional religion, when liberal toleration becomes a militant and superstitious secularism. Local community and local knowledge, against expert certainty and bureaucratic centralization. Artistic and intellectual greatness, when democratic taste turns philistine or liberal intellectuals become apparatchiks. The individual talent of the entrepreneur or businessman, against the leveling impulses of egalitarianism and the stultifying power of monopoly.

Needless to say the right hasn't always fought these battles well or wisely. But the fights have given conservatives a clear stake in the liberal order, a reason to be invested in its institutions and controversies even if, on occasion, they might doubt that some of its premises are true.

So the question, then, is what happens when the reasons for that investment weaken, when the things the right imagines itself conserving seem to slip away?

What does it mean to conserve the family in an era when not just the two-parent household but childbearing and sex itself are in eclipse? What does it mean to defend traditional religion in a country where institutional faith is either bunkered or rapidly declining? How do you defend localism when the internet seems to nationalize every political and cultural debate? What does the conservation of the West's humanistic traditions mean when pop repetition rules the culture, and the great universities are increasingly hostile to even the Democratic-voting sort of cultural conservative?

At least you can still defend the heroic entrepreneur, say the libertarians — except that the last great surge of business creativity swiftly congealed into the stultifying monopolies of Silicon Valley, which are leading the general corporate turn against cultural and religious forms of conservatism as well.

This set of problems explains the mix of radicalism, factionalism, ferment and performance art that characterizes the contemporary right. *What are we actually conserving anymore?* is the question, and the answers range from the antiquarian (the Electoral College!) to the toxic (a white-identitarian conception of America) to the crudely partisan (the right to gerrymander) to the most basic and satisfying: *Whatever the libs are against, we're for.*

On the center and the liberal center-right, meanwhile, there's a sense that the way out of this mess is for decent conservatives to recommit to the liberal order — “to organize and draw a bright line between themselves and the illiberals on their own side,” as my colleague David Brooks put it this week.

But that might not be enough. In the end, conservatives need to believe the things they love can flourish within the liberal order, and it isn't irrational to turn reactionary if things you thought you were conserving fall away.

So the question for the right isn't one of commitment, but capacity. Can conservative energies be turned away from fratricide and lib-baiting and used to rebuild the structures and institutions and habits whose decline has pushed the right toward crisis? And will liberal institutions, in their increasingly ideological form, allow or encourage that to happen, or stand permanently in its way?

In prior columns I've stressed how the weakness of conservatism makes it hard to imagine a successful right-wing insurrection or coup against the liberal order.

But weakness has rippling consequences too, and a conservatism defined by despair and disillusionment could remain central to liberalism's crises for many years to come.

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