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True Conservatism and the Future of the Right

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Simon P. Kennedy

“The stupid party.” John Stuart Mill delivered this droll critique of the British Tories in 1861. It was without question *ad hominem* and uttered in a very different context from the one we inhabit in 2022. It is also not without prescience. The inheritors of the Anglophone Tory tradition across the Western democratic world are floundering and in danger of becoming precisely what Mill described.

It is hard to find green shoots on the conservative Right. The Johnson government in the United Kingdom wallows in hypocrisy. The Trump revival show could continue beyond 2024, but how “conservative” is this revival, really? The Morrison Coalition in Australia, recently routed by a resurgent Labor Party, was the third of a succession of Centre-Right federal governments. This looked like a solid outcome on paper. But the true nature of this success is more liberal than conservative in ideology.

Indeed, Australia’s former Prime Minister John Howard once called the Liberal Party a “broad church”, an utterance which reflects the heart of the crisis on the political Right. If one was to ask what the future of conservatism is, many would readily advocate a concoction of the liberal political philosophy of John Stuart Mill and the neoclassical political economy of Adam Smith. Apparently, conservatism is the philosophy of small, unobtrusive and morally-disinterested government.

This Millian framing of “conservatism” in a post-Covid, post-*Obergefell*, post-Trump age is naive and shallow. It demonstrates no substantial understanding of classical conservative thought. And it leaves us with an

emaciated version of Cold War fusionism, which was in its best moments a pragmatic coalition of true conservatives and right-leaning liberals who combined to combat the tyranny of Soviet communism.

Venerable institutions like *National Review* in the US and *Quadrant* in Australia were birthed in this heady environment, and we can look back with gratitude on certain aspects of that coalition's legacy. But we (and I count myself in this number) are no longer fighting the reds under the bed. Further, the fruits of Mill and Smith have been revealed as flaccid and sometimes rotten. Our purportedly free society is also an increasingly miserable one, crumbling under the weight of low birth rates, moral libertinism, materialistic dependency and a crumbling culture.

So much for liberty. Fusionism ultimately bore very little conservative fruit and was found to be liberal, even libertarian. This libertarianism always has and always will compromise conservatism by prioritizing individual rights and freedoms. Jonathan Cole puts it well: "conservatives, unlike libertarians, can never regard individual rights as isolated ends unto themselves". The same could be said for liberalism more broadly, of which libertarianism is an extreme, and rather excitable, offshoot. Free markets and a secularist liberal individualism are dogmas that find little support beyond their own assertion.

Sure, living standards have risen dramatically since the neo-liberal economic hegemony emerged. However, we are now finding out what propped this growth up. It was cheap, largely Chinese, labour. This fact is doubly troubling, given the recent exposure of our dependency on Chinese manufacturing, along with the moral and political dubiousness of "off-shoring".

Conservatives can no longer be taken seriously as liberal-conservative fusionists, because our historical moment demands something more robust than the mere defence of individual rights and free markets. Token appearances from Russell Kirk and Roger Scruton in the footnotes will not save us from the liberal vacuum that right-wing Millian thought has created.

The Right needs more than liberalism with the handbrake on. Our societies need more than platitudes about the primacy of the individual. No matter how messy the government response to the pandemic was, it was not socialism in new garb. The pinko-commos did not get a stranglehold on us during lockdowns. Rather, it was banal, big-government liberalism playing itself out in an unusual and extreme scenario.

Therefore, the answer cannot be more fusionism. It must be something else. It must be something beyond 1990s liberalism on repeat. Conservatism must be rearticulated, and not merely so we can get sharper talking points on cable news. A reframing is necessary to move on from the Millian quagmire that many seem determined to remain in. Free-speech and free-trade dogmas provide an effective basis for right-wing polemics but are a poor basis for rebuilding society.

A new book which seeks to chart a way beyond Millian and Smithian liberalism is Yoram Hazony's *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*. Hazony leads the Edmund Burke Foundation and is the intellectual leader of the National Conservatism movement. The latter has become a powerful voice for conservative principles on both sides of the Atlantic, and reflects Hazony's twin emphases. The importance of the nation-state is expounded in his 2018 book *The Virtues of Nationalism*, while we find conservative philosophical principles articulated and defended in the volume under consideration here.

Early in *Conservatism*, Hazony bats away the kinds of claims I have been critiquing. So-called "conservatives" are only interested in ideas "that can be used to justify free trade and lower taxes", and to advance the claim that "what is always needed is a greater measure of personal liberty". He aims to "give conservatives a clear sense of what their responsibilities are." Our aim as conservatives is not simply to conserve a calcified iteration of Mill's philosophy in *On Liberty*. We have bigger goals. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis's Aslan, there is a deeper magic in conservative philosophy and the conservative life.

This deeper magic is what Hazony wants to draw out. He won't let the conservative Right rest. Not until we have found a way to sustain our attachment to what T.S. Eliot and Russell Kirk dubbed "the permanent things" will conservatives have found their purpose. These permanent things make us human; that is, not mere beasts. They also make life bearable, and often joyful. To paraphrase Burke from his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a reverting to liberal abstract rights would be a perversion of true liberty, and would result in a "humanity" that is "savage and brutal". Some kinds of liberty are inhumane because they undermine the permanent things.

That is why Hazony doesn't spend a great deal of time on typical right-wing talking points like the free market, individual liberty or freedom of speech. It is not that these don't matter; they do. But they are subordinate goods to the primary goods that Hazony wants conservatives to recapture. Indeed, the goods which conservatives typically trumpet on Fox and Sky News are fruits of the most foundational goods of the social and political order.

After guiding the reader through a history of Anglo-American conservative thought, a journey which traverses early luminaries like John Fortescue and Richard Hooker through to American statesmen like James Madison and his fellow Federalists, Hazony moves into normative mode.

This is the kind of contribution that contemporary Anglophone conservatism needs. Hazony's capacity as a theorist and philosopher is impressive. He provides a normative foundation for conservative thought, one that is reasonable and persuasive. It is persuasive in large part because of the clarity with which Hazony thinks and writes. The matters he deals with could be confusing and, therefore, expressed in a complex way, but Hazony never falls into the trap of writing in a jargonistic fashion, and the reader is easily carried along with the argument.

Hazony admits that one of the great strengths of liberalism is its dogmatism. It can be reduced to a “small number of clearly articulated premises”. Conservatives are understandably more reluctant to make such a move, as it “invites rigidity and dogmatism, even as important matters go unmentioned”. Nevertheless, part of liberalism’s success as a philosophy is due to this reductive, summative approach, and Hazony replicates this for his own conservative philosophy.

This move brings with it two virtues. One is that conservatism, as Hazony articulates it, is reduced to simple, memorable premises. The other is that conservatism is found to be clearly juxtaposed to liberalism. After reading Hazony, any conservative who continues to argue that their job is to conserve classical liberalism has to admit that they may not be a conservative in any real sense of the term.

Hazony’s summary of liberalism is fair and representative: all men are naturally free and equal, political obligation is founded upon the consent of individuals, civil government exists primarily to enable and enhance individual freedom, and all of these truths are “universally valid truths, which every individual can derive on his own ... by reasoning about these matters”.

In contrast, conservatism understands that men are “born into families, tribes, and nations”, which binds all people into involuntary bonds “of mutual loyalty”. This first premise establishes that hierarchy is natural and multi-layered: “The individual is born into a structure that involves certain constraints and unequal relations from the start.” Hazony argues that honour is a vital part of common life, with societal divisions created by competition for it. Natural and artificial hierarchy is, according to Hazony, determined by the “importance and influence” impacting the level of honour each unit enjoys.

Families, tribes and nations must order their life together in terms of “material prosperity, internal integrity, and cultural inheritance”. This ordering is characterised by the institutions of “language, religion, law, and the forms of government and economic activity”, that is, “any social structure or form of speech or behaviour that is passed down from one generation to the next”. These forms of order are passed through the generations by means of hierarchy; the honour of those in authority, such as parents and teachers, promises the propagation of order. In other words, a society’s way of life together is conserved by hierarchy.

A further fundamental of Hazony’s conservative philosophy is that political obligation comes not from individual consent, but rather is a consequence of the individual’s membership of their family, tribe or nation. In other words, “obligation arises wherever a relation of mutual loyalty exists”. These relations of mutual loyalty might sometimes be established by consent (as in marriage), but the obligations that come with these relations are grounded on the nature of the relations, not on individual free choice.

The final premise of Hazony's conservative philosophy relates to epistemology. This question has divided conservatives from their liberal counterparts since Burke published his *Reflections* in response to the ructions of the French Revolution. Thomas Paine argued in his *Rights of Man*, which was a direct response to Burke, that the French revolt was a "burnt-offering to Reason". This is the liberal position—true political principles are universal and can be determined by the right use of human reason.

Hazony rejects this, and argues, with Burke and David Hume and numerous other conservative luminaries, that political truths are "based on experience, and may be challenged and improved upon in light of experience". In a piercing critique of liberal political axioms concerning the primacy of reason, Hazony suggests that the grounds of liberal theory are not "empirically true" and that there is "no historical context in which these premises can be said to have been true". Liberalism is founded on not merely a house of cards, but on an imaginary one.

Rather than flail around grabbing onto imaginary ladders with the liberals, Hazony urges conservatives to make theoretical judgments in the light of historical and empirical experience. Burke's statement remains prescient and consistent with Hazony: "The pretended rights of these theorists are all extremes; and in proportion, as they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false." Reason is, according to Kirk, "a tool weak at best, frequently treacherous", so much so that "even the shrewdest men are puffed up with vanity if they try to set the product of their reason against the consensus of the centuries".

The god of Reason, a deity first worshipped by the revolting French in the late eighteenth century, is a cruel and deceptive god. She affirms the *a priori* over and against the reality that is in front of us. Hazony argues that this false religion resulted ultimately in the decaying and unstable contemporary culture of the Anglophone West. "The compulsion to judge all existing political institutions" against the abstract principles of Enlightenment liberalism "has drawn America and the West nations into a perpetual cultural revolution". Liberal philosophical principles are fundamentally utopian and therefore provide an insurmountable standard, meaning that "revolution must continue its work of uprooting and overthrowing".

There has been an apocalypse, literally an unveiling, of this perpetual liberal revolution in recent years. Many liberals will quietly and reluctantly admit that they are not supporters of the cultural revolt that is under way in the West. The question that plagues them, as much as it does conservatives, is how to arrest this revolution and reverse the decline.

Hazony has an answer. Those who call themselves conservative need to confront this question: Is it the right one? One way of responding is by answering a different query: Does Hazony's conservative philosophy protect and cultivate the permanent things? Can Hazony's rediscovered

conservatism provide a foundation for the recovery of what Russell Kirk described as “those enduring truths and ways of life and standards of order” which make us human and make life worth living?

Over the past 100 years, the evidence suggests that the typical fusionist conservative foci of small government, free markets and social liberties have contributed to the destruction of the things which are precious to our common life, both public and private. It is a tragedy that we have done so much damage to our own cause through the over-emphasis of these things. But we cannot just bemoan our mistakes. We must refocus and regroup around a philosophy that cultivates rather than destroys the things that matter.

Hazony guides his readers in the direction of themes which are typically separated (by liberals) from political thought. These are the sacred and the family. Hazony insists that the things shaping us as individuals and as members of our society are “God, Scripture, Family, and the Congregation”. These matters have become unsavoury for conservative political thinking and political discourse because of what Hazony calls the “fusion of public liberalism with private conservatism”. According to liberal thought and practice, religion and family are private matters that affect private lives, and should be cordoned off from political life.

But Hazony won't allow this separation, because religion and the family are the very things upon which a sustainable political order is built. The fear of God and deference to sacred scripture were traditionally central to the Anglo-conservative tradition, and Hazony makes a strong normative case for returning to this tradition. “A political theory in the conservative tradition cannot be made to work without the God of Scripture”, because this God and his revelation anchor all relative moral and political claims within the higher standard of a divine order. This order is partly inaccessible to limited human beings, but submission to divine order forms an important check on human hubris whilst framing human reasoning.

The family forms the second pillar of conservative social theory and, according to Hazony, it plays a vital role in a healthy society. Hazony's conception of the family is not that of the Western suburban household of the 1950s, which was a “much-diminished version of the traditional family, one that is lacking most of the resources needed effectively to pursue the purposes of the traditional family”. Rather, the traditional family, as Hazony understands it, is a man and woman in covenant with one another, together with their children and sometimes extended generations of relations.

This family was not just involved with each other at a private level, sharing the same house for sleeping, as many families today seem to amount to. The traditional family also conducts productive activity together in the form of business enterprises and is also inherently connected to other households through the life of their religious congregation. This latter institution “plays a decisive role in handing down inherited ideas and institutions” to the next generation. Hazony argues, in a compelling fashion, that the family and congregation provide people with a stable environment where they can

flourish, find meaningful social and spiritual connections with others, and build a social and political legacy that can extend beyond the current generation.

The alternative is harrowing, and one that we increasingly see in our own time. Without deep connections to family and congregation, people are liable to drown “in an ocean of lawlessness” and suffer “even greater hardship as the surrounding society becomes more arbitrary and deranged in its judgments”. In the stable environs of the traditional family and congregation the individual can encounter the permanent things, things which Hazony suggests are accessible by participating “in the daily transmission and elaboration of the things that have been inherited from our forefathers, which are often being conserved nowhere else”.

Hazony is not completely fixated on matters related to religion and the family. The latter parts of the book traverse material more familiar to political theorists, including a substantial discussion of a conservative view of the purposes of civil government. This discussion (in Chapter Five) is rich and provides a helpful riposte to the hubris of liberal political theory, which has done so much to, or is reflective of practices which, undermine the health of society.

The liberal understands the state and society as being in “causal relation”, with the state being “brought into force by universal human reason” and operating in such a way that “the state ... [imposes] law and order on society by force”. This is completely unacceptable for a conservative, according to Hazony, who holds that “state government is, like the state itself, a traditional institution, and thus entirely dependent for its existence on the character and condition of the society it governs”.

Therefore, it would be a mistake to assume that fixing the procedural problems with our parliamentary democracies will bring about long-lasting, substantial improvements to political life. Rather, the rot is found in a misconception of what matters for a healthy society. The liberal response to that problem is that the rights and freedoms of the individual are the bedrock of the common life of society. The conservative would respond that the nation is “composed of real loyalty groups” (families, tribes, congregations) and that fixating on the individual is “a distraction from the actual business of national politics”.

Hazony says the actual business of politics is “to do the practical political work of cultivating ties of mutual loyalty”. He argues that civil government should, therefore, focus on the matters that Burke and Gouverneur Morris articulated back in the late eighteenth century: “(i) a more perfect union, (ii) justice, (iii) domestic peace, (iv) the common defense against foreign enemies, (v) the general welfare, (vi) individual liberty, (vii) national liberty, and (viii) permanence and stability through the ages”.

This section of *Conservatism* demonstrates the virtue of Hazony’s project. Conservatives are often reluctant to embrace the theoretical and normative, preferring ideas that direct our thinking towards the organic nature of

society. Friedrich Hayek's theory of spontaneous order would be a salutary example. However, Hazony recognises the need for conservative thinkers to articulate a genuine normative alternative to liberalism, rather than just relying on history to work itself out in the right direction. We are in a culture war, and inhabit a time of crisis, whether we like it or not. Hazony recognises this in his method.

Hazony also sees that just arguing with political theorists on their own turf is not adequate. A substantial societal shift is necessary, which requires both philosophical and practical underpinnings. Hence why Hazony is so focused on the cultivation of what are often described as pre-political institutions. The family and religious communities have within them the seeds of slow but effective reform (dare I say revolution?).

Hazony recognises this and spends what might seem to some like an inordinate amount of time on theoretical and practical questions about family and religious life. But this focus is admirable, even necessary, because a society that no longer believes in anything other than heightening the positive experiences of the individual person has nothing left to sustain itself. We all need to cling to something beyond ourselves to order our own existence.

One might argue that this human need is precisely why there has been a radicalisation of racial and sexual discourse, which Hazony argues at length is extremely dangerous for Western societies. As Roger Scruton once said, “there is nothing more dangerous to the state than the transfer of frustrated religious feeling to petty secular causes”. This transfer is what has taken place, and the emergence of what many call “cultural Marxism” is a symptom of this. It is a symptom of misplaced *pietas*.

This latter concept is central to Hazony's project. His focus on pre-political bonds of loyalty in the family and religious community calls each reader to consider how they are cultivating piety in their own lives. Hazony never theorises this idea of piety. The philosopher who has best articulated the idea in relation to the political is Roger Scruton. Until his death at the beginning of 2020, Scruton was the leading mind of Anglophone conservatism, so it curious that he is mentioned in a mere solitary footnote in *Conservatism*.

While it is not necessary for Hazony to have included Scruton in what is regardless a remarkable and profound book, the British philosopher provided much philosophical grounding for Hazony's conservatism with this concept of *pietas*, or piety. In his 2018 book *On Human Nature* (a work as short as it is profound), Scruton defines piety as “a posture of submission and obedience toward authorities that you have never chosen”. It springs out of the “ontological predicament of the individual”, by which Scruton means the problem that we all feel of being alone in the world yet simultaneously connected to everything. Piety is, as he argues elsewhere, “the respect for sacred things”, a “deep down recognition of a frailty and dependence” on things beyond ourselves, things that are given and are “not our invention”.

Out of this respect for the sacred spring obligations. Each of these obligations is involuntary. This definition of *pietas*, grounded in ancient Roman thought and practice, reroutes the liberal mind away from consent and contract concerning moral and political obligations in the same way that Hazony does. And it is not merely a question of religion. It is a concept that includes duties we owe to parents, family, community, the state, and God. As Scruton argued, “the bond of allegiance that ties us to the state is ... a bond of piety”, a statement in complete agreement with Burke’s conception of society as an eternal contract between those in the past, those alive, and those to come.

Piety is, therefore, the grounds of conservative political philosophy. To again quote Scruton, it is “the main task of political conservatism ... to put obligations of piety back where they belong, at the centre of the picture”. This is precisely what Hazony achieves in this remarkable book. So often of late, conservatives have seen their duty as defending the now indefensible. Liberalism may have served us well in some respects, but, arguably, this was only because the society it grew up in was a conservative one.

Instead, conservatives should take what Hazony puts before us and rethink our strategy, both in theory and in practice. Recapturing true conservatism through an appropriation of the centrality of the life of piety, humble empiricism, and a clear theoretical case for restrained but active civil government; this is a summary of what Hazony puts forward. Continuing to rely on Mill and Smith will ensure we remain “the stupid party”. Hazony charts a way out of that dead-end, towards a conservatism that has a future.

Conservatism: A Rediscovery

by Yoram Hazony

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