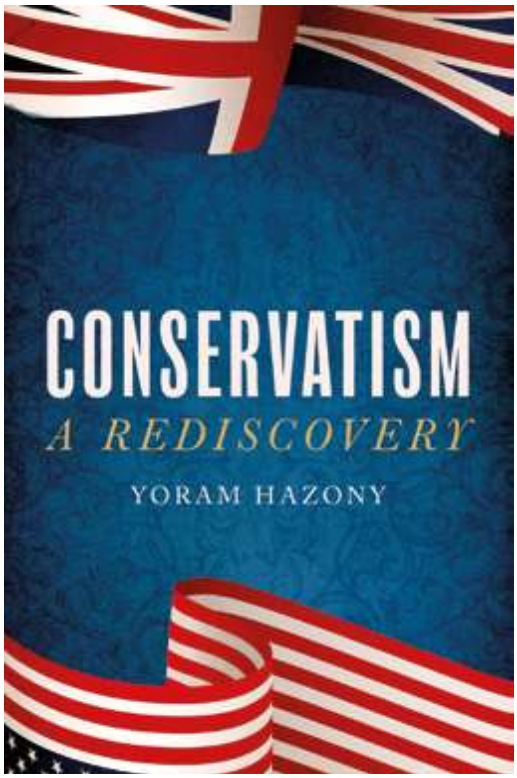
Up from Fusionism

On day one of my job leading a right-of-center think tank in Madrid, my boss waited for a moment of ambient quiet to sneak hurriedly into my office, a bulky item hidden beneath his blazer. Just about any classic in the liberal-conservative tradition would have befitted the occasion of my appointment. However, the secrecy of this particular gift hinted at something else, something intended to inform not my public duties at our think tank's helm, but my own private conduct as an individual. After all, being as privately Christian as one is outwardly liberal has become something of a maxim in our space, given that organizations like mine are steeped in the writings of Michael Novak and the teachings of the Acton Institute. The gift was a copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* and it was accompanied by an appointment to visit a faith advisor. I must confess that I was somewhat taken aback by this blunt interference in my inner life, as if my boss had, by overstepping the outer boundary of our professional rapport, left me vulnerable to further encroachments.

Since then, one book alone has eased my discomfort and helped me realize the purpose of such a gift. Yoram Hazony's *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* is a strident call to root out the liberalism that has progressively crept into conservatism since the 1960s, one of whose ill-guided assumptions is the "myth that politics can address itself to the public sphere alone, whilst avoiding influence on our private lives." When not backed up by conservative deeds, all of the world's talk of conservative values, claims Hazony, disturbs the silence in utter vain. He submits an alternative to that strand of liberalism in the form of the so-called 'Anglo-American conservative tradition.' After surveying the societal havoc of the past six decades wrought by abandoning one for the other, he concludes by intimating his journey from Princeton's student politics in the 1980s to building an orthodox Jewish household in Jerusalem. The result is a timely masterpiece, one that buttresses an erudite argument with the imprimatur of personal experience.

At the core of Hazony's argument lies the notion that man's idealism can spin out of its own axis. In other words, what may seem at first like an enlightened advancement toward human emancipation can easily turn self-corrupted and give way to countless distortions. The English tradition of common law—itself rooted, according to Hazony's Judeo-centric view, in the Hebrew Bible—was cultivated from the 15th century onwards by the likes of John Fortescue, William Blackstone, Edward Coke, and John Selden, and reached a culmination with the Glorious Revolution of 1688. That tradition was doubtless a welcome stride towards achieving the ideals of limited government, separation of powers, individual rights, and due process—all cherished by liberals and conservatives alike. Yet those advances were understood at the time to be the contingent outcome of a particular nation's journey through history, and by no means universal principles applicable to all men, at all times, in all places. The distinction, as Hazony makes clear, is crucial.



The same seed of legal and political traditions was later sown in America, whose independence Hazony posits as a continuation—and not rupture—with that esteemed English heritage. What followed is an inflection point familiar in the West's history. The Founding Fathers left unresolved a dilemma as to whether their narrow share of society's encounter with the principles of freedom and equality was a truth bound in time and place or, instead, a self-evident law of nature applicable to all mankind. This, argues Hazony, is what is plainly at stake in interpreting Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. Although Hazony traces the roots of the Federalist Party to the same nationalist conservative tradition that previously flourished in England, Jefferson's liberal universalism ultimately outcompeted the party of Washington and Adams, thereby connecting the Declaration's letter to America's purported role as guardian of the world's freedoms.

In reference to liberals' trust in reason, as opposed to the empiricism that defines conservatives, Hazony writes that they "have confused certain historical-empirical principles, painstakingly developed and inculcated over centuries, for universal truths accessible to all human beings, regardless of historical or cultural circumstances." This distortion comes into view in the realm of foreign policy. While the Constitution envisioned America's role merely as the defender of its own interests, the ambition to remake the world in liberal democracy's image ultimately meant sending our troops into ill-defined missions in the globe's furthest ends. But the distortion applies to religion, too. Isn't Christianity—which Hazony wants reimposed into the public sphere by fiat—another instance where a preexisting ideal, that of Israel's commitment to the God who anointed the Jews his chosen people, ends up being extended to humanity at large, and therefore distorted? Interestingly, Hazony has pitched his national conservative movement as a venue for conservative Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to hash out their differences.

Assuming that an electable conservative coalition would have the political will to do so, the question remains as to how far society should turn back the clock to undo the damage wrought by the universalist misinterpretation of classical liberal principles. Hazony locates the thrust of that distortion in the immediate postwar period. At that time, the imperative of purging the possibility of another global calamity fed a sense of guilt in our elites that misled them into replacing what Franklin D. Roosevelt called our "God-fearing democracy" with a secular, rights-based liberal hegemony. To assuage concerns that reverting the postwar distortion of liberalism would leave the 1960s civil rights acquis groundless, Hazony is quick to make clear that he's not asking to reimpose segregation. He states, "the Anglo-American legal tradition, with its basis in the Bible and the common law, provides ample basis for rectifying injustice, including oppression based on race."

Readers hoping to derive an operational strategy for the Right based on Hazony's diagnosis may end up disappointed. On the one hand, the author says that 'fusionism,' rather than an intellectually cohesive coalition, was the means by which Right-liberals usurped the 'conservative' label beginning in the 1950s. This produced a conservative movement unfit to conserve much beyond freedom as an end unto itself. In an interview shortly after the book's UK release, Hazony confirmed to me that he "wasn't interested in reviving fusionism." This may point to "de-fusionism," a term Hazony coined in a speech to the NatCon conference in November 2021. Yet he also argues that in order to defeat the rising neo-Marxist 'woke' Left that hijacked America's institutions in the summer of 2020, conservatives should join forces with old-school liberals, some of whom arguably are intellectually at odds with conservatives in all of the ways herein discussed.

Halting the advances of the 'woke' Left, therefore, should be the immediate, shared priority of old-school liberals and conservatives alike. The harder work of restoring faith, nation, and tradition at the core of our politics, however, is a task for conservatives alone. With Hazony's sweeping rediscovery, the Right cannot claim that it lacks a roadmap. ■

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