Live Not By Liberalism

In an email exchange with Professor Ted McAllister, I asked why some conservatives speak so incessantly of universal truths and natural rights, while others, particularly in the nascent New Right, do not. Having grown up in the climate of sunshine rain that was the Iraq War—mounting sectarian violence in Fallujah or Basra juxtaposed with politicians' endless incantations of God's gifts of democracy and human rights to the world—I wondered why supposedly 'universal' truths could prove so difficult in their application.

McAllister explained what he thought had gone terribly wrong along the Left-Right spectrum of postwar political thought:

> [Liberals] end up isolating two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence; they declare (with thin evidence, but not without evidence) that the Constitution was written to give governmental structure to these rights, and in the process end up with a more ideological, less historically nuanced, understanding of the founding and of the regime. They end up with a defense of the republic that is not rooted in Western Civilization as much as in universalistic assertions.

I myself, I realized, was a product of that "ideological, less historically nuanced understanding of the founding." I was more familiar with the "self-evident" truths part of the Declaration than the many charges leveled against King George for defying the common law and other conventions integral to English history, from the separation of powers to the long-established rights of representation. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 gave renewed force to this last one, turning parliamentary sovereignty into the supreme principle of England's constitution. As Yoram Hazony explains in *Conservatism: A Rediscovery,* 1688 was not the novel brainchild of John Locke's 'social contract' theory, but rather a re-affirmation of pre-existing English laws and traditions—what Hazony calls "historical empiricism."

I cannot claim to speak for others regarding the many merits of Hazony's book. However, speaking for myself as an American conservative and a recovering neo-con and free-market fundamentalist, I can say that the most resonant parts were II ("Philosophy") and IV ("Personal"). These sections almost form a heroic couplet of political philosophy. The former is a revived theorization of conservatism, the latter a glimpse at its praxis—i.e., how a conservative life should look and feel.

American liberals of both the Left and Right have largely captured the political imaginations of our elites with a worldview that ranks consent above obligation, the Lockean *tabula rasa* before innate characteristics of personhood, and rights before duties. As Hazony incisively argues, it was only a matter of time before postwar liberalism's inexorable "cultural revolution"—its Nietzschean emphasis on the triumph of the will—would degenerate from "praise and honor for daring acts of transgression" into a sinister solipsism:

> Now an entirely different kind of decay is ascendant: a growing lassitude and despair, a true decadence in which no praise is to be gained from moving in any direction. And so meaningful movement ceases, and all that is left is the monotonous parade of sensations induced by alcohol, drugs, and flickering screens.

This indictment of liberalism's descent into nihilistic cultural Marxism is not unique to Hazony, and it is indeed emblematic of the Anglo-American New Right's now axiomatic but hard-won contention that we live in a *postliberal* world—one in which Enlightenment rationalism is unfit for the task of rescuing the West from its own malaise.

The strength of *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* rests not so much in Hazony's documenting of this despair as in his re-founding of conservative political philosophy with a new account of human nature that is both truer than the liberal one

and better-equipped to mend the West's spiritual-cultural rudderlessness. In planning and writing his book, Hazony seems to have viscerally intuited that the 'classical liberal' account of human nature—the mythic 'state of nature' referred to by Locke, Rousseau, and other paragons of liberal political philosophy—has driven Western civilization to profound existential angst. But far be it from Hazony just to woe and lament. He provides an alternative account—a conservative rewrite, if you like—of the state of nature.

In Hazony's telling, human beings are not born 'free and equal' but subordinate and dependent; humans do not 'consent' to the nation into which they are born; and obligations to love and honor one's parents do not expire at the age of legal emancipation. Against the Romantic's search for his most 'authentic self,' Hazony believes, with Aristotle, that the human individual is inescapably bound to group membership ("isolated individuals" do not remain isolated for long, but "attach themselves to a new clan"); against the liberal myth of self-fashioning individuals, Hazony highlights the inherently mimetic nature of selfhood:

> It amuses us to see adolescents painstakingly outfitting themselves to look like a prominent actor or musicians they take to be important. But adults are no different, following the leaders of their particular tribe, party, or profession, often in excruciating detail.

The success of Hazony's book will be measured not only in a future conservatism that mentions towering Anglo-American conservatives like Hamilton, Selden, or Burke, but also in the recovery of an older diction to describe human flourishing and interpersonal relationships. Honor, loyalty, and constraint will replace the liberal pantheon fame, freedom, and equality.

Hazony argues in the closing section that he indeed practices what he preaches. He describes how he eschewed the Princeton undergraduate's infatuation with binge-drinking and hookup culture in favor of Friday night prayer and the dedicated courtship of a single partner—now his wife—whom he married at a young age. What is more, I recognize myself—and countless other acquaintances—in the youngsters Hazony chastises for failing to give 'significance' by example to the pillars of a conservative life.

Hazony describes such "yo-pro" conservatives in the following manner:

> [Y]oung men and women who are sharp as blades intellectually, yet frequently quite lost in everything having to do with the assignment of proper weight and significance to things. Imagine a young man in his thirties, living with a woman year after year, deferring marriage and children, engaged in the life of no congregation, reading no scripture, and keeping no Sabbaths…
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> What does such a person know about conserving anything? ... [H]is life is that of a liberal.

I know the person Hazony describes above. I was that person, and I fight everyday the temptation to revert to the life of a liberal, a life devoted to what R.R. Reno calls the "hearth gods of health, wealth and pleasure."

Undoubtedly there will be policy battles among the postliberal Right over the extent to which state power can or should be utilized to promote faith, family formation, and communal and national solidarity. In this sense, Hazony and other national conservatives would admit the movement is a work-in-progress of cultural and political restoration. And yet, as our postliberal conservatives' moment hastens in its arrival and departs for destinations heretofore unknown, we must remember that properly diagnosing conservatives' pathologies is as vital as applying the correct cure. ■

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