

CONSERVATISM: A REDISCOVERY

(YORAM HAZONY)

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Yoram Hazony's *Conservatism*, a masterful work, is the book Patrick Deneen's *Regime Change* should have been. Hazony explains how we got here, who our enemies are, why they are our enemies, and what we should do. He offers no preemptive apologies and he does not bow to the idols of the age. He shows why the Left is always only one thing with many heads, with which there can be no compromise. *Conservatism*, despite its anodyne title, moves beyond all the tired and profitless "conservative" babbling of the past six decades, offering a strong intellectual foundation for the future exercise of power by the Right, after the Left is gone forever from our nation (whatever that nation may then be called).

A few years ago Hazony coined the term "national conservatism," as the moniker for his program for the Right. He has been instrumental in hosting a series of high-profile conferences organized around that rubric (none of which I have attended, but friends of mine have). The resulting furious attacks from the Left, aghast that someone on the Right is allowed to actually try to build political power, demonstrate he is over the target. As his term suggests, Hazony's political analysis revolves around, and is based on the crucial importance of, the nation—meaning the people of a place, not the government. For him, the nation, and the layered mutual loyalties and loves which comprise it, most of them unchosen, is the basis of politics. The very mention of the nation, however, is forbidden by the Left, which views America as a mere random assemblage of atomized men and women who choose, on an ongoing basis, for no particular reason, to live in proximity. At best, America is "propositional," with propositions that change as the Left dictates. For the Left, and for much of what passes for the Right, America can never be what a nation always was before the rise of the Left—a group of men and women held together by unbreakable unchosen bonds.

To be sure, nationalism is in the air. Of late, we have heard much talk of Christian nationalism, mostly from those who hate both, and fear the obvious power of combining two powerful and successful principles. Its more-approved counterpart, Jewish nationalism, is also in the news, due to the current Jewish wars against their Middle Eastern enemies.

No doubt Hazony can say more in defiance of the Left than could an American academic, because he is Jewish and because he lives in Israel (presumably a dual American-Israeli citizen). True, this opens Hazony to the charge that he cares about justifying nationalism because he cares about Israel more than America. Probably his being Jewish, and being Israeli, is part of his focus on the importance of the nation (for what nation is more a nation, or at least a people, than the Jews?), but that does not change the importance of his analysis and recommendations for Americans, which are politically wholly unrelated to Israel. Moreover, he has nine children, and thus is necessarily concretely invested in the future of the entire West (in contrast to men or women without children, who should generally have their public policy views deprecated, or be entirely forbidden from participating in the making of public policy).

So let's get to it. What is "conservatism"? It "refers to a standpoint that regards the recovery, restoration, elaboration, and repair of national and religious traditions as the key to maintaining a nation and strengthening it through time." In the context of America, national conservatism, a term Hazony says originated with Daniel Webster, means "Anglo-American conservatism where it has placed an especial emphasis on national independence and on the loyalties that bind the nation's constitutive factions to one another." National conservatism "seeks to return the national interest, or the common good of the nation, to the center of political discourse, after decades in which the freedom of the individual became the overriding principle in all spheres of life."

The core of this book is the existential, crucial distinction between "Enlightenment liberalism," what I simply call the Left, birthed in the Enlightenment and reified in 1789, and "conservatism." Hazony defines the former as "devoted entirely to freedom, and in particular to freedom from the past. . . . In other words, liberalism is an ideology that promises to liberate us from precisely one thing, and that thing is conservatism." By contrast, a conservative is "a traditionalist, a person who works to recover, restore, and build up the traditions of his forefathers and to pass them on to future generations." This is a helpful set of definitions; I define Right simply as "not Left," but I don't disagree with Hazony's general description of the main philosophy, at least in the West, that automatically fills that negative space.

As his references to forefathers and nations make clear, conservatism is not a “universal theory,” as is true of Left ideology. In its specifics, it differs greatly across time and place. What is conservatism in Thailand, or even Spain, is different than that in America. For Hazony, the time and place which matters is England and America, in the past five hundred years. Understanding the conservatism of that tradition “is the key to understanding what made these nations powerful and successful.” (The assumption that the goal of a nation is to be powerful and successful, to the benefit of its citizens, rather than to “lift up marginalized voices” and hand out gibbs to loafers, invaders, and parasites, is another sin against the Left Hazony commits throughout this book.)

Hazony traces the birth of this tradition, though it had precursors, to John Fortescue, during the Wars of the Roses, in the fifteenth century, when he wrote *In Praise of the Laws of England*. Fortescue distinguished between the English tradition of limited monarchy and the Continental tradition of more absolute monarchy. He also discussed other matters central to what made England England, such as due process, private property, and the character of the nation’s people. Richard Hooker, after Henry VIII abandoned the Church, thereby increasing the independence of Great Britain from Continental systems, wrote *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, in eight volumes around 1600. Hooker disparaged revolutionary change, and any change based on the abstract thought of those who imagined they had reasoned out the answers to all of life’s problems, or which offered universally valid knowledge. But he did not reject all change, which was sometimes necessary, in the course of human events.

Then Hazony turns to “perhaps the most important figure in Anglo-American conservatism,” John Selden, one of the drafters of the 1628 Petition of Right, a Parliamentary attack on the perceived excessive absolutism of Charles I. In the Petition of Right are stated most or all of what we regard as the ancient rights of Englishmen, largely embodied in our own Bill of Rights. Selden wrote extensively, often in defense of what Hazony dubs “historical empiricism”—that “reasoning in political and legal matters should be based upon inherited national tradition.” As with Hooker, this did not mean blindly following the past, but realizing that “the inherited tradition . . . preserves a multiplicity of perspectives from different times and circumstances, as well as a record

of the consequences for the nation when the law has been interpreted one way or another.” Changes may be necessary, but “new theories” should not be the basis for them. Finally (after discussion of several others), Hazony notes Edmund Burke, too often regarded today as both the originator and final form of English conservatism, but also the only one of these men who faced the direct challenges of what is now, and was then, the Left—not only the French Revolution, but “classical liberals” such as John Locke, who are also, as we will discuss, men of the Left. While Burke is typically and facilely thought of as a gradualist, crucially, “Where an institution has already fallen into ruin, Burke has no interest in repairing it only in a gradual manner. Rather, he argues that it should be reconstructed in accordance with models and patterns that have proved themselves.”

Hazony boils down this lengthy discussion into five principles of Anglo-American conservatism: historical empiricism; nationalism; religion; limited executive power; and individual freedoms. He explains, expands on, and justifies each one. It is hard to find any fault in his exposition. And, again, he distinguishes Anglo-American conservatism from “Enlightenment liberalism,” which believes that unaided human reason from first principles will reveal the one final universal form of government (although, to be fair, many of the first men of the Left, contemporaneous with Burke, held that limited executive power and a type of individual freedom should be part of that universal form of government—but contrary to the Left’s modern claims, both aspirations long pre-dated the Enlightenment).

Next, Hazony traces the evolution, and only partial survival, of these principles in the new American nation. He distinguishes among the Founding Fathers, between those who, following Selden, wished to restore what they regarded as a system that had fallen off the track, and the radicals, such as Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, who “despised England” and endorsed the view of the Enlightenment Left, and who were the cause of not all of Anglo-American conservatism surviving into the new American republic (though because of the deep virtue of the American nation, in particular of its ruling classes, it would take decades for most of the resulting injection of poison to surface). Hazony goes into depth; this is well-covered ground which I will not repeat, but his exposition is again excellent.

The author's ongoing emphasis on the nation also dominates the next section of his book, political philosophy. "A conservative political theory begins with the understanding that individuals are born into families, tribes, and nations to which they are bound by mutual loyalty." By contrast, "the liberal paradigm is blind to the nation." Rather, it is focused on the individual, his relationship to the state (which is never the nation), and the freedom of the individual to avoid state interference. The latter is simplistic and therefore attractive. But it is destructive; the conservative paradigm has proven vastly more effective at actually generating human flourishing. And the core of the conservative paradigm is mutual loyalty, which "is the primary force that establishes political order and holds its constituent parts in place." The Left, children of the Enlightenment, have always been embarrassed by mutual loyalty. Instead, they exalt individual choice, to be bound or not to be bound at the whim of the individual, and they have wrongly predicted for centuries that loyalty of men to nations and tribes would soon disappear.

Mutual loyalty is the basis of all societies. But other central elements of political conservatism include competition for honor, importance, and influence (limited by mutual loyalty); hierarchy; cohesion (the result of mutual loyalty); deference to traditional institutions (such as language, law, and religion of a nation); political obligation flowing from membership in loyalty groups; constraint as the balance to, and superior of, untethered freedom; and tradition, informed by historical empiricism, as the key indicator of truth. As to honor, Hazony notes that the Ten Commandments require honoring one's parents. In Hebrew (Hazony's main occupation is Old Testament scholar), this means "give weight" to them, recognize them as important. This is a universal human desire, to be important in the eyes of others, and it is a key part of mutual loyalty. As to hierarchy, the importance of a member of any hierarchy is the degree he is honored within that hierarchy. Deference to traditional institutions is enforced, in part, by honoring those who uphold such institutions (not those who seek "truth" through "critical reasoning," as the Enlightenment Left would have it). Political obligation flows not from consent, but from unchosen bonds of loyalty—which may be broken, as they were in the American Revolution, but only in extreme circumstances. Constraint, in any successful society, is primarily self-constraint, which implies that, contrary to the forced egalitarian ideology

of the Enlightenment Left, inequality rather than equality will always result, because those more worthy are honored by society at large as superior to those less worthy, along many axes.

We take a long, and interesting, detour into how “God, Scripture, family, and congregation” “gave Jewish and Christian societies their particular form.” Hazony notes that the American idea that conservatism must operate within a liberal framework, which sets its boundaries and allowed ideas and practices, is purely a post-World War II phenomenon—but one which we have absorbed as natural, despite its obvious destructiveness. Then we turn to the purposes of government. Now we are getting to what our future government should be, though Hazony does not herald that as his focus (unlike Deneen, he does not tout his book as a book about regime change, even though that’s what it is). Hazony lists eight purposes, coherent with Anglo-American conservatism, and taken from such closely-agreeing sources such as the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States and Edmund Burke’s analysis of the English constitution. These are (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.

All these (which are always in some condition of tension and balance) are the opposite of viewing the nation as an arbitrary collection of individuals who choose, for now, to be joined, the standard view of the Left. They view the nation as a whole. The mutual loyalties which bind a family or tribe, and which form the governance structures of both, cannot be precisely scaled to a national government, so some translation must take place. The nation, and therefore the government, is not, however, composed of atomized individuals, but is an agglomeration of smaller loyalty groups. It can fracture, though. “[W]hen a nation is undergoing dissolution, it is because the bonds of loyalty between the tribes or parties of the nation have weakened or have ceased to exist entirely, so that when they are faced with a common hardship, adversity, or enemy, they waste their energies blaming one another and fighting one another. Then no unified front can be established, and no unified power projected.” “The state and government are traditional institutions of certain societies. Their continued existence therefore depends entirely on the cultivation of bonds of mutual loyalty among the rival

tribes that constitute the nation; and these bonds, in turn, depend on the conservation and transmission of particular traditions of speech and behavior that allow rival tribes and parties to compete, while at the same time honoring one another." One only need look around, for example at the current Texas border crisis, to see that we have reached the "You are here" moment on Hazony's map.

The Left, of course, rejects all of this, believing that the "the state is brought into being by the force of universal reason, which is independent of any given society. . . . The state is imagined as imposing law and order on society by force, while society itself is passive." Hazony, again, doesn't refer to the Left, but to "Enlightenment-rationalist" thought. But they are the same thing—the political ideology that has as its two premises total emancipation from all unchosen bonds, and total forced egalitarianism, all in the service of creating heaven on earth. In their vision, the state advances by violence, if necessary, policies based on Left demands, and society thereby achieves perfection in the here and now.

In the book's third part, we return to history, of post-World War II conservatism. We are given a very good survey, of Frank Meyer's fusionism (which, Hazony notes, is not a fusion at all, merely a re clothed Enlightenment liberalism), and of William F. Buckley and the cloud of luminaries who surrounded his movement, from Russell Kirk to Ronald Reagan. But all we need to take away is: "In retrospect, we can see that the politics which emerged from the end of the Cold War in America, Britain, and other countries was devoted almost exclusively to the advancement of liberalism." I couldn't have put it more pithily myself, although I would have hurled various epithets at the Judases who led us to this pass. Hazony also notes that before the war, all Americans were "Christian nationalists"; the idea that is somehow undesirable is bizarre, and just means the Left fears Christian nationalism. Even Franklin Roosevelt, he points out, overtly espoused Christian nationalism. The Left fears it today because it fears any rollback in its advances, in the increase of its power, the wholesale evisceration they accomplished of the American constitutional order, not because there is something wrong with Christian nationalism, America's original philosophy.

Hazony falters a little bit when he tries to distinguish Marxism from Enlightenment liberalism, pushing back against the obvious unitary nature of the Left. He claims Marxism is "seeking to overthrow"

Enlightenment liberalism, and that liberals are “in the opposition” to Marxism. He ascribes the difference between the two to Marxism’s supposed substitution of group oppression for “liberty, equality, rights, and consent.” But oppression, or rather relief from imagined oppression, has always been one of the two key elements of Enlightenment liberalism, inherent in “liberty, equality, rights, and consent.” Hazony does seem to be feeling a way toward the truth, concluding that “liberalism [might be] merely a gateway to Marxism.” The mechanism he proposes is that Marxist identifying of supposed oppression leads liberalism, unable to identify any reason why not, to create new rights, thereby aligning themselves with Marxism, to which Marxism responds by identifying new sources of repression. Rinse and repeat, to convergence. He offers quite a subtle analysis, but it is too subtle. He is correct that Enlightenment liberalism has no defense against movement toward totalitarianism, but does not recognize that this is, and always has been, the inevitable and desired goal and end of the Left, not confined to Marxism. What Hazony offers here is distinctions without a difference; the reader is a little unsure if Hazony is confused, or just pulling his punches, hoping to appeal to those on the Left who feel like “things have gone too far,” but unable to give any definition of “too far” that fits within their ideology.

Finally, Hazony does not neglect recommendations, wisely without claiming that he has any way to implement his recommendations (that will be left to other men, who may at this moment be emerging from the mist). He calls for “conservative democracy.” This is, in short, re-establishing Anglo-American conservatism. It “would be characterized by the following kinds of views.” National identity. Public religion. The common law. Family and congregation. Proper education. The primacy of politics over economics. Tightly-restricted immigration. A foreign policy of modesty. The rejection of international bodies. And so forth. The political mechanism for this will be that “an alliance of factions should work together to restore Christianity as the normative framework and standard determining public life in every setting.” “Such a settlement would vary greatly from one region or state to another, establishing a series of experiments in conservative democracy.” Although, naturally, “If a public conservatism is to have any purchase in a sick society, it must begin with *teshuva*—a personal journey of repentance and return.”

All this is true. In fact, Hazony's program bears a strong resemblance to my own program, Foundationalism. Less aggressive, perhaps, and without the focus on techno-optimism and Space, but I suspect Hazony would be largely behind a Foundationalist society. Yes, putting any of this into practice would require a massive fracture and remaking of American politics. But that seems more likely with every passing month. I am feeling good about it.

And what of classical liberalism, not really mentioned by Hazony, but often offered as an alternative to the Left? This was, for example, the standard political stance of the so-called Intellectual Dark Web, a now-defunct group of left-leaning intellectuals who regarded the Right with horror, but could not tolerate what the Left had openly become. Unfortunately, a desire to make classical liberalism an empty vessel, into which one can pour "everything I like about the modern world," while ascribing anything not liked to "pre-Enlightenment times" and "reactionaries," has blurred the definition of classical liberalism, which in practice now is largely "I am completely a man of the Left, but some of what other men of the Left do is unpleasant, so I call myself a classical liberal, and direct my attacks against the Right while occasionally tut-tutting at the grossest excesses of the Left, excesses I will embrace in a year or two."

But enough snark. We can be more precise. What is "classical liberalism"? Is there any possible way it is not simply leftism? Let's start with Wikipedia (which, to be sure, is terrible, though I am pleased there is finally an article on me, but will do for these purposes): "A political tradition and a branch of liberalism that advocates free market and laissez-faire economics and civil liberties under the rule of law, with special emphasis on individual autonomy, limited government, economic freedom, political freedom and freedom of speech." Every part of that definition is either not an actual element of classical liberalism or merely a restatement of the Left principles of unlimited emancipation and forced egalitarianism. Certainly, "liberalism" can only mean "Enlightenment liberalism," which is the very definition of the Left. Throwing in the "rule of law" is just distraction added to make classical liberalism sound good; the rule of law existed long before liberalism, and is necessarily antithetical to Left achievement of their goals. In practice, it is always ignored once the Left gets enough power to ignore

it, including by classical liberals. Similarly, “economic freedom” means only to the extent not in conflict with Left goals—you have no right to freedom of association, for example, in your economic dealings, under classical liberalism as its modern adherents practice it. In theory, true, one could craft an abstract classical liberalism that is only eighty percent or so Left; in reality, it’s always, or always ends up, one hundred percent Left, because classical liberals share all the essential premises of the Left.

And, let’s not forget, everything good about the modern world—the rule of law, due process, and all the other rights of Englishmen in the Petition of Right, not to mention scientific achievement, reason as a driving principle, and rational analysis of the world—long predate the Enlightenment, and therefore the Left. All those things were developed entirely by men of the Right, in societies that had no idea what a leftist was, except as a cautionary lesson, Satan in the Garden. Self-proclaimed classical liberals, with the most egregious offender being Steven Pinker, frequently lie and claim exactly the opposite, figuring that that their listeners will not be educated enough to catch their lies. But it’s all silly, ultimately. Those who want to call themselves classical liberals today should just accept that they are leftists, and that it is unfortunate for them that they are junior members of the Left coalition, inevitably to be expropriated and exterminated as the more feral members rise to the top of the Left heap. That’s not my problem, though.

One could expand Hazony’s historical/philosophical analysis to current political matters—for example, to the massive waves of alien migrants swamping America at this very instant. Why, for example, are there thousands of Burmese, Ethiopians, and Eritreans living in Indianapolis, close to me? What possible benefit to the American nation results from their importation? What does that say about our nation? But I will not talk about immigration today; that is coming, when I discuss Jean Raspail’s *The Camp of the Saints*. Hazony, however, and I think wisely, largely ignores specific political matters. Too much combination of history and philosophy with present political issues tends to date a book very rapidly, and his goal is foundation building. Unlike me, he is not openly apocalyptic, nor does he overtly call for regime change (although the need for total Regime replacement is implicit in his logical chain). But if the apocalypse is thrust upon us, what Hazony offers here will be very helpful in building the new order.