

---

# Introduction

## *Confronting the New Conservatism*

*Michael J. Thompson*

Conservative politics has been on the rise in America throughout the postwar era. Although conservatism has generally been the politics of the minority, the past several decades have seen a new assertion of conservatism in many domains of politics and culture, which has reshaped American political and public life in the process. America's supposed conservative turn has taken many different forms, from the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980 to the Contract with America in 1994 to the recent aggression in the Middle East. But in the end, conservatism in America has consistently defined itself against the liberal establishment and has sought a redirection of American political and cultural life.

This book is an attempt to come to terms with various aspects of conservative political, social, economic, and cultural ideas, movements, and predispositions in contemporary American life. The essays collected here are each in their own way an attempt to reveal the deeper mechanisms that have come to define different aspects of conservative movements and politics: neoconservative foreign policy, the problem of populism, "cultural rage," family values, gay marriage, far right-wing movements, the conservative turn in the courts, and the renewed attack on the welfare state, among other and related topics. As a whole, this book sees both a continuity and a distinction between "old" and "new" conservatism. On the one hand, there is a continuity with certain older forms of racial backlash, with provincialism, and with nationalism. But at the same time, there is something quite new about contemporary American conservatism: that it latches on to liberal notions of private property and the rule of law; that it embraces markets, celebrates the autonomy of the individual, and most importantly sees itself as a "progressive" movement promising renewal,

growth, and the expansion of freedom and moving away from the despotism that social democratic liberalism has created.

This book is also a response to an earlier study of conservatism in America. In 1962 the sociologist Daniel Bell published an edited volume titled *The Radical Right* that examined the right-wing movements of the 1950s and 1960s and their origins. For Bell and his contributors, the overall explanation for these movements was a response to modernity, expressed as a liberal democratic consensus, and a “status anxiety” felt by small numbers of people and their reaction to a changing, modernizing America. “What the right as a whole fears is the erosion of its own social position, the collapse of its power, the increasing incomprehensibility of a world—now overwhelmingly technical and complex—that has changed so drastically within a lifetime.”<sup>1</sup> The conservatism analyzed by the contributors to *The Radical Right* did not fit into the understanding of a postwar democratic consensus that had emerged with the New Deal and the expansion of American capitalism in the immediate postwar years. The right-wing impulse they examined was considered a minority, a sociological and political oddity that needed to be explained.

But this situation has radically changed. What this book calls the “new conservatism” is not the purview of a minority; it has become hegemonic in the public discourse, has displaced a waning postwar liberalism as a public philosophy, and has succeeded in attaining political and ideological power in many branches of government and within many of the organs of the public sphere. A new culture has been constructed with new predispositions, and it is at the level of culture *as well as* at the level of political and economic institutions that any fruitful analysis of the present situation must proceed. It may not be that most Americans self-identify as “conservative,” but this hardly matters since only a small minority of Americans identify themselves as “liberal,” about 20 percent, whereas 40 percent consider themselves “mainstream” and the remaining 40 percent, “conservative.”<sup>2</sup> These are general figures to be sure, but they indicate the skewness of political ideology that has dominated political culture over the past decade.

But even if the data do not show a radical turn toward the right among Americans’ political attitudes, the nature of the right turn in American politics is real. The new conservatism speaks the language that many different sectors of the American public want to hear: it wants to erode the centralization of political power; restore authority to traditional institutions and to civil society; rely on the free market in economic life; and

base social life on voluntary associations and community.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, it advocates what Michael Oakshott termed “rational prudence” in assessing the policies and legacy of postwar liberalism. Multiculturalism has led to division rather than integration; government attempts at reducing or eliminating poverty have only worsened the problem; the bloatedness of the welfare state hampers economic performance, competition, and innovation; the power of the national state has become a new leviathan squashing individual liberty and choice; and so on. It is this mask of pragmatism that has allowed conservative ideas and policies to become “mainstream” themselves. In this sense, the very distinction between “mainstream” and “conservative” needs to be called into question.

The causes of the rise in conservative politics are many and multilayered in themselves. Indeed, the phenomenon of “backlash” is central. The reaction to the 1960s and the cultural and institutional shifts that were then occurring alienated many middle-class and working-class whites from the broader political project of liberalism. As Douglas Massey has recently argued, “liberals increasingly turned to the courts and executive branch to force working-class whites and local political bosses to accept whatever changes they mandated from above.”<sup>4</sup> There are also structural accounts that see the crisis of the welfare state as effecting a shift in support from liberal to conservative parties.<sup>5</sup> But whatever the case may be, the actual interests that mobilize the new conservative politics in America are multiple and complex, and they require a more nuanced analytic approach. It is for this reason that this volume is a series of essays, each pursuing a different approach to the phenomenon.

Conservatism has always been associated with reaction, with tradition, with stability. But the new conservatism is something different in this regard: it has been able to assert itself as the locator of crisis, as an ideology that points to the cultural and political situation of the present and claims that it has broken down and that it, alone, has the power and the insight to fix it, to make the crooked straight.<sup>6</sup> What the new conservatism has done is not look simply to the past but look toward postwar liberalism and social democracy as serious distortions of social policy and public morality. It argues that liberalism as a public philosophy has led to cultural and moral decay due to its emphasis on the liberty of the individual and the separation between public and private, which has starved the public sphere of morality and the guidance of tradition and authority.

Outside the realm of culture, the new conservatism has argued for the primacy of capitalism and markets as the core tool for the organization of

economic life. Classical liberalism was defined by its liberal theory of property and labor: one has a right to the fruits of one's labor. New Deal liberalism was able to harness the optimistic modernism of Progressivism and merge these with a political rationalism and a populist egalitarianism.<sup>7</sup> The new conservatism has been able to merge the concerns of cultural conservatives—who traditionally had also been anticapitalist in many respects—with the antiprogressivism of the business community, which had always sought to privilege its interests against those of working people or the broader community. New conservatism has become an unabashed apologist for economic inequality just as it has harkened back to the traditional values of family life.

It should also be said from the outset that this book is also conceived as an intervention itself—an intervention into what the authors collected here agree are the corrosive effects of conservatism on American democracy itself. The essays here provide different arguments for why the new conservatism is itself anathema to the most robust traditions in American politics and history. And they argue that, in each case, what is at stake is the viability of a more tolerant, more open, more egalitarian social order that privileges a substantive notion of human freedom over the more narrow, anachronistic concepts of liberty advocated by conservative critics and political actors. Confronting the new conservatism therefore requires a rethinking of democratic politics for the present on behalf of those who seek to uphold the liberal legacy in American political life. Without this, the democratic institutions and culture that have been forged throughout the twentieth century will be in peril.

## NOTES

1. Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 2.
2. See Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 25–44. Also see the work of James Stimson, *Public Opinion in America: Moods, Cycles, Swings* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), and Morris Fiorina et al., *Culture War?* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005).
3. See Robert Nisbet, *The New Absolutism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 62.
4. Douglas Massey, *The Return of the "L" Word* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 27. Also see Robert Wiebe, *Self Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 229–231. This

theme is also dealt with in a more popular manner by Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

5. For this account, see Joel Smith, Allan Kornberg, and Neil Nevitte, "Structural Factors in the Conservative Resurgence," in *The Resurgence of Conservatism in Anglo-American Democracies*, ed. Barry Cooper, Allan Kornberg, and William Mishler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 25–53.

6. For a discussion of this aspect of the new conservatism, see Claus Offe, "Ungovernability: On the Renaissance of Conservative Theories of Crisis," in *Observations on "The Spiritual Situation of the Age,"* ed. Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 67–88.

7. See Theodore Lowy, *The End of the Republican Era* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 23.