

A one-minute history of conservative anti-rationalism

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While left-wing anti-rationalism has been virulent, it is also, I would suggest, on the verge of burning itself out. This is because the left, in one form or another, has always been committed to the idea of progress, and progress has always depended upon the exercise of reason. Most of the social and economic problems in our society are complex problems, which will require both ingenuity and collective action to resolve. None of this will happen if we just follow our gut feelings. This is why the attempt by American “liberals” to rebrand themselves as “progressives” has significant merit: first of all, because the American use of the term “liberal” as a synonym for “left-wing” was etymologically unsound, historically inaccurate, and inconsistent with the way that the word was used in the rest of the English-speaking world; and second, because “progressive” versus “conservative” actually captures more of what is at stake in the two political temperaments – far more so than the abstract “left” and “right.” The core division between left and right is a response to the French revolution and its aftermath, with the left being committed to using the tools of rational foresight and planning to develop a more just society, while the right either fearing the consequences or doubting the value of such 'improvements'.

Because of this, conservative anti-rationalism has a long and distinguished pedigree. Indeed, anti-rationalism is one of the few things that the various ‘conservative’ ideologies throughout history have had in common. The original and most distinguished variant is the sort of evolutionary conservatism best exemplified by Edmund Burke (or, in the 20th century, Michael Oakeshott). This style of thinking puts enormous emphasis on tradition as a repository of accumulated wisdom. In its most sympathetic variants, it is informed by an overwhelming sense of modesty about the ability of individuals to consciously reproduce, much less improve upon, the contents of these traditions. In politics, for example, our traditions allow us to sustain a set of democratic institutions, but we have no idea how they work, or how to recreate them elsewhere. As a result, we should be extremely reticent to change things, lest we break them and not know how to put them back together. The same can be said for the family and the education system. A conservative of this temperament is extremely distressed, for instance, by the fact that the teaching of Latin is no longer part of the general school curriculum. What's so great about Latin? We have no idea. What we do know is that for hundreds of years, the study of Latin and of the Roman classics was central to the education of schoolboys throughout Western civilization, and look at the magnificent accomplishments of Western science, literature, art and politics! So they must have been doing something right – the argument goes – and who are we to say

that we know better?

This style of conservatism appeals to a number of different constituencies, but it has particular appeal for those who are religiously minded. It has obvious attraction for Catholics, simply because it coheres with official Church doctrine – which regards the church's tradition as being just as authoritative as the Bible in determining the correct interpretation of Christian duty. Yet even among Protestants and fundamentalists, who supposedly assign less authority to tradition and more to religious text, there is still considerable appeal, mainly because the veneration of tradition offers a refuge from the relentless onslaught of rationalism. In particular, it offers an attractive hand-wavey response to the whole question about the existence in God. “Who am I to question the wisdom of my forefathers? If they believed in God, then that's good enough for me.” Thus the stance of intellectual modesty can be used, not as an argument for believing *per se*, but merely as a way of deflecting demands for justification. From this perspective, the fact that a belief is very *old* gives it greater authority, and therefore makes it seem more likely to be correct. (This is quite the opposite of the standard Enlightenment view, which regards the antiquity of religious beliefs as a sign that they are probably wrong – after all, our ancient ancestors thought the earth was flat, that fire was an element, and that bathing was unhealthy, so why should they be right about this?).

The second major current of conservative thought is market anti-rationalism, which became influential in the early 20th century, particularly through the work of Friedrich Hayek. Conservatives of this temperament could care less about the teaching of Latin, what they are interested in is the unobstructed operation of the market economy. Why? In the same way that traditional institutions like the family allow us to accomplish something that we are unable to reproduce in a fully explicit way, markets also allow us to accomplish something that we are unable to achieve through explicit calculation. Hayek drew particular attention to the way that, under capitalism, individuals act in response to purely local information (about prices, production possibilities, individual preferences, etc.), and yet the market aggregates this information in such a way as to permit a more efficient allocation of resources across society as a whole. When central planners in the former communist bloc tried to reproduce this explicitly, they found that it was simply too complicated. Even with extremely advanced mathematical techniques, Soviet bureaucrats never succeeded into creating a stable plan to guide production in their economy. Thus in Hayek's view, the market has a certain sort of wisdom, which surpasses that of individuals. This makes it easy to portray any attempt by the government to regulate the market as intellectual hubris, the meddlesome intervention of elitists who think they know more than “the people” what is best for them.

Thus the second “high road” to conservatism is through the study of economics. There is of

course a much-observed tension between the cultural-evolutionary and the free-market versions of conservatism, particularly since the untrammelled free market is the most effective device for destroying traditional institutions that has ever been devised by man. Most of what cultural conservatives and religious fundamentalists hate about the modern world – the rootlessness, hedonism, crass commercialism, loose sexual morality, anti-authoritarianism, and general lack of discipline – is either a direct product of the market, or is a tendency that is dramatically amplified by it. What brings the cultural and the market conservative together is the conviction that these unplanned processes are better than the alternative, which is “social engineering” in the rationalist style.

Finally, there is what might be referred to as the 'melancholy' strain of conservative thought. This view is grounded in a pessimistic assessment of the power of reason to improve the human condition. According to this view, any attempt to improve things will only make them worse: the poor will always be with us, criminals cannot be reformed, there will always be evil in the world, inequality is part of the human condition, and so on. While both the cultural and market views tend to present their ideas as a way of improving the human condition, pessimistic conservatives hold out no such hope. In some cases they hope only to slow the inevitable rate of decline (Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* is perhaps the most influential work in this key.)

Conservatives of this temperament love nothing more than a story about how some well-meaning attempt to improve the human conditions backfired (through the “law of unintended consequences”) leaving the supposed beneficiaries much worse off than they were before (and egg on the face of the chastened liberals, who with their insufferable combination of moral superiority and intellectual hubris thought that they could improve the human condition). There are no doubt many examples of this. Post-war public housing projects, for instance, designed to free the poor from victimization by predatory landlords in nasty, dangerous slums, were an unmitigated disaster. Not only did governments prove to be, in almost all circumstances, even worse landlords, but the “enlightened” design, based on the clean geometric lines favored by rationalists, proved to be entirely hostile to human interaction. The vast open spaces, designed to eliminate the feeling of overcrowding of the slum, quickly became breeding grounds for crime (Tom Wolfe). It was not long before even left-wing social critics, like Jane Jacobs, were singing the praises of “unplanned” or “organic” communities.

The examples of this can be multiplied: rent control, far from helping the poor, winds up creating homelessness; foreign aid, instead of encouraging progress, merely breeds underdevelopment and helplessness; welfare, rather than helping people get back to work, slowly undermines the work ethic, creating a permanent underclass. For the melancholy conservative, impressed by the perversity of human nature, it is practically axiomatic that the human condition cannot be changed. Presented with

any scheme of improvement, they start with the conviction that it cannot work, then deduce from this the mechanism that will defeat it.

These are the classic modes of conservative thought. What has emerged over the past few decades in the United States, however, is a somewhat new variant. Conservatives often refer to this new trend as “common sense” conservatism. The central characteristic of common sense, according to Frank Luntz, is that it “doesn’t require any fancy theories; it is *self-evidently* correct.” To say that it is self-evident is to say that it is known to be correct without argument and without explanation. Thus common sense conservatism shares with other modes of conservative thought a commitment to anti-rationalism, but it differs in what it holds up as the alternative. Making common sense the core of one’s political ideology amounts to a pure privileging of intuitive over rational thought, of “gut feeling” over deliberation, and of heart over head. (Indeed, one can see in the quote from Luntz the explicit degradation of rationality. Common sense is independent, not just of “theories,” but “fancy theories” – the kind proposed by effete east-coast intellectuals. The crucial thing about fancy theories is that you can feel free to ignore them, precisely because they are fancy. You don’t have to worry about the actual content of what the person is saying.) This is what has given rise to the phenomenon of truthiness, and the disconnect that has emerged between Republican political discourse and the “reality-based” community.

The phrase “common sense” itself has of course been test-marketed, and picked because it maximizes positive resonance. (This would account for the number of times that it occurs in Palin’s “mama grizzly bear” spot: “common sense conservative women,” “common sense solutions,” etc.) Who doesn’t like common sense? And yet it is also quite apt at describing the most important unifying idea in contemporary conservatism. If the plan that you’re proposing needs to be explained, then it’s not common sense. If it doesn’t *sound* right, then it’s not common sense.

There are a number of different currents of thought that have come together to produce this tendency. Most obviously, it represents a whole-hearted embrace of traditional conservative anti-rationalism and the critique of liberal “hubris.” It also taps into a deep well of anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism, which remain powerful forces in the United States. The sentiment is perhaps best captured by William F. Buckley’s famous line, that he would “rather entrust the government of the United States to the first 400 people listed in the Boston telephone directory than to the faculty of Harvard University.” Or one can see it on display in the movie *Forrest Gump*, a favorite of American conservatives. The hero of that particular story is a semi-retarded Southerner, who learns a few simple, common-sense truths as a child in the 1950s, which then carry him through the tumult of the 1960s – including the Vietnam war – unscathed. Throughout the movie, it is made quite clear that the blame for

all of the chaos in American society lies with intellectuals, who are constantly overthinking things and trying to be clever, and who thereby lose touch with the simple truths, including the simple moral truths, that can guide us all to a good life.

The most important thing about this species of conservatism is that it generates a set of incredibly powerful *electoral strategies*. Appealing to the gut, rather than the head, plays incredibly well on television, not to mention on talk radio. Indeed, the major channel through which this American style of conservatism has spread is not its intellectual expression – there is practically none – but through the hiring of Republican *campaign strategists* during the off season. (Tellingly, both the Conservative governments in Canada and the United Kingdom made significant use of American strategists.) For example, it works extremely well in the “hard hitting” style of television interview, where no one is given more than ten seconds to make a point, and there is the constant danger of interruption. Fox News interviewer Bill O’Reilly is the master of this: he’ll will challenge someone, saying “How do you explain that, smart guy?”, then listen for about 10 seconds, and if the answer isn’t finished by then, will he start to roll his eyes a bit, then will interrupt. (He eventually got himself in trouble on this, over his claim that it was impossible to explain the regularity of the tides without appealing to the direct intervention of God. This is something that can actually be explained in less than 10 seconds. But there are a lot of other things that can't.) Requiring that all answers be short is not ideologically neutral. It favors the familiar over the uncommon, and the intuitive over the rational, and “common sense” over “fancy theories.”