THE REACTIONARY MIND

Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin

COREY ROBIN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Introduction

A political party may find that it has had a history, before it is fully aware of or agreed upon its own permanent tenets; it may have arrived at its actual formation through a succession of metamorphoses and adaptations, during which some issues have been superannuated and new issues have arisen. What its fundamental tenets are, will probably be found only by careful examination of its behaviour throughout its history and by examination of what its more thoughtful and philosophical minds have said on its behalf; and only accurate historical knowledge and judicious analysis will be able to discriminate between the permanent and the transitory; between those doctrines and principles which it must ever, and in all circumstances, maintain, or manifest itself a fraud, and those called forth by special circumstances, which are only intelligible and justifiable in the light of those circumstances.

—**T. S. Eliot,** "The Literature of Politics"

Since the modern era began, men and women in subordinate positions have marched against their superiors in the state, church, workplace, and other hierarchical institutions. They have gathered under different banners—the labor movement, feminism, abolition, socialism—and shouted different slogans: freedom, equality, rights, democracy, revolution. In virtually every instance, their superiors have resisted them, violently and nonviolently, legally and illegally, overtly and covertly. That march and demarche of democracy is the story of modern politics or at least one of its stories.

This book is about the second half of that story, the demarche, and the political ideas—variously called conservative, reactionary, revanchist, counterrevolutionary—that grow out of and give rise to it. These ideas, which occupy the right side of the political spectrum, are forged in battle. They always have been, at least since they first emerged as formal ideologies during the French Revolution, battles between social groups rather than nations; roughly speaking, between those with more power and those with less. To understand these ideas, we have to understand that story. For that is what conservatism is: a meditation on—and theoretical rendition of—the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back.

Despite the very real differences between them, workers in a factory are like secretaries in an office, peasants on a manor, slaves on a plantation—even wives in a marriage—in that they live and labor in conditions of unequal power. They submit and obey, heeding the demands of their managers and masters, husbands and lords. They are disciplined and punished. They do much and receive little. Sometimes their lot is freely chosen—workers contract with their employers, wives with their husbands—but its entailments seldom are. What contract, after all, could ever itemize the ins and outs, the daily pains and ongoing sufferance, of a job or a marriage? Throughout American history, in fact, the contract often has served as a conduit to unforeseen coercion and constraint, particularly in institutions like the workplace and the family where men and women spend so much of their lives. Employment and marriage contracts have been interpreted by judges, themselves friendly to the interests of employers and husbands, to contain all sorts of unwritten and unwanted provisions of servitude to which wives and workers tacitly consent, even when they have no knowledge of such provisions or wish to stipulate otherwise.[1]

Until 1980, for example, it was legal in every state in the union for a husband to rape his wife.[2] The justification for this dates back to a 1736 treatise by English jurist Matthew Hale. When a woman marries, Hale argued, she implicitly agrees to give "up herself in this kind [sexually] unto her husband." Hers is a tacit, if unknowing, consent "which she cannot retract" for the duration of their union. Having once said yes, she can never say no. As late as 1957—during the era of the Warren Court—a standard legal treatise could state, "A man does not commit rape by having sexual intercourse with his lawful wife, even if he does so by force and against her will." If a woman (or man) tried to write into the marriage contract a requirement that express consent had to be given in order for sex to proceed, judges were bound by common law to ignore or override it. Implicit consent was a structural feature of the contract that neither party could alter. With the exit option of divorce not widely available until the second half of the twentieth century, the marriage contract doomed women to be the sexual servants of their husbands.[3] A similar dynamic was at work in the employment contract: workers consented to be hired by their employers, but until the twentieth century that consent was interpreted by judges to contain implicit and irrevocable provisions of servitude; meanwhile, the exit option of quitting was not nearly as available, legally or practically, as many might think.[4]

Every once in a while, however, the subordinates of this world contest their fates. They protest their conditions, write letters and petitions, join movements, and make demands. Their goals may be minimal and discrete—better safety guards on factory machines, an end to marital rape—but in voicing them, they raise the specter of a more fundamental change in power. They cease to be servants or supplicants and become agents, speaking and acting on their own behalf. More than the reforms themselves, it is this assertion of agency by the subject class—the appearance of an insistent and

independent voice of demand—that vexes their superiors. Guatemala's Agrarian Reform of 1952 redistributed a million and a half acres of land to 100,000 peasant families. That was nothing, in the minds of the country's ruling classes, compared to the riot of political talk the bill seemed to unleash. Progressive reformers, Guatemala's archbishop complained, sent local peasants "gifted with facility with words" to the capital, where they were given opportunities "to speak in public." That was the great evil of the Agrarian Reform.[5]

In his last major address to the Senate, John C. Calhoun, former vice president and chief spokesman of the Southern cause, identified the decision by Congress in the mid-1830s to receive abolitionist petitions as the moment when the nation set itself on an irreversible course of confrontation over slavery. In a four-decade career that had seen such defeats to the slaveholder position as the Tariff of Abominations, the Nullification Crisis, and the Force Bill, the mere appearance of slave speech in the nation's capital stood out for the dying Calhoun as the sign that the revolution had begun.[6] And when, a half-century later, Calhoun's successors sought to put the abolitionist genie back into the bottle, it was this same assertion of black agency that they targeted. Explaining the proliferation across the South in the 1890s and 1900s of constitutional conventions restricting the franchise, a delegate to one such convention declared, "The great underlying principle of this Convention movement . . . was the elimination of the negro from the politics of this State."[7]

American labor history is filled with similar complaints from the employing classes and their allies in government: not that unionized workers are violent, disruptive, or unprofitable but that they are independent and self-organizing. Indeed, so potent is their self-organization that it threatens—in the eyes of their superiors—to render superfluous the employer and the state. During the Great Upheaval of 1877, striking railroad workers in St. Louis took to

running the trains themselves. Fearful the public might conclude the workers were capable of managing the railroad, the owners tried to stop them—in effect, launching a strike of their own in order to prove it was the owners, and only the owners, who could make the trains run on time. During the Seattle general strike of 1919, workers went to great lengths to provide basic government services, including law and order. So successful were they that the mayor concluded it was this, the workers' independent capacity to limit violence and anarchy, that posed the greatest threat.

> The so-called sympathetic Seattle strike was an attempted revolution. That there was no violence does not alter the fact. . . . True, there were no flashing guns, no bombs, no killings. Revolution, I repeat, doesn't need violence. The general strike, as practiced in Seattle, is of itself the weapon of revolution, all the more dangerous because quiet. . . . That is to say, it puts the government out of operation. And that is all there is to revolt—no matter how achieved.[8]

Into the twentieth century, judges regularly denounced unionized workers for formulating their own definitions of rights and compiling their own register of shop-floor rules. Workers like these, claimed one federal court, saw themselves as "exponents of some higher law than that . . . administered by courts." They were exercising "powers belonging only to Government," declared the Supreme Court, constituting themselves as a "self-appointed tribunal" of law and order.[9]

Conservatism is the theoretical voice of this animus against the agency of the subordinate classes. It provides the most consistent and profound argument as to why the lower orders should not be allowed to exercise their independent will, why they should not be allowed to govern themselves or the polity. Submission is their first duty, agency, the prerogative of the elite.

Though it is often claimed that the left stands for equality while the right stands for freedom, this notion misstates the actual disagreement between right and left. Historically, the conservative has favored liberty for the higher orders and constraint for the lower orders. What the conservative sees and dislikes in equality, in other words, is not a threat to freedom but its extension. For in that extension, he sees a loss of his own freedom. "We are all agreed as to our own liberty," declared Samuel Johnson. "But we are not agreed as to the liberty of others: for in proportion as we take, others must lose. I believe we hardly wish that the mob should have liberty to govern us."[10] Such was the threat Edmund Burke saw in the French Revolution: not merely an expropriation of property or explosion of violence but an inversion of the obligations of deference and command. "The levellers," he claimed, "only change and pervert the natural order of things."

> The occupation of an hair-dresser, or of a working tallow-chandler, cannot be a matter of honour to any person—to say nothing of a number of other more servile employments. Such descriptions of men ought not to suffer oppression from the state; but the state suffers oppression, if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule.[11]

By virtue of membership in a polity, Burke allowed, men had a great many rights—to the fruits of their labor, their inheritance, education, and more. But the one right he refused to concede to all men was that "share of power, authority, and direction" they might think they ought to have "in the management of the state."[12]

Even when the left's demands shift to the economic realm, the threat of freedom's extension looms large. If women and workers are provided with the economic resources to make independent choices, they will be free not to obey their husbands and employers.

That is why Lawrence Mead, one of the leading intellectual opponents of the welfare state in the 1980s and 1990s, declared that the welfare recipient "must be made *less* free in certain senses rather than more."[13] For the conservative, equality portends more than a redistribution of resources, opportunities, and outcomes—though he certainly dislikes these, too.[14] What equality ultimately means is a rotation in the seat of power.

The conservative is not wrong to construe the threat of the left in these terms. Before he died, G. A. Cohen, one of contemporary Marxism's most acute voices, made the case that much of the left's program of economic redistribution could be understood as entailing not a sacrifice of freedom for the sake of equality, but an extension of freedom from the few to the many.[15] And, indeed, the great modern movements of emancipation—from abolition to feminism to the struggle for workers' rights and civil rights—have always posited a nexus between freedom and equality. Marching out of the family, the factory, and the field, where unfreedom and inequality are the flip sides of the same coin, they have made freedom and equality the irreducible yet mutually reinforcing parts of a single whole. The link between freedom and equality has not made the argument for redistribution any more palatable to the right. As one conservative wag complained of John Dewey's vision of social democracy, "The definitions of liberty and of equality have been so juggled that both refer to approximately the same condition."[16] Far from being a sleight of the progressive hand, however, this synthesis of freedom and equality is a central postulate of the politics of emancipation. Whether the politics conforms to the postulate is, of course, another story. But for the conservative, the concern is less the betrayal of the postulate than its fulfillment.

One of the reasons the subordinate's exercise of agency so agitates the conservative imagination is that it takes place in an intimate

setting. Every great political blast—the storming of the Bastille, the taking of the Winter Palace, the March on Washington—is set off by a private fuse: the contest for rights and standing in the family, the factory, and the field. Politicians and parties talk of constitution and amendment, natural rights and inherited privileges. But the real subject of their deliberations is the private life of power. "Here is the secret of the opposition to woman's equality in the state," Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote. "Men are not ready to recognize it in the home."[17] Behind the riot in the street or debate in Parliament is the maid talking back to her mistress, the worker disobeying her boss. That is why our political arguments—not only about the family but also the welfare state, civil rights, and much else—can be so explosive: they touch upon the most personal relations of power. It is also why it has so often fallen to our novelists to explain to us our politics. At the height of the civil rights movement, James Baldwin traveled to Tallahassee. There, in an imagined handshake, he found the hidden transcript of a constitutional crisis.[18]

> I am the only Negro passenger at Tallahassee's shambles of an airport. It is an oppressively sunny day. A black chauffeur, leading a small dog on a leash, is meeting his white employer. He is attentive to the dog, covertly very aware of me and respectful of her in a curiously watchful, waiting way. She is middle-aged, beaming and powdery-faced, delighted to see both the beings who make her life agreeable. I am sure that it has never occurred to her that either of them has the ability to judge her or would judge her harshly. She might almost, as she goes toward her chauffeur, be greeting a friend. No friend could make her face brighter. If she were smiling at me that way I would expect to shake her hand. But if I should put out my hand, panic, bafflement, and horror would then overtake that

face, the atmosphere would darken, and danger, even the threat of death, would immediately fill the air.

On such small signs and symbols does the southern cabala depend.[19]

The conflict over American slavery—the looming precedent to this set piece of Baldwin's imagination—offers an instructive example. One of the distinguishing characteristics of slavery in the United States is that unlike slaves in the Caribbean or serfs in Russia, many slaves in the South lived on small holdings with their masters in residence. Masters knew their slaves' names; tracked their births, marriages, and deaths; and held parties to honor these dates. The personal interaction between master and slave was unparalleled, leading a visiting Frederick Law Olmsted to remark upon the "close cohabitation and association of black and white" in Virginia, the "familiarity and closeness of intimacy that would have been noticed with astonishment, if not with manifest displeasure, in almost any chance company at the North."[20] Only the "relations of husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister," wrote the slavery apologist Thomas Dew, produced "a closer tie" than that of master and slave; the latter relationship, declared William Harper, another defender of slavery, was "one of the most intimate relations of society."[21] Conversely, after slavery was abolished, many whites lamented the chill in relations between the races. "I'm fond of the Negro," said one Mississippian in 1918, "but the bond between us is not as close as it was between my father and his slaves."[22]

Much of this talk was propaganda and self-delusion, of course, but in one respect it was not: the nearness of master to slave did make for an exceptionally personal mode of rule. Masters devised and enforced "unusually detailed" rules for their slaves, dictating when they had to get up, eat, work, sleep, garden, visit, and pray. Masters decided upon their slaves' mates and marriages. They

named their children, and when the market dictated, separated those children from their parents. And while masters—as well as their sons and overseers—availed themselves of the bodies of their female slaves whenever they wished, they saw fit to patrol and punish any and all sexual congress between their slaves.[23] Living with their slaves, masters had direct means to control their behavior and a detailed map of all the behavior there was to control.

The consequences of this proximity were felt not just by the slave but by the master as well. Living every day with his mastery, he became entirely identified with it. So complete was this identification that any sign of the slave's disobedience—much less her emancipation—was seen as an intolerable assault upon his person. When Calhoun declared that slavery "has grown up with our society and institutions, and is so interwoven with them, that to destroy it would be to destroy us as a people," he wasn't just referring to society in the aggregate or abstract.[24] He was thinking of individual men absorbed in the day-to-day experience of ruling other men and women. Take that experience away, and you destroyed not only the master but also the man—and the many men who sought to become, or thought they already were like, the master.

Because the master put so little distance between himself and his mastery, he would go to unprecedented lengths to keep his holdings. Throughout the Americas slaveholders defended their privileges, but nowhere with the intensity or violence of the master class in the South. Outside the South, wrote C. Vann Woodward, the end of slavery was "the liquidation of an investment." Inside, it was "the death of a society."[25] And when, after the Civil War, the master class fought with equal ferocity to restore its privileges and power, it was the proximity of command, the nearness of rule, that was uppermost in its mind. As Henry McNeal Turner, a black Republican in Georgia, put it in 1871: "They do not care so much about Congress admitting Negroes to their halls . . . but they

do not want the negroes over them at home." One hundred years later, a black sharecropper in Mississippi would still resort to the most domestic of idioms to describe relations between blacks and whites: "We had to mind them as our children mind us."[26]

When the conservative looks upon a democratic movement from below, this (and the exercise of agency) is what he sees: a terrible disturbance in the private life of power. Witnessing the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800, Theodore Sedgwick lamented, "The aristocracy of virtue is destroyed; personal influence is at an end."[27] Sometimes the conservative is personally implicated in that life, sometimes not. Regardless, it is his apprehension of the private grievance behind the public commotion that lends his theory its tactile ingenuity and moral ferocity. "The real object" of the French Revolution, Burke told Parliament in 1790, is "to break all those connexions, natural and civil, that regulate and hold together the community by a chain of subordination; to raise soldiers against their officers; servants against their masters; tradesmen against their customers; artificers against their employers; tenants against their landlords; curates against their bishops; and children against their parents."[28] Personal insubordination rapidly became a regular and consistent theme of Burke's pronouncements on the unfolding events in France. A year later, he wrote in a letter that because of the Revolution, "no house is safe from its servants, and no Officer from his Soldiers, and no State or constitution from conspiracy and insurrection."[29] In another speech before Parliament in 1791, he declared that "a constitution founded on what was called the rights of man" opened "Pandora's box" throughout the world, including Haiti: "Blacks rose against whites, whites against blacks, and each against one another in murderous hostility; subordination was destroyed."[30] Nothing to the Jacobins, he declared at the end of his life, was worthy "of the name of the publick virtue, unless it indicates violence on the private."[31]

So powerful is that vision of private eruption that it can turn a man of reform into a man of reaction. Schooled in the Enlightenment, John Adams believed that "consent of the people" was "the only moral foundation of government."[32] But when his wife suggested that a muted version of these principles be extended to the family, he was not pleased. "And, by the way," Abigail wrote him, "in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could."[33] Her husband's response:

> We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient; that schools and colleges were grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and Negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all of the rest, were grown discontented.

Though he leavened his response with playful banter—he prayed that George Washington would shield him from the "despotism of the petticoat"[34]—Adams was clearly rattled by this appearance of democracy in the private sphere. In a letter to James Sullivan, he worried that the Revolution would "confound and destroy all distinctions," unleashing throughout society a spirit of insubordination so intense that all order would be dissolved. "There will be no end of it."[35] No matter how democratic the state, it was imperative that society remain a federation of private dominions, where husbands ruled over wives, masters governed apprentices, and each "should know his place and be made to keep it."[36]

Historically, the conservative has sought to forestall the march of democracy in both the public and the private spheres, on the assumption that advances in the one necessarily spur advances in the other. "In order to keep the state out of the hands of the people," wrote the French monarchist Louis de Bonald, "it is necessary to keep the family out of the hands of women and children."[37] Even in the United States, this effort has periodically yielded fruit. Despite our Whiggish narrative of the steady rise of democracy, historian Alexander Keyssar has demonstrated that the struggle for the vote in the United States has been as much a story of retraction and contraction as one of progress and expansion, "with class tensions and apprehensions" on the part of political and economic elites constituting "the single most important obstacle to universal suffrage . . . from the late eighteenth century to the 1960s."[38]

Still, the more profound and prophetic stance on the right has been Adams's: cede the field of the public, if you must, stand fast in the private. Allow men and women to become democratic citizens of the state; make sure they remain feudal subjects in the family, the factory, and the field. The priority of conservative political argument has been the maintenance of private regimes of power—even at the cost of the strength and integrity of the state. We see this political arithmetic at work in the ruling of a Federalist court in Massachusetts that a Loyalist woman who fled the Revolution was the adjutant of her husband, and thus should not be held responsible for fleeing and should not have her property confiscated by the state; in the refusal of Southern slaveholders to yield their slaves to the Confederate cause; and the more recent insistence of the Supreme Court that women could not be legally obliged to sit on juries because they are "still regarded as the center of home and family life" with their "own special responsibilities."[39]

Conservatism, then, is not a commitment to limited government and liberty—or a wariness of change, a belief in evolutionary

reform, or a politics of virtue. These may be the byproducts of conservatism, one or more of its historically specific and ever-changing modes of expression. But they are not its animating purpose. Neither is conservatism a makeshift fusion of capitalists, Christians, and warriors, for that fusion is impelled by a more elemental force—the opposition to the liberation of men and women from the fetters of their superiors, particularly in the private sphere. Such a view might seem miles away from the libertarian defense of the free market, with its celebration of the atomistic and autonomous individual. But it is not. When the libertarian looks out upon society, he does not see isolated individuals; he sees private, often hierarchical, groups, where a father governs his family and an owner his employees.[40]

No simple defense of one's own place and privileges—the conservative, as I've said, may or may not be directly involved in or benefit from the practices of rule he defends; many, as we'll see, are not—the conservative position stems from a genuine conviction that a world thus emancipated will be ugly, brutish, base, and dull. It will lack the excellence of a world where the better man commands the worse. When Burke adds, in the letter quoted above, that the "great Object" of the Revolution is "to root out that thing called an *Aristocrat* or Nobleman and Gentleman," he is not simply referring to the power of the nobility; he is also referring to the distinction that power brings to the world.[41] If the power goes, the distinction goes with it. This vision of the connection between excellence and rule is what brings together in postwar America that unlikely alliance of the libertarian, with his vision of the employer's untrammeled power in the workplace; the traditionalist, with his vision of the father's rule at home; and the statist, with his vision of a heroic leader pressing his hand upon the face of the earth. Each in his own way subscribes to this typical statement, from the nineteenth century, of the conservative creed:

"To obey a real superior . . . is one of the most important of all virtues—a virtue absolutely essential to the attainment of anything great and lasting."[42]

The notion that conservative ideas are a mode of counterrevolutionary practice is likely to raise some eyebrows, even hackles. It has long been an axiom on the left that the defense of power and privilege is an enterprise devoid of ideas. "Intellectual history," a recent study of American conservatism submits, "is never unwelcome," but it "is not the most direct approach to explaining the power of conservatism in America."[43] Liberal writers have always portrayed right-wing politics as an emotional swamp rather than a movement of considered opinion: Thomas Paine claimed counterrevolution entailed "an obliteration of knowledge"; Lionel Trilling described American conservatism as a mélange of "irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas"; Robert Paxton called fascism an "affair of the gut," not "of the brain."[44] Conservatives, for their part, have tended to agree.[45] It was Palmerston, after all, when he was still a Tory, who first attached the epithet "stupid" to the Conservative Party. Playing the part of the dull-witted country squire, conservatives have embraced the position of F. J. C. Hearnshaw that "it is commonly sufficient for practical purposes if conservatives, without saying anything, just sit and think, or even if they merely sit."[46] While the aristocratic overtones of that discourse no longer resonate, the conservative still holds onto the label of the untutored and the unlettered; it's part of his populist charm and demotic appeal. As the conservative *Washington Times* observes, Republicans "often call themselves the 'stupid party.'"[47] Nothing, as we shall see, could be further from the truth. Conservatism is an idea-driven praxis, and no amount of preening from the right or polemic from the left can reduce or efface the catalog of mind one finds there.