# Understanding Conservatism, Old and New

### Reviews of: *Conservative Moments: Reading Conservative Texts* Mark Garnett, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2018 *Blue-Collar Conservatisim: Frank Rizzo’s Philadelphia and Populist Politics* Timothy J. Lombardo, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2018

In the time of Brexit, Trump, Viktor Orbán, the Polish Law and Justice party, and Jair Bolsonaro, the question of what, exactly, is conservatism has taken on a new urgency. Are these new political players dangerous reactionaries or a justified populist counterweight to out-of-touch elites? Are any of them even conservatives? (Many “mainstream conservative” institutions in the US and the UK reject being associated with all or most of the above.) Given these circumstances, the publication of these two books, especially the second of them, is timely.

Let us turn first to *Conservative Moments*. The book is a collection of twelve essays on various political philosophers and politicians who might be considered conservative, as well as four on entire geographical areas, e.g., “Conservatism in Europe.” The figures covered range from Plato and Augustine to Reagan and Thatcher, and include other notables such as David Hume, Edmund Burke, Alexander Hamilton, Samuel Coleridge, Leo Strauss, and Michael Oakeshott. (A chapter on Joseph de Maistre would have been a welcome addition here.) How can such a diverse collection of thinkers and political actors be brought under a single umbrella named “conservative”? To his credit, the editor of this volume, Mark Garnett, recognizes the difficulty of assembling such a crowd under one parasol. He offers his own criterion for admission under that cover: “conservatism can be defined broadly as an aversion towards radical change, reflecting a belief in the imperfection of human nature,” and thus “it [can] be identified across geographical as well as historical boundaries” (xvi).

But what is gained by throwing together essays about such a temporally and spatially dispersed collection in a single volume? The editors of the series of which this book is a part describe it as follows: “‘Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought’... is designed to encourage fresh readings of thematically selected texts. Each chapter identifies a key textual moment or passage and exposes it to a reading by an acknowledged expert” (x). Aside from the use of the word ‘exposes,’ which strikes me as a triumph of trendy jargon over clarity, I also wonder whether the brief space allocated to each “reading” is really sufficient to accomplish the goal of the series: the six or seven pages allocated to a chapter hardly seems enough to convey a novel view of, say, Plato or Hume. What the authors *are* generally able to accomplish is to give a brief discussion of the sense in which a particular thinker may be regarded as conservative, and argue to what extent such a label actually captures his thought. Now, that is a worthwhile achievement—as my grandmother would have said, “that’s nothing to sneeze at”—but it falls short of the grander goal of the series editors.

In any case, the rest of Garnett’s introduction is a useful discussion of the great difficulty in applying the term “conservative” with any precision, given its enormously varied uses in practice. American “conservatives,” Garnett notes, want “to preserve cultural and political traditions which have always been predominantly *liberal* in nature” (xviii, emphasis in original). Meanwhile, those calling themselves “Conservatives” in Britain largely adopted liberal economic policies and embraced liberal political structures, and Christian Democratic parties on the European continent were seen as “conservatives” by Americans, simply because they were anti-Communist.

In the first essay after the introduction, Joseph M. Ellis and Casey R. Pratt discuss “Authority and conservatism in Plato’s *Republic*.” They note that Socrates described a pattern that might seem relevant today: in the last stages of democracy, when “idlers” and “money makers” become increasingly common, the money makers attempt to seize all political power, but “the people will resist, and they will elevate one man above the others to protect them from this threat” (6). Two pages later the authors explicitly draw the parallel to Donald Trump’s election to the presidency of the United States, although they assure the reader that the U.S. is not on the verge of slipping into tyranny as a result of that election.

Socrates, Ellis and Pratt assert, despite his divergence from modern conservatives, especially on the topic of collective ownership, nevertheless “has much to offer conservatism” (9). Specifically, conservatives should look to his lessons on the nature of authority, especially in relation to the family and education. Moreover, his concern about political arrangements that appear to aid the people only to “subvert that interest over time” (9) also ought to inform conservative thought.

W.J. Coats, in his piece on Augustine, claims that the association of the Bishop of Hippo with conservatism lies in “his pessimistic view of human nature and human understanding, and his belief that the future would grow increasingly corrupt” (12). In Augustine’s view, the realm of history was populated by an intermingling of the inhabitants of “the city of God,” the elect destined for salvation, and those of “the city of man,” who lived in strife and discord. However, in the clouded understanding of our fallen state, we are in no position to sort out which is which, and no earthly activities will hasten the final separation of the wheat from the chaff.

However, Coats argues, “progressives,” beginning with many Anglo-American Protestant figures, re-interpreted this situation as one in which earthly activity could *transform* the city of man into the city of God. Furthermore, history could be “read” to determine how this can and should happen, and in the historical process one can discern God’s approval (or disapproval) of one’s attempt to create a shining city on a hill. Christian at first, at the hands of Comte, Marx, and others, this project morphed into modern, secular progressivism.

Per Coats, Augustine sees it as impossible to ever achieve lasting peace or security in the city of man: war is “rooted in the earthly battle between the flesh and the spirit, and this will not change until the end of time” (14). His relevance for modern conservatives is that he “identified a way to limit the potential tyranny in a moral posture flowing from *certainty* about the direction of linear history” (17).

In the subsequent chapter, Allen J. Fromherz discusses the Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun, and concludes that “Ibn Khaldun was none other than the epitome of the traditional conservatism of his age [but] was also its most radical opponent” (24), a view that seems to rest upon Fromherz’s Straussian view that at times, in Ibn Khaldun’s writings, “he did not reveal his true opinions” (24). But Fromherz offers no reason to suppose that Ibn Khaldun did not do so. James A. Harris sees Hume as “not a conservative in the proper sense of the word” (which “proper sense” Harris fails to define) since for Hume “there was... no serious and coherent radical ideology” (33). Why this renders Hume “not a proper conservative” is unclear to this reader.

Volume editor Mark Garnett contributes his own chapter on Burke. He declares “the Burkean conservative is engaged in a continuous process of piecemeal adaptations to unpredictable developments” (39). However, Burke’s (liberal) “economic ideas were ill chosen for a politician with an overriding preoccupation with social... stability” (42). Nevertheless, Burke “deserves to be recognized as... perhaps... the greatest exponent of conservative philosophy” (42). Michael P. Federici explains that Alexander Hamilton “was an advocate of natural aristocracy, a class of elites who were qualified for positions of leadership not by birth or wealth, but by talent and ability” (45). John Morrow praises Samuel Coleridge’s views as being “more humane, liberal, and progressive” (57) than understandings like Augustine’s, unfortunately without asking whether those more optimistic views are in fact more accurate, as though the most important aspect of a thinker’s ideas is how sunny, rather than how true, they are.

In his essay on Leo Strauss, David Lewis Schaefer contends that Strauss “was arguably the greatest philosophic thinker of the twentieth century” (60), a contention that will only be seen as remotely plausible by devoted Straussians. He goes on to declare that “The rediscovery of esotericism... enabled Strauss to refute the historicist assumption that every thinker is inevitably the prisoner of the dominant presuppositions of his time and place, so that contemporary readers can learn little... from even the greatest thinkers of the past” (60). But this is an almost entirely strawman version of historicism, and no significant figure who might be termed “historicist”—not Hegel, not Collingwood, not Croce, not MacIntyre, etc.—thought anything remotely like this.

Efraim Podolisk analyzes Oakeshott’s earlier and later works in terms of the “pessimistic anti-rationalism” (71) of the early material versus the “liberal mood” (71) of the later works. Here, I cannot agree: there is nothing “pessimistic” about debunking doctrines that can’t possibly work, which is what Oakeshott was doing in his essays on rationalism.

The regional essays begin with Elena Chebankova analyzing Russian conservatism as having “liberal” and “statist” branches, both present since the nineteenth century. She says Putin, at present, engaged in grappling with the “existential challenges” to merge these two branches into “a coherent shape and form” (84). Christian Winkler makes the case that conservatism in Japan has much more in common with Western conservatism than one might suspect. Martin Steven contributes an interesting survey of the history of Christian Democracy in post-WWII Europe.

Perhaps my least favorite of the essays in this volume was “Conservatism in Turkey.” I came to it not entirely ignorant of the existence of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, but without any particular opinion as to whether he was a hero, a villain, or, like most politicians, something in between. I believe this ignorance stood me in good stead in evaluating this essay, since I had no pre-conceived position to defend, and hoped to increase my knowledge of Erdogan by reading it.

But my hopes were dashed: all I really learned here was that this essay’s three authors really, really dislike Erdogan. They dislike him so much, apparently, that they can’t write coherently in discussing him. For instance, they contrast Erdogan’s supposed “liberal-conservatism” with the radical reform agenda of Ataturk. While Erdogan is currently popular in Turkey, the authors want to claim that Ataturk still has his adherents as well, and so they write: “The wheel has not turned a complete circle in Turkey, and Ataturk is still a respected figure” (104). But a wheel that turns “a complete circle” is right back where it started, and would mean that Ataturk was as respected as he was at his height of influence. They really mean something like, “But Turkish politics have not turned 180 degrees...” Well, OK, they screwed up a geometrical metaphor. Is that so bad?

No, but it is just a symptom, not the disease, which is that the authors antipathy to Erdogan clouds their ability to think. For instance, they write:

It would be perverse... if the AKP [Erdogan’s party] had claimed to be ‘conservative’ only as a tactical ploy to help it secure a position from which it could usher in an indefinite period of violent instability. (105)

Here, the authors seem to be claiming that Erdogan’s party pretended to want conservative stability but really were after “an indefinite period of violent instability.” But that claim is absurd: what *ruling* party could possibly be hiding its desire for violent instability behind a *ploy* of wanting stable rule? I assume the authors had something else in mind here, but what that could be is beyond my ability to divine. But even worse, only two paragraphs later, the authors indicate that “the AKP has discarded the de-contextualized ‘liberalism,’ while retaining the ‘consevative’ principles” (105). I’m sorry, but I can’t really understand how the AKP’s conservatism was only a “ploy,” but was, in fact, what it retained while abandoning its liberalism.

The book closes with chapters on Charles de Gaulle, Ronald Reagan, and Margaret Thatcher, and discussion of to what extent any of them were conservative. (In broad strokes, the answer is “somewhat.”) As a whole, this volume is a worthwhile survey of 2400 years of conservative thought from across the globe.

Timothy J. Lombardo, the author of *Blue Collar Conservatism*, the other work under review here, wants to dispute the image of working-class conservatives as *simple* racists. No, he insists, they are actually *complex* racists:

...the 1968 Kerner Commission Report... blamed white racism for the urban uprisings that struck American cities in the mid-to-late 1960s... But the familiar backlash narrative is misleading and overly reductive... Parts of the backlash theory certainly ring true, but they still must be understood in the context of the myriad changes wrought by the urban crisis. (6)

Attempts to deny one’s racism serve, for Lombardo, to confirm it. “Blue-collar whites *adopted* color-blind discourse” (10, emphasis mine), to hide the racist motivation behind their “rejection of racially inclusive housing, education, and employment policies” (11). Lombardo never asks whether policies like erecting giant public housing projects, busing kids miles from their homes for school, and affirmative action in the workplace could be rejected for some other reason than animosity towards “racial inclusion”: no, these are apparently good policies *a priori*, and any opposition to them is inherently racist. This assumption is especially extraordinary given that Jane Jacobs, over 50 years ago, offered a devastating critique of the harm done by public housing projects to the very people they were supposed to be helping. But for Lombardo, blue-collar whites supposed pride in their neighborhoods, traditions, and hard work was merely “a means of obfuscating race” (11).

I came to this book as a Frank Rizzo *tabula rasa*, having been too young and too removed from Philadelphia politics to have been aware of him as the city’s mayor in the 1970s, and having read nothing about him since. Thus I approached this work as a piece of serious research that would fill that lacuna. And so I was surprised to find the author writing, in the introduction:

To his critics, Rizzo was little more than a villain. They saw him as an enemy of civil rights, a bully, a racist, a sexist, a homophobe, and a mean-spirited patriarchical figurehead of a regressive political order. He was all those things. (p. 3)

Given that I did not know anything about Rizzo, I was in no position to evaluate if any of these accusations were true. No, what surprised me was to find this in the *introduction* to the book: Shouldn’t the confirmation of these accusations have been in the book’s *conclusion*, rather than in its introduction? Ought not an honest, scholarly examination of Rizzo’s career have begun by asking, say, “Was he all those things?” rather than positing that he was, without further ado? And just to be clear, I am not denying that perhaps Rizzo *was* a bully, racist, sexist, homophobe, etc.: it is just that, if I am to conclude that he was, I would like to do so after the presentation of the case for these criticisms, rather than taking them as assumptions at the start of the “anti-Rizzo” case. And this is the major flaw in this work, in general: rather than approaching Rizzo’s career, and the course of “blue-collar conservatism” more broadly, from the point of view of a social scientist, seeking to determine how to evaluate such phenomena, Lombardo is throughout this work a committed partisan, seeking to convince the reader that “blue-collar conservatism” is mostly racism in disguise, even if there are a few complicating factors tossed in the mix.

Lombardo does present convincing evidence of racism on the part of *many* blue-collar whites: for instance, in the treatment of the Wright family, the first black family to move into the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. The “white ethnics” in Kensington treated the Wrights terribly, and any decent human being ought to condemn such bigotry. But Lombardo is unable to restrict his accusations of racism to such cases where he can clearly back them up. Instead, even when blue-collar ethnic whites proclaim their color blindness, and seem to follow through in action on such declarations, “their color blindness was the ultimate luxury of their white privilege” (244). What are we to make of such an assertion? Martin Luther King urged color blindness on his fellow Americans: was this “the ultimate luxury of...” his what? Is Lombardo contending that if a blue-collar white person happened to adopt the exact same race-neutral stance as King had advanced, they are not just racist for doing so, but doing so is the “ultimate luxury” of their racism? Well, if I were a racist, and I discovered that, per Lombardo, the “ultimate” reward for my racism is that... people should be treated equally regardless of their race, I would begin to think that there was no point in being a racist. He contends that blue-collar whites abandoned liberalism because it “succeeded too well for the wrong people” (244), as if the history of liberal social polices was one of succeeding extremely well for African-Americans, rather than of bringing a halt to decades of African-American economic progress. And he calls the tough-on-crime policies of two quite popular, twice-elected presidents, Reagan and Clinton, “anti-democratic” (245), by which he apparently means “I didn’t like those policies.”

Lombardo’s book is seriously flawed as a work of history in that it approaches the evidence with a thesis to prove, and then rummages through that evidence for whatever bits back that pre-adopted thesis. Furthermore, he re-interprets whatever data would seem to contradict his pre-chosen narrative so as to instead make it *confirm* his story. Nevertheless, this is still a valuable work, first of all in its timeliness, secondly, in that it collects in one place a great deal of information on the history of Philadelphia—Lombardo is clearly a fully competent historian on the technical level—and finally in at least raising the question of what other factors might be behind the rise of “blue-collar conservatism” besides racial animus.