



Will-to-Power Conservatism and the Great Liberalism Schism

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In the last few years, a major fault line has opened up on the American political right: Call it the Great Liberalism Schism. On one side are those of us who remain committed to classical liberal norms and values such as due process, free trade, and religious freedom. On the other side is an increasingly restless group of writers and thinkers at places like *First Things* and the Claremont Institute who say America has tried classical liberalism—and it failed us.

These "post-liberals" believe it's time for a conservative politics that stops worrying about protecting individual liberty and starts worrying about attaining the common good. Generally speaking, that means embracing "strong rule" by a government tasked, among other things, with "enforcing duties of community and solidarity in the use and distribution of resources," as the Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule put it in a March essay for *The Atlantic*.

There's nothing wrong with caring about the common good. It's just that the self-named Common-Good Conservatives don't have a monopoly on the idea.

Just as there are many competing visions of the good life at an individual level, people frequently disagree about what a good society would look like. Most political leftists believe religiously affiliated employers should be required to pay for their workers' birth control—and the language they use in defense of that position and others like it is nothing if not moral. Yet most people on the political right see that understanding of the common good as utterly mistaken. In a democratic society, how do you ensure that only the correct vision is coercively enforced?

At a sufficiently high level, we can all agree the concept is tied to human flourishing. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the common good as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily." The dispute, then, is about *how* to help people thrive. For many of us, protecting individual liberty is crucial as both a component of and a requirement for achieving that goal.

A free society is in itself a good thing. That doesn't mean freedom is the only good or even the highest good. But it is a good that must be included in any final accounting of the common good. To deny someone control over his own life is to assert your supremacy over him, violating his innate dignity as a person. The more coercion exercised, the greater the violation. While there may be pragmatic arguments against the institution of slavery, I trust we all recognize them as

secondary. The first and most important reason to oppose human bondage, which is the opposite of human liberty, is that it's evil. A freer society is a better society, all else being equal.

But freedom isn't just a component of the common good. It's a prerequisite for other components as well.

Any list of the social conditions that promote human flourishing would certainly include things like *justice for all* and *material abundance*. When classical liberals emphasize institutions such as due process and free trade, it's precisely because we see them as means to these ends. Hence libertarians' seeming preoccupation with what the economist Deirdre McCloskey has termed the "Great Enrichment" of the last 250 years.

Classical liberals are not always comfortable employing common-good terminology, but creating the conditions under which people can thrive is undeniably the endgame of the classical liberal project. "We consider cooperation so essential to human flourishing that we don't just want to talk about it," wrote Cato Institute executive vice president David Boaz in his 2015 book *The Libertarian Mind* (Simon & Schuster). "We want to create social institutions that make it possible. That is what property rights, limited government, and the rule of law are all about."

But if the so-called Common-Good Conservatives are not alone in their concern for the common good, then their chosen moniker obscures what differentiates them rather than illuminating it. What might be a better appellation for this group? I suggest, to borrow a concept from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche about human beings' natural desire to expand and dominate, they would more accurately be described as Will-to-Power Conservatives.

In 1651, Thomas Hobbes described the precivilizational state of nature as "a war of all against all." It appears some people believe the introduction of rule of law did little to alter that fact. *New York Post* opinion editor Sohrab Ahmari, in a now-infamous 2019 essay for *First Things*, called upon conservatives to accept the hard truth "of politics as war and enmity." All societies have rulers, the Will-to-Power Conservatives seem to be saying; what matters above all else is ensuring that *our* tribe is dominant.

Don't take my word for it. In a recent symposium published by *The American Conservative*, editor of *American Affairs* Julius Krein (echoing his colleague Gladden Pappin) complains that "contemporary conservatism" lacks "a serious approach to wielding political power." Hillsdale College's David Azerrad argues that conservatives must learn to be "manly," "combative," and "comfortable" using "the levers of state power...to reward friends and punish enemies." And Claremont's Matthew J. Peterson insists that "conservatism must not merely make arguments...it must *act* on them, wielding 'regime-level' power in the service of good political order to do so."

Ahmari in his 2019 essay mocked classical liberals' "great horror of the state, of traditional authority and the use of the public power to advance the common good." He went on to urge conservatives to "fight the culture war with the aim of defeating the enemy and enjoying the spoils."

And what would the Will-to-Power Conservatives do with state control once acquired? The specifics vary from person to person, but the policy agenda can be characterized as right-wing on social issues (blue laws; crackdowns on pornography) and left-wing on economics (industrial subsidies; generous unemployment insurance). At the nexus of the two are proposals to use the tax code to encourage larger families, in which women preferably work less outside the home.

That formulation—socially conservative and fiscally liberal—may seem to have an uncanny valley quality, because it's the inverse of a common shorthand description of libertarianism. The Will-to-Power Conservatives make no bones about that: Their aim is "to challenge the moral-cultural dominance of radical liberal individualism," writes Krein. It is collectivist, if not authoritarian, by design.

Classical liberals seek a world in which everyone is free to live out his own conception of the good so long as he abstains from forcibly interfering with others' ability to do the same. We're therefore just as concerned with defending a person's right to view pornography or buy alcohol on Sundays (to the chagrin of some traditionalists) as we are with defending an employer's right not to be involved in the provision of his workers' birth control (to the chagrin of many leftists). One's freedom, as far as the law is concerned, does not depend on his using it to do what's objectively moral.

For Will-to-Power Conservatives, just the opposite is true: By virtue of representing the correct vision of the good, they say, they have every right to use the coercive power of the state to interfere with others' choices. In place of *equal rights under the law*, it's *error has no rights*. This is no way to achieve the common good.