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Why the GOP Is Ideologically Lost

Eric Levitz

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American conservatism has long been an incoherent and hypocritical creed.

There is nothing new about Republicans preaching balanced budgets while practicing fiscal profligacy; or prescribing laissez-faire for the indigent while expanding welfare for conservative constituencies; or equating public investment with communism while fighting to expand the most centrally planned sector of the economy. Ronald Reagan was a “small-government” conservative in the streets, but a Keynesian in the balance sheets.

Nevertheless, the ideological incoherence of the contemporary GOP is unusually severe. The Reaganites could not practice what they preached; post-Trump Republicans can’t settle on a catechism to hypocritically recite.

The party has a set of unwavering transactional commitments (to reactionary billionaires, provincial capitalists, and the Christian right). And some of its factions harbor intelligible agendas. But these contingents are no longer united by any overriding account of how public policy must change. Today’s GOP insists that corporate titans are “job creators” entitled to low taxes, but also “woke” traitors deserving of state persecution. It calls for an end to American nation-building in the Middle East, but also for Joe Biden to push for regime change in Iran. It derides welfare programs as invitations to dependency, but also evinces *some* interest in expanding refundable tax credits for working-class families. It wants to reassert American economic sovereignty by reshoring supply chains and protecting domestic manufacturing, but also to give multinational firms veto power over U.S. tax policy.

Republicans have less trouble articulating what they’re against: high taxes, immigration, Joe Biden’s fictional meat ban, and Dr. Seuss Enterprises’ property rights. But as this sardonic summary suggests, the GOP’s unifying antipathies are largely divorced from genuine questions of public policy. The social liberalism of consumer-facing corporations is a product of cultural change, not legislative action. The parts of the Biden agenda that most inflame conservative activists do not actually exist. And even on immigration, Republicans boast no consensus vision

for how the status quo should be reformed. In 2018, Donald Trump's bill to slash legal immigration garnered just 39 GOP votes in the Senate. That Republicans lack any affirmative governing agenda is less a matter of opinion than official record: In 2020, the party declined to put forward a campaign platform of any kind, and its standard-bearer never detailed the policies he intended to enact upon reelection.

Conservative intellectuals have conceived new orthodoxies, but they keep getting aborted.

One prominent explanation for the GOP's ideological confusion goes something like this: American conservatism's flagship institutions — its think tanks, legal societies, and highbrow publications — remain faithful to free-market theology. And, uncoincidentally, the GOP's largest donor networks have also retained their hostility to social welfare, progressive taxation, and state direction of the national economy. But market fundamentalism is empirically discredited and politically obsolete. The Reaganite commitment to free trade decimated America's industrial base and facilitated China's rise. Now, a new communist superpower threatens U.S. global dominance. And unlike their American competitors, China's leading exporters can count on state-sponsored investment and subsidy. Republicans *tried* to answer this economic threat the “small government” way, but the Trump tax cuts did little to increase business investment in the U.S. Thus, the objectives of minimizing non-military public spending — and safeguarding America's economic and geopolitical supremacy — have come into tension.

Meanwhile, as college-educated professionals have moved left, and low-income whites have moved right, Republicans have grown increasingly reliant on the support of Americans who have more use for transfer programs than supply-side bromides. And such disaffection with market fundamentalism is not limited to red America's new arrivals. The party's best-organized mass constituency — Christian social conservatives — have grown increasingly dissatisfied with the role of “junior partner” in a coalition with Randian plutocrats. The four decades since Reagan's election have been very good for country-club Republicans, who've seen their share of national income and wealth grow precipitously. Yet over the same period, America's moral traditionalists have witnessed a collapse in their cultural influence. They were promised an end to *Roe* and a restoration of “family values”; instead, they got same-sex marriage, plummeting birth rates, emptying pews, Drag Queen Story Hour — and, to add insult to injury, “woke” corporations that spit in the face of the very movement that gifted them rock-bottom tax rates.

The outlines of a new conservative fusionism — which is to say, of a governing philosophy that could bind blue-collar nativists, Christian conservatives, and anti-China hawks together by redressing their disparate disappointments with Reaganism — is readily discernible. A motley crew of right-wing intellectuals has already begun sketching versions of such an agenda. The details of their visions vary widely. But generally speaking, this “New Right” privileges national strength above free markets, full employment above small government, and the traditional family above individual liberty. A program along these lines would satisfy the bulk of red America's denizens, and have considerable appeal among swing voters. But it does not appeal to the GOP's market-fundamentalist elite. And the entrenched power of those think-tankers and big-dollar donors preempts any genuine realignment. The old Republican orthodoxy is dying and a new one cannot be born.

Is the New Right wrong?

This is more or less the New Right's account of what's happening in the GOP. And it largely aligns with my own understanding of the party's predicament (although, I'm more skeptical of the substantive viability of the New Right's program).

But in an essay that's attracted much conservative interest, the journalist Tanner Greer argues that the New Right's narrative is fundamentally wrong: Republican elites aren't foisting libertarianism on their party's communitarian rank-and-file; elite social conservatives are trying to foist communitarianism on the their party's libertarian masses.

Greer's piece is the best primer on the New Right that I've encountered. It provides a succinct taxonomy of the group's disparate factions, which range from the policy-oriented, "pro-worker" conservatives at American Compass and *American Affairs* — who are chiefly concerned with getting Republicans to embrace industrial policy, immigration restriction, sectoral bargaining, and some forms of social welfare — to the reactionary integralists, who are primarily interested in turning the 21st-century United States into some kind of Catholic theocracy. Greer also offers this fine summary of the New Right's indictment of the GOP's "free market" Establishment:

[T]he conservatives lost the culture war, and this loss, they maintain, was their own side's fault. The left never shies away from using government to make the world woke, but *we* have never been allowed to reply in kind. The libertarian dogmas of Milton Friedman and Frederick Hayek have handicapped conservatism. Libertarian ideals — which champion the sovereign individual unfettered by community, tradition, or obligation — are sugar-coated poison pills. They promise to beat back a grasping federal government, but attempt to achieve this aim by sacralizing the same fatal lie that makes progressivism possible in the first place. *There is no notion of common good*, goes the lie, *that can ever justify violating your right to individual self-realization*.

But Greer insists that the New Right has the wrong culprit. Libertarian intellectuals aren't the source of their ideology's marginalization in American politics; the centuries-old "folkways" of the American people are.

Specifically, Greer argues that an ethos of individual sovereignty is deeply rooted in the culture of America in general, and *red* America in particular. He observes that uneducated 18th-century Americans who'd never read a page of John Locke nevertheless articulated libertarian principles — such as the right of people to govern their own affairs, and live how they personally see fit — in interviews and other records. Greer suggests that these remarks do not reflect the popularization of elite ideas, but rather the ingrained customs of the peoples who first settled the republic:

A legal regime that allows children to freely choose their own marriage partners has been a far more efficient engine of atomization than all the Enlightenment theorists put together. Such a legal regime — and the nuclear-family system it supports — predate Locke by centuries. So it is with all the bugbears of the New Right. The detachment of the suburban home, the egoism of

individualist striving, over-rationalist notions of social contract, the ceaseless whirring of the capitalist machine — all have clear antecedents in English society, many reaching back to the 1200s. In America these antique individualist folkways met the realities of frontier living. No other explanation for the American people's libertarian impulses are needed.

Thus, in Greer's estimation, "America's libertarian tracts were foisted on no one. Rather, they are simply an attempt to articulate in the language of philosophy the common-sense attitudes and practices long embedded in the customs of the people themselves."

He goes on to argue that the common-sense attitudes of America's Scots-Irish immigrants — and thus, of the regions they settled — privilege "clan over community" and individual autonomy over the "common good" to an exceptional degree. And it was these very regions that made Donald Trump president. Which makes the New Right's project fundamentally hopeless: These intellectuals "hope to build a post-libertarian national order on the backs of the most naturally libertarian demographic in the country!"

Anglo-American "folkways" do not determine capital-gains tax rates.

Greer makes an interesting argument. But it's only persuasive if one defines "libertarian" very loosely, and the New Right, very narrowly: It is surely true that most Trump supporters value personal freedom too much to form a mass base for Catholic integralism, or any illiberal state that sought to impose a traditionalist conception of "the common good" upon them. Trump voters largely support marijuana legalization and same-sex marriage.

Yet Greer's analysis conflates two very different questions, namely: "Is the median Trump voter too libertarian to support a literal theocracy?" and "Is the median Trump voter too libertarian to support public investment in manufacturing, collective-bargaining rights, a child allowance — or a Republican Party that endorsed those things?"

And he gives us little reason to believe that the answer to question No. 2 is "yes."

It might be true that America's individualistic culture owes less to Milton Friedman than it does to 12th-century marriage laws. But if inherited customs shape a society's common sense, they do not translate that common sense into public policy. Ideological elites like Friedman do that work — and in so doing, they have considerable latitude to foist unrequested policies onto the public.

The notion that 1970s-era libertarian tracts are mere translations of American common sense into "philosophy" is absurd. The same descendants of Scots-Irish settlers whom Greer casts as natural supporters of market fundamentalism were, just a generation ago, a pillar of the New Deal coalition. In the present day, these voters often support minimum-wage increases in ballot referenda and oppose cuts to Medicare and Social Security in opinion polls. Republicans did not embrace trade liberalization and capital-gains tax cuts in deference to ancient folkways; they did so in deference to elite opinion and business lobbying.

Capitalism: Conservatives can't live with it, can't live without it.

Greer's conflation of Catholic integralists with center-right reformers, and individualist intuitions with libertarian policies, isn't the only flaw in his argument. A separate problem derives from his gender-blind account of America's inveterate individualism. A reverence for the personal autonomy of (white) men — and for the privileging of family above community — might be “long embedded” in our society's customs and traditions. But within the family, custom has long favored hierarchical order over personal freedom, save for that of the patriarch. The idea that women's lives should be shaped by the pursuit of their own idiosyncratic conceptions of happiness — rather than by the fulfillment of traditional roles and obligations — has been mainstream in the U.S. for less than a generation. This is no small point. Greer's neglect of gender inequality isn't a failure of inclusivity but one of analysis; for it is precisely individualism's penetration of the domestic sphere that fuels the communitarian right's anxieties.

Few contemporary conservatives reject gender equality in employment or education as a matter of principle. But the social developments that most alarm them — declining rates of marriage and fertility, and rising rates of LGBT identification — are inextricable from the erosion of deeply rooted, *anti-individualist* domestic customs. And the erosion of those customs is itself quite likely inextricable from “the ceaseless whirring of the capitalist machine.” Virtually every industrialized nation has witnessed the same loosening of conventional gender roles and sexual mores, from one generation to the next, as the process of capitalist development has unfolded.

Beneath the proximate causes of the GOP's ideological confusion, there may be this fundamental one: America's moral traditionalists are wedded to an economic system that is radically anti-traditional. They are too individualistic to countenance a total break with liberal capitalism, but are also repulsed by the social consequences of their own economic customs. And contra Greer, such consequences do not just trouble New Right intellectuals, but also the GOP's rank-and-file Evangelicals, the Trumpist right's aggrieved men's rights activists, and garden-variety right-leaning voters perturbed by the loosening of family ties (which, in some communities, has been supplanted by atomization, not a broader or more freely-chosen collectivity). Given that capitalist development is also the primary force that propels migrants across borders, the nativist right is similarly squeezed between its economic folk wisdom and cultural nostalgia.

These days, when American social conservatives wish to see a model of their desired polity, some turn to the countries of the former Soviet bloc — Russia, Poland, and Hungary — where moral traditionalism appears aberrantly strong. Many have remarked on the irony of this affection, given how large Western chauvinism once loomed in the conservative imaginary. But these post-Soviet states do not appeal to the American right in spite of communism's influence upon their societies; they appeal to the American right *because* of that influence. As the great historian Eric Hobsbawm observed in 1994:

Where comparisons were possible, as between West and East Germany, it seemed that the values and habits of traditional Germany had been better preserved under the lid of communism than in the Western region of economic miracles ... Plainly the communist regimes provided less social space for subcultures, countercultures, and underworlds of all kinds and repressed dissidence ... Nevertheless, the relative tranquility of socialist life was not due to fear. The system insulated its citizens from the full impact of Western social transformations because it insulated them from the full impact of Western capitalism. What change they underwent came through the state or

through their response to the state. What the state did not set out to change stayed much as it had been before. The paradox of communism in power was that it was conservative.

I think the New Right's account of red America's divisions is more accurate than Greer's. If the GOP moderated on economics — and adopted positions on labor, social welfare and public investment that were less wildly reactionary by international standards — the party's median voter wouldn't revolt. And such a GOP would surely have an easier time telling voters what it stood for.

Yet the most intractable division within the contemporary Republican Party is not the conflict between the Cato Institute and Trumpen proletariat, or the right's puritan elites and its licentious masses, but rather, between American conservatism's own irreconcilable commitments. Republicans can neither wage war on capitalism nor make peace with its social implications. So they beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into incoherence.