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## Conservative elites love to defend market orthodoxy. Don't fall for it.

Henry Olsen

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There's been a debate brewing within the world of conservatism ever since Donald Trump won the GOP nomination. Some on the right bitterly oppose his divergence from Republican economic orthodoxy and are fighting to defend the role of economic markets in society against what they perceive as attacks from other conservatives.

These elites may be right to be afraid, but that's because at heart they are more libertarian than they are conservative.

Such libertarian-minded opinion leaders have criticized Trump's call to rule out reform (read: spending cuts) for Social Security and Medicare. They ignored his calls to dramatically increase spending on infrastructure, although some backed his support for defense-spending hikes. Crucially, they savaged his views on trade, especially his attacks the Trans-Pacific-Partnership and NAFTA and his attraction to tariffs. For these people, Trump was not just unfit for office, but an apostate whose heresies had to be cast out of the conservative church.

Trump's overwhelming victory in the primaries should have shocked them out of their ideological slumber. They should have noted that voters in the supposedly free-market party had just resoundingly rejected their arguments. Should have, but didn't.

Instead, they are like the French Bourbon monarchs who, upon being restored to the throne, "remembered nothing and forgot nothing" about the reasons they were overthrown in the first place. Thus, Fox News television host Tucker Carlson's rather mundane point that today's global economy contributes in part to the economic and social decline in many parts of the United States was scorned by leading lights such as David French and Ben Shapiro. Manhattan Institute scholar Oren Cass's book about how to improve the workings of today's economy for less-skilled Americans, "[The Once and Future Worker](#)," was excoriated by conservative think tank economists such as Michael Strain and James Pethokoukis. Together, the market fundamentalists seem to see nothing — absolutely nothing — about today's capitalism to dislike.

The eminent National Review, still the right's premier mass intellectual publication nearly 65 years after its founding, recently devoted an entire issue "[In Defense of Markets](#)." Its authors reminded us of the moral and material advantages that markets can bring. There's wasn't much of anything to disagree with unless you're a genuine democratic socialist. But that was the problem: Most of the issue's authors were beating down straw men that may exist on the left but certainly not on the right. So why the fear?

Cato's Scott Lincicome inadvertently let the cat out of the bag in [his contribution](#) to the National Review compilation. In attacking President Trump's attempts to recast U.S. trade policy, he asks

the key question: “Why should certain American industries and workers have a moral claim to government protection? Why should government prioritize those workers’ living standards above their fellow citizens?” If there is no moral standard against which we can measure market outcomes, then Lincicome is right to protest. But if there is such a standard, then market interventions are not only morally justified, they become morally mandatory. And that is simply unacceptable for the fundamentalists.

Conservatism has long had an uneasy but close relationship with libertarianism. National Review’s founder, William F. Buckley, famously wrote that his magazine would “[stand] athwart History, yelling ‘Stop.’” That mission statement also stated that the federal government’s proper peacetime duties are solely to “protect its citizens’ lives, liberty, and property.” With respect to its efforts to do anything else, “we are, without reservation, on the libertarian side.”

But that dog don’t hunt politically. The libertarian-flavored “stop” candidacy of Barry Goldwater was thrashed at the ballot box in 1964. The great conservative victory, that of Ronald Reagan, came in 1980 only because the great man was — in word and in deed — reconciled to the existence of big government, even if he wanted to “cut, squeeze, and trim” it down to rightful size. He was unequivocally a man who shouted “go” to his fellow citizens.

Nearly 40 years on, these libertarian-conservatives remain oblivious or intentionally in denial about these facts. Conservatives such as Reagan were entrusted to interpret the New Deal, not to abolish or undermine it. The New Deal’s intellectual core, that the federal government should vigorously act to correct market failures, remains at the center of what Americans expect from Washington. Trump’s nomination and election proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that even a majority of Republicans agree.

Less doctrinaire conservative thinkers understand this. Ramesh Ponnuru noted in his National Review essay that “the median family income was slightly *lower* in 2014 than it was in 2000.” He concludes that capitalism “require[s] invigoration” as a result. The American Enterprise Institute’s Yuval Levin goes further, noting that “sometimes our economic policy has to be determined by more than purely economic considerations.” Other factors, such as social order and family formation, are also worthy goals to which pure economic efficiency or growth must bend at times.

My libertarian-oriented friends will not want to hear this, but we live in the garden that Franklin D. Roosevelt made. The conservative task is to prune that garden so that the tree of liberty can coexist within its plan — and perhaps take up an ever-larger part. That task is politically hindered by the unyielding intransigence of those whose goal is to rip up the garden itself. For that reason, this debate is fundamental to the future of conservatism and perhaps of the United States itself.