

The EUROPEAN CONSERVATIVE

Neocons Are Not Conservatives

Sven R. Larson

December 9, 2022

Conservatism is on the rise. In America, the left is meeting formidable resistance to their efforts to bring racism and sexual deviancy into schools. In Europe, the bullies of Brussels, a.k.a., the European Union, have miserably failed in their efforts to stigmatize Viktor Orbán. All they have accomplished is to reinforce the Hungarian prime minister as a fearless leader of the European conservative movement.

Overall, conservatives can hold their heads high and look with confidence to the future. At the same time, growing momentum brings more responsibilities that always come with more political influence. At the forefront of those responsibilities is that which turns ideological principles into legislation.

The obvious foundation for such responsibilities is a solid conservative platform of ideas. That platform already exists, and *The European Conservative* is proud to have added our value to it. In June, we published the National Conservatism Statement of Principles, which was originally drafted for the Edmund Burke Foundation. This inspired a debate here, with contributions from both critics and supporters.

In large part, the conversation has been focused on the role of the nation, as opposed to the unlimited globalism that the left offers. We have also made progress in discussing conservative practice, with contributions on how to be a conservative activist, how to build a sprawling movement, and how to be a conservative freedom fighter.

These are all essential contributions, but once we get to the legislative end of the stick, we will have to be prepared to answer more pointed questions, such as the one about our conflicted relationship with political and economic liberalism. We have brought forward solutions to this conflict, and there is more to come.

Discussing a closely related issue, back in October Sebastian Morello raised the question of what role the state actually should play in a society defined by conservative values. Kurt Hofer has taken up the same question from a conservative Catholic perspective; again, our publication has provided ideas for salient answers.

In other words, we can already learn an important lesson from the conversation about conservatism in theory and practice. Our movement spans a wide range of ideological nuances, as well as experiences regarding political practice. As we go forward, we need to be more apprehensive of the differences across the spectrum, from free-market Reagan-Thatcher conservatives to those who place more emphasis on religious, cultural, and social values.

There does not have to be a contradiction between these, but the implementation of conservatism will inevitably vary from country to country. In other words, a good first step toward conservative practice is to recognize that cultural differences between nations also color their views of what role government should play in their lives. Broadly speaking, European conservatives are traditionally sympathetic toward government solutions, even toward a fairly large welfare state.

Hungary has demonstrated how this can be done by shifting the ideological focus of the welfare state away from the socialist tradition of economic redistribution toward supporting and strengthening the traditional family. Other European conservatives, such as the new Swedish center-right government, can learn a great deal from Budapest.

That is not to say European conservatives are not skeptical of government—they are indeed, but not to the same degree as American conservatives tend to be. The trans-Atlantic difference here is one of nuance, with more or less emphasis on the risk that government, once invited into our lives, will take up more space than intended.

The conservative movement can benefit from recognizing these nuances, but it can also benefit from reinforcing its conversation on the issue that sheds light on them: the role of government in our lives. For American conservatives, more than their European brethren, this issue drives a wedge right through what is commonly seen as the conservative movement. It splits traditional conservatives from neoconservatives.

If the American conservative movement is to make any long-term progress, it needs to come to terms with the fact that neocons actually are not conservatives at all. If anything, they are traditional Scandinavian-style social democrats, and they have owned the Republican party for too long.

In his book *Leviathan on the Right*, Cato Institute senior fellow Michael Tanner traces the roots of neoconservatism back to the 1950s. Back then, writer and publisher William F. Buckley launched a campaign to, as he often put it, make conservatism “respectable” in American politics.

It may seem odd that conservatism would need to be made “respectable” in a country that in the past century was viewed by the rest of the world as the pinnacle of conservatism. However, Buckley did not have traditional conservatism in mind. Along with Irving Kristol, David Brooks, Daniel Bell, and Norm Podhoretz, Buckley invented neoconservatism and successfully made it synonymous with Republican policy.

In retrospect, it is surprising that the neocons could effectively rule the right-of-center in American politics until the election of Donald Trump in 2016. After all, this is an ideology that consists of

two things: a Scandinavian-style welfare state for domestic policy, and a *Pax Americana* doctrine for foreign policy.

Having covered their foreign policy before, let me focus on their domestic-policy ideas. In his *The Rise and Fall of Neoconservatism*, C. Bradley Thompson captures the essence of their ideology as a “syncretic intellectual movement influenced by thinkers as diverse as Plato, Trotsky, and Hayek.” Daniel Bell, a leading neocon sociologist, has defined himself as “a socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture.”

By contrast, traditional American conservatism, often associated with the late Senator Barry Goldwater, embraces individual freedom, strict limits on government powers, and Reagan-style economic liberalism. Thompson explains that Goldwater conservatives reject “the modern welfare-regulatory state,” a position that Goldwater himself makes very clear in *The Conscience of a Conservative*, his exquisite book from 1960:

The currently favored instrument of collectivization is the Welfare State. The collectivists have not abandoned their ultimate goal—to subordinate the individual to the State—but their strategy has changed. They have learned that Socialism can be achieved through Welfarism quite as well as through Nationalization. They understand that private property can be confiscated as effectively by taxation as by expropriating it.

This is exactly why it is so essential for conservatives who see merit in a welfare state to study carefully the Hungarian example and how it contrasts with the Scandinavian model. When a welfare state is designed to preserve the traditional family (Hungary), as opposed to egalitarian economic redistribution (Scandinavia), the role of the state effectively ceases to be confiscatory. A tax paid is still a tax paid, but under the conservative model, the tax is not self-serving. It is a necessary evil and therefore limited in its instrumental role.

By contrast, under the socialist model, taxation is a goal in itself. The higher taxes are, the better.

Neoconservative ideologues are careful to avoid talking about taxes. If they do, it is usually on the premise of tax cuts. However, their socialist view of the welfare state severely limits their ability to deliver on lower taxes—and, frankly, their desire to keep taxes down in general. Thompson references Norm Podhoretz, neoconservative writer for the *Commentary* magazine:

neoconservative statesmen should be able to figure out the “precise point at which the incentive to work” would be “undermined by the availability of welfare benefits, or the point at which the redistribution of income” would begin “to erode economic growth, or the point at which egalitarianism” would come “into serious conflict with liberty.”

In 2003, Irving Kristol pointedly defended the socialist welfare-state model:

Neocons ... are impatient with the Hayekian notion that we are on “the road to serfdom.” Neocons do not feel that kind of alarm or anxiety about the growth of the state in the past century, seeing it as natural, indeed inevitable.

The socialist welfare state that the neocons embrace, began its life in Europe already before World War II. In his book *Beyond the Welfare State* in 1960, Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal explained that the welfare state is a system of government

with fairly explicit commitments to equality of opportunity for the young, social security, and protected minimum standards as regards not only income, but nutrition, housing, health and education, for people of all regions and social groups.

Myrdal describes the welfare state as a ‘work in progress’ of sorts, with its “architects ... continually labouring” to simplify, coordinate, rationalize, and increase the efficiency of the welfare state. Likewise, Irving Kristol explains that neocons “do not like the concentration of services in the welfare state” and would like to find “alternative ways of delivering” welfare-state benefits.

Norm Podhoretz has referred to this fine-tuning process as finding the “golden mean between altruism and self-interest.” The same reasoning runs through Myrdal’s book and his policy work under the Swedish social-democrat government. Closer to home, a similar analysis appears in the works of John Kenneth Galbraith—who also made major contributions to Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty.”

In his essay “Capitalism, Socialism and Nihilism” (*Public Interest*, 1973), Irving Kristol further blurs the line between neoconservatism and socialism. He begins by explaining that free-market capitalism is inherently nihilistic, i.e., lacks any kind of value foundation. That is a classic socialist, and false, argument, the repudiation of which highlights why American conservatives need to rethink their relationship to neocons in general.

As I explained back in June, capitalism is not a full-scale ideology. It is an economic doctrine, centered around the pursuit of profits. It has the very practical consequence of motivating people to pursue profits in business, but also higher salaries, a higher standard of living, a better-quality life.

Furthermore, Kristol sees a direct contradiction between moral justice and capitalism, as if the latter is incompatible with the former. He makes his point by referring, in the aforementioned essay, to ‘distributive justice’ as the means to morally contain capitalism.

This theory of justice is the ideological core of socialism. It says that:

1. One group of people is entitled to more resources than they have; and
2. Another group of people is obligated to provide those resources.

For fairly obvious reasons, this theory of justice is incompatible with capitalism, but not because capitalism cannot be combined with *any* theory of justice. It just doesn’t work well with a doctrine that prescribes large-scale economic redistribution.

A much better candidate for compatibility with capitalism is the theory known as ‘justice in acquisition.’ It traces its origins as far back as John Locke (*Second Treatise of Government*). It was revived for the modern world by Robert Nozick (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*).

Conservatives should not frown upon the theory of justice in acquisition simply because one of its foremost modern proponents happens to be a libertarian. All the theory says, in practice, is that the distribution of economic resources is just if it is the outcome of a voluntary-exchange process where no person's liberty was violated.

Where libertarians take this theory to its edge and refuse to accept any form of government programs for poverty relief, conservatives can instead use it as a pragmatic foundation for their policy endeavors. It serves best as a memento when conservatives are faced with policy ideas: by relying on the principle that what people rightfully earn through employment, investment, and entrepreneurship belongs to them, they can put a healthy distance between conservatism in practice and socialism.

That is a distance that neoconservatives are unable to maintain. Whether the reason is ignorance or secret admiration for socialism is a question best left to the neocons to answer.

American conservatives can begin that work by putting a healthy distance between themselves and the neocons. It matters less whether conservatives adhere to the Goldwater tradition, or to Trump-era conservative pragmatism. The overarching goal for America's conservative movement must be to explain how conservatism in practice differs from socialism. A reasoned dissociation from the neocons would be a good starting point.