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Brink Lindsey on Traditional and Liberal Conservatism

Modern conservatism, explains the Cato Institute vice-president and author of *The Age of Abundance*, is a coalition of libertarians and traditionalists who, in another age, would be at each other's throats. For bringing them together they can thank – roll over, Karl Marx – socialism. He chooses five books on conservatism and liberalism.

Let's start with John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*. You'd think it's obvious but no one else has suggested it. Why *On Liberty*?

I don't know that it's obvious since it's a classic text of liberalism, not conservatism.

Explain that to me.

I think liberals, of both a libertarian, classical, liberal stripe and a more modern egalitarian stripe, see John Stuart Mill as a common ancestor, but he's not really in the conservative pantheon. Indeed it was Mill who said, 'While not all conservatives are stupid, all stupid people are generally conservative.' So he was not only a liberal political theorist but a liberal Member of Parliament, and definitely not a Tory.

Liberal in the European sense, ie libertarian?

He strays from the contemporary libertarian line in a number of respects. But the reason I selected him is that there is a brief passage in *On Liberty* (in the second chapter on defending liberty of thought and discussion) where he lays forth what I think is the best concise explanation for why there is a left and a right – and why there always will be. Why, even though he wasn't a conservative and didn't think much of conservatives, he thought conservatism was a necessary and wholesome part of political life. Let me quote a sentence or two: 'In politics, again, it is almost a commonplace, that a party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life; until the one or the other

shall have so enlarged its mental grasp as to be a party equally of order and of progress, knowing and distinguishing what is fit to be preserved from what ought to be swept away. Each of these modes of thinking derives its utility from the deficiencies of the other; but it is in a great measure the opposition of the other that keeps each within the limits of reason and sanity.'

I think the typical view of politics from inside a partisan mindset is to see politics as a battle of the good guys versus the bad guys. Maybe the good guys are on the left, maybe the good guys are on the right, but it's this Manichean struggle and the way to get progress is for the good side to win and impose their will. Mill sees through that and sees that, in fact, politics is a dialectical process. At any given time truth is partly on one side and partly on the other. It's more a battle of half-truths and incomplete truths than of good versus bad. The excesses of each side ultimately create opportunities for the other to come in and correct those excesses. Liberalism, in Mill's view and in mine, provides the basic motive force of political change and progress. It will go astray, it will have excesses, it will make terrible mistakes – and a conservatism that is focused on preserving good things that exist now will be a necessary counterweight to that liberalism.

Most Americans today think of liberalism in the European sense or libertarianism, as we call it, as part of the conservative movement. Most Tea Party-ers, for instance, would certainly agree with that. Do you see it as sharply distinct from the conservative movement? Are they, in fact, on opposite sides of Mill's dichotomy?

When I'm talking about liberalism versus conservatism, I'm also talking about modern egalitarian liberalism and not just libertarianism. You can approach it, as I did in my book *The Age of Abundance*, by looking at contemporary liberalism and its great triumphs in the 60s and 70s – pushing for civil rights and backing the feminist movement. Those triumphs also had excesses and mistakes mixed in with them. We had problems with growing welfare dependency and the crime explosion, problems with runaway divorce rates and family breakdown, all of which summoned up a conservative movement to respond to those wrong turns. So we see the conservative revival of the 70s and 80s basically making the world safe for the liberal social revolutions of the 60s and 70s. Putting aside where libertarianism fits in, you can see the interplay of left and right correcting each other, fixing each other's excesses and deficiencies in a way that neither side ever intended but works out better than either side ever would have done for itself.

On Liberty by John Stuart Mill

Most of my conservative friends would say that liberalism wins this game because conservatives just correct it and then it continues to roll merrily along.

Yes, I think conservatives are right to feel that they are always behind the eight ball of history. My second and third choices offer an explanation for why that is so and why that is really necessarily so. The wonderful article by Jonathan Haidt, 'Planet of the Durkheimians', which he is in the process of expanding into a book, explores his very insightful analysis of different foundations for liberal and conservative morality. When liberals talk about morality they are almost always talking about two different basic intuitions – intuitions about harm and care. That is, we don't want people to be harmed and we want to care for people when they are hurting. Also, fairness and reciprocity: we want things to be fair, we want like cases to be treated alike. This is the basic liberal morality – whether it is libertarian morality or modern liberal morality, those are the buttons that get pushed that activate a liberal sense of moral outrage. But there are other moral buttons in the human moral imagination that liberals don't pay much attention to that are still very present and lively and salient in the conservative moral imagination. Those are what Haidt calls the authority foundation, the in-group, out-group foundation and the sacreds versus disgust foundation. Authority is the sense of hierarchy and the sense that everything should be in its proper place. The leaders should lead and the followers should follow, people should know their station in life. The in-group out-group is just the solidarity of the tribe – that the key distinction is between us and them.

Nationalism, forms of patriotism, that kind of thing?

Yes. Then there is the perception of the world as divided between the sacred and the profane: a sense of elevation and holiness about some things and a sense of revulsion about others, which, in conservatism, often comes down to issues of sex. We see that very much in the conservative freak-out over gay marriage: it's just disgusting and it's soiling the sacred institution of marriage. When liberals hear conservatives vaunting authority or being patriotic or nationalistic or being homophobic they think that's not a moral reaction at all, they're just being Neanderthals. Haidt says no, they are being moral, they have a moral imagination. It's just a different one from what you have and it's actually one that has much more in common with how people thought morally for a long, long time. I think that's right – in the current setting the moral buttons that get pushed for conservatives are different from the ones that get pushed for liberals. But the fact is that those other three foundations of morality are more traditional, more old-fashioned and are under constant attack by the social forces that are shaping the contemporary world.

And are not going away anytime soon.

And they're not going away anytime soon at all. This is the core insight of Ronald Inglehart's

wonderful work on values change. He's been doing this world values survey for over 30 years, starting in the United States and Europe...

Planet of the Durkheimians by Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham (in Social and Psychological Bases of Ideology and System Justification by J Jost, A C Kay and H Thorisdottir)

Yes, let's go on to Ronald Inglehart. He is someone who I think of as a global public opinion expert, and not ideological. He's conducted the world values surveys for decades, in which he asks people in many countries around the world a similar set of questions.

Yes, and he's been expanding the countries over time. What he has found in his work is something really quite remarkable, which is that there is a predictable pattern of values change as countries develop economically and get richer. As people move out of poverty and have discretionary income and some sort of insulation between them and want, as their lives become more complex and abstract by moving off the farm and out of the village and into the big city and into the white-collar world of knowledge work, as they become more autonomous in this complex, rich world – choosing where they live, who their friends are, who they marry and what job they have – their values change in predictable ways. In particular, they get a lot more focused on personal fulfilment, self-realisation, quality of life – and they get a lot more sceptical about any kind of authority that stands between them and personal fulfilment and self-realisation and quality of life.

Do they get more progressive in some sense then?

They do. They get more secular, they get more spiritual and less religious, they get more sceptical of authority figures and government, and media elsewhere. They get more cosmopolitan, less nationalistic; in short, they get more liberal. Those three traditionalist kinds of moral foundation that Haidt talks about get weaker and weaker. The authority dimension just fades away. As we saw in the 60s, one of the buttons that everybody wore was 'Question Authority'. That mindset has taken over American society. Our trust in government is way down from what it was in the 50s. It bounces up and down with the economy but it will never be what it was before. Our sense of national identity has become much more polyglot and cosmopolitan than the ol' white bread WASP view of what it meant to be an American and what we still hear when we hear people talking about 'real America' on the right.

Does that suggest that inevitably America will start to look more and more like Europe?

It suggests that our values and European values, and values of developing countries that are getting richer, are all moving in a common direction. Economic policy, I think, is a different matter. But in terms of social values, yes. In a whole host of dimensions if you compare attitudes today to attitudes when you and I were little kids – on matters of race, the role of women, on sex and sexual orientation, on the role of religion in public life, on the nature of American cultural identity, Americans today – conservative, right-wing Americans – are way to the left of where their dad and granddad were.

So again here, we have this notion of a conservatism whose role is to moderate a movement in a generally egalitarian direction?

Yes. It is, I'm afraid, their fate often to be decrying cultural trends that they see as leading to chaos, when a generation later those warnings look like the most benighted obscurantism. So we had Bill Buckley in the late 50s warning that enfranchisement of blacks would lead to catastrophic political consequences...

Did Buckley say that?

Yes. He said that the white race is the more advanced race and if it doesn't have the votes, it should maintain its authority any way it can. There's a devastatingly frank passage in a *National Review* editorial in the late 50s along those lines. Of course, that just looks horrible now and, later in life, Buckley admitted that was a terrible error. You had people thinking that a woman working outside the home in traditional male professions was the end of the world – and it wasn't.

Modernization and Postmodernization by Ronald Inglehart

Let's move on to Hayek. You put *The Constitution of Liberty* on here. I'd be interested as to why you chose this book, with its famous postscript, 'Why I Am Not a Conservative'.

So modern postwar conservatism is about more than just traditionalist social values. It's also about economic libertarianism and limited government, free markets, a more sceptical view of the extent to which government can improve life. This kind of strange, unlikely marriage between classical liberalism's economic views and social conservatism was put together as much as anybody by Bill Buckley and the *National Review*. It was dubbed 'fusionism' by one of the *National Review's* early writers, Frank Meyer. The idea was that liberty and tradition went together. Instead of the state providing order, tradition did. You needed liberty for virtue to be able to assert itself because virtue is not really virtue unless it is freely chosen. So you have this idea of libertarian means for conservative ends. Certainly you see contemporary

libertarians thinking of politicians like Goldwater and Reagan as a lot better than what's on offer today, as the kind of politicians that they can summon up enthusiasm for. And you have libertarian heroes like Milton Friedman and Hayek having their influence over the world by being adopted by conservative politicians like Reagan and Thatcher.

Which Hayek might have perceived as a bit ironic given that he planted himself firmly in the direction of an open-ended, change-oriented, dynamic kind of system and very much against anything that relied on authority.

What I wanted to focus on was not so much the libertarian stamp that has been put on conservatism as the conservative stamp that has been put on libertarianism by this alliance. I think this conservative alliance arose because of 20th-century liberalism's infatuation with, and seduction by, the promises and offers made by socialism. The idea that there were radical alternatives to markets, competition and money as the organising principles of society, that there was a more scientific and more rational way of organising things and also a fairer and more equitable way of organising things very much captured the imagination of people, of intellectuals, who saw themselves as the friends of progress. Classical liberals regarded this with utter horror. They saw the march towards more socialistic policies at home and the rise of totalitarian socialism abroad as not the continuation of liberalist promise but as a complete negation of it.

Hayek being exhibit A here.

Yes. And so, by necessity, they fell in with the anti-progressive right. It was an anti-socialist alliance and there was a logic to that – but there are obviously deep philosophical tensions between classical liberalism and libertarianism on the one hand and traditionalist conservatism on the other.

How does Hayek's book, *The Constitution of Liberty*, fit into the picture?

It fits in in a couple of ways. First, in a postscript to the book, Hayek takes pains to distinguish himself from the conservatives who are, at that very time, making him into an intellectual hero. He had written *The Road to Serfdom* back in 1944 in England for an English audience, it was excerpted by *Reader's Digest* and sold millions in the United States and made him into a hero of the modern American right. So, by the time he was writing *The Constitution of Liberty* in 1960 he was already very much identified as one of American conservatism's leading intellectual lights and he was rather uncomfortable with that. So he wrote this essay 'Why I am Not a Conservative' and, as you mentioned, he said that classical liberalism, libertarianism,

was all about ongoing experimentation and change and openness and individualism...

Here's a quotation: 'The main point about liberalism is that it wants to go elsewhere, not to stand still.'

Yes, and yet Hayek's case for free society is one that resonates very well with the conservative imagination and easily lapses into a conservative sensibility. His main case for liberty rests on our ignorance. The fact that any one of us knows only a tiny fraction of the things that affect our life, that we are all dependent on the actions of millions of other people whom we don't know, whom we'll never know, that we live under social rules that we didn't create and that we don't understand. So, for anyone to presume that he has the knowledge to plan everything rationally from the centre is engaged in a massive act of hubris that Hayek later called the 'fatal conceit.' In making this point, Hayek stresses the importance of traditional ways of doing things and the fact that many of the rules under which we live and that have allowed us to achieve this wonderful prosperity and all the opportunities of modern life are rules that no one planned or designed. They are products of human action but not design – the archetypal examples being language, money and law. These are things that no one sat down and hammered out in a rationalistic kind of way but evolved over time in a blind, unconscious way.

Even if Hayek was not a fusionist, the elements of fusionism are here.

Yes. Intellectually Hayek says all the right liberal things, ultimately – about how tradition can't bind us going into the future. He was not at all satisfied with the status quo – he had a whole platform of rationally thought-through reforms that he wanted to institute. And yet the gestalt of his writing gives off this veneration for tradition that is lapped up by conservatives.

One wonders if that will last. In 100 years will this prove to have been a temporary coalition or will it be a permanent one?

I think there is a real tension, even incoherence, in Hayek's thought between this appreciation for the unplanned and spontaneous blind workings of cultural evolution on the one hand versus his being an economist, and a rational social planner who has ideas for reforms that will make a better world on the other. And he can't quite figure out where he sits on that divide. As a result, he gives aid and comfort in ways he didn't really want to, to the kind of moss-backed traditionalism that he himself wasn't sympathetic to. You hear it today in arguments about gay marriage: you hear Hayekian arguments against gay marriage, people saying, 'Well we can't really see any harm that would be caused by letting people love each other, or pledge themselves in legally binding ways' – but, as Hayek said, there are all kinds of rules that we

don't understand the function of. The fact that they have evolved and they've been here a long time suggest that they're pretty important so we shouldn't monkey with them.'

The Constitution of Liberty by Friedrich A Hayek

Lastly, Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 1957. Why is she here?

Once again, she obviously doesn't think of herself as a conservative. She got read out of the modern right by Bill Buckley and Whittaker Chambers. Chambers wrote a savage review of *Atlas Shrugged* in the *National Review*, ending with that quote 'From almost any page of *Atlas Shrugged*, a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: "To a gas chamber – go!".' – saying it had a totalitarian sensibility behind it. So Buckley read the Randians out of the conservative movement and she was happy to be read out. Most fundamentally, Rand was a militant atheist and rejected conservatism's attempt to ground free society in religious principles. Nonetheless, the fact is a whole bunch of conservatives have been inspired and energised by Ayn Rand. Paul Ryan, who is one of the brighter lights in the Republican Party these days, as far as a serious small government conservatism is concerned, has declared openly his inspiration by Rand.

There's a whole bunch of people on the right who have used Rand as the gateway drug, as Jennifer Burns, the new Rand biographer, puts it. And she's certainly not loved on the left, that's for sure. So Rand, in spite of herself, has been a huge influence on the right and this goes to the story of the libertarian streak in modern conservatism. But there's also a streak in Ayn Rand that is very right-wing and explains in part why, despite her atheism and despite the obviously anti-conservative elements of her thought, nonetheless there are deeper elements that are very appealing to the conservative mind. Those are, firstly, her absolutism and secondly, her attempt to ground the case for liberty in nature. It makes sense for any party of order and stability to be very focused on order, to be drawn to the idea that there is black and white and right and wrong and absolutes and also to be attracted to the idea that there is a natural order of things. That no matter what anyone is saying, no matter what ivory-tower intellectual's schemes for reform and social improvement are, there is an unchanging human nature, there is a transcendent moral order and for anyone who tries to defy these things, it's like trying to defy gravity.

Rand is an ally in that way of thinking because she is as absolutist a moralist as you can come across. Her intellectual project is to ground the case for liberty in natural rights – freedom and individual liberty are necessary to the fulfilment of human nature. I think ultimately that's a philosophical project that's doomed; it doesn't work. But it absolutely is one that is congenial to the way that people with a right-wing sensibility think and I think it helps to explain why in

temperament and sensibility if not in the details of her argument Rand has had such an influence.

There is a predominant progressive critique of conservatism which is that so-called freedom is really a conspiracy by the strong to dominate the weak.

Yes, of course another strong element in Rand is a glorification of society's winners – of the smart, the brilliant, the talented, the productive geniuses; she lionises them and makes them into heroes. And I have considerable sympathy for her project of doing so. But, at the same time, she expresses a fairly unmasked contempt for ordinary folks and society's losers and underdogs. This also fits in with the basic alternative between a society of order and stability and a society of reform. You've got one side that is happy with the way things are and wants to keep them that way. Who are those people going to be? They are going to be the people who are thriving and prospering under current rules and the people who sympathise with life's winners. You have another side pushing for reform who are the most obvious constituencies for change, people who aren't doing so well under the current dispensation and the people who sympathise with them.

I think there's a deep resonance between Rand's way of thinking and the conservative party of order/stability sensibility, one that she might not have recognised and might have thought was abhorrent but nonetheless is quite true. It is entirely possible to frame libertarian principles in a completely different way, to argue that it is capitalism that has lifted up the poor more effectively than any social programme – and that if you really care about the underdogs and losers in the world, that a free society with open and competitive markets is in fact your best bet for lifting up the unprivileged and less advantaged. But that wasn't Rand's way of making the argument. Her way of making the argument is one that fits in better with the right-wing point of view.

What emerges from this interview is a description of conservatism as an improbable alliance based on surprisingly sustainable contradictions and, maybe even more surprisingly, successful contradictions. It is odd to have Randians and Christians in the same general movement, for example, or traditionalists and Hayekians on the same side.

Yes, you see it today in the Tea Party crowd; you see folks with their signs and their 'Don't tread on me' flags, all very libertarian kind of imagery, with a 'Take our country back' Palinite middle-American white populism – all mixed together.

And the larger context in which conservatism makes sense, despite its internal contradictions, is as a corrective to the progressive project.

Yes, and certainly the Tea Party movement is a backlash. Republicans were rudderless and incompetent and corruption-plagued, presiding over two unpopular wars and presiding over an economy that went down the toilet. Of course they were going to get bounced. The other guys come in and thought they saw in the election results a mandate to move the country in a fundamentally different direction. I think they over-read their mandate and they summoned up the Tea Party backlash in a dialectical fashion – and that's constrained them to a considerable extent.

Atlas Shrugged by Ayn Rand

Interview by Jonathan Rauch

Books recommended:

[1] <http://fivebooks.com/.../recommended/liberty>

[2] <http://fivebooks.com/.../recommended/planet-durkheimians-by-jonathan-haidt-and-jesse-graham-social-and-psychological-bases-id>

[3] <http://fivebooks.com/.../recommended/modernization-and-postmodernization-by-ronald-inglehart>

[4] <http://fivebooks.com/recommended/constitution-liberty-by-friedrich-von-hayek>

[5] <http://fivebooks.com/recommended/atlas-shrugged-by-ayn-rand-0>

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