

NATIONAL REVIEW

Fusionism, Sixty Years Later

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Who lost the libertarians?" It's a question you hear a lot from conservatives of late. The reason should be obvious to anyone who has followed the conservative movement's internecine intellectual frictions over the last decade — or decades. Self-described libertarians are a minority, even among the ranks of people one could properly describe as libertarian.

On many, or even most, contentious public-policy issues — economics, gun rights, health care, free speech, regulation, constitutional interpretation — most support for the libertarian position actually comes from people who describe themselves as conservatives. In other words, conservatives tend to be libertarian, but libertarians tend not to be conservative. And self-described libertarians are very keen on emphasizing that distinction.

They justifiably point to the areas, many of them quite significant, where the bulk of libertarians depart from the conservative consensus: foreign policy, drugs, gay rights, etc. Of course, the demarcations between these different camps are not hard and clearly defined. Many conservatives now — and even more in the past — hold the same convictions as libertarians on foreign policy and drugs and, to a lesser extent, on issues such as gay rights.

But as a generalization, libertarians want to have their own identity, separate and distinct from that of conservatism. They're a bit like the Canadians you meet abroad who go to almost obsessive lengths to show everyone that they aren't American.

Some conservatives feel the same way about libertarianism, but few are passionate about it. Conservative figures from William F. Buckley Jr. (who described himself in the subtitle of one of his last books as a "libertarian journalist") and Frank Meyer to Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, straight down to our own Charles C. W. Cooke, author of the recent *Conservatarian Manifesto*, have worked assiduously to find common ground and common purpose with our libertarian comrades. Most famously, Meyer created an entire philosophical project called "fusionism" to explain why conservatism and libertarianism should remain joined at the hip. In brief, he said that a virtuous society must be a free society, because acts not freely chosen are not virtuous.

National Review remains an essentially fusionist enterprise. But while it's easy to find conservatives who want to keep this marriage going, it's much harder to find prominent

libertarians who do. As a matter of cultural identity, the libertarian outlook on conservatism is “We’re just not that into you.” The friction between libertarians and conservatives is nothing new. There has never been a time when libertarians did not struggle against what they perceived to be unjust shackles. In the last decade, Brink Lindsey, a scholar at the Cato Institute, tried to defenestrate conservative–libertarian fusionism in favor of what a headline writer at The New Republic dubbed “liberalitarianism.”

Save at the margins, the uneuphonious effort failed, largely because the animosity that some libertarians hold for conservatism pales in comparison with the outright revulsion that progressives hold for any libertarianism distinguishable from libertinism. A house of anti-statists and statist is obviously one divided against itself, and cannot stand. But the friction between libertarians and conservatives is nothing new. There has never been a time when libertarians (or “individualists,” as they used to be called) did not struggle against what they perceived to be unjust shackles.

The history of National Review is in significant part a story of William F. Buckley Jr.’s trying to herd a bunch of cats. Ayn Rand, the anti-statist titan, was “read out” of the conservative movement in these pages by Whittaker Chambers for her views on religion and morality. Rand held “that man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself.”

She even denounced the crucifixion as “the symbol of the sacrifice of the ideal to the nonideal.” It’s not hard to see why such views would not sit well at a magazine with a strong Catholic bent. In the 1960s and 1970s, prominent libertarians such as Murray Rothbard and Karl Hess hoped to use anger over the Vietnam War to create a new sort of fusionism, marrying the so-called Old Right and the New (i.e., radical) Left.

Hess, the famous Goldwater speechwriter, eventually joined Students for a Democratic Society and the Industrial Workers of the World (a.k.a. the Wobblies) and worked with the Black Panthers. In 1968, Rothbard, a brilliant if eccentric intellectual who loathed National Review, lamented in the pages of the left-wing journal Ramparts the recent rise of a new, younger generation of rightists, of “conservatives,” . . . who thought that the real problem of the modern world was nothing so ideological as the state vs. individual liberty or government intervention vs. the free market; the real problem, they declared, was the preservation of tradition, order, Christianity and good manners against the modern sins of reason, license, atheism and boorishness.

“We have allowed ourselves,” Rothbard continued, to sacrifice the American ideals of peace and freedom and anti-colonialism on the altar of a crusade to kill communists throughout the world; we have surrendered the libertarian birthright into the hands of those who yearn to restore the Golden Age of the Holy Inquisition.

It is about time that we wake up and rise up to restore our heritage. The editors of National Review replied to Rothbard’s incessant snipes by saying that they “declined to inhabit, along with Mr. Rothbard, the overcrowded quarters of Freak House,” however “shrewd or useful [Rothbard’s] occasional aperçus in economics.” The question “Who lost the libertarians?” rests on a false premise — because the libertarians were never the conservatives’ to lose. In 1981,

Russell Kirk denounced libertarians in the pages of *Modern Age* as “chirping sectaries” and insisted that any “talk of forming a league or coalition” with them “is like advocating a union of ice and fire.” Measured against such yardsticks, the distance between conservatives and libertarians today seems, if anything, to have shrunk.

What this history suggests is that the question “Who lost the libertarians?” rests on a false premise — because the libertarians were never the conservatives’ to lose. It is a peculiar irony that a movement that seeks to conserve the best of the past is one of the youngest political movements in America. Socialism, progressivism, anarchism, and environmentalism have far older pedigrees than conservatism does. The American variants of socialism go back to the Shakers and even Thomas Paine (albeit tenuously).

Progressivism is a cousin of socialism but nonetheless has its own family tree stretching back to Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill. Anarchism in the West has roots going back to Diogenes. Environmentalism is more amorphous, but one can find antecedents in medieval England and more obviously during the Industrial Revolution.

As for libertarianism, if you see it as the direct descendant of classical liberalism, then libertarians also have a more venerable lineage than conservatives. But there’s the rub. Do they? The Founding Fathers were all classical liberals, but unlike many of their opposite numbers in the French Revolution, they were largely conservative in manners, morals, and faith.

Their conservatism was not labeled as such because it suffused the culture and was simply taken for granted. One need only read the writings of George Washington or John Adams to understand that they were among the first fusionists. (Robert Nisbet once hinted that even Mill, the fons et origo of so much libertarian thought, was actually more of a fusionist himself, clawing back his libertarian reductionism with caveats about the need to curb liberty for the young, the infirm, the “backward,” et al.) Until the middle of the 20th century, the conservative side of the classical-liberal tradition in America was not cultivated the way the libertarian side was, in large part because no one thought it needed to be cultivated. It is not by accident that the first chapter of George Nash’s 1976 classic *The Conservative Intellectual Movement Since 1945* is titled “Revolt of the Libertarians.”

They were there first. The early masthead of *National Review* was like the roster of a life raft, crammed with soaked and battered refugees from the shores of Communism, socialism, progressivism, and the Old Right. This is not to deny that there were conservatives before the founding of *National Review* or the publication of Russell Kirk’s *Conservative Mind*. There were. But they were scattered among various movements and institutions, just as conservative ideas were strewn about. Kirk’s contribution in *The Conservative Mind* was to revisit the historical record and connect the dots in a way that presented American conservatism as a viable tradition. No wonder the early masthead of *National Review* was like the roster of a life raft, crammed with soaked and battered refugees from the shores of Communism, socialism, progressivism, and the Old Right.

Indeed, the Old Right itself was a pretty motley crew. Rothbard was on defensible, if somewhat rocky, ground when he traced his lineage back to it. There certainly were many anarchists and individualists among its ranks. But there were also agrarians, single-taxers, nationalists,

traditionalists, and a glorious smattering of brilliant cranks, literary curmudgeons, and cape-wearing misanthropes.

What made them the “Old Right” was the emergence of a new Right, in the form of the conservative movement we have today. The late Samuel Huntington recognized the newness of that movement in 1957, when he wrote his sadly forgotten essay “Conservatism as an Ideology.” Huntington argued that conservatism was a “positional ideology.”

What he meant is that conservatism emerges from the challenges presented by the existing order. “Men are driven to conservatism by the shock of events, by the horrible feeling that a society or institution which they have approved or taken for granted and with which they have been intimately connected may suddenly cease to exist.” In an age when institutions were under sustained ideological assault, conservatives recognized that they needed an ideology to defeat an ideology. That is why conservatives in America are so different from the conservatives of Europe — especially continental Europe — or anywhere else. Comte Joseph de Maistre, the quintessential European conservative, sought to conserve the absolute rule of Church and Throne.

The American Founders sought to overthrow even the partial rule of Church and Throne. And therein lies all the difference. In Europe, conservatism was understood as the opposite of classical liberalism. The reverse was the case in America, as Friedrich Hayek observed: “What in Europe was called ‘liberalism’ was here the common tradition on which the American polity had been built: thus the defender of the American tradition was a liberal in the European sense.”

Modern conservatism was born from the shock of events — two total world wars punctuated by a peacetime effort to import Bismarckian socialism to our shores, not to mention the long march through the institutions of Marxists, Deweyan progressives, secular humanists, et al. As the conservative movement matured, it sought out the ideological tools and weapons necessary for the counter-assault that would liberate the principles upon which this nation was founded. Yes, conservatives borrowed heavily from the libertarian tradition, but they also borrowed from the religious, patriotic, and moral arsenals of the Founders. That is why the libertarians have stood apart like Coptic Christians, who claim a lineage and authenticity that needs no sanction from the larger, more powerful, and more syncretic Catholic Church.

As I write, a certain wealthy real-estate magnate and reality-show star threatens to become the titular leader of the conservative movement, at least insofar as the Republican party is the practical expression of that movement. He makes little or no effort to celebrate conservatism as a defense of the American tradition of liberty. He never talks about the Constitution, nor plausibly about religion. He makes scant mention of freedom. Instead, he taps into deep reservoirs of resentment and a kind of nationalism that has little to do with patriotism rightly understood. Popularity and “winning” are his lodestars.

He is unlikely to surmount the obstacles erected by the Founders to keep demagogues from wielding what Edmund Burke called “arbitrary power,” yet he and his supporters have illuminated the vulnerabilities within the larger conservative project. Conservatism is an ethereal thing rather than a political system. It has no written constitution to rely on in dark times. And while it is not free of ideas, it is, as a positional ideology, resistant to formulation in a simple,

fixed credo. As such, it always stands at risk of being exploited by someone who yokes personal ambition to popular passion in the service of a movement that is conservative in name only.

And if that happens, the time will come for libertarians to ask, “Who lost the conservatives?”