

Conservatives Are Liberal, and Liberals Are Conservative— On the Environment

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Conservatives and liberals differ on a host of issues: abortion, the death penalty, welfare, school choice, and gun control, among others. Yet beneath these particular differences are two *fundamental* differences: beliefs about tradition and human nature. Most of conservatives' and liberals' positions stem from their differences on these basic beliefs—except for their positions on the environment. The environment presents a paradox. When it comes to the environment, conservatives are liberals, and liberals are conservatives.*

Conservatives seek to preserve the past; they proceed cautiously and slowly with change; they are suspicious of social engineering and social reformers. They believe that society evolved organically and is therefore a seamless web of interconnected parts. A change in one part of the social fabric affects other parts of society—parts that initially may appear unrelated to the change. Conservatives also believe that society is unfathomably complex. Isaiah Berlin writes that classical conservatives, such as Burke and Chateaubriand, spoke of the unique power and value of the infinitely complex

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* *Editor's note:* In this article, the term *liberals* refers to those who are liberal in the contemporary American sense (that is, social democrats), not to the classical liberals, who are sometimes called *conservatives* in the present-day United States.

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and unanalyzable network—as in Burke’s myriad strands of social and spiritual relationships by which the successive generations of mankind were shaped from birth and to which they owed most of what they possessed and were.

Because society is organic and complex, people should have a deep respect for tradition, according to conservatives. The structures that exist in society (the family, government, religion) do so because they emerged and proved successful over hundreds of years of social evolution. Therefore, social change and social reform should be viewed with suspicion. Humankind does not understand the complexity and interconnectedness of society well enough to predict the outcome of social reforms. In fact, social reforms may make things worse because they often result in unanticipated consequences. Therefore, if social change must be undertaken, it must be undertaken cautiously, slowly, and incrementally.

Liberals look askance at tradition. They view it as oppressive, as often hindering the advancement and reducing the well-being of those who have not benefited from traditional social structures. They take a positive view of social engineering and social reforms. Beginning with the philosophers of the French Enlightenment, liberals believed—and continue to believe—that humankind should not be shackled by tradition and ignorance, and society should be molded into something better than what exists. They believe that science and rational analysis will permit us to understand how society and the economy work and will enable us to manipulate society to attain desired ends. Liberals are impatient. Rather than take an incremental approach, they prefer rapid change. As John Maynard Keynes is said to have quipped when asked about the long-term, go-slow approach: “in the long run, we are all dead.” “Change” was the rallying cry of the Clinton presidency.

Conservatives and liberals also have different views of human nature. Conservatives believe that human nature, though good in many ways, has an inherently base side. Although humans have the capacity for doing good (former president George H. W. Bush’s “thousand points of light”), the capacity for doing evil is also an inherent part of human nature. Therefore, conservatives support programs that keep evil actions in check. They favor tough sentences for criminals, more prisons, and a strong national defense. We need traditional authorities and the iron fist to keep the evil side of our natures in check. Liberals, on the other hand, believe that people are basically good. They believe that human nature is not inherently bad and that human nature can be progressively improved. When people break the law or act immorally, they do so not because of their inherent baseness (except for political enemies, such as Adolf Hitler, who are inherently evil); rather, they do so because of their circumstances. Improve the circumstances, and you improve the people. To bring out the best in people, provide education and equal opportunity.

When it comes to the environment, however, liberals are conservative, and conservatives are liberal. Conservatives oppose preservation of the environment. They believe that the environment should be exploited for economic ends. Developers—usually Republicans—complain about regulations that slow their drainage of wetlands

to develop golf courses and build condominiums. Logging executives and workers—usually political conservatives—complain that they should be able to “harvest” forests as they see fit. Western ranchers and mining executives complain that new regulations requiring them to pay market rates to lease federal land will drive them out of business. Conservatives favor “management” of the natural environment. They speak about “wise use” or “multiple use.” The environment exists for humankind to dominate and to bend to its will.

Because the social world is complex and contains an endless web of interconnections, conservatives are hesitant to tamper with it. Yet when it comes to the natural environment, they are blind to the interconnectedness of natural ecosystems; they cannot see how alterations in one part of the natural environment affect other parts of it and thus feel that it can withstand trauma, change, and exploitation. Conservatives refused to recognize the relationships between chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and the depletion of the ozone layer; and when they finally did, they minimized its seriousness and urged a go-slow approach. They were slow to recognize the relationships among industrial pollution in Lake Michigan, contaminated fish, and cancer in humans. Conservative farmers and chemical manufacturers were reluctant to recognize the relationship between agricultural pesticides and fertilizers and contaminated water. It is as though nature exists in isolated compartments delineated by private property. What one does on one’s own private property—or on property leased from the government—affects nothing outside of it.

Liberals acknowledge that damage to one part of the environment may have negative consequences in another part. Although they are eager to move forward with social programs—ignoring traditions, continuity, and the interconnected fabric of society—they revere the tradition in nature. Unlike conservatives, who are slow to stop polluters and developers, liberals demand quick action to halt practices that harm the environment or are likely to harm it. Whereas conservatives want more research and conclusive proof about the effects of industrial practices on the environment, liberals take a conservative approach and urge hands off when there is a suggestion of environmental damage. Conservatives have a history of waiting too long to stop pollution and the destruction of wilderness. They usually move to action at the behest (through lawsuits and legislation) of liberals.

Conservatives’ assumptions about *human* nature lead to another paradox. Conservatives believe that strong laws, stiff sentences, tough judges, and well-funded police departments are necessary to keep human nature’s base and irrational side in check—except when it comes to the environment. Left to their own devices, guided only by rational self-interest and the invisible hand of the marketplace, people will do what is good regarding environmental matters. Society and the environment will benefit from each person’s pursuit of self-interest, and the only problem is getting rid of laws and regulations that restrict people’s pursuit of self-interest. That pursuit may involve destroying wildlife habitat in order to develop mining, ranching, or logging operations, or destroying the integrity of ecosystems in order to develop shopping

malls, motels, condos, and wilderness retreats for the rich and famous. The principal purpose of the Council on Competitiveness, which began operation in 1986 and continued full-steam during the George H. W. Bush presidency with Dan Quayle at its helm, was to help the business community skirt regulations. Two liberals, Bill Clinton and Al Gore, disbanded the Council on Competitiveness.

Although liberals normally have a sanguine view of human nature, they take a conservative turn when it comes to humans and the environment. They believe that the masses are “environmentally illiterate.” Because the public does not know its own best interests and the best interests of the planet, it cannot be allowed to pursue unbridled free enterprise and self-interest. Unless restricted by law and regulation, businesspersons, drivers of four-wheel-drive vehicles, hunters, farmers, ranchers, miners, and developers will run roughshod over the delicate fabric of the environment.

National symbols also present a paradox of conservative ideology. Conservatives have a strong affinity for national symbols—in particular those symbols constructed by humans. These symbols are cultural icons that preserve the social order, so conservatives support strict laws against defacing national symbols. For example, George H. W. Bush and other conservatives supported a constitutional amendment prohibiting flag burning. Liberals tend not to take such an extreme view. Though most do not condone flag burning, they believe that the issue does not merit a constitutional amendment.

Yet when it comes to the environment, conservatives are the first to permit the desecration of our national symbols in the natural world. Acre after acre of wilderness and wetland, mile after mile of beach and riverfront have fallen prey to conservative politicians and businesspersons. Yet our wilderness areas, wildlife, mountains, lakes, and rivers are as much national symbols of America as the flag. Like cities, flags, and monuments, a nation’s natural treasures symbolize its uniqueness. What would Australia be without the Koala bear, America without the bald eagle, Switzerland without the Alps, Germany without its rivers, England without its countryside? In America, the wilderness holds an even more special place as a national symbol. It is the symbol of all that is good and all that is possible in the New World. As historian Leo Marx wrote in his classic book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), “The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery” (3).

Although it is difficult to deny these paradoxes, some might say that I have missed an obvious reason why conservatives take a laissez-faire approach toward the environment: money. Conservatives view the environment as an economic entity, and they favor maximum individual liberty in the economic sphere. Yet how can this preference account for the most curious paradox of all: that communists, the conservatives’ arch-enemies, embraced this very same disrespectful view of nature? Reports from the former Soviet Union and former East Bloc countries reveal that the communist regimes permitted environmental degradation on a scale unprecedented in the West.

How can conservatives, who value tradition in the social world, be blind to the tradition in the environment? How can they respect the integrity of social ecosystems, yet disrespect the integrity of natural ecosystems? What accounts for these paradoxes? I am not sure. Perhaps they believe that humankind is separate from nature rather than part of it, as many liberals believe. Perhaps out of a respect for religious tradition they believe that humans are predestined to dominate the earth and mold it to human will. Or perhaps their attitude has to do with the belief that we are in a tooth-and-claw Darwinian struggle for existence, competing not only with other humans but also with nature. Perhaps it has to do with individual liberty and self-interest. Just as Adam Smith's "invisible hand" works with respect to the market, so too should it work with respect to the environment.

We are only beginning to understand the complex nature of ecosystems and their interaction with humans. Environmentalism and political ideology are more likely to raise paradoxes than to expose clear ideological divisions. There are no easy answers or clearly acceptable solutions. The problem is (as vanishing wildlife know all too well) that our solutions, based on self-interest and ignorance, so far are often too little and too late.

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