

Jay B. Gaskill, on...

## The Emerging Coalition of the **Creative**, Not-Left

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After his summer recess, David Brooks wrote that--

...if you hang around the conservative policy wonks, and read certain conservative magazines, [you will find] the dominant style of conservatism of the coming years. This is the conservatism of skeptical reform. This conservatism is oriented, first, around social problems, not government ...by looking at concrete problems: how to help the unemployed move to where they can find jobs; how to help gifted students from poor families reach their potential. If you start by looking at these specific matters, then even conservatives conclude that, in properly limited ways, government can be a useful tool. Government is not the only solution, but it is also not the only problem.

Second, this conservatism is populist about ends but not means. Over the past decade, many Republican politicians have spread the message that the country's problems would be easily solved if only the nefarious elites would get out of the way and allow the common people to take over. Members of this conservatism are more likely to conclude that, in fact, problems are complex and there are no easy answers, but there is room for policy expertise... but these experts should focus on specific needs and desires of working-class Americans, not gripes and obsessions of the Republican donor community.

Third, this conservatism supports effective government, not technocratic government. Like all proper conservatism, it begins ... a sense that the world is too complicated to be centrally planned. Therefore, it opposes the style of government embodied in Obamacare, where officials in the center define insurance products and then compel people to buy them.

This conservatism knows that central decision-makers, even conservative ones, are no match for complex reality. Therefore, they favor market mechanisms, which take advantage of dispersed knowledge. They prefer simple programs to complex ones. ...

Fourth, this conservatism is skeptical in temper, especially about itself. ... [T]he founders constructed a constitutional order that left room for different policy approaches; that was humble before the evolving needs of the future; and that required compromise and coalition building. The founders did not believe in concentrating power in the hands of any group of highly fallible individuals.

**David Brooks, writing in the New York Times, January 9, 2014**

**Link-** <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/10/opinion/brooks-movement-on-the-right.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&r=0>

## About Principles ...AND... Results

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### *The Great Opportunity of the Century or a Cautious Tweak?*

David Brooks is talking about a thread among conservative intellectual discourse, while trying to make the case for a humble conservative reentry into the liberal conversation. This was based on his assessment that liberalism has finally strayed so far from the practical center that the-liberals-in-charge will allow conservatives to engineer a gentle course correction.

But the progressives have seriously overplayed their hand; they have done real damage this time, and the liberal brand itself has been tainted.

The world is now witnessing the collapse of the progressive experiment in cost-free, Marxism Lite. Progressive political liberals, with the complicity of comatose conservatives and rootless moderates, have brought the modern Western economic system to the edge of total credit and monetary collapse. This represents a failure cascade so huge that it is forcing policy changes that would have been unthinkable ten years ago. Yes, some correction was inevitable, but these failures are unusual in scale, duration and depth.

Traditionally, liberals have been about challenging boundaries; and conservatives were about defending them. But both liberalism and conservatism occasionally crash through the overreach barrier. The progressive liberals have driven over that line and the cliff is now visible.

This leaves the task of restoring balance to the conservatives. But are conservatives ready?

In the post-conservative era, the main premise of progressivism was completely dominant: the unquestioned premise that government exists (to be legitimate, must exist) to make our lives better by eliminating all the inequalities of the human condition through top-down governance, exploiting the bottom-up support of the government-benefitted classes. The GOP (in the USA) and the Conservative Party (in the UK) were locked into a cyclical pattern of populist rejection, followed by a temporary ascendance in which conservatives returned from exile as an occasional corrective. The progressive juggernaut that captured the Democratic Party and the Fabian socialists who captured the British Labour Party was never repudiated. It began to seem that government aimed to supplement, even replace our parents, our religious guides, and through curriculum reform, aimed to remake us through its control of education. The conservatives were allowed to stick around just long enough to stop the occasional excesses – and to repair some, but not all of the damage.

***This is fire truck conservatism: People are grateful for their rescue but they don't invite their rescuers to stay for dinner.***

Conservative leadership seems to take hold for the long haul only when a particular leader (Think Eisenhower or Reagan in the USA; Churchill and Thatcher in the UK) has traction in the culture and on Pennsylvania Avenue or Downing Street. The key ingredients of such major leadership shifts are the breakdown of trust between the to-be-evicted governing political class, and the emergence of a new, potent trust-chemistry between the new conservative leadership cohort and the people at large, **coupled with a new policy course that actually makes things better in the real world.**

The core conservative ethos (a commitment to individual freedom, dignity and accountability, to government restraint, and a robust approach to security, law and order) endures for the ages, too often as an archaic ideal. But the conservative ideal will have sudden new life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century only to the extent that its most visible advocates are seen as dedicated to a great political, cultural

and economic creative-renaissance agenda, and that they are offering a new course of action with the real prospect of recovering America's reduced, damaged and beleaguered middle class.

A glance at the current crop of politicians suggests that heavy lifting will be required. The new crop of conservative leaders must be very well prepared to promote and explain a practical agenda for America's restoration, and to anchor each part of the project in conservative principles that are clear and consistent with common sense. That agenda can be nothing short of restoring America by restoring freedom and widely shared prosperity. It must be founded on forward-leaning *conservation principles* that must be sincerely, articulately and persuasively connected to policy proposals, and to the real world aspirations of all Americans.

But actual principles rarely intrude in politics. This is probably because few people are able to think in principles. Note that core principles differ from ideology or lists of "values" because they require actual thinking instead of rote catechisms. The process of discerning and applying core principles allows for creative adaptation, while enabling conservatives to protect that which is truly essential.

Intellectually lazy conservatives fall into using shorthand expressions, like "no big government" that fail on both counts by obscuring what is conserved and why, and they suggest a reliance on rote catechism instead of actual thinking. Recovering liberals, like former liberal democrat, Ronald Reagan, understood this perfectly. Bill Clinton's second term claim, "the era of big government is over" was not only false, it was a temporarily successful 'trademark misappropriation' that succeeded because almost no one asked "What are you conserving and why?"

President Reagan was gifted in reframing conservative ideas in a charming, folksy discourse, partly because he had years of experience among liberal democrats, partly because he was a skilled actor who believed his material. Our communication task is the essentially the same, but the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are new and the communication modalities have fragmented to the point where a thoughtful essay, say, like this one will be read and absorbed by a small number of people.

**But a small number of gifted leaders, animated by core beliefs and a keen sense of the practical, will change the course of history. And certain principles, when explained and connected, have the power to inaugurate a sea change in the political dialogue.**

Once they are absorbed into the DNA of the new generation of conservatives they can ignite a movement that will alter the course of history. These principles (framed as "musts") include -

1. We must *conserve individual human dignity* against all the bureaucratic minds and structures, both government and private. New conservatives are willing to take on the corporate bureaucracies, often in bed with the new, amoral political class, fired by the same passionate intelligence and trenchant criticism that we address the government versions.

2. We must conserve the conditions in which productive human creativity can flourish by providing a bulwark against the arbitrary controls, constraints, repression, excessive taxation and perversion-of-purpose that creative communities are typically subject to.
3. We must conserve the core moral infrastructure from which individual human dignity and productive human creativity derive their legitimacy.
4. We must conserve the value of work, of earning and of a middle class supported by these values.
5. We must conserve all the aspiration pathways, the upward mobility of every productive or creative person, without political interference or bureaucratic blindness.

Libertarians advance freedom as a primary good, without further elaboration or explanation. But conservatives hold that freedom cannot be understood as more than indulgence without a larger moral framework that contains it. The justification for freedom as a necessary value is that creation and human creativity are primary human values when they are linked to a life affirming moral order. Creativity requires freedom in the context of the larger moral framework. Without creativity, the human species dies. Without robust creativity linked to the moral order, the human species becomes innovatively suicidal. The moral foundations of a free society are deeply tied to the spiritual traditions that connect creative communities with life-affirmation and the enhancement of the human condition as seen through the lens of awakened moral intelligence.

Note that creativity, by its very nature engenders transient, but important inequalities.

Note that without creativity the human project will fail....

Modern American conservatism seems to be experiencing a crisis of incoherence. Consider the following examples:

**Social conservatives** are located in both parties where they represent a durable constituency for law and order, family values, patriotism, and – for the most part – a spirited defense of traditional family arrangements against their redefinition by “social progressives”, and opposition to abortion-on-demand (with significant variations on side issues, like birth control and adherence to *Roe vs. Wade*).

**Libertarians** enjoy the virtue and the vulnerability of thematic consistency – an authentically free-market, laissez faire capitalism, linked with drug legalization and an isolationist foreign policy bordering on pacifism.

**Community conservatism** is founded in the early American vision of nested communities, family, neighborhood, town and state, with a policy of the upward delegation of limited powers, leaving the federal level with only those things that absolutely must be handled by government at the national level.

**Neo-conservatives** are the former leftists who rebelled against the authoritarian excesses of communism and the naïve apologetics of the domestic left, especially for the murderous excesses of Stalin and Mao, among others. This branch of conservatism represents a fierce rejection of leftist politics and of the new authoritarian challenges that

have sprung up after the collapse of Marxism. Their focus on national security leaves room for a great deal of variation on social issues.

**Business-centered conservatism** represents the substitution of one question – “What is good for existing businesses?” for an overall governing philosophy, and has opened up the GOP for the paybacks of “crony capitalism.” Again, social issues are less critical to this subset.

**Fiscal-conservatism** is making a comeback among centrists, conservatives and even realistic liberals. It upholds “quaint” and “old fashioned” notions about repaying loans, not borrowing more than one can pay back, and opposing financial gimmicks that promote such unwise policies to creep into ongoing political arrangements. Social issues and even taxation issues (within the context of “fiscal” responsibility) are secondary concerns.

**National-greatness conservatism** is perhaps the least philosophically consistent on the list, but the most easily explained and understood. A great nation is prosperous, is faithful to great values, and accomplishes great things. The Hoover Dam, the railroads, the Moon Program and victory in WWII are hallmarks of national-greatness conservatism.

Beneath these mostly situational differences there is a shared ethos and common underlying principles.

## **ABOUT TWO RIVER CURRENTS: UNDERTOW & RISING TIDE**

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Something else is afoot in the culture, something deeper still. Moving underneath the superficial crust of the popular culture, underlying all the arguments between and among the liberals and conservatives, two emotional currents are running in opposite directions.

Running downhill is an unspoken attitude, a mindset, a pessimistic sense of life that can be capsulized in the following statement:

**Joy, usually undeserved, is to be compartmentalized, hidden, even denied; but pain is to be shared, put on display for everyone to see and feel guilty about.**

At the risk of oversimplification, the downhill current powers the envy / guilt syndrome. It lurks in the heart of every politically correct nag.

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Coursing uphill is a more uplifting mindset, attitude, an optimistic sense of life that is captured in the following:

**Pain is a natural feature of the human condition, a byproduct of the creative process, something to be compartmentalized, not advertised, never allowed to define or cripple life, but joy is to be shared and promoted.**

I am reminded of the blessing from the Vulcan character in the iconic Star Trek series: “Live long and prosper”. The progressives, driven by the first view, say “Don’t live too long or prosper too much.”

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We can see these views competing in their day-to-day versions. Writ large, the down-current, the undertow, drives the guilt-propelled left. The up-current, the rising tide, animates the creative center, and is shared by most conservatives and many morally anchored liberals.

*This split defines the real divide among us; and it will frame our next struggle. In this context, the arch political right is the tiniest part of potential opposition to the repressive, puritanical left.*

Sympathetic liberals take note: America’s recovery will begin with the conservative recovery but it will liberate old fashioned liberalism from the repressive progressives who have taken over. A successful conservative recovery in the current left-leaning environment is necessarily organized around the real life concerns that transcend popular ideological stereotypes.

**America’s recovery begins with a clear-eyed look at reality: The grand social experiments of the last century are failures.** The later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> socialist experiments in centralized planning have failed or are failing. This was the *Grand Project* to remake the human condition by using the power of government. The inevitable results were, are and always will be toxic to non-compliant businesses and sustained economic growth. The fully centralized economies of the old-line communist countries have cratered.

The “*mixed-economy*” utopian compromise model is next in line to fail because the egalitarian expectations of the left that a mixed economy can be tweaked deliver all the socialist benefits to everyone are unattainable in the real world. But the attempt to do the undoable inevitably drives the compliant political class to make expensive compromises. This in turn generates pressure for punitive tax rates and irresponsible public borrowing; and, in the bargain, it elevates an elite regulatory class to power (in the illusion the mere regulations are cost free). The members of the new regulatory class are self-tasked to impose puritanical political correctness on the rest of us.

**Rarely has the left been so out of touch with the “common people”.**

My strong sense is that here in the USA and elsewhere, there is a growing populist backlash, one propelled by members of the threatened and former middle class. In my opinion, the members of the hard left actually fear a responsible aroused population. Only by scaring people sufficiently with a real catastrophe, can the resulting chaos be exploited by the utopian authoritarians – or others even worse.

America's recovery will start with a conservative recovery if for no other reason than most reasonable and moderate liberals have been cowed into silence. But any conservative surge in the current left-leaning environment must necessarily be organized around the real life concerns that transcend popular ideological stereotypes.

***Conservatives cannot save the day alone. They/we all need the support of the old fashioned, constitutionally grounded liberals, the sane, freedom-loving moderates, and the struggling working people who are or aspire to be part of the American middle class.***

Only a grand coalition of the “not-left” can prevent the collapse of the ***Grand Progressive Project*** from being the pretext for the arrival of something far more authoritarian.

The Fabian socialists of England took the better part of 40 years to tip that country into a sclerotic, failing, quasi-socialist basket case. It took Dame Margaret Thatcher, daughter of a grocer, the better part of two decades just to begin the turnaround.

Ultimate political success depends on policy success. This prospect in turn rests on the ability of conservatives at every level to find, sell and implement the solutions the very efficacy of which will serve to expose the dysfunctional approaches of the current crop of illiberal-liberals...and, in the bargain, to make thing better.

At their best, conservatives exist to conserve the core values on which civilization depends. When conservatives stray from these core values, they cease to exist.

There really is a tide in human affairs and the tide is changing. Civilization depends on ordered freedom, the preservation of the institutions that support ordered freedom, and the ongoing creativity that fuels innovation and adaptivity. Neither conservatives nor liberals have – nor can they have – a perfect grasp of this eternal dynamic under shifting real world conditions.

A healthy civilization needs liberals to challenge arbitrary boundaries and conservatives to protect essential boundaries. A civilization without boundaries is a contradiction, like a multicellular organism in which the cells begin to lose their membranes, and the organism sickens and dies. The cooperation of liberalism and conservatism requires dialogue, which in turn requires shared principles, ***and an attitude of humility that the ideologues will never share.***

Long term human survival will depend on our ability to nurture and protect major centers of constructive creative activity everywhere feasible. This will require the conservation of the life-affirming moral order, because creative innovation, when it is un-tethered from all morality, can and will be misappropriated by the next generation of tyrants. This project will also require the conservation of the institutions that protect and foster general conditions of freedom. All creative enterprises require this, whether they are artistic or technological. Creativity is an equal-opportunity disrupter of things as they are. Yes, it produces inequalities; but without these inequalities, human progress stalls.

Many current partisans of left and right each have a blind spot where creative activities are concerned: The paleo-left, in its infatuation with artistic creativity, tends to marginalize or ignore the technological innovation side, while the paleo-right is almost a mirror image. But life-affirming creativity resists compartmentalization, and the liberties that sustain it are indivisible.

The American experiment was and is the single most important exemplar and model of a creative civilization that has emerged to date. The temporary bankruptcy of modern progressive American liberalism provides an opening to a renewed, forward-aimed conservatism, one animated and informed by the vision of a creative civilization and the USA as the world's single, viable exemplar.

There is a potential genius awakening among conservatives and thoughtful, morally grounded liberals who are willing to recognize and embrace this view.

To incorporate this insight into the conservative canon is to teach that creation, unmoored from the life-affirming moral order, will turn against itself, and that all those authoritarian civilizations that throttle creative endeavors will self-destruct. It is to teach that conservatism is the most reliable ally of American creativity. I believe that this creative form of conservatism will be to reactive, fire truck conservatism as a 3d color movie is to a 19th century daguerreotype.

When it arises, this will not to be the conservatism of your grandparents. It will be the conservatism of the generations who will colonize other worlds. It will be the form of conservatism that saves liberalism from its own excesses and inaugurates a healthy two party system, in a healthy country buoyed and strengthened by a strong middle class supported and sustained by conservative values.

How will we know when the new conservatives have succeeded? ...When core conservative values are no longer seen as just conservative talking points, but as the essential values of any healthy, freedom-respecting, creative civilization.

JBG

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