

Conservatism, Liberalism and Our Future

The Dots Connected

By

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2012 is a year of major transitions, some of which will not be immediately apparent to the casual observer and many clueless policy makers. Three major economies will begin tectonic shifts. America will set the stage for its reemergence as the world's exemplar of progress:

Europe will begin the painful shift away from its incoherent blend of highly productive, self-sustaining economies linked at the aorta to unsustainably underproductive, dependency economies. The new European model, whether the euro survives as a unitary currency, in a two tier form or not at all, will have one key feature: The failing entitlement models will be decoupled and made more accountable for their own misallocation of resources. There is just not enough free-floating altruism in all of Europe for the highly productive economies to voluntarily carry the entitlement load of the highly unproductive ones. The governing institutions of the EU cannot operate as an uber-government over the strong objections of its members. The forms of governance may remain, but the reality of an EU super-state will not gel in its present form.

China will be forced by internal pressures to move from what is essentially a slave labor, subsidized-production economy to something closer to the current American one – a credit-fueled consumption model. The pressures to increase wages and to relax restrictions on consumption cannot long be resisted in China, especially when its sovereign lending represents unspent money-in-the-bank that can be used to ease the conditions of Chinese labor. An important caution: China's model, a mix of police state executions, wealthy, oppressive party elites, de-facto local autonomy for high tech areas, masses of rural poor trying to migrate to cities, and the collapse of communism as a unifying moral paradigm, cannot be sustained. Chinese communist party leaders do not sleep well these days.

The USA will be forced by external circumstances to abandon its decades-long credit-driven consumption binge in favor of the more sober investment-driven production model. In the short and midterm this means "work harder, consume less". In the long term, America's success will be, once again, the exemplar that leads the world into a better place

The common thread in all these shifts is the breakdown of the command economy model (whether socialist, communist, mercantilist, or crony-capitalist) and the collapse of the various liberal subsidized-idleness models. As a result, what we now think of as liberalism and conservatism will change. All in all, I am cautiously optimistic. Let me introduce my optimism with two recently published letters of mine. After that, I will connect the dots.

Among my favorite sources of information and analysis, I particularly enjoy two intelligent conservative-leaning publications, **First Things**ⁱ, which reflects an interreligious, catholic-centered perspective, and **Commentary**ⁱⁱ, that exemplifies a Jewish point of view. Both are driven by a shared concern for the advancement of human dignity in the context of our common moral heritage, the ongoing struggle for human freedom, and a belief in American exceptionalism.

And both have recently published letters from me – one defending **Ayn Rand** from an ideological/religious attack (in the form of a movie review), and one containing my take on a **Symposium on America's future**.

First, from the journal,

First Things:

First Things is published by The Institute on Religion and Public Life, an interreligious, nonpartisan research and education institute whose purpose is to advance a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society.

...my letter as published in the **August/September 2011** issue....

“I’ve been reading First Things for more than a decade now, and David Bentley Hart’s takedown of Ayn Rand (“The Trouble with Ayn Rand,” May) stands out, but not in an admirable way. Many conservative Christians, among them Roman Catholics, will be offended at such a vitriolic attack on a famous conservative humanist author, and I use the term vitriolic advisedly (“just a little spiteful,” in Hart’s confession).

“I grant you that Rand, an autodidact Russian émigré (the daughter of a commercial family whose property was confiscated by the Soviets, and an anticommunist intellectual who fell in love with America) was indeed an atheist. But unlike Phillip Pullman, she did not attack or brutally caricature the Church, and unlike Nietzsche, whom she actively disliked, she did not attack Christianity.

“Taken as a whole, Ayn Rand’s creative output is a celebration of life and human creative powers. I suspect that she is on David Hart’s personal Index *Librorum Prohibitorum* because she embraced “greed” over self-immolative sacrifice. Rand’s passion for creative freedom as a moral imperative was a specific commitment that transcended “mere” greed and belies the parodic attempts to marginalize an original, serious ethic, relevant to the modern human condition and, at least to this believer, something that represents a valued addition to the larger Christian worldview.

“Ayn Rand’s fiction and philosophy is not Christian by any stretch, but it is an expression of life-

affirming, anti-tyrannical humanism. God forbid there would be a movie of one of Eric Hoffer's books."

Second, in the magazine,

Commentary:

From its founding in November 1945, COMMENTARY has been "an act of affirmation." It remains an expression of belief in the United States, perhaps most of all in America's central role in the preservation and advance of Western civilization and, most immediately, the continuing existence of the Jewish people.

...as published in **the January 2012 issue...**

"From reading COMMENTARY'S [November] symposium on America's future, it became clear to me that short term and long term optimism are easier to achieve than that pesky midterm variety. Humanity's long-term optimism has a venerable history, based on the enduring affirmation of human life. Our species' moral compass points us there.

"The 960 Jewish warriors and loved ones who stood against the Romans at the fortress on Masada two millennia ago - refusing to surrender, killing themselves rather than giving the attackers the satisfaction of victory - were realistic optimists. Their optimism was not unlike that of the struggling immigrant parents who work themselves into bone deep weariness day and night so their children will have better futures. It is the same as the optimism of the inventor, the creative artist, and all others who understand that in the sacrifices and rewards of their personal creative struggles, it is actually possible for a few to lift up the lives of the many who will come after them.

"The reasonable optimism of the entrepreneur with a potentially valuable innovation is grounded in the creative experience, in contrast with the unreasonable optimism of the obsessive gambler. It is the optimism of those who understand that setbacks and failures are built into the processes of creation. It is the essential optimism of all of us who believe in the future.

"It seems that, early in the 21st century, the utopian liberal game has run its course. But the power of post-modern liberalism in all its forms, within the academy and the larger intelligentsia, is robust. That power has flowed from the prevalent credibility of the "leveling" ideologies as the primary agent of ameliorative change. This was cemented by the historical association of conservatives with the repressive right wing defenders of kings, tyrants, royalty and other malefactors of unearned privilege.

"Short term optimism flows from the reasonable prediction that there will be a conservative surge - "fire truck" conservatives are typically brought to power when the excesses of

liberalism become too painful. The pending sovereign debt crisis will inflict pain sufficient to discredit liberalism in all its forms for some years to come.

“But midterm optimism is another matter. What happens after the fire is extinguished? What sort of enduring political and intellectual leadership will emerge from the ashes? The answers to these and the related questions critically depend on two things: one, whether the coming crisis will be widely recognized as the result of fundamental contradictions within “liberalism”; and two, whether a new conservatism can address the future with a simple, powerful philosophy that unites its core precepts with a theory of human progress. If the answer to the second question is yes, then so will be the answer to the first.

“Conservative intellectuals like John Podhoretz have their work cut out for them, even before the new garments are ordered.”

Jay B Gaskill

Connecting the Dots

It is clear to me that contemporary political liberalism has lost its way, and that conservatism in some form is needed to provide the necessary corrective, hopefully in time to prevent more damage. As I observed several years ago in a popular essay, *Liberalism is a secular religion*, there is an important sense in which most of us, whether we are classic or modern conservatives, are all liberals. I began that piece with the disclaimer, “All thinking people who respect human life and dignity are liberals in the larger sense. So that makes me and most thinking conservatives liberals, too.” I went on to identify the illiberal elements of the political liberalism of the hard left. My purpose was “not to debate the merits of the public policy issues that make up the catechism of the left, but to explore the notion that, collectively, these views **are** a catechism. There is no better explanation for the extreme resistance of the ‘political liberal’ group to all rational argument.”

Liberalism's enduring project – currently overshadowing its historic commitment to liberty - is to mitigate the harshness of Darwinian competition on the people. Conservatism's enduring project – formerly superseding its waning commitment to inherited privilege - is to protect the legitimate earnings of the people. In former times, neither ideology evidenced a particularly robust focus on the truly greater project: fostering the special conditions of ordered liberty in which creative human enterprises thrive – the very enterprises that constitute the fountainhead of all human progress, whether in the arts, technology or our social arrangements.

This was the core insight led me to connect the major dots. The immediate problem, as I put it in my *Commentary* letter, is “whether a new conservatism can address the future with a simple, powerful philosophy that unites its core precepts with a theory of human progress.”

I believe that new variety of conservatives (a type that I've referenced in an article below as "Renaissance conservatives") will quickly adapt and connect core conservative values to the project of fostering, protecting and anchoring the human creative enterprise.

This adaptation proves to be a natural fit. As a bonus, it also supports the resumption of a fruitful dialogue with the subset of enlightened, freedom-loving liberals who understand that the creative project, writ large, necessarily requires protected freedoms that have always been closely associated with the conservative project. These are the very freedoms essential to the functioning of creative communities throughout history. They include the right to uncensored, unregulated expression, to the legally protected retention of one's legitimately acquired property and earnings (particularly intellectual property and the fruits of one's innovations and inventions) and the protection of voluntary mutual exchange, whether of ideas, art, goods, services or any other value that free men and women, working for themselves, can generate.

These notions are the bedrock of the creative civilization imperative. It is a powerful idea, one that has the potential to transform both liberalism and conservatism. And, not coincidentally, the special conditions for a large scale, ongoing creative efflorescence have strongly rooted themselves in the New World, protected by the American constitutional structure of governance. The American experiment is at its very core the first modern example of a creative society grounded in protected liberties. As the force of this idea spreads and the policy implications sink in, the stage will be set for the Great American Recovery. Once again, our example will lead the world.

These ideas are developed in the following articles, available on **The Policy Think Site**:

The American Creative Surge (PDF download -75 pages)

<http://www.jaygaskill.com/ACS2011.pdf>

Political Liberalism as a Secular Religion

<http://jaygaskill.com/liberalismasreligion.htm>

Living in the Ayn Rand Universe

<http://www.jaygaskill.com/InTheAynRandUniverse.htm>

The Dialogic Imperative (PDF download, 41 pages)

<http://www.jaygaskill.com/i2i.pdf>

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ⁱ **First Things** is edited by RR Reno. Link: <http://www.firstthings.com/>

ⁱⁱ **Commentary** is edited by John Podhoretz. Link: <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/>