Teaching American Conservatism

Paul Milazzo
Ohio University

September 2025

Ask anyone with even modest rightward leanings and they'll tell you that today's academy neglects conservative ideas when it isn't otherwise deprecating or caricaturing them. That's a good enough reason to teach a course on the history of American conservatism, but it doesn't fully explain the rationale for mine.

Approached more expansively, conservative thought can serve as the threshold of a liberal arts education. These days, that's not something to take for granted. The narrowing of university curricula over time to emphasize occupational training, social activism, or identity studies has impoverished campus intellectual life by substituting the parochial for the universal and downplaying perennial questions that have long captivated young scholars. Is there a source of morality external to ourselves? What forms of government and political economy are most conducive to human flourishing? Are equality and democracy essential for a just society? What are the limits of human knowledge?

These are not partisan questions, nor even inherently "conservative" ones, but various men and women we label "conservatives" have addressed them at length. Students need not entertain every argument they encounter—nor could they, given the delightfully fractious and frequently contradictory nature of the American right. But if they contextualize these ideas historically and trace their intellectual lineage, they will learn to situate American conservatism within a broader Western tradition. In short, I treat the history of conservatism in the United States as a pathway to cultural literacy. Given how little students are asked to read and how reticent educators are to assert what educated people ought to know, this method is practically countercultural.

Although most of the course pertains to the 20th century, we devote the first three weeks to the Founding Fathers, Edmund Burke, and Alexis de Tocqueville, who provide the intellectual

scaffolding for what follows. While the authors and activists we read later address various contemporary issues—the New Deal, Communism, industrial modernism, and secularism—their discussions regularly revisit the themes of sovereignty, individualism, hierarchy, community, and tradition raised by the big three. I was pleased to discover how these dialogues broached recurring questions of epistemology and human nature that students rarely have an opportunity to explore.

To take one example, John Adams's back-and-forth with the French philosophes on the merits of bicameral legislatures and mixed government prompts students to contemplate what kind of knowledge is needed to construct a government de novo, as the founders intended. Anne Robert Jacques Turgot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocated pure reason and distrusted any government architecture with circuit breakers to impede the general will. In *Discourses on Davila*, Adams argued that the empirical lessons of history and human psychology validated the Constitution's checks and balances to mitigate democratic excesses. If the philosophes thought absolute liberty to be compatible with absolute power, Adams looked to buffers in the form of local interests and intermediary institutions, as did that more famous antagonist of French rationalism, Burke. Adams and Burke viewed the French Revolution in similarly jaundiced terms, but students enjoy untangling their contrasting views of aristocracy, monarchy, written constitutions, and natural rights.

Debates over ways of knowing feature no less prominently in the 20th century. In their battles against pragmatism, materialism, and positivism, Irving Babbitt's "New Humanism" of the 1920s and Richard M. Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948) intuited a universal source of morality to guide human action distinct from sensory input from one's environment. For Babbitt,

John Dewey and Charles Darwin were the immediate targets, but Rousseau and his Romantic individualism stood as the Ur-source of modern intellectual error.

Friedrich Hayek's critique of socialist planning, meanwhile, delved directly into the limits of human knowledge. Hayek commonly finds himself lumped with libertarians, but once my students read *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), they can't help but notice some rather overt Burkean tendencies. If price systems transmit information synchronously, he implied, then cultures do so diachronically, communicating through tradition the blueprints for successful social institutions. As with economic relations, organic, decentralized evolution outperforms top-down planners or politburos. Hayek did not share Babbitt's antipathy toward Darwin, and he distanced himself from conservatives discomfited by the concept of spontaneous order. Still, he sided with Burke in locating the origin of rights in society rather than nature, despite his admiration for the founders' achievements (which, with respect to the fruits of the 1787 Philadelphia Convention, weren't exactly spontaneous).

By default, my students are more sympathetic to democratic equality and suspicious of hierarchy. Tocqueville, a 19th-century French aristocrat, identified American democracy as the wave of the future while also providing a thoughtful critique of its potential excesses. Many social critics on the right drew inspiration from Tocqueville, but none applies his insights to modern life more evocatively than Robert Nisbet in *The Quest for Community* (1953). Undergraduates recognize his Tocquevillian pitch for local voluntary associations as the antidote to the disenchantment and isolation plaguing 20th-century moderns. What they don't see coming is the affinity he identifies between individualism and the centralized state—a direct shot across the bow to liberals and libertarians alike. Nisbet insists that individualism and collectivism go together like peanut butter

and jelly. It's a conclusion primed to make a Hayekian's head explode but one rooted in Tocqueville's concerns about excessive individualism—self-absorbed citizens are more willing to outsource their public responsibilities to a managerial state and tolerate its "soft despotism." But Nisbet, like Whittaker Chambers, also understood the enduring appeal of communist ideology: It offered membership and a coherent moral perspective to adherents longing for community.

Big ideas come in smaller, more accessible packages as well, which is why fiction and multimedia sources are so conducive to teaching the history of conservatism. The critiques of capitalism and defense of southern regionalism launched by Vanderbilt University's Fugitive Poets in the 1930s, for example, influenced Flannery O' Connor's wry observations about American religiosity in the post–World War II era. Her short stories are more content to lampoon the spiritual poverty of the bourgeois and their hunger for God's grace than to indict their fealty to consumerism, technology, and markets as the Fugitives did. But as a self-described "Hillbilly Thomist," she defended the "Christ-haunted" south as a "storytelling section" that makes "belief believable," thus reaffirming the emphasis on place that characterized the Southern Agrarians' idiosyncratic socioeconomic outlook.

From the other direction, few writers can boast of the cultural reach achieved by Ayn Rand, whose bestselling novels celebrate unfettered capitalism and heroic, atheistic (and never excessive) individualism. Rand is best served in small portions and from oblique angles. Rush's 1976 concept album, *2112*, for example, offers a 20-minute musical adaptation of Rand's 1938 dystopian novella, *Anthem*, that explores art's potential to liberate individuals from technocratic totalitarianism and enforced social equality. Comparing the original with this heavy metal sci-fi sequel leads students to consider Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on Rand, whether her philosophy

overlooks the human need for community, and why it might have appealed to young musicians whose record label was poised to drop them over creative differences.

In lieu of Rand's weightier tomes, I prefer to assign Robert A. Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* (1967). This tale of a lunar colony's libertarian revolt against its Terran overlords contains enough three-dimensional characters, philosophical dialogues, and internal contradictions to fuel multiple in-class conversations—starting with the question of whether the "Loonie" revolution more closely resembles the American, French, or Russian variety.

All told, teaching American conservatism has introduced my students to ideas and ways of thinking about the world that they wouldn't encounter by default in a university setting. If this counts as a public service of sorts, it also happens to be the most fun I've had in the classroom. If you give it a try, I expect you'll feel the same.