Why Teach Conservatism? Educating the Right is Crucial to the Civic Education of Liberal Citizens

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Civic self-knowledge is an increasingly essential purpose of contemporary higher education. Students need to know themselves as not only individuals (which is hard enough) but also citizens—members of a political community with a particular character, history, and set of ideals and purposes. Teaching students about the conservative intellectual tradition is essential to that cause today, not only because conservative ideas shape some of the political debates of our time but also because what we tend to call the conservative tradition is actually an element of our larger liberal civic and political tradition, which our society has long tended to obscure from itself. When students are helped to see it, they often find that they understand their society better.

This essential strand of our tradition is obscured in part because it has tended to be under-theorized. The theory and practice of American political life have always been remarkably different from one another. Our theories have tended to be stark, abstract, individualistic, and fairly radical. Our practice has been elaborate, practical, communitarian, and fairly conservative. Our theories often don't describe our practice very well, and our practice is by no means merely our theories applied.

This disjuncture has often been a source of profound dissatisfaction in American public life, and such dissatisfaction is rampant now among the rising generation. The distance between how we describe ourselves and how we live can make it difficult for some morally and intellectually serious young Americans to take our society seriously because that society seems to be failing to live up to its stated ambitions. And it can make it difficult for other morally and intellectually serious young Americans to take our society seriously because that society seems grounded in a shockingly shallow and simplistic conception of the human condition.

In a sense, today's critics of liberalism on the left attack our society for failing to put its radical theoretical ideals into practice, and today's critics of liberalism on the right attack it for succeeding in putting those ideals into practice. But they are both operating with a terribly incomplete conception of our society's ideals, its practice, and the relationship between them. That conception is incomplete in a particular way. It leaves out the conservative intellectual tradition from its description of our liberal society—or we might say it leaves out the right wing of our history.

What we crudely call the left-right divide began to emerge in the late 18th century in Britain as an argument about the nature of the liberal society. Britain by that time had already come to understand itself as what we now would describe as a liberal society—one defined by the rule of law, rights of property and conscience, the presence and power of some representative institutions, and a degree of individual liberty. And the questions that were coming to define English politics involved where this liberal society comes from and, therefore, where it points and what it requires and demands of its citizens.

One side of that divide, which we have come to call the left side, argued that the liberal society was the result of a discovery of new political principles in the Enlightenment—principles that pointed toward new ideals and institutions and toward an ideal society. Liberalism, in this view, is the pursuit of that ideal society. And it represents a decisive break with the premodern inheritance of the West.

The other side of that divide, which we have come to call the right side, believed that the liberal society was the product of countless generations of gradual political and cultural evolution in the West. By the time of the Enlightenment, and especially in Britain, this evolution had begun to arrive at political forms that pointed toward some timeless principles in which our common life should be grounded, and that allowed for a workable balance among freedom, justice, and effective government given the constraints of human nature. Liberalism, in this view, involves the preservation and gradual improvement of those forms. It is a culmination of Western civilization, not a break from all that came before itself.

One view therefore understands liberalism as a revolutionary discovery that points beyond the existing arrangements of society, while the other sees it as a gradual accomplishment to be preserved and enhanced. The first is thus progressive while the second is conservative. They are very much in tension, even though both take themselves to be both describing and justifying the liberal society.

Contemporary undergraduates with an interest in political theory are likely to encounter the case for the more progressive mode of liberalism in many forms in the course of their education. But they are unlikely to encounter the case for the more conservative mode at all. This is in part because of a systematic bias in contemporary higher education, to be sure, but it is also in part because the conservative form is just not nearly as thoroughly theorized.

To encounter the 18th-century forms of that view, these students would need to read Edmund Burke or be led through the logic of the Declaration of Independence and the US

Constitution with an eye to their full depth and not just their most familiar arguments. To meet those ideas in the 19th century, they might need to linger on Alexis de Tocqueville's introduction to *Democracy in America* (which offers a thousand-year history of liberalism that doesn't even pause to notice the Enlightenment) or pay careful attention to the deepest themes of Abraham Lincoln's speeches. To meet its 20th-century forms, they would need to be introduced to William F. Buckley, Whittaker Chambers, T. S. Eliot, Russell Kirk, Irving Kristol, Frank Meyer, Robert Nisbet, Norman Podhoretz, and a host of related thinkers. In other words, to more fully encounter their society's political tradition, students need to be taught about the conservative intellectual tradition.

Our society is difficult to understand without a meaningful knowledge of the conservative branch of liberalism. A deeper acquaintance with the conservative intellectual tradition would help students grasp that our society's practice is not hopelessly disconnected from its theories of itself but is rather rooted in a deeper and more complicated set of theories than they might have imagined. It would help them see that some of their critiques of the liberal society are actually arguments for a different kind of liberal society and that some claims about why liberalism failed might be better understood as arguments about how liberalism could succeed.

In my experience, exposing smart and serious students of all political stripes to the conservative intellectual tradition tends to open their eyes to some of the sources of their own ideas in ways that leave them grateful and engaged. It helps them to see that their generation is by no means the first to encounter some fundamental quandaries of the liberal society and that, in

some important respects, our politics has long been a struggle to contend with precisely those challenges.

In other words, helping students better know the conservative intellectual tradition is a way of helping them better know themselves as citizens—and so become more truly educated.