The Conservative Tradition as the American Tradition

Rita Koganzon
University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

October 2025

Over the long run of Western political thought, there is only a short interval when teaching texts that are recognizably conservative becomes relevant. Prior to the 19th century, one could teach "the best of what has been thought and said" without much attention to its authors' partisan beliefs, since few of them map onto the contemporary political landscape in any coherent way. Where John Locke stood on the Exclusion Crisis helps us to understand him in his own context, but it does little to situate him in contemporary American politics or illuminate which "side" might lay claim to his thought. To the extent that a thinker like Edmund Burke has been roped into a "conservative tradition," it is mainly in retrospect, when the more fundamental point is that he merits study because he was part of the English political tradition or the Western tradition more broadly.

In American political thought, however, partisanship is always much closer at hand, particularly in writings from the 20th and 21st centuries. And the teachers of American political thought are, inevitably, partisans themselves. This dynamic leads to a couple different temptations or distortions in teaching. The first is an impulse to advocate one's own side in the choice of readings. This can be done either by excluding the other side from a syllabus or by stacking readings to feature the strongest arguments from one's own side, offset only by the weakest efforts of one's opponents. The second, better-intentioned but still distorting impulse, is to teach merely "representative" (but not necessarily sophisticated, and sometimes even purposefully simplistic but "accessible") arguments from each side of a political controversy to present to students a balanced picture of both sides.

While outright advocacy is worse than merely reductive balancing, both of these approaches flatten the variegated landscape of American thought. The best reason to teach the conservative intellectual tradition in the American context is because it is a constitutive part of the *American* intellectual tradition. The left-right rivalry has structured American political thinking for 130 years, and to omit one side of it would be like teaching early modern political thought by assigning only republicans and no absolutists, only Locke and no Hobbes.

I think the best way to avoid both these temptations that bedevil partisan teachers of partisan texts is to think of American political thought as constituting a coherent tradition of its own—an American political tradition. This is the original, synthetic view of the American studies discipline, and until it was overthrown by the political revolution of the 1960s, it produced some of the most remarkable work on America that we have. My task as a teacher is to initiate students into this tradition, which is usually their tradition. To teach from this perspective demands that we look to not merely representative sides of issue debates but "the best of what has been thought and said" in this tradition, because that is what will best illuminate what the tradition is. Any honest effort to teach the American political tradition as a cohesive whole necessitates an extensive engagement with what can be broadly construed as conservative thought—with defenders of slavery and the Southern social order like George Fitzhugh, with the intellectual defenders and critics of industrialization like William Graham Sumner and Henry and Brooks Adams, and with the most astute critics of the 1960s cultural revolution like Joan Didion, Irving Kristol, Christopher Lasch, and Tom Wolfe. There is simply no understanding of the America that we live in without these thinkers.

But even if one sets out to teach these writers only as representative conservatives rather than original thinkers in their own right, an interesting thing often happens in class discussions. It emerges that no really good writer is merely a conservative, just as none is simply a liberal. They all have strange, heterodox, often politically uncategorizable ideas. Fitzhugh contended that slavery was the true socialism. Brooks Adams loved high culture but hated the market. Lasch was a Marxist defender of the traditional family. Didion's libertarian vision of California led her to break with Ronald Reagan and move left at the same moment that Kristol's disgust with the excesses of 1960s radicalism dislodged him from the left and propelled him rightward. As parts of one tradition, American conservatism and American liberalism are inseparably intertwined. Neither is comprehensible without the other. And both are much weirder and more layered than they appear on the presidential debate stage every four years.

Of course, it is hard to judge what is "the best" of 50 or 20 years ago without the benefit of centuries of hindsight and canonization. But this is at least what we should aim at, even if our judgments will sometimes fall short of the mark. To aim at the best is expressly not to aim at the least racist, the most gender-egalitarian, or the most theologically orthodox writer—or the writer whom you think the students will most agree or identify with. If there is any shortcut for selection, it should probably be what provokes the longest sustained discussion fueled by disagreement. All of us will be tempted to conflate "the best" with what we personally like or agree with most, but what Justice Antonin Scalia once said in defense of originalism applies imperfectly to teaching:

> The main danger . . . is that judges will mistake their own predilections for the law. Avoiding this error is the hardest part of being a conscientious judge; perhaps no

> conscientious judge ever succeeds entirely. . . . Originalism does not aggravate the principal weakness of the system, for it establishes a historical criterion that is conceptually quite separate from the preferences of the judge himself.

There is no perfect analogue to originalism in the teaching of political thought, but setting out to faithfully compass the American political tradition in its fullness, which necessarily includes our political opponents, goes at least some way toward conceptually separating ourselves from our preferences and avoiding the principal weaknesses of the system.