



On Teaching Conservatism

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In a modest effort to add meaningful viewpoint diversity to the Emory College curriculum, I taught a freshman seminar on “Sociology of Conservatism” nearly every fall semester from 2016 to 2024. When I proposed the course, my chair supported the heterodox plan but asked me to include our discipline in the title. The seminar focused less on the sociology than on the substance of post–World War II American conservatism, such as what conservatives have been saying, how they support and apply their ideas, and whether those make sense. The main goal was to expose at least some students to the other side on a mostly liberal campus.

Deriving a framework from George Nash and others, the seminar first examined varieties of conservatism—intellectual, economic, constitutional, black, national, anti-woke, and social or postliberal—within a loosely defined tradition. Using Frank Meyer’s old fusion proposal as a starting point, it explicitly raised the question of how well the different strands and ideas cohered, if at all. Without suggesting a definite answer, the course employed several useful themes, such as Jerry Muller’s set of conservative themes, Thomas Sowell’s contrasting visions, and Albert Hirschman’s rhetoric of reaction (put to positive use). After briefly reviewing the conservative media presence, it examined conservatism in public policy (including big government and school choice), law (including originalism and gun rights), and higher education. Early versions also touched on foreign policy. Two team debates based on individual research and group deliberation, on topics like immigration and free speech, typically produced sparks and fostered cohesion. As in any seminar, classes were very interactive, and students regularly led discussion. I tried to make that discussion as inclusive as possible and adopted a fairly neutral posture—students often had to guess my own views. Throughout, I treated the

seminar as an entirely normal course, without justifying the subject or the materials. That approach worked well.

What stands out about the experience?

1. With variations across semesters, it was fun for most students and me. Discussions tended to be good or great, team debates vigorous, and final papers and essays solid to excellent. Conservatism, it turns out, lends itself nicely to the kinds of things we expect from satisfying liberal arts seminars. In a natural way, it can raise big issues, stimulate critical thinking, and generate absorbing conversation. In the age of AI, the quality of the in-class experience will become ever more essential. Studying conservatism can help.

2. For many students, the seminar was a significant learning experience. People who had attended woke high schools or came from left-leaning families discovered new ways of thinking. Some entered with fuzzy notions of conservatism. As a student once said after the end of a semester, he and his peers had expected a class dealing with the likes of Tucker Carlson and Candace Owens, but they got something much more interesting and serious. While I tried to keep a light tone in class, the sense that conservatism comprises a serious body of social and political thought, or at least can be analyzed seriously, was itself a common realization. A number of students seized the opportunity to clarify their ideas and reexamine the grounds for their beliefs. Conservatism works well that way.

3. I experienced support rather than resistance. Though they did not inspect my work in detail, colleagues were aware that I deviated from mainstream sociology, but they appreciated what I did and never obstructed it. Similarly, no seminar participant ever acted as a “snowflake,” attempted a cancellation, or recoiled from controversial notions or

inconvenient facts. The main complaint, believe it or not, was about the amount of reading—in spite of my effort not to assign entire books, chapters, or articles and instead to deliver all readings online in clean, concise, and tightly edited files (which many students did appreciate). Workload aside, the response was positive. One year, I even won the main student-nominated teaching award for this seminar. Conservatism need not be a sensitive topic.

4. Perhaps more than other classes, the seminar fostered some strong connections with students outside of class. Several became regular conversation partners and repeat customers. Though I did not come on as a conservative advocate, in combination with some other courses, the seminar probably conveyed to students that Dr. Lechner might not be on board with progressive conventional wisdom and, more importantly, that it was safe to confide in him about their own heterodox leanings, including the disenchantment some liberal students felt with the narrow agenda and party line they encountered in other classes. Teaching conservatism can help to create such a safe space.

5. While the benefits of seminars like mine for students, instructors, and institutions are obvious, the payoff for American conservatism is less clear. Producing such a payoff was not my goal, and I did not give credit for activist letter writing or rally attendance. As positive as my experience was, it does not address the dearth of intellectual capital in the conservative movement. Perhaps the seminar will turn out to have inspired some contributors. It may have instilled an understanding across the aisle in some liberal students likely to rise to prominence. But responsible college classes at “elite” institutions cannot solve the problems of American conservatism.

6. The seminar ran from Donald Trump's first run for president to his last, both of which accentuated to students the relevance of what we were studying as context for the Trump phenomenon that was not explicitly on the agenda. Though we did not avoid speaking about Trump, operating at a slight remove from the events of the day promoted open discussion. In retrospect, however, closer attention to populism could have deepened reflection on the prospects of conservatism.

7. By dealing with controversial views head-on in an atmosphere of open exchange, the seminar modeled and fostered reasonably free expression, which remains a pretty empty ideal unless some people occasionally have something distinctive to say. Discussing conservatism in an academic setting can do more for free expression than advocating the principle in the abstract.

As a complement to the conservatism seminar, I developed a higher-level special-topics course on "Progressivism and Its Discontents," which I taught several times in the past five years to create a place where the then-ascending progressive narrative on a range of subjects—from meritocracy to systemic racism, from criminal justice to "following the science"—could be analyzed and contested seriously. On each issue, we used representative materials to contrast the (stylized and "steelmanned") progressive case with the case against, stimulating both informal and formal debate, which many students joined with relish. While the anti-progressive arguments were not all conventionally conservative, as a practical matter, students tended to label anything to the right of the left as conservative. Labeling aside, the course format offered a way to teach strands of actual conservative thought, not as prime subject but indirectly, as partial reaction to

and in conversation with progressivism. Especially for progressive students, the course proved illuminating as a way to clarify what they believed and confront ideas some found, as they put it, “extremely challenging” or “extremely striking.”

Studying conservatism can help smart students think harder. Many enjoy the experience. More should have the opportunity.