

## What Does Burke Have to Do With America? Europe and an American Conservatism

Perhaps American conservatives haven't paid close enough attention to Edmund Burke. Rather than being too Burkean, as some allege, maybe traditionalists have been too selective, even cavalier, with their appropriation of the presumed European "roots" of the American order. Consider Burke's most famous rhetorical flourish, the crescendo of his most famous work, where he declared that "the age of chivalry is gone." If an age is over then conservatism is for fools—reaction or adaptation are the only meaningful options. Looked at from this perspective, and taking Burke's words seriously, Burke, the great defender of inherited liberty, seems like a most unlikely forefather of American conservatism.<sup>1</sup>

Burke didn't say that chivalry was dead, but rather the AGE of chivalry was dead. He marked a hinge in history and observed an irreversible change in the direction of civilization. Chivalry is an aristocratic virtue, if virtue it is. Burke indicated the nature of the new age when he wrote that the age "of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever." A hard look at this and the surrounding passages provides little interpretive license for a Burkean appeal to conserve. One age is over; a new age is born. One ruling class is sundered, a new one rests on fundamentally different economic and social conditions. The new conditions produce ideals, morals, and habits both alien to and incompatible with inherited traditions. Burke wrote of extinction, not conservation.

The intimate connection between this morbid age and its aristocratic foundation Burke spelled out in the subsequent paragraphs as he laced together virtues, now gone, with devotion to rank, with ancient traditions, and with "pleasing illusions" that harmonize the different and unequal parts of society. Beyond a conservative's love of dark truths expressed with sublime beauty—a perverse taste for the remains of the day—only one sliver of niggardly hope is found in this part of

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 66-67. All of the quotations from Burke in this section of the paper come from these two pages.

Burke's book. "If (this mixed system of opinion and sentiment) should ever be totally extinguished, the loss I fear will be great." Here is the only sentence in this famous section that suggests that all is not completely lost, that something there is to conserve.

The new Bourgeois Age of "sophisters, economists, and calculators" rests on a "barbarous philosophy" of mechanical self-interest that strips away the "pleasing illusions" to lay bare the naked reality shorn of civilizing and softening manners. "Nothing is left" Burke wrote of a society governed by this barbarous philosophy, "which engages the affections" for the "commonwealth" and the "system of manners" that had made England lovely.

At least in this section, Burke presents a stark dualism between a chivalric age and a barbarous age. One is marked by a complex and unplanned assimilation of un-like and unequal parts. The other is marked by devotion to naked atomism that dissolves all compounded things to find equal and alike components. One is draped in myth and mystery; the other is bathed in the harsh light of reason and science. One lives in history and possesses the soft forms of inherited memory; the other lives in the harsh light of the constant now of universal and abstract truths.

Most problematic, from the perspective of any American appropriation of Burke's "conservatism," is the incompatibility of these two ages. More precisely, some argue, nothing about the myth, the particularism, the inherited liberties, of the chivalric age can possibly be fitted into our rationalist, egalitarian, and individualistic society. Nonetheless, Burke's works generally, and this famous peroration specifically, became a central part of the story of AMERICAN conservatism in the middle of the twentieth century by thinkers who embraced tradition and historical memory over abstract and universal claims. Why? To what effect?

Historian Paul Gottfried<sup>2</sup> argues that not only were traditionalists like Russell Kirk wrong about a meaningful Burkean tradition in America, but their often

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gottfried, *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Gottfried develops this theme primarily in the Introduction and Chapter 1, "The Invention of American Conservatism."

eloquent narrative of the continuity of conservative principles reaching back to aristocratic England (and even to the ancient Hebrews and Greeks) were consciously appropriated by opinion makers who believed none of it. In effect, people like William F Buckley, Jr., who wanted to create an intellectual / political movement that blended anti-communism with a free market ideology, purchased an aristocratic coat of arms from Kirk's workshop. Let me paraphrase, with some of my own buttressing,<sup>3</sup> Gottfried's compelling historical account of this "contrived" European heritage.

Russell Kirk's unexpected bestseller, *The Conservative Mind* (1953), supplied an eloquent and literary mythos of a shared British and American Burkean tradition. By wedding this conservative mythos with anti-communism and free market ideology, Buckley and others tethered pressing and current ideological positions with a venerable but contrived history of Anglo-American civilization. Indeed, in due course, the promoters of an emerging, self-conscious, conservative movement would place their current ideological battles as a new phase in a long struggle to defend the civilizing and liberating ideals of western civilization. From here it was a short intellectual hop to understand the freedom ideals that lay beneath anti-communism and free market ideology as simultaneously the final moral fruit of a long evolution of the West and the existential last stand of western civilization against a totalizing enemy of ordered liberty. By telling the story of western civilization in this way, and in support of contemporary ideological positions, movement leaders could baptize their version of conservatism in Western Civilization (rather than simply an expression of certain ideological interests) and they could become dismissive of history. To be sure, American freedom is the result of a very long history. But it is the result, the culmination, the final and fullest expression of a long historical evolution, and therefore this American "conservatism" had overcome its history. If the expression of American conservatism in the 1950s began to take an abstract and universalist quality, it was

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<sup>3</sup> I find Gottfried's argument very suggestion and often persuasive, but also very fragmentary. What I do in the summary that follows is to give Gottfried's account with my own attempt to fill in certain gaps.

because the leaders of the movement were defending (and in that sense conserving) the final fruit. No longer interested in historical development, they were involved in a struggle to save civilization. Paradoxically, a true conservative might note, saving civilization depends on gratitude that comes only from a deep understanding of the historicity of human life.

If Kirk's story was initially intellectual prelude (useful to create a sense of historical gravitas), it soon became anachronistic, as did Kirk and those who crafted this civilizational narrative. Structural problems with this form of historical mythos plagued this species of American traditionalism from the start. Kirk's argument that a Burkean tradition has persisted in America required that he trace a legacy through brilliant thinkers whose sentiments, tastes, and ideas resided on the boundaries of American culture and whose brilliance was most often expressed in the form of critiques, laments, and sometimes jeremiads. More importantly, this Burkean tradition was necessarily in tension with two foundational American beliefs: equality and the primacy of individual choice.

Putting aside for now the challenges of defending hierarchy as part of the American tradition, Gottfried argues that Kirk's embrace of choice contributed to the fateful flaw in the eventually dominant strain of American "conservatism"—value-conservatism. Gottfried wrote concerning Kirk's argument: "To become 'conservative'...was no longer a question of birth, or of social position, or of the worldview related to either. It was a matter of agreeing with sentiments and with passing a self-administered quiz on values."<sup>4</sup> From the beginning, it seems, Kirk presented conservatism as a liberal choice—one option among many.

Having been incorporated into the nascent movement, Kirk was exposed to withering assaults from within and yet he was dependent on the movement for his livelihood and influence. As Gottfried sees it, a new version of the American conservative movement emerged in the late 1960s and through the seventies. Crafting an emancipatory view of American history, and led by the Straussian, Harry Jaffa, this Conservative Movement 2.0, as I'll call it in this paper, purged itself

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<sup>4</sup> Gottfried, *Conservatism in America*, 14.

completely of any anti-egalitarianism. With equality as the new defining principle of the movement (co-opting part of the leftist understanding of America), the mythos of America told by the opinion leaders required different heroes—action heroes rather than dyspeptic thinkers. Kirk was kept around by various institutions of the conservative movement, but for all intents and purposes, he had outlived his usefulness.

Whether Kirk was right about a living tradition in America that runs through Edmund Burke or not (and to this subject I will return), Gottfried's analysis of the character of what I'm calling "Conservative Movement 2.0" from the 1970s to the present is inescapable. It is important to keep these questions distinct: 1. Has there even been an American conservative tradition with meaningful continuities to Aristocratic Europe (England)? 2. Is there anything conservative about contemporary movement conservatism? The answer to the first of these, I think, is rich and complex, and the historical ridges that one discovers on close inspection are as important as the shape of historical patterns that one sees from a distance. The second question raises pressing concerns about politics, policy, and about something deeper—American identity. Once we answer that question we are better prepared to think through the significance of the longer history.

Professor Gottfried has long traced the leftward trend of movement conservatism, particularly beginning in the 1970s with the influx of neoconservatives and the deep pockets of their funders.<sup>5</sup> A new matrix of institutions provided a network of scholars, journalists, and policy advocates who could, in ways unimagined by the conservative activists even ten years before, influence political discourse and policy debate. From these sources emerged one of the most successful political ideologies in American history. This ideology was successful by appearing conservative while tacking left. Key to its presumed "conservative" foundation, movement conservatives staged a vigorous fight against relativism and historicism. The primary intellectual targets were the various schools of thought in academia that we group under that expansive canopy,

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, his lively book, *The Conservative Movement* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992).

postmodernism. The fight in the academy found similar expressions in politics and culture where movement conservatives defended universal principles against those who advocated one species or another of relativism or a generalized cultural permissiveness.

Somewhat confusingly, Gottfried calls this “value conservatism.” Rather than understanding the word “value” as a relative term (a thing’s value is relative to each person), Gottfried notes that movement conservatives (and many before our era) use the word as a claim to a universal moral truth. While different factions of the broader movement might draw from distinct historical and linguistic resources, from Catholic Natural Law reasoning to a fabulously loose natural rights teaching, all politically motivated conservatives could think of themselves as bound to shared commitment to a universal moral code—“values”. By contrasting their “values” with the value-neutrality or relativism of their opponents, movement conservatives established themselves as defenders of morality. In this way the anti-communist liberalism of the neoconservatives became the foundation for Movement Conservatism 2.0. It won this high ground within the movement because people had wrongly assumed that their leftist opponents were without a morality rather than possessing a competing morality. By declaring their defense of “values” the new conservatives made equality and other universalizable abstractions into the new normal.

Straussian and neoconservative opinion makers could emphasize the moral universalism of their ideology to attract various religious groups whose members were primarily interested in cultural battles. But the heart of Movement Conservatism 2.0 (as measured by control over key institutions and media sources) was found in a set of political-cum-moral ideals. These ideals could be considered conservative only in the context of postmodernism where the very concept of moral principles is problematized. However, seen outside of the context of a postmodern other, conservative ideology is progressive, emancipatory, and truer to the non-communist American left than to the American right, avers Gottfried.

The first and most important ideological transformation leading to Movement Conservatism 2.0 was to turn equality from a problem into the defining

ideal of conservatism. With a new foundation of equality, American conservatism discovered a whole new set (and newly prioritized set) of heroes and forbearers. The *Declaration of Independence* declared this “conservative” principle in simple and unambiguous terms, and the new conservative hagiography revolved around the realization or promulgation of this egalitarian ideal—a conservative history that now ran through Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sometimes neglected among historians of American conservatism, the successful hijacking of equality as definitionally conservative depended on conflating equality and freedom. The relationship between pre-movement American conservatives and equality has long been exceedingly complex, often contentious, but never unambiguous. Freedom (or its conceptual cousin, liberty), on the other hand, has deep emotional roots in the soul of every self-proclaimed conservative, no matter his stripe (this is true even for those conservatives who don't like using “freedom” in a way that tends toward abstraction). In political discourse, those who call themselves conservative, at least since the election of Ronald Reagan, speak as though equality and freedom are unambiguous and interconnected ideals—they stand or fall together. This conceptual marriage made movement conservatism politically potent because it translated the deep conceptual confusion of the vast middle of America into ideological slogans that fit perfectly a political movement. In this way, movement conservatives do represent the broad American middle. At least they took the moral confusion of the American middle and gave it principled form.

The second component of Movement 2.0 ideology is democratic universalism. Deftly entwined with equality-cum-freedom, movement conservatives argue that only democracies deserve to be considered morally legitimate because only democracy reflects the conscious and ongoing choice of the people, and only democracy is consistent with the ideals of equality and freedom. Because the United States was the first nation to realize in both word and deed the highest political ideals, it is exceptional. This exceptionalism is quite the reverse of an older form that suggests that America is distinctive because it has the history, culture, habits, and folkways that peculiarly prepare it to live well with these ideals.

This older form of American distinctiveness contained a non-interventionist streak since one cannot expect other nations, with other histories and folkways, to be successful with our ideals. The new species of conservatism reversed this understanding, putting America in the van of a progressive history—the carrier of the highest human ideals. What made America exceptional in this reading of American destiny was that it was the first to discover that which is universal. Americans are the keepers of the tablets, the guardians of human ideals, the evangels of the future. Americans are not preservers of a specific tradition, but the possessors of saving knowledge.

Gottfried is correct, I think, to argue that this ideology cannot be squeezed into any conservative categories that are rooted “the social world of European conservatism.”<sup>6</sup> In many respects the ideal of democratic universalism is closer to the ideology of the French Revolutionaries than to any conservative defense of particular, historical, liberties. Not only is democratic universalism abstract (a word of derision for any Burkean), but it is particularly reductive and homogenizing. It requires little reflection, little historical knowledge, little sense of perspective. Rather, this ideology presents itself as the fruit of common sense shorn of any historical knowledge. Or, to put it a somewhat different way, the good of democratic universalism is known and knowable outside of the authority vested in institutions, in tradition, in anything beyond the resources of the individual self. Hence Movement 2.0 is alien and hostile to Burke’s appeal to prescriptive liberties, to an established church, to an inherited peerage, to a defense of tradition as higher than reason, or to any social order that depends on “hierarchy and degrees.” It is, moreover, hostile to the very way of thinking that one might consider conservative in the Burkean sense.

If Movement 2.0 is liberal rather than conservative, as Gottfried suggests, then the underlying issue reveals itself to be a question of authority. And when we turn explicitly to the problem of authority we face the primary problem for a European-style conservatism in the American context. Gottfried noted several times

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<sup>6</sup> Gottfried, *Conservatism in America*, 8.

in his book that the problem with Kirk's Burkean project was that he disconnected ideas from an aristocratic "social base" or "social standards" or "social authority." Unfortunately, on this subject, Gottfried's analysis is fragmented, elliptical, and imprecise. But no matter what precise meaning he gives to "social base," it takes us back to competing forms of authority. Seen from this perspective, Gottfried's argument is powerful but inadequate with regard to the purchase of Burkean traditionalism in America. To sort out the questions about social authority in America and whether Burke has anything to say to a bourgeois society, we must examine more directly the nature of American society—or at least a prominent view about our society.

Understood in Tocquevillian terms, America is an experiment in living outside of history.<sup>7</sup> A rich historical consciousness, so central to any meaningful conservatism, requires social institutions that provide each individual with the primary resources for defining self. A historical, hierarchical, and established church, for instance, provides a rich and essentially non-voluntary institution in which a person finds himself. Long before an individual becomes truly aware of his individual identity, his identity is inextricably interwoven with this church, and this identification of self with institution brings with it a recognition that one is part of a body that has a life extending back centuries as well as forward indefinitely. To be part of such a church is to feel (rather than think) historically connected, to understand that belonging entails duties, and to experience the authority of something larger than one's self. Acceptance of this authority, moreover, is not a simple matter of choice (as, for instance in might be with a congregational church in which members covenant with each other). Because the church is such a constituent part of one's identity from birth one cannot think easily of self as fully

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<sup>7</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville provides, I think, the most sophisticated and insightful exploration of the problem of European forms of thought, including conservative ideas, for American social conditions. Gottfried does not draw on Tocqueville in this book to make his case, so I decided to develop the argument as fully as I could, drawing on Tocqueville's classic, *Democracy in America*. My essay on a related subject, entitled "The Tocqueville Problem and the Nature of American Conservatism" will be published soon in the new journal, *Anamnesis*.

disentangled from this institution and its obligations, even if one finds a growing disagreement with its teachings. Moreover, while one's church might claim to represent universal truths, the very "body" into which one is incorporated is very particular, historical, and almost living. One belongs to an institution where the history shapes a distinct body of traditions, customs, shape, and character. One tends to love this church in part because it is one's own, because it and self participate in the same story, because its very particular, distinct "body" has the peculiar beauty only found in those things that belong to us.

One more example of institutional relationships and historical consciousness should suffice to establish the principle with which we can contrast the American experience. When families form the primary institutional foundation of society, they take on a historical life beyond the members of the living. When families are the primary means of protection, of economic security, of political influence, and of entrance into society, then one's family necessarily places obligations and expectations on one's self. Probably most important, the family is the repository of economic assets, often in the form of land. For aristocrats, the estate becomes the tangible expression of the historical unity of their family—land passed down each generation, undivided, to an heir who bears the responsibilities of maintaining the institutional integrity of the family. To belong to such a family is to be reminded regularly of ancestors and of duties, to know that participation in the institution is hardly a matter of choice for anyone who wishes to make his way in business, politics, or society.

Such families have long historical lives, develop very particular institutional identities, and they place both formal and informal burdens on individuals who must protect the reputation of the family that largely defines them. Protecting the honor of the family include one's ancestors and, perhaps more pressing, one's descendents. Aristocratic families require that one function as a representative of the family and therefore always to be reminded that their individual identity is merged in complex ways with this institution. As with the church, one feels the family as part of one's self, as historical, particular (unique), and as something that

has authority over one's actions and even one's beliefs. It does not exist by virtue of individual choice.

Such an institutional matrix places each individual in what feels like a living, breathing history—organic relationships that make it nearly impossible to step outside of history to become an unencumbered individual, free to live according to the dictates of his own desires, according to his own reason. To live in history, as I'm using the word here, is to find one's self deeply entangled in particular, historical, institutions, each of which shape identity and exercise authority. Such a social world is complicated by the often overlapping authorities, a wide array of demands on one's understanding of purpose and personal identity, and by what is often a messy tangle of relationships, expectations, and obligations.

The American experience fractures all of these institutions and therefore all the authoritative institutional structures that foster historical consciousness. The vast migrations of people to America not only allowed people to leave behind the specific social institutions that had heretofore governed their identities and provided them with social authority, but the expanse of land allowed people to be in constant motion with dreams of ever greater opportunities. Such mobility encouraged a distinctly American form of individualism where, in the paradigmatic case, people would meet others on the frontier, form towns together, each person distinct from any family, class, or other social ties. Each person could present himself as he wanted, he could start afresh, he could be a new person. Families lost most of their functions for their members. Bound together by affection and choice (except for the earliest years of one's life), the individuals of families were often on the move, and families came into being and dissolved with great rapidity, as did their resources.

All social institutions followed a similar pattern whereby they were products of conscious choice and came into and fell out of existence rapidly. Because these institutions could not serve to incorporate individuals into a long historical story and because they existed largely as a result of individual choice, they neither molded identity nor exercised social authority. This individualism and social equality encouraged Americans to think of themselves as natural rather than historical

creatures. As individualists, no longer defined by non-chosen institutions, each person bears the responsibility of deciding what to believe—each man is his own theologian, moral philosopher, and political theorist. Because he cannot draw on tradition, historical memory, or centuries of experience, it is necessary to believe that the most basic truths are available to the individual qua individual. In order for each individual to arrive at such truths on his own, he must assume that all humans share a fixed nature, that universal moral truths about government are available by accessing the truths found in each person's soul and experience.

In the absence of historical consciousness and institutional authority, Americans understood an abstract, generalized, society to possess authority since it was the collection of free, autonomous individuals. On matters concerning one's personal life, a person was sovereign, and on matters larger than the scope of an individual's experience or knowledge, he deferred to the authority of an abstract society. In America, then, authority was found in the smallest social particle, the individual, and in the large, abstract entity, society.

This is, broadly speaking, the way Tocqueville understood the American problem with history and authority. For him, the key to American moderation was found in the middle spaces between the individual and abstract society, which they filled with a number of devices--artificial contrivances. Gottfried makes no specific reference to Tocqueville, but he does resurrect Louis Hartz's thesis that America's non-feudal and Lockean past produced a "bourgeois liberal tradition." Gottfried suggested that Kirk and the traditionalists should have taken Hartz more seriously. Presumably, had those who wanted to incorporate a Burkean conservatism into the American tradition understood that liberal soul of Americans, they would taken real American history seriously and abandoned their project. Whatever differences one might explore between Tocqueville's argument and Hartz's thesis, both appear to leave no room for a robust traditionalist conservatism in America on the grounds that no historically rooted social authority is possible in this context.

A key part of Gottfried's critique of traditonalists is that they were not sufficiently historical. At times he appears to believe that Kirk was consciously cavalier with historical evidence and at other times he stresses what amounts to a

peculiar characteristic of Kirk's personality that made him want to give America European hues. Either way, this characterization has the most famous conservative defender of historical continuities and historical imagination as being insufficiently historical. The charge is not without some justification. Kirk had a well-developed historical imagination that allowed him to feel the grand assemblies of peoples and institutions long dead, to find in musty ruins a curious creative inspiration that blended piety with almost child-like excitement. His imagination allowed him to see in the great parade of history an endless variety of adventures. Moreover, this peculiar historical imagination caused Kirk to see patterns across centuries and even millennia of a sort that cannot be described as historical, at least as defined by the profession. The histories he told were allusive rather than empirical, evocative rather than definitive, and the stories he told were of a sort that allowed the reader to find a historical habitation. I suggest that Kirk's historical imagination was strangely suited to the needs of American conservatives in a way that a historian could never have been. I submit, and will explore later in this essay, that Kirk produced a useable history that could have sustained a healthy American conservatism.

But it hasn't. Kirk's mytho-historical approach to American culture and identity was, as Gottfried argues, first co-opted and then buried by opinion leaders of Movement 2.0. Gottfried gingerly chides Kirk on his close association with political conservatism. As a result of this association, and this dependency, Kirk steadily accommodated his views to the ever more abstract, universalist, "values" centered movement. By the 1970s and 1980s, Kirk's adjustments made him only barely relevant to a movement that retained him as a marginal intellectual fixture. In spite of his constant attacks on all ideologues, Kirk ended up being a displaced man of letters attached to ideologues who pretended to be intellectuals. Unable to be a force within, he lacked any standing to offer a sustained intellectual alternative outside of the establishment institutions of the movement.

There is much truth in this argument and recent histories of the most traditionalist intellectual institutions suggest that Kirk and the traditionalists did not create a sufficiently robust tradition to sustain itself or its institutions. In many

cases, traditionalists have faced the choice of wilderness or accommodation since ideology finds no place for thinkers. Perhaps this development exposes the inherent weakness of such a European-oriented conservatism in an American context. This, I think, is Gottfried's view—for him a rather sad reality that the evidence has forced him to confront.

Early in this essay I suggested that we separate two questions: 1. Has there even been an American conservative tradition with meaningful continuities to Aristocratic Europe (England)? 2. Is there anything conservative about contemporary movement conservatism? Gottfried makes an overwhelming case that the answer to the second question is no. From the point of view of conservatives, Movement 2.0 might be a favored alternative to the mainstream liberalism and from various leftist ideologies now in the process of disintegration. Movement 2.0 is a restrained species of liberalism that is friendly to various populist impulses in favor of restrained government and it fights a very successful war against the social engineering ideals that threaten American liberty and habits of self-rule. But the danger of the movement is almost as great since it provides a right-wing universalism that reinforces the most dangerous tendency in American democracy as explored by Tocqueville—the tendency to strip away history, conventions, traditions, moral habits, and even the particularity of localism, leaving each individual stripped of any elevating culture.

Right-wing liberalism (i.e., Movement 2.0) fights government centralization and social engineering while encouraging what Jose Ortega y Gasset called modern "barbarism"—the habit of accepting everything created by civilization to the present as part of one's natural world. The modern barbarian has no historical consciousness and so is incapable of gratitude, he possesses no awareness of how complex is the created world he inhabits and so he accepts the ease of his life as part of the natural environment. The barbarian is most defined by his inability to feel a part of a long historical story in which one's present is but an episode. The more that the American people associate the word "conservative" with abstract claims to natural rights, to a devotion to equality-cum-freedom, and to political agenda that promises liberation from non-chosen restraints (veneration of choice as the highest

value), the farther the American people are removed from a living, conservative tradition.

The second question is much more difficult to answer because of a variety of conceptual and historical problems, but Gottfried's claim that Kirk and others invented a European pedigree that was ill-suited to America or the emerging political movement called conservative, is too simplistic. Gottfried's argument seems to rest on an assumption that the European class system is a necessary part of the "social base" for such conservatism. Moreover, he rejects as historically false the efforts to provide a genealogy that leads, in an unbroken chain, from Medieval Europe to contemporary America, with Burke representing the thinker who expounded the characteristics latent in this tradition.

Perhaps Hartz was wrong about, or he overstated, the Lockean foundation to American society. Tocqueville's analysis of the empire of equality might also be perceptive and accurate in many respects, while missing a vibrant and living stream in American history. If so, then Gottfried's critique of Kirk might well be an overstatement—and perhaps an overstatement that comes with consequences.

The American people never belonged to a state of nature. Coming from a variety of folkways, they established an identifiably British political culture in America. The American colonies, as well as the nation they eventually formed, were heirs of a rich civilization just as truly as were any European nations. From the beginning these Americans have possessed a complex and contested patrimony. This rich inheritance made possible a new species of western civilization on new soil, but however new, it had no life except that it was connected to what came before. Moreover, reflective Americans have always understood their European and Mediterranean roots. The conscious efforts of Americans to retain, to respect, and to appropriate their traditions shaped the founding, which stands as an amazing testament to the ennobling and restraining power of a rich heritage. In short, Kirk's arguments about the civilizational context for the American founding, for the restraints of the revolution, for the moderation of the Constitution, are hardly incidental and they identify, much more so that the newness of the nation, deep continuities.

To be sure, the self-selection of those who migrated to the United States, along with the circumstances they found, produced a unique expression of western civilization. The particulars are very familiar: influence of covenanting Protestants, the diversity of peoples in the context of expansive land, the development of cash crops, the abundant opportunities, the inability to maintain aristocratic institutions in the face of such opportunities. From such influences the United States emerged with a jealous regard for liberty, with a long-developed tradition of self-rule, and with a practical social equality. Whatever vestiges of a European class structure that might have persisted to the time of the revolution, could not survive in this society. It is true that authority increasingly was vested in the individual and in abstract society (or the majority), but the trend toward equality was widespread in the West generally, not just America. What is noteworthy about America is not that it was without aristocracy, but that it had found ways of encoding some of the virtues of an inherited European civilization without this class structure. Such success would not be true of Europe.

Indeed, the famous lament by Burke with which this essay began, concerns a European branch of Western Civilization. The age of aristocracy was dying in Europe and with it had died all of its virtues, or its peculiar grace. Burke was thinking not of America when he penned those words because America had escaped this fate, not by sustaining aristocracy, but by evolving a branch of English civilization that retained most of its strengths, together with moral improvements, without a dependency on class structure. America was a superior form of Western civilization because it found a more just way of conserving its best traits.

For England at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the hope for continuity was to avoid the revolution then destroying France and to recognize that its own forms of liberty and order, its own valued "rights" of Englishmen, depended on perpetuation of a social order, while slowly adjusting it. Burke, the great commoner and Irish Whig, was hardly interested in a divine right monarchy. He was one of the great defenders of liberty and because of this devotion to liberty he recognized that the greatest threat came from those who sought to overturn the system in favor of an abstract, universal ideal. A defense of the chivalric age was a defense of a system

that had slowly accommodated a more expansive freedom in England. The American evolution of English liberties, however, had not depended on this social system, and so there is no Burkean reason to want the Americans to adopt aristocracy.

A Burkean defense of American liberty requires understanding the necessary conditions for a moderated, regulated, and sustainable liberty. A Burkean conservatism, as applied to the United States, stresses the need for institutions that bind people to each other with cords of both affection and obligation. Such a conservatism also cultivates a living past, a set of folkways, customs, traditions, and beliefs that bind one generation to another and that allow people of every generation to understand that they belong to a great “partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection.”<sup>8</sup> And finally, a Burkean conservatism stressed the need to belong to a “little platoon” and to a very specific place that has a distinctive, eccentric, and thus very particular character.

Not only have American thinkers stressed these themes throughout American history, but our traditions of local rule, of self-government, of religious affiliation, of countless local or regional associations, have helped in this form of conservation. One way of looking at Kirk’s body of work is to stress the very continuities that are most fragile in the America of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—sense of place, sense of history, a defense of the full person rather than the unencumbered individual. One might reasonably claim that Kirk’s style of writing and of arguing borrowed too much from the aristocratic ages and that had he written in a more modern idiom, the conservative story might have attracted the rising generation—perhaps had his historical conservatism found a more contemporary form of expression it would have successfully battled the universalists.

And yet here is part of the problem. Jaffa, the neoconservatives, and the various liberal factions of Movement 2.0 offer a simplistic anthropology, political theory, and moral theory. They have the advantage for people who want a winning

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<sup>8</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 85.

national political ideology—political pez candy. Part of Kirk’s charm is in his method. It draws the person who loves complexity and who wants to think and live in the interstices between Truth outside of time and the buzzing particularity of humans in time. Kirk’s way of telling history repels those who must have settled answers to everything (ideology) while it draws those who expect life to be a faithful journey.

One might argue that Kirk’s association with the conservative political movement weakened his influence and, like Robert Nisbet, he might have kept greater distance from politics in order to avoid the ideological wars. Perhaps so—or at least I could detail a few mistakes Kirk made as he sought to exert influence inside a movement that was essentially hostile to his historicism. But, after over 15 years of teaching students who are prone to be political activists, I have seen an unbroken pattern. A small percentage of very capable students are captured by Kirk’s words and his imagination, and no matter how reading him changes their career trajectory, they are unable to think of Movement 2.0 the same way as before. Kirk’s works continue to save some people from an ideological life.

Gottfried is correct about the driving character of Movement 2.0, but he is wrong, or at least premature, about the purchase of Burkean conservatism on American thought and culture. Kirk’s work was as much recovery as conservation, and the political and cultural trends of the last several decades, especially with the rise to cultural hegemony of the Baby-boomers, has been relentlessly leftward. We think and speak in moral abstractions more today than fifty years ago. Our persistent mobility undermines attachment to place and its peculiar traditions. Each new generation is less historically minded than the one before. The great bulwarks against these abstracting, homogenizing tendencies, like “the South” or Midwestern towns, or the cowboy culture of the Western states, are less particular and distinct than they were a generation ago. The creation of the most successful political ideology in modern American history, Conservative Movement 2.0, is perhaps the biggest single threat to the continuity of Burkean traditionalism in American culture and life.

In the “Conclusion” of his book, Gottfried noted that his son found the effort to get the political labels correct and precise was a waste of time. He said what so many of my students tell me, that we all know what we mean by these labels. But they are wrong. The transformation of the conservative label in popular language has narrowed the political debate and turned traditionalist conservatives into “extremists” because popular American political thought does not allow any categories that don’t fit on a narrow, two-dimensional beam. And so, the political success of Conservative Movement 2.0 has almost ensured the end of a living conservative tradition in America. But for much of American history, we had a heritage to preserve, and the necessary resources to conserve what was beautiful about America’s heritage. Savoring the remains of the day is a peculiar and wonderful conservative gift. Even more fortunately for conservatives, at the end the day.....dawns yet another day.