

5

THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATIVE POLITICS IN EUROPE – A CENTRAL- EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Ferenc Hörcher

DÉBUT

To speak about the future is almost impossible. To speak about the future in politics is flatly impossible. An essay with the above title, therefore, is nothing more than an act of *hybris*. And yet, to arrive somewhere one needs to plan where to go and how to get there. Therefore, I think that the idea of the Centre for Political Thought in Krakow to ask European intellectuals with a conservative bias to offer their views of the prospects of conservatism as a political ideal and as a practical political reality is legitimate. This essay is meant to address some of the questions posed by the Centre.

The title of the present essay is not meant to claim that this paper can describe the future of Europe and the role conservatives can play in it. It is not more than a draft drawn from an individual perspective – from the perspective of a Central-European academic

educated in the history of political thought and political philosophy – on the challenges facing Europe and the possibilities opened up by these challenges for conservatism.

It consists of three parts. First, it lists some of the most important recent events in global politics that might have an effect on the future of Europe. This enumeration, though recalling well-known facts, is necessary because we shall surely miss our target if we cannot define correctly our present location. Second, it will take note of some of the existing answers offered by political powers associated with conservatism on these challenges. Finally, it will provide its own proposals of how to confront these challenges according to the best – British-style, Aristotelian and republican – conservative standards.

IS CONSERVATISM STILL ALIVE?

But before all else, let us first think about the question whether conservatism is still a valid notion of/in politics today? There are radical views which hold that all the modern political ideologies are dead by now. After all, we are living in a postmodern age, in media-democracies, where popular choices are made following rather pragmatic considerations of popularity; and, therefore, all the value-laden theoretical presuppositions are no more than simple ballasts for the actual political agents in the day-to-day business of making politics.

This essay does not share these sceptical, sometimes even cynical worries. Political ideologies are not meant to hog-tie politicians in order to hibernate political action. Marx claimed that ideas are dependent on existence, particularly on the existence of the particular agent. As John Lukacs so eloquently wrote, ideas in fact have the function to facilitate political action. Lukacs

argued that the causal link is missed by Marx: we can only do whatever is opened up for us by our way of thinking. Ideas work for actions as the track for the locomotive: the latter cannot move but in the direction determined by the former. In other words our ways of thinking mark off the horizon of our imagination, which on its part determines

our particular decisions in individual cases. We surely will not do what we do not imagine as doable.

If we accept that ideologies are still important parts of the repertoire of politics today, there is a further question: is conservatism still among the relevant political ideologies? One of the possible



ways to discredit it is to stress that conservatism is a retroactive kind of ideology, which aims to keep under control the effects of another ideology, namely progressive liberalism. What if liberalism is not a risk today and, therefore, there is no need for a counterbalance? A further counterargument may ask whether it is logically possible to expect a future for an ideology that turns away already from the present and has more interest in the past than in anything else. And finally, why should we regard conservatism as still a viable alternative in the age of mass

democracy and populist politics, when conservatism – as we learnt it at school – is an elitist ideology of nostalgia and gentlemanly behaviour?

This essay does not deny the force of these dilemmas. However, it claims that all of them rest on a rather naïve, simplified interpretation of conservatism. This essay would like to offer an alternative reading of the main characteristics of this ideology. It aims to show that it is not liable to the above criticisms and that we can associate it with our European future.

‘EARTHQUAKES’ OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The new millennium surprised the world with a number of political earthquakes. No doubt the first globally important point was 11 September. With the fall of the twin-towers, Americans lost their granite-hard conviction that the US, the only superpower of the new millennium and the safeguard of global peace, is itself vulnerable. With it the whole world lost its belief of a stable world-order, controlled by the superpower whose main ideology was and remained ever since that of defending freedom globally. With the loss of these two beliefs, we entered a new age of universal uncertainties and irregularities.

A second blow of our global political comfort zone was the financial crisis of the late 2000s. Once again starting out from the US, it shook trust in a stable world and eliminated our expectations that the basis of global economy is itself rock-solid.

This was a kind of dramatic overture of the new millennium. And yet it was not yet over, even if leading Western powers were able to momentarily calm down passions raised by these two earthquakes among their populaces and on the markets.

The second wave of challenges was perhaps even more devastating than the first one. It also consisted of two steps. The first one was the exit vote from the EU by the majority of British voters, which exercised an unprecedented blow on the European project. And we cannot see as yet the end of the tunnel. So far it is

surely the loudest criticism of the failures of European policy-makers to reach out and address voters in a convincing way. But the effects of Brexit were doubled by a further surprise within Western politics. American voters proved their determinacy and, in spite of the tremendous campaign of the mainstream media and the intellectuals of progressive university campuses against him, they elected Trump as president in 2017.



Brexit and Trump's presidency got interpreted together, and this brought about a landslide within Western public discourse. Why? Well, earlier both of these facts lay outside of the terrain of what people thought was politically possible or even imaginable. In a way the two choices – both of them the decisions

of the electorate, and, therefore, the legitimacy of them unquestionable – opened up political discourse and political action before what was earlier hardly feasible. This way they signalled the end of an era and encouraged politicians to turn once again towards their electorate.

CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTION? NO, THANK YOU!

In one reading of the story, this turn is a conservative revolution. In another one it results in the phenomenon that is ridiculed by its opponents as 'populism'. Left-liberals make all efforts to discredit the winners of this new trend. Labelling it as populism, they try to delegitimize these moves. It is perhaps more surprising that for a part of conservative-minded voters and members of the conservative elite, these shocking moves also represent a rather gloomy prospect for what they had known as conservatism earlier. To turn away from Europe in Britain or from the standards of mainstream professional politics in America is not something conservatives would have identified earlier as part of the conservative identity. Some of them feel it is in fact a corruption of conservative principles.

European conservatives are certainly saturated by what is called European culture, and, therefore, they try to defend a culture-based notion of conservatism, though the Brexit-vote and Trump's victory both signal the takeover of a plebeian conservatism that targets the less educated part of the conservative electorate. This is a fatal conceit on the part of populist conservatives. According to the premises of the conservatism this paper calls for, there is no future, and particularly no conservative future without concentrating huge powers on the education of our children.

And again, most American conservatives are not ready to give up their self-perception as opposing personality-cults and the sort of voluntarism which is fuelled by animosities and violent passions instead of the practical common sense one gets from practical experience and from learning how

to take responsibility for others, in accordance with local habits and general customs of the political culture of one's community. They do not believe in turning things upside-down without hesitation, as revolutionary politicians used to do.

To understand the present moment and the real urgency of it, one needs to recall that Brexit and the Trump-phenomenon are still not the whole story. The new situation we confront is greatly determined by the migrant crisis of Europe. This is an issue that directly belongs on the conservative agenda.



THE KEYS OF THE FUTURE: MIGRATION AND DEMOGRAPHY

Migration is not a new phenomenon in Europe. The continent has been open to recurring waves of invaders for thousand years. However, since the Turkish invasion in the early modern period, there was no experience of a massive incursion that threatened the existing system of states. This is only true, of course, if we take the Russian invasion of Eastern Europe as done by a European superpower and not by an external force. The new flux has been building for years by now, but a breakthrough happened in 2015 when the number of illegal migrants jumped to an unprecedented level. And if the news is true, millions of migrants are already waiting to cross the Mediterranean and enter European borders, legally and illegally.

European states as well as EU institutions were rather slow to react to the new pressure on their borders from the south and the east and to understand the stakes. The two countries in the centre of the siege were Italy and Greece, and both countries were near to state bankruptcy. Germany was keen to strengthen its own position, and the Greeks also had their share in the financial aspect of the growing crisis.

Although Merkel could negotiate a pact with Turkey, by now the whole European public sphere was dominated by the discussion about the migration issue. Once again the left and the right were radically divided in their answers to it, and once again the political elites of the eastern and the western part of the continent react differently. Until the EU could make a long-term deal with the Turks, there was a constant fear of a breakthrough. The Italians introduced a stricter border regime, and the countries on the migration route built out their legal and physical barricades. In spite of all these measures, for months large crowds of uncontrolled migrant groups travelled across Europe, causing an exceptionally loud safety-alarm among the populace.

Germany's Angela Merkel was a key proponent of what was called *Willkommenskultur*, a policy of liberal migration-regime. The policy let people in if they claimed to have arrived from countries where their life could have been directly at risk according to the protocol of the EU or the UN. She was supported by the liberally dominated German media and by the majority of European public intellectuals, while a lot of the electorate, fuelled by radical and 'populist' political powers, became frustrated by the situation. Their frustration caused a remarkable shift in the voting tendencies in Europe and for a time also in Germany. Merkel succeeded to pacify her camp, and she is back in popularity with a strategy to calm down passions about the migration issue.

Although there is a momentary rest in the migration crisis, it still remains a time bomb, which needs to be directly tackled, like by a common European policy of humanitarian intervention, border policy and the rise of the defence and security capacities on a European as well as national level, if we want to avoid catastrophe. Conservatives should remind mainstream politics of the inherent dangers of the situation and returning to the issue that is of primary importance for the future of Europe. However, they should also avoid harsh, awe-inspiring and hectoring rhetoric. All in all the migration crisis is an unprecedented political burden on Europe, which is experiencing once again a political crisis as a result of it. But in times of crisis, calm heads and clear words are a must.

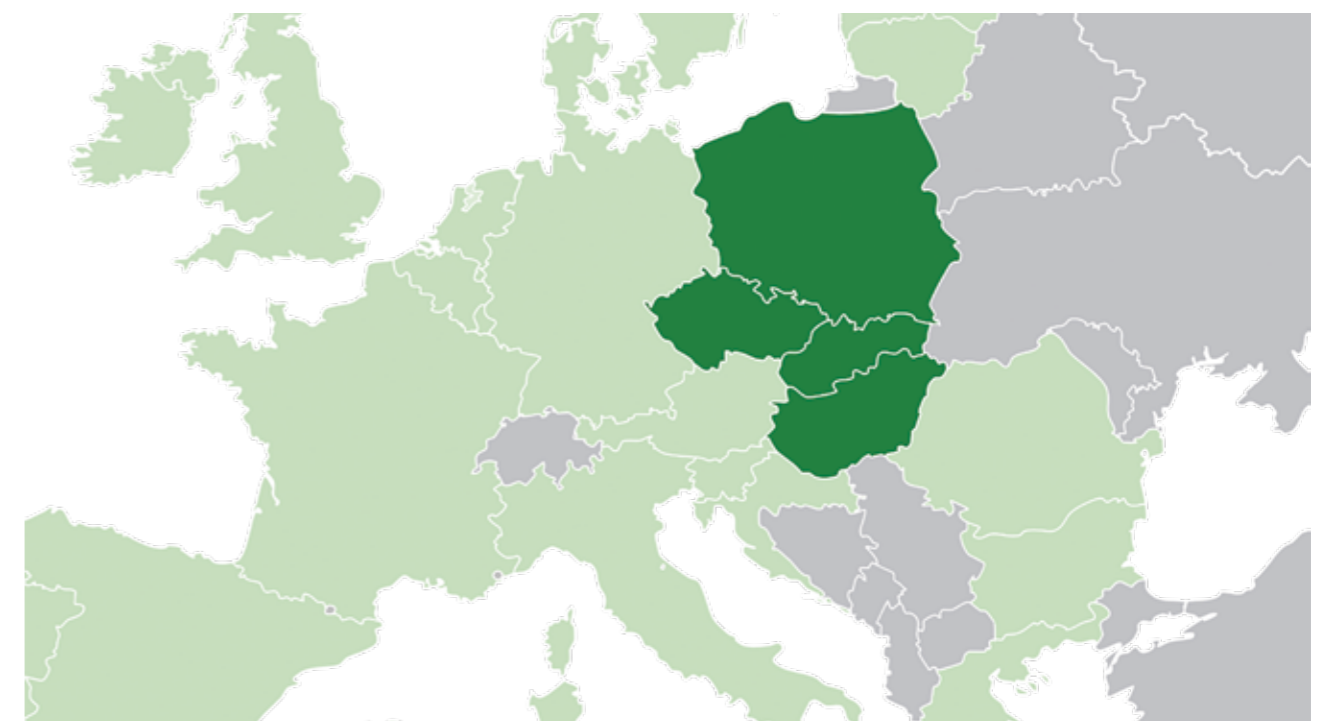
A further strategic point connected to the migration issue is, of course, the declining demographic trends in the population figures of most European countries. This makes the external threat the more provocative and harder to resist. There is no space here to go into details about this long-range problem, but it needs to be clearly stated that there is no satisfactory solution to the migration crisis without European nations once again recovering their demographic potential.

CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE CENTRE

A further development of the migration issue and the unexpected Brexit vote is the strengthening of the power and voice of the V4 countries, the elite of the eastern European bloc earlier under Soviet occupation. The V4 is now a power-group representing the political interests of its member states in the European orchestra. The organisational framework of the V4 countries was for long simply a formal arrangement without political substance. But after Brexit and as a result of the migration crisis, there is a lacuna in European politics: the dissenting voice of the Euro-realists, who do not accept the tacit European agreement of being kind and very humanitarian to external forces and strictly adhering to the liberal jargon of political correctness internally. The role of the bad boy can be filled in by the coalition of the V4 countries, who have a wholly different experimental horizon than most members of the Western elites, for they have a rather serious inferiority complex due to the historical traumas caused and suffered by their countries.

Although all the four partners of the V4 countries are independent players with their own European

strategies, in all of them a hard-line policy against illegal migration seems to promise very good returns in electoral votes. This is obvious from the fact that independently of the colour of the government, in all four of these countries we find a version of this hard-liner position pursued. One should also note, that this hard-line position is echoed among the electorate of some Western European countries, which makes the issue the more sensitive, as Western politicians might become frightened by the prospect of a coalition between VF political elites and a wider European electorate. All in all, the strengthening presence of Central Europe for the moment causes more dilemmas than it solves. This means that Europe needs to tackle the issue rather soon if it hopes for a viable strategy for survival. Otherwise a division of Europe along the earlier iron curtain is still a realistic option. However, a tough power-policy of sanctioning culprits might not be fruitful, as it can turn out counter-productive among the voters. Germany and France, however, started a tactical game of *divide et impera*, which might bring its fruits.



THE RUSSIAN LEADER AS A TRADITIONALIST CELEBRITY

And now that we had a look at the major political issues that divide Europe and impact its policies, let us see how European conservatives react on the issue. This paper has no chance to give a full account of the different conservative forces in Europe. Instead of that enumeration, it picks out two paradigmatic ways of reaction. It needs to be premised that from the perspective of the present paper, neither of the two seem to be too promising, as both of them seem to disregard traditional conservative values. In any case, both of them represent a rather strong provocation against the ruling political style in Europe. And both of them come from the earlier Soviet bloc part of Europe, which leads to a conclusion that if Europe wants a long-standing solution, there is a need for the pacification of this periphery.

The first reaction to the new crises of Europe among conservatives is a kind of 'authoritarian or Eastern turn'. According to the narrative that propagates this solution, the European identity is in an awful condition: the European intelligentsia, including the political elite, has forgotten the traditional European values of marriage, family, patria and religion. To heal this loss and to regain identity, inspiration can come from the East, where all these values are still highly appreciated. A key figure in this regard is the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. Partly by his own political talent, partly due to the very successful activity of the Russian secret agencies and the official Russian state-media, the Russian president is highly appreciated among European Conservatives. Wiping out of his fans' memory of his rather uncomfortable KGB-past, Putin poses now as the only Christian ruler of Europe, the defender of religion and conservative values, a real hero and Christian knight and the last representative of traditionalism in Europe.

Obviously, this is a constructed image that has nothing to do with historical reality, and yet he is quite popular among his own voters as well as among many Europeans. Believers in the Putin-model would

return to an earlier, interwar example of leadership in Central-Europe, like that of Piłsudski and Horthy in Poland and Hungary respectively. To manipulate public perception, the migration issue provides opportunity for politicians to show their heroic quality. After all, the authoritarian model of conservatism is based on the assumption that a heroic leader will be followed by its fans, irrespective of particular wrong decisions he or she might have made time after time.



THE POPULIST TURN

The second reaction of conservatives to the dilemmas of the day is the 'populist turn'. While conservatism used to be elite-oriented and refused to accept even the ideas of democracy and egalitarianism, the new trend among conservatives is to win over the majoritarian principle of democracy and to run for the majority. Given the fact that there is a democratic deficit in Western Europe in the relationship called the 'Brussels bureaucracy' and the European citizenry, and most Western leaders are too comfortable to fight for majorities, conservative leaders are right to sense a chance to win the populace for their causes.

This aim is made easier to achieve by the different technological innovations of the digital age. Politically alert media-messages can easily reach and directly address not only social groups but individuals outside of the realm of mainstream media too. As

a consequence, it is possible for leaders who have been discredited by the media elite and the circle of politically active public intellectuals to avoid their influence. Instead they can rely on a door-to-door campaign to turn directly to the electorate. As a result, a new generation of conservative politicians have an unprecedented popularity among politically active citizens due to the fact of their direct approach and their decision to quit earlier tacit agreements, including the hypocrisy of political correctness. Their success is also due to a technique of negative campaigning, which results in a loss of trust among the populace in the power holders of the European status quo. This gives an opportunity for outsiders to enter the political stage. There is, therefore, widespread fear in the European political and media-elites that the newcomers can take over their positions.

THE RETURN TO COMMON SENSE

Although authoritarian and populist tendencies promise some success, this paper wants to argue that conservatives should not rely on them to win in the political competition. Although conservatism at its best is never doctrinaire, one cannot envisage a powerful conservative renaissance without firm grounds in established values and accepted ways of political behaviour. Neither an authoritarian nor a populist kind of politics promises to provide these grounds. While populism is explicitly denying the importance of such value-presuppositions, the authoritarian trend simply sacrifices European-style constitutional and rule-of-law traditions in order to build up a working regime of effective centralised government.

There are those who claim that there is no alternative but these harsh measures if we want to overcome the non-realistic left-liberal elites, causing real problems in Europe since their takeover in the after-1968 political climate. They are pushing societies towards unnatural targets, so there is good reason to get rid of their dominance in politics, the media and in the academic world whatever the means. This paper will argue, however, that there is an alternative solution to tackle the issue: a more modest, less overwhelming way that, however, allows us to preserve the values conservatives cherish while helping us to win the case.

COMMON SENSE VERSUS ALT-RIGHT AND POLITICAL REALIST CONSERVATISM

The type of conservatism this paper promotes as the alternative is a common sense, republican kind of conservatism. In the last bit of the paper, therefore, we need to elaborate these two concepts: what does the adjective common sense and republican stand for here?

Let us start with the idea of common sense. In order to explain it this paper distinguishes it from two other types of conservatism. Common sense conservatism should be distinguished first of all from the ideological fundamentalist type of conservatism, covered in recent years by the alt-right in the US. Their provocative and outrageous ideas are regarded by common sense conservatives as neither conceptually verifiable nor sustainable on the long run. On the contrary, they regard the aggressive negative campaign used by the alt-right as purely a marketing strategy, which has its *raison d'être* in campaign time, but they cannot provide the theoretical foundations for conservatism.

A second distinction concerns the sort of political realism that is usually associated with the representatives of the American neoconservative movement. The neocons, as they are usually labelled, went through a political transformation, leaving the camp of the non-Stalinist left in order to join the camp of American conservatism. Most of them relied on the sometimes non-explicit political teachings of their father figure, Leo Strauss, a German-Jewish philosopher of the first rank, who emigrated to the US in 1937 to escape Hitler's anti-Semitic policy. He taught at the New School in Manhattan, New York, and later at the University of Chicago, exercising a tremendous influence, especially among New York based Jewish intellectuals, and winning them over to the case of conservatism.

The neocons had a very explicit foreign policy,

and were theoretically most active in international relations during the presidency of G. W. Bush, striving both practically and theoretically for what can be regarded as American exceptionalism, a kind of global leadership towards the realm of absolute human rights. They were the most keen to encourage the intervention in Iraq.

Apparently neoconservative ideology has its admirers in Central Europe as well. András Láncki, for example, one of the former advisers of Viktor Orbán, is a researcher and admirer of Leo Strauss. Another ideologist of right wing politics in Hungary is Gábor G. Fodor, whose pronouncements, like the one he apparently took from the 17th century prelate Cardinal de Retz ('There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment and the masterpiece of good ruling is to know and seize this moment') or the famous slogan of 'civic Hungary' (*polgári Magyarország*) are simply political products that sound like an adoption of neocon slogans. They never fail to stir up emotions and resentment even within the conservative camp. These neocon ideologists might be behind the main policy line of Orbán's 2017 Kötse-speech, arguing for an activist foreign policy and economic strategy for Hungary and targeting an ideal of Hungary growing into the role of a 'middle state', a term which is rather difficult to make sense of.

If alt-right and neocon influences are visible in Central Europe today (and I do not venture to make any pronouncements about the ideological backing behind the present Polish government of Beata Szydło), this paper would present its common sense conservatism as an alternative of that direction. Although the President Trump has already in his Republican campaign called himself a common sense conservative, clearly it is a notion that cannot easily be associated with the Trump regime. On the contrary, it is mostly associated with the old Whig statesman,

founder of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, who held that one of the greatest political virtues is to moderate one's passion and try to listen to the advice of common sense, or *recta ratio*, understood in accordance with Cicero as human rationality in harmony with nature.

The common sense conservative is not taking the elitist route of the intellectual conservative. She is happy to keep both conservatism's language and logic on the level of ordinary people without becoming 'populist', i.e. giving in to, or even less, relying on popular political passions. It is realist in the sense of not trying to imitate leftist politics by destroying social frameworks and building monuments instead of useful architecture. It tries to solve the everyday problems of everyday people, listening to the complaints of the voters and addressing particular local contexts instead of the whole of the populace. It does not want to destroy its enemies, and it does not rely, therefore, on a

culture war 'psychosis' but concentrates on internal politics. In foreign policy issues, it is not naïve, but it is not dreaming about 'grandeur'. Rather it tries to be more like a fox, and only in rare moments does it attempt to imitate the lion. All in all, this is a conception of the statesman's role, which is more modest and relies more heavily on what is called in the Aristotelian tradition political prudence, the wisdom of the ruler to act in accordance with the demands of the moment without giving up one's basic principles and highest values.

The common sense politician is by definition closer to everyday reality and the common voters than most of his political competitors, particularly the doctrinaire liberals and the fundamentalist conservatives. He relies more heavily on the political contribution of the citizens than the believers of representative democracy would expect. In this sense common sense conservatism is close to what this paper calls conservative republicanism.

CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICANISM

The political philosophy of republicanism became quite trendy a few decades ago, and it was mainly advocated by leftist intellectuals as a kind of criticism of the individualist liberal framework of authors, like Rawls and Dworkin. As opposed to the main ideas of people like Skinner and Pettit, conservative republicanism proposes to build conservatism on the actual experiences of smaller social units that work well, especially on the traditional governance of European towns.

Urban republicanism is a living tradition in Europe, which worked as an incubator of large-scale political structures, like states, in the early modern period. Cities were quite useful for would be politicians to test their abilities, and learn in practice rather than in theory the skills of the profession. City governance was not possible without a larger portion of the citizenry getting actively involved in running the city. In this way, cities were much more experienced

in how to regulate their populace by means of the procedurally circumscribed regulations of that very populace than any other forms – think about the republicanism of Kant, who was a longstanding admirer of republics and a devoted citizen of his native town, Königsberg.

Unfortunately, while the theory of the modern state has been delineated by great authors in very detailed treatises over a long period of time, theories of the city were less fashionable, as sponsors were lacking for a long time. By the time the academic disciplines of the theory of the state, government or political science were established, the level of the state was taken as the standard scale for political theory. Although there were influential theories of self-governance (think about Tocqueville) and in the modern framework of state administration, cities needed their local office-holders, who required proper materials to learn. Not much energy was lost to think about it in a systematic fashion.

Even more significantly, conservatives were usually less enthusiastic about cities, claiming that their supporters tend to reside in rural areas, while big cities are by definition politically progressive in their political climate. While sometimes even this generalisation might be challenged, the point this paper wants to make is that conservatism as a theoretical enterprise and also as a political reality should concentrate on the scale of the political community of the city. This choice is confirmed by the fact that neoliberalism tends to turn public discourse

towards the realm of supranational institutions, global networks and global justice in general. If the state is taken over by populist pragmatists, and at the supranational level by Brussels bureaucrats, global firms and neoliberal ideology, conservatives have a natural choice to concentrate their efforts on the level of the city, which can be won one after the other, without the need to overinvest into the struggle. This is, at least, the message conservative republicans want to spread.

CONCLUSION: A PLEA FOR A COMMON SENSE, REPUBLICAN CONSERVATISM

As we saw in this paper, Europe and the West in general are experiencing a shocking line of political crises and explosions in the 21st century. September 11, the financial crisis, the Brexit vote, the unexpected election of Trump to presidency, the migration crisis and the rise of the V4 countries each individually could have a major impact on a Europe that is politically not really in full swing. Obviously, the European political infrastructure did not react properly to this fusion of crises, and, therefore, Europe as a political force is constantly and very rapidly losing its weight and authority in the world.

This paper wanted to argue that although some sort of gain has been realised from the dysfunction of the European institutions, mainly in Central European conservative politics, the sort of conservatism that could capitalise on it is not yet on stage. The paper pointed at two conservative types that can bring momentary success but no long-term breakthrough: conservatism with an authoritarian bent and populist conservatism. Both of them, or a combination of them might be performing quite well in the political competition of a chaotic present, however, great prices have to be paid for that. No doubt, the label conservative was dropped by some of these leaders because they realised that

major conservative values had to be sacrificed on the altar of electoral efficiency.

This paper, therefore, presents an alternative version of conservatism based on two traditional values: a common sense approach to politics and republicanism, meaning in this case not more than a participatory vision of political community. The main thesis of the paper is that a common sense approach is viable even in this critical moment, and it claims that it can avoid the pitfalls of giving up basic values (like political realism does) or of becoming doctrinaire (like a radically ideological type of alt-right conservatism does). On the other hand, the republican element of this conservatism means an encouragement of the active participation of the citizenry, to raise the legitimacy of conservatism by the democratic principle. This participatory model is based on the long-standing tradition of the governance of European cities, which were the incubators of democratic policy-making. According to the model proposed, conservatism can manage to remain close to common sense and encourage active participation and a political culture of responsible governance. This way, it is argued, conservatism can remain up-to-date and yet loyal to its venerable tradition. •



6

CONSERVATISM: TRUTH AND MODERATENESS

Zoltan Balazs

Corvinus University, Budapest, Center of Social Sciences,
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

The right/left scale is an old toolkit by which political philosophies are introduced to freshmen at universities. There is nothing generally wrong with it. Moreover, it combines two ideas in a felicitous way, namely, the idea of comparing particular political philosophies to one another in terms of their content (what constitutes leftist and rightist thinking) and the idea of intensity (radical/moderate politics). Evidently, party programs and ideologies do not necessarily correspond to political philosophies, yet the latter are its intellectual sources.

On the scale, conservatism has usually been considered to be a rightist political philosophy, closer to the center than radical rightist ideologies. On the far left, Marxism and other socialist philosophies have been placed, whereas liberalism has been interpreted as being closer to the center, near to conservatism. Now there is nothing generally wrong with this textbook presentation. However, contemporary political debates and struggles suggest that a significant shift of balance has occurred. Liberalism has become dominated and permeated by an extreme sort of absolutist egalitarianism to the extent that it has almost completely abandoned its core ideas, its commitment to protecting private and public liberty and to the tradition of moderate governing. In fact, absolutist egalitarianism is on the march to occupy and conquer conservatism as well. The former construction of a balance consisting of two extreme and two moderate forces appears to be on the verge of falling. At the same time, we are also witnessing a resurgence of ideological thinking on both sides of the scale, and the growing radicalization of politics, which means that extreme thinking and practice begins,

once again in modern Western history, to exert an unruly influence on the center.

Classical conservatism is the archenemy of political radicalism of any sort. I do not think there is any cogent reason for conservatives to abandon this conviction, which, on the one hand, secures its position in the center and, on the other hand, helps it to resist ideological absolutism. Since liberalism seems to have denied its classical, moderate traditions and succumbed to ideological absolutism, conservatism has now to bear the extraordinary political responsibility of sustaining moral realism, political sobriety and moderate government in the center. Since it has been traditionally hostile to political ideologies and 'isms' in general, it has the potential, flexibility and credibility to take on this responsibility. Since it rests on solid philosophical grounds on the basic truths about human nature and society, and since it possesses enormous critical resources to reject radical, simplifying, utopian and absolutist thinking (leftist and rightist alike), conservatism has and is able to fulfill a critical role in political thinking and practice today.¹⁸

In what follows, I shall enlarge on this thesis by citing and briefly analyzing what appear to me some major ideological struggles today fought in terms of absolutist conceptions having radical political consequences. There is no assumption here in terms of priorities, and it goes without saying that there will be overlaps between the various arguments. Nonetheless, they are distinct or can be rendered meaningful without explicitly invoking the others. Out of each brief analysis, there will emerge a constructive conservative point.

¹⁸ I am indebted to John Kekes and to his *A Case for Conservatism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) for his lucid argumentation. He places conservatism in between pairs of extreme attitudinal-philosophical positions, an approach this essay has much in common with.

CONSCIENCE

Contemporary liberalism has been rapidly moving toward what Carl Schmitt once called the tyranny of values.¹⁹ In many leading liberal journals on ethics and moral philosophy, a vast portion of discussion has increasingly been either on subtleties of justice, equality, respect and human rights (liberty or freedom, the root concept of liberalism, is usually a terrain of republicanism today), or on the search for the ultimate principle. Though Kantianism flourishes, disagreements are mostly on whether it is the Categorical Imperative or the Universal Respect for Persons that is the truly ultimate principle.²⁰ Act Utilitarianism is replaced by Rule Utilitarianism and other kinds of contractualist, rational-choice based ethics that are similarly zealous about their search for the ultimate principle or value.²¹ What is more, even virtue ethics has been absorbed and duly digested by liberal theorists. Almost invariably, discussions of particular virtues end up being interpreted in a way that they are shown to be reducible to equality, respect or the absolute worth of human persons.

At the other extreme we find relativists, genealogists and all sorts of post-Nietzschean skeptics who do not deny the social importance of values or a belief in them, but they constantly remind us of their historical and cultural contingency. And as is often the case with extremes, they can forge political alliances. On the one hand, fervent believers in equality or respect, for instance, may share the skepticism of relativists and deny the objective nature of values, lest they need to defend the primacy of their own chosen value. Some would argue further that there is a human and personal need for faith and strong beliefs. Working and fighting for social justice, for instance, may be a personal choice, a form of political activism, a way of

self-fulfillment. On the other hand, hardcore relativists may doubt the absolute value of respect, for instance, and yet be jealously defending the universal right of doubt and argue that this is in what respect consists. Such apparently inconsistent argumentations are not infrequent. Relativist absolutists and absolutist relativists have much in common.

Conservatives need to face both challenges and point out such inconsistencies. But they can also make a constructive step as well by recalling and re-invoking the old and practically forgotten concept and a real component of the human nature: this is conscience. Conservatives can and should point out that no value or principle can be declared to be absolute by philosophy. Moral philosophical speculations themselves have only limited value. Much of morality is given and has been handed over to us in terms of explicit prohibitions and unwritten laws that are written in the human heart. This is not a mystery. Notwithstanding the changing nature of *mores* or of the *Sitten*, there are universal wrongs that conscience warns us of. There are and can be all sorts of mitigating circumstances, social preconditions, persistent bad habits and corrupt institutions which confuse conscience, yet we are free to resist them. An embracement of relativism and contingency, a belief in some freely chosen cause does not eliminate conscience. Nor do subjective and often erroneous speculations about how to impose a single value or principle over the conscience make it infallible. Conservatives need to stress the dignity of informed conscience that is independent both of historical and subjective contingencies. If conscience is truly taken seriously, it will speak in an audible and authoritative voice, which is now being suppressed by moral tyrants and moral anarchists alike.

¹⁹ Schmitt, Carl. *The Tyranny of Values*. Translated and edited by Simona Draghici. Washington, DC: Plutarch Press, 1996.

²⁰ For the Kantian dilemma, see Korsgaard, Christine: *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²¹ Derek Parfit, arguably one of the greatest synthetic minds in contemporary moral theory, proposed that Kantianism, Utilitarianism and Contractualism are unifiable and that there is a single last principle of all ethical theories: *On What Matters*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 2017.

THE AUTHORITY OF MORALITY

Closely related to the tyranny of values is the liberal advocacy of morality over politics and possibly over all human affairs.²² After the devastating moral consequences of totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century, it is hardly surprising that many people concluded that morality should come first everywhere and always, especially in politics. The social and moral emancipation movements of the '60s, the interpretation of the problems of the Third World as being caused by immorality and the successful revolutions against dictatorships brought about by civil and human rights movements produced a climate of global moralizing. Issues such as capitalism, inequality, environment protection, global warming, gender inequalities, intergenerational, international justice and so on are considered to be mostly ethical problems that politics need to address directly, for legislation needs

to answer these challenges in the first place. This urgency is coupled with a general moral guilt culture, where guilt must be felt for all sorts of historical crimes (often starting from the Crusades) and for domination and exploitation of any kind. The priority of morality, conceived in these positive (values, principles, right causes) and negative (guilt) terms, is imposed upon universities and university policies, upon courts (including Constitutional and Supreme Courts), mass media, social media, churches, on the prevailing *comme il faut* political discourse and so on.

In opposition to this we can also witness an increasing general skepticism over morality and the moral dimension of politics. Some of those who share this skeptical attitude point out the reality of power behind moralism. Others only sense and complain about the practical impossibility of talking in a



²² Arguably, the most well known exponent of this view was Bernard Williams (for the locus classicus see his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Fontana Books, London; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985). But he does not share the view that there is any objective moral order. The view that morality is not an absolute ruler of the human world (nor should it be) yet morality is an objective part of reality see the phenomenological ethics of Aurel Kolnai, another great conservative thinker.

different tone and with a different conviction. Again, others take a positively power-centered position, arguing that there is no point in discoursing about discourses if implicit or explicit barriers, such as political correctness, filter out topics beyond the morality-first consensus. For instance, followers of the alternative right and identitarianism often take the strategy of provocation and other kinds of direct actions that unmask the realities of power. In a more radical form, some believe the news is nothing but manipulated, faked and dishonestly interpreted reports. They believe this entitles them to do the same. It is only power that counts, after all.

In the midst of such absolutist positions, conservatives need to be moral realists who admit the objective and authoritative nature of the moral order. But they must also deny that it needs and can be imposed on humanity and society in an absolutist way. Conservatives must be fully aware of the fact that moral authority in human hands is liable to be misused.

First, the objectivity of the moral order is that man was created a moral animal, which means that our actions, decisions, emotions and even thoughts have a moral aspect and whatever we think, feel and do may be in need of moral justification. If our conscience is silent, it will be our fellowmen who demand justification. Morality cannot be ignored for long.

LIBERTY

Leaving moral issues behind, liberals and other leftist thinkers are concerned, even worried about what they call autocratic and populist tendencies not only in some remote corners of the world, but within the core countries of Western democracies as well. The basic argument is simple: new autocracies or autocratic movements justify themselves in terms of democracy, but what they call democracy is really nothing but populism (anti-elitism, the rejection of institutions, the checks and balances, and the favoring of direct, immediate, acclamatory voting). Autocracies are non-democratic because democracy entails liberalism, constitutional constraints, separation of powers and so on. Those who oppose liberalism like to

Secondly, however, this is distinct from pan-moralism and its absolutist consequences. The moral aspect does not emerge as an always-overriding authority. Much of our lives consist of doing things that we consider generally good outside of a specifically moral sense. It does not occur very frequently that morality or the authority of morality commands us *to do* something. In fact, in probably most cases it commands us *not to do* something. The authority of morality is restrictive and prohibitive, rather than a prescriptive, goal-oriented agent. Liberals are right to emphasize that morality is important, but it is important mainly in this restrictive sense and within this restricted scope. Third, those who reject liberal moralism are right to point out that there is an aggressive power dimension often behind it; that liberalism has become (to the dismay of the handful remaining classical liberals) an ideology that enforces its moral ideals on behalf of the authority of morality upon politics, institutions, even private associations and persons. Conservatives know that since morality *is* real and stands on objective grounds, it *does* have a certain coercive aspect. This is why it can be misused, even abused in political discourse and action. Such abuses must be uncovered and resisted. However, no abuse of morality in the form of pan-moralism exempts us from the authority of morality, the moral order or from the validity of moral prohibitions entrenched in our culture or, as conservatives are bound to believe, grounded in human nature.

point out that democracy is by definition 'populist' and that when liberals defend democracy, it is their rule, rather than the interest of the people, that they want to preserve and protect. Democracy cannot and should not be constrained.

Debates of this kind tend to be murky and unhelpful. Conservatives can offer a more honest and straightforward view of democracy because they interpret it in terms of history and culture, taking Alexis de Tocqueville's insights about democracy seriously. On the one hand, they realize that populism as defined above has always been an organic part of any democracy. There is nothing new about

the popularity of populism in crises. This has ever been the rule, rather than the exception, of most democracies. Conservatives can, once again, refer to human nature. There is absolutely nothing striking about our strong emotional reactions to grave crises. Among such reactions, fear, hatred, anguish, agitation, as well the desire for immediate action, strong leadership and grand visions are the most prominent ones. Populism as defined above is a result of a deep-rooted urge that something has to be done immediately. Since contemporary democracies operate on a rather short-term basis (elections are held quite often), since its basic principles include the universal suffrage and the equal weight of votes, and since modern states run by elected officials have competences and powers unprecedented in history, populism is an inevitable feature of any democracy. Democracies are naturally closer to autocratic rule than liberals would like to admit.

On the other hand, the reason why democracies are in need of restraining and disciplining is precisely because of such populist urges. Yet contrary to liberals, conservatives must and can point out that the constraints and limitations of democracy are what they are, namely, constraints and limitations. They can comfortably argue that history teaches us that democracy can be tyrannical and autocratic, against the interests and best intentions of its citizens, especially in absence of experience and self-imposed discipline. What is very often required is less and not more democracy.

It is not impossible to argue forcefully and convincingly why and how less democracy serves the public interest. Conservatives can argue that it is both public and private liberty that is in need of protection against the unconstrained will of the changing majority. If liberals abandon the protection of freedom in favor of other values (see the introduction), then conservatives of today should undertake this job. They can point out that crises are natural parts of human history and that they can be overcome by wisdom and competence rather than by prophets and gurus; by patience and good governance rather than by will, pressure and passions; by social and political efforts concerted by institutions and routines rather than by visions and miracles; by virtuous, strong and determined people rather than by all-powerful, loud, dictatorial leaders. Prophets, visionaries, dictators, impatient masses, strong desires, agitation and such reactions not only may deepen crises, but they may also threaten public and private freedom.



CIVILIZATION

Once upon a time, much of the globe was dominated by empires embedded in the Atlantic civilization. These empires up to the Modern Age were transnational and transcultural, that is, having a dynasty, a public service and administration, usually an army and an intellectual elite that was committed to its own task within the empire, rarely making serious efforts to integrate these distinct parts into a unified and homogenous state, and much less aiming at forming and forging a single nation. Empires had religious legitimacy, some natural and rational justification (the common good), sometimes certain universal and missionary ideals, various professional codes of virtue, a hierarchy of partly hereditary social and political positions, and more or less institutionalized separation of powers. These empires were politically more abstract and rationalist than contemporary nations are, yet more concrete, distinctive and well shaped in terms of functions, social and political roles, ethics and even ethnicities.

It is not suggested that these empires (the last one, the Danube monarchy was dissolved as late as in 1918) were perfect. Nothing is perfect in this world, yet history does commend them as examples of sophisticated, efficient, enduring, yet non-tyrannical and moderate governing.

After the decline of these empires and the rise of modern nation states (some of which began to abuse the concept of empire, as in the cases of the French and the German Empires), formerly separated functions, powers and competences were rapidly unified and nationalized. Natural hierarchies were largely abolished. Theological and rationalist legitimacy was replaced by emotions and subjectivist philosophies. Ideals became identity-based. The malaise of such nation states revealed first by and in the Great War to horrendous extents prompted liberals to proclaim a crusade against this development. Though liberals do not realize it, the abolishment of nation states has a very antimodernist and almost traditionalist inspiration: old empires are sometimes (romantically) cited as examples of tolerance and cultural openness (especially

the emphatically non-Christian Hellenistic and Arab cultures). The liberal abolishment of the nation state is, however, still a progressive and absolutist ideal. For the antidote to nationalism and the alternative to the nation state is, according to the mainstream liberal thinking, a homogenously conceived multiculturalism and multiethnicism, a sort of a patchwork world that



is, however, organized and run efficiently by some supranational or superstate structure on which no cultural, religious or national tradition as embedded in and nurtured by the Atlantic civilization can have formative influence. This system is constructed according to an abstract dichotomy of individuals who care about only their personal identities or are in need of protection (liberals and other leftist ideologies, including radical socialists and communists differ mainly on which groups or what kind of individuals are need of protection in the first place), and the unified superstructure ruled by the enlightened elite. There are no intermediary organizations (NGOs are meant to spread and promulgate the ideals of the elite and recruit its members), there is no real separation of powers, no separation of social roles (not to mention hierarchies) and ethical codes; ideally, not only separations but also distinctions are eliminated. The dictatorial consequences of such objectives and of such a world need to be pointed out by conservatives relentlessly.

No wonder that these tendencies and such thinking have provoked strong reactions on the far right. Though Nazism and the unconstrained exaltation of national egoism are still rather unpopular in Europe and in the Western world, making the interest of the nation first and above any other political principle, issue and even the common good is an increasingly influential position. It often comes in the form of

a rejection of globalization, the invisible forces of capitalism or the conspiring elites – of the harsh criticism of the European Union as an administrative and non-elected superstate, and not in an honest and sincere defense of the moral and rational superiority of the nation-state. However, what lies behind these criticisms is usually nothing but the nationalization of the global state, the totality of local power, the particularistic version of the liberal ideal of non-separation, non-distinction and the perfect unity of citizens and leaders or elites. Needless to say that such regimes have similar dictatorial consequences, liable to the criticism of conservatives.

There is no chance to return to the world of transnational and transcultural empires. Conservatives should not take such ideas seriously, as they need to be political realists. Yet the criticism of both the globalist and the localist or nationalist absolutisms does recall and point to the virtues of empires, the greatest of which was the prevention of dictatorships and totalitarian ideologies and regimes. What seems to be still applicable and feasible from their practice is the real separation of powers, the concern over values of the Atlantic civilization and high culture, including aesthetical and religious ones, as well as the protection of the autonomy of non-state organizations, especially those that have deep roots in history and tradition.

HISTORY AND THE PRESENT

Finally, conservatives face two equally absolutist alternatives with regard to history and historical thinking. The one originates in the traditional progressive belief in the future, in the perfectibility of mankind, in the utopian unity of all nations. It needs to be added that this belief, indeed, faith has usually been held in a qualified sense. Mankind has serious challenges to face; a concentrated and concerted effort must be made to overcome them (such as the climate change); a simple mistake may launch a nuclear war threatening ultimate destruction and so on. This is, in fact, what justifies the promotion of moralism, the search for the magic formula of ethics, enlightened democracy, perennial peace and happiness secured by a world government.

The other side is arguing that the Day of Judgment is imminent. The decline of Western civilization is almost unstoppable, social cohesion is on the verge of cessation; demographic tendencies and migration will soon bring about the collapse. This argumentation is similarly qualified: there are some last chances and forces remaining to block the demolition, although despair is the reasonable reaction to the modern world.

Conservatives, once again, stress the historical lessons about human nature and human communities that have produced the greatest evils and the finest personalities of mankind alike. No doubt doomsday scenarios cannot be ruled out, and it is true that

civilizations can be extinguished or may wane due to their inner weaknesses. However, political and collective actions aiming at ultimate goals, perfect solutions, once-and-for-all turns and the like are misguided and contribute to, rather than mitigate, the calamities. Hence, grand schemes to save the world or the globe by political force need to be avoided. Similarly, apocalyptic politics is to be suspected because it may easily justify exceptions, states of emergencies, the concentration of power to resist the enemy and so forth. They are often symptoms of

weakness rather than sources of strength. In short, both totalistic-utopian and apocalyptic-hysterical politics and politicians should be sharply criticized by conservatives. They need to be sensitive to both instincts, responsive to concerns over the future and over the past, yet, paradoxically perhaps, they ought to be the realists of today, the heroes of the present, rather than of the past. They can rely firmly on the eternal truths about humanity and the human condition; and they do not need to cling either to the future or to the past.

CONCLUSION

As far as I see it, contemporary conservatism needs to be critical of both leftist and rightist ideological aberrations and extremisms. It can and must be a voice of moderation in times of crises, especially in democracies that are apt to embrace extremisms of all kinds all too easily. However, conservatism does not need to be exclusively critical. In fact, a purely critical stance is always deficient in terms of persuasiveness and credibility. Therefore, I offered a few constructive points in virtue of which conservatives can tell not only what they criticize but also why they do so. Conscience is a vitally important faculty of human beings, which gives them responsibility and autonomy, yet holds them accountable efficiently. Conservatives should more strongly than ever defend conscience. They should also defend the authority of morality but point out how it can be abused politically. Since liberals have largely abandoned the concept and value of liberty as traditionally understood, conservatives have a mission to promote it in a meaningful and sensible way, protecting it against all sorts of tyrannies. Conservatives should, again, speak up for the reality of Atlantic civilization and reject both national egoism and globalist superstructures. Finally, conservatives should focus on the political needs and issues of the day, standing firmly on the timeless truths of human nature and reject fantasies of a perfect future and the hysterical accounts of history alike.

I have no intention to make practical political proposals or make extensive comments on the

current European political tendencies here. It should be sufficient to say that conservatives as principled moderates should resist both the onslaught of egalitarian, utopian, absolutist thinking and policy programs, including those about migration, social justice, bureaucratic governance and the seduction of authoritarian, power-centred, mystically and egoistically nationalistic etatist parties and programs. Moreover, there are signs of a sound and robust sort of conservative policy getting solidified and even popular in Austria, Germany and France (notwithstanding the electoral defeat of F. Fillon: the dramatically rapid loss of popularity of the leftist-liberal E. Macron is a grave warning to the left). Even what is called right extremism in Scandinavia has – especially in Norway and Denmark – come closer to the center. Eastern Central European countries have different party trajectories, yet moderate conservatism is alive in them. Though these parties often have various, even strenuous relations to their natural home parties. This is certainly true in Hungary where the governing party has been increasingly criticized by conservatives, myself included, for slipping toward the extreme (whereas the Jobbik, a noted extremist party, has done enormous efforts to get closer to the centre). There is, I conclude, a natural demand for a credible and convincing policy of moderation which conservatives, unlike mere realists, opportunists, politically and intellectually weightless personalities can and should advance and represent in a principled and philosophically sound way. •

