

The Demise of Fusionism and the Rise of American Post-Liberalism

America is the land of liberalism – of Lockean liberalism. Michael Oakeshott observed that “the inspiration of [...] [the] founders of American independence was the ideology which Locke had distilled from the English political tradition”, and praised Locke as the producer of “a brief conspectus of the manner in which Englishmen were accustomed to go about the business of attending to their arrangements – a brilliant abridgement of the political habits of Englishmen”.¹ Prominent conservatives including Peter Viereck observed rightly that even the conservative mind was shaped profoundly by liberalism and sought to preserve its value in the face of the onslaught of progressivism in the late 19th and throughout the 20th century.² It is hard to imagine American conservatism without its liberal core.³

Throughout the Cold War, American conservatism was markedly liberal.⁴ The historian of intellectual conservatism George Nash explained it through

¹ OAKESHOTT 1962: 27, 121.

² VIERECK 1965: 18.

³ As a mainstream movement with a recognised group and set of ideas, American conservatism belongs to the 20th century. In doing so it was inexorably shaped by the Cold War, which acted to excise illiberal tendencies from movement conservatism. One might go so far as to term American conservatism a species of the genus Cold War Liberalism without resorting to hyperbole.

⁴ The key tenets of the American liberal consensus, as enumerated by the British sociologist Godfrey Hodgson, are as follows: “[...] postwar American capitalism can generate abundance for all; its capacity to do so derives from the endless potential for economic growth; this creates a natural harmony of interests by promoting a more equal society; it also furnishes the resources for government to resolve social problems; the main threat to this beneficent system comes from communism, against which America and its allies must engage in prolonged struggle; America’s destiny is to spread the message of the benefits

the analogy of a three-legged barstool, propped up by traditionalists such as Russell Kirk; anti-Communists such as Whittaker Chambers; and classical liberals such as Hayek, a potpourri that was neatly labelled by Frank Meyer as “fusionism”.⁵ But even a barstool can have one leg that bears more weight than the other. The first words of the foreword to William F. Buckley Jr.’s anthology of American conservative thought read: “America celebrates itself as a nation of the liberal tradition, yet that tradition has, in fact, a strong conservative bias.”⁶

However, by the time President Ronald Reagan, the fusionist extraordinaire, stood in the looming shadow of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and entreated Gorbachev to advance the cause of peace and liberty by tearing down the Berlin Wall, there was already something hollow.⁷ The Cold War had been won for liberal democracy and against totalitarianism and communism, but liberalism itself was on the decline. When the coalition started to break down with the end of the Cold War, American conservatism oscillated between fiscal austerity and rampant foreign intervention and hawkishness, commonly associated with neo-conservatives.

The definitive moment where fusionism can be said to have died as a serious force in American conservatism was with the election of Donald Trump as President in 2016. In its stead, a new conservatism has started to take root. The collapse of fusionism and the void it created has been filled by a new post-liberal conservatism in the USA. This represents a renewed focus and concern with political life beyond the realm of economics and a turn toward defending institutions. Its main feature – indeed, its defining feature – is its repudiation of liberalism. In the land of liberalism, it is now a stranger.

I will begin by giving contours to the “Post-liberal Right” through examining the inspirations and writings of each of its constituent groups: Integralists

of capitalism to the rest of the world.” It is admittedly a vision of American politics that is undisturbed by the rancour of Vietnam, but still encapsulates the ideal type to which the American liberal mind aspired to, whether left or right. HODGSON 2017: 14.

⁵ NASH 2006; 2022; HAYEK 2011: 519–534.

⁶ LEWY-YOUNG 1970: ix.

⁷ NASH 2006: 555–574.

such as Adrian Vermeule who suggest that Catholicism presents the ultimate political answer to the problems faced by the United States today; the West Coast-based followers of Leo Strauss and Harry Jaffa, who tend to engage in and promote the rhetoric of crises and decline in close alliance with the populists, and suggest a Nietzschean solution to the problems of modernity; and communitarians, who draw from the earlier strand of traditionalists and suggest that the problems of liberal atomism can be solved with a return to local communities and seek to revitalise them. Following this, I examine the similarities between the Post-liberal Right and the early Progressives of the late 19th and early 20th century. Next, I will discuss the particular problems that attend being conservative in a liberal society, and what happens when that liberal consensus breaks down. In doing so, I express discontentment with the post-liberal turn because of the conspiratorial element and their adoption of idols outside the Anglo-American political tradition, both of which represent significant departures from the tradition in which they ought to be working within.

DEFINING THE “POST-LIBERAL RIGHT”

It is oftentimes helpful to attempt to define the things we talk about and oftentimes take for granted. Such is the case with the Post-liberal Right, which is spoken about as monolithic – and whether it is a barstool with many legs or an obelisk with many sides but one core is something we ought to consider. But for now it is essential to look at its constituent parts. First, I will examine Patrick Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed*, which represents right-communitarianism, and then proceed to look at Adrian Vermeule’s review of *Why Liberalism Failed*, through which he develops the integralist position.⁸ Next is Michael Anton’s *After the Flight 93 Election*, which brings together a statement of principles that West Coast Straussians affiliated with the Claremont Institute embody

⁸ DENEEN 2018; VERMEULE 2018: 202–213.

in spirit.⁹ I will conclude this section by considering the National Conservatives through the work of Yoram Hazony and the National Conservative Statement of Principles.¹⁰

Patrick Deneen's right-communitarian position is somewhat harder to define than the rest, but ought to be considered first largely because it sparked the debate about the failures and challenges of liberalism that, in this context, made post-liberalism a realistic intellectual and political ambition among those on the American Right. Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* is unique in many regards, but the first difference readers will notice, when contrasted with the other members of the Post-liberal Right, is that he accepts the liberal underpinnings of the American Founding.¹¹ "Liberalism", Deneen argues, "has failed – not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself".¹² Pointing to the failures of the American regime to respond to growing anomie and discontent among the populace, Deneen remarks that the creeping tendency of liberalism to hide under the façade of an assumed neutrality and supposed invisibility renders the public sphere impotent in light of a creeping despotism, packaged in explicitly Tocquevillian terms.

Deneen's solution to the issue is more revealing than the prognosis, which is deeply philosophical. At the very outset Deneen establishes the need to move beyond contemporary progressivism and conservatism because they "have advanced liberalism's project" and cannot "provide a new path forward".¹³ But "moving beyond liberalism" does not lead us to shoot for the stars and land up with tyrants, but rather help preserve "some of liberalism's main commitments" – "political liberty and human dignity" – which are the two specific fruits of the liberal tradition Deneen intends to preserve.¹⁴ In doing so, Deneen, while

⁹ ANTON 2019.

¹⁰ HAZONY 2022; Edmund Burke Foundation 2022.

¹¹ "A political philosophy conceived some 500 years ago, and put into effect at the birth of the United States nearly 250 years later, was a wager that political society could be grounded on a different footing." DENEEN 2018: 1.

¹² DENEEN 2018: 3.

¹³ DENEEN 2018: 19.

¹⁴ DENEEN 2018: 19.

moving beyond liberalism, tries to keep some of its rudiments alive, a critique that Adrian Vermeule levels against him.

Concluding his prognoses of the crises of liberalism, Deneen observes the tendency of liberalism to “impose the liberal order by fiat” through “the administrative state run by a small minority who increasingly disdain democracy”.¹⁵ The increasing depersonalisation of political life has adverse effects throughout the body politic, and the rise of the administrative state has accompanied the expertise fetish that early 20th-century progressivism married to ideas of national representation through the presidency.¹⁶ In other words, Deneen’s contention is that we live in a largely technocratic, managerial state, run by an impersonal bureaucracy that promotes the liberal order while feigning disingenuously both impartiality and knowledge of the science of government. The only solution that remains is that the house of cards will collapse, and Deneen heeds critics who, when “envisioning such scenarios rightly warn of the likely viciousness of any successor regime”.¹⁷ The return to local communities fosters “actual human liberty” and “civic and individual self-rule”.¹⁸ The local is the “expression of the universal and eternal, the divine and sublime”, and only by returning to it can we develop a new culture that rests on localism and “self-governance that arise[s] from shared civic participation”.¹⁹ Deneen’s solution to the collapse of the liberal order, both left and right, is to return to the small, sustainable, human-scale. This is the only antidote in his book to “the abstraction and depersonalisation of liberalism”.²⁰

Deneen’s focus on local communities, however, separates him from the others we consider, who are nationalist in orientation. His only statement on the nation-state is that “politics and human community must percolate from the bottom up, from experience and practice”.²¹ The localisation of

¹⁵ DENEEN 2018: 180.

¹⁶ DEARBORN 2021.

¹⁷ DENEEN 2018: 181.

¹⁸ DENEEN 2018: 187–88.

¹⁹ DENEEN 2018: 192–193.

²⁰ DENEEN 2018: 192.

²¹ DENEEN 2018: 188.

culture, economics and politics to create a civic life that is proximate to the concerns and lives of those invested in it is a much needed shift in American life – one which this author very much wishes would strengthen local leadership and improve the manner in which citizens interact with their communities and recognise and undertake their duties to others – but it needs to be complemented with a state and national programme that permits these communities to thrive and prosper.

This is where Adrian Vermeule and the integralists pick up. Integralists believe in the union of the Catholic Church and the American state, and its most advanced and vocal proponents are Catholic converts Sohrab Ahmari and Adrian Vermeule. Vermeule, a law professor at Harvard, has written at considerable length about the administrative state and, unlike Deneen, has no qualms about commandeering the administrative state to reach the ends he desires.²² Criticising Deneen, Vermeule recommends that “rather than retreating to a nostalgic localism, nonliberal actors strategically locate themselves within liberal institutions and work to undo the liberalism of the state from within”.²³ The locus of Vermeule’s thrust is clearly opposed to localism, which he views as nothing more than narrow-minded, backward-looking parochialism. While he agrees with Deneen’s assertion that the liberal order is decrepit and long due for replacement, he criticises Deneen for his “relapse into liberalism”.²⁴ Because Deneen is vague about what exactly post-liberal order might look like, Vermeule argues, his way has “no answer to the overhanging threat of liberalism” because localism “deliberately eschew[s] any substantive theory of the common good”.²⁵ For Vermeule, Deneen is simply another wolf in sheep’s clothing, saying one thing and doing another. To rectify this, Vermeule suggests, almost like fan fiction, “an alternate ending” for Deneen’s book, “one that yields a genuinely illiberal answer to the question, What is to be done?”²⁶

²² SUNSTEIN–VERMEULE 2020.

²³ VERMEULE 2018: 203.

²⁴ VERMEULE 2018: 209.

²⁵ VERMEULE 2018: 209.

²⁶ VERMEULE 2018: 206.

“My answer”, Vermeule asserts, “is that the state will have to be reintegrated from within”.²⁷ The apparatus of the administrative state, which on Deneen’s account is a key threat to and a driver of the deterioration of local communities, is for Vermeule a necessity, and thus, needs to be controlled by people who agree with him. Vermeule begins by arguing that “liberalism is a world religion – and one of the most successful religions in human history”, thereby setting up the stage for the replacement of one religion by another.²⁸ After all, he would say, was it not swapping out falsity for truth, the fake religion with the one true religion? Furthermore, change has to happen realistically; “the non-liberal state that emerges will have to be born from within the frame of the old order.”²⁹ The vehicle for deliverance is the administrative state, Vermeule avers, and the biblical figures of “Joseph, Mordecai, and Daniel, hold posts as elite administrators [...] they may even come to occupy the commanding heights of the administrative state”.³⁰ The integration of the Catholic Church into the American Regime will take place through “the vast bureaucracy created by liberalism in pursuit of a mirage of a depoliticised governance”.³¹

Besides stipulating government by common good and religious authority, Vermeule does not provide us with a substantive look into the world he craves. But he is confident it will be a good world, or, at any rate, better than the world we live in currently, and therefore has no qualms about pressing forward for its realisation. “It would be wrong to conclude that integration from within is a matter of coercion”, Vermeule concludes, “as opposed to persuasion and conversion, for the distinction is so fragile as to be nearly useless”.³² What Vermeule has in mind is remarkably Progressive: he shares in common with the first wave of Progressives a critique of the constitution and the refusal to do away with it, only changing it substantially from the inside out without

²⁷ VERMEULE 2018: 206.

²⁸ VERMEULE 2018: 208.

²⁹ VERMEULE 2018: 210.

³⁰ VERMEULE 2018: 211.

³¹ VERMEULE 2018: 211.

³² VERMEULE 2018: 212.

amending the formal Constitution.³³ More interesting, Vermeule is willing to co-opt the Progressive contrivance of the administrative state to reach the ends to which he aspires in the name of the common good; one necessarily wonders how far he could be from a right-wing progressive.

The third strand in this tradition is the West Coast Straussians, who stand opposed to the integralists and claim to be inheritors and preservers of the American constitutional tradition. This group largely consists of the Claremont Institute-affiliated students of Harry Jaffa, and through him, Leo Strauss, the German émigré and philosopher. Mark Lilla's complaint against Strauss is directed toward a set of his students who were "prepared to see the threat of 'nihilism' lurking in the interstices of modern life, waiting to be released and to turn America into Weimar".³⁴ For the West Coast Straussians we are always teetering on the edge of crisis, and unless we take radical actions to solve this impending crisis, doom awaits. The frequency with which this existential threat comes about becomes remarkably shorter, and soon enough we find ourselves in what could only be a state of perpetual crisis. Of particular importance to this strain of thought is the work of Michael Anton, who, under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus, borrowed from Livy through Machiavelli's *Discorsi*, wrote the essay *Flight 93 Election* in early September of 2016, which, along with the assistance of the Mercer family, was responsible for the Trump presidency and making the American right fall in line with the Trump agenda. Anton was rewarded for his paper warfare with a post at the National Security Council.

Anton's essay is named after Flight 93, which was hijacked on 9/11 and intended to be flown into a federal building in Washington, DC. The passengers took control of the plane after fighting against the hijackers and crashed it into an empty field in Pennsylvania. The essay begins and ends with a refrain. It opens by boldly asserting that "2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway", and ends by concluding that "[t]he election of 2016 is a test – in my view, the final test – of whether there is any *virtù* left in what used

³³ RANA 2016: 41–64.

³⁴ LILLA 2016: 60.

to be the core of the American nation”.³⁵ Between the Machiavellian rhetoric and the Americanised articulation of Weimar doomerism it seems quite clear that Anton thinks we have reached a breaking point, and therefore we find ourselves in a do-or-die situation with the 2016 election. The entire essay is peppered with crisis rhetoric, and the emphasis on the crisis rhetoric cannot be overstated in this case: what separates the West Coast Straussians from their East Coast brethren and the other tents of the Post-liberal Right is their insistence on perpetual crisis and their constant emphasis on it to the point where crisis mongers might be a more straightforward definition of what is really going on in that world.

For the West Coast Straussians, the Left is the vile enemy, Bolsheviks in disguise, threatening to ruin democracy in America. They creak and groan against the hegemony of the Left, and Anton notes that “these are dangerous times” and that “the Left has made them so and insists on increasing the danger”.³⁶ The West Coast Straussian hivemind also suffers from a saviour complex. The West Coast Straussian will say things that others are unwilling to say to save the body politic from immediate dissolution. “Like Decius, Machiavelli sacrifices part of himself – in his view, the only everlasting part: his reputation, his *nome* – to save his *patria*. Like Decius (and Jesus), Machiavelli’s new orders can be implemented only through, and after, his death.”³⁷ Between the high esteem in which they hold themselves and their prescription for “stronger medicine – most potent than any hitherto administered”, the West Coast Straussians claim that fusionism and what remains of it has failed and led the conservative movement astray and into the arms of its Leftist captors.³⁸ The cards always seem stacked against them and they intend to continue believing that they are always playing against the house in a high-stakes game of blackjack, to pick up on Anton’s card game analogies.

For the West Coast Straussians, the medicine that “is effective at killing malignant cells”, is Trumpism.³⁹ Of all the constituent elements of the Post-

³⁵ ANTON 2019: 61, 76.

³⁶ ANTON 2019: 11.

³⁷ ANTON 2019: 20.

³⁸ ANTON 2019: 20.

³⁹ ANTON 2019: 20, 74.

liberal Right, the West Coast Straussians emerged with a newfound prominence when they hitched their lot to the Trump bandwagon in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, even before the primaries were over. “Trumpism”, Anton claims, is “broadly defined as secure borders, economic nationalism, and America-first foreign policy”.⁴⁰ But there is more to Trumpism that Anton deigns to mention in this pithy definition: the culture wars, punishing exponents of “managerial Davoisie liberalism as far as the eye can see”, and a no-hostage takeover and dominance of cultural and educational institutions because they “are wholly corrupt and wholly opposed to everything we want, and increasingly even to our existence”.⁴¹ Anton ridicules the right through a screed against Matthew Continetti, who put forth “the usual litany of ‘conservative’ ‘solutions,’ with the obligatory references to decentralisation, federalisation, ‘civic renewal’, and – of course! – Burke”.⁴² Clearly Anton shares Vermeule’s esteem for Deneen’s localism.

While Anton is right in following Strauss in observing the overwrought use of the *reductio ad Hitlerum*, he would do well to pay heed to Strauss’s warning to “beware of the danger of pursuing a Socratic goal with the means, and the temper, of Thrasymachus”.⁴³ And Anton is not an isolated case. In 2021, following Trump’s loss in the general election, Glenn Ellmers, also affiliated with the Claremont Institute and its de-facto university, Hillsdale College, wrote in the Claremont journal *American Mind* that those who voted for Biden should be called “citizen aliens”, and that “most people living in the United States today – certainly more than half – are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term”.⁴⁴ Ellmers says openly what Anton stops short of saying: that “this recognition that the original America is more or less gone sets the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy apart from almost everyone else on the Right”, and “Claremont was one of

⁴⁰ ANTON 2019: 74.

⁴¹ ANTON 2019: 76, 70.

⁴² ANTON 2019: 64.

⁴³ STRAUSS 1953: 6.

⁴⁴ ELLMERS 2021.

the very few serious institutions on the right to make an intellectual case for Trumpism".⁴⁵ In other words, the West Coast Straussians are to Trump what Machiavelli was to the new Prince.

Much less incendiary than the West Coast Straussians, who oscillate between crises and self-inflicted scandals, are the National Conservatives, led by Yoram Hazony and his Edmund Burke Foundation, after an eponymous conference the Burke Foundation hosts. The National Conservatives ought to be considered at the end because they represent the big tent approach to the Post-liberal Right: they bring together the right-communitarians like Deneen, the integralists like Vermeule, and some of the West Coast Straussians (Anton was a signatory to their statement of principles).

The National Conservative approach to the Right begins in a wholesale repudiation of fusionism and through it, liberal conservatism. Like Anton, Hazony criticises the conservative establishment because they have self-consciously said that "[w]hat we are conserving is liberalism, or that Conservatism is a branch or species within liberalism, or that Liberalism is the new conservatism".⁴⁶ The blame is placed squarely at the feet of William F. Buckley, Jr., the founder and editor of *National Review*, which "stood for a public philosophy of liberalism wedded to a private Christianity, and was consciously guided by the imperative of eliminating Burkean, traditionalist influences from American conservatism".⁴⁷ In doing so, Buckley and the *National Review* paved the way for institutionalising a conservatism that was essentially "a public liberalism with a private conservatism", paving the way for the fusionism to become "a bulwark helping to prop up the hegemony of liberalism throughout the democratic world".⁴⁸ Like the West Coast Straussians, the National Conservatives believe that the conservative establishment failed them.

Like Vermeule and the integralists, the National Conservatives believe that the impact of the privatisation of religion is a grave error that ought to

⁴⁵ ELLMERS 2021.

⁴⁶ HAZONY 2022: xvii.

⁴⁷ HAZONY 2022: 301.

⁴⁸ HAZONY 2022: xxvi.

be reversed. “The liberal doctrine requiring a ‘wall of separation between church and state,’” for Hazony, “is a product of the post-Second World War period and is not an inherent feature of American political tradition. It should be discarded”, he continues, “both with respect to majority religion and to minorities”.⁴⁹ Unlike Vermeule, however, there is no clear mechanism for this wall to be torn down, and it is not immediately clear how this will manifest itself in public life. The “biblical tradition – Christianity and Judaism – must be recovered as the standard determining public life”, Hazony avers, by “overturning the postwar Supreme Court decisions that imposed the principle”.⁵⁰

Where the National Conservatives agree with the most with the three different strands of thought we have examined so far is their visceral hatred of liberalism, both left and right. Liberal democracy, Hazony claims, is intrinsically broken, and he criticises the three “fundamental axioms” of liberal democracy: “availability and sufficiency of reason”, “the free and equal individual” and “obligation arises from choice”.⁵¹ While “in theory, one can imagine a world in which liberalism coexists with the sources of religion and nationalism”, Hazony points out that “liberalism has a tendency to give way and transfer power to Marxists [...] liberalism would merely be a gateway to Marxism”.⁵² The liberal prioritisation of universal reason and individual freedom and equality over the claims of the community and of tradition, Hazony argues, opens liberals to critiques that stem from the “many genuine instances of unfreedom and inequality in society”, and if liberals are therefore true to their stated values, they will succumb to the claims made by such critics.⁵³ Hazony’s mantra for his alternative to liberal democracy is “conservative democracy”, best summed up as “God, the Bible, the family, the congregation, and the independent nation state”.⁵⁴ The big enemy of these five shibboleths of Hazony’s “conservative

⁴⁹ HAZONY 2022: 341–342.

⁵⁰ HAZONY 2022: 345.

⁵¹ HAZONY 2022: 332.

⁵² HAZONY 2022: 333.

⁵³ HAZONY 2022: 323.

⁵⁴ HAZONY 2022: 333.

democracy” is “Enlightenment liberalism [which] is the source of the current catastrophe”.⁵⁵ The problem with liberal societies is that they thrive on pre-liberal structures, associations and sentiments, but do little to understand or nurture those very things that are foundational for liberalism’s flourishing. Thus, liberalism fosters what Hazony terms “paradigm blindness”, which is constitutional for liberalism insofar as it overemphasises the relationship between the individual and the state, and resorts to the default idiom of rights, to the detriment of all other constitutive political relationships and concepts.⁵⁶

A RETURN TO PROGRESSIVISM

United by shared critiques of liberalism, the Post-liberal Right, thus, has made an appearance in the land of liberalism. To be clearer, liberalism has no friends – left or right – in the United States today. On the Left, the Progressives, from their very first incarnation, defined themselves in opposition to liberal thought and practice, and it is no surprise that contemporary Progressivism has a markedly illiberal turn.⁵⁷ On the Right, however, liberalism ruled the roost. Hazony is not wrong in pointing out that Buckley and the fusionists took seriously their commitment to liberalism, but, unlike Hazony’s dim assessment of the *National Review* and its philosophy, these men were conservative in ways that befitted a liberal society. In this section, I will briefly consider the similarities between the early Progressives, which were the first American post-liberals, and the Post-liberal Right.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. The Post-liberal Right has, for the most part, taken up the baton of the early Progressives, and comparing what the constituent parts of the Post-liberal Right espouse and what the Progressives thought is helpful in understanding the tradition in which their post-liberalism operates. Whether they consciously know it or not, they are returning

⁵⁵ HAZONY 2022: 345.

⁵⁶ HAZONY 2022: 89–96.

⁵⁷ EISENACH 1994.

to a different tradition than what Cold War American conservatism worked within. Stephen Skowronek and Stephen Engel lay out six defining shibboleths of American Progressivism: constitutional critique, critique of rights, criticism of the party system, faith in expertise, managed economy and national community.⁵⁸

The first defining characteristic of Progressives was their critique of the Constitution. The original Progressives, by criticising the Constitution, “dispelled the notion that the Constitution was a work of timeless truth”.⁵⁹ But more importantly, “their alternative, what we today call the ‘living Constitution’, was open-ended with regard to the possibilities of government and more amenable to programmatic action”.⁶⁰ This line of attack can be found most clearly in Vermeule and the integralists, who are by no means originalists.⁶¹ Similarly, the National Conservatives, while not specifically critics of the Constitution, seek to return to an age of Biblical morality by “overturning the postwar Supreme Court decisions that imposed the principle of ‘separation of church and state’ in America”.⁶² Like the Progressives, both the National Conservatives and the Integralists seek to transform the order of government from within in light of the difficulty of formally amending the Constitution.

The next critique that the Progressives levelled was against the over-dependence on rights. “The reformers”, Skowronek and Engel note, “assaulted the old regime for turning rights [...] into impediments to the development of democracy”.⁶³ Hazony criticises the tendency of liberalism to constantly expand rights, observing that “liberal societies ceaselessly manufacture new ‘rights’ so that the young and healthy may do whatever they please”.⁶⁴ Instead of focusing on “freedoms or rights”, Hazony wants us to think about “responsibilities and constraints”.⁶⁵ Furthermore, “this activity – of fixating on a fictional

⁵⁸ SKOWRONEK–ENGEL 2016.

⁵⁹ SKOWRONEK–ENGEL 2016: 6.

⁶⁰ SKOWRONEK–ENGEL 2016: 6.

⁶¹ HAMMER 2021: 917–960; VERMEULE 2020.

⁶² HAZONY 2022: 345.

⁶³ SKOWRONEK–ENGEL 2016: 7.

⁶⁴ HAZONY 2022: 124.

⁶⁵ HAZONY 2022: 231.

abstract individual, declaring his rights and upholding them – is for the most part a distraction from the actual business of national politics”.⁶⁶ Deneen, too, criticises rights talk in the same idiom as Hazony, but goes further in positing that demands “for comprehensive assurances that inequalities and injustices arising from racial, sexual, and ethnic prejudice be preemptively forestalled and that local autocracies or theocracies be legally prevented [...] have always contributed to the extension of liberal hegemony”.⁶⁷ Surprisingly it is the West Coast Straussians who defend rights talk. Ellmers observes that “government derives all its legitimacy from the inalienable rights of the people, and makes their consent essential to the common good and justice”, and this is what makes America exceptional, in similar tones to Anton.⁶⁸

While the early Progressives were quick to criticise the party system, it was because the parties of old were tied up with what they perceived as parochialism, “reinforcing localism and elevating narrow interests”.⁶⁹ Localism was “ill adapted for national actions aimed at the great governing challenges of the day”.⁷⁰ The West Coast Straussians prominently criticise the parties: Ellmers writes that “American constitutionalism established a nonpartisan form of government that was genuinely unprecedented”, while Anton’s recommendation in the *Flight 93 Election* is that voters rise above party and follow the path laid down by *virtù*.⁷¹ For Hazony and the National Conservatives, the party system has produced a Right that has “had little interest in political ideas other than [...] well-known liberal views” and the Left is still animated by Marxism.⁷² Vermeule and Deneen, however, are silent on this matter.

The early Progressives were clear in their faith in expertise, which manifested itself in the creation of the administrative state and “an extensive ‘para-state’ of think tanks, universities, foundations, professional societies, and lobbying

⁶⁶ HAZONY 2022: 238.

⁶⁷ DENEEN 2018: 196–197.

⁶⁸ ELLMERS 2021; ANTON 2019: 23–61.

⁶⁹ SKOWRONEK–ENGEL 2016: 8.

⁷⁰ SKOWRONEK–ENGEL 2016: 8.

⁷¹ ELLMERS 2021; ANTON 2019: 76.

⁷² HAZONY 2022: xvii.

organisations [...] to surround it”.⁷³ Vermeule is the most open about co-opting the expansion of the executive and the administrative state for the purposes of integration.⁷⁴ “The vast bureaucracy created by liberalism in pursuit of a mirage of depoliticized governance may”, he hopes, “by the invisible hand of Providence, be turned to new ends”.⁷⁵ The National Conservatives are concerned about the para-state and in their statement of principles they pick up on the Progressive idiom of “national interest” to argue that “most universities are at this point partisan and globalist in orientation and vehemently opposed to nationalist and conservative ideas”, and they should not receive government money “unless they rededicate themselves to the national interest”.⁷⁶ Expertise in the abstract notions of social science ought to be replaced by religious expertise in Biblical morality and leadership, but the premise that the administrative state and the para-state institutions that surround it are here to stay is never up for question. The critique of rationalism in Hazony’s treatise is more concerned with the state of mind than of the rationalist and not with the premise that the administrative state and the expansive executive branch should be curbed.⁷⁷

The Progressives aspired to a managed economy, making “the case for using government to secure greater equity in economic relationships”.⁷⁸ While the Progressives were confronted by big business and thought trust-busting and supporting unions was the best solution to the problem, some members of the Post-liberal Right, including Senator Josh Hawley, who spoke at the National Conservatism conference in Miami, have brought that same language to bear upon technology firms.⁷⁹ The National Conservatism statement of principles notes “trans-national corporations showing little loyalty to any nation damage public life by censoring political speech, flooding the country with dangerous and addictive substances and pornography, and promoting obsessive,

⁷³ SKOWRONEK–ENGEL 2016: 9–10.

⁷⁴ POSNER–VERMEULE 2010; VERMEULE 2018: 202–213.

⁷⁵ VERMEULE 2018: 211.

⁷⁶ Edmund Burke Foundation 2022.

⁷⁷ HAZONY 2022: 104.

⁷⁸ SKOWRONEK–ENGEL 2016: 11.

⁷⁹ ROSENBERG–ALLEN 2021; HAWLEY 2021; 2022.

destructive personal habits”.⁸⁰ On the other hand, Deneen tries to overcome “the illusion of autonomy in the form of consumerist and sexual license” that is implicit in contemporary liberalism and hopes that “the fostering of household economics” will “resist the abstraction and depersonalization of liberalism” while confronting “the greater challenge of minimizing one’s participation in the abstract and depersonalizing nature of the modern economy”.⁸¹

The last plank of the Progressive platform was the creation of a national community and the conscious move of politics away from the local and toward the national. While Deneen is circumspect about the nation and his thought is marked more by the absence of it, the other constituent members of the Post-liberal Right are less hesitant to pin their hopes on the nation and the national community. The West Coast Straussians only talk in the idiom of America and the American regime. Vermeule implies that the “nonliberal state” that will come after liberalism keeps the structure of the administrative state and executive action alive – only using it for different ends – and criticises Deneen’s tactic of “retreating to a nostalgic localism”.⁸² Most importantly, the National Conservatives’ first principle is grounded on the existence of a national state and public interest. Their statement of principles opens by stating that “[w]e emphasize the idea of the nation because we see a world of independent nations – each pursuing its own national interests [...] as the only genuine alternative to universalist ideologies”.⁸³ Especially for the National Conservatives, but also for the others, the “public interest” of the early Progressives is rediscovered as the common good and the national interest, and the focus of thinking is inextricably linked to the nation state.

From the brief excursus above, the similarities between the early Progressives and the Post-liberal Right are stark and, for observers of the American political tradition, establish the tradition in which the Post-liberal Right unwittingly acts. To observe agreement on and the transformation of all six shibboleths

⁸⁰ Edmund Burke Foundation 2022.

⁸¹ DENEEN 2018: 188, 192, 194.

⁸² VERMEULE 2018: 203, 210.

⁸³ Edmund Burke Foundation 2022.

reveals an intellectual and political kinship from the other side of the political spectrum. We have come full circle.

POST-LIBERALISM IN THE LAND OF LIBERALISM

What does it mean to move beyond liberalism in the land of liberalism? The conservative movement in America has been most successful when it has appealed to and acted within the liberal tradition, and the goal of the conservative movement has historically been to conserve the liberal tradition. Today, the United States has no effective liberal tradition outside the conservative attempts to preserve it, which puts American conservatives in the hard position of having to defend liberalism while also repairing the underlying damage that liberalism does to the body politic. How, then, can post-liberalism thrive in a liberal society?

In all fairness to critics of the “America is the land of liberalism”, the United States has had illiberalism in its midst: one ought only to look toward Southern Agrarianism or the thought of Calhoun and the slave-based plantation economy.⁸⁴ But that does not detract from the original characterisation of liberalism as the dominant tradition in America. Most telling is the anti-Federalist criticisms of the initial Constitution, which secured the formal passage of the Bill of Rights: the criticisms that came from its most trenchant critics were that “they saw in the Framers’ easy thrusting aside of old forms and principles threats to four cherished values: to law, to political stability, to the principles of the Declaration of Independence, and to federalism”.⁸⁵ The issue was not whether the United States was broadly liberal – it was about how it was to be transformed into a regime befitting the liberal conditions that caused its creation in the first place.

Conservatism, thus, in America seems paradoxical on the surface; even more so when one considers that unlike what Hazony might suggest, liberalism is a key tenet of the conservative movement in America. Peter Viereck noted that

⁸⁴ SMITH 1993: 549–566.

⁸⁵ STORING 1981: 7.

when this successfully happens, “the liberalism thus conserved often turns out to be the conservative-tending, law-centred liberalism of Locke, Lincoln, Wilson, not the radical-tending, mass-centred liberalism of Rousseau, Jackson, Weaver, Donnelly, La Follette”.⁸⁶ Viereck’s “new conservatism” proposes a broadly liberal regime, one that focuses on solving national issues with acuity, engages in defence of the realm, guarantees freedoms and rights, and puts the impetus back to local leadership to preserve the communitarian vision. It understands that liberalism in its pure form is corrosive to the very things that sustain it in the first place – local communities, strong bonds, families, duties, obligations and elites – and seeks to preserve a genuinely communal life that is vital and provides the tools and resources for human flourishing for those who choose to desire it. This, then, is the role of post-liberalism in a liberal country: to enrich and enliven it, to sustain it, and to act as a backstop for the sterilising, atomising effects of mass society and modern life.⁸⁷

At its very best, post-liberalism can emphasise the failures of liberalism in keeping the things that matter vital: local communities, the family, patriotism, hard work and a genuine equality under the law.⁸⁸ Liberalism does a poor job tending to the very things that make it successful, and the good conservative does not rail against it but rather understands its limitations and seeks to secure its successes for posterity, while standing watch cautiously against a cult of rampant progress with no sense for the unintended consequences of progress at all costs. But its solutions, as we have seen above, have a conspiratorial bent to it; hardly does one require recourse to speculation to emphasise that the constitutional and political tradition within which it operates are less amenable to the imposition of a religious state or ignoring the national community completely to focus on local communities which exist in a state of suspended animation in an undefined ether. The nation-state is here to stay, as is the secular state. The problems of modern life cannot be solved by recourse to the pre-modern world; to turn back the clock would reproduce the same conditions that resulted in its transformation.

⁸⁶ VIERECK 1962: 246–247.

⁸⁷ VIERECK 1962: 246–247.

⁸⁸ ZITNER 2023.

At various points, liberals and conservatives in the American tradition have looked to their English cousins: Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., borrowed Winston Churchill's test for liberal democracy and took inspiration from Lord Randolph Churchill in his *Vital Centre*, while Viereck looked to the squirearchy to support his brand of liberal conservatism.⁸⁹ They have emphasised the cool scepticism and pragmatism of their British counterparts which coexists with a love for decorum and proper conduct, perhaps as a safeguard against taking themselves too seriously. Dour, colourless humour and pithy wit are par for the course. When our current breed of post-liberals borrows, it ossifies fluidity into ideology; when they look abroad, it is to the continent, to de Maistre and to Viktor Orbán. Hazony, Deneen, Vermeule and Anton have either been guests of Orbán or written in effusive praise of his regime. Like the early Progressives' Germanophilia, the Post-liberal Right has found an idol outside the liberal tradition, and, like the early Progressives, will have to face an eventual reckoning on the matter.⁹⁰ The distinctiveness of the United States, Viereck reminds us, "is based on the resemblance between moderate liberalism and moderate conservatism", while the Old World "is based on the difference between extreme liberalism and extreme conservatism".⁹¹ Continental idols are ill-suited for anything but bludgeoning one's own country through praise of another while glossing over the deficiencies of the mythical society that is being lionised.

The extent to which, however, this might impact British post-liberalism is up for debate. While the current impetus for post-liberalism on the right in the United States has been largely spurred on by debates that are endogenous to it, it seems to be the case that there is also an incredible salience and kinship between the two. Post-liberals on either side of the Atlantic are concerned that in their esteem their countries are no longer ascendant superpowers, that domestically or internationally their countries are past their prime, and consequently some drastic course of action must be taken. American post-liberalism

⁸⁹ SCHLESINGER 1998: xvii, 8; VIERECK 1962: 241.

⁹⁰ EISENACH 1994.

⁹¹ VIERECK 1965: 125.

is specifically inward-looking and domestic in orientation, driven by a distaste of internationalism and its association with the coasts' cosmopolitanism. Whether this dynamic can be successfully translated to the United Kingdom is quite suspect. Furthermore, because the United Kingdom has an established church, it appears that the extent to which the integralists could hold sway even when their Catholicism – oftentimes with the zeal that only converts can bring to the table – is swapped for High Church Anglicanism, is quite suspect. In sum, the symbiotic interplay between British and American post-liberalism could be put in jeopardy by new developments on the American right.

It is hard not to be disappointed over what could have come with a new iteration of conservatism in the United States, but there is hope for the future in the twin inheritances of the American tradition. “America was not simply the expression of a monolithic Lockeanism”, Steven Smith points out, “but was a covenantal community seeking a kind of moral and intellectual perfection through the acknowledgment of sin, guilt, atonement, and eventual redemption”.⁹² It would bode well for the future of conservatism in the United States to understand the objects to which it has directed its conservation and the traditions in which it has hitherto existed, and recognise its particular genius. Viereck’s injunction, warning us against “the indiscriminate anti-liberalism of hothouse Bourbons and tsarist serf-flogger”, who “are not justified in calling themselves American traditionalists”, is one we all ought to pay heed to.⁹³

⁹² SMITH 2023: 2.

⁹³ VIERECK 1965: 125.

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