

Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right

Review Number:

962

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 September, 2010

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ISBN:

9780230614796

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£23.75

Pages:

208pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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Elizabethtown College humanities Professor Paul Edward Gottfried's latest book on American conservatism provides a complex analysis of the centrality of value rhetoric in the post-Second World War conservative movement. In the introduction Gottfried characterizes the book as partially autobiographical in that this work is a manifestation of his own personal effort to make sense of the modern American right (p. xi). A self-described 'exile' from the American conservative movement, Gottfried painstakingly navigates through historical conservatism to demonstrate the ideological break with the past – both past American conservatism and the European conservatism of such notable icons as Edmund Burke (p. xii). He asserts that 'the merging of anti-Communist and pro-free-market sentiments with a contrived 'conservative' pedigree' served to 'produce a fictitious foundation for a political movement' (p. xiv). The six chapters and conclusion that follow his introduction weave an impressive argument steeped in a thorough understanding of contemporary conservative ideology as well as careful attention to the historicity of conservative ideals and aims.

The essential thesis, which emerges rather quickly and is maintained throughout, is that following the Second World War a values-based conservatism emerged in the United States which simultaneously and intrinsically weakened its connection with substantive conservatism while also moving this new 'conservatism' further to the political left. The first part of this argument seems straightforward and perhaps even obvious enough, at least to social and political historians. It does not, for example, seem a stretch to suggest that the conservatism of Lincoln or Taft differed markedly from the conservatism of George W. Bush. However, the notion that the neoconservatives who helped bring Bush to office were in fact more socially liberal than traditional conservatism implies necessitates pause. Popular conservative figures like Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh rarely top lists of the liberal-minded. Yet, Gottfried offers a convincing

argument regarding the co-optation of some aspects of the liberal social justice platform espoused in the 1960s. One of the best examples he offers of this new 'conservative orthodoxy' is that of the move by neoconservatives to re-fashion Martin Luther King, Jr. as an essentially conservative religious leader who supported equality but opposed affirmative action (p. 136). Aside from the lack of historical accuracy surrounding such a depiction of King, for Gottfried the larger issue seems to be superficial nature of forging a party based on such flimsy notions. In his introduction, he describes value conservatism as having a 'structural weakness' as a building block for a political movement (p.xiv). Yet, he also recognizes that as 'weak' as it may seem for forging a meaningful political party, it nonetheless enjoys a good deal of media popularity, which he attributes in part to the media's liberalization of conservatism.

One theme that perhaps merits greater exploration is the role of the media in the creation of a fictitious, yet highly marketable conservatism, if that is indeed what has happened. Gottfried makes numerous references to the media's liberalization of conservatism, manifested in part by the advent of popular neo-con talking heads on cable television yet one cannot help but wonder if there are other reasons for this. Did conservatism simply become another commodity in a hyper-capitalist country where everything, if packaged correctly, can be bought, sold, and consumed? If so, perhaps these neo-conservatives are marketing geniuses albeit bereft of more than a superficial articulation of historical conservative philosophy. In fact, an examination of the American 'liberal' movement might be undertaken from much the same framework used by Gottfried to investigate the political right. Perhaps the real political truth that such an approach might reveal is that the American two-party system has evolved into the media right and the media left where myth trumps historicity and, as Richard Nixon learned in 1960 during the first televised presidential debates, substance is no match for flash. If American conservatism would be unrecognizable to Burke and Locke would be perplexed by American liberalism (often falsely denounced as communism by the far right) then perhaps the proliferation of the post-Watergate bumper sticker 'Don't vote. It just encourages them' had multiple applications in an increasingly media-centric political arena.

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the book is Gottfried's exhaustive use of sources to demonstrate the historical disconnect of contemporary conservatism. He fluidly transitions from discussions of classical conservative texts as well as more contemporary conservative musings and he does so in a way that allows the reader to clearly distinguish post-Second World War American conservatism from other, perhaps truer forms of conservatism. He references the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s as a key moment in conservatism because here, it would seem, conservatives had the opportunity to dismantle many aspects of the modern welfare state, implemented by liberal administrations, and perhaps even more meaningfully, to do away with a number of government agencies like the Departments of Education and Transportation. Yet, this did not happen. Instead, concludes Gottfried, the would-be Reagan revolutionaries seized power rather than shrinking the size and scope of the government. By definition, a very un-conservative thing to do, and yet the 'value permanence' utilized by post-war conservative media figures and activists succeeded in creating a new conservative paradigm in which, quite ironically, this no longer mattered. Gottfried explains the late 20th century shift in conservatism, writing that 'Current leaders do not adhere to the notions of limited government put forth by their predecessors in the fifties' (p. 143). Moreover, he contends that following the defeat of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election 'no Republican presidential contender has questioned the welfare state's policies, let alone premises, in any fundamental way' (p. 148). Hence, from Gottfried's perspective, the liberalization of conservatism manifested itself in a general acceptance of welfare policies (despite modest reform measures) and a co-optation of many aspects of the Democratic social justice platform. Neo-cons may point to President Lincoln's support for abolishing slavery as evidence of value permanence all the while ignoring the fundamental conservatism of Goldwater's assault on the New Deal and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

While at times the book-especially the conclusion-reads like St. Thomas Aquinas' rhetorical styling in *Summa Theologica* in that Gottfried seemingly attempts to anticipate and respond to all possible objections to his arguments, the perspective he offers requires perhaps less defense than he imagined. To the extent that Gottfried has an axe to grind it seems safe to say that it is with self-identified media and think-tank conservatives who assign a historically flawed pro-civil rights, pro-women's rights stance to conservatism

all the while criticizing the proliferation of big government even as their own world view of government no longer allows for the possibility of meaningfully dismantling it. While the neo-conservative movement in the United States has taken conservatism into a direction that is not only inconsistent with limited government and fiscal restraint, it is also the case that the value conservatism employed by neo-cons has allowed them to reap numerous victories. Herein lays the challenge for historians of modern American conservatism. Gauging the success of the movement and understanding to whom it appealed and why is a fundamentally different enterprise than endeavoring to tease out its lack of historical or perhaps even intellectual authenticity. Gottfried's preoccupation with the right is steeped in an effort to interrogate neo-conservative ideology, rhetoric, and imagery for consistency, accuracy, and meaning. His efforts along those lines yield significant insight into the intellectual hollowness of media-driven movements. Superficiality, however, should not be confused with left-leaning. Regardless of the extent to which the right became more 'liberal' following Goldwater's defeat, it should also be noted that the rise of value conservatism has created stringently intolerant rhetoric which many on the left view as decidedly conservative.

While Gottfried focuses on the broader political development of the conservative right, a number of other scholars of modern American conservatism have focused on the grassroots components of the movement. For example, Lisa McGirr examines the explosion of conservative activism in Orange County California in the 1960s. In *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, McGirr like Gottfried, finds a break between the old school Goldwater conservatives who were recast as marginalized libertarians or 'wing nuts' on the fringe of the larger movement.⁽¹⁾ Yet her focus is more on the way in which this new conservatism brought people out of their comfortable suburban homes by appealing to their fear that the liberals were ruining the country. Issues of prayer in school, secondary school curriculum, sex-education, Communism, involvement in the United Nations, pornography, and feminism galvanized social conservatives to take political action. In this way, one might argue, the value conservatism decried by Gottfried as a weak foundation for a political movement, became the opiate of the conservative masses in McGirr's study. Yet, in attempting to come to terms with a deeper understanding of modern American conservatism, it nevertheless is important to open up further dialogue on the subject, one which hopefully results in a fuller comprehension of what is probably the most significant political and social development in the United States since the 1960s. In closing, Gottfried's book is passionate, well-written, informative, and provocative and it adds much to the growing field of conservative history.

Notes

1. Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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