

# CONSERVATISM AS AN IDEOLOGY REVISITED: THE CASE OF NEOCONSERVATISM<sup>1</sup>

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This paper has a very modest goal. It intends to serve as a first attempt at understanding the widespread notion that today's conservatism, at least as far as the Anglo-American version, commonly called 'neo' – conservatism is concerned, is somehow different from earlier, more serene versions of conservatism. Not for today's conservatives F. J. C. Hearnshaw's dictum that: 'It is commonly sufficient for practical purposes if conservatives, without saying anything, just sit and think, or even if they merely sit' (quoted in Kirk 1993: 3). Though still considered by many, along with John Stuart Mill, 'the stupid party', conservatives for the past couple of decades have generally not resigned themselves to sitting peacefully, without as much as thinking, saying, or actually *doing* anything. The English commentator, Geoffrey Wheatcroft described this change in conservative attitudes this way, putting a name to it along the way:

Every Tory leader since Sir Robert Peel had implicitly agreed with his opponents that the future belonged with their side; that at best a rearguard action could be fought; that conservatism's role was to make concessions as slowly, and with as good grace, as possible. That is, until Margaret Thatcher. She was the first Tory leader who did not share this belief (Wheatcroft 1996).

Beginning with Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and with Ronald Reagan in the U.S., conservatism has, most uncharacteristically, become a *fighting* faith. Or, to put it another way: it has become what many of its adherents since the time of Peel would have forcefully insisted it could or should never become – that is, a full-fledged political ideology (meaning a distinctive, more or less coherent system of political beliefs with a view to informing political *action*).

Samuel Huntington's influential article 'Conservatism as an Ideology' (1957) differentiates its subject from other examples of the species by describing it as a kind of positional, or situational belief-system, continuously responding to the challenges of the times, expressed in rival (we are tempted to say 'real')

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ideologies, but itself lacking substantive content, that is a permanent, idiosyncratic core of propositions. So, depending as always, on the meaning of the word, you might summarize Huntington's argument in *Conservatism as an Ideology* this way: It really isn't.

Another thinker, Michael Oakeshott, most explicitly and unapologetically takes this later position – that conservatism is *not* an ideology; or, perhaps more accurately: that, although you could be a conservative (and not just in politics, either), there's really no such thing as conservatism (as an ideology) – as those who adhere to an ideology are the exact opposite of a conservative.

Oakeshott's understanding of conservatism, of course, as one of his friends, Professor John Casey notes 'could not be further from the world-view of the Conservative party' during the years of Thatcherism (Casey 1993: 63).<sup>2</sup>

This paper does not consider it as one of its aims to give a comprehensive definition of conservatism, nor, correspondingly, the adjudication of the conservative credentials of the various authors it deals with; it takes for granted the supposed conservatism of its subjects, on account of their self-definition, or common perception. It takes as its point of departure a not terribly controversial feature of conservatism, indeed, the most usual of suspects when it comes to the so-called 'list' approach to conservatism as an ideology, and which at the same time is also the usual basis for denying conservatism's ideological nature. This feature might be called *anti-rationalism* (and is leading the list of, e.g., Anthony Quinton in *The Politics of Imperfection* as the recognition of the *intellectual imperfection* of human beings).

This author happens to believe that the well-known conservative arguments, following from this scepticism concerning the capabilities of human reason, against rationalistic plans of perfecting social institutions are rather powerful. They are also of an unmistakably *negative* nature. It's not too difficult to see how this alleged negativity renders conservatism somewhat helpless in the face of what conservatives perceive the relentless onslaught of rationalistic plans of reform (taking the forms of various *ideologies*) which for the best part of the last century have been the chief characteristic of the times. Some conservatives reacted to this constellation of events with a certain measure of resigned pessimism, believing that the future indeed belonged with the opposing side; 'that at best a rearguard action could be fought; that conservatism's role was to make concessions as slowly, and with as good grace, as possible.'

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<sup>2</sup> On the other hand there are those who would characterize conservatism as a distinct political ideology from its earliest beginnings, which, for example, Robert Nisbet does without the slightest hesitation in his *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* (1991).

But others decided to take up arms against this sea of troubles, and by opposing try to end them. This, they reasoned, could only be done by adopting an ideology of their own, to arm themselves with in the battle of ideas. This is what I shall call the '*ideologization*' of conservatism. Flashing a light on the origins of this feature of contemporary Anglo-American (neo)conservatism is what the exceedingly modest aim of this paper is. It will also not try to answer the question if the whole enterprise amounts to a setting right of the out of joint time, or a particularly clever way of suicide.

### Michael Oakeshott and the 'intimations of tradition'

Being conservative, according to Michael Oakeshott, and in his famous words, means, among other things, preferring

'the familiar to the unknown, [...] the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss' (Oakeshott 1991: 408).

In other words, it means exhibiting a certain kind of *disposition* in manners of thought and behaviour. What it most emphatically does *not* mean is subscribing to a certain set of beliefs, or general principles, 'a creed or a doctrine' – an *ideology*.

Ideologies belong to the *rationalist* approach of politics, which takes as its starting point a system of theoretical, abstract ideas, and intends to use it as a guide (a 'crib') to political action.

The problem with ideologies, according to Oakeshott, is that they can never include the whole, or even the best part of our knowledge about politics, as part of that knowledge is of a *practical* nature, that is of a kind that can't be formalized (set in rules, put into books). In fact all human knowledge has two distinct elements: *technical* and *practical*. Of these two, only the former is available to the rationalist mind, as it is the kind that is susceptible to formalization. The difference between these two kinds of knowledge is well illustrated by Oakeshott's famous examples of one not being able to learn how to cook, or drive a car from a book.

So Oakeshott considers political ideologies only a poor extract, a crude abridgement of political knowledge, and the ideological manner of political conduct an impoverishment of politics. The fullness of political knowledge can only be found in the practice of a given political community, in *tradition*. Political action can take as its guide nothing else but '*the intimations of tradition*'.

This description of the nature of politics and political knowledge drove many readers of Oakeshott to desperation. But Oakeshott evidently had no intention of letting himself goaded into answering the classic question of political ideology. ‘Do you want to be told, that in politics there is, what certainly exists nowhere else, a mistake-proof manner of what should be done?’ Oakeshott asks one of his critics (Oakeshott 1991: 136).<sup>3</sup>

However, in his ‘On being conservative’ he does give some clues as to what kind of political arrangements someone with a conservative disposition would prefer. Oakeshottian politics is above anything else one of a limited variety. For him, ‘governing is a specific and limited activity’. It is concerned only with the administration (‘the provision and custody’) of general rules of human conduct, ‘which are understood, not as plans for imposing substantive activities, but as instruments enabling people to pursue the activities of their own choice with the minimum frustration’ (Oakeshott 1991: 424).

As people tend to be engaged in a great variety of activities, and entertain a multiplicity of opinions, collisions between them are inevitable. Hence the need – to resolve the more consequential of these collisions – for rules of conduct, the making and enforcement of which constitute the offices of government. But to avoid imposing *substantive* activities, or opinions (the ‘dreams of others’) on people, the rules have to be *general*, and only a government that is ‘not concerned with moral right and wrong’, ‘indifferent to <truth> and <error> alike’ on the part of its subjects, is well suited to the task (Oakeshott 1991: 428-30).

Now, Oakeshott observes that some conservatives may want to *defend* their view of the proper nature of government ‘by appealing to certain general ideas’. He on his part does not think that a disposition to be conservative in politics is ‘necessarily connected with any particular beliefs about the universe, about the world in general or about human conduct in general’, and has ‘nothing to do with a natural law’, for example (Oakeshott 1991: 423).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, if a man of this disposition is asked the question: Why ought governments to conduct themselves in a ‘conservative’ manner, and limit their activities to the administration of what is, for all practical purposes, the *rule of law*, Oakeshott thinks it entirely sufficient for him to say: ‘Why not?’ (Oakeshott 1991: 427)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Oakeshott’s intransigence concerning the role of ideology in politics is splendidly illustrated by the following anecdote: John Kekes, the Hungarian-born American political philosopher approached Michael Oakeshott on an occasion, and asked him what an American conservative should do, given the perhaps limited availability of the ‘intimations of tradition’ in his country, at least as compared to Professor Oakeshott’s. And the great thinker’s answer was: ‘That’s your problem.’

<sup>4</sup> Consequently, ‘there is more to learn about this disposition from Montaigne, Pascal, Hobbes and Hume than from Burke or Bentham’ (Oakeshott 1991: 435).

<sup>5</sup> This would seem a good example of what Paul Franco, concluding his monography, somewhat euphemistically refers to as Oakeshott remaining ‘too sketchy and laconic on important issues’ (Franco 1990: 236).

As we have seen, there were others who considered it ‘commonly sufficient for practical purposes if conservatives, without saying anything, just sit and think.’ But then again, there were some who did not. Or, rather, rejected the label – all the while exposing many of the same ideas.

### **F. A. Hayek and the ‘ideology of freedom’**

In his famous essay, ‘Why I Am Not a Conservative’, F. A. Hayek gives his reasons not only for that, but – perhaps somewhat less famously, but none the less forcefully – voices his ‘increasing misgivings’ with regards to describing himself as a ‘liberal’, too.<sup>6</sup> It is necessary to recognize, he writes, that what he means by ‘liberalism’ – and takes to be his own position – ‘has little to do with any political movement that goes under that name today’. Those political movements have ‘absorbed the crude and militant rationalism of the French revolution’, and are led ‘more by a desire to impose upon the world a preconceived rational pattern than to provide opportunity for free growth’.

Hayek’s kind of ‘true’ liberalism, on the other hand, ‘shares with conservatism a distrust of reason’, and recognizes its debt to conservative thinkers’ ‘loving and reverential study of the value of grown institutions’ (Hayek 1984*d*).

Indeed, Hayek builds his ideas on much the same epistemological ground as Oakeshott. His main enemy is also ‘rationalism’, the origins of which he also traces back to the works of Descartes and Bacon. The problem with rationalistic plans of reform is that they jeopardize the ‘spontaneous order’ of ‘grown’ (and not planned) social institutions, which rely on dispersed, tacit (practical) knowledge for their proper functioning. Hayek first took note of the importance of this kind of knowledge while studying the economy and the free market, but later he generalized his observations, and applied them to the law, morals and language.

As the rejection of political rationalism is, as we have already noted, one of the basic tenets of conservatism, it is not surprising that Hayek felt the need to defend himself against charges of being a conservative. His defence, however, is made rather less convincing by the frequent citation of Edmund Burke as the kind of ‘liberal’ Hayek considers himself as being, settling in the end on a term – ‘Old Whig’ – of a somewhat limited contemporary usefulness in his search for an appropriate label for his political beliefs.

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<sup>6</sup> For those who would, on the grounds of his self-definition, protest including Hayek in a survey of conservative thought, along with the arguments presented in this chapter, we recommend considering that during a visit to the Conservative party’s research department in the 1970’s Margaret Thatcher reportedly slammed a copy of Hayek’s *The Constitution of Liberty* on the table, and declared: ‘This is what we believe’ (Cassidy 2000).

Now, Hayek, of course didn't consider Burke a proper conservative (neither did Oakeshott, by the way, as we have seen). According to Hayek 'conservatism proper is a legitimate, probably necessary, and certainly widespread attitude of opposition to drastic change' – something not unlike Oakeshott's conservative 'disposition'. The problem for Hayek with this kind of conservatism is that

'by its very nature it cannot offer an alternative to the direction in which we are moving. It may succeed by its resistance to current tendencies in slowing down undesirable developments, but, since it does not indicate another direction, it cannot prevent their continuance. [...] The tug of war between conservatives and progressives can only affect the speed, not the direction, of contemporary developments. But, though there is a need for a 'brake on the vehicle of progress', I personally cannot be content with simply helping to apply the brake' (Hayek 1984*d*: 281-2).

Conservatism, 'by its distrust of theory and its lack of imagination concerning anything except that which experience has already proved, [...] deprives itself of the weapons needed in the struggle of ideas.'

As Hayek didn't think it would be enough for him to 'sit and think', he set out to arm himself with an 'ideology of freedom.'

Oakeshott, alas, in all this saw another victory of rationalism.

'While formerly it was tacitly resisted and retarded by, for example, the informality of English politics [...], that resistance has now itself been converted into an ideology. This is, perhaps, the main significance of Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* – not the cogency of his doctrine, but the fact that it is a doctrine. A plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics. And only in a society already deeply infected with Rationalism will the conversion of the traditional resources of resistance to the tyranny of Rationalism into a self-conscious ideology be considered a strengthening of those resources.' (Oakeshott, 1991: 26-7)<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes it is indeed very hard not to pronounce Hayek guilty of the sin of 'constructivist rationalism' that he so eloquently criticizes elsewhere. For example, at the end of his *magnum opus* *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, he proposes his own 'model constitution', at the centre of which we find a legislative body with its members elected for 15 years by the 45-year old members of society, from their own ranks (to better ensure competence and independence).

But Hayek, by all means, was quite aware of the perils of his enterprise. He prefaces his 'model constitution' with a quote from *Hume* – from whom, remember, Oakeshott suggests we may learn more about the conservative disposition than from Burke, or, we might suppose, Hayek –, who also closed his *Essays* with *The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth*.

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<sup>7</sup> Supplementing Oakeshott's opinion of Hayek, his remark about the post-War years: 'There were a lot of Viennese comedians around Cambridge those days' (Minogue 1993: 96). Although he might have meant Wittgenstein.

'In all cases it must be advantageous to know what is the most perfect in the kind, that we may be able to bring any real constitution or form of government as near as it is possible, by such gentle alterations and innovations as may not give too great a disturbance to society' (quoted in Hayek 1984a: 382).

We might get closer to understanding Hayek's programme, if we inspect in a bit more detail his thinking in relation to Hume. In his essay *The legal and political philosophy of David Hume (1711-1776)* Hayek quotes with eminent agreement S. S. Wolin, who wrote about Hume that he 'turned against the enlightenment its own weapons', when he undertook 'to whittle down the claims of reason by the use of rational analysis'. According to Hayek, Hume, building on his sceptical theory of knowledge, which recognized the 'narrow bounds of human understanding', produced a theory of the growth of human institutions, the anti-rationalist nature of which is reflected in Hayek's favourite Hume quotation: 'the rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason'. As for the potential ideological use of his theories (such as proposing a model constitution), Hayek observes:

'The transition from explanation to ideal does not, however, involve him in any illegitimate confusion of explanation and recommendation. Nobody was more critical of, or explicit about the impossibility of, a logical transition from the *is* to the *ought*' (Hayek 1991: 107-8).

Hayek's stated purpose with his 'model constitution' is 'not to propose a constitutional scheme for present application'. He emphatically does 'not wish to suggest that any country with a firmly established constitutional tradition should replace its constitution by a new one drawn up on the lines suggested.' He even recognizes the importance of 'the background of traditions and beliefs' which make constitutions work in these countries – as the constitutions themselves do not explicitly state all that they presuppose (or sometimes do not even exist in written form).

But, as Hayek notes, 'very few countries in the world are in the fortunate position of possessing a strong constitutional tradition.' So, besides giving the ideas discussed in the preceding parts of his book 'a more definite shape', by outlining a model constitution embodying them, he also would like to help new democracies (and also, new supra-national institutions), which do not have the privilege of relying on the 'intimations of tradition' (Hayek 1984a: 384-5).

Not that Hayek – as we have just seen – would necessarily dismiss those 'intimations.' In fact, quite the opposite is the case. On many occasions, he makes it clear that the 'ideology' that he champions is closely linked to tradition. In an essay devoted to the importance of general principles in politics, he writes that those principles 'have never been fully articulated in constitutional documents', and have, in fact, usually been only 'vaguely and dimly perceived.' What's more, later he states:

‘This is not to say that these ‘principles’ must necessarily take the form of articulated rules. Principles are often more effective guides for action when they appear as no more than an unreasoned prejudice, a general feeling that certain things ‘are not done’; while as soon as they are explicitly stated speculation begins about their correctness and their validity.’

On the other hand:

‘Once the instinctive certainty is lost, perhaps as a result of unsuccessful attempts to put into words principles that had been observed ‘intuitively’, there is no way of regaining such guidance other than to search for a correct statement of what before was known implicitly’ (Hayek 1984c: 304-5).

Though undoubtedly Hayek strived for a ‘doctrine’, it was ‘the doctrine which is at the basis of the common tradition of the Anglo-Saxon countries’ (Hayek 1984d: 293).

In addition, the principles proposed by Hayek are, not just in origin, but in substance as well, not at all unlike those that Oakeshott hinted at being comfortable with. Among them Hayek gives pride of place to the *rule of law*, which he conceptualizes in much the same way as Oakeshott: as limited government by general principles instead of specific commands. In fact, providing a framework for this kind of government is the explicit goal of his ‘model constitution’, with the admittedly strange arrangements made for exercising the legislative function being intended as a safeguard against the usurpation of that function by more results-oriented political actors.

So, it’s not in the least bit surprising that some would write of Hayek as a conservative (Gray 1993), or, for that matter, of Oakeshott as liberal (Gray 1993, Franco 2000). And it’s hard not to feel sometimes that Oakeshott’s complaint about liberals – that they don’t always seem to know who their real friends are – is true of his relationship to Hayek just as well.

### **Irving Kristol, Leo Strauss and the ‘crisis of modernity’**

Irving Kristol, the founding father of American neoconservatism,<sup>8</sup> opens his 1995 essay, ‘America’s ‘Exceptional’ Conservatism,’ recalling the day in 1956 when arriving at his office at the *Encounter* magazine in London he found on his desk an unsolicited manuscript from Michael Oakeshott. (‘This, I thought, is the way every editor’s day should begin.’) He proceeded to read the essay, called ‘On Being Conservative’, with ‘pleasure and appreciation’. (‘It was

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term ‘neoconservatism’ in two, not entirely distinct senses. My excuse is that the term *is* used, in scholarly literature as well as in political discourse, in both senses. In the first, more comprehensive sense it refers to late 20<sup>th</sup> century varieties of conservatism generally (‘new’ conservatisms, e.g. Thatcherism); in the second, narrower one to the specifically American version established by Mr. Kristol and his associates in the 1960’s and 70’s.

beautifully written, subtle in its argument, delicate in its perceptions, and full of sentences and paragraphs that merit the attention of anthologists for decades, perhaps even centuries, to come.’) Then he rejected it.

By way of explanation Kristol proposes that while admiring the essay, he didn’t really like it. That is, he disagreed with it. The reason was that, by his own account, he was ‘in the earliest stages of intellectual pregnancy with those attitudes and dispositions that later emerged as ‘neoconservatism.’ And American neoconservatism is very different from the kind of ideal English conservatism that Oakeshott was celebrating so brilliantly’ (Kristol 1995: 375-6).

The reason why Kristol thinks ‘Oakeshott’s conservative disposition runs squarely against the American grain’ is the kind of ‘ideological patriotism’ inherent in the American character; a consequence of the widely noted fact that the United States is a ‘creedal nation’, united, as a nation of immigrants, by a ‘civic religion.’ All this explains, according to Kristol that when he, this time as an editor at Basic Books, eventually published Oakeshott’s *Rationalism in Politics* in the United States it sold a measly 600 copies.

Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom*, on the other hand, proved a huge publishing success in America, selling 600.000 copies (at one point even making it into *Readers’ Digest*<sup>9</sup>). Kristol in the same essay traces back the roots of post-World War II American conservatism to that publishing event,<sup>10</sup> the importance of which he sees not primarily in converting people from ‘statism’ to ‘antistatism’, but in intellectually *mobilizing* people who were already antistatist and pro-free market, and making their views more respectable. Though confessing to never having read *The Road to Serfdom*, he expresses his admiration of Hayek’s later writings concerning intellectual history and political philosophy (Kristol 1995: 378).<sup>11</sup>

By Kristol’s famous definition a neoconservative is ‘a liberal who has been mugged by reality’ (*ad notam*: a conservative is a liberal who has been mugged). Like Hayek, neoconservatives (many of them one time liberals or radicals) were deeply unsatisfied with contemporary turns of American liberalism, so, like Hayek, they took to reclaiming ‘the traditional principles of liberalism from the leftists who had hijacked and corrupted it’ (Podhoretz 1996).

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<sup>9</sup> This, one hardly needs to add, says nothing about the intellectual qualities of the two books (Cassidy, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> So does George H. Nash in his *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America* (Nash 1976: 4).

<sup>11</sup> Another prominent neoconservative, Michael Novak in his *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* cites Hayek’s ‘Why I Am Not a Conservative’ when wanting to identify the intellectual tradition he would like to defend.

But, in fact neoconservatives went further than the Hayekian project of resurrecting classical liberalism. In his 'Autobiographical Memoir' Kristol mentions Leo Strauss as one of only two thinkers who had the greatest effect on his intellectual formation (the other was Lionel Trilling).<sup>12</sup> Strauss, who had emigrated from Nazi Germany to America, saw as the central problem of his time the 'crisis of modernity'. This meant primarily the loss of faith on the part of the West in its own moral ideals, which loss manifested itself in a lack of political resolve (or in Machiavelli's famous term '*virtu*') and a consequent unreadiness to act in defence of those ideals. 'Once we realize that the principles of our actions have no other support than our blind choice, we really do not believe in them any more. We cannot wholeheartedly act upon them any more', writes Strauss in the Introduction to his *Natural Right and History* (Strauss 1953: 6).

Strauss thought that this crisis was, so to speak, encoded in the DNA of modernity, and he traced it back to the liberalism of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, and their break with the ancient tradition of political philosophy.

For Hobbes obviously starts, not, as the great tradition did, from natural 'law', i.e. from an objective order, but from natural 'right', i.e. from an absolutely justified subjective claim which, far from being dependent on any previous law, order, or obligation, is itself the origin of all law, order, or obligation (Strauss 1952: VIII.).

But, by giving up on natural law, the moderns gave up on political philosophy (defined as the search for *truth* in matters of politics) as well, substituting it with a 'value-neutral' social science built on the Weberian distinction between 'fact' and 'value'. This, according to Strauss, inexorably leads to nihilism, indeed 'it is identical with nihilism' (Strauss 1953: 6).

The only cure could be found in the writings of the 'ancients', Plato and Aristotle, and in their ideas about 'classical natural right' (or, rather, natural law) and the proper place of philosophy in the life of the community.

Strauss wrote in a letter that he really believed 'that the perfect political order, as Plato and Aristotle sketched it, *is* the perfect political order'. However, he also agreed with the ancients on the chance realization of this perfect political order. So, in another place he wrote that 'liberal or constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demanded than any other alternative that is viable in our age' (quoted in Deutsch and Soffer, 1987: 8).

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<sup>12</sup> The Straussian connection to neoconservatism has been much in focus recently. Articles e.g. in *The New York Times* and *The Economist*, though sometimes with debatable conclusions, nevertheless quite clearly documented the intellectual and personal influences linking Strauss, his disciples and some of today's leading neoconservative figures (Atlas 2003; *The Economist* 2003; see also: Heer 2003).

So, by all probabilities, and contrary to much what is said today about Strauss and his followers, their aim really has been the preservation of liberal democracy, as it is practiced, first of all, in the United States, and which they regard roughly as their hero, Churchill did: the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time. But they do have some reservations about the tenacity of liberal democracy. They think it is, by its very nature, vulnerable in a confrontation with despotism, lacking the moral basis for making the necessary sacrifices which are needed to persevere in such a confrontation.<sup>13</sup>

So for them, an Oakeshottian-Hayekian 'rule of law' government, which is 'not concerned with moral right and wrong', 'indifferent to <truth> and <error> alike' and has 'nothing to do with natural law,' emphatically wouldn't suffice. For Straussians, as we have seen, government has *everything* to do with natural law.<sup>14</sup>

The Straussians, of course, are not alone in having serious reservations about liberal democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville's contemporary, Benjamin Constant had basically the same insight about the difference between the liberty of the ancients and the moderns. For the former, liberty meant a right to participate in the matters of the community, often bought by paying the price of personal sacrifice; for the latter, a right to an undisturbed private sphere. Modern bourgeois societies would much rather make love, or at least commerce, than war. But sometimes, in the face of tyranny, making war is what is called for.

Indeed, the great animating passion of neoconservatives in the 1970's was their implacable anti-communism. Norman Podhoretz writes, paraphrasing George Will, who noted about bankers during the Polish crisis that they evidently loved commerce more than they loathed communism: neoconservatives did not love anything more than they loathed communism (Podhoretz 1996).

It was in the realm of foreign policy where neoconservatives made their most determined stand in the 1970's and 80's, and they have remained (or, rather, have reemerged as) the most influential.

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<sup>13</sup> One of the favourite texts of neoconservatives is Thucydides' Peloponnesian War. That war, of course, was lost by Athens, and won by Sparta.

<sup>14</sup> Libertarian critics of the neoconservatives had a point when they recently wrote that 'merely living in a free society appears to be insufficient for neo-conservatives' (Crane and Niskanen 2003).

### Jeane Kirkpatrick and the ‘rationalist perversion of politics’

Just as Friedrich Hayek dissociated his ideas from both conservatism and what he considered a flawed kind of liberalism, neoconservative foreign policy intellectuals waged a two-front war against traditional conservative ‘realist’ foreign policy – as personified by Henry Kissinger and practiced by the Nixon and Ford administrations – on the one hand, and the liberal ‘idealism’ of the Carter presidency.

Against the second, they deployed some thoroughly Oakeshottian arguments (although sometimes in the guise of Burkeanism). Perhaps the most prominent neoconservative foreign policy intellectual of the era, Reagan adviser Jeane Kirkpatrick, in the Introduction to her book of collected essays, *Dictatorships and Double Standards*, names ‘the rationalist perversion in modern politics’ as the source of much that is wrong with the world (recent events in Iran and Nicaragua, among other things).

The essence of rationalism, as Kirkpatrick understands it, is the ‘failure to distinguish between the domains of thought and experience,’ that is between ‘ideas and institutions’. ‘Rationalism encourages us to believe that anything that can be conceived can be brought into being.’ Rationalist theories ‘begin not from how things are but how they ought to be,’ and consist ‘in the determined effort to understand and shape people and societies on the basis of inadequate, oversimplified theories of human behaviour.’ It is ‘concerned more with the abstract than the concrete, with the possible than the probable,’ and less ‘with people as they are than as they might be’ (Kirkpatrick 1982: 10-1).

Kirkpatrick blames the ‘rationalist spirit of the age’ for viewing ‘each situation as a *tabula rasa* on which a plan can be imposed’, and taking no note of the fact that

‘institutions are patterned human behaviour that exist and function through the people of society, and that radically changing institutions means radically changing the lives of people who may not want their lives changed. [...] When we forget, or wilfully choose to ignore, the intractability of human behavior, the complexity of human institutions, and the probability of unanticipated consequences, we do so at great risk, and often immense human cost’ (Kirkpatrick 1982: 17-8).

In 1981 a speech delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations, entitled ‘Ideas and Institutions’, Kirkpatrick supplemented the above with a lengthy quote from Burke’s *Reflections*, and expressed her belief that

‘we have had enough rationalism in our foreign policy’ and recommended instead taking ‘the cure of history’ which is ‘nothing more or less than the cure of reality’ (Kirkpatrick 1983: 44).

But neoconservatives were no fans of foreign policy realism in the Kissingerian mould, either.

Their main problem with realism was its ideological indifference. According to this school of thought, in foreign policy there is no place for morality. The only thing that counts is the geopolitical balance of powers. Injecting notions about the moral superiority of one of the participants into the international system only brings instability.

Neoconservatives long argued that when confronting the Soviet Union, ideology was paramount. It was so on the part of the Soviets, who probably didn't consider themselves representatives of a 'normal' nation state, 'seeking its place under the sun.' But it was still more important on the part of the United States.

As Jeane Kirkpatrick wrote: 'the notion that foreign policy should be oriented toward balance of power politics, or *realpolitik*, is totally foreign to the American tradition.' Governments must act from an ideal of their societies, especially in democracies, where moral legitimacy is a persistent question in politics. Irving Kristol, similarly, insisted that 'pure amoral *Realpolitik* is no part of the American political tradition,' and warned against the nation sacrificing its moral foundations and thus 'casting a pall of illegitimacy' over its ideals. Norman Podhoretz said that realism 'robbed the Soviet-American conflict of the moral and political dimensions', thus jeopardizing Americans' will to make the necessary sacrifices to pursue the Cold War effectively (quoted in Hoeverler 1991: 152-71).

In a speech entitled 'The Reagan Reassertion of Western Values' Kirkpatrick warned that

'it is not only conceivable that an affluent and technologically advanced democratic civilization may succumb to one that is distinctly inferior in the wealth and well-being of its people. This has occurred more than once in history. The decisive factor in the rise and fall of nations is what Machiavelli called *virtu*, meaning vitality and a capacity for collective action. In the battle with totalitarianism, a free society has enormous advantages of which we are all well aware. But without the political will not merely to survive but to prevail, these advantages count for nought' (Kirkpatrick 1983: 31).

And in another, 'The Reagan Phenomenon and the Liberal Tradition', after noting that the presence of intellectuals at relatively high policy-making positions in the Reagan administration (Kirkpatrick was a professor of political science before signing on as President Reagan's UN envoy) signals that 'there is something ideologically self-conscious going on' in American politics, she stated that 'the president and many of his principal advisers see themselves as purveyors and defenders of the classical liberal tradition' (Kirkpatrick 1983: 7).

### William Kristol, Robert Kagan and the ‘laying of the foundations’

The successes of the Reagan years however – especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ‘evil empire’ – gave way in the 1990’s to what the neo-conservatives saw as the complacency of the first Bush and the Clinton presidencies. In a *Foreign Affairs* article published in 1996, William Kristol and Robert Kagan – representatives of a new generation of neoconservatives – find the foreign policy climate of the times reminiscent of the mid-1970’s (the period of the first great neoconservative awakening). Conservatives are, once again, ‘adrift’, leaning uncertainly ‘on some version of the conservative <realism> of Henry Kissinger and his disciples.’ Meanwhile, the American public is ‘indifferent, if not hostile, to foreign policy and commitments abroad, more interested in balancing the budget than in leading the world.’

What one might call (after its first and most trenchant diagnostician) the Tocquevillean disease of modern democratic societies – turning away from public affairs in favour of the pursuit of one’s and one’s family’s happiness, that is material well-being – is ready to reassert itself. Americans ‘have never had it so good’, the authors observe (mentioning as proof, among other things, ‘the security of Americans not only to live within their own borders but to travel and do business safely almost anywhere in the world.’) The lack of visible threats ‘has tempted Americans to absentmindedly dismantle the material *and spiritual*<sup>15</sup> foundations on which their national well-being has been based.’ As Kristol and Kagan see it, the post-Cold War question of ‘where is the threat?’ is misconceived. ‘In a world in which peace and American security depend on American power *and the will to use it*, the main threat the United States faces now and in the future is its own weakness.’

So, what America needs, once again, is a ‘neo-Reaganite foreign policy of military supremacy *and moral confidence*,’ which would actively engage in promoting American principles of governance – democracy, free markets, respect for liberty – abroad and also in pursuing policies intended to bring about ‘change of regime’ (in Iran, Cuba or China, for example). This ‘more elevated vision’ of America’s international role would consist in a ‘benevolent global hegemony’ resting on the ‘strategic *and ideological* predominance’ of the United States. Kristol and Kagan even challenge the famous admonition of John Quincy Adams against America going abroad ‘in search of monsters to destroy’ with the words: ‘But why not?’

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<sup>15</sup> The italics from now on are added to highlight the continuous presence of the ideological dimension in neoconservative foreign policy thinking.

The last but one part of Kristol and Kagan's article bears the subtitle: 'From NSC-68 to 1996.' As the authors inform us, NSC-68 was a national security planning document drafted in 1950 by, among others, Paul Nitze, which called for an all-out effort to meet the Soviet challenge, and called for a full scale ideological confrontation and massive increases in defence spending. Now, what is eminently interesting from the authors' point of view regarding NSC-68 is that at first, against a backdrop of an American public enjoying peace and prosperity, it languished. Then the North Korean invasion of South Korea changed that. The moral of the story, according to the authors, is that

'as troubles arise and the need to act becomes clear, those who have laid the foundations for a necessary shift in policy have a chance to lead Americans onto a new course' (Kristol and Kagan 1996).

Michael Oakeshott, on the other hand, calls the approach in which 'arrangements of a society are made to appear, not as manners of behaviour, but as pieces of machinery to be transported about the world indiscriminately,' 'one of the most insidious current misunderstandings of political activity' (Oakeshott 1991: 130).

## Conclusion

Oakeshott, in his famous metaphor, described politics this way:

'In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make friend of every hostile occasion' (Oakeshott 1991: 127).

The Straussians would obviously contest this reduction (as they would see it) of politics to a 'traditional manner of behaviour'. After Plato, they would say that the 'ship of state' is best guided by the philosopher, relying on the resources of *reason*, not tradition.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The aims of the Straussians in this respect are well illustrated by the title of this selection of Strauss' essays: *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*. They wouldn't necessarily disagree with the part concerning the sea being boundless and bottomless, though. As Robert Devigne observes, according to the Straussians 'a lack of belief in truth is not theoretically wrong,' it only 'creates dangerous political conditions' (Devigne 1994: 193). What they would probably strongly object to is letting the crew in on the bottomlessness and boundlessness of the sea – unlike the philosophers, the people can't handle the truth (or lack thereof) very well. Given Strauss' well-known preference for the 'esoteric' mode of writing, it always carries a certain amount of risk to venture into unravelling Straussian doctrine. Nevertheless, if one takes Plato as seriously as, by all indications, Straussians do, one can't discount the use of the Platonian 'noble lie' as a legitimate tool of politics. Irving Kristol once wrote about a

Among the ‘extremes’ of opinion represented by Oakeshott and the Straussians, Edmund Burke seems to be occupying a middle ground – as it is to be expected from a practicing politician. Concluding his *Reflections*, he recommends his opinions in the following manner:

‘They come from one [...] who wishes to preserve consistency; but who would preserve consistency by varying his means to secure the unity of his end; and, when the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails may be endangered by overloading it upon one side, is desirous of carrying the small weight of his reasons to that which may preserve its equipoise’ (Burke 1999: 365).

Indeed, Burke seems to function as a kind of litmus test for the varieties of modern conservatism. As we have seen, he was too ideological for Oakeshott, while being, at the same time, too ‘parochial’ for Strauss.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, he was just about right for Hayek. He wasn’t shy of applying reason, as one of a variety of means, but only as a counterweight, in the service of the ultimate end of keeping the vessel in which we sail ‘afloat on an even keel’.

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foreign policy crisis: ‘The reason we gave for the intervention [...] was phony but the reaction of the American people was absolutely and overwhelmingly favorable. They had no idea what was going on, but they backed the president. They always will,’ provided he ‘wraps himself in the American flag’ and lets his adversaries wrap themselves ‘in the white flag of surrender.’ Alas, this particular intervention took place in Grenada in 1983 (quoted by Devigne 1994: 186).

<sup>17</sup> According to Kristol, Strauss ‘felt that Burke’s emphasis on <prescription> as the basis of social order was too parochially British, and too vulnerable to the modern insistence that we should, in the words of Tom Paine (echoed by Jefferson), ‘let the dead bury the dead’ (Kristol 1995: 9).

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## RESÜMEE

**Zurück zur Ideologie des Konservatismus:  
der Neokonservatismus**

TIBOR MÁNDI

Ausgangspunkt der Studie ist der vielzitierte Artikel von Samuel Huntington aus dem Jahre 1957 mit dem Titel *Conservatism as an Ideology*. Er beschreibt den Konservatismus in diesem Artikel als eine Art positionierte Ideologie, deren Inhalt sich flexibel an die Herausforderungen der gegebenen historischen Epoche anpaßt, jedoch eines nur für ihn charakteristischen substantivischen Kerns ermangelt. Ziel der Studie ist die Darstellung dessen, wie sich der traditionelle anglo-amerikanische Konservatismus im Laufe der vergangenen Jahrzehnte aus einer Antiideologie mit den von Huntington beschriebenen Merkmalen in den „Neokonservatismus“ mit starken ideologischen Zügen umgestaltet hat. Der erste Teil der Studie ruft die Tätigkeit von Michael Oakeshott, dem paradigmatischen Denker des theoriefeindlichen, traditionsgebundenen Konservatismus in Erinnerung, mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die von der Rationalismus-Kritik des Autors gespielte Rolle in der Verwerfung des ideologischen Politisierens. Das nächste Kapitel stellt dar, wie sich im Denken von Friedrich Hayek die der Oakeshottschen Kritik sehr ähnliche Kritik des Rationalismus mit der Anforderung der Erarbeitung der „Ideologie der Freiheit“ verknüpft (welche Ideologie die größtenteils auch von Michael Oakeshott akzeptierten Züge des klassischen Liberalismus aufweist). Am Ende der Studie, zum Abschluß des ideengeschichtlichen Überblicks wird untersucht, wie die von der politischen Philosophie von Leo Strauss befruchtete Liberalismus- und Modernitätskritik der amerikanischen neokonservativen Autoren zur entschlossenen Bejahung der ideologischen politischen Auftritts führt. Die letzten zwei Kapitel stellen die Wirkung der neokonservativen Ideologie auf den theoretischen Hintergrund der amerikanischen Außenpolitik dar, wozu die Texte von Jeane Kirkpatrick aus den 1980-er Jahren, bzw. von William Kristol und Robert Kagan aus den 1990-er Jahren herangezogen werden. Dementsprechend ist das Ziel der vorliegenden Studie nicht die Aufdeckung des ideologischen Hintergrundes der amerikanischen Außenpolitik, sondern sie will lediglich – wie dies im Titel des letzten Kapitels angedeutet ist – durch das kurze Aufzeichnen der „Grundsteinlegung“ zu einem besseren Verständnis dieses Hintergrundes beitragen.

