

## ANTI-HISTORICISM

Perhaps the best example of paradox and lack of philosophical acumen in the American conservative movement is that, partly through the mediation of William Buckley, the movement became widely associated with Straussian anti-historicism and a correspondingly abstract notion of higher values. When it comes to addressing questions of moral universality and right, Strauss asserted, history and tradition lack all authority. The paradox here is that students of modern conservatism in the Western world had long regarded Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century British thinker-statesman, who was in some respects a forerunner of Hegel, as a key figure and as perhaps the most representative conservative thinker—even as the *father* of modern conservatism. And why had he been so regarded? Because Burke saw the close connection between attaining virtue, wisdom, and knowledge and learning from history. He believed in conserving the best of the human heritage, what he called “the bank and capital of nations and of ages,” not as an *alternative* to pursuing higher values but, on the contrary, as an indispensable guide to those values. The individual is morally and intellectually weak, but the species is wise. Burke had an acute awareness that the past has shaped and moves in the present. Concrete instances of well-being now enjoyed

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owe greatly to the efforts of ancestors. Tradition at its best does not offer final answers but attunes human beings to goodness, truth, and beauty—to divine providence. The transcendent reveals itself as, guided by history, humanity struggles to articulate it afresh. For Strauss, by contrast, Burke’s “historicism” represents a threat to moral universality, what Strauss calls “natural right.” This historicism is, Strauss contends, a greater danger than the ideas of the French Jacobins, whose conception of universal human rights are at least appropriately ahistorical, abstract. According to Strauss, what is ultimately normative in human affairs can be discerned only by abstract rationality, while Burke’s defense of the historical consciousness amounts to relativism or nihilism. This is historicism and must be flatly *rejected*. Strauss’s view of Burke and historical consciousness betrays a pronounced reductionism. Strauss never contemplates that historical thinking might have a form entirely different from what he rejects. He seems psychologically resistant to consider the possibility. But, surely, the experience and achievements of the human race are a rich source of guidance for intellectually limited and otherwise flawed individuals. It is revealing that so many self-described American intellectual conservatives should have adopted moral rationalism and turned anti-historicism, previously associated in the Western world with radicals and revolutionaries, into an ideological staple.

Undermining respect for historical experience and advancing a purely abstract notion of universality was no marginal philosophical move. It was a stratagem with far-reaching ramifications. The implied view of human nature, society, and right was hard to reconcile, for example, with the old belief of mainstream Christianity that tradition is an essential support for religious life and thought and with its central idea that the Word was historically incarnated. The latter belief flatly contradicts the notion that moral right can have nothing to do with history. It has been a striking and curiously incongruous element of movement conservatism that numerous Christian movement conservatives, especially Roman Catholics, adopted Straussian anti-traditionalism and moral rationalism. That they could be so easily won over to a view

sharply at odds with their supposed religious beliefs suggests a lack of elementary philosophical discernment. Strauss and his disciples may have intuited that in this quarter vague notions of natural law together with philosophical innocence would ease acceptance of his notion of natural right. A group that might otherwise have been the most likely to enroll in the defense of tradition would instead, unknowingly, set out to undermine it.

The anti-historicist prejudice against learning from history and the preference to be guided by purely abstract ideas also runs counter to the American constitutional temperament. The latter is reflected, for example, in Madison's view that the setting up of government is better informed by experience than by theorists "in their closets." One of the reasons why Edmund Burke was sympathetic to the American colonists in their resistance to the British government was that they were complaining of violations of long-standing traditions, including "the rights of Englishmen." Their thought, practice, and general sense of direction evinced continuity with classical, Christian, and British traditions. The framers built original features into the Constitution, but in essential respects it implied and extended the way of thinking about life and politics that the colonists had brought to America and adapted to their circumstances. The framers of the Constitution assumed and hoped that the culture and personality traits that had generated constitutionalism in the first place would continue to shape the American people and its leaders. Their constitutionalism grew out of and depended for its survival on the habits of moral virtue and responsibility that these traditions had fostered. These habits had to be carried forward. Followers of Strauss, by contrast, have argued, some with great intensity, that the founders deliberately *broke* with the past and constructed something new on the basis of abstract, ahistorical "principles." According to the late Harry Jaffa, to celebrate the American founding is to celebrate revolution. Jaffa's contrived, reductionistic view of the founding gained currency among young Americans who had little historical or philosophical education but who found in this ideology a language for expressing their

patriotism. One has to wonder if Jaffa's reinterpretation of America and the Constitution as based solely on abstract principles rather than on an old heritage did not express a nonphilosophical desire: to be able to think of America and the Constitution as not being creatures of WASP culture. If understood as based on ahistorical principles, the Constitution would appeal more to Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics and even to non-Christian recent arrivals in America. Jaffa's view of the American founding conflicts so much with the historical record that it is plausible to think that it serves a deep psychological need. It is as if Jaffa and theorists like him see America's actual past as a source of discomfort. Their anti-historicism might as well have been tailor-made to discourage Americans from studying and cherishing their historical origins.

The just-described abstractionist notion of "the founding" actually reinforced the old progressive view of the meaning of America, which was powerfully and persuasively challenged by Russell Kirk and other scholars before and after Jaffa and the Straussians. The ahistorical idea of the founding made it appear that the survival of the Constitution was a matter of Americans keeping certain ideas in their heads, which drew attention away from the more demanding task of nurturing the personal and cultural habits, most importantly the moral character, that had given rise to the spirit of constitutionalism in the first place. Looking back on the development of America since the adoption of the Constitution, it is possible to see that a failure to undertake this demanding work of transmission and revivification was bound to erode the accomplishments of the framers. The institutions they set up could not work as intended unless they were animated by people who embodied what I call the constitutional personality. Without people of that kind, the institutions would become mere plans on paper or would be put to nefarious purposes.

"A republic, if you can keep it," is how Benjamin Franklin is supposed to have described the new American form of government. To understand the actual origins of America's constitutional regime is the same as to recognize what is required for it to survive. Keeping it is not

a matter of course. Repeating certain “founding principles” could never substitute for the arduously acquired traits of the constitutional personality, including the moral character on which everything else depends. To champion the US Constitution without emphasizing its moral and cultural prerequisites is in effect to undermine it.

It can be argued that, in the final analysis, it was precisely a failure to satisfy the demanding preconditions of American constitutionalism that produced the decline of the American constitutional temperament and the deep constitutional crisis of today. Some Straussians might argue that nothing could have been further from their intention than to weaken the Constitution, but their abstractionist notion of its nature helped produce just that effect. To be a good American did not require respect for, familiarity with, and cultivation of the cultural heritage that made American constitutionalism possible. All that was needed was adherence to America as an “idea.”

Ahistoricist thinking regarding America helped prepare the way for the notion that, unlike other countries, America is not a historically evolved society with deep roots in a particular past. America is “exceptional.” It is founded on principles that make it a model for other countries. One leading Straussian, the late Allan Bloom, referred to “the American Project.” America’s principles are everywhere applicable, he asserted. World War II was “an educational project” fought to force those who did not accept American principles to do so. This view of America’s role, which receives much attention in this book, reinforced and ideologically garnished the already strong imperial impulse in the American foreign-policy establishment. Academic Straussianism here became indistinguishable from the more directly political ideological current known as “neoconservatism,” which gained political prominence in the 1980s. Most of the leading neoconservatives had once been on the hard left. They had now had “second thoughts,” but had a vision of the world transformed. They had global ambitions. What they desired for the world was a mixture of equality, democracy, and capitalism. Almost without anybody in the conservative movement

noticing, neoconservatism became the dominant public voice of the conservative movement—another instance of philosophical incongruity.

Like Straussianism, neoconservatism was not uniform, but its representatives had foreign-policy views of a markedly hawkish and imperial cast. No advanced knowledge of intellectual history was required to see that its philosophically rather crude ideological universalism was closely akin to the radicalism of eighteenth century French Jacobinism, a resemblance that is discussed in depth in this volume. It is appropriate to mention that it was the fondness of the Jacobins for “abstract,” ahistorical principles and their disdain for historically evolved beliefs and practices that scared Edmund Burke and inspired him to write his seminal *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in which he accurately predicted many of the events that would become known to history as the “Reign of Terror.”

The affinity of many self-described American conservatives for ahistorical theorizing, the virtual opposite of a historically informed and grounded view of life, exemplifies the sometimes glaring philosophical shortcomings and contradictions that will be taken up in these pages.

These preliminary observations regarding intellectual flaws are not meant to assert that Straussians and neoconservatives have made no salutary contributions to American conservatism. My emphasis has been on the basic assumptions that are most distinctive and characteristic of their thinking and that have been most detrimental to the intellectual development of the conservative movement. Straussians and neoconservatives have of course sometimes moved outside of those limiting assumptions and linked up with and contributed to more promising intellectual currents. In recent years, increasingly threatening social and political circumstances have also made ahistoricist ideology look more and more distant from historical reality. What is the relevance of formulaic notions of “the American founding” for facing the collapse of American institutions, the fragmenting of America, and precipitous cultural decline? These acute challenges have prompted many anti-historicists, especially of the so-called West Coast, Claremont variety,



to frame responses. Straussians appear to be pushing their old formulas to the side as incidental to pressing needs. It remains to be seen whether the confrontation with the real world will trigger a more than superficial reassessment of old assumptions. Ideologues tend to hang on to their most cherished illusions even after reality has called them into question. It would not be surprising if the abstractionist mindset that created the notion of American exceptionalism lingered and reconstituted itself, for example, as an unsound form of nationalism. Another more cheering possibility is that worsening historical circumstances will help dispel abstractionism and generate a new intellectual seriousness.

## THE NEED FOR INTELLECTUAL RENEWAL

Why give much attention to philosophically inferior and inauspicious ideas? One reason is that ideas of that kind can move entire societies and thus affect the course of history. I started to pay closer attention to Straussian anti-historicism and neoconservatism in the late 1970s because I expected their influence to grow, not because they had intellectual merit but because they appealed to and advanced powerful interests. What was curious, if not unexpected, was that, with very few exceptions, movement conservative intellectuals seemed oblivious to or unconcerned about what was happening. It seemed to me that to avert decline, stagnation, and worse, it would be necessary for conservatism to shake off the more dubious aspects of these intellectual currents. Yet something about the intellectual background of the movement conservatives made them strangely undiscerning—tolerant of, even receptive to, the mentioned ideas. It was this lack of awareness of danger that made me try to expose some obviously questionable ideological notions and to warn of their practical implications. A question that comes to the forefront in this book is why so many intellectual conservatives failed to notice or call out these ideas. One explanation is the previously mentioned bias in favor of politics narrowly conceived, which included the old Buckleyite