

LIBERALISM FOR A NEW CENTURY

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Liberalism and the Conservative Imagination

JENNIFER BURNS

Over half a century ago, liberals and conservatives skirmished on the pages of the nation's leading opinion magazines about the definition of the word *conservative*. More than mere semantics, the argument centered on what it meant to be conservative and who would determine the parameters of conservative identity. Now, revisiting that mid-twentieth-century debate promises to illuminate what it means to be liberal, for the conflict highlights core liberal values in the storied time of liberal dominance. In the 1950s, liberals welcomed conservative social values but frowned on the accompanying economic ideas. In place of the conservative emphasis on laissez-faire and business, they defended the ability of government action to ameliorate social problems and advanced a reasoned yet passionate conception of the common weal.

Since then, liberal reaction to conservatism has almost entirely reversed itself. Liberals now share some of conservatives' suspicion of the federal government. Many gladly embrace the "neoliberal" economic agenda of free trade, low taxes, and low regulation they found so troubling at midcentury. And they have become extremely reluctant to credit conservatives with wisdom or salience in the realm of cultural or religious values. Naturally, much has shifted in the United States during the past fifty-odd years, with the intervening years giving rise to a host of

moral concerns that were unimaginable before the 1960s. Still, it is worth revisiting the time when both liberals and conservatives articulated a robust set of nonmarket values. Conservatives, through their embrace of the free market, have weakened their hold on these ideals. Liberals, for a variety of reasons, have also let these values lapse into disuse. The time is ripe for liberals to rediscover and restate the beliefs and priorities that animated their first vigorous critique of conservatism. In so doing, they may be able to converse more easily with Americans who both sympathize with the conservative claim to uphold the nation's most cherished values and are receptive to liberal economic policies.

When self-conscious, articulate, and ambitious "new conservatives" first appeared in the postwar years, liberals greeted them as valuable contributors to political and social debate. Reviewing Peter Viereck's *Conservatism Revisited* (1949), the book that inaugurated a vogue for conservatism, Dwight Macdonald told readers of the *New Republic* that the work was "useful and clever" and wrote, "the defect of Viereck's book, curiously enough, is that it is not deeply conservative enough."¹ Similarly, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. praised Viereck's work in the *New York Times Book Review* as "a brilliant political essay."² Other titles of the New Conservative movement, such as Clinton Rossiter's *Conservatism in America* (1955) and Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953), also received a warm reception from liberal reviewers.³ A flood of articles appeared in liberal opinion magazines appraising and evaluating the New Conservatism. Although writers not infrequently criticized aspects of the "conservative revival," the overall reception was respectful and even welcoming.

Much of this endorsement was instrumental. Liberals had worried for years about their one-sided dominance of political discourse. In the introduction to *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), now remembered primarily for its gibe at conservative ideas, Lionel Trilling actually bemoaned the absence of conservative voices in America. He wrote, "It is not conducive to the real strength of liberalism that it should occupy the intellectual field alone."⁴ Trilling cited John Stuart Mill's engagement with Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a model that liberals should follow. Wrestling with the ideas of an opponent would only strengthen liberal thought, Trilling argued. Similar intentions were telegraphed by the title of a 1950 *New York Times* article by Schlesinger, "The Need for an Intelligent Opposition."⁵

This pragmatic endorsement aside, midcentury liberals also evinced genuine appreciation for conservative thought. After the wars, revolu-

tions, and disillusionments of the previous decades, temperance and prudence emerged as newly important virtues. Macdonald wrote in his review of Viereck, "In an age where technology is as dynamic and destructive as it is today, there is much virtue in one who simply *conserves*, who tries to slow down the machinery a bit."⁶ Similarly, Schlesinger defined conservatism as a "grand" British tradition and, reviewing a book about John C. Calhoun for the *Nation* in 1950, wrote, "A time of perplexity creates a need for somber and tragic interpretations of man. Thus we find Burke more satisfying today than Paine, Hamilton or Adams than Jefferson, Calhoun than Webster or Clay."⁷ These sentiments were also manifest among rank-and-file liberals less illustrious than Macdonald and Schlesinger. A writer in the *Bulletin of the Association of American University Professors* (AAUP) argued that "the conservative of today is the twentieth-century humanist," and hoped that the new conservative strength could usher in "an era of human dignity in which men could once more live as self-respecting individuals within a meaningful community of ordered values."⁸ This receptivity to conservatism's more pessimistic view of mankind came partly from the influence of neo-Orthodox theology. But the New Conservatism also meshed well with a liberal phase of self-criticism and introspection that had arisen in the postwar years, particularly after the midterm electoral defeats of 1946 and the presidential contest of 1952.

Moreover, liberals' position of cultural dominance meant that they could afford to be indulgent toward conservatism, which appeared as little more than a side curio that might spice up intellectual life. As conservatives would bitterly complain in the ensuing years, liberal discourse was marked by an unconscious assumption of enduring superiority. Schlesinger thought a revitalized conservative party would be desirable, and he generously allowed that it "might even win an election now and then."⁹ Liberals framed themselves as natural arbitrators of the good and the true, generously welcoming quaint, fuddy-duddy conservatives to the national conversation. That conservatives were not true contenders for intellectual leadership was made clear by the constant characterization of conservatism as a "mood" or "temper" rather than a true political philosophy.¹⁰

Liberals could appreciate conservatism as an intriguing yet utterly harmless mood because in the early 1950s, conservatism had yet to harden into a clearly defined ideology. During these years, the right was wracked with internecine conflict and could hardly claim to offer a coherent political program until it settled its internal disputes. Not until the

early 1960s would Frank Meyer's doctrine of fusion unify traditionalists, libertarians, and anticommunists under one banner. Before this settlement, even the definition of the word *conservative* was up for grabs.¹¹ Thus, what liberals praised as conservatism was, in reality, only one part of the larger coalition that would come to be known as American conservatism. In fact, liberal affection for traditionalist conservatism, as showcased by the praise of Viereck, Rossiter, and the other New Conservatives, was a conscious effort to elevate traditionalism over the libertarianism and crude anticommunism that also vied for the conservative label.

By the mid-1950s, perceptive liberals had begun to sense a genuine threat in the nascent marriage of libertarianism and traditionalism. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was the most prescient. As far back as 1950, he had noticed several variants of conservatism in circulation. Schlesinger was deeply suspicious of conservative receptivity to business, and he made the first effort to define "true" conservatism as distinct from the advocates of *laissez-faire*. He wrote, "Conservatism is not the private property of the National Association of Manufacturers. It is not a device for increasing the short-run security of business. It is rather a profound sense of national continuity, stretching deep into the past and forward into the future, and providing a protective membrane for all the people of society."¹² In Schlesinger's view, conservatism was an organic vision of society that valued reciprocal obligations, emphasized social and national responsibilities, and was entirely compatible with state-run welfare programs. Thus, economic individualists and dedicated opponents of the New Deal could not justly claim the label of conservative.

As different pieces of the future conservative coalition drew closer to one another, liberal criticism increased, and soon the very definition of the word *conservative* became hotly contested. Like Schlesinger, other liberals began to suspect they were being offered a kind of bait-and-switch ploy. Writing in 1953 in the *Western Political Quarterly*, Brandeis professor Gordon Lewis noted the many meanings of conservatism and commented, "The critic of the enterprise may perhaps be pardoned for suspecting that, when all the sound and fury are over, he is really being offered nothing much more than the defense of the present order of a self-satisfied and unimaginative American capitalism."¹³ Many liberals, unwilling to let conservatism be so easily redefined, mounted a valiant effort to distinguish true from false conservatism. Status still clung to the word *conservatism*, so making such an effort seemed worthwhile.

Perhaps the best example of this definitional struggle came in Clinton

Rossiter's *Conservatism in America*, which labored to separate false, lowercase "conservatism" from true, uppercase "Conservatism." To Rossiter, Conservatism was an honorable creed descended from Burke that "accepts and defends the institutions and values of the contemporary West." Rossiter styled himself as a Conservative following that definition. And he attacked false American conservatism as unworthy of the name, for this conservatism had committed the "chief intellectual sin" of embracing individualism and "economic Liberalism."¹⁴ Like Schlesinger and other liberals, Rossiter was comfortable with the social and cultural values typically attributed to conservatism but blanched at its economic agenda. By calling himself a Conservative, Rossiter hoped to carve out a political position that blended Burkean social values with American realities.

Rossiter's efforts touched off a virulent reaction among other claimants to the conservative moniker. Reviewing *Conservatism in America*, Gerhard Niemeyer wrote sarcastically, "It is once again fashionable to call oneself a conservative—provided, of course, one does not stray too far from the liberal fold." Niemeyer criticized Rossiter's imprecision in his definitions of conservatism, particularly his failure to understand that American conservatives were primarily concerned with the dangers of the federal bureaucracy. But even he was hesitant about laissez-faire, writing, "The alliance is accidental and should not obscure the profound differences between conservatism and laissez faire economism." Niemeyer himself was a conservative crusader for small government yet also a critic of capitalism—a seemingly impossible position, which existed for a brief moment during the ideological flux of the 1950s. Still, unlike liberals, Niemeyer did not find laissez-faire odious enough to sever his ties to movement conservatism.¹⁵

For liberals, perhaps the clearest danger signal came in 1955 with William F. Buckley's founding of *National Review*, a magazine that embodied both the emerging conservative fusion and the willingness of conservatives to stake their claim on the traditional terrain of liberals, the opinion magazine. The immediate negative reaction to *National Review* showed how deeply liberals rejected conservative economics, even while welcoming conservatism as a social or political philosophy. This gap was most obvious in the reaction of Dwight Macdonald. Though Macdonald had praised Viereck's traditional conservatism, he had nothing but derision for *National Review*'s blend of libertarianism, religious traditionalism, and anticommunism. He excoriated the magazine as "scrambled eggheads on the right," calling it amateurish, dull, long-winded, and

perverse. "Here are the ideas, here is the style of the *lumpen*-bourgeoisie, the half-educated, half-successful provincials . . . who responded to Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Senator McCarthy," Macdonald scorned. *National Review* was "pseudo-conservative" and advanced a "crude patchwork of special interests." He concluded, "We have long needed a good conservative magazine. . . . This is not it."¹⁶ By embracing free-market economics, traditionalist conservatives had lost the respect and influence once granted them by liberals.¹⁷

But with *National Review*, one faction of midcentury conservatives gained a powerful new way to assert their understanding of conservatism. In an intemperate 1956 *National Review* column, Yale political scientist Willmoore Kendall went on the offensive against the popular New Conservatives, dismissing them as "Trojan Horses" of liberalism. He criticized Peter Viereck for telling his audience "how to be conservative and yet agree with the Liberals about Everything," while writing that Rossiter "went Viereck one better: he could make you feel ashamed of yourself if you were *not* both conservative and Liberal."¹⁸ Kendall argued vigorously for a conservative position that was clearly distinct from liberalism. This conservatism would combine traditionalism and free-market economics; staunchly independent and proudly oppositional, it would have no need or desire for liberal praise. The battle was joined.

Much as Trilling had anticipated, the slow development of conservatism into an ideology, rather than a mood, forced liberals to articulate their own principles and beliefs. Of course, Trilling's idea sounded better in theory than practice, and there is little evidence that liberals welcomed the new strength of conservatism (rather than "New Conservatism") as salutary for its own sake. They wrote with utter seriousness against a dangerous and wily opponent. But in retrospect, like Trilling, we can be grateful for this moment of conflict, for it resulted in a clear paper trail of midcentury liberal values, principles, and beliefs. The residue of this conflict is somewhat dusty, and necessarily incomplete, but is a valuable resource nonetheless.

The liberal defense against conservatism sounded two main themes worth revisiting today: a belief in the efficacy of human effort to change society for the better and a stirring articulation of nonmarket values. The first theme dominated the early 1950s and responded as much to neo-Orthodox theology as to the New Conservatism. Sensitive to criticism that liberalism succumbed too easily to utopian visions of social planning, liberals defended a middle road that avoided both impractical idealism and complacent inaction. In a printed debate with Russell Kirk,

Schlesinger wrote, "It is preposterous to suppose that we cannot continue to improve the conditions of American life in sectors of weakness—and to argue this is not to argue that man or society is perfectible, only that degrees of happiness and security are important."¹⁹ In a similar vein, Temple University professor Gaylord Leroy admitted the past failings of liberalism but refused to relinquish liberal belief in human efficacy. In the AAUP bulletin, he wrote, "If the liberal was in error in telling us that man had a power he lacked, the conservative is guilty of much the same error when he tells us that man lacks certain powers he unquestionably has." Leroy criticized conservatives for indulging in sentiment and seeking to "escape the challenge to act by telling themselves that action is useless."²⁰

The responses of Schlesinger and Leroy limn a moderate position still worth defending. Liberals today could respond to the neoconservative critique of government programs with a similar commitment to the power of human effort. Indeed, the stubborn popularity of Social Security in the face of Republican assault indicates that Americans do appreciate the ability of the government to manage and ameliorate large-scale social problems, such as poverty among the aged. The Social Security debate also indicates that many Americans harbor a corresponding doubt about the reliability of the private sector when it comes to critical areas of social policy. Defending human agency and effort may be easier than many liberals assume. And the necessity of doing so has particular urgency in the current time of environmental crisis.

The more dominant theme of the midcentury debate, which retains special relevance, was liberals' articulation of nonmarket values. This theme had two primary points of emphasis. First was a willingness to challenge businesses' ability to serve as a fair-minded arbitrator of national interests. Not only were midcentury liberals willing to alter the outcomes of market competition to serve a wider public good (primarily through redistributive taxation), but they questioned the basic ability of business to lead national affairs. Liberals found New Conservatives far more palatable than proponents of *laissez-faire*, for the New Conservative emphasis on tradition and continuity was an implicit argument against the legitimacy of upstart merchants and bankers. Such attitudes could shade easily into snobbery about the *nouveau riche*, and when coupled with an emphasis on intellectualism, could taint liberalism with a veiled elitism. But this elitism was tempered by liberals' deep commitment to the idea of a commonwealth.

This second liberal theme of the commonweal or national good, evoked in response to resurgent conservatism, is particularly remarkable

because after a brief moment of popularity, it was rarely articulated again. At midcentury, liberals spoke in a confident, sure voice about the interests of the nation as a whole. They confidently criticized the behavior of capitalists without impugning capitalism, and their tone was steady, not defensive. Since then, these attitudes have been mocked from both the right and the left as complacent centralism and a false consensus that papered over the realities of American life. But without a robust sense of the public good, liberalism has little to do but carp at business. Surely, such carping has its uses, for as a dominant feature of American life and a thoroughly human institution, business will always behave in ways that call for criticism and correction. But liberals also need to offer a positive idea of what America can do and be. In the 1950s, as they fought back against the first surge of conservatism, liberals articulated such a vision.

This vision was a by-product of the more immediate struggle against the conservative threat. Schlesinger, a prolific commentator on current events, was one of liberalism's most active combatants. As a historian with a fondness for analytic precision, Schlesinger directed his ire primarily at conservative misuse of the British conservative tradition. But underlying this criticism were Schlesinger's own liberal beliefs, which emerged clearly in his attacks upon conservatism. Russell Kirk was one of his favorite targets, for Schlesinger found Kirk to be a rank hypocrite in his willingness to accept the alliance with business despite his clear aristocratic and communitarian sympathies. In a fiery 1955 attack upon the New Conservatism, which he called "the politics of nostalgia," Schlesinger singled out Kirk. Citing his characterization of federally provided school lunches as "totalitarian," Schlesinger wrote, "If there is anything in contemporary America that might win the instant sympathy of men like Shaftesbury and Disraeli, it could well be the school lunch program. But for all his talk about mutual responsibility and the organic character of society, Professor Kirk, when he gets down to cases, tends to become a roaring Manchester liberal." This tendency, however, went beyond Kirk, for American conservatives more generally, "when they leave the stately field of rhetoric and get down to actual issues of social policy, they tend quietly to forget about Burke and Disraeli and to adopt the views of the American business community."²¹ To Schlesinger, American conservatism was little more than a smoke screen to advance the economic interests of business. It was dangerous because the business community, incapable of seeing beyond its own short-term interests, would provide poor political leadership.

In a way almost unimaginable today, Schlesinger questioned the ability of business leaders to run national life. For Schlesinger, the problem was not so much that conservatives were conservative but that they were capitalists. American conservatism, as it was emerging, was the conservatism of plutocracy, not aristocracy. He wrote, "Conservatism founded on money is fickle, selfish, and irresponsible; its chief object is to protect what it has and, if possible, to make more." However, he was willing to grant that aristocratic conservatism might be different: "The aristocrat, ideally at least, wants to protect the poor because in the end he regards the nation, rich and poor alike, as one family."²² Astonishingly, Schlesinger, a committed democrat, came close to defending hereditary rule in his article. But this gesture was a mere rhetorical flourish, for underlying Schlesinger's relative friendliness to the Tory position was his belief that British conservatives, like American liberals, saw society as an organic whole and were willing to make economic sacrifices to ensure the well-being of all members of society. He cited British Tory measures on behalf of factory workers and the career of Winston Churchill, suggesting that these activities were analogous to the efforts of the Roosevelts, Stevensons, and Harrimans in the United States. Schlesinger pointed out proudly that these civic-minded American aristocrats were to be found among liberals, not conservatives. Though Schlesinger's intent in this essay was merely to flay conservatism and highlight its deficiencies, in passing his essay helped define the liberal conception of society.

A more explicit statement of liberal values came from August Heckscher, whose 1947 book *A Pattern of Politics* placed him in the New Conservative camp.²³ Heckscher might have been a New Conservative, but a 1953 essay made clear he had would have little in common with the emerging conservatives of *National Review*. Early on, Heckscher recognized the changed meaning of conservatism and the developing fusion between libertarianism and traditionalism. He echoed many of the criticisms voiced by other liberals. American conservatives only claimed to be conservative; they ignored the noble spirit of British Toryism in favor of Manchester economics; and so forth. But Heckscher's essay was not so much critical as elegiac, for he lamented what conservatism had lost when it allied itself with laissez-faire. In such an alliance, conservatives would never offer a romantic yet reasoned, almost literary defense of the government and the state. So Heckscher did so instead.

Heckscher began his essay by confronting conservative economic values. Whereas he agreed with the conservative critique of bureaucracy, he

thought conservatives were wrong to argue solely in terms of dollars. Heckscher sympathized with the idea that an expansive federal bureaucracy could have a detrimental effect on local communities and the traditions of American life. But conservatives largely ignored this more subtle point and attacked centralization in the terms of its economic cost: "The point was almost never made that the rapid and revolutionary developments in Washington were, in their total impact, a blow against the free, independent, varied, and self-governing life of the American community. This was the true basis for a conservative critique. Bureaucracy may have been expensive, but that was not the real trouble with it." Though conservatives claimed to be defenders of community, they did little to develop a positive understanding or defense of it in their work. Instead, they focused entirely on economic questions, thus confining their concern to a select segment of the population. But, for Heckscher, this narrowness belied a fundamental misunderstanding of conservatism, for "not only is welfare—the welfare of all the citizens—a supreme end of the government; it is a concept made familiar by the authors of the Constitution and basic to every sound conservatism."²⁴ Here was a bold and positive statement about the purposes of government that was entirely at variance with conservative ideals: government was to maintain the welfare of all its citizens as its supreme end. This view might have seemed a basic concept of civic life. But faced with the growing ranks of opponents who denied and attacked this basic tenet, Heckscher took the time to elucidate a fundamental liberal belief.

Warming to his theme, Heckscher emphasized how conservatives, ironically, betrayed their historic roots as they turned against the state in favor of the free market. According to him, there was a venerable conservative/Republican tradition, descending from James Madison and continuing through the Whig Party, the Homestead Act, and the present Eisenhower administration, that "had a strong respect for federal power, wielded responsibly for a good end. It upheld the states, not as a means of thwarting national action, but as viable communities where citizens could be cultivated and loyalties engaged."²⁵ Essentially, Heckscher was arguing for the moral superiority of the East Coast, patrician wing of the Republican Party, as opposed to the more libertarian factions from the western and Sun Belt states. In 1953, this segment of the Republican Party remained vigorous and strong. But as Heckscher and Schlesinger seemed to intuit, it faced a formidable challenge from its own grass roots. Fearing that conservatives were abandoning their historic beliefs, Heckscher felt compelled to reassert the worth of this Republican tradition.

Although he identified his ideas as conservative, Heckscher presented a vindication of state action that stands today as essentially liberal testimony, for it contains a vital confirmation of human efficacy and the positive role of government. Although he criticized Manchester economics, Heckscher was no frothing socialist. Rather, he believed that government is essential to capitalism because it can soften and soothe the blows of the free market. Heckscher's words have meaning for us today because they speak to the continuing reality of capitalism's dominance. And they are also extraordinarily eloquent:

Individuals must know that preventable catastrophes will not needlessly be let fall upon them, that the worst of fortune's ills will be alleviated out of the common store, and some floor will be placed under the normal and predictable hazards of a lifetime. It is in such a framework that true enterprise flourishes and that opportunity is more than a word.²⁶

Heckscher's ideas speak to the uses to which an affluent society can put its wealth. In his view, government does not hobble the winners or carelessly squander its citizens' resources. Rather, it makes the game of capitalism fair and competitive and does what it can to minimize the inherent risks of life. The market remains a primary institution but is not sacrosanct. As Heckscher acknowledged, the values that he highlighted were fast being abandoned by conservatives. Today, they lie unclaimed.

The liberal effort to wrest the word *conservative* from its laissez-faire and McCarthyite custodians underlay much political commentary in the 1950s, for the semantic tug-of-war cut to the heart of both liberal and conservative identity. Although Heckscher and Schlesinger were two of the most penetrating commentators on up-and-coming conservatism, their arguments were echoed by less famous writers in the liberal ranks.²⁷ The debate also profoundly shaped—and obscured—the ways in which intellectuals on the left understood the right. Traces of the discussion appear in Daniel Bell's edited volumes *The New American Right* (1955) and the revised *Radical Right* (1963), for decades the most influential scholarly works on the American right.²⁸ In his contributions to these volumes, historian Richard Hofstadter refused to concede the label *conservative* to the populations he analyzed. Instead, Hofstadter called his subjects "pseudoconservatives," a distinction that gains its full meaning in the context of the New Conservative revival and debates about the word *conservative*. Hofstadter was unwilling to use the word *conservative* because, like most liberals of the time, he understood the term to

mean something very different than anticommunist crusaders and free-market disciples.

Although the sudden liberal preoccupation with conservatism in the 1950s foreshadows the anguished debates that erupted after the 2004 election, to review the ideological conflicts at midcentury is to peer into a curious looking glass in which present realities are almost entirely reversed. Fifty years ago, conservative economic ideas outraged liberal sensibilities, yet their social and cultural values elicited little negative comment. To today's eye, the minor role of religion in the 1950s liberal counteroffensive is striking. Very few commentators of the time mentioned the conservative emphasis on religion, and even fewer offered any criticism.²⁹ They made scant effort to carve out a secular realm of political discussion or to attack conservatives for their religiosity. Midcentury liberals seemed to assume that religion was a natural and unremarkable ingredient in political and social discussions. Perhaps this silence is unsurprising for the era, when leading liberals like Schlesinger celebrated the theological insights of Reinhold Niehbur, and more radical segments of the Left also drew upon Christian writers to articulate their social vision. But it is certainly worth noting that when liberalism was most robust, it was also entirely comfortable with religion.

Liberals fought long and hard to prove that their ideological opponents misused the word *conservative*, but by the 1960s, the battle had been lost. By then, conservatives had managed to redefine the word so that it referred almost solely to traditionalists comfortable with the despised Manchester economics. A conservative was now someone who called for both an unfettered free market and a return to tradition, however bizarre such a position seemed to liberals. *National Review* had been one of the first steps in this libertarian-traditionalist fusion. An unmistakable sign of victory came with Barry Goldwater's *Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), cowritten with Buckley's brother-in-law, L. Brent Bozell. This best-selling book definitively established the new meaning of the word *conservative* both in the American vernacular and in the American political scene. After its publication, there would be no more New Conservatives, only conservatives.

Evicted from the conservative fold, where did homeless would-be Burkean conservatives go? Some of them restated their arguments, even as they realized the cause was lost. Rossiter reissued *Conservatism in America* in 1962, newly subtitled *The Thankless Persuasion* to reflect the beating he had taken from the Right. Viereck was even more explicit in his new subtitle, republishing *Conservatism Revisited* (1949) in 1962

with the addition of *Book II: The New Conservatism—What Went Wrong?* His second edition noted the changed meaning of the word *conservative* and asked, “What is it, triumph or bankruptcy, when the empty shell of a name gets acclaim while serving as a chrysalis for its opposite?”³⁰ Disconnected from both the refigured conservative movement and centrist liberalism, writers like Viereck, Rossiter, and Heckscher faded into obscurity. The values they had championed did the same. Liberals, now focused primarily on the cultural and social struggles surrounding civil rights, had less interest in economic questions. Writers who were first known as New Conservatives but were willing to ally with free-market promoters, or at least to overlook the conflict between capitalism and their social beliefs (like Russell Kirk), became plain old conservatives and gravitated to Buckley’s *National Review* or other outposts of movement conservatism.

As conservatism redefined itself, so too did liberalism. Through the 1960s, liberalism’s traditional emphasis on economic questions and the role of the state gave way to a concern with social questions—in Daniel Bell’s phrase, liberalism moved from class to culture.³¹ In large part, this shift came at a time when a host of newly important moral issues, from racism to sexism, and much later, sexual orientation, staked their claim on liberal sympathies. The legitimacy of these concerns is beyond question, and the liberal response is one to be proud of. Conservatives entirely missed the boat on racial and sexual discrimination, as the more truthful among them freely admit.

But if liberals’ movement away from economic concerns and the role of the state is understandable, it is also unfortunate. Paradoxically, when they turned to culture, liberals lost the ability to understand how conservatives connected with a larger audience, for they stopped taking conservative arguments seriously. In the 1950s, liberals took time to respond to the conservative challenge and elucidated their own positions on the issues at stake. Since then, they have largely avoided doing so. As David Plotke points out in his introduction to the 2002 reissue of *The Radical Right*, “Parts of the left often tried try to weaken [the conservative] position by pointing out the apparent tension between the aversion to state action in economic and social welfare policies and a willingness to use government to defend traditional cultural values. This strategy was more clever than effective. Its proponents often made their critique in place of a substantive response to either half of the right’s perspective.”³² By failing to engage the Right’s arguments, liberals have found themselves mystified by the popularity of conservatism.

Liberals in the 1950s might not have been so surprised, for they understood some aspects of conservatism's appeal. If today's liberals were more familiar with certain conservative values—mainly the idea of permanence and the need for caution in undertaking social change—they might, at the very least, better understand the opposition that many of their policies and attitudes have engendered. And one can both understand and disagree with the conservative viewpoint, acknowledging that social change may be disruptive and threatening to many while asserting its necessity. This position, after all, was the one liberals maintained during the civil rights era. But without understanding the conservative reluctance to embrace change, particularly top-down change, liberals isolate themselves from widespread, natural popular reactions, leaving them open for conservatives to exploit. Liberals can recover some of the midcentury sense that change should occur slowly, with an eye on preservation and gradualism, even as they keep their belief in reason and progress. As they defend the possibilities of social transformation, liberals can restate their older belief that human beings have the ability to assess their society's needs and to effectively address the most pressing problems.

Perhaps more importantly, in the midcentury debate, liberals can discover a sense of civic identity, civic pride, and language of the commonweal that has almost entirely vanished from contemporary discourse. One might argue that this conception of the commonweal or the greater good is hopelessly outdated and will never achieve popularity. But liberals can profitably take a page from the conservative playbook in this regard. Conservatives at midcentury cared little that their ideas were unpopular. Indeed, they used their sense of marginalization to form a powerful oppositional culture and to cement themselves into one relatively coherent, or at least peaceful, ideological movement. After giving all parties a thorough hearing, they smoothed out or minimized internal disputes. Then they used a formula that was brilliant in its simplicity: Repeat the message. Who would have thought, fifty years ago, that capitalism would be so popular and government so demonized? Simple messages, repeated often, take on the appearance of timeless wisdom. And, indeed, the conservative critique of liberalism contained seeds of truth; many liberals were elitist, complacent with their power, and blind to other sides of human nature. But liberals, too, have wisdom on their side. In addition to faulting all the ways conservatives have led us astray, they would do well to emphasize the positive messages of liberalism. There is more to life than money. And investments in the common stock

can improve all our lives. These messages are worth repeating again and again until they, too, seem to be common sense.

As I write these closing words, New Orleans lies under water, its citizens homeless and desperate, the rest of the country and the world shocked and embarrassed at the paucity and ineffectiveness of the American government's response to the disaster. Hurricane Katrina provides an obvious object lesson about the need for a vigorous, competent, active state, and for a government that can attract the best and brightest to its ranks because national service is considered an honorable calling rather than a patronage giveaway. The storm triggered a feeling throughout the land that might be called conservative in the sense that midcentury liberals conceived it—the idea that the nation is akin to family and that the more fortunate find meaning and reward in caring for those buffeted by fate or foul weather. If conservatives will not, or cannot, argue for these values, then liberals must.

3. LIBERALISM AND THE CONSERVATIVE IMAGINATION

1. Dwight Macdonald, "Back to Metternich," *New Republic*, November 14, 1949, 35.
2. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Terror versus Decorum," *New York Times Book Review*, October 23, 1949, 49.
3. Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955). Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953). Rossiter's volume was awarded the 1954 Charles Austin Beard Memorial Prize. Kirk's book was lavishly praised in *Time* magazine, largely at the behest of Whittaker Chambers. Nonetheless, the review is an important indicator of Kirk's early acceptance by outposts of middlebrow liberal culture. Max Ways, "Generation to Generation," *Time*, July 6, 1953, 88, 90-92.
4. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), x.
5. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Need for an Intelligent Opposition," *New York Times*, April 2, 1950, 13, 56-58.
6. H. Malcolm Macdonald, "The Revival of Conservative Thought," *Journal of Politics* 19, no. 1 (February 1957): 80.
7. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Calhoun Restored," *Nation*, April 1, 1950, 302.
8. Gaylord C. Leroy, "The New Conservatism," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1955): 276.
9. Schlesinger, "Need for an Intelligent Opposition," 164.
10. For characterizations of conservatism as a mood, see C. Wright Mills, "The Conservative Mood," *Dissent* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1954): 22-31; and Daniel Aaron, "Conservatism, Old and New," *American Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1954): 99-110.
11. George H. Nash describes the process of conservative ideological fusion in *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996; 1976), especially chapter 5. Elsewhere I offer a critique of Nash and trace the changing definition of the word *conservative* in scholarly literature since the 1950s. See Jennifer Burns, "In Retrospect: George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*," *Reviews in American History* 32 (September 2004): 447-62.
12. Schlesinger, "Need for an Intelligent Opposition," 58.
13. Gordon K. Lewis, "The Metaphysics of Conservatism," *Western Political Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (December 1953): 741.
14. Rossiter, *Conservatism in America*, 17, 229.
15. Gerhart Niemeyer, "Conservatism in America," *Journal of Public Law* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1955): 441, 445. Niemeyer was a fervent combatant within conservative circles, attacking Meyer for his advocacy of laissez-faire and defending Kirk against all comers. Despite his disagreements with Meyer and other libertarians, Niemeyer was generally not troubled by the alliance, for he remained a movement conservative. See "Interoffice Memos—1961," Box 14, William F. Buckley Papers, Yale University.
16. Dwight Macdonald, "Scrambled Eggheads on the Right," *Commentary* 21 (April 1956): 367-73. Other negative reviews of *National Review* include John Fischer, "Why Is the Conservative Voice So Hoarse?" *Harper's*, March

1956, 17-22; and Murray Kempton, "Buckley's National Bore," *Progressive*, July 1956, 13-16.

17. Not only the editors' fealty to business but their affection for Joseph McCarthy placed *National Review* beyond the pale.

18. Wilmoore Kendall, "The Liberal Line," *National Review*, November 3, 1956, 17.

19. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Mr. Schlesinger: The Liberal Wants to Change Life and to Improve It," *New York Times*, March 4, 1956, SM6.

20. Gaylord C. Leroy, "The New Conservatism," *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1955): 276.

21. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The New Conservatism: The Politics of Nostalgia," *Reporter*, June 16, 1955, 10.

22. *Ibid.*, 10.

23. August Heckscher, *A Pattern of Politics* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947).

24. August Heckscher, "Where Are the American Conservatives?" *Confluence*, September 1953, 57, 62.

25. *Ibid.*, 61.

26. *Ibid.*, 63.

27. A sampling of this discourse includes Ludwig Freund, "The New American Conservatism and European Conservatism," *Ethics* 66, no. 1, Part 1 (October 1955): 10-17; Chadwick Hall, "America's Conservative Revolution," *Antioch Review* 15, no. 2 (June 1955): 204-16; Bernard Crick, "The Strange Quest for an American Conservatism," *Review of Politics* 17, no. 3 (July 1955): 359-76; Arnold A. Rogow, "Edmund Burke and the American Liberal Tradition," *Antioch Review* 17, no. 2 (June 1957): 255-65.

28. Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (New York: Criterion Books, 1955); and Bell, ed., *The Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1963).

29. Of all the articles discussing the New Conservatism, only a few commented on the role of religion in conservative thought, and these few did so only tangentially. See Crick, "Strange Quest for an American Conservatism." Leroy, "The New Conservatism," links conservatism to neo-orthodoxy but treats religion as unremarkable.

30. Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1962). Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 17, 151. Significant portions of this new edition were also published in Bell, *The Radical Right*.

31. See Daniel Bell, "Afterword (2001): From Class to Culture," in *The Radical Right*, ed. Daniel Bell, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 447-503.

32. David Plotke, "Introduction to the Transaction Edition (2001): The Success and Anger of the Modern American Right," in Bell, *The Radical Right*, 3rd ed., xiv.

4. LIBERALISM AND BELIEF

1. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 530.