

Liberals vs. Conservatives; Two Views of Humans, Two Views of Human Rights

Sam: First off, I want to ask you about your definitions of liberalism and conservatism. In your review of the book “Left, Right, and Center: Essays on Liberalism and Conservatism,” edited by Robert A. Goldwin” you criticize liberalism as a policy that attempts to use government to encourage people’s “better motives” as opposed conservatism that “supplies the defect of people’s motives.” What is wrong with a government that encourages people’s “better motives?”

Voegeli: I think that saying that the position of conservative sensibility is that human nature is what it is and therefore, a social agenda or political movement, predicated on the idea that humans can become much better than they have shown themselves to be is a highly doubtful venture. That said, if the worst you could say about liberalism is that it is probably not going to succeed, then, considering how wonderful the world would be if it did succeed, we have nothing to lose by trying it. So, it is not just that liberalism has not succeeded, but that it has justified some horrific things in pursuit of this glorious radically different future—this totalitarian impulse. The upside [of liberalism] is doubtful and the downside is very sobering.

Sam: In your review of the book Which Side Are You On? by Thomas Geoghegan which discussed FDR’s guiding principle that people’s rights are whatever society determines them to be, you write, pointing out the self-serving logic on which FDR’s principle is based: “Since all rights are made or invented, there’s no reason for new deal liberals not to avail themselves of the right to make and invent a new right whenever it might be useful.” What’s the danger in this?

Voegeli: Well, according to the Declaration of Independence the rights that humans have are endowed by nature and nature's god. The older understanding is that it has been a great challenge to human beings to ascertain what rights are as clearly as possible, and then implement and protect them as completely as possible. But, nevertheless, rights are a sort of metaphysically existing thing— they are not like a favorite flavor of ice cream. But, as FDR argued the case, beginning with the Commonwealth Club Address in 1932 and continuing up through his 1944 State of the Union Address when he introduced the concept of a Second Bill of Rights, rights exist because of the consensus that evolves with people, which of course changes over time. One of the new deal agencies, or so-called alphabet soup agencies that FDR created was the National Resources Planning Board. Its purpose was to map out a post-WWII domestic policy agenda, and the authors of this report were very enthusiastic about this business of coming up with rights, so they added to one of their reports a list of their own that urged society to recognize the right to rest, recreation and adventure. This list was, in large part, a first draft of the 2nd Bill of Rights.

Sam: It seems like what they are calling rights should really just be a piece of legislation.

Voegeli: You know, when you get into that sort of territory the unseriousness of it all is a critique of its own—obviously, this is not something you govern a society by. Even so, the notion behind [FDR’s principle] is that human nature is entirely plastic, malleable, and has no real meaning. And, I think this is a basis which makes self governing extremely difficult, and makes a dangerous and even vicious government highly likely.

Sam: So, in a nutshell, you are saying that conservatives reject the notion that you can just make a right up because it is useful because the act of doing so degrades rights from being inherent in human nature—which is what the Founding Fathers saw— to simply a consensus

decision based on current circumstances. But conservatives certainly do not embrace the notion of inherent or universal rights, so how do conservatives see rights independent of liberalism?

Voegeli: Well, I do not know that I agree with that. I think that conservatives understand that there are such things as natural rights that people enjoy and possess and are inalienable because they are ours by nature. But, turning natural rights into civil rights, means creating a civil society in which the government derives power just from the consent of the governed. And, these societies have particular histories and cultural qualities that developed over time in history. In that sense, I think conservatives are dubious about the concept that there exists universal rights that somehow transcend or can be realized in any way other than through particular civil societies. So, the challenge [for conservatives] is to simultaneously honor the rights that people possess but also to obtain and protect the social, moral, and political orders in which those rights can have meaning and manifest themselves.

Sam: Is it fair to say that conservatives see rights as inherent but not universal?

Voegeli: If by inherent you mean natural, then yes, if by universal you mean sort of easily translatable from one social setting to another, I would say yes I am highly skeptical of that. But then, there is no one country that has figured out this question of rights in a way that is so blunt that nobody else needs to do it anymore. Every country is going to develop the notion of inalienable rights such as liberty and the pursuit of happiness in ways that manifest the certain historical experience religious outlook overtime. It's one thing to say that rights are natural and all people present them; it's another to say that it is for us to judge with a high degree of confidence whether particular nations are in violation of these things. I think there needs to be a degree of political humility in this regard.

Sam: The Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy has questioned whether conservatism is an ideology or a social attitude. From what you have said, the conservative mission to ensure that natural rights are reflected as civil rights order would suggest that it is a rather vague ideology.

Voegeli: Do you have handy a definition of ideology. That's sort of a loaded word in itself.

Sam: Well, a philosophy as coherent as liberalism or egalitarianism such that it does not have to defined relative to another view.

Voegeli: I think I am inclined to agree with the Stanford Encyclopedia on this point in that conservatism is more like an attitude than an ideology because the way that I understand that ideology is that it should be a perfectly self-contained intellectual unit. The ideology believes that when certain truths have been established, when certain objectives, which have been mapped out in the past, have been laid down, then the hard work is basically done. I have met conservatives in my life who would qualify it as ideology, but I believe that conservatism done right is humble. To put it another way, I think what makes ideology is the direct movement toward a certain objective. Conservatism, as the name implies, is more backward looking. To be conservative is to think there is a certain legacy that is valuable and because it is valuable it deserves conservation. And, it is also vulnerable. By its virtue it requires conservation. We can't be certain that left to its own devices it will simply flourish on its own. It needs help, it needs protection. Left out in the cold, it's likely to suffer and erode. So I take the...

Sam: That certainly sounds like a social attitude, then. By that definition, you could be a conservative in any country at any time in human history.

Voegeli: Yes, I suppose that is justified. If a conservative is simply someone who wants to keep old ways of doing things intact and is deeply skeptical about trying anything new then there were conservatives in Central America saying that we need to have more human sacrifice—we've been doing that for a thousand years, you know, let's not mess around with anything here. But I think conservatives have to be held up to a more challenging standard. Obviously, it has got to be something more than to keep what is going on, going on. But, conservatism is not so far to the other side that it says based on the great confidence with which we now understand these shimmering truths, we are happy to rip society up by the roots and try all sorts of bold and thrilling new experiments.

A Liberal Autopsy of Liberalism

Sam: How have liberal politicians starting from Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressives to President Obama sold their policies to the American public?

Voegeli: In the 100 year arc that you described, all liberal politicians, with several exceptions, have had a way to present a variety of significant revisions of, and even fundamental rejections of, the American Founding and the principles abiding the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as merely an updating of the principles of 1776 and 1787. FDR, for example, expressed his entire project in the terms of rights; the 1936 democratic platform, introduced nearly every plank with "we hold this truth to be self evident" and then went on to talk about the need for this program and that program. Obama does this as well. Bill Clinton did it. Lyndon Johnson did it. I think the rhetoric of the modern liberal project (intends) to persuade people that nothing unusual is going on here. That said, Woodrow Wilson, and a few of the early progressives were far more explicit about their rejection of the founding. At the time, though, America was not ready to sign up for something quite that drastic. There was still quite a great deal of lingering respect for the founding, certain inalienable rights, a good deal of that 'don't tread on me' cupedness. So the kind of progressivism that says 'we have outgrown all that let's just dump it' proved to be a public relations problem. But following especially on the footsteps of FDR, the liberal project has gone out of its way to reassure people that it is simply the American project—not so much saying that they were consistent with Jefferson and Madison, but that if brought up to date, they would agree.

Sam: Are there any aspects of Woodrow Wilson's thinking that are reflected in today's liberal movement?

Voegeli: No, I do not think so... [Wilson initiated] a counter founding, of sorts. Whereas the first founding was based on the notion of natural rights, Wilson's and the progressives' was based on history; the very term progressive means that you're standing your ground not because something is permanent and inalienable, but because you are someone who understands the big historical picture. This is where we get the phrase "being on the right side of history"—the notion that history has a side and that we can know what it is. This is progressivism straight up.

Sam: Could progressives ever disagree on what the right side of history is?

Voegeli: Good question. I would recommend reading some work by a political scientist at the University of Virginia, James Ceaser. A point that Ceaser makes is that there is one significant difference between 21st century progressives, and early 20th century progressives. The 1st and 2nd generation of progressives really did believe that there was such a thing as science or philosophy of history and societal progress. They believed that they understood it and, therefore, could see farther over the horizon than most people. On the basis of this expertise they had a kind of...—

Sam: An ability to know who would on the right side of history.

Voegeli: But most 21st century progressives, if you press them on it, will eventually admit their skepticism about fundamental truths and principles—they do not really believe in them. So, this logical philosophy has been supplanted in the 21st century by the idea that there is no objective right and wrong. In fact, John Rawls, in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice* advocating for a redistributive state says that if there is a person whose idea of happiness is to count blades of grass on private lawns or in public parks that the requirement of justice is to be fully respectful of that life plan as he calls it. But even further, a just society provides the person who wants to count blades of grass with all the material resources he needs— food, and clothing and shelter— and all the psychological resources. Under no circumstances can [society] tell him ‘the way your living it's stupid, it's fickle, it's pathetic.’ We must instead give him lots of affirmation and encouragement so that he never has to doubt his life plan.

Sam: That is very interesting.

Voegeli: And, so, Ceaser's main claim is that 21st century liberalism, does not, as 20th century liberalism did, believe in itself. [21st century liberalism is of the belief] that there is nothing really true or right or correct. Everything is either useful or not useful. Does it make us better off or not— more happy or less happy? More pain or less pain? And all of this is the entire analysis that any nation or person should ever make.

Sam: Utilitarianism.

Voegeli: Yes, but of a particular sort—a moralistic entitlement as though there is no basis to really criticize anything. [They are saying] essentially, ‘people like us all agree that we want a world of greater equality, richer experiences, dignity for everybody and the capacity to pursue your own particular plan.’ They are experiments that lack grounding in every sense of the word.

Sam: Would you argue that New Deal and Great Society policies (large, government-led efforts to create jobs, grow the economy, and help the poor in the mid-1900s, which were both informed by, and went on to form, American liberalism) negatively affected the American economy?

Voegeli: Well, the short answer to your question is I don't know. To fully answer that question we would have to engage in what would amount to an exercise in congressional history, figuring the trajectory of the American economy—what does it look like in 2016—in the absence of the New Deal and Great Society projects. Would per capita GDP be lower, higher or the same? I think that you could make a pretty effective critic of the 20th century liberal project without staking a claim on that particular question.

Liberalism's Favorite Children: Political Correctness and Judicial Activism

Sam: Now, how does political correctness find a home in a liberal movement that does not recognize any objective right and wrong?

Voegeli: Political correctness manages to not believe in any fundamental principles and at the same time to be extremely strident about all of these various sorts of microaggressions. So it takes place in this non-foundational moral universe, and in this universe, the one thing they know is that straight white males throughout history have had their way. Now, (political correctness advocates say) it's everybody else's turn not because of some high flown gobbledygook about natural rights, but because 'we've waited long enough.'... The rule of political correctness is that there are no rules, so there is no reason that they cannot treat rhetoric that is disagreeable or unpleasant, as they do on the modern campus, as violent. I guess it is a comforting idea that rhetoric with which you disagree is violent... There is an utter moral confidence and assertiveness of the social justice warriors on campus and elsewhere who say that if the wrong people's feelings are hurt, they have limitless rights to make their displeasure known, and to curtail the speech of people they disagree with.

Sam: You say in one of your review that liberals and radicals come together because they desire similar outcomes. Can you see that dynamic reflected in the political correctness debates?

Voegeli: The liberal appreciates the rules of free speech and inalienable rights and thinks they should be upheld regardless of what political purposes they serve. Whereas to the politically correct radical, free speech and unalienable rights—the John Stuart Mill package—were only valuable for a time when really bad people were in charge of things and we needed to speak up for the chance for people to express themselves and make progress. But now that that day is on the horizon and the straight white male tyranny will be ended, we no longer have need of these archaic forms of liberalism. So, I think that there are liberals who dislike political correctness, but they are certainly not dealing from the position of strength right now.

Sam: It seems as though the ark of the liberal ideology that you have described starts with being fairly grounded in enlightenment rationalism but shifting to a degree of sometimes reckless humanism and utilitarianism.

Voegeli: I think that is fair.

Sam: How does liberalism manifest itself in constitutional interpretation. And I suspect you have already begun to answer that question in noting the belief in a right side of history.

Voegeli: It manifests itself in the notion of a living constitution. The living constitution is a permanent work in progress so it fits, I think, naturally with liberal's view that what counts is history and progress. A key aspect of the living constitution is that life judges are well within their authority to discover previously undetected meanings in constitutional language that has been unchanged for generations; if you believe that fundamental rights are always evolving, it makes sense that the constitution is evolving itself....Hence, {we can explain} last year's {Supreme Court} decision that if people are coming to a different understanding of marriage, {justices can take it upon themselves to incorporate that understanding into the 14 Amendment}.

The fact of the matter is, in a democratic republic citizens have a perfectly serviceable way to manifest that different understanding: vote for legislators who share it and to vote against those who do not. What a self governing people does not need is judges to make those god-like interpretations on the basis of their own interpretation of society's evolving sensibilities.

Sam: My last question for you is, considering today's political climate, what's your pitch for conservatism to young people?

Voegeli: Well, I think my pitch to young people is the same as my pitch to old people, which is as George Will said, 'the difference between liberalism and conservatism is that liberalism thinks the point of politics and life is to make the world a better place and conservatism thinks the point is to keep it from becoming even worse.' Now such things are particularly hard to say to young people especially those living in a place like America—it does not fit with the assumptions about the world that young people in affluent societies make. It does not fit neatly with their assumptions about the world. I think that the challenge for conservatives in talking to young people is to impress upon them the fragility of much that they see around them. To impress upon them the need to regard themselves, not simply as consumers of the civilizational achievements that have been wrought over the centuries, but as custodians of them with a rebuffed sense of duty to transmit that heritage intact to the next generation; the duty is to leave them a nation, a republic, that is at least as sturdy as the one that has been bequeathed to you.

Sam: Dr. Voegeli, it's been pleasure to speak with you.

Voegeli: You as well, Sam. I wish you the best of luck in writing your article.

Sam: Thank you. Have a good evening.