

# The New Criterion

Features January 2008

## Introduction: saving remnants

by Roger Kimball

*An introduction to our symposium on the future of conservatism in Britain and America.*

*Precautions are always blamed. When they are successful, they are declared to be unnecessary.*

—Benjamin Jowett

*It is useless for sheep to pass resolutions in favor of vegetarianism.*

—Dean Inge on the League of Nations

In a recent essay about the war in Iraq, Victor Davis Hanson noted that the world of Washington was an “echo chamber.” One creditable—or at least listened to—pundit or politician opines in a way the media likes and, presto, a new bit of conventional “wisdom” is born—or at least reinforced. A mere opinion, often ill-informed, frequently at wide variance with the truth, is repeated often enough, and it suddenly acquires the carapace of general currency that, at a distance, can easily be mistaken for fact. As Hanson shows, what has happened with the war in Iraq provides a sterling example of the genre: how many times have you heard it uttered, in tones of somber certainty, that “There is no military solution to Iraq”? That “We can’t impose democracy on anyone”? That—well, readers can complete the list for themselves. Contrary evidence seems incapable of penetrating the hard shell of such conventional fancy. If it could, then the fact that democracy *was* successfully imposed, after a military solution, on such nasty regimes as Hitler’s Germany, Hirohito’s Japan, Mussolini’s Italy, not to mention more recent examples in the Balkans and Argentina, would act as a powerful damper in the echo-chamber Hanson describes. But it doesn’t.

Of course, the war in Iraq is not the only phenomenon susceptible to the echo chamber. Any controversial datum or movement is prey to its distorting simplifications. One conspicuous example, I believe, is the fate of conservatism. More than two decades ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan ruefully noted that Republicans had become “the party of ideas.” He was right about that, as recent American political history amply attests on issues from welfare and taxes to free markets and national security. But in the last couple of years, conservatives, especially conservatives in America and Europe, have seen their prospects fed into the echo chamber.

Everywhere one looks, it seems, the fortunes of conservatism are—or are said to be—on the ebb. You can hardly open a newspaper or tune into a television news show without being warned (or, more often, without hearing celebratory shouts) that now, finally, at last, the forces of enlightenment and progress are once again on the ascendant, that conservative ideas and the people promulgating them are in rout. One saw this, for example, in recent months in the aura of supposed inevitability—now conspicuously tarnished—that attended the campaign of Hillary Clinton. People from every political persuasion simply took it for granted that the presidency was hers for the asking. Why?

It was partly in order to probe behind the echo-producing organs of opinion that *The New Criterion* and London's Social Affairs Unit convened a conference last autumn on the present state and near-term prospects of conservatism in the United States and Britain. We recognized that the subject was not only enormous but also in many respects imponderable. Nevertheless, out of our discussions certain patterns and leitmotifs emerged, above all, perhaps, a concern with the illiberal results of liberal attacks on the traditions, policies, and institutions of conservatism—what Kenneth Minogue diagnoses below as the “drift in modern states towards despotism.”

This “drift towards despotism” has been a recognized liability of modern liberal society at least since Tocqueville warned about the “tutelary” forms of despotism to which democracy was peculiarly susceptible. Democracies, he noted, do not so much tyrannize over their minions as they *infantilize* them. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that one of the more exquisite modern forms of tyranny is infantilization—a situation in which enervation and apathy replace the more brutal tinctures of oppression. What primarily concern us now are the bureaucratization and institutionalization of those imperatives, and it was part of our task in this conference to begin an anatomy of those forces and ask how conservatism might provide an alternative or at least an energizing resistance to them. The issue, Minogue notes, is not just this or that public policy but “our way of life as a free people. Individual self-control is an indispensable condition of freedom. Without it, we become the puppets of governments.”

Taken together, the papers below make a good start on showing how that descent into puppetry can best be resisted. They touch, and touch eloquently, on a wide range of issues, from education to partisan politics to the law. By way of introduction, I would like simply to say a few words about three issues that are often in the air when the topic of conservatism arises: I mean gloominess, truth, and change.

First the gloominess. I have recently begun keeping a folder marked “Conservative Gloominess.” It is full of articles and animadversions by various hands: dire prognostications about who the next occupant of the White House will be, harrowing descriptions of disarray among conservatives, despairing portraits of U.S. or European society. What's odd, or at least uncharacteristic about these bulletins from the abyss is not their substance—to be candid, I have written plenty of items that could justly be filed there—but their tone and what we might call their existential orientation. From time immemorial conservatives have delighted in writing works with titles like *Leviathan*, *The*

*Decline of the West*, *The Waste Land*, or, to take a more recent example from one of our participants, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*. I think I am right in recollecting that when Robert Bork once delivered himself of a withering account of some aspect of our society, a member of the audience remarked on how depressing his paper was. In response he suggested that he might call his next essay “Little Mary Sunshine,” to which a fellow panelist said, “Oh yes, ‘Little Mary Sunshine Gets Skin Cancer.’”

Well, that’s all in a day’s work for a conservative. But I’ve noticed a troubling disruption of late. By habit and disposition, I submit, conservatives tend, as a species, to be less gloomy than—than what? What shall we call those who occupy a position opposite that of conservatives? Not liberals, surely, since they are so often conspicuously *illiberal*, i.e., opposed to freedom and all its works. Indeed, when it comes to the word “liberal,” Russell Kirk came close to the truth when he observed that he was conservative *because* he was a liberal. In any event, whatever the opposite of conservatives should be called—perhaps John Fonte’s marvelous coinage “transnational progressives” is best—they tend to be gloomy, partly, I suspect, because of disappointed utopian ambitions.

Conservatives also tend to enjoy a more active and enabling sense of humor. The English essayist Walter Bagehot once observed that “the essence of Toryism is enjoyment.” What he meant, I think, was summed up by the author of *Genesis* when that sage observed that “God made the world and saw that it was good.” Conservatives differ from progressives in many ways, but one important way is in the quota of cheerfulness and humor they deploy. Not that their assessment of their fellows is more sanguine. On the contrary. Conservatives tend to be cheerful because they do not regard imperfection as a personal moral affront. Being realistic about mankind’s susceptibility to improvement, they are as suspicious of utopian schemes as they are appreciative of present blessings. This is why the miasmic gloominess emanating from many conservative circles today is so dispiriting. It goes against the grain of what it means to be conservative. It is dampening, and I for one hope it will prove to be a quickly passing phenomenon. Among other things, this recent access of personal gloominess makes the practice of professional gloominess—the robust deployment of satire, ridicule, and so on—much more difficult and less satisfying.

This brings me to the issue of truth. Conservatives are realists. They like to call things by their proper names. Like Oscar Wilde’s Cecily Cardew, they call a spade a spade, unless it is explicitly outlawed, just as they prefer to call “affirmative action” “discrimination according to race or sex,” taxation “government-mandated income redistribution,” and “Islamophobia” a piece of Orwellian Newspeak foisted upon an unsuspecting public by irresponsible “multiculturalists” colluding more or less openly with Islamofascists. This is a theme that arises in several essays below, but I’d like to flag for special attention Daniel Johnson’s peroration to his thoughts on “The Conservative Response to Islam.” “Relativism,” Johnson writes,

is the tribute paid by reason to toleration. But relativism, whether moral or epistemological, can never be the basis of politics. Skepticism, being quietist, can never prevail against belief. The only

answer to atavism is activism. It is better to obviate the need for radical solutions to pseudo-problems by offering conservative solutions to real problems. If Islam is the solution to the decadence of the West, then we have been asking the wrong questions. If Islam is now the problem, however, then the solution can only be a conservative one. Islam will not overwhelm a society that draws its morality from biblical and its rationality from classical sources. The West does not need an Islamic revolution, but a Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman renaissance.

Radical Islam is among the most pressing external threats to Western society today, but we also face a host of internal threats. Among the most dangerous of internal threats, I think, is what we might call creeping multiculturalism—the accommodationist spirit that, for example, is more saddened than outraged when calling a Teddy Bear “Muhammad” lands a school teacher in a Sudanese jail.

Creeping multiculturalism intersects in poignant ways with a subject that is always at the center of concern for conservatism: change. Towards the end of his thoughtful new book *Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again*, David Frum gently takes issue with Russell Kirk’s invocation of “the permanent things.” “How few of those there really are!” Frum writes. “The fact of change is the great fact of human life,” he says, pleading with conservatives to “adapt” to change and retake the intellectual and political initiative. Some such rhetoric might be required on the hustings. But I confess to having mixed feelings about that exhortation, if for no other reason than that I believe change to be not *the* but *a* great fact of human life. An equally great fact is continuity, and it may well be that one “adapts” more successfully to certain realities by resisting them than by capitulating to them. “When it is not necessary to change,” Lord Falkland said some centuries ago, “it is necessary not to change.”

I recognize that “change,” like its conceptual cousin “innovation,” is one of the great watchwords of the modern age. But William F. Buckley Jr. was on to something important when he wrote, in the inaugural issue of *National Review* in November 1955, that a large part of the magazine’s mission was to “stand athwart history, yelling Stop.” It’s rare that you hear someone quote that famous line without a smile, the smile meaning “he wasn’t against change, innovation, etc., etc.” But I believe Mr. Buckley was in earnest. It was one of the things that made *National Review* *unzeitgemässe*, “untimely” in the highest sense of the word. The *Review*, Mr. Buckley wrote, “is out of place, in the sense that the United Nations and the League of Women Voters and *The New York Times* and Henry Steele Commager are *in* place.”

The Australian philosopher David Stove saw deeply into this aspect of the metabolism of conservatism. In “Why You Should Be a Conservative,” which deserves to be better known than it is, he rehearses the familiar scenario:

A primitive society is being devastated by a disease, so you bring modern medicine to bear, and wipe out the disease, only to find that by doing so you have brought on a population explosion. You introduce contraception to control population, and find that you have dismantled a whole culture. At home you legislate to relieve the distress of unmarried mothers, and find you have given a cash incentive to the production of illegitimate children. You guarantee a minimum wage,

and find that you have extinguished, not only specific industries, but industry itself as a personal trait. You enable everyone to travel, and one result is, that there is nowhere left worth travelling to. And so on.

This is the oldest and the best argument for conservatism: the argument from the fact that our actions almost always have unforeseen and unwelcome consequences. It is an argument from so great and so mournful a fund of experience, that nothing can rationally outweigh it. Yet somehow, at any rate in societies like ours, this argument never is given its due weight. When what is called a “reform” proves to be, yet again, a cure worse than the disease, the assumption is always that what is needed is still more, and still more drastic, “reform.”

Progressives cannot wrap their minds (or, more to the point, their hearts) around this irony: that “reform” so regularly exacerbates either the evil it was meant to cure or another evil it had hardly glimpsed. The great Victorian Matthew Arnold was no enemy of reform. But he understood that “the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of faith had left culture dangerously exposed and unprotected. In cultures of the past, Arnold thought, the invigorating “remnant” of those willing and able to energize culture was often too small to succeed. As societies grew, so did the forces of anarchy that threatened them—but so did that enabling remnant. Arnold believed modern societies possessed within themselves a “saving remnant” large and vital enough to become “an actual” power that could stem the tide of anarchy. I hope that he was right.

## Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. “Conservatism in America and Britain: Where Are We Now?,” a symposium organized jointly by *The New Criterion* and London’s Social Affairs Unit, took place on September 28, 2007 at the Union League Club in New York City. Participants were Brian Anderson, Peter Berkowitz, Jeremy Black, Robert H. Bork, Gerald Frost, Michael W. Gleba, Daniel Johnson, Roger Kimball, Herbert I. London, Andrew C. McCarthy, Kenneth Minogue, Michael Mosbacher, George Nash, John O’Sullivan, and James Piereson. Discussion revolved largely around earlier versions of the essays printed in this special section. [Go back to the text.](#)
  2. *Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again*, by David Frum; Doubleday, 213 pages, \$24.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
-

**Roger Kimball** is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from The New Criterion at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 26 Number 5 , on page 4

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2008/1/introduction-saving-remnants>