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AHR Forum
The Problem of American Conservatism

ALAN BRINKLEY

IT WILL NOT, I SUSPECT, BE A VERY CONTROVERSIAL CLAIM to say that twentieth-century American conservatism has been something of an orphan in historical scholarship. Historians have written books and articles about modern conservatism, of course, some of them quite good. In recent years, moreover, both the quantity and the quality of scholarship on the subject has markedly increased. Even so, it would be hard to argue that the American Right has received anything like the amount of attention from historians that its role in twentieth-century politics and culture suggests it should.¹ Given the history of the last twenty years, that is coming to seem an ever more curious omission. This essay is an effort to understand why that omission has occurred.

These observations are not the product of any personal scholarly research on conservatism (or of any personal engagement with or sympathy for conservative politics). On the contrary, my own recent work has focused on the history of American liberalism at mid-century. But this is not so abrupt a departure from such concerns as it might sound. I came to my study of American liberalism out of, among other things, a skepticism about some of the scholarly assumptions that have governed the study of American political culture in this century. Most historians have told the story of twentieth-century American political and cultural development by emphasizing the triumph of the progressive-liberal state and of the modern, cosmopolitan sensibility that has accompanied and to a large degree supported it. They have argued about the timing of this triumph and about

I presented an early version of this essay at a 1989 symposium on the twentieth-century Right at the University of Maryland, College Park, and I thank the members of the history department there both for the occasion and for their helpful responses. Similarly, I thank the history graduate student association at Yale, the department of history at Princeton, and the Columbia University Seminar on Twentieth-Century Politics and Society for opportunities to present later versions of the paper and for the many important suggestions and criticisms their members offered. John Higham, Michael Kazin, Gary Kulik, Marvin Gettleman, and Kathleen Blee generously commented on various versions of the manuscript; and Charles B. Forcey provided both research assistance and substantive suggestions. I am grateful to them all.

¹ In a recently published study of scholarship about the Right since the mid-1950s, William B. Hixson, Jr., claims to "have covered all the relevant scholarly material published by sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, and historians." Social scientists, he notes, have produced an enormous quantity of scholarship, but "historians as a group play a minor role in this study." Hixson, *Search for the American Right Wing: An Analysis of the Social Science Record, 1955-1987* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), xvii-xix.

whether it has been a good or bad thing. But, until recently at least, they have seldom doubted that it occurred.

Like some other recent scholars, however, I have been struck increasingly by other, quite different features of modern America: by the chronic weakness of the progressive state,² by the enormous difficulty liberals have had in securing and retaining popular loyalties, and by the persistent strength of other forces (many of which, for lack of a better word, we generally call conservative) in a long and still-unresolved battle over the nature of American politics and American culture.³ This is an important and, at least until recently, largely neglected part of the story of twentieth-century America. And so the "problem of American conservatism," as I define it here, is not a problem facing conservatives themselves and not a problem conservatives may have created for others. It is a problem of American historical scholarship, the problem of finding a suitable place for the Right—for its intellectual traditions and its social and political movements—within our historiographical concerns.

CONSERVATISM HAS NOT ALWAYS BEEN THE ORPHAN within American historical scholarship that it is today. The progressive historians who dominated the writing of American history through much of the first half of this century placed conservatives at the center of their interpretive scheme, a scheme that portrayed American history as a long and often intense struggle between popular democratic elements and entrenched anti-democratic interests. But theirs was a constricted view of conservatism, focused almost exclusively on economic elites and their efforts to preserve wealth and privilege. It is not surprising that later

² Skepticism about the progressive assumptions of much twentieth-century political history can be found in Barry D. Karl, *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945* (Chicago, 1983). Some more specialized studies that raise challenges to the assumption that the United States has been moving steadily toward greater political unity include Ellis W. Hawley, *The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly* (Princeton, N.J., 1966), which chronicles the many frustrations New Dealers encountered in attempting to impose various forms of order on the industrial economy; Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge, 1982), which describes the halting, piecemeal process by which Americans "patched" together a modern state; James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal* (Lexington, Ky., 1967), and Patterson, *The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition* (Princeton, 1969), which describe the obstacles to centralization the New Deal encountered and never entirely overcame; Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, 1989), 85-121, which describes the way in which liberals modified or abandoned many of their most ambitious plans for consolidating and rationalizing the economy in response to substantial political, ideological, and economic obstacles.

³ Writers from both the Right and the Left have chronicled the survival of an anti-progressive, anti-statist tradition in twentieth-century America. Robert A. Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York, 1953), is a conservative intellectual critique of the rise of the modern state and an account of the continuing struggle against its influence by individuals and non-governmental institutions and associations. The late Christopher Lasch, writing from the Left, has identified a tradition in American culture of important anti-progressive intellectuals (a tradition of which he was an outstanding contemporary example) in *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York, 1991) and other works. The short-lived *democracy: A Journal of Political Renewal and Radical Change* (edited by Sheldon Wolin and with which Lasch was connected for a time) provided a running critique of progressive centralization and expressed the belief (and hope) that it was not, in fact, securely or inevitably entrenched as the governing dynamic of American life.

generations of scholars have found the progressive framework inadequate.⁴

What succeeded the progressive model, however, was a series of interpretive schemes that did relatively little to enlarge our understanding of conservatism and at times further marginalized the Right. That was particularly true of the so-called consensus scholarship that briefly dominated American historiography after World War II.⁵ The consensus scholars did take note of one of the most serious shortcomings of the progressive view of conservatism. They recognized that the Right did not consist only of elites defending wealth and privilege, that there was a popular, grass-roots Right—most immediately visible to them in the alarming rise of “McCarthyism” in the early 1950s—that needed explanation. But little in their explanations of what such scholars at times called the “radical Right,” the “New Right,” or the “pseudo-conservative revolt” suggested that conservatives were people whose ideas or grievances should be taken seriously or that the Right deserved attention as a distinct element of the American political tradition. Instead, the consensus approach tended to produce a dismissive view of conservatism, a view suggested by the literary critic Lionel Trilling’s famous 1950 statement, in the introduction to *The Liberal Imagination*:

In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation. This does not mean, of course, that there is no impulse to conservatism or to reaction. Such impulses are certainly very strong, perhaps even stronger than most of us know. But the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas.⁶

Fourteen years later, in the midst of a presidential campaign that seems in retrospect to have challenged such assumptions, Richard Hofstadter (Trilling’s colleague and friend) wrote of Barry Goldwater that he “represents a very special minority point of view which is not even preponderant in his own party.” “When, in all our history,” Hofstadter asked, “has anyone with ideas so bizarre, so archaic, so self-confounding, so remote from the basic American consensus, ever got so

⁴ Perhaps the most influential version of the “progressive” interpretation of American history is Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, 2 vols. (New York, 1927). Among the discussions (and critiques) of progressive scholarship and the assumptions behind it are Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968); and Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), esp. 92–108, 206–78.

⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948), was one of the first expressions of what later came to be known as “consensus” assumptions. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955), is perhaps the purest expression of those ideas, including a brusque dismissal of the influence of the Right: “The ironic flaw in American liberalism lies in the fact that we have never had a real conservative tradition” (p. 57). John Higham, “The Cult of the ‘American Consensus’: Homogenizing Our History,” *Commentary*, 27 (1959): 94–95, is the critical assessment that gave the “consensus school” its name. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 320–60, examines and criticizes consensus scholarship.

⁶ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York, 1950), ix. Trilling was, however, more willing than many of his liberal contemporaries to concede that conservatism retained considerable strength in American culture, even as he dismissed it as a serious intellectual movement.

far?"⁷ The result of such assumptions was the tendency of consensus scholars to explain much American conservatism as if it were a kind of pathology—a "paranoid style," "symbolic politics," a product of "status anxiety"—an irrational or semi-rational aberration from a firmly established mainstream.⁸

But it was not just "consensus" scholars who had trouble taking conservatism seriously. New Left scholarship, which attacked the consensus with great effectiveness for ignoring or marginalizing the Left, had relatively little to say about the Right. That was in part because of the way much of the New Left celebrated, even romanticized, "the people." Having repudiated the liberal suspicion of "mass politics" and embraced instead the concept of "participatory democracy," scholars of the Left had difficulty conceding that mass movements could be anything but democratic and progressive; they found it difficult to acknowledge that they could emerge from the Right.⁹ But New Left scholars also neglected conservatism because, no less than the consensus historians they were challenging, they were in large measure preoccupied with the Cold War and the liberalism they believed supported it. One of the central assumptions of New Left political history, an assumption associated at first with William Appleman Williams and his students but one that ultimately spread far wider among radical historians, was that the ideology of capitalist hegemony in modern America has not been conventional conservatism but "corporate liberalism," which has shaped American foreign policy and domestic life alike.¹⁰ New Left political scholarship has, therefore,

⁷ Richard Hofstadter, "A Long View: Goldwater in History," *New York Review of Books* (October 8, 1964): 17–20. Peter Viereck, one of the contributors to *The New American Right* in 1955, had by 1963—when a second edition of this influential book was published—partially disavowed his own earlier, dismissive view of conservatism and by implication Hofstadter's as well. He had failed, he acknowledged, to recognize "something far more serious intellectually [than McCarthyism]—the non-McCarthyite, non-thought-controlling movement known as 'the new conservatism.'" Viereck, "The Philosophical 'New Conservatism,'" in Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (Garden City, N.Y., 1963), 185.

⁸ The most celebrated expressions of the "consensus" approach to non-elite conservative dissent were the essays collected in Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (New York, 1955). Richard Hofstadter was the leading historical voice in this reassessment, especially in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1965), which included his influential essay "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," first published in *The New American Right*. Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, 2d edn. (New York, 1962), is a partial exception to this trend. Rossiter never doubted the primacy of the liberal tradition in America, but he treated conservatism as a serious (if marginal) alternative intellectual stance. According to two recent, sympathetic historians of the Right, Rossiter "announced to the academic world that right of center was intellectually respectable." Charles W. Dunn and J. David Woodard, *American Conservatism from Burke to Bush: An Introduction* (New York, 1991), 4.

⁹ The ferocity with which the New Left attacked consensus scholarship for linking populism with such apparently anti-democratic movements as McCarthyism reflected, at least in part, this reluctance to accept that mass popular politics could embrace the Right. Scholarly work that attempted to rehabilitate the populists (and mass movements in general) includes Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America: Midwestern Populist Thought* (New York, 1962); Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York, 1976); Bruce Palmer, "Man Over Money": *The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980). One of the first important challenges to the Hofstadter view of populism was C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," *American Scholar*, 28 (1959): 55–72, reprinted in Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, rev. edn. (Baton Rouge, La., 1968), 141–66. Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), argued, further, that support for McCarthy did not arise from "populist" impulses but from among traditionally right-wing, conservative groups.

¹⁰ William Appleman Williams suggested the outlines of the "corporate liberal" approach to

generally been more interested in discrediting liberalism—and, within the academic world, in wresting leadership and initiative from liberal scholars—than in confronting what it has generally considered a less formidable foe: the self-proclaimed Right.¹¹

Nor has the “organizational synthesis,” which has played a large role in recent years in shaping interpretations of twentieth-century America, found much room in its framework for the Right. The existence of a conservative tradition is not, perhaps, incompatible with the organizational view that the driving force in the modern world is the emergence of large-scale bureaucratic institutions. But neither does a conservative tradition play a very active role in that view. The organizational approach, therefore, tends to portray conservatism (when it considers it at all) in the same way it considers other forms of dissent: as the futile, and dwindling, resistance of provincial or marginal peoples to the inexorable forces of modernism.¹²

More recently, historians interested in the idea of “republicanism” have done much to revive scholarly interest in resistance to “progress” and the progressive state and to identify a powerful political tradition distinct from liberalism. Most scholarship on republicanism, however, identifies it as a set of ideas that *preceded* liberalism and ultimately fell victim to it—at the time of the American Revolution, according to some, and in the mid and late nineteenth century according to others. By the twentieth century, most such scholars imply, the nation’s ideological landscape was largely devoid of anti-progressive challenges to the liberal center.¹³

But to say that these and other interpretive models have left little room for the Right is not to answer the question of why historians have neglected conservatism. It is only to restate it. Why has American conservatism not claimed enough

twentieth-century history in his classic work *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1959), but he gave fuller expression to the idea in *Americans in a Changing World: A History of the United States in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1978). See also, among many other works, R. Jeffrey Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern American Political Theory, 1890–1920* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982); and Martin Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890–1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (New York, 1987).

¹¹ Robert Nisbet, recalling his own experiences as a conservative in the academic world of the 1960s, noted that “the Left never hassled me as they did the Kennedy liberals and also Old Socialists . . . In later years, other conservatives . . . told me their experience had been the same as mine; they were largely left alone, at least in comparison with those who weakly or despairingly kept trying to remind the Rudds and Savios of the nation that they were friends of the Revolution by other means.” *The Making of Modern Society* (New York, 1986), 17.

¹² One of the earliest and clearest statements of the assumptions of the “organizational synthesis” is Louis Galambos, “The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History,” *Business History Review*, 44 (1970); a later evaluation is Galambos, “Technology, Political Economy, and Professionalization: Central Themes of the Organizational Synthesis,” *Business History Review*, 57 (1983): 472–93. A recent reconsideration is Brian Balogh, “Reorganizing the Organizational Synthesis,” *Studies in American Political Development*, 5 (1991): 119–72. A more skeptical view of the organizational synthesis can be found in Alan Brinkley, “Writing the History of Contemporary America: Dilemmas and Challenges,” *Daedalus*, 113 (1984): 121–42.

¹³ Daniel Rodgers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” *Journal of American History*, 79 (June 1992): 11–38, is a thoughtful, if skeptical, account of the influence of republicanism on modern scholarship. Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914–1960* (New York, 1989), esp. 183–95, 331–36, argues that republican traditions remained hardy well into the twentieth century.

attention from scholars to cause them to revise or overthrow their conceptual models in order to make a place for it? How have scholars managed to content themselves with a set of paradigms in which conservatism plays so small a role? Answering those questions requires considering not just the nature of historiography but the nature of American conservatism itself.

AMERICAN CONSERVATISM IS NOT EASY TO CHARACTERIZE, even for those who view it sympathetically. Conservatism encompasses a broad range of ideas, impulses, and constituencies, and many conservatives feel no obligation to choose among the conflicting, even incompatible impulses, that fuel their politics. Individual conservatives find it possible, and at times perhaps even necessary, to embrace several clashing ideas at once. Conservatism is not, in short, an "ideology," with a secure and consistent internal structure. It is a cluster of related (and sometimes unrelated) ideas from which those who consider themselves conservatives draw different elements at different times. This ideological juggling makes the American Right particularly baffling to many of those historians who (as most do) stand outside it and try to make sense of it. Still, conservatism is no more inchoate than liberalism, progressivism, socialism, or any other broad political stance that describes a large and diverse group of people.¹⁴ And so its lack of ideological consistency and clarity is not a sufficient answer to the question of why it has received so much less attention than these other clusters of political ideas.

In the twentieth century, at least, American conservatism has also been relatively late in developing as a major intellectual or political force. (In this sense, there is at least some truth to Lionel Trilling's 1950 evaluation of the Right.) There have always been conservatives and reactionaries in modern America, but they have not always been very effective in making themselves heard or felt. George Nash, a sympathetic chronicler, has written that until at least 1945 "no articulate, coordinated, self-consciously conservative intellectual force existed in the United States. There were, at most, scattered voices of protest, profoundly pessimistic about the future of their country."¹⁵ Nor, prior to 1945, did American conservatives often constitute an effective political force, as the abysmal performance of such organizational efforts as the Liberty League in the 1930s suggests.¹⁶ Not until the postwar era did large numbers of conservatives manage to articulate a serious and important critique of liberal culture. And only in the 1970s did they begin to make that critique the basis of an effective political movement by creating (among other things) a network of publications, think tanks, and political action committees that have come to rival and often outper-

¹⁴ Daniel Rodgers has written provocatively about the diversity of meanings of conventional political labels in "In Search of Progressivism," *Reviews in American History*, 10 (December 1982): 113-32; and in *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (New York, 1987).

¹⁵ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America: Since 1945* (New York, 1976), xiii.

¹⁶ George Wolfskill, *The Revolt of the Conservatives: A History of the American Liberty League, 1934-1940* (Boston, 1962); Robert F. Burk, *The Corporate State and the Broker State: The Du Ponts and American National Politics, 1925-1940* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), esp. 143-253.

form their powerful liberal counterparts.¹⁷ Conservatism as an intellectually serious and politically effective movement is, in short, a relatively new phenomenon—born of the frustrations of political exile in the 1930s and 1940s, the passions of the anticommunist crusades of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and perhaps above all the political and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. It has been slow to emerge in a visible and powerful-enough form to demand scholarly attention.

But this, too, seems an inadequate explanation for the absence of scholarly attention to the Right. If historians have done nothing else in the last twenty years, they have demonstrated their ability to retrieve the experiences of people and groups whose lives and ideas are not immediately visible in mainstream politics and culture. There have, for example, been long periods in the twentieth century when the Left has seemed dormant, in which its constituencies and goals were not immediately visible. And yet historians have very effectively portrayed the life and ideas of the Left during its years in the wilderness. The same case remains to be made for the Right.

A BETTER EXPLANATION for the inattention of historians may be that much American conservatism in the twentieth century has rested on a philosophical foundation not readily distinguishable from the liberal tradition, to which it is, in theory, opposed. Few historians any longer agree with Louis Hartz's claim that no important political theory has taken root in America unless it was grounded in a commitment to democratic capitalism and Lockean conceptions of freedom. But there was at least some truth in Hartz's claim, and the claim of scholars influenced by him, that "to be an American conservative it is necessary to reassert liberalism."¹⁸ Indeed, the defense of liberty, the preservation of individual freedom, has been as central to much of American conservatism in the twentieth century as it has been to American liberalism. Many conservatives would argue that in the twentieth century it has been much more central to their concerns than it has to the concerns of liberals.

That claim has some basis. Late nineteenth-century (or "classical") liberalism, epitomized in the ideas of the Liberal Republicans of the 1870s and 1880s,¹⁹ rested securely on the individualistic, anti-statist assumptions of John Stuart Mill and the Manchester liberals of England. What came to be known as "liberalism" in mid and late twentieth-century America has been to a significant extent a conscious repudiation of the anti-statist elements of that classical tradition. It has been, instead, an effort to build the case for a more active and powerful state (even if one in which ideas of individual rights played an important, often central role).

¹⁷ Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York, 1986).

¹⁸ Hartz, *Liberal Tradition in America*, 145–77; Peter Viereck said much the same thing in 1963 when he wrote that "our conservatism, in the absence of medieval feudal relics, must grudgingly admit it has little real tradition to conserve except that of liberalism." "Philosophical 'New Conservatism,'" 199. See also Stuart Gerry Brown, "Democracy, the New Conservatism, and the Liberal Tradition in America," *Ethics*, 66 (October 1955): 8.

¹⁹ John G. Sproat, *The Best Men: Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1968), 3–10, 143–68.

The anti-statist liberal tradition of nineteenth-century America has, therefore, increasingly become the property of those who in the twentieth century are generally known as conservatives (or, as some of them prefer, libertarians).

Nothing, in fact, so irritated many conservatives of the 1930s and 1940s as the New Deal's appropriation of the word "liberal." The real liberals, they insisted, were the enemies of New Deal statism, the defenders of individual rights against the "social engineering" and "paternalism" of the Left.²⁰ True liberalism, Herbert Hoover argued in 1938, rested on the "deep realization that economic freedom cannot be sacrificed if political freedom is to be preserved." The New Deal was not liberalism but a form of "national regimentation" reminiscent of fascism and communism. It was, Hoover argued, "a vast shift from the American concept of human rights which even the government may not infringe to those social philosophies where men are wholly subjective to the state. It is a vast casualty to Liberty if it shall be continued." Liberalism, which had emerged ascendant from World War I, "is today imperiled and endangered."²¹

Perhaps the single most influential contemporary statement of "conservative" opposition to the New Deal came from a man who always insisted he was a liberal, even as he became a hero to many right-wing intellectuals: Friedrich A. Hayek. Hayek was a distinguished Austrian economist who emigrated to England in 1931 and later moved to the United States, where he settled at the University of Chicago. With the specter of totalitarian oppression in Central Europe always in mind, Hayek devoted himself to refurbishing the tattered reputation of the classical, anti-statist liberalism of the nineteenth century. He became (along with others such as the economist Milton Friedman and the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott) an important voice on behalf of a form of libertarianism in modern society and a bitter critic of the "collectivism" he saw sweeping through Britain and America in the 1930s.²²

Out of these concerns emerged Hayek's celebrated 1944 book, *The Road to Serfdom*. It was not a work of scholarship, Hayek readily conceded. It was a "political book," a call to arms—a warning, directed at a general readership, of the dangers confronting the West. (He began writing it in London during the Nazi blitz, so it is perhaps not surprising that it had a superheated, polemical tone.) Somewhat implausibly, it became a major best seller, a *Reader's Digest* condensed book, and a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. To many postwar conservatives, Hayek's book served as a philosophical and even programmatic bible.²³

The Road to Serfdom was, at its heart, a strenuous polemic against the New Deal on what Hayek insisted were liberal grounds. The New Dealers, he claimed, offered fervent assurances that it was possible to increase the economic power of

²⁰ Michael W. Miles, *The Odyssey of the American Right* (New York, 1980), 18–20.

²¹ Herbert Hoover, *Addresses upon the American Road, 1933–1938* (New York, 1938), 138; Hoover, *The Challenge to Liberty* (New York, 1934), 103, 190.

²² C. Hartley Grattan, "Hayek's Hayride," *Harper's* (July 1945): 48–49; Hayek to Walter Lippmann, April 6, 1937, Lippmann Papers, Sterling Library, Yale University, Series III, Box 77.

²³ Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago, 1944). For a discussion of the impact of the book on its time, see Theodore Rosenof, "Freedom, Planning, and Totalitarianism: The Reception of F. A. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 5 (1974): 149–65. Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, 34–37, discusses the influence of Hayek's book on postwar American conservatives.

the state without infringing on personal liberty. But the totalitarian experiences of Germany and the Soviet Union illustrated the impossibility of maintaining that balance. "Economic control," he wrote, "is not merely control of a sector of human life which can be separated from the rest; it is the control of the means of all our ends." And, given that connection, the most dangerous form of economic control was statism, for "the separation of economic and political aims is an essential guaranty of individual freedom." Thus, he wrote, "It is necessary now to state the unpalatable truth that it is Germany whose fate we are in some danger of repeating." The United States, like Nazi Germany, had embarked on the "road to serfdom."²⁴

The centrality to modern conservatism of the essentially liberal concerns that Hayek raised—the fear of the state, the elevation of individual liberty above all other values, the insistence that personal freedom is inseparable from economic freedom—helps explain the dismissive view of conservative intellectual life among many liberal scholars. To them, this libertarian conservatism is simply a rigid and unreflective form of assumptions that liberals themselves share, not a fundamental or intellectually important challenge to the reigning political assumptions of American life.²⁵

That much of this individualistic conservatism has had a strong regional base has only added to the tendency of historians to dismiss it. Historians of the South, to be sure, have long acknowledged conservatism as a central element of their region's history. Indeed, in no other field of American scholarship have conservative ideas received such intensive and sophisticated analysis. Otherwise, relatively few scholars have until recently shown much interest in, or even recognition of, regionalism as a force in modern American history. According to many recent conceptual models, regionalism is a declining force, overwhelmed by economic centralization and mass culture. The history of modern conservatism—and, in particular, its close ties to the American West—suggests otherwise.²⁶

Conservatism has been an important presence in every area of the United States. But the dramatic rise of the Right in the last half-century may owe more to the West than to any other region. Of the most successful national conservative leaders of the postwar era, Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan, all but Wallace were westerners. George Bush may or may not have been a genuine conservative, but it seems clear that he acquired his right-wing credentials (frail as they may have been) from his experience in Texas politics.²⁷ The most secure voting bloc (and the best source of money) for

²⁴ Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, ix, 2, 92, 145–46.

²⁵ Examples of the liberal response to Hayek's book include Alvin Hansen, "The New Crusade against Planning," *New Republic* (January 1, 1945): 9–12, and Seymour E. Harris, "Breaking a Lance with Mr. Hayek," *New York Times Book Review* (December 9, 1945): 3, 14, 16.

²⁶ The emergence in the last decade or so of an energetic group of younger scholars engaged in a "new western history" has served as an important challenge to the tendency of many twentieth-century American historians to neglect regionalism as an important force in modern society. Two collections of essays that lay out some of the premises of the "new western history" are William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York, 1992); and Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, Kan., 1991). So far, however, relatively few of the new western historians have devoted much attention to the Right.

²⁷ Garry Wills, "The Hostage," *New York Review of Books* (August 13, 1992): 21–28.

conservative candidates and conservative causes has been the western states. Conservative intellectual life has found its most prominent homes at universities outside the East: the University of Chicago and, more recently, Stanford and other California universities.²⁸

One reason for this is the continuing distinctiveness of the West's social and economic circumstances and the particular appeal of conservatism's libertarian, anti-statist ethos to people dealing with those circumstances. Resentment of presumed domination by the East is one of the oldest themes in western American history. It has helped produce the populist revolt of the late nineteenth century and periodic movements of social and economic protest since. In the past half-century, moreover, many westerners have rechanneled the resentments that created populism—away from the great private economic institutions that were the traditional targets of western anger and toward the federal government, which many westerners believe has assumed the intrusive and oppressive role that banks and railroads once played as the great obstacle to western freedom. That should not, perhaps, be surprising. The federal government is the greatest landowner in the West. (It owns, for example, 44 percent of the state of Arizona, 90 percent of the state of Alaska). It controls an enormous proportion of the natural resources on which western economic growth largely depends. Many of its environmental regulations impinge on western preferences and western enterprises much more directly and severely than on their eastern counterparts. (The revolt against the 55 mile-per-hour speed limit in the 1980s was primarily a phenomenon of western libertarian conservatism, fueled by a sense of the disproportionate burdens the regulation inflicted on the region.)²⁹

That intrusive federal presence has been particularly difficult for many westerners to accept, because it has coincided with, and (according to many conservatives) obstructed, the West's rise to economic eminence. In reality, the West's rise to eminence is itself in large part a product of government largesse. Without the great federally funded infrastructure projects of the twentieth century—without the highways, airports, dams, water and irrigation projects, and other facilities the government has provided—the economic development of the Southwest in particular would have been impossible.³⁰ But few western conservatives have shown much inclination to confront such contradictions. They have focused not on those state initiatives benefiting them but on those they believe have served the declining East by curbing westerners' freedom to develop their own region. Kevin Phillips, an energetic chronicler (and, often, defender) of the modern Right, makes this point explicitly: that the West (or, to use the term he coined, the "Sun Belt") stands in dramatic contrast to the exhausted regions of the North and East, that it is the engine that can restore America's economic

²⁸ Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman, Okla., 1991), 601–11, summarizes the history of the rise of the western Right.

²⁹ Michael McGerr, "Is There a Twentieth-Century West?" in Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin, *Under an Open Sky*, 248–50; Gerald D. Nash, "Bureaucracy and Reform in the West: Notes on the Influence of a Neglected Interest Group," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 2 (July 1971): 295–305.

³⁰ See, for example, Jordan A. Schwarz, *The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (New York, 1993); Leonard Arrington, *The Changing Economic Structure of the Mountain West, 1850–1950* (Logan, Utah, 1963); James L. Clayton, "The Impact of the Cold War on the Economy of California and Utah, 1946–1965," *Pacific Historical Review*, 36 (November 1967): 449–73.

greatness. He wrote in 1982: "I believe that the Sun Belt . . . is the key to making America work again both as a polity and as an economy," that "the frontier Frederick Jackson Turner believed closed is economically and spiritually open once more," that westerners' "churches, their businesses and their patriotism demonstrate the ongoing vitality of old American credos and self-reliant ways of doing things."³¹ The belief that unfettered economic freedom has been responsible for western economic growth—that, as Barry Goldwater has written, "individual initiative [has] made the desert bloom"—may be a myth.³² But, if so, it is a durable one, which fuels western conservatism and gives it a powerfully libertarian base.

LIBERTARIAN ASSUMPTIONS (REINFORCED AT TIMES BY REGIONALISM) have permeated modern American conservatism. But they have not constituted the whole of it. There are other powerful currents running through conservative thought, currents that have demonstrated growing power in the decades since World War II, that are not libertarian at all but intensely normative. Relatively few conservatives have been content to base their claims on purely libertarian grounds, and some, at least, have seen in America's "cult of liberty" a dangerous threat to civic virtue and social stability.³³ The forms these normative concerns have assumed, and the apparent contradiction between them and the libertarianism with which they coexist and in whose language they are often couched, have been especially difficult for historians to explain. This form of conservatism often seems intellectually inconsistent and hence resistant to analysis. Much more important, it has posed a direct challenge to some of modern liberalism's (and the modern Left's) most basic assumptions about the nature of modern American society.

The normative assumptions that long informed much European conservatism—the belief that a good society must find its grounding not simply in liberty but in respect for moral traditions, universal values, and inherited social hierarchies—did not find much favor in American thought through most of the nineteenth century or much of the twentieth.³⁴ To be sure, there were notable exceptions. Such ideas have always had a diffuse appeal to some privileged elites.³⁵ And they have had a special appeal to elites (and others) in the American South, which has throughout its history bred a number of defenses of hierarchical, organic notions of society, not only as rationalizations for white supremacy

³¹ Kevin P. Phillips, *Post-Conservative America: People, Politics, and Ideology in a Time of Crisis* (New York, 1982), 237–38; Phillips introduced the idea of the "Sun Belt" in *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1969).

³² Barry M. Goldwater with Jack Casserly, *Goldwater* (New York, 1988), 35.

³³ See, for example, Robert Nisbet, "Conservatives and Libertarians: Uneasy Cousins," *Modern Age*, 24 (1980): 4–5; Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 76–81.

³⁴ George Nash notes, for example, that "Burke was not highly esteemed in American academic circles in the 1930s" (*Conservative Intellectual Movement*, p. 69). Robert Nisbet observed similarly that Burke and Tocqueville were almost entirely absent from twentieth-century intellectual life, even among conservatives, until the 1940s (*Making of Modern Society*, p. 8).

³⁵ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York, 1981), offers a provocative, and largely sympathetic, view of a form of normative cultural conservatism among elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See esp. chaps. 4, 5, and 7.

and economic oligarchy but also (as the Agrarians made clear in 1930 when they published *I'll Take My Stand*) as expressions of intellectual unhappiness with the progressive norms of the industrial world.³⁶ Historians, however, have generally explained the South's commitment to organicism and hierarchy as evidence of the region's distinctiveness, not as a sign of broader challenges to America's liberal core.

Until World War II, there was perhaps some justification for such assumptions. In the 1950s, however, a number of conservative intellectuals (many of them neither members of traditional elites nor southerners) launched a strenuous assault on relativistic and libertarian visions of society and built a case for the importance of inherited values and traditional norms that was not rooted in regional concerns.³⁷ One of the most influential was Russell Kirk, who claimed at times to have been influenced by the Agrarians and whose 1953 book *The Conservative Mind* ultimately became an important force in stimulating the growth of Burkean ideas in the American Right (and in encouraging the Right to appropriate Tocqueville as a source for its concerns). Kirk included among his six "canons of conservative thought" the "belief that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience" and that "political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems"; "affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life, as distinguished from the narrowing uniformity and equalitarianism and utilitarian aims of most radical systems"; the "conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes"; and the faith that "tradition and sound prejudice provide checks upon man's anarchic impulses." The "true conservative," he wrote,

may be a resolute and strong-minded clergyman, endeavouring, in his parish, to redeem men and women from their bondage to modern appetites, contending against all the power of the cheap press and the dreary cinema and the blatant radio, reminding them that they are part of a great eternal order, in which it is their lot to serve the ends of love and justice, venerating the mysterious social union of the dead, the living, and those yet to be born.³⁸

At about the same time, Leo Strauss and his disciples at the University of Chicago were offering a strong defense of Western and classical intellectual traditions as a source of eternal truths and timeless values. Modern social thought, Strauss argued, was not only incapable of improving on its classical forebears, it actually served to erode the moral and intellectual foundations of civilization. Liberal political theory, with its emphasis on individual liberty and subjective morality and its eager rejection of "natural right," leads, Strauss wrote, "to

³⁶ *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, by Twelve Southerners (New York, 1930).

³⁷ Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming, *The Conservative Movement* (Boston, 1988), give special attention to the normative qualities of modern conservatism. "Conservatives, as much as Leftists," they write, "are united by a distinctive approach to reality—particularly nature. For the Left, the concept 'nature' suggests infinite plasticity; for the Right, by contrast, it is something fixed, and even normative" (ix-x).

³⁸ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind, from Burke to Santayana* (1953; London, 1954), 17-18, 140-65, 436. On the positive reaction to Kirk among conservative intellectuals, see Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 74. Kirk's book followed, and built on, other, less widely noted texts of the postwar period that offered similar defenses of a more normative conservatism. See, for example, Nisbet, *Quest for Community*; Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, 1948); Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt against Revolt, 1815-1949* (London, 1949).

nihilism—nay it is identical with nihilism.” For, he argued, “Once we realize that the principles of our actions have no other support than our blind choice, we really do not believe in them any more. We cannot wholeheartedly act upon them any more. We cannot live any more as responsible beings . . . The more we cultivate reason, the more we cultivate nihilism.”³⁹ The effort to root principles in particular historical circumstances, to deny the existence of “universal norms,” to resist “efforts to transcend the actual”—an effort that formed the basis of the modernist project—had, Strauss claimed, produced a society in which no principle or value could withstand attack. The attempt by historicists “to make man absolutely at home in this world ended in man’s becoming absolutely homeless.”⁴⁰

Neither Kirk nor Strauss enjoyed wide recognition or acclaim in the 1950s, when they were doing their most important work. Kirk remained for many years an isolated, largely unread cult figure (with a very small cult); and Strauss, in part because of his frequent obscurantism and his highly elitist views about the proper audience for philosophical ideas, developed no significant following beyond the fervent circle of admirers he collected (and retains) within academia.⁴¹

But other intellectual defenders of normative conservatism attracted considerable attention. Catholic conservative intellectuals (perhaps most prominently, William F. Buckley) have long attacked the relativism and excessive individualism of modern liberalism. At times, they have renounced industrialism altogether and have turned instead to an image of a preindustrial world in which the bonds of community were sustained by timeless values protected by the church.⁴² Some have drawn from the church’s invigorated twentieth-century interest in Thomas Aquinas and Aquinas’s ideas of an organic community, ideas the Catholic Left has used at times as well.⁴³ Major writers and artists of the first half of the twentieth century (among them T. S. Eliot and Willa Cather) rebelled against the relativism and the acquisitive, materialistic values of modern industrial society, a stance vigorously defended in the 1960s and beyond by, among others, Saul Bellow. “The tendency of unlimited industrialism,” Eliot wrote in 1939, “is to create bodies of men and women—of all classes—detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion. And a mob will be no less of a mob if it is well fed, well clothed, well housed, and well disciplined.”⁴⁴ Some

³⁹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), 4–5.

⁴⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 16–18.

⁴¹ Alan Udoff, ed., *Leo Strauss’s Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement* (Boulder, Colo., 1991), contains recent, appreciative critiques of Strauss’s work. But Shadia B. Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (Houndsmill, Eng., 1988), and Stephen Holmes, “Truths for Philosophers Alone?” *Times Literary Supplement* (December 1–7, 1989): 1319–24, are less sympathetic.

⁴² William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom”* (Chicago, 1951), was perhaps the most visible example of this Catholic social conservatism in the early postwar period. See also Ross Hoffman, *The Organic State: An Historical View of Contemporary Politics* (New York, 1939). Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), is an important recent study.

⁴³ George Q. Flynn, *American Catholics and the Roosevelt Presidency, 1932–1936* (Lexington, Ky., 1968), 22–35. The revived interest in Aquinas was sparked, or at least signaled, by the 1891 publication of Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum novarum* or *On the Condition of the Working Class* and reinforced by Pius XI’s 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* or *Forty Years After: On Reconstructing the Social Order*; see Leo XIII and Pius XI, *Two Basic Social Encyclicals* (New York, 1943).

⁴⁴ See, for example, Eliot’s 1939 lectures at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, published as *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London, 1939); quotation is from p. 21. Saul Bellow’s attraction to a nor-

Jewish intellectuals have cited the religious and civic traditions of Judaism in an attack on what they consider the excessive emphasis on individual rights and liberties in modern American liberalism; a successful society, they believe, must rest on a set of moral standards shared, and if necessary enforced, by the community.⁴⁵

In the 1970s and 1980s, this normative intellectual tradition began to attract a large political and even popular following. The Straussians, for example, were at the center of the intellectual and academic debates of the 1980s, and (as the enormous success of Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind* demonstrates) they won considerable sympathy for their argument that tradition can provide society with a much-needed moral and spiritual core.⁴⁶ The so-called neo-conservatives, most of them former socialists, began in the 1960s to embrace and promote a form of normative conservatism in their effort to discredit the New Left. They did not, on the whole, embrace Strauss or Kirk. But their denunciations of the radicalism and relativism of the 1960s, their calls for a re-legitimation of traditional centers of authority, and their cries for a refurbishment of American nationalism and a recognition of the moral claims of American democracy came increasingly to resemble the appeals of other, more longstanding conservatives.⁴⁷ (Their appeals have found an echo as well among a group of intellectuals—sometimes described as “neo-liberals”—who on social and cultural issues at least have adopted normative stances in many ways similar to those of some self-proclaimed conservatives.⁴⁸)

mative conservatism is evident in his admiring, if somewhat guarded, introduction to Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987), 11–18.

⁴⁵ Daniel Bell, for example, told an interviewer in 1978 of “a fear of mass action, a fear of passions let loose. A lot of this goes back to a particularly Jewish fear. In traditional Jewish life, going back particularly to the Assyrian and Babylonian episodes . . . there's a fear of what happens when man is let loose. When man doesn't have halacha, the law, he becomes chia, an animal.” Nathan Liebowitz, *Daniel Bell and the Agony of Modern Liberalism* (Westport, Conn., 1985), 70.

⁴⁶ Richard Rorty and Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., debate the implications of Bloom's book in “Straussianism, Democracy, and Allan Bloom,” *New Republic* (April 4, 1988): 28–37.

⁴⁷ Irving Kristol, *On the Democratic Idea in America* (New York, 1972), 330–33; Phillips, *Post-Conservative America*, 5–49. Robert A. Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (New York, 1975), especially in chapter 5, suggests the confluence of neo-conservative thought with an older tradition of normative conservatism. Critical discussion of the neo-conservative movement includes Peter Steinfels, *The Neo-Conservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America's Politics* (New York, 1979); Nathan Glazer, Peter Steinfels, James Q. Wilson, and Norman Birnbaum, “Neoconservatism: Pro and Con,” *Partisan Review*, 47 (1980): 497–521; Amitai Etzioni, “The Neoconservatives,” *Partisan Review*, 44 (1977): 431–37; Seymour Martin Lipset, “Neoconservatism: Myth and Reality,” *Society*, 25 (July–August 1988): 29–37.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, 1982); Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York, 1983). These new critiques of liberalism, many of them ostensibly from the Left, are often difficult to distinguish from neo-conservative and even older conservative critiques. Some, for example, have much in common with the work of the English political theorist Michael Oakeshott, a major spokesman for an older conservative tradition. Jeremy Waldron, for example, notes a similarity between Oakeshott's description of a modern, liberal rationalist (“Like a man whose only language is Esperanto, he has no means of knowing that the world did not begin in the twentieth century”) and Sandel's (“a person wholly without character, without moral depth, for to have character is to know that I move in a history I neither summon nor command”). Waldron, “Politics without Purpose?” *Times Literary Supplement* (July 6–12, 1990): 715–16.

IF THE ARGUMENTS OF THESE CONSERVATIVE INTELLECTUALS were the whole, or even the most important part, of the normative conservatism of recent years, historians would probably have relatively little difficulty explaining and categorizing their ideas. But there is another segment of the contemporary Right whose demands are considerably more radical and whose critique of the contemporary world derives not from elitist notions of tradition and morality but from what, for lack of a better term, might be called a deep-seated cultural and religious fundamentalism.⁴⁹ This is, in the end, what has constituted the greatest "problem" of American conservatism (for historians and for liberal culture in general): the challenge of understanding and explaining a phenomenon so profoundly at odds with what many Americans have come to believe are the uncontested assumptions of modern Western society.

The dramatic resurgence of fundamentalism as a social and political force took almost all liberals (and almost all historians) by surprise when it became visible in the 1970s.⁵⁰ The goal of the fundamentalist Right was to challenge the secular, scientific values of modern culture, values most liberals have come to consider norms of modernity. Many liberals were, therefore, surprised and even baffled by the suddenly powerful assaults on such symbols of "progress" as the secularization of popular culture, the teaching of evolution, even the principle of the separation of church and state.⁵¹ Fundamentalists revived ancient quarrels over the banning of books and movies. Some used religious arguments to frame positions on seemingly non-religious issues, claiming, for example, that the Bible mandated a massive expansion of the American defense budget (an argument that Ronald Reagan, on occasion, seemed to endorse). Others argued that biblical prophecies of the coming millennium should be a factor in the shaping of public policy (a view that Secretary of the Interior James Watt once cited in defense of his opposition to environmental regulations).⁵¹ Many mixed their religious fervor with an essentially secular fundamentalism, which rested on a normative view of "traditional" middle-class constructions of family, community, and morality.

Indeed, the most powerful single strain within fundamentalist conservatism through much of the 1970s and 1980s may have been its assault on the efforts of modern feminists to redefine gender roles. Battles over abortion, birth control, the Equal Rights Amendment, and other gender-based issues (and, more recently, battles over homosexuality) have mobilized the fundamentalist Right more successfully and energetically than any other issue.⁵² Anti-feminist women were

⁴⁹ I use the term "fundamentalism" not simply to describe people with fundamentalist religious beliefs (some of whom are involved in the so-called Christian Right but many of whom are not politically active) but a larger group, often described as the "New Right" or the "populist Right," who share a commitment to purging American culture and politics of what they consider its relativistic, anti-traditional character.

⁵⁰ "The conflict," writes the Christian conservative Carl Horn, "is between those who believe that law and public policy derive from religious belief and those who reject such an assumption." Gottfried and Fleming, *Conservative Movement*, 85.

⁵¹ Paul S. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 140-51, 304-24.

⁵² Jane Sherron De Hart has contrasted the normative quality of the anti-feminist position to the more relativistic stance of feminists. "Gender," she writes (characterizing the right-wing position) "was sacred. It was a given: a biologically, physically, spiritually defined thing; an unambiguous, clear, definite vision of humanity into two. Feminists, however, insisted that gender, like race, was a social

especially active in the revival of the fundamentalist Right. And they were instrumental in tying it to two important and related claims: that a family structure rooted in traditional notions of gender is the basis of a stable, moral society, and that a moral consensus in society is, in turn, essential to the stability of the family. "The family is the core institution that decisively determines the nature of society itself," one pro-family activist wrote in 1980. It is, she insisted, "the primary source of moral authority for the developing individual. The moral authority anchored in the family is by its very nature dependent on a consensus of core values within society." In that light, the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s appeared a menacing threat to what anti-feminists believe were once universally accepted norms. Prior to the 1960s, one activist argued in 1982,

America was accepted as being a Christian nation . . . This country was then very much family-oriented. Though divorce, living together outside of marriage, abortion, homosexuality were not uncommon then, they were at least seldom defended in theory. There were moral absolutes that were recognized; and agencies of public expression, including the media and school system, honored those values. Then, unfortunately, over the last twenty years this Judeo-Christian moral consensus has been threatened, challenged, and often times shattered.⁵³

This newly powerful challenge to secular culture has been all the more puzzling to many liberal and leftist scholars because its champions have often couched their essentially normative demands in libertarian language: denouncing a coercive state or an alien "cultural elite" for intruding on the lives of individuals and communities. But the liberal rhetoric should not obscure the larger agenda of most politically active fundamentalists (religious and secular alike), which is not just to protect their own allegiance to "traditional" moral standards but to impose them on society as a whole.

By the early 1980s, it was no longer possible to dismiss conservative fundamentalism in America as a declining rural peculiarity, consigned to oblivion a half-century ago by the Scopes trial and the inexorable forces of modernization. It was necessary to recognize it as a considerable and growing social and political force, which was finding expression at times at the heart of the American state. And while the highly publicized setbacks of some of the most prominent religious fundamentalists of the 1980s considerably weakened their political power, the fundamentalist Right remains a potent, even growing, political force in America (as the 1992 Republican convention suggested), just as it is an important and rapidly growing force in many other areas of the world.⁵⁴

construction; the meaning attached to sexual difference was actually made by humans, not God or Nature, and therefore could be changed." De Hart, "Gender on the Right: Meanings behind the Existential Scream," *Gender and History*, 3 (Autumn 1991): 256. See also Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley, Calif., 1984), 158-75; Zillah R. Eisenstein, "The Sexual Politics of the New Right," *Feminist Theory*, 7 (Spring 1982).

⁵³ Rebecca E. Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia, 1987), 23-25. The statements, quoted in Klatch, are by Onalee McGraw and Virginia Bessey.

⁵⁴ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby have edited a series of volumes, known collectively as the Fundamentalist Project, at the University of Chicago Divinity School in an effort to identify both the international character of fundamentalism and the wide-ranging utility of the concept. Three volumes were in print as of mid-1993, all published by University of Chicago Press: *Fundamentalisms*

In fact, as George Marsden and other historians of modern evangelicalism have revealed, fundamentalism and pentecostalism—the two religious movements that have had the most impact on politics and culture in recent years—were never the dwindling rural phenomena that scholars had assumed in the 1950s and 1960s. The traumatic experience of the Scopes trial stilled the *public* voice of fundamentalism for a time; but throughout the 1930s, and even more aggressively in the 1940s and 1950s, fundamentalist and pentecostal denominations were growing more rapidly than any other religious orders.⁵⁵ What happened in the 1970s was not so much a sudden explosion in the number of evangelicals in America (although that happened, too) but a renewal of cultural and political activism within an already large and well-established religious community.

The resurgence of right-wing fundamentalism in the United States has unsettled many liberal and left-oriented scholars because it has seemed to contradict some of their most basic assumptions about modern society. A rational, economically developed society, progressive intellectuals have tended to believe, does not spurn modernity. It does not reject progress. Liberal scholars have tended to explain the phenomenon by stressing economic backwardness and a kind of cultural irrationality, by emphasizing the oddities of the fundamentalist mind and the idiosyncrasies (or pathologies) of provincial cultures. Leftist scholars have stressed class oppression and economic deprivation but have reached essentially the same conclusion: that fundamentalism was a product of social or economic isolation and powerlessness. The fundamentalist Right, scholars have been tempted to believe, is a group somehow left behind by the modern world—economically, culturally, psychologically—expressing frustration at their isolation and failure.⁵⁶

And yet the reality of modern American fundamentalism, as recent scholarship has begun to demonstrate, is not always, or even usually, congruent with these assumptions. Who, in fact, have been the men and women who have populated the fundamentalist and pentecostal churches, who have protested against “godlessness” and “immorality” in popular culture, who have adopted obscurantist positions on education and publishing, who have joined fundamentalist political crusades to make America a “Christian nation”? Many, perhaps most, of these people have not been poor, provincial folk or helpless victims of economic oppression. They have not been an isolated, rural fringe. They have not been

Observed (Chicago, 1991); *Fundamentalisms and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education* (Chicago, 1993); and *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance* (Chicago, 1993). See also Malise Ruthven, “The Fundamentalist Project,” *Times Literary Supplement* (April 30, 1993): 14.

⁵⁵ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York, 1980), 176–98.

⁵⁶ A classic example is Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1970* (New York, 1970), written before the resurgence of the Right in the 1980s and largely concerned with right-wing movements of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Daniel Bell’s book *The New American Right* was reissued in 1963 under the title *The Radical Right* (Garden City, N.Y., 1963), with new essays by Bell and others reinforcing the implication of the earlier volume that the normative Right was the product of social and psychological dislocation. Among other examples of such analyses, see Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York, 1972). For an extensive discussion of this literature, see Hixson, *Search for the American Right Wing*, 9–26, 61–112.

rootless, anomic people searching for personal stability. To an increasing extent in the last fifty years, they have been people who have moved successfully into at least the lower ranks of the middle class, and sometimes much higher; people who have shared in the fruits of the consumer culture; people who have become part of the bureaucratized world of the organizational society. Many of them have been people with stable families and secure roots in their communities; people from urban areas, members of the new service economy, men and women whose new affluence has not weakened their fundamentalist beliefs. If anything, it may have strengthened them.⁵⁷

Recent scholarship on the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and 1930s makes clear that much the same can be said about its membership, which consisted heavily of urban, middle-class men and women.⁵⁸ Scholarship on right-wing political dissenters in the 1930s suggests that even some of the most extreme and, on the surface, bizarre political leaders of the Depression years attracted supporters who were in all visible respects stable, rational, "normal" people whose deep resentments against the modern world were not rooted in social or economic marginality. That such men and women so often combined a defense of their own moral values with a populist resentment of distant centers of corporate or state power further reinforces this emerging picture of people whose political views are in many ways as fluid, adaptable, pragmatic, and internally inconsistent as any other group and refutes simplistic images of them as obsessive zealots.⁵⁹

The nature of the modern fundamentalist Right suggests, in short, that it has been possible to be a stable, affluent, middle-class person, to have become part of the modern bureaucratic world and to have embraced the consumer culture, to have achieved and enjoyed worldly success, and to have clung nevertheless to a set of cultural and religious beliefs that are at odds with some of the basic assumptions of modernism.⁶⁰ And these possibilities serve as a challenge to the assump-

⁵⁷ Recent work on religious fundamentalism and pentecostalism that supports such a conclusion includes Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*; Gillian Peele, *Revival and Reaction: The Right in Contemporary America* (New York, 1984); David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985); Harrell, *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington, 1975). David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), chronicles the history of the many nativist movements (some of them with fundamentalist roots) that have surfaced repeatedly throughout American history.

⁵⁸ Two important new books that explore the social roots of the Klan and dispute earlier, "paranoid-style" characterizations are Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991); and Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991). Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York, 1967), was an early challenge to the portrait of the Klan as a rural, provincial peculiarity.

⁵⁹ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York, 1982), considers two protest movements of the 1930s that have often been considered right-wing and even fascist and suggests that they were rooted in rational economic grievances and a broad populist sensibility. Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 1983), considers several of the most extreme right-wing leaders of the interwar years and suggests that even their unattractive views were not radically at odds from those of mainstream Americans.

⁶⁰ Among important recent work that suggests the stability and rationality of the non-elite Right is Jerome L. Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1990); Klatch, *Women of the New Right*; Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class,*

tions of most historians that intense religious faith and fundamentalist morality should be understood as secondary or dependent characteristics, products of economic or social maladjustment, to be discarded as their adherents move into the cosmopolitan world. The character of the modern fundamentalist Right suggests that faith and normative morality may, instead, be primary characteristics, with autonomous power. That they survive and flourish in the midst of a culture many historians (and others) have assumed is incompatible with them suggests that it is possible to live in the modern world and enjoy its largesse without absorbing modernist values. They suggest that the integrated economy and powerful mass culture of modern America may not have the homogenizing power that many critics have assumed.

Robert Wiebe, an important figure in the growth of the "organizational synthesis," suggested in a small and largely unnoticed book published in 1975 that the nationalizing and consolidating forces he had described so effectively in *The Search for Order* may not be sufficient to explain the nature of modern society. The United States, he argued, is not a truly consolidated nation. It is, in the phrase he uses as the title of his book, a "segmented society." The American people, Wiebe argued, live in a nation of almost unparalleled diversity and complexity. They cope with that diversity less by rallying behind common assumptions and universal values than by "segmenting" their world: creating discrete, isolated social spheres for their private lives separate from the bureaucratized economic system in which most of them work. America, he argues, is as much a cluster of distinct cultures with divergent world views as it is a centralized, consolidated nation. To the degree that it has maintained stability in modern times, it has done so in large part because the members of its various "segments" have managed to retain a certain autonomy within the larger, national culture and have thus managed to avoid the difficult and disorienting task of adapting their lives and their values to the standards of people different from themselves. "What held Americans together," he wrote, "was their ability to live apart. Society depended upon segmentation."⁶¹

Wiebe's argument, a less startling one today, in the age of multiculturalism, than it was in the 1970s, provides at least a partial explanation for America's recent cultural conflicts. Much of the history of the postwar United States has been the story of two intersecting developments. One is the survival of fundamentalist private values among people who have in other ways adapted themselves to the modern public world. The second is the unprecedentedly vigorous assault on those values by liberal, secular Americans.

and *Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991). See also Alan Wolfe, "Sociology, Liberalism, and the Radical Right," *New Left Review*, 128 (July–August 1981): 3–27, for a discussion of the way sociologists have viewed the Right; and Michael Kazin, "The Grass-Roots Right: New Histories of U.S. Conservatism in the Twentieth Century," *AHR*, 97 (February 1992): 136–55, for a perceptive overview of recent historical and sociological scholarship. Recent non-scholarly books that have tried to treat the populist Right as a political force with rational grievances include Thomas Byrne Edsall with Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, 1991); and E. J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York, 1991).

⁶¹ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York, 1975), 46.

To many liberal intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s, nothing was so alluring as the ideal of what David Hollinger and others have called "cosmopolitanism," an outlook that stressed the virtues of tolerance, relativism, and rationalism and that was generally accompanied by a strong contempt for what liberals considered the backward "provincial" mind, with its presumed superstitions and prejudices. The cosmopolitan creed argued that "provincialism" (religious provincialism, ethnic provincialism, regional provincialism) accounted for the survival of racism and bigotry; provincialism stood in the way of progress and rationalism. A culturally segmented America was no longer acceptable; only by universalizing the values of cosmopolitanism, by launching an assault on the backwardness and intolerance and anti-rationalism of the "village mind," could the United States become a truly enlightened society worthy of serving as a model to the world.⁶²

The politics of the 1980s and 1990s suggest that this effort—the effort to make the values and assumptions of liberal, secular Americans the values of all Americans—has failed. It has contributed to some great accomplishments, to be sure: most notably in loosening the grip of racism and sexism on American life. But it has not eliminated, and has in many ways increased, the cultural chasms separating different groups of Americans from each other. Members of the secular center continue to define America as a society committed to modern rationalism, free inquiry, scientific discourse, and above all progress. But members of the fundamentalist Right continue, despite (or perhaps because of) the assaults of recent years, to define America as a very different society: as a bastion of traditional (or "family") values and traditional faith in an increasingly godless age; as a citadel of righteousness in a corrupt world; as the earth's only truly Christian nation. It is unthinkable for secular Americans to contemplate any retreat from the rational, progressive course on which they have long assumed the nation is irrevocably embarked. But it is equally unthinkable for fundamentalists to consider abandoning in the name of progress the values and faiths that give their lives meaning and their communities definition.⁶³

It has not been easy or comforting for liberal, secular Americans to assume (as many have done) that the fundamentalist Right is an irrational, rootless "lunatic fringe," plagued by cultural and psychological maladjustments. But it may be even more difficult and less comforting for secular intellectuals (and hence for most historians) to accept that fundamentalists can be rational, stable, intelligent people with a world view radically different from their own. For to accept that is to concede that they may have been wrong in some of their most basic assumptions about America in our time. It is to recognize that the progressive modernism that most scholars, and many others, have so complacently assumed has become firmly and unassailably established in America—the secularism, the relativism, the

⁶² See, for example, David A. Hollinger, "Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia," *American Quarterly*, 27 (1975): 133–51; Terry A. Cooney, "Cosmopolitan Values and the Identification of Reaction: *Partisan Review* in the 1930s," *Journal of American History*, 68 (1981): 580–98; Daniel Joseph Singal, "Beyond Consensus: Richard Hofstadter and American Historiography," *AHR*, 89 (October 1984): 976–1004.

⁶³ For an exploration of the centrality of religion to much of American life, and a critique of intellectuals, scholars, and others for attacking or ignoring it, see Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York, 1993).

celebration of scientific progress—may not in fact be as firmly entrenched as they thought. It is to admit that modernism is not yet truly secure; that, even in America, some of the most elementary values and institutions of modern society still have not established full legitimacy with a large, and at times politically powerful, segment of our population.

THE "PROBLEM" OF AMERICAN CONSERVATISM as I have tried to describe it here is, in the end, a problem of historical imagination. It resembles other problems historians have encountered as they have opened up the world of scholarship and have struggled to retrieve previously unexamined communities and social experiences. But, while historians have displayed impressive powers of imagination in creating empathetic accounts of many once-obscure areas of the past, they have seldom done so in considering the character of conservative lives and ideas. That has no doubt been a result in part of a basic lack of sympathy for the Right among most scholars. But it is a result, too, of the powerful, if not always fully recognized, progressive assumptions embedded in most of the leading paradigms with which historians approach their work.

Understanding America in the twentieth century requires, ultimately, more than an appreciation of the central role of liberalism (in all its various forms) in our modern history, and more, too, than an understanding of the important role of the Left in challenging liberal claims. It requires, as well, a recognition of many alternative political traditions, including those of the Right. That will not be an easy task. Conservative traditions in America are diverse and inconsistent: both libertarian and normative, both elite and popular, both morally compelling and morally repellent. They fit neatly into no patterns of explanation with which most historians are comfortable. But scholars have redefined their categories and paradigms repeatedly in recent decades to help them understand areas of the past they had previously neglected. It may be time for us to do so again.