

What Is Conservatism and What Is Wrong with It?

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Liberals in the United States have been losing political debates to conservatives for a quarter century. In order to start winning again, liberals must answer two simple questions: what is conservatism, and what is wrong with it? As it happens, the answers to these questions are also simple:

Q: What is conservatism?

A: Conservatism is the domination of society by an aristocracy.

Q: What is wrong with conservatism?

A: Conservatism is incompatible with democracy, prosperity, and civilization in general. It is a destructive system of inequality and prejudice that is founded on deception and has no place in the modern world.

These ideas are not new. Indeed they were common sense until recently. Nowadays, though, most of the people who call themselves "conservatives" have little notion of what conservatism even is. They have been deceived by one of the great public relations campaigns of human history. Only by analyzing this deception will it become possible to revive democracy in the United States.

//1 The Main Arguments of Conservatism

From the pharaohs of ancient Egypt to the self-regarding thugs of ancient Rome to the glorified warlords of medieval and absolutist Europe, in nearly every urbanized society throughout human history, there have been people who have tried to constitute themselves as an aristocracy. These people and their allies are the conservatives.

The tactics of conservatism vary widely by place and time. But the most central feature of conservatism is deference: a psychologically internalized attitude on the part of the common people that the aristocracy are better people than they are. Modern-day liberals often theorize that conservatives use "social issues" as a way to mask economic objectives, but this is almost backward: the true goal of conservatism is to establish an aristocracy, which is a social and psychological condition of inequality. Economic inequality and regressive taxation, while certainly welcomed by the aristocracy, are best understood as a means to their actual goal, which is simply to be aristocrats. More generally, it is crucial to conservatism that the people must literally love the order that dominates them. Of course this notion sounds bizarre to modern ears, but it is perfectly overt in the writings of leading conservative theorists such as Burke. Democracy, for them, is not about the mechanisms of voting and office-holding. In fact conservatives hold a wide variety of opinions about such secondary formal matters. For conservatives, rather, democracy is a psychological condition. People who believe that the aristocracy rightfully dominates society because of its intrinsic superiority are conservatives; democrats, by contrast, believe that they are of equal social worth. Conservatism is the antithesis of democracy. This has been true for thousands of years.

The defenders of aristocracy represent aristocracy as a natural phenomenon, but in reality it is the most artificial thing on earth. Although one of the goals of every aristocracy is to make its preferred social order seem permanent and timeless, in reality conservatism must be reinvented in every generation. This is true for many reasons, including internal conflicts among the aristocrats; institutional shifts due to climate, markets, or warfare; and ideological gains and losses in the perpetual struggle against democracy. In some societies the aristocracy is rigid, closed, and stratified, while in others it is more of an aspiration among various fluid and factionalized groups. The situation in the United States right now is toward the latter end of the spectrum. A main goal in life of all aristocrats, however, is to pass on their positions of privilege to their children, and many

of the aspiring aristocrats of the United States are appointing their children to positions in government and in the archipelago of think tanks that promote conservative theories.

Conservatism in every place and time is founded on deception. The deceptions of conservatism today are especially sophisticated, simply because culture today is sufficiently democratic that the myths of earlier times will no longer suffice.

Before analyzing current-day conservatism's machinery of deception, let us outline the main arguments of conservatism. Although these arguments have changed little through history, they might seem unfamiliar to many people today, indeed even to people who claim to be conservatives. That unfamiliarity is a very recent phenomenon. Yet it is only through the classical arguments and their fallacies that we can begin to analyze how conservatism operates now.

1. Institutions

According to the first type of argument, found for example in Burke, social institutions are a kind of capital. A properly ordered society will be blessed with large quantities of this capital. This capital has very particular properties. It is a sprawling tangle of social arrangements and patterns of thought, passed down through generations as part of the culture. It is generally tacit in nature and cannot be rationally analyzed. It is fragile and must be conserved, because a society that lacks it will collapse into anarchy and tyranny. Innovation is bad, therefore, and prejudice is good. Although the institutions can tolerate incremental reforms around the edges, systematic questioning is a threat to social order. In particular, rational thought is evil. Nothing can be worse for the conservative than rational thought, because people who think rationally might decide to try replacing inherited institutions with new ones, something that a conservative regards as impossible. This is where the word "conservative" comes from: the supposed importance of conserving established institutions.

This argument is not wholly false. Institutions are in fact sprawling tangles of social arrangements and patterns of thought, passed down through generations as part of the culture. And people who think they can reengineer the whole of human society overnight are generally mistaken. The people of ancien regime France were oppressed by the conservative order of their time, but indeed their revolution did not work, and would probably not have worked even if conservatives from elsewhere were not militarily attacking them. After all, the conservative order had gone to insane lengths to deprive them of the education, practical experience, and patterns of thought that would be required to operate a democracy. They could not invent those things overnight.

Even so, the argument about conserving institutions is mostly untrue. Most institutions are less fragile and more dynamic than conservatives claim. Large amounts of institutional innovation happen in every generation. If people lack a rational analysis of institutions, that is mostly a product of conservatism rather than an argument for it. And although conservatism has historically claimed to conserve institutions, history makes clear that conservatism is only interested in conserving particular kinds of institutions: the institutions that reinforce conservative power. Conservatism rarely tries to conserve institutions such as Social Security and welfare that decrease the common people's dependency on the aristocracy and the social authorities that serve it. To the contrary, they represent those institutions in various twisted ways as dangerous to the social order generally or to their beneficiaries in particular.

2. Hierarchy

The opposite of conservatism is democracy, and contempt for democracy is a constant thread in the history of conservative argument. Instead, conservatism has argued that society ought to be organized in a hierarchy of orders and classes and controlled by its uppermost hierarchical stratum, the aristocracy. Many of these arguments against egalitarianism are ancient, and most of them are routinely heard on the radio. One tends to hear the arguments in bits and pieces, for example the emphatic if vague claim that people are different. Of course, most of these arguments, if considered rationally, actually argue for meritocracy rather than for aristocracy. Meritocracy is a democratic principle. George Bush, however, was apparently scarred for life by having been one of the last students admitted to Yale under its old aristocratic admissions system, and having to attend classes with students admitted under the meritocratic system who considered themselves to be smarter

than him. Although he has lately claimed to oppose the system of legacy admissions from which he benefitted, that is a tactic, part of a package deal to eliminate affirmative action, thereby allowing conservative social hierarchies to be reaffirmed in other ways.

American culture still being comparatively healthy, overt arguments for aristocracy (for example, that the children of aristocrats learn by osmosis the profound arts of government and thereby acquire a wisdom that mere experts cannot match) are still relatively unusual. Instead, conservatism must proceed through complicated indirection, and the next few sections of this article will explain in some detail how this works. The issue is not that rich people are bad, or that hierarchical types of organization have no place in a democracy. Nor are the descendents of aristocrats necessarily bad people if they do not try to perpetuate conservative types of domination over society. The issue is both narrow and enormous: no aristocracy should be allowed to trick the rest of society into deferring to it.

3. Freedom

But isn't conservatism about freedom? Of course everyone wants freedom, and so conservatism has no choice but to promise freedom to its subjects. In reality conservatism has meant complicated things by "freedom", and the reality of conservatism in practice has scarcely corresponded even to the contorted definitions in conservative texts.

To start with, conservatism constantly shifts in its degree of authoritarianism. Conservative rhetors, in the Wall Street Journal for example, have no difficulty claiming to be the party of freedom in one breath and attacking civil liberties in the next.

The real situation with conservatism and freedom is best understood in historical context. Conservatism constantly changes, always adapting itself to provide the minimum amount of freedom that is required to hold together a dominant coalition in the society. In Burke's day, for example, this meant an alliance between traditional social authorities and the rising business class. Although the business class has always defined its agenda in terms of something it calls "freedom", in reality conservatism from the 18th century onward has simply implied a shift from one kind of government intervention in the economy to another, quite different kind, together with a continuation of medieval models of cultural domination.

This is a central conservative argument: freedom is impossible unless the common people internalize aristocratic domination. Indeed, many conservative theorists to the present day have argued that freedom is not possible at all. Without the internalized domination of conservatism, it is argued, social order would require the external domination of state terror. In a sense this argument is correct: historically conservatives have routinely resorted to terror when internalized domination has not worked. What is unthinkable by design here is the possibility that people might organize their lives in a democratic fashion.

This alliance between traditional social authorities and the business class is artificial. The market continually undermines the institutions of cultural domination. It does this partly through its constant revolutionizing of institutions generally and partly by encouraging a culture of entrepreneurial initiative. As a result, the alliance must be continually reinvented, all the while pretending that its reinventions simply reinstate an eternal order.

Conservatism promotes (and so does liberalism, misguidedly) the idea that liberalism is about activist government where conservatism is not. This is absurd. It is unrelated to the history of conservative government. Conservatism promotes activist government that acts in the interests of the aristocracy. This has been true for thousands of years. What is distinctive about liberalism is not that it promotes activist government but that it promotes government that acts in the interests of the majority. Democratic government, however, is not simply majoritarian. It is, rather, one institutional expression of a democratic type of culture that is still very much in the process of being invented.

Conservative social orders have often described themselves as civilized, and so one reads in the Wall Street Journal that "the enemies of civilization hate bow ties". But what conservatism calls civilization is little but the domination of an aristocracy. Every aspect of social life is subordinated to this goal. That is not civilization.

The reality is quite the opposite. To impose its order on society, conservatism must destroy civilization. In particular conservatism must destroy conscience, democracy, reason, and language.

* The Destruction of Conscience

Liberalism is a movement of conscience. Liberals speak endlessly of conscience. Yet conservative rhetors have taken to acting as if they owned the language of conscience. They even routinely assert that liberals disparage conscience. The magnitude of the falsehood here is so great that decent people have been set back on their heels.

Conservatism continually twists the language of conscience into its opposite. It has no choice: conservatism is unjust, and cannot survive except by pretending to be the opposite of what it is.

Conservative arguments are often arbitrary in nature. Consider, for example, the controversy over Elian Gonzalez. Conservatism claims that the universe is ordered by absolutes. This would certainly make life easier if it was true. The difficulty is that the absolutes constantly conflict with one another. When the absolutes do not conflict, there is rarely any controversy. But when absolutes do conflict, conservatism is forced into sophistry. In the case of Elian Gonzalez, two absolutes conflicted: keeping families together and not making people return to tyrannies. In a democratic society, the decision would be made through rational debate. Conservatism, however, required picking one of the two absolutes arbitrarily (based perhaps on tactical politics in Florida) and simply accusing anyone who disagreed of flouting absolutes and thereby nihilistically denying the fundamental order of the universe. This happens every day. Arbitrariness replaces reason with authority. When arbitrariness becomes established in the culture, democracy decays and it becomes possible for aristocracies to dominate people's minds.

Another example of conservative twisting of the language of conscience is the argument, in the context of the attacks of 9/11 and the war in Iraq, that holding our side to things like the Geneva Convention implies an equivalence between ourselves and our enemies. This is a logical fallacy. The fallacy is something like: they kill so they are bad, but we are good so it is okay for us to kill. The argument that everything we do is okay so long as it is not as bad as the most extreme evil in the world is a rejection of nearly all of civilization. It is precisely the destruction of conscience.

Or take the notion of "political correctness". It is true that movements of conscience have piled demands onto people faster than the culture can absorb them. That is an unfortunate side-effect of social progress. Conservatism, however, twists language to make the inconvenience of conscience sound like a kind of oppression. The campaign against political correctness is thus a search-and-destroy campaign against all vestiges of conscience in society. The flamboyant nastiness of rhetors such as Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter represents the destruction of conscience as a type of liberation. They are like cultists, continually egging on their audiences to destroy their own minds by punching through one layer after another of their consciences.

Once I wrote on the Internet that bears in zoos are miserable and should be let go. In response to this, I received an e-mail viciously mocking me as an animal rights wacko. This is an example of the destruction of conscience. Any human being with a halfways functioning conscience will be capable of rationally debating the notion that unhappy bears in zoos should be let go. Of course, rational people might have other opinions. They might claim that the bears are not actually miserable, or that they would be just as miserable in the forest. Conservatism, though, has stereotyped concern for animals by associating it with its most extreme fringe. This sort of mockery of conscience has become systematic and commonplace.

* The Destruction of Democracy

For thousands of years, conservatism was universally understood as being in opposition to democracy. Having lost much of its ability to attack democracy openly, conservatism has tried in recent years to redefine the word

"democracy" while engaging in deception to make the substance of democracy unthinkable.

Conservative rhetors, for example, have been using the word "government" in a way that does not distinguish between legitimate democracy and totalitarianism.

Then there is the notion that politicians who offer health care reforms, for example, are claiming to be better people than the rest of us. This is a particularly toxic distortion. Offering reforms is a basic part of democracy, something that every citizen can do.

Even more toxic is the notion that those who criticize the president are claiming to be better people than he is. This is authoritarianism.

Some conservative rhetors have taken to literally demonizing the very notion of a democratic opposition. Rush Limbaugh has argued at length that Tom Daschle resembles Satan simply because he opposes George Bush's policies. Ever since then, Limbaugh has regularly identified Daschle as "el diablo". This is the emotional heart of conservatism: the notion that the conservative order is ordained by God and that anyone and anything that opposes the conservative order is infinitely evil.

* The Destruction of Reason

Conservatism has opposed rational thought for thousands of years. What most people know nowadays as conservatism is basically a public relations campaign aimed at persuading them to lay down their capacity for rational thought.

Conservatism frequently attempts to destroy rational thought, for example, by using language in ways that stand just out of reach of rational debate or rebuttal.

Conservatism has used a wide variety of methods to destroy reason throughout history. Fortunately, many of these methods, such as the suppression of popular literacy, are incompatible with a modern economy. Once the common people started becoming educated, more sophisticated methods of domination were required. Thus the invention of public relations, which is a kind of rationalized irrationality. The great innovation of conservatism in recent decades has been the systematic reinvention of politics using the technology of public relations.

The main idea of public relations is the distinction between "messages" and "facts". Messages are the things you want people to believe. A message should be vague enough that it is difficult to refute by rational means. (People in politics refer to messages as "strategies" and people who devise strategies as "strategists". The Democrats have strategists too, and it is not at all clear that they should, but they scarcely compare with the vast public relations machinery of the right.) It is useful to think of each message as a kind of pipeline: a steady stream of facts is selected (or twisted, or fabricated) to fit the message. Contrary facts are of course ignored. The goal is what the professionals call "message repetition". This provides activists with something to do: come up with new facts to fit the conservative authorities' chosen messages. Having become established in this way, messages must also be continually intertwined with one another. This is one job of pundits.

To the public relations mind, the public sphere is a game in which the opposition tries to knock you off your message. Take the example of one successful message, "Gore's lies". The purpose of the game was to return any interaction to the message, namely that Gore lies. So if it is noted that the supposed examples of Gore lying (e.g., his perfectly true claim to have done onerous farm chores) were themselves untrue, common responses would include, "that doesn't matter, what matters is Gore's lies", or "the reasons people believe them is because of Gore's lies", or "yes perhaps, but there are so many other examples of Gore's lies", or "you're just trying to change the subject away from Gore's lies", and so on.

Many of these messages have become institutions. Whole organizations exist to provide a pipeline of "facts" that underwrite the message of "liberal media bias". These "facts" fall into numerous categories and exemplify a wide range of fallacies. Some are just factually untrue, e.g., claims that the New York Times has failed to cover an event that it actually covered in detail. Other claimed examples of bias are non sequiturs, e.g., quotations

from liberal columns that appear on the opinion pages, or quotations from liberals in news articles that also provided balancing quotes from conservatives. Others are illogical, e.g., media that report news events that represent bad news for the president. The methods of identifying "bias" are thus highly elastic. In practice, everything in the media on political topics that diverges from conservative public relations messages is contended to be an example of "liberal bias". The goal, clearly, is to purge the media of everything except conservatism.

The word "inaccurate" has become something of a technical term in the political use of public relations. It means "differs from our message".

Public relations aims to break down reason and replace it with mental associations. One tries to associate "us" with good things and "them" with bad things. Thus, for example, the famous memo from Newt Gingrich's (then) organization GOPAC entitled "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control". It advised Republican candidates to associate themselves with words like "building", "dream", "freedom", "learn", "light", "preserve", "success", and "truth" while associating opponents with words like "bizarre", "decay", "ideological", "lie", "machine", "pathetic", and "traitors". The issue here is not whether these words are used at all; of course there do exist individual liberals that could be described using any of these words. The issue, rather, is a kind of cognitive surgery: systematically creating and destroying mental associations with little regard for truth. Note, in fact, that "truth" is one of the words that Gingrich advised appropriating in this fashion. Someone who thinks this way cannot even conceptualize truth.

Conservative strategists construct their messages in a variety of more or less stereotyped ways. One of the most important patterns of conservative message-making is projection. Projection is a psychological notion; it roughly means attacking someone by falsely claiming that they are attacking you. Conservative strategists engage in projection constantly. A commonplace example would be taking something from someone by claiming that they are in fact taking it from you. Or, having heard a careful and detailed refutation of something he has said, the projector might snap, "you should not dismiss what I have said so quickly!". It is a false claim -- what he said was not dismissed -- that is an example of itself -- he is dismissing what his opponent has said.

Projection was an important part of the Florida election controversy, for example when Republicans tried to get illegal ballots counted and prevent legal ballots from being counted, while claiming that Democrats were trying to steal the election.

* The Destruction of Language

Reason occurs mostly through the medium of language, and so the destruction of reason requires the destruction of language. An underlying notion of conservative politics is that words and phrases of language are like territory in warfare: owned and controlled by one side or the other. One of the central goals of conservatism, as for example with Newt Gingrich's lists of words, is to take control of every word and phrase in the English language.

George Bush, likewise, owes his election in great measure to a new language that his people engineered for him. His favorite word, for example, is "heart". This type of linguistic engineering is highly evolved in the business milieu from which conservative public relations derives, and it is the day-to-day work of countless conservative think tanks. Bush's people, and the concentric circles of punditry around them, are worlds away from John Kerry deciding on a moment's notice that he is going to start the word "values". They do not use a word unless they have an integrated communications strategy for taking control of that word throughout the whole of society.

Bush's personal vocabulary is only a small part of conservative language warfare as a whole. Since around 1990, conservative rhetors have been systematically turning language into a weapon against liberals. Words are used in twisted and exaggerated ways, or with the opposite of their customary meanings. This affects the whole of the language. The goal of this distorted language is not simply to defeat an enemy but to destroy the minds of the people who believe themselves to be conservatives and who constantly challenge themselves to ever greater extremity in using it.

A simple example of turning language into a weapon might be the word "predictable", which has become a synonym for "liberal". There is no rational argument in this usage. Every such use of "predictable" can be refuted simply by substituting the word "consistent". It is simply invective.

More importantly, conservative rhetors have been systematically mapping the language that has historically been used to describe the aristocracy and the traditional authorities that serve it, and have twisted those words into terms for liberals. This tactic has the dual advantage of both attacking the aristocracies' opponents and depriving them of the words that they have used to attack aristocracy.

A simple example is the term "race-baiting". In the Nexis database, uses of "race-baiting" undergo a sudden switch in the early 1990's. Before then, "race-baiting" referred to racists. Afterward, it referred in twisted way to people who oppose racism. What happened is simple: conservative rhetors, tired of the political advantage that liberals had been getting from their use of that word, took it away from them.

A more complicated example is the word "racist". Conservative rhetors have tried to take this word away as well by constantly coming up with new ways to stick the word onto liberals and their policies. For example they have referred to affirmative action as "racist". This is false; it is an attempt to destroy language. Racism is the notion that one race is intrinsically better than another. Affirmative action is arguably discriminatory, as a means of partially offsetting discrimination in other places and times, but it is not racist. Many conservative rhetors have even stuck the word "racist" on people just because they oppose racism. The notion seems to be that these people addressed themselves to the topic of race, and the word "racist" is sort of an adjective relating somehow to race. In any event this too is an attack on language.

A recent example is the word "hate". The civil rights movement had used the word "hate" to refer to terrorism and stereotyping against black people, and during the 1990's some in the press had identified as "Clinton-haters" people who had made vast numbers of bizarre claims that the Clintons had participated in murder and drug-dealing. Beginning around 2003, conservative rhetors took control of this word as well by labeling a variety of perfectly ordinary types of democratic opposition to George Bush as "hate". In addition, they have constructed a large number of messages of the form "liberals hate X" (e.g., X=America) and established within their media apparatus a sophisticated pipeline of "facts" to support each one. This is also an example of the systematic breaking of associations.

The word "partisan" entered into its current political circulation in the early 1990's when some liberals identified people like Newt Gingrich as "partisan" for doing things like the memo on language that I mentioned earlier. To the conservative way of politics, there is nothing either true or false about the liberal claim. It is simply that liberals had taken control of some rhetorical territory: the word "partisan". Conservative rhetors then set about taking control of the word themselves. They did this in a way that has become mechanical. They first claimed, falsely, that liberals were identifying as "partisan" any views other than their own. They thus inflated the word while projecting this inflation onto the liberals and disconnecting the word from the particular facts that the liberals had associated with it. Next, they started using the word "partisan" in the inflated, dishonest way that they had ascribed to their opponents. This is, very importantly, a way of attacking people simply for having a different opinion. In twisting language this way, conservatives tell themselves that they are simply turning liberal unfairness back against the liberals. This too is projection.

Another common theme of conservative strategy is that liberals are themselves an aristocracy. (For those who are really keeping score, the sophisticated version of this is called the "new class strategy", the message being that liberals are the American version of the Soviet nomenklatura.) Thus, for example, the constant pelting of liberals as "elites", sticking this word and a mass of others semantically related to it onto liberals on every possible occasion. A pipeline of "facts" has been established to underwrite this message as well. Thus, for example, constant false conservative claims that the rich vote Democratic. When Al Franken recently referred to his new radio network as "the media elite and proud of it", he demonstrated his oblivion to the workings of the conservative discourse that he claims to contest.

Further examples of this are endless. When a Republican senator referred to "the few liberals", hardly any liberals gave any sign of getting what he meant: as all conservatives got just fine, he was appropriating the

phrase "the few", referring to the aristocracy as opposed to "the many", and sticking this phrase in a false and mechanical way onto liberals. Rush Limbaugh asserts that "they [liberals] think they are better than you", this of course being a phrase that had historically been applied (and applied correctly) to the aristocracy. Conservative rhetors constantly make false or exaggerated claims that liberals are engaged in stereotyping -- the criticism of stereotyping having been one of history's most important rhetorical devices of democrats. And so on. The goal here is to make it impossible to criticize aristocracy.

For an especially sorry example of this pattern, consider the word "hierarchy". Conservatism is a hierarchical social system: a system of ranked orders and classes. Yet in recent years conservatives have managed to stick this word onto liberals, the notion being that "government" (which liberals supposedly endorse and conservatives supposedly oppose) is hierarchical (whereas corporations, the military, and the church are somehow vaguely not). Liberals are losing because it does not even occur to them to refute this kind of mechanical antireason.

It is often claimed in the media that snooty elitists on the coasts refer to states in the middle of the country as "flyover country". Yet I, who have lived in liberal areas of the coasts for most of my life, have never once heard this usage. In fact, as far as I can tell, the Nexis database does not contain a single example of anyone using the phrase "flyover country" to disparage the non-coastal areas of the United States. Instead, it contains hundreds of examples of people disparaging residents of the coasts by claiming that they use the phrase to describe the interior. The phrase is a special favorite of newspapers in Minneapolis and Denver. This is projection. Likewise, I have never heard the phrase "political correctness" used except to disparage the people who supposedly use it.

Conservative remapping of the language of aristocracy and democracy has been incredibly thorough. Consider, for example, the terms "entitlement" and "dependency". The term "entitlement" originally referred to aristocrats. Aristocrats had titles, and they thought that they were thereby entitled to various things, particularly the deference of the common people. Everyone else, by contrast, was dependent on the aristocrats. This is conservatism. Yet in the 1990's, conservative rhetors decided that the people who actually claim entitlement are people on welfare. They furthermore created an empirically false association between welfare and dependency. But, as I have mentioned, welfare is precisely a way of eliminating dependency on the aristocracy and the cultural authorities that serve it. I do not recall anyone ever noting this inversion of meaning.

Conservative strategists have also been remapping the language that has historically been applied to conservative religious authorities, sticking words such as "orthodoxy", "pious", "dogma", and "sanctimonious" to liberals at every turn.

//3 Conservatism in American History

Almost all of the early immigrants to America left behind societies that had been oppressed by conservatism. The democratic culture that Americans have built is truly one of the monuments of civilization. And American culture remains vibrant to this day despite centuries of conservative attack. Yet the history of American democracy has generally been taught in confused ways. This history might be sketched in terms of the great turning points that happened to occur around 1800 and 1900, followed by the great reaction that gathered steam in the decades leading up to 2000.

* 1800

America before the revolution was a conservative society. It lacked an entitled aristocracy, but it was dominated in very much the same way by its gentry. Americans today have little way of knowing what this meant -- the hierarchical ties of personal dependency that organized people's psychology. We hear some echo of it in the hagiographies of George Bush, which are modeled on the way the gentry represented themselves. The Founding Fathers, men like Madison, Adams, and Washington, were, in this sense, products of aristocratic society. They did not make a revolution in order to establish democracy. Quite the contrary, they wanted to be aristocrats. They did not succeed. The revolution that they helped set in motion did not simply sweep away the church and crown of England. As scholars such as Gordon Wood have noted, it also swept away the entire social system of the gentry, and it did so with a suddenness and thoroughness that surprised and amazed everyone who lived through

it. So completely did Americans repudiate the conservative social system of the gentry, in fact, that they felt free to mythologize the Founding Fathers, forgetting the Founding Fathers' aristocratic ambitions and pretending that they, too, were revolutionary democrats. This ahistorical practice of projecting all good things onto the Founding Fathers continues to the present day, and it is unfortunate because (as Michael Schudson has argued) it makes us forget all of the work that Americans have subsequently done to build the democratic institutions of today. In reality, Madison, Adams, and Washington were much like Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union. Like Gorbachev, they tried to reform an oppressive system without fundamentally changing it. And like Gorbachev, they were swept away by the very forces they helped set into motion.

The revolution, though, proceeded quite differently in the North and South, and led to a kind of controlled experiment. The North repudiated conservatism altogether. Indeed it was the only society in modern history without an aristocracy, and as scholars such as the late Robert Wiebe have noted, its dynamic democratic culture was most extraordinary. It is unfortunate that we discuss this culture largely through the analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville, an aristocrat who wanted to graft medieval notions of social order onto a democratic culture that he found alien. In the South, by contrast, the conservative order of the gentry was modified to something more resembling the oppressive latifundist systems of Latin America, relieved mainly by comparatively democratic religious institutions. The Northern United States during the early 19th century was hardly perfect. Left-over conservative hierarchies and patterns of psychology continued to damage people's minds and lives in numerous ways. But compared to the South, the North was, and has always been, a more dynamic and successful society. Southern conservatism has had to modify its strategies in recent decades, but its grip on the culture is tragically as strong as ever.

* 1900

Something more complicated happened around 1900. Railroads, the telegraph, and mass production made for massive new economies of scale, whereupon the invention of the corporation gave a new generation of would-be aristocrats new ways to reinvent themselves.

The complicated institutional and ideological events of this era can be understood in microcosm through the subsequent history of the word "liberal", which forked into two quite different meanings. The word "liberal" had originally been part of an intramural dispute within the conservative alliance between the aristocracy and the rising business class. Their compromise, as I have noted, is that the aristocracy would maintain its social control for the benefit of both groups mainly through psychological means rather than through terror, and that economic regulation would henceforth be designed to benefit the business class. And both of these conditions would perversely be called "freedom". The word "liberal" thus took its modern meaning in a struggle against the aristocracy's control of the state. Around 1900, however, the corporation emerged in a society in which democracy was relatively strong and the aristocracy was relatively weak. Antitrust and many other types of state regulation were not part of traditional aristocratic control, but were part of democracy. And this is why the word "liberal" forked. Democrats continued using the word in its original sense, to signify the struggle against aristocracy, in this case the new aristocracy of corporate power. Business interests, however, reinvented the word to signify a struggle against something conceptualized very abstractly as "government". In reality the new business meaning of the word, as worked out in detail by people like Hayek, went in an opposite direction from its original meaning: a struggle against the people, rather than against the aristocracy.

At the same time as the corporation provided the occasion for the founding of a new aristocracy, however, a new middle class founded a large number of professions. The relationship between the professional middle class and the aristocracy has been complicated throughout the 20th century. But whereas the goal of conservatism throughout history has primarily been to suppress the mob of common people, the conservatism of the late 20th century was especially vituperative in its campaigns against the relatively autonomous democratic cultures of the professions.

One of the professions founded around 1900 was public relations. Early public relations texts were quite openly conservative, and public relations practitioners openly affirmed that their profession existed to manipulate the common people psychologically in order to ensure the domination of society by a narrow elite. Squeamishness on this matter is a recent phenomenon indeed.

* the 1970's

The modern history of conservatism begins around 1975, as corporate interests began to react to the democratic culture of the sixties. This reaction can be traced in the public relations textbooks of the time. Elaborate new methods of public relations tried to prevent, coopt, and defeat democratic initiatives throughout the society. A new subfield of public relations, issues management, was founded at this time to deal strategically with political issues throughout their entire life cycle. One of the few political theories that has made note of the large-scale institutionalization of public relations is the early work of Jurgen Habermas.

Even more important was the invention of the think tank, and especially the systematic application of public relations to politics by the most important of the conservative think tanks, the Heritage Foundation. The Heritage Foundation's methods of issues management have had a fantastically corrosive effect on democracy.

* the 1980's

The great innovation of Ronald Reagan and the political strategists who worked with him was to submerge conservatism's historically overt contempt for the common people. The contrast between Reagan's language and that of conservatives even a decade or two earlier is most striking. Jacques Barzun's "The House of Intellect" (1959), for example, fairly bristles with contempt for demotic culture, the notion being that modern history is the inexorable erosion of aristocratic civilization by democracy. On a political level, Reagan's strategy was to place wedges into the many divides in that era's popular democracy, including both the avoidable divides that the counterculture had opened up and the divides that had long been inherent in conservatism's hierarchical order. Reagan created a mythical working class whose values he conflated with those of the conservative order, and he opposed this to an equally mythical professional class of liberal wreckers. Democratic culture in the sixties had something of a workable theory of conservatism -- one that has largely been lost. But it was not enough of a theory to explain to working people why they are on the same side as hippies and gays. Although crude by comparison with conservative discourse only twenty years later, Reagan's strategy identified this difficulty with some precision. People like Ella Baker had explained the psychology of conservatism -- the internalized deference that makes a conservative order possible. But the new psychology of democracy does not happen overnight, and it did not become general in the culture.

* the 1990's

In the 1990's, American conservatism institutionalized public relations methods of politics on a large scale, and it used these methods in a savage campaign of delegitimizing democratic institutions. In particular, a new generation of highly trained conservative strategists evolved, on the foundation of classical public relations methods, a sophisticated practice of real-time politics that integrated ideology and tactics on a year-to-year, news-cycle-to-news-cycle, and often hour-to-hour basis. This practice employs advanced models of the dynamics of political issues so as to launch waves of precisely designed communications in countless well-analyzed loci throughout the society. For contemporary conservatism, a political issue -- a war, for example -- is a consumer product to be researched and rolled out in a planned way with continuous empirical feedback from polling. So far as citizens can tell, such issues seem to materialize everywhere at once, swarming the culture with so many interrelated formulations that it becomes impossible to think, much less launch an effective rebuttal. Such a campaign is successful if it occupies precisely the ideological ground that can be occupied at a given moment, and it includes quite overt plans for holding that ground through the construction of a pipeline of facts and intertwining with other, subsequent issues. Although in one sense this machinery has a profound kinship with the priesthoods of ancient Egypt, in another sense its radicalism -- its inhuman thoroughness -- has no precedent in history. Liberals have nothing remotely comparable.

//4 The Discovery of Democracy

Humanity has struggled for thousands of years to emerge from the darkness of conservatism. At every step of the way, conservatism has always had the advantage of a long historical learning curve. There have always been experts in the running of conservative society. Most of the stupid mistakes have been made and forgotten centuries ago. Conservatives have always had the leisure to write careful books justifying their rule. Democracy,

by contrast, is still very much in an experimental phase. And so, for example, the 1960's were one of the great episodes of civilization in human history, and they were also a time when people did a lot of stupid things like take drugs.

The history of democracy has scarcely been written. Of what has been written, the great majority of "democratic theory" is based on the ancient Greek model of deliberative democracy. Much has been written about the Greeks' limitation of citizenship to perhaps 10% of the population. But this is not the reason why the Greek model is inapplicable to the modern world. The real reason is that Greek democracy was emphatically predicated on a small city-state of a few thousand people, whereas modern societies have populations in the tens and hundreds of millions.

The obvious adaptation to the difficulties of scale has been representation. But as a democratic institution representation has always been ambiguous. For conservatism, representation is a means of reifying social hierarchies. The Founding Fathers thought of themselves as innovators and modernizers, and the myth-making tradition has thoughtlessly agreed with them. But in reality the US Constitution, as much as the British system it supposedly replaced, is little more than the Aristotelian tripartite model of king, aristocracy, and gentry (supposedly representing the commons), reformed to some degree as President, Senate, and House. Many people have noted that George Bush is consolidating executive power in a kind of elective kingship, but they have done little to place the various elements of Bush's authoritarian institution-molding into historical context. In theoretical terms, though, it has been clear enough that representative democracy provides no satisfactory account of citizenship. Surely a genuine democracy would replace the Aristotelian model? Fortunately, there is little need to replace the Constitution beyond adding a right to privacy. After all, as historians have noted, Americans almost immediately started using the Constitution in a considerably different way than the Founders intended -- in a democratic fashion, simply put, and not an aristocratic one. The president who claims to be "a uniter not a divider" is hearkening back to the myth-making of a would-be aristocracy that claims to be impartial and to stand above controversy while systematically using the machinery of government to crush its opponents. But his is not the winning side.

Not that democracy is a done deal. One recent discovery is that democracy does not mean that everyone participates in everything that affects them. Every citizen of a modern society participates in hundreds of institutions, and it is impossible to be fully informed about all of them, much less sit through endless meetings relating to all of them. There are too many issues for everyone to be an expert on everything.

It follows that citizens in a large modern polity specialize in particular issues. In fact this kind of issue entrepreneurship is not restricted to politics. It is central to the making of careers in nearly every institution of society. Conservatism claims to own the theme of entrepreneurship, but then conservatism claims to own every theme. In reality, entrepreneurship on the part of the common people is antithetical to conservatism, and conservatism has learned and taught little about the skills of entrepreneurship, most particularly the entrepreneurial cognition that identifies opportunities for various sorts of useful careers, whether civic, intellectual, professional, or economic. Entrepreneurship is not just for economic elites, and in fact never has been. One part of democracy, contrary to much socialist teaching, is the democratization of goods and skills, entrepreneurial skills for example, that had formerly been associated with the elite. American society has diverged dramatically from that of Europe largely because of the democratization of entrepreneurship, and that trend should continue with the writing down and teaching of generalized entrepreneurial skills.

The real discovery is that democracy is a particular kind of social organization of knowledge -- a sprawling landscape of overlapping knowledge spheres and a creative tension on any given issue between the experts and the laity. It is not a hierarchical divide between the knowledge-authorities in the professions and a deferential citizenry; instead it democratizes the skills of knowledge-making among a citizenry that is plugged together in ways that increasingly resemble the institutional and cognitive structures of the professions. This generalized application of entrepreneurial skills in the context of a knowledge-intensive society -- and not simply the multiplication of associations that so impressed Tocqueville -- is civil society. The tremendous fashion for civil society as a necessary complement and counterbalance to the state in a democracy, as launched in the 1980's by people like John Keane, has been one of the most hopeful aspects of recent democratic culture. Indeed, one measure of the success of the discourse of civil society has been that conservatism has felt the need to destroy it

by means of distorted theories of "civil society" that place the populace under the tutelage of the aristocracy and the cultural authorities that serve it.

Economics, unfortunately, is still dominated by the ancien regime. This consists of three schools. Neoclassical economics is founded (as Philip Mirowski has argued) on superficial, indeed incoherent analogies to the mathematics of classical mechanics whose main notion is equilibrium. Economics, it is held, are dynamic systems that are constantly moving to an optimal equilibrium, and government intervention will only move the economy to the wrong equilibrium. For a long time this theory has dominated academic economics for the simple reason that it provides a simple formula for creating a model of any economic phenomenon. Its great difficulty is that it ignores essentially all issues of information and institutions -- important topics in the context of any modern economy. Austrian economics (associated with Hayek and Mises) began in the context of debates about the practicability of central planning in socialism; as such, it is organized around an opposition between centralized economies (bad) and decentralized economies (good). Although preferable in some ways to neoclassicism in its emphasis on information and institutions, as well as its rhetorical emphasis on entrepreneurship, it is nonetheless hopelessly simplistic. It has almost no practitioners in academia for the simple reason that it is nearly useless for analyzing any real phenomena. A third school, a particular kind of game theory based on the work of John Nash, does have elaborate notions about information and at least a sketchy way of modeling institutions, and as a result has established itself as the major academic alternative to neoclassicism. Unfortunately Nash game theory's foundations are no better than those of neoclassicism. Whereas neoclassicism, though ultimately incoherent, is actually a powerful and useful way of thinking about the economy, Nash game theory is based, as Mirowski again has argued, on a disordered model of relationships between people. Fortunately it has no particular politics.

The state of economics is unfortunate for democracy. Conservatism runs on ideologies that bear only a tangential relationship to reality, but democracy requires universal access to accurate theories about a large number of nontrivial institutions. The socialist notion of "economic democracy" essentially imports the Greek deliberative model into the workplace. As such it is probably useful as a counter to conservative psychologies of internalized deference that crush people's minds and prevent useful work from being done. It is, however, not remotely adequate to the reality of an interconnected modern economy, in which the workplace is hardly a natural unit. A better starting place is with analysis of the practical work of producing goods in social systems of actual finite human beings -- that is, with analysis of information and institutions, as for example in the singular work of Thorstein Veblen, John Commons, Joseph Schumpeter, Karl Polanyi, John von Neumann, Mark Casson, Joseph Stiglitz, Paul David, Bruno Latour, and Michel Callon.

This work emphasizes knowledge and the very general social conditions that are required to produce and use it. Simply put, knowledge is best produced in a liberal culture. This is why the most prosperous and innovative regions of the United States are also the most politically liberal, and why the most conservative regions of the country are also the greatest beneficiaries of transfer payments. Liberals create wealth and government redistributes it to conservatives. This is, of course, the opposite of the received conservative opinion in the media, and indeed in most of academia. But it is true.

Another connection between democracy and a modern economy is the democratic nature of entrepreneurialism. People who reflexively defer to their social betters will never learn the social skills that are needed to found new types of social relationships. This was clear enough in the interregnum in the 19th century between the fall of the American gentry and the rise of the modern corporation. An economy of generalized entrepreneurialism, moreover, requires an elaborate institutional matrix that is part public and part private. As scholars such as Linda Weiss have argued, the conservative spectre of a conflict between government and entrepreneurial activity is unrelated to the reality of entrepreneurship. To be sure, much has been learned about the kinds of government policies that do and do not lay the foundation for economic dynamism. It is quite correct, for example, that direct price controls in competitive commodity markets rarely accomplish anything. (Labor markets are a much more complicated case, in very much the ways that neoclassical economics exists to ignore.) Free trade would also be a good thing if it existed; in practice trade is distorted by subsidies and by uneven regulation of externalities such as pollution, and "free trade" negotiations are a kind of power politics that differs little from the gunboat diplomacy that opened markets in a one-sided way in former times. The point is scarcely that markets are

inherently democratic. The economic properties of infrastructure and knowledge create economies of scale that both produce cheap goods (a democratic effect) and concentrate power (an anti-democratic effect). Conservatives employ the democratic rhetoric of entrepreneurialism to promote the opposite values of corporate centralization. But the 19th century's opinions about the political and economic necessity of antitrust are still true. More importantly, a wide range of public policies is required to facilitate a democratic economy and the more general democratic values on which it depends.

Lastly, an important innovation of democracy during the sixties was the rights revolution. Rights are democratic because they are limits to arbitrary authority, and people who believe they have rights cannot be subjected to conservatism. Conservative rhetors have attacked the rights revolution in numerous ways as a kind of demotic chatter that contradicts the eternal wisdom of the conservative order. For conservatism, not accepting one's settled place in the traditional hierarchy of orders and classes is a kind of arrogance, and conservative vocabulary is full of phrases such as "self-important". Institutions, for conservatism, are more important than people. For democracy, by contrast, things are more complicated. The rights revolution is hardly perfect. But the main difficulty with it is just that it is not enough. A society is not founded on rights alone. Democracy requires that people learn and practice a range of nontrivial social skills. But then people are not likely to learn or practice those skills so long as they have internalized a conservative psychology of deference. The rights revolution breaks this cycle. For the civil rights movement, for example, learning to read was not simply a means of registering to vote, but was also a means of liberation from the psychology of conservatism. Democratic institutions, as opposed to the inherited mysteries of conservative institutions, are made of the everyday exercise of advanced social skills by people who are liberated in this sense.

//5 How to Defeat Conservatism

Conservatism is almost gone. People no longer worship the pharaohs. If the gentry were among us today we would have no notion of what they were talking about. For thousands of years, countless people have worked for the values of democracy in ways large and small. The industrialized vituperations of conservative propaganda measure their success. To defeat conservatism today, the main thing we have to do is to explain what it is and what is wrong with it. This is easy enough.

* Rebut conservative arguments

This is my most important prescription. Liberals win political victories through rational debate. But after a victory is won, liberals tend to drop the issue and move along. As a result, whole generations have grown up without ever hearing the arguments in favor of, for example, Social Security. Instead they have heard massive numbers of conservative arguments against liberalism, and these arguments have generally gone un rebutted. In order to save civilization, liberals need a new language, one in which it is easy to express rebuttals to the particular crop of conservative arguments of the last few decades. And the way to invent that language is just to start rebutting the arguments, all of them. This means literally dozens of new arguments each day.

Do not assume that rebutting conservative arguments is easy, or that a few phrases will suffice. Do not even assume that you know what is wrong with the conservative arguments that you hear, or even indeed what those arguments are, since they are often complicated and confusing in their internal structure. Do not just repeat a stock response that worked for some previous generation of liberals, because your audience has already heard that response and already knows what the counterargument is. Conservative rhetors have invested tremendous effort in working around liberals' existing language. In the old days, racists were racists and polluters were polluters. But those old labels do not win arguments any more. Liberals must now provide new answers in plain language to the questions that ordinary citizens, having heard the arguments of conservatism, now have. Do environmental regulations work? Why do we protect the civil liberties of terrorists? Are liberals anti-American? What do we need government for anyway?

* Benchmark the Wall Street Journal

The Wall Street Journal's opinion page is the most important conservative publication, and it is often described as a bulletin board for the conservatism. A better metaphor, however, would be a war room. Day by day, the

Wall Street Journal's editors detect liberal arguments coming over the horizon, and immediately they gather up and distribute the arguments that conservatives will need to rebut them. Since the retirement of its late editor Robert Bartley, the Journal's opinion page has become more sophisticated. The crude lies and belligerent irrationality of the Bartley era have not disappeared, but they have certainly been attenuated. Daniel Henninger in particular does something interesting with clouds of associations that are subrational but not quite fallacious.

Liberals should not imitate the antireason of the Journal or other distribution channels of conservative opinion. Instead, as part of the hard work of inventing democracy, it will be necessary to tell the difference between methods that liberals ought to be applying in their own work, such as the day-to-day rebuttal of arguments, and methods that liberals need to analyze and place in the same category as the priesthood of Egypt.

* Build a better pundit

Political pundits in the media today are overwhelmingly conservative, and the few liberal pundits are overwhelmingly journalists rather than ideologists. It is difficult to identify a single pundit in the media who consistently explicates liberal ideology. It is time to build a democratic punditry.

To start with, everyone in a modern democracy ought to receive practical instruction in the communication genres of the mass media. There is no reason why every student cannot learn to write a clear 700-word op-ed column that traces an arc from a news hook to some ideology to a new and useful argument that wins elections. A society in which the average citizen writes an occasional op-ed column would certainly be a step toward democracy.

But even if the skills of punditry are widespread, there is no substitute for professional pundits who can make "brand names" of themselves in the media, and talented people will not make careers out of democratic punditry until they are reasonably assured of being able to make money at it. This is where think tanks and their philanthropic funders come in. Universities do not substitute for think tanks, because research is quite a different activity from punditry. Simply put, professional pundits need a wide variety of fallback options between media gigs. Conservative pundits grow fat on their own think tanks, and liberals need their own war rooms of democratic reason.

* Say something new

Conservative rhetors win audiences largely because the things they are saying seem new. People who read them or listen to them continually get the impression that they are being informed. If news and opinion editors seem biased against liberals, one reason is simply that liberals are not delivering the goods. Whenever you get ready to express a political opinion in the media, first ask whether you have ever heard that opinion in the media before (as opposed, for example, to scholarly works). If so, figure out what the counterarguments are -- because there will be counterarguments -- and then proceed to base your column on the counterarguments to that. Get ahead of the curve.

* Teach logic

Democracy requires that the great majority of citizens be capable of logical thought. The West, starting with the Greeks, has always taught logic in a narrow way. Logic does include the syllogism, but it also includes a great deal of savoir faire about what constitutes a good argument, a good counterargument, and a good counterargument to that. In particular, the citizen must have a kind of map of the arguments. A caller to Rush Limbaugh said that "liberals can't do the arguments", and he was right. Existing curricula on "critical thinking" are unfortunately very weak. They should be founded on close analysis of actual irrationality.

Many on the left unfortunately abandon reason because they believe that the actual basis of politics is something they call "power". People like this have no notion of what power is. For example, they will argue that reason is useless because the powers that be will not listen to reason. This is confusion. The purpose of reason is not to petition the authorities but to help other citizens to cut through the darkness of conservative deception.

Others on the left believe that reason is the property of the elite. This is true historically, but that is simply because the essence of conservatism is to deprive the common people of the capacity to engage in democracy. Many bad theories of democracy actually reinforce conservatism, and this is one of them.

Similarly, others on the left argue that requiring politics to be based on reason tilts the playing field in favor of the elite. This is historically true as well, and politics based on money does the same thing. But that is reality. The fact, again, is that democracy needs the citizenry to be educated, and the skills of reason are the foundation of democratic education. Democracy cannot be established in any other way. Aristocratic rule is not reinforced by the use of reason. The situation is quite the reverse: in order to fight off democratic values, conservatism must simulate reason, and pretend that conservative deception is itself reason when it is not. Many conservative pundits, George Will and Thomas Sowell for example, make their living saying illogical things in a reasonable tone of voice. Democracy will be impossible until the great majority of citizens can identify in reasonable detail just how this trick works.

* Conservatism is the problem

Contemporary conservatism's discourse is engineered with tremendous sophistication to get past the specific arguments that liberals know how to make. Conservative strategists, moreover, are willing to achieve their goals incrementally, depending on the arguments that liberals are capable of making at a given moment. Of course it is important for liberals to make the arguments against each increment. But it is more important to explain what conservatism is in general, and then to explain what is wrong with it.

For example, I once heard Rush Limbaugh discussing with a listener how school vouchers were just a conservative tactic, and how conservatives' real goal was to eliminate public funding for education altogether. This is the sort of thing that loses elections, and yet I have never heard a liberal pundit discuss it.

The extreme nature of conservatism -- not just the extremity of its rhetoric but the oppressiveness of its prescriptions for society -- is clear enough in the conservatives' own literature, but American culture no longer has the categories to identify what it is. Indeed, one can hear fascism, never mind conservatism, on the radio any day of the week. But Americans have mostly forgotten what fascism even is, so that they can listen to fascist rhetoric and it will actually sound kind of fresh.

* Critically analyze leftover conservative theories

Liberal ideology is in disarray. After all, conservative ideology has dominated human thought for thousands of years, and it takes concentrated effort to liberate oneself from it. Such intellectual liberation will never happen without a detailed history of conservative theories -- which is to say, the ways in which these theories have been designed to subordinate people's minds to a hierarchical social order dominated by an aristocracy. Lacking such a history, liberal ideology draws in random and confused ways on conservatism, giving it a sentimental update without particularly changing it. Or else liberalism spins out into something wishfully called radicalism, which at best inverts conservatism into something that does not work as well and does not liberate anyone either. A genuine tradition of liberatory social thought does indeed exist, but it must be disentangled from its opposite.

As an example, let us consider the notion of social capital, which has been fashionable among both conservatives and liberals for some time now. The conservative version of the social capital is a medieval ideology that justifies the hierarchical conservative order in terms of the values of community. This medieval notion of community is particularistic in nature: everyone in a community is knitted to everyone else through a system of roles and relationships into which they are born, and which they supposedly accept and love. This network of relationships is made to sound harmonious, and objections to it are made to sound divisive, by neglecting to mention the oppression of the life-long hierarchical bonds that make it up. This is the kind of society whose passing Tocqueville lamented, and that is at the core of modern conservatism in authors such as Robert Nisbet. For Nisbet, modernity could only be understood in a negative way as an erosion of the particular types of community and order that traditional institutions provided. This is what many conservatives mean when they value social capital, regret its decline, and urge its revival.

This notion of social capital should be contrasted, for example, with Ernest Gellner's notion of the modern democratic citizen as "modular", that is, as capable of moving about within the society, building and rebuilding relationships and associations of diverse sorts, because of a set of social skills and social institutions that facilitate a generalized, dynamic mobility. The modular citizen gets a place in society not through birth or the bonds of an inherited order but through a gregarious kind of entrepreneurial innovation.

The difficulty with too many liberal notions of social capital is that they are oblivious to the tension between conservatism and democracy. As a result, they are vague and ambiguous as to the nature of social capital, how it might be measured, and what kinds of institutions might erode or encourage it. For example, a theory of social capital that locates it in plain numbers of social network connections is insufficient because it undervalues social skills and overvalues particularistic forms of community that are not adaptive in a dynamic modern economy. This is how liberals end up quoting Tocqueville and sounding indistinguishable from conservative theorists of "intermediary institutions".

Social capital is just one example of a general crisis of liberal ideology. The first step in resolving this crisis is to get clear about what conservatism is and what is wrong with it.

* Ditch Marx

Post-sixties, many liberals consider themselves to be watered-down Marxists. They subscribe to a left-to-right spectrum model of politics in which they, as democrats, are located in some hard-to-identify place sort-of-somewhat-to-the-left-of-center, whereas the Marxists have the high ground of a clear and definite location at the end of the spectrum. These liberals would be further out on the left if they could find a politically viable way to do it. Conservative rhetors concur with this model, and indiscriminately calling liberals communists is back in style. This is all nonsense. Marxism is not located anywhere on a spectrum. It is just mistaken. It fails to describe the real world. Attempts to implement it simply created an ugly and shallow imitation of conservatism at its worst. Democracy is the right way to live, and conservatism is the wrong way.

Marx was a brilliant analyst for his time. His analysis of technology's role in the economy was wholly original. He was the first to analyze the structural dynamism of a capitalist economy. But his theory of modern society was superficial. It overgeneralized from the situation of its time: the recent discovery of economies of scale, crude market institutions, no modern separation of ownership and control, and a small middle class. Marx followed the political economy of his day in analyzing markets as essentially independent of the state. But this is not remotely the case.

One difficulty with Marx, which is the topic of a vast literature, is that his theory requires a periodization of history that does not correspond to historical reality. Capitalism, for example, is supposed to be a discrete totality, but claimed starting dates for this totality range across a good four hundred years. His economic analysis of society, though indisputably productive in the way that many powerfully wrong ideas are, makes history seem more discontinuous than it is. In fact, the relationship between conservatism and democracy is more or less constant throughout thousands of years of history. One evidence of this, for example, is Orlando Patterson's stunning discovery that Western notions of freedom were invented by former slaves in the ancient world and have remained more or less constant ever since.

In economic terms, Marx's theory is mistaken because he did not analyze the role the capitalist plays as entrepreneur. The entrepreneur does an important and distinctive type of work in inventing new ways to bring together diverse factors of production. Now in fact the nature of this work has remained largely hidden throughout history for a wide variety of reasons. Because Marx had no notion of it, the capitalist's profit seemed to him simple theft. It does not follow, though, that entrepreneurs earn all of their money. The theories of mainstream economics notwithstanding, serious how-to manuals for entrepreneurs are quite clear that the entrepreneur is trying to identify a market failure, because market failures are how you make money. The relationship between entrepreneurship and the state is much more complicated than economics has even tried to theorize. Capitalists, moreover, are not a class. Particular networks of capitalists and other well-off or otherwise connected personages may well try to constitute themselves as an aristocracy, but this is a phenomenon with several more dimensions than just economics.

Nor is Marxism of any use as politics. All that Marx offered to people who worked in deadening factory jobs was that they could take over the factory. While unions and collective bargaining exist in many contexts for good economic reasons, they are an essentially medieval system of negotiations among orders and classes. They presuppose a generally static economy and society. They are irrelevant to knowledge-intensive forms of work. Nor do they provide any kind of foundation for democratic politics. People want their kids to be professionals, not factory workers, and democracy helps people to knit themselves into the complicated set of institutions that enable people to build unique and productive lives.

* Talk American

Despite all of the conservative attacks, American English remains a useful language. So use it, and learn to say democratic things in it. There is a style of academic "theory"-talk that claims to be advanced and sophisticated but actually lacks any precision. "Privilege", for example, is not a verb. If new words are needed and are actually good for analyzing the deception of conservatism or the invention of democracy, go ahead and teach them. Integrate them into the vernacular language.

While you are at it, forget the whole strategy of the counterculture. Be the culture instead.

* Stop surrendering powerful words

Many liberals abandon any word that conservatives start using. That means, since conservatives systematically lay claim to every word of the English language, that liberals have been systematically surrendering powerful words such as family, nation, truth, science, tradition, and religion. This has made it increasingly difficult for liberals to explain what they believe. There is no alternative: if conservatives have been twisting a powerful word, then you have to explain in concise American English what the word really means and how the conservatives have distorted it. Contest the signifiers. Use the words.

* Tipper Gore is right

Snoop Dogg's music really is garbage. Some liberals, however, argue that racists hate rap and so therefore any disapproval of rap abets racism. This is bad logic and stupid politics. If racists hate rap then the logical, rational, politically efficacious thing to do is to say that some rap is good and some rap is bad, and that good rap is an art form like any other, and that the bad rap exists because the people who rap it are bad people.

Do not be afraid of losing contact with young people. If all you know about youth culture is Snoop Dogg, then I suppose it is time for some focus groups. Use the focus groups to identify language that Martin Luther King would approve of. Besides, there is plenty of good politics in mass culture, as cultural studies professors have explained at length.

Nor should you be afraid of losing campaign contributions from the entertainment industry. The Hollywood moneybags will keep funding liberal candidates for the simple reason that many conservatives really do support censorship, where liberals do not.

That said, there is certainly a disconnect between some liberal entertainers and the liberals who win elections. Some entertainers are willing to get up on stage and embarrass John Kerry. Scorn them.

* Assess the sixties

Make a list of the positive and lasting contributions of the sixties. Americans would benefit from such a list.

* Teach nonviolence

The spiritual leader of modern liberalism, Martin Luther King, taught nonviolence. This has been narrowly construed in terms of not killing people. But, as King made clear, it has other meanings as well. You have to love your enemies. This is difficult: the reality of conservatism is so extreme that it is difficult even to discuss without sounding hateful. There is also an intellectual dimension to nonviolence. Nonviolence means, among other

things, not cooperating in the destruction of conscience and language. Nonviolence implies reason. Analyze the various would-be aristocracies, therefore, and explain them in plain language, but do not stereotype them. Nonviolence also has an epistemological dimension. Few of us have the skill to hate with a clear mind. Conservatism is very complicated, and you cannot defeat it by shouting slogans. This is the difficulty with Michael Moore. He talks American, which is good. But he is not intellectually nonviolent. He is not remotely as bad as Ann Coulter, and liberals have criticized him much more thoroughly than conservatives have criticized Ann Coulter. But he is not a model for liberal politics. There is no doubt that Martin Luther King would be in George Bush's face. But how? That is why liberals need a language.

* Tell the taxpayers what they are getting for their money

Civilization requires a substantial number and variety of public services, which in turn require moderate and reasonable amounts of taxes. Despite decades of conservative rhetoric, a majority of Americans are perfectly happy to pay their taxes. And yet liberals keep letting conservatives clobber them with rhetoric that makes taxes sound like a bad thing. It is time for liberals to stop losing this argument. To start with, do not talk about amounts of money ("we should spend \$15 billion on health care"). Instead, talk about what the money buys ("we should provide medical care to 15 million children"). And stop letting Bush call his tax policies "tax cuts": he is not cutting those taxes; he is just postponing them.

* Make government work better for small business

The market continually undermines both conservatism and democracy. Both systems must continually improvise to accommodate it. The difference is that conservatism pretends to be a timeless order whereas democracy is all about experiment, innovation, and entrepreneurial culture. Conservatives have historically tried to include entrepreneurs in their coalition, even though conservatism is almost the opposite of the cultural conditions of a modern economy. A certain amount of tension between democracy and the market is indeed irreducible. But a great deal has been learned about markets and their relationship to government, and the democratic culture of innovation can reduce the unnecessary tensions between small business and government while providing for social values such as urban design, consumer information, and the environment.

An excellent example of this is duplicative paperwork. Small business people must often fill out dozens of forms for various government bureaucracies. This is a significant expense. These forms should be combined and given a clean and unified interface. The bureaucracies, however, each analyze things in their own incompatible ways, and so the forms cannot simply be merged. Like much of democracy, this is an interesting design matter.

* Clone George Soros

George Soros is an excellent citizen. Conservatism has gotten so out of sync with the conditions of a modern economy that significant numbers of wealthy people, especially young entrepreneurs who live and breathe the liberal culture that makes successes like theirs possible, would be happy to help build the institutions that a democratic society needs. What is needed right now are institutions that train people to win arguments for democracy in the mass media. Antireason has become thoroughly established in the media, and it will take real work to invent languages of reason that are fresh and cool. And this work just costs money.

* Build the Democratic Party

Your model should be Pat Robertson. He is as extreme on the right as anybody in the United States is on the left. Yet his people took over large parts of the Republican Party. They did this in three ways: laboriously designing a mainstream-sounding language, identifying large numbers of talented activists and training them in the day-to-day work of issue and party politics, and building their own communications systems. Liberals should do the same.

Now, many liberals argue that the Democratic Party would magically start winning again if it would only move to the left. This is lazy nonsense. The Democratic Party has moved to the right for the simple reason that liberals do not have a language that wins elections. To take over the Democratic Party, liberals need to replace the left-

wing policies that do not work and, for the policies that do work, get a language that moves 51% of likely voters to vote Democratic.

Other liberals argue that the Democratic Party, and the "system" in general, are irretrievably broken, and that they must build a third party, such as the Green Party with its endorsement of Ralph Nader. The difficulties with this notion are hard to count. For one, splitting the left is a certain recipe for centuries of aristocratic domination. For another, building a party with only people who share your opinions to the nth degree is a certain recipe for factionalism and isolation. For another, the Green Party is a chaotic mess that has no serious chance of becoming a mass-based political party.

Life under aristocratic domination is horrible. The United States is blessed to have little notion of what this horror is like. Europe, for example, staggered under the weight of its aristocracies for thousands of years. European aristocracies are in decline, and Europe certainly has its democratic heroes and its own dawning varieties of civilized life, and yet the psychology and institutions that the aristocracies left behind continue to make European societies rigid and blunt Europeans' minds with layers of internalized oppression. People come to America to get away from all of that. Conservatism is as alien here as it could possibly be. Only through the most comprehensive campaign of deception in human history has it managed to establish its very tentative control of the country's major political institutions. Conservatism until very recently was quite open about the fact that it is incompatible with the modern world. That is right. The modern world is a good place, and it will win.