BOOK REVIEWS

Varieties of Conservatism

Barry Alan Shain


John Kekes, a professor of philosophy and public policy at the State University of New York at Albany, is a prolific author. In the past ten years alone, he has written at least seven books on moral and political philosophy, and the Case for Conservatism is the most recent. And it is an important work, particularly for conservatives. Its importance, though, may lie less in what Kekes actually accomplishes and more in what he set out to achieve.

In a work of about two hundred pages, Kekes attempts to show that conservatism is not a set of political and moral commitments that result from “the sway of passion over reason and of self-interest over morality,” or that it is incapable of being defended in a “reasonable and morally committed” manner. Here Kekes makes a case for a form of conservatism that he realizes many conservatives will not recognize as such. This is, however, of little concern to him for it is not his goal to canvass the historical or contemporary thought of recognized conservatives or to consider that of any particular thinker. Indeed, American conservatives like Russell Kirk are only mentioned in footnotes in which Kekes describes a dangerous variant of absolutist or religious conservatism. The only contemporary thinker who is favorably treated with any regularity is the English moderate, Michael Oakeshott. Accordingly, it is his own variant of conservatism, Kekes-ism, so to speak, that he defends as philosophically superior to all alternatives, both liberal and conservative. Other varieties, especially those that are guided by orthodox religiosity, intrusive morality, or illiberal sentiments are viewed as wrong-headed and dangerous. Yet, by cogently defending and articulating his understanding of conservatism, Kekes has set an important marker against which other varieties of conservatism must eventually test themselves.

But Kekes’s understanding of conservatism is not so blatantly exceptional that it fails to draw on some of the most important elements of what almost all commentators would recognize as conservatism. He holds that skepticism, pluralism, traditionalism, and pessimism are central to conservatism; indeed, he finds them essential to any defensible political and moral philosophy. In addition, he suggests that conservatism also flows from a natural human disposition, one


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among many conflicting ones, which cherishes and fears losing that which is valued. Because of this, however, Kekes believes that conservatism is a defensible philosophy only during times of rare levels of widespread prosperity and human accomplishment, and at all other times conservatism is "an inappropriate attitude." This is so because conservatism is a political and moral philosophy whose "aim is to safeguard a society's whole system of arrangements that guarantee the political conditions of good lives." For Kekes such a defense is only reasonable when the vast majority of the members of a society are enjoying important social benefits such as equality, an inviting environment, peace, individual rights, tolerance of diverse sexual and religious norms, bodily health, and other creature comforts. Thus, for Kekes, conservatism is a philosophy best suited for an advanced industrial society like our own.

Although his conservatism is the instinctive political and moral philosophy of choice for bourgeois society, Kekes believes that the consensus that had formerly supported this natural linkage has broken down. Under such circumstances, conservatism demands a systematic defense, since the aim of making conservatism articulate and reflective "is to resolve conflicts about the arrangements that maintain and protect the political conditions of good lives." And because Kekes believes that "there is a surprising degree of agreement among conservatives and their various opponents about what political conditions are actually conducive to good lives," making conservatism more systematic should provide the intellectual resources with which to persuade "reasonable and morally committed political thinkers who strongly disagree in other respects," of the errors of their ways. For Kekes, then, conservatism is a moral and political philosophy that is appropriately suited only for unusually affluent and beneficent times, that defends as universal the core values of modern liberal society, and that should be made articulate in order to persuade serious and moral liberal and socialist thinkers to defend American liberal political institutions.

Up to this point in Kekes's argument there are at least three questions that other conservatives might wish to raise regarding his understanding of conservatism. First, is conservatism really only appropriate for Periclean Athens, Augustan Rome, France under Louis XIV, the social democracies of contemporary Europe such as Denmark and Sweden, and the United States after the close of the Second World War? Second, is it true that it is only in the past few decades that there has arisen in America, or in the West in general, a cascade of voices challenging traditional political and moral values? Has there not been continual conflict concerning the nature of Western values, and which of them should be dominant? More particularly, since the rise of Enlightened thought, hasn't there been a fundamental distinction between anthropocentrism—Kekes's party of humanity—and those who continued to adhere to various forms of theocentrism with its inherent limits on human hubris? And third, will adherents of liberalism and socialism, the two powerful alternatives to conservatism recognized by Kekes, be moved to change their core understanding of politics and morality by the reasonable appeals of conservatives? Has not modern epistemology and psychology, and indeed Kekes himself in his exploration of the Liberal Faith, suggested that such expectations are naively optimistic; that is, unless what they are being asked to embrace is only marginally different from what they accept already? But, then, Kekes's conservatism would necessarily differ only at the margins from liberalism and socialism.

With such questions in mind, let us
now consider more carefully Kekes's understanding of what he describes as the four basic beliefs of conservatism: skepticism, pluralism, traditionalism, and pessimism. Each of these is positioned between "extreme beliefs," many of which he associates with other varieties of conservatism and all of which he views as dangerous. Thus, skepticism is the *via media* between rationalism and fideism. Rationalism is, for Kekes, a perspective which views the universe as divinely ordered in a manner which is knowable by human reason; fideism holds the same except that the conduit to a correct understanding of the cosmos is through Divine Revelation rather than fallen human reason. Both hold that, to live a good life, humans must order themselves (or have themselves ordered) in accord with God's ways. And both, for Kekes, are to be rejected because they are falsely metaphysical, and in their own separate ways likely to lead to intolerance. Kekes holds that only a conservatism guided by wholly human institutions and ultimate values, and what looks very much like atheism, is ultimately defensible.

The second pairing is between absolutism and relativism, with the preferred intermediate being what Kekes describes as pluralism. Each of the putative extremes is associated with the earlier extremes—absolutism with rationalism, and relativism with fideism. Accordingly, each is dangerous and, again, is likely to lead to intolerance. Pluralists, however, are in partial agreement with each, such that "absolutism prevails in the realm of moral necessity" and "relativism prevails in the realm of moral possibility." What Kekes means by moral necessity is that there are universal basic values that are to be defended absolutely. These values are almost all valued by contemporary liberals: equality; individual rights; guaranteed access to material needs; justice; individual self-direction; moral, religious, and sexual tolerance; and protection of the environment. All other social attributes which he assigns to a secondary role, the realm of moral possibility and variation, must never conflict with his absolute primary values. Accordingly, with Kekes's understanding of conservatism, most cultures in human history are again shown to be illicit.

Additionally, he stipulates that social commitments to human excellence which are intrusive, and which might demand that certain of his basic values be overridden, are also indefensible. The interior concerns of human beings and their souls are wholly off limits to any kind of authoritative social body. As is generally the case with liberal thinkers, the possible benefits of such political and social activities are ignored and only the dangers associated with them are considered. Is conservatism, then, only a superior means for producing shallow human beings fit for the most pedestrian of bourgeois existences? All of the tragic and tension-ridden features of life and, most importantly, those of exclusive and intrusive communities of religious faith are curiously indefensible under Kekes's understanding of conservatism.

His third pairing is between the concerns of the individual, or autonomy, and those of society, or authority, with traditionalism forming the intermediate bridge between them. Kekes explains that the "exercise of autonomy [by choosing activities] is the individual aspect of their conformity to their tradition's authority, which is the social aspect of what they are doing." But clearly, the importance of autonomy to Kekes takes precedence over that of societal authority. He finds that social authority "is unjustified if it involves forcing individuals to participate in particular traditions or to adopt particular conceptions of a good life rather than others," and that it "has no legitimate place in interfering with individuals as they try on the individual level to decide for themselves which tradi-
tions they should participate in and what conceptions of a good life they should adopt.” And, of course, his understanding of acceptable traditionalism only allows for those traditions which meet Kekes’s minimal set of “universal” values; otherwise, they are to be prohibited. Again he assumes that such standards are readily discoverable and that widespread agreement is likely. But agreement is only likely between those capable of reflecting “well on the historical record,” certainly not the ill-educated or passionate. Hence, “conservatives, in a word, will not favor populist politics.” So much for an American variant of conservatism that looks to evangelicals for support and that stands in opposition to the ways of our contemporary liberal elites.

Finally, the fourth pairing is between human perfectibility and total human corruption, with Kekes’s preferred intermediate being a moderate form of social pessimism. He is clear, however, to distinguish his position from the Christian dogma of original sin by noting that conservatives do not hold that “human beings are corrupt and that their evil propensities are uncontrollable.” Their view is that human beings are both good and evil, but that society is unable to insure that good will triumph over evil. Although this is a defensible position and to be preferred to comparable claims of general human beneficence held by some on the left, one must ask if conservatism is a moral and political philosophy that categorically denies the truth of original sin as understood by many Christians. We should not be surprised, therefore, by Kekes’s opposition to this dogma, because for him matters of religious faith should have the same standing in conservatism as the need to protect “care-free love affairs.” Overall, then, Kekes’s four basic values are recognizably conservative, but each seems to be defined by him in ways that would eliminate most conservatives from conservatism. One must surely wonder about the value of such an intellectual strategy.

Much of what is argued in the middle and later chapters of this book either reiterates claims made earlier or is reminiscent of arguments found in Kekes’s Against Liberalism (1997) or in his other books. At times, in fact, it seems as if Kekes has pulled out sections from his earlier books or articles on moral philosophy, for example on moral intuition and disgust, and placed them in this one. Nonetheless, his critical assessment of contemporary liberalism, even if unoriginal and often poorly integrated into the flow of this book’s argument, is to be applauded. Still, one might also conclude that such critiques were more appropriately placed in earlier books which took as their central concerns the problems of certain variants of contemporary liberalism, particularly that of John Rawls as he developed it in the late 1960s. (As in the past, Kekes seems wholly unconcerned with Rawls’s more recent work.) In short, readers who wish to explore liberalism’s putative flaws or a range of interesting issues in professional moral philosophy would be better served by turning to Kekes’s various other publications.

Another feature of the later chapters which bears mentioning is that whenever Kekes elaborates on specific moral issues, rather than on general conservative principles, one is led to question further his understanding of conservatism. For example, consider his discussion of the moral features of marriage in which he claims that it is wholly for the delight of the partners. Societal and familial considerations, and other ways of viewing marriage, he dismisses. In particular, he finds that “to focus on whether they can or cannot have children, whether their relationship is sexual, whether their sexual relationship takes one form or another is to misjudge what is important.” Similarly, Kekes believes
that reason is likely to show that "a good life involves atheism or homosexuality among consenting adults," but not "human sacrifice or paedophilia." Such an understanding of what is acceptable under his universal values is, thus, surely unlikely to offend most moderate liberal readers.

Let me close, then, by summarizing those issues which might be of greatest interest to Conservative readers. We can begin with Kekes's claim that the core principles of conservatism have only recently come under attack. This is certainly wrong and, ironically, displays a lack of historical perspective. Social and political patterns, and religious and political values, which today are generally understood to be conservative, have been under attack from Kekes's favored party of humanity for much of the last four hundred years. Kekes is equally unaware of the constant tension in America during much of the past two hundred years between progressive elite forces pushing for liberalizing political and social changes and a reactionary and Christian conservative populace holding on to communal and Christian values. All of this is ignored because for Kekes, conservatism is a moderate branch of the Enlightenment rather than a reaction against it. Similarly, his absolutist embrace of the pretensions of modern philosophy helps explain his naive belief that most of the moral and political differences which exist between liberals and conservatives can be overcome through a reasonable exploration of the issues. In spite of his own understanding of liberalism as a faith, he systematically ignores that liberalism and conservatism are separate faiths with different gods. The former, the arrogant product of The Fall, denies the God of Revelation, and the latter holds Him to be the source of truth. Kekes's hostility towards religion, and even perhaps his atheism, may explain this confusion, but it does not make more defensible his understanding of conservatism. In short, like the late Isaiah Berlin whom Kekes so admires, there is something that is conservative in Kekes's preferred philosophy, but far more that is not.

Most glaringly absent from Kekes's flawed exploration of conservatism is any discussion or consideration of the importance of localism to a correct understanding of conservatism, particularly any variant being recommended to an American audience. Maybe this explains his errant transformation of Patrick Devlin's defense of parochialism into one of universalism. In addition, many of his omnipresent fears regarding the dangers of moral intrusiveness would have been lessened if he rightly understood the value of localism and an authentic federalism. What Kekes fails to recognize is that localism, when conjoined with the right of exit, is capable of providing safeguards to many of the dangers he so fears, while allowing for and even fostering moral and religious institutions and traditions that are necessary for human flourishing.

Kekes must be lauded for attempting to present a coherent and systematic defense of conservatism. Yet, given the substance of that which he defends, there is little for conservatives to admire. Like others in the classical liberal tradition, Kekes celebrates rationality, moderation, and bourgeois values. Although such an outlook forms a valuable and needed corrective to the excesses of much of contemporary liberalism, it is in essence little different. His understanding of human flourishing is far too narrow. He is naïve in his confidence in reason's ability to produce agreement concerning the contested character of the human good. In his selection of modern liberal norms as his own primary values, though with different emphases, he dismisses as unacceptable much that is valued by conservatives, most particularly, by the pi
ous. In the end, his conservative plural-
ism looks all too liberal because Kekes,
like an increasing but still small number
of academics, is a liberal who finds him-
self dissatisfied with contemporary lib-
eralism. That he may learn from conser-
vatism and impart his new found wisdom
to other liberals is genuinely to be hoped
for, but no conservative should be mis-
led into believing that what Kekes de-
fends here is a form of conservatism that
any of them should embrace. The need
for an articulate defense of an authentic
conservatism thus remains. But for hav-
ing made this need more visible, John
Kekes deserves our thanks.

An Obsession with Contempt
IAN CROWE

Poisoning the Minds of the Lower
Orders, by Don Herzog. Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 1998. 559
pp.

Poisoning the Minds of the Lower
Orders, the
author explains, was first intended as
a book on conservatism, but it became an
examination of the relationship between
conservatism and democracy under the
impact of the French Revolution and
(which is evidently the same thing to
him) a period investigation into the “poli-
tics of contempt.” The title was chosen
as being “a favorite verbal formula of the
conservatives [and] also their most ma-
cabre nightmare,” and one can piece to-
gether pretty much the whole 545-page
argument from that. Not that Don Herzog,
who is a thoroughly modern educator,
wishes to make argument his priority.
The style and the structure of the book
suggest rather an emphasis on two other
goals: encouraging the reader to adopt a
less reverential and more rigorous ap-
proach to interpreting eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century political and social
discourse, and, through a resultant, no-
nonsense objectivity apparently rare
among historians and political commen-
tators, to expose the nexus of ugly preju-
dices and assumptions shaping that dis-
course.

It is hard not to be impressed—and,
believe me, after a few pages of the
author’s self-congratulatory style you will
try very hard indeed—by the sheer scale
of research presented here: an abun-
dance of documents, referenced meticu-
ously, cross-referenced sharply, and
explored busily with genuine enthusi-
asm. Sadly, there is nothing impressive
in Herzog’s claim to objectivity or origi-
nality, except its gall. The author, neces-
sarily an “unreconstructed liberal,”
claims that, in writing the book, he “hoped
to strike a modest blow for the rational-
ity of free speech by scrutinizing conser-
vative ideas” and doing what only unre-
constructed liberals can in this
balkanized world of ideological warfare—
that is, to dispel the fog of partisanship,
prejudice, and lies: “There is... much here
on conservatism, much of it sharply criti-
cal, all of it I hope relentlessly fair.”

It is the characteristic of a certain
academic approach to equate historical
objectivity with weight of source ma-
terial. Sheer bulk, however, rarely consti-
tutes a conclusive proof of anything, and
here the weight puts severe strains on
Herzog’s evaluative technique. Scant atten-
tion is actually paid to purpose or
context in evaluating—as distinct from
describing—the material, and the mass
of sources laid side by side from a span of
fifty years with no particular attention to
type, comprising private letters, polemi-