



LIBERTY MATTERS

SMITH, HUME, AND BURKE AS POLICY LIBERALS AND POLITY CONSERVATIVES

*In this edition of Liberty Matters, Daniel Klein, Professor of Economics at George Mason University, sketches the liberalism of Smith, Hume, and Burke, and argues that it was a worldly liberalism, sensitive to the coarse clay of humankind and to liberty's dependence on stable, functional polity. Klein distinguishes polity issues and policy issues ("policy" in a sense tailored to that distinction). **Smith**, **Hume**, and **Burke** leaned toward policy liberalization. But the liberal outlook accepts and engages, even enjoys, the sticky moral and cultural circumstances that give the polity its color and character—making for stability and functionality. The troika were policy liberals and polity conservatives, and their conservative liberalism, Klein suggests, is the best understanding of classical liberalism—which, he also suggests, is the wisest and most virtuous political outlook for the modern world.*

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by Daniel B. Klein

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Preface: This essay is a condensation and variation of Klein (2020a), which is about three times the length of this essay.

"TO UNDERSTAND RENOVATIONS
BEING MADE TO A BUILDING, IT IS
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To understand renovations being made to a building, it is good to understand the kind of order that the renovator hopes to establish. [Edmund Burke](#) writes to a French correspondent in 1789: "Permit me then...to tell you what the freedom is that I love." That freedom is liberal policy;

and that is *why* he is so opposed to the goings-on in France: They will not conduce to "practical liberty" (1992, 7, 11). By understanding the sensibilities of Smith, Hume, and Burke in policy reform, we have a better sense of what their judgments would aim for, long-term, when they consider renovations to the polity.

But Smith, Hume, and Burke were conservative in a way that gave body and color to their liberalism. Smith, Hume, and Burke represent conservative liberalism.

In that expression, "liberalism" comes second, but it is primary: It is the noun. It communicates the moral life and the culture, and hence the institutions, including policymaking, they want lived in the house. In that house there are innumerable mansions. The modifying adjective, "conservative," softens the punch of liberalism but enhances its wisdom and habits by moderating the claims made for the liberty principle, thereby making liberal principles more practical, pertinent, and robust. *Conservative liberalism* is a suitable name for the venerable political outlook of our three sages, a name that can span all continents, can connect back in time to the blessed arc of liberal civilization, and can endure through the ages. Hume, Burke, and especially Smith cap the

original arc of liberalism and best represent classical liberalism.



David Hume (1766)

I understand polity as something broader and more organic than the constituent parts of the government. Actions that significantly affect the polity raise issues of polity reformation. Dramatic reforms in immigration policy, for example, may significantly alter the electorate and norms surrounding the functioning of the polity, so mass immigration has a significant polity-reformation aspect to it. But most policy issues have a rather small aspect of polity reformation.

The polity conservatism of Hume, Smith, and Burke was not neutral. In matters of polity reformation, their liberalism would be favored, and the contrary disfavored. Still, the salient feature of their posture of polity reformation was conservatism.

My reading accords with the "three-sided comparison" of David Miller (1981, 196), which finds among the three men "substantial similarities in outlook...: a belief in economic freedom, a belief in social hierarchy, and a commitment to the political establishment of eighteenth-century Britain." Hume, Smith, and Burke are repeatedly listed together by Friedrich Hayek as representative of the liberalism he espouses (Hayek 1948, 4-7; 1960, 55; 1967, 160).

“The Child of Jurisprudence Is Liberalism”

So says J.G.A. Pocock (1983, 249), and Dugald Stewart made similar remarks (1854, 26; cf. 183, 171).

[Adam Smith](#) maintained three senses of justice, one being commutative (Klein 2020b). Smith summarizes the basic precept of commutative justice as "abstaining from what is another's" (TMS 269.10). He gives his most definite description of commutative justice's "most sacred laws" (TMS 84.2) as not messing with other people's person, property, and promises due. In the *Treatise* Hume copiously uses the word "abstain" in the same manner, and explains that the rules of commutative justice evolve to be precise and accurate (T 3.2.6.7-8; EPM 3.2.34 - 3.2.45). Hume and Smith are in these regards developing their own expressions of the natural jurisprudence tradition (Haakonssen 1981, 12; 1996, 27, 117-8; Buckle 1991, vii, ix).



Adam Smith

Smith flips the duty of commutative justice (not messing with other people's stuff) to state the correlated claim of right: Others not messing with one's stuff. That principle operates in each of the two dimensions of his jural philosophy for modern civilization. That jural philosophy involves *jural dualism*, that is, two kinds of jural relationships, equal-equal, like you and your neighbor,

and superior-inferior, or governor-governed (Diesel 2020a, b). Liberty is others, particularly the government, not messing with one's stuff.

Smith speaks of "the violence of law" and related expressions in WN,^[1] and in TMS of "fortunate violence" and "irresistible force": we "submit," "are taught to acquiesce" – not consent! – to "those superiors" (253.30). For Hume, the critic of social contract, it is the same, and likewise for Burke. Burke's talk of "contract" and "compact" belongs to a rejection of contractarianism, for what he means is custom likened to a "virtual" contract (1992, 160), "by the spirit of philosophic analogy" (1999a, 122), and it is an assenting to God, not a consenting to any human political pact. The political theory of Hume, Smith, and Burke is conventionalist and not contractarian.

The conventionalist nature of their political theory pertains to the American identity. The Declaration of Independence and the rebel side of the War for Independence may have been imprinted, opportunely and perhaps opportunistically, with [John Locke](#), [Cato's Letters](#), and [Thomas Paine](#), but the Constitution and *Federalist Papers* bore, opportunely but not opportunistically, more the spirit of men like Hume and Smith, who rejected social contract.

There is a historicist element in liberty. However, it is pinned down within any modern jural-dualistic society by what I call *the jural logic of one's own*: A type of action in the superior-inferior jural relationship is an initiation of coercion if (and only if) such action in equal-equal jural relationships is an initiation of coercion. Yes, what counts as initiation of coercion among equals varies with historical context, but whatever any particular jural-dualistic context recognizes as initiation of coercion among equals will, on the jural logic of one's own, pin down what counts as such when done by the jural superior. This logic takes the historicist element onboard, and domesticates it.

The Liberty Principle and the Liberty Maxim

The liberty principle says: In a choice between two reforms (one of which may be no reform at all), the one that rates

higher in liberty better serves universal benevolence. But Smith did not maintain the liberty principle as an axiom. Rather, it is defeasible. Smith, Hume, and Burke held that the principle holds only by and large, making a maxim. Thus, they give liberty a presumption, which like any presumption can be overcome when the prosecution overcomes the burden of proof. Some of the exceptions come because the greater direct-liberty option has indirect effects and ramifications that over time result in less liberty overall (Klein and Clark 2010, 2012). Many of Smith's exceptions have an indirect-reduction-in-liberty element to their justification (Clark 2010).

“LIBERTY ENJOYS A PRESUMPTION,
BUT SO DOES SOMETHING ELSE, THE
STATUS QUO.”

Liberty enjoys a presumption, but so does something else, the status quo. The two presumptions are in tension for liberty-augmenting policy reforms, and they must moderate one another. The matter of how much of a presumption to give to the status quo makes another contextualization for a meaning of *conservative*; this "conservative" *in policy reform* relates to but should be distinguished from "conservative" *in polity reformation*. Hume, Smith, and Burke were conservative in polity reformation, but I would not assess them to have been particularly conservative in policy reform.

Liberal in Policy Reform

Dugald Stewart (1982, 311) wrote that works such as Smith's *Wealth of Nations* "have aimed at the improvement of society, —not by delineating plans of new constitutions, but by enlightening the policy of actual legislators." Many scholars write explicitly of Smith's pro-liberty "presumption" or "burden of proof."^[2] Almost all of Smith's exceptions are endorsements of status-quo policy.

Hume says that after "fixing and observing" the rules of commutative justice "there remains little or nothing to be done towards settling a perfect harmony and concord" (T 3.2.2.12). Hume was not dogmatic; thus Roger Emerson

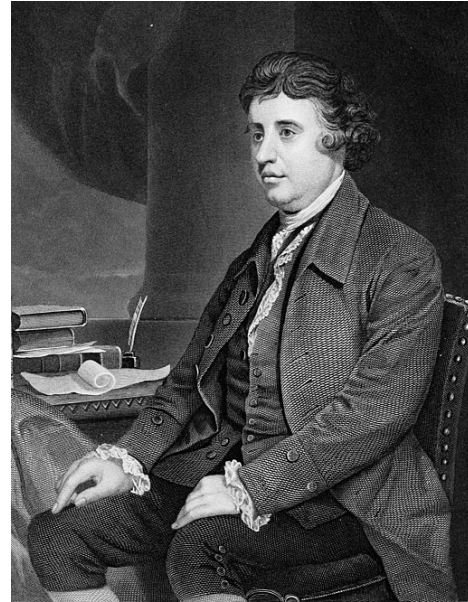
says that Hume's "*laissez faire* was one with qualifications" (28). But the assessment of Russell Hardin (2007) ought not be controversial: "[Hume] thinks that government should be kept small and not intrusive, as he argues in his varied essays on economics" (200).^[3]

In policy reform, Burke too was a liberal. His posthumous "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity" is his only work focused on political economy, and it is plainly and strongly favorable to the presumption of liberty and free markets. He speaks of government intervention as "coercion" (1999c, 61, 70; 1992, 161), saying that beneficial "timely coercion" is something that government owes to the people. Russell Kirk (1997) said that Burke "steadfastly opposed all policies calculated to reduce private liberties" (147), and he repeatedly calls Burke a "liberal" (161; Kirk 1960, 20, 22, 214). Samuel Huntington (1957) wrote: "[I]nsofar as Burke had views on the desirable organization of society, he was a liberal, a Whig, and a free trader" (461). Yuval Levin explains that Burke the parliamentarian "was, above all, a reformer," and suggests that Burke represents what he calls "conservative liberalism" (2014, 9, 229; Levin 2019).

On the word *liberal*, Burke was in the post-1776 Smithian semantic fold.^[4] In the 1777 Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol he spoke of "the liberal government of this free nation" (p. 16). In a 1778 letter he writes that "the prosperity which arises from an enlarged and liberal system improves all its objects: and the participation of a trade with flourishing Countries is much better than a monopoly of want and penury" (1961, 426). In 1778 Burke speaks of the "liberality in the commercial system" (1999c, 33). In the *Reflections* he speaks significantly of "a liberal descent," (1999a, 123), a moment that Gertrude Himmelfarb aptly seizes as liberal in our sense (1986, 167-173). Burke declaims against the new revolutionary assembly in France: "Their liberty is not liberal" (1999a, 174); and: "It is a vile illiberal school, this new French academy of the *sans culottes*" (1992, 299).

Whether Burke was a Smithian liberal in policy reform is a question that would have to consider not only his discourse but all of his activity as a politician, issue by issue. I attempt a first pass in Klein (2020a). Burke's

exceptions seem to be related to the needs of practical politics or to his polity conservatism. Gregory Collins (2017) mounts a case for Burke as an economic liberal and concludes: "While these objections show that Burke did not promote abstract natural rights theory animated by orthodox *laissez faire* doctrine, they do not contradict Burke's endorsement of market freedom" (588).



Edmund Burke

Conservative in Polity Reformation

Burke in his last years saw polity radicalism run amok in France and surge as "*armed doctrine...in every country*" (1999b, 76). In attacking polity radicalism – which makes men "little better than the flies of summer" (1999a, 191) – he expounded a polity conservatism, in *Reflections*, *Appeal*, *Regicide Peace*, and lesser works (Burke 1992). As for Hume and Smith, I think that polity conservatism can be said to go for them, too.

There are general arguments for polity conservatism:

- (1) Established ways have been through a historical process, of selection and survival and adaptation, that reflects, albeit highly imperfectly, functional goodness. "Our patience will atchieve more than our force" (Burke 1999a, 275).
- (2) To some extent goodness is historic and established ways are good because they are established.

(3) The citizen's knowledge is slight, as is that of the social theorist or reformer, and such knowledge is highly conditioned by experience and practice; the consequences of a proposed polity innovation, or even its true nature, are scarcely known. Political projectors are subject to "innumerable delusions" (WN, 687.51). Rampant delusion throws politics into the hazards of collective foolishness and opportunistic abuse.

(4) Happiness depends on tranquility, which depends on confidence. Confidence in living depends on rules certainty and stability. Every reformation excuses, arouses, and inspires a next reformation, reducing certainty, stability, confidence, and the quality of life.

(5) Bad reformations are not easily corrected: Their badness enjoys plausible deniability and is stubbornly denied (Burke 1992, 92-93). Also, they breed interest groups who stoutly defend them.



Yet Smith, Hume, and Burke were ready to take up the burden of proof and espouse reformations. In the regular course of things the changes are conceived as adaptations and improvements, not transformations. "I would make the reparation as nearly as possible in the style of the building" (Burke 1999a, 363).

Polity conservatism has its starkest contrast in polity radicalism. But another contrast might be called *polity loutishness*. In former days I did not think enough about the dependence of liberty and liberalism on stable and functional polity; I did not much consider the polity-reformation dimension. In proud consistency to a too-simple assemblage of principles, and in an unwillingness to face up to humankind's susceptibility to atavistic cohesionist politics, polity loutishness might tend toward

inappositeness, indifference, denial, dupedness, or appeasement in the face of polity recklessness, mischief, or radicalism, when what is called for is recognition and, often, forthright opposition. Burke excels in calling out polity louts.

Concluding Remark

Conservatives, classical liberals, and libertarians see today that, in politics, even in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, one cannot take basic functionality and procedural fairness for granted. And we have seen that, since the Nobel heyday of Hayek and Friedman, the merits of individual liberty and small government have not won mass popularity and favor, and the academic class is mainly adverse. I think that Hume and Smith sensed that "the liberal plan of equality, liberty, and justice," "allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way" (WN 664.3) would always face deep-seated, instinctual mass opposition, and Burke perceived "a sect aiming at universal empire, and beginning with the conquest of France" (1999b, 76, 157). The polity will always be pervaded by immense factions who, in their denial and self-deceit, work willy-nilly towards greater governmentalization of social affairs. The conservative liberalism of Smith, Hume, and Burke is as relevant in our day as it was in theirs.

Endnotes

[1.] For "violence of law" and like remarks see WN 525-526.4-5, 248.9, 285.31, 342.30, 372.32, 422.16, 586.52, 653.28, 647-8.17

[2.] E.g., Viner 1927, 219; Hollander 1973, 256; Young and Gordon 1996, 22; Griswold 1999, 295; C. Smith 2013, 796; Otteson 2016, 508.

[3.] On Hume as a policy liberal, see Klein and Matson 2019.

[4.] On the Smithian semantic "liberal" fold, see Klein 2019.

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THE VALUE OF CONSERVATIVE LIBERALISM

by Michael Huemer

I want to thank Dan Klein for his interesting thoughts about the conservative liberalism of Smith, Hume, and Burke. My own interest is more in contemporary issues than in interpretation of historical figures. But as Klein observes, the conservative liberalism of these great thinkers is of continuing relevance today. So I will here focus on three issues of current import that Klein's essay raises: (i) the coherence of "conservative liberalism," (ii)

the arguments for conservatism, (iii) the importance of conservative liberalism in today's political situation.

The Coherence of Conservative Liberalism

"Conservative liberalism" sounds at first like an oxymoron, with conservatism and liberalism being traditionally seen as ideological opposites. This impression, however, stems more from misunderstanding about the meanings of "conservatism" and "liberalism" than from any real tension. I take it that "liberalism," as Klein uses the term (and as I use it herein), refers to a certain (admittedly broad and vague) set of substantive values. These values include such things as individual liberty, the rule of law, the moral equality of persons, and a free-market economic system. This is the liberalism of Hume, Smith, and other historical figures. (This of course is not to be confused with the common use of "liberal" in the contemporary American political scene, to refer to a left-wing person.)

I take it that "conservatism," as used by Klein (and myself herein), refers to a political stance that values the preservation of the existing institutions and practices of one's own society, and would require a burden of proof to be met by those who propose significant changes.

With that understanding, "conservative liberalism" makes perfect sense in certain societies. If one lives in a society that presently recognizes most individual rights, treats persons roughly as moral equals, and more or less practices the rule of law, then a liberal would of course want to preserve these traditions and the institutions that implement them. Thus, a liberal in such a society would naturally be a conservative.

The Case for Conservatism

I won't here discuss the case for liberalism, as it is not a major focus of Klein's essay, and it is in any case well-known; let it suffice to say that liberal societies have in general fared far better than illiberal ones and are today the countries that people around the world most commonly want to move to. The case for conservatism, however, is less well appreciated. Klein mentions five central arguments, most of which I agree with. To have their greatest force, however, I think these arguments

ought to be supplemented with a sixth argument, as I will explain below.



First, in the spirit of devil's advocacy, let me try to articulate where one might want to resist Klein's five arguments (as quoted from Klein):

(1) "Established ways have been through a historical process of selection and survival and adaptation that reflects, albeit highly imperfectly, functional goodness."

There is some truth to this. However, just as in the case of biological evolution, the process by which social practices evolve need not select for goodness. In the case of biological evolution, nature selects for *selfishness*. Many behaviors can benefit the individual who engages in them at the cost of society or the species as a whole – and, on the correct understanding of evolution, we would expect evolution to *favor* those behaviors. Similarly, some of our *social practices* may exist only because they have 'survival value' – they succeed in maintaining and spreading *themselves* – even if they are harmful to human beings. (Granted, they cannot be *too* harmful – they cannot be so bad that they destroy the society that adopts them.) Perhaps this point is recognized by the "highly imperfectly" qualifier in Klein's statement.

(2) "To some extent goodness is historicist and established ways are good because they are established."

This is the one argument of the five that I see nothing in. A thing cannot be good merely because it exists; that makes no sense to me.

(3) "The citizen's knowledge is slight, as is that of the social theorist or reformer [...]; the consequences of a proposed polity innovation, or even its true nature, are scarcely known. [...]"

With this point, I strongly agree.^[1] For this reason, large reformations are almost always much more risky than proponents realize. This applies both to policy changes and to changes in institutional structures and norms.

I can imagine, however, a "polity radical" making the argument that this point cuts both ways: if our knowledge is slight, then we may be *underestimating* the value of reforms, just as well as we may be overestimating it. Too, we may as well be overestimating the value of the status quo and underestimating its risks. So it is not so clear that the point motivates conservatism rather than reformism.



(4) Happiness depends on tranquility, which depends on confidence. [...] Every reformation excites, arouses, and inspires a next reformation, reducing certainty, stability, confidence, and the quality of life.

This point stands in some tension with the fifth argument, which claims that bad reformations are not easily corrected. The latter suggests that, once adopted, a reformation will usually become stable. So there is only a short-term cost in terms of instability. If the reformation is truly better, then that cost will be outweighed in the long term.

This fourth argument claims, however, that each reformation will lead to further reformations. That *could* be true – there is some a priori plausibility to the idea – but I do not know of any compelling evidence that it is. It is about equally plausible to hold that good reformations will make further reformations *less* likely, since they will increase people's satisfaction with their system. On the other hand, perhaps *bad* reformations will

make further reformations less likely because they will cause people to become more cautious.

(5) "Bad reformations are not easily corrected: Their badness enjoys plausible deniability and is stubbornly denied. Also, they breed interest groups who stoutly defend them."

This again seems plausible but could cut both ways. Wouldn't it also be true that *good* reformations would be stable? More importantly, this fifth argument directly suggests that some elements of *the status quo* may be surviving despite their badness, since "their badness enjoys plausible deniability" and they have bred "interest groups who stoutly defend them." This stands in tension with argument (1).

Now, here is a sixth argument that I think the conservative needs (my addition):

(6) *Regression to the mean*: As a general statistical matter, we should expect large changes in our society to, on average, move us closer to *the mean* for human societies in general. But the average human society is *terrible*, compared to our current society. Therefore, in general, the average large change in our society is bad.

Of course, *some* changes will still be good. But if we assume that we are highly ignorant about society and bad at predicting the future, then for any proposed large change, we should start out presuming that it will have about the average effect of large changes. So we should in general have a strong presumption against any large change. I think that this point plugs the gap in some of the above arguments and is in keeping with the general spirit of Klein's (and Burke's) arguments. My argument differs from arguments (1)-(5) above, in that my argument turns on comparing our society, favorably, to most other human societies. I think you should be conservative if and only if you live in a society where things are going comparatively well. If you live in a society where things are going badly – where the people are poorer, less healthy, less happy, and so on, than average – then you should be a reformer.

The Need for Conservative Liberalism Today

As I say, our society has been going extremely well, relative to the norm for human societies. But this fact is drastically underappreciated. There is a kind of reckless disregard for institutions and established processes in the current political moment that I have not seen before in my lifetime.

At the cost of descending from the heights of abstract theory to the depths of contemporary politics, I will point out that America's current leader was voted into office largely *for the purpose* of "shaking things up" in Washington. It is hard to think of a more foolish political idea. Remarkably, many voters who were once thought to be conservative today show no concern about the President's violation of the law, open flouting of longstanding political and social norms, and abuse of power. Most of the elites in America's erstwhile conservative party (that is, the Republican Party) have abandoned any pretense of concern for fair process, in favor of short-term, apparent gains in power for their tribe. Here, I have in mind such striking phenomena as the Senate Majority Leader openly rejecting the idea of impartiality in a trial, and openly avowing his intention to coordinate *with the defendant* on the conduct of a trial.

Meanwhile, as I write this, one of the leading challengers to our current President is a candidate who openly embraces socialism, the core idea that America opposed during the last century's Cold War. Somehow, in one of the most prosperous, safe, happy, and free societies that has ever existed in human history, large numbers of people on both sides of the political spectrum have agreed that the institutions, practices, and norms of their society need to be burned to the ground. A clearer illustration of political irrationality could hardly be wished for in any time and place.

Endnotes

[1.] See my "In Praise of Passivity," <http://www.owl232.net/papers/passivity.htm>.

HUME NO CONSERVATIVE

by Knud Haakonssen

The suggestion that the politics of Hume, Smith and Burke may be divided up into concern with institutional arrangements of the polity and concern with the pursuit of policy and then put together as "conservative liberalism" has an attractive neatness. The question that Dan Klein's essay raises is whether the former kind of concern is properly characterized as "conservative" and the latter as "liberal". Since none of the three thinkers used either term in anything like the meaning that Dan invokes, I have considerable difficulties trying to capture the meaning of the three as this was expressed in their terms. Nevertheless, let me make an attempt, using Dan's manner of description.

“SO, CAN OUR THREE AUTHORS BE DESCRIBED AS "POLITY CONSERVATIVES"?”

I.

So, can our three authors be described as "polity conservatives"? Encouraged by the need for brevity and the limitations of personal competence, I will speak only about Hume in this first comment and say that the description is at most a truth with modifications, and that the latter are more interesting than the truth.

In the grand perspective of European history Hume (and Smith) saw modern society as a prolonged process of liberation from the barbarism of feudalism and popery. And Hume was of course scathing about the ancients; as far politics was concerned they certainly had nothing to teach the moderns. Furthermore, the moderns were for Hume really quite modern: "The *Oceana* is the only valuable model of a commonwealth, that has yet been offered to the public."^[1] Yet, James Harrington's insight – formulated in the middle of the previous century – that "property [is] the foundation of all government" was too simplistic.^[2] It could not capture the multiple factors that made modern government unique; instead Harrington's

suggested re-modeling of the government of England was a utopian fantasy. Further evidence of Hume's focus on "modernity" may be taken from the fact that when he began to plan his history of Great Britain – which eventually became *The History of England* – he at first saw no reason to go back further than the Stuart monarchs. In so far as conservatism has anything to do with respect for olden times, the label fits Hume very poorly.



David Hume

Hume's central ambition as a political author was to achieve a science of politics that could explain how far modern government had achieved what he saw as the highest goal for the constitution of a polity, namely a proper balance of liberty and authority. He thought that "all kinds of government, free and absolute, seem to have undergone, in modern times, a great change for the better, with regard both to foreign and domestic management", by which he meant external and internal security.^[3] But, he went on to stress:

though all kinds of government be improved in modern times, yet monarchical government seems to have made the greatest advances towards perfection. It may now be affirmed of civilized monarchies, what was formerly said in praise of republics alone, *that they are a government of Laws, not of Men*. They are found susceptible of order, method, and constancy, to a surprising degree. Property is there

secure; industry encouraged; the arts flourish; and the prince lives secure among his subjects, like a father among his children.^[4]

The great strides of the European monarchies and especially of France meant that Hume thought it appropriate to talk of them as "civilized monarchies" comparable in many respects to Great Britain. Nevertheless, the British government was the most modern in the sense that it had gone the furthest in balancing authority with liberty. This was in the main the unintended and unforeseen outcome of the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688-9.

Like Smith after him, Hume saw this event as a decisive moment for the English and Scottish polities. For Hume the Revolution was something entirely unexpected and new. Neither of the rival party-political ideologies of Tories and Whigs had an adequate explanation of the event or assessment of the settlement that was its outcome. In order to explain it, you had to lay aside both absolute monarchism and ancient constitutionalism, let alone the more recent fancies of an original contract, and instead understand the mixed motives arising from either in particular situations. And in order to assess what the Revolution had brought, you had to understand that the constitutional settlement as such could not be the subject of party politics. The settlement was a framework within which party politics could be conducted. This was an understanding that Hume sought to convey through his *Essays* and his *History*. But irrespective of how "scientifically" balanced his explanation and how even-handedly "sceptical" his assessment, it was clear that Hume endorsed the outcome of the Revolution.

In the wake of the Revolution the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707 came about. Although Hume decided to end his *History of England* with the Revolution, it is clear that he was a unionist. His basically Whiggish outlook led him to endorse the new constitutional arrangement and to pursue his personal career very much within this new polity. And despite his limitless contempt for the English, he was a vigorous promoter of the Anglicization of Scottish culture, especially as far as language and literature were concerned.

In sum, Hume was a distinct progressivist and modernist in his view of European politics and culture. He endorsed a revolution that brought about a truly novel government, as he saw it. And he supported the dissolution of the political sovereignty of his own country, which led to another constitutional novelty, the incorporating Union. These well-known broad features of Hume's political thought frankly do not seem to be well described as "polity conservatism."

II.

As mentioned, Hume's fundamental approach to politics (and much else) was balance. That is to say, he wanted to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of competing political views in such a way that his audience would learn to accept that opposites had to be – and could be – lived with. The balancing counterweight to the progressivism and modernism indicated above was an array of suggestions for what could go wrong and was going wrong with modern polities understood in this way. Two of his greatest fears were the national debt and what he saw as the abuse of individual liberty.

The modern method of deficit financing of warfare to protect trading interests considered as matters of national safety, or "reason of state", had led Britain into a spiraling debt that Hume feared would lead to national bankruptcy. The suggested remedy was to lay aside an economic policy based upon "jealousy of trade" in favour of one of competitive markets characterized by peaceful emulation. In this we might see a case of "policy liberalism", but it should be noted that the malaise that had to be cured was the doing of the most liberal polity yet seen, that of British Whiggism.

Hume's other great fear was that the balance of authority and liberty that was the outcome of the constitutional settlement after the Revolution was tottering. This had been a theme from the earliest essays, but it became an obsession for several years late in his life as he reacted to the civil unrest in connection with John Wilkes. The principle was that:

In all governments, there is a perpetual intestine struggle, open or secret, between Authority and Liberty; and

neither of them can ever absolutely prevail in the contest. A great sacrifice of liberty must necessarily be made in every government; yet even the authority, which confines liberty, can never, and perhaps ought never, in any constitution, to become quite entire and uncontroulable. ... liberty is the perfection of civil society; but still authority must be acknowledged essential to its very existence.^[5]



King George III

The way in which governments had conducted policy in Britain had seriously undermined the "essential" authority, as Hume summarized his view of the situation a decade into the reign of George III:

Only consider how many Powers of Government are lost in this short Reign. The right of displacing the Judges was given up; General Warrants are lost; the right of Expulsion the same; all the co-ercive Powers of the House of Commons abandon'd; all Laws against Libels annihilated ... the revenue of the civil List diminish'd. For God's sake, is there never to be a stop put to this inundation of the Rabble?^[6]

This call for action does not seem to be unambiguously one for "liberal policy".

My conclusion is that Hume's idea of politics is far too "English", as it were, to be adequately analyzed by means of a distinction between "polity" and "policy" so rigid that it makes sense to characterize his view of one as "conservative", the other as "liberal". This might work for

polities with a fixed (written) constitution, but Hume's genius was to capture the fluidity of structure and action in English politics.

Endnotes

[1.] David Hume, "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth", in *Essays Moral, Political, Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1987, pp. 512-29, at p. 514.

[2.] "Of the First Principles of Government", in *Essays*, pp. 32-36, at pp. 33-34.

[3.] 'Of Civil Liberty' in *Essays*, pp. 87-96, at p. 93.

[4.] 'Of Civil Liberty', p. 94.

[5.] "Of the Origin of Government", *Essays*, pp. 37-41, at pp. 40-41.

[6.] Hume to William Strahan, 25. June, 1771, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols., Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969, vol. II, p. 244-45.

LIBERALISM AND JUDGMENT

by Brianne Wolf

On February 5, 2020 in a speech announcing his decision to vote in favor of Trump's impeachment, Mitt Romney said: "My promise before God to apply impartial justice required that I put my personal feelings and political biases aside. Were I to ignore the evidence that has been presented and disregard what I believe my oath and the Constitution demands of me for the sake of a partisan end, it would, I fear, expose my character to history's rebuke and the censure of my own conscience." Romney's decision flew in the face of party loyalty, but he claimed to be exercising moral judgment along the lines of something like Adam Smith's impartial spectator.

In his essay, Dr. Klein argues that Burke, Hume, and Smith are policy liberals, but polity conservatives who seek to maintain laws as traditionally interpreted. Klein's argument about polity conservatism is well-taken in that

Burke, Hume, and Smith all wanted to maintain political stability through rule of the law. However, I suggest that the foundations of their polity conservatism differ. While Burke bases his polity conservatism on adherence to tradition and a kind of patriotic reverence for precedent, I argue that in contrast, Hume and Smith advocate judgment ahead of patriotism—putting concern for justice and liberty ahead of duty to country. For Burke, love of country requires adherence to custom, whereas for Hume and Smith, custom can have negative effects on the impartial judgment required for liberal citizenship.



Patriotism and (Im)partiality

Burke argues for the importance of tradition. He speaks of "ancient chivalry" (R, 446), the "fabric of society" connecting "the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth" (R, 456), and "love, veneration, admiration, [and] attachment" for one's country (R, 448). [1] Burke supported the English Civil War and the American Revolution because they reformed from within their traditions whereas the French wanted to throw out tradition altogether to form something new. The English and Americans consider "our liberties in the light of an inheritance" (R, 429). For Burke, patriots respect the nation that provides their liberties.

Hume and Smith also discuss patriotism. In "Of the Protestant Succession", Hume describes the "impartial

patriot" who "would ponder and examine, in order to form a just judgment upon the whole" (E, 506).^[2] He suggests a role for precedent in his "Of the Original Contract" because "human society is in perpetual flux" and following the "established constitution" provides stability. Without rule of law, freedom becomes subject to the will of tyrannical rulers motivated by "faction and fanaticism"—he gives the examples of Henry VIII and Charles I (E, 476-477). However, this faithfulness to precedent does not arise out of a duty to country. Instead "experience and observation" demonstrate the utility of maintaining traditions because they help preserve freedom (E, 480).

Smith rejects the man of system who uses his fellow citizens and denies them their liberty in an effort to achieve his vision of a perfect society. In contrast Smith discusses the man of public spirit, who sympathizes with those he is administering by "moderating" his behavior so as to "accommodate, as well as he can, his public arrangements to the confirmed habits and prejudices of the people" (TMS VI.ii.2.16). Smith's patriot is also impartial—he describes factions as the opposite of the impartial spectator: "In a nation distracted by faction, there are, no doubt, always a few though commonly but a very few, who preserve their judgment untainted by the general contagion" (TMS III.3.43). Faction along with deference to the rich and their customs are the greatest dangers to the moral sentiments (TMS III.3.43; I.iii.3.1). For Smith, patriotism is characterized by rising above partiality and party to advocate for the common good (Elazar Unpublished manuscript).

Smith consistently places concern for justice ahead of concern for country. The prudent man, he tells us, will serve his country "when distinctly called upon" but "he will not cabal in order to force himself into it" (TMS VI.i.13). Further, the prudence of public officials like generals, statesman, and legislators requires "sacred regard to the rules of justice" (TMS VI.i.15). Justice ought to inform patriotism. Smith supports maintenance of constitutional order for stability, but notes that in addition to respect for the constitution, the good citizen "promote[s], by every means in his power, the welfare of

the whole society of his fellow-citizens" (TMS VI.ii.2.11). It is this perspective on patriotism, I would argue, that leads Smith to advocate liberal policies, among them the reform of the poor laws (WN I.x.c.45-63; Wolf (2017)) and the rights of the American colonists.^[3]

Unlike Burke, Both Hume and Smith advocate a patriotism guided by moral judgment and separated from custom, duty, or tradition. For example, Burke is much more deferential to the crown than is Smith (Winch 1996, 172-178).

This dichotomy I've established is far from perfect, however. Smith appears partial to his native land when he asserts that Britain's colonial policy is less illiberal than that of Spain or Portugal (WN IV.vii.b.50-51). Burke expresses a skepticism about the British government's right to use their authority in his "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity" saying "My opinion is against an over-doing of any sort of administration, and more especially against this most momentous of all meddling on the part of authority; the meddling with the subsistence of the people."^[4]

Judgment, Politics, and Morality

In Smith's and, to a lesser degree, Hume's, political philosophy, policy liberalism and polity conservatism require that citizens exercise judgment. The capacity for judgment is crucial for a healthy and free polity. Judgment is formed through everyday interactions with others and is based on affective connections with one's fellows in society. These affective connections are also essential for ensuring justice, morality, and liberty.

For Hume, whose definition of sympathy differs from Smith's, this occurs through conversation, debate, and fellow-feeling about common experiences—what Ryan Hanley (2011) has called "a politics of humanity." These shared experiences with others are how one develops judgment that is capable of overcoming faction. While judgment may have to be guided by elites, especially in matters of aesthetics, judgment remains essential.

For Smith, it is the exchange of sympathy—imaginatively changing place with another—in everyday interactions, like commercial transactions, that creates a basic

foundation for morality for the average person. The "path to wealth" and the "path to virtue" are almost always the same because for them to achieve material success, they need to be esteemed by their neighbors (TMS I.iii.3.5). "Mere propriety" is all that is required to avoid social disorder (TMS I.i.5.7; Forman-Barzilai 2010, 113).^[5] This is also why he thinks an education of some kind is required for the laboring poor. When they are confined to placing heads on pins all day they need opportunities to develop judgment elsewhere so they can exercise "just judgment" about both "ordinary duties of private life" and "extensive interests of [their] country" (WN V.i.f.50). Liberty rests in our capacity for judgment (Fleischacker 2004).



Edmund Burke

or Burke, the basis for politics should not be everyday experience, but rather inherited custom and tradition:

Society is, indeed, a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure; but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership in agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross

animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." (R, 457-458).

The source of connection between citizens is everyone's participation in a given polity with a specific history and tradition. Judgment in politics should similarly be based on the system of established precedent, rather than everyday interactions with one's fellows.

For Hume and Smith, interaction with others is essential for forming moral, aesthetic, and political judgments. It is our sympathetic exchanges that lead us to resent injustice and fight on behalf of our brethren (TMS II.ii.1.4). However, Smith worries about custom perverting moral judgment. Smith notes the prejudices that can arise from custom, citing how Europeans see other culture's practices such as foot-binding as horrific and savage, but ironically, they think nothing of European women "squeeze[ing] the beautiful roundness of their natural shape into a square form of the same kind" with corsets (TMS V.1.8).

Convention matters for Hume's theory of justice by providing a system by which we judge the propriety of others' behavior and then make our moral judgment, but convention does not itself guide our actions—it is merely a framework. We work out the standards of justice through experience, like two people rowing a boat, through trial and error figure out how to steer in a straight line rather than going in circles (T 3.2.2.10). For Hume, unlike Burke, the antiquity of a law does not matter; instead, it is the process of deciding on the law with others and whether or not the law upholds standards of justice that is relevant (Haakonssen 1981, 42-43).

The differences inhere in the basis for judgment. For Burke, the basis of judgment rests in tradition and the antiquity of a given law, but for Hume and Smith, judgment rests in emotional sensibility and sympathetic exchange with one's fellows.^[6] For Hume and Smith

then, judgment can be developed widely because of the kinds of interactions that foster moral capacity.

The Danger of Emotion

The danger for liberty lies in judgment being overwhelmed by emotion. All three thinkers agree on this. For Hume and Smith emotion is central for a successful politics that is based on moral concern for and connection to others. It is a particular kind of emotion they find problematic. For Smith, this occurs when emotional fascination with order overtakes sympathy. This is his critique of the man of system who forgets the liberty of his fellow citizens in favor of his perfect plan of government (TMS VI.ii.2.17). For Hume this is evident when religious zeal blocks individuals' ability to feel with others and see their perspective which leads to faction (Herdt 1995). Burke fears the excess of emotion of the French revolutionaries that lead to irrational political judgments like executing the king and queen (R, 446). He argues that they "have wrought underground a mine that will blow up, at one grand explosion all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of Parliament" (R, 440). Each of these instances could be characterized by love of country or patriotism. Burke even suggests that the French revolutionaries think they are demonstrating love of country in their defense of "the rights of man" (R, 440).

Love of country is a dangerous emotional attachment if it overwhelms one's judgment formed through interaction with others. To have a truly liberal politics, citizens must be free to exercise their individual judgments according to their own principles. This judgment must be guided in some sense by a concern for the whole through interactions with others and the structure provided by the framework of law. Affective ties to others provide the limit on self-interest and a concern for justice. Patriotism and reverence for tradition alone are insufficient because they are subject to the dangers of faction, self-interest, and partiality to one's own belief system. Impartial judgment is crucial for liberalism.

Polity conservation requires citizens who can exercise judgment to move past their self-interested concerns or

inherited policies to a society that supports individual freedom for all. This is only possible through shared experiences and connections with others. It is this kind of judgment that allows citizens to recognize, for example, the injustice of colonial, mercantilist policy or contemporary trade policy that supports the nation ahead of the freedom of individuals.

Endnotes

[1.] All references to *Reflections on the Revolution in France* are found in Burke (1999 [1790]) and will be cited parenthetically as (R, page).

[2.] All references to *Essays Moral, Political, Literary* are found in Hume (1994 [1777]) and will be cited parenthetically as (E, page).

[3.] Smith (1987 [1778], 380).

[4.] Burke (1990 [1795], 212).

[5.] Others have argued that Smith's goal is perfection in virtue. See Hanley (2009).

[6.] This can be seen in Burke's aesthetic judgment, which he argued should follow a system. He begins his *Enquiry*: "for if Taste has no fixed principles, if the imagination is not affected according to some invariable and certain laws, our labour is like to be employed to very little purpose; as it must be judged as useless, if not an absurd undertaking, to lay down rules for caprice, and to set up for a legislator of whims and fancies" Burke (1990 [1757], 12). Frazer (2015) argues that unlike Smith, Burke's politics followed this commitment to system.

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LIBERALISM REMAINS PRIMARY

by Daniel B. Klein

Liberalism Remains Primary: Replies to Michael Huemer and Knud Haakonssen

My sincerest thanks to Michael Huemer and Knud Haakonssen—and to Liberty Fund.

My presentation of conservative liberalism involves a distinction between policy issues and polity issues. In a longer paper [at SSRN](#) I elaborate on the distinction.

“THE WORD "POLICY" IS, IN THE PRESENT CONVERSATION, TAILORED FOR THAT DISTINCTION, SUCH THAT SPEAKING HERE OF A POLICY REFORM TENDS TO ABSTRACT AWAY FROM HOW IT WOULD CHANGE THE POLITY.”

The word "policy" is, in the present conversation, tailored for that distinction, such that speaking here of a policy reform tends to abstract away from how it would change the polity. Such will be serviceable especially when the reform does not, in fact, much change the polity.

Consider an analogy: An elderly fellow named Sam has for some years now developed a cataract problem. Sam now considers cataract surgery. That "reform" will

improve his eyesight. But does it change Sam? Does it much change Sam's character or soul? There might be some change in the more essential being that Sam is, but it seems reasonable to say that, basically, Sam is still Sam, only now he sees better.

Likewise, for many policy reforms—liberalizing occupational licensing, the minimum wage, land-use restrictions—there is not much change in the polity. Its character and culture are not much changed, nor its stability jeopardized. Thus, these are policy issues in our sense here. Other issues, such as significant changes to immigration policy or schooling policy, some would say drug policy (marijuana, cocaine etc.), would raise questions about broader effects on the culture and character of the polity. Some such implicit comparison is in play with my distinction between "policy" and "polity." Think "change in what the polity *does*" versus "change in what the polity *is*."

But on top of the doing-versus-being aspect of my formulations, another important facet comes with the specific coordinate meanings of "liberal" and "conservative." In calling Smith, Hume, and Burke "policy liberals," I refer to issues parsable in terms of liberty—such as liberalizing occupational licensing, the minimum wage, and land-use restrictions. Issues that are not parsable in that way are not what I have in mind when I speak of policy liberalism. This point is important for responding to Knud (I go with first names, following Knud's example). Knud has doubts about Hume as a policy liberal and quotes a passage from a 1771 letter in which Hume notes a number of reforms and expresses dissatisfaction with the trend they represent. Many of the issues mentioned in Hume's list are not liberty issues in the grammar-like sense. The six issues mentioned by Hume and quoted by Knud are:

the right of displacing the Judges was given up; General Warrants are lost; the right of Expulsion the same; all the co-ercive Powers of the House of Commons abandon'd; all Laws against Libels annihilated ... the revenue of the civil List diminish'd.^[1]

Several of the six issues are about government rules governing the operation of government operations, and on that ground alone they are beside the point when assessing Hume as a policy liberal. I confess to knowing little about the brass tacks of the six issues in their historical context. Maybe a few of them (general warrants, libel laws, and the revenue) are parsable in terms of the liberty principle, as liberalization.



Murray N. Rothbard

The passage counts for something but not much when assessing Hume's policy liberalism. The passage comes at the end of an unpublished letter dealing with practical affairs passing between Hume and his publisher. The passage is off-hand political kibitzing. Although Hume is unhappy about the general trend that the list represents ("this inundation of the Rabble"), I don't think we can conclude that he necessarily opposes each and every reform in the list. Finally, if some of the issues are liberty parsable and liberalizations, they may be ones for which Hume's polity conservatism kicks in—"the Rabble" and few lines later "the Odium of the populace." Hume's apparent concern about the relaxation of libel laws would probably stem from his concerns about political destabilization—then as now, talk of "mobs" was not only metaphorical. As for "the revenue of the civil List diminish'd," that is about monies flowing to the Crown, and Hume is concerned about the diminishing place of the monarchy. Again, policy liberalism does not imply an

axiomatic allegiance to the liberty principle. No one is suggesting that our three thinkers made claims for the liberty principle like those made by Murray Rothbard.

My idea of polity liberalism is very much what Adam Smith had in mind when he joined in promulgating the original political meaning of "liberal," for example in highlighting "allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way" to explain "the liberal plan of equality, liberty, and justice" (WN 664.3), reiterating "liberal system" (538-9.39), and so on. Tools utilizing the mass digitization of texts, supplemented by traditional scholarly methods, have enable us to establish (1,2) the origination of "liberal" in its first political meaning; the arc is clear. Once again we find that Hayek was right (*Const. of Liberty*, 1960, 530 n13). That meaning of "liberal" is explicit in Adam Smith.



Friedrich von Hayek

Incidentally, the kinds of issues more likely to be "mere" policy issues in my sense tend to be regarded as "economic," and liberty in such matters as "economic freedom." That is interesting. As we've seen, policy issues in my sense are, first, not polity issues, and second, are parsable in terms of liberty. Why such issues tend to be dubbed "economic" is something we might want to explore.

Besides challenging me on Hume as a policy liberal, Knud challenges me on Hume as a polity conservative. Knud points out that the polity that Hume wished to maintain

in Britain was quite young, having been born, as it were, after the Glorious Revolution or even 1707. How can one be called a polity conservative if the polity that one seeks to conserve is so modern?

Knud's point brings us to another way in which liberalism remains primary in conservative liberalism. The nature of the polity within a given national jurisdiction will evolve through time. In a sense there is a stream of polities—plural—succeeding one another through time, and, taken to an extreme, we never step in the same polity twice.

The conservatism of polity conservatism is about preserving and protecting some essential qualities of the polity. But what is essential? What are the historical benchmarks for these qualities? As I write in [the longer piece](#):

As for the United States today: Is the spirit of the polity the vision of the Declaration, the Constitution, and the Founding Fathers, or is it the current status quo? Suppose we were to roll back Social Security significantly: Is that a changing of the polity, against the presumption of polity conservatism, or a *cancellation of a change to it*, consonant with polity conservatism? Is James Madison still a leading spirit of the polity?

The problem to which we have arrived illuminates one reason why I say that the polity conservatism of Smith, Hume, and Burke *is not otherwise neutral*: While maintaining a polity conservatism generally, their polity inclinations would also lean liberal. Here, in the polity sphere, "liberal" is not so confined to the grammar-like parsings. Liberty-conducive qualities—e.g., checks and balances—would get special favor as things worthy of holding on to, even if those qualities were of only recent emergence. Their polity posture was conservative, but not only that.

I want to see a correction in the attitudes of certain libertarians, so as to better appreciate polity conservatism; I want to see more worldliness and maturity among libertarians. I want them to read the Burke of the 1790s, and to appreciate that stuff. I join Michael in lamenting in today's political scene "a kind of reckless disregard for institutions and established processes": We should not

take stable and functional polity for granted. Also, I want to foster continuity and affiliation between those who identify as conservative and those who identify as classical liberal or libertarian. For reasons such as these it is useful to paint Smith, Hume, and Burke as conservative liberals. Yet another reason for the project is that it may help conservatives who think of themselves as opposed to liberalism to realize that they err in their tendency to fold together the liberalism of Smith and the so-called liberalism of leftism.

Knud is quite right in saying that the polity character that Hume upholds is modern. And no doubt Knud would say the same about Smith, who knocks the "ancient moralists" for not marking out commutative justice, with its "precise and accurate" rules, from ethics generally (TMS 328.1-3, 341.37). The marking out of commutative justice, and the appreciation of its specialness in being grammar-like, is crucial, because it is then flipped to enunciate liberty, which is then the spine of policy liberalism. So the liberalism of Hume and Smith is indeed modern. But "conservative liberalism" can accommodate the modernness of the polity that is to be established or maintained.

That the adjective "conservative" is there to modify, in a specific way, the noun "liberalism" is a point to underscore as I respond to Michael, who writes:

I take it that "conservatism," as used by Klein (and myself herein), refers to a political stance that values the preservation of the existing institutions and practices of one's own society, and would require a burden of proof to be met by those who propose significant changes.

Michael then proceeds to consider "The Case for Conservatism." But my "conservative liberalism" is not a mere blend of "liberalism" and "conservatism," as though we filled our soda cup half with Sprite and half with Orange Fanta, making "Sprite Fanta." My conservative liberalism is policy liberalism tempered by polity conservatism. Michael tells the reader that I make five central arguments for "conservatism." But those five arguments are made for polity conservatism, not conservatism *simpliciter*.

Michael's comments on my five arguments are, nonetheless, very valuable. The major lesson is that the arguments are sometimes cross-cutting, or countervailing. And I welcome his addition to the list of arguments, namely, that if, by global comparison, we have a pretty good polity, precaution recommends against significant change. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

One of the five arguments for polity conservatism is: "To some extent goodness is historic and established ways are good because they are established." In response, Michael writes: "This is the one argument of the five that I see nothing in. A thing cannot be good merely because it exists." That is a rather stark way of rephrasing my point.

I think it is important to see that a big part of people's well-being lies in their ability to find enjoyment while plying that which they have become accustomed to. What it is that they have become accustomed to may not be good; it may be decidedly bad. Given lived experience up to this moment, however, there is something to be said for people being able to continue on with conditions that they have learned to live with, conditions that have generated proprieties, prompted solutions, and established expectations, now habitualized personally and conventionalized socially. When our sensibilities in ethics, morals, and politics operate on an ethical issue, the historical circumstances and color of the issue must be part of what those sensibilities work upon. The historical element of the problem is not dispositive, but it is there, it counts. The historical element corresponds to Smith's third "source" of moral approval "the perception of the agreement or disagreement of any action to an established rule" (and expectations) (TMS 327.16). Ethical judgment depends on historical contextualization of the conduct under consideration. Our ethical sensibilities are partly historic. But only partly!

Endnotes

[1.] Hume to William Strahan, 25. June, 1771, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols., Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969, vol. II, p. 244-45.

STARK DEMARCATION UNHELPFUL

by Daniel B. Klein

My thanks to Brianne Wolf for engaging my painting of Smith, Hume, and Burke as policy liberals and polity conservatives.

Brianne treats the polity conservatism. She does not dispute that it is apt to regard each as a polity conservative. But she suggests that "*the foundations of their polity conservatism differ*" (italics added).

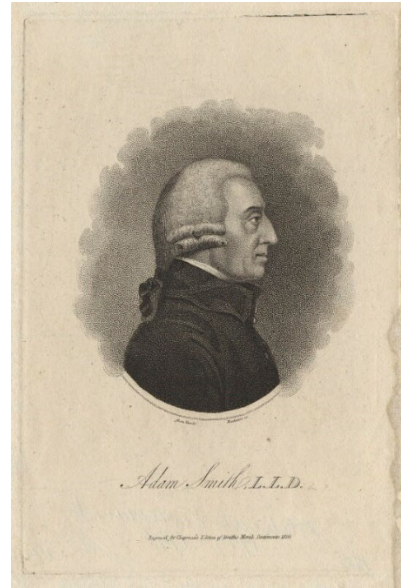
Any two people will differ at least somewhat in their political sensibilities, as they will in other aesthetic domains. Perhaps Burke was somewhat warmer on tradition and custom than Hume, and maybe than Smith too. But uniqueness does not imply large differences. Where Burke faulted the French revolutionists and their British sympathizers for having too little regard for tradition, he was not saying that tradition was all that mattered. He was an active reformer; he favored letting the Americans go their own way. In criticizing French affairs, he was not saying anything that Hume or Smith would have much disagreed with, I think.

Brianne often suggests a foundationalism or demarcationism—and associated lexicographic prioritization—that I am uncomfortable with. Brianne writes:

- "Hume and Smith advocate judgment ahead of patriotism"
- Hume and Smith put "concern for justice and liberty ahead of duty to country"
- "Smith consistently places concern for justice ahead of concern for country"
- "both Hume and Smith advocate a patriotism guided by moral judgment and separated from custom, duty, or tradition"

Smith is quite explicit that moral sentiments are aesthetic. Notice that both Part IV and Part V of TMS treat *the beauty* of objects, with the second chapters treating "the

character and actions of men" (TMS 187) or "moral sentiments" (200). Political sensibilities are aesthetic.



Adam Smith

Brianne sees Smith and Hume as alike, and so do I. But that likeness would not "advocate judgment ahead of patriotism." It is not "judgment" versus "patriotism." It is one judgment versus another judgment, with patriotism etc. playing a role in the arriving to each judgment. Brianne quotes Smith on the ability of laborers to arrive at "just judgment" (from WN 782.50). Judgments can be more or less just. Smith's multifaceted justice has within it considerations of patriotism, tradition, and so on—like I noted previously (I quoted Smith on the third source of moral approval, TMS 327.16). And I think Brianne is mistaken when she writes: "For Hume...the antiquity of a law does not matter."

In all of this, is there any reason to see Burke as much different from Smith and Hume? Not as far as I can see. Burke emphasized tradition, custom, and so on because Richard Price, Thomas Paine, the Jacobins, and others did not give those things enough weight and standing in their sensibilities. Burke did not wish to replace judgment with tradition; he wanted to shore up tradition to its proper place within judgment. To do that Burke deployed his genius in waxing poetic, and polemic, about how traditions and institutions provide practical senses of propriety, shared meaning, intelligibility of conduct and

character, and coherence of life generally. Polity radicals and polity louts need Burke's schooling.

Likewise, I am uncomfortable when Brianne writes: "The danger for liberty lies in judgment being overwhelmed by emotion." Note that reason and passion is not nearly as simple as the familiar "slave of the passions" quotation from the *Treatise* (which he disavowed) might lead one to believe. Hume suggested that the activity of reasoning, necessary for rendering a judgment, is a calm passion—a *passion* ([link](#)). One might even contend that he allows that the faculty of reason involves impressions and associated triggerings, or passions, albeit calm ones. In suggesting such, Hume suggests a distinction not so much between reason and passion as one between calm passions and violent passions.

Where Brianne writes that "The danger for liberty lies in judgment being overwhelmed by emotion," I would say that the danger for liberty lies in judgment being overwhelmed by *unjust* emotions. The flourishing of liberty depends on just emotions. (See [here](#) on passion/emotion as sentiment active/passive.) We have some control over our emotions and passions, and we should exercise that control justly.

COVID-19 AND CONSERVATIVE LIBERALISM

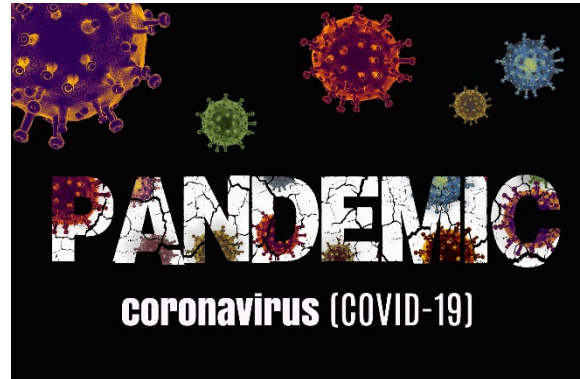
by Daniel B. Klein

How does Covid-19 illustrate things about conservative liberalism?

There are no absolute libertarians in foxholes. In the Covid-19 crisis it is very likely that the government should exert its power of institutionalizing the initiation of coercion. Very plausibly, the government should coerce anew, for example ordering bars and concerts to suspend activities. Such emergency incursions on liberty should of course be temporary.

The well-being of the whole is supreme. That goes for Smith's entire moral philosophy. It is specific to neither his policy liberalism nor his polity conservatism. It stands

behind both, and all else. My byword is *the holiness of the whole*. The liberty principle is not synonymous with the holiness of the whole, and hence is defeasible.



What other emergency measures should the government take?

In a major speech on Covid-19 President Trump [announced](#): "We are cutting massive amounts red tape to make antiviral therapies available in record time." Speedy availability is needed for test kits, ventilators, care personnel, facility capacity, [convalescent blood therapy](#), and so on.

Cut the red tape surrounding occupational licensing, new drug permitting, production requirements, facility restrictions ("certificate of need"), restrictions on imports and on "price gouging." We need rapid response on the supply side.

Charles II imposed certain restrictions on the importation of grain into England. Smith writes:

The distress which, in years of scarcity, the strict execution of those laws might have brought upon the people, would probably have been very great. But, upon such occasions, its execution was generally suspended by temporary statutes, which permitted, for a limited time, the importation of foreign corn. The necessity of these temporary statutes sufficiently demonstrates the impropriety of this general one. (WN 536.34)

Smith repeats the theme two pages later, having also discussed export bounties:

The temporary laws..., expedients to which Great Britain has been obliged so frequently to have recourse, sufficiently demonstrate the impropriety of her general system. Had that system been good, she would not so frequently have been reduced to the necessity of departing from it. (WN 538.38)

Then the next paragraph begins: "Were all nations to follow the liberal system of free exportation and free importation" they would achieve "the most effectual preventative of a famine" (538.39).

Covid-19 emerged in December 2019. Now an emergency descends upon us all, as we learn the peril and learn how to change our habits and daily lives. We are experiencing the emergency together.

Prior to the emergence of Covid-19, we had had regular experience with viruses and related fatalities. The 2017-18 flu season in the United States was severe, but we had regularized our attitudes and practices, and did not regard the some [61,000 deaths](#) to be an emergency.

But for one among those 61,000, or their family members, it was indeed an emergency. They might ask: How about cutting some red tape for us? Is our morbidity and mortality not equally important? Hey you, what is it that you are really all about? Would not liberalizations on supply and development vastly reduce healthcare costs for all of us? Would that not be the most effectual preventative of a crisis?

And, had there not been so much red tape, supplies and responsiveness would have been better achieved from the very onset of the Covid-19 outbreak. We would have been ready to respond rapidly.

Plain old policy liberalism, people.

The policy liberals have been right all along about 'consumer protection' restrictions. "The affected anxiety of the law-giver lest [consumers] should employ an improper person, is evidently as impertinent as it is oppressive" (Smith, WN 138.12). Policy liberals were right about it even before 1776, for example in [1751](#), [1758](#), [1763](#).

Emergencies might call for temporary restrictions on liberty. But overcoming emergencies depends critically on liberalizing old restrictions. Those moments might show us how the old restrictions stunk to high Heaven to begin with. Freedom makes wealth, and wealth is health—the most effectual preventative.

Also, enact tort reform, loser-pays etc., to be more conducive to security on the part of suppliers. Unshackle people, to trust and cooperate more freely. Thick-skinned individualist legal norms are part of good old policy liberalism. And reform against [bulls--t patents](#).



Thus, policy liberalism makes us robust, anti-fragile. But even more so in another, more fundamental way.

In the Covid-19 crisis, everyone is a factor. Your conduct counts. Everyone.

To "blunt the curve," to buy time for test kits, etc., everyone needs to show moral responsibility—responsibility for themselves, their family, friends, people at large.

What makes moral responsibility?

The governmentalization of social affairs tends to throw us into the passive position, and "our passive feelings are almost always so sordid and so selfish" (Smith, TMS 137.4). Liberty places us in the active position, and our "active principles" are "often so generous and so noble" (Ibid). Smith emphasized commutative justice as a social

grammar. But grammar does not tell us how to fill the blank page. Grammar underdetermines our conduct. To make a becoming use of our own, we tap sympathy, heed our conscience, built from exemplars, and apply our beneficence and other becoming virtues. Proprieties emerge bottom up, in voluntary affairs, of their own accord.

Burke wrote:

To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind. The interests of that portion of social arrangement is a trust in the hands of all those who compose it... ([Refl.](#), 136-7)

And:

It is better to cherish virtue and humanity, by leaving much to free will, even with some loss to the object, than to attempt to make men mere machines and instruments of a political benevolence. The world on the whole will gain by a liberty, without which virtue cannot exist. (Ibid, 201)

The policymaker should sow liberty to reap virtue—so that when Covid-19 comes around people act responsibly to blunt the curve.

And what about polity conservatism? How does Covid-19 pertain to that?

As I see it, the polity dimension is in play here, but not especially in a way that calls in the conservative aspect. Rather, the polity dimension brings out, again, the primacy of liberalism in conservative liberalism.

Robert Higgs is a great policy liberal but, alas, not a polity conservative. In the present moment, amid the Covid-19 crisis, however, his masterwork [Crisis and Leviathan](#) is uppermost in my mind. Emergency measures usually are subsequently scaled back, but often not all the way back. Beware the ratchet effect. Polity-wise, we should be concerned about [what we might become](#).

The polity sensibilities of Smith, Hume, and Burke are conservative, *but not otherwise neutral*. In conservative liberalism, "liberalism" is the noun and it is primary. The long-term orientation is toward a more liberal character of the polity, and that means a general opposition to the governmentalization of social affairs.

The polity sensibilities of the conservative liberal sometimes temper the impulse toward liberty, but, also, those polity sensibilities sometimes *bolster* that impulse.

AGAINST FIXED STANDARDS

by Brianne Wolf

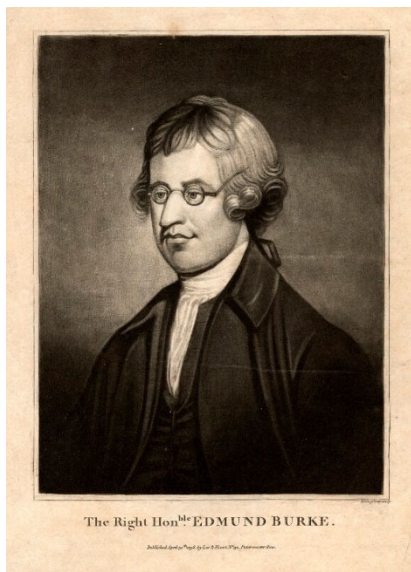
In his response to me, Dan takes issue with my suggestion that the foundations of Burke, Hume, and Smith's polity conservatism matter. In order to tease this out, I want to explore a specific subject Dan raises—the role of aesthetics.

Of course I did not mean to suggest that Smith and Hume did not care about such things. Much of my work involves thinking through why aesthetics were important to them. But I do think it is necessary to separate Hume and Smith from Burke on these points. No one denies that Burke, Smith, and Hume, were correspondents and friends who had related interests and concerns. Indeed, as I cited, Burke and Smith argued similarly in their responses to the case of the American colonies. However, Burke's advocacy for the American colonies is based on long-standing British tradition:

“OF COURSE I DID NOT MEAN TO SUGGEST THAT SMITH AND HUME DID NOT CARE ABOUT SUCH THINGS.”

"Again and again, revert to your **old principles** —seek peace and ensue it; leave America, if she has taxable matter in her, to tax herself. I am not here going into the distinctions of rights, nor attempting to mark their boundaries. I do not enter into these metaphysical

distinctions; I hate the very sound of them. Leave the Americans as they anciently stood, and these distinctions, born of our unhappy contest, will die along with it.... Be content to bind America by laws of trade; **you have always done it**.... Do not burden them with taxes.... But if intemperately, unwisely, fatally, you sophisticate and poison the very source of government by urging subtle deductions, and consequences odious to those you govern, from the unlimited and illimitable nature of supreme sovereignty, you will teach them by these means to call that sovereignty itself in question.... If that sovereignty and their freedom cannot be reconciled, which will they take? **They will cast your sovereignty in your face**. No body of men will be argued into slavery...The Englishman in America will feel that this is slavery; that it is legal slavery, will be no compensation either to his feelings or to his understandings."^[1]



Edmund Burke

Burke's aesthetic treatise is partly a response to Hume.^[2] He also responds to the aesthetic quality of Smith's work in his letter to him about *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.^[3] Burke was in search of a fixed standard. He begins the *Enquiry* stating: "It is probable that the standard both of reason and Taste is the same in all human creatures. For if there were not some principles of judgment as well as of sentiment common to all mankind, no hold could possibly be taken either on their reason or their passions, sufficient to maintain the

ordinary correspondence of life." He continues: "For if Taste has no fixed principles, if the imagination is not affected according to some invariable and certain laws, our labour is like to be employed to very little purpose; as it must be judged an useless, if not an absurd undertaking, to lay down rules for caprice, and to set up for a legislator of whims and fancies."^[4]

I agree with Dan's suggestion that the potential problem for liberty lies in *unjust* emotions that overtake one's concern for others. Yet in order to develop this sense of justice or injustice, one has to cultivate moral judgment. And though the aesthetic is always a part of these judgments, Smith spends an entire chapter at the beginning of his explanation of sympathy separating taste and moral judgment. He writes that taste is different than sympathy because it involves a conservation about objects "without any peculiar relation either to ourselves or to the person whose sentiments we judge of" (TMS I.i.4.2).

Why does Smith do this? This inquiry is a piece of a larger project for me, but in part, it is to suggest the dangers for individual liberty when aesthetic concerns—which sometimes entail adherence to a system of custom or duty—overwhelm the connection with one another we have access to through sympathy. This pursuit of system can cause an overreach by those in power because of the unjust emotional pull of love of order, or it can, like in Hume, take the form of factions where the parties "are commonly intoxicated with the imaginary beauty of this ideal system" (TMS VI.ii.2.15).

Why does the aesthetic aspect of their thought matter? I think it is because, as Dan rightly says, politics and aesthetics are intricately entwined, but aesthetic judgment also acts as a helpmate to the proper development of moral judgment. In his aesthetic essay, "Of the Standard of Taste" Hume ends with a consideration of religious faction. He does so, I argue, to point out why a particular process for reaching a standard of taste, discussion with others—with occasional direction by experts—is so important. For Hume, there is a standard of taste, but it is found through the sharing of sentiments rather than only the use of one's reason (Dan's point about Hume

not rejecting reason completely is well-taken). Politically, a fixed standard is not helpful. Discussion of ideas will always be more important for securing a just society. For Smith, obsession with order can be dangerous, but taste might also be beneficial. Sympathy is the primary way of connecting with others, but aesthetic discussions might allow people to connect in other ways that are easier than imaginatively changing place with another. The only fixed standard Smith advocates is that of grammar like rules of justice, while other virtues "should be directed by a certain idea of propriety, by a certain taste" (TMS III.6.11).

This is not to say that Smith or Hume were not patriotic in any sense (I even acknowledge Smith's bias toward Britain in his account of mercantilism), but they recognized the potential dangers of hard and fast doctrines. It is interesting that Dan ascribes a foundationalism to my first response, when the point of it was to suggest that politics is messy and having stark sensibilities is a path to forgoing moral judgment and consequently justice. This is at the root of Hume's fear of faction, Smith's worry about the man of system, and even Burke's anger at the *philosophes*.

Still, I do think the different foundations of their polity conservatism matter. Burke's fear of the French revolutionaries and writers like Price and Paine, as Dan points out, is rooted in their lack of regard for custom and tradition. Smith's worry about the man of system is a lack of regard for other *citizens*. Similarly, Hume worries that religious doctrines, despite being an avowed infidel, prevent discussion of ideas between citizens. He says for example, "But a very violent effort is requisite to change our judgment of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind from long custom has been familiarized...Of all the speculative errors, those, which regard religion, are the most excusable in compositions of genius; nor is it ever permitted to judge the civility or wisdom of any people, or even of single persons, by the grossness or refinement of their theological principles. The same good sense, that directs men in the ordinary occurrences of life, is not hearkened to in religious

matters."^[5] Religious tradition prevents the development of moral judgment and the exchange of sentiments between citizens. As Knud put it in his response, Hume seeks balance.

I appreciate the project to try and find the commonalities between the conservative and liberal traditions. This is exactly why liberalism needs judgment. "Stark demarcations" as Dan says are not helpful. They create divisions between citizens and preclude considerations of justice. This is why I take issue with the foundation of Burke's polity conservatism and what gives me pause about conservative liberalism. I very much agree with Michael when he says, "If one lives in a society that presently recognizes most individual rights, treats persons roughly as moral equals, and more or less practices the rule of law, then a liberal would of course want to preserve these traditions and the institutions that implement them. Thus, a liberal in such a society would naturally be a conservative." And also, "I think you should be conservative if and only if you live in a society where things are going comparatively well. If you live in a society where things are going badly – where the people are poorer, less healthy, less happy, and so on, than average – then you should be a reformer." Dan has said that in the formulation of conservative liberalism, liberalism remains primary. I would ask, does the concern for liberal policies remain primary over the concern to preserve the polity? I ask because the status which you assign to custom and tradition in guiding your judgment of fellow citizens and policies you would advocate, matters.

Endnotes

^[1.] Edmund Burke, "Motion to Repeal the Tea Duty" in *Collected Works of Edmund Burke vol. 1*, Online Library of Liberty, April 19, 1774, 129; emphasis mine.

^[2.] For more on Burke's Philosophical Inquiry as a response to Hume, see James Boulton's introduction in Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958). See also Darío Perinetti, "Between Knowledge and Sentiment: Hume and Burke on 'Taste,'" in *The Science of Sensibility: Reading Burke's*

Philosophical Enquiry, ed. K. Vermeir and M.F. Deckard (Springer Netherlands, 2011).

[3.] Letter from Edmund Burke, September 10, 1759 in Smith, Adam. 1987. *Correspondence of Adam Smith*. ed. E. C. Mossner and T. S. Ross. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 46-47.

[4.] Burke, Edmund. 1990 [1757]. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 11-12.

[5.] Hume, David. 1994 [1777]. "Of the Standard of Taste" in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 247.

POLICY AND OR VERSUS POLITY CONSERVATISM

by Michael Huemer

I'd like to thank Dan Klein for the clarification of his idea of polity conservatism, which I did not fully understand earlier. (See Daniel B. Klein, "Liberalism Remains Primary", above.) I now see better the distinction between *polity* conservatism and *policy* conservatism. However, though I see that there is such a distinction, I still am not sure why the *arguments* for polity conservatism would not also support *policy* conservatism. Take the point that established ways have been through a selection process and are thus likely to be adaptive: why wouldn't this be just as true of *policies* as of features of national character? Similarly, take the points that our knowledge of the workings of society is slight, and that happiness requires tranquility: wouldn't these also support *policy* conservatism, i.e., a reluctance to change particular government policies?

In response to my (very brief) objection to one of his initial observations, Dan points out that there is some value in people's being allowed to continue on in the ways they have grown accustomed to. Here, there may not be much disagreement between us. I agree that there is *some* value to this. I would give a utilitarian explanation: changing things that people have grown accustomed to

often makes people unhappy (partly *directly*, and partly indirectly, because of the costs of finding new ways of accommodating different practices or policies). So I think we can agree that one should not change either the polity or particular policies *for no reason*.



I would add, however, that I don't think this consideration will make very much difference in very many cases. That is because, first, I think it is a consideration of only modest weight, since it is only a temporary cost – in most cases, when we change practices, people will shortly get used to the new practice, and it will cease to bother them. Second, I think the reasons in favor of making changes are often very weighty – often, existing practices are actually seriously unjust – or at least, the proponents of reform think that they are. So in most cases, raising this modest utilitarian concern will properly have little effect on the debate.

To take one example, many people have grown used to the current regime of drug prohibition. Drug dealers, crime bosses, DEA agents, prosecutors, and so on have all adapted to this regime. Indeed, they would suffer major losses if we switched away from prohibition. That is *some* reason to maintain prohibition. But that really is not an important consideration, when compared to the arguments for thinking that drug prohibition is a major injustice.

Dan probably agrees with me on that case. But a similar point applies to other cases. Suppose, e.g., that someone thinks that there is a *right* to health care, and therefore, the government is obligated to ensure its availability to the indigent. That person would not be and should not be impressed with the observation that many people have

grown accustomed to a status quo in which there are no such guarantees – that just isn't an important consideration, compared to the issue of whether there is a right to health care.

ENCOUNTERING 18TH CENTURY SAGES: A REPLY TO BRIANNE WOLF

by Daniel B. Klein

Michael Polanyi (1959) speaks of one of science's most important instruments: "we need reverence to perceive greatness, even as we need a telescope to observe spiral nebulae" (96). I think that Brianne shares my strong inclination to use that instrument in examining Hume and Smith. But I feel such inclination to use that instrument in examining Burke as well, more so than Brianne does. She maintains that "it is necessary to separate Hume and Smith from Burke." Brianne says that Hume and Smith "recognized the potential dangers of hard and fast doctrines," as though the same could not be said of Burke.



Michael Polanyi

I just wrote, "I *feel* such inclination..." An exploration of one's feelings begins with a useful contrast. Brianne and

I need to compare and contrast our feelings over a beer—another ingredient to good science.

Brianne provides a lengthy Burke quotation from 1774 and another from the *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* on "fixed principles" for taste. I see Burke's *Enquiry* remarks are saying merely that even when you and I find that we have aesthetic estimations that disagree, we may nonetheless find mutual conformance to certain general principles; there will be some commonality to our sensibilities, even if we disagree on this particular matter. Burke is saying that the rules from which our aesthetic estimations emerge are loose, vague, and indeterminate, but that does not mean that they are purely arbitrary. They are not pure caprice, whim, fancy. Brianne says that, unlike Hume and Smith, "Burke was in search of a fixed standard," but I don't see here a difference among the troika.

Burke's distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, for example, could be a useful device for understanding both Jim's estimation of an object and Mary's; and Jim and Mary might both agree that Burke's distinction is useful in that way. Thus we excavate some commonality between their sensibilities. But I would not say that Burke's distinction points to any hard and fast doctrine—quite the contrary.

What Brianne says about Smith and Hume, highlighting their appreciation of conversation as a process for exploring and developing standards of taste, I fully endorse, but I don't see much reason to suppose differently with respect to Burke.

I appreciate the attention Brianne brings to the early TMS chapter in which Smith suggests that emotional circumstances vary as to whether our relationship to the object under discussion is in any way "peculiar," that is, whether my relation to it differs from your relation to it. Notice that Smith gives as examples of objects where no such "peculiar" relation exists "a picture, or a poem, or a system of philosophy" (21.5), and that when Smith exposts what I dub estimative justice he uses "a poem or a picture" (270.10), perhaps quietly suggesting that we see "a system of philosophy" here too. Smith encourages us to estimate a system of philosophy as though it bore no

peculiar relation to ourselves. He wants us to maintain a vigilance against our own creeping superstition, fanaticism, dogmatism and groupthink. All of those are pejorative, and different from Burke's "prejudice." Burke writes: "Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through *just* prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature" (*Refl.*, 182; italics added). A prejudice can be distributively and estimatively just. Indeed, developing juster prejudices is the greater part of virtue.

I have noted that policy liberalism is primary in conservative liberalism. Brianne asks: "does the concern for liberal policies remain primary over the concern to preserve the polity?" If by "preserve the polity" Brianne means preserve it from utter collapse or dissolution, then I think the question moves beyond some of my presuppositions. Our polities simply are not in danger of utter collapse or dissolution. In this respect I think that our times are not so different from those of Hume, Smith, and Burke. If we faced very different circumstances, then conservative liberalism might be much less apropos.

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Polanyi, Michael. 1959. *The Study of Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

POLITY CONSERVATISM AS EQUIPAGE OF POLICY LIBERALISM

by Daniel B. Klein

I am grateful to Michael for his engagement and questions. He asks about the arguments I had sketched for polity conservatism: "wouldn't these also support *policy* conservatism, i.e., a reluctance to change particular government policies?"

Excellent question.

Recall that here I use "policy" in a tailored sense, most significantly tailored *away from* reforms that might well significantly alter the character and political workings of

the polity. "Policy" in this tailored sense, then, has built into it the condition that we simply need not fret much about how the policy reform might alter the polity. That's the case for the vast majority of the liberalizations that Cato Institute liberals advocate. Let them take Uber—even though it destroys the taxi monopolies. Liberalize schooling. Abolish Ex-Im. Et cetera.

The relaxation of zoning and land-use restrictions may alter the character of the neighborhood, but it won't unsettle the character and political workings of the polity. Ditto drug liberalizations. If augmented liberty brings vicissitudes, let them come. Michael is right, people will learn to adjust, and, besides, abundance enables people to opt for a life more insulated from the vicissitudes.

The alternative to letting the market rip is terribly pocked with ugliness. The impartial spectator told me herself.

For the vast majority of issues, liberalizing what the polity can *do*—in the sense of freeing up what its members are allowed to do in their voluntary relationships—will not spell changes in what the polity *is*—at least, not the kind of changes that we conservative liberals are worried about.

That's not say that we're averse to every possible change in the character of the polity. Recall that our polity sensibilities, though conservative, are not otherwise neutral. Liberalization may well make the character of the polity more liberal. God bless. That was, to Hume and Smith, one of the things the "liberal plan" had going for it.

Reduce the role of government in schooling, most of all for the character changes it will bring. And reduce taxpayer funding of colleges and universities.

I propose "conservative liberalism," then, not as deduction in a philosophical exercise. I propose it as a common room for classical liberals, libertarians, and conservatives, a common room by no means specific to the United States.

In that common room, there is common understanding of what policy liberalism is and what its chief merits are. Also common are allegiances to it, to one degree or another. There is common understanding that, by and

large, the governmentalization of social affairs is a sham and a menace—we can debate how large the "by and large" is. In that room we also share an understanding that policy liberalism depends on equipage, some degree of polity conservatism—we can debate the degree.

2025 will be the 400th anniversary of the first edition of [Grotius's masterwork](#). The Western liberal project of the past 400 years faces great challenges. We can scarcely do better than to meet in a common room chaired by Smith, Hume, and Burke. They remain leading spirits of [The New World](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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