

PERSPECTIVE

Environmental Professionals Must Be Both True Liberals and True Conservatives

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The terms “liberal” and “conservative” are abused, scorned, and defamed to the point of uselessness. Liberals are pilloried for big government, high taxes, corrosive relativism, and moral permissiveness. Conservatives are damned as those who opportunistically honor only the strong and powerful while brutalizing the poor, the helpless, and minorities. Two words that once were not ideological have become lost in ideology. It may now be impossible to escape the ideology, but the ideology should be seen as a constraint, not a condition. We are in serious trouble with this loss of credible meaning to our language. We are overdue to recover the actual meanings of Liberal and Conservative. Both have historical origins and classical definitions that might be surprising in light of today’s polarization. Not the least, it becomes clear that environmental science is not inherently liberal, as some critics complain; instead, it reflects the best of both Classical Liberalism and Classical Conservatism.

Classical Liberalism is not an ideology but instead a way of human thought and action. “Classical Liberalism” means the capacity to be continuously self-critical by rigorous rational analysis that questions *a priori* principles. Classical Liberalism is skeptical of dogma, fixed conclusions, and permanent answers. Historically, one of its primary objectives is the enlargement of individual liberty to pursue self-critical rationality. The famous American essayist E. B. White said that above all, he wanted to be remembered as a “reliable person” based on this self-criticism. This continuous problem solving also includes a belief in essential human goodness and potential for real human progress. Another outcome is the pursuit of revolutionary change over gradualism or protection of the status quo. The Classical Liberal is

never satisfied with his or her personal condition, nor with the situation of society, both of which are always flawed and demand immediate improvement.

Such Liberalism has a history. It is uniquely a product of Western Civilization, and may not be readily transferable to more communitarian or authoritarian societies where personal autonomy is questioned. Christianity offered the worth of the individual soul. The Renaissance promoted individual autonomy. The Reformation stressed the importance of personal and independent decisions and actions. The Scientific Revolution offered continuous self-criticism and rejection of fixed dogmas. Modern scientific method emerged from Classical Liberalism. The Enlightenment (Age of Reason) emphasized that the human condition deserved to be continuously improved and must not remain in squalor. The American Revolution sought to secure “inalienable” and “natural” rights and liberties (unlike the French Revolution of a decade later that emphasized equality over autonomy). The Industrial Revolution seemed to guarantee a continuous increase in human well being, notably in the increase of the bourgeoisie, or prosperous middle class.

Classical Liberalism would thus surprise today’s liberal and conservative dogmatists. When the English philosopher John Locke penned his “Second Treatise on Government” back in 1689, he introduced Classical Liberalism because he insisted on the centrality of rational analysis and the natural freedom of the individual from external restraints. In his case, these were the limits imposed upon personal autonomy by feudalism, monarchy, and religion. He rejected authority based on the sovereignty of God, inheritance, divine right, or conquest. Instead, Locke turned to ownership of private property as a guarantee of individualism and freedom. (Thomas Jefferson thus idolized the industrious and virtuous yeoman farmer on his fruitful tract of land.) Each individual is endowed with natural rights that become personal opportunities. One historian of liberalism, Cathy Matson, sees Tom Paine as America’s representative Classical Liberal because he invested his case in secular

reasoning, scientific inquiry, freedom in the marketplace, and the unleashing of human potential (Matson, 2001). Today, such views might go beyond Liberalism or Conservatism to point to today’s Libertarianism.

Matson adds that, in Classical Liberalism, a negative liberty defined the freedom to choose one’s own goals, unimpeded by external authority (Matson, 2001). This 18th-century view is still with us, but it is hardly called Liberalism any more. So-called “positive liberty” emerged in the 19th century, in which the best features of society set the norms for the best cultivation of human faculties. Positive Liberalism (also called Reform Liberalism, says Matson) depended upon 19th-century *laissez faire* economics. She writes that this reform included angry repudiation of sweetheart deals and special privileges from opulent and bureaucratic government because they subvert natural human freedom of action. Sounds very contemporary, doesn’t it?

Classical Conservatism is also more a point of view than an ideology. It is not exactly the other side of the coin. There is much to be said for a common ground—centered on personal well-being—between Liberalism and Conservatism. Paraphrasing legal theorist Richard A. Epstein, self-actualizing individualism is our best bet for relative peace and relative freedom as long as it is “restrained by the rule of law and a sense of fair play” (Mahoney, 2004). This was a goal held in common by America’s Founding Fathers despite their considerable differences. Both Conservatism and Liberalism also praise the West’s success story of enhanced material well-being. Liberal political scientist Daniel J. Mahoney (2004) points us to the views of conservative economist Leo Strauss: marketplace self-interest, through industrialization, created “conditions of civil peace and economic prosperity that are truly unprecedented in the historical adventure of humankind.” Nevertheless, critics of Liberalism believe it inevitably points to moral relativism and political anarchy, while Conservatism is said to end up in dogmatic and repressive fundamentalism.

Classical Conservatism seeks to identify and perpetuate the best of the existing

order. It is value-conserving and deliberately traditional. It places a premium on permanence, durable institutions, and social order. Thus it is wary of revolutionary or dramatic shifts in social, political, or economic institutions; tradition and order are the bedrock of any political system able to provide a real measure of freedom. Intellectually, conservatives value the wisdom of the past, which of course is a continuously expanding resource. Hence, Classical Conservatism expects leadership from a well-informed elite rather than from the common man.

Classical Conservatism finds that humans behave best when they are grounded in a long-standing natural order that must not be invaded, disordered, or diluted. Classical Conservatives thus see humans inhabiting a natural world that is society's permanent foundation. Certain lasting conditions are necessary for individuals to develop their fullest potential to join the leading elite. This includes a rigorous personal ethic of hard work, frugality, and delayed gratification. There is an objective moral order that repels pluralism and relativism.

Classical Conservatism has its own history, but also has a common past with Classical Liberalism: freedom of individual action, from the same origins in Western Civilization (notably, again, John Locke). The bedrock of conservative society is a radical individual autonomy and exceptional freedom for entrepreneurial capitalism. Self-interest is a bedrock tenet, say conservatives, because it defines the human condition. While its origins can be traced back to Plato's *Republic* and Thomas Aquinas, Classical Conservatism can be seen as the brainchild of the Englishmen Thomas Hobbes (with his emphasis on human concupiscence) and Edmund Burke (in his abhorrence of the dramatic changes brought on by the French Revolution, which to him epitomized mob rule). Burke wrote of "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born," a mutual obligation to preserve old institutions and ways of life.

The conservative elite, genuinely superior in their own right, once had the responsibility for the social welfare of the rest of society. Hence England's 19th-century "noblesse oblige" that introduced reforms such as the elimination of slavery, improved industrial working conditions, "white man's burden" in overseas empires, and so on. Ideology was not long in coming. Historian William Robbins (2004) reminds us of the political minefields laid between the 19th-century liberalism of England's William Gladstone and the conservative Tory paternalism of Benjamin Disraeli.

American politicians John Adams and Alexander Hamilton remain our 18th-century spokesmen for this elitism. Such an elite enjoys superior information that must be freely applied to society and preserved for future generations. By the turn of the 20th century, the American Progressive Movement of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot believed authority should reside with so-called scientific "experts." Such a natural aristocracy also deserves special privileges to disseminate its wisdom. It is a "civilized minority" against the mob. The social critic H. L. Mencken, who invented the term "booboisie," insisted, "Only a true aristocracy, secure in its social status, can be entrusted to lead society." Once the elite secures power, it is not wishful thinking that everything will turn out well and humanity will have a happy ending. This is the outcome of being "tough-minded and manly," in the words of political analyst Neal Gabler. Liberals, on the other hand, wonder if anything can ever be quite that right.

Now the waters get muddied. *Laissez faire* economics, which originated in Classical Liberalism as a statement of the autonomy from feudal interference of individual decision making, became the darling of Classical Conservatism. Adam Smith wrote his *Wealth of Nations* in that star-studded year, 1776. He concluded that the maximizing of individual wealth—"possessive individualism"—was the proper goal of society, not the strengthening of the state, as in monarchy (in his day) or big government (in our day). He reluctantly admitted that there was a place

for government, such as in public works or trade protectionism or regulation of monopolies. This need for government sovereignty became the fox in conservatism's chicken coop. The "invisible hand" of the marketplace required continuous watchfulness.

By the 20th century, Classical Liberals began to look to government to prevent abuses. Many Americans lived unfulfilled and even oppressed lives amidst the plenty of industrialization, while others greedily became rich. The view arose that government must take the responsibility to establish the minimum conditions for the decent existence of each individual person. Enhancement of personal rights still prevailed as the dominant liberal idea. Now government became another tool for personal rights as well as earlier tools of rationality, science, and economics; hence, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal with its social reform programs of minimum wage laws, progressive taxation, and social security, as well as Lyndon Johnson's Great Society's public welfare (no family left behind). A free society, says Epstein, is an imperfect compromise between the destabilization inherent in individual autonomy and the social ordering that is the outcome of political command (Mahoney, 2004). This tension is a necessary condition of a free society. Some see this as a major shift from earlier "opportunity liberalism" to late 20th-century "entitlement liberalism." Was this also a sell-out?

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was both a Classical Liberal and portrayed the noblesse oblige of a Classical Conservative. It seemed as if Classical Liberalism had captured the agenda of Classical Conservatism: emphasis upon durable social conditions for Americans to develop their fullest individual potential. The establishment of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, including freedom from want and from fear, offered workable conditions for individual opportunity. After World War II, Americans enjoyed a rising tide of consumerism and economic abundance that seemed to fulfill the Classical Liberal dream of human progress.

During the 20th century, Classical Conservatism narrowed its vision. For one thing, it became positivistic: price mechanisms provide real information in an inherently ambiguous world, said Austrian economist Frederich A. Hayek in 1944 (Fukuyama, 2004). By the end of the 20th century, *laissez faire* economics was also overtaken by a single-minded emphasis upon the highest possible personal enrichment. It doesn't matter where this enrichment comes from, whether from individual entrepreneurship, market manipulation, or government generosity. The visible hand of government must above all benefit the entrepreneur, fulfilled in today's "welfare capitalism." The carefully wrought conservative ethic of hard work, self-discipline, frugality, and delayed gratification was abandoned to unfettered hedonism, self-indulgence, and personal acquisitiveness.

Now, finally, we get to environmentalism. It has also been defaced. The word "environmentalist" and even the expertise of the environmental professional have been plagued by misunderstanding and deliberate abuse.

One of the most surprising outcomes of the 20th century was the rise of modern environmental science as a statement of Classical Conservatism. How can this be? Isn't environmentalism in bed with Liberalism alone? Not at all. Fresh scientific method and expanded information has reshaped modern environmentalism to see nature in terms of entire, durable systems, one of the leading tenets of Classical Conservatism. The emergence of ecology as a reputable scientific approach, perhaps beginning with the identification of ecosystems by the Englishman A. G. Tansley in the 1930s, meant dedicated attention to the preservation of existing environmental systems. This expanded stance, built on multiple disciplines, is, I would argue, a new paradigm that is equal in its fresh importance to Einstein's relativity and subatomic physics. And we all know that we are just barely beginning to learn the ramifications of ecological science.

It was no longer sufficient to study an organism independently or even in the

frame of its immediate surroundings alone. Tansley and others, such as the American Eugene Odum in the 1950s, instead found it necessary to explain the globe's affairs in terms of both a biotic community and non-living forces such as physical and chemical factors. They were all part of one whole. Wildlife manager Aldo Leopold, an environmental hero, said in the 1940s, "When we meddle with the natural world, let's be certain to keep all the parts, like a watchmaker or automobile tinkerer." Rachel Carson brought public attention in the 1960s to human intervention against interactive natural systems by connecting the application of chemical pesticides with the deaths of masses of innocent birds and other wildlife, both locally and worldwide. The protection of entire ecosystems gained the public eye and led to such legislation as the Wilderness Act of 1964 and, in part, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, while the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Clean Water Act of 1972 implied protection of entire systems, both human and natural.

Nothing could be more conservative, in classical or other terms. Edmund Burke had specifically argued for the preservation of the organic unity of society that must repel invasion from alien and radical interests. John Locke insisted that the natural world was humanity's property but he deplored wanton and wasteful exploitation of nature. As noted above, Classical Conservatives depended upon humans emergent inside a permanent natural order. In the 1950s, the leading American spokesman for a carefully considered Conservatism was Russell Kirk; he spoke out for an organic model of society, bound together by the interweaving of permanent values and lasting institutions (McLemee, 2004). This requires the cultivation less of pure rationality and more of tradition, self-restraint, and the "moral imagination," something akin to intuition and wise instincts. "Even the most intelligent of men cannot hope to understand all the secrets" of morals and society, wrote Kirk, writing in terms that might please modern ecologists: "The individual is foolish but the species is

wise." Kirk also worried that free-market doctrine feeds "the dream of avarice" while avoiding obligation (McLemee, 2004).

In this new light of environmental conservatism, who are the revolutionaries or radicals? The answer becomes obvious: those who interfere with or upset the earth's natural systems to the extent that nature is permanently changed and risks destruction. Industrial exploitation of natural resources, without careful thought to ecosystems, forces radical degradation that is dangerous to both the natural world and its human inhabitants. Indeed, humans should only be seen in terms of their habitation in functioning natural systems. We also have acquired the greatest power in history to modify nature. As early as 1864, the American George Perkins Marsh noted this power, which was often applied ignorantly [Marsh, 1965 (1864)]. While American ambassador to Greece and Turkey, Marsh wrote of the collapse of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations, in large part because of their environmental excesses. What is left, for example, of the once-fertile soils of central Italy or the fabled cedar forests of Lebanon?

Marketplace economics, when it treats natural resources such as clean air and fresh water as "externalities" or "free goods," urges the worst kind of revolutionary thinking—that we must induce "growth" regardless of the outcome toward externalities. This sounds like radical revolutionary thinking of the 1960s: existing systems are so bad that anything else would be better. Instead, it's hard to think of a better world without well-functioning, orderly, and supportive natural systems.

Ecosystem science instead sees organisms involved in their own cost-benefit actions—species growth and survival under changing conditions, otherwise known as evolution (Seabright, 2004). Species are trusted to act according to their natures; anything else would be self-destructive. Here also, environmental science takes the next step beyond Liberalism and Conservatism by insisting that the absolute value of the autonomous individual always

depends on context. There is no such thing as human autonomy even in contemporary nature-beating technological society—everything is intimately connected with everything else. We fasten on nature's interconnectedness: it is unacceptable for anyone, including humans, to command the rest of the natural world that we inhabit and without which we cannot exist. The overall negative payback is likely to overwhelm short-term advantages (think of needless water depletion in the American West compared to impending scarcity). As Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson pointed out, any understanding of the complexity of life should make us always wary of our interference with nature. This is the so-called precautionary principle. The rule of freedom is tempered by the rule of reciprocity. Self-interest cannot properly function without the duties of obligation and benevolence (Seabright, 2004). In politics this would mean a high degree of respect for others, an insistence on fair play, and ordinary civility, features sorely lacking in today's atmosphere.

Let me briefly sum up. Classical Conservatism, or any sound conservatism, is elsewhere than in today's so-called capitalist economies, now single-mindedly devoted towards profits. Admittedly, all this turns current opinion upside down, but the reasoning, and history, is with this turnabout. The "elsewhere" is in today's best environmental science and environmental protection. The best of Classical Liberalism prevails in the self-critical scientific method. The best of Classical Conservatism prevails in the continuing existence of entire natural systems.

Now, it's your turn: I haven't said anything about Republicans, or Democrats, or even Ralph Nader!

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