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## WHAT CONSERVATIVE SOCIAL JUSTICE MEANS TO ME

MICHAEL BOULETTE\*

*To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.*<sup>1</sup>

The question posed by the editorial board is, in fact, twofold. It must first be determined what conservatism is, and only then can we begin to comment on a properly conservative conception of social justice. This essay will attempt to answer both questions. The essay will first argue for a truly conservative conservatism, a conservatism dedicated to preserving our vital social traditions, and a traditional protectivism against the tide of progressive social thought.<sup>2</sup> Next, the essay will suggest a definition of social justice consistent with this notion of conservatism. Accordingly, the essay will argue that true conservative social justice must concern itself with the preservation and perfection of our traditions—individual enterprise, limited government, and personal responsibility.

The epigraph to this essay presents an understanding of conservatism somewhat different from our modern Republican-Democrat paradigm. Conservatism presents itself as disposition rather than ideology.<sup>3</sup> Conservatism, as I understand it, is a preference for practical and traditional politics. It values the gains of centuries more than the supposed improvements of a Congressional session—what has been hard-won over history to utopian social engineering.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Michael Oakeshott, *On Being Conservative*, in RATIONALISM AND POLITICS AND OTHER ESSAYS 407, 409 (1991)(hereinafter *On Being Conservative*).

2. See Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, in RATIONALISM IN POLITICS AND OTHER ESSAYS 5 (1991) (hereinafter *Rationalism in Politics*).

3. *On Being Conservative*, *supra* note 1.

4. See *On Being Conservative*, *supra* note 1. See also, Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the*

This is not to equate conservatism with a blind adherence to tradition—truth is not established by pedigree. However, conservatism, so conceived, does presuppose that institutions that have withstood the erosive effects of time ought not be lightly cast aside. This conservatism suggests that our traditions—correctly understood—embody moral truths, even if only imperfectly.<sup>5</sup> Thus, conservatism finds no need to conflate a plurality of political and social traditions with the absence of normative morality—recognizing that variance in tradition need not translate to the absence of truth. Instead, this conservatism understands that the same truth permits varying presentations across cultures and traditions, and that these truths can be comprehended only in the context of individual traditions (lest they become axioms without application). These traditions are the means by which we instantiate truth in our lives and in our souls; they are the vehicles through which we transmit truth across the generations. In short, moral truth finds its truest expressions in our traditions, and it is conservatism that serves moral truth by respecting and protecting humanity's connection to it.

Consequently, if we are to understand conservative social justice, we must look to our traditions and their connection to normative truths. It is undeniable that our tradition is a liberal one—a tradition that devotes itself to liberty, to the primacy of individual freedom over and above attempts at social planning and leveling. The tradition of our nation—accepting all its diversity—is one that values the rights of individuals over the force of the majority, personal initiative over government grant, local responsibility over federal prescription. We are a people apt to trust our neighbor before our government and more accepting of individual folly than government arranged perfection. Admittedly there is no single conception of the American *ethos*, but surely a spirit of liberty prevails in our history and our hearts.

Conservatism, as I have described it, accepts that there is something of value in these traditions, something worth protecting in the American way of life. Conservatives cut of this cloth believe that there are certain truths of individual liberty and responsibility uniquely instantiated in the American tradition, and that these truths must be protected or be lost. They must be fought for against the tides of social progressivism, egalitarian leveling, and radical utopianism.

Thus, we are finally left with the original question “what is conservative social justice,” and in many ways the answer is implicit in what has already been said. Conservative social justice—or more properly American conservative social justice—finds itself in a respect for the individual, in a reverence for liberty and, particularly American, liberty. As a result, conservative social justice levels a series of commands; it calls

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*Revolution in France* 192 (1968)(1790).

5. *Rationalism in Politics*, *supra* note 2, at 15.

conservatives to action both politically and personally. Conservative social justice demands individual responsibility, decries buck-passing, and requires all individuals to make themselves deserving of the freedom their tradition has bestowed upon them.

It follows from this that to protect our freedom we must respect each other. We must always prefer individual charity to government welfare (and become practitioners of that charity). We must balance our traditional freedom with moral obligation, and in so doing become worthy of that freedom. In politics, we must value the imperfect truths of our tradition as the fruit of centuries, while, as individuals, continuing to strive and perfect. We must practice public restraint and individual magnanimity. We are limited politicians, but limitless individuals.

In addition, conservatives shoulder the responsibility of reminding our fellow citizens of the value of the American tradition. We must remind Americans of both the value and fragility of their traditional liberty. As such, conservatives cannot relegate themselves to the task of preservation—acting as the guards of ancient tomes—we must live out our tradition and embody its values. We must speak its language and strive to supplement its deficiencies. Conservatives must be conservationists, not historians.

To conclude, the foregoing essay has attempted to briefly suggest a particular vision of conservatism and its implications for social justice. Understandably there will be some who disagree. This is not a conservatism founded upon natural law; it looks for earthly and not heavenly truths.<sup>6</sup> This is not a conservatism inspired by theistic faith (although it could be). And this is not a conservatism that necessarily concerns itself with an opposition to gay marriage, overturning *Roe v. Wade*,<sup>7</sup> or preserving family values. However, it is conservative insofar as it strives for continuity, insofar as it seeks to *conserve* the gains of centuries, and it is in that conservation that conservative social justice lives.

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6. *On Being Conservative*, *supra* note 1, at 423.

7. 410 U.S. 113 (1973).