

CHAPTER ONE

Defining the Terms of Discourse

In the first part of this chapter I develop an understanding and definition of conservatism. This is followed by a much briefer discussion of racism and its correlative ideology of white supremacy.

Conservatism in America

Most of the literature on the American political tradition asserts that the United States is a liberal society, without a significant conservative tradition. I contend that the American political tradition is pervasively conservative with, contrary to much of the literature, liberalism rather than conservatism being the “remnant,” the “illusion,” or the “thankless persuasion.”¹

There are three related problems in the study of conservatism in America. The first has been the tendency of historians and social scientists to ignore conservatism in their teaching and research. (In my years of study in political science I was assigned only two books on conservatism, Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Clinton Rossiter’s *Conservatism in America*.) As the editors of *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia* write: “The historiography of American conservatism . . . remains immature. For decades, the academic historical establishment largely ignored American Conservatism or dealt with it as some sort of fringe group. Only after the surprising and enduring appeal of Ronald Reagan did most historians begin to take serious scholarly notice of self-proclaimed conservatism. . . . But for now the story of conservatism in America, as told by academics, is fractured and inconclusive.”²

Alan Brinkley, the historian of liberalism, writes, “[T]wentieth century American conservatism has been something of an orphan in historical scholarship.” Brinkley attributes this inattention to conservatism to the tendency of scholars to view it as “a kind of pathology,” a “paranoid style,” but he writes, “A better explanation for the inattention of historians may be that much American conservatism in the twentieth century has rested on a philosophical

foundation not readily distinguishable from the liberal tradition, to which it is, in theory opposed.”³

This tendency to ignore “self-proclaimed” conservatism or treat it as a kind of pathology is related to the larger tendency of American scholarship to understand the American tradition as profoundly and pervasively liberal, rooted in the philosophy of John Locke. This view was stated most persuasively in Louis Hartz’s seminal 1955 work, *The Liberal Tradition in America*. Although few scholars today fully embrace Hartz’s thesis, the work exerted and exerts a powerful influence on teaching and research on ideology in the American political tradition.⁴

The third problem is the tendency to locate conservative thought in the writings of Burke, and finding little self-conscious Burke in the American tradition, it is concluded that there is little conservatism in the tradition or that it is an illusion, a remnant, or a “kind of pathology.”⁵

Understanding Conservatism

Conservatism as a self-conscious ideology is usually understood in terms of a set of enduring principles, usually derived from Burke but in some cases traced to Plato and the Ancients.⁶ But Huntington is largely correct when he contends that, unlike most ideologies, conservatism lacks what he calls a “substantive ideal” or “vision.”⁷ Building on Mannheim’s classic essay “Conservative Thought,” Huntington argues that conservatism as an ideology is best understood “situationally.”⁸ Or as Mannheim wrote, “conservatism . . . is always dependent on a concrete set of circumstances in a [particular] period and country.”⁹ In other words, conservatism is always a reaction to a challenge to an existing order becoming “conscious and reflective when other ways of life and thought appear on the scene, against which it is compelled to take up arms in an ideological struggle.”¹⁰ Situationally conservatism is defined as

the ideology arising out of a distinct but recurring type of historical situation in which a fundamental challenge is directed at established institutions and in which the supporters of those institutions employ the conservative ideology in their defense. Thus, conservatism is that system of ideas employed to justify any established social order, no matter where or when it exists, against any fundamental challenge to its nature or being, no matter from what quarter. . . . Conservatism in this sense is possible in the United States today only if there is a basic challenge to existing American institutions which impels their defenders to articulate conservative values.¹¹

Writing in 1954 Huntington did not anticipate that the civil rights and black power movements in a few years would mount a sustained challenge to the existing order; therefore, he declared there was no conservative intellectual tradition or movement in the United States, and the effort to create one was “futile or irrelevant.”¹²

Huntington also downplayed the challenge of the New Deal to the Lockean order, arguing that the only threat that could spark a conservative movement in the United States was the threat of international Communism. However, in addition to Communism, the New Deal was, as we shall see, formative in the emergence of a self-conscious conservative tradition and movement in the United States.

Conservatism as an ideology is thus a reaction to a system under challenge, a defense of the status-quo in a period of intense ideological and social conflict.¹³

In addition to understanding conservatism situationally, Huntington writes that the ideology may be understood in two other ways. First is the classic “aristocratic theory” associated mainly with Burke, which is the reaction of a specific class (the feudal aristocracy) to a specific historical circumstance (the French Revolution). Second is the “autonomous theory” in which any individual from any class can embrace a set of universal ideas—liberty, justice, moderation, balance, order—thought to constitute the essence of a conservative outlook. Although Huntington contends that conservatism is best understood situationally, he believes that in whatever situation the ideology emerges it will represent the “manifestations in history of Burke’s ideas.”¹⁴ Thus, unlike Mannheim, Huntington continues to tie conservatism to a specific set of ideas rather than viewing it having no substantive ideal or vision. This appears to contradict his situational argument that conservatism is the defense of any existing order against any organized challenge, whether the established order is liberal, conservative, or Marxist. However, he suggests any system under stress will employ Burkean ideas in its defense because Burke was inclined to “defend all existing institutions wherever located and however challenged.”¹⁵ For Huntington Burke therefore becomes “the conservative archetype.” Burke, however, would not likely defend a radical Marxist regime or perhaps even a militant liberal one. Huntington seems to acknowledge this when he writes,

No necessary dichotomy exists, therefore, between conservatism and liberalism. The assumption that such an opposition does exist derives, of course, from the aristocratic theory of conservatism and reflects an over concern with a single phase of western history. . . . The effort to erect this ephemeral relationship into a continuing phenomenon of history only serves to obscure the fact that in the proper historical circumstances conservatism may well

be necessary for the defense of liberal institutions. The true enemy of the conservative is not the liberal but the extreme radical no matter what the ideational theory he may espouse.¹⁶

But the postwar conservative tradition and movement that emerged in the United States after 1945 did reject New Deal liberalism, and it did so more in the tradition of Locke, then Burke. In other words conservatism in the United States is a manifestation in history of Locke's ideas. Again, at other places Huntington appears to acknowledge this as in his critique of Russell Kirk's *Conservative Mind*. Huntington describes this seminal work in American conservative thought as "out of time and out of step in America because in Burkean fashion "it is dreaming of a world of less democracy, less equality, less industrialism, an age in which the elite ruled and the mass know their place."¹⁷ In other words, Kirk wished to manifest Burkean ideas in modern American history. Huntington's analysis as useful as it is is nevertheless yet another manifestation of the confusion surrounding the discussion of conservatism in the historical and social science literature.

This confusion notwithstanding, however conservatism as an ideology is understood, it could never be appealing to African Americans because collectively they have never been satisfied with the status-quo or the established order, and "manifestly, the ideology has little appeal to any one discontented with the status-quo."¹⁸

As I will demonstrate in a subsequent chapter, African American thought has always been mainly a system-challenging, dissident thought. However, until the 1950s and 1960s this thought had not been linked to a powerful mass movement. And "the mere articulation of a dissident ideology does not produce conservatism until that ideology is embraced by significant social groups."¹⁹ Once it appeared that the black movement presented "a clear and present danger" to the existing order, a self-conscious conservative movement would necessarily emerge, and it would also necessarily be for the most part a racist movement. Although as I will show in chapters 6 and 7 conservatism in the post World War II period was a product of multiple challenges to the Lockean order—the New Deal, international Communism, and countercultural challenges to traditional values and institutions—the defense of racism was probably indispensable to the movement's acceleration in the 1960s and 1970s and its ascendancy to presidential power in 1980.

Understanding Racism

Race was taken into consideration—was a predicate for policies and decisions—in the creation of the American republic in order to subordinate

Africans and maintain control over them. Four Clauses of the Constitution reflect explicit decisions at Philadelphia to subordinate and oppress Africans.²⁰ Of the most infamous of these clauses Donald Robinson writes, “It bears repeating . . . that Madison’s formula did not make blacks three fifths of a human being. It was much worse then that. It gave slave owners a bonus in representation for their human property, while doing nothing for blacks as non-persons under the law.”²¹

Race was taken into consideration for the same purposes in the design of the economy, including the use of African women and children as well as men as enslaved labor in the South and subordinate labor in the North. Meanwhile, race was used to exclude nonenslaved Africans from capital and credit markets. In the South race was used to deny Africans not only the fruits of their labor but the fruits of their love as well, as the children of the enslaved were traded like ordinary articles of commerce.²²

In the North so-called free Negroes because of their race were routinely denied access to inns, schools, hospitals, churches, and cemeteries. Frequently, they were also victims of extraordinary violence because of their race. In 1741, for example, in New York City amidst rumors of a slave rebellion, thirteen black men were burned at the stake, seventeen were hanged, and more than one hundred black women and men were thrown into a dungeon beneath city hall.²³

The making of these kinds of race-based decisions to subordinate Africans in America is the meaning of racism as used in this study. It is based on the definition advanced by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in their 1967 book, *Black Power: Politics of Liberation in America*, where they define racism as “the predication of decisions and policies on considerations of race for the purpose of subordinating a racial group and maintaining control over it.”²⁴ The Carmichael and Hamilton definition breaks with the way racism is traditionally defined by social scientists and historians because it focuses on behavior, rather than attitudes or ideology or the relationship between ideas and behavior. For example, many scholars of racism define it using some variations of the definition developed by Pierre Van den Berghe as “any set of beliefs that organic, genetically transmitted differences (whether real or imagined) between human groups are intrinsically associated with the presence or absence of certain socially relevant abilities or characteristics, hence that such differences are a legitimate basis of invidious distinctions between groups socially defined as races.”²⁵ For purposes of the scientific study of racist behavior—historically and structurally—the Carmichael and Hamilton definition is preferred because the Van den Berghe type definitions tend to conflate a theory or explanation of the phenomenon with its empirical observation by stating that racism exists only if a belief in racial group inferiority is used to rationalize racial group mistreatment or subordination.

But, theoretically, it is possible that racism could be based not on perceived racial group inferiority but for simple economic or political reasons. (It is also possible that a group could be subordinated on the basis of the belief that it is superior). Antiracism in the United States, for example, has its origins not in the perceived differences between blacks and whites but in economic necessity and power. Frederickson writes, "The evidence strongly suggests that Africans and other non-Europeans were initially enslaved not so much because of their color and physical type as because of their legal and cultural vulnerability." And "it is clear from authoritative discussions of the legal, moral and religious foundations of slavery taking place in seventeenth-century England and the Netherlands that there was little or no overt sense that biological race or skin color played a determinative role in making some human beings absolute masters over others."²⁶

The Van den Berghe type definitions of racism also complicates the process of research because it requires first identification of the beliefs in group inferiority and then a showing that these beliefs are in fact the basis for the racism, rather than mere rationalizations.²⁷

However, as a historical matter racism by Europeans toward all the other peoples of the world but especially African peoples was rationalized on the basis of an ideology of white or European supremacy or, more precisely, an ideology of the inferiority of nonwhites. In the Anglo-American case the ideology that posited the inferiority of African peoples is deeply rooted in Western philosophy. Hegel wrote of Africans that they have not yet "attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence . . . in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realized his own being . . . and the Negro . . . exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state" and that "among Negroes moral sentiments are quite weak, or more strictly speaking, non-existent." And Kant also concluded that blacks were inferior to whites in moral and rational capabilities and have by nature "no feelings that rise above the trifling."²⁸

The ideology of white supremacy is also rooted in the Judeo-Christian faiths,²⁹ cultural chauvinism,³⁰ and scientific pretensions.³¹ Thus, although racism in the United States is fundamentally about economics and relationships of power it has also been buttressed by a powerful ideology.

Racism in the United States, as Joe Feagin so ably demonstrates, is not merely individual acts of racism or bigotry, prejudice or racial stereotyping, or even racially discriminatory institutional practices. Rather it is systemic—a complex, interdependent, interactive series of behavioral and ideational components.³² This "systemic racism" is reflected historically in the unjustly gained economic resources and political power of whites; empirically in a complex array of anti-black practices; and in the ideology of white supremacy and the attitudes of whites that developed in order to rationalize the system.

This complex systemic phenomenon is what African American thought challenges and African American movements have sought to overthrow. Conservatives, however, have sought to maintain it or, at best, to change it gradually, always prioritizing stability over justice. This, then, historically and situationally, is what in the first instance makes conservatism and racism in America the same.

It is more than this, however. For in the second instance the “substantive ideals” or “vision” of America and their economic, cultural, and political manifestations were also conservative, which are the subjects of the next chapter.