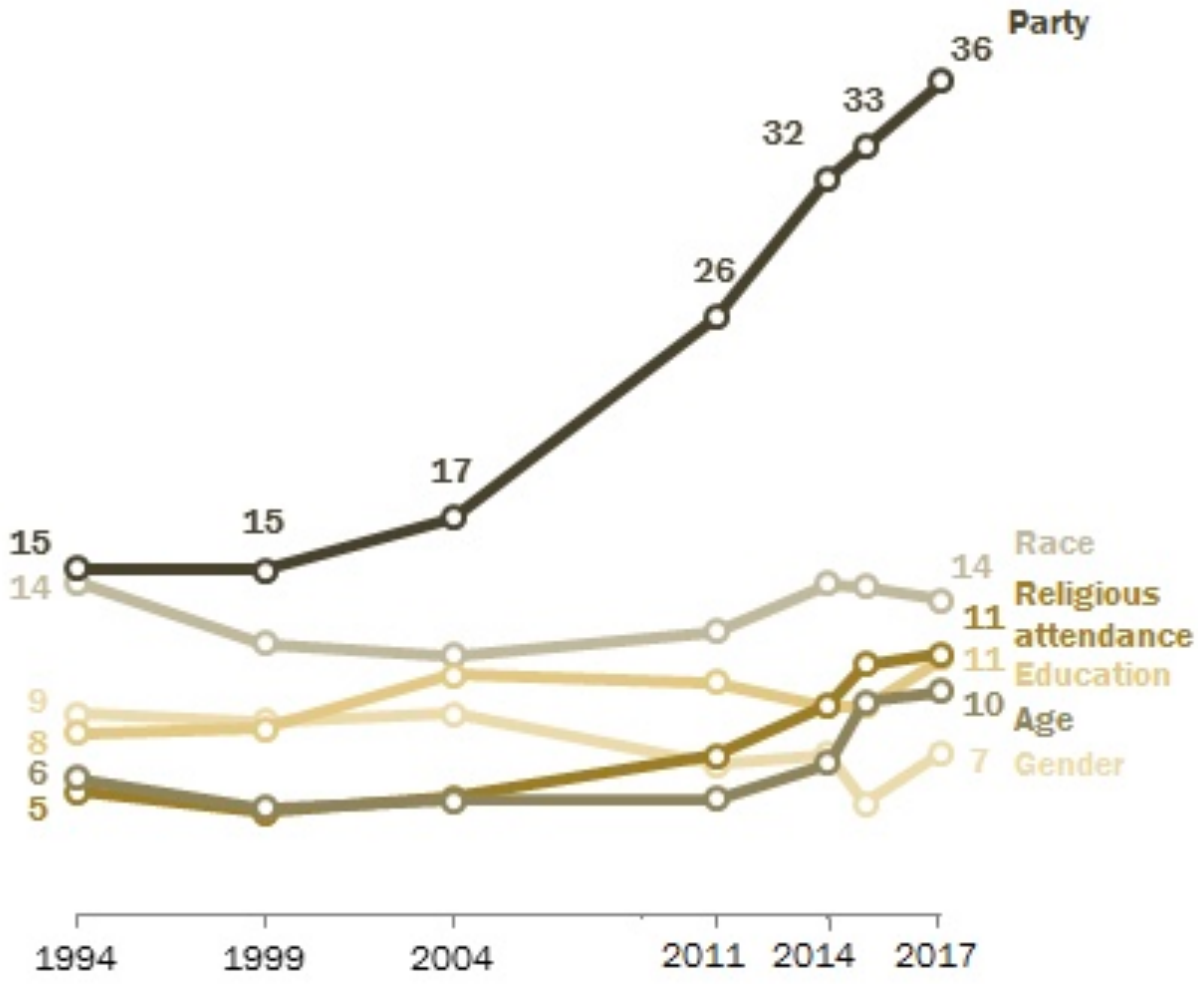
What is a Conservative?

The chart you see below was published by Pew Research Centre in 2017. It records something quite remarkable. The dark rising line shows how American society has become more and more divided along party lines during the last 20 years or so. Party loyalty is now by far the most divisive thing for Americans - much more than race, religion, gender, education or any of the other characters that also mark social identity and loyalty. This, of course is enormously consequential. It paralyses decision making and distorts thinking about important problems. It puts negotiation and sensible compromise out of reach, and it promotes public lying.



And it isn't only America. Polarisation has been rising in all the democracies. It's as though a grumbling unarmed civil war has been building up - in fact some American scholars say the only thing with which to compare today's partisanship is the intolerant atmosphere of the 1850s before the civil war. If this is anything like the truth, we should be very interested in understanding why we have done this to ourselves. But here's a funny thing - as soon as we begin to think about it, something odd happens - many of the ideas we want to study become slippery and refuse to sit still while we examine them.

For example, the language we use to talk about this depends on words like *right & left, conservative, liberal, libertarian, progressive* - yet nearly all of us would be hard pressed to say exactly what they mean. Try it and see. Define 'conservative'.

Most likely you will think of a list, maybe a bit like this: conservatives don't like too much change, they don't care for immigrants, or gays, or abortions; they like to see solid old men in charge of things; they tend to be religious; they're not keen on modern art; and they're anti-communist. These days, too, they dismiss or minimise the problem of climate change; they believe capitalism is here to stay, and they play politics hard, with a sure sense of righteousness. No matter how long your list though, there's a problem. A definition like this is *describing* something, rather than defining it. What if you want to know the *cause* of conservatism - what it really is and what makes it tick? You might see the problem better with another instance.

In the DSM 5, the book where all psychiatric disorders are defined, we read the following:

Diagnostic Criteria
312.33 (F63.1)

- Deliberate and purposeful fire setting on more than one occasion.
- Tension or affective arousal before the act.
- Fascination with, interest in, curiosity about, or attraction to fire and its situational contexts (e.g., paraphernalia, uses, consequences).
- Pleasure, gratification, or relief when setting fires or when witnessing or participating in their aftermath.
- The fire setting is not done for monetary gain, as an expression of sociopolitical ideology, to conceal criminal activity, to express anger or vengeance, to improve one's living circumstances, in response to a delusion or hallucination, or as a result of impaired judgment (e.g., in major neurocognitive disorder, intellectual disability [intellectual developmental disorder], substance intoxication).
- The fire setting is not better explained by conduct disorder, a manic episode, or antisocial personality disorder.

This is how the disorder of pyromania is officially defined. Under some circumstances, this definition could determine if someone goes to prison or not. Consider for a moment though, and I think you will agree this is not quite satisfactory. There's no explanation of the phenomenon at all; we're no wiser about the nature of pyromania, yet we feel any decent definition should say what its subject <u>is</u>, not just what it looks like. In other words, the definition would be a lot better if it told us why the things on that list belong together; and why no others - or, in short, what <u>causes</u> pyromania.

I want to convince you that 'conservatism' is like this. We recognise it well enough to use its name, but not enough to explain what it is. The consequences in this case are heaps of confusion, and deepening divisions in our societies we seem unable to heal. Well, it so happens political theory is in a better position than psychiatry these days, and we can say quite a bit about political categories and behaviour. That's what this essay is about.

Why am I asking this about conservatives, and not about the others, you might be wondering - so-called 'progressives', or 'liberals'. The reason (I think) is that there is an

interesting difference between the two cases. Thinking about the 'left' of politics it wouldn't be too much exaggeration to say that lefties are concerned by things that can be captured in a couple of words, say 'equality' and 'community'. That's enough to tell us that they value a society with an opportunity landscape that is flat. For them, a good society strives to provide as much as possible for the flourishing of each and every one of its citizens, regardless of station, or anything else. And this endeavour can only succeed when the people share both this vision and the responsibility of pursuing it.

Conservatives, on the other hand, can't be captured as easily as this - at least not by any formula that I know. If anyone tries to convince you otherwise, say with 'love of freedom', or 'Christian values', or 'tradition', or 'moral rectitude', or 'free markets', or 'patriotism', then see if you can turn those epithets into a social program or ambition, and it will not do. Any political belief whatsoever must be a means to achieve some desirable state of society. But as soon as you look closely at conservative formulae like these, they won't yield a coherent picture of society at all. Instead, what you get is a vision of conflict. Plenty of people have commented on this - that contemporary conservatism is a cause for civil war, and not a political ideal.[1] This, if true, is pretty strange. It's one of the things I want to investigate in this essay.

Another one is this: for the thirty years or so while we've been getting more polarised, conservatism (in one variety or another) has been in charge of political agendas in much of the democratic world. The general name for this program is neo-liberalism. It isn't conservative in an old-fashioned way; it's something new - an economic doctrine (some would rather say, a prejudice) joined to a whole family of cultural, and sometimes religious commitments, that vary in content and emphasis from place to place and over time. This package deserves an explanation. Even though parties of the left have adopted neo-liberal economic orthodoxies in some degree, all the people who accept the whole package call themselves conservative. But there is no obvious reason why, for example, it is conservative to privatise utilities or public services, or beef up 'security' at the expense of civil liberty, or suppress freedom of information, or deny the reality of climate change. And in fact, all of these have been opposed by conservatives in the past.

And this puzzle - call it the coherence problem: why and how the bits of conservatism fit together - is connected to another one: what on Earth is the family relationship between different and well known conservatives? Say, Trump and Putin, Rush Limbaugh, Mussolini, Tony Abbott, evangelical Christians and neo-Nazis? Think a bit about this, and you may be tempted, like me, to wonder if there is no single thing to call conservative, but a number of things, each with its own aetiology and distinctive features. If this were true, it would be an important thing to understand too.

Let me first state a couple of starting axioms. The first is the one just mentioned:

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[1] Talk of 'ideologies' is constant - but to my mind, false. An ideology is a comprehensive, defensible vision of a possible state of society, only useful to the extent it can be a guide to building a feasible program. Oddly, conservatives in particular, use the term against their opponents in a derogatory sense, as if it were reprehensible to own any ideology because it means blind adherence to an unworkable program, perhaps like Bolshevism.

- Conservatism is in need of definition because we need to explain why the things that motivate conservatives belong together in a package.
- Second, we understand conservatism to be something enduring in human experience. A description of conservatism in the 1950s might not be suitable now, but we would expect some core to be constant over time - and perhaps across cultures too.
- As a result, we would look for its essence in our human nature - some reason or set of reasons why people divide into political 'tribes' in the way they do.
- And even if such a 'natural' explanation for polarisation were to turn up, we would still expect there to be varieties of conservatism - in other words, anything inherent would interact with individual and collective temperaments and experience to produce a spectrum of conservative appearances.

I have postulated like this because the question we are investigating has been the subject of a lot of very interesting work by scholars in politics, sociology and psychology in recent years, and that is what I'd like to explore in what follows. These students have shown that without a doubt, political dispositions do indeed have roots in our human social nature. Once you accept this, it follows that we could manage our tendency to fight about politics in much the same way we manage other parts of our natures that can be destructive - like lust, aggression, mendacity, avarice, selfishness, and so on - that is, by developing social or institutional remedies or sanctions. And yet, we have gotten ourselves in trouble precisely by doing the opposite. We've abandoned well-tried democratic practices just so we can fight. Or so it appears.

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Let's start with a famous modern attempt to define the essence of conservatism, and then use this as a way into those discoveries. Proceeding this way might give you a sense of how it happens that we can choose conflict, even if we know perfectly well how to avoid it.

It is due to Russell Kirk, who's 1953 book *The Conservative Mind* was received rapturously by grateful conservatives, and is still revered today. It appeared at a time when post-war conservatism was badly in need of a champion. The New Deal had swept all before it; the new conservative president had turned out to be hardly conservative at all; and the country was roiled by McCarthyism and its reaction. Into this dour scene came Kirk's passionate assertion of conservative virtue. It was articulate (in its antique-sounding way), confident, heartfelt, thoughtful and comprehensive. It was just what conservatives were looking for. It went under countless pillows, and soaked into conservative consciousness for good. Surveying the problem of definition in his first chapter, Kirk says this: "the essence of social conservatism is preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity."[2]

Now I don't know about you, but to me, this little claim needs to be unravelled before it makes sense. Does he mean all of humanity, back to the beginning? What is

[2] Kirk, R 1953. *The Conservative Mind: from Burke to Eliot*. Henry Regnery, Chicago

preservation? Why moral traditions? If I had to unpick his proposal into three parts, (having in mind what he says in the rest of the chapter) it would be something like this:

- Society is an organic creation of the collective life of a people, accumulating habits, beliefs, practices, stories, laws, and other achievements as a consequence of its survival. These can't be won any other way than by this slow process of experience. They are therefore of inestimable value, and their preservation must be the first rule of a prudent people.
- Morality is the chief order of tradition - the rules which govern the behaviour of individuals with respect to each other, and the authority granted by each member of society to its rulers, as well as the internalised rule we call conscience.
- The memories, prescriptions and prejudices acquired over time have a kind of infallibility. This, for two reasons - they are foremost among the conditions of survival and flourishing for a people; had they not been, there would be nothing to preserve. Second, as Kirk explains in what follows, moral traditions incorporate the submission of a people to a recognised higher order - the divinity that shapes our ends.

Taking the first one first - in my view this idea is eminently defensible. On most readings, it is the core of Edmund Burke's celebrated defence of conservatism, made in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). It is the idea that hard won achievements should be built upon rather than rejected; that change, when necessary ought to be cautious rather than wholesale; and that within all traditions there is a treasure of wisdom, truth and creativity which no society can afford to discard. This way of seeing things is often called 'classical conservatism'. It has been practiced ever since revolutionary times, for better or worse, and rightfully generates respectful adherence to this day. And it was very visible when Kirk wrote, in the 'moderate' conservatism of Eisenhower's administration, which he and others (not without reason) thought to be much too 'liberal'. If it was warranted in Burke's day by his experience of tumultuous revolution, surely it is even more so in ours.

Kirk's second suggestion - that the essence of tradition is moral - is more contentious. It seems to me that a great part of the accumulated experience of any people concerns other forms of understanding than the moral. As a collective, we learn over time how to know our physical and biological environments; how to make sense of physical events and phenomena; how to regulate our relations with neighbours; how to perform economic functions - sharing, trading, acquiring, disposing and so on; how to celebrate our aesthetic urges; how to codify our sense of social and spiritual relations, and many more. All these compose in the end, significant parts of traditions, and it would be a stretch either to insist that they are moral concerns, or to minimise their importance. So there is a question why this scholar would want morality to trump everything. We'll come back to this by and by.

As for Kirk's third proposition, in light of what he says subsequently, it appears he believed, not only that its morality is the paramount order of a society, but that "society is a spiritual reality, possessing an eternal life". He certainly wasn't the first to think so.

Just the same, most of us will want to pause here and wonder what this idea is about. Does he think the society of the Eskimos eternal? What about the ancient Babylonians, or the painters of Lascaux, and all other extinct societies? Possibly not. It's hard to tell. But for the sake of his argument, it's clear he only wished to analyse the 'western European' tradition (or traditions), and that he was very impressed by the role of its religious tradition at the centre.

He goes on to say, conservatives believe in a "transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems." And further, "Custom, convention and old prescription are checks both upon man's anarchic impulse and upon the innovator's lust for power."

I understand him to be saying two things here: that an enduring society has something divine about it - perhaps it expresses god's design - and second, that old and customary things should be revered just because they are old. You could say the key to his thinking here is the word 'prescription'. This is what reveals the backbone of what we preserve - the normative foundation, enduring and authoritative; the rock of all our deeds and choices, and an anchor for our wayward souls. Kirk evidently feels no prescription could be reliable if it did not issue from an authority higher than any human one.

Jefferson and Paine would, of course, have been aghast to hear an inheritor of their republic talk like this. No one today would want to call the American founders radical, (although their contemporaries certainly did) but their conception of politics grew precisely from the desire to discover motives and principles of government that were free from the monopoly of kings and priests. Employed with care, reason, not authority can be the guide to an enlightened society, they said. They would have agreed with Kirk that "freedom and property are closely linked"; and they would have understood when he says, "…civilized society requires orders and classes, as against the notion of a 'classless society'".

But the vision of society in the Declaration of Independence is, in an important sense, the exact opposite of Kirk's. That document speaks to something innate in us - the desire to be free, responsible, and communal - to join our fellows in multiplying and sharing the benefits of our creativity. It is a humanist vision, full of a sense of human potential. Kirk's is theocratic. It doesn't celebrate what humans might become; it laments their fallibility, and recommends a very ancient remedy - submission to princes and prelates. So right here, we see a division in the category of the conservative that will be worth a closer look.

It's quite likely you won't recognise the conservatives you know in this portrait. That's because Kirk isn't looking for a descriptive definition; he wants to find something "essential". It may be he has discovered something which lurks unseen within conservatism, unremarked, and unacknowledged. If he's right, then that essential thing would be a disposition to distrust human nature. Conservatives then would be anti-egalitarian because they think there are better and worse people (orders and classes) so

they won't believe we can cooperate well enough to govern ourselves as equals. And since they don't grant fundamentally equal rights to citizens, they would not work for equal opportunity. And since there must always be some justification for privilege, they would be inclined to find it in a supra-human order, either mystical or religious. Many outstanding conservative thinkers before Kirk have done just this.

According to them, conservatives are people who are worried about the cooperative capacity of human beings; they feel better when there is a visible, effective authority to keep us in check. It doesn't need to be a malign one, but it must function to uphold the cohesion of the society - to bind things together, and to suppress our unruly and selfish impulses. Plato, Thomas Hobbes, and plenty of others saw things this way. Thinkers like these who had seen the chaos of civil war first hand were impressed more than anything by the need for efficient decision-making and the great harm that comes from a leadership vacuum. To them, the problem of government was how to employ power at the top in such a way as to avoid tyranny, keep order, and pursue the interests of the people as a whole.

Russell Kirk did know a thing or two about the tradition of conservative thought, and for what it's worth, I think he did put his finger on something essential when he located the division between conservatives and the rest right where we answer the question: are humans cooperative or competitive? Nothing seems to separate us into political tribes more cleanly than this. But of course, we are both - so the answer contains a judgment about which capacity is either dominant, or more functional in the lives of social creatures like ourselves. What sort of things could plausibly sway us toward one contingent answer or the other? Inherited disposition? Early childhood & parental example? Salutary experiences? Education and peer influence? Social pressure? Well, that's what scholars have been trying to unravel - with some success. Let's see what they've found.

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In a notable passage in his *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Karl Popper discussed what he called "the strain of civilisation".[3] He thought there was an unavoidable tension, always present in societies in which people had made some move to take responsibility for collective decisions (the open ones). It was not a problem in his so-called 'closed societies' because they were structured upon Kirk's 'order' - a fixed arrangement of social classes and functions which provided for each and every member a secure and unquestioned sense of purpose; an immemorial ordering of social reality that left no room for doubt, and punished heresy and insurrection severely.

But in open (what we would call 'free') societies, there is always a price to pay - an "uneasiness" which is "felt even in our day. It is the strain created by the effort which life in an open and partially abstract society continually demands from us - by the endeavour to be rational, to forgo at least some of the emotional social needs, to look after

[3] Popper, K, 1945. *The Open Society and its Enemies* Routledge; vol I, 176

ourselves, and to accept responsibilities." Popper thought it was likely to be more acutely felt in times of social change.[4]

An obvious implication of this idea is that human nature must contain both a set of impulses towards free and autonomous (egalitarian) social living, and another set which draws us to ordered (hierarchical) modes of life. That is indeed what modern research has confirmed. And in that sense, Popper seems to have been essentially correct. Life as a subject entails submission. And although stratified societies can appear perfectly stable, they contain within themselves, seeds of revolt. Submission is never perfect because it is opposed in some degree, and in some circumstances, by a yearning for freedom. And in their turn, democratic societies are always threatened (to a degree that depends on social conditions) by a contrary yearning for leadership, cohesion, and certainty. And for the sake of those, as experience has shown, a free people may choose to exchange liberty for subjection.

If human social nature is divided this way, then we would want to know why, when it is clearly the source of a lot of conflict. We are by a long way the most social mammals, with much more complicated (and productive) social lives than any other - so you might expect our endowments for social existence to be highly evolved in such a way that our collectives were as free from contradictions as, say the most successful social insects. But they are not. Human societies have to work hard to stay together - certainly when they grow beyond a certain modest size.

There's another puzzle - human morality. We don't just look out for our offspring and closest relatives, the way many mammals and birds do; we practice altruism - that is, we routinely sacrifice our own interest for others, whether they are related or not. The first scientist to wonder about this was Darwin, in his *Ascent of Man*, in 1871. How could altruism be possible, he asked, if natural selection gave reproductive advantage to individuals according to their fitness? Any behavioural tendency to take risks on behalf of another would reduce fitness, and so would be eliminated. He made some shrewd guesses about an eventual answer, but had to admit he was in no position to provide one.

Now we know things about this that would have fascinated Darwin. Humans, as he well knew, are descended from social primates - our nearest living primate relatives (not direct ancestors) are the two species of chimps. All pre-human primates live in socially structured groups with a dominant male who monopolises reproductive rights and resources - an arrangement usually called a 'dominance hierarchy'. The alpha male is not really a leader, because he doesn't supply beneficent services; he is more like a bully, taking what he can command, and resisting every attempt at power sharing or

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[4] He wrote his book in exile in New Zealand, as an attempt to explain what had happened in his native Germany. As far as I know, it was one of the first studies of social development to look at things this way. Despite inevitable shortcomings due to its age, Popper's account of the conditions that make it possible for a democratic people to respond to a despotic populist is still full of valuable insight, including this claim - that social unrest or rapid change can awaken unfree impulses in a free people.

usurpation.[5] Dealing with rivals is a normal part of his role. He stays in power with a combination of shrewd alliances and brute force - as long as they work for him.

So, with this ancestry, you'd expect pre-industrial human societies to work this way too. But they don't (or didn't). Every hunter-gatherer band ever encountered hasn't been a dominance hierarchy. On the contrary, they have all been egalitarian societies, essentially leaderless, with highly developed ways of governing themselves without dominance or coercion.[6] This isn't what you'd expect if we inherited a set of dispositions and ancestral habits moulded by those very ancient imperatives.

So what happened? A most interesting answer has been suggested by Christopher Boehm, an anthropologist and primatologist who has studied this problem over a couple of decades. At some time in the last half-million years (the evidence will probably never allow us to pin down the time precisely) our hominid ancestors perfected the use of offensive weapons - tools for efficient assassination. That changed everything. Boehm calls it a 'political revolution' because once rival males could simply gang up on an alpha, the dominant role became redundant. No one could hold it securely, so the bands figured out how to live fraternally - how to make collective decisions; how to resolve conflicts without destructive violence; how to sanction upstarts, and so on.

Biologically modern humans have known this for their entire existence, and possibly our immediate ancestors lived this way for just as long. So we must have developed a set of intuitions adapted for egalitarian living - something very close to what we nowadays call the love of freedom. Orlando Patterson thinks this predilection has at least two parts - a desire not to be coerced or restrained against the achievement of some aim; and what he calls 'civic freedom' - "the capacity of adult members of a community to participate in its life and governance".[7] Some scholars believe the cognitive challenges of living complex social lives in this way in a political community was the stimulus for the growth of big human brains and the acquisition of language. Be that as it may, Boehm's insight is that after hundreds of millennia as hunter-gatherers, we entered our modern (post-agriculture) life with a mixed inheritance: we are both primates and democrats.

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[5] This distinction is an interesting one, made by Chris Boehm in his study *Moral Origins*, (Basic Books, 2012). His point is that the concept of leadership as we normally understand it is a more recent development, belonging to bigger, more complex societies than those ancestral ones. Dominant males have a single interest - to maximise their reproductive success. And they do this with just two assets - muscle, and a bit of political skill. When this happens in societies like ours, we call it tyranny, and it is universally abhorred. Leadership of complex societies is different because it always, at least in some degree, entails the notions of responsibility and consent.

[6] This is true of traditional nomadic bands, not of those less common large traditional 'chiefdoms', which were found in places with abundant resources that could support larger collectives. In those societies hierarchies more like the ones we are familiar with grew up, and a few of them aggregated into empires with cities and complex political systems, state religion, and all the apparatus of a State.

[7] Patterson, O, 1991. *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture.* Basic Books. p 4

The tension Popper saw when Germany's people succumbed to Nazism was a contradiction between that part of our inheritance that makes us responsive to a 'führer', and the part that is repulsed by him. Our species history means that we are condemned to live with these incompatible 'natures' inside us for ever. This sounds like bad news for liberal idealists and everyone who has dreamed of a future state free from conflict - but, we should not be surprised; after all, reconciling our contradictory social nature has been the central problem for political thinkers ever since thinking began. My claim is that when we search for the sources of present political conflict, this is where the search ends.

All the other phenomena and causes that we identify as fuel for opposition - ideologies, wealth distribution, religion, class, megalomania, greed, and the rest - all of them can be traced in the end to the fact that we (individually and collectively) are potentially both subjects, and citizens. Put us in a hierarchy and we can be one; put us in a democracy, we can be the other. We are not equally endowed with both dispositions (some folks are more inclined to authority; others to community), nor are we inclined uniformly all the time; circumstances matter a lot. As Popper said, when people sense a threat to social stability and cohesion, they are more inclined to abandon responsibility and look to an authority. That is why it's so easy for 'populists' and demagogues to rally support by attacking immigrants, fomenting conflict, and emphasising fear. We are generally more tolerant when we feel safe and the social world is secure.

As you can imagine, the thing Karl Popper wanted to explain - how a 'civilized' people could, in a few years become barbarians - attracted lots of attention from social scientists, psychologists, historians, and other scholars after the war, and from that work, a number of explanatory themes emerged. One of the most fruitful, and, to my mind, most useful enquiries is the one that pursued the question: what is authoritarianism? You can think of this as a natural extension of Popper's hunch, applying empirical methods to something that is, in a sense another way of peering into Plato's everlasting question: what is justice?

In this case, the most interesting answer I know has been given by Karen Stenner, based on a decade or so of work with her mentor Stanley Feldman. Karen makes a compelling case that, just as Popper guessed, in any population, and therefore in any society, there will be a spread of dispositions towards authority - that is, people who are less tolerant of 'difference', or a condition of lowered conformity, uniformity, security, and stability. Their uneasiness expresses itself, under any conducive circumstances, in a desire for a remedial authority - something to put things back to their 'normal' state, and take care of threats to the cohesion and continuity of the social world.

It doesn't matter so much whether those threats are serious or even real, as long as susceptible people believe them to be so. In other words, from the point of view of anyone wanting to conjure up support for an authoritarian program, it is the stories we tell ourselves that count. That's why propaganda is essential to that enterprise, and why the most successful tyrants have the best propaganda resources.

Authoritarianism, in Stenner's view, is "an individual predisposition concerned with the appropriate balance between group authority and uniformity on the one hand, and individual autonomy and diversity, on the other." [8] Notice there's no mention of power here - so Stenner's idea is that aspiring autocrats might be interested in monopolising power, but those who want him to succeed are interested in having him fix some perceived threat to the paramount social order - not power itself. Think back to Boehm's idea, and you can imagine that what Stenner has discovered is an important detail of how the two ancestral social modes coexist in each of us, and how their balance can be disturbed.

I hope you will agree that this is a useful insight into the nature of conservatism. Conservatives can be people who don't like things to change too much or too fast, and they can be people who look for strong leadership when precious values are threatened - and the more sensitive they are to these stimuli, the more conservative they are. Karen Stenner found this distinction clearly present in her data. People who feel strongly about the 'get off my back' kind of freedom (libertarians in the USA) are distinct too. So, according to her findings, you can say there are three basic kinds of conservative - not exclusive, and often entangled, but nevertheless motivationally different. This is the way she put it:

> When people use the terms *conservative* or *right-wing* they typically mean one (or problematically, more) of the following: an enduring inclination to favour stability and preservation of the status quo over social change (what I call "status quo conservatism"); a persistent preference for a free market and limited government intervention in the economy ("laissez-faire conservatism"); or an enduring predisposition, in all matters political and social, to favour obedience and conformity (oneness and sameness) over freedom and difference. [9]

Her research gives us a few important insights. First, "intolerance of difference" is strongly correlated with the authoritarian disposition, and not with the other two.

> Authoritarians prove to be relentlessly "sociotropic" boundary-maintainers, norm-enforcers, and cheerleaders for authority, whose classic defensive stances are activated by the experience or perception of threat to those boundaries, norms, and authorities. Those are the critical conditions to which authoritarians are eternally attentive. The perceived loss of those conditions—via disaffection with leaders, or divided public opinion—is the catalyst that activates these latent predispositions and provokes their increased manifestation in racial, political, and moral intolerance (and its corollary: punitiveness).

Second, the two social values most precious to authoritarian-inclined people are confidence in political leadership (the old deference to the 'big man'), and a feeling of consensus in public opinion. "Nothing aggravates authoritarians more than feeling that

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[8] Stenner, K, 2005. *The Authoritarian Dynamic*. Cambridge University Press p14

[9] Stenner, K, 2009. Three kinds of "Conservatism". *Psychological Inquiry*, 20, 142-159

leaders are unworthy of trust and respect, and/or that beliefs are not shared across the community ("normative threat").

Third, at least two innate personality characteristics - 'openness to experience', and cognitive capacity (broadly specified) - appear to be strong determinants of the authoritarian tendency.

Fourth, another two factors seem to be essential in the origin of 'status quo conservatism', the tendency to resist change. They are: 'conscientiousness', a major personality dimension associated with rigidity, order and control; and increasing age.

Finally, just one thing appears to determine one's adherence to 'laissez faire' conservatism - socio-economic status. In other words, rich people are drawn to the doctrine that rich people deserve what they have, while poor people deserve their destitution. Of course, privilege has been defended in a myriad of ways ever since politics began, but essentially, no matter if they come from the mouths of aristocrats, plutocrats, slave-holders, monarchs, robber-barons or tyrants, these self-serving defences are pretty much the same.

I think Stenner's typology helps us untangle a couple of bits of our puzzle. From a social psychology point of view, the label 'conservative' embraces at least three different things which appear to be different, not just descriptively, but in their social and psychological causes. The people committed to them are motivated by different concerns to act on different parts of the social, cultural and economic reality. In other words, if Stenner and the many scholars who agree with her are correct, conservatism as we understand it, is indeed an inclusive, non-unitary category, containing a number of parts not necessarily compatible with each other. And yet … what are we to make of that persisting feeling that something elusive binds them together - that, in spite of everything, conservatives really do belong to one 'tribe'?

That question takes us back to where we began, wondering about the drastic polarisation of recent times, and what is causing it. For even if self-identified conservatives aren't all the same, it is surely still significant that they are satisfied to dwell in the same tent. Why is that?

Jonathan Haidt is a scholar who has used his research to pursue this puzzle with very interesting results. Consider the following two statements:

"The national Democratic Party is immoral to the core. Any American who would vote for Democrats is guilty of fostering the worst kind of degeneracy. The leaders of this party are severely out of touch with mainstream, traditional American values. They are crusaders for perversion, for licentiousness, for nihilism and worse."

"Republicans don't believe in the imagination, partly because so few of them have one, but mostly because it gets in the way of their chosen work, which is to destroy the human race and the planet. Human beings, who have imaginations, can see a recipe for disaster in the making; Republicans, whose

goal in life is to profit from disaster and who don't give a hoot about human beings, either can't or won't." [10]

Haidt saw that intolerance like this is really about incompatible moralities - each accuser is convinced beyond doubt that their moral understanding is not just preferable, but exclusively correct, and that their opponents are not just wrong, but immoral. That got him enquiring into the origins of moral understanding. He wanted to know if it were possible for there to be, within the same culture, two or more essentially opposed sets of commitments to right and wrong that might explain such vehemence. Later, he extended his search to other cultures, to see if their moral constitution might be different in the same way.

Ever since Darwin first posed the problem of moral origins in its modern form, it has been understood as an evolutionary puzzle - we need to explain how human evolution produced our moral capacities, and any other identifiable permanent features of our moral nature. So starting with the framework provided by Boehm's paleo-anthropological work, Haidt and his colleagues searched for evidence of original moral motivations by probing the moral choices people made during carefully prepared experiments in several countries.

What they found is fascinating. There is compelling evidence that systems of morality everywhere are founded on just a handful of needs and intuitions that arose from the human development of complex social lives during the last few hundred thousand years (and of course constrained and partly shaped by our ancient pre-human sociality). The research identified five of them, with possibly a sixth; the scheme is not closed, and research is ongoing They are:

- Compassion, empathy, and basic aversion to harm being done to others. This cluster of moral motives likely has its evolutionary origins in nurture of infants and the young, which is universal (not only in primates). In its elaborated human form, it includes the social virtues of kindness, gratitude and so on.

- Reciprocity and fairness. Reciprocal altruism, as Darwin knew, is widespread in the living world; its emergence appears to require that creatures are long-lived, social, and good at keeping track of favours and betrayals. Humans, in addition, have a uniquely powerful sense of 'fairness' which can be detected in babies only a few months old, and which becomes, in adulthood, an important social principle - justice.

- Loyalty, particularly in-group loyalty. These are a set of values and corresponding emotions related to the human proclivity for cooperation within social groups, and enmity without. Pretty obviously, the much valued 'patriotism' is derived from this.

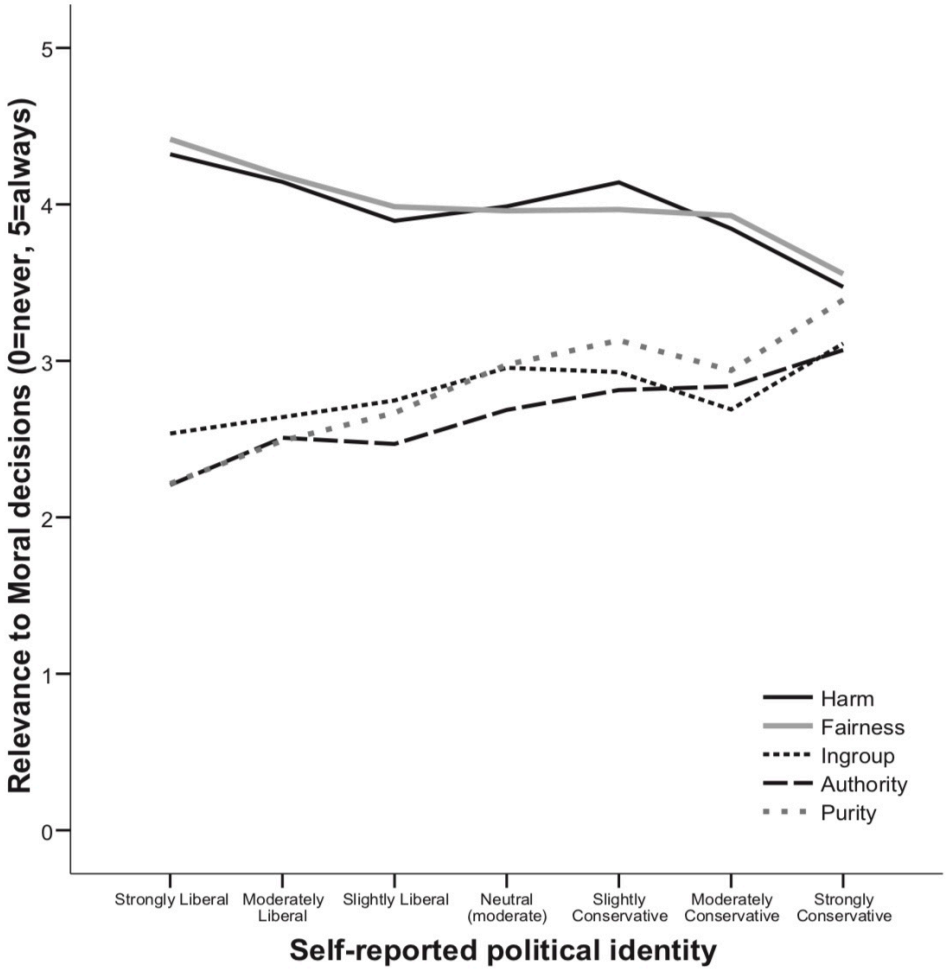
- Authority and respect. This is the bundle of intuitions we inherited from the time before we developed egalitarian bands. It is the ancient half of Popper's conflicted social nature - our former self adapted for a dominance hierarchy. It is the basis not

[10] These two are cited at the head of Graham, Nosek, Haidt, 2012. PLOS ONE 7; 12 e50092

only for deference towards leaders, but respect for elders, and preference for order, and aversion to rapid social change.

- Purity and sanctity. Haidt points out that humans (alone of all primates) adopted a meat-heavy diet during the last couple of million years, at the same time as we developed a prominent frontal cortex. And we, alone (at least as far as we can tell), possess the emotion of disgust. This universal aversion to things naturally linked to disease transmission, appears to have been the source of religious taboos and the like, and is present in modern people in the form of a variety of feelings concerning wholesomeness and depravity in social life. [11]

This approach to explaining polarisation, in Haidt's view, has the advantage that it doesn't require that conservatives be seen as 'anti-progress', or uncaring; or progressives as disrespectful iconoclasts. Instead, you could simply say that the two opponents have different moral preferences - they feel differently about the priority of the five foundations. The theory becomes really interesting after it was tested on groups in several societies, including some non-western ones. The findings can be summarised in the diagram below.



[11] The theory of moral foundations sketched here is described in: Haidt & Graham, 2007, *Social Justice Research*, 20; 1, 98-116. Also Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind,* 2012. Random House. The figure is from Graham, Haidt & Nozek, 2009. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 3, 1033

Leaving aside questions about methods, what Haidt and his colleagues here showed is that 'liberals' (American lefties) are distinguished by a marked preference for two of the moral foundations - compassion and fairness - and conservatives by a lack of this bias; they align the foundations more nearly together. In practice, this means that liberal talk about social justice is often drowned for conservatives by their concern about social disorder, weak leadership, loss of values and disrespect; while many liberals don't see these as legitimate concerns at all. In his book Haidt describes how much insight he gained while researching this matter in Brazil and in rural India, where, as you'd expect, the non-liberal slant on moral foundations was obvious.

Many researchers, including these, have been impressed by the way Western thinkers take for granted something that is either missing or undervalued in other cultures - individualism. Our way of valuing individual autonomy is in fact a special feature of modern European-derived cultures - or at any rate its dominance in the lives of hundreds of millions of people certainly is. In the rest of the world, and for the whole of it until a couple of centuries ago, all of morality was focussed on the preservation and well-being of communities, not individuals. And that means the three moral foundations neglected by liberals won't be superseded - now, or ever - because they are just as rooted in our social nature as the other two. We have to find ways to accomodate them if we want social peace and cooperation.

I don't know about you, but this reminds me of Russell Kirk, a man who plainly found authority, sanctity, respect, and obedience more compelling as moral guides than social justice reform. Notice that Kirk explicitly rejects the egalitarian ideal, and in so doing, repudiates the whole framework of rights that upholds it. He is prepared - no, eager - to replace rights with privileges. But if we were mystified by his motives at the beginning, what can we say now? Well, the way Jon Haidt sees it, Kirk belongs to, and is speaking to a tribe of folks who feel in their bones that authority and obedience, group loyalty and fidelity, and religious notions like purity and sanctity are indispensable (even paramount) values; that threats to them are of the utmost seriousness; and that people who do not see this are more like enemies than dissidents.

Are these the seeds of intolerant polarisation? And do we now have a good handle on what conservatism is? It seems to me that what Kirk left out, clever research has supplied - a plausible, if not final account of how we humans follow two broad paths in our political loyalties, and always have. They were bequeathed by our species' social evolution, and are written into our cognitive and emotive systems. That means, as Popper suspected, that we will always have to contend with them, and find ways to resolve them if we want social harmony. To my mind, Jonathan Haidt has given us an updated version of Kirk's claim that political problems are really moral problems, but with the advantage that the new story can be fruitful and conciliatory, rather than prescriptive and conflictual.

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We don't need to worry about whether neo-nazis or greedy billionaires are really conservative. We just need to be ready to understand why ordinary folks, for reasons that seem perfectly good to them, can hold opinions inexplicably at odds with our own. Is Augusto Pinochet or Donald Trump a conservative? Well, it depends. They are anti-democrats, and authoritarian; but they don't mind change, as long as it's a certain sort, and they are not necessarily friendly to religion and tradition. What distinguishes them isn't any political category, but their interest in power, and a particular style of using it. Thugs and bullies are not political actors at all. Their direct ancestor is the primate alpha male, who didn't govern his community, but mastered it. Twentieth century experience has shown, if there was any doubt, that totalitarianism (which can be understood as dominance hierarchy adapted to a big complex society) is exactly the same, whether it is run by radicals or reactionaries.

One might say, as many observers have done, that the most useful distinction to be made in the category of conservatism is the one between Burkean or classical conservatism and reactionary, or 'movement' conservatism.[12] Neo-liberalism has provided a field for reactionaries to flourish, but more than this, it has been a cover for laissez-faire conservatives - and we might well ask what is conservative about rich people working successfully for their own interest? Every era has its own dominating political themes. Ours is sometimes called 'the politics of envy'. It runs on a competitive creed, and one that is impatient with the idea of equality, as well as the legal processes that equality entails.

It has been said you can measure the health and strength of a democracy by its citizens' commitment to the rule of law, because a people can only govern themselves if together, they agree to submit equally to the yoke of regulation. Pay taxes, grumble, but pay them anyway, and expect that sacrifices made for fellow citizens are a fair thing, and necessary for the community's sustenance and cohesion. If this commitment is weak, as it is now, then we will surely see, bit by bit, the very fabric of society stretch, and then tear. That's the real significance of growing inequality - it is a path from imperfect democracy to something else. What that will be depends on who and what ends up with the tiller in their hands. A future in the hands of plutocrats would not be conservative; it would be brutal. In fact, you could say real conservatives are the best people to resist that; Burke wasn't egalitarian, but he did believe the business of government was to provide for the maximum flourishing of the whole society.

The whole society? Does that mean everyone, humble and great, has their own claim on the common good? If so, then conservatives can't be on the side of privilege; they must be in there with everyone else figuring out how the greatest good can come of our joint membership of the body of citizens. After all, nothing but common purpose keeps us together. Nothing.

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[12] See a fine essay by Sam Tanenhaus on this: *Conservatism is Dead.* New Republic, February 18th, 2009