

Is Contemporary American Conservatism More Than Just a Reactionary Ideological Platform?

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, MAY 25 2012

In this post I want to suggest that, rather paradoxically, US conservatism is anti-conservative when you consider its origins. 'Conservative' Republicans rather disparagingly call Republicans that are seen to have US-defined 'liberal' positions such as pro-abortion, gun control etc. as RINOs (Republicans In Name Only). In an unfortunate case of name-calling can I call US conservatives CINOs (Conservatives In Name Only)?

I recently attended an event at the Institute for the Study of the Americas, where Joel Aberbach (UCLA) spoke on the conservative identity of contemporary America. And it got me thinking about the utility of the term 'conservative'. From a political theory perspective, and very simply put, conservatism opposes radical change and suggests that the current order is a product of past rationalisations and should thus be maintained. It does not mean that conservatism rejects change just that it is mediated through the reflections of the past. This understanding allows conservatism to claim it is anti-ideological, in that it is dependent on the local context and not some optimistic forward-looking projection of what can be achieved. This understanding is confirmed when discussing Edmund Burke's reaction to the French Revolution's ideas of the rights of man.

But what got me thinking, was when Aberbach commented that US conservatism in the last decade or so is 'much more radical and extreme' than it was in the 1960s. How can conservatism, as described above be labelled either 'radical' or 'extreme'? Surely any change would be expected to be slow, and these two terms do not imply maintenance with the past. It does not compute. As Spock would say, it's 'illogical'.

This is a good example of a term being stripped of its original meaning from the inside leaving only an empty shell made-up from only the letters c-o-n-s-e-r-v-a-t-i-v-e. The 'old' definition has been replaced by a social, economic and political dogma whose agenda may at times align with its origins but is no longer exclusively wedded to them. In a sweeping statement, I would say they are both reactionary and ideologues at the same time. Reactionary in the social realm to 'progressive' advances of equality for those previously marginalised in the market-place of opportunities, and in all three realms, ideologically-driven in that they project a future that is based on the 'return' to a mythologised past. In a limited analysis, one example that can upset my position is the size of government. At the founding of the state government was much more limited. If viewed, however, through the lens of time, the growth of government corresponded to necessary practical realities. The creation of various departments, such as education, to manage the changing role of government is one example.

Thus, the term 'conservative' has been branded by politicians as a framework which allows them to peddle their political positions with a seeming degree of continuity. The Tea Party movement itself is an interesting example of the empty shell being emptied again and replaced with a more reactionary and ideological brand. I do suppose, in one small shout out to continuity, rather intriguingly, this process is mimicking the original meaning of conservatism; it is using the historical identity of the term as a means to tap into peoples' desire to maintain continuity to the past.

So, change that has evolved from continuity is no longer necessary to conservatism. But maybe I've got it all wrong. Can the health care reforms, gay marriage, gun control, abortion all be considered too radical change, or are they

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merely progressions on the gentle road of history? In this polarising world, the sadness is that the answer to this question depends on what side of the aisle you are sitting on. It is essential that political positions are forensically examined but where does name-calling get us? I suggest nowhere, which is why I will not use the term CINO in conversation.

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Read more from Matthew A. Hill in his e-IR blog, Reflections on American Politics from an Outsider

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but othertimes it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.