Diachronic Identity: Intimations, Perturbations, Antifragility and Toleration

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Having already been privy to most of the contributions for this symposium, there is little that I, for one, can add to the fine-grained discussion emanating from so many differing perspectives. What's on offer here may just be me nattering to myself; therefore not all aspects of it invite a response, but of course it's your prerogative.[1]

Conservatism (little "c") in its most trivial sense is concerned with continuity—it is therefore an identity claim (p. 3). Though identity in the canonical Lockean tradition is *a*social, one can still theorize about what the necessary and/or sufficient conditions might be for a given socio-cultural tradition to persist in some recognizable form over time—i.e. diachronic identity.[2] Such discussion would not be incompatible with conservatism understood as an epistemic stance[3] (the more narrowly proscribed *political* conservatism), or the more ubiquitous variant, *cultural* conservatism (pp. 80, 82, 83, 85), or indeed *social* conservatism. If one understands each of these related dimensions in (to some degree) spontaneous order terms, then politics' proper sphere should for the most part be downstream from culture (p. 4). This therefore makes a nonsense of the lazy caricatural characterization of conservatism as necessarily reactionary (p. 3). Dynamicism is woven into the very fabric of a viable socio-cultural order: "[c]ivil society must have a self-sustaining order of its own—the order associated with Smith's 'invisible hand', Burke's 'prejudice', and Hegel's 'cunning of reason'" (p. 65), an evolving non-axiomatic consensus (pp. 5, 34). Burke's famous phrase (see note 2) is applicable across all domains (p. 12). Adam Smith, of course, grasped the logic and immense computational efficiency of the market order (p. 47).

Both classical liberalism and conservatism found common cause in inverting the idea that legitimacy issues forth from some epistemic monopoly or other (pp. 17, 24, 36, 104, 112)—i.e. the Enlightenment (pp. 9, 14, 135)—whereby the actions of multitudes of *individuals* imply an emergent and complex socio-cultural order. One might think of Burke's insight as an instance of what Taleb (2014) has termed antifragility; i.e. a property of all complex systems that have endured. In other words, dynamic and healthy complex spontaneous order benefits from *some* degree of volatility, randomness, disorder, risk, unpredictability, opacity, and uncertainty—be it in business, politics, medicine, or life in general. Therein lies the rub: to what degree can a system, *any system*, absorb perturbations and still maintain its identity, integrity, or coherence? A complex society composed of complex minds, each with its own permutation of beliefs, approvals and disapprovals, preferences and aversions, hopes, fears, anxieties, and skills, will *always* contain conflicts and tensions. It is the classical liberal-conservative axis that most appreciates that the best we can ever do is manage and contain them on reasonable but defeasible grounds.[4] Can one draw a firm and tenable distinction between the essential and the incidental within a tradition or web of belief? And to what degree can a cultural ecosystem assimilate new perturbations? (p. 3).

The standard argument, which you as my philosophy tutor thirty years ago so starkly presented to me, is that spontaneous orders corrode traditional patterns of behavior. The question that exercised me for years after was "what were traditional patterns if not spontaneous orders?" This was my first conceptual encounter with the notion of societal perturbation and culture as an *ecosystem*, and marked my nascent interest in more technical, non-philosophical articulations, i.e. under the auspices of complexity theory, which came much later, though always informed by my interest in classical liberal social philosophy (Marsh and Onof, 2007; Doyle and Marsh, 2013).[5] Perhaps what you had in mind back then was the Friedmanian *zeitgeist* of the Thatcher-Reagan years, whereby it seemed that the market should subsume or impinge on all other orders and/or become the dominant arbiter of all value—a view mistakenly ascribed by many to Hayek and his progenitor Adam Smith. You (and John Gray—2007) point to this classic and supposed

tension in *An Invitation*: "belief in a free economy and free trade clashes with local attachments… " (pp. 2, 4). Two decades later, in your "Hayek and Conservatism" chapter for *The Cambridge Companion to Hayek*, you finessed this idea which had been puzzling me: "Those who believe that social order demands constraints on the market are right. But in a true spontaneous order the constraints are already there, in the form of customs, laws, and morals" (Scruton 2006, pp. 219–20). Moreover, you go on to say that "Hume, Smith, Burke and Oakeshott—have tended to see no tension between a defence of the free market and a traditionalist vision of social order. For they have put their faith in the spontaneous limits placed on the market by the moral consensus of the community" (ibid.).[6]

Expressed in these ways, you provided me with a most elegant solution to the conundrum that I posed earlier. As we are "situated" (pp. 25, 28) and cognitively "bounded" (pp. 29, 39, 47) beings (to use more recent jargon), the very precondition of knowledge, generally speaking, is the exploitation of the epistemic virtues accorded by society's manifold of spontaneous orders, a manifold that gives context and definition to intimate, regulate, and inform action (p. 48). Hume, Smith, Burke, Oakeshott and Hayek all recognized the market order, one amongst many, as the most effective *communication* system, i.e., the coordination problem (p. 47). And, as you rightly point out, the Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* presented an infinitely richer understanding of "invisible hand" explanations that was typically coopted in isolation from the Smith of *The Wealth of Nations* (p. 42; cf. Hardwick and Marsh 2014). Conservatives and classical liberals stand shoulder-to-shoulder regarding the Rule of Law: "a market economy presupposes honest people hence must be backed up by the moral and legal strictures" (pp. 41, 42, 51). However, a *fundamentalist* conception of market institutions, as Gray put it, is "a hubristic neglect of the human need for common life" (Gray 2007, p. viii). Moreover, he writes, this paleo-liberalism displayed more affinity with the "Old Left project of doing away with, or marginalizing politically, the human inheritance of cultural difference" (Gray 2007, p. 153).[7] They both promote bloodless abstractions, "reducing human beings to their over-civilised shadows" (p. 96).[8]

Thus the fissure that opened up between these two strands (liberalism and conservatism) seemed to be of an ontological nature.[9] Whereas classical liberalism took the individual to be an irreducible unit "exalted into an absolute value" (pp. 29, 15, 46), modern conservatism offered the needed corrective in understanding the individual to be on an ontological *par* with society (pp. 23, 59), transmuting the abstract individual into one as an expression of individuali*ty*—or as Bosanquet and Oakeshott put it, "adverbial".[10] Or, as you (and Hayek) put it, the political order is legitimized "not by the free choices that create it, but the free choices that it creates" (pp. 31, 62).[11] Individuali*ty* allows for "eccentricity and independence… a sign of a deeper obedience than any sheepish conformity" (p. 31).[12] This, by the way, seems to be in tension with your claim that "liberals and conservatives are temperamentally quite distinct. Liberals naturally rebel, conservatives naturally obey" (p. 55; the moral psychology of Jonathan Haidt, as expounded in Marsh 2018, offers empirical validation for your claim). In any event, as you rightly say, the relation between (classical) liberalism and conservatism is not one of absolute antagonism, but rather of symbiosis (p. 55).[13]

Social conservatism, as I have argued (Marsh 2018, pp. 182-83), does and can accommodate change, but change that is already prefigured or *intimated* within a given tradition. Unless the current state of society exactly as it stands is itself a value, then why not remedy incoherencies? What would typically be claimed in the name of human rights can be redescribed as an Oakeshottian "intimation" that was being ignored. Three cases in point: the 15th Amendment (ratified 1870), the Married Women's Property Act (1882), and most recently gay rights. These supposed human rights were *historically specific grievances within a tradition of political behavior that needed to be remedied within that very tradition. A tradition that becomes broadly conscious of its being out kilter of with itself is a tradition best-placed to redress a specific anomaly.* This seems to be in tune with the conundrum I posed earlier and your neat answer.

Moving on to cultural conservatism, what I find particularly interesting is your view that "culture becomes an object of conservation only when it has already been lost" (p. 90). Ruskin, writing at a time when "political economy" was passing into economics, and economics into the technical form we know today, was widely mocked for the technical blankness of his work. This, I think, misses the point. Ruskin refused to separate ethics and economics, repudiating the whole picture of economic activity as detached from human well-being. In their different ways—different from Ruskin and from one another—William Morris and Marx repudiated that picture, too. Arnold, whom you quote, "saw in the art of the past a spiritual wholeness and social cohesion which were, he believed, vanishing from the world of industrial capitalism" (p. 85) and which did *not* require religious faith (p. 87), "turning a stream of fresh and free

thought upon our stock notions and habits" (ibid.). Again, this was a managed dynamicism, albeit via state action. Culture was an essential guide to the exercise of political power (recall my earlier claim that politics must be downstream from culture). Cultural conservatives à la Disreali actually required intervention by the state to ameliorate the poor's condition (p. 89). The spiritual crisis of the post-Nietzschean world manifest as *Eigenschaftslosigkeit*[14] animated Robert Musil. Musil, writing as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was precariously teetering on the verge of collapse, self-described his orientation as a "conservative anarchist" (Musil 1913/1995). This is very puzzling indeed. Historically, how is the phrase "conservative anarchist" best construed? Nietzsche called the state "the coldest of all cold monsters"; to him it was a tool of collectivism and a promoter of inferior values. I should think it was Musil's repudiation of the state-collectivist aspect of politics that constituted his anarchism. His conservatism, however, harked back to the (perhaps idealized) period before the cultural degeneration of Austria began. As a severe cultural critic, his conservatism may have been an appeal to an older, purer, less socially corrupt time. It's still an odd combination: anarchism and conservatism. The society whose values Musil would have wanted to conserve still needed a state to maintain civil peace and prevent external aggression. Presumably his rejection of the state was only a rejection of the collectivist state. That would mean that Musil was only qualifiedly an anarchist. The term "conservative anarchist" has some currency in our time, but suffers from a muddled association with libertarianism. The conservative anarchism I wish to proffer stresses community, shared values and interests, Burke's "little platoons" (p. 51) or more widely civil society, which could in theory operate without the state. Operating without the state = anarchy. So, one can see conservatism here as shorthand for communitarianism, and communities running their own affairs minus the state. It should be noted that communitarianism does not entail collectivism, which generally involves anonymous masses controlled as an "enterprise association" by the state.

I now turn my thoughts to your discussion of toleration (p. 150), which to my mind is *the* pressing existential issue of the day, and cuts across the various identity claims as I've outlined. I am referring to the unfettered perturbations that Douglas Murray (2017) has so grimly and it must be said, humanely, documented.

The UK, France, Germany, Sweden and Canada[15] have internal competing sources of authority now—i.e. Sharia (pp. 127, 129, 148, 153)—and therefore are deeply perturbed, as some brave souls from within the tradition have acknowledged (Tawhidi 2018). This situation has been aided and abetted by the Jew- and precariat-hating Trojan Horse that is the so-called "regressive Left"[16] (Nawaz 2016) and their elitist managerial counterparts (or as you put it "literary cabal"—pp. 44, 47, 117). We need a better expression of the dynamics of toleration to counter the infertile sloganeering of the ever-decreasing circles of identitarian intersectionalism, the upshot being that both the extreme Left and the extreme Right converge on Jew hatred. As you say, in order to justify itself, the teleology of the ontological slum that is identity politics is to relentlessly conscript every institution and even language to its purpose (p. 110).[17]

The paradox often pressed against tolerance is that it must tolerate the intolerant and, under the democratic possibility that an intolerant view may gain majority support, submit to its own demise. To counter this contingency should we not introduce a logical structure into tolerance?

1. There is value in allowing the free expression of opinion. Even of intolerant opinion.

2. But the institution of tolerance within which such free expression takes place has a greater value than the free expression of particular opinions, specifically of those opinions that do not respect the value of tolerance. They can therefore be constrained or suppressed.

Put another way,

(a) if the tolerant don't tolerate the intolerant, then the tolerant are reneging on their basic premises; but

(b) if they tolerate the intolerant they are logically obliged to do so even to the point where the intolerant destroy the system of toleration.

I'm inclined to accept a two-level view of tolerance/free speech or something like it, but how one plausibly argues for this is another matter. In the wake of *Charlie Hebdo* what is the way forward?

α. A pragmatic or consequentialist approach. (My view: censorship usually blocks truth-seeking or self-government or both).

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Or,

β.   A deontological or rights-based approach. Everyone has a moral right to free speech which is to be respected and protected *regardless* of the social cost.

The problem has a double dimension: it relates to the current state of political debate, the political sociology of tolerance where tolerance is being leached by its opponents; and the philosophical dimension of how this state of affairs can be countered, or at least addressed philosophically.

The most conservative society imaginable is consistent with liberal toleration. Presumably in a society with that degree of coherence and homogeneity, intolerance would not likely be a problem since there would not be enough disagreement to provoke intolerance. Liberal toleration can be particularist in the scope and limits of what is tolerated. And conservatism can be universalist in its view that all societies are historically and socially specific and none can escape this predicament. Also, there's the possibility that liberal toleration can be an element of a particular (conservative) tradition.

So is toleration then indexical to a socio-cultural-political ecosystem? Japan, say, doesn't court "cultural" diversity because it is already pretty much homogenous. Eastern Europe seems to have had enough of the external over-perturbations to their system, as you and I know full well, having independently in the '80s kept lines of communication open to dissidents and, in my case, refuseniks.[18] Conservatism itself is indexical, too (p. 2). The army coup against Gorbachev was undertaken by people who wished to conserve the 70-year-old system. Of course we recognize toleration as a part of our "traditional manner of behavior": the liberal state accommodates the views and actions of socialists, communists, nationalists, Muslims, &c. It is not concerned with substantive conceptions of the good (Rawls). The liberal state should never initiate intolerance. But if intolerance is preached or practiced by any group of citizens, then the activities of that group are not to be tolerated. I see no paradox or incoherence here. Paradox or incoherence could only arise if the liberal state did what *ex hypothesi* it cannot do, namely promote a substantive conception of the good. Not tolerating the activities of a group on that rationale would introduce self-contradiction into the nature of the liberal state. But this cannot happen. A state that did this could not—definitionally not—be liberal.

The progressivist-rationalist conceit takes progress to be coextensive with *improvement*—morally, socially, techno-logically, economically and scientifically. Conceived thus, it is clearly a "grand narrative" notion which, on closer scrutiny, is subject to all the weaknesses of such constructions. It is impossible to determine whether a change for the better in one part or aspect of the ecosystem is progressive for the system overall, since there is no Archimedean point from which progress can be assessed. *Every change alters some state of affairs, destroying or modifying it.* Wholesale change can only but inaugurate unintended consequences, as attested by the litany of horrors that so marked the twentieth century. Musil's protagonist in *The Man Without Qualities* captures this idea, in that every progressive step is also a retrogressive step (Musil 1930–1932/1995). This is also echoed by the master of paradox, Chesterton: "The theory of a complete change of standards in human history does not merely deprive us of the pleasure of honouring our fathers; it deprives us even of the more modern and aristocratic pleasure of despising them" (Chesterton 1908, p. 26).

When Enoch Powell delivered his 1968 Birmingham speech, the psychology driving his perturbatory concerns was fully understandable. Sadly (given how formidable a mind he was), he had the *wrong* demographic in mind, operating on a suspect metaphysic: that is, mistakenly conflating a *contingent* property with an essentialist metaphysic.[19] The post-colonial level of perturbation that he was so concerned about turned out to be a good infusion of antifragility into the notion of Britishness, since the UK's newest residents were ones that fully subscribed to the extant *core* values of liberality. Samuel Huntington, Bernard Lewis, Christopher Hitchens, Robert Wistrich, and Walter Laqueur, though, did get it right.[20]

NOTES

1   Unless otherwise specified, all references refer to Scruton 2017.

2   Burke's "association between the dead, the living and the unborn" (p. 45; cf. your comments on Eliot, p. 93). "A state without the means of some change, is without the means of its own conservation" (Burke 2009/1790, p. 21).

3   An attitude or disposition (Johnson and Oakeshott respectively) or as you put it "a hesitation" (p. 33), all in a similar vein to (Marsh 2018).

4   "Liberty is not the foundation of social order but one of its by-products" (p. 52).

5   Ken Minogue was not averse to ribbing me about what he took to be improbable confluences of thought. He did eventually come round to appreciate that non-Cartesian cognitive science has a great deal of resonance to situated liberalism or conservatism if you like.

6   Many of these aspects are discussed in more detail in Abel and Marsh (2014, pp. 107-140) and in Hardwick and Marsh (2012).

7   I had this very conversation with John Gray at Jesus at the time of the original release of Gray 2007.

8   The globalist's fantasy is embodied in the now defunct but not forgotten HSBC slogan "The World's Local Bank". The city in which I currently live has been subject to extreme perturbation within a very short period of time: there is palpable sense that swaths of it have become a generic (οὐ-τόπος) "everywhere and nowhere", exhibiting the dislocated transience characteristic of an airport terminal. Insofar as the southern American experience is concerned (pp. 99-100), I'd recommend that you read the work of novelist-philosopher, Walker Percy, a kindred spirit to Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor.

9   "There is no such thing as society"—Margaret Thatcher in *Woman's Own*, September 23, 1987. By contrast, identity in the Marxist tradition, in giving due recognition to ubiquitous sociality, has tended to posit inflated social ontologies. The political class' (and other elitist groups') sneering, scolding and hectoring of the precariat is a dreadful case of bad manners as you and Walker Percy understand (pp. 48-49), not to mention the hubris of Major, Blair, Merkel, H. Clinton, Trudeau, Macron, Juncker et al., spending down "trusts and endowments on their own self-made emergency" (p. 45).

They now quell dissent via blasphemy law (M-103 in Canada) and via the unholy alliance of big data corporations in cahoots with governmental censorship—digital authoritarianism, the dark side to technocracy.

10   Bosanquet and Oakeshott were, of course, deeply influenced by the Hegelian tradition (pp. 62-67).

11   "It is probably no more justified to claim that thinking man has created his culture than that culture created his reason" (Hayek 1952/1979, p. 155).

12   A prominent case in point: consider the ("pussy-hatted") sheep-like disproportionate support offered by the middle and upper classes for the Women's March, tone-deaf to its Jew-hating leadership, a now commonplace mainstreamed dissimulation disguised as merely criticism of Israel and buttressed by useful idiots. These days the most interesting public free thinkers tend to fall on the classical liberal-conservative axis—many of them exiles from the illiberal Left.

13   Marsh 2018, p. 171 follows Freeden (1994) in marking the idea that ideologies are porous and as such are morphological.

14   The term *Eigenschaftslosigkeit* connotes the dual idea of diagnosis/remedy and evidence of profound alienation (Payne et al. 2007, p. 147).

15   Islamic Party of Canada: https://archive.li/Z0Nk4#selection-1057.0-1187.1

16   The precariat being the very people servicing their lifestyle. A prominent herd-like referent for the "regressive"/illiberal Left is as per note 12.

17   Though the writing was on the wall twenty years ago in the UK, no-one in the most dystopian of scenarios could have envisaged the scale (numerically and time-wise) of the willfully overlooked depravity of Rotherham, Rochdale, Peterborough and other towns and cities besides, partly a function of the degradation of language into euphemistic hollowness. The "regressives" are conspicuously silent because most of the perpetrators are at the apex of the identitarian stack whereas the victims happen to be of the most dispossessed of the precariat.

18   In the mid-80s I was actively involved with the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry (Gerlis 1996), taking in medical supplies, media, and items that had actual currency (scotch, Levis &c.). It was around this time, through you, that I discovered Kathy Wilkes' Eastern European activities; I briefly met her via the good offices of Bill Newton-Smith. For those who might not know anything about her

see: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/sep/19/guardianobituaries.obituaries. (I consider her *Real People* a minor classic). Years later I worked for the now defunct Sabre Foundation, an outfit that Jesse Norman was critically involved with as well, that began by shipping up-to-date science books to the then Eastern Block.

19 Niall Ferguson and I are in accord on this matter, the identitarian analog of the current "regressive" Left: https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/yes-i-agree-with-enoch-except-1581758.html. You too say as much (pp. 7, 38, 50). Consider too the soft bigotry of the *Gutmenschen* (vanity dressed up as selfless conviction), "grievance studies" and "social justice" hucksters (with their worn-out "dreary orthodoxies"—p. 73), who as self-appointed representatives of historically "oppressed" groups, have, in effect, demeaned these groups' moral and intellectual agency. One of the oddest paradoxes is that in their advocacy and despite their proclaimed "liberal" credentials, they are for all intents and purposes, cultural conservatives.

20 As per usual, much of the aforementioned discussion is the residue from a daily panel-beating with my colleague Dave Hardwick—though he may or may not agree with what's been said here.

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