Introduction to Symposium:
Continuity or Creation? American Conservatism in Paul Gottfried’s
Conservatism in America

When Russell Kirk published *The Conservative Mind* in 1953, he was an isolated voice in both academia and the public, which was dominated by liberals and the Left. However, since then there has been a steady rise in academic scholarship and public literature about conservatism—its triumph, its decline, and its reinvigoration—that has carved out a place in the American public consciousness. One of the most recent and thoughtful of these works is the subject of this symposium: Paul Gottfried’s *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right*.

Associated with paleoconservatism, Paul Gottfried is the author of numerous articles and books and is the Horace Raffensperger Professor of Humanities at Elizabethtown College. If there is a central theme in his works, it would be the consolidation of the therapeutic managerial state in the West. In his previous two books, *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State* and *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt: Towards a Secular Theocracy*, Gottfried traces the development of a new liberalism that emphasizes expertise and planning, a belief in progress, and a plebiscitary democracy based on an ideology of the public confessions of crimes committed against abstract classes of victims. Conservatism provides an intellectual and political counterweight to the therapeutic managerial state that social scientists and government bureaucrats rule at the expense of citizens.

In his third book on this subject, *Conservatism in America: Making Sense of the American Right*, Gottfried recalls the development of the conservative movement that emerged in the 1950s
when anti-communism brought disparate groups together and provided them an organizational principle for intellectual coherence and political action. Although it was bound together by a common existential threat, the conservative movement was not rooted in a solid social or economic base as it was in Europe. Because the appropriate social and economic classes for European conservatism did not exist in the United States, the efforts of William Buckley, Russell Kirk, and Harry Jaffa were doomed to failure. Instead, America’s sole tradition has been liberalism, as argued by Louis Hartz in his *The Liberal Tradition in America*. Although Gottfried does not share Hartz’s enthusiasm about liberalism, he does acknowledge that the absence of feudalism and the presence of liberal ideas constitute the intellectual and political framework of the United States. Perhaps this is best demonstrated by the contemporary conservative movement’s acceptance of the democratic welfare state and the ideology of multiculturalism. For Gottfried, American conservatism, therefore, never was and can never be conservative according to European standards.

However, the conservative movement’s absorption of these ideas from the Left has been tempered by a self-conscious patriotism of neoconservatives ("value conservatives") and traditional cultural concerns of social and religious conservatives. The first group speaks of American greatness in the world and urges us to spread our founding ideas of proportional nationhood everywhere; the second calls for social and traditional values at home and implores citizens to return to a culture that is centered on the family. Of the two groups, Gottfried is skeptical of the first; the strand of universal aspiration, which presently shapes American foreign policy, is questionable at best and substitutes slogans for thinking at worst. Furthermore, because they are more accommodating of the ideas of the democratic welfare state and ideology of multiculturalism, neoconservatives come into conflict with social and religious conservatives in defining what conservative means. As neoconservatives ascend into power and influence the conservative movement, the demarcation between conservative and liberal
values become blurred, thereby raising the question of what constitutes conservative values, if anything, today.

In the first response to Gottfried’s argument, “Conservative Practice versus Conservative ‘Values’: Gottfried on the Decline and Fall of American Conservatism,” Kenneth B. McIntyre examines Gottfried’s three claims: 1) there is no social base for the conservative movement in America; 2) without a social base, the conservative movement had to resort to universal values in order to connect itself to the current form of life; and 3) these universal values are inherently anti-traditional and therefore anti-conservative. Although McIntyre shares Gottfried’s conclusions about the current state of conservatism, he differs in the trajectory of his arguments and has specific misgivings about Gottfried’s conception of the social and economic basis for intellectual and political movements. McIntyre also has reservations about Gottfried’s claim on the novelty of the therapeutic managerial state and its complete obliteration of an older, liberal version. Concluding with an appeal to British conservatism, particularly of Michael Oakeshott’s, McIntyre suggests that conceiving of conservatism as a certain type of disposition or way of life rather than abstract, universal ideas is a possible antidote to the ideological rhetoric and questionable policies of contemporary conservatives today.

The second contributor, Ted V. McAllister, questions Gottfried’s claim about the discontinuity that exists between Europe and America. In “What Does Burke Have to Do With America? Europe and American Conservatism,” McAllister argues that Burkean conservatism continues in American intellectual thought and culture, albeit these connections are difficult to discern as each new generation becomes less historical in its consciousness than previous ones. A possible solution to this problem can be found in American institutions and the decentralization of authority, something Tocqueville recognized and Gottfried neglects. For McAllister, institutions and the decentralization of authority allows Americans to foster a historical consciousness and solve the problem of authority between the individual and the state. The ideas of Tocqueville, therefore, suggest a way out of the abstract
thinking—whether about the state or the free market—that characterizes contemporary conservatism.

In “The Meaning of Conservatism,” Michael P. Federici agrees that Gottfried has identified the important points of the conservative movement and whether it is compatible with the cultural and historical contours of America’s past. Ultimately Federici finds it difficult to conceive that, given the variety and recent scholarship about American conservatism, it has no significant connection to European civilization. Similar to Gottfried, Federici questions whether universal values, like the ones Harry Jaffa ascribes to Lincoln, can be trans-historical and instead offers the ideas of Kirk, Babbit, Niset, and Berry, who replace ahistorical truths with ethical and constitutional standards that are connected to the actual historical reality.

The fourth contributor, Grant Havers, interprets Gottfried’s work as part of the defense of Western Civilization and views Gottfried’s project as one similar to Leo Strauss’s. In “For the Love of the Bourgeois: A Comparative Analysis of Paul Gottfried’s and Leo Strauss’s Defense of the Liberal Democratic West,” Havers places Gottfried’s work in the tradition of Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre, Karl Mannheim, and other European traditionalists who denounce abstract universals. However, Havers points out that Gottfried’s suspicion of universal values do not influence his admiration for the universal morality of the bourgeoisie and that the “value conservatives” who aspire to universal values are actually more nuanced in their thinking than often recognized. In spite of these differences, Havers recognize that both Gottfried and Strauss are engaged in a common project and calls for a possible synthesis of these two strands of conservatism in defending the West as a paradoxical civilization whose universalistic morality is grounded in a particular history.

The final critique of Gottfried’s book is provided by David B. Frisk, who in “Gottfried’s Disconnect” challenges Gottfried’s conception of Republican politics and its relationship to conservative principles. According to Frisk, political leaders must operate within the circumstances and contingencies that they find
themselves in and therefore, cannot always adopt ideal positions when opposing the Left. In fact, to ask political leaders to adopt such ideal positions is to be apolitical to a fault and actually accepts abstraction over particulars—a charge that Gottfried makes against “value conservatives” but does not recognize that he commits the same error.

In his “Response to Contributors,” Paul Gottfried reaffirms his position as a paleoconservative but one who prefers the Protestant Reformation to the Catholic Church and the bourgeoisie to the aristocracy and responds to the criticism made by each contributor. What he hopes to accomplish in his book is to demonstrate what conservatism is and is not in America and show that the European conservative tradition has a negligible influence here. He questions whether there is a high degree of continuity between eighteenth-century and present-day liberals, placing him in opposition to the claims of Strauss, Kirk, and Hartz. Whereas the old liberalism was a Protestant, bourgeoisie ideology, today it is post-bourgeoisie, managerial, and multicultural.

Of course, these debates and questions will not be resolved in this symposium. However, this symposium will hopefully clarify the parameters of the discussion about what constitutes conservatism in America, both past and present, and where it will go and should go in the future. I would like to personally thank each of the contributors for their insightful responses to Gottfried’s book, Joe Devaney, and especially Dr. Gottfried for taking the time to respond to the contributors’ critiques. Although we will probably never agree on what constitutes conservatism and where it is headed, we can at least discuss these matters civilly and thoughtfully. I hope this symposium accomplishes this small but important task.

Lee Trepanier