

The Role of Social Conservatism in the Postliberal Order

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Abstract

The world order's ongoing transition towards multipolarity demands consideration of the ideological principles on which it will be built. Unipolarity's unsustainability has highlighted the crisis of liberalism as the basis of the world order. This article considers the possibility of establishing a postliberal order based on the principles of conservatism, some of whose postulates will have to be modified. As societies have different traditions that are often incompatible with one another, a conservatism-based multipolar order needs a 'connective tissue' that would make it universal and would facilitate global cooperation between different societies. Offering a critique of technofeudalism and transhumanism, this article analyzes social conservatism from the bottom up, as an ideology based on anthropocentricity and the preservation of man amidst rapid technological change.

Keywords: international order, multipolarity, liberalism, conservatism, social conservatism, technofeudalism, transhumanism.

MULTIPOLARITY AND THE CHANGING BALANCE OF POWER

As U.S. unipolarity gives way to multipolarity, new rules (describing what is unacceptable/punishable in international relations) and principles (determining normative legitimacy) will have to be defined (or old ones recontextualized) (Proroković, 2018).

This process will depend on whether the multipolar order continues to be established through confrontation, or is instead established through the eventual cooperation of key actors on certain issues. In an order established through confrontation, legal frameworks are mostly determined by the victors, and legitimacy flows from victory. For instance, the U.S.'s victory in the Cold War legitimized the West's dominance in international relations, supporting the imposition of liberalism-based norms. On the other hand, if an order is established through cooperation, then legal frameworks are defined through great powers' negotiation and compromise in the course of establishing the balance of power.

U.S. unipolarity's principles were shaped by liberalism: political liberalism (multi-party systems, rule of law, human rights), economic liberalism (open markets with little role for the state), and liberal internationalism (cooperation through multilateral institutions involving states with similar values) (Lake, Martin and Rise, 2021, pp. 225-251). Now, under the approaching anarchic multipolar order, liberal values may remain dominant within one pole, but they will have to confront the ideological foundations of the other poles. Some liberal rules and principles will persist (unchanged or transformed) subject to agreement by the great powers.

This paper examines several interrelated processes: liberalism's crisis, the establishment of a postliberal order, and conservatism's potential role in that order.

THE CRISIS OF LIBERALISM, AND THE POSTLIBERAL ORDER

Predictions in the 1990s—of the 'end of history' and 'end of ideology' (Fukuyama, 1992)—did not come to pass. Crises of ideologies are natural; they occur periodically and are greatly influenced by the international environment.

In the middle of the 20th century, Daniel Bell claimed that the ‘great ideologies’ of the 20th century were becoming less relevant as rational individuals adapted to technological development, the welfare state, and new institutions that allow groups to exercise their rights through negotiations (Bell, 2000, p. 393). Some of Bell’s claims were correct, but after 65 years, his predicted postmodern era has not yet arrived. “Two years into the Obama administration, the ironies and shortcomings of [Bell’s] approach deserve to be clearly highlighted. While the president claims to be in a post-ideological, responsible center, Americans who do not remember and have little understanding of socialist ideology accuse him of proclaiming socialism; the electorate struggles over party dogmas clumsily labeled neoconservative and neoliberal; civic discourse is permeated with empty rhetoric of rebellion and revolution, punctuated by sporadic episodes of dispassionate violence; and political society, long lacking the New Deal consensus assumed by Bell and his followers, oscillates from apathy to protest and back again” (Summers, 2011). According to Summers, the crisis of liberalism in the U.S. triggered a social crisis (the polarization of American society) and then a political crisis (Donald Trump and Republicans in deep conflict with Democrats, accused of serving the deep state).

Stories about the “end of ideology” are actually themselves ideologically motivated. Bell and Fukuyama focused excessively either on criticizing contemporary ideologies, or on proving the infallibility of one ideology.

Ideologies, taught simply and propagandized simplistically, have great potential for growth and destructive power, homogenizing, motivating, and mobilizing broad masses of people. Periods of ‘the rise of ideology’ witness *ideologization*, “the process by which a social group is recognized in ... representations related to its historical role” (Larousse, 2004, p. 691). At the extreme, the ideological narrative takes on historical/civilizational significance, becoming a “universal teaching” that can explain literally everything.

Of course, ideological narratives are not universal teachings, nor can they explain everything. Faced with the dominance of one ideology, its opponents also homogenize, mobilize, and motivate themselves to

oppose it, forming a ‘counter-elite’ that challenges the ideological order. Anti-liberal elites, which formed in the early 21st century around the world, are diverse and even mutually opposed (including nationalists, fascists, religious fundamentalists, communists, anti-globalists, and conservatives), but together have significantly reduced liberalism’s influence, bringing nearer a postliberal order.

Even liberalism’s most ardent defenders have begun to consider this approaching possibility, though some still count on liberalism’s dominance within multipolarity (Ikenberry, 2018). Harari, who has succeeded Fukuyama in popularizing liberalism, writes that liberalism is in crisis but has no alternative. Humanity faces three common enemies: nuclear war, climate change, and new technologies. These threats necessitate international cooperation, which is possible only if the new order is also based on liberal postulates (Harari, 2018a).

However, Harari reaches this conclusion because he only considers parochial nationalism as a possible alternative to liberalism. Parochial nationalism indeed limits cooperation, and threatens to yield jingoism and war. But not only nationalist elites are anti-liberal.

For instance, in Turkey, Erdoğan’s ideological matrix is indeed considered nationalist as well as populist (Yabancı, 2022, pp. 4-5). And Myanmar “has never been particularly welcoming to groups... not from the dominant Bamar Buddhist ruling class” (Malji, 2021, p. 1). Yet in Hungary under Orbán, nationalism gives way to conservatism, based on the family and family values, historical identity, and the culture of memory (Szaló, 2021, pp. 90-99). Orbán has himself called for a Grand Strategy for Hungary, not a Strategy for Greater Hungary. The Iranian government is based less on Iranian/Persian nationalism, and more on the Shiite branch of Islamic philosophy (Posch, 2017, pp. 70-94), built by Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ali Sharicati, Morteza Motahhari, Sayyad Abolhasan Bani-Sadr, and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (Dabashi, 2006). In Argentina, national sovereignty is championed by economically leftist Peronism (which has won 10 out of 14 presidential elections since the end of World War II) (Fierman, 2021). In Brazil, the same applies to da Silva, “a left-wing leader” with “distributive economic policies (inclusion

of the poorest majority) and inclusive social policies (inclusion of racial and sexual minorities)” (Silva, 2022). In much of Africa, anti-Westernism, anti-colonialism, and anti-globalism come more from the left than the right. For instance, Burkina Faso’s President Ibrahim Traore “critiques...[W]estern dominance in Africa’s internal affairs,” revealing international financial institutions as means “to manipulate and control...developing countries” (Shabir and Khan, 2025, p. 301). And in El Salvador, Nayib Bukele’s policy of *Mano Dura* (firm hand) combines autocracy with populism to restore trust in institutions and respect for the law. Its categorization remains debated, but it is clearly illiberal (Nillson, 2022, pp. 16-24).

In short, today’s world is much more complex than Harari’s dichotomy of liberalism versus nationalism.

Furthermore, Harari does not consider why liberalism is in crisis. There are three main reasons: American imperialism, de-sovereignization, and neoliberal values.

First, the liberal order was and is based on *American imperialism*. In the 1980s, the crisis of communist ideology led to the liberal order’s worldwide acceptance. Yet it came alongside a rapid expansion of American/Western influence (Lake, Martin and Risse, 2021). Only states that shared ‘common values’ (i.e., accepted American definitions of things like democracy, freedom, and human rights) would have a place in the liberal order. Yet different cultures have different understandings of such concepts, depending on history and traditions formed over centuries.

Second, liberal universalism is articulated through international institutions (organizations, treaties, conventions), managed by the political West, and led by the U.S. through privatization, loans, and Bretton Woods. The greatest beneficiaries of this are American (Western) corporations, which acquire functional control of foreign economies. Over time, a transnational elite takes power; first in the economy, then in politics (formation of parties and selection of politicians) and culture (imposition of liberal values). This has *de-sovereignized* states, made them dependent on the West and incapable of conducting autonomous foreign policy.

Third, the liberal order's ideological content has changed from what it was at the end of the Cold War (Ramirez, 2025). Unconstrained by any competition, American and Western European liberals developed neoliberalism, which transposes market principles into the social and political spheres, leading to deep fissures and dissatisfaction in both Western and non-Western societies. Everything is on the market, including identities, affiliations, and sexes. Marriage is no longer just a union between a man and a woman, the individual has priority over the family, genders have replaced sexes, interest groups have replaced nations, corporations have replaced states, and sects are as legal and legitimate as religions are.

Given the liberal order's crisis, stemming from internal problems and external/international pressures, a postliberal order can hardly be established on liberal postulates.

BASIC POSTULATES OF CONSERVATISM

One alternative is conservatism, made newly relevant by liberalism's crisis. Built by Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre (Burke, 2013; Rosa, 2023), reactionary conservatism appeared in response to the French Revolution and American Civil War, arguing that legitimacy requires authority.

Authority is not merely power; power can be imposed by force and does not require societal or individual consent. Authority involves consent, yielding social and individual obligations that ensure stability and order (Nisbet, 1993). The authority of established institutions derives from their historical continuity, from respect for previous generations' knowledge and experience (Cvetković, 2017, p. 22). For this reason, the lack of authority obviously leads to the problematization of continuity, i.e., continuity is lost with the destruction or collapse of traditional authorities (Arendt, 1961, pp. 91-92). Without continuity, it is impossible to maintain what has been achieved, evolution and development are severed, and crises with unpredictable consequences arise.

Conservatism, like Plato, also views society as an organism, within which individuals and groups have roles and functions (Platon, 2013; Vahitov, 2025), and which is "held together by...traditional institutions

such as the family and by respect for an established culture, based on faith, tradition, and customs” (Heywood, 2004, p. 67).

And conservatism sees hierarchy as necessary to organize social relations. Since man is “an imperfect being, a dependent and limited being, a being who cannot be reborn by radical social and political change,” man is “condemned to make the best of the existing situation by a more modest policy of compromise and accommodation” (O’Sullivan, 2008, p. 28). Since inequalities are natural, hierarchy is also natural, but it must be actively maintained; the organism must actively repair weakened roles and relationships. Authority’s legitimacy depends on this, and it is conservatism’s challenge to solve this problem in a timely and satisfactory manner.

The insistence on tradition and hierarchy often underpins national, religious, and/or cultural conservatism. Its critics often contend that conservatism cannot develop beyond the borders of one nation, religion, or culture. Harari also says as much, albeit with reference to nationalism rather than conservatism. According to this critique, conservatism is too narrow to encourage international cooperation or the search for universal answers to global threats. However, through constant balancing, compromise, and adjustment: “the conservative... accepts general principles, which are different from fanatical ideological dogmas. These principles are the result of conventions and compromises, and have been tested by long experience. However, these general principles should be applied cautiously, always taking into account the circumstances that differ from country to country and from era to era” (Kirk, 2014, p. 13).

This motivates a different criticism of conservatism: that it lacks a substantive core. But that is what makes every variant of conservatism original: “Conservatism can be both resistance and attack; it can be passive but also active, provocative, rebellious, subversive, creative, and even revolutionary. Karlheinz Weissmann directly links the emergence of the German conservative revolution to Nietzsche and the ‘ethics of rebellion.’ To the extent that it opposes the forces of universal leveling, the degradation of all standards, disintegration and decadence, conservatism must be a movement of resistance and non-

conformity, that is, non-conformism, and ultimately of a firm will to remain even in a lost position, since today's mass society is structurally anti-conservative" (Dostanić, 2021).

Within the new balance of power, conservatism's appropriateness is self-evident. Instead of legal frameworks declared universal by international organizations, the principles of global governance will be defined mainly by the actors with the greatest authority, itself derived from legitimacy. Such principles may include certain components of liberal ideology, but cannot be based exclusively on liberal universalism. There cannot be only one understanding of democracy, rights, or freedoms.

Conservatism's reactivation does not guarantee its universal acceptance or the pursuit of solutions only through it. To find universal answers to global threats, it is necessary to consider conservatism's social dimension.

SOCIAL CONSERVATISM

Despite liberalism's present crisis, it has deeply shaped politics, economics, and social processes. One such imprint is the legitimization of the market economy, which has been adopted even by communist states (such as China and Vietnam), albeit with a role preserved for the central authorities and the goal defined as the fight against poverty. While neoliberalism's systemic error lies in its application of market principles to all spheres, including political and social ones, there are no signs of this being re-examined in the economic sphere.

That may be fatal. Socialism opposes an unrestricted market because it begets class differences. European social democracies, but also Chinese communism, therefore pursue a fairer distribution of wealth using taxes and subsidies. For conservatism, an unrestricted market is also problematic because it threatens to lead to the (fundamentally progressive) phenomena of technofeudalism and transhumanism. Whereas socialism may be satisfied with market-based development if it increases wealth that can then be redistributed, conservatism perceives technofeudalism and transhumanism as inherent dangers given their negation of traditional society, their destruction of

shared traditions, unique cultures, and organic communities, their transformation of the concept of authority, and their formation of a completely new hierarchy.

Yet the era of technofeudalism has already begun. In the last two decades, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon have changed the global economy so much that it now resembles the European medieval feudal system, in which technological giants are the masters and consumers are the serfs. Rent drove feudalism, profit drives capitalism, and technofeudalism is bringing us towards a new system (Varufakis, 2025). People's lives now take place more or less in the digital world, leading to changes in the economy.

This threatens balanced economic development, but is even more of a political and social risk. Numerous political manipulations are possible online; fake news, psychological and propaganda operations, the reshaping of citizens' electoral will. Even more worrying, the frequent use of digital platforms is eroding the customs and traditions that preserve collective identities.

Tradition's obsolescence and abolition redefine authority, atomize society, and destroy the established hierarchy. In technofeudalism, a few corporations control the economy and rely on political manipulation—facilitated by the breakdown of traditions and identities—to maintain that control. This is a continuation of neoliberal discourse, which determines moral worth based on utility. Everything that is useful is universal. From the economic sphere, technofeudalism spreads to the political and social ones.

Yuval Noah Harari speculates about the possibility of a future new religion worshipping data (*dataism*), which may emerge as advances in AI and bioengineering allow humans to seek power and even God-like abilities (Harari, 2023). "Harari's secular account can be summarized as the rise and fall of homo sapiens, as historical developments lead to techno-humanism and dataism. Jesus Christ holds no significant place in this narrative" (Kramer, 2024, p. 216).

Technofeudalism creates conditions for the birth of technohumanism (Kramer, 2024, p. 216), and then transhumanism and the singularity, a state of irreversible and uncontrolled technological

development. One writer has predicted 2043 as the year when politics becomes irrelevant in the new social order (Hughes, 2006, p. 1). Harari writes: “There is no reason to think that homo sapiens is the last stop” (Harari, 2018b, p. 61). “If science is right and if our happiness is truly determined by the system of biochemical processes in our bodies, then there is no other way to ensure lasting satisfaction than to tweak this system a little. ... Cyborg engineering will go a step further, merging the organic body with inorganic devices such as bionic hands, artificial eyes, or millions of nanorobots that will move through our bloodstream, diagnose problems, and repair damage” (Ibid, pp. 55, 61).

As early as 1985, the Cyborg Manifesto declared that “a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creation of social reality and fiction” (Haravej, 1991).

Technological development begets ideological, economic, political, and social transformation. Given the new challenges, risks, and threats that modern societies face, conservatism must also be re-examined, with an eye to incorporating elements of social democracy (Notermans, 2000) and answering questions about the purpose of man as an individual, his communication with the collective, and the functioning of the community. Is man needed by the emerging world? What kind of man is needed? How does he regulate his relations with the community? What are authorities and traditions based on? What are the tasks of society? What is the function of the state?

To prevent further social degradation (through society’s atomization and subsequent transhumanism), traditional society must be preserved by strengthening social functions and the authority of institutions, establishing a more just order, protecting individuals, providing a modern form of equality, and insisting on a socially-responsible state.

Within conservatism, the state is the highest form of a people’s institutional organization, an expression of the community’s historical aspirations, and the guarantor of its collective interests. The state’s weakening endangers the preservation of identity, the maintenance of culture, and the transmission of traditions. The strengthening of non-state actors promises technofeudalism and transhumanism. Social conservatism calls for new technologies to be evaluated by how good

they are, not by how useful they are. If new technologies endanger humanity, their use must be adjusted or limited. Without humans, there is no earthly world. Traditions recognizing this are necessary to safeguard the future of humanity.

Unlimited biological and social engineering inevitably lead to transhumanism and the gradual suppression of the human species. If an adequate response is not found to this challenge, conservatives will become mere onlookers as *homo sapiens* becomes cyborg and then, most likely, disappears altogether. New technologies' inevitability and unavoidability do not necessarily mean that *homo sapiens* has completed its historical path. By insisting on authority, traditions, collectivism, and other fundamental postulates of conservatism—as well as care for the individual, who must be motivated to defend humanity—an alternative to technofeudalism and transhumanism is being built. Such an alternative can be universal, offering a common goal to different traditional societies and their (multi)national states.

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The postliberal order will be built within a new, multipolar balance of power. Without the dominance of a single actor, solutions will not be imposable by force. The principles and ideological basis of the postliberal order remain undetermined. How will the new principles be legitimized? Nationalist and/or state-centric imperialisms of individual great powers, characterized by selfishness and exclusive reliance on self-help, will only lead to conflict and, in turn, technofeudalism and transhumanism. (A high-conflict environment drives the pursuit of national security at all costs, with technologies evaluated on the basis of their usefulness rather than goodness.) Instead of this, conservatism is emerging as an alternative for regulating political and social relations.

However, in a time of technological revolution, it is difficult to find comprehensive answers within classical conservatism. First, individual and collective life is irreversibly changing, and history shows that there can be no return to the old. Old traditions and hierarchies may become dysfunctional, and therefore unusable, if they are not adapted

to the new times and technological revolution. Secondly, traditions vary across societies, including regarding what is good and bad. The various conservatisms need a 'connective tissue,' a common theme around which it is possible to organize global cooperation. For this reason, instead of a 'top-down' focus on authority, hierarchy, etc., conservatism should adopt a 'bottom-up' focus on the individual and his/her membership in a community based on tradition, and in this context critique the technological revolution, technofeudalism, and transhumanism.

The new balance of power in the postliberal order requires discussion of how international relations and political and social processes will be organized in a globalized world. Definition of the good will determine what is permitted. Thus, the survival of man as an individual and the anthropocentricity of the world depend upon the new world order's ideological basis.

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