HOW TO IDENTIFY TODAY'S CONSERVATIVE THINKERS

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The term "conservatism" is confusing to many modern audiences.

What does it mean? What group of people, or set of beliefs, does it stand for? Conservatism is most often associated with other "isms," such as Republicanism, classical liberalism, or libertarianism. Its followers might share a Judeo-Christian worldview, support President Donald Trump, or watch Tucker Carlson.

But these are all just associations—and while they may show us pieces of what conservatism is (or at least of what it is generally *assumed* to be), they don't provide a full understanding of the conservative vision. What's more, the things or people we associate with conservatism often hold diametrically opposed opinions and beliefs. For instance, is conservatism libertarian in its economic vision or is it populist? Depending on whom you talk to, you may get very different answers.

Some believe that this is a very attenuated time for conservatism. Following the death of Sir Roger Scruton, Ben Sixsmith asked the readers of *Unherd* why British conservative intellectuals are "so thin on the ground"—and how we might cultivate another generation of conservative intellectuals to take up Scruton's mantle.

"We still need intellectuals, or, at least, we need historians, philosophers, scientists, economists, critics and political theorists who understand and explain the relevance of their studies to the world," Sixsmith wrote. "We need depth in our historical, scientific, societal, philosophical and aesthetic understanding to know what should be conserved and what

may be destructive and degrading in the long term."

Part of the difficulty here stems from an observation that Russell Kirk makes as part of his "Ten Conservative Principles." Kirk suggests that "there exists no Model Conservative, and conservatism is the negation of ideology: it is a state of mind, a type of character, a way of looking at the civil social order." Conservatism is not sustained by dogma but rather by a "body of sentiments" that animate the conservative thinker. Yet because conservatism does not have a central creed, it can "accommodate a considerable diversity of views on a good many subjects," as Kirk puts it.

Because of this, I think many conservatives are often "hiding in plain sight." They may be Republican or Democrat, religious or agnostic. But they believe, with Kirk, in the importance of permanence, even as they believe in the need for reform and renewal. They love the true, the good, and the beautiful—and they have a healthy reverence for the ancient ecosystems (both human and natural) in our world.

Finding today's conservative thinkers, then, requires us to look outside our stereotypical assumptions and associations, and to consider the guidance we've received from Edmund Burke and Russell Kirk (among others) in defining the state of mind associated with conservatism. The conservative thinker will believe in an "enduring moral order," as Kirk puts it. Edmund Burke argues in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that conservatives must be mindful of their foundations, and in their zeal for reform be careful not to tear down the entire structure their civilization rests on. Rather than wanting automatically to tear apart everything that is, conservatives want first to inspect and understand it—and hopefully preserve as much as they reform. They must respect and seek to strengthen communities, the local and little political bodies that best serve to empower and support human beings.

An additional thought might be added here from Wendell Berry, an invaluable thinker who does not see himself as "conservative" but who avoids the name for reasons I think Kirk would approve of. Berry is too particular and too prudential to give a political label to his thought. The term does not "help him," he once told me, because it does little to advance or enliven his work—and means very little in his local context.

I have found myself agreeing with Berry more and more over time. I am loath, in fact, to embrace the label "conservative" myself—in part because of the ways most people define it, and in part because I am unsure whether any political label fully defines my beliefs. But it could be that the very impetus to abandon labels, to forsake party and creed to more fully embrace one's principles and one's place, might itself be a "conservative" sentiment—at least according to Kirk's view.

All that said, I think there are several modern thinkers who understand and advance a conservative "state of mind," and advance ideas and principles that help grow the moral imagination. They show us the beauty of permanent things and the brokenness that we must seek to heal. They provide a path forward, but do so in a way that is modest and prudential. I would argue that these thinkers must be read to grow our understanding of what conservatism should look like in a modern world—even if some of them would personally eschew the label "conservative."

This list is not exhaustive, by any means. But it's the beginnings of a sketch that I'm making, as much for myself as for anyone else, as I consider the work to be done in our own time.

Alasdair MacIntyre is a moral and political philosopher whose considerations of virtue are essential reading for conservatives. His classic work *After Virtue,* in particular, stands out as one of the most important philosophical works of our time.

Wendell Berry, as mentioned earlier, does not consider himself a conservative, but his vision of the good life is rooted in reverence, prudence, and the biblical principle of "Love thy neighbor." His essays, poems, and novels all posit a vision of American life in which the local and the little are respected and nourished—and where the beautiful complexity of creation and community are treated with care.

Norman Wirzba, like Wendell Berry, has committed his scholarship to building a vision of conservation and stewardship. Books like *From Nature to Creation* and *Food and Faith* guide the reader into a deeper, more theological understanding of the world and our responsibilities to it.

Patrick Deneen has long offered works that are committed to the principles of subsidiarity and prudence so important to conservatism's legacy. His book *Why Liberalism Failed* is crucial to our moment.

Marilynne Robinson is a novelist and essayist whose vision of the world draws us to wonder, reverence, and care. Her work teaches us about virtue and theology, and directs us toward the good—regardless of whether she herself fits the politically conservative mold or not.

Matthew Crawford's work is necessary reading for today's conservatives. His books *Shop Class as Soulcraft* and *The World Beyond Your Head* offer complex philosophical inquiries into metacognition and community, alongside examinations of various embodied disciplines. Crawford draws us back to the roots of society and craft, to the things that make us human, and asks us to reconsider the modern world we've built for ourselves.

James K.A. Smith's books *You Are What You Love* and *Desiring the Kingdom* help explain liturgical rhythms through the lens of pedagogy and philosophy. He helps his readers better understand human nature and consider the roots they are building or neglecting for themselves and the next generation.

Alan Jacobs's books consider literature, theology, epistemology, and history (among other things). His essays—on topics ranging from the life of Thomas Merton to the digital commons—are always considerate and measured. In his work we see the wisdom and prudence integral to conservative thought.

Yuval Levin is an analyst, an academic, and a public intellectual whose work considers our institutions and political systems. His books *The Fractured Republic*, *A Time to Build*, and *The Great Debate* (about Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine) constantly bring the reader back to conservative principles, to a respect for tradition alongside a desire for reform.

Charles Marohn is the founder of Strong Towns, an author, and an engineer who applies the principles of conservatism to communities and towns in need of renewal. His work offers the vision for subsidiarity, incrementalism, and local empowerment so crucial to Kirk's conservative vision.

Others: Ross Douthat, Susannah Black, Matthew Lee Anderson, Jake Meador, Karen Swallow Prior, Charles C. Camosy, James Poulos, B.D. McClay, Jonathan Coppage, Rod Dreher, Leah Libresco, and Michael Brendan Dougherty.

In addition to these thinkers, publications like the *New Atlantis*, *Modern Age*, and the *Hedgehog Review* come to mind as vital "conservative" philosophical publications to be reading and considering in our time.

Finally, I wanted to suggest a list of philosophers, authors, and essayists who are no longer living but who seem particularly relevant and important to our own moment.

Some of them considered the dangers of modernity or the flaws in our economic and political systems. Others were theologians and activists who cultivated a vision for human community far better than any we've yet realized. Some were champions of place, environmentalists and scientists and farmers who fostered a reverence for the created world and understood the necessity of subsidiarity and modesty in stewarding it wisely. Others were novelists who, in their work, served as ethicists, philosophers, and scientists.

Their various contributions help us understand our world and ourselves better:

Jane Austen

Hannah Arendt

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Charlotte Brontë

Albert Camus

Willa Cather

G.K. Chesterton

Flannery O’Connor

Dorothy Day

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Frederick Douglass

George Eliot

T.S. Eliot

Jacques Ellul

Martin Luther King Jr.

Christopher Lasch

Aldo Leopold

Madeleine L’Engle

C.S. Lewis

Thomas Merton

Henri Nouwen

Pope John Paul II

Walker Percy

Josef Pieper

John Wesley Powell

Wilhelm Röpke

Dorothy Sayers

Wallace Stegner

Edith Stein

John Steinbeck

J.R.R. Tolkien

Simone Weil

A final note: I believe that one of the difficulties of the right today, in defining itself, is that our conservative Western tradition and canon are both tangled up in historic efforts to undermine, destroy, and oppress—efforts that are fundamentally "un-conservative" when measured by Kirk's principles. Imperialism and colonial policies were not conservative. There was nothing modest, prudential, or preservative about them. Industrialism and unbridled capitalism's consequences on our environment and ecology have yet to be fully reckoned with in many conservative circles. The United States' enslavement of African peoples, seizing of indigenous lands, and racist treatment of many immigrants are all denials of the *imago dei* that ought to be fundamental to a conservative's understanding of what it means to be human.

As we consider history, then, conservatives must look not just for the good and the beautiful, but also for the broken and the disordered—and he or she must reckon with them. Often, however, we seem all too eager to place this burden of remorse and reform on progressives, while we consider the past with nostalgia and carelessness.

Several of the thinkers, activists, and writers listed above were viewed as progressive during their lifetime because of their willingness to critique and call out corruption, to question the powerful, and to come alongside the vulnerable and disenfranchised. But a conservatism that will truly last and build a beautiful legacy must draw these people into its canon and learn from them.

If we cannot do that, we will have nothing to stand on in generations to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gracy Olmstead's writing has appeared in the *New York Times, the Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, and elsewhere. Her forthcoming book will focus on the Idaho farming community where she grew up.