

Interview with Samuel Goldman

by Gabriel Romero Lyra Trigueiro

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Samuel Goldman earned his PhD in Political Science from Harvard. His dissertation, “The Shadow of God: Strauss, Jacobi and Theologico-Political Problem”, dealt with Leo Strauss’s argument that secular regimes lack “normative and foundational authority” and thus easily degenerate into anarchy and despotism.

Goldman’s writings on politics, religion, philosophy, education and culture have appeared in *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *First Things*. He is currently senior collaborator of the renowned *The American Conservative*. He is also assistant professor at the department of Political Science at George Washington University.

On June 17, 2015 I had the please and honor of meeting him personally in his office at GWU for a conversation about the conservative movement in the United States. At the time the questions I made were framed by the issues I was dealing with in my doctoral research, namely the many fissures and clashes between two specific segments with the conservative tradition in the US – the neoconservatives and the paleoconservatives.

Back in Brazil I was invited to publish the conversation in REP. However, professor Goldman and I decided it would be more interesting to prepare a new interview, with a broader scope and encompassing questions relevant for those interested in political theory and philosophy.

In the interview that follows, professor Goldman talks about his own intellectual trajectory as well as some of the more interesting and complex particular aspects of the political and philosophical tradition of conservatism based on the North American experience.

Gabriel Trigueiro

Can you talk a little about your political education and its main intellectual influences?

Samuel Goldman

I became interested in conservatism while I was an undergraduate in the late ‘90s. This was partly an attempt to provoke people. By that time, Mohawk haircuts and nose piercings had become passé—at least in the circles in which I grew up. If you really want to ruin Thanksgiving, try wearing a bow tie and quoting Reagan!

But it wasn’t all provocation. I liked the cultural elitism I found in writers like Allan Bloom. Bloom’s argument that real books and serious art were more worthy of a human being’s attention than populist schlock made a big impression on me. Bloom also showed me how Plato, or Aristotle, or Rousseau, or Nietzsche matter for us today. Although I now disagree with many of Bloom’s interpretations, his insistence on the enduring relevance

of philosophy was thrilling, and very different to technical approach I encountered in philosophy classes.

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I was also impressed by what I understood as the realism of the neoconservatives, who recognized that good intentions can have perverse consequences, and that governments should make sure they provide basic public goods, above all safety of person and property, before moving on to more complicated tasks. The success of Rudy Giuliani in restoring order to New York City seemed to confirm their wisdom. Around this time, I worked as an intern at The Manhattan Institute, which served as a kind of brain trust for Giuliani.

With these influences, you won't be surprised that I enthusiastically approved of the Iraq War, which began just as I was starting graduate school in political science. Its failure to secure any of the goals that had been promised was shocking to me, particularly because it was so contrary to what I had thought to be the central neoconservative insights.

So in the mid-2000s, I began studying alternative traditions of conservative thought to figure out where I had gone wrong. That led me to *The American Conservative*.

Gabriel Trigueiro

Can you talk about the creation of *The American Conservative* and its role in the American political debate?

Samuel Goldman

The American Conservative was founded in 2002 as a forum for conservatives and libertarians who opposed the war in Iraq. The magazine was organized and funded by Pat Buchanan and Taki Theodoracopoulos. Its first editor was Scott McConnell, who had worked at the *New York Post*. Since 2010, the magazine has been in the capable hands of Daniel McCarthy.

TAC is often described as "paleoconservative". That meant something twenty years ago, but I don't think it's very helpful now. It would be more accurate to say (as David Brooks has observed) that most writers for TAC are critics of bigness and uniformity in politics and society. In general, we prefer local and regional decisions and institutions to national ones.

That doesn't necessarily mean "small government", at least for me. Consider Vermont's experiment with single-payer healthcare system. It didn't work, but it was a valuable experiment in federalism.

TAC contributors also tend to be more attentive to the consequences of capitalism than mainstream conservatives. As Marx observed in the "Community Manifesto", local community and traditional authority don't fare well in a society in which everything has a price. Although he was a man of the Left, Christopher Lasch is an inspiration on this point.

Finally, TAC writers are mostly critics of America's militarized foreign policy and the national security apparatus that supports it. Some people call this isolationism, but no one is proposing that the United States withdraw from the rest of the world. The real question is the terms on which America should relate to the rest of the world.

I can't speak for other contributors to the magazine, many of whom are more expert in these matters than I am. But I'm looking for a more modest foreign policy that relies on diplomacy rather than violence and takes inspiration from the so-called "classical realism" that emerged after World War II.

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Gabriel Trigueiro

What was the main philosophical and intellectual appeal that the conservative tradition had on you? This appeal still exists today?

Samuel Goldman

For me, the core conservative insight is human limitation, or to be pompous, finitude. We don't know as much as we think we do. And it's hard for us to act in ways that reflect even what we do know. Christians often articulate these limits in terms of sin. I'm not a Christian. But this seems to be one theological concept that's beyond empirical reproach.

One thing that follows from awareness of the limits of human knowledge and self-control is skepticism about the possibility of progress. We have much better technology than our ancestors. But I don't think we're better people in any grand sense. After all, we're still human beings. That means we're inclined to act irresponsibly, to favor our own interests over others', and to allow ourselves to be manipulated by unscrupulous men.

That's why we need hierarchies and government, to set bounds to human folly. And while the structures of authority that we inherit are never perfect, it's fairly rare that they are so bad that it's better to overturn them than to preserve them. Part of the problem is that it's easy to criticize, but very hard to develop comprehensively better alternatives. That's the difficulty with Marx, who was very good on the contradictions of capitalism, but weak on replacements.

So I'm inclined to regard order and stability as central virtues of social institutions. They don't necessarily outweigh other considerations, including justice. But they do have to be taken into account. Philosophical liberals—whether of libertarian or progressive flavors—tend to ignore this.

Another major insight of conservatism, going back to Aristotle, is the society is prior to the individual. We aren't born in a state of nature, and then faced with a choice to cooperate with others under certain rules. We are produced and formed by a particular community, which we can exit but never fully efface (at least without serious psychological damage). So culture matters as much and often more than will.

Finally, I share the conservative suspicion of abstract principle. That comes from the idea of limitation: it's extremely improbable that we'll perceive the whole truth, once and for all. And what elements of truth we can glean will be influenced by community, society, and period in which we live, as well as our own reason.

So partial justification of institutions and practices is the only kind of justification we'll ever get.

Gabriel Trigueiro

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Can you talk about the importance of Edmund Burke in the intellectual and political pantheon of the American conservative movement?

Samuel Goldman

I think Burke is more of a totem than a real influence. Because Burke explicitly defends a social order descended from feudalism, Americans have had to be extremely selective in taking inspiration from his ideas. In '50s, Russell Kirk placed Burke at the fountainhead of a conservative intellectual tradition in America. Fifty years before that, however, Burke's fans included Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, who liked the idea of reform rooted in a society's empirical habits and dispositions, rather than abstract principles.

That's probably a misuse of Burke. But it reflects the difficulty Americans have in being "Burkean". You see the same problem from the other side in the popular interpretation of Burke as a natural lawyer. This allows some conservatives to rescue Burke from Leo Strauss' accusation of relativism.

For Americans, I think Tocqueville is a much more fruitful source than Burke. That's because Tocqueville takes as his point of departure America's lack of the medieval inheritance that was so important for Burke. Tocqueville understands that Americans won't and probably can't respond to appeals to tradition in itself—the rights of Englishmen, the "blessed plot", and so on. Right or left, we can't resist talking about more abstract principles of liberty and equality. The trick is to prevent these credal elements from being totally abstracted from culture and history.

Gabriel Trigueiro

What are the peculiarities of American conservatism, as it relates to a larger, Anglo-Saxon tradition?

Samuel Goldman

American conservative relies heavily on the idea of natural rights. That idea plays a comparatively minor role in English thought, and almost none in Continental conservatism. That's largely because of the role that natural rights discourse played in War of Independence and debate over the Constitution. To "conserve" the American political tradition is to conserve the idea of natural rights.

In this sense, you could argue that American conservatives are not conservatives at all—that they're really liberals. There's some truth to that, but it has to be qualified. Most American conservatives are *conservative* liberals insofar as they see natural rights and social contract as a model of political legitimacy—but not of authority per se. The political theorist Peter Lawler calls this "keeping Locke in the lock-box".

American conservatives are also likely to attribute natural rights to God. Someone (I've forgotten who) has written that conservatives are people who believe that the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence are literally true, while progressives regard them as metaphors.

There have always been Americans who come closer to European styles of conservatism. I mean figures like Henry Adams. But they have tended to be pretty marginal to American political life. As Allan Bloom pointed out, you have to be a buffoon or crank to be a real critic of democracy in American life. That, again, is why Tocqueville is probably our wisest guide.

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Gabriel Trigueiro

A classic study of American conservatism, “The Conservative Intellectual Movement”, written by renowned historian George H. Nash, is still valid as an interpretive key? What are its greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Samuel Goldman

This is still the best book on the subject. Its main limitation is indicated by its title: it’s about conservatism as an intellectual movement. But that’s only part of the story. There have always been conservative intellectuals in America, if sometimes in a marginal position. But it’s only since World War II that there’s been a mass movement that calls itself conservative.

In order to understand how that happened, it’s important to descend from the heights of political theory. Most supporters of Taft, Goldwater, and Reagan weren’t intellectuals. They got their ideas from pamphlets, magazines, sermons, and other “popular” media. And of course they weren’t making voting decisions in abstraction from their own lives. Political, social, and economic changes between about 1945 and 1965 are also crucial.

So far, progressive scholars have done a much better job making sense of this material than conservatives, who tend to be locked into intellectual history. Rick Perlstein’s *Before the Storm* is a pioneering effort in this project (I am less impressed by subsequent volumes in Perlstein’s series).

Gabriel Trigueiro

In a memorable passage in the history of the conservative movement, Irving Kristol, then editor of the political magazine *Encounter*, rejected an article by philosopher Michael Oakeshott. His justification was that Oakeshott’s argument represented a too secular variant of conservatism, therefore “incompatible” with the American tradition. How do you interpret this statement? The idea of transcendence, and even the role of God is negotiable in conservatism, or should it be interpreted as an absolute value?

Samuel Goldman

This is a good example of the American approach in action. Americans, speaking generally, aren’t too impressed by appeals to precedent and tradition. Our political tradition is one of grand principles, often rooted in theology. In addition to the Declaration, look at Lincoln’s Second Inaugural.

That has good and bad consequences. On the one hand, no British politician would have written something like Lincoln's Second Inaugural. It's altogether too grand, moral and metaphysical in almost equal measure. On the other hand, Americans have what Tocqueville described as a taste for general ideas. They don't like the idea that certain practices, habits, and institutions might be good for them, but inappropriate for others. No, they have to be right for *everyone*.

That's part of the reason Oakeshott's brand of conservatism doesn't make much sense here. It's too hesitant, too modest, too English. Americans who talk this way remind me a bit of people who dress up like characters on Downton Abbey. It's a kind of intellectual costume.

The problem is that universal truths of the kind Americans prefers require heavy-duty grounding. Few people think they can be proved philosophically. So religion is the obvious source of authority. But relying on theology in this way risks turning conservatism into kind of civil religion of the kind described by Machiavelli or Rousseau.

Neoconservatives like Kristol are often criticized for this. Although he was basically a secular Jew, he liked to invoke and promote Christian faith when it was convenient to do so. But Christians have been equally guilty of identifying America and its political tradition with the divine—and much more influential when they do so. There's recently been a reaction against this tendency in evangelical circles.

Gabriel Trigueiro

In the second half of the 20th century, there were some key figures in the American conservative thought - William Buckley Jr. and Russell Kirk, for example. Today, is there something equivalent or the conversation is more fragmented?

Samuel Goldman

Things are much more diverse today. Partly because of the internet, there are no longer magazines or writers whom "everyone" reads. The emergence of Fox News has also been enormously destructive. Although there have been "pundits" for a long time—Walter Lippmann was perhaps the first—television turns political commentators into entertainers. Of course, Buckley was an entertainer too, at least compared to Kirk. But *Firing Line* was a graduate seminar compared to the outrage circus you find on TV today.

Gabriel Trigueiro

Can you suggest canonical books and interesting recent interpretations on the conservative thinking?

Samuel Goldman

Peter Viereck's *Conservatism Revisited* is a neglected classic. Not everyone will agree with his defense of "socialism" as a conservative principle. But Viereck offers an important

reminder that conservatives have historically been skeptical of capitalism. Robert Nisbet's *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* also deserves more attention. Like Viereck, Nisbet was a critic of the fetishistic emphasis on the individual that characterizes much American conservatism. More recently, as I've said, Perlstein provides a glimpse of the political milieu from which the American conservative movement emerged. Although a progressive, he's not without sympathy for the Goldwater movement.

Gabriel Trigueiro

In view of the recent tragedy in Charleston, could you talk briefly about the role of the South in the imagination and identity of the American conservative tradition?

Samuel Goldman

Robert Nisbet claimed in an autobiographical essay that all American conservatism begins in admiration for the South. That's an exaggeration. But an affinity for Southern things is an important strand in American conservative thought. This goes back to the War of Independence. The Lockean philosophy to which many conservatives still refer was most influential in the Upper South.

There is another strand of American political thought derived from the Puritans, which emphasizes justice and equality over property rights. In practice, however, it has more often taken progressive than conservative form. Probably the closest you can come to a Yankee conservative is John Quincy Adams, who enthusiastically took Burke's side in the great debate with Tom Paine. But he was defeated by Andrew Jackson, whose appeals to populism, smaller government, and backcountry religion look more like modern conservatism than Adams' moralistic republicanism.

The connection to the South has been politically fraught at least since the United States fought a world war in the name of democracy. It was never morally acceptable to admire a society based on white supremacy. Since World War II, it's been less and less socially acceptable.

This has posed a challenge for conservatives who admire the South. One way to deal with it is to rewrite history to minimize the role of slavery and racism. That's what people sometimes mean when they talk about "heritage not hate".

But the heritage not hate strategy won't work. As a quick survey of the declarations of secession by many Southern states suggest, white supremacy was the *raison d'être* of the Confederacy, and carried over into segregation. In some ways, these developments support conservative skepticism about progress. White supremacy was more deeply entrenched intellectually and politically from the 1840s to the 1940s than it was in the colonial period or the early republic.

The attempt to claim civil rights figures like Martin Luther King as unwitting conservatives also isn't very convincing. King was a serious Christian and qualified defender of the American political tradition, which distinguishes him from the multicultural left of today. But I don't think he's fairly described as a conservative. Leading conservatives of the '60s certainly didn't think so—read contemporary editorials in *National Review* to find out.

So conservatives have to find ways of rehabilitating Southern traditions that don't depend on ideological distortions. That may not be as hard as it sounds. The recent remigration of blacks from the North back to the South suggests that there are elements of Southern life that African Americans find appealing, perhaps including the fact that the South is more racially integrated than the North. Those are the things to emphasize.

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Another strategy is to find alternative sources for conservative thought and practice. There's a fascinating and neglected Jeffersonian tradition in the Upper Midwest, for example. Not coincidentally, this tradition is also much closer to the historic basis of the Republican Party.

To be clear: I'm not suggesting that conservatism can be reduced an affinity for the South. But I don't think conservatives have yet undertaken a serious reckoning with the role of race in conservative thought or American history. An important book remains to be written on this subject.

Gabriel Trigueiro

Although the United States early in the second half of the 20th century were still mostly one Protestant country, there is a 'special relationship' between the rise of American Catholicism, in the 1940s and 1950s, and the emergence of the American conservative tradition. Would you talk a little bit about it?

Samuel Goldman

For its first century or so, the United States was regarded as a Protestant country. To the extent that people wanted to "conserve" its institutions and habits, that meant defending Protestantism against Catholic, and to a lesser extent Jewish, subversion. This instinct goes all the way back to the Puritans, who regarded the Pope as a potential antichrist. And one of the grievances the Declaration of Independence raises against the King is that he extended toleration to Catholics in Quebec, which the American patriots regarded as a threat to their liberties.

The anti-Catholicism of American thought began to moderate in the early 20th Century. As industrialism and mass democracy became increasingly suspect, Catholicism looked like a fundamental alternative to the whole modern world. Henry Adams was a pioneer of this turn. Although an atheist descendant of Puritans, he offered an extremely sympathetic depiction of the medieval Church. In a way, it's a return to Burke.

A few decades later, though, many of the leading figures in the resistance to the New Deal were Protestants. Catholics were mostly Democrats and supporters of Roosevelt. There was a populist Catholic tendency, represented by the likes of Father Coughlin. But this wasn't exactly conservative. I suspect that this is because Catholic thought was traditionally not as suspicious of the state as the Anglo-Protestant tradition. Also, many Catholics were immigrants or descendants of immigrants, and less susceptible to self-help arguments.

So it's a bit of surprise how many the founders of *National Review* were Catholics. The reason, I think, is that Catholic teaching was so much more comprehensive than mainline Protestantism—and thus seemed to be a clear and equal alternative to Communism.

Whittaker Chambers' dramatic conversion, recounted in *Witness*, is a symbol of that.

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But evangelical Protestantism was more characteristic of the rank and file of the conservative movement. Contrary to the caricature, this wasn't backwoods fundamentalism, but rather the faith of the Sunbelt suburbs. Catholics, meanwhile, largely remained liberals and Democrats. John F. Kennedy was still being attacked as an agent of the pope as late as 1960.

These distinctions changed somewhat with the emergence of the Religious Right. Although it was led by charismatic Protestants, such as Pat Robertson, by the '80s conservatives were trying to build alliances between traditional Christians of all denominations. The key figures here were the Catholic Richard John Neuhaus and the former Nixon aide Charles Colson.

Socially, the key bridge issue was abortion. Reagan's electoral success among so-called "white ethnics", who were largely Catholic, was another important factor.

The result today is that pretty much any white person who attends church regularly is likely to vote Republican. And many of these people call themselves conservatives. That's true of both Catholics and Protestants. On the other hand, blacks remain heavily religious and heavily Democrats. So it's not Christianity in itself that determines political behavior.

Jews, meanwhile, have an ambiguous position in the conservative movement. Although Jews have been well represented among conservative intellectuals since World War II, they've rarely supported conservative politicians in any numbers. Some Jewish conservatives expect that to change in the future, as the Jewish population trends toward orthodoxy and Democrats and progressives become less supportive of Israel. But I wouldn't count on it. Like South and East Asians, Jews have a lot of characteristics that seem a natural "fit" for conservatism, but they are deeply suspicious of conservatives' traditional emphasis on Christianity as the basis of American life.

Gabriel Trigueiro

What are the main challenges of American conservatism today? And what are the main recommendations do you suggest?

Samuel Goldman

One challenge is to offer solutions to today's problems, which include family collapse, wage stagnation, the loss of meaningful work to automation, and the increasing cost of housing and education. Many conservatives are nostalgic for the Reagan era. That leads them to offer '80s solutions to '80s problems.

At the same time, I think conservative should reconsider their relationship to politics. One difference between Buckley and Kirk was that Buckley was more interested in winning elections, while Kirk was trying to figure out how to preserve private virtues and cultural traditions. The most important goal for conservatives should be to live a conservative life, enjoying goods of family, learning, religion, and so on. Politics is at best an instrument for securing that—not an end in itself.

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