

## Resorting to Statism to Find Meaning

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**Abstract** The paper develops the idea of *configuration of ownership* to distinguish three primary political ideologies: (classical) liberalism, conservatism, and leftism. The liberal configuration is atomistic in its recognition of owners and ownership claims; it conforms closely to Adam Smith's "commutative justice," which Smith represented as a sort of social grammar. The conservative configuration also strives for a social grammar, but it counts among the set of owners certain spirit-lords such as God and Patria. The liberal and conservative configurations become isomorphic *if and only if* the ownership claims of the conservative spirit-lords are reduced to nothing. The left configuration ascribes fundamental ownership of resources to the people, the state, and sees laws as organizational house-rules into which one enters voluntarily by choosing to remain within the polity; the type of justice that pertains is parallel to Smith's "distributive justice," which Smith associated with aspirational rules for achieving beauty in composition. The scheme illuminates why the left's conception of liberty consists in *civil liberties*. The formulation of configurations is used to interpret the semantics of the three primary ideologies. Meanwhile, it is noted that actually existing parties and movements are admixtures of the three primary ideologies. For example, what makes Republicanism "conservative" is that it is *relatively* conservative; it by no means thoroughly or consistently rejects the precept of collective ownership by the polity.

**Keywords** Statism · Liberalism · Conservatism · Leftism · Configuration of ownership

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Man is a meaning seeking animal. Meaning is developed and sustained in beliefs, communities, customs, and institutions. It is represented by symbols and identifiers. These components work together as a subculture. The meaningfulness of a subculture is enhanced by belonging to things that are great and permanent. Thus many look to politics and government. Such subcultures are often called ideologies.

I am a pragmatic libertarian or classical liberal. I would love to live in a culture in which the identity of mere "liberal" worked for me, but in the Anglosphere that culture broke down about a hundred years ago. I spend a lot of time in Sweden, and enjoy being able to use just "liberal" and "liberalism," terms regarded with proper opprobrium by both Swedish social democrats and social conservatives. Here I will insinuate that culture by calling it just "liberalism." So "liberalism" here does not mean John Dewey, J.K. Galbraith, John Rawls, George Lakoff, and Paul Krugman. Rather, liberalism means Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, William Graham Sumner, Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman.

My ambition is to provide a fundamental formulation of the political landscape. The political landscape blooms with flowers and timber of every color, but I suggest three primary colors:

- leftism
- conservatism
- liberalism

Leftism necessarily and conservatism typically resort to statism in the search for meaning. Liberalism is the ideology of depoliticization; it is an attitude and reform agenda that opposes the resort to statism in the search for meaning. It demands that people find meaning elsewhere, or, if they have to, settle for less meaning.

The three primary colors find their differences in *the configuration of ownership*. The three ideologies work from three different configurations of ultimate ownership.

The configuration issue relates closely to Adam Smith's distinction between grammar-like rules and aesthetic rules for achieving beauty. Leftism is oriented toward the pursuit of beauty, or what Lon Fuller called the morality of aspiration. Leftism is inherently statist. Conservatism is oriented toward a social grammar, or what Lon Fuller called the morality of duty. Liberalism shares with conservatism a grammatical orientation—both “right” ideologies are social-grammar philosophies. But liberalism and conservatism differ in the configuration of ownership. Liberalism is a social grammar that militates against statism. Whether conservatism is statist depends on the ownership claims attributed to its spirit-lords, such as God and country. Mild claims for the spirit-lords allow conservatism to eschew statism and merge with liberalism.

Please avoid the precept that some kind of supreme right or ethical trump is thought to inhere in “liberty,” “ownership,” or “commutative justice.” Adam Smith wrote that prohibiting banks from issuing small-denomination notes was “a manifest violation of...natural liberty,” and yet favored it (WN, 324). Elsewhere he allowed a “superior” to transgress the rules of commutative justice (TMS, 81). The struggles and admixtures of the three primary ideologies certainly concern policy positions, but those differences are not our focus here. Rather, the focus is their *semantics and conceptual formulations*. One could uphold left semantics and liberal positions: “the minimum wage does not reduce liberty and is bad.” Likewise, one could uphold liberal semantics and left positions: “the minimum wage reduces liberty and is good.” Neither of these combinations would be illogical, merely peculiar.

I favor liberal views and the eschewal of seeking meaning in statism. But those views are not argued here. Nothing I say here is intended as criticism of conservatism or leftism.

### Adam Smith: Two Types of Rules, Two Types of Justice

When Smith addressed commutative justice, he called it justice, *simpliciter*. When he addressed distributive justice he generally used beneficence, benevolence, charity, friendship, and generosity.

To illuminate the difference between commutative justice and other virtues, Smith drew an artful analogy to two different kinds of rules for writing:

The rules of justice may be compared to the rules of grammar; the rules of the other virtues, to the rules which critics lay down for the attainment of what is

sublime and elegant in composition. The one, are precise, accurate, and indispensable. The other, are loose, vague, and indeterminate, and present us rather with a general idea of the perfection we ought to aim at, than afford us any certain and infallible directions for acquiring it. A man may learn to write grammatically by rule, with the most absolute infallibility; and so, perhaps, he may be taught to act justly. But there are no rules whose observance will infallibly lead us to the attainment of elegance or sublimity in writing; though there are some which may help us, in some measure, to correct and ascertain the vague ideas which we might otherwise have entertained of those perfections. And there are no rules by the knowledge of which we can infallibly be taught to act upon all occasions with prudence, with just magnanimity, or proper beneficence: though there are some which may enable us to correct and ascertain, in several respects, the imperfect ideas which we might otherwise have entertained of those virtues. (TMS, 175–176)

Later, Smith reiterates the analogy to writing: “It was observed...that the rules of justice are the only rules of morality which are precise and accurate; that those of all the other virtues are loose, vague, and indeterminate; that the first may be compared to the rules of grammar; the others to those which critics lay down for the attainment of what is sublime and elegant in composition...” (TMS, 327).

Smith says commutative justice is like grammar. He sees distributive justice as analogous to rules which critics lay down for the attainment of what is sublime and elegant in composition. As such, Smith's analogy may be represented in Table 1.

Substantively, commutative justice is claims of ownership, including self-ownership, and voluntary agreements: “The most sacred laws of justice, therefore, those whose violation seems to call loudest for vengeance and punishment, are the laws which guard the life and person of our neighbor; the next are those which guard his property and possessions; and last of all come those which guard what are called his personal rights, or what is due to him from the

**Table 1** How the two justices parallel rules for writing

Nature of the rules		
“Precise, accurate, and indispensable”		
“Loose, vague, and indeterminate”		
Ethics	Commutative justice	Distributive justice
Writing	Grammar	“rules which critics lay down for the attainment of what is sublime and elegant in composition”

promises of others” (TMS, 84). This formulation echoes Hume’s (1751, 26; 1740, 526). It holds up well throughout Smith’s work, and it constitutes “natural liberty.” Elsewhere Smith also suggests that reputation, too, is protected by commutative justice (TMS, 82, 269; LJ, 8, 105, 121, 125, 399, 480). He says commutative justice “consists in abstaining from what is another’s” (TMS 269).

Smith explained that “Mere justice is, upon most occasions, but a negative virtue”: “The man who barely abstains from violating either the person, or the estate, or the reputation of his neighbors, has surely very little positive merit. He fulfils, however, all the rules of what is peculiarly called justice, and does every thing which his equals can with propriety force him to do, or which they can punish him for not doing. We may often fulfill all the rules of justice by sitting still and doing nothing” (TMS, 82).

Commutative justice is parallel to grammar, for grammar, too, is exclusively negative, in the sense that appraisal of one’s grammar is little more than pointing out any grammatical mistakes. Complying with the rules of grammar, like complying with commutative justice, has little positive merit. Finally, grammar too can be fulfilled by “sitting still and doing nothing”—if a student turns in an assignment consisting of a blank sheet of paper, the teacher must concede that his grammar was flawless.

Hayek (1976, 36) noted: “That practically all rules of just conduct are negative in the sense that they normally impose no positive duties on any one, unless he has incurred such duties by his own actions, is a feature that has again and again, as though it were a new discovery, been pointed out,” and he provides a lengthy footnote containing many examples of writers hitting upon the “negative” or grammar logic of liberty.

Merely satisfying the grammar of commutative justice not only deserves little merit, but may well be blameworthy, just as blank sheet of paper fails aesthetically as composition. Distributive justice, Smith says, “consists in proper beneficence, in the becoming use of what is our own” (TMS, 269–270). Thus, Smith describes conformance to distributive justice as “becoming”—an aesthetic compliment—and identifies it with “proper beneficence,” which is one among “the other virtues” that, Smith said (175, 327), had rules that are only loose, vague, and indeterminate.

### The Two Justices Clarified by Ownership

Both justices can be clarified by taking seriously the element of ownership that resides in each. Commutative justice “consists in abstaining from what is another’s.” Thus, it is not messing with other people’s stuff.

Ownership clarifies distributive justice, too, for Smith describes it as consisting “in the becoming use of what is

our own.” I propose that again we think in terms of ownership, this time ownership of exhaustible resources. The resources include not only our tangible stuff, our person, and the contracted rights, but also our human capital, including our *attention* and *energy*. Distributive justice consists in our properly *distributing* our exhaustible resources.

### The Configuration of Ownership

I submit that at the heart of social justice is a particular view of the configuration of ownership. The configuration presupposed by social-justice leftists and social democrats generally is that all resources in society are ultimately owned by society, the state, the people, the polity. That presupposition is something of a taboo; it is often only implicit or inchoate. But sometimes it becomes explicit.

Good examples of works that make it explicit are *The Myth of Ownership* by Niam Murphy and Thomas Nagel (2002), and *The Cost of Rights* by Stephen Holmes and Cass Sunstein (1999). Holmes and Sunstein suggest that the polity is an encompassing social organization whose rules we all enter into “voluntarily” (210). They write: “Unless society is organized as a cooperative venture, private property cannot be created and maintained” (192). This language echoes John Rawls: “society is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage” (Rawls 1971, 4). With his construction, Rawls imagines people who “choose together, in one joint act, the principles which are to assign basic rights and duties and to determine the division of social benefits” (11). Holmes and Sunstein affirm the “deep truth” in the medieval legal notion that “only the sovereign [has] an absolute interest in land: ordinary landowners ‘hold of the sovereign’” (63). In their social democratic worldview, all things are owned, fundamentally and ultimately, by the polity, and any decentralized exercise of property rights or contract is undertaken by its authorized delegation. “Private property [is] a creation of state action,” “laws [enable property holders] to acquire and hold what is ‘theirs’” (66, 230). One of their chapter titles sums it up: “All Rights Are Positive” (35; cf 48, 83, 116, 184, 205).

The tenant of an apartment building understands that “his” apartment is, ultimately, the property of the landlord. The employee of a company understands that “his” office, “his” desk, “his” computer are, ultimately, the property of the company. The social democrats view us as tenants of the polity. That car you drive is “yours” only in that the government delegates certain powers to you. Your property is the bundle of positive, prescriptive rights or subdominions that the government delegates to you to make use of the tangible stuff that ultimately really belong to the polity.

The social-democratic works just noted are peculiar only in their candor. The political culture generally, or at least in academe and law, is essentially social-democratic in its tacit notions of the configuration of ownership. Legal positivism predominates in law schools. Law professors will tell you as a matter of conventional wisdom that ownership is the bundle of powers (or rights) that government accords the owner. These powers may be seen as sub-dominions which the government carves out and delegates to you.

To the social democrat, in passing a minimum-wage law, society does not restrict your liberty. Rather, it refrains from granting you the right of employing someone for less than the specified amount. It has simply refashioned the bundle of rights you hold, just as a company may set rules for interactions among employees. If you don't like the arrangement, you are free to exit the polity. There is no force, because no one has forced you to belong to the polity. The people, the state, is an encompassing overlord, and governmental bodies are the people's administrative apparatus and official means of expression.

Social justice would correspond to distributive justice only if, in understanding the phrase "the becoming use of what is our own" we read "our" in a collectivist way. Only if the set of social resources is understood as owned by the collective unit would distributive justice become social justice. In the collective sense, We own social resources, and We pursue distributive justice by the becoming use of what is Our own. That way of thinking about the matter is the essence of social justice.

### The Spirit-Lords of Conservatism

I propose that conservatism be seen as including certain spirit-lords among the owners. These spirit-lords might be thought of as such things as God or the national spirit.

In *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, Russell Kirk presents six canons of conservative thought. The first canon begins: "Belief that a divine intent rules society as well as conscience, forging an eternal chain of right and duty which links great and obscure, living and dead. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems" (1960, 7). He writes that "the essence of social conservatism is preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity" (6).

Kirk calls Edmund Burke "the greatest of modern conservative thinkers" (1). The following Kirk passages refer to Burke. They postulate an enduring divine spirit that suffuses society:

[Burke] began and ended his campaign for the conservation of society upon the grand design of piety: in his reverent eyes, the whole of earthly reality

was an expression of moral principle...In examining Burke's conservative system, therefore, it is well to commence on the lofty plane of religious belief. (Kirk 1960, 30)

Revelation, reason, and an assurance beyond the senses tell us that the Author of our being exists, and that He is omniscient; and man and the state are creations of God's beneficence. This Christian orthodoxy is the kernel of Burke's philosophy. (31)

[Kirk quotes Burke:] 'the awful Author of our being is the author of our place in the order of existence; and that having disposed and marshaled us by a divine tactic, not according to our will, but according to His, He has, in and by that disposition, virtually subjected us to act the part which belongs to the part assigned to us.' (33)

'There is an order that keeps things fast in their place,' said Burke himself, penetrating to the very root of conservative instinct; 'it is made to us, and we are made to it'...(34)

[H]e says that mundane order is derived from, and remains a part of, divine order. Religion is not merely a convenient myth to keep popular appetites within bounds...(34–35)

In my scheme, it is a divine being that endures the ages. Its "own" might best be understood in terms of inherent obligations each person owes to it, as though the obligation were assumed by way of contract. Kirk writes: "This social compact is very real to Burke—not an historical compact, not a mere stock-company agreement, not even simply a juridical concept, but rather a contract that is re-affirmed in every generation, in every year and day, by every man who puts his trust in another" (59). Kirk makes clear that he (and Burke) feel that there can be no meaningful or significant sense of contract—neither in the liberal sense nor the left senses—without a kind of moral underwriting by the divine spirit (54, 119). A contract between two individuals only has moral significance because it carries with it corresponding contracts with the divine spirit.

If we have a contract with the spirit-lord, and that contract says we are not to snort cocaine, then our snorting of cocaine violates commutative justice, for it violates the contract. When the government prohibits the snorting of cocaine, it is enforcing that contract, not violating our liberty—just as laws against fraud are not a violation of our liberty.

Thus, as a matter of divine grammar, we are to obey the contract with the spirit-lord:

Burke...is emphatic that the first rule of society is obedience—obedience to God and the dispensations of

**Table 2** Configuration of ownership of liberalism, leftism, and conservatism

The configuration of ownership within the polity	
Liberalism	{Lisa’s own, Bob’s own, government <sub>1</sub> ’s own, government <sub>2</sub> ’s own,...}
Leftism	{the people’s own} = {(Lisa, Bob, government <sub>1</sub> , government <sub>2</sub> ,...)’s own}
Conservatism	{God’s own, Patria’s own, Lisa’s own, Bob’s own, government <sub>1</sub> ’s own, government <sub>2</sub> ’s own,...}

Providence, which work through natural processes. (76)

Another foundation for social principle is Burke’s ‘Obey the Divine design’—so one may paraphrase his concept of obedience to a natural order. By a proper regard for prescription and prejudice, we discover the means of dutiful obedience. (64).

“Prescription” is the term that Kirkians use for what liberals would call paternalistic interventions.

In the conservative grammar, although the individual must not transgress the spirit-lord’s dominion, the notion of the individual’s own is otherwise the same as in the liberal grammar. This liberal element of the conservative configuration of ownership is expressed in Kirk’s fourth canon of conservative thought: “Persuasion that property and freedom are inseparably connected...Separate property from private possession, and liberty is erased” (1960, 7–8). Thus both conservatives and liberals recoil at the left’s configuration involving “the people” as overlord. In juxtaposing conservatism and liberalism, there is another factor that deserves mention, namely an ambiguity in ranking two reforms in terms of liberty. Ambiguity arises from possible disagreement between a ranking that looks only at direct liberty and a ranking that looks at overall liberty—a distinction developed in Klein and Clark (2008). The more pervasive the disagreement between direct and overall liberty, the less grammatical is the liberty principle. Conservatives find more disagreement between direct and overall liberty than do liberals. This impasse between conservatives and liberals might relate to the configuration distinctions offered here. I think that conservatives overes-

timate the disagreement between direct and overall liberty, and I suspect that the causes of their doing so relate to their relative piety toward the spirit-lords. That is, I suspect that their piety toward the spirit-lords arrests their understanding of politics, economics, and cultural ecology.

**The Three Configurations of Ownership**

In Table 2 I represent the citizens of the polity as Lisa, Bob,...

Governments—city, state, county, national—are owners of properties such as streets, parks, buildings, etc. These are represented as government<sub>1</sub>, government<sub>2</sub>,...

I represent the spirit-lords as God and Patria.

When the law controls Lisa’s own in a way that is not a protection of God’s, Patria’s, Bob’s, or government<sub>1</sub>’s own, conservatism calls it coercion. That statement would not hold for leftism. The meaning of the configurations is illustrated by applying them to some concrete examples in Table 3.

For the cocaine ban, Table 3 presupposes that the conservative view holds that cocaine use is a violation of God/Patria’s own. If, instead, we presuppose that the conservative view holds otherwise, then the cocaine ban is deemed a reduction in liberty. The example shows how the conservative configuration becomes isomorphic to the liberal configuration if the spirit-lords’ own are reduced to nothing. That kind of conservative-libertarian view is represented by Frank Meyer (1996), who upheld that policies like drug prohibition trampled on liberty, and he tended to oppose them. But other conservatives, such as Russell Kirk or Brent Bozell (see selections in Carey 1998),

**Table 3** Configurations of ownership applied to concrete examples

	Federal minimum wage law	Federal ban on cocaine
Liberalism	The law reduces liberty, as it violates the liberty of non-violators (employers). It aggresses on Lisa’s own,...	The law reduces liberty, as it violates the liberty of non-violators. It aggresses on Lisa’s own,...
Leftism	The law does not reduce liberty, as it does not violate anyone’s own.	The law does not reduce liberty, as it does not violate anyone’s own.
Conservatism	The law reduces liberty, as it violates the liberty of non-violators. (In the absence of a minimum wage, <i>employing people at low wages does not violate God’s own or Patria’s own.</i> ) Thus, the law aggresses on Lisa’s own,...	The law augments liberty, as it does not violate the liberty of non-violators <i>and it prevents violations of commutative justice.</i> Even in the absence of such laws, <i>engaging in cocaine use violates God’s own and/or Patria’s own.</i>

would tend to see cocaine use as a sort of violation of a spirit-lord, and hence might not call the ban a reduction in liberty, just as a liberal does not call a ban on murder a reduction in liberty.

The variation among conservatives indicates precisely the problem of trying to achieve a grammar when certain owners, God and Patria, have ownership in properties and contracted claims that are intangible and ethereal. Lacking tangibility, the claims in question and the imputed exclusive dominions are terribly vague. By contrast, the ownership and contractual claims imputed to Lisa and Bob are based on tangibles and focal voluntary interactions (Friedman 1994). The liberal configuration consists of a set of reasonably clear and self-enforcing focal-points. Not so for the spirit-lords. The conservatives want to have a grammar, but they have a very hard time determining whether a word is a noun or a verb—or even whether a group of letters is a word. Did Bill Buckley violate his contract with God when he got stoned? Frank Meyer sought to avoid this problem by essentially taking the spirit-lords out of the configuration of ownership. But the statist conservatives cannot escape the problem, and their sense of grammar suffers accordingly.

Table 3 presupposes that the left would not regard the minimum wage and the cocaine ban as unconstitutional. Otherwise, they *would* be reductions in liberty. For the left, liberty does have meaning. It lies in the sub-dominions carved out of the polity's super-dominion. The carvings made by the super level must be respected by lower levels. The constitution must be respected by Congress. Likewise, if local censorship laws transgress the dominions prescribed by the first amendment, they are deemed reductions in liberty. That's why, for the left, the question of liberty consists of issues of *civil liberties*.

One might object to the basic distinction I make between configurations left and conservative. One might say that any left configuration in terms of

{(Lisa, Bob, government<sub>1</sub>, ...)’s own}

can be reformulated in terms of

{God’s own, Patria’s own, Lisa’s own,  
government<sub>1</sub>’s own, ...}

and vice versa, showing that there is no substantive difference between the schemes left and conservative. That is, one could object that, by such isomorphism, the schemes left and conservative reduce to sameness. I think the point about abstract isomorphism is probably correct. But such isomorphism between left and conservative does not undo the distinction or its importance. A scheme of configuration, left or conservative, is a matter of culture. It is a scheme by which configuration is understood, if only tacitly. Such cultural embeddedness affects how people

conceive of the implied rights, and such conception will affect which configurations are sought and come to be. Thomas Schelling's book *The Strategy of Conflict* is hailed for seminal ideas of coordination problem, focal point, commitment, promise, threat, and so on. But the masterwork's main point is that the purely formal structure of a situation cannot capture all that might matter to the actual human players, that culture, context, and labeling make for focalness and can make all the difference: “But we must rule out a possible axiom that might seem to be suggested by analogy with other game theories, namely, that (to use the term of Luce and Raiffa) the ‘labeling’ of rows, columns, and players should make no difference to the outcome. It is precisely because strategies are ‘labeled’ in some sense [DK: for example, in terms of the people’s own or in terms of Patria’s own]—that is, have symbolic or connotative characteristics that transcend the mathematical structure of the game—that players can rise above sheer chance and ‘win’ these games...” (Schelling 1960, 95–96; see generally 65–118).

Political discourse and public policy entail great and pervasive elements of mutual coordination. In a sense, culture is nothing but schemes of focal points. Even though any given left configuration might, in an abstract way, translate to a corresponding conservative configuration, that does not mean that there is no substantive difference, no importance, to whether it is understood one way or the other.

The three configurations elucidate why liberalism is often tagged as “atomistic.” Indeed, the liberal configuration of ownership—and *only* the liberal configuration—is atomistic—or individualistic. That atomism is routinely used to tag liberal *sensibilities* as atomistic, but that maneuver usually lacks legitimacy. Liberal sensibilities see man’s inherent sociability—per Smith and Hayek—and see social processes as a skein of mutualities. Liberalism *privileges* neither the conservative spirit-lords nor the social democratic We, nor any other holisms, as a cultural force and source of meaning. But the *warrant* for the “atomistic” configuration of ownership is, arguably, as anti-atomistic as the respective warrants for the non-atomistic configurations. The warrants lie in the morality of aspiration, which cannot be atomistic.

### Juxtaposing Left and Conservative

The left sees a circle encompassing the members of the polity at a point in time. As Tocqueville (1969, 693–694) observed, democracy allows citizens to feel that they are above the government and yet subservient to and a part of a larger entity. Universal suffrage is vital to the notion of popular sovereignty. The people then own the resources of

the polity, and politics becomes distributive justice—making a becoming use of what is their collective own. Leftism is fundamentally an aesthetic political pursuit, a morality of aspiration, working with loose, vague, and indeterminate rules, not a grammar. Acting together toward common ends and commonly experiencing the narrative make for an approximation of common knowledge (Chwe 2001), an imagined mutual coordination of sentiment, and an imagined community in the life moment. Part of the penchant is a yearning for sentiment to encompass all the people, at least in the imagination—what I have elsewhere termed “the people’s romance” (Klein 2005). Thus, the impetus to pursue collectively goal X is not so much the achieving of X as the collective doings supposedly done to achieve X. The penchant for encompassing sentiment by way of collective endeavor may well have origins in the evolutionary environment (Hayek 1978, 1988). The great endeavor and project of social democracy is the advancement of “equality,” “equal opportunity,” and “social justice.” The left is a politics of hope, of progress, of deliverance, of renewal. Its leaders are liberators—in the sense of liberating Us, the people, from traditional inhibitions and constraints, to exercise our collective will. Russel Kirk describes the tenets of radicalism at the end of the eighteenth century: “The aim of the reformer, moral and political, is emancipation—liberation from old creeds, old oaths, old establishments; the man of the future is to rejoice in pure liberty, unlimited democracy, self-governing, self-satisfying. Political power is the most efficacious instrument of reform...” (1960, 29–30).

Where leftism finds meaning horizontally in the grand union during the life moment, conservatism finds meaning vertically in great and divine things descending through the ages, in the spirit-lords God and Patria. Edmund Burke is quoted by Kirk: “The reason first why we do admire those things which are greatest, and second those things which are ancientest, is because the one are the least distant from the infinite substance, the other from the infinite continuance, of God” (Burke quoted by Kirk 1960, 40–41). The books *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson and *The Invention of Tradition* edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) offer incisive left-leaning analyses of how, around the world, imagined national communities arose partly from administrative relations with external powers, partly from technological developments promulgating a national language, and by the inculcation and propagation of symbols, rituals, and cultural artifacts of a supposed national tradition. These authors tell of an imagined ancestral spirit-lord that endures through time and serves as medium by which we are bound together. Leaders of conservative politics pretend to be personifications of the spirit-lord, symbols of its character, and protectors of its way of life.

In *Moral Politics*, the social-democratic political psychologist George Lakoff says that meaning in politics organizes itself by metaphors of family-based moralities (2002, 331). He sees conservative politics as based on a “strict father morality,” within which we can see the instructor and enforcer of the proper social grammar. He sees left politics (he calls it “liberal”) as the “nurturant parent morality,” which more emphasizes empathy, compassion, and fair distribution—virtues Adam Smith associated with distributive justice, or the becoming use of our own social resources.

It is commonly pointed out that conservatism tends toward nationalism, while, at least by comparison, leftism tends towards internationalism. The connotations nicely fit the configurations offered here. Conservatism sees its national traditions as especially sacred. It is committed to them as ancient patrimony, and feels both obliged and justified in a nationalist prejudice. It instinctively presupposes a specialness or superiority in its Patria.

Meanwhile, Kirk notes that “radicals unite in detesting Burke’s description of the state as a divinely ordained moral essence, a spiritual union of the dead, the living, and those yet unborn” (1960, 9). The left, by contrast, is a lateral association within the polity during the life moment. It is not superstitious and prejudicial about peculiar ancient traditions. It finds its meaning in the narrative and romance of this life’s experience. It understands that the yearning for the people’s romance is a general human yearning, not special to this particular people. Our people’s romance is our roller-coaster ride, basically no different than other people’s roller-coasters. The polity is a necessary device to delimit “the people” and define the requisite span of the experience and the sentiment, but it does not begrudge other peoples in other polities the same human yearnings. In fact, the chief downfall of the left’s internationalism is their defining collective project, the welfare state, as it makes it very difficult to be welcoming to immigrants. In discussing immigration from Mexico, Paul Krugman, for example, demonstrates fascinating contortions to hold on to both the people’s romance and a purported concern for poor people. (For a critical analysis of Krugman on immigration, see Klein with Barlett 2008, 121–123.)

Table 4 presents a scheme of statist penchants and includes distinctions between left and conservative. It mentions several of the ideas touched on here, as well as a few others I’ve been thinking about.

### The Warrant and Limits of Grammar

The grammar of natural liberty is, as such thing go, precise and accurate, to use Smith’s adjectives. The *warrant* for it, however, is not precise and accurate. The warrant is

**Table 4** A scheme of statist penchants

Strata	Statist Penchants		
High-strata	<p><b>Governing-set mentality:</b> high and looking up                      Self-exaltation, among the elites, close to the “alpha male”</p> <p>Left  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Makers, transformers, liberators, deliverers</li> </ul> </p> <p>Conservative  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personifications, symbols, protectors of way of life</li> </ul> </p> <p><b>Managerial mentality and Parental attitudes:</b> high and looking down  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pretense of knowledge</li> <li>Parentalism and bogus compassion</li> </ul> </p> <p>“Nurturant” Parent                      Caring toward development</p> <p>Strict Father                      Enforcing the conservative grammar</p>		
All-strata	<p><b>The people’s romance:</b> State as project, endeavor, drama, narrative (“progressive,” hope)                      The major soc-dem project: “equality,” “equal opp.,” “social justice.”</p>	<p><b>Conformism</b></p>	<p><b>Common way of life,</b> tradition; social grammar (conservative, faith).</p>
Low-strata	<p><b>Validation,</b> government as phantom lord, submission, relinquishment of critical thinking at deep levels, sanctimony.</p> <p><b>Reverence</b> of powerful/famous beings, kowtowing-obsequiousness-fawning-servility.</p> <p><b>Envy, resentment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On left: Identity politics as participation in political power.</li> </ul>		

aesthetic—loose, vague, and indeterminate—a realm that Smith, in one spot, associated with Platonic justice (TMS, 270). That realm provides the warrant, also, *for the exceptions* one would make to adherence to the grammar.

All three major ideologies affirm the liberal grammar in an important sense: They all insist that Smith’s commutative justice be upheld in private-to-private interaction. Aside from those who drive loud Harley-Davidsons and a few others, only the government gets to violate natural liberty. In that respect we live in liberal polities.

But as concerns government action, the dominant character of the “liberal democracies” is social democracy. All the actually existing parties are admixtures of the three ideologies, but since the so-called progressive era and the

collapse of classical liberalism and its semantics, the times have increasingly become social democratic. The mythos of universal democracy—government is Us, the polity is Ours, and We are free in so far as we may exercise our democratic rights—has steadily advanced and fundamentally changed how people see politics and government. The social democratic ethos has undone the public understanding of Smith’s idea of liberty. It has disposed of liberty as a guiding political principle. The liberal lexicon was subverted during the progressive era and died in the 1930s. Now the cultural institutions, particularly academe and law, are solidly social democratic. The presumption is given to the status quo, not to natural liberty. Even “conservative” parties today, such as the Republican Party, are highly

social democratic in character, appeal, and tactics. They are conservative only in a relative sense.

It is probably natural for people to look for meaning in things that are powerful and permanent, so it is probably natural for people to look to government for meaning, for validation. But in addition to whatever is natural, the cultural institutions inculcate statist paths to meaning and validation. The public schools, academe, much of the major media, and the government itself tell Lisa and Bob, starting in grade school, that politics and government are a major source of whatever meaning they can find in their lives.

Liberalism offers meaning to liberal intellectuals and ideologues, such as me. As a community, such liberals pursue the related causes of negotiating with statism and cultivating a liberal subculture, and, as an individual, each pursues his own aesthetic adventures within those causes. Liberalism, for us, is a great and relatively permanent cause worth belonging to and serving.

For the masses, however, liberalism does not, itself, offer a basis for meaning. It does not make for mass political meaning. That is why it could not withstand the democratic tide that came in around 1890 and still engulfs us. That liberal principles cannot give wings to national spirit and the people's romance was recognized by J. G. Fichte, an early rabble-rouser for German versions of those things. In his *Addresses to the German Nation* in 1808 he said: "What spirit has an undisputed right to summon and to order everyone concerned, whether he himself be willing or not, and to compel anyone who resists, to risk everything including his life? Not the spirit of the peaceful citizen's love for the constitution and the laws, but the devouring flame of higher patriotism, which embraces the nation as the vesture of the eternal" ([1808] 1968, 120, see also 125–126).

It is sometimes suggested that liberalism can provide mass political meaning by making the presumption of liberty itself a political ideal with which the people can identify. Thus, our American patriotism is a commitment and devotion to liberty; our American Patria is a liberal spirit.

This view and hope never had much validity, and now has even less. It has never been proper to view liberalism as peculiarly American—Adam Smith never stepped foot in America. During the days when "liberalism" was still liberalism, America was an intellectual backwater. Any thought of liberalism serving as a basis for American pride and patriotism today is misguided. Liberalism ultimately invokes Adam Smith's "universal benevolence," wary of national prejudice. Liberalism is non-nationalist as well as anti-statist.

Liberalism's understandings, its configuration of ownership, its semantics, are today mortifying to practical politics. The major parties and the major media tacitly conspire to keep them out of the public mind. The

conventional "liberal v. conservative" framework is a society-wide groupthink that protects taboos and shuts out the view that we live in a polity of wholesale coercions.

Surely, there are in all people, and perhaps more so in Americans, certain bents toward natural liberty and suspicion and distrust of politics. But those bents cannot go far in making mass political meaning. Liberalism is bound to remain a rather intellectual affair, as its warrants are exceptionally intellectual. Justification for an ideology must come down to answering and satisfying the human yearning for meaning. Liberals must confess that their philosophy doesn't deliver meaning by way of government and politics. However, they have strong, if subtle, grounds for claiming, with Adam Smith, that liberalism is a good platform for the spontaneous development and sustenance of diverse non-political sources of meaning. Finally, in pointing out the unintended consequences—moral, cultural, and material—of the resort to statism for meaning, both left and conservative, liberals may negotiate the meaning of statist politics.

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