

**Building a Rhetorical Bridge
To (and For) Reasonable Conservatives**

(with a Disclamatory Introduction)

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When Scott Lucas and Bevan Sewell asked me if I'd like to become a regular contributor to *Libertas*, I was flattered, but also perplexed: what could I possibly bring to such a lively political forum that wasn't already being provided by others, and at overstock levels?

So I turned to the specifics of my own discipline and career for an answer. Firstly, whereas many contributors to such sites are political scientists, possibly historians, maybe economists, I am an author and a literary scholar. Admittedly, my scholarship in that latter discipline is so heavily weighted in the directions of history, politics, and international relations, that my own peers have often wondered if I'm in the right department. And with a career-long commitment to Transatlantic Studies, I consoled myself (none too reassuringly) that perhaps I really wasn't so dubious a fit as a regular contributor to *Libertas*, after all. But these doubtful self-validations did not answer the first question: what could I bring that was distinctive? What I ultimately hit upon may elicit grumbles, guffaws, gasps of outrage, giggles of derision, but that is (so I'm told) the nature of writing on and for the web.

My answer ultimately arose from the most quotidian aspects of the life of an English professor. As you are all aware, an inescapable part of that job is to teach rhetoric, logic, argument: whether we English professors like it or not, that is part of our lot in life until we are very senior scholars and/or tenured at a University with both a very light teaching load and a very large cohort of doctoral students to handle all those Freshman Comp courses. So, in the last dozen years, while attending scores of Transatlantic conferences, and colloquia on American Culture, and plenaries on American Exceptionalism and Eurocentrism, I would find myself slipping into my role as a Professor of composition, of rhetoric, of critical thinking and argumentation. In consequence, it often struck me, when I found myself balking at a learned speaker's points, that it was not usually because of what was adduced, but a consequence of the argumentative and rhetorical methods. Or, to use a vernacularistic idiom to critique the scholarship, "it's not what they said; it was how they said it."

In the first place, even deadly serious matters do not require a correspondingly deadly dullness in the prose with which they are discussed. A second, related issue concerns the format of the presentations, which tend to be of the "earnest essay" variety,

often very informed but also frequently peppered with tangential citations, incompletely contextualized quantitative data, and various other tortuous and uncertain “proofs.” (I do not bracket the word “proof” with quotes to suggest that I doubt the value of quantitative evidence; I do so to signal that one-sided or ham-handed evidentiary efforts are not the same thing as proof. Yet these presentations frequently demonstrate just such awkward monopolarity of political argumentation—often innocently, sometimes cannily).

In contrast, I believe there is a place for—indeed, a want of—more accessible and balanced rhetorical styles and approaches in the domain of academic (or let us say, “learned”) discourse. And so—trying to find a (possible) virtue in the (probable) defect of being an English professor asked to offer political commentary—I resolved to dedicate these columns to not merely alternative views, but an alternative format. Wanting to keep these pieces short and fast-moving, I promise/threaten that evidentiary discursions will be at need, rather than ad nauseum. Naturally, there is an implied (indeed, inevitable) consequence to this decision: “opinion” pieces do not carry the evidentiary weight of closely reasoned, written, and referenced essays. Yet “op ed” articles also have (again) the virtues of their defects: they are easier to read, and may make concessions to reader engagement that dense scholarship rarely has the time (or rhetorical largesse) to court. An even more extreme attempt to achieve this “reader-friendliness” will be noted in my occasional resort to irony and satire. Not suitable for serious debate? I think Swift, Voltaire, Brecht, and a host of others would disagree, and to good effect. Arguably, the more serious the issue, the more essential it is that some relief, some contrast to the dominant paradigm of grave (even grim) argumentation, maintain the vitality of the debate, if only by dint of its difference. Irony and satire cannot (and should not) be presumed to possess the same gravitas of focused and detailed analytical investigation, any more than quicksilver should be mistaken for steel. But both have their uses, and often the former is a useful, even essential, adjuvant to the tempering of the latter.

A second feature of how these columns reflect a somewhat different (or at least, rhetorically-focused) approach to contemporary cultural and political discourse is that it seems to me that many august academics and experts have either forgotten (or ignored) that the rules (well, traditional strategies) of rhetoric advise that most arguments should be addressed to, and formulated for, what insurance companies and lawyers like to call, “the reasonable person.” The paradox of this hypothetical being is that “the reasonable person” is the lynchpin of an immense amount of juridical activity and decision-making, and yet, is nowhere described or defined except in the most colloquial and indefinite terms. This is in part because the concept must remain malleable: many insurance claims and legal suits ultimately boil down to sustained battles over what it is fair to expect of a “reasonable person” in terms of their knowledge of the law, communal (and self-protective) proactivity, and general perspicacity. But this unusual being (perhaps as mythical a creature as the unicorn, the dragon, or the happy-go-lucky tax auditor) has a further quality that ensures its enduring nebulousness: the “reasonable person” is fundamentally an inherent and impossibly perfect centrist. This “constructed” individual exists at the midpoint of all bell-curves, inhabits the murky zone of the “social norm” or the “statistical mean.” Although a realistic impossibility, it is nonetheless an eminently logical concept: a being that is in any way statistically anomalous cannot be very useful as a “normative” basis of comparison. Any atypical elements in such a being could,

reasonably, be perceived as variables which induce correspondingly atypical reactions, behaviors, or opinions. In short, the “Common man” is the intrinsically correct model upon which to base the characteristics of the “reasonable person.” (That there is nothing at all ‘common’ about the “common sense” which is a defining characteristic of the “reasonable person” is a separate and thorny matter.)

It is arresting, therefore, to observe how very little contemporary political discourse seems to be vectored toward these “reasonable persons” who exist at the center of the bell curves of human capability and opinion. The level of diction in academic essays is usually suitable only for other individuals with doctorates or similar career preparation. It is a matter of experts communicating to experts. It is of course appropriate that such domains of specialized discourse exist and flourish broadly. And there may be more than one reader of this who, considering the different fare created for the “person in the street,” is even now grumbling, “yes, and that is why there are news magazines for different levels of readers—everything from *The Economist* to *US News and World Report*.” Again, quite true. But there is still an important conversational linkage that is missing, or is so underserved that it exists only in small doses and in even smaller venues: a direct point of contact between these two different domains of discourse. Right now, the task of bridging the gap between professors and populace is left for those specialty journalists who might opt to (but usually don’t) consult the learned journals of the academic realm as part of their efforts to relay political news and opinion to “lay” readers of varying abilities and political predispositions. What does not exist, therefore, is a direct, unmediated conduit between academia and interested laypersons. It is hoped that these columns might, in small measure, facilitate such contact and exchange.

But this is only half of the importance that vests in the “reasonable person” as a focal point of rhetorical strategy. In debate and general argument, the “reasonable person” is the recommended object of persuasion because, quite simply, it is presumed that s/he is amenable to being persuaded. I do not mean that the “reasonable person” is somehow perceived as being weak-minded and in need of guidance. Rather, the presumption regarding this imaginary being is that they are undecided because they are still open to various appeals and arguments.

From a casual inspection of most academic addresses or articles, one would hardly suspect that this strategy is the historically-vindicated *sine qua non* of effective rhetoric. Rather, learned and eloquent writers and orators often seem wholly seduced by their own passion, and wind up preaching to those already in agreement with them (let us call these allies the “choir”) about the grievous wrongs or recidivisms of those who are politically opposed (let us call them the “heretics”). However, this preaching to the choir is just as pointless as delivering the same sermon in the heretics’ camp. It is pointless because neither of the audiences will change; the choir-members are already true believers; the heretics are already dead-set against you.

What is missing from the rhetorical picture? As you have anticipated, the reasonable person. The great bulge at the center of human abilities, knowledge, opinion, and attitude are those people who are un- (or incompletely-) decided, people whom pollsters call the “fence-sitters”: those persons whose opinions still can be shifted, in large or small measure, by the power of arguments they have yet to hear and consider. These are—rightly—the primary targets and objects of rhetoric, regardless of the topic or opinion of

the spokesperson. To aim one's words and ideas anywhere else is essentially a waste of precious time and energy.

However, one cannot successfully address the fence-sitters, the "reasonable persons," as one would the choir: they are not predisposed to believe any particular argument; they are merely receptive to a new perspective. As such, the basic principles of responsible rhetoric—of creating fair and accurate analogies, of acknowledging both sides of the issue, of avoiding *ad hominem* attacks, and countless other constraints—become not merely ethical choices, but mandatory operating parameters. Nothing decides a crowd of the undecided so swiftly and surely as when they discern that the person addressing them does not respect their intellect, and does not bother to "fight fair" in the process of mounting an argument. This sense of a simultaneously pragmatic and ethical embrace of balanced argumentation and evidence is sorely lacking in much contemporary political discourse. These failings want to be both cited and critiqued, regardless of the partisanship of the article or author, and that is something I hope to undertake in these informal fora.

So who is this "reasonable person," for our purposes? Since most persons with any political interest at all are not completely neutral, we can begin by breaking the field down into liberals and conservatives, since each of those terms has more to do with an outlook and approach to policy-making (rather than being more narrowly associated with any particular party or platform).

Happily, although usually set in opposition to each other, conservatives and liberals arguably have some similarities, at least in terms of subcategorical ranking. To be more precise, there seem to be three kinds of conservatives, and also liberals, and thus I propose the following tripartite taxonomy for distinguishing them:

Reflexive
Reactionary
Reasonable

"Reflexive" signifies a liberal/conservative that adopts positions by reflex; there is little need for thought. They follow the party line, and if no such line or credo exists, they generally adopt courses of behavior which follow the social and/or ideological vectors implied by the tenets they have already slavishly followed.

"Reactionary" signifies a person who undertakes active engagement with issues, but not as an inherently open-ended process. These persons begin each policy question with the outcome largely predetermined; for them, political process is not about discovering a truth, but how best to fit the new challenge into their universe of pre-established rights and wrongs. It is an intellectual exercise, but one that is inherently teleological.

"Reasonable" signifies that, although the individual in question starts with a political predisposition, it is not so profound as to be a prejudice. It is certainly not a teleology. The value of thought, induction, deduction, macroviews balanced and informed by microdata, are all at a premium in this person's internal political processes. This has the highest potential for creating independent thinkers (and voters), and makes such an individual inherently and constantly ready to "depart" from the party line--largely because they do not see themselves as concerned with, or constrained by, what the

"party" says. They trust their own powers of cognition--and social and political values--over the impulses of the madding crowds that populate both the left and right sides of the political aisles.

So we will wish to address ourselves to someone who we would (happily) identify as "Reasonable". But should we choose a liberal or conservative? Again, to be guided by the belief that these columns will serve best if they studiously do not duplicate superior, similar efforts elsewhere, it would seem advisable to address these columns to Reasonable Conservatives. There are plenty of liberal opinions to be found circulating in the liberal academic journals and blogs that are frequented by (is a pattern emerging?) liberals. But just how often do those domains of discourse involve conservatives, except to rant at their perfidies or patiently (yet often patronizingly) advise them on reconsidering their provincialisms?

In short, this kind of treatment of conservatives and their views does not truly engage them in discourse: there is no *a priori* assumption of any validity in the perceptions of the opposed camp, and, (both more subtly and more confoundingly) there is no recognition of the fundamental differences in the epistemological and practical paradigms that exist between the two. The merits of each sides' arguments are lost on the other not merely because of the ends they wish to achieve, but because of the dissimilar epistemological and rhetorical means each employs in the course of their argumentation.

Let me ground these abstractions in tangible details. In the first place, as encountered by liberals, the conflicting political consciousness of conservatism is founded not so much in differences of opinion regarding the passing partisan issues of this (or any other) day, but in a set of fundamental epistemological distinctions. Firstly, the conservative mind is inherently pragmatic, rather than visionary or utopian: hence, it is deeply rooted in both recorded history and observed (and usually measurable) phenomena. Such a mind is not the place to go to behold a bright new vision of Things To Come (for those 'Things' would look suspiciously like the 'Things' we see today—or in history books). However, the conservative mind is, by its nature, reflexively analytical of tangible particulars, of means and methods whereby objectives will (or will not) be realized. (Say what you will regarding the dubious track record that conservatives have in matters such as social programs and civil rights, they do manage to get reelected consistently, despite having a smaller registered support base. Whether or not one considers that a desirable outcome, conservatives have a demonstrated ability to repeatedly achieve it in the face of unpromising odds. That itself is an achievement which warrants some respect and somber consideration.)

Predictably, conservative theorists and projectors are driven by both the algorithms and agenda of true *real politik*, in which politics are ever a domain of unmitigated materialist conflict. As such, their earnest and proper job is not to ruthlessly "screw" the opposition, but to unflinchingly chart a course toward what their political and sociological paradigms tell them will produce the best outcome for their own nation—where "best" is defined by a sometimes simplistic, sometimes startlingly complex, amalgam of material and traditional desiderata. For evidence of these contrasts and paradigms at work, witness the treatises of Kahn and Huntington--and if Fukuyama sounds more jarring and provocatively post-modern when he announces "the end of history," it is a phrase that (as we know) actually announces the reification of the conservative elements of the existing world order into an enduring "steady state" of

global political ecology. To waggishly reword the axiomatic presupposition that seems to inhabit the core of Fukuyama's theory, "The more things change, the more they don't. At all. Ever." Obviously, Fukuyama's arresting title announced no new political order--but it certainly sounded provocative enough to sell a lot of books (again, the admirable practicality of the conservative mind at work).

I am not suggesting that Kahn, Huntington, or Fukuyama are "Reasonable Conservatives": however, they provide excellent illustrations of not only conservative thought and habits of mind, but the conservative analytical paradigm in operation, albeit often in an extremist mode. This should be used to inform not only any discourse that hopes to reach Reasonable Conservatives, but also the kinds of appeals and values that they will recognize as valid, and those which they are more likely to ignore, devalue, or misconstrue. And lest it sound as though I am engaging in the same patronizing attempts at "partisan rehabilitation" that I critiqued earlier, allow me to aver that liberal thought has its own blind spots, presuppositions, and peccadilloes--and plenty of less-than-Reasonable expositors. However, insofar as the liberal perspective predominates in (at least the American) academy, and there is a paucity of alternative discursive space that actually attempts to "speak conservative," my concern cannot be with the Reasonable Liberal: s/he is not the often-excluded minority in this particular subculture.

And so the final purpose of these columns: to take what might be seen as "liberal" perspectives but investigate their merits (and yes, failings) through the language and lens of what might be called the paradigms of conservative thought and expression. I am fully aware that such an enterprise may turn out to be an embarrassing exercise in futility that only serves to aggravate persons on both sides of the political spectrum. Even now, I can almost hear the accusations of oversimplification, generalization, and appropriation (and construction) of false and/or flawed social identities. To which I can only respond: discourse is not physics, so failure (or success) can only be conclusively assessed in retrospect. That makes it worth trying.

At least once.