

# On “Conservative Balance” and “Traditional Values”

New Ideological Antagonisms  
between Western Modernity and Russia

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## **Abstract**

The article analyzes “traditional values” through the lens of history, philosophy, and political science in the context of the main social and political processes within Western modernity. From such a perspective, the notion of ‘traditional values’ comes as an important element of the liberal-conservative approach characteristic of Western modernity as opposed to the prevalent emancipatory approach. The history of relations between the West and Russia shows that Russia has traditionally acted as a “conservative balancer” in the system of international relations that developed in the 19th century. At the end of the 20th century, following the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, radical left-liberal elites gained the upper hand in the West. The current conflict between Russia

and the West reflects a reconfiguration of Western modernity, where Russia seeks to take its traditional place as a liberal-conservative center in the system of international relations. Thus, the notion of ‘traditional values’ becomes one of the components of a holistic worldview. The article offers basic intellectual and methodological tools for studying the current crisis precisely in terms of the unfolding new ideological confrontation.

**Keywords:** ideology, traditional values, modernity, liberalism, conservatism, geopolitics, culture wars.

Discussions about “traditional values” outside of official state discourse are often puzzling, or, at a minimum, provoke an ironic grin. Moreover, this is true not only of the “liberal community,” but also of completely loyalist groups. “Traditional values” are criticized for being meaningless, reactionary, amorphous, and explicitly declarative. A favorite objection often raised in this regard cites divorce statistics in Russia (What sacred bonds of marriage and the family are you talking about?) and a very low level of religiosity of the Russian population (compared to the main ideological opponent—the United States), weak horizontal ties, lack of social trust in Russian society, and much more.

In this interpretation, the “protection of traditional values” is seen as just a situational and opportunistic tool designed to help political elites maintain the stability of the state and society during geopolitical turmoil, as an “ideological crutch,” but certainly not as the basis for a holistic worldview. Moreover, it is said that the “protection of traditional values” cannot be an attractive idea “for export” because every nation has its own values. This is a debatable point: the “protection of traditional values” seems declarative because it does not imply a single and final list of these values, but only states the need to protect them from the universalizing Western narrative. It is proposed to protect the “different” from the “common” and the “tested” from the “new.” Such protection matches the well-known definition given by American political scientist Michael Joseph Oakeshott to conservative thinking: “To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to

prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss” (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 169).

In other words, in order for the discussion about “traditional values” not to seem empty and formal, it should focus not on “values” as such (in the form of an approved list), but on a fundamentally different way of thinking and understanding how society and the state should be organized. In this article, we will try to present a different and in our opinion more integral and philosophically substantiated view on what is commonly called “traditional values.” The hypothesis is that “traditional values” can be understood not only, and not so much, as a list of any specific principles but as a special approach to understanding the dynamics of social development, and ultimately, a truly holistic worldview, a type of thinking, or, if you like, an “ideology” (in the positive sense of the word).

### **MODERNITY AS A “STRUGGLE WITH THE PAST” AND COMPENSATORY MECHANISMS**

In order to understand what is new and what is “traditional,” and whether it concerns principles or the very mode of thinking, one should turn to the sociological roots of the ongoing changes. At the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries, a new type of society emerged in the West due to a number of historical circumstances. Sociologists and philosophers called it “modernist society.” This society itself has a large number of characteristics, both political and economic, but from the ideological perspective, the main characteristic of this type of society is the constant “struggle with the past.” In modernist society, no principle or tradition can prove its necessity for society until it gets approved by “reason.”

Constant deliverance from the “burden of the past” and “tradition” is a constitutive feature of modernity. In the absence of “compensatory” mechanisms, this process turns into a constant struggle and “rearrangement” of reality to meet some abstract principles put forward by “reason” that has freed itself from its “fettters.” Sociologists, however, emphasize, luckily for us, that there is such a “compensatory mechanism”

in modernity, and it is called 'historical consciousness,' or, in other words, 'conservative thinking.' Oddly enough, it is the modernist society that, due to the loss of traditions, shows keen "interest in the past" by developing historical science, and opening new museums, galleries and cultural institutions (Lübbe, 2016). The problem is that the balance between a striving for progress and attention to and respect for the past is not soundly ensured, and the maintenance of this fragile equilibrium depends on the play of random social forces and contingencies. It is important to note that the balance is maintained simultaneously at two levels: within each society and between individual states and civilizations within the system of international relations.

The history of the West, starting around the 19th century, is a difficult and painful search for these balances, both within each individual society and in international politics. Russia, as a constant participant in the European system of interstate relations (after defeating Napoleon) and cultural exchanges, played the most active role in establishing this balance, serving as a "conservative balancer," thereby preventing the unification of social orders, and, according to Henry Kissinger (2022), acting as a tamer of hegemony by opposing the most radical progressive tendencies of its time and thus having a stabilizing effect on the dynamics of public and international relations in general.

The delicate balance was lost during World War I and the Russian Revolution, which radically changed the structure and dynamics of relations. One can say that the radical version of modernity won in the country that was supposed to oppose it. Moreover, the radical victory of modernity was accompanied by the physical destruction within the country of the very possibility of relations that could serve as a "balancer." Building such a society set the greatest precedent in history. Prior to this, not a single Western society had had the resolve (although there were attempts) to choose solely the strategic path of modernity, excluding the possibility of "compensatory mechanisms."

A fundamental change in Russia's role in the system of international relations led to a global redistribution of ideological positions. Now the West acted as a "conservative balancer" in the system of international relations, upholding moderation and traditional forms of market

relations and defending itself against the “Bolshevik threat.” However, despite the persistent and stable position of the West at the international level, contrary processes took place within Western societies. Left-wing intellectualism, which is precisely the form of representation of the dominant modern approach associated with the rejection of traditions, gradually took over cultural and educational institutions. It was a paradoxical process: as the USSR evolved from radical Bolshevism to moderate “socialist conservatism” during the second half of the 20th century, exactly the opposite happened in the Western elites—conservative tendencies lost their influence, while progressive positions strengthened. The difference was that while Soviet Bolshevism emphasized the radical transformation of socio-economic relations, the “new left” focused on changing the moral and cultural foundations of Western society (Gottfried, 2009). The short-term conservative turn in the late 1970s and the 1980s, when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were at the helm, failed to reverse this trend. Moreover, the disappearance of the USSR, which was largely precipitated by the efforts of these conservative leaders, undermined the fundamental need for the West to act as a “balancer.” Conservatism had finally lost its “protective attractiveness” (due to the disappearance of the subject whose influence had to be fought off) and began to rapidly lose its position to the left-wing elites, primarily in culture and education.

Russia, which was in a state of total ideological and worldview vacuum after the collapse of the USSR, and had to “collect” itself again, withdrew from international politics, thus giving Western “left-wing” elites a unique historical opportunity to build up their propaganda and educational resources, finally ousting Cold War-era “conservatives” and “balancers” from education and ultimately from politics. When Russia returned to world and European politics in the 2000s, it did so as a new “conservative balancer,” which the Western elites, already “boosted” by left-wing ideology and confident of their complete and total victory, could not help taking extremely aggressively. In this regard, Ukrainian events, from 2014 until the special military operation in 2022, only served as a geopolitical catalyst for the ideological enmity that has been an inseparable element of the modernist system since its inception.

**WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO KEEP THE BALANCE?  
RUSSIA'S EXPERIENCE: MISTAKES AND CONCLUSIONS  
FOR THE FUTURE**

The obvious question that arises in this regard pertains to social philosophy: Why is the lack of balance between the two centers of modernity so dangerous? The simplest answer to this question is this: the lack of balance may cause society either to fall into utopianism and forcibly “rearrange” social relations to match a theoretically constructed ideal, or to “get stuck” in the past, and therefore lack energy for development. Obviously, the former option is likely if the “left-wing” spectrum achieves absolute victory, the latter one is possible if the “right-wing” forces win.

No country in the world, except Russia, has ever tried so hard to fully achieve one of the extreme forms of modernity. In this sense, Russia is a country with unique historical experience in implementing radical modernist utopia. Russian culturologist Vitaly Kurennoi draws attention to the following point: “Soviet history is a unique case of a long-term social experiment to build an organizational and management structure designed to radically modify human behavior” (Kurennoi, 2013, p. 12). We will only note that this experience, in our opinion, has been fundamentally underestimated and has not been assessed by the modern Russian intellectual class.

In the 1990s, after the fall of the USSR, the Russian elites and Russian intellectuals made a fatal mistake by fundamentally misinterpreting the ideological orientation of the West. Russia was gravitating towards the West, seeing this process as a movement from “radical modernity,” which had proved deficient, to the liberal-conservative “middle ground.” This kind of society based on these principles was indeed built in the West in the second half of the 20th century and that is why it was objectively attractive. However, in the 1990s, the West itself was already moving in the opposite direction from “liberal conservatism” to a new edition of radical modernity by rejecting the remaining traditions, revising family relations, sexual morality, etc... At the same time, the West did not abandon its role of hegemon in the geopolitical and economic spheres and was using its dominance to advance, among other things, a radical ideological agenda.

A separate problem was that this movement towards radicalism in the West was most noticeable at that time not in politics, where the previous elites still wielded power by inertia, but in culture and education. This peculiarity of Western society was noted in the second half of the 20th century by Friedrich von Hayek. He wrote, “The influence of rationalism has indeed been so profound and pervasive that, in general, the more intelligent an educated person is, the more likely he or she now is not only to be a rationalist, but also to hold socialist views (regardless of whether he or she is sufficiently doctrinal to attach to his or her views any label, including ‘socialist’). The higher we climb up the ladder of intelligence, the more we talk with intellectuals, the more likely we are to encounter socialist convictions. Rationalists tend to be intelligent and intellectual; and intelligent intellectuals tend to be socialists” (Hayek, 1962, pp. 52-53).

In fact, the penetration of the new “Western ideology” is felt most strongly in the intellectual and academic sphere, and this is no coincidence. Since the Soviet-era Marxist socio-humanities were completely discredited, a new class of humanities-minded intellectuals formed in Russia in the 1990s. Its main purpose was the uncritical borrowing of Western humanitarian methods in social cognition. Mastering these methods was akin to a religious revelation for post-Soviet humanities scholars. These peculiarities of post-Soviet development weakened critical thinking and made it difficult to separate political processes from cultural and unbiased analysis of reality, and rationally forecast the future. Undoubtedly, the translation policy played an important role in these processes as mainly the texts of left-wing and far-right theorists made their way into the Russian intellectual space, while the “middle ground” liberal-conservative views were much less available.

As a result, the post-Soviet humanities, in fact, made a pivot turn, moving from one version of radical modernity to another, de facto bypassing intermediate stages and ignoring alternative theories that offered a more balanced and stereoscopic view of reality. The dominant paradigm in socio-humanities was social constructivism, which essentially did not differ much from Soviet Marxism, but appeared in a new, updated version.

The main dogma of social constructivism comes from a very refined and terminologically loaded explanation viewing the emergence of all traditions as "inventions" and "constructs" of the human mind and culture at a certain stage of development, as a rule, in the interests of a certain social group so that it could exercise its power over another group (where there was "bourgeois exploitation," there emerged "male chauvinism"). Recognized authorities in this field are, for example, left-wing sociologist Benedict Anderson or historian Eric Hobsbawm, as well as post-structuralist philosophers Paul-Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, et al.

References to their works in academic texts exploring the problems of "tradition" are taken for granted today. Another important feature of social constructivism is that the distinction between theory and practice is disappearing, since the theoretical explanation is essentially tantamount to an automatic suggestion of what has to be changed and how, and scientific texts resemble political programs. In other words, "old" principles, such as academic neutrality and objectivity, become the "servants of oppression" in this paradigm, and the new humanities, designed to advise political activists, turn into a progressive tool of liberation. Knowledge itself is described as an instrument of political struggle. In practice, this means that if social institutions and traditions are "invented" and always the product of the human mind and the desire for power, then using the theories of social constructivism, we have the opportunity to "reinvent" any tradition, making it serve not the authorities, but the goals that we today see as correct and necessary for achieving freedom, equality, and inclusivity. And so any historical past becomes something that must be overcome for the sake of building a better future, and the present turns into a space of "culture war."

Moreover, from this point of view, there are no spheres of life where the possibility of "reassembly" or "overcoming" would be limited by something: this concerns both socio-political institutions and our norms in the field of language, morality and sexual relationships.

The problem is that, being inside the dominant paradigm of Western humanities, there is practically nothing to object to them with. Inevitably, the theoretical foundations of this paradigm produce



practical recommendations almost literally repeating the old Marxist thesis: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Marx, 2010, p. 387).

Once again, we should note the danger of such reasoning: the point is not whether freedom is good or bad, and how many genders or understandings of what a human-being is and how he/she should develop can exist hypothetically. The problem is that by intentionally intervening in a complex social reality woven from traditions and rules, the influence of which on various aspects of our lives we are unable to fully comprehend, we create huge risks that changes will not lead us to the desired result, and what was before will be tragically lost. F. von Hayek clearly warns us about this: “Man is not born wise, rational and good, but has to be taught to become so. It is not our intellect that created our morals; rather, human interactions governed by our morals make possible the growth of reason and those capabilities associated with it. Man became intelligent because there was tradition—that which lies between instinct and reason” (Hayek, 1992, p. 21). And further he says: “And our whole civilization in consequence rests, and must rest, on our believing much that we cannot know to be true in the Cartesian sense” (Hayek, 1998, p. 12).

The experience of Russia’s development in the 20th century proves this. Having forcibly re-created socio-economic reality to fulfill rationally planned goals and objectives, the USSR not only failed to achieve the desired results, but it eventually lost socio-economic competition to those who preferred to adhere to old market principles and refrain from social experiments. Rebuilding market economy after the planned experiments cost Russia no less than its abolition a century ago had. Current experiments with language and morality in the West are even more dangerous simply because, just as in the case of the abolition of market mechanisms under the pretext of increasing the predictability and rationality of production, we do not know what aspects of our social reality, adaptability and simply elementary mental health depend on traditions called today patriarchal or cissexual. Today we can only say that, thanks to these traditions, we have formed our civilization, which means that their role clearly cannot be completely

negative. Reality is always more convincing than its possible future, because reality is already here, but there is no intended future yet, and perhaps there will never be any.

This argument has been stated most accurately by philosopher Andrei Teslya: "Subject to criticism should primarily be not the existing, but what is proposed as an alternative. Since it does not exist yet, to assert itself, it must present arguments much more weighty than the criticism of the existing: the existing can be as bad as possible, but it already exists, while the alternative does not, and we cannot know in advance with all certainty how bad it will be once it materializes. We compare reality with a dream, with the imaginary, that is, these are fundamentally different notions. The problem, therefore, is not the attractiveness of the imaginary, but the consequences of its realization" (Teslya, 2015, p. 34).

A person cannot survive in a world without traditions, or in a world where traditions or norms of behavior are the subject of choice, since a person perceives himself as a human within the framework of a certain tradition. Mastering a tradition precedes the emergence of personality. One cannot choose his "gender" because before choosing it, "gender" must already exist as a system of norms and rules, and therefore be a cultural disposition. Apparently, this is impossible just as there is no way one can choose his "own" language, because the development of grammatical constructions occurs unconsciously and spontaneously through imitation at an early age. Moreover, it is thanks to the unconscious assimilation of grammatical constructions in childhood that we can consciously learn other languages in the future, using the knowledge and cognitive models of the native language that formed without our participation and were never something we could choose. If we offered a child a choice of language, he would never be able to make this choice, because he would have no experience of existing inside linguistic reality. This example shows that by making the fundamental elements of human life the subject of choice, perhaps we deprive humanity of the opportunity to adapt to social life. The free choice of identity on a number of substantive issues essentially amounts to "creating something from nothing," whereby a person must create his own social reality without having any real experience of sociality per se.

## **REVENGE OF COMMUNITARIANISM AND RUSSIAN TRADITION**

It is worth noting that 20th century Western philosophy undoubtedly had the tradition of criticizing the freedom of the “liberal subject”—communitarianism (Amitai Etzioni, William Galston, Charles Taylor, and others). The discussion of interest to us dates back to the 1970s. The main arguments were developed during debates over John Rawls’ “A Theory of Justice” (1971) (Rawls, 1995). By the end of the 20th century, communitarianism had become a fairly influential intellectual trend within Western modernity. Its popularity coincided with the rule of conservative political elites and the end of the Cold War.

Communitarians consistently criticized the basic principles of liberalism, claiming that freedom can be understood as something that remains after the “subtraction” of the predicates that make up human sociality. In other words, communitarians challenged the fundamental thesis of left-liberal discourse related to the idea that true human freedom is “hidden” from us by totalizing power discourses, which must be “deconstructed” and destroyed. Communitarians insisted on the significance of the “community” for developing one’s personality, drew attention to the initially social nature of human “values” and basic behavioral patterns, contrasting the atomic liberal subject with a real, historically and culturally conditioned person living in a particular place, time and community.

Communitarians also insisted that the liberal theory, which proclaimed the universality of its values, was, in fact, deeply biased. From their point of view, at its heart undoubtedly lies the grand moral idea of a free individual who is not burdened with social ties and moral prejudices that are not the subject of his own choice. While insisting that such an idea of the individual and freedom is abstract and illusory, communitarians also emphasized an equally important aspect of the individual’s responsibility to the community, which cannot be justified within the boundaries of the liberal understanding of freedom.

In the liberal interpretation, an individual seems to always oppose society, his main task is to “deconstruct” and critically analyze the principles and norms that are “imposed” on him. However, society (as Alasdair MacIntyre notes, for example) can only function on the idea of

shared virtue and “moral consensus” (McIntyre, 2000). Morality cannot be the subject of choice; it is “inherited,” because a person is a “social being” who finds himself within the framework of a specific social narrative (in this case McIntyre refers to Aristotle’s understanding of virtue). According to McIntyre, the liberal theory of justice artificially “rips” a person out of social ties, destroying the unity of public perceptions and leaving the person “lonely” and “devoid of responsibility.”

Unfortunately, at the moment we can state that despite a brief surge in the popularity of communitarianism in the academic milieu at the end of the 20th century, it could not have a significant impact on the implementation of practical policy and essentially became the “last attempt” at the intellectual alignment of the processes that were mounting within Western modernity.

At the end of this section, I would like to note that the basic principles of communitarianism are similar to the system of arguments that traditionally evolved in the Russian philosophical tradition. In our view, the Russian philosophical tradition is a fairly original way to criticize the dominant liberal approach of Western modernity from a conservative-communitarian position.

From its very beginning, Russian philosophy tried to figure out whether the development of modernity is possible without deepening and intensifying individualism. Where are the boundaries of modernity’s emancipatory strategy? How much individualism can the social organization of Western society withstand? How can religiosity be preserved in a secular world?

The tradition of political realism, including with respect to the IR theory, was also thoroughly developed in Russian philosophy. So the heuristic potential of Russian philosophy in solving topical issues of modernity seems extremely interesting. Apparently, this question is still to be addressed by unbiased and attentive researchers.

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Summing up, I would like to say that the struggle for “traditional values” should mean not the protection of some specific list of “values,” but the protection of the mindset that distinguishes between science

and politics, public and private, rational and emotional, male and female, truth and lies, etc. All these values, in fact, make up the principles of classical liberal conservatism, which the West (and this, apparently, can already be said with absolute certainty) has rejected, opting for a “culture war” and a new version of radical modernity.

The protection of “tradition” in this sense is the best barrier against social radicalism, the possibility of which is inevitably present in any modern society, especially in the intellectual-humanitarian class. Therefore, paradoxically, the danger of radical modernity is best of all understood in today’s Russia by those who do not have an academic liberal arts education, because the awareness of this danger stems from the most tragic experience of radical social transformations in the Soviet period and from life experience, which is more valuable and more accurate than any sociological or political theories.

In the 20th century, Russia preferred a social experiment to moderate and measured development, and the West chose to stand aside. Today, the situation looks exactly the opposite, and Russia’s political choice seems rational: in a situation of social experimentation, the one who observes is more likely to win. To paraphrase Marx, one might say: “Philosophers first explained the world, and then tried to change it, now they must leave it alone.”

The terrible experience of utopia is, paradoxical as it is, our main advantage. Russian philosopher Semion Frank prophetically noted back in 1924: “When we Russians, financially and spiritually impoverished, with whatever we had in life lost, are looking for instructions and insight from the leaders of European thought, from whom most of us used to learn before, we, innately inclined towards humility, always devoid of national conceit and least of all capable of it in these unhappy times, find out with astonishment that there is no one and nothing to learn from, and that even though we have a much bitter experience of misfortunes and have sounded the depth of misery, we can probably teach humanity something useful ourselves” (Frank, 1990, p. 136).

We hope that this publication will be the first step in the discussion about values and modern ideological conflicts. Ideological content

is rapidly coming back into world politics, becoming a key factor in international relations. Having made a brief pause at the end of the 20th century, the Western modernity project continues to evolve, generating new conflicts and historical events. These processes require calm and subtle analysis, unencumbered by moral evaluations and accusations.

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