

A Conservative Pluralism

Conservatives should oppose elite attempts to crush American subcultures.



Casey Chalk writes in [*The American Conservative*](#):

Not long ago an acquaintance in the federal government told me he would be visiting some family in the Eastern Shore of Virginia. I told him my fascination with the Eastern Shore—settled by the English not long after Jamestown—especially [Tangier Island](#), whose locals speak with an accent [historical linguists say](#) resembles that of seventeenth century Cornwall. My coworker shrugged it off. “All those people need to move on with their lives. There’s no future there. It’s backwards,” he said.

Though perhaps others would be less direct, I think that sentiment is quite common among urban elites. The problem with flyover country, the Rust Belt, Appalachia, and other backwater parts of America isn't globalism, off-shoring, unrestricted immigration, and other destabilizing trends, they say, but the working class's unwillingness to accept a changing world and a new economy. These people need to leave their broken, rundown communities for the urbs and suburbs, [join the service industry](#), and get a degree. "Pay Workers to Leave Depressed Towns: Public policies are more effective when they invest in people, not places," read the [headline and subheadline of a 2019 opinion piece at Bloomberg](#).

There's an irony there, though one little explored. Aren't urban elites supposed to be multiculturalists and pluralists? Aren't they supposed to respect, even celebrate other cultures? The presumed answer, if unspoken, exposes a double standard. If we're talking about foreign cultures, especially those that exemplify the exotic *other*, sure. But if we're talking about old, often dying American subcultures, especially ones that hold conservative, traditionalist beliefs about, say, gender or sexuality, that's another thing. Those cultures, especially the more they might affect the next election cycle, are a threat to contemporary mores and in need of eradication.

Politics professor Claes Ryn's essay "Neo-Jacobin Nationalism or Responsible Nationhood?" in the recently re-published [Defending the Republic: Constitutional Morality in a Time of Crisis](#), though focused on foreign policy, helps us better understand this tension. America, our elites tell us, is a nation that celebrates diversity and pluralism, welcoming and honoring all peoples regardless of their culture. Yet at the very same time, they exhibit palpable condescension towards the most ancient and venerable subcultures of American society. Whether we are talking about the coastal regions

of [Delmarva](#), the hollers of Kentucky, or the plateaus of the Ozarks, its inhabitants are nothing but a bunch of bigoted, backwards, redneck yokels.

Ryn calls this broader intellectual movement neo-Jacobinism, given its similarities to those who inspired and led the French Revolution of 1789. Neo-Jacobins champion universal principles of liberty and equality; they esteem themselves virtuous fighters against contemptible, backwards bigots; and they demand our society (and everyone else's) undergo radical change to realize their utopian vision. We see that, for example, in the [revolutionaries' response](#) to reactionary, devout Catholics in the Vendée. "The great arrogance with which neo-Jacobinism prescribes for all humanity shows that self-serving ideology, not philosophy, shapes its thinking," writes Ryn.

What's especially frustrating about this, observes Ryn, is that America spent half a century resisting—and eventually defeating—a global power that sought to accomplish that very same Jacobin project. "It is disheartening to consider that, after ridding itself of the scourge of communism, humanity may now have to suffer the consequences of another homogenizing pseudo-universalism." (No doubt, Ryn is [far from the only observer](#) to [identify similarities](#) between Soviet totalitarianism and the new authoritarianism of our woke elites.)

The influence of this alternative political vision in our republican institutions represents a repudiation of [the Framers' understanding](#) of human nature and the need to protect and preserve state sovereignty, local autonomy and variety (see *Federalist* 45). Ryn explains: "The neo-Jacobin myth of America the Virtuous offers a justification not for restraining but for unleashing the will to power." And, most worryingly, it is being applied not only to peoples in far-flung places of the world, but [upon the American people, often with severe consequences](#).

I contemplated this paradox during the height of the pandemic, when my social media feeds were overwhelmed by exhortations to support “local” businesses—Google for example [promised](#) to provide \$800 million to small- and medium-sized local businesses. *What* “local” businesses did tech elites mean, I wondered. If commercials like [this one for YouTube](#) are any indication, it sure won’t be the working class independent contractor with “Trump/Pence” and “*ΜΟΛΩΝ ΛΑΒΕ*” bumper stickers on his Ford F-150.

I’d offer that what our elites mean by the “Buy Local” movement, is actually just an extension of their globalist, monoculture preferences. “Buy Local” means supporting the new Asian-fusion restaurant with illegal immigrants working in the kitchen. It means supporting the minority-owned confectionery selling organic baked goods with single-source chocolate, whose owner moved from some other anonymous, exchangeable suburb a few years ago. What’s important is that the local businesses with the right political opinions, with the pro forma rainbow flags and Human Rights Watch stickers in their window, are supported. It is, in other words, a sham localism that serves as yet another vehicle for the agenda of universalizing globalists. (Ironically, it’s also apparently [not that good for the environment](#).)

Of course, the “Buy Local” movement is often an improvement over an alternative commercial attitude that is indifferent as to where one’s money is spent. But we should be honest about its frequent manifestations in American culture, which often are not aimed at preserving generations-old communities and industries, but self-congratulatory and self-aggrandizing gestures among the technocratic class. Supporting the latest craft brew establishment founded by an out-of-state transplant will not help ensure those with generational roots in your community survive the recession.

Conservatives, under the banner of true pluralism, should resist this snobbish, often prejudicial form of localism and

expose it for the farce that it is. The true pluralist, or what Ryn calls a cosmopolitan,

does not assume that he is in all important respects superior to his host. He understands that the good life can be lived differently by different peoples and that all peoples, including his own, have strengths and weaknesses.... He delights in the fact that the world is not a place of barren homogeneity.

Responsible citizenship and neighborliness means possessing a true pride in and love for our peculiar community, in all its uniqueness and imperfections, but also respecting what Ryn calls "the attainments and legitimate interests of other societies." I think, for example, of my years working in Thailand, whose people exemplified a veneration for its often imperialist monarchy, Buddhist monks, and spirit houses that I as a democratic American raised in a religiously denuded public square often found bizarre. Then again, it was their country, not mine, and I understood the proper response was respect and deference to their traditions and mores, many of which are praiseworthy. In the case of a nation, this means honoring the legitimate interests of our nation's many venerable sub-cultures, not only racial minority communities, but also Italian urbanites in the Northeast, rural Scotch-Irish of Appalachia, or the small-town Germans of the Midwest.

This is where American conservatives must assume the mantle of true pluralists and multiculturalists. I've [cited](#) fellow TAC contributor Michael Warren Davis's proposal that to truly appreciate another culture, one must first love one's own. We must identify those individuals and businesses who actually embody a link to the past, and who are invested in their communities not simply as an act of self-celebration, but because they are truly *theirs*.

It would also mean, *qua* Ryn, acknowledging that America's

subcultures are some things, and not others. And it would mean allowing—and even supporting—other American subcultures to be free to pursue their own vision of the good without constant censure from urban elites who think they just need to move on and accept life in a cubicle. That vision may not be totalizing or supremacist for our elites and the monoculture institutions they inhabit, but it should be enough for everyday Americans.