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REVIEWS

Michael Anderson's *The Conservative Gene*: A Review

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Alexander Janet, 1858, *Signing of the Declaration of Independence*, copy of Trumbull painting (image in public domain)

By P. F. Sommerfeldt -

Admittedly, I'm a tough nut to crack in terms of political theory – my castle has a hard and high wall and I'm difficult to impress – but Michael Anderson has done it yet again. His newest book *THE CONSERVATIVE GENE: How Genetics Shape the Complex Morality of Conservatives* (Simms Publishing 2021) is another bellwether, deftly assimilating new genetic theory around a potentially complex morality that may somehow be connected if pronounced tendencies can be inherited like genetic behavior. Anderson's application of an overarching thesis appears to be becoming more accepted, especially in epigenetic parlance although nurture apparently still supersedes nature in training. My lament is that Anderson's newest study may not receive sufficient attention as it's from a small press without obvious marketing or wider distribution. To understand from where this raised eyebrow encomium is coming, I'm a Jewish liberal and very progressive, but am hyper curious nonetheless to process and understand political history.

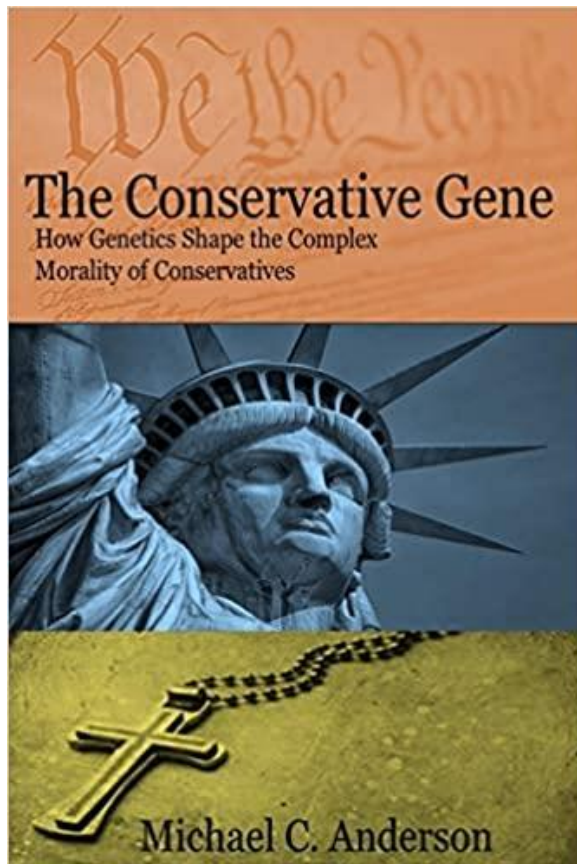
I begin my personal political history in the Classical World somewhere close to Aristotle and, if a confessional is at all useful for treating modern political theory, I still have a limited guarded fondness for Marx only because his thunderbolt about modern Christianity is still relevant: Marx suggested Christianity's greatest failure was to not follow the social imperative of Jesus to take care of people at the most basic level and to offset base instincts like greed. Had Jesus' exhortations truly been heeded, what we perceive as 'Communism' to combat economic inequality would have possibly never existed in the post-Roman world and what became Communism as an antithesis to greed would have been superfluous in the perception of "capital" as one dynamic to shape policy. There are many institutions now embedded in American society that would have puzzled our founding fathers. The Electoral College was partly originally created to integrate the rural and often racist southern states – what would sadly become the traitorous Confederacy – with the more populous northern states. As Pulitzer-prize winning historian J. J. Ellis has said, "I'm virtually certain the Founders would nod their approval if we dispensed with electoral votes and chose our presidents in a popular election." [1] True conservatives believe in the power of democracy without tinkering. A more justice-oriented higher morality in a post-Marxist yet more and more relativistic modern world should also lament the undermining of trust in elections and the

undermining of the press, the latter of which has always been needed to stem the tide and balance and expose Executive excesses. These should be high moral priorities of the true conservatives Anderson so capably explicates. Seeing the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia should fill every conservative with pride in maintaining the vision of the highest moral liberty from elitism and entitlement. When I first saw it years ago with its inscription exhorting to “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof”, I was also filled with humility that true freedom also calls for responsibility to maintain liberty unselfishly. This does not mean liberty from vaccinations or liberty from wearing masks, clearly needed to protect ourselves and others. But this liberty has to be inclusive to all regardless of color, creed or identity.



Liberty Bell of Philadelphia, 18th c. (public domain)

Conservatism is much more than the old familiarity of “if it’s not broken, why fix it” mentation. Reduced to the most common denominators that Anderson has already posited in prior books, where compassion is one of the basic instincts undergirding progressive thinking, Anderson elucidates loyalty as the larger trait of conservatives. Yet loyalty and a concomitant resistance to change – the old comfort of familiarity – is only part of what makes conservatism tick, as Anderson brilliantly develops.



With compelling historical insight Anderson succinctly describes how “morality” is not only a generic part of our inherent cultural baggage but is in some (still vague for now) way also possibly generated from a tenuous place of deeper instinctive personhood. Of course, some will find it simplistic or even frightening that genetics might shape our political inclinations, but Anderson documents millennia of human identification with just such deeper impulses. As mentioned, one of the impulses he identifies and elucidates as a primary conservative hallmark is loyalty, a fondness for reciprocity and fairness in a tendency to embrace what makes us feel comfortable about our past in a mostly undocumented experience. This conservative propensity to loyalty can be in balance with the progressive trait of compassion. Both of these “instincts” are generally good in themselves with both emotional and intellectual commitments to impact social causality in the right ways and yet each has inherent weakness as Anderson understands. For example, in this study Anderson is all too aware that blind loyalty can look the other way when it is directed to unworthy persons. This last insight leads directly to

Gingrich and Trump: Anderson's criticism of both includes perceptions that polarization, rude tactics and other blunt negative instruments like bullying contribute to extreme partisanship that plagues the Republican Party (e.g., pp.148, 166, 167), which now seems to have lost its way in upholding Conservative virtues and future prospects unless it practices what it preaches about morality with tempered responses to beleaguered value systems and hot button issues like abortion and sexual identity that are not necessarily part of the traditional Conservatism practiced for centuries but have been steamrolled by religious extremism in the past century. Anderson makes valid conclusions about how "21st century elections have damaged Conservative ideology", and "how Trump's election threatens the future prospects for the Republican party," (both 166-7). A true conservative could never support Trump's authoritarian fascism and disregard for law.

In all, Anderson's thoughtful book is a must read for anyone who wishes to see the evolution of the American political system as well as its devolution into factionalism and tribalism, partly driven by petty differences as well as major contrasts in being motivated by either loyalty for conservatives or compassion for progressives. If Anderson can make me – a dyed in the wool liberal – think in different ways, this is both refreshing and impressive.

Notes:

[1] Joseph J. Ellis, "What would founding fathers think of Donald J. Trump", *CNN Opinion*, May 6, 2016