Out of Their Right Mind
Conservatism is Crazy, But Psychiatry is Here to Help

For centuries, statesmen and philosophers have argued about just what modern political conservatism really is: aristocratic or meritocratic, orthodox or libertarian, reactionary or triumphalist. Finally, science has the answer: conservatism is madness. That, at least, is what four professors—Jack Glaser, Frank Sulloway, John Jost, and Arie Kruglanski—suggest in a study that got a great deal of attention in the last few months.

The study, “Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition,” was originally presented at the American Political Science Association’s (APSA) annual con-
ference and then published in the *Psychological Bulletin*. There it languished in obscurity until the public relations office of the University of California at Berkeley issued a press announcement linking Hitler, Reagan, Mussolini, and Rush Limbaugh. Quoting the authors, the release made note that Hitler and company could all be considered conservatives because “they all preached a return to an idealized past and favored or condoned inequality in some form.”

The actual paper is less forthright and less interesting—but no less stupid. The main thesis is that conservatism’s “core ideology” “stresses resistance to change and justification of inequality and is motivated by needs... to manage uncertainty and threat.” The authors review the literature surrounding the “authoritarian personality,” analyze numerous surveys of conservative opinion about “liberal” affinities like abortion, jazz music, gay marriage, and horoscopes, and then measure the lot against “Fascism” and “Right-Wing Authoritarianism” scales.

As ever, blame eventually falls on mom and dad. Authoritarian personalities are the result of “harsh parenting styles” which have “led entire generations to repress hostility toward authority figures and to replace it with an exaggerated deference and idealization of authority and tendencies to blame society scapegoats and punish deviants.” But nature as well as nurture is at fault—including genetic factors such as “anxiety proneness, stimulus aversion, low intelligence, and physical unattractiveness.”

Such claims must pass for common sense at Berkeley, because the authors were simply shocked that conservatives did not take well to being lumped in with Hitler. Jost and Kruglanski even published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* insisting that their study in no way “pathologizes” conservatism and was not meant as a critique of conservative thought. In a press release, Glaser claimed that “decreased cognitive complexity” by no means meant being “simple-minded.” On the BBC, Kruglanski suggested that conservatives should think positively about the study’s findings: Just think of being “intolerant of ambiguity” and “close-minded” as being called “loyal” and “decisive.”

Thomas Langston and Elizabeth Sanders, authors of “Predicting Ideological Intensity in Presidential Administrations: The Case of George W. Bush,” are even less shy about labeling conservatism pathological. The current president, it turns out, is your typical “Active-Negative (AN)” personality type. AN presidents “act out of deep, long-standing insecurities for which power serves as compensation for damaged self-esteem.” As evidence for their diagnosis, the authors point to Bush’s allegedly troubled relationship with his parents, his “violent temper,” “abusive relationship with alcohol,” his Christianity, and his choice of a “nurturing” wife.

Langston and Sander’s profile has the benefit of explaining away any policy that the authors dislike as a product of the president’s deepest insecurities. Why is Bush so big on tax cuts? To protect a “vulnerable core.” Why did he overthrow Saddam Hussein? Low self-esteem, which makes the president “react with rage and aggression to fill the psychological void” of his childhood. In a similar spirit, psychiatrist Oliver James recently told The Guardian that Bush’s “deep hatred” for his parents “explains his radical transformation into an authoritarian fundamentalist... his unconscious hatred for them was chan-
neled into a fanatical moral crusade to rid
the world of evil.”

Taking a more proactive stance are
groups such as the Psychoanalysts for
Peace and Justice, an organization of “psy-
choanalytically-informed citizens” who
have come together to bring their “psycho-
analytic insights” to bear on public policy.
“Because we know the destructiveness that
resides in each of us,” the group’s website
explains, “We know the importance of not
letting it destroy what we hold dear.”

All of this naturally leads one to wonder
if these academicians and analysts have
lost their minds. More importantly, it
offers a hint of the ideological unanimity
and isolation of the academic world, where
the only way to make sense of political
conservatism is by resorting to theories of
madness. It is worth asking, surely,
whether a study on the pathologies of the
left, as evidenced by such left-wing figures
as Joseph Stalin, George McGovern, Kim
Jong Il, and Bill Moyers, would have been
published in a serious psychiatric journal.

Above all, though, this stands as a pow-
erful example of the misuse of science and
the arrogance of expertise. More than a
denigration of conservatism, these studies
reveal an utter derision of genuine political
life altogether. They display a kind of psy-
chiatry-as-zoology, with a knowledgeable
expert standing well above the fray, meas-
uring his subjects by standards altogether
foreign to the character of their activity. It
is a way to avoid contending with the sub-
stance of unfriendly or unfamiliar views by
dismissing ideas as byproducts of urges,
and arguments as empty superstructure. It
results in ever-increasing disdain for gen-
uinely complex social and political ques-
tions, and in such enlightening insights as
“happy people don’t start wars.” Call us
crazy, but this all seems like a gargantuan
waste of time and effort.

Before the first test of the atomic
bomb in the New Mexico desert in
July 1945, the senior scientists who
worked on the Manhattan Project were
bused to prearranged locations to observe
the explosion. Edward Teller, then 37 years
old, was among the scientists at Compañía
Hill, twenty miles northwest of ground
zero. Although the observers were sup-
posed to lie on the ground with their backs
turned to the blast, Teller disobeyed—he
looked directly at the bomb. Protected with
welder’s glasses and sunscreen, Teller
watched the atomic flash: “It was as if I had
pulled open the curtain in a dark room and
broad daylight streamed in.”

The rest of Teller’s life was dominated
by the power of the atomic nucleus—its
immense physical power, which Teller
helped to leash and unleash, and also its
daunting political power, which gave shape
and urgency to the Cold War.

Teller was a giant of science, and he
mingled with the greatest minds of twen-
tieth-century physics. Born in Budapest in
1908, by the time he graduated from high
school Teller was already friends with fel-
low Hungarians Eugene Wigner (who
would win the Nobel Prize for Physics in
1963), John von Neumann (one of the pio-
nears of computer science), and Leo
Szilárd (one of the fathers of the atomic
Edward Teller, RIP

The Controversial Life of the Father of the H-Bomb