

Conservatism in the Post-Modern Age

Conservatism may be defined as a response to the recklessness of modernity (modernity being understood in general terms as the twin doctrines of secularization and scientific progress). If the job of conservatism has been, as William F. Buckley, Jr. put it, "to stand athwart history, yelling stop!", it would seem fair to say that history has run over conservatism like a freight train. The chief question confronting conservatism on the eve of the first "post-modern" century is whether the post-modern age presents any prospect of a return to some aspects of pre-modern thought, or whether post-modern times will experience a mere metastasis of modernity.

At first glance, the twentieth century seems to be ending much as it began, with a sentimental liberal optimism about a New World Order of cooperation and comity, based on a balance of power anchored by a loose world empire led by an English-speaking trading nation. The promise of technology (as distinct from science) seems brighter than ever, and basic middle class prosperity, having been achieved by so much of the democratic world, seems within reach of any people who establish a market economy.

A deeper survey reveals, of course, how fully modernity has played out to its endgame, in philosophy, religion, politics, art, and science. Joseph Cropsey has written that "the United States is the microcosm of modernity, repeating in its regime, on the level of popular consciousness, the major noetic events of the modern world," and that "modernity has grown by consuming itself." On the practical and moral level, the most significant casualty of this consummation has been decent family life. The continued decline of family life must eventually prove

fatal to civilization. Pessimism can be gratuitous and cheap, but conservatives must admit that the prospect of the twenty-first century holds much more for conservatives to worry about than ever before.

This pessimism may seem paradoxical, since the circumstances I describe come amidst considerable political and intellectual success for the conservative movement. Quite aside from the electoral accomplishments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, it is clear that conservative thought cannot be dismissed as it was by Lionel Trilling in 1950 as "irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas." But the ostensible ascendancy of conservatism owes precisely to the fact that the endgame of modernity has caused the dominant liberal outlook to become, in Trilling's words, "stale, habitual, and inert," and thus creating a vacuum for conservatism to fill. Conservatism's "success" is a measure of the severity of the crisis of our time. A powerful and ironic indicator of this is the fact that the book in which Trilling dismissed conservatism, entitled *The Liberal Imagination*, can be read today as a *conservative* work.

The Dead End of Modernity

Laying out the task of conservatism for the next century, then, is a tall order. The conditions for articulating what to do are made difficult by the general aspects of modern intellectual life, which not only impose the necessity of narrow specialization, but which have also made intellectual life increasingly remote from the intelligent reading public.

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Winston Churchill raised the issue in his prewar essay, "Mass Effects in Modern Life," of whether the remorseless march of progress has effaced the possibility for "outstanding personalities" to have an understanding and influence on large events. The "great diminution . . . of independent people" caused Churchill to worry primarily that modernity had foreclosed the opportunity for heroism in battle, but the conditions he describes apply to intellectual life as well. Breaking this trend requires resisting the powerful modern trend of specialization. The aim of writing comprehensively, as a "man of letters" of old, may seem either quaint, presumptuous, dilettantish, or absurd, but the task requires that one set out after large themes. The dead end of modernity can be seen in every vital area of our civilization; what requires to be done is nothing less than filling what Viscount Morley called "the vacant Thrones" of philosophy, religion, politics, art, and science.

The starting point for a conservative critique of the post-modern age is to call into question the idea of progress as an inevitable and irreversible process. In philosophy, for example, is there anywhere for modernity to go after Heidegger? The completion of philosophy and history as contemplated by Hegel reached a dead end with Heidegger. A return to metaphysics is thought to be impossible. New philosophical vistas seem to be closed off; there is nothing left but nihilistic will to power. (Indeed, the naked nihilism of deconstructionism and the "politically correct" movement can be viewed as the last gasp of the unphilosophic Left.) Even Heidegger apparently had some misgivings about our philosophic condition, as expressed in his famous posthumously published interview in *Der Spiegel*, where he said: "philosophy will be unable to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavor. *Only a god can save us.*" (Emphasis added.)

One may doubt whether a return to some aspects of pre-modern philosophy is possible only so long as one implicitly accepts the idea of progress. Once the idea of progress is called into question, it becomes plausible to argue that a return is possible because it is

necessary. The most promising work on this theme is that of Leo Strauss and his followers, and Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre's conclusion, that "We are waiting not for a Godot but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict" to lead us out of the new Dark Age, is not encouraging of success on the scale of mass culture, but it may be a sober reckoning that conservatives have to constitute a lonely remnant for a long time to come. We were several centuries getting into our present fix; it may take as long to get back out.

The "St. Benedict" Solution

The "St. Benedict solution" might be what is required to halt the decline of religion in the West (although we should not overlook the flourishing of traditional Christian faith in many parts of the Third World, especially Africa). Western religion is steadily losing its grasp of the transcendent ground of its being under the steady onslaught of modern philosophy and modern science. Just as modern philosophy undermines reason, so too it undermines revelation. Philosophy and science have made unintelligible "the laws of nature and nature's God." Man's conquest of nature through technology has separated man from nature. This has had a significant impact on spiritual life. The ordinary professional urbanite no longer senses any intrinsic connection between the church calendar and the rhythms of the four seasons, as his agricultural forefathers did. When nature is remote, so too is nature's God.

These trends have nearly destroyed Western Christendom, with many denominations madly scrambling to jump on every secular political bandwagon. The road to salvation, we are implicitly (and often explicitly) told, runs not through Jerusalem, but through Managua. Feeding the hungry is edifying; it cannot substitute for feeding the hunger of the soul. On the intellectual level, the decay is so far advanced that the essential teaching of most seminaries—even many supposedly conservative Protestant seminaries—is a soft Christian existentialism. The task for conservative intellectuals in the next century, it seems to me, is to restore the integrity of the older Christian humanism that champions

the interaction of, and tension between, reason and revelation. I have found the most helpful recent work on this subject is Robert Sokolowski's *The God of Faith and Reason*.

The sorry condition of art, literature, and criticism in our illiterate mass media age has been so thoroughly diagnosed that I need not reiterate it here. Yet I am surprisingly optimistic about the prospects for art and literature. Although it is true that popular culture, modern mass media, deplorable public education, and shortened attention spans have debased the aesthetic tastes especially of my generation, nowhere is the dead end of modernity more evident to ordinary people than in art and literature. Again, the late "liberal" critic Lionel Trilling anticipated the state in which we find ourselves:

A spectre haunts our culture—it is that people will eventually be unable to say, "They fell in love and married," let alone understand the language of *Romeo and Juliet*, but will as a matter of course say, "Their libidinal impulses being reciprocal, they activated their individual erotic drives and integrated them within the same frame of reference."

Most of my contemporaries in ordinary life recognize this and recoil from it. True enough, Bret Easton Ellis's execrable *American Psycho* is a best seller, but I also think there will be a fertile field for conservative novelists, artists, and critics in the next century, as people awaken their sensibilities to the excellence of older styles of art and literature.

The Dirty Little Secret of Science

The realm of science also offers encouragement. The dirty little secret of science is leaking out; namely, that science will not fulfill the grand promise made at the outset of the Scientific Revolution several centuries ago of delivering a comprehensive knowledge of the whole (thereby replacing philosophy entirely) and achieving the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate. The conquest of nature through *technology* (the practical fruit of science) will continue apace, thus relieving man's physical estate, but science cannot explain and repair the human soul. Hence the permanent limitations of

science are being grudgingly admitted. There are still quite a few true believers among scientists, but for the most part scientifically midwived eudaemonia is no longer in prospect. This can only help encourage the reconsideration of philosophy and religion. (Theoretical physicists and astronomers mention "God" and "creation" under their breath these days.) The work of Stanley Jaki and Leon Kass seems to me to be the most helpful in this area.

The arena in which the working out of modernity is most explosive is, of course, politics. Politics is the crossroads between philosophy and religion, on the one hand, and art, science, and culture on the other. And because American politics most clearly carries out the ongoing debate about fundamental principles owing to the very philosophical nature of its Founding, the cause of America is central to determining the nature of the post-modern age.

The effects of modernity on politics are most evident in the dissolution of practical moral reasoning. To a significant extent, the triumph of the "fact-value" distinction means moral questions are not susceptible to rational deliberation. In place of moral reasoning is historicism. Moral judgments are today based on a notion of the unfolding of history. Alas, too many conservatives accept the historicism of our time as a given, and do not, for instance, have a principled objection to legal positivism, except that they would prefer a different current of history to prevail in jurisprudence. (Witness, for example, the complaints of some conservatives against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas's jurisprudence of natural law and natural right.) The recovery of moral reasoning based on "the laws of nature and nature's God" must rank foremost among the tasks for conservative thinkers in the next generation.

The other great political event that will cast a long shadow into the next century is the collapse of Communism. This can and should be celebrated as a triumph of practical (if unsteady and inconsistent) statesmanship. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Communism relieve the crisis of the West. We would do well to recall the

counsel of Whittaker Chambers that the threat of Communism was merely the external manifestation of the internal crisis in Western thought. Marxism, after all, was a Western export to Russia. It was not the case, Chambers reminded us, that we can "Destroy Communism and ... go back to business as usual." (As a practical matter, the collapse of Communism implies not the prospect of a New World Order, but more likely a return to something like the *status quo ante* of the nineteenth century, requiring a statecraft based on traditional balance of power considerations.)

The "Soft Despotism" of Bureaucracy

Although the prospects of hard despotism under Communist tyranny have diminished, the advance of what Tocqueville called "soft despotism" through centralized bureaucracy continues relentlessly. There is a deficiency in conservative scholarship about bureaucracy. Bureaucracy has been hitherto criticized principally for being inefficient, wasteful, and intrusive. It is of course all of these things, but it is much more. There is a core theory of bureaucratic rule, based on Progressive era teachings about the prospects of human evolution, that has not been adequately stripped away by contemporary scholarship. Bureaucratic rule seeks a transformation of human nature through scientific management of social affairs by expert elites. On the theoretical level, bureaucratic rule is "value-free"; consideration of fixed principles is unwelcome. To mention property rights, for instance (or any other individual rights), in a proceeding about bureaucratic policy and procedure, is considered embarrassing and vulgar. On the practical level of the everyday world, bureaucratic rule seeks to bring independent character to heel. (I am often invited, because I work on public policy issues, to meet with businesspeople about some regulatory issue—especially environmental issues. Often

the majority sentiment in a meeting is to strike a deal with the regulators, in which the business must subordinate itself to the regulator in exchange for "the privilege of doing business"—a phrase actually used in some court decisions upholding regulatory authority. Often businesspeople in such discussions are uncomfortable with—and sometimes hostile to—any consideration of the right principles of free government on such issues. In these cases, I will sometimes divide the house by saying: "If you have the soul of a slave, I suppose you deserve to be governed like one." Not a good way to make friends.)

To be sure, James Burnham predicted in his 1941 book *The Managerial Revolution* that the capitalist and socialist parts of the world would come to resemble one another closely in their mode of social and economic organization. But this does not reach the heart of the matter. The task for conservatives in the next century will be to found a revisionist scholarship of American Progressivism. Such a scholarship will contrast the Hegelian, Weberian, and Darwinian roots of Progressive political philosophy with the political philosophy of the American Founding. Progressive political philosophy sought to refound American democracy on new principles—essentially a second American Revolution. Progressivism replaced "the new science of politics" (Tocqueville's words) of the American Revolution with an even *newer* science of politics. The principles of Woodrow Wilson—an early president of the American Political Science Association, by the way—are explicitly opposed to the principles of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. The point is, there is much in the American political tradition that requires re-establishing in the common mind of America. The good news is, the American tradition has within it the theoretical resources needed to recover the original revolution in American politics. Such a revolution, if it can be wrought, will expose the endgame of modernity.