

The Road to the Future

In the late 1970s, if you had asked someone what a conservative was, the answer would have been easy. He was a proponent of the free market, an enemy of the welfare state, and an anti-Communist in favor of high defense spending. Having come to political consciousness during the Carter years and particularly during the Iranian hostage crisis, I was such a conservative. Later, as I began to read beyond newspaper columns and magazines, I would come to see this American equation of conservatism with classical liberalism or free market economics as the "Great Train Robbery" in our intellectual history.¹

I may be mistaken, but my impression is that the attention paid to the problematic nature of conservatism during the Reagan Presidency has left us with a richer understanding of what conservatism might be. Today, the meaning of conservatism in America is hotly contested, and in the increasing conflict between so-called "neoconservatives" and "paleoconservatives," we may be witnessing another intellectual train robbery. Unfortunately, this debate unfolds at the level of public policy rather than at the level of first principles. The theoretical question therefore remains: What is conservatism?

Three Dimensions of Conservatism

In a 1957 article, Harvard's Samuel P. Huntington attempted to come to an understanding of conservatism which would make sense in the American context.² He considered three possible definitions. The first alternative described by Huntington followed the Marxist critique of ideologies. In such a perspective, ideologies are rationalizations of power in the struggle of classes. Conservatism would then be the *apologia* of the feudal aristocracy. Since there was no feudal

past in America, yet there were American conservatives in the 1950s, an "aristocratic" theory seemed an unlikely interpretation. Second, Huntington considered conservatism as an "autonomous" body of ideas, in some sense a political philosophy. Russell Kirk's list of conservative principles was duly noted, but Huntington dismissed these, for he believed the range of ideas brought together in *The Conservative Mind* was far too diverse to form a coherent theory.

Finally Huntington settled on a "positional" conservatism, an attitude toward change which attempts to defend the social and institutional status quo, whatever that status quo may be. Conservatism would thus emphasize organic development and guard against revolutionary change in any regime. Such a conservatism would be Burkean, at least with regard to process if not principles. Like many in his generation, Huntington decided that in an America with a uniformly liberal tradition, conservatism can only mean an attitude toward change, and American conservatives must therefore be defenders of the progressive American experiment in liberal democracy. This proposition has re-emerged among neoconservatives today.

Now I believe that Huntington's conclusion is wrong, but his taxonomy is helpful in formulating a more authentic understanding of conservatism. To me, conservatism is clearly an autonomous set of ideas, but it is also historically situated—there were no "conservatives" in the strict sense before the French Revolution. Since history at a certain

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level seems to have an intelligible order, however, this positional quality does not obviate the autonomous character of conservative ideas. And as we shall see below, how our historical position is described makes all the difference. Finally, among those autonomous ideas which conservatism asserts and explores are ones historically associated with aristocracy. As C.S. Lewis once put it: "the thing of which Aristocracy was a mirage is a vital necessity; if you like, ... Aristocracy was right: it was the Aristocrats who were wrong. [A] society which becomes democratic in *ethos* as well as in constitution is doomed. And not much loss either."³ Properly understood, conservatism is characterized by all three of Huntington's definitions.

Something's Wrong at Dartmouth

But I am getting ahead of myself. While already a conventional American conservative, sometime after arriving at college in the autumn of 1983, the conviction began to grow in me that ... well, something was wrong. Small intimations seemed to add up to big trouble. Pious professions about taking part in the "life of the mind" and living the "examined life" were intoned at convocations and in faculty speeches on ceremonial occasions. But these seemed to be desiccated clichés considering the ideological slavishness which so often passed as enlightened thought. Campus progressives considered some common-sense propositions "challenging": e.g., human beings should be treated with equal dignity. Yet other, to me equally commonsensical, propositions were considered unspeakable: e.g., homosexuality is not normal, some sex role differentiation is preferable to androgyny. There was also an intolerance for religious faith which alarmed me: after all, like most American colleges, mine had been founded largely for the education of the clergy. Most worrisome, as Allan Bloom would later point out, a certain flatness of soul could be sensed among us. The examples of some of the Great Books stood in judgment over the petty stakes which dominated our small lives. Too much seemed out of place, and I turned to the history of political thought to try to find answers. As a columnist for the daily student newspaper, I

began to write rather longish pieces about the decline of the West.

Now if you have concluded that something is wrong, and you also suspect that this something was not wrong in some past time, the question of a turning point immediately presents itself. Dating the decline of the West is one of the oldest of conservative intellectual games, but it is an exercise which anyone must go through who hopes to arrive at a sophisticated account of the unfolding of our history. Some locate our fall in the 1960s, some with the New Deal, some in the Enlightenment, many with the French Revolution. The intellectual villains of Western decline have included Nietzsche, Rousseau, Hobbes, Luther, and Machiavelli. Perhaps the most audacious thesis is that of Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*, which traces our current malaise to the triumph of Ockhamite nominalism over logical realism in the fourteenth century. Each of these answers to the question of a turning point is built upon a complete philosophy of history. But which account was correct? And how did one define what exactly was right in the past which was now wrong?

These questions prompted me in my senior year to write a thesis exploring such issues systematically. I set out in search of that *ancien regime* which conservatives were seeking to conserve or at least whose demise conservatives were lamenting. My answer was perhaps an evasion of an answer, or at least the beginning of many new questions. For I concluded that at its heart, conservatism is not the attempt to conserve any particular political regime. Rather, conservatism is a critical meditation upon, or grappling with, *modernity* itself, that spirit of rationalist subjectivity which grew dominant in the first half of the sixteenth century and which has characterized our existence ever since. This modernity seemed to me to be a great civilizational decision to repeat the original sin in the Garden. The serpent had said: "you shall be like God." Was this not the point of the modern project, that man the creature would become his own creator, that nothing would exist that is to him in a relationship of givenness which can only be accepted? *Homo sapiens*, the man who is wise

because he can come to understand his place in the created order willed to become *homo faber*, man the *maker*, who knows himself only in his technological mastery over his world.

Yet we do not ask to be born. This much is irreducibly given. We enter a world which began long ago and which has had a concrete history. In contrast to modernity's exaltation of the Self, the conservative knows the existential condition of humanity: we are "trapped" in a world we have not made. The pre-modern found himself trapped in a world he never made; his response was wonder and praise to the Maker. The modern found himself trapped in a world he never made, found this situation an intolerable affront to his sense of Self, and set about to re-make the world in *his* image. The post-modern now finds himself in a world largely re-made by the moderns, and he decides that it will do. It has been said that in modernity, the ends of political life were lowered; still, there was a certain dramatic nobility in the Faustian striving of the Self. In the "post-modernity" which is now much discussed, however, even this nobility has vanished. Out of the freneticism and skepticism of modernity we are now left with a spirit of complacency and credulity. The world of chemistry and erect sets has become the world of Nintendo.

Yet this post-modernity is not a negation of the modern project. It is rather the completion of it, that toward which modernity had always driven. For modernity always contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Conservatism, then, has been the often inarticulate recognition of modernity's destructiveness, coupled with a desire to maintain those elements of the pre-modern spirit which could be saved under modern conditions. But while the post-modernity championed by so many academic leftists is really only the decadent consummation of modernity, there is also the possibility of a true *post-modernity*, a wholly *new* spirit: health after modernity's exhaustion.

Here lies the conservative's true vocation. Far from simply attempting to preserve in pristine form a pre-modern past, the conservative is more properly a "modernist anti-modern," one sort of post-modern really. When modernity's critical spirit is turned on

itself, two roads forward emerge. One leads to the frivolous post-modernity of Rorty, Derrida, and all of their deconstructive negations. The other road forward leads us to a renewed and balanced appreciation of the pre-modern past, and to a conservative affirmation.

A Religious Search

Perhaps I am particularly bad at keeping the elements of my life limited to their respective spheres. Nonetheless, my search for an account of the changed nature of man's being in the world under modernity led to a religious search as well. A firmly Protestant Christian who comes to conclusions such as I have outlined above necessarily begins to reconsider his attitude toward the "feudal," "hierarchical," "dogmatic," and "anti-modern" spirit of the Roman Catholic Church.

I will be very brief. I began to see in the venerable Reformation cry of *sola scriptura!* the seeds of deconstruction in textual criticism. Torn from an "interpretative community" which limits our subjectivity and guards the text's intent, the meaning of the words alone either is, or can become, indeterminate. But if the characteristic Protestant principle opens itself to deconstruction, then by its nature it undermines the possibility that a Revelation could be preserved through time in truth: Protestantism would by its very nature destroy itself. This seemed to be the case intellectually, when modern textual criticism yielded a wholly disenchanting (or Marxist, or feminist) text. It also had a practical dimension as well, as the complete secularization of once-Protestant universities demonstrated. But if *sola scriptura* led to what a believer could only see as a misreading, had it avoided a similar result at the beginning? Ignoring the Church's tradition of interpretation, perhaps the Reformers themselves had misread the words of scripture; certainly their hermeneutic had more than a little to do with the subjective spirit of their age. Perhaps as the Catholic Church claimed, read as a whole, the Bible *was* Catholic.

Faith comes by grace and not proof. Still, the decisive piece of evidence for me was as follows: if modern subjectivity is particularly corrosive of Christian faith, whose es-

sence is reliance on an Other, and if the Reformation was in some sense the modernization of Christian faith, then the Church was right to close up like a clam and stand monolithically against the harsh winds of the modern spirit in Europe—precisely the strategy adopted at Trent. Furthermore, if we are now in a new age, a post-modern time when the problem is more utter credulousness than skepticism, then it is appropriate for the Church to open up and to reclaim its evangelical mission—the promise of Vatican II. Condemned on the one hand by Protestants for its closedness to modernity, and on the other by “traditionalist” Catholics for its evangelical openness to the world, the Catholic Church, I thought, was vindicated by this balance between extremes.

My conclusion was that because it has never successfully made its peace with modernity, the Catholic Church is providentially well positioned to speak with authority to an emerging post-modern world. We are in a “Catholic moment.” Ironically, the so-called progressives in the Church can best be understood as “old moderns,” trying to catch the Church up with a world that is already passing away. The future does not belong to these progressives, however, for a recognition that the old modern world is dying is evident throughout the writings both of Pope John Paul II and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Both are aware that post-modernity is upon us, and both recognize the unique contribution Catholicism can make under such conditions. They are physicians for our post-modern souls. In a spirit of practical post-modernity, I was received into the Roman Catholic Church at Easter in 1989.

The Politics of “Counter-Enlightenment”

So now I am in graduate school, slowly grinding my way through a doctorate in political theory. My dissertation will explore the politics of “Counter-Enlightenment,” those thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who saw most clearly the dangers of the imperious and unlimited Self and who exhibit most forcefully the “modernist anti-modern” spirit. While conservatism in the Anglo-American tradition

has been largely a matter of *Kulturkritik*, there may be some genuinely political elements to be gleaned from the Continental reactionaries. The prescriptions of Maistre, Bonald, and Donoso Cortes may not always be attractive, but they seem to me to speak to us with greater insight than most figures in the history of political thought.

When the mistakes of modern political philosophy—which became the lies of modern ideologies—are spent, what next? This is the question which now confronts us. I have not said much of conservative tasks here. This is because the tasks I see for myself are largely tasks of understanding. For example, in conventional accounts, the subjectivity of the modern spirit was introduced into the West by the Incarnation, or at least by the reflections of the Church Fathers on Christ’s revelation. How was it that St. Augustine could reconcile this subjective spirit with an objectively ordered world whereas for the moderns this subjectivity ran out of control? What was modernity? Was it inevitable? Why did it happen when it did? How does man’s freedom stand in relationship to such a *Zeitgeist*? And what is post-modernity? How exactly are the post-modern and the pre-modern related? These are questions that seem vital to me. Answering them is part of the general task of constructing a political theory for a post-modern world.

Now America presents a particular puzzle from the standpoint of theory. We are perhaps the country where modernity has most hypertrophied: the liberal-radical goal of androgyny has progressed further here than anywhere else, intergenerational solidarity is extremely limited, divorce rates are high by any standard, social atomization has progressed so far that we have perhaps the highest rate of single-person “households” in the history of any civilization. Yet we are also the most churched country in the industrialized world, we retain more of the old morality than most, we have never found socialism appealing. In the midst of hyper-modernity, we have retained some remarkable pre-modern characteristics. Still, our political tradition is almost pristinely modern, and therefore inadequate to the new dispensation.

Conservatives have always stressed the

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importance of virtue in a well ordered polity. Aiming at a *summum bonum* of virtue (or salvation) in political life, however, was abandoned by modern political philosophers as dangerously impractical. Instead, emphasis was placed on avoiding the *summum malum* of violent death. The means employed to achieve this end were many. In Lockean liberalism, man's unruly desire for "glory" was channelled away from public political striving into private economic acquisition. As we busied ourselves with economic gain and the rising tide raised all boats, we had no time for conflicts over the *summum bonum*. The low end of physical security was achieved. From the point of view of political and moral theory, however, there is one salient lacuna in this account. There is no vision of what one might do or be once he has grown rich, once comfortable self-preservation has been secured. That is, modern political theories offer no guidance for people in precisely our own situation. Thus, in a society of unprecedented wealth, Americans have no idea what to do next: we simply continue our life of getting and spending.

The aimless consumer materialism now regularly lamented in Papal encyclicals is the result of this failure in modern theory. Of course pre-modern political and moral philosophy elaborated at length what way of life was noble or fine. The concluding section of Aristotle's *Politics* seeks to educate those who have financial independence about how to live as "gentlemen." But how do we post-moderns "live well"? This is the (very tradi-

tional) type of question which new conservative political theories will have to answer. As the relationship between the individual and the state becomes more casual and modern legitimation theories increasingly fail to explain our political experience, political philosophy for a post-modern age will necessarily become more explicitly moral; certainly in form and perhaps also in content, post-modern political theory will come to resemble pre-modern.

If I am right, then the future is bright for conservatives. If conservatism is understood as somehow a post-modern phenomenon, we will no longer labor under the tiresome accusation that we are on the wrong side of history and therefore irrelevant. The one threat to the realization of this promise seems to me to be those neoconservatives who are like the progressives in the Catholic Church. They seek to drag old-style conservatism into the modern world—just when that world is dying. Against these latecomers, paleo-conservatives should be able to assert confidently that the road to the future runs through the past.

¹The phrase is Clinton Rossiter's in his *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982 [1955]).

²Samuel P. Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *American Political Science Review*, LI, June 1957, 454-473.

C. S. Lewis, "Talking About Bicycles," *Present Concerns* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 72.