

"Up From Liberalism" Revisited

American conservatism typically has possessed a flexible, non-reactionary temper that is suspicious of doctrinaire formulations. The tradition of counter-revolution that has characterized Continental conservatism has never had a place on these shores. Owing partly to this quality of moderation, and partly to specific historical circumstances, the most widely recognized variety of conservatism in this country has in fact been economic liberalism. Whereas English conservatism has retained something of its anti-liberal identity by virtue of its long Tory tradition, based upon generations of attachment to the land, life in America has moved more rapidly down what Tennyson called the ringing grooves of change. Thus liberalism has been successful here in influencing all aspects of our public discussion.

Understood in its broadest sense, the spirit of liberalism has guided man's efforts both to master nature and to secure universal affluence through the use of technology. In recent generations, it has inspired a humanitarian impulse—essentially a secularized version of Christian charity—that assuages the conscience, even as it inculcates a desire to reform. This attractive combination has made the triumph of liberalism appear inevitable. A common assumption behind the modern incarnation of this doctrine, however, is that society is a mechanism for increasing production, and that happiness is the gratification of appetites. This way of thinking has become so pervasive that the person who objects to it risks seeming insufficiently thankful for progress.

The tremendous benefits that liberalism has encouraged since its birth in the early modern period—material abundance, improved medical care, democracy—are evident all around us today. But this has not prevented many observers from pointing to

the paradox that, amidst general affluence, modern man is afflicted with deep anxieties which only increase with our attempts to ameliorate them through purely naturalistic means. A result of the fact that our public discourse is conducted principally in terms of such concepts as growth and production is that the roots of this malady are neglected. Few voices have demonstrated an interest in driving the inquiry back to the level of first principles. Some writers of a traditionally conservative cast of mind, well versed in history, have proven to be adept at this sort of analysis; but the genuine traditionalist faces difficulty gaining a proper hearing in this culture. There is much in his view that is old-fashioned and ill-at-ease with the thrusting, profit-oriented, business-dominated civilization of modern America. Often, when he expresses concern about society's devotion to change for its own sake, he is accused of being impractical. His task is not made easier by the fact that the name "conservative" is applied these days to financiers, to opportunistic politicians, and to a segment of the Soviet Politburo. It is no wonder that Raymond English once described conservatism as "the forbidden faith."

I emphasize the enormous odds that conservatism faces in our public sphere, because the fact that it is caricatured by mainstream scholarship, by the media, and by many of its self-professed adherents, leads to a superficial understanding of the term that deprives us of the insights of a profound cultural vision. When I was an undergraduate, I considered some form of liberalism to be the only option available for someone who aspired to become broadly educated. Liberal-

George Michos (Weaver Fellow, 1989-90) is currently a doctoral candidate in government at Harvard University.

ism was a charismatic term, implying freedom, novelty, progress, prosperity. The enthusiastic and talented people whom I knew all identified themselves as liberals. Conservatism, on the other hand, brought to mind unimaginative Philistines and self-satisfied professionals dwelling in nondescript suburbs.

Liberal By Default

I was essentially a liberal by default in those years, however; liberalism's attraction for me was more a matter of its style than its specific doctrinal content. Radicalism held little appeal: I was no Stephen Dedalus, rejecting nation, kindred, and Church. Nor was I especially interested in discussions about directly political affairs. I tried to avoid debates with earnest partisans about politicians and policies. The language of both liberals and conservatives made me uneasy, though I could not articulate the reasons for this. It was only after I graduated that I discovered that conservatism could be stimulating, when seen as a perspective that historically has been concerned with the spiritual and moral object of life.

Conservatism helped me to see that prominent advocates on both sides of the political spectrum today have become, for all intents and purposes, materialists, in the sense that they judge policies preeminently by their relation to the "standard of living." While modern liberals emphasize the importance of government-sponsored social programs and the desirability of wealth redistribution through taxation, those on the Right celebrate the market economy and the way technology can be used to achieve maximum productivity. On the surface, the two sides differ markedly, but each concentrates its mind nearly exclusively on methods that will serve to realize the goal of the affluent society. Only the most superficial inquiries into the nature of this promised society are countenanced.

Discussions concerning social and cultural issues are not exempt from this materialistic calculus. Whereas the Left believes in group rights and equality of result, the Right counters with "opportunity society" rhetoric and national education schemes. Although liberals may have been the first to adopt this manner of thinking, conservatives have

readily adapted themselves. Indeed, many of today's conservatives appear readier to judge proposed policies on the anvil of progress than do the liberals. Admittedly, these conservatives may be distinguished from the liberals by dint of their laudable attempt to revive liberalism's original dedication to the concept of individual liberty; but it is nonetheless clear that, though they differ about means, these conservatives have joined the liberals in effectively excluding from the national debate any significant discussion of ends.

I was frustrated by this phenomenon as an undergraduate, but what concerned me more immediately at that time was my weariness with the ritualistic liberalism I had come to know on campus. Resolving, upon graduation, to take up something as far removed as possible from the academic environment, I initially went to work with a fast-paced business firm. Though I decided not to make a career of business, this experience had its exciting moments. One thing I realized from the start is that the modern American executive bears little resemblance to the stodgy, reactionary bugbear of radical mythology. The businessman, far from being rigid or absolutist, is instead a flexible pragmatist who adapts easily to rapidly changing times. Gerald Graff has noted that the spirit of corporate culture is not bound to old values, or to any values in particular, but is instead cool, opportunistic, unsentimental. It coexists quite easily with the radical cultural criticism produced in the universities. The link between the radicalism one finds on campus and the liberalism of the business world is, though it might initially seem curious, quite close, I believe. The similarity lies in this: the radical who pushes to make education immediately relevant shares a belief with the pragmatic executive in the overweening importance of the present moment and of the stimulations and demands of the present. The period I spent in business had the effect of leading me to think harder than I yet had about the nature and aims of education. In response to the colossal amount of time and energy I saw being spent on present concerns in the workaday world, I reconsidered, not how irrelevant my history and philosophy

courses had been as preparation for what followed, but how genuinely important those disciplines were for affording me some sense of perspective about myself and the civilization in which we live.

The truth was driven home to me that education is significant because it distances us, for a time, from our own immediate needs and acquisitive urges. In the best case, I imagined, the student should resist the lure of current fashions and ephemera, in the humanities, in politics, and in the marketplace. If he realizes their lure for what it is, he can then devote himself to, say, the writings of an author from another time, another place, another culture, and appreciate them for their own sake; the object being to elevate his mind and spirit by acquainting himself with what Matthew Arnold called "the best that has been thought and known," apart from any strict utilitarian purpose.

Starting Over

I decided to come to graduate school in order to devote myself to education, understood in this light. About the time I was coming to this decision, I discovered an autobiographical essay by Richard Weaver in an early number of *Modern Age* (Winter 1958-59), which he called "Up from Liberalism." Weaver's story struck a familiar chord with me, providing inspiration for my imminent career change. It is instructive to recount today because his comments about the atmosphere in our universities, and the possibilities for resistance to the dominant current of thought there, remain pertinent.

In that piece, Weaver described the transformation of his thinking over the course of his career. There was his early attachment to socialism, a faith he absorbed by virtual osmosis in the atmosphere of the 1930s at the University of Kentucky. For him, however, socialism was "an intellectual abstraction." He grew disenchanted with the movement once he realized the naivete of the people involved in it. This dissatisfaction increased during the years he spent in graduate work at Vanderbilt University, where he studied under John Crowe Ransom and came in touch with the lively intellectual and literary activity that he found in the company of the

Agrarians. He was suddenly troubled there by his realization that "many traditional positions in our world had suffered not so much because of inherent defect as because of the stupidity, ineptness, and intellectual sloth of those who ... were presumed to have their defense in charge."

But it was not easy for Weaver to give up his progressive habit of mind. What he called his "conversion to the poetic and ethical vision of life" did not come until he had taught for some time in Texas in close contact with "its sterile opposite," the rampant and complacent Philistinism that he met around him. One afternoon when he was driving across the prairies of Texas to begin his third year of teaching a thought dawned on him: "It came to me like a revelation that I did not *have* to go back to this job, which had become distasteful, and that I did not *have* to go on professing the cliches of liberalism, which were becoming meaningless to me.... It was a great experience to wake up... to the fact that one does have a free will, and that giving up the worship of false idols is quite a practicable procedure." At the end of the year he gave up his Texas job "and went off to start my education over at the age of thirty."

Deciding that I had had enough of business, I went off to start my own education over again with those ideas in mind. My first step was to work for a time as an assistant to the author Russell Kirk, in Mecosta, Michigan. Pleasant hours spent with Kirk, both in his squat log cabin library, and in a canoe, navigating the local swamps, provided an intimation of the poetic and ethical life that Weaver described. In subsequent months, when I was studying for a master's degree at Yale, I had the chance to live in the home of the literary critic Cleanth Brooks. Sitting out on Brooks's back porch, sipping whiskey and discussing a range of subjects with him, I learned about poetry, the spirit of Agrarianism, the Southern literary renaissance, and what it means to be a Christian man of letters.

I touch on my experiences with Kirk and Brooks in order to emphasize my earlier suggestion that conservatism is essentially a way of life, not a set of beliefs that adhere to a specific political or economic agenda. The example these men have shown me is that

any worthwhile social philosophy must look beyond questions of sheer quantity, with their attendant emphasis on the means of production, and inquire instead into the quality of life we desire for ourselves. I have chosen to concentrate on political philosophy precisely because this is a discipline where there is still room to make this type of inquiry. As a branch of the social sciences, however, political philosophy must ever justify itself before those who would emulate their brethren among the natural sciences, and attempt to achieve for the study of political phenomena the same calculable certainty that characterizes the physical sciences. Though the term has gone out of fashion, positivism, the attempt to limit the validity of reason in the search for truth to the methods of the natural sciences and to discard all metaphysical speculation and ethical evaluation, remains the dominant outlook in political science today, as it has been for some time. In the eyes of the positivist, truth is regarded simply as that which can be described inductively from the empirical observation of successive events. While it is true that all of society must be open to be studied in an objective manner, the result of this outlook is that ancient concepts which resist scientific scrutiny—such as justice, freedom, and virtue—are either ignored or effectively emptied of meaning. The bitter lessons of Fascism and Communism in this century indicate the danger that awaits those societies in which men lose their understanding of these terms.

Combatting Relativism

If political science is to be revitalized, the first matter to be overcome is the liberal social scientist's thoroughgoing relativism. This relativism manifests itself in a skepticism with respect to answers that is the result of the social scientist's empirical, positivistic orientation. Relativism, empiricism, and positivism have thus far combined to yield social science literature of a remarkably banal quality. In order to free reason from the limitations imposed by empiricism and positivism, it is up to political philosophers to pose fundamental questions once again. We must return to the questions that previous societ-

ies have been unafraid to ask, to wit: How may we lead virtuous lives? What is the nature and destiny of man? These are essentially spiritual questions that require faith illumined by reason if they are to be answered. A society that has lost both its faith and its confidence in reason is bound to show signs of serious confusion. G.K. Chesterton observed this confusion at the beginning of this century:

What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert, himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt—the Divine Reason.

The element of humility in the liberal's attitude is genuine, but it ultimately wears a little thin, because it is merely the product of his relativism. At times, he demonstrates an intolerance which leads one to suspect a sense of frustration beneath his customarily cheerful demeanor. The liberal is frustrated because he has been taught that this world is all there is, and that his own physical desires are all he can ever really know. The first liberals were still well enough informed by the traditional Christian categories that they were able to avoid despair. But the gradual development of liberal theology, essentially without Christ and the Atonement, essentially also without any supernatural God, has served only to quicken the sense of desperation of the modern liberal. Since he is unwilling to look for divine forgiveness, he has developed a sense of guilt which he has directed not only at himself, but at his nation.

The inadequacy of liberalism stems from the fact that its original premise, the belief in the essential goodness of man, is belied by the history of man and of every individual. The liberal has believed that education and enlightenment would be enough to lead man to virtue and to happiness, but this has not proven to be the case. The liberal belief that evil resides primarily in political institutions

has been paralleled by the Marxist belief that evil inheres in the mode of economic production, but both the liberal and the Marxist have had difficulty explaining how the institutions can be so bad if human nature is so good. Thoughtful liberals have reconsidered their conception of man in the wake of the calamities of this century, and in the post-World War II era we have seen some of the most persuasive writings ever produced by liberals. But this does not mean that we can afford to have liberals dominate our public discussion, to the exclusion of other points of view.

The question has been asked, of late, whether American conservatives have any reason for existing any more, now that the collapse of the Soviet empire is on its way to being accomplished. I have tried to indicate that, since conservatism is about more than anti-Communist stances and economic reforms, important as those activities are in their places, conservatives will always have a task. The most important thing conservatives can contribute to society at present is their vision. It has ever been thus. American conservatives have been at their best when they have aimed at discerning the philosophical sources of our discontent. The most respectable writers in this tradition have set their sights on posterity and have labored simply to tell the truth in enduring fashion. Earlier this century, articulate critics such as George Santayana, Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and the Southern Agrarians, all made a mark on American culture without the benefit of broad cultural support. For the most part, they were prophets crying in the wilderness, urging restraint on a society given over almost exclusively to liberalism. They were civilized voices who objected to the utilitarian and levelling ethos of the machine culture. Though they did not expect to see their ideas exert a wide influence in their own lifetimes, they nonetheless said what

they had to say, gracefully, with conviction.

Notwithstanding the remarkable impact that conservatives have made in the political arena over the past generation, our priority in the future must be to produce scholarship and opinion that attempts to emulate the level of intelligence and verve displayed by these earlier writers. As M.E. Bradford and others have suggested, we should focus our intellectual analysis on the assumptions that inform the debates in social, political, and cultural theory. By participating in the mainstream, we may avoid adopting the posture of mere romantic pessimists enjoying a cheap melancholy over the decline of the West, or Epicurean fugitives from a hopeless society. For ours is a practical intellectual task. The debate we must pursue with the liberals concerns human nature itself; and there is no subject with more immediate practical consequences than this. If we are to have a healthy public philosophy, it must be predicated upon a realistic conception of man, ignoring neither his capacity for noble achievement nor his capacity for evil. Conservatism has always recognized that evil resides primarily in individuals, not in institutions, and that institutional reform, however drastic, can never succeed in curing human behavior of its basic weakness. The modern liberal would offer us the tinsel illusion that, with the proper amount of tinkering with the laws, we might solve our worst social ills. Their most visible critics respond with effective practical arguments, but these critics would promote a society that resembles a streamlined stimulation mechanism, with ever-increasing production and consumption, realized for no higher purpose. Wiser minds have taught us that, while institutional reforms and technical progress can greatly improve our society, reform and technique without a rebirth of the human spirit are bound to be disillusioning and discouraging.