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Sensibility or Virtue?

The New Communitarians and the Crisis of Modern Liberalism
by Bruce Frohnen. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 1996.

*Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism: The Legacy of Burke and
Tocqueville* by Bruce Frohnen. University Press of Kansas,
Lawrence, KS, 1992.

In his latest book, *The New Communitarians and the Crisis of Modern Liberalism*, Bruce Frohnen applies to modern American politics the themes in his historical study of the political and social normative principles of Burke and Tocqueville. These two thinkers, with the whole tradition of Christian Western civilization behind them, provide him with the basis of his description and critical analysis of contemporary American politics and social objectives. His main thesis is that beneath the pretentious and abstract sentimental rhetoric in favor of community, family values, and spiritual commitments to duties above "rights," contemporary American liberal politicians, such as President Clinton and Mario Cuomo, remain essentially materialists, epicureans, and hedonists. Their rhetoric merely disguises their belief that the pursuit of pleasure and creature comforts is the supreme good in life, so that their politics seeks to create a culture wholly devoid of any spiritual basis. They salvage their morally bankrupt liberalism through propaganda, utilizing both rational and emotional appeals aimed at establishing a totally secular and egalitar-

ian society ruled politically and legally by self-styled "intellectuals." The chief theoretical spokesmen for their revised liberalism include Robert Bellah, Amitai Etzioni, William Galston, Charles Taylor, and Gary Wills.

With Clinton as their national leader in politics, the "new communitarians" are really disguised old liberals. They are skillful in exploiting the techniques of modern mass technology utilized by a liberal partisan press, the glitter and sensationalism of Hollywood films, and the vulgarities of Madison Avenue advertising. Their common objective is to create popular, stereotyped images which pass as substance and truth with the American public. They perceive that Americans are champions of conservative values in religion, the family, education, the arts, and economic and social affairs, and therefore adopt the language of religious orthodoxy and traditional morality in order to pursue their egalitarian objectives. Moreover, they assume Rousseau's concept of a "civic religion,"

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and deify the state into a new, absolute, benevolent, and infallible secular church. Their object is to render unto Caesar the things that traditionally have belonged to God. The new communitarians are often intolerant bigots against institutional religion and wish to invest the state with the functions of traditional faith. To them, salvation is not for the soul, but for the happy belly.

Most of Frohnen's study consists of a descriptive account of the doctrinaire ideology of the new communitarians, which contrasts sharply with the traditional beliefs held by most Americans throughout history. He makes "virtue" in both the private lives of individuals and in the public lives of society's leaders the crucial concept in describing and judging the ills that afflict contemporary American culture. His judgments are subtle but evident in the implicit contrasts he presents between past normative religious and moral values and the current political dogmas of the supposedly reformed secular liberals.

One of the crucial differences, he notes, is how traditionalists and modern liberals seek solutions to the moral and social evils that afflict society: "Where conservatives seek to reform the individual, and through the individual society, liberals seek to reform society, and through it the individual" (7). The liberal view is based upon a belief in the natural goodness of man—a very flattering dogma to the human ego—which rejects as unnecessary the need of self-discipline for the individual through any external moral code. The liberal regards as tyranny the claim of institutions that he is subject to any normative principles in controlling his personal and social behavior. Thus, each private person is perceived as a law to himself, and from this anarchical base the moral norms of institutional religion or common morality are dismissed as an attempt to impose someone else's mo-

ality upon the free individual. Faith in man's natural goodness also results in the liberal dogma that any individual who fails, or commits a crime, is really a victim of an unjust and repressive society.

Historically, modern liberalism finds its roots in Rousseau's belief that man is by nature good and becomes corrupted through his civic and religious institutions. In total contrast to these assumptions is the traditional doctrine of Christianity: that man is by nature weak, limited, and corrupt, and therefore needs the institutions of society to redeem him from his natural weaknesses and to enable him to fulfill his better nature as a creature fashioned in the image of God. In rejecting the moral and social norms taught by family, Church, and community, in favor of the self-centered and autonomous desires of individuals, the new communitarians sanction an initial anarchy and then attempt to resolve the resultant chaos by the adoption of social welfare programs based upon political collectivism. Like Rousseau, they assume that only the state can create a new moral and social order in community. But the new communitarians seem unable to distinguish between genuine community and their political collectivism.

The ideology of revised liberalism rests heavily upon an extension of the social welfare state, now backed more than ever by value-free sociology, by social norms based upon survey statistics, and by psychological conditioning aimed at improving the self-image of individuals and groups according to race, gender, and economic class. On a national scale, the main objective of the new communitarians is to condition the American public to feel good about itself, to exalt its self-image above the self-images of all other nations, regardless of how shallow or corrupt its actual nature reveals itself in anti-social behavior. In such a social condition, the personal morality of

liberal politicians becomes an irrelevant factor in their public ideology.

At the core of the new liberalism is a wholly materialistic and egalitarian view of life and human nature. Its basic political agenda is to create economic equality of condition through a leveling process based upon confiscatory taxes paid by those who work and succeed, and it seeks to support those who cannot or will not work and fail. Moreover, the new liberalism makes no distinction between poverty caused by circumstances beyond an individual's control and poverty caused by irresponsible behavior or a lack of ability. Equality of condition as a desired norm leads the new communitarians to look upon economic success as the result of selfishness, and failure as the fault of injustices in society.

The religious and political views of Gary Wills provide the essence of many beliefs advocated by the new communitarians, and will serve as an exemplum of all of them. Formerly a self-styled conservative, Wills assumed a very extreme form of liberal philosophy late in the 1960s. He favors eliminating religion from public schools and public functions. In place of the Christian tradition he would establish a civil religion based upon patriotism and citizenship, with fictional myths about great leaders, such as Washington and Lincoln, providing the ideals for American democracy. He advocates changes in the Catholic Church that would allow its clergy to marry, ordain women, accept birth control, tolerate abortion, and abandon its faith in any moral absolute. Wills denies that the past can transmit ascertainable moral or legal norms by which to guide our present-day beliefs and actions. In his view, the nation therefore has no fixed character through its constitution, but is only in a constantly changing process of creating and revising its character and self-image. His book *Inventing America* (1978), is a psychological study

of Jefferson, which, he claims, provides the key to the true character of America during the era of its founding. In *Explaining America* (1981), and *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992), Wills contends that the Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution, provides the valid guide to American democracy, because its abstract language against political tyranny, and its claim that "all men are created equal," enabled Lincoln to "reinvent" and reconstruct American society by creating the living myth that equality is the constant great objective of American democracy. Thus Wills abandons the long-established contrary belief that individual and corporate freedom under constitutional law is the true essence of the American federal-state system. The venerable concept of society as a moral compact between God and man (as set forth by Edmund Burke), and even the social contract theory of Locke, which posits a reciprocal relationship between rulers and subjects based upon defined constitutional powers and civil rights, is set aside in favor of rule by the latest public opinion polls. Wills holds that the Constitution has been made largely irrelevant because modern public opinion has wholly modified the world of the eighteenth century which gave birth to it. Public opinion as shaped by the media, Hollywood, and Madison Avenue now provides the norms by which to judge the character of American leaders in directing political policies on the path to national equality of condition. Since popularity is based upon numbers, statistical majorities, rather than laws or the corporate nature of man, provide the criterion for valid political programs. Thus the French Jacobin brand of national unlimited government based upon mass democracy, often led by demagogues, displaces the traditional American constitutional federal system of government with limited powers. For Wills and the other new communitarians, the supreme test of gov-

ernment is always how it contributes to equality of condition in creating a community that transcends race, religion, sexual orientation, and social class.

A very curious omission in Frohnen's study is his failure to note the connection between the new communitarians and the "man of feeling" in eighteenth-century "sensibility." The modern American "bleeding heart" liberal is a direct descendent of the "man of feeling" which is so strongly criticized by Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke. Johnson noted that those who dissolved every public concern into humanitarian pity or mercy at the expense of justice to individuals did so in theory without any self-sacrifice. Men of feeling, he noted, will "pay you with their tears." Burke's aphorism, "theoretical virtue is practical vice" was aimed at the man of feeling. A political morality based upon feeling inverts the whole religious relationship between emotion and morality. Instead of feeling deeply about the fulfillment or violation of moral principles, the man of feeling and his modern liberal counterpart make how deeply we feel the whole basis of what is considered good or evil. This enables the new communitarians to assume that their egalitarian politics makes them morally superior to anyone who adheres to the traditional relationship between morality and feeling. Their humanitarianism, which is based upon feeling and not upon morality as principle, displaces Christian charity directed by principle, so that being touched by a delicate distress at anyone's misfortune becomes for them at once the source, test, and end of virtue in man's moral and political life. Bleeding heart politicians are generous with other people's money. They sacrifice justice to individuals under moral and constitutional law in order to parade their moral superiority through an ethics of feeling. This, in essence, is what the new communitarians wish to establish through

their collectivist egalitarianism.

Bruce Frohnen offers a compelling alternative to the new communitarian "man of feeling" in his first book, *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism*. This thoroughgoing treatment of the legacy of Burke and Tocqueville consists of seven chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter, "Natural Law and Virtue," establishes the ethical foundation that he considers necessary for the instrumental means by which every well-ordered, just, and free society enables its citizens to pursue "Virtue," the highest end of mankind. Adherence to moral natural law, perceived through normative "right reason," is the equivalent in secular life to a state of grace in religious life, and leads to true happiness.

Chapters two and three are devoted to an explication of the basic principles in the political philosophy of Edmund Burke. The author presents an accurate summary of the vital role of moral natural law as the basis of Burke's conservative political philosophy. His account treats with equal validity a number of other pertinent matters. It indicates the function in Burke's politics of his orthodox Christian and corporate conception of human nature, as distinct from Rousseau's revolutionary theory of man's natural goodness; rightly notes his appeals to moral prudence as the first of practical political virtues; perceives that his providential conception of history beyond empirical facts ("the known march of the ordinary providence of God"), and experience, together with prudence, provides the antidote to artificially constructed systems of rational ideology; and sympathetically presents his interpretation of British limited constitutional monarchy and the rule of prescriptive law, as opposed to absolute monarchical power, or rule through prerogative and arbitrary will. Moreover, it

praises Burke's belief in timely reform and change in civil society, as against ideological and violent revolution; defends his case for aristocracy and hierarchy, equity and liberty, as against egalitarian leveling; describes his views regarding tradition, customs, manners, prescriptive law, providence, prejudice, party government, and the divine origins of government. One of its recurrent themes is the moral necessity of all persons to accept the inherited terms of their existence. As Burke put it, the situation of man is the preceptor of his duties.

Frohnen believes that up until Burke's death in 1797, his principles provided the archetypal model for a sound conservative political philosophy. But after the French Revolution, to put his politics into practice in modern society, it was necessary to take fully into account the great changes wrought by the industrial revolution, and above all by the French Jacobin concept of egalitarian democracy. In light of these powerful new forces in modern society, Burke's politics needed to be modified in order to remain relevant.

Alexis de Tocqueville provides Frohnen with the ideal writer whose political principles are in harmony with Burke and also in qualified sympathy with modern democracy. Tocqueville accepted as undoubtedly valid Burke's attacks on Jacobin egalitarianism as the greatest single menace to society and as the source of a new kind of tyranny—the collectivist ideological tyranny of the modern democratic totalitarian state, whose appeal was based upon a sentimental conception of human nature, a fictitious “general will” sanctioned by numbers or by brute force, and wholly secular-

ized values in pursuit of materialist ends. Tocqueville's visit to the United States convinced him that “the inherent tendency toward equality in American society,” when combined with the freedom in the corporate and communal life so evident in all the states and with constitutional restraints upon centralized authority made possible a well-ordered and just society. He did not believe that American constitutional republican government could be transferred

to France or to other European nations. He did not live long enough to note the enormous growth in the highly centralized authority of the federal government following the Civil War. Chapter four, “Tocqueville and the Conservation of Liberty in America,” presents the positive arguments in Frohnen's thesis re-

garding that perceptive observer, and chapter five, “Virtue Properly Understood: Tocqueville and the End of Self-Interest,” notes that the problems to be overcome in modern democracy include radical individualism, the tyranny of majority will, the pursuit of creature comforts as the great end of life, and the destruction of a spirit of public benevolence, all leading to the “soft-despotism” of the egalitarian welfare state.

The main thesis of Frohnen's book becomes evident in chapter six, “The Dilemma of Contemporary Conservative Horizons.” He argues therein that the dual legacy of Burke and Tocqueville's conservatism in democracy has been largely “submerged in the sea of egalitarian materialism spawned most prodigiously by Hobbes,” and by modern society, because it too has abandoned the “pursuit of the good life in favor of a



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pursuit of the comfortable life.” This theme is extended in chapter seven, “The Quest for Virtue,” which is centered in a plea to modern conservatives to overcome the dilemma of egalitarian democracy by restoring the political and social legacy of Burke and Tocqueville.

Frohnen’s study raises the question of the extent to which that legacy has been fulfilled by conservative heads of state in contemporary society. If the administrations of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States are taken as the best that conservatives have accomplished in practice, clearly the legacy has hardly been fulfilled at all. Apart from recent practical politics, Frohnen explores the political philosophy of six writers widely regarded as conservatives to determine which one comes the closest to being an adherent of Burke and Tocqueville. He quickly dispatches the politics of Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and Michael Novak, all of whom exhibit some valid aspects of a conservative philosophy, but neither its complete form or substance. His main concern is with three writers—Michael Oakeshott, Irving Kristol, and Russell Kirk. He summarizes their essential principles in order to determine which provides the soundest guide for modern conservatives in solving the serious problems of democratic egalitarian society.

He approves of Oakeshott’s insistence that human reason is very limited, and that political rationalism must be rejected. But Oakeshott omits the whole realm of religion from his politics, so that his plea in favor of following moral habit because of historical continuity lacks the firm foundation which in the past was always provided by institutionalized faith, doctrine, and rites. Frohnen finds some virtue in Kristol’s defense of local government, his approval of strong non-political institutions as shields against the centralized power of the state,

and his harsh criticism of utopian theories. But he criticizes that writer’s materialist, utilitarian, epicurean, and wholly secular cast of thought as utterly lacking in the spiritual principles and politics of Burke and Tocqueville. Religion as revelation is wholly ignored by Kristol; at best he considers it socially useful. Frohnen perceives that to Kristol the good life is one of material comfort and secular culture, and his harsh criticism of the journalist makes it doubtful that his “neo-conservatism” has any real claim to be considered what it purports to be.

Having eliminated as inadequate five of the six contemporary writers he discusses, Frohnen perceives in Russell Kirk the true heir of the Burke-Tocqueville conservative political tradition. Over the past four decades the author of *The Conservative Mind* (1953), has risen above the ephemeral concerns of journalists, and has consistently adhered to “the permanent things” in civilized life. He has championed the objective moral, political, and cultural principles and actions that depend upon the recognition of a transcendent reality, so that his thought is centered in a conservative philosophy that includes but goes beyond empiricism and human reason. Frohnen knows that there is no easy or set formula for the salvation of modern society from its most serious afflictions, but the courage necessary to pursue the life of virtue he proposes holds the best promise of applying the conservative legacy of Burke and Tocqueville.

In a book that has so many strong virtues it may seem a bit querulous to point out weaknesses, but one major flaw needs to be addressed: Frohnen’s method of handling abstractions. He is aware of the problem, and includes a section in chapter two on “Abstraction and Idealization.” He quotes Onora O’Neill, who holds that “abstraction, taken literally, is a matter of selective

omission, of leaving out some predicates from descriptions and theories,” and he notes that “to communicate without abstraction is impossible,” that even the word “cat” is an abstraction. All this is very true in the grand abstract; indeed to abstract is to abridge. But when applied to cultural and historical categories rather than to cats, it fails to take into account the serious problems that occur when what is omitted destroys necessary distinctions and limits or falsifies universal nature. The *Reader's Digest* is hardly a valid model for serious scholarship.

It is essential for scholars to think critically about abstractions, particularly regarding what is left out. Burke condemned what he called “the hocus-pocus of abstraction,” because it was a popular soporific for theorists who are reluctant to wrestle with the complexities of concrete details and facts of history and circumstances. When applied to the eighteenth century, the abstract category “The Age of Reason” utterly falsifies this historical epoch by omitting all of its many non-rational contradictory complexities.

The category “The Enlightenment,” whose metaphorical core resides in “light” as the opposite of darkness, ignorance, and anti-intellectual obfuscation, leads unwary students to accept it without critical examination. How many students are aware that one of the most common of the many meanings of “Enlightenment” involves an unbounded faith in the materialistic and mechanistic science of the seventeenth century applied to every branch of knowledge, including ethics and politics, and a corresponding exclusion of any belief in or attribution of social merit to the almost two thousand years of Christian contributions to European civilization? To Burke, who

revered what he called “the Christian commonwealth of Europe,” much of the Enlightenment was a moral return to the spiritual dark ages of pagan society.

Frohnen's use of “Reason” as an abstract absolute leads him into some seeming or real contradictions. On page fifteen he asserts that conservatism “does not assert the primacy of reason,” and four pages later he notes that “the conservative need not, indeed cannot be anti-rational.” The ambiguity is compounded later when he sets abstract reason against faith and then against emotion, all treated as abstractions. His difficulties could have been avoided if he had first made clear that there are different kinds of reason, and that some species of it are valid in the field of science but not in that of religion, ethics, and politics. During Burke's time there were at least six different, often contradictory, types of “reason” or rational traditions of thought. Frohnen should have included a separate chapter or at least an added section of one describing the various types of “reason” he discusses throughout his book. The same applies to emotion.

Many well-known scholars who have spent decades studying the eighteenth century have frequently fallen into the error of treating such vital concepts as “reason,” “nature,” and “emotion” as abstract absolutes. It is therefore not surprising nor particularly grievous that Frohnen, a young scholar, in his first book, has fallen into this common error. Moreover, since both the *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism* and *The New Communitarians* evince so many excellent intellectual attributes, he is clearly well-equipped to undertake further investigations of the political legacy of Burke and Tocqueville, and the promise of modern conservatism.