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Conservative Critics of Modernity: Can They Turn Back the Clock?

It is not easy to be a conservative in the modern world. In fact, it takes a high degree of moral courage, for conservatives are almost always on the defensive, fighting for causes that seem hopeless or lost because they go against the most powerful currents of the modern age.

In praising the courage of conservatives, I am referring primarily to cultural rather than to economic or political conservatives. The proponents of free-market capitalism and limited government that are today called conservatives (in the economic and political sense) actually enjoy a certain momentum in their favor so they need not think of themselves as defenders of lost causes. But cultural conservatives are different. They are die-hard adherents of religious, philosophical, and artistic traditions that are out of place in the modern world. They are like dinosaurs who inexplicably missed the mass extinction sixty-five million years ago. As creatures from another era, cultural conservatives were not made for modern civilization and do not fit into the universe of respectable opinion. This gives them the distinction of being the last genuine radicals, and usually makes them the most interesting figures in today's intellectual

circles. To these wonderful pre-historic creatures, I would like to offer some words of encouragement by sketching a broad picture of modern culture that indicates why History is not as overpowering as it sometimes seems to be and why, in the long run, traditional patterns of culture are favored by the natural order of things and even by divine providence.

Let me begin with a simple definition: Cultural conservatives are those daring thinkers who are willing to question the basic assumption of historical progress—the assumption that the modern world as it has developed over the last four hundred years in the West (and now around the globe) is superior in decisive respects to all the civilizations of the past. This question has been raised by many great cultural conservatives and answered in a variety of provocative ways.

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One striking example is the Russian writer and former dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn; he is a cultural conservative who shocked his audience during the Harvard Commencement Address of 1978 by asking if Western civilization took a wrong turn at the time of the Renaissance when it replaced God-centered societies with Man-centered societies, producing a world of secular humanism that now appears to be spiritually exhausted. Another great thinker who could be classified as a cultural conservative is Leo Strauss whose scholarly writings are dedicated to reviving classical Greek philosophy as a genuine alternative to modern philosophy—a proposal that implies no real progress in philosophy has occurred since its peak 2,400 years ago.

Other cultural conservatives look to the Middle Ages as the high point of Western civilization: For example, Henry Adams, who preferred Gothic cathedrals dedicated to the Virgin Mary to the dynamo of the industrial revolution. Or traditional Catholics, who think that Latin Scholasticism is the peak of Christendom. Or Eastern Orthodox believers, who believe that monasticism and the centuries-old liturgy are the authentic sources of Christian spirituality. Orthodox Jews are also cultural conservatives because they believe that traditional Judaism, faithful to the divinely revealed Mosaic Law, is superior to Reform Judaism. And one should not forget America's Southern Agrarians, including Richard Weaver, who held fast to the conviction that the Old South, despite the evil of slavery, represented a higher civilization than the more "progressive" industrial and commercial society of the North.

Reflecting on these examples, one may infer that cultural conservatives are driven by a profound dissatisfaction with the modern world and look to the pre-modern world for sources of inspiration, especially for

models of lost greatness. The root of their dissatisfaction is the belief that modernity does not constitute unmixed "progress" over the past because the advances in freedom, material prosperity, and technology that we presently enjoy are offset by a decline in the highest aspirations of the human soul—in the aspirations for heroic virtue, spiritual perfection, philosophical truth, and artistic beauty. Seen in this light, modernity is not superior to past civilizations because it has ushered in an un-heroic age. It has sacrificed the highest achievements of culture for a more equitable and secure but more prosaic existence that, in the last analysis, is not justified because it has lowered the overall aim of life and debased the human spirit.

The obvious objection to this kind of thinking is that cultural conservatives are, at best, hopeless romantics with an incurable nostalgia for the past or, at worst, dangerous reactionaries who want to "turn back the clock" and repeal the modern age. Both sentiments are usually met with derision or with the advice that cultural conservatives should learn to accept defeat graciously because historical progress (articulated in various forms by Kant, Hegel, Marx, Mill, Dewey, and most recently by Francis Fukuyama) is not only desirable; it is also inevitable and irreversible. In response, those who share the intuitions of cultural conservatives that something is wrong with modernity—but who feel trapped by theories of the inescapable nature of "progress"—need to see that modern civilization is not as mighty as it claims. Let me offer a few proposals for freeing our minds from the grip of modernist thinking.

The first step is to devise a philosophical equivalent of long-range planning. The "future," after all, is not simply the next decade or even the next generation. We need to think about civilization after the next cen-

tury or after the next millenium or (I add somewhat facetiously) after the next ice age. To gain an idea of what civilization might look like in the distant future, we must wait for all the forces of modernity to play themselves out and then see what kind of reaction will occur. Who knows, for example, what Western Europe will look like in a hundred years? Will it still be European and social democratic? One strange and alarming statistic that foreshadows major changes is the “population implosion” or “birth dearth”—the declining birth rate of advanced industrial societies resulting from the sexual revolution and modern technology. Nations like Italy now have negative replacement rates that are so low that there may be no more Italians in 150 years. Will there be a reaction that repeals modern trends? Or will European races simply die out and be replaced by African and Arab races shaped by Islamic culture? All that one can say at this point is that the modern trends will likely continue for some time (perhaps a generation or two), following the present pattern which combines permissive freedom, materialism, half-baked nihilism, and strange New Age cults on the fringes. This situation will remain until modern Western civilization subverts its existing foundations and collapses or is transformed by reactions that resemble more traditional structures of authority.

In addition to proposing the long view, I would urge people to stop thinking in terms of historical progress in a rational and linear direction and to think instead in terms of cycles of civilization in which narrow trends play themselves out over finite periods while the full range of human possibilities remains permanently viable. The underlying assumption is that civilization has ups and downs; but beneath it is an order of Nature—a set of laws, patterns, and forms that give human nature and the natural universe an enduring structure. Though

not truly eternal like God, the natural patterns will endure as long as created beings endure. The implication is that human nature may be temporarily distorted (sometimes for centuries) by the rise and fall of historical civilizations; but certain natural patterns that God has imprinted on created beings will persist and re-assert themselves. What looks inevitable today—democracy, industrial and technological society, even modern science—can be seen more realistically as a transient phase in the rise and fall of civilization. The present order of things is therefore not an inevitable culmination of history but a diluted version of something better that is livable until older patterns, including older patterns of greatness, are able to re-emerge. How and when this will occur is impossible to predict. But let us not confuse the last few centuries with a necessary or best order, and let us remain open to the permanent possibilities of the human soul.

To illustrate the way cultural conservatives might challenge the present order and recover enduring patterns of human nature, I would like to speculate about four idols of the modern age—democracy, women’s “liberation,” modern art, and modern science. Contrary to conventional wisdom, I doubt that these phenomena are as inevitable or as desirable as most people have been led to believe by the dogma of historical progress.

Consider the status of democracy. Is it really the best form of government or the one toward which all nations are converging? Every serious conservative must wrestle with these questions because the deepest prejudice of our age is the belief that democracy based on human rights (liberal democracy) is the best, indeed the *only* legitimate form of government. Thomas Jefferson said the idea was “self-evident” to all enlightened minds and therewith shut

down discussion of the issue. He made it seem un-patriotic to question this view, although patriots like Alexander Hamilton did entertain the possibility that monarchy was better. One should also remember that most of the great political thinkers of the classical and Christian tradition were at odds with present thinking. Despite the differences among Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the early American Puritans, all agreed that democracy is not the best form of government and that monarchy, aristocracy, or some kind of mixed constitution is the best regime in most cases. It would be a major step in liberating our minds if we could recover their reasoning and take it seriously once again.

Their argument, in a nutshell, is that democracy is not the best regime because it tends to level distinctions between high and low in society and in the souls of citizens; and this leveling tendency undermines the quest for virtue or human excellence. Instead of judging life by the peaks of humanity—the philosophers, saints, and heroes—democracy glorifies the tastes and opinions of the average man, producing a popular culture or mass society that weakens the highest impulses of the soul. In extreme forms of mass democracy, the people as well as the educated elites become ashamed of the moral superiority implied in true virtue and tear it down by treating it with indifference or contempt. This leads to “democratic tyranny,” something we have witnessed in violent forms under socialism or communism and in softer forms in the debased mass culture of America and the social democracies of Europe.

Because democracy tends to level distinctions between high and low, the classical and early Christian thinkers favored more hierarchical regimes than democracy. Following Plato’s maxim that the “regime in the city shapes the regime in the soul,” they

favored monarchy or aristocracy in order to perfect the minds and characters of citizens; or they defended mixed regimes that combined wisdom and virtue in rulers with the demands of the people for consent. Of the various models proposed, the one that makes the most sense to me is Saint Thomas Aquinas’s idea of mixed or constitutional monarchy—a regime that combines elements of kingship, aristocracy, and democracy in a balanced order. This was the order of the English Constitution for centuries, a balance of King, Lords, and Commons. It was also the order of the Spartan regime, which combined kingship (actually two kings) with an aristocratic body of venerable elders (the *gerousia*) and the elected representatives of the people (the *ephors*). The mixed constitution was also the political order endorsed by the great conservative, Edmund Burke, and by Plato in his *Laws* and Cicero in his *Republic*. It is the basis of the Catholic Church, which I would describe as an elective constitutional monarchy in which the supreme Pontiff is elected by the College of Cardinals and governs in communion with the bishops, the ordained priesthood, and the people. It is the regime underlying most corporate hierarchies in business, the military, and tribal life where one boss or chief governs by consensus in partnership with qualified elites and the broad mass of people.

Is it possible today to believe that those favoring constitutionally mixed monarchies are right and that advocates of pure republicanism or democracy are wrong about the best form of government? I believe that it is possible to hold this view, even if it cannot be implemented in the present age. The decisive issue that favors the traditional view is the connection between a hierarchical political regime and the need to maintain a high or heroic culture over a popular or mass culture. Without high culture, the human soul is degraded to the point where

it becomes indistinguishable from animal or plant life and human existence rarely rises above comfortable self-preservation. For anyone concerned with human nobility, it is crucial to establish a regime that promotes high culture over popular culture—that promotes Mozart over the Beatles, as it were, or Michelangelo over Hollywood, or opera over rap music, or the classical liberal arts over professional training. Since all high culture is aristocratic culture—taking aristocratic in its broad sense to mean rule by the best souls rather than mere hereditary privilege but not excluding hereditary privilege in some areas—it follows that hierarchical regimes would be better at promoting high culture than purely democratic or republican regimes.

While we can appreciate the freedom, prosperity, and dynamism of modern liberal democracies, we cannot forgive the “cultural wasteland” they have produced through the leveling of high culture by the masses and its even more devastating deconstruction by the educated elites in the democratic age. What is unnatural about the present arrangement is precisely the contempt shown by elites for true and meritorious elitism—for the natural inequalities of mind and spirit which cannot be eliminated from human nature and which elites in healthier ages channeled into noble and spiritual cultures that actually spoke to all classes of society. Under present conditions, the mission of cultural conservatives should be the defense of high culture over popular culture and the reassertion of traditional hierarchies wherever possible while waiting for modernity to spend its last energies on nihilistic self-destruction.

A second way to resist mass democracy is to re-examine women’s liberation or feminism. Such a re-assessment should begin by recognizing the familiar trade-offs of so-

called “progress.” The gains in freedom and equality by modern women are offset by declines in the higher, intangible realms—in romantic love (including decline in the grace of women as they are coarsened by efforts to imitate men), in the seriousness of marriage as a permanent commitment, in the responsibilities of motherhood and child rearing, in respect for authority as a result of feminizing authority, and in manly honor as men conform to the new code of androgyny. Driving the whole feminist movement is a notion of personal autonomy that equates moral worth with nothing higher than having a salaried career or a middle class profession. How durable and satisfying is this new social experiment?

It may sound shocking to hear, but it is possible that the new experiment will not last more than two generations because it goes against the practices of all pre-existing cultures and against Nature “herself.” The present trend assumes that men and women are interchangeable—that no distinct roles should be assigned by custom or by law to the two sexes and that both men and women find their fulfillment in bourgeois careerism. Yet all previous cultures have established different roles for males and females, usually assigning political, military, and religious authority to men while giving social and moral power to women in varying degrees. This pattern is often overlooked by academic proponents of multiculturalism, who seem to forget that non-Western societies have always distinguished the roles of men and women and nearly all have been patriarchal. How long can modern society defy the wisdom of the ages? It cannot do so indefinitely if the universal experience of peoples and cultures is rooted in Nature—and plenty of evidence suggests that it is.

One bit of evidence is that modern Western societies preserve natural differences without admitting it. While officially requiring men and women to be treated not

merely equally but identically—as in the training of women for hard-hat construction jobs, military combat, weight-lifting, and professional boxing—the double standard quite reasonably persists beneath the surface. “Men are from Mars, women are from Venus,” proclaims a best-selling book on male-female relations.

Moreover, new studies in sociobiology and genetic research support the claims of natural differences between the sexes. Feminists themselves refer to feminizing authority and the work place, by which they mean making them less hierarchical and competitive. The new school of “difference” feminism recasts old stereotypes by describing female reasoning as intuitive and personalized compared to male reasoning, which is abstract and impersonal. In addition, everyone knows that males are much more aggressive and violent than females—as evidenced by violent crime statistics, male addiction to violent video games, the macho swagger of computer hackers, and the rowdy behavior of boys. From all of this evidence, one may reasonably infer that traditional cultures were more natural in thinking that men are better suited for military and political life and women for domestic, aesthetic, and moral life and that efforts to transform roles distorts both spheres by unduly homogenizing them.

The reason why the facts of life are so readily denied today is that several powerful forces are at work—ideology, technology, and prosperity—and these forces have created a temporary artificial world in which sexual differences seem obsolete. On one level, ideology causes people to deceive

themselves in order to uphold the myth that gender is a social construction and the sexes are the same. This is akin to socialism’s “big lie” that private property and religion are merely social constructs—an anti-natural ideology that kept tyrannical systems operating for seventy years, until human nature reasserted itself. On another level, technology and material prosperity conspire to make natural differences seem unimportant because all tasks have become easier and life is less heroic, creating the illusion of interchangeable sex roles. In addition, the higher authority of traditional religions, all of which are patriarchal, seems irrelevant in a modern secular culture dominated by materialism and technol-

ogy. As long as there are no great wars and emergencies, as long as no harsh demands are placed on people in advanced industrial societies, as long as sex is detached from procreation and parenting is detached from serious moral authority, then all people will seem like interchangeable parts in a consumer-worker society. But this is an artificial state of things that cannot last indefinitely.

Where will dissatisfaction and reactions begin to appear? Certainly, great events like wars and social breakdowns will cause some re-evaluations. But even without such crises, in middle-class society one can already see reactions caused by the “eternal feminine” in women rebelling against pressures to be little more than imperfect imitations of men. I refer to mundane troubles like eating disorders in women who have been taught by a unisex society to hate every ounce of extra flesh on their female bodies. I think also about educated and profes-



Nineteenth-century Philadelphia...

Courtesy of Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau

sional women who admit that careers are not as satisfying as they first appear and that deeper meaning can be found in traditional religion than in bourgeois careerism—a recognition that there is higher dignity in devoting oneself to family, church, and local community than in slaving away as, say, a lawyer for material success and power.

Admittedly, the novelty of careers among first generation feminists is still a significant force, and the second generation naively takes for granted an artificial unisex world without seeing the special conditions on which it rests. But there are also underground trends in the opposite direction that have been ignored by the popular media. One recent book, for example, records the stories of young career women who have re-

jected the sexual revolution and returned to the divine wisdom about men and women found in the Orthodox Jewish tradition. Such women are the vanguard of a “resistance” movement that will eventually change modern norms, just as human nature eventually defeated socialist ideology in countries where it seemed firmly established for two generations.

A third trend that needs to be challenged is “modernism” in the fine arts and architecture. Here we face the most bizarre contradiction of all between an imposed modernist ideology and the true feelings of people. While the general public recognizes that modern art has reached a dead end, the art establishment of museums and schools of fine arts still uphold modernism. Most people see clearly that the rejection of beauty and the contempt for visible reality by modern artists is absurd; and most are offended

by art that has been reduced to gimmickry or shock value or the nihilism of abstract chaos. Beneath the quiet surface, nearly everyone thinks about modern art like the little boy in *The Emperor’s New Clothes*: There is nothing there! Unfortunately, the inner voices of people are still stifled by fears of sounding philistine.

As with other modern ideologies, however, modernism in art will eventually give way to the natural demands of the body and the soul—in this case, to the demand for depictions of visible realities and beautiful forms which earlier art celebrated. We will then see a titanic clash between the earlier classical and medieval styles and the modern style. By the classical style, I mean art which imitates Nature or idealizes Nature following

canons of perfect proportion and symmetry. By the medieval style, I mean the Gothic style and iconography, in which art is intended to glorify God by depicting visible realities as images of invisible beauties. These earlier styles should be revived in order to defeat the modernist style, which equates art with subjective self-expression and substitutes the energy of the artistic process for the beauty of Nature and the glories of Creation. Modern architecture, too, fits this pattern by rejecting higher beauty for the cold and lifeless utility of abstract functionalism. Here, the seeds of a reaction are already evident within the architectural establishment. To Mies van der Rohe’s lapidary dictum of modernist dogma that “Less is more,” Philadelphia architect Robert Venturi famously responded, “Less is a bore.”

To see what returning to earlier styles of art and architecture might look like, I would



...Twentieth-century Philadelphia.
Progress in architecture?

point to two examples. The first is the crusade of Prince Charles in England to tear down ugly modern buildings in certain sectors of London and to restore the more humane styles of beauty from earlier periods. A more serious case is the struggle that took place recently at the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture. There, the dean of the school, Thomas Gordon Smith, fought a successful battle against the reigning “modernism” and hired a new team of faculty to teach the next generation of architects the classical and medieval styles of church architecture—Romanesque, Byzantine, Gothic, and Renaissance. His point is not to slavishly imitate everything done in the past but to develop variations on the older styles based on the recognition that a church should offer a glimpse of otherworldly beauties and give physical embodiment to the transcendent truths of the Christian faith. The underlying assumption is that certain styles are eternally viable—they never go out of style—because they constitute the perfection of the thing in question; and it is only the false belief in historical progress and the restless desire for novelty that cause modern people to look upon older perfections as boring or outmoded.

Finally, I would like to encourage cultural conservatives to question the premises of modern science. This is the most difficult challenge because modern science is true in some sense; and a return to many claims of pre-modern science would be false and dishonest. Obviously, much of modern cosmology is true. The earth is not at rest at the center of the universe, and the universe is not simply a finite sphere. The general picture of an expanding and evolving natural universe put forward in Big Bang cosmology and Darwinian evolution has more evidence to support it than a static Aristotelian model. Yet the modern scientific

model is far from being conclusively proven. One must take seriously the objections raised, for example, to Darwinian theory by those who argue that the chances of life emerging from non-life are nearly zero and that the fossil record for transitional forms between stable species is almost non-existent. Such criticisms, cogently stated by Phillip E. Johnson in *Darwin on Trial*, are necessary for every serious conservative to ponder.

But the main ground for challenging the modern scientific view of the universe is not the insufficiency of evidence; it is the incompleteness of modern science’s theoretical claims. Modern natural science has nothing to say about the ultimate purpose of the universe beyond the orderly movement of natural bodies in accordance with mathematical laws. The reason for omitting the most important question (that of purpose) is that modern science deliberately lowers the goals of science in order to make progress in lesser realms of knowledge—a trade-off that follows the logic of the entire modern project. In its version of modernism, science restricts itself to explaining “how” Nature works rather than “why” Nature works as she does. It postpones indefinitely the question of Nature’s ultimate purposes or designs (the question of natural teleology). Stated in more precise Aristotelian language, modern science focuses on material and efficient causes and dispenses with formal and final causes. But how long can modern science ignore formal and final causes? Once again, I believe that such issues cannot be ignored indefinitely because the highest kind of knowledge is required to understand the natural world and to satisfy the human soul. One should not be surprised, then, to see an underground movement of thinkers who have revived formal and final causes in the concept of “intelligent design.”

According to the school of intelligent

design, Nature is not a product of blind mechanical forces because her complex structures cannot be reduced to numerous small parts that accidentally came together over time. As Michael Behe argues, many of the critical parts of animals, such as eyes or wings, exhibit “irreducible complexity”: they cannot function as anything but complete units and therefore could not have evolved through incremental changes. The whole animal also functions as a complete unit that could not have gradually evolved, just as twenty or even eighty per cent of an airplane is not capable of flying. The implication is that formal causality of some kind, not excluding special creation by intelligent design, is needed to explain organic functionalism. On a cosmic scale, Paul Davies suggests that the entire natural universe exhibits design and direction. He acknowledges that Nature is evolving (as modern science says), but it does so by producing “self-organizing wholes” of ever-greater complexity—beginning with simple structures like stars and galaxies and moving toward more complex forms such as living cells and human minds. Since the chance appearance of complex forms is extremely low, Davies infers that living and intelligent beings must result from Nature’s self-organizing tendencies. Nature is therefore alive and directed toward intelligent life and could be said to aim at conscious understanding as its natural end. While the school of intelligent design is still speculative, it challenges the narrow thinking of much of modern

science because it is simply more plausible than the theory of a purposeless universe driven by blind mechanical causes.

If these arguments are correct, then we conservatives have reason to be encouraged. They show that we can resist the degradations of modern culture and can hope to reverse the tide of history with positive results. They show that we are freer than we have been taught to believe: There is no historical determinism to trap us because the forces of Nature and of Nature’s God are stronger than the forces of progress. Not only can we imagine alternatives to modern civilization, we can also recover some of the greatness of the past.

And time is on our side. Modernity is not a permanent stage but a transient period in historical civilization, temporarily supported by the distortions of modernist ideologies and modern technology. Against those pressures, we can push back. And we can take heart at the words of William F. Buckley, who once said that the job of the conservative intellectual is “to stand athwart history and shout, ‘Slow down! Stop! Return to ancient wisdom.’” To this courageous call, I would add the observation that ancient wisdom is worth recovering not merely because it is ancient but because it testifies to the permanent possibilities of the human soul as well as the natural order of things. These possibilities will eventually triumph over modern illusions.