

*A liberal professor's battle against  
ghosts.*

## *Illusions of Illusion*

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*The Conservative Illusion*, by M. Morton Auerbach. *New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.*

THE EXPANDING conservative movement must expect to find a variety of works directed against its philosophical and political position. This is, among other things, a witness to its present importance and promise for the future. Furthermore, it is not impossible to think that some of these works will bring criticism which can be assimilated. Conservatives remain in this age almost the only believers in tolerance; in any age I think they will respect the

spiritual admonition present in T. S. Eliot's saying: "One needs the enemy." The enemy helps one to define oneself: he can arouse conscience and bring chastisement for errors.

At least this is what I would have been willing to say before reading M. Morton Auerbach's *The Conservative Illusion*. Now I begin to doubt; unless the critics of conservatism can furnish something more real than this, there is little chance that the great conversation can be profitably continued very long. I have said "something more real" because I would indicate at the beginning the general nature of this

work. *The Conservative Illusion* sets out to do a complete demolition job on a point of view and a philosophy which are older than Burke, older than Plato, older than the Bible, because they go back to the ancient time when people first began to reflect about the nature of man, the nature of creation, and the manifold relations between the two. The project is, to say the least, ill-advised, and the actual achievements are incidental. Still, as an example of the recourses the enemies of conservatism may try in their alarm, the book is worth examining.

One begins to understand the presumptuousness of the attempt after looking at the author's method. By a combination of dialectic and hypostatization he manages to create a definition of conservatism so artificial and so brittle that it shatters easily upon contact with historical circumstances, which he is always ready to supply in abundance. According to Professor Auerbach, if the conservative steps one foot in one direction, he becomes a "reactionary"; let him step one foot in another and he is a "liberal"; one foot in another and he is an "authoritarian." And if he stays in the little corner that is defined for him, Professor Auerbach has a special set of postulates to belabor him with.

It is most revealing to note that although Professor Auerbach's great enemy is Plato, to whom he attributes most of the afflictions that come in the form of conservatism, he is thus constantly indulging in the worst, the least acceptable kind of Platonizing. Under his examination almost everybody turns out to be something less, or other, than a conservative because some of his beliefs do not square with the rigid, archetypal idea which has been set up. And such failures to measure up even in minor matters are used to pronounce conservatism an illusion. In its formal aspect the book is one long exercise in definition-

chopping. Following out his method, he arrives at the absurdity of declaring that the Dark Ages and the Late Middle Ages have been the only conservative societies.

IT IS NOT EASY to locate the real point of the author's attack. His argument is so bound up with these stipulative definitions and at the same time so reiterative that one can get lost in the mazes and repetitions. As far as I can make out, however, the case is approximately as follows: there may be conservative values, but they can never get themselves translated into reality, at least under the aegis of conservatism. The result is that the conservative must either abandon his attempt and become "alienated," contenting himself perhaps with writing a *Utopia*; or he must try by force to get them realized and so transform himself into an "authoritarian"; or else (note the crossing of boundaries of definition again) he must become a "liberal" by largely accepting the institutions and methods of the time, while wearing some conservative trappings. I must say that the conservative thinkers of my acquaintance know nothing of these inhibitions which he so pontifically lays upon them.

Still, conceding that all of these courses can be followed, there is no real ground for presenting them as inevitable. What makes them appear so in the author's exposition is a peculiar metaphysic of history which pervades the book from end to end. He sets up a concept of abstract, inexorable historical forces which have no relationship to human will or purpose. In fact, there is no conservative principle that he is more vocal against than belief in the primacy of ideas and values. Consequently, whenever he wants to write *finis* to a political doctrine, all he has to do is invoke his conjuror's term and say that "historical forces" make it irrelevant.

But the reader still wants to know why

historical forces, even of the kind he visualizes, make conservatism more irrelevant than other political philosophies. Here it becomes necessary to look more closely at the idea of conservatism which he has codified. The term which he uses most frequently in designating its essence is "harmony." I suspect that this may be an evasion of a more accurate word which would be embarrassing for the author to handle. The word is *order*. Order, or harmony as an expression of order, I would agree, is the goal which most if not all conservative thinking has in view.

Now the present author appears to believe that because ours has been increasingly an age of conflict, the conservative ideal of order must be abandoned as an impossibility. I quote from page 85: "Conservatism seeks 'community,' tradition, harmony, and quiescence. In this century it has found organization, violence, political powers, and revolutionary upheaval." If these two sentences are taken as premises, what conclusion is to be drawn? The conclusion I would draw is that however incompletely conservatism may be realizing itself, it offers the remedy for the major evils besetting our era.

No informed person will deny that conservatism, with its passion for an order reflecting a meaningful hierarchy of the goods, has been having a rough time for several decades. That is evidenced by the common admission that we are passing through a period of exceptional crises. But to pass from the presence of conflict to a conclusion that control and discipline and order have no place in the world is to reverse the process by which political judgments should be arrived at.

Any theory of political ordering has some difficulty in actualizing and maintaining itself in the face of empirical reality; and any such difficulty can be interpreted as a "tragic" limitation. It is highly

characteristic of the author's militant secular liberalism that he is very impatient with the idea of tragedy. Anything containing an element of the tragic is repudiated by him for this reason, and if in some places he makes himself appear difficult to argue with, it is largely because he has left out this dimension of reality. And correspondingly it is because he shies away from any such recognition that he can insist upon the unrealistic standards of complete consistency and triumph for the politically permissible. In his account, as previously noted, conservatives are always being "defeated" by adjusting themselves to the liberal trend, or by becoming alienated, or they are undone by the contradictions in their own doctrines.

He is a great one to find contradictions in everybody, and he rests so much of his case upon this kind of discovery that something must be said about it as a point of argument. To show that a political system or a political thinker exhibits contradictions is not nearly so serious a charge as he assumes his readers are ready to believe. I will hazard that such can be proved more or less about any comprehensive system which has ever been put forward. What the contradictions may, and certainly in many cases do indicate is that the author of the system is at grips with reality. The contradictions are not of course good things in themselves, but they are evidences of a referential relationship to the world, and they may be resolved on a higher level. Thus they are often signs of vitality.

I would take a position quite the contrary of Professor Auerbach's and say that the system which has everything perfectly blueprinted is far more to be suspected as to its origin and viability than the one which has not managed to solve a contradiction or two. The conservative believes in order, of course, but not in the

perfectly rationalistic order which is a burlesque on what is attainable in the real world. The conservative order is one which encompasses ideals and facts, unity and diversity. It is neither merely natural nor merely intellectualistic; it is an order which seeks to bring together the existential world and a pattern of justice. For Professor Auerbach to suppose that turning up a contradiction in this and that person's position is to administer the *coup de grâce* merely underscores the rigidity of his own thinking.

I AM PRONE TO BELIEVE that this peculiar quality of the book (which originated as a Columbia University doctoral dissertation) results actually from Professor Auerbach's own isolation from his subject. Let me say here that he sounds throughout like a man who has learned everything that he knows about social orders from books. His understanding never seems to penetrate beyond the verbal representations of the things he is talking about. He appears to have no sense of the emotional factors which cause people to love and to try to preserve their communities and sometimes to do "contradictory" things toward that end. Hence, for all his invocations to history, his own concept of it remains *jejeune*.

The only way he can maintain his curious thesis is to keep a wedge driven between conservative values and his version of reality. In his eyes, any revolution, any significant conflict, any decay of an aristocratic order is another proof that the conservatives have failed. Thus on page 254 we find him preparing what looks like a deadly trap for conservatism: "Unless we are to assume that ideology is an irrelevant construction of the mind, it is essential that values be grounded in history. *History is the real test of ideology*, because history is the critical battleground

of the human values which ideology represents." But anyone who recognizes this as nothing more than dialectical materialism can easily slip out of the snare. The truth Professor Auerbach refuses to take note of is that for those who reject positivist philosophies, history is not to be read in simple fashion from the phenomenology of events.

History does not become history until it has been interpreted, and then not merely in regard to preponderance of matter. There may indeed occur confused battle on a darkling plain, but this will not be simply a case of external facts and forces. For the conservative the battle is moral and spiritual. The function of the study of history is to heighten the conscience; and this teaches one to resist history as well as to accept it, for events do not legitimize themselves. No matter how many victories Professor Auerbach's historical forces win, he has not secured anything he can defend in terms of value. He leaves history at the level of reportage, whereas the conservative image of history arises out of primal affection and a desire to follow transcendental ideals of justice. And it is this that gives content to the philosophy of conservatism.

Considerations like these leave one wondering about the alternative he has in view. *The Conservative Illusion* is obviously intended to be destructive criticism, but even in works of the most destructive kind the author usually has somewhere in the wings, so to speak, an idea, a hint, a suggestion of what should appear in place of what he seeks to destroy. The nearest approach to anything of the sort appearing in this polemic is a notion of freedom which he is heroically rescuing from conservative control.

But the notion lacks clear exposition, and when we put together the various pieces, it becomes nothing more than turning

ourselves over to the blind historical forces which he has reified. He does, however, give us glimpses of what this kind of freedom will produce. On his own admission it issues in a society where there is more interest in weather control and space travel than in moral problems and political community, and in which "movie stars, crooners, and athletes" will have more prestige than men of thought and character. Such are the historical forces which render conservatism obsolete.

I am left with the feeling that *The Conservative Illusion* is itself a remarkably defeatist book. It is evident from beginning to end that the author cannot abide the idea of a source of order or center of control. Having erected, as he thinks, a heavy tombstone over those who have taught the desirability of such a center, what has he left to offer? It is a politics of infinite dispersion. Everything goes flying off in its own direction; liberalism becomes ever more liberal; hierarchies are toppled so that there is no longer any

means of judging one thing as better or worse than another. Moral order is collapsed into something like the universe of modern astrophysics, with everything moving away centrifugally, nobody knows where or why. And this goes on forever, because if at any point one stops and tries to pull back toward a position of value, he becomes a conservative. After more than three hundred pages of tiresome insistence, the author comes to rest with this statement:

But to offer mankind Conservative harmony as its supreme goal, on the assumption that social and moral forces are decisive in history, is to offer an illusion; and to burden man with a superfluous sense of guilt for failing to achieve an illusion is to make a grim joke of history which has too long borne unnecessary tragedies.

That is a lot of toil to arrive at a conclusion the first half of which is untrue and the second empty rhetoricism.