

Varieties of Conservative Experience

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OBSERVERS of the political process are generally if sometimes grudgingly agreed that the decade of the 1960's saw a revival of American conservatism. It would be difficult, indeed, to figure otherwise. If we compare the political situation in 1970 to that which existed ten years earlier, the signs of what is generally described as "conservative" advance are readily apparent: the Goldwater nomination, the emergence of Ronald Reagan, the 57 percent of the vote secured by Nixon and Wallace, the Buckley Senate victory in New York. Each of these occurrences suggests a popular revulsion with "liberalism" and the emergence of a "conservative" opposition.

Exactly what this conservatism consists of, however, is another and more difficult matter. The nature of what the public has rejected is a good deal clearer than the nature of what it has affirmed. There are common features among the several presentations described as conservative, but there are differences as well. And the latter are

vexing. Does conservatism mean emphasis on "law and order," or limited government and civil liberties? Is it isolationist or interventionist in foreign policy? Does the conservative believe in accepting a certain degree of economic paternalism, or is he an advocate of *laissez-faire*? At times there appear to be as many answers to such questions as there are conservative spokesmen.

In part, of course, this confusion is owing to the simple fact of human individuality. People being as they are, even those who bear a common political label will have their disagreements. Yet quite plainly the problem extends beyond this. Conservative success in the political arena has been accompanied by mounting disagreement at the level of philosophical analysis. American conservatism has yet to decide exactly what it is, or even if, in the deeper sense, it is conservative at all. If conservatism is more advanced politically than it was a decade ago, it is also more clearly riven by ideological factions.

Critics of the American Right have been alert to these discrepancies and have made a great to-do concerning them. The disagreements, it is alleged, demonstrate that the conservative movement is a rather hopeless aberration. It is argued in particular that politics of the Goldwater-Reagan type is not conservative in the philosophical sense. Various spokesmen within conservative ranks agree with one or another aspect of this assessment and contribute their mite to the view that the American conservative movement is something like the Holy Roman Empire—neither American, nor conservative, nor a movement.

This article takes another view of the matter. It seeks to suggest that there is indeed a philosophical American conservatism, that this conservatism is logically related to the political position taken by such men as Goldwater and Reagan, and that it has grown in scope and vigor more or less in keeping with the record of political expansion. It is our view, indeed, that insofar as there are differences in the rate of progress, the philosophical development has been the more rapid, and has in considerable measure fueled and directed the political movement.

In suggesting such things, we make full allowance for the working *lacunae* in the conservative political performance and the tensions within American conservative philosophy. Yet these are not altogether, or even chiefly, a liability. On the one hand, they do represent a certain wasting of energies in internal conflict, and do lead some conservatives down paths which, to this writer at least, seem erroneous. But they are also stigmata of the success, both political and philosophical, of which we have been speaking. It is precisely because conservatism has grown so much in recent years that it has attracted a wide variety of adherents and has become capacious enough to house an intramural debate.

There is more internal conservative disagreement today than there was ten years ago in part because there is more obviously something there worth disagreeing about.

The passages which follow attempt, in necessarily abbreviated fashion, to note the major schools of conservative thought, to observe the points of tension among them, and to suggest some over-arching themes which justify us in viewing them as components of a single movement. In pursuing this discussion, we shall employ three broad categories which, adapting usages prevalent on the American Right, we shall describe as traditionalist, centrist, and libertarian. These terms are of course quite loose and approximate, with numerous overlaps among them, and are intended merely as an analytical convenience. With that proviso in mind, they can perhaps assist us in understanding what American conservatism nowadays is all about.

I

IN THE TRADITIONALIST CAMP, the obvious and proper place to begin is with a group of scholars we may describe as the theological conservatives. Their chief concern is to nourish the precepts of Western religious orthodoxy amidst the confusions of an intensely secular age. The principal spokesmen for this outlook are not Americans, and their names are heard but rarely in explicitly political discourse; yet their effort to revive the elements of Christian faith and to assert the primacy of religious teaching has had enormous impact on American conservative thought. Most, although not all, are Catholic; each places stress on the shaping power of religious absolutes in relation to other aspects of human experience.

The major names in this theological revival are Etienne Gilson and the late Chris-

topher Dawson, the “doctors” of the modern Catholic Renaissance. To these we might add the names of the late John Courtney Murray and, speaking for a revived conservative Judaism, Will Herberg. In America proper, the leading conservative Catholic scholars include Thomas Molnar, Frederick Wilhelmsen, and Stanley Parry, among many others who might be named. In the journalistic world, a flamboyant Catholic traditionalism is expressed by the magazine, *Triumph*, founded by L. Brent Bozell. Among them these writers have created a notable corpus of theological-traditionalist literature in defiance and criticism of the prevalent modern rationalism. All are “conservative” on the theological scale, and anyone who supposes there *is* no metaphysical conservatism extant would do well to immerse himself in this subtle and impressive literature.

That these spokesmen are theologically conservative, however, implies nothing in particular about their political inclinations. It is widely supposed, indeed, that the theological and metaphysical themes pursued by such writers are discordant with the major conceptions of political conservatism. The principal emphases of this school are the affirmation of religious absolutes and the fallen state of man. In some cases, this theological concern expresses itself in the conviction that politics is pretty much irrelevant—that American society is so far corrupted that political, constitutional or other efforts to rescue it are hopeless, and that only a militant religiosity is anything to the purpose.

Standing in close relation to the theological conservatives are those I shall describe as Natural Law conservatives. Here we find two notable scholars who rank with Gilson and Dawson as creators of a seminal literature in opposition to the relativist tendencies of the modern era. These scholars are Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss, who

between them have done a massive work of scholarly reclamation and raised up an influential body of disciples. Many of the notions they stress are similar to those expressed by the theological conservatives, with the difference that they give much greater emphasis to the classical component of Western culture as opposed to the specifically Judaeo-Christian achievement. The effort is to recall our society to the rule of the *Nomos*—the higher law above the drift and flux of human circumstance.

Among the Natural Law conservatives now living and writing in America, mention should be made of Eliseo Vivas and Donald Atwell Zoll, along with a numerous company of Straussian-Voegelinians who might be depicted as “majority rule conservatives.” The latter term is used to suggest the idea that a majority is entitled to enforce certain decrees and proscribe certain ideas in society. The political system, in this conception, is seen to be the working out of a public orthodoxy which may be legislatively defined. Major advocates of this view include Walter Berns, Harry Jaffa, and the late Willmoore Kendall. In addition to other points of difference with limited-government conservatism which are common to the traditionalist school, the majority rule conservatives are explicitly hostile toward “strict construction” of the Constitution, efforts to elaborate personal rights airtight against intrusion, and libertarian forms of argument in general.

Blending toward the center of our philosophical spectrum are those I shall call, for want of a better term, the cultural conservatives—those who are most self-consciously in the tradition of Burke. These spokesmen draw on both the theological and Natural Law components, but place their principal emphasis on tradition as such, the claims of community, and the organic structure of society. In particular the need for cultural rootedness and apprecia-

tion for the affective side of life are stressed as against the prevalent modern scientism and neoterism. Foremost among the writers of this school is, of course, Prof. Russell Kirk, who has done more than any other single individual to restore the term "conservative" to the vocabulary of American scholarship. Others who have made a notable contribution in this *genre* include Peter Stanlis, Francis Wilson, and Robert Nisbet.

The cultural conservatives are the most avowedly traditionalist of the traditionalists, and therefore in one sense the most authentically conservative of the conservatives. They emphasize *conserving* as such—appreciation of the existent and hostility to demands for ceaseless change. Yet in political terms this stance can be and is converted to the most adamant opposition to conservatism in the popular sense—as with the so-called "new conservatives" of the Peter Viereck-Clinton Rossiter stripe who suggest that an authentic conservatism would oppose Goldwater-Reagan efforts to alter the established power of liberalism. Libertarian spokesmen in the general conservative alignment have been prompt to make the same point from the opposite direction.

The major themes of all these various "traditionalist" spokesmen may be summed up as an emphasis on the higher law above the sway of individual impulse, a stressed awareness of human frailty, and the consequent need for authority, order, and virtue. All these notions appear to place the traditionalist schools in opposition to that popular brand of conservatism which stresses individual freedom, limited government, and the productive blessings of the market economy. And it is from this contrast that numerous traditionalists and libertarians, and critics of the American Right who are neither, have concluded that philosophical conservatism and political conservatism have nothing in common.

II

OUR SECOND major grouping consists of those we shall call "centrists"—frequently described, for reasons rejected in this article, as "fusionists"—that school with which the present writer is chiefly in sympathy. Its principal theoreticians accept many of the emphases propounded by the theological, Natural Law and cultural conservatives, agreeing that the ends of life must be given axiomatically through religious truth and conducted in accordance with the dictates of the higher law. In particular, the centrists share the traditionalist aversion to naturalist and positivist themes in the social sciences, objecting to the notion that the complexities of human behavior can be resolved into its material or psychological components. They are at one with the traditionalists in opposing heedless change for its own sake and cherishing a healthy mistrust of human nature.

Yet the centrists pursue these notions to conclusions which are quite different in many cases from those preferred by the traditionalists. They are, for one thing, less wedded to the concept of tradition *qua* tradition. Antiquity and precedent are not emphasized in their work so much as is the question of whether right general principles are being pursued. They make accommodation for the classical-Natural Law contribution to the corpus of Western value, but tend to assert (again with individual differences) that the Judaeo-Christian contribution is the decisive element in the Western ethic. And they arrive in their general political stance at a position which is markedly more libertarian than that of the traditionalists.

Among the proponents of the "centrist" view two names in particular are familiar to readers of conservative journals: Frank S. Meyer and Richard M. Weaver. Meyer has argued for a libertarian-conservative

position rooted in Judaeo-Christian metaphysics, issuing in a limited government system placing maximum stress on the liberty of the person. He argues that the Western tradition was split in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its emphasis on ethical authority being largely appropriated by the Tories, its emphasis on personal liberty passing into the hands of the classical liberals. What is needed, he says, is to reunite these strains into a single philosophic whole—an enterprise which he believes was partially achieved in the American political settlement.

Weaver's writings are very much in the Natural Law tradition, marked by pervasive insistence on the rule of universals and a hostility on these grounds to Burkean conservatism conceived as an empirical resort to precedent and circumstance. (Prof. Stanlis, for his part, rejoins that Burke should not be considered in this light.) Weaver's thought, like Meyer's, is very specifically connected to the American political experience, and bears the imprint of his Southern agrarian background. From a metaphysic of order and authority, Weaver affirmed a limited-government position and argued the need for a rooted individualism. He was a prominent advocate of the view that the traditionalist and libertarian strands in conservative thought could and should be united.

An important younger spokesman for this centrist outlook is Stephen Tonsor, who has written compellingly on both aspects of the modern crisis—the disintegration of the moral order on the one hand, the mounting threat to the liberty of the person on the other. Like Meyer and Weaver, Tonsor observes that the integrity of the person cannot be made secure without a value metaphysic which secures the boundaries of political right, affirms the liberty of the individual, and establishes limits on the reach of the political state. In this conception, affir-

mation of the higher law and the reign of political liberty are indissolubly bound together. We may have the second only as a by-product of the first.

The description of this position as “fusionism” tends to miss the point at which such writers are aiming: namely, that they are not “fusing” things together but describing a unity which exists either logically or historically. The “fusionist” label suggests a yoking together of disparate elements—the attainment of an unnatural unity. And the point of the centrist spokesmen is, for the most part, that the unity of which they speak is altogether natural and inescapable: if the Western metaphysic is eroded, then liberty is eroded as well; if personal liberty is extinguished, then an important component of the Western ethic, the integrity of the person, is also extinguished, as are the conditions of ethical choice. The argument may be right or wrong; but whatever one's conclusion on that score the “fusionist” label obscures the fact of what the argument is *about*.

A similar view emerges from a rising school of Protestant conservatives, little heard from in the ranks of official Protestantism but influential nonetheless. These are the Reformed theologians in the tradition of Herman Dooyewerd and Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands, Benjamin Warfield and J. Gresham Machen in the United States. Their principal representatives in America are Cornelius Van Til, Rousas J. Rushdoony, and Gordon Clark. Rushdoony in particular has pursued Augustinian and Calvinist themes to a limited-government, free market political conclusion. The preoccupations are similar at certain points to those of a Gilson or a Dawson, with the obvious difference of a marked hostility to Greek influence, a strong Reformed tradition, and emphasis on the specifically Calvinist bases of the American political experience.

Also within the centrist fold, but blending strongly toward the libertarians, are those we may call the constitutionalists. Here the emphasis on theology and fundamental value metaphysics is diminished if not eliminated, but secondary elements of the theological position are retained. We include such spokesmen as centrists because they see essentially traditionalist elements—respect for the past, mistrust of human nature, insistence upon the rule of law—as mandating a limited-government type of politics, thus uniting at the political level both traditionalist and libertarian themes. The position is almost a conservative classical liberalism in the manner of Lord Bryce and A. V. Dicey, combining legal sensibility with strong grounding in economics. Among modern European spokesmen who have had decisive impact on American political thought, the most prominent names of this school are F. A. Hayek and Sir Karl Popper. In its simplest terms, the position of these spokesmen may be described as the idea that mistrust of human nature requires limitations on the reach of political power.

III

THESE OBSERVATIONS bring us to our third general grouping—the libertarians. Here the major preoccupation is with personal liberty as such, with limitations on the state, and with the deleterious social consequences of governmental intervention. A chief concern of this school is the danger of state intrusion in matters of economics. It has developed a considerable body of economic expertise which has loomed prominently in the conservative political presentation—although many of the participants do not describe themselves as “conservatives.”

Undoubtedly the most prodigious labors in this field have been performed by Ludwig von Mises, successor to Boehm-Bawerk

and founder of the “Austrian school” in America. The line of thought is pure-libertarian, holding to a strictly order-keeping conception of the state and in particular condemning inflationist expansion of the money supply. Somewhat less hard-line but close to Mises in many ways are Hayek, whose major expertise is of course in the field of economics, and the late Wilhelm Roepke. Mises, Hayek and Roepke among them have constituted a mighty bulwark against the doctrines of twentieth century collectivism.

Ranged alongside the Austrian economists, in agreement with them on many particular subjects but more pragmatic in approach, is the so-called “Chicago School.” Here the most celebrated figures are Profs. Milton Friedman, George Stigler, and Yale Brozen. The Chicagoans are committed to a limited government and *laissez-faire* conception of the state but concentrate on empirical demonstrations of statist failure and attempt to devise practical linkages by which the nation can move from interventionism to market solutions. Friedman’s “negative income tax” and “school voucher” proposals are examples.

Beyond the free-market economists are those who might be called the “extreme libertarians”—writers who combine free-market, limited government enthusiasms with an active hostility toward conservative and religious philosophic themes. Standing more or less *sui generis* is Ayn Rand, who takes a Misesian view on economic questions and combines this with an active theology of individualism. Miss Rand has widely popularized capitalist and limited government ideas through her novels and polemics, while condemning “conservatives” in general and the Christian religious in particular as enemies of freedom at par with the liberals.

Edging out the Randians in libertarian enthusiasm is a school of “anarcho-capital-

ists" who want to abolish the state altogether. Although drawing many of their ideas from the market economists, they sometimes consider the Mises and Rand positions insufficiently libertarian because these would allow some function to the state in matters of public order and national defense. The major intellectual spokesman for this outlook is Murray Rothbard, himself a credentialed free market economist and follower of Mises. Its effort is to suggest that all functions now held by government, including police and national defense, should be privatized, so that there will be no state whatever and a complete regime of freedom. In pursuit of these beliefs, it has attempted to link up with libertarian elements in the New Left in a general anti-statist front.

In its further modulations, the libertarian school disowns conservatism in metaphysical and political terms alike. Many radical libertarians and anarcho-capitalists view themselves as descendants of the eighteenth century enlightenment and classical liberal development of the nineteenth century. Some among them particularly dislike the religious emphasis in traditionalist conservatism, whose attachment to religious absolutes they view as a pretext for political absolutism. Others see reliance on tradition as anti-rational, since it provides no reasoned basis for choice between traditions. Still others reject the conservative's pessimistic view of human nature.

In the world of politics, the elements of libertarian disagreement with conservative themes are equally apparent. Recent emphasis on "law and order" in the conservative presentation is an obvious point of irritation. Certain anarchist and libertarian spokesmen have denounced the anti-Communist stance of political conservatives on questions of foreign policy, which is seen as an alibi for the buildup of a militarist and interventionist state. Other points of

disagreement include such matters as drug use, pornography and censorship, internal security investigations, the work of the FBI, and so on. On all such matters the extreme libertarians accuse the political conservatives of being just as wedded to statism as their liberal adversaries.

SUCH THEN is our brief conspectus of conservative thought in contemporary America. That there is an enormous diversity of opinion is apparent, and in some respects this would seem to justify the view that conservatism in America is a melange of discordant opinions, or merely an attempted revival of classical liberalism. Certainly the conflict and the classical liberalism are there. But it does not follow from these observations either that there is no common center of concern, or that contemporary conservatism is simply an updated version of Herbert Spencer. Our brief review suggests, indeed, the opposite of these conclusions.

For one thing, the spread of conservative opinion with its inclusion of theological, Natural Law, and traditionalist spokesmen makes it plain that the argument involves a great deal more than celebration of the market economy. Critics who contend "there is no American conservatism" in the philosophic sense have obviously not been paying attention: had they examined with any care the work of Weaver or Kendall, Kirk or Meyer, Vivas or Herberg, they would not make such statements with so much careless assurance. The American conservative movement over the past several decades has seen a determined effort to establish the metaphysical grounds of conservative belief, as well as to trace the economic consequences of the limited state as opposed to liberal interventionism.

At the same time, the work of the economists, whatever their own particular metaphysic, has supplied an essential ele-

ment of the conservative presentation. The fact that interventionist and paternalist measures are economically dysfunctional, spreading more misery than they forestall, is knowledge that is essential to intelligent social commentary. To realize that governmental manipulation of the economy can extinguish vital liberties and frustrate the efforts of countless people to improve their lot in life cannot be a matter of indifference to conservatives. Conservatism is by no means materialist; but neither is it sunk in Manichean hatred of the material order and the goods appropriate to that order.

This commonality of interests may be illustrated by comparing traditionalist and libertarian responses to a principal species of modern liberal thought—the dehumanizing thrust of “behaviorism” in the social sciences. This type of analysis offends the ethical and Natural Law presuppositions of a Voegelinian or Straussian political scientist and the libertarian nerve of a Hayekian or Friedmanesque economist. It assumes that men can be treated as products of the material flux and therefore as proper objects of “scientific” investigation; and it pursues this belief toward a rigid collectivism in which it seeks to plan and manipulate human life in the interests of the total state. It is at once anti-traditionalist *and* anti-libertarian. The rise of collectivist social engineering is the result of a comprehensive world-view which denies *all* the distinctive values of the Western ethical and political tradition.

To meet this challenge, the conservative movement must put forward an equally broad response. It needs to affirm, not merely one aspect of traditional Western belief, but all aspects. Which means it needs to defend the essential truths imparted by our religious faith, and to understand that these are paramount. And it needs as well to understand the fact that the institutions of limited government, and the market economy which is their natural corollary, are the secular by-products of that faith which also require, in their own dimension, appropriate understanding and defense. The traditionalists on the one hand, the libertarians on the other, are at work on different aspects of what is in fact a single crisis.

Granted the internal disagreements and the existence of exclusionists on either end of the spectrum, most conservatives in America today seem conscious of this commonality of interests. Nearly all of them are concerned, in one fashion or another, with the integrity of the human personality, proper limits on the reach of secular power, the conditions and goals of ethical volition. These concerns are the product of the conservative metaphysic; they are in turn the source of the libertarian social analysis. The fact that traditionalists are preoccupied with issues at one point along this continuum, libertarians at another, should not obscure the fact that the continuum is there.