

MODERN AGE

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Conservatism and the New Political Theory

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IN HIS NOVEL, *The Eustace Diamonds*, Anthony Trollope has sketched this portrait of England's Conservatives:

"They feel among themselves that everything that is being done is bad,—even though that everything is done by their own party. It was bad to interfere with Charles, bad to endure Cromwell, bad to banish James, bad to put up with William. The House of Hanover was bad. All interference with prerogative has been bad. The Reform bill was very bad. Encroachment on the estates of bishops was bad. Emancipation of Roman Catholics was the worst of all Abolition of corn-laws, church-rates, and oaths and tests were all bad. The meddling with the Universities has been grievous. The treatment of the Irish Church has been satanic. The overhauling of schools is most injurious to English education. Education bills and Irish land bills were all bad. Every step taken has been bad. And yet to them old England is of all countries in the world the best to live in, and is not at all the less comfortable because of the changes that have been made. These people are ready to grumble at every boon conferred on them, and yet to enjoy every boon. They know too their privileges, and,

after a fashion, understand their position. It is picturesque, and it pleases them. To have been always in the right and yet always on the losing side; always being ruined, always under persecution from a wild spirit of republican-demagogism—and yet never to lose anything, not even position or public esteem, is pleasant enough. A huge, living, daily increasing grievance that does one no palpable harm, is the happiest possession that a man can have. There is a large body of such men in England, and, personally, they are the very salt of the nation. He who said that all Conservatives are stupid did not know them. Stupid Conservatives there may be,—and there certainly are very stupid Radicals. The well-educated, widely-read Conservative, who is well assured that all good things are gradually being brought to an end by the voice of the people, is generally the pleasantest man to be met."

We all recognize the likeness. We feel the kinship and congeniality. And yet, all of us know that this portrait does not apply to American conservatives of the mid-twentieth century. For American conservatives of the last quarter of a century have been a forward-driving force, an innovating force, one might

even be tempted to say, an up-turning force. They have not been disposed to spend their time lamenting a status quo of this or the last century. Rather, they have mounted attack after attack against the status quo. For the status quo in America has been the liberal Establishment. That remark is not quite accurate. To be correct, it would be necessary to distinguish a social status quo from an intellectual status quo. The social status quo, an America of middle-class people, predominantly still individualist, predominantly still committed to free enterprise, predominantly still believing in God, the forgiveness of sins, and life eternal, has by and large pleased our conservatives. Their quarrel has been with the intelligentsia who have both alienated themselves from the traditional order of this country and have woven over it a network of institutions where "un-American" ideas are nurtured by academic deans, socialist press publishers, juridical sociologists, with-it theologians, and ideological bureaucrats. Even though no more than a thin top layer, it must be called the Establishment, for all through the institutions of this country which are concerned with meaning, goals, information, education, and moral correction there prevails, by tacit agreement, what has been called the second religion of the intellectuals, an amalgam of socialism, positivism, progressivism, and anti-Christian humanism. The intellectuals do not explicitly postulate this their religion, rather they take it for granted; yet nobody who "deviates in the slightest" from these beliefs will slip by the watchdogs of the academy, the press, the media, and the judiciary.

Today's intellectual Establishment is a composite of yesteryear's revolutionary ideologies. If they still speak the language of opposition they know how to mute and conceal it. The public hears their voice not as coming from the basement but as if from the seats of authority, the cathedra, the editorial, the textbook, the bench, and the regulatory office. They have been in undisputed possession of the commanding heights for so long that nobody can still recall every having heard another message of direction. Particularly for those who seek and impart education, the thing to do,

the way to prove their decency, is to conform to this message. The sole effective rebellion against this Establishment comes from yesteryear's anti-revolutionaries, the conservatives. It is they who now, rather than standing pat, take the bold step forward, voice the daring alternative.

Since our topic is the reconstruction of political theory, let us look at the most original, furthest advanced political theorist living today, Eric Voegelin. Since we are speaking of the public difference made by the thinking of conservatives, we shall not consider the whole work of Eric Voegelin—who in many ways is a professors' professor—but chiefly the two works that have been most widely read and discussed, *The New Science of Politics*, and *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*.

II

VOEGELIN'S restoration of political theory can be gauged if we consider what political science was unable to do at the time when Voegelin was a young academic teacher in Vienna. It was the time when fascism had possession of Italy, and Hitler clamped the iron heel of his stormtroopers on Germany. As he himself described the situation:

Europe had no conceptual tools with which to grasp the horror that was upon her. There was a scholarly study of the Christian churches and sects; there was a science of government, cast in the categories of the sovereign nation-state and its institutions; there were the beginnings of a sociology of power and political authority; but there was no science of the non-Christian, non-national intellectual and mass movements into which the Europe of Christian nation-states was in the process of breaking up. (*Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 1968, p. 5)

The inadequacy of positivist political science when confronted with a novel phenomenon like totalitarianism can be gauged by the work of a leading scholar, Herman Finer's *Mussolini's Italy*. Painstakingly accurate in its facts, the book utterly failed to comprehend the spirit of

evil in fascism. Its incomprehension was a fitting foil to Neville Chamberlain's illusion that Hitler was nothing more than a zealous German patriot who merely desired to unite all ethnic Germans and who could be appeased by offering him the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia. Similarly, the educated classes of Germany, used to keep up with philosophy and sociology, could not find there any conceptual tools that would lead to an understanding of Hitler's movement and regime. With intellectually innocent eyes, they went forward to their disaster. On this side of the Atlantic, the positivistic "taboo on theory" had actually barred people from imagining that there could be any such thing as a distinction between a good and a bad government, or between irrational mass movements and *bona fide* political parties.

The experience of this intellectual helplessness in a dark hour of human history was the motive that spurred Eric Voegelin's forward moves into political theory. Roughly, the new terrain which he opened and secured can be characterized as follows:

a) Totalitarian mass movements result from underlying idea systems that must be understood as "variants of theologizing," as they converted religious symbols into mundane ones, thereby creating political "religion substitutes." To analyze this, Voegelin had to discover the distinctions between theologies rational and irrational, and religious experiences high and low. As he plowed into such questions, Voegelin noted that half a century earlier it would have been impossible to establish any answers in terms of scientific discipline. The task had become feasible since "for two generations, now, the sciences of man and society are engaged in a process of re-theoretization. The new development, slow at first, gained momentum after the First World War, and today it is moving at breathtaking speed." (*The New Science of Politics*, 1952, p. 3). In philosophy, classics, orientology, biblical studies, and comparative religion eminent scholars had done work that deliberately broke out of the shell of positivist limitations. This was the development that permitted Eric Voegelin to call his own book: "the new science of poli-

tics," a title that in no ways implied a claim of unprecedented invention.

b) Using analytical tools developed through these scholarly advances, Eric Voegelin began to do new work in political theory, as he developed an in-depth understanding of totalitarian movements and their intellectual foundations. If one may be allowed to reduce this work to a brief formula, he showed that the totalitarian thought pattern had "immanentized the transcendence." Transcendence here is shorthand for the ensemble of historical symbols and concepts through which man had comprehended the divine in contrast to the "things of this world." Since the event of philosophy, the concepts of these two realms had been kept separate, acknowledging a tension between immanence and transcendence that is characteristic of the human condition. The totalitarian idea systems had attributed the absolute character of symbols of transcendence to forces and entities of this world. This amounted to a deification of something that ought not to be deified because it could in no ways claim to be god. In other words, the divine transcendence was conceptually pulled into history and identified with political enterprises so that, as Camus remarked, "politics became religion" and "logical murder" was legalized.

c) Further, Voegelin called attention to the character of these idea patterns as a closed "system" the internal logic of which was tyrannically used to displace human experience and the exploration of reality. He showed that Comte and Marx "prohibited any questioning" that might endanger their systems, so that the system itself was substituted for reality and became a false "second reality." (Musil) To use Maritain's words, "they impugn from the outset . . . the reality to be known and understood, which *is here*, seen, touched by the senses, and with which an intellect which belongs to a man, not an angel, has directly to deal: the reality *about which and starting with which* a philosopher is born to question himself: if he misses the start he is nothing." (*The Peasant of the Garonne*, 1968, p. 100) This givenness of being was removed in totalitarian thinking, the "start" of which is rather his will to power, first manifested as the power of manipulated con-

cepts, then as the power to change, destroy, and manipulate being, which in turn requires intellectual control of the divine ground of being. As a result of ideological thinking politics, which Aristotle had recognized as belonging to the realm of "acting," *i.e.* human choices made in view of a given reality, now shifted to the realm of "making." Or, to use again Musil's language, politics, which had been understood as action within the limits of "real possibilities" was now being looked at as the "impossible dream," the creation of "possible realities."

III

IN THESE analytical efforts, Voegelin developed a number of more general concepts of political theory which were first brought together in his two chapters on the problem of political representation, in *The New Science of Politics*. Representation, he pointed out, is not agency, political representation is governed by man's understanding of the society in which he lives as a "cosmion," a little world, so that it essentially represents the truth of being. This he proved to be an empirical finding applicable to all civilizations and all ages. Society is an integral part of man's self-understanding, for in political association man participates in the order of being which includes of necessity the divine ground of being. Thus the problem of God in political existence is not arbitrary. It cannot be escaped.

Voegelin's thinking here has been called "theological." It is not. It is strictly anthropological—anthropology understood, of course, philosophically. Voegelin's anthropology is new in language and conceptual categories but in substance it draws on thousands of years of thinking fed by experience. Indeed, Voegelin characteristically has developed his concepts through an exegesis of texts of political thought from all ages and many cultures, not only of the philosophers but also of the cosmological myths. Historically speaking, his anthropology, while deeply rooted in the past, is also "new" because it is a restoration achieved against a background of two hundred years of the "contracted self," a concept of man willfully reduced to a fragment

of human experiences and involvements. In contrast to his artificially reduced human reality, Voegelin has regained the full dimension of man's concerns, questions, experiences, symbolizations, and participations. The fact that this reality includes God does not stem from an intent to proselytize but rather from an empirical recognition of the full dimension of reality which humans have embraced in their endeavor at self-understanding.

a) In addition, we find in Voegelin's work the new distinction between ideology and philosophy. Ever since Napoleon had ridiculed Destutt de Tracy by using "ideologists" in a snarling tone, the concept has been used pejoratively. Marx used it to characterize what he termed the "false consciousness" of the bourgeoisie, Max Weber took the pejorative color of the term for granted, and so did Karl Mannheim. What was new was not the element of deprecation but Voegelin's contradistinction between ideology and philosophy which implied a scientifically elaborated dichotomy between rationality and irrationality. This was possible only after a painstaking reinterpretation of philosophy attained by a profound re-reading of the texts, chiefly of Plato and Aristotle.

Voegelin disclaimed any attention to "return to the specific content of an earlier attempt" of political science. He does want, however, to return to "the consciousness of principles." This meant, above all, that one had to rid oneself of the modern notion of philosophy as an academic field consisting in a survey of a great variety of philosophies, like a survey of various opinions. The discovery of philosophy was an historical event in which there emerged a new mode of human participation in the order of being, a mode in which the mind and its workings became itself a basic experience of the soul. One cannot simply change the meaning of philosophy that was shaped in this event. There are no philosophies, there only is philosophy, a way of life rooted in experiences and articulating new and differentiated symbols of order.

Voegelin describes this event of man-becoming-conscious in the following terms:

Man is not a self-created, autonomous being

carrying the origin and meaning of his existence within himself. He is not a divine *causa sui*; from the experience of his life in precarious existence within the limits of birth and death there rather rises the wondering question about the ultimate ground . . . of all reality and specifically his own. The question is inherent in the experience from which it rises: the (rational animal) that experiences itself as a living being is at the same time conscious of the questionable character attaching to this status. Man, when he experiences himself as existent, discovers his specific humanity as that of the questioner for the where-from and the where-to, for the ground and the sense of his existence. . . . the adequate articulation and symbolization of the questioning consciousness as the constituent of humanity is . . . the epochal feat of the philosophers. ("Reason: The Classic Experience," *Southern Review* p. 241)

It was the new, philosophic mode of human participation which made the science of political order possible. But the concepts and symbols developed by the philosophers could not have any meaning part from the motivating experiences. As Voegelin put it:

[The] Platonic-Aristotelian analysis did not in the least begin with speculations about its own possibility, but with the actual insight into being which motivated the analytical process. The decisive event in the establishment of (political science) was the specifically philosophical realization that the levels of being discernible within the world are surmounted by a transcendent source of being and its order. And this insight was itself rooted in the real movements of the human spiritual soul toward divine being experienced as transcendent. In the experiences of love for the world-transcendent origin of being, in *philia* toward the *sophon* (the wise), in *eros* toward the *agathon* (the good) and the *kalon* (the beautiful), man became philosopher. From these experiences arose the image of the order of being. (*Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 1968, p. 18)

From this analysis follows the criterion of rationality in existential terms:

Thus, the reality expressed by the *Nous* symbols is the structure in the psyche of a man who is attuned to the divine order in the cosmos, not of a man who is in revolt against it; Reason has the definite existential content of openness toward reality in the sense in which Bergson speaks of (the open soul). If this context of the classic analysis is ignored and the symbols *Nous* or *Reason* are treated as if they referred to some human faculty independent from the tension toward the ground, the empirical basis from which the symbols derive their validity is lost; they become abstracts from nothing, and the vacuum of pseudo-abstracts is ready to be filled with various non-rational contents. ("Reason: The Classic Experience," *X Southern Review*, p. 246)

The characteristic of philosophy is therefore the attitude of spiritual openness which Bergson has named "the open soul" as well as the intellectual openness which is the opposite of ideological reductionism, the willful excision of questions and of factual evidence from the record. And the philosophical science of political order is, like all science, firmly based on experience and ceases to be science as soon as the experiential basis is removed or ignored.

b) Philosophy was an historical event of the first magnitude and must be recalled as that. This insight served as the pivot of Voegelin's construction of history. An irrational concept of history has played the decisive role in the intellectual and social disorders of our time. Contemporary ideologies are all futurist. The future is given the place of eminent and absolute reality; this means, as Camus put it, that "no one is virtuous, but everyone will be." Ethics gives way to an absolute imperative to act, for the sake of history. "To choose history, and history alone, is to choose nihilism . . . Those who rush blindly to history in the name of the irrational, proclaiming that it is meaningless, encounter servitude and terror and finally emerge into the universe of concentration camps. Those who launch themselves into it preaching its absolute rationality encounter

servitude and terror and emerge into the universe of the concentration camps.” (A. Camus, *The Rebel*, 1956, p. 246) It was in the name of “philosophy of history,” an eighteenth century enterprise that sought to establish a science of history on the basis of an exclusion of the divine and the assumption of man’s autonomy, which had set up the usurpation of divine rank by the historical future and the forces working for it. Unless one could find an intelligible construction of history as an alternative, there could be no escape from terror, concentration camp and legalized murder.

Voegelin’s brief formula for an alternative construction is that “the order of history is the history of order.” The mere sequence of actions and events, kingdoms and wars, rulers and dynasties has no meaning. Meaning is experienced when one mode of human participation in the order of being replaces another. This may happen as the result of the experiences and articulations of a few concrete persons, and within the limits of a small people, but insofar as what happens this way is seen as universally human, the concrete persons or small people are functioning as representatives of mankind. Nor are such experiences and articulations events in a separate sphere of the mind. They result in a new outlook on life, hence in a new mode of living. Borrowing a term of Bergson’s, Voegelin has called them “leaps in being.” A leap in being occurs when experience and insight rush in on established traditions with the effect of something like a “new truth,” so that people, looking at their own past, begin to separate the “before” from the “after.” Thus history, too, is an order of time stemming from typical experiences that result in ordering symbols. The symbols, reflecting the reality of experience, shed light not only on a particular “leap in being” but on the whole of human existence in time. Voegelin’s work first concentrated on two such leaps, the first identified with the experience and insights of the Hebrew prophets, the other with the advent of Greek philosophy.

In the *New Science of Politics* he hinted, under the name of “soteriological truth,” at a third leap identified with the experience of Jesus of Nazareth. The order of history, thus

constructed, is no story of inevitable progress. A “leap in being” is indeed something like progress, but, first of all, any such leap always encounters also resistance, and, secondly, there is no guarantee of its permanence. True, once it has occurred it cannot be made undone or even neglected. It becomes a fixture in historical memory. But there is also the possibility of deliberate revolt against that memory. Even though it turns out impossible simply to fall back on the *status quo ante*, the revolt will result in a fall from being, a “loss of reality.” What happens in such cases can be grasped only in the light of that order of understanding against which the revolt is aimed. In this sense, Voegelin is probably the one political theorist who has shed most light on the character of our time, as when he coined the formula “Gnosticism—the nature of modernity.”

The use of the name of an heretical religion of the early Christian centuries was analogical. Voegelin showed that an analysis of ancient gnosticism helped us to understand the ideas and symbols that have played a major role in the shaping of the modern outlook. In that context he also coined the phrase that has been so widely noted, of the fallacious “immanentization of the Christian eschaton,” which pinpoints the chief source of political irrationality today. Voegelin’s analysis of our time takes up the last three chapters of *The Science of Politics* and all of *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*. It induced *Time* magazine to give a major review to his work, in 1953, and to commit itself to Voegelin’s ideas for at least the following ten years. One may say, however, that it is regrettable that Voegelin’s deprecatory judgment of our time should have occupied the attention particularly of young people, to the exclusion of his constructive philosophy, particularly of history.

The term “gnostic” has thereby lost its usefulness as a heuristic tool as it became an epithet, a means by which people excuse themselves from thinking as they gain in one-upmanship. In view of this regrettable selectiveness, it may be in order to quote here a passage from Voegelin’s last major work, the fourth volume of his *Order and History*: “This ultimate mode of lastingness to which as a

measure we refer the lasting of all other things, is not a 'time' in which things happen, but the time dimension of a thing within the whole that also comprises the divine reality, whose lastingness we express by such symbols as 'eternity.' Things do not happen in the astrophysical universe; the universe, together with all things founded in it, happen in God." (p. 334)

IV

AT THIS POINT we return to Trollope's portrait of English conservatives in order to find out something about ourselves. We have seen that that portrait is not our own likeness. That means, we have inherited a name but not the content to which this name referred when it arose. In other words, it does not make sense today to raise the question: "What is a conservative?" as we could not possibly answer that question in any way like Trollope did, by means of a portrait. Nor can we answer it by defining something like a party line. That is a political vice reserved to such modern movements as have crystallized around an ideology. There is a small group of Americans calling themselves conservative who feel collectively bound to a party line: the assertion that there is only a single kind of human order, the order of the market tending to equilibrium. That belief, however, does not even extend to all who are otherwise also known as libertarians; nor is insistence on market prices alien to those others who may refer to themselves by the awkward and ill-fitting name of traditionalists. The fact is that a name without a content, conservatism, has been arbitrarily thrown into the modern political scene and has stuck on us. But to whom do we refer as "we," then?

By the *via negativa* we can indeed group together all citizens who oppose and abhor the politics of futurist, revolutionary, progressivist ideologies which confuse civilization or revolution with works of human salvation. That problem first became a test of political judgment through the phenomenon of fascist and communist totalitarianism and legal murder. Having learned to recognize the spirit of political irrationality on that large a scale, we were able to discover it in the politics of liberal welfarism

too. Finally we came to discern the intellectual and spiritual elements of such perversion in religion, philosophy, literature, art, and the sciences of man. "We," then, are primarily those who feel they must say "no" to these tendencies and movements. But what is it to which we say "yes"? Basically, and in one word, to common sense. That is our affirmation in the realm of politics. Political common sense, however, is not to be had for the asking, in our time.

The *Politics* of Aristotle is largely common sense, but it is informed by fully adequate concepts of God, nature, society, and man. Today such concepts must be regained by a deliberate effort, for the wares available on the intellectual market are defective, broken, distorted, and phony. Thus whoever holds a view of man that reduces the human person to a fraction of his full reality cannot see man for what he is, and thereby bars himself effectively from common sense. Whoever entertains a view of history that destroys the present and past and locates all values exclusively in some human future, is also barred from common sense. Whoever acts under the illusion that man can create a new man, a new world, or a new society lives in a dream-world and is barred from common sense. Whoever looks on particular social forces, political movements, or policies as something like a hallowed cause that implies full justification, is divinizing human action and is thereby barred from common sense. Common sense is political sobriety that is fully aware of human limits inherent in the human condition.

Thus there is a philosophical and cultural patrimony to which "conservatives" are committed by their affirmation of common sense. In the face of modern reductions and distortions, they press toward a restoration of the human image in the fullness of its dimensions. That prohibits a willful exclusion of the transcendence, which exclusion is nothing but an ideological choice. They reject the false certainty of closed idea-systems because our experience of life is not systematically closed. They reject the false dichotomy of fact and value, the illicit tyranny of the methods of physical science over the knowledge of man.

They disdain the ideology-ridden fragmentation of life and the human person in literature and art.

In all of this, conservatives are very far from something resembling *nostalgia*. Since modern thinkers and modern scholarship have already blazed trails of rediscovery, we simply decide to live and think *à la hauteur des principes*. We thereby know that in our time not all roads lead downwards. Left politics characterize the Establishment, but already are going from defeat to defeat. This may not be cause for celebration, since we are tied up with liberals in histor-

ical existence. But we rejoice in all signs of recurring sanity. Thus, with Whitaker Chambers we fully realize the grim significance of our fight against the assault on the human mind. But with Maritain we can also see, in the midst of much darkness, the stars weakly glimmering.*

*This article is based on an address presented at the ISI National Friends and Alumni Conference in April of 1978, held in Washington, D.C. The theme of the Conference was: "The Consequences of 25 years of Conservative Thought."