Conservatives as a Creative Minority

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Stephen J. Tonsor, longtime Professor of History at the University of Michigan, first appeared in the Spring 1958 issue of *Modern Age*, with a review of Christopher Dawson's *The Dynamics of World History*, under the title "History and the God of the Second Chance." In the following essay he examines the spirit and force of a "creative conservative minority" in a time of cultural crisis. Creative minorities have as their objects criticism and invention not the exercise of power, as Tonsor is careful to note. And it is important to remember that no movement can live by retreating into the past, that its main goal should be the reclamation of the past and the reconstruction of the future. A critical sagacity informs this essay, which is representative of Tonsor's writings and thought.

YESTERDAYS ARE always difficult to recall with precision. There are always, even to historians who should know better, "the good old days" or "the bad old days." Nor is it possible to determine the nature of events through which one is living. The prophetic office, and the prophetic utterance which reads the signs of the times, is always discounted if not repudiated and persecuted.

It is not surprising, then, that as World War II came to an end and the world limped into the 1950s, few discerned the meaning of the days through which mankind was passing. It seemed that everything was alright, that tomorrow would be like today, only better, through an infinity of years. That those years of the "normal 50s" were harbingers of crisis, a cultural crisis already developed and in place, seemed unbelievable.

Liberalism and the left had triumphed, the welfare state was the political form for modern man and was daily expanding its activities and perfecting its instruments. Centralization of power and bureaucratic rule had displaced republican virtue and self-sufficiency. Cultural modernism had shattered the forms of the arts and evacuated the contents of traditional belief. An impoverished hedonism was devouring the social seedcorn and year after year the size of the underclass increased. Growing taxation, government spending, and inflation had become a substitute for an articulated economic policy rooted in a theoretical cognizance of economic reality. A theory of "convergence" argued that the centralized leftism of the democratic West would meet and merge with the "maturing socialism" of the Soviet system. There was, on this view, nothing to fear but the remnants of Fascism which, from time to

time, reasserted themselves in the public life of the democracies.

We recognize now that the intellectual, economic, social and political world of the mid-1950s was a dream world. It is true that our slumbers were disturbed from time to time by events such as the Korean police action, the East German and Hungarian revolutions, the Berlin Blockade, and finally, and most decisively, the Vietnam War and the cultural revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These events were all the more incomprehensible to the public at large because they seemed to be inexplicable, so out of the context of the false expectations which had been generated by fifty years of Leftward drift.

To be sure, there had been apocalyptic warnings since the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, a whole school of social theorists and historians had predicted the collapse of Western culture or at the very least *"Das ende der Neuzeit"* (The end of Modernity). As with best-sellers in the twentieth century, Spengler and Toynbee were purchased by the hundreds of thousands but remained, for the most part, unread. They were the cultural upholstery of the newly affluent middle classes.

The idea of progress stood in the way of these diagnoses of decadence, disorder, and collapse, never mind that the poets from the end of the nineteenth century onward brought in the same verdict. Progress and Socialism remained the organizing principles of society, culture, and politics even following the great depression and the advent of totalitarianism. The belief in "Progress" was a surrogate religion. Its signs and wonders were the natural-scientific and technical conquest of nature. Regardless of the ravages of ideology which killed as many victims as the great plagues of the late middle ages, men still believed there was "a good time coming" to be ushered in by socialism and science.

The social theorists and historians who opposed this view usually argued that historical development was cyclical or biological in character and that the end of the age was predetermined and ineluctable. Their diagnosis was accurate; their explanation was faulty. They offered no satisfactory program for dealing with the crisis except to stand, as Spengler had urged, like the heroic soldier at Pompeii and let the lava flow over oneself. Romano Guardini in his lecture series, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, made the best of a bad thing, welcomed the end of modernity, and attempted to take some spiritual comfort in what was to come.

Those who searched for pivotal causes of the depressing transformation of Western society turned to denunciations of the "masses" and the "elites." That the problem lay elsewhere did not occur to these cultural diagnosticians. That all culture is radically defective because it is the creation of flawed and sinful mankind, and stands at every moment, as Karl Barth so eloquently argued, under the judgment of God, was not an idea widespread among the cultural theorists. That culture was the work of human minds and hands, more or less adequate depending on its congruence with the order of nature and Providence, at its best defective and constantly in need of reshaping and reformulation, that culture was the work of Spirit and not the creation of positivistic science, seems an idea nearly totally lost to the cultural theorists of the twentieth century.

The word "masses" is a relatively new addition to the vocabulary of social thought. It appears first in nineteenth century French denunciations of democratic politics. It expressed the fear of "the great unwashed" in a new and compelling fashion which combined a detestation of revolutionary democracy with

a fear of Socialism. This fear of the masses received its ultimate formulation in José Ortega y Gasset's, *The Revolt of the Masses*, first published in 1930. Among some intellectuals and elitists the notion that the problems of Western culture were due to the masses received widespread approval. The idea of the destructive masses, of course, stood in direct opposition to the Marxist myth of the "creative masses," who supposedly were the engines of technical, social, and political transformation. Of course, Marxists knew that the "creative masses" were nothing but a propaganda tool to be employed in Marxism's assault on bourgeois society. Lenin altogether abandoned the idea of the revolutionary masses and secured revolution through the creation of a conspiratorial elite.

In fact the concept of the masses was the figment of the imaginations of anti-democratic and anti-socialist right-wing thinkers. The masses did not exist. The notion that in the nineteenth century, thanks to the machine and technology, men were formed, one like another, by some great social cookie cutter was nonsense. The many in contrast to the masses had always been composed of individuals, human beings defined by their own unique particularities, moved by their own hopes and dreams, sinners and saints because of their own actions.

The many had not suddenly been transformed by the machine and technology. Only intellectuals remote from the world of the many, non-participants in the world of physical labor, could believe such a thing. For this reason the idea that the masses were somehow to blame for the increasingly evident disintegration of Western society, for the collapse of standards and the rebellion against form, must be abandoned.

That nineteenth century European culture was seriously flawed was apparent to all close observers. The development of Western culture has been accompanied by repeated crises in which the imperfections of human making and doing and the consequences of man's creatureliness shook the social fabric to its foundations. These crises were accompanied by attempts to reform and reshape the cultural fabric.

The nineteenth century, however, found this simple explanation hard to accept. That culture was the creation of Spirit rather than the product of "material, objective forces" did not accord with the positivistic, materialistic ideology of the age. It was easier to blame the masses than it was to engage in a thoroughgoing criticism of the flawed assumptions and life-objectives of the age.

The masses were the creation of rather than the causes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideological movements. The symptoms which Ortega in *The Revolt of the Masses* and Elias Canetti in *The Masses and Power* (1962), describe as derivative from "mass" civilization are not the distillation of a mythical entity called the "masses" but evidences of deep-seated maladies in Western society. Such mythic constructions as the "masses" prevent us from dealing with the realities of our condition.

Similarly the analysis of social orders in terms of "elites" obscures as much as it reveals. Mosca and Pareto attempted to lay bare the non-equalitarian, the authoritarian structure of democratic society. Their explanations were not so much explorations of the deceptive and flawed nature of democratic politics as they were explorations of social power wherever it is found. It is important to remember that elites are not about ideas, political or cultural, but about the mechanics and the manipulation of power. Elites exercise the power generated by creative minorities. They are the technicians of political and cultural ideas which have their origins, sometimes at a remove of several generations, in creative minorities whose objects were criticism

and invention rather than the exercise of power.

Consequently, to describe the pathologies of twentieth-century liberalism as due to the "treason of the clerks" or the "revolt of the elites," is not a very satisfactory explanation. Christopher Lasch's last book, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995), is only the latest attempt to blame the executors of power in a failing system of ideas. Like the elites of the Soviet Union in the generation before 1989 the liberal elites who manage the American power structure have the good sense of rats leaving a sinking ship.

The notion that liberalism is in its terminal phase due to the defection of the "creative masses" or the revolt of the elites obscures the role of the conservative creative minorities in the course of the last two generations in reshaping the cultural identity, the economic order, and the political structure of the Western world. Power is derivative from ideas, and elites which exercise power nearly always stand at a remove from the creative minorities which generate the power. Leopold von Ranke, the father of scientific historiography, believed that political power was derivative from spiritual potency. They were not the same thing but distinct and complementary. The development of the German universities in the twentieth century was a reflection of this belief. No doubt von Ranke came to this conclusion as a result of his study of the Reformation, for in 1817 he began his historical studies with an essay on Luther.

It will be recalled that the Reformation swept over Europe at a moment of cultural crisis when the society and belief system of the high-Middle Ages came unraveled. This "Autumn of the Middle Ages," as Huizinga denominated it, was a period in which a flawed and corrupted culture dominated by wearied and confused elites staggered to its dissolution. The spiritual forces, the creative minorities of reform, restoration, and innovation stood outside the centers of power. Creative minorities are not often found at the palaces of kings, at the courts of popes, and in the halls of Congress. Charlemagne and his intellectual cohort are, perhaps, the great exception to this rule in all of European history.

Moreover, creative minorities are usually not unitary but are, rather, diverse. The interests of these diverse groups, all set on the task of reformation and restoration, are not only different but may at first appear to be in conflict. Thus the minorities associated with Renaissance and Reformation at first appear antithetic and only in the course of time merge in their energetic recreation of Western society.

Observers of the contemporary conservative movement have often pointed to the diverse nature of the minorities which shaped the movement. Those who were exterior to the movement often saw weakness in such diversity and disruptive conflict in these differing interests and goals. True, the three chief groups which emerged at the end of World War II as the creative minorities seemed to have little enough in common. The cultural conservatives and traditionalists were hardly on speaking terms with the economic and social Classical Liberals and neither of these groups appeared to be natural allies of the Cold War fighters. Frank Meyer saw these divisions so threatening that he spent a great deal of time devising and promoting a position he described as "fusionism." It is important to realize that the critique of the regnant liberalism has its sources in a number of differing minorities and that the reformation and innovations they offered were remedies for different portions of Western society.

Here it must be stressed once more that the "conservatism" which emerged

in the period following World War II was not a movement aimed at a resurrection of the past or the preservation of the status quo. It is true that there were what one might call "pressed flower" conservatives in the movements, but for the most part these creative minorities looked both for a reclamation of the past and for a reconstruction of the future. They sought to recast the perennial concerns of conservatives and Classical Liberals in the language and instrumentalities of the present. Theirs was not a crablike movement into the future.

In the late 1940s and 1950s there was a revival of interest in a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal conservatives. The interest in these commanding thinkers of the past was in large measure academic and centered on the publication of new translations, biographies, and accurate editions. Intellectual movements such as the Scotch Enlightenment and Austrian Economics gained recognition among academicians.

Nonetheless, these academic concerns spread into a wider reading public and this public recast the thought of these past liberal conservatives into a new and challenging public philosophy. Lord Acton who supplied the epigraph for Friedrich von Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* (1944) had been rediscovered in Nazi Germany by Ulrich Noach, and was simultaneously rediscovered in England by Herbert Butterfield, Douglas Woodruff, and Archbishop David Mathew. While the focus of most of these Actonians was religious, the emphasis of freedom of conscience was viewed as a challenge to totalitarian politics. It did not take long for the general reader to discern that Acton's concern with freedom represented a challenge to the steady encroachment of the centralized and omnicompetent state on the lives and spirits of citizens living in bureaucratic societies.

At about the same time Jacob Burckhardt, the Swiss historian who had refused appointment as von Ranke's successor in Prussian Berlin, reclaimed the attention due him. Again, the interest in Burckhardt was at first tangential, centering on his invention and discussion of the Renaissance. In the English-speaking world this changed rapidly with the publication of Alexander Dru's translation of Burckhardt's letters. Werner Kaegi's biography of Burckhardt and the repeated publication in England and America of the *Weltgechichtliche Betrachtungen (Force and Freedom)*, found a wide and receptive audience.

Contemporaneous with these publications was a renewed interest in Alexis de Tocqueville both as an object of academic enquiry and as a diagnostician of the ills of democratic society. *Democracy in America* (1835-1840) was read even by those academicians who were devoted and partisan socialists. Much the same might be said of the vogue enjoyed by Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*. W.W. Norton kept this and other works by him available in paperback reprints.

It seems odd now that Edmund Burke would have been helped back into fame by "that running dog" of socialism, Harold Laski, who saw Burke as the father of the welfare state. When Burke was taught it was usually as a demonstration of how silly was his attack on the French Revolution. However, Burke was read and studied by many who considered him a contemporary enemy of the idea of the state as a rational construct. One of these early students of Burke and his influence on Continental Conservatism was Golo Mann, who, while a professor at Hillsdale College, published a study of Friedrich von Gentz, Metternich's secretary and the translator of Burke into German.

What the creative conservative minority found in these writers was the demolition of what has been called "the Enlightenment project." These liberal

conservative writers provided a reasoned analysis and rejection of the idea of progress, the notion of a planned utopian future, and the idea of an omnicompetent state enjoying unchecked powers. Most of the academicians who originally read these authors miscomprehended them and saw them as speaking to the past rather than the present. However, these great political analysts found comprehending readers who would use their words and arguments to reshape the future.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee were being published and abridged. Their impact upon the reading public was very great and their erudite analysis of the fate of Western Civilization found a receptive audience. It is difficult to say just what their impact on the *mentalité* of the post-war years was, but there can be no doubt that they helped to demolish the myth of progress and the anticipation of utopia by planning. Similarly, the impact of the dystopian novel on the social anticipations of the reading public has been insufficiently noted.

Taken together these literary influences colored the thinking of the three large and distinctive creative minorities of the post-war years: the cold warriors, the cultural traditionalists, and the Classical Liberals. However divergent their ultimate concerns, they all agreed on the limits of rational planning, the fatuous character of the idea of progress, and the inherently unpredictable and undetermined character of the historical process. They agreed, too, on the necessity of a moral armature for the social order, a set of universally accepted rules within whose context the life of society could move forward. Whether these rules were divine mandates, a natural law, or a pragmatic and consensual order was a matter of debate. They could not be, all agreed, an arbitrary imposition or an act of individual self-will. Much which has been written recently about communitarianism and individualism obscures the roots of both conservatism and Classical Liberalism in an agreed upon and universally accepted set of rules or laws.

While it is true that the conservative creative minority was not an acknowledged elite exercising power from the "commanding heights" of the academy, many members of those creative minorities were university professors. For the most part they found little encouragement in the academy. Here and there, where innovation was prized, as at the University of Chicago, new ideas might be fostered, but most deans, departmental chairmen, and executive committees wanted faculty who were safe and told the beads of liberalism without skipping the Apostles' creed.

Chicago was an exception, and in economics, business administration, and law fashioned a new and coherent theory of political economy. The Scotch Enlightenment and Austrian economics figured largely in this development, though the economists and lawyers who shaped the new ideas were innovators, recasting the thought of Classical Liberalism in terms of twentieth-century social reality.

In political science two major figures appeared who transformed the study of politics. Both were refugees from Hitler's frenzy. Unlike many other refugees from National Socialism they were not Marxists. On the contrary, they found Marxism and National Socialism to be of a piece. Both believed the totalitarian ideologies to be the consequence of the failed intellectual tradition which reached back to the beginnings of modernity. Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago and the peripatetic Eric Voegelin renewed and transformed the study of political science. Both were reluctant to call themselves, or to permit themselves to be called, conservatives, perhaps be-

cause of their enduring distrust of all ideologies. Both returned to the study of the Greeks, though their respective views of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were widely at variance. Neither cultivated dogmatic ideological conformity but inducted their students into a questioning and analysis which were bound to result in the overthrow of received liberal shibboleths. Both insisted on the necessity of "openness" in all scientific inquiry. This meant that for both of them the religious was not excluded from study but became a primary field of enquiry.

The growing concern with the Soviet drive for world domination was not simply a matter of national self-interest or the philosophical rejection of a soulless, deterministic world view. It was, above all, a religious rejection of an atheistic, mechanistic conception of man. Marxism was even more aware than most Christians that these two world views were incompatible. It is clear now that a Polish Pope and the Catholic Church produced the downfall of the Soviet system in 1989. However, much earlier and especially from the pontificate of Pius XII onward, Roman Catholicism was the seed-bed of the conservative movement in the United States. Patrick Allitt, in a neglected book, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985*, has made clear the impact of Catholic intellectuals on the development of American Conservatism.

Many of the most prominent anti-Marxists in the early development of the creative minorities were former communists. The honor role is a long one but most prominent among these great figures were Whittaker Chambers, Frank Meyer, James Burnham, Freda Utley, and Hedda Massing. Max Eastman, Sidney Hook, and Bertram Wolf had broken with Stalinism but lived in a curious half-way house of statist anti-Communism. Like Saul, these great, wounded intellects of modernism had held the cloaks of those who had stoned Stephen, but also like Saul they were stricken from their horses on the road to Damascus.

Catholics and former Marxists were not only hostile to Marxism but were also cultural traditionalists. The Marxists of the 1930s and 1940s, unlike their present-day counter parts, belonged to a political culture which still read books and viewed the poet as the highest exemplification of humankind. Catholics identified with the poets and writers of the great Catholic cultural resurgence of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both groups, in their separate and distinctive fashions, sought for the restoration and preservation of culture. It is not surprising that André Malraux turned more completely to culture from ideology or that Whittaker Chambers during the period of his hiding translated *Bambi.*

The campaign against Marxism was not simply a campaign of military resistance. Even more important was the campaign of religious and cultural opposition. Now that the military threat of Marxism has abated and the tenets of classical liberalism, especially in the economic field, have triumphed, the cultural wars have re-emerged as the decisive struggles. It is in this area that Marxism and its kissing cousin, postmodernism, still offer effective challenges to an emergent culture which has much in common with the Baroque spirit, which subsumed into itself and reconciled the remnants of Medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation creativity.

Minorities become self-conscious creative forces only in the measure that they share a common identity and common goals. The spirit of creative minorities is always a spirit of Charlemagne's round table: the spirit of the cenacle. Group awareness is achieved in the extended societies of the twentieth century through journals, little magazines, and fugitive literature of all sorts. Espe-

cially important are periodic meetings and gatherings. Had there been no conservative journals or magazines there would have been no conservative movement. Conservatives had a model of the importance of literature to the development of the movement in Marxism and especially, in an odd way, *Action française*. It was the cadre schools of Marxism and the summer schools of *Action française* that provided the model for the nascent conservative movement.

Out of these diverse strands of thought, these complex movements of ideas, the conservative movement at the end of the twentieth century has shaped itself. Important to its success was the patronage of a very few foundations and individuals who financially supported social and cultural criticism and innovation. This was possible, for it must be borne in mind that at their inception these groups were not overtly political. Their object was not political action. They saw themselves, rather, as a leaven in the great seething, bubbling mass of democratic society. Politicians of both major parties betrayed and disappointed the hopes of these creative minorities.

We have noted that journals and books played a decisive role in the communication of conservative ideas. The handful of publishers, nearly always on the edge of financial disaster, turned the names of obscure intellectuals into commonplaces. New York was not then, as it is not now, the locus of conservative thought. Chicago and the South played a disproportionate role, but without access to the printed page these ideas would have lost their national character and slumped back into provinciality.

The energy and the dynamism of creative minorities rarely endure beyond one generation. As the excitement of discovery and the joy of criticism ebb, the movements institutionalize themselves. Bureaucratic sclerosis replaces self-assured independence. The story is an old one often analyzed by historians. The historical study of German Social Democracy at the turn of this last century has been quite exhaustive and illustrates the substitution of administration for charisma.

The creative energies and talents are lured away from the tasks of social criticism and cultural creativity into political action. The pin-striped suit replaces the tweed jacket. The Washington think-tank replaces the "defunct scribbler."

Still, all is not lost. The intellectual capital of the first generation remains intact and continues to shape the future. History is a one-way street and once social invention and cultural creation have reshaped society the effect is permanent.

Major social and cultural movements are well aware of the demise of their creative minorities. There are efforts to regain the energy and excitement of the "first century," the "primitive Church," and the "founding fathers." Often these efforts result in intellectual Williamsburg restorations. All aging movements, and especially those standing on the brink of death, have an uncontrollable love for "primitivism." Thus the Old Left sought renewal in the frenzies of the New Left. Like the heroine in Thomas Mann's novel, *Die Betrogene*, these efforts at rejuvenation often mistake the symptoms of incipient death for evidences of rebirth.

Movements cannot live into the future by retreating into the past. There are, as Ernst von Lasaulx, a nineteenth-century scholar of the classics, asserted, "no Restorations." A new creative minority must attempt, in the spirit of Cardinal Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctine*, to make explicit all that is implicit in the past, to bring into actuality all that a previous generation posited only in potentiality.