

difference between success and principled action. It is also true that Hitler was operating in a world exhausted by war, economic collapse, ideologically divided and politically decadent. "In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king."

For some years a school of scholars of American history interpreted the populist movement of a century ago in America as a native American variety of Fascism. Lukacs inverts the argument by making Hitler a populist. By this feat of verbal prestidigitation have we gained anything in understanding? Surely, contemporaries of Hitler would have been astonished to discover that he was not a Fascist.

That Hitler was not a conservative but rather a radical social reformer is not generally recognized. No doubt the "Conservative" Hitler was both a National Socialist construction for partisan political purpose and a Marxist ideological construction resulting from the inability of Marxists to make distinctions between right-wing political movements. Yes, Hitler believed in and made a social revolution, though whether the social transformation National Socialism produced was beneficial is a matter of lively debate.

In the representational arts and in architecture Lukacs seems to confuse the Nazi higher *Kitsch* with the aesthetically praiseworthy. The designs for the Berlin of the future, over which Hitler and Speer labored down to the last days of the war, can only be described as grotesquely monumental. In representational art, *gesunde Erotik* (healthy eroticism) and the school of "the Master of the pubic hair" were not restoration and innovation but a slick decadence.

The Hitler of History is an intelligent and, in many instances, a profound book, but one to be read with care and discernment lest it come to illustrate once more that a little learning is a dangerous thing.

Conservative Thought and Public Policy

GERALD J. RUSSELLO

Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present, edited by

Jerry Z. Muller, *Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. 450 pp.*

AT PRESENT THERE ARE at least four substantial collections of conservative writing readily available: Buckley and Kesler's *Keeping the Tablets* (1988) (earlier published, with a slightly different set of selections, as *Have You Ever Seen a Dream Walking?* [1970]); Russell Kirk's *Portable Conservative Reader* (1984); George A. Panichas's *Modern Age: The First Twenty-Five Years* (1988); and most recently Roger Scruton's *Conservative Texts* (1991). Such collections are valuable because they can illustrate classic examples of conservative thought and also demonstrate the application of conservative principles to a number of contexts. The weakness of such collections is the reverse of their strength. Unlike the universalist thrust of liberalism, conservatism has remained stubbornly and consistently local in its concerns and arguments, and any compendium purporting to set forth conservative principles must by necessity flatten areas that to conservatives are highly nuanced. Indeed, most conservative collections

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begin with a disclaimer of sorts, to the effect that conservatism is more an outlook that cannot be captured in any set of texts, no matter how representative, rather than a comprehensive ideology.

Collections of any sort inevitably reflect the interests and tastes of their editors, and *Conservatism* is no exception. Professor Jerry Z. Muller intends with what he calls his "anthology with an argument" to "present and explicate the characteristic features of conservative analysis which were first articulated in the eighteenth century and which have consistently recurred, in a variety of national contexts, until the present day." Muller restricts his volume to those writing on what he calls "public policy," and omits the large body of conservative writing on cultural or religious questions, except insofar as they relate to that subject. He likewise has not included any selections from what he characterizes as "the literary and romantic strands of conservatism that traffic in the nostalgic evocation of the past." As a result, there is little overlap between Muller's collection and those mentioned above, each of which features selections from these other conservative schools. Muller readily admits his choice of authors is in some way conditioned by his own definition of conservatism, and which in turn support his definition. However, because Muller applies his definition of conservatism to authors who did not consider themselves to be conservatives, and selects only the "conservative" portions of their work, the choices are sometimes unexpected. Yet these very differences in selection make *Conservatism* a nice complement to the other anthologies.

Meant as a general introduction for an international audience, especially students, Muller covers an impressive array of American, English, and European conservative thinkers. Hume and Burke open the collection, which then proceeds to works—some of them otherwise hard to

find—by Oakeshott, de Maistre, de Bonald, Justus Möser, Schumpeter (who alone is privileged with selections in two separate sections), Schmitt, and Arnold Gehlen. The readings themselves are organized in thematic chapters, such as "War," "Democracy," "The Critique of Revolution," and "Authority." The American contribution is varied, and includes William G. Sumner, James Madison in the person of Publius (*Federalist* 49), the nineteenth-century lawyer Rufus Choate and sociologist Phillip Rieff. Selections from Neuhaus and Berger's *To Empower People* (1977) and Irving Kristol's 1971 essay "Pornography, Obscenity and the Case for Censorship" add a contemporary gloss. For each selection, Muller adds a short preface, and each text is helpfully annotated; there is also a bibliography. Substantive commentary on conservatism is reserved to a lengthy Introduction and Afterword. Those seeking an introduction to the breadth and penetration of European conservative analysis, which is sometimes neglected in American texts, will find the collection worthy of attention, and Muller's commentary provides much to ponder. One could, of course, quibble over the choices—why, for example, Madison and not Adams?—yet that is inevitable in anthologies.

Which returns us to Muller's goal for the volume: to explicate the themes that underlay the conservative social scientific approach to "public policy." This approach may seem a poor way to demonstrate enduring conservative principles, as public policy by its nature is a shifting and unsteady set of compromises between principles and interests. Muller has in mind, however, not specific policy recommendations—which would be tedious to read as well as not useful—but rather the conceptual tools conservatives have used to analyze society. The problem facing conservative thought Muller sums up in a quotation from the historian J.G.A. Pocock, that "too many

minds have been trying to 'conserve' too many things for too many reasons." At various times and in different countries, conservatives have defended a wide variety of social forms and institutions, some of which are opposed to one another: nationalism and internationalism, democracy and aristocracy, capitalism and forms of the welfare state. Muller concludes from this history that conservatism, contrary to what some of its exponents claim, is not a set of principles designed to defend particular institutions. Rather, borrowing from Samuel Huntington, he claims conservatism is best understood as a "positional" body of thought that arises when institutions formerly taken for granted are threatened. Muller intends to describe the consistency in the arguments of conservative thinkers, despite the variety of objects those arguments have sought to preserve.

Muller's introductory section on "Recurrent Conservative Assumptions and Predispositions" is relatively straightforward, and presents a series of propositions familiar to those knowledgeable about conservative literature. Likewise, Muller lists a number of substantive arguments and themes that he finds characteristic of conservative writing. These range from a belief in human imperfection and the importance of habit and custom, to a skepticism of a contractarian view of human nature and conservatism's low view of wide-ranging "theories" of human society. More interesting is the discussion of common metaphors employed by conservatives. From Aristotle, for example, conservatives have adopted

the image of the "second nature," which has served as "a foil against what conservatives regard as overly optimistic and excessively rationalistic accounts of moral behavior." The second nature represents the core of internalized attitudes and norms that is necessary to inculcate culture and virtue into the individual.

Closely related is the metaphor of culture being a veil, which protects us from the baser forms of human nature and guides us to in our own lives. Stripping away the veil, as Burke claimed the French revolutionaries did, has the same effect as eliminating the elements of our "second nature": it would result in "a return of man to his natural state, a state not elevated and benign, but brutish and barbaric." The discussion is nicely done, but too brief;

Muller does not fully trace the influence of these metaphors through the two centuries of conservative writing.

This collection, therefore, squarely faces the central tension in the conservative tradition: the paradox that societal institutions and traditions, even though they are human constructs and therefore temporary, must be defended as necessary. Conservatives are presented with the unfortunate dilemma either of defending whatever society happens to exist at the present time, in the name of order, or the belief that such conditions represent the will of God, or of pining for a long-ago and oftentimes imaginary past that represented a better time. At its best, conservative thought avoids both extremes and embraces what George Panichas, in another context, has called an "equitable understanding" between the claims of permanence and change.



Edmund Burke

The challenge, therefore, for conservative thinkers is to formulate concretely what Burke meant when he said change was the means to our preservation.

In his Introduction, Muller wishes to distinguish conservatism proper from the closely related positions of orthodoxy and traditionalism. Muller labels as "orthodoxy" the belief in an objective order, defined either by revelation or reason, while he calls "traditionalism" the undue allegiance to the traditions of an earlier time. Muller's discussion of the differences among orthodoxy, traditionalism, conservatism and reaction is reasonable and generally unobjectionable. In some ways, Muller's account echoes Russell Kirk's discussion in an essay on "The Books of Conservatism." Kirk distinguishes conservatism from reaction in that "the conservative hopes to reconcile what is most important in old customs with the change that any society must endure if it is to endure.... [T]he reactionary desires a return to conditions of an earlier period." The reactionary position, with its reliance upon abstractions about history and society, has more in common with liberalism than a true conservatism.

Muller distinguishes the orthodox from the conservative by claiming the former defends existing institutions and practices because they are in some sense true and accord with a principle of reason or revelation. The conservative, however, "defends existing institutions because their very existence creates a presumption that they have served some useful function, because eliminating them may lead to harmful, unintended consequences, or because [their] veneration ... makes them potentially useable for new purposes." While these two definitions may not in fact conflict, as one could believe that existing institutions are serving a useful function precisely *because* they correspond to a more lasting principle, Muller discounts the possi-

bility. Conservatives who think so, he contends, are only fooling their audience, or perhaps themselves: "conservative thinkers may regard it as useful for most people to believe that existing institutions correspond to some ultimate truth." Muller's conservatism, therefore, is rooted in a modern, pragmatic sensibility: conservatives like to preserve things that work. References to correspondence with any higher principle or contentions that societal institutions reflect an "organic" understanding of the social order are so much rhetorical window-dressing for the underlying utilitarianism.

Muller uses the unfortunate term "historical utilitarianism" to describe the conservative argument in favor of historical practices. He finds definitive of conservatism the belief that old institutions or practices must be preserved because they further social well-being, whatever other reasons there may be for their preservation. Although he distances this term from a strict Benthamite utilitarianism, it obscures the real differences between conservatism and any sort of utilitarianism. To say that conservatives favor those institutions that in the long run increase human happiness is not a sufficient explanation of conservatism—for who would advocate institutions that reduce happiness? Muller acknowledges that non-conservatives have also advocated the value of utility, but passes over the vital difference: the conservative inquiry over the nature of happiness. For the strict utilitarian, the definition of happiness is, really, unimportant, so long as society maximizes it; to the conservative, this answer is unacceptable. One must first understand in what happiness consists before one can increase it, or even to ask whether it can be increased through the means of public policy. The equation of conservatism with historical utilitarianism also eliminates important groups from Muller's conservative world

— any thinker who traffics in “nostalgia,” that is, who believes other institutions, no longer existing, could be more beneficial than those we have at present, has no place in Muller’s account. They are reactionaries on the losing side of history.

More troubling is Muller’s contention that conservative thought is “relativist,” because since the French Revolution “a long-term trend in the development of conservative thought has been from the defense of particular institutions to the defense of institutions in general,” and the rise of functional arguments for the need of institutions as such. This claim obviously is linked to the first, and amounts to an argument that conservatives end up defending the status quo—conserving whatever institutions a particular society has until they disappear when others replace them; then defending these newer institutions. Such a view denies conservatism any creative effect in the formation of culture. Muller does recognize that conservatives, through the recurrent arguments and themes he identifies, need not always advocate surviving institutions, yet he does not propose how conservatives can recognize when such a course would be appropriate.

This approach makes it easier for Muller to discount the visionary or prophetic strain of conservatism, what Bruce Frohnen has called the role of the seer. Seers do not engage in mere nostalgia; rather they hold up society to a mirror, and point to ways of life starkly different from the present. They can pierce the veil of the temporal to glimpse the permanent things, and then are able to convey their insights to us. The accumulation of these individuals, with the historical institutions and practices they have inspired, collectively makes up the tradition conservatives defend. As Kirk argued, the lessons of history transcend their contingent usefulness and utility.

“The truths of history, the real meanings, are to be discovered in what history can teach us about the framework of the Logos, if you will: about the significance of human existence: about the splendor and misery of our condition.”

Indeed, the whole question of individual initiative is sidestepped in this collection. We do not see in Muller’s conservatism a place for the creative and dynamic role each individual must play in the process of cultural preservation, which some conservatives such as Kirk have made a cornerstone of their thought. The role Muller sees for conservatism, while sometimes brilliant and in some sense necessary, is always a second-order role. Their position on the issues of the day are dependent upon forces over which they have no control: “conservatism as an articulated intellectual position only arises when the legitimacy of existing institutions can no longer be taken for granted, either because those institutions are under ideological attack or because of social, political and cultural developments that tend to undermine their authority or their functioning.” Conservatism’s positional nature, on this view, makes it a servant of events rather than a participant in them. While in one sense this may be true (the French Revolution was the obvious impetus for Burke’s *Reflections*), in another sense it diminishes the value of what Burke and other conservatives have been trying to preserve.

The problems with Muller’s definition of conservatism perhaps arise in trying to assemble a number of conservatisms into a coherent transnational conservative position. Conservatism is an approach, a perspective that informs one’s outlook, not an easily-reducible set of propositions applicable to social problems. Muller knows that conservatism shares some aspects with non-conservative philosophies, but he uses this fact only to conservatism’s disadvantage.

Thus, conservative reliance on natural law or revelation, mistakenly borrowed from the orthodox tradition, is a screen to convince the masses of the utility of social institutions, while its utilitarian view of history (also shared with some non-conservative schools of thought) is central to its outlook. By muting the differences between national conservative traditions (albeit for the sake of those unfamiliar with conservatism generally), the complexities of the conservative position are lost.

Conservatives, in fact, have not been as relativist as Muller contends. In the United States, for example, the country with the briefest conservative tradition, conservatives have striven to preserve the Constitution in accordance with founding principles. They have not accepted just any Constitution (or interpretation thereof) presented to them as a governing document, merely because they believe in constitutional government. On the contrary, conservatives have consistently fought for a particular understanding of constitutional principles that is rooted in longstanding traditions of Anglo-American jurisprudence and self-government. The conservative complaint over judicial usurpation of constitutional government does not fit within Muller's argument. His view, in contrast, would seem to require conservatives, after a period of mourning over the loss of their understanding of constitutionalism, to embrace whatever alteration an activist judiciary has wrought, so long as it has existed for a long enough time to contribute in some manner to an ill-understood social well-being.

The "romantic and literary" tradition of conservative thought may have been helpful here. In contrast to rationalist liberalism, conservatism preserves those non-intellectual and non-theoretical aspects of social and political life, whose theoretical defense is less important than their lived experience. Romantic or imagi-

native conservatism can sustain the feelings of loyalty and affection that are necessary for the social order and that transcend particular policy questions. As conservatives have argued for two centuries, imagery, narrative, and metaphor are central to society; in this way romantic conservatism complements the social scientific. The imaginative tradition of conservatism is aspirational and strives to inspire the coming generations. Indeed, with the rise of "postmodernism," and its attacks on the modern understanding of reason and objectivity, the elements of conservative thought that reach back to a pre-Enlightenment tradition assume a new importance. To paraphrase Willmoore Kendall, no one would storm the beach at Tarawa for "historical utilitarianism" or to vindicate the place of mediating institutions in modern society. Only when society is understood as having a purpose beyond itself and of which its individual members are a part can considerations of public policy be effective. That judgment and process of selection, which Kirk would have called prudence, is enshrined in the romantic and literary tradition of conservatism as much as in any other.

Muller notes conservatism is constantly presented with a Burkean "choice of inheritance": "conservation of the institutional legacy of the past inevitably involves a selection from among existing traditions and legacies. Conservative theory...cannot be applied without judgment." *Conservatism* contains a wealth of good conservative writing, and on the whole Muller's commentary provides a good thumbnail sketch of the main points of conservative analysis. However, he need not have denigrated other strands of the conservative tradition, especially when these compatible conservatisms can provide a framework for the very values he emphasizes through his collection.