

How Does the Past Become the Future?

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TO WHAT EXTENT should the past determine the future? Only a few years ago it seemed to most intellectuals that the future would extinguish the past. The past in an "age of revolution" would become a museum of artifact.

Perhaps the most potent and commonplace source of this abolition of the past lay in the idea of "youth" as a determinative force in present history. From Rousseau onward, "youth" ceased to be a formative stage in the achievement of maturity and became an autonomous condition. By the end of the nineteenth century, youth movements everywhere displaced the goal of maturity. Increasingly men and women, aided by style, the cosmetician's art, the plastic surgeon's skill, and the physician's pharmacopoeia, provided extraordinary examples of arrested development. It is instructive to note that the ideological movements of the twentieth century had, as their most important component, youth movements. Their objective was human transformation and the abolition of the past.

From the French Revolution to the Russian and Chinese revolutions, the goal was the abolition of the past. Through the "Romantic" mumbo jumbo of

Hegelian sublation, the past was to be transcended and refigured in such a way as to provide mankind with a new dawn. The religions, social orders, ethical and artistic constructs of the past were to be bulldozed into the capacious dustbin of history and replaced by a utopian dream-world.

It is difficult now to comprehend, even with the sophisticated tools of historical understanding, the Marxist dreamworld; a world in which human limitations were to be transcended by gigantic projects aimed at the total conquest of nature, beginning with the transformation of human nature. Schemes to water the arid reaches of central Asia were no less fantastic and abortive than schemes to create the "new Soviet-man" or, in Nazi ideology, the racially pure Germanic superman.

It is, of course, mistaken to assume that these transformational efforts to abolish history were limited to the ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Utopianism was not necessarily colored by ideology. The "Brave New Worlds" men constructed in their imaginations and attempted to give the shapes of reality were often as not the products of Promethean presumption and pseudo-scientific daring. It is well to remember that the eugenics movement, so closely tied to racism and the middle class hum-

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bug, antedated National Socialist dreams of creating a super race.

"Scientism" was, and still is, as powerful as any political ideology. Its dreams of and blueprints for a perfected future have been a strong revolutionary force whose object is to overcome the past, to abolish tradition, and create new hedonistic values. That the givens of the human condition cannot be transformed but only ameliorated is a fact which does not seem to have occurred to the "scientist." That amelioration in one area of human experience is often purchased at the expense of deformation in another is an unexpected aspect of everyday experience. "The unanticipated consequences of rational action" is a cliché of twentieth-century speech.

Those post-modernist movements which have been born of a sense of ideological and "scientific" failure nonetheless repudiate and denigrate the past. Deconstructionism is Voltaire's cynical remark that "history is the pack of lies the living play upon the dead" writ large. If we cannot make any truth-statement, all assertions, including any analysis of the past, are acts of the will which conform to our advantage. Race, class, and gender, rather than a disinterested analysis of the past, are the sources of the fictions through which we manipulate the present and transform the past.

It is apparent now to everyone except tenured professors at our universities that the age of scientism and ideology is over and that the Pyrrhonic claptrap of post-modernism is an expended force. The past cannot be abolished, amended, or appropriated by the causes of class, race, and gender.

The English poet Edward Thomas says in a poem, "Early One Morning," "the past is the only dead thing that smells sweet...." He surely is mistaken, for the past is not dead, and never dies, but lives on as a force in all of our daily lives and in the very constitution of the self. The

past as the power of grace and sin exerts an energy and is a quiddity whether or not that past is known or regarded. The institutions of slavery may be abolished and abandoned. The fact of slavery in the past conditions every possible future.

Conservatives since Burke have held that history is the distillation of past experience, the awareness of past experience, the awareness of the sum of human trial and error. It is the fixed star by which the present and the future should be guided. Public interest is no more than an awareness of this body of tradition and its implications for present action. Statesmanship is no more than an apprehension of the meaning of past experience.

It is clear, however, that today is not simply a replication of yesterday and that tomorrow will not be like today. The future cannot be shaped in terms of the past alone. All life has a novelty that transforms genera and species, ancestors, and location in the temporal sequence. Some lives and some events possess an absolute character. Once the world historical character has appeared, as Hegel realized, all future history bears his mark. He does not abolish the past but rather fulfills it and gives significance to its experience.

The abolition of the past which the past two revolutionary centuries hoped for has proven to be not within the realm of possibility. However, neither the restoration of the past nor the preservation of the *status quo* is a possibility either. Time is a one-way street and there is no turning back or any possibility of arrested forward motion. There is a note of unutterable pathos in a person or an age which pretends its creaking joints have been limbered by drinking at the fountain of youth.

It is a matter of great interest that just at the moment in the eighteenth century when the abolition of the past became the object of revolution, historical con-

sciousness became more acute. Modern historical science was invented just when the men of the Enlightenment thought they had strangled and trampled on the writhing body of the past. Niebuhr and von Ranke charmed history, phoenix-like, and caused its resurrection out of the ashes of the past. Moreover, the sciences of history and philosophy understood the process of becoming as developmental. History was conceived to be an unfolding of the character and content of the past. "Development" was not seen as amendment but rather as fulfillment. The future was seen as that which existed in potentiality transformed into that which existed in actuality. In this sense the future was the handmaiden of the past.

These notions were implicit in Aristotelian philosophy but were given their clearest formulation by Catholic nineteenth-century theologians who sought to express both the continuity of truth, *semper eadem*, and the clearer, ramified, transformed, and contemporary expression of that truth. The great question for these theologians and historians was the question of how the doctrines and structures of the primitive Church became the complex and time-conditioned Church of the nineteenth century.

The work of theology was not simply additive and adjustive. It was, these theologians believed, a development of those elements inherent in the deposit of faith. This work was essentially conservative but its end result was a more complex, comprehensive, and contemporary understanding of the deposit of faith. History was not simply a historical process, as Marxists believed, by which history itself was abolished.

These ideas were not simply theological but were in a broad sense historical, biological and, as I shall argue, political. Developmental pattern was the stuff of history, theology, biology, and politics.

John Henry Newman and the Munich

School were the chief exponents of historical theology. Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), was the most important and comprehensive statement of these ideas. It led to his being received into the Roman Catholic Church and was to become a source of Roman suspicion as to the orthodoxy of his faith.

Newman argued that doctrine in a primitive, incomplete, undeveloped form was present in the early Church. What appears as change in the course of time is only amplification and the growth of understanding. Not all change, of course, is integral to the development of primitive doctrine. Heresy, often enough, is simply an index to the state of mind, the terms of debate, concerning doctrine within the Church. It is not a doctrinal untruth but a portion of doctrine wrenched and sundered from the complementary context of doctrinal wholeness. "Corruptions," on the other hand, are manifest untruths and stand in bold contradiction to the doctrines held by the Church. The problem for historical theology is one of discernment which is aided, according to Newman, by certain tests of "authenticity." Newman's essay was an extraordinary effort to reconcile integrity and continuity of doctrine with increasing complexity and understanding and applicability to historic changes in mentality and perception.

At the very time Newman was expounding a theology of the development of Christian doctrine, Benjamin Disraeli was constructing a theory of the development of Conservative political ideas. Disraeli was in search of an authentic "primitive Toryism" and in analyzing how this "primitive Toryism" in a contemporary, developed form, could be instantiated in current policy and legislation. What were the basic doctrines of Toryism and how could these doctrines be made relevant to contemporary political situations? In 1835, Disraeli published his *Vin-*

dication of the English Constitution which attempted to do for Toryism much of what Newman was later to attempt for Catholic doctrine. The coincidence is not accidental, for the power of ideas, as they move through history, is contagious. This is especially true for those who have a bent for literature, who think of themselves as poets and novelists, as did both Disraeli and Newman.

Politics no less than theology involves belief resulting from a fundamental orientation to the experience of existence. This experience and these beliefs always have a historical dimension. They come to us out of a past which embodies the cumulative experience of mankind or a significant part of mankind.

Disraeli argued "...that Toryism should be divested of all those qualities which are adventitious and not essential, and which, having been produced by the course of circumstances which are constantly changing, become in time obsolete, inconvenient...." It is this essential character which marks fundamental positions in theology and in politics. "Authentic" development is the unfolding of the content of these essential positions.

Disraeli's rethinking of the content of conservatism made possible the revival and eventual triumph of the Tory party. Today's British Conservatives, as Margaret Thatcher acknowledged, owe him a great debt. However, Disraeli's policy of political expedience corrupted the purity of his theory. It remained for his great opponent, William Gladstone, close student of Newman, Ignaz von Döllinger, and Lord Acton, the great exponents of theological development and historical theology, to transform conservative political theory into practical politics in the parliamentary programs of the Liberal party. It was Gladstone who rescued the authentic past and transformed the threatening present into its image.

These nineteenth-century theological and political theories have a pregnancy

and meaning, however remote they may seem to the current dilemma of American conservatism at the end of the twentieth century. The essential conservative position is beguiled on all sides by "heresies" and "corruptions" which mask themselves as "authentic" developments of the classic conservative position. These "heresies" and "corruptions" develop out of mistaken legislative programs originating in expedience, enthusiasm, and political wrongheadedness. At the present moment, conservatives must ask once more who they are and what they believe before they present a program of what they intend to do legislatively.

Conservatism reenacts the past not as a past program but as a set of beliefs and values which are translated into current idiom. The "authenticity" of this current idiom is demonstrable in that it does not contradict, corrupt or attenuate the conservative goals, perspectives, or values of the past. Principles and not programs lie at the heart of conservatism.

Conservatism, then, is a set of beliefs, principles, and historical reflections which have come to us from the past. Everyday conservatism has become increasingly aware of this body of doctrine. Burke, de Tocqueville, Mill, Burckhardt, and Acton are for conservatives the "Law and the Prophets." They are the reflective ordering of the experience of men living in modern society. They all lived in the shadows of the French Revolution, and all of them must be considered as responsive to the heresies, corruptions, and political deformations of the revolution. Conservatism lives out of a past and that past is "the Revolution."

But beyond this body of doctrine and insight, there is what I would like to call the "vernacular architecture" of conservatism, the way in which these ideals and principles are translated into the politics of a particular time and place. Here, too,

conservatism faces the danger of an accommodation which is, in fact, a corruption, an accommodation which is a political deformation. In America, of course, the Founding is determinative, and the Constitution stands at the very center of American political conservatism. It is for this reason that the questions of "original intention" and judicial activism are the most important questions in current American political thought. The "vernacular architecture" of American politics is conservative even though liberalism and left-wing intellectuality have managed to build some shanties onto the American political structure.

Central to conservative doctrine and the translation of this doctrine into the politics of a particular time and place is the fear of unchecked power and its centralization. There is no room in the American system for an imperial presidency and its employment of revolutionary rhetoric and democratic bribery to sustain its quest for totalitarian dominance.

It is for this reason that the checks of a balanced constitution are so important. It is for this reason that the diffusion of power to the states and particularly to the local communities is imperative. Education, welfare, and social control must be taken out of the hands of the central power and its instrumentalities.

It is for this reason that the budget of the Federal government must be reduced; that taxes paid to the central power must be drastically curtailed and redirected to the states and the local communities. Beyond the needs of defense and a limited Federal police power, only those extraordinary needs of national communication, the alleviation of national disaster and the control of corporate entities which are national or international in scope should be left in the hands of the Federal government. The Federal government should not subsidize culture, impose standards on education, or engage in any activity, however benign it

may appear to be, which is more properly the activity of the states or the local community.

These are, of course, the commonplaces of contemporary conservative thought and yet elective officeholders of the Left and Right, in spite of the wishes of the electorate, day in and day out increase the power and scope of the Federal government.

As de Tocqueville was aware, the great engine for transforming and increasing the power of the central government was warfare and the growing scope and might of the armed forces. There cannot be an imperial presidency aside from an imperial America. It follows that the United States must disengage itself from any exercise of power which is not an expression of commanding American national interest. We must not become the policeman of the world. Our interest in the Third World must be predicated on the idea of benign neglect. Surely the people of East Peoria have little at stake in East Timor, however much we may grieve at the fate of the East Timorese and however much as private citizens we are bound, in charity, to assist the alleviation of their suffering.

Tocqueville and the founders were well aware that religion was indispensable to the prosperity and survival of democratic polities. The myth of the "wall of separation" between church and state was long ago refuted by Paul Kuyper, the great constitutional lawyer and historian. Established religions are bad, not simply because they compel the consciences of dissenters, but because they are harmful to religion itself. The fear of establishment and its consequences does not mean that the State must discourage or act antithetical to religion and its interests. Indeed, the state should do all in its power to acknowledge and encourage the role of religion in society and should act to foster those practices which have popular approval which acknowledge

man's dependence on God. Moreover, in those areas where the state and the church have a common interest, such as education and charity, the state should sustain and encourage the religious community.

It is clear that there is a marked division between conservatism and libertarianism. Political society has interests which are more comprehensive and responsible than those of a selfish individualism. Privatization alone is not the key to the good or even the minimally functioning society. The general rather than the individual welfare must in most cases be paramount. The state should always act in such a way that its powers to tax foster the development of commu-

nal and personal initiatives in charity, in elimination of poverty, and in the development of a vibrant culture.

The vernacular architecture of conservatism is the stuff of contemporary politics. In every area of individual and community concern, there are proposals and plans to achieve the goals of traditional conservative political doctrine based on the experience of the past. This vernacular architecture of political conservatism must be organic, decentralized, and rooted in past experience. Even here, however, not all developments will prove to be "authentic." There will be heresies, corruptions, and deformations masquerading as a politically desirable future.