

The Newberry Library Bulletin

Volume III, No. 3, June, 1953

THE THIRD NEWBERRY LIBRARY CONFERENCE ON AMERICAN STUDIES

THE THIRD NEWBERRY Library Conference on American Studies was held on November 8, 1952, in the Librarian's office.* It was based on a paper by Stanley Pargellis, "The Tradition of Conservatism in America." This paper attempted to answer the question: What is the distinction between liberalism and conservatism? Are both outmoded terms, employed today solely for purposes of abuse? Or can they still be applied to designate differences in political thinking as old as the art of politics? Of the twenty-two participants in the Conference, some dealt chiefly with differences of verbal definition; others attempted to deal historically with the issues suggested; still others analyzed the merits of liberalism and conservatism as defined by Mr. Pargellis, or according to definitions of their own.

With the paper as a catalytic agent, the debate moved from attempts to define liberalism and conservatism as attitudes of

* The Conference was attended by: Ray A. Billington, Northwestern University, *Chairman*; Arthur Bestor, University of Illinois; Richard C. Overton, Northwestern, *Discussors*; Paul M. Angle, Chicago Historical Society; Robert Bierstedt, University of Illinois; Daniel J. Boorstin, University of Chicago; Merle Curti, University of Wisconsin; Bernard Duffley, Michigan State College; Max David Fellman, University of Wisconsin; Louis Filley, Antioch College; Max Fisch, University of Illinois; Merrill Jensen, University of Wisconsin; Russell Kirk, Michigan State College; Richard W. Leopold, Northwestern University; Arthur Link, Northwestern University; Stanley Pargellis, Newberry Library; Charner M. Perry, University of Chicago; Frederick Sweet, Art Institute of Chicago; Kendall Taft, Roosevelt College; Richard M. Weaver, University of Chicago; Fred D. Wieck, Newberry Library; Francis Wilson, University of Illinois.



THEODORE THOMAS

Founder of The Chicago Symphony Orchestra, whose collection of autograph letters has been acquired by the Library (see page 104)

mind, regardless of historic context, to attempt to define the dynamics of American society today, and finally to the discussion as to whether American tradition is essentially conservative or liberal. The argument wove its way among differences in semantic interpretation and differences of analysis and evaluation of Western history, American culture and the role of the United States in the world today.

In defining its basic terms, Mr. Pargellis' paper emphasized that a conservative is not one who worships free enterprise blindly, who wants to return to the past, who believes that property is more important than human beings, who hates labor unions or resists all change, or who is prejudiced against thought, or regards habit rather than reason as the best guide to conduct. The essential difference between liberalism and conservatism is rooted in two ways of thinking about the solution to any political or administrative problem. These two ways are related to the philosophic distinction between empiricism and rationalism as two ways of knowing or arriving at truth. The liberal, generally speaking, is a rationalist who proves a proposition by appealing to abstract and universal principles. The conservative is an empiricist who takes into consideration a wide variety of facts and, bearing in mind his principles and his ends, tries to come to the best decision under the circumstances.

The Abolitionists, for example, were rationalists who thought no price too great to pay for righting the wrong of slavery, though that price be civil war, possible foreign war, disaster to the nation's economy, and ineradicable hatred. Henry Clay, conservative and empiricist, also regarded slavery as evil, but wanted to avoid the tragic consequences of its precipitate abolition. So, too, conservatives and liberals both believe in civil liberties, but for different reasons. The liberal believes in free speech because God created men equal, or because every man has the right of self-determination and self-development, or for similar abstract reasons. The conservative believes in free speech because he knows historically that, people being what they are, affairs tend to run more smoothly,

(74)

with far less danger of underground disturbance that may end in revolution, if men are allowed to vent their differences of opinion.

The correlation of facts, principles and ends is the essence of conservatism. By facts in a situation a conservative means everything that bears upon the situation; by principles he means statements of objective realistically based upon experience. One conservative principle, used by good and evil conservatives alike, is that of expediency or compromise. Expediency should mean what it used to mean for Hobbes, Jefferson and Lincoln: that which is "fit, proper and suitable to the circumstances of a case." No government can be carried on without compromise; witness the Constitution of the United States. To the moral conservative the point in any political problem is not whether one side is right and the other wrong, but whether the government is carried on for the common welfare and whether the means employed remain clean. To the conservative, therefore, means are far more important than ends. Conservative principles include honesty, fairness, sympathy, magnanimity and courage. These are absolutes and are fundamentally religious concepts.

In the first half of the 19th century, Mr. Pargellis' paper went on to say, the conservative usually believed in the guiding hand of God and in an ethical code. This code included a sense of responsibility to the immediate circle of people with whom he came in contact. He concerned himself with individuals, not with liberal abstractions like Man or Mankind. He looked upon the State as an almost mystical complex of people, land, inherited institutions and ideas bound together by historical development into a unity and dominated by a prevailing idea. The conservative held the State, thus conceived, in reverence and considered it his paramount duty to preserve it.

It is characteristic of the conservative that he wants to maintain existing institutions; he is reluctant to countenance change in the fundamentals of social or political life. He knows there is always evil in society, but in considering plans for

(75)

its eradication, he is alert to the effects his measures may have on other interlocking aspects of his culture. He does not forget to ask whether the eradication of one injustice will lead to the perpetration of other still greater injustices.

Applying this analysis to American history in the 20th century, Mr. Pargellis found that in the conduct of foreign affairs, upon which our safety depends, there has been "too much of the ideologue, the rationalist, the doctrinaire, the idealist and too little of the conservative." These attitudes can be traced to our 17th century Puritan heritage, in part, which attempted to translate certain universal principles into social, economic, and political law. Doctrinaire thinking also characterizes other fields in the United States today, notably business and education. Nevertheless, from the 17th to the 19th century, American political thinking was dominated by the conservative approach. At least one British thinker has suggested that today Americans are still the most conservative people in the world, although we refuse to recognize our conservatism. The conservative tradition of thought is by far the dominant American political tradition.

Mr. Pargellis' paper stirred the Conference to a stimulating debate with a range and variety of viewpoint which can here only be suggested by a few selected highlights.

Opening the discussion, Mr. Overton said he had found a variety of definitions of "liberal" and "conservative" in Mr. Pargellis' paper. According to some of these, Lincoln could be regarded as a conservative. Means are important to the conservative, Mr. Overton argued, but so are objectives. In fact, conservatism might be defined as the proper balance of objectives, means, self-orientation and self-redirection.

Speaking as an "unrepentant liberal," Mr. Bestor said that if the paper had been entitled "The Tradition of Liberalism in America," he would have found it equally convincing and would have adopted it as his own personal credo. Mr. Pargellis had summed up certain qualities of mind and principles of conduct which he admired; and he called himself a conservative. But, Mr. Bestor said, he admired the same principles and

(76)

called himself a liberal. The historian cannot use words that way. The terms "liberal" and "conservative" entered the vocabulary of political and economic discussion only in the 19th century.

Conservatism, Mr. Bestor explained, never stands alone but always in contrast to something else. In the 19th century it stood against liberalism and radicalism. Today the dictionary definitions of the two terms are valid: the conservative is "characterized by the desire to maintain existing institutions in political and related matters"; the liberal view is "favorable to changes and reforms tending in the direction of democracy." Applied to American political and economic thought, there is actually very little disagreement as to which viewpoints, parties and men in any given period are to be called conservative or liberal. The conservative of one generation may, in substance, believe what the liberal of a previous generation believed; but in his own time the direction of his thinking places him on the conservative side of the dividing line which all men, himself included, agree on drawing. There is little disagreement in classifying the Loyalists in the American Revolution, the Federalists and Jackson's opponents as conservatives; and the men who carried through the Declaration of Independence, and Jefferson and Jackson, as liberals.

But conservatives, more often than not, have repudiated the beliefs which Mr. Pargellis' paper attributes to them; and they have accepted more often than they have repudiated other beliefs that are said to be no part of the conservative tradition. Indeed, certain of the beliefs which Mr. Pargellis says are part of the conservative tradition have been held more frequently and more tenaciously by liberals than by conservatives. Mr. Bestor concluded by asking, "Which of the following represents doctrinaire rationalism and which the empirical examination of an extremely wide variety of facts: the conservative blockade against protective labor legislation which rested upon a tortuous reading into the 'due process clause' of the dogma of 'freedom of contract'; or the liberal Brandeis brief which marshalled economic, social, and medical evidence con-

(77)

cerning the effects of hard labor in industries which legal decisions had placed beyond the power of the state to regulate?"

An important point in the paper was supported by Mr. Boorstin when he said that America's cultural and political ideas have tended to be predominantly conservative. In the United States conservatism has not produced a political philosophy, but has always had certain marked characteristics among them humility. Conservatism is opposed to ideologies because they *are* ideologies. The character of American culture is away from ideology; it is pragmatic, pluralistic; it avoids doctrinaire political systems. In a century and a half the United States has had greater institutional continuity than any European country. We have had no such rapid breaks with the past as Europe has had and do not suffer from the cultural amnesia which characterizes certain European countries.

Mr. Kirk endorsed Mr. Pargellis' stand on the importance of the ethical view of life. The main difference between liberals and conservatives, he said, is the principle of veneration. The conservative does venerate; the liberal does not. They also differ in their interpretation of what is essential and what is accidental in the structure of our institutions. Mr. Kirk doubted that anyone, himself included, could definitely decide whether he was a liberal or a conservative. Jefferson, the founder of American liberalism, venerated the past and yet was ready to set up a new society arbitrarily on the basis of principles of pure reason. Today liberalism has lost the sense of Providence and veneration, and thereby has lost the guide to its conduct.

The argument that liberalism cannot be equated with rationalism, or conservatism with empiricism, was also advanced by Mr. Taft. He cited Patrick Henry as a revolutionist who avowed that his feet were guided by the lamp of experience. Conservatives, said Mr. Taft, sometimes do some of the same things as liberals, and vice versa; but the conservative tends to talk in terms of fear. He cited John Morley's view of the conservative as one whose hope that the world would improve was over-shadowed by his fear that it never would.

(78)

Still another speaker, Mr. Fisch, questioned the validity of the two key terms, pointing out that "liberal" and "conservative" were never precisely defined even in the 19th century. But today the terms are obsolete. Nevertheless, it is characteristic of conservatism to attempt to solve a problem without changing the status quo. The aim of a conservative solution is to conserve property, but sometimes a liberal solution actually conserves property better in the long run.

Applying the terms "conservative" and "liberal" to the history of American painting, Mr. Sweet said our 19th century art followed the English school and was essentially conservative. At the turn of the century, however, some American artists began to paint the raw, bald aspects of life. Here Mr. Sweet equated liberalism with realism. An important change came with the Army Show of 1913, when the really liberal aspects of French art, embodied in the work of Picasso, Duchamps and Brancusi, were exhibited for the first time in the United States. But the real break with tradition on the part of American painting came with the depression of the 1930's. It was then that the floodgates were opened to abstract art, which has developed so rapidly in this country in the past ten years and is in essence liberal.

Mr. Perry was another speaker who did not know whether he was a liberal or a conservative; but he did not believe the difference could be traced to ideology or temperament. The terms had certain definite meanings in their historic context. It must now be decided whether, in view of the revolutions that have taken place in our epoch, conditions have so changed as to require a redefinition of the terms "liberal" and "conservative." Judging the two terms in regard to the structure of institutions, the difference between them can be determined only by diagnosing a tendency toward or away from a relatively fixed tradition. The historian's diagnosis must refer to such a tendency in terms of a particular historical situation.

With most of what Mr. Pargellis had said about conservatism, Mr. Bierstedt agreed, but he was not sure it was correct to identify conservatism with empiricism and liberalism with rationalism. Leibnitz was a rationalist and a conservative;

(79)

John Stuart Mill an empiricist and a liberal; John Dewey a liberal and a pragmatist. As methods and theories, both empiricism and rationalism can become dogmas. Similarly, an idea that was once liberal may, in time, appear to be conservative. Those who defend the dictatorship of Dewey in education today are conservatives. What is important in distinguishing between the two terms is the attitude of mind with which an idea is approached and not the idea itself. Liberalism and conservatism are highly relative concepts.

Mr. Jensen also called for a relative use of the terms, in which the historic context determined their meaning. He pointed out that there have been situations where there was a liberal versus a conservative viewpoint, as in the case of 17th century New England or the New Deal, but that the terms in the abstract lack significance.

The American usage of the word "liberal" is almost unique, said Mr. Wilson. As we use the term, it does not exist in Latin America or Europe. Our usage of "liberal" as an honorific or prestige term became current after World War I, when most people interested in reform thought of themselves as liberals. But the reforms had nothing to do with historical liberalism. The real difficulty lies in the term "conservative," a good historic word which has ceased to be used in the United States. The crux of the conflict between the two viewpoints came in Latin Europe when the issue was Latin liberalism versus Latin conservatism. Religion played the key role: liberals were anti-theistic, the conservatives theistic. Religion, Mr. Wilson said, does not confuse, it clarifies the issue.

Liberalism is to be equated with secularism. Most of the participants at the Newberry Conference, Mr. Wilson continued, are secularists, and hence cannot understand conservatism as an experience. Whether they are for or against John Dewey, it is all the same; they are debating an issue incomprehensible to an early 19th century Latin liberal or Latin conservative. In the Anglo-American world, liberal society—originally a commercial and business society—became our conservatism. Today, old-fashioned liberalism survives in the

(80)

decimated liberal parties of Europe; effective conservatism is in the Christian democratic parties. There are different kinds of secular society, culminating in communism. The old-fashioned liberals (who believe both in an anti-clerical philosophy and in the free market) tend to split; they can go either toward the communists or toward the democrats. Most of them have gone over to the communists or the socialists. Europe today tends to be collectivist.

Prudence, Mr. Wilson concluded, is not incompatible with an absolute philosophy. In deciding upon any course of action, we ask not only what is the fact, but also what it means. We must get back to a philosophic position. Mr. Pargellis was mistaken when he said that liberals believe in free speech because God created men equal. In practice, no American liberal believes in God at all, or that God created man to begin with. Liberals can be as intolerant and absolute as anybody else. For example, no liberal would dare suggest that Senator McCarthy has performed any useful function.

Following another line of argument, Mr. Fellman said that the recent presidential elections were not a choice between liberalism and conservatism. Both major parties contained conservatives, liberals, and fringe groups. It is unfair to liberals to accuse them of preferring legislation to liberation. Legislation is itself a liberating force. The alternative to state power is not absence of power but some other kind of power. What the American people need to be liberated from is the myth that we lived in a state of nature until the Founding Fathers decided to give us a government. Government is not unnatural.

Mr. Fellman went on to agree with Mr. Boorstin that America has no explicit conservative political philosophy. The fact is, America has always had a liberal tradition. Everyone in this country is a liberal; nobody runs for office as a conservative and no political party could afford to call itself conservative. The difference between American and European conservatism is that American conservatism has never had an institutional base. A true conservative tradition needs an established church, a feudal caste and a property system which can serve as

(81)

a foundation for genuine conservatism. Our emergence as a nation coincided with great revolutionary political and economic changes, and our culture has given these forces free play. We exalt education instead of a church; we are more impressed by the miracles of science than by the miracles of religion; we have never had a landed gentry that might have become a privileged class. Our interest in property is in money-making: almost every piece of property in America is for sale. Our farmers are not peasants; they are businessmen in overalls. Hence, American business can be called conservative only in a limited sense. Consider the fluidity of American business, the large number of new enterprises and bankruptcies each year, the threat of continuous invention, the fierceness of competition, the growth and movement of population. All of these factors prevent the development of a stable conservatism.

American conservatism, Mr. Fellman continued, is an outmoded conservatism. It is not the product of an authoritarian tradition. At any given moment it is that combination of forces which resists the latest and strongest disturbance of the status quo. But the fact that America has no conservative tradition does not mean that we have no other tradition. American conservatism has never been identified with a church or a social class. Our political parties do not wage theological war against one another, because basically they believe in the same ideology. Conservatism is not consistently identifiable with either party, nor has it a continuous history in this country. In the mercantilist 17th century, our conservatives favored vast state controls; today they are opposed to collectivism. At one time or another, conservatives have opposed our separation from England, universal manhood suffrage, the anti-trust laws, the income tax amendment, the bill to pack the Supreme Court. The essence of conservatism is resistance to major legal change in the status quo.

Mr. Angle, the next speaker, thought that Mr. Pargellis' paper had suggested this fundamental problem: How have we in the United States approached political problems, regardless of the labels we have used: by a doctrinaire approach, an em-

(82)

pirical approach or by a combination of both? This, he observed, is a recurrent problem in American history, and the question we have to answer in each case is what type of approach achieved the particular solutions of particular problems in our history.

Following this suggestion, Mr. Filler said that the difference between liberalism and conservatism involves a difference of attitude toward change. But the real question is: change in what direction? What is to be changed? Liberalism has been interested in change on humanitarian grounds; its concept of liberty is a humanitarian concept of liberty on the basis of human needs. Conservatives are said to be interested in facts. But they are, for the most part, interested in immediate facts, rather than all the facts. Mr. Filler defended John Dewey, pointing out that Dewey, like Mr. Pargellis' conservative, based his philosophy on experience. There is a new type of conservatism, he added, represented by Herbert Hoover, who opposed monopoly and favored free trade because of national self-interest. This national interest, as envisaged by conservatives, is at variance with the larger interest the liberals have in mind.

Like other speakers, Mr. Curri felt that the dichotomy between liberalism plus rationalism versus conservatism plus empiricism was too sharp. The search for a new conservatism is so much in the air that the role of institutional religion is being re-examined. In the struggle between various groups for and against change, leaders of religious organizations have generally sought to maintain established institutions, and thus have sided with the dominant economic and social classes. The meaning of terms like "conservative" and "liberal" must be sought not abstractly but in their historical time and place. In the struggles and conflicts of history, ideas (Locke's, for example) have been used in various ways. After the Civil War there was an intellectual revolution which changed the essential meaning of the two terms we have been debating. We cannot say that conservatives see things steadily and see them whole; it is impossible for anybody to see things in any way

(83)

except partially. There is too much absolute thinking about these matters. In history we have interaction: terms change their meanings; many problems are never solved to the satisfaction of everybody concerned. The important question is, To whose satisfaction were they solved?

At the opening of the afternoon session, Mr. Link, like some of the earlier speakers, said the terms "liberal" and "conservative" have little meaning today. He preferred the division suggested by Mr. Overton into positivists and negativists. The negative school may be divided into the two extremes of liberal and reactionary, both of which believe in a kind of natural progress of man. The positivists believe in artificial government, government by law. Both progressives and conservatives fall in this category.

He was followed by Mr. Leopold, who said that the conservatives of one generation are not those of another, that liberals claim for themselves the standards Mr. Pargellis claimed for the conservatives, and that the coupling of liberalism with rationalism and conservatism with empiricism was invalid. When a conservative like Elihu Root faced certain progressive innovations in the early years of the 20th century, he too fell back on certain "universal" truths which he accepted without testing, such as "the rules of right conduct", "the universal principles of eternal justice", and so on.

Mr. Weaver said it was impossible to settle the issue without introducing a third term, "radicalism". Liberalism has no position of its own; it simply tries to avoid the positions of conservatism and radicalism, both of which have real positions. Conservatism always argues from definitions and works from the law and from precedent. Radicalism also argues from definitions, but at the heart of radicalism is the theological heresy of the denial of substance. At the heart of liberalism is the belief that the objective and the process resolve themselves into one thing. The case you are working on, John Dewey taught, gives you your method and your method develops as you work your case. The goal cannot be other than immediate. The great archetype of the American conservative is Lincoln; the

(84)

great archetype of the American liberal is Mr. Justice Holmes; but it is not easy to say who is the archetype of the American radical.

Mr. Duffey announced that he would confine his discussion to the subject and title of Mr. Pargellis' paper and limit his remarks to American literature. From the beginning, the tradition of American literature has been liberal. This does not necessarily mean that American culture as a whole is liberal; but as far as American writing goes, its tradition has always been that of liberalism, progressivism, dissent, revolt and criticism. There has been something like a continuous stream, with an almost man to man influence from one writer to another.

Called upon by Chairman Billington to comment on the discussion, Mr. Pargellis said that his paper had tried to distinguish between two ways of approaching an administrative problem. In the old gamut running from left to right, the people at the extreme left were labelled radicals, and the people at the extreme right, reactionaries. Each extreme had some sort of rooted doctrinaire notion in mind. Getting away from both extremes and moving toward the middle, we find conservatives and liberals. Today there are few liberals in the sense to which he feels close; he is now a little right of center. The best position is to be either a liberal conservative or a conservative liberal. The question is whether or not—at the point of 12 o'clock noon—there is a fundamental difference in the way one approaches an administrative problem. It was on this basis that the speaker had suggested that a conservative is one who looks more to the facts and to experience; and the liberal, perhaps, to some more theoretical and doctrinal notion. This may not prevent the liberal from looking at the facts, but he has an element of abstraction in his mind which is foreign to conservative thinking.

It was this difference of approach that the keynote paper had tried to emphasize. Both liberals and conservatives would agree, for example, on the need for unified efficiency in the Missouri River Authority, but for different reasons. The con-

(85)

servative would envision this as a way to conserve property for the good of the state, which is vital to Americans as Americans. The liberal would approve it on the grounds that the people who live in the Missouri Valley should have the chance to live the fullest life they can live—an unprovable proposition.

The conservative approaches such problems humbly, the speaker concluded. It was Winston Churchill who said that the statesman gets all the facts he can, takes everything past and present into account, makes the best decision he can at the moment, goes down on his knees and prays for the solution of the problem—knowing all the while that he may perhaps be wrong fifty years from now. The liberal is not humble in this sense.

Mr. Pargellis' remarks were followed by a running debate in which a few highlights were these:

Mr. Curti reported that at last summer's conference on American studies at Cambridge University, a great many of the seventy-five British historians and social scientists who attended Allan Nevins' seminar on American foreign policy were sympathetic to Mr. George Kennan's book and critical of our foreign policy, particularly in the cold war. These people, who were either members of the Conservative Party or of the Labor Party, agreed, in spite of their political differences, that American foreign policy is too much like Soviet foreign policy: too ideological, moralistic, inflexible. They felt that our foreign policy was not conservative. Later in the discussion, Mr. Curti said that all change is inevitably within the context of a tradition; even the Russian Revolution was within the context of a tradition.

Mr. Fisch said it was unimportant that conservatives and liberals would take different positions unless they presented different solutions to the same problem. It was necessary to pin the discussion down to specific areas on which conservatives and liberals would arrive at different solutions to the same problem. He cited slavery as an example.

In the chair, Mr. Billington pointed out that slavery was dying out in the 19th century; it had already been abandoned

(86)

by the British and was being abandoned elsewhere. The people who defended slavery at that time were conservatives, and those who wanted to get rid of it were liberals and radicals. Mr. Pargellis replied that when an institution needs change, and is disintegrating through its own inherent weakness, the people who defend it are not conservative but reactionary. The conservative is not afraid of change, but he opposes violent change and its resultant injury to the community.

Perhaps the most interesting result of the Conference was the expression of such divergent views about the meaning and the historical validity of the terms "liberal" and "conservative". Nearly every speaker took issue with some other speaker's use or definition of these concepts. The general position, if indeed there was one, was relativist: it called for an historical context to which the key terms could be applied, rather than a wider use of the terms which would fit any given historical situation. It was of interest also that experts in American history could not agree on the nature of the principles underlying our historical development. Some interpreted our tradition in terms of humanitarianism, social idealism, and rationalism. Others viewed the past and present of America as materialist and experiential. Certain of the more provocative questions indicated in the keynote paper were, unfortunately, not made the focal points of discussion. Some of these were: the dual consciousness of American political thinking which can be traced to ideological differences behind the French and the American Revolutions, as these differences have affected later generations; the use of the words "liberalism" and "conservatism" as concepts fundamental to any political age or milieu, rather than as terms of abuse or party badges; and the necessity of guarding against the use of abstract doctrines in our practical relations with other countries, at a time when world leadership has been thrust upon us.

(87)