

Page: 6 of PPCR

THE ETHICS OF POLITICAL CONSERVATISM

FRANCIS G. WILSON

FOR nearly a hundred years the failure in Western society of political conservatism has been growing more apparent. Today its inability to cope with either the moral or the administrative problems of industrial society bears a parental relationship to the continued wars of the twentieth century. Nor can one look to the philosophies stemming from Marxism for much consolation, though one might argue that, had the ruling order in the old European society faced more adequately its responsibilities, the *Communist Manifesto* would never have been written or it would not, at least, have become one of the world's best sellers. The long story of revolution and social disruption running through the nineteenth century is dispassionate commentary on the effectiveness of conservatism.

American conservatism had the good fortune of not having to face the intricate questions of political leadership posed by disintegrating industrialism until after 1929. Little comment need be made on the efforts of American leaders, for the problems of 1929 still remain with us, glaringly unsolved. To the older problems are now added the titanic issues of global war—war on a scale never faced by a single industrial or other power in the history of the world. American philosophies of leadership are in danger of sinking quietly into a long period of inarticulateness, which bodes no good for the future character of the American people.

If we turn back to the fecund pages of Alexis de Tocqueville, it becomes clear

that what he was witnessing was the failure of European conservatism in the nineteenth century—a failure which crystallized in reality long before the French Revolution itself broke out. But it seems true also that throughout Tocqueville's writings a concern for the morality of the ruling class is ever present. The failure of conservatism which he saw can be argued to be primarily a failure, first, in the morality of the old aristocracy; second, a failure in the standards of behavior in the bureaucratic class; and, third, the failure of the masses to maintain principles of morality which are part of human liberty. Tocqueville believed that Christian morality was the foundation of all political morality, and he protested against the racial theories propounded by his friend Arthur de Gobineau.¹

It is natural for conservatism to be interested in the quality and morality of political leadership. Here Tocqueville illustrates another point of importance. He insisted that in democratic periods there is a tendency for general causes to be more important than particular ones and that, by contrast, in aristocratic times the element of personal leadership is a more significant force in the tendencies exemplified by a society. When men are submerged in the mass and leadership becomes less important, it can be argued that the course of society is more or less predetermined and that the morality of individuals becomes less significant.

¹L. Schemann (ed.), *Correspondance entre Alexis de Tocqueville et Arthur de Gobineau, 1843-1859* (Paris, 1908), pp. 22-24, 186 ff., 307-8.

cant. The individual bears less moral responsibility for what takes place.²

The continuation of the nineteenth-century disintegration into the twentieth, culminating in a crisis like the present, has led the conservative to fear for the future. This fear of the future is not mitigated, of course, by the consciousness of the intelligent conservative of the responsibility that all conservatives bear for the present condition of the world. For the failure of the modern system may be seen simply as the great failure of conservatism since the middle of the eighteenth century and especially since the rise of the proletarian-mass challenge to the governing orders in society. There is fear, for example, for the result of the present war, even though the democracies, i.e., nonrevolutionary governments, should win. Gradually, too, it has become clear that the primary issue is to be found in the use of techniques of politics based upon physical and moral violence. The rise of the techniques of violence means in one sense that the conservative and democratic effort to establish the rule of law and constitutionalism has failed and that instead the legacy of Marx and Lenin, christened by the revolution in Russia in 1917, has become the heritage of all political regimes. To the conservative, however, whatever immoralities may be attributed to the plutocrats or the bourgeoisie, they are not so great as those arising from the Leninist tradition of the authoritarian state.³

What can the conservative do? It is little consolation to witness the liquidation of nobler socialist ideals in the tyranny of Moscow and the immorality of

² *De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Gustave de Beaumont (14th ed.; Paris, 1864), III, 139 ff.

³ See Jacques Maritain, "The End of Machiavellianism," *Review of Politics*, IV (1942), 1 ff.

the Third International. To urge that despotism may be the end of the trail for democratic humanitarianism provides no salvation for either conservatives or revolutionaries. The crisis in political morality, exemplified in the techniques of violence, extends to all regimes, not just the revolutionary dictatorships which have risen to power on the mistakes of the former rulers of society. All regimes are involved, for moral irresponsibility in political techniques is a very contagious disease. Yet the conservative in practical politics is likely to be blinded by the short-run situation which has attached conservatism to the defense of capitalism and a disintegrating industrialism. The conservatism which men like Tocqueville saw fall, however, was not affiliated with individualism or with the new industrial system. It returned frankly to Christianity as the foundation of its politics, and it regarded all individuals as belonging to groups or corporate bodies which had each in turn legitimate functions to perform.

In such a regime, now all but forgotten, the ends of human organization were sanctified by divine truth and by use and wont. The means adopted to attain ends were likewise in substantial measure guaranteed by the principles of historic continuity; these techniques were meliorated by fundamental agreement running throughout society itself. It is idle to urge that the social conflict of the twentieth century is less severe than that of other times. Every disintegration of social synthesis weakens the old adherence to the ends given to man, but even more so is weakened the means or techniques that are adjusted to the attainment of the required ends. If the ends or standards of social existence are repudiated, it is hardly possible that standards will remain in the day-to-day techniques

of power. So it is, as the great moral issue comes to its means; the great immorality is the adoption of techniques which contravene ethical principles of individual, however human. The authoritarian revolutionaries believe that the individual means to be used in the attainment of even a mediate and not a final purpose. To the conservative, the world is a restoration of the repudiated ethics of political life, whatever may have been the responsibilities of the conservatives.

To state the outlines of the restoration in politics is to state the outlines of the restoration. Not only have the moderns been blinded by the last stages of industrialism, but among the conservatives there is disagreement as to the questions. Ideally, one might expect the conservative, as distinct from the revolutionary, to agree with others as to the functions of his position and the restoration. But that may be only the maddest of those who would have the madness which has afflicted the world since August, 1914.

Conservative ethics force us to rest in the logic of political traditions. Now traditions are overlapping and living, but all traditions tend to a principle of order and fundamentals throughout a restoration. Only the tradition that condemns violence, the specific alternative to establish a temporary order of consensus and consent. Axioms of a regime that depends upon violence can never be a real tradition, for its subjects cease to will in the continuation of their beings. By

of power. So it is, as today, that the great moral issue concerns political means; the great immorality of our day is the adoption of techniques in politics which contravene ethical respect for each individual, however humble he may be. The authoritarian revolutionary can easily believe that the individual is merely a means to be used in the attainment of even a mediate and not an ultimate purpose. To the conservative the hope of the world is a restoration of the now repudiated ethics of political conservatism, whatever may have been the former irresponsibilities of the conservatives themselves.

To state the outlines of such an ethical restoration in politics is no easy task. Not only have the modern conservatives been blinded by the late magnificence of industrialism, but among themselves there is disagreement as to certain ethical questions. Ideally, one might say that the conservative, as distinguished from the revolutionary, attempts to reach agreement with others as to the implications of his position and function in history. But that may be only a hope in the breasts of those who would escape from the madness which has been with the world since August, 1914.

Conservative ethics for politics comes to rest in the logic of particular traditions. Now traditions are shorter or longer, overlapping and living side by side; but all traditions tend to establish the principle of order and consensus on fundamentals throughout a society. It is only the tradition that can do this, for violence, the specific alternative, can establish a temporary order but never consensus and consent. Axiomatically, a regime that depends upon violence can never be a real tradition, though its subjects cease to will in the complete frustration of their beings. By definition, too,

violence fulfils itself as consensus is denied.

Tradition, being what it is, constantly changes and evolves. The issues of the old traditional remain dead to the adherents of the new. Conservative political ethics is, therefore, neither purely relative nor absolute; it functions in the light of a situation that has been produced by the conflicts and adjustments of history, reaching always the principle of order and consensus. It tends to be excited neither about the ancient perfectionism nor about that of the future. It is the absolutism neither of men who know nor of men who think they think. Conservative ethics is related to a social system, that is, to a principle of cultural organization. In the nature of the case, Western conservatism cannot be Chinese or Mohammedan, except in those elements which are perceived by reason to extend through all literate cultures.

In America, if we watch the problems which press against the leaders for solution, we may see the shorter and the longer traditions. Christian morality is older than industrialism, yet the crisis of northern industrialism in the United States may seem to some likewise the end of the Christian principle of life. In response, the Christian may urge that industrial tradition is, like any economic consensus, to be shorter lived than the fundamentals of the spiritual life. Or one might urge that the agrarian way in many sections of America is showing more durability than the urban and commercial tradition.⁴ The modern agrarian may argue, like southern leaders of antebellum days, that the agricultural interest will again become the balance wheel of society or, as we might say, the neces-

⁴ See Oliver E. Baker, "The Farmer and National Unity," in *Democracy and National Unity*, ed. W. T. Hutchinson (Chicago, 1941), pp. 106 ff.

sary counterweight for order and consensus.

The decline of the industrial system is translated in social terms into the class struggle. It would seem there is always some conflict in society, always some class strife, if we use the term "class" to mean groups of people who for limited periods feel a common interest in opposition to a particular enemy. Class effort may be sharp and violent or it may be mellow and more like a friendly argument. Marx sought to sharpen the conflict by agitation; the conservative seeks by his instinct for order and consent to dilute or minimize this conflict, permitting the conflict itself to be waged within the ambit of law and approved morality in behavior. The individual effort of the revolutionary is tested, indeed, by his ability to accentuate class conflict.⁵ Conservatives are bound to regard the principles of morality as above the class conflict, and thus such struggle becomes, as in James Madison's argument in the tenth number of *The Federalist*, a changing, fluid aspect of society. Classes are groups of people drawn together by a *de facto* interest, whereas the Marxian view seems to hypostatize the class relationship as a kind of social substance which exists whether or not it is recognized. To the Marxian, political morality grows out of the class situation itself. In this sense proportional representation arises from the fluid class conceptions of modern conservatism, having in mind the changes of class or group alignment that may develop in the choice of particular individuals.

Conservatism develops most naturally in the minds of those who possess social power, but the essential nonrevolution-

⁵ See Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (New York, 1940), for a significant treatment of the lives of some modern revolutionists.

ary position of conservatism does not limit it to positions of dominance. Conservatism can be in the extreme a minority point of view, but the middle ground of social balance is also a common and happy position for the conservative. The conservative tradition of constitutional balance, shown in the writings of the founding fathers in the United States, is an excellent example of this viewpoint. The mixed constitution, with its representation of all classes in the government, is, indeed, one of the longest and most sustained traditions of conservatism; it has been part of conservative politics since the articulation of this view by the Greeks, particularly Aristotle and Polybius.

On the other hand, the mixed or balanced constitution, as argued by Blackstone, may shade quietly over into a true minority viewpoint, in which the conservative himself seeks to maintain his liberty against a hostile social predominance. In this sense southern political thought can be seen as a simple extension of the check-and-balance argument of the framers of the American Constitution. The dominance of any one group in a government is denied, for such a control would mean the end of liberty. Thus, as the American business class finds itself moving into a minority position, the minority conservatism it must maintain can find nourishment in a long and honorable political tradition at the very heart of liberalism.⁶ The middle classes in American society are facing a profound test of their leadership, for the American mass movement, on the one hand, and the rise of the bureaucratic state, on the other, threaten to crush its

⁶ See Jesse T. Carpenter, *The South as a Conscious Minority, 1789-1861* (New York, 1930); Guido de Ruggiero, *The History of European Liberalism*, trans. from the Italian (New York, 1927).

political morality and the influence it tends to have on the formulation of public policy.

It may be argued, with some justification, that one of the most spectacular features of American life has been the interplay of elements in the ruling order of the States. One great group of leaders, the southern, was destroyed in war and reconstruction, and a new one has been re-established effective at the present time. The Jacksonian era hardly gave rise to any permanent leadership which enabled the western section of the States to balance the ruling order of the East. But, even more so, the industrial and financial leadership has moved the old French aristocracy far away from the traditionalities of leadership; increased numbers have found themselves remote, untrusted and unloved by the people, and look to leadership.

The appeal of eighteenth-century gentlemen to the average American in retrospect seem greater than the titanic effort of the modern titan of finance. A ruling order of men to survive the stern examination of leadership conducted by Congress and the labors of the Lords of the similar situation in France produced a revolution, but the conservative tradition of America has held its side and above the titan of finance saved for a time a rigorous leadership. Mr. James W. Gerard's America appeared after the war at least as little better than before. The civil servant, the bureaucrat, the component of the *science* of administration, has attempted to replace the rule of other rulers and become the American political tradition.

conservatism does not limit
 as of dominance. Conserv-
 in the extreme a minority
 but the middle ground of
 is also a common and hap-
 or the conservative. The
 tradition of constitutional
 in the writings of the
 ers in the United States, is
 example of this viewpoint.
 nstitution, with its repre-
 l classes in the government,
 e of the longest and most
 ditions of conservatism; it
 t of conservative politics
 ulation of this view by the
 ularly Aristotle and Polyb-

er hand, the mixed or bal-
 ution, as argued by Black-
 ade quietly over into a true
 wpoint, in which the con-
 self seeks to maintain his
 st a hostile social predomi-
 his sense southern political
 be seen as a simple extension
 and-balance argument of the
 he American Constitution.
 nce of any one group in a
 is denied, for such a control
 the end of liberty. Thus, as
 n business class finds itself
 a minority position, the
 servatism it must maintain
 rishment in a long and hon-
 ical tradition at the very
 eralism.⁶ The middle classes
 a society are facing a pro-
 of their leadership, for the
 mass movement, on the one
 he rise of the bureaucratic
 other, threaten to crush its

T. Carpenter, *The South as a Con-*
try, 1789-1861 (New York, 1930);
 iero, *The History of European Liberal-*
in the Italian (New York, 1927).

political morality and the moderating in-
 fluence it tends to have on the formula-
 tion of public policy.

It may be argued, without being too
 spectacular, that one of the tragedies of
 American life has been instability of the
 elements in the ruling order in the United
 States. One great group of conservative
 leaders, the southern, was wiped out by
 war and reconstruction, and it has not
 been re-established effectively to the
 present time. The Jacksonian movement
 hardly gave rise to any coherent or per-
 manent leadership which might have en-
 abled the western section of the United
 States to balance the ruling groups in the
 East. But, even more so, the modern in-
 dustrial and financial leaders have, like
 the old French aristocracy, moved al-
 ways farther from the true responsibil-
 ities of leadership; increasingly they have
 found themselves remote from the people,
 untrusted and unloved by the many who
 look to leadership.

The appeal of eighteenth-century gen-
 tlemen to the average American must in
 retrospect seem greater than the inspira-
 tion of the modern titan of industry and
 finance. A ruling order can hardly sur-
 vive the stern examination of steward-
 ship conducted by Congress after 1929 on
 the labors of the Lords of Creation. A
 similar situation in France might have
 produced a revolution, but the conserva-
 tive tradition of America, existing out-
 side and above the titans of industry,
 saved for a time a rigorous accounting.
 Mr. James W. Gerard's sixty rulers of
 America appeared after 1929 for a time
 at least as little better than brigands.
 The civil servant, the bureaucrat, the ex-
 ponent of the *science* of public adminis-
 tration, has attempted to take the place
 of other rulers and become the heir of the
 American political tradition; but the ver-

dict on this effort awaits the conse-
 quences of social disorganization in
 world-wide economic debacle and war.
 Since the structure of leadership after
 1865 was out of balance, it may be argued
 that the leaders of American finance and
 industry should not be blamed entirely
 for their failure to resist temptations that
 a more balanced society would have kept
 out of their way. Even now a chastened
 business class has gone back to Washing-
 ton to co-operate with the maturing lead-
 ership of a half-consistent New Deal.

In the light of Western and Christian
 tradition, the ethics of conservatism is in-
 dividualistic. The individual as a de-
 pendent creature in a divine order has
 primary responsibility for the standards
 of society. Individualistic ethics dis-
 solves the generalization of "class" into
 simple but inaccurate semantic reactions.
 The morality of historic conservatism
 leaves few "objective factors" behind
 which the individual may hide himself in
 times of trouble. The fiber of society is
 found in each individual. Economic cau-
 sation ceases to be a separate and inde-
 pendent element, for it is reduced in de-
 tail to moral and psychological considera-
 tions or simply to phases of the culture
 pattern. The deterministic element,
 whether economic or class, becomes in
 this view a clumsy, vague, and thorough-
 ly bad system of identifications. Ethical
 judgment is, in the conservative view, a
 social cause of first importance. Instead
 of a Freudian analysis which proves too
 much too soon, the psychological inter-
 pretation of behavior insists on the in-
 dividual as the sources of reason in the
 life of the community. Christianity does
 not insist on the goodness of man, but it
 sees in the human will, when governed by
 truth, the source of social and political
 validity. The corrupted human will is

the foundation of social disaster.⁷ The conservative emphasizes human agency in history, and great men are in effect unique events, though arising in the context of validated moral standards.⁸ Conservative ethics tends to see as the counterpart of cause the retribution pertaining to individuals; as cause is associated with morality, it is part of a universal moral order, carrying in itself its ultimate mechanism of reward and punishment. Even Marxism, with its great sense of aggregate causation, looks to the day when the moral faults of the *bourgeoisie* will bring retribution.⁹

In any moral approach to politics, such as in the ethics of conservatism, there is no joy in evil or suffering in society. The conservative impulse is to submit to the moral values embodied in community life, and, while God may not be seen specifically in the community, there is respect for the ethics of a society, if it is at all possible. Conflict, marginal conflict usually, makes the realization of political morality impossible; but conflict at the margin becomes part of the pattern of behavior and is accepted, without denying the essential principle of the character of the individual. Such respect for community acceptance may lead to idealism, as in the thinking of Josiah Royce, but for the Christian generally it does not extend this far, for divine truth is not found primarily in social structure, nor is

⁷ Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York, 1941).

⁸ See Frederick J. Teggart, "Causation in Historical Events," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), 4.

⁹ Cf. Hans Kelsen, "Causality and Retribution," *Philosophy of Science*, VIII (1941), 533 ff. Edmund Wilson records that, when Bakunin was returned to Russia by the Austrian authorities, Nicholas I extorted from him a confession of his crimes. Confession of wrongdoing and penitence are retained to this day, says Wilson, as a feature of the paternalistic Russian system (*op. cit.*, p. 270).

the interpretation of truth necessarily a function of authority in the state. Indeed, the failure of political idealism to catch on in American life is evidence of the fact that a democracy may respect community ethics without assuming that the state is in any sense a final interpreter of social morality.

When Aristotle argued that everything has a "nature," he was presenting one of the foundation stones of any systematic social thought. Individualistic ethics, for example, is built upon the nature of man, just as the modern scientific approach to social relation makes the same assumption. But conservatism, like other theoretical approaches, wavers between the application of moral freedom and retribution, on the one hand, and pattern or inevitability, on the other. Here, indeed, is one of the key questions in the discussion of the ethics of conservatism. While Marxism, for example, may argue the inherent tendencies of the *bourgeoisie* to exploit and abuse the proletariat, it must argue also the freedom of the working class to rise in revolt against the ruling class. Almost it can be said that the revolt of the proletariat is a moral obligation of that class as a means to establish justice in society. Pattern and moral freedom march side by side through the pages of socialism, but such is the situation likewise in the argument for conservatism. In part the conservative may see pattern or law in the amoral mass democracy as it is kneaded into one shape or another by the bureaucrat, but he may also insist on the responsibility of each individual, mass man or otherwise, for the situation as it develops. There is a deep-seated tendency of those who sit in judgment to assume that pattern or law does not apply to themselves.

In measure, therefore, the search for moral judgment in all social theories is

governed by a search for a pattern that acts as a modifying factor, but that might otherwise be regarded as being absolute. All good and evil are patterns and, by implication, must be taken into account. To the conservative, the pattern of evil in the community is not man and there is also a pattern of good. The Christian leader, who moves afield, was insisting on a pattern of the government, not of the sages, but the behavior of the community was governed by a pattern, not just as those who reject a pattern are free to mount a pattern, but just as those who reject a pattern are free to mount a pattern set for correct living.¹⁰

That conservatism wavers between the ethical judgment and the events may well take the form of a pattern in showing the character of the events and conditional character of the events. Biological events may be used effectively by either the conservative or revolutionaries, in witness to the work of E. A. Hooton and others, which may be cited. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* which limits the scope of the events, either for revolutionary or conservative purposes. Conservatism thus an effort to reduce the scope of the revolutionary will, to submerge under law the events, to look to the discontinuity of the events. Obviously, a selective pattern is all that is available to be turned against the events by showing his inability to cope with the existing circumstances.

What is the connection

¹⁰ A. M. Ludovici, *A Defense of the Puritan Revolution* (London, 1915), pp. 165 ff., for example, for the Puritan Revolution of the seventeenth century; he defends the Puritan Revolution as a means to preserve "merrie England."

governed by a search for pattern, which acts as a modifying force on judgments that might otherwise be inapplicable by being absolute. All great systems take patterns and, by implication, social evils into account. To the Christian there is a pattern of evil in the corrupted nature of man and there is also law in the behavior of the Christian leader. Confucius, to move afield, was insistent in his justification of the government of gentlemen and sages, but the behavior of the gentlemen was governed by a pattern of propriety, just as those who rejected filiality also fell into a pattern. Yet Christians and Confucians alike would argue that men by nature are free to mount to the standards set for correct living.¹⁰

That conservatism which moves away from the ethical judgment of men and events may well take the results of modern science in showing the deterministic and conditional character of much human behavior. Biological theory may be used effectively by either conservatives or revolutionaries, in witness of which the work of E. A. Hooton and J. B. S. Haldane may be cited. Any social theory which limits the scope of will may be used either for revolutionary or for conservative purposes. Conservative realism is thus an effort to reduce the effectiveness of the revolutionary will; it is an attempt to submerge under law the purpose which looks to the discontinuity of social structure. Obviously, a selective use of pattern is all that is available, since pattern may be turned against the conservative by showing his inability to meet changing circumstances.

What is the connection between moral

¹⁰ A. M. Ludovici, *A Defense of Aristocracy* (London, 1915), pp. 165 ff., for example, argues the vulgarity of the Puritan Revolution in England in the seventeenth century; he defends Charles's effort to preserve "merrie England."

purpose and amoral law? In the politics of nonrevolutionary epochs there is considerable overlapping between different schools of politics, for all leaders accept some change, and particular policies may be regarded as at once conservative and revolutionary. The achievement of revolution itself establishes a new tradition, and there emerges a defense of that tradition in the light of standards of justice. A relatively consistent failure of ideal purposes to be attained in practice suggests indeed the operation of pattern against the revolutionist. Conservatism tends to accept purpose as narrowly ideal, while experience itself, in contrast with the revolutionist, is remote in most instances from purpose. Historical process must be used by the conservative to explain the discrepancy between the ideal and the real. In general, also, the conservative in power is less deterministic than the critics of the old order, who point to disorder and social evil as inherent in the ruling system.

In many ways the modern conservative tradition is as diverse as the revolutionary. The kind of tradition, with its implicit logic and ethical evaluations, that may be defended varies profoundly even in the United States. On the one hand, industrial conservatism has accepted the quondam revolutionary principle of rational progress—a principle that moved into conservative liberalism after the French Revolution. On the other hand, many critics point to the failure of industrialism wherever it has been tried in order to urge the importance of restoring the conservatism of agrarian society. Industrialism, it can be argued, has not provided property for the ordinary individual; rather it has destroyed the property principle for the urban masses; it has destroyed the cultural context and balance in which American conservatism

grew.¹¹ Socialism may, therefore, be regarded as an inevitable "escape" from the conditions of living under the industrial system. The contemporary southern agrarian can insist that the South today is not socialistic because it is still agricultural in its way of life and that, at any rate, socialism has been most mild and successful when it has been tried in predominantly agricultural societies, such as the Scandinavian countries. It is simply the success of American capitalism up to 1929 which has blinded American thinkers to the turbulence of the nineteenth century in England and Europe generally and to the prophetic stresses visible long before that date in industrial life itself.¹²

Revolutionary thought has during a hundred years sought to deny nearly every social hierarchy or status and to enlist in the cause of revolution the forces of science. The apparent ease of progress, the effortless achievements of industrialism, likewise made it possible to believe that public opinion, whatever its content, might be the voice of the God of Progress. The agrarian criticism asserts that industrialism has produced the doctrine that the proper standard for society is what the public wants, that is, a society without standards. In contrast, a society with a humane hierarchy, which is agrarian, provincial, traditional, and religious, will have leisure and freedom of the mind, for freedom of the mind is freedom from industrial slavery.¹³ One might pursue the argument to show that the people do not, under actual conditions,

¹¹ Cf. Caroline F. Ware (ed.), *The Cultural Approach to History* (New York, 1940).

¹² See Benjamin E. Lippincott, *Victorian Critics of Democracy* (Minneapolis, 1938); Robert Hunter, *Revolution, Why, How, When?* (New York and London, 1940).

¹³ See *I'll Take My Stand*, by Twelve Southerners (New York, 1930).

get what they want. The peoples of all the world did not want war, but they have it, and the vast industrial and technological conflict of today which is called war will perhaps tend to exhaust industrialism itself.

The agrarian criticism of industrialism suggests the whole problem of the relation of institutions and ethical values. As more and more social energy is directed toward saving industrial civilization, the ethical component of industrial society, the possibilities in industrial tradition or lack of tradition are also presented for solution. No traditional system of ethics can deny the embodiment of moral value to some extent in institutions, though the imperfection of institutions may readily be admitted. Agrarian criticism, moreover, suggests the freedom of the will, animated by purpose, to change the institutions which dominate society. How can institutions be changed? How ought they be changed? To what extent can hierarchy be eliminated and the principle of equality be instituted within the framework of tradition, or order and consensus?

The embodiment of ethical standards in institutions is the characteristic problem of political or social ethics, as distinguished from the issues of individual action and character. To what extent do institutions reflect ethical validity? What is the relationship of such structures as the family, the church, the association, or the state to one another? How can and should institutions be changed the more effectively to express and stabilize such values? Again, the issue of the morality of inequality must be viewed in terms of the functioning of institutions. In essence ethical conservatism sees values in institutions, but such values are functional in character, that is, they are part of the struggles of everyday life; they are

the balance wheel of growth and conflict. To say that the ethical institutions is functional is to say that the ideal is realized in the institutional situation. Conservation through imperfect, existing institutions and a church that is ideal in positive sense. The conservation to the state likewise admits moral standards of communal standards of communal standards perfectly equated with purpose.

Ethical conservatism tends to emphasize on the divine principle tends to move definitely toward authoritarianism of political authority tends to accept the practical control, though during the late and early nineteenth century and the absolutism of the state with the principle of equality and individualism. However, one economic individualism is a lasting element in conservatism, an accident of the times, now about run its course. Exhaustion of individualism and conservatism, the result to the supremacy of the state must be found in institutions such as the church. It can be argued that the authority of such an English idealist as John Green has been potential in the individualistic basis. Likewise, the insistence of authoritarianism, especially with nonrevolutionary, leadership, since the liberal reaction, to trust to the bureaucratic power of the centralized information of institutions. To move the check on power and enforcing responsibility.

¹⁴ Cf. Arnold Brecht, "The Political and Legal Philosophy," *view*, XXIX (1941), 312 ff.

the balance wheel of group and class conflict. To say that the ethical value of institutions is functional does not imply that the ideal is realized in any single institutional situation. Christianity lives through imperfect, existing Christians and a church that is ideal only in the purposive sense. The conservative who turns to the state likewise admits that the ethical standards of community life are imperfectly equated with political reality.¹⁴

Ethical conservatism which places little emphasis on the divine in human life tends to move definitely toward the authoritarianism of political idealism. It tends to accept the practice of state control, though during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the moral absolutism of the state was tempered with the principle of economic individualism. However, one cannot say that economic individualism is an inherent or lasting element in conservatism; it is an accident of the times, and one that has now about run its course. With the exhaustion of individualism in secular ethical conservatism, the remaining barriers to the supremacy of the bureaucratic state must be found in parallel institutions such as the church. Indeed, it may be argued that the authoritarianism of such an English idealist as Thomas Hill Green has been potentially dangerous to the individualistic basis of ethics. Likewise, the insistence of liberal humanitarianism, especially when it is clearly nonrevolutionary, leads in the same direction, since the liberal has been willing to trust to the bureaucracy and to the power of the centralized state the moral information of institutions. But to remove the check on power or the means of enforcing responsibility permits the hold-

ers of power, by their own patterns of action, to drain away the moral implications of institutions.

Aside from the anarchistic element in Christianity, the Christian church has seen through the centuries the necessity of political organization and the use of power in directing human lives. But the church has been a force in social conservatism as it has stood outside the actual organization of power and dichotomized for the individual and the group the source of ethical validity. Such a duality in the ethics of institutions makes improbable the development of the implications of conservative or liberal authoritarianism. In looking at modern intellectual culture, the Christian thinker doubts the ability of mere science to understand the nature of man and its ability to provide an ethical content for community life.¹⁵ As between the Christian and secular discussion of morals, the issue is not about reason itself, for both points of view affirm the importance of reason in life, even though the scientific approach (witness psychology) may in effect minimize reason. The issue is the source of reason and its application in detail to social conditions. The Christian affirms that reason partakes of the divine and that it is an instrumentality for the discovery of truth permanently contained in a divine moral order and transiently or traditionally embodied in human institutions. The Christian affirms that such a morality is the permanent basis of any society.

When those outside Christian conservatism admit the importance of religion in social organization, the danger is clear that religion may become simply a technique for the control of the masses for the specific political purposes of the

¹⁴ Cf. Arnold Brecht, "The Impossible in Political and Legal Philosophy," *California Law Review*, XXIX (1941), 312 ff.

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

ruling class. Basically, this danger inheres in all political realism; it is not infrequently the core of a Machiavellian attitude toward politics, for all purposes and all validities may be reduced to techniques in the struggle for power. Religion may be reduced to a phase of the techniques of politics. The Christian asserts that the primary force of the spirit does not arise directly from politics, while the authoritarian is likely to exhaust the spiritual side of life in the dynamics of politics. Cogently, Allan Tate argued in *I'll Take My Stand* that one factor in the southern loss of its cause was the separation of its religion from its politics. Tradition itself, without the impact of religion, tends to be a tradition of violence rather than of spiritual nourishment. The southern consensus in politics was not close to its religion, whereas in the North humanitarianism was in fact for many the exhaustive practical application of religion.

Humanitarianism thus stands as the central issue in modern politics. The issues of humanitarianism, of fellow-feeling, go directly to the character of institutions and the ethical standards that are reflected or vitalized by institutional application. In recent times, however, humanitarianism has been further narrowed to the problem of the economic reorganization of society. Even Christian thinkers have come to regard the economic conditions of life as intimately related to the spiritual effectiveness of men. The writings of Protestant thinkers and the encyclicals of the popes demonstrate the Christian concern for the economic problem, though here it must be argued that Christian conservatism is attempting to make the economic aspects of life a subordinate phase of the force of Christian morality. The concentration on economic humanitarianism comes to the present

in a continuous line from the rise of abolitionism and socialism in the nineteenth century. The danger in this approach, however, is that even for Christians the solution offered is purely political in character; the state must be used in order to solve the problem as it is posed. There is a greater danger, it would seem, that Protestantism may become more political than Catholicism. Such a solution must defeat Christianity itself, since it will more and more become like optimistic materialism in its philosophy. Ethical conservatism insists upon solutions alternative to the political. Remotely, of course, there is reward and punishment in the afterlife, but upon the temporal plane itself the nonpolitical group, the association, the organization of regions, the free action of individuals may be looked to as a means of securing in degree the ideal ends of humanitarianism. The secondary aspects of power may be fully as important as the primary and political phase.¹⁶

Conservative ethics has accepted the ideal of progress as fully as revolutionary thought. The differences, however, are profound when one considers the tempo of progress and the means to be used in attaining the progressive society. To attain progressive ends slowly is surely as valid as the revolutionary principle of the cataclysmic attainment of purpose. To the conservative the pattern or behavior tendencies of revolutionism are the greatest defect of the method, for socialism becomes a struggle for power in which progressive ideals themselves are mere techniques or weapons in the conflict. The internecine struggles in socialist minority groups and the bloody consequences of revolutionism in modern society should at least lend some support to the conserv-

¹⁶ See Donald Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan* (New York, 1938).

ative interpretation of p
Within the minority gro
for power may be accou
perceptible disintegration
and within the irrespon
power the same tendency
astrous scale may be obs

We have already in
heart of the present cri
morality of political con
great protagonist of the
tarian system of govern
punctions as to the te
might be used in the att
And while one may not
sequences of ethical in
political techniques ren
is sufficiently continu
morality of whole socie
tism insists that mora
served in the techniq
politics as fully as in
the ends of freedom and
The historic belief in
and the rule of law is
statement for our time
of ethical responsibility
political means.

Ours is an age of iro
itics. The leaders of s
lied upon a statemen
and honor in the ch
often fallen beside t

¹⁷ See Benjamin Gitlow
statement of the eventual
social justice may feel be
dishonesty in political tech

ative interpretation of political ethics. Within the minority group the struggle for power may be accompanied by the perceptible disintegration of character, and within the irresponsible group in power the same tendency on a more disastrous scale may be observed.

We have already insisted that the heart of the present crisis concerns the morality of political conflict. Lenin, the great protagonist of the modern authoritarian system of governing, felt no compunctions as to the techniques which might be used in the attainment of ends. And while one may not say that the consequences of ethical irresponsibility on political techniques remain unbroken, it is sufficiently continuous to vitiate the morality of whole societies. Conservatism insists that morality must be observed in the techniques and means of politics as fully as in the acceptance of the ends of freedom and social morality.¹⁷ The historic belief in constitutionalism and the rule of law is still the primary statement for our times of the principle of ethical responsibility in the choice of political means.

Ours is an age of iron technicity in politics. The leaders of states who have relied upon a statement of high purpose and honor in the choice of means have often fallen beside the way. The ideal-

¹⁷ See Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess* (1940), for a statement of the eventual repulsion one devoted to social justice may feel because of immorality and dishonesty in political techniques.

ism of Woodrow Wilson in the Paris Peace Conference is an example of the conflict that is characteristic of the present hour. Wilson's earlier conservatism as to means adjusted readily to new proposals for legislation; he became a progressive while remaining always a conservative, but it was a conservatism which relied upon the continuous life of institutions informed by the spirit of law and honor. Happily, Wilson was more successful in insisting upon virtue in the practice of politics among Americans than among those whose inspiration was the Machiavellianism of European politics.¹⁸ Perhaps belatedly in these troubled times, we may say with William Alexander Percy:

It is sophistry to speak of two sets of virtues, there is but one: virtue is an end in itself; the survival virtues are means, not ends. Honor and honesty, compassion and truth are good even if they kill you, for they alone give life its dignity and worth. Yet probably England and France and all the good and noble and the true of all the world will die and obscenity will triumph. Probably those that practiced virtue will be destroyed, but it is better for men to die than to call evil good, and virtue itself will never die.¹⁹

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

¹⁸ Much of Wilson's conservatism was expressed in his admiration for British political institutions (see *An Old Master and Other Political Essays* [Boston, 1893]). James Kerney, *The Political Education of Woodrow Wilson* (New York, 1926), reveals much of the typical character of the Christian conservative.

¹⁹ *Lanterns on the Levee* (New York, 1941), p. 313. By permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.