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THE CONTEMPORARY RIGHT

by

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I

Students of politics have long observed the so-called "law of the pendulum" in politics. This proposition says that there is a secular swing in public appreciation, especially in democracies, between the conservative and the liberal spirits of politics.¹ This is another way of stating the continuous disintegration and reintegration of the force of symbols in politics. Movements are seldom static in their persuasive force. Liberals like to point to the disintegration of conservative thought, demonstrated even by the more trivial of political changes, while conservatives are convinced, in general, of the law of the disintegration of liberalism. Such a conservative proposition arises from a study of the disappearance of idealism in a movement as it comes closer to the inner circle of power. As T. V. Smith has argued, the greater the element of compromise, *i.e.*, effectiveness, in political decision the less becomes the element of ideality.² Now the appeal of the liberal is, according to conservative thought, his support of the ideal solution, or the absolutely just situation. But as the liberal comes close to power, the necessities of decision constantly force him away from the lofty nature of his principle. Thus, inevitably as liberalism and revolutionism approach the effective organization of power, their *élan vital* tends to be dissipated in the practicalities of day-to-day politics. In this theory, conservatism is never dead, but its vitality tends to be coincident with the operation of the law of disintegration of liberalism.

II

In a day of transition, such as the present clearly is, both liberalism and conservatism become singularly dynamic, but this mutual dynamism is, no doubt, a product of balanced ideological tension as well as of the external forces of political and social chaos. The chaos of our day is a reflection of the failure of the consolidated liberalism of another era to reach its goal in the immediate present. In the nature of the case, since liberal and

¹W. B. Munro, "The Pendulum in Politics," in *Harper's Magazine*, Vol. CLIV (1927), pp. 718 ff.
²See T. V. Smith, "Compromise: Its Context and Limits," in *Ethics*, Vol. LIII (October, 1942), pp. 1 ff. On p. 7, Smith remarks: "The quantity of compromise required in society varies directly with the area of action; the quality of ideality surviving compromise varies inversely with the size of the collectivity . . . Quantity and quality of ideality for action are incompatible and so vary inversely."

revolutionary idealism is immoderate in its claims, it falls farther short of its goal than conservatism, for the disintegration of the force and persuasiveness of particular reform movements is one of the clearest facts in politics. The liberal and the revolutionary mind has cultivated the illusion that the reverse is the case, for they have placed much of their hope of future success in the complete and dismal failure of conservatism in power.

The constant rebirth of conservative spirit shows it to be on somewhat firmer ground. In the first place, its ideals are stated in more moderate terms, and their realization is more clearly perceived to be in an evolutionary context that only long national experience may reveal. In the second place, the ideals that continually are reborn in conservative spirit are stated in the light of political realities. The conservative, in his nature, can never promise as much as the liberal or revolutionary, yet in historical retrospect he may claim that some connection between political promise and political fact does exist. As the conservative spirit witnesses its eternal rebirth from the disintegration of the revolution, it may observe with some dispassionateness the fusion of old enemies, now reformed or more instructed in political prudence; it may recognize the force of the frustration generated in periods of war, external stress, and the realignments of political power; it may consider as a curable evil the psychological fatigue that may immunize the mass of men to the call of any ideal save that of public order; it may safely rationalize the partial reform and consider it a worthy achievement, even though it may fall far short of the ideal of justice; but more important than any other factor, it may witness with appreciation the resurgence of old values that in other periods have animated constructively the course of history.

The defense of freedom, constitutional government, and the moral and religious tradition of the West has become possible only through reforms in the social order that may succeed in beating back or containing the revolutionary energies of Russian Marxism. In this situation the traditional enemies of conservatism, such as liberals and democratic socialists, have recognized their community with the conservative spirit at least as far as the impact of totalitarianism is concerned. The disintegration of liberalism and socialism, combined with the resurgence and dynamism of conservatism has provided a potential or theoretical meeting ground on which to battle the new enemy of Slavic fascism.³

³W. Hardy Wickwar, "Foundations of American conservatism," in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. XLI (December, 1947), pp. 1105 ff., has argued that American conservative thought in the nineteenth century was out of line with that of Europe. Our conservatism, since its reformulation followed a revolution, could not defend known historical institutions. It defended ideas such as constitutional government, property, and moderation in reform. Wickwar has argued, for example, that Burke's conservatism had little influence in America. Much the same might be said of Latin American conservatism, for there also was a break with the past, and conservatism had to defend ideas concerning the nature of public order, rather than the continuity of European institutions.

III

The contemporary conservative defender of democracy faces an issue that was hardly conceived of when the modern techniques for expressing the sovereignty of the people were shaped. For a century ago it was assumed that when the people were given power they would use it, and use it to the limit. If the masses should effectively use their right to vote in order to control the state, the conservative fear of the last century of the tyranny of the majority might have some meaning.⁴ But when the tyranny of the masses, or the majority, did not materialize, the first interpretation was that the masses were conservative, indeed far more conservative than the educated classes. Henry S. Maine framed his argument against democracy in these terms: aristocrats constitute a progressive force against the reactionary masses. The tyranny of the majority meant, in effect, the destruction of the very possibility of progressive change. And with Bagehot the thick crust of custom was a work of the masses; it had to be broken by the processes of change supported by the more flexible and educated.⁵

While Sir Henry Maine could see that wire-pullers and manipulators dominate democracy, he did not reach a theory of the process of politics in which oligarchy and organization leaves the majority with hardly any political power. In other words, he could not explain why the masses did not reach out and seize government in terms of actual democratic politics. Or, one might cite Lord Bryce, who saw in the bosses and machines of American politics a temporary aberration that soon would be overcome by the more simple remedies available to the democratic state.⁶ Before the rise of the totalitarian state masquerading under the forms of democracy, the theory of political process was beginning to be formulated. But one can hardly find here an imagination bold enough to conceive of the system of manipulative techniques that have been used by the authoritarian state, and which are clearly behind the facade of so-called democratic defense to be found in Fascism and Communism.⁷ In the evolution of conservative theory, by which it made its adjustment to democracy as earlier fears proved to be ungrounded, it is clear there was little perception of the perverse possibilities

⁴E. B. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Farrer, 1942), pp. 14-15. In this discussion I am indebted to the unpublished dissertation of my colleague, J. A. Ranney, *Political Parties in the American System: Theories of their Function, 1870-1915* (New Haven: Yale University, 1948).

⁵See Henry Sumner Maine, *Popular Government* (London: J. Murray, 1885); Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics* (New York: Appleton, 1873); John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: H. Holt, 1859); A. V. Dicey, *Lectures on the Relation of Law and Opinion in England During the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1914), pp. 240 ff., where the author has shown how the conservatives profited from the extension of the franchise, and in general how the expectations of radicalism in the enfranchised masses remained unrealized.

⁶James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1923), Vol. II, pp. 114 ff., 162 ff.

⁷See Robert Michels, *Political Parties A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. by E. and C. Paul (New York: Hearst's International Library, 1915); M. I. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, trans. from the French, 2 vols., (New York and London: Macmillan, 1902); A. F. Bentley, *The Process of Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908).

of democratic process. It could not be imagined that the whole system by which the masses were given power was to become the backbone of modern political slavery. Yet such a paradoxical result has produced the modern issue of the nature of free elections, and it has altered profoundly the conservative appreciation of democracy.

There exists then a renewed perception of the issue of constitutional government. With the advent of democracy, the rule of law could no longer be the code of an oligarchic or aristocratic group of holders of social and political power. Constitutional government, in the present crisis of government in the West, must be reformulated in the light of the ideal sovereignty of the people. Yet that light must be diffused or refracted through the realistic process under which sovereignty is exercised. Clearly, the rule of law embodied in a constitution serves various purposes. It has one coloration if its purpose is to check executive, legislative, or judicial excesses; it has another if it is a check against the tyranny of the majority; it has another if the issue is the control of party oligarchy and the privileges of democratic placement; and, finally, it has another if the issue is seen, not as excessive power in the executive or any other organ of government, not as too great a seizure of power by the masses, not as the interposition of irresponsible party conclaves, but as the existence of a permanent, inescapable, and only partially controllable process of politics. Here the rule of law is not so much the creation of constitutional norm as it is the creation of conditions under which the people in the mass exercise to some degree the potential of their power. In the extreme, the democratic problem, through constitutional process, is to create a condition under which the tyranny of the majority is conceivable, or in which the process of political control is limited in its impact on the people themselves.

The conservative problem in the current international defense of constitutional democracy is much like the older radical formulation; it is a restoration of government, in measure at least, to the people. But it is a restoration that will remove the political process from the control of revolutionary elites who have spoken with strident prophecy in the name of common man. In warring against the revolutionary tide of the present, much as a conservative Europe sought with success to contain the French Revolution, the contemporary right seeks to preserve or reestablish free elections. But such an objective implies honorable opposition, not an intransigent fury of oppositional epithet; it implies the existence of more than one responsible political party, not a para-military organization masquerading as a party; it implies freedom in the communication of ideas and in political propaganda, not the control of press, radio, and public meeting in the name of an official ideology; it implies the competition of ideas, not the governmental support of one orthodoxy; it implies a constitutional process, orderly and precise, in the conduct of elections, and not the faking

of election returns; and finally it implies that the state shall be governed by the results of elections, and that another free election will follow at the appointed time. It implies, above all, that political discussion and the selection of public policy and personnel is not a phase or a technique in civil war, which in effect falsifies the whole of the democratic process.

Such a conservative defense of the democratic tradition is surely a far cry from the conservative reaction to the first stirrings of democracy in the modern period. But it is clearly in line with the principles of balance and moderation in the conduct of the state; it reflects the most ancient and the highest ideals of political prudence. It avoids the common abyss of both unchecked political cynicism and a schizophrenic utopianism, for both are dangerous to the very existence of democracy. The intransigent opposition, which destroys finally the rule of law, nurtures the people with ideologies which in our time combine both cynicism in technique and utopianism in end, and which alternate with erratic violence between the two. Such a conservatism would check the power of unbalanced propaganda and the use of modern techniques of revolution and dictatorial control.⁸ Such a conservatism, struggling today through the channels of foreign policy, may offer the ideals of the Western moral order a chance to be expressed again through political gradualism, by giving some reality to the sovereignty of the people, and by providing some check to the manipulators of the revolutionary party oligarchy. Under these conditions a state must pay some attention to what its citizens may desire, or which their long-run and permanently formulated opinions may demand.

If in the recent past the conservative movements of Europe, America and Latin America have been slow in their support of democracy, and if they have failed to see that conservative objectives are compatible with the modern state, and if, then, they failed, those who have inherited the opportunity to remake society have also failed. One can argue that the modern crisis is the result of the failure of the conservatives of another day, but it can well be insisted that the liberal creed that gained dominance in the nineteenth century has equally failed to perceive what a modern state is and to curtail destructive political diseases before they have gained a warlike and revolutionary momentum. If the old conservatism of the nineteenth century is a casualty of war and revolution, so are the older liberalism and democratic socialisms. Both conservatives and liberals of older trade-marks have suffered erosion before the resurgence of social Christianity, which now animates much of European conservatism, and revolutionary communism, associated with Slavic nationalism, or, indeed, Slavic fascism.

Conservatives may admit their failure in technique, their failure to move adequately with the times, and the lack of a firm prophetic insight.

⁸Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1946), ch. xviii.

But they may likewise ask why the liberals in their turn did the same thing. They might answer that the conservative failure has been on the level of technique and clumsy political footwork, but they may say also that the liberal failure has been one of principle, and, therefore, less curable than that of the conservatives. Liberals have stood for freedom, but there have been central confusions in their thought. One terminology has been used in an attempt to cover both nineteenth century capitalism and the advocacy of the planned economy; that terminology has futilely claimed for itself the idea of the common good, the general welfare, social and political progress, scientific method in the social sciences, democracy, humanitarianism, and the protection of individuality and personality. Throughout liberal history some of its adherents have tended to support the strong man, Napoleon or Stalin, while loyalty has been professed for the historic ideal of constitutional government. In the eighteenth century liberals defended the natural rights of man, but they cut themselves loose from the ancient Christian philosophy that had given it meaning before the tribunal of the Western mind with the result that human rights have been overwhelmed by the rising tide of materialism in the interpretation of the nature of man. The liberal has made haste to support economic reforms and in his haste has taken political short-cuts that have led to the destruction of the more sober ideals of constitutional democracy, and by doing so they have often stopped barely short of the support of the totalitarian regime. In Latin liberalism, both in Europe and in Latin America, the war against the Catholic Church has confused the weaknesses of men with the principles of Christian philosophy. The struggle has often degenerated into an effort simply to gain an unimpaired control over the agencies of modern political power. Yet, in spite of all these facts, the most significant element in the contemporary situation is that the Russian movement is the heir of the totalitarian systems that lately have crumbled in military defeat. Here is the basis of union between a resurgent conservative spirit and the faltering and confused ideal of liberalism. In a context of foreign policy, liberals, socialists, Catholics, Protestants, capitalists and others may unite to defend a free but imperfect Europe, a Europe in which constitutional democracy is the framework for the future competition of ideas. The Russian system offers nothing in terms of the historic Western ideal of the free man, and it has actually made little or no contribution to the economic well-being of its own citizens. It has sought with intransigent fury to steal the emotional force of all the symbols that before were used in the defense of freedom.

In this period of transition in which a new stage is being set for both the right and the non-dictatorial left, it must be recognized that nineteenth-century capitalism has come to our time with profound changes. The new danger is not the irresponsibility of a *laissez-faire* which never existed ex-

cept as a doctrine of protest,⁹ but rather the forces of bureaucratic centralization, the overweening of the military, and the surrender of freedom in the effort to make international industrial society function in some way. Liberals may see that socialism and the bureaucratic society without constitutional democracy has only one eventuality, the modern tyranny. The battles of the nineteenth century have been fought and compromised, and conservatives like liberals are learning that effective democracy is the only basis of freedom. Religious issues, likewise, are changing, since religious freedom is an underpinning for all freedom, and nineteenth century anticlericalism is remote and strange from modern reality. If the liberal is to fight the abuses of extreme and fascist nationalism, it must support the historic freedom defended by conservatives.

IV

After the Napoleonic wars there was a new perception of social and political issues in which extreme positions jarred each other in the conflicts of succeeding generations. But that conflict made it clear that for society to exist there must be public order and effective production of the goods by which society lives. Much of conservatism in a time of crisis like the present is devoted to fostering these elemental aspects of society. The modern liberal who has had enough of revolution from the east may understand this better at this time than after the Napoleonic period. Yet the conservative today knows that the causes of crisis run deep, and that profound changes in economic arrangements must be attained if the critical time is to be surmounted. In this the liberal will give support, knowing as the conservative does, that the restoration of the rule of law in the form of constitutional democracy is the only context in which freedom and useful reform are possible.

Thus it is only under parliamentary or democratic institutions that the historic forces for order, freedom, and beneficial reform may bring together in some common agreement the political antagonists of another time.¹⁰ The basis of compromise cannot be found entirely in philosophy, for the material-

⁹Collectivism is hardly an important issue in Europe or Latin America in the contemporary situation. Collectivism seems to increase with the disorganization, industrial decline, and the growing poverty of once wealthy and powerful states. In Latin America nationalization may mean, not socialism, but, for example, "Brazil for the Brazilians"; yet, apparently, this is also an age of new and rising "tycoons" and captains of industry in Latin America. One might suggest, likewise, that it is the love for easy intellectual victories that has led left wing and liberal thought to cultivate the myth of *laissez-faire*. As a true liberal doctrine of the nineteenth century, *laissez-faire* was essentially a theory of protest against the actual and historic interventions of the state in economic matters.

¹⁰See R. A. Butler, "A Conservative Presents His Manifesto," in *New York Times Magazine*, December 14, 1947. Sir Richard Austen Butler was the chief architect of Britain's Conservative "Industrial Charter." Reform—the new era of social reform of which he speaks—springs from the tradition of conservatism itself, rather than from an effort to copy either liberal or socialist theories of reform. He argues that "those who wish to study the social reform movement of Conservatism" should read the biographies of men like Richard Oastler, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Benjamin Disraeli, Joseph Chamberlain, Neville Chamberlain, and Winston Spencer Churchill.

ism and scientism of the liberal is hardly reconcilable with the theistic philosophy of social Christianity. Yet agreement and common purpose can be found, not only in support of the constitutional government, but in the effort to reach reforms that will extend the benefits of technological society to the ordinary citizen. The conservative, like the Christian Democrat in Italy,¹¹ cannot accept the principle of the class struggle, and he will not desert the validity of the concept of private property functioning on behalf of the family. But both liberals and conservatives may agree that the land tenure system must be reformed, and that the abuses of industrial society must be constantly in the mind of those who frame legislation. The liberal, long anticlerical in his perceptions, may find that social Christianity will support much of his program for reform.

Moreover, both conservatives and liberals must struggle against some of those who, in the name of friendship, carry principles to extremes. Stalin's state socialism has mocked and demoralized the democratic socialist and liberal movement all over the world; and the nationalistic extremism of Franco, Peron, and others compromises the conservatism of Christian democracy. Whatever else it may be, conservatism, as a spirit in politics, is an eternal demand for political moderation in which reform may be attained without the psychiatric fury of nationalism or the intransigent hatred of revolutionary Marxism.

¹¹The Christian parties in Europe, or those parties that draw heavily on Christian social theory, such as the Christian Democrats in Italy or the Popular Republican Movement in France, have been in fact the only ones effectively practicing conservatism during the early postwar years. Such a situation exists in Italy, France, the Low Countries, and in Western Germany. In the last two years, Protestant and Catholic movements have often worked in cooperation. One might note in the same connection the non-Marxian and deeply Christian attitude of many leaders of the British Labor Party.