

# THE CONSERVATIVE MOOD

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In the material prosperity of post-war America, as crackpot realism has triumphed in practical affairs, all sorts of writers, from a rather confused variety of viewpoints, have been groping for a conservative ideology.

They have not found it, and they have not managed to create it. What they have found is an absence of mind in politics, and what they have managed to create is a mood.

The psychological heart of this mood is a feeling of powerlessness—but with the old edge taken off, for it is a mood of acceptance and of a relaxation of the political will.

The intellectual core of the groping for conservatism is a giving up of the central goal of the secular impulse in the West: the control through reason of man's fate. It is this goal that has lent continuity to the humanist tradition, re-discovered in the Renaissance, and so strong in nineteenth century American experience. It is this goal that has been the major impulse of classic liberalism and of classic socialism.

The groping for conservative ideas, which signifies the weakening of this impulse, involves the search for tradition rather than reason as guide; the search for some natural aristocracy as an anchor point of tradition and a model of character. Sooner or later, those who would give up this impulse must take up the neo-Burkeian defense of irrationality, for that is, in fact, the only possible core of a genuinely conservative ideology. And it is not possible, I believe, to establish such an ideology in the United States.

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Russell Kirk's "prolonged essay in definition" (*The Conservative Mind*) is the most explicit attempt to translate the conservative mood into conservative ideas. His work, however, does not succeed in the translation it attempts. When we examine it carefully we find that it is largely assertion, without arguable support, and that it seems rather irrelevant to

modern realities, and not very useful as a guideline of political conduct and policy:

1: The conservative, we are told, believes that "divine intent rules society," man being incapable of grasping by his reason the great forces that prevail. Along with this, he believes that change must be slow and that "providence is the proper instrument for change," the test of a statesman being his "cognizance of the real tendency of Providential social forces."

2: The conservative has an affection for "the variety and mystery of traditional life" perhaps most of all because he believes that "tradition and sound prejudices" check man's presumptuous will and archaic impulse.

3: "Society," the conservative holds, "longs for leadership," and there are "natural distinctions" among men which form a natural order of classes and powers.

When we hold these points close together, we can understand each of them more clearly: they seem to mean that tradition is sacred, that it is through tradition that the real social tendencies of Providence are displayed, and that therefore tradition must be our guide-line. For whatever is traditional not only represents the accumulated wisdom of the ages but exists by "divine intent."

Naturally we must ask how we are to know which traditions are instruments of Providence? Which prejudices are "sound?" Which of the events and changes all around us are by divine intent? But the third point is an attempted answer: If we do not destroy the natural order of classes and the hierarchy of powers, we shall have superiors and leaders to tell us. If we uphold these natural distinctions, and in fact resuscitate older ones, the leaders for whom we long will decide.

## II

It is pertinent to ask Mr. Kirk at what moment the highly conscious contrivances of the founding fathers became traditional and thus sanctified? And does he believe that society in the U. S.—before the progressive movement and before the New Deal reforms—represented anything akin to what he would call orders and classes based on "natural distinctions?" If not, then what and where is the model he would have us cherish? And does he believe that the campaign conservatives—to use the phrase of John Crowe Ransom—who now man the political institutions of the U. S., do or do not represent the Providential intent which he seeks? How are we to know if they do or do not, or to what extent which of these do?

Insofar as the conservative consistently defends the irrationality of tradition against the powers of human reason, insofar as he denies the legitimacy of man's attempt collectively to build his own world and indi-

vidually to control his own fate, then he cannot bring in reason again as a means of choosing among traditions, of deciding which changes are providential and which are evil forces. He cannot provide any rational guide in our choice of which leaders grasp Providence and act it out and which are reformers and levelers. In the end, the conservative is left with one single principle: the principle of gratefully accepting the leadership of some set of men whom he considers a received and sanctified elite. If such men were *there* for all to recognize, the conservative could at least be socially clear. But as it is, there is no guide-line within this view to help us decide which contenders for the natural distinction are genuine and which are not.

### III

Conservatism, as Karl Mannheim makes clear, translates the unreflecting reactions of traditionalism into the sphere of conscious reflection. Conservatism is traditionalism become self-conscious and elaborated and forensic. A noble aristocracy, a peasantry, a petty-bourgeoisie with guild inheritance—that is what has been needed for a conservative ideology and that is what Prussia in the early nineteenth century had. It was to the spell of tradition among these surviving elements of a pre-industrial society that conservatism could appeal. The Prussian upper classes lacked the elasticity of the English, and their country lacked an important middle class. Accordingly, they could avoid the English gradualism and the blurring of clear-cut ideologies in parliamentary compromises. In addition, caught between military neighbors, their military set could become a key element in Prussian society. Burke was the stimulus, but it was the German elaboration of his response to the French Revolution that resulted in a fully developed conservatism, sharply polarized against liberalism.\*

If England already softened conservative thought with liberal elements, in America, liberalism—and the middle classes that bore it as a deep-seated style of thought—has been so paramount as to preclude any flowering of genuinely conservative ideology.

Here, from their beginnings the middle classes have been predominant—in class and in status and in power.\*\* There is one consequence of this simple fact that goes far to explain why there can be no genuinely conservative ideology in the United States:

There is simply no stratum or group in the population that is of any political consequence to whose traditions conservatism could appeal. All

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\* Cf. Mannheim, "Conservative Thought," *Essays in Sociology and Social Psychology* (Ed. and Trans. by Paul Kecskemeti. New York: Oxford, 1953).

\*\* For an elaboration of the factors in the triumph of liberalism in the U. S., see Gerth and Mills, *Character and Social Structure* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953, pp. 464-472).

major sections and strata have taken on, in various degrees and ways, the coloration of a middle-class liberal ethos.

#### IV

The greatest problem of those American writers who would think out a conservative ideology of any political relevance is simply the need to locate the set of people and to make clear the interests that their ideology would serve. There are those, of course, who deny that politics has to do with a struggle for power, but they are of no direct concern to politics as we know it or can imagine it. There are also those who deny that political philosophies are most readily understood as symbols of legitimation, that they have to do with the defense and the attack of powers-that-be or of would-be powers; but by this denial a writer makes himself rather irrelevant to the intellectual features of the public decisions and debates that confront us.

The yearning for conservative tradition, when taken seriously, is bound to be a yearning for the authority of an aristocracy. For without such a more or less fixed and visible social anchor for tradition and for hierarchy, for models of conduct in private and in public life, that are tangible to the senses, there can be no conservatism worthy of the name. And it is just here—at the central demand of conservatism—that most American publicists of the conservative yen become embarrassed. This embarrassment is in part due to a fear of confronting and going against the all-pervading liberal rhetoric; but it is also due to three facts about the American upper class:

*First*, American writers have no pre-capitalist elite to draw upon, even in fond remembrance. Mr. Kirk, for example, cannot, as European writers have been able to do, contrast such hold-overs from feudalism, however modified, with the vulgarity of capitalist upper elements. The South, when it displayed an “aristocracy” was a region not a nation, and its “aristocrats,” however rural, were as much a part of capitalist society as were the New England upper strata.

*Second*, the very rich in America are culturally among the very poor, and are probably growing even more so. The only dimension of experience for which they have been models to which serious conservatives might point is the material one of money-making and money-keeping. Material success is their sole basis of authority.

*Third*, alongside the very rich, and supplanting them as popular models, are the synthetic celebrities of national glamor who often make a virtue out of cultural poverty and political illiteracy. By their very nature they are transient figures of the mass means of distraction rather than sources of authority and anchors of traditional continuity.

*Fourth*, it is virtually a condition of coming to the top in the American

political economy that one learns to use and use frequently a liberal rhetoric, for that is the common denominator of all proper and successful spokesmen.

There are, accordingly, no social strata which serious minds with conservative yens might celebrate as models of excellence and which stand in contrast to the American confusion the conservatives would deplore.

## V

The American alternative for those interested in a conservative ideology seems to be (1) to go ahead—as Mallock, for example, in his 1898 argument with Spencer did—and defend the capitalist upper classes, or (2) to become socially vague and speak generally of a “natural aristocracy” or a “self-selected elite” which has nothing to do with existing social orders, classes and powers.

The first is no longer so popular among free writers, although every little tendency or chance to do it is promptly seized upon by conservative publicists and translated into such pages as those of *Fortune* magazine. But, more importantly, if it is useful ideologically it must be a dynamic notion and hence no fit anchor for tradition. On the contrary, the capitalist elite is always, in the folklore and sometimes in the reality of capitalism, composed of self-making men who smash tradition to rise to the top by strictly personal accomplishments.

The second alternative is now the more popular. In their need for an aristocracy, the conservative thinkers become grandly vague and very general. They are slippery about the aristocrat; generalizing the idea, they make it moral rather than socially firm and specific. In the name of “genuine democracy” or “liberal conservatism” they stretch the idea of aristocracy in a quite meaningless way, and so, in the end, all truly democratic citizens become aristocrats. Aristocracy becomes a scatter of morally superior persons rather than a strategically located class. So it is with Ortega y Gasset and so it is with Peter Viereck, who writes that it is not “the Aristocratic class” that is valuable but “the aristocratic spirit”—which, with its decorum and *noblesse oblige*, is “open to all, regardless of class.”

This is not satisfactory because it provides no widely accepted criteria for judging who is elite and who is not. Moreover, it does not have to do with the existing facts of power and hence is politically irrelevant. And it involves a mobile situation; the self-selecting elite can be no fixed anchor. Some have tried to find a way to hold onto such a view, as it were secretly, not stating it directly, but holding it as a latest assumption while talking about, not the elite, but “the mass.” That, however, is dangerous, for again, it goes so squarely against the liberal rhetoric which requires a continual flattery of the citizens.

Both these alternatives, in fact, end up not with an elite that is anchored

in a tradition and hierarchy but with dynamic and ever-changing elite continually struggling to the top in an expanding society. There is simply no socially, much less politically, recognized traditional elite and there is no tradition. Moreover, whatever else it may be, tradition is something you cannot create. You can only uphold it when it exists. And now there is no spell of unbroken tradition upon which modern society is or can be steadily based. Accordingly, the conservative cannot confuse greatness with mere duration, cannot decide the competition of values by a mere endurance contest.

## VI

In one of its two major forms, as instanced by Mr. Kirk, the defense of irrationality rests upon pre-capitalist, in fact pre-industrial, bases: it is simply the image of a society in which authority is legitimated by traditionalism and interpreted by a recognized aristocracy.

In its other major form the defense rests upon what is perhaps the key point in classic liberal capitalism: it is the image of a society in which authority is at a minimum because it is guided by the autonomous forces of the magic market. In this view, providence becomes the unseen hand of the market; for in secular guise Providence refers to a faith that the unintended consequences of many wills form a pattern, and that this pattern ought to be allowed to work itself out.

In contrast to classic conservatism, this conservative liberalism, as a call to relax the urge to rational planning, is very deep in the American grain. Not wishing to be disturbed over moral issues of the political economy, Americans cling all the more to the idea that the government is an automatic machine, regulated by a balancing out of competing interests. This image of government is simply carried over from the image of the economy: in both we arrive at equilibrium by the pulling and hauling of each individual or group for their own interests, restrained only by legalistic and amoral interpretation of what the law allows.

George Graham has noted that although Americans think representative government a wonderful thing, they hold that representatives are merely "politicians" who as a class are of a fairly low order; that although they willingly honor the dead statesmen of the past, they dishonor the politicians of the present. Professor Graham infers from this, as well as other facts, that "perhaps what Americans yearn for is a complete mechanization of politics. Not a dictator but a political automat is the subconscious ideal," something that will measure up "to the modern standards of being fully automatic and completely impersonal."\*

In the United States the economic order has been predominant among institutions, and therefore the types of men and their characteristic traits

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\* *Morals in American Politics*. (New York: Random House, 1953, p. 4).

are best interpreted in terms of the evolving economic system. In turn, the top men, almost regardless of how top is defined, have always included in one way or another those who are at the top of the economic system.

Insofar as one can find a clue to the basic impulse of the Eisenhower administration, it is the attempt to carry out this sacrifice of politics to the free dominance of economic institutions and their key personnel. It is a difficult task, perhaps even one that only crackpot realists would attempt, for now depression and wars, as well as other perils and complications of modern life, have greatly enlarged the federal government and made it an unwieldy instrument.

At the center of their ideology, the capitalist upper circles and their outlying publicists have had and do have only one political idea: it is the idea of an automatic political economy. This is best known to us as simply the practical conservatism of the anti-New Dealers during the Thirties of which the late Senator Robert Taft was perhaps the prime exemplar. It has been given new life by the frightening spectacle of the enlarged, totalitarian states of Germany yesterday and Russia today. And now it has become the only socially anchored conservative rhetoric in the American managerial elite, who now blend with the formal political directorate.

## VII

And yet on the practical political level the conservative groping has not been much more than a set of negative reactions to any signs of "liberal" or "progressive" policies or men. Conservatives have protested their individual rights rather than any common duties. Such duties as they have set forth—the trusteeship of big corporations, for example—have been all too transparently cloaks for harder and narrower interests. For a dozen years, the New and Fair Deals carried forth a series of specific personalities and policies and agencies that have been the shifting targets of conservative bile. Yet, for electoral purposes, that bile had to be ejected into the "*progressive*" atmosphere carried forth and sustained by the New Deal.

American conservatives have not set forth any conservative ideology. They are conservative in mood and conservative in practice but they have no conservative ideology. They have had no connection with the fountain-heads of modern conservative thought. In becoming aware of their power they have not elaborated that awareness into a conscious ideology. Perhaps it is easiest for people to be conservative when they have no sense of what conservatism means, no sense of the conservative present as being only one alternative to what the future might be. For if one cannot say that conservatism is unconsciousness, certainly conservatives are often happily unconscious.

## VIII

The poverty of mind in U. S. politics is evidenced in practice by the fact that the campaign liberals have no aim other than to hold to the general course of the New and Fair Deals, and no real ideas about extending these administrative programs. The campaign conservatives, holding firmly to utopian capitalism (with its small, passive government and its automatic economy), have come up against the same facts as the liberals and in facing them have behaved very similarly. They have no real ideas about how to jettison the welfare state and the managed war economy.

In the meantime both use the same liberal rhetoric, largely completed before Lincoln's death, to hold matters in stalemate. Neither party has a political vocabulary—much less political policies—that are up-to-date with the events, problems and structure of modern life. Neither party challenges the other in the realm of ideas, nor offers clear-cut alternatives to the electorate. Neither can learn nor will learn anything from classic conservatism of Mr. Kirk's variety. They are both liberal in rhetoric, traditional in intention, expedient in practice.

You can no more build a coherent conservative outlook and policy on a coalition of big, medium and small business, higher white collar employees and professional people, farmers and a divided South than you could build a racial outlook and policy on a coalition of big city machines, small business men, lower white collar people, a split and timid labor world, farmers and a divided South.

Within each party and between them there is political stalemate. Out of two such melanges, you cannot even sort out consistent sets of interests and issues, much less develop coherent policies, much less organize ideological guidelines for public debate and private reflection.

This means, for one thing, that "politics" goes on only within and between a sort of administrative fumbling. The fumbles are expedient. And the drift that they add up to leads practically all sensitive observers to construct images of the future that are images of horror.

## IX

One thinks of the attempt to create a conservative ideology in the United States as a little playful luxury a few writers will toy with for a while, rather than a serious effort to work out a coherent view of the world they live in and the demands they would make of it as political men.

More interesting than the ideas of these would-be conservative writers is the very high ratio of publicity to ideas. This is of course a characteristic of fashions and fads, and there is no doubt that the conservative moods are now fashionable. But I do not think we can explain intellectual fashions, in particular this one, by the dialectic that runs through intellectual discourse,



nor by the ready seizure by vested interests of ideas and moods that promise to justify their power and their policies.

For one thing, policy makers often do not usually feel the need for even reading, much less using in public, much less thinking about, the conservative philosophies. When Robert Taft, before his death, was asked if he had read Russell Kirk's book, he replied that he did not have much time for books. Like the radical writers of the previous decade, conservative writers of the 40's and 50's are not in firm touch with power elites or policy makers.

Another reason America has no conservative ideology is that it has no radical opposition. Since there is no radical party, those who benefit most from such goods and powers of life as are available have felt no need to elaborate a conservative defense of their positions. For conservatism is not the mere carrying on of traditions or defense of existing interests: it is a becoming aware of tradition and interests and elaborating them into an outlook, tall with principle. And this happens usually only when the tradition and the top position which benefit from it are really attacked.

Neither a radical ideology nor a conservative ideology but a liberal rhetoric has provided the terms of all issues and conflicts. In its generic ambiguities and generality of term this rhetoric has obfuscated hard issues and made possible a historical development without benefit of hard conflict of idea. The prevalence of this liberal rhetoric has also meant that thought in any wide meaning of the term has been largely irrelevant to such politics as have been visible.

Underneath the immediate groping for conservatism there is, of course, the prosperity that has dulled any deeper political appetite in America's post-war period. It is true that this prosperity does not rest upon an economy solidly on its own feet, and that for many citizens it is not so pleasant as they had probably imagined. For it is a prosperity that is underpinned politically by a seemingly permanent war economy, and socially by combined incomes. Still, no matter how partial or how phoney, by old fashioned standards the atmosphere is one of prosperity.

It is true, of course, that the radicalism of western humanism did not and does not depend for its nerve or its muscle upon fluctuations of material well-being. For those who are of this persuasion are as interested in the level of public sensibility and the quality of everyday life as in the material volume and distribution of commodities. Still, for many, this prosperity, no matter how vulgar, has been an obstacle to any cultural, much less political, protest.

More specific than this general climate of prosperity has been the tiredness of the liberal, living off the worn-out rubble of his rhetoric; and, along with this, the disappointment of the radical, from the turns of Soviet

institutions away from their early promise to all the defeats that have followed in the thirty years of crisis and the deflation of radicalism.

The tiredness of the liberal and the deflation of radicalism are in themselves causes of the search for some kind of a more conservative point of view. It is good, many seem to feel, to relax and to accept. To undo the bow and to fondle the bowstring. It is good also, perhaps, because of the generally flush state of the writers and thinkers, for we should not forget that American intellectuals, however we may define them, are also personally involved in the general level of prosperity. To this we must also add the plain and fancy fright of many who once spoke boldly; the attacks upon civil liberties have touched deeply their anxieties and have prodded them to search for new modes of acceptance.

These are sources of the conservative impulse from the standpoint of the old left and liberal centers—to which most of the intellectuals have felt themselves to belong. From the right of center, there have also been impulses—impulses that were always there, perhaps, but which have come out into large print and ample publicity only in the post-war epoch. First of all there are interests which no matter what their prosperity require defending, primarily large business interests, and along with this, there is the need, which is felt by many spokesmen and scholars as great, for cultural prestige abroad. One prime result of the increased travel abroad by scholars, stemming from the anti-American rebuffs they have experienced, is the need to defend in some terms the goodness of American life. And these little episodes have occurred in a large context of power: a context in which the economic and military and political power of the U. S. greatly exceeds her cultural prestige, and is so felt by the more acute politicians and statesmen at home and abroad.

The campaign conservatives will continue to go in for public relations more than for ideology. Just now they do not really feel the need for any ideology; later a conservative ideology of the kinds we have been discussing will appeal to no one. The radical humanist will continue to believe that men collectively can and ought to be their own history-makers and that men individually can to some extent and should try fully to create their own biographies. For those who still retain this minimum definition, the current attempts to create a conservative ideology do not constitute any real problem.

In the meantime, political decisions are occurring, as it were, without benefit of political ideas; mind and reality are two separate realms; America—a conservative country without any conservative ideology—appears before the world a naked and arbitrary power.