

Russell Kirk

CONSERVATIVE MIND. FROM BURKE TO ELIOT

The Idea of Conservatism

“The stupid party”: this is John Stuart Mill’s description of conservatives. Like certain other summary dicta which nineteenth-century liberals thought to be forever triumphant, his judgment needs review in our age of disintegrating liberal and radical notions. Certainly many dull and unreflecting people have lent their inertia to the cause of conservatism: “It is commonly sufficient for practical purposes if conservatives, without saying anything, just sit and think, or even if they merely sit,” F.J.C. Hearnshaw observed. Edmund Burke, the greatest of modern conservative thinkers, was not ashamed to acknowledge the allegiance of humble men whose sureties are prejudice and prescription; for, with affection, he likened them to cattle under the English oaks, deaf to the insects of radical innovation. But the conservative principle has been defended, these past two centuries, by men of learning and genius. To review conservative ideas, examining their validity for this perplexed age, is the purpose of this book, which does not pretend to be a history of conservative parties. This study is a prolonged essay in definition. What is the essence of British and American conservatism? What sentiments, common to England and the United States, have sustained men of conservative impulse in their resistance against radical theories and social transformation ever since the beginning of the French Revolution?

Walk beside the Liffey in Dublin, a little way east of the dome of the Four Courts, and you come to an old doorway in a blank wall. This is the roofless wreck

of an eighteenth-century house, and until recently the house still was here, inhabited although condemned: Number 12, Arran Quay, formerly a brick building of three stories, which began as a gentleman's residence, sank to the condition of a shop, presently was used as a governmental office of the meaner sort, and was demolished in 1950 – a history suggestive of changes on a mightier scale in Irish society since 1729. For in that year, Edmund Burke was born here. Modern Dublin's memories do not extend much beyond the era of O'Connell, and the annihilation of Burke's birth-place seems to have stirred up no protest. Still more recently many of the other old houses along the Quays have been demolished; indeed most of the eighteenth-century town falls into dereliction. The physical past shrivels. Behind Burke's house (or the sad scrap of it that remains), toward the old church of St. Michan in which, they say, he was baptised, stretch tottering brick slums where barefoot children scramble over broken walls. If you turn toward O'Connell Street, an easy stroll takes you to the noble facade of Trinity College and the statues of Burke and Goldsmith; northward, near Parnell Square, you may hear living Irish orators proclaiming through amplifiers that they know how to lead the little streets against the great. And you may reflect, with Burke, "What shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue!"

Since Burke's day, there have been alterations aplenty in Dublin. Yet to the visitor, Ireland sometimes seems a refuge of tradition amidst the flux of our age, and Dublin a conservative old city; and so they are. A world that damns tradition, exalts equality, and welcomes change; a world that has clutched at Rousseau, swallowed him whole, and demanded prophets yet more radical; a world smudged by industrialism, standardized by the masses, consolidated by government; a world crippled by war, trembling between the colossi of East and West, and peering over a smashed barricade into the gulf of dissolution: this, our era, is the society Burke foretold, with all the burning energy of his rhetoric, in 1790. By and large, radical thinkers have won the day. For a century and a half, conservatives have yielded ground in a manner which, except for occasionally successful rear-guard actions, must be described as a rout.

As yet the causes of their shattering defeat are not wholly clear. Two general explanations are possible, however: first, that throughout the modern world "*things* are in the saddle," and conservative ideas, however sound, cannot resist the unreasoning forces of industrialism, centralization, secularism, and the levelling impulse; second, that conservative thinkers have lacked perspicacity sufficient to meet the conundrums of modern times. And either explanation has some foundation.

This book is a criticism of conservative *thought*; and space does not allow any very thorough discussion of the material forces and political currents which have been at once the forcing-bed and the harvest of conservative ideas. For similar reasons, one can deal only laconically with the radical adversaries of conservatism. But there are good political histories of the years since 1790, and the doctrines of liberalism and radicalism are sufficiently established in the popular mind; while conservatism has had few historians. Although the study of French and German

conservative ideas (linked with British and American thought by the debt to Burke of Maistre, Bonald, Guizot, Gentz, Metternich, and a dozen other men of high talents) is full of interest, that subject is too intricate for treatment here; only Tocqueville, out of all the Continental men of ideas, has been properly recognized in this volume, and he chiefly because of his enduring influence upon Americans and Englishmen.

The Conservative Mind, then, is confined to British and American thinkers who have stood by tradition and old establishments. Only Britain and America, among the great nations, have escaped revolution since 1790, which seems attestation that their conservatism is a sturdy growth and that investigation of it may be rewarding. To confine the field more narrowly still, this book is an analysis of thinkers in the line of Burke. Convinced that Burke's is the true school of conservative principle, I have left out of consideration most anti-democratic Liberals like Lowe, most antigovernmental individualists like Spencer, most anti-parliamentary writers like Carlyle. Every conservative thinker discussed in the following chapters – even the Federalists who were Burke's contemporaries – felt the influence of the great Whig, although sometimes the ideas of Burke penetrated to them only through a species of intellectual filter.

Conscious conservatism, in the modern sense, did not manifest itself until 1790, with the publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In that year the prophetic powers of Burke fixed in the public consciousness, for the first time, the opposing poles of conservation and innovation. The Carmagnole announced the opening of our era, and the smoky energy of coal and steam in the north of England was the signal for another revolution. If one attempts to trace conservative ideas back to an earlier time in Britain, soon he is enmeshed in Whiggery, Toryism, and intellectual antiquarianism; for the modern issues, though earlier taking substance, were not yet distinct. Nor does the American struggle between conservatives and radicals become intense until Citizen Genet and Tom Paine transport across the Atlantic enthusiasm for French liberty: the American Revolution, substantially, had been a conservative reaction, in the English political tradition, against royal innovation. If one really must find a preceptor for conservatism who is older than Burke, he cannot rest satisfied with Bolingbroke, whose skepticism in religion disqualifies him, or with the Machiavellian Hobbes, or that old-fangled absolutist Filmer. Falkland, indeed, and Clarendon and Halifax and Strafford, deserve study; still more, in Richard Hooker one discovers profound conservative observations which Burke inherited with his Anglicanism and which Hooker drew in part from the Schoolmen and their authorities; but already one is back in the sixteenth century, and then in the thirteenth, and this book is concerned with modern problems. In any practical sense, Burke is the founder of our conservatism.

Canning and Coleridge and Scott and Southey and Wordsworth owed their political principles to the imagination of Burke; Hamilton and John Adams read Burke in America, and Randolph promulgated Burke's ideas in the Southern states.

Burke's French disciples adopted the word "conservative," which Croker, Canning, and Peel clapped to the great party that no longer was Tory or Whig, once the followers of Pitt and Portland had joined forces. Tocqueville applied the wisdom of Burke to his own liberal ends; Macaulay copied the reforming talents of his model. And these men passed on the tradition of Burke to succeeding generations. With such a roster of pupils, Burke's claim to speak for the real conservative genius should be difficult to deny. Yet scholars of some eminence have endeavored to establish Hegel as a kind of coadjutor to Burke. "Sir," said Samuel Johnson concerning Hume, "the fellow is a Tory by chance." Hegel's conservatism is similarly accidental, as Tocqueville remarks: "Hegel exacted submission to the ancient established powers of his own time; which he held to be legitimate, not only from existence, but from their origin. His scholars wished to establish powers of another kind [...]. From this Pandora's box have escaped all sorts of moral disease from which the people are still suffering. But I have remarked that a general reaction is taking place against this sensual and socialist philosophy." Schlegel, Gorres, and Stolberg – and Taine's school, in France – were admirers of both Hegel and Burke, which perhaps explains the confounding of their superficial resemblance with their fundamental inimicality. Hegel's metaphysics would have been as abhorrent to Burke as his style; Hegel himself does not seem to have read Burke; and people who think that these two men represent different facets of the same system are in danger of confusing authoritarianism (in the political sense) with conservatism. Marx could draw upon Hegel's magazine; he could find nothing to suit him in Burke.

But such distinctions are more appropriate in a concluding chapter than in a preface. Just now, a preliminary definition of the conservative idea is required.

Any informed conservative is reluctant to condense profound and intricate intellectual systems to a few pretentious phrases; he prefers to leave that technique to the enthusiasm of radicals. Conservatism is not a fixed and immutable body of dogmata; conservatives inherit from Burke a talent for re-expressing their convictions to fit the time. As a working premise, nevertheless, one can observe here that the essence of social conservatism is preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity. Conservatives respect the wisdom of their ancestors (this phrase was Strafford's, and Hooker's, before Burke illuminated it); they are dubious of wholesale alteration. They think society is a spiritual reality, possessing an eternal life but a delicate constitution: it cannot be scrapped and recast as if it were a machine. "What is conservatism?" Abraham Lincoln inquired once. "Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried?" It is that, but it is more. F.J.C. Hearnshaw, in his *Conservatism in England*, lists a dozen principles of conservatives, but possibly these may be comprehended in a briefer catalogue. I think that there are six canons of conservative thought.

(1) Belief in a transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems. A narrow rationality, what Coleridge called the Understanding, cannot of

itself satisfy human needs. "Every Tory is a realist," says Keith Feiling: "he knows that there are great forces in heaven and earth that man's philosophy cannot plumb or fathom." True politics is the art of apprehending and applying the Justice which ought to prevail in a community of souls.

(2) Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence, as opposed to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems; conservatives resist what Robert Graves calls "Logicalism" in society. This prejudice has been called "the conservatism of enjoyment" – a sense that life is worth living, according to Walter Bagehot "the proper source of an animated Conservatism."

(3) Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes, as against the notion of a "classless society." With reason, conservatives often have been called "the party of order." If natural distinctions are effaced among men, oligarchs fill the vacuum. Ultimate equality in the judgment of God, and equality before courts of law, are recognized by conservatives; but equality of condition, they think, means equality in servitude and boredom.

(4) Persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked: separate property from private possession, and Leviathan becomes master of all. Economic levelling, they maintain, is not economic progress.

(5) Faith in prescription and distrust of "sophisters, calculators, and economists" who would reconstruct society upon abstract designs. Custom, convention, and old prescription are checks both upon man's anarchic impulse and upon the innovator's lust for power.

(6) Recognition that change may not be salutary reform: hasty innovation may be a devouring conflagration, rather than a torch of progress. Society must alter, for prudent change is the means of social preservation; but a statesman must take Providence into his calculations, and a statesman's chief virtue, according to Plato and Burke, is prudence.

Various deviations from this body of opinion have occurred, and there are numerous appendages to it; but in general conservatives have adhered to these convictions or sentiments with some consistency, for two centuries. To catalogue the principles of their opponents is more difficult. At least five major schools of radical thought have competed for public favor since Burke entered politics: the rationalism of the *philosophes*, the romantic emancipation of Rousseau and his allies, the utilitarianism of the Benthamites, the positivism of Comte's school, and the collectivistic materialism of Marx and other socialists. This list leaves out of account those scientific doctrines, Darwinism chief among them, which have done so much to undermine the first principles of a conservative order. To express these several radicalisms in terms of a common denominator probably is presumptuous, foreign to the philosophical tenets of conservatism. All the same, in a hastily generalizing fashion one may say that radicalism since 1790 has tended to attack the prescriptive arrangement of society on the following grounds.

The perfectibility of man and the illimitable progress of society: meliorism. Radicals believe that education, positive legislation, and alteration of environment can produce men like gods; they deny that humanity has a natural proclivity toward violence and sin.

(1) Contempt for tradition. Reason, impulse, and materialistic determinism are severally preferred as guides to social welfare, trustier than the wisdom of our ancestors. Formal religion is rejected and various ideologies are presented as substitutes.

(2) Political levelling. Order and privilege are condemned; total democracy, as direct as practicable, is the professed radical ideal. Allied with this spirit, generally, is a dislike of old parliamentary arrangements and an eagerness for centralization and consolidation.

(3) Economic levelling. The ancient rights of property, especially property in land, are suspect to almost all radicals; and collectivistic reformers hack at the institution of private property root and branch.

As a fifth point, one might try to define a common radical view of the state's function; but here the chasm of opinion between the chief schools of innovation is too deep for any satisfactory generalization. One can only remark that radicals unite in detesting Burke's description of the state as ordained of God, and his concept of society as joined in perpetuity by a moral bond among the dead, the living, and those yet to be born – the community of souls.

So much for preliminary delineation. The radical, when all is said, is a neoterrorist, in love with change; the conservative, a man who says with Joubert, *Ce sont les crampons qui unissent une generation a une autre* – these ancient institutions of politics and religion. *Conservez ce qu'ont vu vos peres*. If one seeks by way of definition more than this, the sooner he turns to particular thinkers, the safer ground he is on. In the following chapters, the conservative is described as statesman, as critic, as metaphysician, as man of letters. Men of imagination, rather than party leaders, determine the ultimate course of things, as Napoleon knew; and I have chosen my conservatives accordingly. There are some conservative thinkers – Lord Salisbury and Justice Story, for instance – about whom I would have liked to write more; some interesting disciples of Burke, among them Arnold, Morley, and Bryce, I have omitted because they were not regular conservatives. But the main stream of conservative ideas is followed from 1790 to 1986.

In a revolutionary epoch, sometimes men taste every novelty, sicken of them all, and return to ancient principles so long disused that they seem refreshingly hearty when they are rediscovered. History often appears to resemble a roulette wheel; there is truth in the old Greek idea of cycles, and round again may come the number which signifies a conservative order. One of those flaming clouds which we deny to the Deity but arrogate to our own employment may erase our present elaborate constructions so abruptly as the tocsin in the Faubourg St. Germain terminated an age equally tired of itself. Yet this roulette-wheel simile would be repugnant to Burke (or to John Adams), who knew history to be the unfolding of a Design. The

true conservative thinks of this process, which looks like chance or fate, as, rather, the providential operation of a moral law of polarity. And Burke, could he see our century, never would concede that a consumption-society, so near to suicide, is the end for which Providence has prepared man. If a conservative order is indeed to return, we ought to know the tradition which is attached to it, so that we may rebuild society; if it is not to be restored, still we ought to understand conservative ideas so that we may rake from the ashes what scorched fragments of civilization escape the conflagration of unchecked will and appetite.

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