
The American Conservative Character

Author(s): Russell Kirk

Source: *The Georgia Review*, FALL - 1954, Vol. 8, No. 3 (FALL - 1954), pp. 249-260

Published by: Georgia Review

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41397759>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Georgia Review*

JSTOR

The American Conservative Character

By RUSSELL KIRK

THE word “new” always makes me uncomfortable, for I would have asked God to conserve Chaos, and have stormed Heaven with the Titans for the sake of old Cronos. I am by no means happy, therefore, to find various journalists and critics writing of the “New Conservatives” in the United States—as if they were a coherent sect of political economists. The cardinal principle of conservative thought is the conviction that *new* systems and structures incline dangerously toward presumption; the true conservative wants no share in an undertaking that is wholly new. He requires that continuity, rather, which links the dead, the living, and those yet unborn. Yet it is true that a conservative movement of imposing proportions seems to be stirring with a fresh vigor in this country, at least in the world of letters and speculation. My own book *The Conservative Mind* has gone into a fourth printing within a year of its publication, and a similarly cordial reception was given to several other American books of a conservative tendency, recently—Dean Nisbet’s *The Quest for Community*, Mr. Clinton Rossiter’s *Seedtime of the Republic*, Mr. Daniel J. Boorstin’s *The Genius of American Politics*, Mr. Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences*, the writings of Mr. Peter Viereck, President Gordon Chalmers’ *The Republic and the Person*. I believe that more than eight thousand copies have been sold of Mr. A. H. Hobbs’ *Social Problems and Scientism*. There is a movement unmistakably conservative at work in the realm of education; and among the ranks of thinkers professedly liberal, from Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr to Mr. Jacques Barzun, an inclination toward conservative liberalism, rather than radical liberalism, may be discerned. The word “conservative” is become a term of approbation in most quarters. We have come a long way since 1932, I think, so that the American Manchesterians of the pre-Roosevelt years often are less doctrinaire than they were, and so that the American radicals are now far less intolerant of things established. I am not altogether pleased at this tendency, however; I should be sorry to see the United States of America settle for a conservatism of the *juste milieu*. True conservatism is not a mere splitting the difference.

I hope, then, that our resurgent American conservatism will not be truly new, looking toward a wave of the future, but rather a genuine revival of intelligent interest in the old liberties and duties of American society. I hope, moreover, that it will be not merely a shop-and-till conservatism, a conservatism of timidity, but instead a conservatism of imagination, generous and charitable. I hope it will not be a clumsy muddling through our national problems, in contempt of principle, but on the contrary a conservatism illuminated by the wisdom of our ancestors and inspired by a revived consciousness of the moral nature of society.

We Americans were from the first a people endowed with strong conservative prejudices, immeasurably influenced by the spirit of religious veneration, firm in a traditional morality, hostile to arbitrary power whether exercised by a monarch or a mob, zealous to guard against centralization, sedulously eager to retain prescriptive rights, convinced of the immense value of the institution of private property. The best men in our political life, like Calhoun and like Lincoln, generally desired to be considered conservatives. Our outwardly radical movements, like Populism, have commonly been underlaid by certain conservative motives. Doctrinaire socialism never has been able to win many converts among us. Our occasional professions of egalitarianism have been given the lie by our actual conduct of affairs. We have submitted ourselves with good will to the most successful conservative device in the history of politics, the Federal Constitution, so that it is no accident that we now constitute the chief conservative power among the nations. None of our great parties has long been dominated by genuine radicals, and all of them have always contained true and influential conservatives to keep the doctrinaires in check. Our native conservatism extends to every class and interest in our society. I think, then, that we have reason to be proud of the healthy and continuous existence of conservative principles among us, for three centuries; and I hope that we will act today in the light of this long conservative development, and not lust after abstract new doctrines, whether we call those abstractions "conservative" or "liberal" or "radical." I do not really want a *new* conservatism, but rather an illumination and renewed recognition of the lofty conservative concepts and realities which have sustained our nation so long.

Now Mr. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., writing in the quarterly journal *Confluence*, remarks that "The aim of the New Conservatives is to

transform conservatism from a negative philosophy of niggling and self-seeking into an affirmative movement of healing and revival, based on a living sense of human relatedness and on a dedication to public as against class interests, all to be comprehended in a serious and permanent philosophy of social and national responsibility." This is well put, and I do not quarrel with Mr. Schlesinger's description. I think it important, however, to make sure that certain possible implications of Mr. Schlesinger's essay are not wrongly interpreted. First of all, I do not believe that true American conservatism has ordinarily been "a negative philosophy of niggling and self-seeking." Many of the people who think this are suffering from a delusion semantic and historical in its sources. I never cease to be surprised at the prevalence of the notion, even among professors of history and politics, that the word "conservatism" means a doctrinaire attachment to the accumulation of private wealth, an inclination toward political centralization, and a glorying in ruthless competition. These beliefs, whether or not they are consonant with one another, are none of them articles of conservative conviction. It is under the influence of these vague concepts of conservatism that people who ought to know better describe John W. Burgess, or Francis Lieber, or William Graham Sumner, as conservatives. I do not propose to discuss here the several merits or defects of these men. All of them had certain opinions which were conservative in their general tendency, no doubt. They all believed in private property, as do all conservatives. But in plain historical fact, these individuals, and many more whom the opponents of things established try to label "conservatives," are simply liberals of various schools—chiefly of the Manchesterian or German varieties. Their opinions may have been sound, or they may have been erroneous; but conservatism does not stand or fall by their principles; it is quite a different system of belief. The corruption of the meaning of important words has been one of the most ominous and confusing symptoms of the decay of the higher learning in our time. We can get nowhere in politics, or in any other field of endeavor, until we can define our terms. We ought to be careful, then, not to confound the traditional conservatism of our nation with certain nineteenth-century liberal dogmas promulgated by Bentham or the Mills.

Nor do true conservatives seek to harden the conservative impulse into a set of dogmas. I hope that they do not despise philosophy; and I am sure that Mr. Schlesinger does not mean by "a serious and perma-

ment philosophy" such a system of abstract doctrines as the Benthamites professed. Mr. Daniel Boorstin recently warned us against the danger of attempting to force "the American Way of Life," as an abstract political concept, upon all the world. We need more such cautionary voices. Prudence and humility are the virtues of the successful conservative statesman, who does not mistake abstractions for principles.

With these qualifications, Mr. Schlesinger's summary of the aims of thinking conservatives today is acute. But Mr. Schlesinger believes that the New Conservatives—his term, not mine, for I do not think that there really is sufficient coherence of opinion and endeavor among our thinking conservatives to justify their being designated as a sect—suffer from impracticality and an historical confusion. One cannot trace a regular line of consistent conservative leaders in American history, he says; besides, "the New Conservatives, for all their ardent conviction that philosophy must be precipitated out of the actual circumstances of society and the concrete life of the people, remain astonishingly indifferent to the actual circumstances of *American* society and to the concrete life of the *American* people." Then, too, America never had a feudal system, and so lacks the aristocratic traditions which gave force to European conservatism. Mr. Schlesinger insists that "as feudalism was the central fact in European conservatism, so the business community must be the central fact in American conservatism." The New Conservatives either must align themselves with the businessmen, therefore, he continues, or else with what he calls "the party of the people" (at present, apparently, the minority party). "The true obligation of the New Conservatives is to illuminate the limits and potentialities of business rule in America, and not to reproduce the agreeable but irrelevant sentiments of European conservatism."

So, after all, Mr. Schlesinger slips into the errors of the Jacobins—especially the Jacobin passion for simplicity. The dominant aspiration of the French revolutionaries was for simplicity of structure and concept; it was no mere coincidence that they detested Gothic architecture. And Mr. Schlesinger, in his desire to reduce the complexity of American politics to black-and-white abstractions, lops away from his concept of the contesting forces in our country every branch or twig that does not suit his *a priori* system, so that when he has finished, we are left with the Hard, Practical Industrialist confronting the Civil-Liberties, Democratic Liberal. This is bathos. First of all, Mr. Schlesinger has confused the Conservatives (who did not exist before 1790, and

did not take the name for more than two decades after) with the Tories; then he has supposed that the conservative interest was *identical* with that of the landed proprietors, an error of fact; then he has ignored the conservative interest in America which never had much sympathy with industrial aggrandizement; then he has eliminated from consideration the conservative elements in the Democratic party; then he has implied that the New Conservatives know nothing of Real Life in these states; and at last, after such a series of ingenuous bounds, he leaves us with the interesting alternatives of serving Mammon or serving The People.

Mr. C. Wright Mills takes rather the same line, I am told, in a recent review of my book; indeed, this seems to be the general plan of campaign for liberals alarmed at the increasing influence of conservatives in the realm of thought. The liberal, who used to pride himself upon his superiority to base mechanical fact, now will pose as the shrewd realist, his feet planted in the warm earth of traditional American life; and he will reproach the conservative philosophy as (in Mr. Schlesinger's words), "a hothouse growth, cherished by romantic intellectuals and rightly ignored by conservatives who mean business." This attitude is reasonably clever, but I do not think that it will go down. The problems of our time are too pressing for the liberals to maintain their ascendancy merely by stealing the clothes of the conservatives.

Now I believe that conservatives are not merely a sect of political economists, but rather a number of persons, of all classes and occupations, whose view of life is reverential, and who tend to be guided by the wisdom of their ancestors, rather than by abstract speculation. To attempt to identify the true conservative with the hard-headed man of business is to substitute what sociologists love to call a "stereotype" for careful analysis of American society—in short, it is an error precisely of the sort which Mr. Schlesinger attributes to the conservative writers. The American businessman is a being caricatured out of all reality, for good or evil, by his undiscerning enemies and his adulatory partisans. He is immensely important, it is true, to the cause of American conservatism, and so needs to be examined with reasonable impartiality. Nevertheless, American conservatism does not depend exclusively upon him for leadership and sustenance. The United States possess no regular class or interest of the sort that Matthew Arnold called "the barbarians"—that is, the landed gentry; yet old families are not without

their influence, and gentlemen of substantial private means are not yet an extinct breed, and probably the number of persons endowed with leisure by the inheritance of wealth is larger than it used to be. An upper class, though amorphous, does still carry some weight in political life. Often these representatives of the American upper class are men whose names are quite unknown outside their little towns or their immediate circle of friends and admirers; yet the role of these persons in moderating judgments ought not to be ignored, for—as Bagehot wrote of such obscure men of strong character and broad views—it is they, in their corners of the land, who give form to what is called **enlightened public opinion**. Nor ought the influence of farmers and farm organizations upon the conservative cause to be forgotten; nor the influence of professors, journalists, and writers, that element which Gissing called “the unclassed.” All the same, the businessman remains a great prop of American conservatism.

Yet how many industrialists and financiers take any interest in general ideas? How many know anything about politics? How many, indeed, are really conservative? The fact that the Democratic party, during Mr. Truman’s administration, often found it easier to raise money for its campaigns than did the Republican suggests that a great many men of wealth are interested simply in obtaining influence with whatever party is in power, and also that some of the most influential men of business rather like to pose as friends of the levelling movement, in which role they are flattered by the liberal intellectuals. For a long while, the American man of business, generally speaking, has been intent upon getting and spending to the exclusion of almost every cultural and social interest; thus, when he is compelled by the exigencies of the hour to turn his attention to politics, he tends either to be easy game for the wiles of the evangelists of collectivistic “progress,” or else he entrenches himself behind the dogmas of Manchesterian economic theory, recollected from his youth or learnt from some publicist, and remains densely ignorant of the nature of true conservatism. He becomes a Marxist without knowing it, by accepting theories of economic determinism and of the primacy of economics. Indeed, he actually embraces the term “capitalist” (a denigrative word coined by Marx) and is so foolish as to declare that the only important question in politics is a contest between “capitalism and communism”—which, since both these concepts were originated by Marx, is very like the famous battle between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Such

are his professions; but his actual prejudices are much more generous and sound, commonly, than the confused opinions he utters. In his heart, the businessman is really a conservative, substantially; but he understands neither himself nor his era. In the whole American nation, perhaps, there are not a hundred important businessmen who take an intelligent interest in the problems of modern society. And of those who have recently awakened to the necessity for shoring up traditional society, perhaps the majority are adherents only to what Bagehot calls "the conservatism of fear."

The American businessman is inordinately vain. He has reason to be proud of his prodigious industry and of an efficiency equalled, perhaps, only in Germany; but he has reason to be ashamed of his record as a cultured man. Far more than the English middle classes of Arnold's time, American businessmen are Philistines. It is the businessman's very ignorance of general ideas that renders him perilously susceptible to flattery. A new sort of adulation is being tendered to him, just now: the praise of certain eminent "liberals" who used to be enthusiasts for Big Government, but (always anxious to move with the wave of the future) are now become enthusiasts for Big Business. Liberals, or ex-liberals, of this stamp love magnitude, aggrandizement, and centralization for their own sake; and whether they praise the state or the successful capitalist, their cast of mind is hostile to true conservatism. The businessman who indulges this species of adulation runs the risk of finding himself supplanted, one morning, by the commissar.

A conservative order is not the creation of the free entrepreneur; rather, the modern man of business exists only because a conservative order recognizes the importance of his function. Here and there, the industrialist and the banker are opening their eyes to the truth that their security, and the security of our whole society, depend upon an understanding of the first principles of moral and social order; and they may begin to apply their energies to something more than quantitative material production. One such industrialist happens to be a friend of mine—an old-fashioned manufacturer, a religious man, with a strong will, and a strong respect for the pagan and the Christian virtues. By long experience of the world, he has learned the true meaning of justice—"To each man the things which his nature fits him for." He is not a sentimentalist or an equalitarian; but he is a generous and honest man. He knows commutative justice, and thus the necessity for the reign of law. Wiser than most educationists, he knows

that society is not a machine, to be tinkered with at a whim; society, instead, is a delicate growth, kept in tolerable health only because some conscientious men devote their lives to conserving the moral ideas and political rights and economic advantages we have inherited from our ancestors. His practicality informs him that slogans like "human right" and "absolute liberty" and "social justice" and "fair share for all" do not have meaning unless they are attached to particular proposals; he distrusts the abstractions of liberalism. My friend, in short, is a good conservative.

But he is not the only type of American conservative. Another friend of mine is a farmer with a face like leather, who owns eighty or a hundred acres of stony ground, upon which, by much exertion, he raises potatoes and beans and cucumbers, and keeps a few cows. He resents any endeavor to convert him into another sort of man than the being he is by nature and circumstance. He wants to live as his father lived before him, and to bring up his children in his own ways. He knows that it is highly imprudent to disturb a thing that is at rest, unless one has some powerful motive; he retains a suspicion of most change, though he understands that some change must occur in society, just as the human body exhausts its old tissues and acquires new. But he is convinced that certain moral axioms never can be discarded with impunity, and that some mysterious continuity governs the destinies of mankind, as surely as the seasons follow their cycle. A hater of centralization, a lover of old customs and old stories, in his little community he stands out with some success against the ascendancy of the mass-mind and against the threatened conversion of society into a mere state-directed economic operation. He understands the idea of the Republic, a government of laws and not of men, and so he would confine the operation of government within prescriptive bounds. Although my farmer friend is not much read in political theory, still he is a conservative of reflection.

The point I am endeavoring to make is this: the people in America whom we call "conservatives" are not restricted to particular classes or occupations. In a popular magazine, recently, I observed a reference to "the rich conservatives, the well-off liberals, and the poor laboring men." This notion is nonsense. We all know the names of a half-dozen radical millionaires, and some working men are fiercely conservative, and the well-to-do may be anything under the sun. Conservatism and liberalism and radicalism are states of mind, not of the pocketbook.

The United States, I think, throughout their history, have been a nation substantially conservative, though rich men have exerted less direct influence upon government here than almost anywhere else in the world.

Yet though conservatism has had an old and honorable function in American life, the very meaning of that word was forgotten by many Americans until recent years. Only now are leaders in national and state politics plucking up courage enough to call themselves conservatives. The people of the United States became the chief conservative nation of the world at the very time when they had almost ceased to call themselves conservatives at home. For a generation, the word "liberal" had been in fashion, particularly in universities and among journalists. The liberal, in American parlance, has been a man in love with change, commonly a pragmatist; he has tended to despise the wisdom of our ancestors and to look forward confidently to an endless vista of material progress, in which a general equality of condition will be enforced. But the First World War disturbed the complacency of the liberal; the rise of the totalitarian states and the coming of the Second World War shook his liberalism to its foundations; and the spectacle of Soviet Russia, together with certain alarming indications of decadence in most of Western society, put an end to the popular ascendancy of liberalism.

Mr. Clinton Rossiter and other writers have reminded us, recently, of the profoundly conservative tendency of the thought of colonial leaders and of the founders of the Republic. The conservatism of the early Republic, North and South, found its best expression in the writings of John Adams and James Madison. Sir Henry Maine remarks that the most successfully conservative device in the history of politics is the Federal Constitution. That conservatism has leavened our nation ever since, through the eloquence and the labors of men so various as John Randolph, John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Stephens, Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, and the present generation of Republican and Democratic leaders. They differed greatly, many of them, as to particular policies and expedients; but they differed little enough in their opinion of human nature, the aims of life, and the rights and privileges of the civil social existence. We have always repudiated the doctrinaire radical, here in America, whenever such a man seemed anxious for power. The very heroes of liberal adulation have had

a strongly conservative streak in their nature: Wilson was the disciple of Burke, and no man was more inflexibly conservative in his prejudices than Bryan.

Yet Mr. Schlesinger couples with a compliment to certain conservative writers this remarkable assertion: "The intellectual traditions of American conservatism, never particularly strong, had been unusually weak in the last generation. When things had gone well, conservatism had generally amounted to little more than a complacent endorsement of the status quo; when things had gone badly, it tended to shrink into a shamed and stammering apoloia. It had rarely dared articulate a broader social philosophy. The longer traditions, the deeper analyses, the higher hopes, had been typically left to the liberals." Now Mr. Schlesinger has good reason to lament the decay of true conservatism among statesmen between 1923 and 1953, let us say; but it is surprising that he should speak of that period as deficient in conservative *thinkers*, when it was the time during which the influence and the powers of Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt (the first decade of that period, at least) were at their height, and when the Southern Agrarian writers were doing their finest work. Though conservatism has been routed, now and then, in American practical politics, it never has lacked men of genius to defend its claims in the realm of the mind; our conservatism has been a continuous and native growth in these United States. It is no wonder that the present role and impulse of the United States is profoundly conservative. Americans have more to conserve, probably, than have any other modern people. Conservatism here never has been a mere affair of party programs or of special interests. We have all felt ourselves to be partners in the gigantic concern of American society, whether our share in that partnership, materially, was large or small. The majority of our conservatives have been men of slender means and obscure station. These conservatives have not been inspired primarily by a devotion to "free competition" or "the American standard of living"; instead, they have felt that the American Republic conferred upon them justice, order, and security in the things that were their own. What gives our conservatives their present strength in this time of troubles is their belief in a moral order which joins all classes in a common purpose, and through which men may live justly and freely. That radicalism leads simply to the triumph of squalid oligarchs is sufficiently manifest now in more than half the world; that liberalism, as Santayana suggested a generation ago, is simply

a transitory phenomenon, a weakening of the traditional order in preparation for an arbitrary collectivism, the present state of the British liberal party and the confusion of American liberals sufficiently attest.

Yet these high conservative values, and this great reservoir of conservative strength, were neglected or misdirected during the past two decades and more. Mr. August Heckscher, in his essay entitled "Where Are the American Conservatives?" in last September's *Confluence*, describes the doctrinaire pseudo-conservatism which afflicted both Republican and Democratic parties during the Age of Roosevelt:

The concept of a pure conservatism, its pattern "laid up in heaven," was an illusion; it was in fact the same illusion that had possessed the Liberals and the Utopian democrats through the nineteenth century. That the conservatives should have fallen under its spell was particularly strange, for traditionally the conservatives mistrust an excessive rationalism—they know that the world moves by habit, by values, by inherited faith, quite as much as it moves by getting new ideas. The conservatives, when they are in their right mind, avoid tearing up the roots of something they do not like almost as instinctively as they avoid tearing up the roots of institutions and procedures of which they approve.

This notion of a "pure conservatism" is a delusion shared, too, by a good many liberal critics of conservatism, who fancy they are demolishing the principles of the true conservatives when in reality they are destroying nothing more than their own Benthamite or Manchesterian roots. I think that intelligent conservatives in the United States, within universities and outside universities, now are reawakened to the real nature of the conservative philosophy, which is marked by principle and prudence, not by abstraction and obstinacy; and I trust that intelligent liberals soon will abandon vulgar slogans and dull stereotypes for a lively and valuable criticism of the conservative spirit.

I think that the old conservative character of the American people is marked by these qualities:

(1) A general belief in an order that is more than human, which has implanted in man a character of mingled good and evil, susceptible of improvement only by an inner working, not by mundane schemes for perfectibility. This conviction lies at the heart of American respect for the past, as the record of Providential purpose.

(2) An affection for variety and complexity and individuality, even

for singularity, which has exerted a powerful check upon the political tendency toward what Tocqueville calls "democratic despotism."

(3) A conviction that justice, properly defined, means "to each the things that go with his nature," not a levelling equality; and joined with this is a correspondent respect for private property of every sort.

(4) A suspicion of concentration of power, and a consequent attachment to our federal principle and to division and balancing of power at every level of government.

(5) A reliance upon private endeavor and sagacity in nearly every walk of life, together with a contempt for the abstract designs of the collectivistic reformer.

(6) A prejudice against organic change, a feeling that it is unwise to break radically with political prescription, an inclination to tolerate what abuses may exist in present institutions out of a practical acquaintance with the violent and unpredictable nature of doctrinaire reform.

I am well aware that American character is complex, and that along with these conservative threads are woven certain innovating and even radical threads. I know, too, that national character is formed, in part, by the circumstances of history and the conditions of environment, so that such a character may alter, or even grow generally archaic. I know that certain powerful influences presently at work in American society are affecting this traditional character, for good or ill. Nevertheless, I think it is time we acknowledged the predominantly conservative cast of the American mind, since the inception of our Republic, and time we paid our respects to the strength and honesty of that character. We are not merely the pawns of impersonal historical influences; we have it in our power to preserve the best in our old institutions and our old opinions, even in this era of vertiginous change; and we will do well, I think, if we endeavor to govern ourselves, in the age that is dawning, by the prescriptive values in American character which have become almost our second nature.