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Liberals and Conservatives, 1789-1951

By PETER VIERECK

IN EUROPE liberalism and conservatism often correspond to two rival parties. Here nineteenth-century England is still the classic model. In twentieth-century America, conservatism and liberalism cannot be identified with such meaningless grab-bag labels as "Republican" and "Democrat." They exist as rival wings within each state organization of both American parties.

In America the meanings of liberalism and conservatism are blurred, sometimes to meaninglessness, always to vagueness. They are blurred by our empiricism, our distrust of theories, our political inconsistencies in both parties, reflecting at worst opportunism and at best the American zest for experiment. In that sense we are still very much the new-born republic for whom all Europe's isms are "wasms." But such a calculated contempt for isms and abstractions is itself an ism, and quite an abstract one. In the pious fervor of its faithlessness, it is a faith sometimes just as doctrinaire and stultifying as the European throne-and-altar dogmas scorned by American empiricists and pragmatists.

Any discussion of liberalism and conservatism, though it must end

The problem of what constitutes a desirable social program, as contrasted with one which merely identifies itself with traditionally-approved party labels or forward-sounding phrases, has been receiving increased attention. PETER VIERECK has taken the lead, of late, in reviving for fresh consideration what seem to him insufficiently appreciated aspects of conservatism. He teaches European history at Mt. Holyoke College and is also a poet (his latest volume *Strike Through the Mask*). His *Conservatism Revisited* (Scribner, 1949) attempted a new review of Metternich's personality and accomplishments. The present essay will appear with others in a volume tentatively called *The Devaluation of Values: Babbitt Junior vs. a New Conservatism* to be published by the Beacon Press. HEINZ EULAU, who takes issue with Mr. Viereck, is on leave from Antioch College on a Ford fellowship for the advancement of college teaching. PAUL BIXLER expresses his personal view of both Mr. Viereck's and Mr. Eulau's opinions.

in twentieth-century America, must begin in nineteenth-century Europe, where the contours of terminology are less shadowy.

Then and now, here or there, liberalism vs. conservatism is not the battle between right and wrong that both sides, in the drama of debate, may imagine it to be. It is a battle between right and right. For each shares an equally needed half of a unifying psychological and political truth. From the strained rhyme of the Gilbert and Sullivan opera, we learn:

. . . every boy and every gal
That's born into the world alive,
Is either a little Liberal,
Or else a little Conservative!

We may add that every democracy "born into the world alive," must be both liberal *and* conservative. In a free, law-abiding society, liberals and conservatives should battle each other sturdily within the peaceful parliamentary framework. But they should instantly stand united against violent unparliamentary threats from extremists of left or right; that is, from radicals or reactionaries, communists or fascists.

In an unhealthy, unstable society, liberals and conservatives are centrifugal rather than centripetal; tangential and rootless and outward-bound rather than (in Wordsworth's phrase)

Type of the wise who soar, but never roam;
True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home.

In consequence, such a polarized, uncentered society is finally rent asunder in the tug of war between opposite political extremes.

Examples of healthy societies, deeply and centrally rooted, are England, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Holland, and Belgium, where the western heritage was preserved and democracy attained. But what of countries where liberals and conservatives are constantly gravitating to radicalism and reaction respectively, to communism and to fascism? There the result is class war or ideological war, with the western heritage of freedom the victim of alternate terror from both sides. The most notorious example of this is Russia, alternating between the rightist extreme of tsarism and the leftist extreme of communism. Russia never attained a workable, parliamentary, middle way, except for the promising interlude of the Duma of 1905-1917.

LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES

During 1871-1951, Germany and France alternate between central and polarized societies, while England remains the former and Russia the latter. Germany inclines more to the authoritarian traditions of the army and the east. France inclines more to the parliamentary west, tempered by the man-on-horseback appeal of the Napoleons, Boulangers, and deGaulles.

All lawful civilized government, whether republic or monarchy, needs both liberals and conservatives, just as a well-functioning automobile needs both brakes and gas. Radicalism may be defined as a car going full speed ahead without brakes. Reaction may be defined as a car with the brakes jammed on so tight that it cannot move at all.

The British Lord Chancellor Viscount Jowitt once remarked, "No one can define a pretty girl; but, thank heaven, we all know one when we see her." Likewise, it has never been possible consistently to define and distinguish "liberal" and "conservative"; yet voters and historians usually manage to know them in practice. The difficulty is not the lack of definitions but the superfluity of definitions, often by abstract and doctrinaire theorists. The definitions of these two isms vary so widely because they depend:

- (1) on which country of Europe is under discussion;
- (2) on which decade of history is under discussion;
- (3) on which particular issue is under controversy.

For example, what is conservative in nineteenth-century western Europe (England or France) would seem daringly liberal in eastern Europe, especially in tsarist Russia. In turn, what is liberal in western Europe today (for example, liberal capitalist democracy) would seem reactionary to the twentieth-century of the Soviets, and would have seemed radical to the more feudal Russia of the tsars. Even within the Anglo-American west, time changes the meaning of these words. Twentieth-century New Deal liberals repudiate with a shudder, as somewhat to the right of Herbert Hoover, the middle-class laissez-faire capitalism of Gladstone (1809-98), founder of the British Liberal Party.

Nonetheless, "liberal" has certain enduring connotations since the days of the eighteenth-century rationalists and the nineteenth-century utilitarians. These connotations apply both to the Gladstonian "bourgeois" liberal and the modern anticapitalist liberal. Liberalism connotes an optimistic secular religion of progress; sometimes, but not always,

materialistic, hedonistic, and pragmatic; surely generous and idealistic, yet striking the conservative as often blind to the lessons of history. The conservative of the school of Edmund Burke (1727-97), Metternich (1773-1859), and Disraeli (1804-81) insists—often overinsists—on the need for unbroken organic continuity of historic development. The conservative opposes not all innovations but those innovations that are abstractly “enlightened” but in practice unworkable and disruptive because they have not evolved from the solid roots of past experience. That able Gladstonian liberal John Morley (1838-1923; Secretary of State for India, 1905-10) has given us an amusingly devastating definition of one kind of conservative:

. . . with his inexhaustible patience for abuses that only torment others; his apologetic words for beliefs that may not be so precisely true as one might wish, and institutions that are not altogether so useful as some might think possible; his cordiality towards progress and improvement in a general way, and his coldness or antipathy to each progressive proposal in particular; his pygmy hope that life will one day become somewhat better, punily shivering by the side of his gigantic conviction that it might well be infinitely worse.

It was mentioned earlier that different kinds of liberals may be distinguished from different kinds of conservatives according to which of various issues are under controversy. These issues include the following in both American and European disputes:

- (1) tempo of social change;
- (2) need for tradition;
- (3) faith in the masses and in the natural goodness of man;
- (4) feasibility of changing human nature;
- (5) importance of utilitarian motives (economics vs. “ideas” in history);
- (6) risk of extending full democratic privileges even to those engaged in forcibly destroying democracy;
- (7) conflict between liberty and a leveling equality;
- (8) absoluteness or relativeness of existing restraints and standards.

In ordinary times these eight issues justify vigorous disagreement and debate. They do not justify hotheaded suicidal disunity in these extraordinary times when parliamentary conservatives and parliamentary liberals must cooperate against an unappeasable communist police-state that would exterminate both.

II

The European catastrophe of 1789-1848, without which the ruthless militarism of 1870 would not have triumphed, is the mutual destruction of liberalism and conservatism between those two famous revolutions. Between 1789 and 1848, international liberalism and international conservatism, instead of uniting against militarist nationalism, fought some sixty years of civil war, interrupted by truces but never by real peace. First they fought each other in the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon; then in the European revolutions of 1820, 1830, 1848. Thereby each undermined the other's claims to the allegiance of that ancient international community known as Europe. Result: the international community of Europe, based on Hellenic, Roman, Judaic, and Christian traditions, ceased to exist. It broke up into exclusively national loyalties, a process that triumphed partly in 1848 and wholly in 1870, culminating in the two most destructive wars in history.

For this catastrophe, liberals and conservatives were both to blame. Conservatives, not in England but in Eastern and Central Europe, were too static and reactionary. They failed to see that timely reform (as the Austrian minister Metternich vainly warned his bigoted monarchs) was the only way to prevent revolution. In turn liberals—except in England, Scandinavia, Switzerland, etc.—were too breathlessly rapid and revolutionary. They failed to learn what an English Fabian Socialist has called “the inevitability of gradualness.” Especially in eastern and central Europe, they scorned the English liberal concept of “His Majesty's loyal opposition.” This in turn was more than half the fault of majesties who, like Alexander III of Russia, stubbornly treated even enlightened opposition as disloyal.

Either group, either international middle-class republican liberalism or international aristocratic Hapsburg conservatism, would have been better for the cause of peaceful international European unity than the militarist, racist nationalism that triumphed when these two rival internationalists destroyed each other.

Bonar Law (Conservative premier of England, 1923) once shocked a Conservative Party rally by giving a refreshingly facetious and irreverent definition of the two isms. Explaining that the difference was one of outlook rather than concrete program and that the real opposition was between the right and left wings within each opposing party, Bonar Law

informed his pious Conservative audience that they had all the stupid people on their side and the Liberals had all the cranks. In practice, the regular six-year alternation in office between the forward dashes of the clever "cranks" and the brake action of the solid "stupid people," has enabled England to "muddle through" with amazing success in maintaining civic peace and parliamentary government. Unfortunately foreign policy, being too delicate and too dangerous for muddling, has been most unsuccessful in twentieth-century Britain.

Let us quote at some length from one of the most perceptive analyses of this problem ever written, an analysis insufficiently known. In his book *The New Leviathan*, 1942, that wise historian and philosopher R. G. Collingwood explained the secret of England's successful parliamentary government as follows:

For most of the [nineteenth] century English political life was dominated by two parties, Liberal and Conservative. . . . To hasten the percolation of liberty throughout every part of the body politic was the avowed aim of the Liberal party; to retard it was the avowed aim of the Conservative party. . . . They were not fundamentally in disagreement. Both held it as an axiom that the process of percolation must go on. . . . Both knew that if it were too fast, and equally if it went too slow, the whole political life of the country would suffer. . . . Conservative policy was *not to stop* the vehicle but to slow it down when it seemed likely to go too fast.

. . . It is easy to bring *two* opposite criticisms against the two-party system. Each criticism *conceals a desire for tyranny*:

(1) *First, that the parties are rivals*, wasting in friction energy that would be more usefully spent in getting ahead with the work. But the two parties were not rivals. . . . They were united, and consciously united, in work which everyone in those days considered important: controlling the rate at which freedom percolated through the body politic. What the partisan of tyranny objects to is that freedom should percolate at all. . . .

(2) *Secondly, that the parties were not rivals*; that they merely posed as rivals, wasting energy in a pretense at rivalry. They were combining, says one [communism], to exploit the proletariat. They were combining, says another [fascism] or perhaps the same, to bolster up a cretinous parliamentary system. . . . But the two parties, though agreed on fundamentals, differed in function. One was charged by common consent with seeing that the process did not fall below the optimum velocity; the other that it did not exceed it. So two barristers may agree in resolving that justice shall be done; but they are charged with seeing that the court shall know what there is to be said for the plaintiff and for the defendant respectively.

The most remarkable event in our political history during the twentieth

LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES

century has been the eclipse of the Liberal party. Why did it happen? In a dialectical system it is essential that the representatives of each opposing view should understand why the other view must be represented. . . . The Conservative who described his party as a brake on the vehicle of progress understood that the vehicle must be propelled. Did any Liberal understand that it must have a brake? . . . I think not. . . . [Liberals] pictured themselves as dragging the vehicle of progress against the dead weight of human stupidity; and I think they believed Conservatives to be part of that dead weight. Conservatives understood that there must be a party of progress. Liberals, I think, never understood that there must be a party of reaction. . . . That, I suggest, was why the Liberal party disappeared. It was not because the Labour party arose and by degrees took its place as the party of progress; if the Liberal party had known its business, it would have absorbed the Labour party instead of being replaced by it. It was because the Liberals did not understand the dialectic of English politics.

III

In America a fascinating confusion has resulted from the fact that popular journalists improperly apply the term "conservative" to the *laissez-faire* economics which our Old Guard Republicans and N.A.M. have unconsciously derived from European liberalism.

It was Gladstone's Liberal Party, never the Conservatives, who espoused the *laissez-faire*, free trade, and free competition of Adam Smith and of the Manchester School. And on the continent, wherever the armies of the anticonservative French Revolution went, one of their first thoughts was to abolish the allegedly "outworn" guilds and establish *laissez-faire*. This was their means of establishing the middle class in power. It was one of their means, more effective than their guillotine, of overcoming the *antibourgeois* workers, aristocrats, peasants, and kings, with their systems of the just price, medieval guilds, or modern trade unions, as well as mere feudal restraint.

The liberation of capitalist energies and the strict legal ban on trade unions was one of the few consistent aspects of the French Revolution, from Jacobins and Girondists through the Directorate. Everyone knows the guillotine devoured aristocrats, espousing monarchy, and the priests, espousing ultramontaniam. It is often forgotten today that the Jacobin guillotine of Robespierre and the rest was likewise devouring countless workingmen espousing trade unions. (Cf. the researches of Professor

R. R. Palmer of Princeton University on Jacobin laissez-faire capitalism and Jacobin execution of worker representatives.)

Neither then nor today has the middle-class businessman succeeded in convincing either workers, farmers, priests, or aristocrats of the mystical, self-regulating perfection of laissez-faire. Instead, humane social laws—whether for “radical” or “medieval” reasons—were increasingly introduced throughout the nineteenth century. Some were introduced by pressure from radical worker-groups. Some were introduced by the great humanitarian Tory aristocrats of the 1830’s and 1840’s, like the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury.

The humane curtailing of a callous laissez-faire, the improvement of British factory conditions, and the reduction of hours of work for women and children have even been called the “revenge” of the Tory aristocrats for the middle-class Whig Reform Bill of 1832. But neither revenge motives nor the shallow materialism of a Karl Marx are needed to account for modern social reform. Social reform would have come anyway, and will come anyway, so long as enough rich men and enough poor men believe deeply enough in the traditional Christian ethics to apply it also to economics.

Laissez faire has had to give way to social reform and to restraints on an anarchic capitalism whenever workers and aristocrats have joined forces. Examples are the “Tory socialism” of Disraeli, the antifascist democratic Conservatism of Churchill, certain phases of the mellow Hapsburg monarchy, and the New Deal of that fabulous character straight from Disraeli’s *Coningsby*: the aristocratic Squire of Hyde Park. Far from being Marxist or necessarily revolutionary or leftist, a compassionate and humane approach to economic suffering is the logical outgrowth of the oldest Christian, Jewish, and Hellenic ethics. This holds true from the reforms of the democratic aristocrat, Pericles, in free Athens right through the encyclical *De Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII on working conditions in 1891 and through such profound Protestant theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr, whose honorable and admirable liberalism sounds often like healthy, old-fashioned conservatism, in contrast with that other kind of “liberalism,” against which his resignation of 1951 from the masthead of *The Nation* was so dramatic a protest.

Social reforms do indeed become perniciously Marxoid, collectivist, totalitarian, or in the narrow sense “socialist,” when they go too far across

the "statist line" and threaten civil liberties and a responsible individualism with the curse of statism. With its dangerous and economically needless nationalizing of steel, the British Labor Government crossed the statist line. That line may be defined as the line beyond which liberty is sacrificed to security. The Fair Deal and New Deal have crossed it only partly, far less than alleged by the Old Guard and the N.A.M. but sufficiently far to require a more alert populace and a more vigilant opposition party.

The only electable Republican alternative to the Fair Deal and New Deal lies not in a return to Coolidge and Harding laissez-faire. It lies in the kind of program represented by serious responsible leaders like Governors Warren and Driscoll, and Senators Duff, Lodge, Saltonstall, Aiken, and Margaret Smith, Representative Clifford Case, and Republican heirs of Willkie and Vandenberg internationalism. Such an enlightened Republicanism may now seem a relatively weak minority in the party; but the discrediting of the Asia Firstism of Taft and MacArthur and the adherence of Eisenhower to the Republicans, would bring their enlightened minority into a much-needed national leadership.

Such Republicanism would be represented by the *New York Herald Tribune*, not by the *Chicago Tribune*. It would continue the New Deal tradition of government inspection of industry but not as a punitive expedition nor with class-war bias. It would oppose further state ownership and anything smacking of the disastrous nationalizations of the Labor government across the Atlantic. But it would keep the New Deal humane social laws on the books and practice them. In the last analysis, Christian ethics must always be put above profit-materialism, in public economics as much as in private life. But this can be accomplished with a more decentralized and more bi-partisan administration, so as to halt the bureaucratic statism now building up in Washington after too many years under a single party.

What strange historical bed-fellowship when our Old Guard's laissez-faire economics is called "conservative"! Its economics comes straight from those eighteenth-century "Reds," the Jacobin revolutionary terrorists. To regulate society for the commercial class, as both Robespierre and Senator Taft have attempted in their different ways, is as pernicious as the leftist or socialist tyranny of regulating society for the proletariat—or for any other fraction of society. Both liberalism and conservatism at their

best are concerned with the progress or conservation, respectively, of society *as a whole* rather than of any one class or pressure group.

In that fact lies the justification of European monarchy and aristocracy, especially the British monarchy: at their best, they represent not class interests but society as a whole. (When they fail to do so, they become quite properly discredited and overthrown.) Their function is a needed one, the function of unification and social cement and moderation and mediation. Instead of sneering at the valuable function of European constitutional monarchies and aristocracies as if they were mere snobbery and luxury, American liberals should try to insure that this same mediating, nonpartisan, non-election-bound function is also achieved in our country. In our case it can be, and has to be, achieved democratically and without hereditary aristocracies: by means of the Constitution and the Supreme Court.

Asked by President Teddy Roosevelt what was the justification of Austria's supposedly outdated and reactionary monarchy, the old Hapsburg emperor Francis Joseph replied: "to protect my people from their governments." Thus excesses of the various intolerant nationalities, excesses of various class groups and economic pressure-groups of right or left, could be moderated by the throne. The Czechs, for example—who overthrew the Hapsburg monarchy-of-mediation only to get the Nazi and Communist dictatorships-of-persecution—have learned this lesson now; Benes on his deathbed may have learned it; so have millions of living Europeans after Hitler and Stalin.

In America, anything approaching monarchy or hereditary power is out of the question, despite Hamilton's hopes. Here the same purpose is served by the Supreme Court, as guardian and interpreter of the Constitution, standing at least partly above parties, above the momentary excesses of heated elections, above momentary mob whims. "To protect my people from their governments": within such a framework, be it European monarchy or American Supreme Court and Constitution, the rivalry of the conservative and liberal halves of truth will mean not civil war or chaos, as in most of the rootless and traditionless democratic republics of Europe's continent, but gradual evolutionary progress, the synthesis of freedom and lawful order.