

The Critic as Radical

T.S. Eliot's conservatism sought the still point in the turning world.

By George Scialabba

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR wrote of the 20th-century conservative thinker: "Gloomy or arrogant, he is the man who says no; his real certainties are all negative. He says no to modernity, no to the future, no to the living action of the world; but he knows that the world will prevail over him." That T.S. Eliot at least partly resembled this portrait he himself acknowledged. As he wrote to a friend in 1921: "Having only contempt for every existing political party, and profound hatred for democracy, I feel the blackest gloom."

In daily life, Eliot was neither gloomy nor arrogant but serene and gracious, generous and humble. At the height of his fame, his courtesy even to the callow and importunate was legendary. Yet however Eliot achieved this extraordinary equableness, he doubtless saw himself as a man whose vocation was to say no, to stand athwart history strenuously wielding negative certainties. Why, exactly, did Eliot loathe modernity and what did he hope to conserve against its advance?

Eliot was a great disparager. In *After Strange Gods*—which remains, notwithstanding the infamous remark about "freethinking Jews," an important statement of Eliot's beliefs—he refers to "the living death of modern material civilization" and declares "Liberalism, Progress, and Modern Civilization" self-evidently contemptible. (That was perhaps an echo of Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*, which condemned the proposition that "the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself to, and come

to terms with, progress, liberalism and modern civilization.") Elsewhere in the same vein Eliot deplores "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" and lays it down that "one can assert with some confidence that our period is one of decline."

He praised Baudelaire, who, in an age of "programmes, platforms, scientific progress, humanitarianism, and revolutions," of "cheerfulness, optimism, and hopefulness," understood that "what really matters is Sin and Redemption" and perceived that "the possibility of damnation is so immense a relief in a world of electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform, and dress reform ... that damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation—of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it gives some significance to living."

At the root of this condemnation of modernity lay the conviction of Original Sin. Eliot believed that most people have very little intelligence or character. Without firm guidance from those who have more of both, the majority is bound to reason and behave badly. Eliot made this point frequently: sometimes gently, as in the well-known line from "Burnt Norton": "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." Sometimes harshly, as in "The Function of Criticism," where he derided those in whom democratic reformers place their hopes as a rabble who "ride ten in a compartment to a football match at Swansea, listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust."

The obtuseness and unruliness of humanity in the mass meant that order, the prime requisite of social health, could only be secured by subordination to authority, both religious and political. "For the great mass of humanity ... their capacity for *thinking* about the objects of their faith is small"—hence the need for an authoritative church rather than an illusory Inner Voice. Likewise, "in a healthily stratified society, public affairs would be a responsibility not equally borne"—hence the need for a hereditary governing class. Underlying these social hierarchies is a hierarchy of values. "Liberty is good, but more important is order, and the maintenance of order justifies any means."

Order, long preserved, produces tradition—"all the actions, habits, and customs," from the most significant to the most conventional, that "represent the blood kinship of 'the same people living in the same place'." Eliot's best-known discussions of tradition are found in his literary essays: "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "The Metaphysical Poets," and others.

His poetry was, of course, revolutionary as well as conservative, and his criticism explains this apparent paradox. Artistic originality emerges only after a lengthy assimilation of many traditions. The artist surrenders his individuality, and it is returned to him enriched. The tradition too is enriched. "The whole existing order" is "if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is

conformity between the old and the new. ... The past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."

A continually modified tradition is not an unchanging magisterium. In politics and religion alike, Eliot's conception of tradition is surprisingly dynamic. Our "danger," he wrote, is "to associate tradition with the immovable; to think of it as something hostile to all change; to aim to return to some previous condition which we imagine as having been capable of preservation in perpetuity." On the contrary, "tradition without intelligence is not worth having." We must "use our minds" to discover "what is the best life for us ... as a particular people in a particular place; what in the past is worth preserving and what should be rejected; and what conditions, within our power to bring about, would foster the society that we desire." This does not sound like Condorcet or Godwin; but neither does it sound much like Burke or de Maistre.

Eliot was too subtle not to recognize—and too honest not to acknowledge—that his more general pronouncements about political philosophy were unsatisfactory. Like all general pronouncements, they reduce to truisms. Continuity is best, except where change is necessary. Much tradition, some innovation. Firm principles, flexibly adapted. When he was asked about his literary-critical method, Eliot replied, "The only method is to be very, very intelligent." It is likewise the only political-critical method.

Concerning two matters of contemporary relevance, Eliot was profoundly, though unsystematically, intelligent. Eliot's political utterances were, for the most part, fragmentary and occasional, occurring in essays, lectures, and the regular "Commentaries" in his great quarterly *The Criterion*. His compliment to Henry James—"he had a mind so fine no idea could violate it"—applied

to Eliot as well, for better and worse. He was never doctrinaire; on the other hand, he was rarely definite. As one commentator observes: "To gesture toward, but not to reveal; to pursue, but not to unravel, this is Eliot's procedure." Yet although he eschewed programs, there is much in his asides.

About economics, he repeatedly professed theoretical incomprehension. But just as often, he professed skepticism that any immutable laws of political economy proved that extremes of wealth and poverty were inevitable or that state action to counter disadvantage must be futile. Disarmingly, he acknowledged:

I am confirmed in my suspicion that conventional economic practice is all wrong, but I can never understand enough to form any opinion as to whether the particular prescription or nostrum proffered is right. I cannot but believe that there are a few simple ideas at bottom, upon which I and the rest of the unlearned are competent to decide according to our several complexions; but I cannot for the life of me ever get to the bottom.

Nevertheless, "about certain very serious facts no one can dissent." For "the present system does not work properly, and more and more are inclined to believe both that it never did and that it never will."

What were some of these "very serious facts"?

... the hypertrophy of Profit into a social ideal, the distinction between the use of natural resources and their exploitation, the advantages unfairly accruing to the trader in contrast to the primary producer, the misdirection of the financial machine, the iniquity of usury, and other features of a commercialized society.

Sometimes he wondered whether Western society was "assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries, and had any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends." On one occasion he sounded almost like a communist: "Certainly there is a sense in which Britain and America are more democratic than [Nazi] Germany; but on the other hand, defenders of the totalitarian system can make out a plausible case for maintaining that what we have is not democracy but financial oligarchy."

Indeed, Eliot was full of surprises on the subject of communism. Try to imagine his dreadfully predictable acolytes at *The New Criterion* saying something like this: "I have ... much sympathy with communists of the type with which I am here concerned [i.e., "those young people who would like to grow up and believe in something"]. I would even say that ... there are only a small number of people living who have achieved the right *not* to be communists."

Eliot did not think much of most anti-communists, "who abhor extreme socialism for motives in which a very little Christianity is blended with a great deal of self-interest and prejudice." For "no one is any more justified in a general condemnation of the principles of the extreme Left than he is in a general condemnation of those of the extreme Right. The principle of Justice affirmed by the intellectuals of the Left is at least analogous to Christian justice."

In fact, Eliot feared and despised unrestrained capitalism. He associated himself with those who "object to the dictatorship of finance and the dictatorship of bureaucracy under whatever political name it is assembled." Capitalism, he wrote, "is imperfectly adapted to every purpose except that of making money; and even for money-making it

does not work very well, for its rewards are neither conducive to social justice nor even proportioned to intellectual ability." It "tends to divide the community into classes based upon differences of wealth and to occasion a sense of injustice among the poorer members of society." During World War II he wrote a friend that he was willing to join a "revolution" whose "enemies" would include not only "popular demagogues and *philosophes*" but also "those who want after this war to revert to money hegemony, commercial rivalry between nations, etc."

Even when deploring the consequences of Original Sin, Eliot could not help acknowledging the social scaffolding of cultural questions. He supported censorship of pornography, though not of "books possessing, or even laying

of the good society went deep. "Stability is obviously necessary," he insisted—indeed it would seem to be the alpha, if not the omega, of any intelligible conservatism. "You are hardly likely to develop tradition, except where the bulk of the population is so well off where it is that it has no incentive or pressure to move about." But without precisely that incentive, the labor market of neoclassical economic theory cannot function. Stable communities or efficient labor markets—one must choose.

Eliot was ready to do so. An Anglican committee report he coauthored in the late 1930s called for the "thorough reconstruction of the present economic and political system." He probably meant this, bromidic as it sounds. A few years earlier he co-signed a letter to the *Times* arguing that there was enough

scope both to the individual—thus securing the utmost variety in human affairs—and to the social whole—thus stimulating the rich, collective activities which would surely come to life in a society free to express its invention, its mechanical skill, its sense of the earth in agriculture and crafts, its sense of play."

This sounds much more like William Morris than like Margaret Thatcher. But beyond these, he offered virtually no details. He was neither a visionary nor an activist but a critic.

I said that Eliot had much to teach us about two matters of contemporary relevance. About the first, distributive justice, he wrote much, directly if not programmatically. About the other, he wrote scarcely a word—not surprisingly, since it was hardly visible on the horizon before his death. I'm referring to the steady erosion of inwardness—Eliot would have said "spiritual depth"—resulting from the omnipresence of commercial messages (the "nightmare" of "advertisement") and electronic media.

I have no doubt that Eliot would have reacted strongly and negatively to this development, so discordant with his sensibility and practice. As described in his critical essays, the gradual surrender of the artist's personality to tradition, which is at the same time the mastery and transformation of the tradition, resembles the attitude of the narrator of the *Four Quartets* toward Being and history. In both cases, the prescribed motions of the spirit are inward and downward, the virtues prescribed are humility, gravity, receptiveness. The refrain of "Burnt Norton" has become a meme: "the still point of the turning world."

This capacity—as a valiant minority of contemporary critics keeps insisting—is what advertising and the cyberworld are, with fearful rapidity, extin-

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claim to, literary merit." But, he went on, "what is more insidious than any censorship is the steady influence which operates silently in any mass society organized for profit, for the depression of standards of art and culture."

He was no feminist and posed these scandalously sexist rhetorical questions: "Might one suggest that the kitchen, the children, and the church could be considered to have a claim upon the attention of married women? Or that no normal married woman would prefer to be a wage-earner if she could help it?" But at least he remembered to add: "What is miserable is a system that makes the dual wage necessary."

The incompatibility between untrammelled capitalism and Eliot's conception

wealth in the world "to give every individual a certainty of adequate provision," but that "there appears to be lacking some machinery of distribution" to accomplish this.

What kind of "system" did Eliot want? A Christian society, of course—his critique of capitalism strikingly parallels that of *Rerum Novarum*, *Centesimus Annus*, and other papal encyclicals. But like those venerable documents, Eliot's writings, though they could be pointedly negative, were not vividly affirmative. He thought there should be a lot more people living on the land. He thought people should have to spend fewer hours working for a living. He enthusiastically endorsed this description of the goal: a "new type of society, which would give fullest

guishing. It simply cannot withstand the immediacy, volume, and near instantaneous succession of stimuli to which all of us are incessantly subjected. The spirit has its rhythm and metabolism; it cannot survive in just any environment. Or, if you prefer: the brain is plastic and may be drastically reshaped. Our world is flat, as we have been loudly told. Will the same processes that flattened it also flatten our souls?

The most moving passage I have encountered in all of Eliot's writings occurs in a letter to his friend Paul Elmer More:

To me, religion has brought at least the perception of something above morals, and therefore extremely terrifying; it has brought me not happiness, but the sense of something above happiness and therefore more terrifying than ordinary pain and misery; the very dark night and the desert. To me, the phrase 'to be damned for the glory of God' is sense and not paradox; I had far rather walk, as I do, in daily terror of eternity, than feel that this was only a children's game in which all the contestants would get equally worthless prizes in the end. ... And I don't know whether this is to be labeled 'Classicism' or 'Romanticism'; I only think that I have hold of the tip of the tail of something quite real, more real than morals, or than sweetness and light and culture.

This revelation has not been vouchsafed to me, but I can recognize here a description of something supremely valuable. I would fight, as I believe Eliot would, to preserve the conditions of its possibility against the encroachment of the electronic hive. ■

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— OLD AND RIGHT —

The military strength of Rome derived from the complete subordination of the army to civil authority, but this does not occur merely by saying it shall be so. An army is a diversion of energy from the productive life of a nation. In the Roman republic, control of the army was ensured by local control of conscription. The soldiers' reward for winning a campaign was to go home. Their loyalty to the commander was restricted to military orders given under the Senate's commission. The commander on active service was subject to direct instructions from the Senate, which were enforceable because the army was likewise dependent on the Senate for supplies. If a commander was superseded, his soldiers would obey the Senate; they were a citizen army. A commander had very little chance of sitting tight and establishing an independent regime in a foreign region.

The permanent acquisition of conquered provinces changed the whole set-up. The armies were enormously increased by mercenaries and dubious allies. Expenses had to be met from tribute. Vast wealth was at the disposal of a victorious general in a distant province; and if their pay was in arrears the soldiers looked immediately to their commander. There were also chances for big deals by civilians with political connections and no scruples. It was a tempting gamble for a Roman financier to back a general with personal loans to be recouped by favor. Caesar owed millions before he gained preferment. The Senate was divided by factional interest.

The army of the Republic operated spatially as a lateral instrument of the civil authority, an extensor swung from a universal joint. The extensor weakened as it lengthened, while the load it clutched was much greater. When the several armies occupied the provinces, the weights at the outer ends, which could neither be dropped nor managed, dragged them from the socket, and then impelled them against the center like gigantic battering rams. The "arm of the law" was unequal to the reach and retractive action demanded by such an unprecedented spread of its field.

What had happened was that the primary direction of the current of energy was reversed, and with it the incidence of physical power. The republic was formed by a community that produced its own livelihood, including the personnel and maintenance of the army; the energy originated within the state. It could meet extraordinary demands in war because the normal expenses of the state were moderate; and the agencies of direct authority were so arranged as to provide the most economical pick-up. When a state relies upon a citizen army for defense, the intrinsic difficulty is to find a way to connect and disconnect the individual for intermittent military duty at minimum expense and with the least dislocation of the civil economy. That problem was fairly well solved by the republic, with a centrifugal mechanism as the source of energy required. It could not operate in reverse.

In the republic, [Romans] had been capable craftsmen and good farmers, disposed to thrift, else they would never have developed their keen sense of property; but from the beginning of empire, the ratio of production to population diminished in Rome, while unemployment increased and became chronic. And in the imperial set-up, Rome was strictly a consumer of material goods.

—Isabel Paterson, *The God of the Machine*, 1943