

Conservatism and Crisis: A Reply to Fr. Parry

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THERE IS A SENSE in which Disraeli's dictum on "the two nations" is true of the United States today. But it is true not in Disraeli's—or in Karl Marx's—sense of a profound gulf between a poor and frustrated majority and a powerful and wealthy minority. The opposition between "the two nations" that constitute the United States today is characterized by spiritual and intellectual differences, not by differences of wealth and economic power.

A profound chasm has come into being between the beliefs and instincts of the

solid citizenry of the country and the ideology of the dominant section of those whose powers and talents determine the tone and direction of our national life. For some decades now, the tradition of Western civilization—both generally and in its specific American form—has been under concerted attack from a corrosive and nihilistic ideology, which has perversely seized upon the century's broadening in factual knowledge as a charter for frontal attack upon the age-old wisdom of the civilization concerning the nature and destiny of men. Positiv-

ist in its epistemology, relativist in its ontology (if ontology is a proper category for such metaphysical nihilism), Utopian, to the point of *hubris* and beyond, in its conviction that human beings can be manipulated and “structured” like beams of steel to satisfy an engineer’s blueprint, this ideology takes political form in what today is called Liberalism.

It is this outlook which characterizes the presently predominant intellectual and governmental leadership of the nation. But, although that leadership maintains itself in power upon the basis of a quasi-monopolistic control of the channels of communication and by proposing speciously attractive programs, appealing to apparent immediate interests of sections of the electorate, it has not succeeded in seriously establishing its ideology in the minds and souls of the American people.

“Civilizational Crisis”?

MAKING FREE with Tounbee’s phrases, I would maintain that there is indeed a “schism in the body politic,” but that there is not so far in the generality of Americans a “schism in the soul.” It is here that I would begin to take exception to Fr. Stanley Parry’s consideration of the present state of our society [“The Restoration of Tradition,” *MODERN AGE*, Spring, 1961].

His analysis of the forms of social crisis is brilliant. In particular, his discussion of the deepest form of social crisis, what he calls “civilizational crisis,” is profound and accurate; but I challenge his premise that we in the United States are in the grip of a crisis of this type. Such a crisis Fr. Parry defines as involving “a falling out of the area of experience of large segments of previously held truth”—that is, the destruction of fundamental traditional beliefs in the minds of the people who make up the civilization.

No one can deny, of course, that the impact of the views and attitudes of the intellectual leadership has affected and distorted the form in which traditional truths are held and understood by the American people; but all evidence points to the essential survival of that tradition in the *ethos* of the people. And when I say “the people,” I do not mean only “the man on the street”; I mean also the great majority of professionals and businessmen and community leaders, of Congressmen and state senators and legislators and municipal officials. The other “nation,” powerful though it is, is a limited and shallow stratum; sometimes described as the Liberal Establishment, it is constantly horrified and constantly thwarted by the refusal of the solid strata of American society to acquiesce in its outlook. To give but a few random examples: its “sophisticated” moves towards appeasement of Communism have brought into existence a widespread and deeply rooted anti-Communist movement; its flossy “educational” projects—projects without substance and totally unrelated to true education—are being defeated in bond vote after bond vote in communities all over the country; the socializing projects of the bureaucracy and the Executive again and again are thwarted by the Congress; and, most offensive to the Establishment, a strong and solid conservatism with firm intellectual foundations is arising to challenge it at every level of American life.

These are not the symptoms of a dying civilization. This is not Fr. Parry’s “change in the very structure of the community’s experience of truth in history.” This is not Toynbee’s “schism in the soul”; it is more akin to Spengler’s figure of “pseudomorphosis.” The essential health of the American tradition remains vigorously alive; but it is imprisoned in the mould that a dominant Liberalism has for a time succeeded in imposing upon it. Whatever the case may

be in the other provinces of Western civilization, in the United States our crisis is not of the "dissolution" of tradition; it is a crisis brought about by the sad fact that those whose duty it is to articulate the tradition have betrayed it. Our crisis calls not for a new concept of truth to form a new tradition, but for intellectual, moral and political leaders who can articulate again and develop in contemporary terms a tradition that in its essence is still doggedly defended by the people.

Is Conservatism Relevant?

THEREFORE, THE OPPOSITION of conservatism and Liberalism is not, as Fr. Parry maintains, irrelevant to the decisive issue; it is the issue. Were our crisis a "civilizational crisis" in his sense, a deep-going "change from order and truth to disorder and negation," a change shared in by the whole of society, then it would be true that conservatism is simply a "formula for escaping inevitabilities in history." For then the conservative effort to vindicate the fundamental spirit and understanding of our civilization, its "shared participation of truth," would be meaningless. If the civilization were indeed so dead in the hearts of the people, then the only adequate response *would* be to drive free of the civilizational debris and devote all energies to proclaiming the essential truths of man's good in timeless terms, without respect or piety towards the shaped forms and the rich heritage in which, as citizens of Christendom and of the American Republic, our understanding of truth lives.

If this were so, then Fr. Parry's "prophetic response," not conservatism, would be the stance of a man who was a man. There are times when so deeply revolutionary a response is demanded—for the "prophetic response" is a revolutionary response.

It challenges not merely the perversions and distortions of truth which have grown up in the civilization's perception of truth and in its body politic, but it challenges the very form the civilization's perception of truth has taken. It says, not only that the vision of the civilization has been perverted, but that at its best it has become outmoded before a higher vision; that its very way of understanding and of guiding human life is no longer a way to truth and good, but has become an inhibiting limitation upon the spirit.

IT IS TRUE THAT the prophetic tone has many levels. And when the conservative movement is embarked upon the course of combat against the perversion of a civilization, upon the course of restoring the civilization, that tone may well be necessary. There is something of the revolutionary, or, if you wish, counter-revolutionary, in the endeavor to wipe out the perversion of a civilization, to return to the source of its virtue, to re-assert and bring to fruition its pristine glory. But it is not in this sense that Fr. Parry, following Eric Voegelin, writes of "prophetic response." He means (this is why he regards the conservative enterprise as irrelevant) that our civilization has passed the point of no return. It has, to use his phrase, "fallen out of existence."

While I will not deny that such things have happened in history—to Sumeria, to Egypt, to the Classical world—I do not believe that Western Christendom has run its course. Whatever may be in store for it in the European land of its birth, I do not believe that in the United States, the most forward thrust and strongest bastion of the West, thirty years of Karl Marx, John Dewey, and Franklin Roosevelt have cast us adrift, "out of existence" in a civilizationless void.

The Relevance of Conservatism

THEREFORE, THE CONTEMPORARY American conservative effort is far from irrelevant. Rather it is directed with precision towards overcoming the actual spiritual, moral and political crisis we do face today—not Fr. Parry's systemic "civilizational crisis," but a schism in our society between the outlook, the "perception of truth," of those who hold decisive political and ideological power and that of the people as a whole. Having said this, I must add that a "civilizational crisis" in Fr. Parry's terms is not impossible in the not-too-distant future; if the leadership of our society remains much longer in the hands of those who hold it today, it is possible that they will succeed in totally destroying the Western consciousness, the instinct for virtue and freedom, which still informs the *ethos* of Americans beyond the direct influence of the Establishment. The problem can be stated in the starkest terms: can the men of the rising conservative movement in America expel the dominant Establishment from its positions of control before they succeed in bringing about the corruption of the American people in the image of their own corruption?

This is not simply—perhaps not primarily—a political problem. It is a confrontation at every level: intellectual, moral, social, political. The conservative task would seem to be a heroic task. All the heights of our society—with the partial exception of the Congress and the state legislatures—are occupied by forces inspired by a Liberalism philosophically nihilistic to the genius of Western civilization. That task would be more than heroic, it would be a valiant but hopeless Lost Cause, were it not that the attacking conservative forces can draw upon the energies and vitality of those who make up the body of the social order.

The Place of Freedom

FR. PARRY'S INSISTENCE upon the deep and final character of the crisis of our civilization, and his insistence upon the irrelevance of the conservative-Liberal polarity, stems, I believe, from his failure to understand the specific genius of Western civilization which inspired our Constitution and the men who created it and guided the Republic in its early years. They created a political instrumentality congruent with the deep Western fusion of belief in the authority of absolute truth and good with belief in the dignity and freedom of the individual person. This was an epochal leap forward in the development of the Western and Christian vision of the majesty of God and the freedom of man. Fr. Parry condemns the contemporary American conservative devotion to this breath-taking vision of human potentiality under God (he calls it "spiritual individualism") as a hopeless and fatal "refusal to consider the issue of substantive truth." He ranges it alongside of Liberalism and reaction and economism as a "partial response" to our crisis—a response doomed to disaster because it does not come to grips with the truth of the human condition.

He fails completely to understand that the great social and political problem of Western civilization—how to establish an order that makes possible the flowering of devotion to truth and good and simultaneously preserves the freedom of the individual person—is here solved in principle for the first time. The key is the limitation of the power of the state—that is, of the power of some men to impose their beliefs on other men—while to the natural leaders of the social order is given the duty of leading and persuading their fellow men in the paths of justice and truth. Where has there ever been a society at once so noble and so free as the American Republic in the first half century of its existence? And

what destroyed the promise of that idyllic spring but the successive infringements upon the concept of divided and limited governmental power, which are historically symbolized (each time more catastrophically) by the development of mass democratism in the 1830's, by the undermining of the sovereignty of the several states in the 1860's, and by the naturalization in this country of the theory and practice of the twentieth century collectivism in the 1930's?

Because Fr. Parry conceives freedom only as a by-product, not as a primary condition, of a good social order, he does not understand the character of the sickness of our society: the displacement of freedom in behalf of what those with power think the good to be. It does not matter here that I would agree with Fr. Parry that their concept of the good is disastrously wrong, totally out of accord with the constitution of being; the evidence of historical experience confirms what the founders of the Republic drew from the insight of the West: if the freedom of individual persons is not guaranteed by the arrangements of the political order, power always corrupts, even when the motives of those who use it to enforce their beliefs are beneficent. This is not to deny the necessity of devotion to virtue in the persons who make up a social order, and particularly in those who hold positions of influence in it, if such an order is to survive. But to affirm the necessity of virtue as an end for men does not require the subordination of freedom. Rather, if individual persons, who are the only spiritually significant entities in the social order, are to achieve virtue, they must be free. The responsibility for recognizing the demands of virtue, articulating the modes of virtue, and inculcating virtue cannot rest in any social organism, but only in individual persons. The coercive organs of society cannot establish or enforce virtue, since by

its nature virtue must be the free choice of persons. The attempt to enforce it by power turns gold into dross.

The Vision of the West

THE DEEP UNDERSTANDING that the Founders of our Republic derived from the essential Christian and Western recognition of the mutual independence of virtue and freedom, they made socially actual in the institutions and the *ethos* of the Republic. Fr. Parry rejects that high point in Western history; he maintains that to posit virtue and freedom as interdependent necessities of the social order, and to place the responsibility for virtue upon the individual, is to neglect "the problem of right social order and in doing so [to neglect] the central problem of civilizational crisis." But this "spiritual individualism" is our tradition. It is this understanding that still remains in the hearts of the American people, inarticulate, instinctive perhaps, but firmly held. And it is to the articulation, the renewal, the development in contemporary conditions of their vision that the rising American conservative leadership is devoted.

There is no certainty that this leadership will in sufficient time achieve the intellectual and political victory necessary to insure the triumph of the spirit of Western civilization it embodies. But if it does not, that will be its failure; it will not be because it has embarked upon a hopeless endeavor. For the West is not dead in spirit; its glorious vision—the highest ever achieved by men—remains.

It is not only from the collectivist riders of power abroad and at home that defeat can come. The tenuous tension between the claims of virtue and the claims of freedom can be upset as well by men who—although they hate tyranny and collectivism with a fierce hatred—blind themselves to the central truth of the West, that neither virtue nor freedom can be made the end in a social

order at the expense of the other without spiritual disaster.

Fr. Parry's Spenglerian pessimism on the fate of Western civilization rests on other foundations than Spengler's own; and he, basing himself upon a Rock firmer than any civilization, has hope, where Spengler had only grim fortitude. Civilizations have been born and civilizations have died; and it may be that ours will turn out to have been at the point of death in this mid-20th century. But whether this will be so or not depends upon our understanding and our energies. It depends upon our strength to recover the essence of our past, upon the imagination and vigor with which we can create the forms in which that essence can be realized under contemporary conditions. It depends upon the stamina and the courage we can summon to fight for the West-

ern vision against the perversions that assail us from every side.

We may, I repeat, be defeated. But only then—after we have tried with our deepest energies to vindicate the truths of the West, when in our defeat the Western forms of truth no longer live in the hearts of men—only then will Fr. Parry's "prophetic response" be the part required of men devoted to truth and good. That day has not come. The West still lives. Today our need is not for "prophets" in Fr. Parry's sense—men who, with everything destroyed behind them, delve deep into reality to re-establish a form for truth when all forms lie in shards. In every aspect of human endeavor—philosophical, social, political, military—what we need are fighters for the reasoned and revealed incarnation of truth, virtue, freedom that Western civilization has been and can again be.

Federal Aid For Urban Renewal: Help or Hindrance?

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IN RECENT YEARS, there has been a rising tide of discussion, attempted explanation and warm debate on the array of problems facing our urban communities. All too often the approach to a solution to the particular local problem of the moment involves an appeal to a higher level of government. It frequently seems that if only the city, town, or locality could obtain some state or federal help (primarily financial), progress could be made toward a solution—whether the problem has to do with schools and public buildings, water systems and sewage disposal, roads and streets, mass transit systems, low-income housing and slum clearance, or any other public welfare activities. The states, al-

though providing considerable financial aid to local governments, face the same problems as these with respect to receipts and expenditures, so that the national level of government is the most promising source of funds. Nor is there lack of response—federal aid to other governmental units has been rising rapidly, and last year federal money was provided for the first time to help meet “the pressing needs for mass transportation in our urban centers.”

One aid program of the National Government—that dealing with urban renewal—will be considered here in terms of its effect on urban blight and slums and on some traditionally local governmental and private activities.