

On the Starboard Tack

The American Dissent: A Decade of Modern Conservatism, by Jeffrey Hart, *Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1966. 262. \$4.95.*

How to Argue with a Conservative, by Neil Staebler and Duncan Ross, *New York: Grossman Publishers, 1965. 203 pp. \$4.95.*

"THE RELIGION most prevalent in our northern colonies," said Edmund Burke in his famous speech on *Conciliation*, "is a refinement of the principle of resistance: it is the dissidence of dissent." Thus the dissenting spirit in America has evidently a much longer history than Mr. Hart's subtitle appears to imply. He is writing, however, about a particular group of dissentients, those associated as editors or contributors with that lively and vigorous journal called *National Review*, which last year celebrated the tenth anniversary of its intrusion into the world of ideas and opinions. Their particular dissent has been directed against the *Zeitgeist* prevalent since the early 1930's in government offices, in the classrooms, in an influential section of the press, and among the intellectual sort in general, and identified by both champions and adversaries as "liberalism."

A few years before the advent of *National Review* Mr. Lionel Trilling had asserted that this liberalism had become "not only the dominant but the sole intellectual tradition." Perhaps he should have known better; for in 1947 before the names of Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss were known to the generality of Americans, Mr. Trilling, with the usual disclaimer about "wholly imaginary" characters, had introduced them into his novel *The Middle of the Journey*, under what now seem the most transparent of

disguises. It was the *cause célèbre* afterwards associated with those two personages—following as it did the report (1946) of the Canadian Royal Commission on the revelations of Igor Gouzenko—that began to generate misgivings, even among intellectuals, about some of the illusions associated with the new liberalism. The climate, therefore, in which *National Review* made its appearance was not as unpropitious as it seemed to some brahmins of the left, among them Mr. Dwight Macdonald, who predicted for it an early demise. Still, it had evidently no powerful financial backing and the editors with one or two exceptions were inexperienced in the technical side of journalism, a weakness reflected in some of the earlier issues. Its survival and success—illustrated in the proliferation of its readership and the grudging respect it has won from its rivals—constitute one of the most interesting phenomena of the times. For a year or two the circulation figure remained virtually static at about twenty thousand then took an astonishing series of forward leaps until at last accounts it was something above ninety thousand, putting it far ahead of all other journals in its class.

Mr. Hart ascribes this in some part to an absence of competition, since "there is no other weekly edited for a well-educated audience whose views are anything like *National Review's*."¹ But he also suggests that a certain lightheartedness and humor, notably lacking in such sobersided and portsided publications as the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *New Leader*, may have had something to do with it. But then this particular advantage doubtless derives from the fact that *National Review* is still an organ of dissent, for humor and satire are more effective weapons of attack than of defense. Mr. Hart may have had something of this in mind in extending the comparison to two other journals of opinion, the *Commonweal*, edited by Catholic laymen, and *America*, edited by

Jesuits. The "excessive solemnity" of these quasi-religious organs proceeds, as he tells us in a footnote, from

the extreme importance political *respectability* has for them. We may see that for upwardly-mobile Catholics, eager to assimilate to the Establishment, political liberalism is no joking matter; nor is conservatism. Of the two magazines it seems to me that *Commonweal* is the grimmer. America is capable of a transcendence of liberalism when a religious issue is at stake [as in the uproar over Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy*].

This implication that conformity to the neo-liberal *ethos* (despite the famous syllabus of 1864) represents a badge of newly arrived at status, analogous perhaps to admission into a fashionable club or election to an Ivy League university's board of overseers, is an engaging notion, especially if one recalls the British commentator who soon after the launching of *National Review*, described the ideas and aspirations of American conservatives as "essentially those of a middle class attempting somewhat guiltily and self-consciously to escape from a dominating egalitarian background."² Much more to the present point, however, is the question of how much of the humor and gaiety could survive if the voices of dissent should become those of affirmation and respectability, that is to say if "conservative" rather than "liberal" doctrines and attitudes should presently prevail. Mr. Hart thinks this not only possible but in a sense already accomplished.

The last ten years . . . have seen a dramatic change in the prospects of intellectual conservatism. In 1954 its voices were few and scattered, its books for the most part unwritten. Today there is something like a conservative Establishment.

He also foresees the strengthening of this Establishment from the ranks of disenchanted or disaffected liberals, for he believes that the rival Establishment is beginning to disintegrate under the pressure

of continuing revolution. The rapid evolution of events is driving its representative figures either farther to the right or farther to the left of those they have been attempting to hold. The "vital center" between Marxism on the one side and fascism on the other, which so many liberals sought to occupy, is no longer tenable, something European intellectuals were long ago forced to recognize. Mr. Hart finds it exemplified in the ideological quarrel between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, both conspicuous members of the European Left; he quotes Mlle de Beauvoir's explanation of the cause of the breach.

While Sartre believed in the truth of socialism, Camus became more and more a resolute champion of bourgeois virtues. . . . A neutralist position between the two blocs had become impossible. Sartre therefore drew nearer to the USSR; Camus hated the Russians, and although he did not like the United States, he went over, practically speaking, to the American side.

Since this book was written we have witnessed a similar realignment of some prominent American liberals over such questions as the War in Vietnam and the intervention in the Dominican Republic; it is illustrated in the estrangement between Mr. Humphrey and some of his former associates in the Americans for Democratic Action. Toward the end Mr. Hart seems to question whether there really is or has ever been such a thing as a distinctive liberal position, whether the position taken by any particular liberal political writer on any particular question is not in some sense "derivative."

Even such classic and valuable liberal positions as Mill's on the virtues of "discussion" would appear to assume prior agreement among those participating in the discussion. What is there really to discuss with a man whose assumptions and goals are totally different from one's own—who denies, to choose the extreme case, one's right to exist? . . . Among those

who enjoy a broad agreement on their interests and goals, the sort of discussion Mill had in mind is useful indeed and certainly can be a mode of illumination. But because Mill's position in this matter seems to depend on broad prior agreement—in point of fact on the existence of a common civilization—and because there is nothing in his position capable of generating or sustaining such a civilization, his position comes to seem an attractive, indeed a desirable, derivative.

What Mr. Hart appears to be saying in these rather convoluted sentences is that in any debate that is to be anything more than sound and fury there must be some commonly acknowledged set of values and that liberalism of itself has not provided them. This of course is true.

But is it not also true of the sort of conservatism expounded in *National Review*? Is it any more possible to discover a definitely conservative position? Much of the confusion on this point arises from the volatile nature of the supposedly antithetical terms employed. It is sometimes said that new conservatism is old liberalism writ larger by five letters. In the recent conservative symposium edited by Mr. Frank S. Meyer³ it is difficult to find a position that cannot also be associated with liberalism in one or another of its historical forms. Thus the conservative sect which sometimes calls itself "libertarian" shows close affinities with the Manchester liberalism of Ricardo, Bentham, and Cobden and in a few extreme cases with philosophic anarchism. Professor Sartori of Florence, who has made a noble and on the whole successful effort to isolate the conceptual and semantic content of current political terminology, would probably classify Mr. Willmoore Kendall's constitutional conservatism⁴ as "classical liberalism" in the tradition of Montesquieu. Another conservative cult, to which Mr. Hart himself apparently belongs, derives its political philosophy from the writings and speeches of Edmund Burke, recognized by Macaulay, Acton, and Morley as the great

avatar of British liberalism. Alexis de Tocqueville, who serves as a political cicero to Professor Stephen J. Tonsor, opposed liberalism to the egalitarian democracy which he feared would lead to despotism. Thus it was less paradoxical than it seemed when *National Review* rejoiced in the defeat of the Conservative Party in Canada and in gains made by the Liberal Party in an Italian election.

The identification of conservatism with the desire for "order and stability" and liberalism with a desire for "innovation and progress" has perhaps slightly more psychological as well as historical justification. The ruminative sentry in *Iolanthe* who perceived how nature had contrived to make everyone either liberal or conservative from birth was not entirely wrong, since the choice is influenced by temperament as well as by circumstance.

Those who identify the left-looking *Zeitgeist* with the gnostic spirit as opposed to Christian tradition seem on much surer ground. Modern gnosticism with its utopian visions and aspirations represents the transfer of *gnosis* (knowledge) from the metaphysical to the materialist sphere. Man through his knowledge, that is his sciences and technologies, is capable of becoming his own redeemer, or so it is now widely believed. Modern gnosticism is a kind of secular pantheism in which all differentiations of personality as well as of condition must disappear with the absorption of all mankind into an earthly nirvana. It is a vision that enraptures many besides its prophets, but it has shocked many professed liberals who have discerned in it the deadly sin of *hubris*. More than twenty years ago the late William Alyott Orton wrote that

... a purely secular interpretation of social life, either historical or contemporary, has an inherent tendency to become utopian, in terms of the only category that it knows—the material. Early Christianity found here its first and most formidable obstacle. All discussion of the nature of

the Kingdom of God is intended to lift human hopes and aspirations to a plane on which they would not be doomed to endless and bitter disappointment. Modern Christianity has had precisely the same task in confronting the rationalist utopianism of Frederick Harrison, H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley, Lancelot Hogben, J. T. Shotwell and scores of others, and also the more dogmatic version current everywhere among the Marxists. . . . Modern positivism does in fact reflect not only the utopian illusion but the utopian disillusion; and it is brought to the latter by an intellectual as well as a circumstantial nemesis.⁵

How to Argue With a Conservative by a former member of the House of Representatives and his associate is refreshing in the sense that it concedes argument is possible. It consists of a series of criticisms brought against the domestic and foreign policies of various recent Demo-

cratic administrations and what are deemed to be sufficient and conclusive answers. Though the treatment of the controverted points is amiable and well mannered, and though some aspirants for public office may find it a useful handbook, it is all rather superficial. Besides, if Mr. Hart is right about the disintegration of liberalism, it is already out of date.

Reviewed by J. M. LALLEY

¹Mr Hart fortifies his argument in two places by quotations from *Modern Age* but apparently does not recognize it as being directed to "a well-educated audience." Of course *Modern Age* is only a quarterly but then *National Review* at this writing is still only a fortnightly.

²Peregrene Worsthorpe, *The Listener* (BBC), January 5, 1956.

³*What Is Conservatism?* 1964.

⁴*Democrazia e definizioni*, 1958; American edition, *Democratic Theory*, 1962. Sartori distinguishes between "political (constitutional) liberalism" and "economic (*laissez faire*) liberalism."

⁵*The Liberal Tradition*, 1945.

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A Logomachic Liberal

Letter to a Conservative, by Steve Allen,
New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965. 368 pp. \$4.95.

IT IS no easy task, in the space of a brief review, to convey the distressing fatuity of this book; as Mr. William F. Buckley once said of another man's work, "You have to read it not to believe it." If Steve Allen is even remotely to be considered a representative American liberal, then conservatives have nothing whatever to fear.

Of course he is a very amiable gentleman, versatile, often witty, and quite sincere; but his *business* encourages superficiality—his *forte* is the swift riposte. *Letter* was dictated (presumably between shows) over a four or five year period and so is conversational in tone throughout; but to engage in sharp repartee with a dictaphone is no guarantee that the playback will constitute persuasive dialogue.

A willingness to participate in dialogue, though, ought surely to be expected of persons concerned for truth. Those who have not the truth seek it, we hope; and those that think they have it already need reassurance. Few can be so self-righteously confident as to suppose dialogue wholly unnecessary or serious discussion a waste of time. I am not talking about argument for argument's sake. That can be, and often is, a waste of time—especially if the participating arguers aren't really serious. What I am talking about is dialogue—the sharing of views or knowledge or both by persons equally anxious to arrive at truth or understanding. Unlike formal debate, a proper dialogue need not be entered upon by persons whose views lie in direct opposition to one another: dialogue is appropriate to the search for compromise and a broadening of outlook. Its intent is not to settle something once and for all: there are no lost causes, Eliot said, because there are no gained causes. The

search for truth goes on from generation to generation, and each must go over much old ground anew.

No doubt Mr. Allen means well by his *Letter*, but really, what are we to think of an affable conversationalist who begins a sentence: "Not all McCarthyites are Catholics but. . ."? Elsewhere, the author refers disparagingly to "Mindszentyites" who, partly because they do *not* carry Ezra Pound paperbacks in their briefcases, reveal "a mammoth insensitivity to [the] potential reality [of indiscriminate nuclear burning. . .of entire continents. . .]" (One performs Mr. Allen a service by quoting him out of context, by the way: *in* context he is quite impossible.)

In ten loosely-disorganized chapters, *Letter* ranges over The John Birch Society, Communism, Foreign Policy, China, Latin America, Government Planning, Freedom, War, Morality, Extremism, Reaction, and Conservatism—the latter term emerging as the vaguest of the lot, printed with an upper- or lower-case "c" according to whim. No attempt is made, that is, to distinguish between political Conservatives and "natural" or temperamental conservatives.

"What we see demonstrated time and again," writes Mr. Allen of the present stalemate in dialogue, "is essentially *an inability to think properly*." (Italics in original.) True, alas, too true. Consider these few random samples of liberal (Steve Allen) thought:

It was not, according to [the expostulations of some reactionaries], the enormous hordes of Mao Tse-tung's highly motivated Communist armies that won the Chinese mainland; rather it was *we* who *lost* it. The question of how we could lose something we never had seems rarely to be faced. [Italics in original.]

Are the people of Russia free? One hundred ninety million American voices unite to roar "No!" to the question. But consider the case of a man who is re-