

MODERN AGE

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The Future of American Conservatism: a New Revival?

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IT WAS NOT so many years ago that essays under titles very similar to this one appeared in avalanche proportions. Efforts to define "conservatism" and to predict its future was the favored vocation of conservative writers. It seemed during the 1955-1965 decade particularly that publicists were more interested in these topics, in the state of the "movement," than they were in issues of public policy. Indeed, reputations were made, so to speak, on the basis of intra-conservative commentary rather than upon discussions of general political and philosophical issues.

Currently, there is a dearth of such reflections—and, in one sense, this scarcity is welcome as one became satiated by an overabundance of "Whither Conservatism?" But the recent silence is intriguing. In part it can be explained by the fact that "conservatism" (definition suspended) no longer is the profession of an embattled few and popular journalists now commonly juxtapose "liberal" and "conservative" as if the terms represented two virtually equally numerous legions of social opinion. "Conservatism," therefore, if it is not in an optimum condition, would seem to be, at least, secure from extinction.

But there are other reasons for the cessation of the flood. The prominent one is the obvious fragmentization of the "conservative" coalition. It is now awkward to talk about "conservatism" as a coherent ideological perspective. Only the *term* "conservatism" enjoys a wider popular usage; what was assumed to be "conservatism" in the earliest days of the "revival" (from 1948-1965) remains a distinctly minority attitude, even among that "movement" that is called, generically, at least, "conservatism."

Also, as "conservatism" underwent its contemporary maturation it became less philosophical in tone and more disposed toward ideological combat. This situation was paradoxical: "conservatism" became, in a sense, more "issue oriented," but, conversely, it failed, by and large, to relate issues to the sharp delineation of alternative social theories.

Leading figures of the "revival" moved away from the larger questions of social theory to more explicitly partisan preoccupations and, indeed, some became substantially neutered as acute social critics by the rather considerable personal adulation accorded them, failing to resist that tempta-

tion so prevalent among artists to be more concerned with the projection of their personalities than with their art.

These tendencies can be seen, in specific focus, by the marked increase of the number of young intellectuals (or at least the politically oriented) presumably espousing "conservative" outlooks and an equally marked decrease in the number of young conservative scholars engaged in the business of serious, nonideologically-related social theory. Bright young men and women of the "conservative persuasion" have perceived where the action is and it does not seem to be in the academy, but more likely in the increasing welter of "pop" right-wing "little magazines," YAF conventions and even pseudo-intellectual foundations reputedly engaged in the propagation of "conservatism."

With these factors in mind, it might be useful to trot out the old war horse once again, 1974-style, and take stock of the present state of conservatism and to speculate on its future impact and role in the culture.

The author should like to present his credentials and biases prefatory to such an enterprise: he is a "cradle conservative," an immediately postnatal Tory. He was the only child in his grammar school who was pulling for the British to win the Revolutionary War, being then (and still) a sentimental monarchist. He had a consistent record of Toryism as an undergraduate, jeopardized his graduate student career by exotic affections for Burke, Metternich, Disraeli, Santayana and Ortega, published his first academic-style article in *Modern Age* in 1959, suffered through the academic proscriptions of the '50's and '60's (he earned his keep bringing Plato to the prairies), profited from the academic "tokenism" of the later '60's, published when and where possible (over a quite dubious range of topics), gained a reputation as a Tory "irregular" and discovered (after the direct and fond tutelage of such gentlemen as Eliseo Vivas and William McGovern and others) that he was not in the "conservative

mainstream." Throughout, he clung, perhaps from blatant vanity, to the notion that he was a philosopher—of some sort.

The author has engaged in this marginal memorabilia only to fairly present to the reader his peculiar perspective on conservatism and its future; he does not pretend to an objectivity he cannot muster.

On what may appear to be a superficial level, the mood of conservatism has perceptibly changed by 1974. A brief way of indicating this change is to say that it has lost much of its compelling grandeur, its elemental sense of passion and, finally, its evocation of the tragic sense. It has, in contrast, become increasingly prosperous (in a comparative sense), respectable, *bourgeois*, cautious and, if you will forgive, fat—the antithesis of that almost classical leanness characteristic of conservative thought and writing in those recent eras when conservatism felt itself on the verge of being swept away and with it the civilization it had sought to maintain. Contemporary conservative writing displays a high finish, an oracular tenor (interspersed with an often heavy-handed wit that, to borrow from Aristotle, falls short of being either "well-bred" or "impudent"), but it lacks the crystalline hardness of those who were accustomed to live, simultaneously, with both "first principles" and personal cultural deracination. The conservative has been traditionally faced with two levels of discourse: the care of psyches and the care of bodies (to use a Platonic formulation); he has had to deal on the level of spirit (the realm of philosophy) and the level of the body (the realm of politics). Unlike his social adversaries who could address themselves exclusively to one or the other, the conservative not only had to confront both, but he also had to *inter-relate* them. This was and is the unique genius of historical conservatism. Put another way: the conservative not only acknowledged the stratum of spirit, but took a singularly fulsome and majestic view of it. He also acknowledged the stratum of the body and took a modest and, it is fair to say, realistic view

of it. This viewpoint implies that subordination of the political to the philosophical that is so characteristic of the conservative tradition, but it also suggests the intimate correlation of the political and the philosophical, an equally apparent conservative motif.

The difficulty with contemporary conservatism is that it has neglected this interrelationship—it speaks of the psyche and it speaks of the body, but it does not adequately relate them. The consequences of this lead to a decline of its comprehensive world view, its majestic aura recedes, it tends toward the narrow and the prosaic. It lacks passion, because it fails to grasp the rudimentary and cosmic elements in common experience, it is “culture-bound,” and lacking this it is also deficient in compassion. It sheds its tragic sense, because it no longer takes human tragedy seriously as an inescapable component of the human predicament. It becomes, curiously, either “progressive” or “reactionary,” because it does not accept inevitabilities, it declines to consider fundamental accommodation as being as necessary as environmental adaptation. In blunter language, contemporary conservatism becomes, of all things, optimistic: it entertains affirmative prospects for social amelioration based upon either a fragile hope for political success resting upon what it thinks to be a kind of historical drift founded, more practically, on its new-found alliance with the dissatisfied middle classes or a possibility of a return, also politically effected, to a social condition more akin to the uninhibited mobilities of the past. Both are equally fanciful, but both “hopes” divert conservatism’s attention from the phenomenon of human tragedy. In short, American conservatism is bouyed up by the thought that there is a better than even chance of preserving the *status quo* more or less intact.

It may well be that the American public yearns to recover lost values and vanished securities—but this is because it cannot find them in the contemporary milieu. It is the obligation of conservatism to help

them realize these values and securities, but not to speak pompously about “what’s right with America.” If there is to be another “conservative revival,” it must begin where the last one left off: by asking, once more, the question “What’s wrong with America?” and offering some meaningful changes. One way to respond to the question of what is the future of American conservatism is to present the need for a second conservative revival in this century—and one that aims to take up the burdens assumed by the revival of 1948, along with its general orientations. If conservatism, after the earlier and now moribund revival, had created its own “establishment,” as it sought eagerly to do, with all the apparatus of such an organism, complete with adequate funding, media resources, publishing houses, research foundations, *et al*, then, at least, it would have been a considerably more powerful influence of sorts on affairs more or less directly political. It did not accomplish this, but it did preserve many of the less useful accoutrements of an “establishment” with its corresponding orthodoxy. The result of this incestuous, in-group *apparat* is that a large percentage of genuine conservative commentary is now being produced by people not expressly labeled as “conservatives” or by those perhaps fortunately located on the outskirts of the bastions of conservative orthodoxy.

Conservative impact on the society is lessening rather than increasing almost exactly in proportion to conservatism’s intensifying disinclination to talk about fundamental social ideas and to, instead, substitute for it an increasing defense of “special interests” and corporate business. This is a strange, one-sided love affair, this liaison between some elements of conservatism and the business community. Conservatism leaps to the latter’s defense, guns blazing (or as much as their guns will blaze), but it is never rewarded for these Horatio-like services. Business plays the shy maiden, indeed, willing to have its interests advocated by the conservative “establishment,” but unwilling to lend very much solid support

to the defender. Conservatism's rewards from this sector are meagre, to say the least, especially in view of the zeal exerted. American radicalism is far better funded—and, curiosity of curiosities, often by the business community that is being shielded by presumably conservative publicists. One can only suppose that the amounts of corporate money finding its way to the support of leftwing causes and organizations is the result of the astonishing naiveté of American businessmen. However, some practical tokens of gratitude might, one imagines, be legitimately expected by the conservative apologists. This intimate symbiosis between some conservatives (and very notable and powerful ones) and corporate business may not be very desirable on several grounds, but the fidelity of these conservatives is remarkable in any case, considering the scant reciprocities shown.

One is not suggesting that conservatism is tainted by either a defense of the free enterprise system or by close association with men of business, both connections being understandable and even to be expected. However, the preoccupation by much of the conservative intelligentsia with the advocacy of reasonably specialized economic questions vitiates the energies and appeals of conservatism. There are certain things that are indispensable to the health of the society—and conservatives must be preoccupied with them. Our economic arrangements, while important, are clearly secondary to these factors. Contemporary American conservatism is frequently guilty of having the "tail wag the dog"—and the reference is not made only to so-called "libertarians," but also to self-proclaimed "conservatives" whose affection for the theory of the "invisible hand" apparently outranks all other principles.

If American conservatism has lost the track and a new revival is indicated, such a renaissance will have to confront four major problems. How it deals with these problems will determine its future in terms of its effect on social development. Perhaps we can label these as follows:

1. the problem of community;
2. the problem of nature;
3. the problem of civic ethics;
4. the problem of style.

1. It is not extravagant to call the "problem of community" the central problem of this century. It has also been, historically, a central conservative problem. It is, as well, a more drastic problem than the ramifications of it dealt with by conservative sages of the past, because the principal implication of the word "problem" in the contemporary setting is the possible extinction of the human community. It is not the question of the extinction of the species explicitly; men will, doubtless, continue to live in groups of some sort. Rather, the question is whether men will live in something called a "community." An available dictionary defines "community" thus: "A social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and have a cultural and historical heritage." Even that spare definition helps to illumine the problem. This definition is not at variance with more elaborate formulations, the profoundest of which is likely that of Josiah Royce (especially in his *The Problem of Christianity*). Royce makes numerous most insightful observations regarding community that cannot be recounted here, but one necessary condition, he contends, is that there is in the consciousness of the community, as the totality of individuals, a "remembered past" and an "anticipated future." In that sense alone, the community is dying.

Its demise represents something far more serious than even those social controls customarily attributed to the community. Its passing may well create rudimentary changes, likely aberrational ones, in species behavior due to an absence of the reinforcing gratifications of communal living. It is not possible here to pursue this line of reasoning beyond the briefest suggestions, but there is ample evidence to suppose that present social maladies that are reaching crisis proportions result, in large measure,

from the declining reinforcement of the community. The "problem" thus becomes the most salient concern of the social analyst—or anyone else interested in the business of social conservation.

This situation would appear to present American conservatism with a challenge and an opportunity of virtually unprecedented proportions in view of the fact that historical conservatism has been especially sensitive to the conservancy of the community. The entire thrust of conservative political thought has been to contend with the preservation of community, giving it, incidentally, that priority expounded, initially, by Aristotle. Indeed, the early writings of the 1948 revival (some years after the more theoretical contributions of Royce), buttressed by the humanism of Santayana and Babbitt, accorded the maintenance of community a central focus.

What happened to this conservative concern for community and with it that most elemental linkage with the anxieties and aspirations of the vast majority of men? It collided with the indigenous American rightwing preferences for nineteenth century individualism, one of those generative factors (along with numerous others tangentially connected) that eroded the primacy of community and with it the stabilities and satisfactions of American social life. Conservatism, the arch-paladin of community, became—and surely in the public mind it became—the champion not only of individualism, but also of those other post-nineteenth century innovations that reshaped human living patterns, the most prominent of which was the natural exploitation, centralization, urbanization and *anomie* that the age introduced. The community was harassed by the thesis that human conditions of life ought to be predicated upon the ease of consumption in contrast to the primordial requirements of man.

It is not that the American conservative traditionalists turned their coats (although a good deal of "trimming" went on), they were simply out-weighted by the sheer vol-

ume of the latter-day Hamiltonians. A part of the newly-formed "conservative" phalanx, not otherwise, in theory, in the same camp with Spencer, Sumner and Frank Chodorov, shied away from the traditionalists' invocation of the primacy of the community. Was this another form of "collectivism" they asked? Wasn't the implicit notion of the "organic society" un-American or, at least, a doctrine of authoritarianism? Phrases like "Tory Socialism" struck irrational fear in their hearts. Incredible as this degree of philosophical and historical ignorance may have been, it helped to bury the manifest conservative concern for the problem of community.

Meantime, of course, the society, unaffected by this ill-education and pusillanimity, was suffering all those pangs of deprivation occasioned by the decline of community and all sorts of ideologues, conscious of the situation, rushed in with amelioratory proposals. The New Left could talk about "community," however bizarre their visions might be of a new tribalism, utopian communes and, frequently, totalitarian-style social systems. That the citizenry was cool to these recommendations is a testimony to its good sense and lingering, perhaps even subconscious, intimations of the nature of the genuine community.

But these folk received precious little guidance from conservatism, save for a few bold writers who were not too concerned about their standing in the "mainstream." Who would be offended, then, by the obvious observation that America is swiftly becoming a distinctly unattractive place in which to live? Real-estate developers? Automobile manufacturers? Exxon? The MacDonald Hamburger chain? The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers? Ethnic fanatics? The Mafia? Richard Nixon? *Human Events*? Why should conservatives care? Their concern is for social conservation, to restore the sense of community and to make life in America worthy of the people who live there and who, largely, do not know how to help themselves out of the bind. The new

revival, if it is to come, must address itself, with a *sang-froid* courage, to the task. The job is still to encourage men to "love their little platoon," but in order for them to do so we must somehow keep the "little platoon" a going concern.

2. The "problem of nature" involves matters both metapsychological and elusive, on the one hand, and institutional and concrete, on the other. Put in ordinary speech: America is having problems getting along with nature. The phrase "getting along with nature" is significant, because it implies a condition not universally acknowledged by Americans, the conception that the natural order is not infinitely amenable to human manipulation, at least not without serious aberrational consequences. This premise is considerably more inclusive in scope than concerns about ecological compatibilities or the preservation of the flora and fauna. It implies that on a variety of levels the natural configurations of reality require an accommodation, a recognition, by members of the natural order, men included. The defiant and even vengeful attitudes toward things "natural" (to include, of course, the physical environment itself) that characterized common American viewpoints during much of the last century has had the accumulated effect of alienating men from their natural roots, their species determinants.

That this perilous condition exists is recognized by a wide spectrum of opinion, including writers identified with the New Left. It is not some conservative penchant, although, historically, a case could be made that sensitive naturalism has been a feature of modern conservative thought since Burke. This perspective, from the conservative standpoint, is explainable in several ways: its connections with natural law theory, its agrarian predispositions, its intense aesthetic tendencies. In short, conservatism, while not indulging in the impulsive sentimentalisms of Rousseau and his descendants, has assumed the existence of an objective natural standard, in the first place, and, secondly, has assumed that ways of life

could be conceived of as being "natural" and "unnatural," even presuming the former to require an environmental setting that includes a close proximity between men and nature thought of as being the undefined furniture of the universe.

It is easy enough to say that contemporary conservatism has "waffled" on the environmental issue and has been too prone to support the exploiters rather than to staunchly advocate conservation. It is appropriate to point out how paradoxical is that posture, as, in the march of history, conservatives were the first "conservationists" (one can recall Burke, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Ruskin and others). It is, in itself, an indictment, but the conservative failure is starker yet: conservatism has failed to grapple with the problem of reconciling man and nature; it has been remiss in seeking means, social techniques, to aid in the recovery of a vital acceptance of and compatibility with nature, not only nature *qua* the natural environment, but nature as it constitutes the core of the person. The ultimate degradation of the human species must be that we now find it necessary to conduct classes in "sensitivity training" or how to teach men to be the animals that, in part, they are. Indeed, to reduce animalistic sensitivity to the formalized and self-conscious techniques employed in this type of "instruction" likely defeats the purposes and may, as well, have certain regrettable psychological consequences.

Conservatism should be prepared to condemn efforts to further corrupt the role of man as a co-participant in the natural order; it should resist attempts to construct environmental conditions that suffocate man's deep-seated needs and gratifications. Conservatism has not done this, principally because of its ill-founded fears of the "natural man" as being more or less what Hobbes thought him to be and because it has tended to see the realm of nature as some "war of all against all" in which the precious uniqueness of human culture was totally explainable in terms of the ingenuities of social control. Of course the conser-

vative endorses the necessity of social control and, of course, he acknowledges the restraining influences of civilized culture, *but* the nature of social control (and, by implication, its legitimacy) flows from its being an extension of the controls objectified in the natural order itself. That natural order is not some primal chaos, as is known by anyone familiar with the disclosures of twentieth century science, but too many American conservatives currently exhibit a fashionable loathing for "scientism," a stance that frequently blinds them to the genuine insights of scientific investigation. Nature viewed from the perspective of science is no more like the visions of Hobbes or Spencer than it is the concepts of Prince Kropotkin.

Beyond, then, the more crass motives that prompt some "conservatives" to be anti-environmentalists—those who put industrial efficiency ahead of ecological or aesthetic considerations—contemporary conservatism suffers from an anti-naturalistic predilection, a severance of the historical adhesion of conservatism to the land. The so-called "environmental" or "ecological" controversy is misunderstood. It is not merely a question of preserving tracts of wilderness for posterity or providing "green belts" for crowded urban areas or cleaning up the air and water, it involves conceiving of human life within the perimeters set by nature, both in terms of the ecological relationship of man to his physical environment and the naturalistically-defined requirements of the species. Not only physical survival is at stake, but also the psychical survival is threatened. It may be that contemporary man has been "engineered" to the point where his society becomes aberrational and his behavior pathological. His primordial "wiring" is at war with those artificial conditions that are the product of man's choices in regard to his environmental arrangements.

"Conservation," then, takes on a magnitude far beyond the axioms of the Sierra Club, often valuable as those recommendations may be. But contemporary conserva-

tism is at a loss to know what to conserve, which explains its uneasy ambivalence regarding nature. What it ought to be concerned about are *essences*, those natural paradigms that underly human social institutions and practices. Such essences, derivable from the objective order of nature, are not identical to human conventions, that may be equated with *forms*, transient configurations. Currently, the conservative defense of "tradition" tends to be the conservation of social forms instead of essences, but in placing its emphasis here, conservatism runs the risk of jeopardizing concern about and recognition of the imperative essences. Let us suppose the family to be a "natural" social institution in the sense that "pair-bonding" for the propagation and rearing of young is a human species characteristic that results not from cultural conventions, but from biological directive, as similar sub-societal arrangements can be found in other intelligent social mammals. It would seem altogether reasonable to "conserve" the family institution in this sense, to structure human practices in accord with this natural directive. But such a conservation seeks to preserve the essence of the institution; it can be quite flexible regarding the form. It need not seek to expressly conserve the form of family life typical, let us say, of the American middle classes in the nineteenth century, especially if such a formal conception of the family does not appear efficacious in a later era and if such a resolute insistence upon the form of family organization impairs the continuity of the essential institution.

Contemporary conservatism is confused on this point. It is in a quandry understanding the tradition it announces it protects. Tradition can cover a multitude of mores—bearbaiting and flogging were "traditions" of a sort and their passing is hardly regretted. Tradition is built of social continuities and accumulations that express the actualization of those essences that are finally rooted in the natural order. Thus, the alienation from nature represents

something more than instinctual impairment, it means a disastrous social discontinuity. Many "traditions" we can do without, but this specific essentialistic variety of tradition is imperative.

Current conservative opinion is too preoccupied with conserving that which is conventional and, therefore, ephemeral and expendable. It is prone to emphasize the sanctity of systems and customs; it wishes to hold the line with regard to the social "liturgy" without adequate attention to the civil "theology." It is very upset, for example, about the "welfare problem," the entire machinery of the welfare state, but it has not really faced the problem of the nature of social work or the basis on which social duties and rewards are allocated. It supposes that the "work ethic" is somehow desirable, but it is not sure why, except, perhaps, for the not too enlightening thought that it is better for people to be occupied and out of mischief and productivity is to be encouraged. But surely there must be better reasons for social work than these. One does not solve the "welfare mess" by telling people that they ought to work because it is socially disquieting for them to be idle or that their production is required or that work and "self-respect" are joined in some inexplicable manner. One suspects that there are ample grounds for the requirement that people work in terms of mutual obligations that arise from a naturalistically conceived division of labor. Why should *Homo sapiens* be exempted from these responsibilities? Work is meaningful and satisfying, but only in a social context where the rewards are primarily those of enjoying the reciprocity of regard and sharing in the communal enterprise.

Our society rewards work on the basis of the explicit nature of the function rather than on the degree of excellence displayed in the performance. This attitude culminates in our stultifying emphasis on "status." The honorific nature of work simply follows from the vocation involved. Mediocre lawyers (or even incompetent ones) en-

joy a higher status than able plumbers or skillful teachers. It is as Burke once wrote: "Thousands admire the sentimental writer; the affectionate father is hardly known in his parish." There are manifestly inadequate social rewards for excellence in the discharge of social duties of whatever kind they may be. Society needs more competent automobile mechanics and fewer bad poets; it needs more concerned parents and far fewer "beautiful people." It surely needs to recognize excellence in the pursuit of the more common and fundamental social obligations as against the more specialized functions. What recognition is there for the decent man, the conscientious parent, the loyal friend, the public-spirited citizen (unless he endows a hospital)? And what are the rewards of cunning, selfishness and aggrandizement?

This preeminence of artifice and snobbery is insidiously destructive and must be abandoned. Our division of labor must be repostulated on patterns closer to the natural and ethical paradigms. Our rewards should reflect the fundamental ethical verities. Conservatism, of all shades of thought, should be in the forefront of agitating for such a change in our social fabric. The conservative must stand unequivocally for the honest journeyman as against the shrewd opportunist and he must resist with all his energies the continued demolition of the natural connection, the debasement of the cosmic imperative, in the name of human vanity.

3. We live in an age of moral enthusiasms and moral ambiguities. We may say, in truth, that we live in an Alexandrine age in ethics: we are little concerned, at base, with the civic morality, but we are intensely concerned with a type of highly personal and quite utilitarian ethic. We are inclined to address ourselves to that same question that intrigued the Judaic philosophers of the Middle Ages: how does the "good man" live in the "bad city?"

But is it possible to be a "good man" in a "bad city"? Is this really any more pos-

sible than some Epicurean asceticism, the contemporary version of which is the bucolic commune where the evils of the world are presumably avoided by withdrawal into rustic simplicity and social communism? Do we not, in sum, underestimate the configuring character of social life in shaping our most rudimentary moral outlook? It must be admitted, for example, as Burke long ago pointed out, that even freedom is primarily a social and not an individual condition. How is it possible for an individual to be truly "free" in a social environment in which freedom is not a general characteristic? How, then, is the ethical life possible, except in a most limited sense, amidst moral chaos and the breakdown of those anticipated obligations that restrict conduct and offer the necessary unities implied in the recognition of common or collective ethical ends? The maintenance of the civic ethic in reasonably healthy shape serves not only a heuristic or didactic purpose, it establishes the foundation for social tranquility by regularizing social reciprocity and implementing the only really viable actualization of social order.

Of course, the collapsing vitality of the idea of community has adversely affected the liveliness of a civic ethic. It has created the milieu of "every man for himself," even if that dictum takes on more or less moralistic overtones. A part of the difficulty springs from the fact that we are all post-Freudians, assured, in a number of ways, that society and its discrete ethic must war in some fashion upon our subjective needs and desires. It is hard for us to view a civic ethic in anything but adversarial terms. On the other hand, the most rudimentary thrust of democracy is *appetition*; it is a world view resting upon a theory of the satisfactions of appetite. Regardless of how valid this express assumption may be, it is fair to say that recent democratic thought has tended to narrow the range of appetite and to argue for an appetitive urge that is largely, if not wholly, physicalistic and material. Even freedom becomes construed as being a lack of restriction upon the possi-

bilities for physicalistic appetite—and now popular democracy turns this around, in a manner of speaking, to contend that the older civic ethic ought to be replaced by a "new morality" that consists, principally, of public power being employed in order to attain some general equality in the satisfaction of these delimited appetites. If there is a "civic ethic" at all in this viewpoint, it is the insistence that everyone ought to be granted "equal time" at the social trough.

But neither egocentric individualism or doctrinaire egalitarianism are sympathetic, finally, to a civic ethic predicated upon the assumption that the organic entity—the state or community—may have ethical requirements above and beyond the moral concerns of individuals. To accede to this concept of the civic ethic does not invariably entail some absolutistic theory of statism, of *raison d'état*. The political formulations of community are only instrumental to the maintenance of the civic ethic and are limited by that ethic. Conservatism must, therefore, perform two operations at once: (a) revive the civic ethic and (b) refute the theorem, frequently advocated by popular democrats, that the civic ethic can be construed to be some consciously manufactured social dogma, positivistically justified, enforceable by the coercive power of government. This is a tricky tightrope to walk. It requires a defense of the idea of a discrete "general welfare" ("commonweal" may be a more felicitous word), while, at the same time, denying that that "general welfare" can be grounded upon pseudo-empiricistic hypotheses promulgated by a governmental elite.

The distinction hinges on the word *ethical* and what it implies. No one could doubt that ethical relativism, as the reigning cultural disposition, has been the principal foe of a functioning civic ethic. The thrust of this relativistic preference has been to deny any significant obligatory character in universal moral rules pertaining to society over-all. Yet what has occurred is that this very same ethical relativism becomes

reified into an absolutistic formulation—"situational morality" and all it connotes becomes an absolute moral standard, socially and politically enforceable. The effect is to create a counterethic that explicitly denies the obligatory mandate of universal social rules. In very precise linguistic terms, this contention is really not an ethic at all; it is, at best, an assertion of a utilitarian morality, however it becomes the axiomatic basis for social and political control.

The conservative argument is that the empirical base for the discovery of the civic or communal ethic is not to be found in direct observation of social practice—such an operation can lead to the conclusions of Machiavelli or Hobbes or Marx. The empirical recognition of the deontological grounding of civic ethics must be founded on the basis of a broader range of phenomena, to include both the natural order and the historical spectrum. This broader recognition is, to a high degree, the result of a rudimentary mode of perception. This perception is admirably contrasted in the language of Thomas Gould:

The trouble is, alas that the mood has passed. The vision of the sophists has triumphed after all. We can no longer count on seeing brilliance and order in the jungle; indeed we see the law of the jungle in our very cities. And when we have occasion to dwell on the intricate regularity of the motion of moons or electrons, we are as likely as not to feel that the universe is rather like a vast, mindless servo-mechanism, or a giant IBM machine, one which, however, is incapable of giving anybody any answers.¹

This "hermeneutic" perception applies, of course, to both the discovery of community, natural order and the deontological features of that natural order that produce a civic ethic. Conservatism, armed with that vision, has the duty to articulate it in compelling form, to translate the intimations of natural order into intellectually uncom-

promising principles of social morality. This enterprise is not to be confused with some mission to restore ethical authoritarianism, based upon some narrow, cognitively-projected canon of moral absolutes, reinforced by puritanical coercion (granting, of course, the inescapable necessity to use punitive means to require, when needed, the recognition of obligation). The restoration of the civic ethic is burdensome only for those whose rapacities and indulgences would be curtailed by such an ethic. For the larger segment of mankind it would be a welcome advent, conducive to a heightened regard for fellow creatures, an expansion of human congeniality by a lessening of fear and random aggression. In sum, the object of conservatism is *social friendship*, the moderating of animosity by the tightening of the collective moral bonds, the depiction of a collective ethical purpose.

We live in a snarling era and conservatism in its understandable desire to prevent the victory of Jacobinism has often had to become tough and contentious. At times, the ideological conflict has proceeded on a "no quarter asked or given" basis. But these exigencies should not obscure, for conservatives, their more paramount goal: the renewal or recovery of social harmony, the encouragement of social friendship, the rule of tranquility and benevolence. The only means to this supreme end is to revive the civic ethic. Contemporary American conservatism must remember that it still must seek to "bind up the nation's wounds."

4. The three foregoing "problems" entail the recovery of conservatism's "style." Historically, the conservative has been more interested in style than other social attitudes; his aristocratic predilections lead him to take the matter of *areté* very seriously indeed. Style—conceived of as the spontaneous expression of individual self-knowledge, self-cultivation and self-direction—is thought of as being the primary indication of health (in a metapsychological sense), a freedom that follows from the discharge of obligation, the possession of

an accurate apprehension of reality and the tempering of the intellectual capacity and discipline (hence, the recognizable links between a regard for style and classical and renaissance humanism).

The matter of style is germane to contemporary American conservatism in three ways: (a) its possession by conservatives themselves, as indicative of the conditions listed above; (b) the stylistic tone of society in general; (c) the relationship between the general style of conservatism and its corresponding influence on the society.

Consideration (a) leads one into dangerous generalizations and, possibly, *ad hominum* observations and, consequently, may well be prudently avoided. Consideration (b) need not be dwelt upon, either; style, thought of in neohumanistic terms, is hardly much admired in the current milieu. We must face it, ours is a vulgar age and that is that. The matter of (c), however, is at once pertinent and requiring comment.

In stylistic terms, it is fair to say that conservatism, since 1948, has become progressively more conformist, less exciting, less colorful and, to be frank, less aristocratic in tone. Style is often connected with eccentricity and often fairly so. Conservatism, in its livelier moments, projected an image of eccentricity, predominantly an honest, unpremeditated eccentricity. There are, one suppose, two main types of false or trivial eccentricity that are the antithesis of real style: first, a "public relations" variety of eccentricity that is coldly calculated to produce some desired reaction and, second, a nonconformity that attaches only to superficial and nonconsequential matters, masking a comprehensive unwillingness to be unconventional regarding significant issues. These pseudo-eccentricities are quite typical, by the way, of a good deal of so-called "radical chic." One would not urge conservatives to ape the affectations of the pre-Raphaelites or adopt the wearing of togas in public to express their admiration for the merits of the Roman Republic. Pseudo-eccentricity usually gives one the reputation of being a "kook" (to use the

current *patois*) and, thus, one's serious opinions are discounted.

But on the level of substantial ideas, conservatives must be eccentrics. To do otherwise is to deny their stylistic natures. This eccentricity has always lent to the conservative persuasion its most formidable political advantages: candor and excitement. The best advice forthcoming to American politicians would be (with apologies to the Delphic Oracle): "Be yourself!" We are brought to the brink of stupification by political merchandizing; we yearn, hunger is better, for the fresh stimulus to be exuded by uninhibited public men. In short, we covet style—not an "image," but a style that reflects those qualities that produce the externalities of style.

Conservatives need to stop behaving like Rotarians and stock brokers. They need to throw away their geranium pots, Norman Rockwell prints and "water buffalo grain" attache cases. They need to recapture their latent sense of style; they need to inject into the social discourse an exhilarating impudence, a bold and candid willingness to express their ideas however shocking and dismaying to some—and would not that be, these days, eccentricity writ large?

These orientations must be infused into a "second revival," restoring that spirit of intellectual adventure that propelled conservatism from a parlor avocation into a national influence—and then was allowed to decline in its maturity, confusing philosophical timidity with prudential social and political caution. We need this "second revival" badly if we are to avoid a social equilibrium yawing precariously between reckless radicalism and dehumanizing philistinism.

With the earlier revival in full swing, Russell Kirk authored, in 1954, a well-known work, *A Program for Conservatives*. It is a thoughtful book still much deserving of attention. The brief reflections in this essay cannot unveil some new, current "program," but if one was inclined to offer some more or less specific advice to contemporary American conservatism in cap-

sule form, these might be the recommendations:

1. Disentangle a belief in control from an advocacy of a pragmatic *Realpolitik*.
2. Understand that the powers of government are limited, ultimately, by prudence and discretion.
3. Defend individual prerogative in terms of the "rights" that follow from the discharge of social duty.
4. Be as apprehensive of private power as the public variety.
5. Support the resurgence of legislative power.
6. Condemn irrational and ineffective pseudo-benevolence, but preserve a conviction in genuine benevolence as a social imperative.
7. Rejuvenate, where possible, the significance and quality of local, communal institutions.
8. Resist all attempts to disguise vulgarity and despoilage behind the false arguments to necessity.
9. Leave protestations of self-righteousness to the missionaries.
10. Don't be afraid to talk about the "aristocratic principle"—the promise of America is still the opportunity for every man to attain the aristocratic ideal.

11. Hew hard to the "unbought grace of life"—it still means civility, decorum and social friendship.
12. Recognize the only true but yet profound equality among men—it arises from their universal natures.
13. Grant esteem to the excellence in performance of social duties, however humble, in contrast to artificial status—elemental human decency is still the prime test of citizenship.
14. Consign politics to a secondary role—and then play it up to the hilt with excitement, style, candor and wit.

The above set of recommendations—another "fourteen points"—only hints at the program to be instituted by a "second revival." But it is time that conservatively-oriented social theorists and critics, proceeding from these perspectives, undertake that assignment described by Plato: to become physicians and to minister to the health of the social body. Beyond moral exhortation, we require a new social vision for this country, worked out with rational discipline and empirical credibility, that will unite the historical motifs of humanistic conservatism with the common aspirations of men.

¹Gould, Thomas, *Platonic Love* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 170.

Advertising in the Affluent Society

HAROLD DEMSETZ

ADVERTISING is a subject about which the ratio of poetic opinion to systematic analytics approaches infinity. Like romance, advertising is an activity to which most people have been exposed and about which little is known. Casual generalizations and uninformed opinions come easily in such a situation. Academics are no exception; indeed, sensitive scholars are expert in nothing if not easy generalizations.

Advertising activity often is viewed with disdain and even hostility by intellectuals. The usual reasons set forth in defense of this hostility are somewhat curious. The charge that advertising attempts to persuade buyers surely is true; that it offers a biased view of the product is true to an appreciable extent, although the extent is limited by antifraud laws if not by common sense and intelligent business practice. These aspects of advertising—bias and intended persuasion—are true also of much communication, including many academic lectures. However, professorial promoters have available to them the protection which can be marshaled under the rubric of academic freedom.

The persuasive powers of the academic lecture are nowhere illustrated better than in the writings of Thorstein Veblen and of his student, J. K. Galbraith. Thorstein Veblen wrote in 1921 the following view of the industrial system that had emerged during the previous century:

. . . The growth and conduct of this industrial system presents this singular outcome. The technology . . . which takes effect in this mechanical industry is in an eminent sense a joint stock of knowledge. . . . It requires the use of trained and instructed workmen—born, bred, trained, and instructed at the cost of the people at large. So also it requires . . . a corps of highly trained and specially gifted experts. . . . These expert men, technologists, engineers, or whatever name may best suit them, make up the indispensable General Staff of the industrial system; and without their immediate and unremitting guidance . . . the industrial system will not work. . . . To do their work as it should be done these men of the industrial general staff must have a free hand, unhampered by commercial considerations . . . nor are