

1 **Liberalism: Illusions and Realities**

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6 **The spate of books** on conservatism and liberalism in America has resulted in
7 debates about the respective merits of these allegedly opposing political creeds in
8 which a great deal of semantic confusion is manifest. Mr. Clinton Rossiter in his
9 *Conservatism in America* has accurately defined the conservative mood in our
10 nation as a combination of nationalistic preferences and a passion for the
11 economics of *laissez-faire*, which is to say, that our conservatism in domestic
12 politics is the old liberalism of the Manchester School. Mr. Russell Kirk in his
13 *Conservative Mind* seems to assume that there is some authentic conservatism in
14 the mere desire to preserve the status quo of the American paradise; and he
15 rather uncritically seeks to relate this American conservatism with a British
16 conservatism which is rooted in the aristocratic tradition and has none of Kirk's
17 prejudice against the Welfare State, and with the rather pathetic aristocratic
18 tradition of our own Southland, as expounded by Randolph and Calhoun. This
19 Southern tradition was pathetic because it was but a remnant of an old
20 aristocratic society in a nation which had no conscious relations with the
21 European feudal past, and because it was a form of aristocracy based upon chattel
22 slavery and was naturally destroyed with the institution of slavery.

23 It is obviously necessary to make the most careful distinctions between the
24 conservatism and liberalism which are merely moods or ideologies according to
25 which one defends a status quo or seeks to leave it behind, and the conservatism
26 and liberalism which are cogent political philosophies. We can dismiss the sort of
27 conservatism and liberalism which are dispositions toward some status quo very
28 simply by giving *a priori* preference for liberalism over conservatism on the

29 grounds that it is not reasonable to defend any status quo uncritically; and that it
30 is certainly not reasonable to do so in the rapidly changing conditions of a
31 technical society in which "new conditions teach new duties and time makes
32 ancient truth uncouth." If being for or against change were the only issue
33 involved, any critical person would be bound to be "liberal."

34 If we study the various meanings of "liberalism" and "conservatism" in Western
35 and particularly American social history, it soon becomes apparent that
36 "liberalism" in the broadest sense is rightly identified with the rise of a modern
37 technical society availing itself of democratic political forms and of capitalistic
38 economic institutions. This "liberal society" came to birth in Britain, France and
39 America in opposition to the feudal aristocratic culture of the European past.
40 "Liberalism" in the broadest sense is therefore synonymous with "democracy." Its
41 strategy is to free the individual from the traditional restraints of a society, to
42 endow the "governed" with the power of the franchise, to establish the principle
43 of the "consent of the governed" as the basis of political society; to challenge all
44 hereditary privileges and traditional restraints upon human initiative,
45 particularly in the economic sphere and to create the mobility and flexibility
46 which are the virtues and achievements of every "liberal society" as distinguished
47 from feudal ones.

48 But liberalism has more distinct connotations; and upon them hang all the issues
49 of contemporary political controversy. One of these connotations arises out of the
50 history of technical societies; the other arises out of the peculiar philosophy of the
51 French Enlightenment and the French Revolution. In the first instance, the
52 narrower connotation of liberalism is identified with the peculiar and unique
53 ethos of middle-class life. But since the middle classes soon found the laboring
54 classes to the Left of them, liberalism soon ceased to be the exclusive philosophy
55 of democracy. Even without the rise of labor as a political power, modern
56 democracies, as they developed from commercialism to industrialism, found that
57 the freeing of economic initiative from political restraint was only one side of the
58 problem of justice. The other side was placing restraints upon initiative in the
59 interest of security and justice.

60 Thus in every modern industrial nation the word "liberalism" achieved two
61 contradictory definitions. It was on the one hand the philosophy which insisted
62 that economic life was to be free of any restraint. In this form it was identical with
63 the only conservatism which nations, such as our own, who had no feudal past,
64 could understand. It was the philosophy of the more successful middle classes
65 who possessed enough personal skill, property or power to be able to prefer
66 liberty to security. On the other hand the word was also used to describe the
67 political strategy of those classes which preferred security to absolute liberty and

68 which sought to bring economic enterprise under political control for the sake of
69 establishing minimal standards of security and welfare. It has been rather
70 confusing that both of these strategies go by the name of "liberalism."

71 The new conservatism about which one hears so much these days may claim a
72 right to the title of "liberalism" on the ground that its promise of gaining justice
73 through economic liberty is actually closer to the old classical economic
74 liberalism than the new liberalism is. On the other hand if the concern for justice
75 is the primary hallmark of liberalism, those who want to bring economic
76 enterprise under at least minimal control have as much right to this title as those
77 who want to preserve economic freedom. For a technical society, moving from
78 commercial to industrial activities, was bound to find the emancipation from
79 traditional restraints inadequate in the long run as a program for justice.

80 Thus it was significant that John Stuart Mill, who gave the liberal creed the most
81 classic expression in the 19th Century, moved in the latter years of his life from
82 pure libertarianism to a liberal socialism. It is even more significant that the
83 Liberal Party in Britain took this turn at the beginning of the century before the
84 Labour Party became a power. In Lloyd George's radical budget the taxing power
85 of the state was used to guarantee minimal security for the workers. This
86 development, in which incidentally Lloyd George was supported by Winston
87 Churchill, Britain anticipated by a quarter of a century the transmutation of
88 Jeffersonian liberalism into Roosevelt's "New Deal." American conservatives have
89 made much of this *volte-face* of the liberal tradition; and in their "liberty leagues"
90 tried to fill the political niche of the seemingly abandoned Jeffersonianism.

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92 **In European democracies** the desire to establish justice by bringing economic
93 power under political control was advanced by the Socialist parties. In Britain,
94 the old Liberal Party slowly lost ground in the postwar years to labor and the new
95 conservatism. At this moment, the old debate between freedom and control of
96 economic life has narrowed to a very small difference in emphasis between the
97 Tories and the Labour Party, a difference which has become slight in all modern
98 nations. The debate between a responsible Right and a responsible Left is both
99 inconclusive and insoluble because the degree of emphasis which must be put on
100 planning or spontaneity, on control or freedom, cannot be solved in terms of
101 fixed principles. The peculiar conditions of each nation and of each period within
102 a nation must and will determine the degree of emphasis on the one side or the
103 other of the equation.

104 In all stable modern nations the political situation reflects the insolubility of this
105 problem. Responsible parties, when not corrupted by demagoguery and dishonesty,
106 know that the economic and political life in a community cannot go too far in a

107 collectivist direction without becoming prey to bureaucratic stagnation. Nor can
108 it go too far in the direction of an uncontrolled economy without aggravating the
109 perils of insecurity and the evils of inequality arising from centralization of
110 power. Both evils are inherent in the economic process itself, particularly in our
111 era of rapid growth of techniques.

112 The semantic difficulties arising from this shift in meaning of the word liberal as
113 a technical civilization moves farther and farther from its original contest with an
114 organic and aristocratic society, are, however, simple compared to the confusions
115 of definition which arise from the fact that "liberalism" is both a political
116 philosophy, identified with the rising technical civilization, and a total philosophy
117 of life which was elaborated in the French Enlightenment. This confusion
118 becomes the greater because liberalism and a modern technical society had their
119 simultaneous inception in three modern nations, Great Britain, France and
120 America. In one of these, France, the aristocratic past, based upon an organic
121 society, was always in the background with its reactionary illusions which in turn
122 incited the illusions of the Enlightenment. In another, Great Britain, the old
123 society was broken in the Cromwellian revolution. Britain finally settled down at
124 the end of the century with a constitutional monarchy of William and Mary which
125 fused both liberal democracy and a more creative version of the old society. This
126 fusion has ever since characterized British life and made John Locke on the one
127 hand, and Edmund Burke on the other, the exponents of the chief strains of
128 British political philosophy. In America the liberal society and the new nation had
129 a simultaneous birth on a virgin continent with only a few vestigial remnants of
130 the old society, and these were finally eliminated in our Civil War. For these and
131 other reasons, American liberalism drew its primary inspiration from the
132 ideological presuppositions of the culture which gave rise to the French
133 Revolution and excluded a part of the British inheritance.

134 The French Enlightenment was "liberal" in its social policy in the sense that it
135 championed all the extensions of political power and freedom from political
136 control of economic enterprise which characterized the whole middle-class
137 movement in its struggle with the feudal past. But it also had a total philosophy of
138 life based on confidence in the perfectability of man and on the idea of historical
139 progress. These two ideas were basic to all the political miscalculations of the
140 Enlightenment and were the source of its errors. "Liberalism" acquired a special
141 connotation as a philosophy of life which did not take the factors of interest and
142 power seriously, which expected all parochial loyalties to be dissolved in more
143 universal loyalties; and which was indifferent to organically or historically
144 established loyalties and rights under the illusion that it would be simple for
145 rational man to devise more ideal communities and rights. The liberalism of the

146 French Enlightenment was thus based upon illusions as to the nature of man and
147 of history. It was quasi-anarchistic and pacifistic in its attitude toward the
148 coercions which are a necessary part of communal cohesion and toward the
149 conflicts of interest which always take place between communities. These were
150 the illusions which Burke challenged in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

151 The philosophy of the Enlightenment was not shared by such conservatives as
152 John Adams or such Jeffersonians as James Madison. Our Constitution was, in
153 fact, informed by a realism which contradicted all the illusions of the
154 Enlightenment. Nevertheless it became the primary source of inspiration for the
155 democratic movement in America. When sectarian Christian perfectionism
156 merged with the thought of the Enlightenment on our frontier, perfectionist
157 illusions in regard to man became the staples of the American liberal movement.

158 It must be apparent to anyone that it adds to the semantic confusion if those who
159 do not share the illusions of Diderot and Condorcet are termed "conservatives."
160 Such persons would be more accurately defined as "realistics," particularly since
161 a realistic estimate of perennial factors in the historical and social situation may
162 be put into the service of either a conservative or advancing social policy. It would
163 certainly be wrong to define a labor leader as "conservative" merely because he
164 knew, as every good labor leader must know, that a collective bargaining
165 agreement is not merely a rational or moral encounter, and that its success
166 depends upon the strength and unity of the force at his disposal. Incidentally, it
167 must be observed that organized labor has always been "realistic" in this sense.
168 Its realism included preference for proximate goals of justice, while the more
169 academic liberalism was frequently beguiled by the utopian illusions of the
170 Enlightenment.

171 In terms of international policy, confusion would be avoided if the word
172 "conservative" were confined to the pure nationalist. It certainly does not fit the
173 internationalist who knows about the perils and responsibilities of a nation in the
174 potential global community, but who is not persuaded that "word government" is
175 the answer.

176 There is, in short, no reason why the errors of the Enlightenment should continue
177 to bedevil the "progressive" political movements, and why "liberalism" should be
178 identified with illusions about human nature and history. Sometimes the foes of
179 liberalism insist that the illusions are inherent in the policy. There are even some
180 belated liberals who darkly insinuate that a realist who professes to be liberal in
181 social policy must be a crypto-conservative who has yet to reveal his true colors.
182 These confusions could be eliminated if the clear evidences of history were
183 presented to prove that the "liberal" illusions are not necessary for democracy,
184 and might actually have a have a baneful influence upon its life. The best

185 evidence for this thesis is a comparison between the course of British and French
186 democracy. In France the enthusiasm for a liberal society soon degenerated into
187 Jacobin fanaticism and Bonapartist absolutism.

188 In contrast, the curious blend of aristocracy and democracy in Britain slowly
189 evolved into the world's most stable democracy, in which "liberty broadened
190 down from precedent to precedent." The only remnant of the old feudalism is still
191 the prevalent class snobbishness of British life. This superior achievement was
192 due, partly to the superior wisdom of the Lockean type of liberalism and partly to
193 the interplay between the Lockean liberalism and the Burkean type of
194 conservatism. The aristocratic tradition at its worst tried to maintain the
195 traditional privileges of the feudal order. At its best it appreciated the organic
196 aspects of community better than urban-centered liberalism. One must include
197 under the "organic" aspect of community the force of mutually and historically
198 acknowledged rights and responsibilities, in comparison with the "inalienable"
199 rights which are worthless if no community acknowledges them. One must also
200 include standards of justice which have developed by slow and unconscious
201 growth rather than by conscious political intervention. Finally, to the organic
202 aspects one must reckon the hierarchies of authority which develop in every
203 political and economic realm, and without which the community could not be
204 organized.

205 It is rather ironic that the rigorous equalitarian creed of Communism should in
206 practice generate the monstrous inequalities of power and privilege which we see
207 in the Russian scene. The inequalities are more excessive than usual because
208 there is nothing in the creed that would come to terms with functional hierarchies
209 as such. We have lesser ironic realities in so-called liberal communities, whether
210 in labor unions or in churches. In every case justified inequalities of authority
211 develop, and usually some unjustified inequalities of privilege.

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213 **An academic** liberalism with its abstract notions of liberty and equality has
214 never been able to come to terms with these realities of the community. There is,
215 therefore, some truth in the aristocratic-conservative tradition which the most
216 democratic society must rescue from the error of aristocratic pretensions and
217 must incorporate into the wisdom by which the life of the community is regulated
218 and integrated. This truth may be imbedded in a conservative tradition. But it
219 must be freed from the errors which are also transmitted in the conservative
220 tradition. If that is done the result can only be a realistic liberalism. It will be a
221 liberalism because only that philosophy, stripped of its utopian errors, leaves the
222 way to the future open.

223 There is, unfortunately, no social locus in America for a valid "conservative"
224 philosophy. The more parochial part of the business community is bound to
225 develop a conservatism in which a decadent *laissez-faire* liberalism in domestic
226 politics is compounded with nationalism. It can be beguiled from these
227 prejudices only by the prestige of an Eisenhower. The realism embodied in a valid
228 conservatism, therefore, becomes the property of all parties and tendencies which
229 have enough pragmatic wisdom to discern the perennial factors in the shifting
230 historical scene.

231 *Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr is a noted Protestant theologian who has written*
232 *extensively on the nature of man and history.*

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