

The Anti-Revolutionary Nature of Freedom

Peter Viereck

THE success of parliamentary restraints in America, England, and sometimes western Europe and their failure in the rest of the world, suggests a lesson. The lesson is that parliamentary restraints only work when democracy has ceased to be revolutionary. They only work when it has become traditional, conservative, well-rooted.

Therefore, American liberals, who demand that our democracy today must "defy all traditions" at home and outbid Russia in "leading the revolution sweeping Asia", are cutting off the limb on which they repose. The strength of that democratic limb is its deep roots below, its traditionalism, nurtured by a slow organic evolution. Democracy can no more be transplanted today by Jacobin methods than it could when the French Revolution was replacing the monarchist King Logs of Europe with the Robespierrian King Storks.

I

Revolution or Conservation?

WHAT actually keeps a free society free?

Society is kept free by the traffic lights of law, not by the revolutionary lawlessness of well-meaning radicals and hasty innovators. In the complex structure of

life today, revolution means not romantic barricades, as in a simpler age. It means the total economic and psychological disruption of the social mechanism, with disaster, starvation, and new tyranny as revolution's inevitable fruits.

In most liberal books and magazines, we hear America has "a great revolutionary tradition", to which we should "again" be "faithful". It is high time to counter-assert that this talk of America's "revolutionary tradition of '76" is mostly or partly a myth. This myth hampers and embarrasses our necessarily anti-revolutionary and Metternichian foreign policy today. (Of course, "anti-revolutionary" does not mean pro-reactionary but, wherever possible, a third and central alternative.)

For the sake of accuracy, let us speak less of the so-called "American revolution of 1776." Let us speak more of what I have elsewhere called "the American Conservation of 1776".

George Washington and most of his colleagues were great conservatives. They were conserving the traditional established rights of all free-born Englishmen and the by-then-traditional heritage of 1688. It is George III who was the revolutionist against the status quo. George III, this alien Teutonic despot unsteeped in Britain's free past, was the real radical.

He was upsetting the time-honored existing rights which Burke in England and Washington overseas were trying to conserve.

A new school of American historians should do research in such neglected conservative statesmen of our past as John Randolph of Roanoke,¹ with their stress on minority rights, on decentralization, and on the Burkean view of freedom as an organic evolution within a closed value-framework. There has been too much stress on our revolutionary Tom Paine tradition and on the absolute dictatorship of majoritarianism.

Majority rule, as thoughtful liberals like John Stuart Mill have recognized as much as any conservative, must sometimes be restricted (which is not the same thing as saying it must ever be destroyed). It must be restricted by such factors as reverence for tradition, rights of the individual, rights of economic and racial minorities, and the lasting value-framework of the west, which must not be wrecked by ephemeral and transient majorities. The failure of radical illusions about Russia should remind Americans that their surest tradition is the great Conservation of Washington, Hamilton, Randolph of Roanoke, and (except for his indefensible pro-slavery) Calhoun, not the doctrinaire revolutionary slogans of Tom Paine, Patrick Henry, and Henry Wallace.

In the words of the poet Goethe, "Only law can give us liberty". In the words of the poet Baudelaire: "Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes". Society depends on anti-revolutionary legalities. They need to be widely accepted as objective, not as mere operational tools of power and self-interest. These unifying common traditions must be more than mere rationalizations of disunifying private greeds. Freedom must have roots deeper than the eighteenth century, though including that enlightened century. Freedom must have roots not restricted to such thin top-soil as utilitarianism and eighteenth-century "social contracts." Its roots must be more deeply anchored. They must anchor in the moral (originally religious) doctrine of the infinite preciousness of each individual soul.

NOT revolution but "law can give us liberty." What revolution can give—temporarily, so long as the guillotine acts as bed-of-Procrustes—is equality. Equality is desirable. A lot of things on earth are desirable. But equality is not the same as freedom.

There is no getting around the fact that there is no substitute for *liberté*. Not *fraternité* by itself. Not *égalité* by itself.

Some may prefer equality to freedom, in the context of a social misery that makes freedom seem meaningless. But they soon find out that an enforced equality, without free individualism to temper it, becomes an Orwellian nightmare-version of the workers' paradise, in which "all are equal, but some are more equal than others."

II

Anti-Counter-Revolutionary

AMERICA'S great 18th-century conservative Gouverneur Morris, put his finger on the central fallacy of our liberal Jeffersonian way of thinking: "Jefferson believes in the perfectibility of man, the wisdom of mobs, and the moderation of Jacobins." Americans will have learned the anti-revolutionary nature of freedom when they believe in the innate imperfectibility of man, the folly of mobs, and the unappeasable immoderateness of all Jacobins of right or left, including the New Fermenters of Asia.

Meanwhile, do not overlook that the evolutionary nature of freedom cuts as much against reactionaries as against liberals. Reactionary revolution (counter-revolution) is as inimical to freedom as revolution from below. The one provokes the other, in a pendulum swing between right and left. It is idle and merely partisan to ask whether the swing began first on the far right or first on the far left. What difference does it make?

No criticism of the revolutionary myth, to which liberals are prone, is complete without equal criticism of the counter-revolutionary myth, to which conservatives are prone. The latter myth has corrupted

most European conservatives except British conservatives. Whether it also corrupts the American Republican party beyond hope, depends on whether or not that party repudiates, without pussy-footing, its counter-revolutionary, thought-controlling extremists. Their dream of reactionary counter-revolution in Asia and in Europe, backing the Francos against the center, is as dangerous to freedom as the liberal dream of flirting with everything revolutionary for its own sake.

SOMETIMES the conservative orates too pompously about "maintaining established institutions." These can be discredited in two ways: by attack from the left or by exploitation from the right. When the conservative fails to save them from discredit, it may be the fault of the left. But it may also be his own fault for overemphasizing the attack from the left and under-emphasizing the exploitation from the right.

Since the industrial revolution, conservatism is neither justifiable nor effective unless it has roots in the factories and trade unions. It was the Tories of the 1830's, like the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, who fought for the factory laws to improve English working conditions. The laws were passed against the opposition of Whig industrialists and many Utilitarian liberals. And later Disraeli's Conservative Party, against the bourgeois opposition of Gladstone's laissez-faire Liberal Party, legalized and protected the long-persecuted trade unions and passed the workmen's social laws of the 1870's. When the urban industrial worker of England votes today—whether for Laborites or Conservatives, whichever he freely elects—it is because Disraeli in 1867 "dish-ed the Whigs" by extending the franchise, which the 1832 Reform Bill of the Whigs

had restricted to the wealthy middle classes.

Most needed by contemporary American conservatism is this humane heritage of Disraeli and many Tory monarchists. Nor is this need for humane reform, which ought to spring from a feeling of brotherhood, bought off by condescension (Lady Bountiful making Christmas bundles for the Honest Poor) or by expediency (throw the proletariat another bone to keep it from growling).

WE may distinguish between English conservatism, on the one hand, and the reactionary misuse of conservatism in eastern Europe. English conservatism tends to be evolutionary. Eastern conservatism tends to follow the self-defeating rigidity of a Nicholas I, whose motto was "submit and obey". Even in the west, the static type of conservatism finds adherents whenever there is an irrational anti-radical panic instead of a rational anti-radical alertness. Examples of this are, at times, the political thought of de Bonald and de Maistre and the atmosphere of the French emigration of 1800. A genuine Burkean conservative opposes tyranny from above as well as from below, George III as well as Robespierre. Abusers of the conservative function oppose lawlessness only when it comes from "Jacobins" and "Reds". These words they use irresponsibly—in what today is named "McCarthyism" and what has always existed as "counter-revolution"—against anybody who disagrees with their extremism. The revolutionist calls the evolutionaries "Bourbons" and "fascists;" the counter-revolutionary calls them "Jacobins" and "Reds." In this way, the right-wing and left-wing revolutionists are equally the foes—and slanderers—of the peaceful, evolutionary road to freedom.

¹Russell Kirk, *Randolph of Ranaoke: A Study in Conservative Thought*, Chicago, 1951.