

# Kirk, Rossiter, Hartz, and the Conservative Tradition in America

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THREE SIGNIFICANT studies published in the 1950's discussed the relative lack of influence of conservatism in the American political tradition. In *The Conservative Mind, From Burke to Santayana*, Russell Kirk argued that conservatism as a recognizable body of political thought or persuasion dated from the writings of Edmund Burke against the excesses of the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Kirk listed six principal characteristics of conservative thought: 1. "Belief that a divine intent rules society . . ." (the sixth edition states a "Belief in a transcendent order, or body of natural law . . ."); 2. "Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life . . ."; 3. "Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes . . ."; 4. "Persuasion that property and freedom are inseparably connected . . ."; 5. "Faith in prescription . . ." (and a distrust of abstract design), and 6. "Recognition that change and reform are not identical . . ."<sup>2</sup> Kirk then traces the influence of these ideas in American and British politics and culture to the present day. Despite the conservatism of the Revolution and the Constitution, the young Madison, the Federalists, Randolph, and Calhoun, Kirk found conservatism to exist in America only as an oppositional philosophy as early as 1800. After 1860, conservatism persisted

primarily as a cultural and intellectual persuasion best found in the writings of such men as Henry Adams and T. S. Eliot. America had too much "democratic complacency," too much "voracious democracy and a ponderous state," too much "discussion and private judgment," too much individualism, too much materialistic, melioristic progressivism, and too much of "ceaseless flux" and "incessant experiment" to be truly conservative.<sup>3</sup>

Clinton Rossiter in *The Conservative Tradition in America: The Thankless Persuasion* adopted much the same view as Kirk.<sup>4</sup> Rossiter too defined conservatism in Burkean terms; developed a similar, though more elaborate list of conservative canons; thought the foundation of American society and government to be remarkably conservative, and yet concluded that by the 1820's genuine conservatism had died "as a major force in the life of the whole nation," to the point that "the one glorious thing to be conservative about has been the Liberal tradition of the world's most liberal society."<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America*<sup>6</sup> differed from Kirk and Rossiter in that he found no real conservatism to have existed even in the founding of America: "Colonial history had not been the slow

and glacial record of development . . . it had been the story of new beginnings, daring enterprises, and explicitly stated principles—it breathed, in other words, the spirit of Bentham himself.”<sup>7</sup> A middle class nation from the start, America had no conservatism because it had no need, unlike the England of Burke and Disraeli, to defend an *ancien régime* against revolutionary radicalism. Also, America had no fixed social classes to provide the basis for a Marxian attack on the liberal principles common to all Americans. Hamilton was a Whiggish liberal; Jefferson a democratic one. Neither, clearly, was conservative.

Working on this paper while much of the world seemed to be on the brink of revolutionary chaos, I marvelled again at the stability and solidity of America and saw again the relevance of the Burkean warning against the terrors of revolution. Certainly, Kirk, Hartz, and Rossiter have written works of great substance which are always profitable to read. Nevertheless, all three authors have made an error in their approach to the subject, an error which at points all three warn against. Rossiter, for example, writing about John Adams, stated:

The town meetings, schools, farms, and churches of New England—not the monarchy, peerage, estates, and Church of old England—were the institutional base on which he built his Conservative theory. Indeed, wherever we look among the men of the early Right, we see that they were Americans grappling with American problems in the American arena.<sup>8</sup>

But local schools and government, the churches, and the farms were the dominant institutions for three hundred years of American history. So perhaps we should look to the history of these institutions rather than to European political categories in order to trace a conservative influence in America. Kirk, too, particularly in his concluding chapters, found a persistent conservatism in America: devotion to property rights and a widespread distribution of property; the continued strength of the family; the constitution, both

written and unwritten, as a bulwark against precipitous change (“the most sagacious conservative document in the History of Western Civilization”); the practical success of Calhoun’s concurrent majority; a conservative attachment to religion; the continued strength of the small town “from which much of America’s vigor comes”; a strong feeling of common identity among Americans; even an uneasy working relationship between conservatism and democracy, demonstrated best perhaps in the great variety of communities which provided a barrier between the individual and the omnipotent state. (Kirk went so far as to say that of his six premises, “four at least continue to animate the social impulses of a great many people in America and Britain.”)<sup>9</sup>

As for Hartz, his liberal tradition seems much clearer if it is understood as an American version of conservatism—a fusion of conservative social values with personal individualism and economic entrepreneurship, best exemplified for Hartz in the Whig political party. Throughout his book he uses conservative phrases to describe his Americans: “a pride of inheritance,” a revolution supported by organized religion, a force “in all ages and countries” on the side of conservatism (according to John Adams), a solidity and sobriety to the national character, the persistence of the tradition of natural law, a peculiar sense of community, the suspicion of democratic political power, the great love of property by all sides which eventually led to a Whig-like political triumph in 1840 and again in 1860, even in some respects the strange conservatism of progressivism.<sup>10</sup>

So, as an experiment, let us do away with the European-Burkean model of conservatism for the time being and look at a few recent studies of American history in order to piece together a more indigenous conservative tradition for America.<sup>11</sup>

Darrett Rutman called the founders of Massachusetts “Children of Tradition.” They sought out the New World in order to preserve an old and good way of life that was in danger of vanishing—their aim was to build a closed, corporate community. Yet the religious and

social theories of these people, allowed to flourish in the freedom of the New World, caused their towns to develop in some surprising ways and in the founding of New England to create a paradigm for American conservatism: tight-knit, voluntary communities; a traditional, stable, local leadership, nevertheless elected by the "great body of the people," rather than a self-perpetuating or hereditary aristocracy; a strong religious tone to the community; but also a substantial amount of economic individualism, the fruits of which individualism were to benefit the society as a whole.<sup>12</sup> The famous "decline" of Massachusetts Bay was not caused by a collapse of the faith of the original founders; indeed, there was not a decline at all, but only the gradual evolution of society as it grew to accommodate both community and individualism and to reconcile the tension between these forces in new ways. Bernard Bailyn's conflict between the New England merchant in the seventeenth century and the church orthodoxy<sup>13</sup> is the story of different degrees of emphasis of these dual tendencies within the American character, a tension not dissimilar to that between the ardent republicans and the moderate republicans of the American revolution,<sup>14</sup> or the Jacksonians and the Whigs in the 1830's,<sup>15</sup> or even perhaps between the Populists and most everybody else in the 1880's and 1890's.<sup>16</sup> In each case, one side was more interested in maintaining the unity and moral integrity of the communal side of the American character while the other side was more willing to pursue the individual opportunities offered by the relative free economy of America. One side preached once again a Jeremiad on behalf of the old values and old ways; the other wished to use the traditional setting as the foundation for further development. But as Perry Miller said about the seventeenth century colonials, so also might we say about their nineteenth century descendants:

Devotion to business, accumulation of estates, acquisition of houses and lands; these were the duties of Christians. What they gained of elegance or luxury was the just reward of blessed diligence, yet

business and riches meant devotion to the world, and luxury meant pride. The sins paraded in the sermons were not so much those of the notoriously scandalous but such as were bound to increase among good men. They then had to be all the more vigorously condemned because they were incurable; after proper obeisance to the past the society was better prepared to march into its future.<sup>17</sup>

The Jeremiads seem to have worked, for in his appraisal of the political leadership of America in the Jacksonian era, Edward Pessen wrote of the "fundamental similarities of the Democratic and Whig parties,":

. . . the era's chief political figures . . . were conservative in their beliefs about these fundamental matters. They believed in private inheritance of wealth and the sanctity of private property. They accepted a hierarchical social system and the enormous economic disparities prevalent in their era. . . . Their acceptance of the broadened suffrage was more politic than enthusiastic . . .

For all their restless temper, their hunger to change both their lot and their locales, they had no interest in drastic alteration of their society. They loved change (in their personal status) but dreaded revolution . . . The dominant values, like the dominant political, economic, and social tendencies in the Jacksonian era were essentially conservative.<sup>18</sup>

Another way to approach American conservatism is through a discussion of the newer writing about the New England town. Although many of the students of the towns argue that change and growing conflict was characteristic of the town by the middle of the eighteenth century<sup>19</sup> their evidence also brings to mind the dictum of di Lampedusa in *The Leopard*: "Things must change in order to stay the same." True, several developments did weaken the unity and disrupt the harmony of the seventeenth century—an expanding, less homogenous population; new economic opportunities; greater economic diversity,

crowded town lands; and the slow rise of a few urban centers to positions of prominence—but the fundamental outlook of the people of the town changed little at all. As Michael Zuckerman makes clear in *Peaceable Kingdoms*, in the interest of promoting harmony, the town learned to adjust its institutional arrangements in order to accommodate itself to the growing diversity and, thereby, to preserve its unity at a different level.<sup>20</sup> In the Federalist Party in New England, the conservative values of the town remained secure well into the early national period of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Page Smith, in *As a City Upon a Hill: The Town in American History*, carries this argument into the twentieth century and throughout the nation at large, finding that the conservative leaders of the town helped maintain “a received tradition and custom virtually intact.”<sup>22</sup> And “. . . from the founding of the colonies at least to World War I we still tell the story of America in terms of the competing communities in which we live.”<sup>23</sup>

As strong a conservative influence pervades American political thought and practice as it does the history of the town. Just as the town was central to American culture so local political ties created the foundation of the American political confederation. Both Virginia and Massachusetts vigorously asserted their independence from central political authority as early as the 1630's. By 1700 American towns and counties had developed a strong sense of their own local political traditions and worked to protect themselves from the expansion of royal political power after 1660. In the American colonial writings against the Dominion of New England and in support of America's own Glorious Revolution in 1688-1691 can be found primitive examples of most of the points made by the revolutionaries of the 1770's.<sup>24</sup> The revolutionary opposition to all unrestrained sovereign political power whether in the hands of the one, the few, or the many also developed out of seventeenth century thought and experience: from John Cotton's line of 1655, “It is necessary, therefore, that all power on earth be limited . . .”, to Madison's great institu-

tional balancing of power at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, there runs a clear thread of political agreement.<sup>25</sup>

Another good seventeenth century concept that found its way into American political thought was a skeptical, but not hopeless, view of the nature of man. The covenant theology liberated men from a belief in the overwhelming sinfulness of man, gave men the hope that they would know something of the state of their own souls, and showed how they could understand the relationship of the entire nation to God's plan for the universe. But if men were not trapped by the burden of sin, neither, as Madison said in Federalist #51, were men angels and government was, therefore, necessary but also dangerous. So, instead of the European conservative view that power was benevolent if exercised by the right people, the American conservative protected this ordered system of balanced power by keeping most of the important governmental activities at the familiar local level, developing competing authorities to keep men free. Jefferson built a capital in the swamps along the Potomac so that with “Government at a Distance” the national government could not corrupt the people and the national governors would not become too enamoured with their power.<sup>26</sup> The opposition party usually argued that power was being abused while the government party replied that a modest use of properly restrained democratic power was perfectly acceptable. With both parties in close agreement on the question of power, the political settlement of the revolution persisted well into our own century. In the February, 1979, *Commentary*, James Q. Wilson, writing about American politics up to the 1950's, stated:

That system was designed to preserve liberty and maintain a national union by a set of procedures meant to insure that no important decision would be reached without the concurrence of each interest vitally affected by that decision . . . Politics would be non-ideological, conflict would be minimized, and such policies as survived the process of interest group

bargaining would command widespread support and thus be likely to endure.<sup>27</sup>

Two episodes of the nineteenth century seem to mar the conservative tradition in American history: the Civil War and the early period of the Industrial Revolution. To many, these periods were destructive of old values, socially divisive, grossly materialistic, and, for conservatives at least, too naively progressive—they represented a moral crusade in the name of higher law and individualistic competition raised to a law of nature. But these periods too were not without their conservative merit.

The South defended its secession in largely conservative terms, using the political philosophy of 1776 to justify revolt against an overbearing central power. But the North was not a revolutionary power intent on radically changing the nature of the Union. Lincoln and the Republicans viewed the Southern defenders of slavery as the revolutionaries who had departed from the consensus of 1787 that slavery was an evil to argue instead that slavery was a positive good which should be extended to the nation at large.<sup>28</sup> The war, then, was fought to preserve an old, agreed upon proposition. Furthermore, the idea of equality defended by Lincoln was not a radical abstract notion but was truly a self-evident proposition: men are men rather than something else, upon this understanding all self-government depends, and therefore, there are some things that no man may do to another (such as own him). In any event, the war was fought over the meaning of common constitutional principles—the nature of Union, the proper restraints on power, and the rights of the states. Although this war diluted the Southern conservative influence in the nation for more than a century, the fact that the nation was able to heal its wounds and continue on as a united country proved the strength of the common values and traditions of American history.<sup>29</sup>

Nor was the period of the early industrial revolution a period of future shock as we sometimes imagine. If we look behind the rhetoric of the apologists for emerging en-

trepreneurial capitalism we do not find the rugged individualism and cutthroat competition of song and legend but the conservative American values of hard work, individual responsibility, private property, frugality, community reform, and private charity. Rather than a period of materialistic excess this was a period of marvelous growth for middle class America. National income rose dramatically and farmers, workers, and businessmen all benefited from the new prosperity: schools, hospitals, libraries, colleges, and various eleemosynary institutions blossomed, sometimes with the help of local government, often with substantial private funds; new interest in education, literature, music, and art could be found in the growing cities; new services, products, and conveniences became available to the middle class. Rather than a time of chaos and disorder, America experienced an orderly, successful, and basically confident, middle class response to new opportunities based on old values and ideas. At the end of the period Main Street was still secure: attitudes towards property, religion, and social mores were little changed; the patterns of political life and the size and scope of the national government remained true to the arrangements of the founders; even the nature of most business enterprise had changed only gradually from local control and ownership to a more national organization.

As before, in an era of increased wealth and opportunity, Americans used a portion of their wealth to purchase a measure of soul-searching and reformation. A new Jeremiad needed to be preached to help keep the old values intact while wholeheartedly welcoming material change. Only the centralizing excesses of World War One which provided so many precedents for future government growth seriously weakened the continued conservative dominance of American society.<sup>30</sup>

There have been tendencies in American history that seem unconservative: our individualism, our optimism, our progressivism, our materialism, and our democratism. But each of these qualities can be understood at least partially in a conservative way. The individu-

alism was that of the inner-directed personality firmly rooted in a living community; the optimism stemmed from an appraisal of personal and national experience and the general prosperity of the country; the materialism was only a measure of general social virtue and Americans used their material wealth to purchase a life of high quality; the progressivism came from a belief that individual effort could bring self-improvement, an idea that at

heart was a religious belief; and as Tocqueville taught, local autonomy, the leadership of traditional groups, and American constitutionalism mitigated the dangerous tendencies in democracy. America was not solely a conservative nation; many would argue that the conservatism was not particularly lovely or healthy, but that America has contained a strong and often dominant conservative tradition seems undeniable.

<sup>1</sup>This book is now in its sixth edition with a revised and lengthened final chapter, Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind, from Burke to Eliot* (South Bend, Indiana, 1978). For the most part I have used the first edition, Chicago, 1953. <sup>2</sup>Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, pp. 7-8. <sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 284, 261, 259, 378, 259. <sup>4</sup>Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, second edition, revised (New York, 1962). The first printing was in New York, 1955. <sup>5</sup>Rossiter, *Conservatism in America*, pp. 15-16, 20-40, 45-54, 64-66, 73-84, 103, 106, 118, 207, 262. <sup>6</sup>Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955). <sup>7</sup>Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, p. 48. <sup>8</sup>Rossiter, *Conservatism in America*, p. 127. <sup>9</sup>Kirk, *Conservative Mind*, pp. 400-401, 423, 424, 422, 412. The point on community is best made in the sixth revised edition, Chapter XIII, "Conservative's Promise," pp. 420-428 where Kirk discussed Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community* (New York, 1953), itself one of the most important defenses of conservatism and its place in American society. The point on the six premises, first edition, p. 401; in the sixth edition, he said, "most people," p. 401. Some of the recent survey research literature shows the persistence of conservative social values in America, e.g., *Public Opinion*, November/December, 1978, 23-37, and Donald J. Devine, *Does Freedom Work?* (Ottawa, Illinois, 1978), especially chapters 4 & 6. <sup>10</sup>Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, pp. 37, 51, 41, 39, 47, 51, 55, 128-134, 255. <sup>11</sup>I do not mean to suggest that the authors cited would endorse my interpretation of their work, but I do insist that these studies are permeated with evidence of the prevalence of values and attitudes which Kirk, Hartz, and Rossiter all call conservative. <sup>12</sup>Darrett B. Rutman, *American Puritanism: Faith and Practice*; (New York, 1970). Though I am reminded of Michael Kammen's warning in *People of Paradox, An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York, 1972): "There are traps everywhere . . . for hunters of the unique and indigenous, traps left inadvertently by earlier writers with bifocal vision who were especially concerned with two periods of our past: the great age of colonization and the era of the American Revolution." p. 15. Other historians have found remnants of medievalism lingering on in the colonial period, e.g., Kammen, *Paradox*, pp. 21-30, and Rowland Berthoff and John M. Murin, "Feudalism, Communalism, and the Yeoman Farmer" in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Stephen G. Kurtz (New York,

1973), pp. 256-288. Berthoff and Murin argued against Hartz that there was a good bit of feudalism remaining to be purged at the time of the American Revolution. The Revolution, they write, ". . . summarily put an end to one archaic element of eighteenth century society, the feudal revival, and inadvertently turned away from a no less ancient communalism while beginning to exalt a third traditional figure, the virtuous yeoman freeholder. . . ." p. 276. In the process, they believed the conservative communalist lost out to the liberal individualist, p. 262; but I argue that this liberal was also a type of conservative. <sup>13</sup>Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1955). <sup>14</sup>Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution," *The William & Mary Quarterly*, January, 1967, 3-43. Ardent vs. moderate republicans seems more descriptive of the divisions within the American revolutionary movement than radical vs. conservative, commercial vs. noncommercial, or even Puritan vs. less Puritan. See, Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Chicago, 1956), "The most radical change produced in America by the Revolution was in fact not a division at all but the union of three million cantankerous colonists into a new nation," p. 100; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1967); Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence, Military Attitudes, Policies and Practice, 1763-1789* (Bloomington, 1977); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1967); Forest McDonald, *The Formation of the American Republic, 1776-1790* (Boston, 1965), and many more. <sup>15</sup>Hartz, *Liberal Tradition*, chapters 4 and 5; Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (Stanford, 1957), especially chapters 2, 3, 4, and 8. <sup>16</sup>I offer this last thought with a good deal of trepidation, but Richard Hofstadter's view of the Populists in *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955), still seems convincing to me. <sup>17</sup>Perry Miller, *The New England; From Colony to Province*, (Cambridge, 1962, first edition, 1963), p. 52. <sup>18</sup>Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Homewood, Illinois, 1964), pp. 274, 205, 350. These passages are virtually a restatement of Kirk's conservative canons. Some of Pessen's language in chapters 10 and 13 on the elite nature of the leadership goes even farther in portraying America as a society with a recognizable social hierarchy. Still the combination of personal restlessness

with conservative social values seems to puzzle most of the historians I have read, though Daniel Boorstin handled it rather well in Book One of *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York, 1965). As American intellectuals abandon their own liberal faith in American democracy, they seem to be finding more aspects of the past that seem morally reprehensible and thus perhaps more conservative.<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Darrett Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston* (New York, 1965); Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York, 1970); Philip Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, 1970); Robert Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976); James A. Henretta, *The Evolution of American Society, 1700-1815* (Lexington, Massachusetts, 1973).<sup>20</sup> Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms, New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1970).<sup>21</sup> See my *A Federalist Persuasion: The American Ideal of the Connecticut Federalists*, unpublished dissertation, Yale, 1971. Also, James M. Banner, *To the Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origin of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815* (New York, 1970); Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent* (Ithaca, 1970).<sup>22</sup> Page Smith, *As a City Upon a Hill: The Town in American History* (New York, 1966), pp. 235, 246. Also my review of the Smith book, "Town, Faith, Country," *The Intercollegiate Review*, November/December, 1967, 57-62; my article, "Puritanism as a Basis for American Conservatism," *Modern Age*, Fall 1974, 404-413. The "island communities" in Robert Wiebe's *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967), sound like Page Smith's town and Robert Nisbet's *laissez faire* of communities.<sup>23</sup> I developed this point at greater length in an unpublished essay entitled, "The Concept of Freedom—An Essay in Honor of Edward

G. Bastian," delivered at Earlham College in April, 1975.<sup>24</sup> David S. Lovejoy, *The Glorious Revolution in America* (New York, 1972).<sup>25</sup> Besides the works mentioned in note 14, I should add Bernard Bailyn, *The Origin of American Politics* (New York, 1967), and Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience* (New York, 1965), here, for example, pp. 63, 65, 50, 187, or 49, "A Tory under Oppression or out of Place, is a Whig: A Whig with power to oppress is a Tory." In the colonies Americans developed not only a conservative theory of mobs (to manifest popular will and maintain order without conjuring up permanent popular political institutions), but also a conservative theory of when revolution was justified (only after substantial grievances had been borne patiently over a long time without redress). Some of this is found in Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution, Colonial Radicalism and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1766* (New York, 1974), pp. 3-50.<sup>26</sup> James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community, 1800-1828* (New York, 1966).<sup>27</sup> James Q. Wilson, "American Politics, Then & Now," *Commentary*, February 1979, p. 39. One might cite here Daniel Boorstin in *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953), on the "givenness" and "seamlessness" of American history in Chapter I, and on why these traits are now threatened, in Chapter VI. He wrote of the idolatry from which we have been free, ". . . the idolatry which would put the thorough plan of a particular generation in the place of accumulating wisdom of tradition and institutions," p. 171.<sup>28</sup> Harry Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided, An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Seattle, 1959).<sup>29</sup> Boorstin, *Genius of American Politics*, pp. 129-132.<sup>30</sup> Jonathan R. T. Hughes, *The Governmental Habit, Economic Controls from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, 1977), pp. 126-157.