Conservatism in Crisis

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Patrick M. Garry, *Conservatism Redefined: A Creed for the Poor and Disadvantaged* (New York and London: Encounter Books, 2010)

Bill Kauffman, *Bye Bye, Miss American Empire* (White River Junction,VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2010)

Claes G. Ryn, *The New Jacobinism: America as a Revolutionary State*, 2nd ed. (Bowie, MD: National Humanities Institute, 2011)

Conservatives have been uneasy for upward of two decades about the political atmosphere of the United States and the increasingly pervasive intrusion of government bureaucracy into every facet of American life. It soon became clear that the "Reagan Revolution," for all its solid achievements, had not fundamentally altered the ceaseless expansion of government's purview and the centralization of its powers, with the attendant proliferation of programs, regulations, and agencies. Conservatives seemed to be winning numerous intellectual and electoral contests, but the massive secular welfare state continued its evidently inexorable advance, dominating more and more of the social, political, and cultural terrain. The economic implosions throughout the developed world over the past three years ought to have been conservatism's vindication; instead its reputation has been further tarnished, and the goal of a long-term restoration of conservative principles and practices as the dominant mode of government seems as distant as ever.

The three books considered here all touch on this distressing state of affairs, but they approach the problem from widely varying perspectives and offer quite different assessments of conservatism's prospects. The tone of these works ranges from gritty populism to sophisticated erudition, the mood from deep pessimism to guarded optimism. Each of them offers distinctive insights into the source and nature of the conservative discomfort with modern American society, but it is unlikely that many readers will come away from any of these volumes with the sense that a definitive conservative political strategy has been mapped out. At the least, however,

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the authors compel us to confront the dilemmas of conservatism in a seriously intellectual context.

Claes Ryn's *The New Jacobinism* is in one way the least problematic of the three volumes here considered, because it addresses a political crisis from an essentially moral perspective. The first edition was issued as a roughly one-hundred-page monograph early in 1991, when the first Persian Gulf War undertaken by the first President Bush was widely seen in a favorable light all across the political spectrum. The new edition adds half again as much text and proclaims a vindication of the original thesis, which, twenty years ago, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and amid the breakup of the Soviet Union, seemed puckishly provocative: "Contrary to widespread belief, evidence is accumulating that Western democracy is in continuous and serious decline" (9). In 2011 it is difficult to demur.

The original book comprises eleven crisp, succinct chapters, which unpack the ambiguity of the term *democracy*. Ryn distinguishes between constitutional democracy, characterized by "aristocratic restraint" and decentralized government, and Jacobin democracy, based on the visionary ideology of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which concentrates power in the national government and restlessly strives to erect an egalitarian regime on the rubble of traditional, hierarchical institutions. Hardly a devotée of uncritical nostalgia, Ryn remarks, "One reason why Jacobinism has been able to do much damage to the ethical and cultural foundations of popular government is that obviously there are some good grounds for having reservations about the old Western tradition" (18), and he quotes Burke's notable dictum, "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation" (16). What Ryn deplores is a breakdown of the fruitful tension between the democratic spirit of equality and "countervailing influences," as "a new Jacobinism is working to sever the remaining connections between popular government and the traditional Western view of man and society" (13).

Conservatives will find nothing particularly novel in Ryn's exposition of the two competing visions of democratic popular government, but his account is valuable for its elegance, clarity, and brevity, as well as its deft application to the American political scene in the early 1990s: "The new Jacobinism is much in evidence in present efforts to turn democracy into a world-wide moral crusade." This development he regarded as especially ominous because "it often finds expression even among people called 'conservatives'" (13). The point is, of course, that conservatism was in danger of being subverted by an alien ideology for purposes at variance with its vision. The original book closes with a chapter that calls for "Recovering Moral Realism."

The edition of 2011 adds five chapters as an "Afterword" subtitled "Out of Step: A Retrospective." Ryn's principal concern in this recent supplement is to explain that conservatism's political impotence is paradoxically an excessive preoccupation with practical politics and a neglect, indeed a misprision, of the philosophical basis of any valid and viable conservative political program. Looking back over three decades, Ryn recounts with dismay the infiltration of the conservative movement by neoconservatives and their surprisingly rapid rise to dominance. This political coup was possible because of the intellectual negligence and naïveté of many self-described conservatives who failed to recognize that neoconservatives were mainly former liberals, not infrequently

of Trotskyite affinities, who had not relinquished their taste for expansive government and abstract ideological theorizing, even while altering their views on particular programs and policies.

Ryn maintains that the University of Chicago political philosopher Leo Strauss is the intellectual inspiration of neoconservatism and that his views are incompatible with conservatism properly understood. Ryn is too circumspect a thinker to draw a straight line from Strauss's ideas to American military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past two decades. His point is rather the sound conservative proposition that *ideas*—even if only eventually—*have consequences*. Strauss, he maintains, has influenced two or three generations of academics and political intellectuals, and his way of addressing political questions has thus laid a foundation for the displacement of genuine conservative caution by an excessively enthusiastic simulacrum of conservative patriotism.

Although Strauss endorses various positions associated with conservatism, Ryn argues, the basic principles of Straussian thought are antithetical to the respect for tradition and historical context that is integral to conservatism:

> An important element of Strauss's thought that is particularly relevant to a discussion of the neo-Jacobin trends is his deep bias against looking for normative guidance in "tradition" or "convention." What is morally universal—"the simply right"—is ascertained, he argues, through ahistorical ratiocination. Those who are willing to let their search for good be influenced by historical authority or experience are moral relativists. (106)

Ryn reinforces his assertion of Strauss's dubious status as a conservative by pointing out his disdain for Edmund Burke and denial that a respect for tradition can comport with an acknowledgment of natural law.

Ryn cites as a particularly compelling example of the baleful effect of Strauss on conservatism the success of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) among reviewers and general readers who see themselves as political conservatives: "It contained ideas that were hard to reconcile with central features of the Western heritage, including the American political tradition. Many had read it carelessly and selectively, paying attention primarily to its criticism of intellectually placid students addicted to drugs and bad music, of sycophantic, trendy professors, and of cowardly academic administrators" (120). While these points are valid, Ryn argues, criticism of extreme and often merely risible radicalism hardly makes a conservative of a man with a vociferous disdain for tradition, who sees the university as an Enlightenment institution, and admires Rousseau.

For Ryn, conservative politics in the United States is disabled by a lack of intellectual sophistication, by what amounts to an educational failure:

> Besides being not very careful readers, many conservative intellectuals had little interest in philosophy beyond the most broadly stated general principles. Most regarded ideas in general as less important than issues of practical politics. They were impatient with "fine distinctions." That Bloom's "universally valid principles" and the more general Straussian anti-historicism had far-reaching practical ramifications attracted little attention. (121–22)

It is the almost exclusive preoccupation with elections, platforms, and policies that

has undone conservative politics: unless the cultural matrix from which political movements emerge is restored, electoral victories and successful legislative initiatives will not rejuvenate the virtue of a decadent people. The conservative vision has been eloquently articulated, but it cannot be implemented in any concrete fashion without a populace capable of receiving it. Of course, it may be necessary to acknowledge that the refinements of conservative tradition innately resist the crude reductions of popular democratic politics.

While Claes Ryn is a distinguished conservative thinker, one hesitates to affix any of these terms to Bill Kauffman. Apart from disenchantment with the current political condition of the United States, he and Ryn appear to have nothing in common. Kauffman's *Bye Bye, Miss American Empire* is written in a thoroughly colloquial, not to say vulgar style befitting the popular-culture tone evoked by this title. For example, George W. Bush is deemed "the man who made possible the Ovalization of Mr. Obama" (xiv), and popular response to current American foreign policy is described thus:

> Today [the American people] . . . barely object when our government sends armies to invade and kill by the tens of thousands citizens of countries that have never done a lick of harm to us. If we sit quiescently in front of the television as Iraqis and Afghans are slaughtered, would we have even bothered to lift our fat asses from the couch to object to the theft of Hawaii? (157)

Like Ryn, Kauffman favors a less aggressive international stance on the part of the United States, but his rhetoric lacks something of the former's finesse: he seems to think that placing "quiescently" and "fat asses" in the same sentence qualifies as a manifestation of sophisticated wit.

Nevertheless, *Bye Bye, Miss American Empire* calls for notice because it raises issues that trouble all conservatives and, more important, proposes a course of action with a great appeal among many, especially those of a traditional or paleoconservative cast of mind. Although it is not immediately evident from either the title or subtitle, Kauffman's theme from start to finish is secession. Since a fundamental principle of conservatism is that government should be small, modest, local, and insofar as possible answerable to the citizens immediately affected by its policies; and since the national government of the United States and even many state governments are appallingly bloated, bureaucratic, arbitrary, and unaccountable; the devolution of power from the federal government to the states, and from the latter to counties, towns, and villages, has begun to assume an almost irresistibly enticing aura to many conservatives.

The book moves from state to state and region to region, providing sketches and interviews with a remarkable medley of local proponents of secession in various guises and on different levels: Kauffman takes up adherents of an independent collection of southern states—absent the racialist legacy of slavery; of New York and California split into smaller states; of an independent Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Texas; of outlying districts of Los Angeles separating from the central metropolis, and so on. He considers a range of conjectures regarding the means, probability, and imminence of any of this happening, and he concludes thus:

> From the Green Mountains ofVermont to the Redwood Forests of California

> to the waters of Blue Hawaii, agitated patriots have sounded a tocsin to which localist rebels across America are responding. We can see the gathering secessionist movements as a harbinger, a warning—or blessed sign of hope. I choose hope. What say you, friend? (240)

Somewhat obscured by the familiar, folksy tone and the comforting clichés is the evident neglect of any serious consideration of if, how, and when any of this might come to pass. Kauffman cites a rather dizzying array of local politicians and activists, eccentric intellectuals and writers (Gore Vidal, Norman Mailer, Kirkpatrick Sale), and popular entertainers (Bob Dylan, Pink Floyd) whose attitudes and opinions hardly converge into a coherent outlook, much less an intelligible program. Kauffman does not actually attempt to *imagine* how the peaceful devolution into smaller polities of the concentrated political, legal, and—most ominously—military power of the United States might be accomplished. If Southern California secedes, for instance, does it get to keep the naval base at San Diego and all the ships with nuclear weapons?

To be sure, it is not too difficult to imagine a set of circumstances and a sequence of events that could result in the breakup of the United States. What is utterly unimaginable is how this would be anything but chaotic, violent, and terrifyingly destructive. It is highly unlikely that such a development would prove a pleasant experience for many Americans, and those who might benefit are unlikely to be the "neighborhood patriots" and "backcountry rebels" of Kauffman's subtitle. He offers thus not a program for secession or a set of policies that would set the process in motion, but rather a fond hope that what is now the United States will somehow amicably devolve into a gathering of diverse independent polities of different sizes, shapes, and interests. The historical precedent that comes unbidden to mind is the crumbling of the Roman Empire in the middle of the first Christian millennium. Barbarian invasions, both as cause and effect, along with several other kinds of unpleasantness were, I think, involved.

Patrick Garry's *Conservatism Redefined* actually offers prescriptions—howbeit of a general nature—for implementing conservative ideas as a political program and, as his subtitle indicates, a strategy for persuading the public of the validity of his hypothetical conservative campaign. Conservatism is *A Creed for the Poor and Disadvantaged* because it is "an equal-opportunity creed: it promises opportunity and social identity to all who adhere to it, from the wealthiest to the most downtrodden" (66). Most conservatives are likely to agree with most of Garry's proposals and recognize them as familiar elements in the tradition. *Conservatism Repackaged* may have been a more accurate title, although it displays serious rhetorical disadvantages. Garry is quite severe (rightly, as I judge) in his criticism of George W. Bush's campaign slogan, "Compassionate Conservatism"; nevertheless, his own aim is likewise to make conservatism, in the current argot, more "user-friendly."

Like Ryn, Garry maintains that conservative political problems largely result from a distorted image of conservatism having been presented to the public. He observes that although conservatives are popularly identified with Republicans, the administrations of both Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard Nixon continued and extended the expansion of the federal government associated with their Democratic predecessors:

> Social spending overtook defense spending for the first time. The number of pages of the *Federal Register* grew by 121 percent under Nixon, compared with 19 percent under Johnson. The Nixon administration created new government agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. In 1971, the Cost of Living Council was established to control wages and prices, in what was the most concerted attempt at state control of the economy since World War II. (16)

And Nixon was following in the footsteps of "President Eisenhower, who created the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and extended the reach of Social Security more than Presidents Roosevelt or Truman ever had" (17).

To be sure, Garry is more irenic toward neoconservatism than Claes Ryn or Bill Kauffman. For example, Leo Strauss is quoted favorably, arguing "that the emerging crisis in America was not the lack of individual liberty but the erosion of individual virtue" (21), and various neoconservatives are credited with illustrating "the importance of a traditional understanding of cultural issues such as family, crime, and education." Nevertheless, it is Russell Kirk, "perhaps the nation's preeminent conservative scholar," who is quoted much more frequently. In contrast to neoconservatives, who, in supporting the invasion of Iraq, "may have gone too far" and "led to a distorted public perception of conservatism," Kirk "advocated restraint in foreign policy and warned against the use of military force" (6–7).

This conservative political vision assumed a tangible form in the administration of Ronald Reagan, "the first conservative president since the 1920s"; but "conservative politicians became seduced by the lure of centralized government and social welfare benefits." The conservatism that eventually triumphed in the election of Ronald Reagan "was built around the threefold foundation of anticommunism, belief in the free market, and an opposition to the kind of bloated government that characterized the welfare state." The collapse of the Soviet Union and the remarkable economic prosperity of recent decades require that "conservatism—the creed of ideas—must once again be reformulated and reasserted" (28–29).

Thus, while Ryn seeks to distinguish a validly conservative vision from defective substitutes, Garry is bent upon weaving together as many diverse strands as may be compatible with a viable conservative program. He rests his program of conservative renewal on two main principles, which he sees as the essence of the conservative creed: "the belief in history" and "the belief in human dignity," and devotes a chapter to expounding each. In the first of these chapters, Garry stresses the necessity of social institutions relying upon and respecting the historical roots of a culture. He draws upon especially traditional conservatives, like Richard Weaver and the late George Panichas, previously editor of this journal.

His argument here resembles Claes Ryn's refutation of Strauss's dismissal of history. Citing Weaver, Garry maintains that "a conservative believes in the existence of a structure of reality independent of the individual. And this structure of reality can be found in the lessons of history" (33). On the other hand, he also assumes "the conservative view that America is the first universal nation, insofar as it is not defined by ethnic or religious identities, but rather by principles" (37). This seems a

version of American "exceptionalism" that many traditionalists find problematic.

When he takes up human dignity, Garry specifies that it rests upon "individual freedom . . . referenced in the Declaration of Independence . . . that comes not from government but from a higher power" (48). He is at pains, however, to distinguish respect for the individual and his liberty from mere individualism, and he insists that responsibility must always be a check on freedom. "An excess of individual freedom," he argues, "can often counteract the freedom of people to form and sustain community" (49). For Garry, human dignity is the concept that mediates between our desire for personal independence and our need to live in harmony with other men. To make this point, he cites not only such diverse thinkers as Russell Kirk and Leo Strauss but also Dostoyevsky.

The heart of Garry's argument is the proposition that conservatism can only be revived if its spokesmen convince the public that "the real conservatism" is "a creed of opportunity for those most in need," as the title of chapter 4 has it, or, according to the title of chapter 6, that conservatism is "a creed for the common person." These two chapters in varying ways make a very solid argument that conservatives ought to stress, first, how free market economic principles provide the opportunity for the poor to improve their lot and, second, how the defense of personal moral virtue and civic order ensures the social stability that makes prosperity possible. In the wake of a good deal of recent sociological research, Garry points out that the poor and disadvantaged suffer disproportionately from the deleterious effects of divorce, illegitimacy, and various other cultural pathologies that liberal social policy has condoned and even encouraged. Liberal politics effectively traps the poor in a state of dependency.

Chapter 5 offers an account of "Historical Deviations from the Conservatism of Adams and Lincoln." "The early development of conservative thought in America generally revolved around two events: the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, and the presidency of Abraham Lincoln" (95). John Adams is not, perhaps, the most obvious exemplar of constitutionalism, and many traditionalists, especially, will balk at the notion of Lincoln as a model for conservatism. Garry maintains, however, that Lincoln represents a particularly potent voice for the revival of conservatism in our time: "Under Lincoln, American conservatism became identified with the value of work—a value relating to more than just a means to a wage; freedom of work was a vital component of human dignity" (96). During the Gilded Age, and especially during the Great Depression, conservatism became associated in the public mind exclusively with the interests of corporations and the wealthy. The Reagan presidency overturned for a time this perception, and conservative politicians must once again seize this initiative.

The book concludes with a few general specific policy prescriptions, some of which run against the grain of popular conservative politics but that are hardly radical: conservatives should take reasonable and responsible interest in preserving the natural environment and not always bow to corporate commercial interests in this area; everyone should "have a stake in [an ownership] society" and pay some taxes, including inheritance taxes (145). Not every conservative will agree with everything that Garry says, especially about specific issues; nevertheless, he has made a game effort to craft a vision of conservatism that will appeal to the wider electorate as well as a broad swath of conservatives. An aspiring conservative

political candidate could do worse than read this book both for general platform guidelines and a rhetorical strategy for an electoral campaign.

It is possible to admire Patrick Garry's efforts, however, and hope that his book exercises influence without any expectation that "real conservatism" will attain political predominance in the foreseeable future and, indeed, without intense enthusiasm in the prospect. Garry's frequent designation of conservatism as a "creed" is somewhat unsettling, but his persistent recourse to the phrase "conservative ideology" and its variants is positively alarming. Even a cursory reading of Russell Kirk ought to disabuse anyone of the notion that conservatism is an ideological system that can be retooled or redesigned to address the problems of a particular set of political circumstances. *Ideology*—the effort to construct a rational political system answerable to all contingencies from the ground up—is precisely what conservatism seeks to resist.

But it does not resist by proposing an alternative program matching its rival point for point. "To hold a political philosophy is in fact not the function of a political, that is, a Parliamentary party," writes T. S. Eliot: "a party with a political philosophy is a revolutionary party."[1] This stricture applies equally well, mutatis mutandis, to the American political situation. A healthy culture must precede a healthy politics: conservatism's main work is to *conserve*—that is, to preserve in a vital condition, not *preserve* in amber—a rich civic culture for which government provides order and security without determining its nature, much less changing it, according to an ideological scheme. The question now confronting American conservatives (and the European situation appears to me more desperate by several degrees of magnitude) is whether we still have a civic culture sufficiently robust for correction and salvage by political measures?

Patrick Garry's *Conservatism Redefined* is a sober, sensible argument that it can be done, but the very necessity of devising a conservative political order suggests that the program is problematic. Bill Kauffman is aware that there is a crisis and sees a solution in the dismantling of the various unwieldy governmental institutions that embody the oppressive power of Leviathan, but he seems oblivious to the potential for anarchy and terror that such a devolution may well unleash. Implicit in Claes Ryn's *The New Jacobinism* is the pessimistic conclusion that only a regeneration of the cultural sources of wisdom and self-restraint offers any hope of a revived conservative politics, and this is a long-term process beyond the scope of electoral cycles.

Eighty years ago the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset warned about the emergence of the "mass man," the *hombre-masa*. "These pampered masses are of sufficiently low intelligence to believe that the material and social organization placed at their disposal like the air is of the same origin, since it seems never to fail either."[2] We see such persons not only in the "Occupy" movements that emerged in 2011 but also in boardrooms, faculty lounges, and government agencies; their growing social and political dominance is ominous:

> The simple process of maintaining the present civilization is surpassingly complex and requires incalculable subtleties. Ill able to govern it is this average man who has learned how to use much of the apparatus of civilization, but is characterized by a rooted ignorance of the very principles of this same civilization.[3]

Ortega is lamenting the fact that the industrial and liberal-democratic revolutions of the past two centuries have furnished the world with heretofore unimaginable material prosperity and personal autonomy without supplying the intellectual and spiritual cultivation and maturity requisite for truly benefiting from such advantages. "That liberalism may be a tendency towards something very different from itself," Eliot remarks, "is a possibility in its nature."[4] The critical issue of our time is, has the liberal deconstruction of traditional culture left politics anything to conserve?

1 T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society,* in *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Inc., 1967), 13.

2 *La rebellion de las masas*, 16th ed. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1964), 70: "Estas masas mimadas son lo bastante poco inteligentes para creer que esa organización material y social, puesta a su disposición como el aire, es de su mismo origen, ya que tampoco falla, al parecer."

3 Ibid., 75: "El simple proceso de mantener la civilización actual es superlativamente complejo y requiere sutilezas incalculables. Mal puede gobernarlo este hombre medio que ha aprendido a usar muchos aparatos de civilización, pero que se caracteriza por ignorar de raiz los principios mismos de la civilización."

4 Eliot, *Idea of a Christian Society,* 12.