

CXIV – The Decline and Fall of Conservatism

[LRC lewrockwell.com/1970/01/butler-shaffer/cxiv-the-decline-and-fall-of-conservatism](http://www.lewrockwell.com/1970/01/butler-shaffer/cxiv-the-decline-and-fall-of-conservatism)

By Butler Shaffer

Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us "something is out of tune."

~ Carl Jung

There are few experiences more unpleasant to endure than the irrational rants of fear-ridden people. This is particularly annoying when the anger arises not out of an immediate physical danger, but from a perceived offense to an abstraction with which they identify. The curse "may you live in interesting times" reflects how easily our judgments — and actions — can be rendered perilously foolish by turbulence in our world.

We live in interesting times, whose stormy inconstancy may prove to be both a harbinger of, and catalyst for, creative change. But change is accompanied by uncertainty, particularly regarding the forms and practices from the past whose continuing usefulness might be called into question by innovation. For example, having attached ourselves to institutions — not out of clear thought but out of habit — what will be our response to transformations that may render such agencies obsolete? This, I believe, is the condition now before us. Like such periods as the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution — each of which brought into question the prevailing systems and beliefs — our "interesting times" may prove to be quite beneficial, if only we confront their dynamics with intelligence.

I have written of these current processes of change that manifest themselves, in part, in decentralizing social systems and behavior. But many fear such changes, mainly because they have so fervently identified themselves with institutional systems that are now called into question. Having attached themselves to such abstractions out of unexplored habit, such people begin to experience a sense of personal-identity death: "if my sense of being is inextricably tied to the nation-state, who will I become if that institution should become extinct?"

If a person lives a centered life — in which his or her beliefs and behavior are not in contradiction, but reflect integrity — a fundamental change in one's life may be inconvenient or even unpleasant, but it need not be destructive of one's sense of self. If, in the words of Viktor Frankl, a person retains the inner capacity "to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances," the opportunities for survival are greatly enhanced.

But upon what basis does one make such a choice? If one's life has been dominated by external forces that defined reality for such a person, how does such a mind overcome its own conditioning? This raises, anew, Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle": the mind that is

being observed is the same mind that is doing the observing! Furthermore, if one's sense of being and reality have been defined by an institutional order whose authority is now in retreat, if not collapse, upon what source does that mind draw for its wholeness?

Men and women whose philosophical and empirical understanding arises from within themselves, have fewer difficulties adjusting to changes occurring around them. Principles developed internally, through constant introspection and skepticism, are more readily adaptable to new situations, technologies, or social problems. They provide the inner basis of support for sound thinking. Such inner-directed people need not await the decrees of an institutional "ethics committee" to judge the proper course of their conduct. For example, if respect for the inviolability of privately-owned property is a principle one embraces, whether the product of a new technology satisfies this standard can be determined through careful reasoning.

An example of what can occur when one's actions are not informed by inner-developed transcendent principles can be observed in modern "conservative" politics. There was a time when conservative thought was actually characterized by . . . thought! Such classic thinkers as John Locke, Edmund Burke, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer — to name just a few — rekindled discussions, in the years following World War II, about individual liberty and the state. A new group of conservative thinkers — including Leonard Read, Russell Kirk, Robert Nisbet, and Ayn Rand — arose to drag political and social philosophy out of its Marxist/socialist quagmire. (I shall always remember a 1962 CBS Reports television debate in which Kirk and Rand went after one another in the kind of spirited discourse one rarely sees anymore.) Such men and women had their disagreements, but there was a shared understanding that individual liberty, private ownership of property, the marketplace, and a continuing distrust of state power, were essential to a free and productive society. These values were fervently embraced, and not simply used as slogans to be stuck into meaningless political platforms and then contradicted as soon as the next session of congress convened.

Thoughtful conservatives understood that it was the voluntary cooperation of individuals — not the regulatory and punitive arm of the state — that held a society together. I was never comfortable with Edmund Burke's definition of "society" as "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." Nonetheless, his proposition — which goes to the essence of conservative thought — is an idea that energized intelligent thought and discussion in my college days.

Conservatism lost its principled bearings, I believe, when it substituted anti-communism for individual liberty during the Cold War years. To be a "conservative" suddenly meant to be staunchly anti-communist, a position also taken by Adolf Hitler; and ought to have foreshadowed the future of a political philosophy — originally rooted in anti-totalitarian premises — that was to become twisted into its antithesis.

The Cold War defined conservatism for nearly half a century, and when the Soviet Union collapsed, conservatives were left without a *raison d'être*. Their very existence, as a political movement, ceased to be. They had accumulated weapons and powers — along with an army of defense contractors eager to keep the game going — but no "enemy." Conservatives — and, I should add, so-called "liberals" — were like a man with a leash, desperately in search of a dog. If centralized power was necessary to resist a foe that later disappeared, what could justify the retention of such power?

The events of 9/11 — whoever the responsible parties might have been — satisfied the state's need for an enemy that would rationalize the continuing accumulation of power over Americans. Being in power, conservatives had no interest in the pursuit of inner-directed principles that might serve as an anchor to the ship-of-state. In the struggle between individual liberty and state power, conservatives used to embrace a presumption for liberty. For most modern conservatives, liberty is simply a hindrance to an all-reaching police-state. Those who insist upon protecting liberty get labeled "traitors" or "America-haters." To conservatives and liberals alike, power has become its own purpose.

The inner, reflective life that once made conservatives interesting people, has given way to the outward, reactive anger of the brute. If you doubt this, listen to the content of what any of the modern conservatives have to offer. Does any of it challenge your thinking, or inform your mind in any productive way? Typical of this reactive mindset is Fox Snooze's Bill O'Reilly, who recently dismissed the thoughtful British MP, George Galloway, as "an idiot." After Ken Livingstone, the mayor of London, blamed Western governmental interference in the Middle East for the recent subway bombings in his city, O'Reilly also called the mayor "an idiot." When a British journalist asked Tony Blair if the subway bombings reflected badly on his government's policies, O'Reilly's response was that "this reporter should have been slapped." O'Reilly went on to ask, rhetorically, whether any American journalist would have asked such a question of George Bush. The answer, sadly, is "no," for like conservatives generally, most American journalists also suffer from the collapse of the inner voices to which Carl Jung refers!

O'Reilly's Fox Snooze colleague, John Gibson, recently demonstrated his commitment to the frenzied moral confusion of modern conservatism. After a man — later acknowledged to have had no connection with terrorism — was tackled, held to the ground, and then shot five times in the head by London police, Gibson applauded the British government for being so "ruthless." "I love the way the Brits have 10 million cameras sticking up the nose of every citizen," he went on, adding that "five in the noggin is fine." He did admit that there would be "hell to pay" if the dead man had nothing to do with terrorism, but that price will not be paid in terms of the violation of any moral principles enlightening Mr. Gibson's judgments.

The moral and intellectual bankruptcy of modern conservatism is to be found throughout the media. The appeal is increasingly to the reptilian hulks who are drawn to rhetoric that appeases their unfocused sense of anger. To speak of introspection – upon which a responsible, centered life depends — is to invite the charge of "appeasement" or "sympathy" for terrorists. That conservatives' enthusiasm for the Iraq war is not the least dampened by the platform of lies and deceptions upon which it was based, ought to be a significant enough indictment of their character. But many go on to make light of Americans' systematic torture of Iraqi citizens (do you remember Rush Limbaugh analogizing the Abu Ghraib scandal to a fraternity prank?). Even the video-taped shooting, by a Marine, of a helpless, wounded Iraqi, was defended by many conservatives.

Over the years, my articles have elicited both support and constructive criticism from a wide range of viewpoints. But from current conservatives I receive little more than angry name-calling, threats, factual ignorance, and assorted forms of irrationality. I even get e-mails from people who call themselves Christians, even as they support war!

As I read and listen to the conservative rampage against the very values that once defined their position, I am reminded of my young adult years, when those of us who held individualist views had to work, ever so hard, to confront collectivist doctrines. The Marxist/socialist camp was wrong on just about every issue, but they offered a challenge to the mind that had to be met. I find no inner substance to modern conservatism that requires careful examination. Their oratory remains at the level of adolescent taunting, or what one might hear at a labor union beer-party. Like sharks lurking offshore, most conservatives are a deadly force to be avoided, not intellects with which to reason.

The extent of the conservative metamorphosis can be measured by the unbridgeable chasm separating two men named Karl. The first was a late and dear friend of mine, Karl Hess, who advised and wrote speeches for one of the last of the traditional conservatives, Barry Goldwater. His words "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice" and "moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue" stand in vivid contrast to the mindset of the other man, Karl Rove, a Machiavellian who advises George W. Bush. The distance separating these two men also measures how far modern conservatism has moved from a more principled center.

If there is any encouragement to be found in America's current madness, it is this: a healthy system can tolerate reactive, mindless rage for only a short period of time before plunging into an entropic freefall. We may be a society presently dominated by fools, but our civilization is too commercially and technologically sophisticated to long endure relationships based upon slapping people around, or putting "five in the noggin." The unfocused rage and preoccupation with collective violence that unites modern conservatives provides the route back to the "stone age" to which they like to speak of sending others, but to which they lead only themselves and their neighbors.

Like drunken teenagers who have stolen an expensive Rolls-Royce and taken it on a wild joy-ride, conservatives will likely find themselves failing to negotiate a sharp curve in the road and crash into a tree. The extent of the damage done to the car may depend upon what we do to limit their access to that which we value. The playwright, Arthur Miller, expressed our dilemma in these words:

"Few of us can easily surrender our belief that society must somehow make sense. The thought that the state has lost its mind and is punishing so many people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied."

But people who lack a moral, psychological, and intellectual center do not have to concern themselves with internal denial. For such people — particularly modern conservatives — the evidence of our societal madness is not a vice to be denied, but a virtue to be openly celebrated.

The Best of Butler Shaffer

