

II

Traditions At War

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THE SUBJECT OF TRADITION in contemporary society bespeaks its own importance. We are immersed in traditions, from how to tie shoelaces to the proper table setting of knives, forks, and spoons. Traditions are so much a part of us that we are not consciously aware of most of them; we “obey” them automatically, seldom, if ever, giving them much thought. They provide us with our patterns of expectation, with norms of right and wrong, with rules of propriety and impropriety—with, in short, a framework within which we find order in what would otherwise be a chaotic world. Indeed, as Edward Shils reminds us, no society could exist without traditions.¹

I begin with these remarks because most of the problems and divisions that afflict our society can be understood by reference to the modification, displacement, or erosion of traditions, particularly normative traditions. To put this more concretely, the present conflict over the character and the destiny of our nation is principally an extension of the basic divisions that separated Burke from the *philosophes* of the French Revolution. Whereas Burke could see the vital and indispensable roles of traditions for the society to become an organic “partnership in every virtue, and all perfection,”² the *philosophes* were antagonistic towards traditions, con-

vinced that society could be torn apart to be built anew by the use of “reason.”

To be sure, there are enormous differences between then and now, not the least of these being that the *philosophes*’ positions have been differentiated and refined, their major elements now constituting well-established traditions in their own right. Modern American progressivism, with its quest for equality, its view that more and bigger government is the cure for whatever ails us, its propensity for blaming society for the wrongs or shortcomings of individuals, and, *inter alia*, its anti-traditionalist stance in the name of freedom, progress, and tolerance, is unmistakably the outgrowth of the Enlightenment. So, too, at only a slightly greater remove is the relationship between the *philosophes*, the counter-culture, and those elements at the fringes of society (e.g., animal rights activists, the disciples of Mother Earth) that have lost their bearings.

Still another observation, highly relevant to the topic at hand, is this: while conservatives, understandably enough in light of their roots, have always been concerned about the status of traditions and the relative health of society, their concerns have reached new and perhaps even unprecedented levels in recent decades, particularly since the late 1960s. The grumbling about the decline

of traditional values and standards that prevailed during the 1950s has turned into warnings about the collapse or disintegration of society. In addition, most conservatives have increasingly come to view the decline and the displacement of traditions, particularly those they have long regarded as essential to the health and the preservation of an essentially decent and civil society, as part of a concerted effort by academics, the media elite, and Hollywood to refashion the norms of our society; to kick the props from under the established way of doing things and to bring into question the traditional norms for making judgments between right and wrong, good and bad, superior and inferior. At least this much is suggested in describing the cultural conflict that is taking place today as a "war."

In what follows I begin by briefly outlining the nature and scope of the conservatives' concerns today. Then I endeavor to put this decline into a broader historical perspective, one which shows, I believe, the underlying linkage between our present crisis and the basic assumptions and beliefs of the Enlightenment. Finally, I want to turn to a highly important, but more concrete, concern, namely, the effects of progressivism on the American political tradition. My underlying point throughout is that modern progressivism (liberalism) bears a good deal of responsibility for our cultural decline.

I

Now all manner of evidence can be produced to show the deterioration of our society. It is not unreasonable to start with the state of public education because, perhaps more clearly than any other, it reflects the consequences of the loss of traditions. "If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the educational performance that exists today," so reads the oft-quoted sentence from *A Nation at Risk*, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war." But, as

the report points out, "we have allowed this to happen to ourselves."³ Yet, even recognizing our enormous decline, the prospects for turning our schools around seem remote at best. Consider only the bitter controversy in New York City over the so-called "Rainbow" curriculum, a controversy which manifests the deep divisions that exist over the most basic questions concerning education (e.g., What is its purpose? What ought to be taught and how?), hardly an insignificant matter since education is one of the chief conveyers of traditions from one generation to the next. As we might expect, disputes over these matters have become quite pronounced, though not any more refined, in the reaches of higher education over the last few decades, resulting in, among other things, the abandonment of a "core curriculum" along with the literary canon at some of our more "progressive" institutions.

Public education has experienced the full effects of the erosion and displacement of traditions in the wider society in still other ways. As William Bennett writes, "In 1940 teachers identified talking out of turn; chewing gum; making noise; running in the halls; cutting in line; dress code infractions; and littering" as the "top problems" in the public schools. In 1990, these had been replaced by "drug abuse; alcohol; pregnancy; suicide; rape; robbery; and assault."⁴

But the declines in education are only symptomatic of a broader social deterioration. Bennett, using key indicators relating to crime, education, and family, also provides incontrovertible evidence of alarming social degeneration since the 1960s: "there has been a 560 percent increase in violent crime; more than a 400 percent increase in illegitimate births; a quadrupling in divorce rates"; and "a tripling of the percentage of children living in single-parent homes." During that same period, we are informed, the suicide rate among teenagers increased

by more than 200 percent, while, not unexpectedly, S.A.T. scores dropped almost 80 points.⁵

The countless observations of those who have lived through this period, impressionistic though they may be, would only confirm what Bennett's figures show. Anthony Harrigan's excellent account recently printed in these pages identifies significant trends in our "cultural and social decay" over the last half century that have accelerated since the 1960s.⁶ First, he points to the increasing secularization in the society; "freedom of religion," the legacy bequeathed to us by the Framers, "has been distorted into a national policy of freedom *from* religion." Partly as a result of this secularization, he observes, we now live in a "media-dominated world that drenches society with its counter-values and that fills the young with visions of lust, brutality, and promiscuousness"; that glorifies "greed"; that casts man "as a mere consuming creature"; and that "impresses upon young minds that self-gratification and institutional gratification—materialism and sexual experimentation—are accepted in this society." Nor can education hope to stem the tide. So strong is the "popular culture that portrays human bodies as meat and that celebrates permissiveness in human relationships" that teachers who attempt to counteract it and "seek to impart" mutual respect and "decency" often face ridicule. Whereas in the past, Harrigan writes, schools honored our Founders, today they are disparaged as "oppressors."⁷

Harrigan has much more to say about our decline: the growth of a pornography industry, "cities awash" in drugs, metal detectors in our schools, the "no go zones" in our cities, the pervading fear of crime, and so forth. Yet an underlying proposition in his account is that the evils we experience are the outgrowth of the erosion and virtual disappearance of norms, beliefs, mores and the like which

have traditionally served to guide or restrain individuals, principally in the pursuit of their appetites. Forcefully articulating the consensus view of conservatives, the editors of the *Wall Street Journal* point out that this lack of restraint resulted in the excesses of the 1960s; the "acts of defiance—against the war, against university presidents, against dress codes, against virtually all agents of established authority." What is worse, they point out, these acts were "defended" "with great rhetorical firepower" in "books, magazines, opinion columns, and editorials" and even "justified" by "the intellectuals—university professors, politicians and journalistic commentators."⁸

In sum, without belaboring the point, from the late 1960s on, we have experienced an assault on traditions not unlike that which Burke had witnessed; an assault which in critical circles has not only gained legitimacy, but respectability as well.

II

As intimated above, this anti-traditionalism is not without its own traditions that have been critically clarified and refined over the course of more than two centuries. In the political realm, broadly defined, these traditions are, for the most part, logically interrelated so as to form a relatively coherent ideology. While it is difficult to identify the primary proposition, assumption, or tenet of this anti-traditionalism which underlies and gives birth to all the dimensions of its ideological structure, many find Solzhenitsyn's view, set forth in his famous Harvard address, persuasive; namely, that the root cause for the decline of the West relates to the altered status of man in the order of being which found political expression in "the Age of Enlightenment." This new doctrine, which he designates as "rationalistic humanism," "humanistic autonomy," or "anthropocentricity," "proclaimed and practiced autonomy of man from any higher force above him." In

the last analysis, he maintains, it holds that man is "the center of all" and "the measure of all things on earth."⁹

This "anthropocentricity" provides a valuable point of departure for explaining certain aspects in the downward drift of our culture. Irving Babbitt, for example, who earlier in the century had come to essentially the same conclusions concerning the effects of the Enlightenment, points out how man's new status leads to the lack of "humility" in the individual and encourages a reluctance, characteristic of the modern Western man, "to look up to standards and discipline himself with reference to them."¹⁰ A major cause of this failure he attributes to the rise of the "critical spirit" that has "undermined" "the doctrine of the Fall and that of divine grace"; a spirit that has led individuals to reject "the outer authority, whether that of revelation or of the church."¹¹

Now Burke was fully aware of such individuals and their destructive potential. These individuals, as he put it, "have no respect for the wisdom of others, but a very full measure of confidence in their own"; they are "those who think little or nothing has been done before their time, and who place all their hopes in discovery." "They conceive, very systematically," he continues, "that all things which give perpetuity are mischievous and therefore they are at inexpiable war with all establishments."¹²

Corollary doctrines, according to Solzhenitsyn, flow from this "anthropocentricity." To begin with, this "humanistic way of thinking," he remarks, does "not admit the existence of intrinsic evil in man." And, he continues, "It started modern Western civilization on the dangerous trend of worshipping man."¹³ This belief of the inherent goodness of man, particularly the common man, eventually leads to the Rousseauian notion that, as Babbitt puts it, "evil is not in man himself, but in his institutions."¹⁴ From

this it is a short step to the corollary, advanced by the Progressives around the turn of the century: if institutions can corrupt man, they are capable of making men good, of perfecting human nature, of eliminating the imperfections which corrupt men. As this doctrine gained favor, the tradition of looking to government as a provider and as the solution to the most perplexing problems gained a foothold. As this tradition has solidified, we have witnessed the political centralization of the very kind that Tocqueville feared.

"Anthropocentricity" also helps to account for other aspects of our present culture that are, to say the least, troublesome. To begin with it involves what Eric Voegelin inveighed against, a closure toward the transcendent.¹⁵ Certainly a major effect of this closure is seen in the goals of our social engineering through the agencies of the state. As Solzhenitsyn puts the matter, "The humanistic way of thinking, which had proclaimed itself our guide, did [not] see any task higher than the attainment of happiness of earth." To this way of thinking, he continues, "Everything beyond physical well-being and the accumulation of material goods, all other human requirements and characteristics of a subtler and higher nature, were left outside the area of attention of state and social systems, as if human life did not have any higher meaning."¹⁶

Richard M. Weaver, reflecting on the same concern nearly fifty years ago, characterizes "the goal of social democracy" such as that we experience today in terms of "scientific feeding." "If one dares to visualize the millennium of the social democrats," he writes, "he is forced to picture a 'healthy-minded,' naturally good man, provided for by a paternalistic state and seeking to save himself from extinction by boredom through dabbling in some art."¹⁷ Today the vision is not even concerned with boredom or with "dabbling in some art." After all, who can

define art?

III

The effects of progressivism with regard to the role of the government, as well as the form and direction of public policies, are readily apparent. What is often overlooked is how the norms and objectives of the Enlightenment have affected the fundamental structures of the American system. Here the progressives' task has been complicated by our tradition of constitutionalism, a belief that has persisted over the decades and is still very strong. Inherent in this constitutionalism are notions of restraint and forbearance that are binding on majorities and office holders alike; that both must operate through the constitutional forms and processes until such time as they are changed through amendments. As a consequence, the anti-traditionalists, or "progressives," have had to operate in a political environment with this underlying spirit of constitutionalism; a spirit clearly inimical to the animating principles of their most fundamental norms. A certain sense of frustration in this state of affairs is clearly reflected in the view, expressed by Jefferson among others, that a people ought not to be bound down by the "dead hand" of the past, that each generation ought to be able to fashion the government under which it will live.¹⁸

Over the course of our history the progressives or liberals—*i.e.*, the "anti-traditionalists" who have accepted the *philosophes'* basic premises outlined above—have pursued two distinct paths in endeavoring to alter the basic structure of the system. One pursued by the Progressives and their sympathizers earlier in this century involved a direct frontal assault on our political tradition. They contended that our founding was fundamentally flawed, that the Framers were "reactionaries" who sought to thwart the truly republican ideals of the Declaration of Independence, primarily equality.

The goals and purposes of the Constitution were, likewise, attacked; constitutionalism was assailed as the means by which the values of the Framers were being legally imposed upon subsequent generations.¹⁹

This view of the Constitution and the Framers, despite the strenuous efforts of certain historians and political scientists over the decades, has never made much headway with the American people. Moreover, this path to the realization of progressive norms was never very promising to begin with. Taken on its own terms, it would require a new founding to establish an order that would embrace and perpetuate "correct" principles. Leaving to the side the controversies that were bound to arise over these principles, the very idea of a new founding is, and has been, an anathema to the American people. In fact, the logic of this approach, calling as it does for a repudiation of the Framers' handiwork, disadvantaged its advocates severely by rendering their cause "revolutionary."

The second path, that followed in recent decades, has been to accept the Constitution and, then, to refashion it in conformity with the values of progressivism, while making it appear that this refashioned Constitution fundamentally accords with the design of the Founders. Sometimes this refashioning takes the form of emphasizing those parts of the Constitution compatible with progressivism, while downplaying or ignoring those that are not. In this fashion, what was clearly understood well into this century to be a federal system, wherein the states retained significant powers, has now been transformed into a consolidated or unitary regime.²⁰ With this transformation, we have not only witnessed centralization, but also the growth of ever-expanding "positive" government clearly committed to egalitarian ends; one that is poised and ready to undertake even the most minute tasks of social

engineering, whenever the constellation of political forces allows.

This refashioning, however, has more frequently taken the form of redefining key terms and clauses of the Constitution. The meaning of "liberty" in the context of "due process," for example, has broadened in recent decades to such an extent that its boundaries are now difficult, if not impossible, to define. One measure of just how revolutionary this change has been is simply to note that there would scarcely have been any need for the specification of rights that we find in our bill of rights had its drafters shared the modern conception of the "liberty" protected by "due process"; the "due process" clause of the fifth amendment alone would have sufficed.²¹

But it is with regard to those specific rights within this "liberty" which are most useful to progressivism in its "battle" against myth, superstition, and inhibiting traditions that we see the foundations upon which its traditions rest and the changes they have fostered in our society. For instance, the widest latitude of freedom of speech and press is clearly essential for its overall mission, a fact which helps to account for their sacred status in progressivism. At the same time, relativism—another of its dogmas—virtually compels it to define the first amendment freedoms of speech and press in a fashion that rarely permits of any limitation. And its view on these "rights" has largely prevailed; all the traditions which once served to differentiate "liberty" from "license" have lost most of their force.

In a more general vein, from the progressives' concern to insure virtually unlimited freedom of expression, from their relativism that encourages diversity, springs the proposition heard so frequently today that the basic value of our political tradition is "toleration," save, of course, for certain kinds of teachings, normally those that would deny relativism. The progressives' hostility to reli-

gion, their secularism, has also had its effect. The belief that the first amendment prescribes a high "wall of separation" between church and state has gained wide currency, despite the fact that any such view rests upon interpreting the "establishment" and "practice" clauses so as to render them incompatible with one another.

Refashioning the Constitution in these ways still has not provided liberalism with the "elbow room" it needs to attain its objectives. This is why, in very recent decades, we have witnessed what can fairly be called the concoction of new rights, the most prominent of these being a constitutionally (*i.e.*, Court-recognized) "right of privacy" residing, so to speak, in the "penumbras, from the emanations" of various specific rights and subsequently interpreted to embrace the right of abortion. Even more recently, liberals have come to look upon the ninth amendment as the potential grounds for the judicial enforcement of "fundamental human rights" or the full realization of the goals held out in the Declaration of Independence such as equality, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.²² The new rights contended for, in turn, generally arise from a synthetic "tradition," not from the American tradition; from what, *à la* John Rawls, "reasonable" men would contract for under totally artificial conditions.²³ In this, and in so many other ways that emphasize individual "rights," our modern discourse has come back to the social contract framework of thinking, albeit in quite modern form, that so enthralled the sons of the Enlightenment.

IV

That progressivism has "won" truly impressive victories in the short space of twenty-five years cannot be gainsaid. By way of concluding, we may profitably ask, whether it is bound to sweep all before it? After all, we must never forget that modern progressivism was born out of the fanaticism of the French Revolu-

tion and that its ideological dogmas bred a fervency, a sense of righteousness, and a certitude seldom matched over extended periods by those who would resist its "advances." We can say with some certainty, therefore, that it will remain a powerful force for the indefinite future.

Several factors, however, militate against its ascendancy. We have come to realize, perhaps more acutely than ever before, the limited capacity of government—the chief engine of progressivism—to produce basic and widespread social change. On the other hand, to the extent that the achievement of progressive goals depends on reshaping the attitudes of people through education, its methods will encounter powerful resistance from basic and long standing traditions. Then, too, there may be limits to what can be achieved through education, even "sensitivity" sessions, in altering the outlook and behavior of individuals. Moreover, the freedom of individuals to pursue their own beliefs also creates enormous problems for progressivism. Think only of the millions today, disenchanted with the secular humanism of the public schools, who have turned to private schools or home schooling.

Probably the major reason why the traditions of the anti-traditionalists are unlikely to emerge victorious in the long run is that they will prove inadequate for human wants and needs, spiritual and material. In short, progressivism suffers from the same maladies as communism. Yet, its traditions in our contemporary society have had a devastating impact in virtually every major sector of society. In the purely political realm, they have created uncertainty about the character of our heritage as well. They are, to paraphrase Madison, a disease that may yet prove fatal for our society.

1. Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago, 1981). This work is the most comprehensive treatment of the meaning and nature of tradition. 2. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York, 1982), 194. 3. *A Nation at Risk*, Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Washington, D.C., 1983), 5. 4. William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators* (Washington, D.C., 1993), ii. 5. Bennett, i. 6. Anthony Harrigan, "A Lost Civilization," 35 *Modern Age* (Fall 1992), 4. 7. Harrigan, 5. 8. "No Guardrails," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 March 1993, A12. 9. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *A World Split Apart* (New York, 1987), 47-8. 10. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, 1979), 301-02. 11. Babbitt, 191. 12. Burke, 184. 13. Solzhenitsyn, 49. 14. Babbitt, 99. 15. For an excellent account of the breadth of Voegelin's concern and other developments in modern thinking see Ellis Sandoz's *The Voegelinian Revolution: An Introduction* (Baton Rouge, 1981). 16. Solzhenitsyn, 49. 17. Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, 1948). 18. See, for instance, Jefferson's long letter of 12 July 1816 to Samuel Kercheval. *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York, 1984), 1395-1403. 19. For an excellent overview of the Progressives' views on the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, as well as their acceptance among historians, see: Richard F. Gibbs, "The Spirit of '89: Conservatism and Bicentenary," *The University Bookman*, 14 (Spring 1974). 20. For a classic account of how this came to pass see: Raoul Berger, *Federalism: The Founders' Design* (Norman, 1987). 21. For a history and analysis of these developments see: George W. Carey, "Liberty and the Fifth Amendment: Original Intent," 4 *Benchmark* (Fall, 1990). 22. These efforts are set forth and critiqued in Thomas B. McAfee's brilliant article, "The Original Meaning of the Ninth Amendment," 90 *Columbia Law Review* 1215. 23. I am referring here to John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* and his development of rights from the "original position."

Tradition and the Mechanical Eden

Thomas Molnar

IT IS TEMPTING to imagine tradition and contemporary life like two unequal blocks, one a huge monolith, the other a thin layer laid on the first but not quite of the same material. Or we may see in tradition a superimposition of (past) "modernities," and in contemporary time we may see the most recent of the series, already superseded by the next one, called perhaps post-modernity. We may obtain yet another spatial and temporal concept if we consult former generations—through their memories, literature, arts, and law—whether they too believed they were living through a monumental change from their tradition to their modernity. Was the passage from Greco-Roman paganism to Christianity, from Romanesque to Gothic building styles, from kingship to revolution and republic, as momentous, as traumatic, in today's parlance, as the change-over from horsedrawn carriage to steamship, then to jetplane and spaceship, and the corresponding ways of life?

The testimony of former generations does not signal any brutal transformation of sensibilities; it seems the permanence of nature and the structural constants of life—family, community, hierarchy, the sacred and the profane—gave tradition a self-assurance that easily assimilated the sporadic fragments of modernity. Nor do we have documents to

suggest a feeling of increased rapidity, except by those who first boarded the train or the car. Drama, whether of Sophocles or of Shakespeare, had the same internal rhythm, set and measured by rules, and legal systems were structured according to the ageless perception of class differences, magnitude of the crime, innocence or guilt. In short, only with our modernity do we find that modernity has become not a mere transformation balanced by permanences, but a new and willed creation, a drastic separation from tradition, an attitude of ignorance and contempt *vis-à-vis* the past. Our modernity is not only a contentment with and glorification of the present, but also a project of divesting the past of significance, filing it away as opaque and dead, in fact as something laughable, naive, embarrassingly *passé*.

Since examples abound everywhere, let us take them from various areas. Why issue catechisms, ask a number of theologians of the Roman Catholic Church, why not the free flight of faith? Why should young artists study and draw the human body, asks the board of judges of the National Endowment of the Arts, when such an exercise humiliates their right to independent creation? Why the family? asks Joseph Fernandez, former superintendent of schools in New York City, why not teach children that some have "two