

John Cogley

A NOTE ON THE BIRCH SOCIETY

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ACCORDING TO Peter Viereck's famous *mot*, anti-Catholicism is the anti-Semitism of the liberals. There might also be a sense in which anti-Birchism is the anti-Communism of the liberals. For the Birchites incarnate all that the American liberal hates and fears in public life. The Birch movement represents paranoia on a mass basis. With its sick belief that the Enemy is everywhere — dramatized by Mr. Welch's charge that one of Them sat in the White House for eight long years — the Society has created the image of a group of people who might turn lunatic at any moment. The movement represents organized intolerance. With its insistence on political orthodoxy of the most rigid right-wing character and bitter accusations against all who dissent from it, the Society has created the image of an Hitlerian force in American life. The movement represents fanaticism unchecked. With its notorious super-patriotism, xenophobia, and extreme nationalism, it has created the image of a group that would go to any lengths to force its view on others. The movement represents reaction. With its wholesale rejection of modernity, social progress, contemporary art and literature, the modern sciences and progressive education, it has created the image of a group intent on turning back the clock to a less enlightened, less humane age. The movement represents con-

spiracy. With its secret membership lists, cell meetings, spy-activities, and threats of hidden powers over the lives and careers of others, it has created the image of a group awaiting the day to "take over" America. The movement represents recklessness. With its bellicose statements and the violence of its rhetoric, it has created the image of a group that might one day bring nuclear devastation to the world. Finally, the movement represents ignorance. The wild, unsubstantiated statements of Birch leaders and their fanciful accounts of contemporary history have created the image of a group whose rejection of complexity could lead to desperate acts and a barbarous assault on our civilization.

This unrelieved public image of the John Birch Society is not made out of whole cloth. There are statements of the Birch leaders, articles in their publications, and personal experiences wherever the movement thrives, to back it up. And yet . . . These are not people from another planet. One reminds oneself that they are one's own contemporaries, with the same kind of American upbringing, the same general set of experiences, the same childish memories and adolescent hopes. Why did the experience with democracy as it has actually been lived by our own generation prove to be so disappointing? Why, when they talk about their "beloved country," do they hark back constantly to an America that probably never existed but one that certainly they never could have known? For isn't it an

odd sort of patriotism that rejects the actual institutions of government, the actual leaders and directors of its destiny; that dismisses the people who sustained those institutions and supported those leaders as dimwits and dupes; and that regards at least half of the nation's history as the product of deceit and deception by unscrupulous leaders cheerfully accepted by defrauded people? The Birchites may sing the glories of America louder than the rest of us, but it would be hard to find in history the America they sing of. For the nation as it actually existed, outside the Platonic "conservative" heaven that seems to haunt them, they have nothing but scorn. If their flags fly bravely, it is to celebrate not a nation or a common experience but a political abstraction.

All of us have ideas of what went wrong. Sociologists trace the movement to the insecurities of people achieving a certain material standard and desperately anxious to hold on to it. (The Birch movement is not working-class but is largely made up of people recently emerged from the proletariat.) Psychologists put their emphasis on the overburdening weight of modern complexities and the desire to single out not vague historical forces but easily identifiable persons and organizations that can be blamed. Political commentators attribute the movement to the success of a certain number of well-financed demagogues and rabble-rousers. There are accounts which stress the ambitions of newly-minted millionaires and frustrated military men. Others see the movement as a perverse victory for the Communists, a further exemplification of the old idea that hate impels the hater to ape the thing he hates. Each of these explanations is plausible, if not wholly satisfying, and together they go a long way toward making the Birch movement less mysterious, sociologically, psychologically, politically, theologically. But the seemingly simple statement of one of my colleagues, the philosopher Scott Buchanan, caused me more unease than any other comments on the subject I have heard.

Mr. Buchanan once got to talking about the Birch Society and groups like them with which both he and I have had unhappy, painful ex-

periences. "They are trying to tell us something," he said. "They think we won't listen, and so they take these outrageous ways to get our attention and force their presence upon us." The explanation sounded so facile that my first reaction was to pass over it. But I have learned from experience that Mr. Buchanan has a rare gift for striking at the heart of a matter with a simple statement. I began to wonder what it was that the Birchers were trying to tell us, if indeed that was it. Scott Buchanan had said that it behooved the nation to listen to them, as one should listen to the native Communists and every manner of extremist, and not be content with condemnation, anathema, and excommunication. Ever since, I have been trying — with little success — to decipher the Birch message.

It would seem to be, I have concluded, a demand for an American ideology, to counter the rigid orthodoxy of the Communist world. For, historically, the United States has operated with a dismaying lack of consistency. We have been both liberal and conservative — or, to make a distinction dear to the Birchers' heart, both democratic and republican. The reason for this, I believe, is that from the very beginning we have been the heirs of two almost contradictory traditions. On the one hand, we are a product of the Christian West and, on the other, a child of the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment. To be sure, we had our beginnings in revolution, but it was a conservative revolution. The Founding Fathers fought not for a brand new idea, a breakthrough as we would say today, but for the rights of free men in the homeland. Their struggle, at least in the beginning, was not inspired by any messianic notion of millennial significance; rather they were interested in conserving in the New World the notions of limited government, an enabled Parliament, Magna Charta, and all the hard-won achievements of Englishmen. This was the basis for the conservative element in American life.

But the Founding Fathers were also men of their own time who were not deaf to the ideas of the Enlightenment. If the conservative element of their heritage was a product of Christian tradition, looking back to 1066 and all that, there

was a liberal element just as well, which has hung on in American life to this day. It seems that this element is the one the Birchers and their followers would like to cancel out or treat as a cancerous growth.

It is true that it is not easy to reconcile the two elements. The conservative stands for traditional order, stability, and the aristocratic principle. It embraces all that is summed up in the phrase "republican virtue": a suspicion of change, a distrust of the masses, the need for republican representation and limitation on political power, a built-in check on governmental exuberance, etc. Traditionally, it canonizes frugality on the part of the lower classes and *noblesse oblige* on the part of the upper. It stresses simple piety for the humble and a fairly housebroken religion for all the people: religion is conceived of as a stabilizing force undergirding sound political institutions that are to be uncompromisingly republican in structure. At their best, this may be the kind of America the Birchers are demanding, in their inarticulate, largely incomprehensible way. One catches glimpses of it in their dogged insistence that the United States is a republic, not a democracy, in their simple equation of liberalism with treasonable communism, and in their attempts to expunge from history the contribution liberal thought made to the development of American society.

The religious members of the Birch movement (and they would appear to be numerous) have never really accepted the Enlightenment's contribution to the making of America, because they can not conceive of a force seeded in theological rebellion and brought forth in pride of intellect as the source of good, even political good. Their conclusion is not without a basis in fact, for the liberalism of the Enlightenment did break with the religious tradition of the West, and right on its most central point, its doctrine of man. As George Santayana once said, there was in the Enlightenment "nothing subterranean acknowledged; no ultimate catastrophe, no jungle, no desert, and no laughter of the gods." The pristine liberals dreamed of a race of men released from the bondage of the traditional religion; a race of men who, by the force of their innate reason,

would create a morally better world through the sheer power of intellectual energy. Knowledge, the Enlightenment philosophers proclaimed, was power. Science was looked upon as infinitely benign. History worked automatically for man. Each of these doctrines affronts the religious mind. Understood in a fundamentalist way, and the Birchers always seem to read history by moving their lips, they can be seen as the very antithesis of a religious worldview. Whoever nurtures them, goes along with the movements developed from them, or even fraternizes with their exponents, is readily tagged as an Enemy Within. And the peculiar logic of the Birch mentality sees these doctrines as the preface to full-blown Marxism. Hence the blurring of the differences between the liberal and the Communist.

The trouble is that the movements and institutions derived from doctrine are as frequently a product of history and human forces as of their dogmatic origins. This is particularly true when the doctrines have not been the sole but only one of several influences on the institutions affected.

At most, the liberal element was only one of the major influences on the shaping of America. Conservatism was ever an equal, and balancing, force. Moreover, the liberalism of the Enlightenment never reached the shores of this nation in its French consistency. Our native liberals have never been Eighteenth Century Liberals, any more than our conservatives have been *ancien régime* Conservatives. Both groups have existed side by side and have even been linked together on the programmatic basis which forms the heart of both traditions in their American incarnation. The struggle between liberalism and conservatism in the United States has not been a do-or-die, either-or, life-and-death confrontation. On the Supreme Court, in the Congress, within the political parties, and in public life, the two forces have joined together in the service of the common good, which is the essence of politics. Fortunately, neither has been found in its fullness in this country, with the result that American public life has been riddled with inconsistency and ambiguity. But this very pragmatism has served the nation well. It has given us the oldest operat-

ing Constitution in the West and one of the most stable governments in history. We have been a live-and-let-live people. When some among us push one or another element in our many-faceted tradition to the limit, as the Birchers are doing, we all get the vague sense that something “un-American” is going on. We feel an uneasiness, a sense of something alien poisoning the political climate.

The Birch mind, even when it is highly unsophisticated, simply can not abide the ambiguity and vagueness of our American commitment. Actually, it frequently seems to have more respect for the consistency of even the movements it despises, like Communism, than for the messiness and lack of precision of our commitments. This secret admiration for the despised foe may account for the Birchers willingness to imitate the methods of the totalitarian powers. The attitude of tolerance, which seems to be devolved from the ideological inconsistency they find so reprehensible, is judged as weakness—a weakness easily exploited by “strong-minded” Communists, who, like themselves, reject the *both-and* in favor of drastic *either-ors*.

Perhaps, then, the Birchers, in the formula devised by Scott Buchanan, are trying to tell us to be totally what they insist we are—the product of the Christian West (before the Enlightenment), without any quarter given to the “enemy” forces that came later.

If that is what they are trying to tell us, I am afraid the answer we give must be no. For we are

not one thing—nor for that matter is Christianity to be identified with one age. We are a pluralistic convergence of many different historical forces. We do not value ideological consistency as a political asset, however intellectually satisfying it might be. We do not regard tolerance as weakness or “toughmindedness” as strength. We do not reject history as embodying unalloyed evil, as they reject modern history; nor do we canonize history as embodying unalloyed good, as they canonize the history that is so old they can not remember its ambiguous details.

Mr. Buchanan has an extraordinary faith in the human intellect. Even when he sees irrational conduct, like that shown by the Birch Society, he is convinced that there is some rational basis for it. He would not let me get away with dismissing the Birchers as a psychologically sick, pathological development. “Try to find out the rational basis of their action,” he told me. I am not at all sure that I succeeded. Perhaps I have not found even a clue to that basis. Perhaps, on the other hand, in my zeal to find reason where none seems apparent, I have exaggerated the complexity of the Birch argument. In any case, I can find few points of agreement with them. Just possibly though, there is enough basis for discussion. As Mr. Buchanan would remind us, the essence of the democratic commitment is to seek for a basis of discussion—even with those who seem as far away from a rational starting point as the members of the John Birch Society.

Stillwell John Conner

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY

STILLWELL JOHN CONNER is a member of the Council of the John Birch Society; this Council, in Mr. Conner's words, "comprises a group of 26 men who meet regularly with Robert Welch to evaluate and advise on the Communist threat and the effectiveness of the Society in combating this evil." Mr. Conner is a businessman.

THE JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY is unequivocally opposed to Communism.

The Catholic Church is unequivocally opposed to Communism. As early as 1846 Pope Pius IX pronounced a solemn condemnation; Pope Leo XIII defined it in his encyclical QUOD APOSTOLICI MUNERIS; and in 1937 Pope Pius XI in his encyclical DIVINI REDEMPTORIS "exposed the errors and the violent, deceptive tactics of Bolshevistic and Atheistic Communism."

With clear insight he attributed its spread to "the fact that too few have been able to grasp the nature of Communism. The majority instead succumb to its deception skillfully concealed by the most extravagant promises." And he enunciated three factors—that are as prevalent today as they were in 1937, if not more so, since the intervening years have brought about a greater corrosion of moral principles.

The factors responsible for the rapid diffusion of Communism are:

- "A world already to a large extent de-Christianized."

- "A propaganda so truly diabolical that the world has perhaps never witnessed its likes before."

- "A conspiracy of silence on the part of a large section of the non-Catholic press of the world. We say conspiracy, because it is impossible otherwise to explain how a press usually so eager to exploit the little daily incidents of life has been able to remain silent for so long about the horrors perpetuated in Russia, in Mexico and even in a great part of Spain; and that it should have relatively so little to say concerning a *world organization* as vast as Russian Communism." (italics added)

Propaganda, a conspiracy of silence and a de-Christianized world are component parts of the climate that has nurtured atheistic Communism.

The Church's position remains unchanged as the recent statement from the Vatican clearly indicates: "... it is necessary to be intransigent towards Marxist and Communist ideology. The more subtle and equivocal its tactics of penetration, the more intransigent we must be."

The Church's position on socialism is likewise explicitly defined in QUOD APOSTOLICI MUNERIS, RERUM NOVARUM, QUADRAGESIMO ANNO and MATER ET MAGISTRA. In the latter Pope John XXIII referred repeatedly to "the brilliance of (Leo's) teachings" which "stand out in clear relief," and then proceeding to QUADRAGESIMO ANNO, Pope John stated: "Pope Pius XI further emphasized the fundamental opposition between