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The Varieties of Conservatism: British and American

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I am standing this evening on ground which was Indian and Spanish before it was American, and which consequently was never British and never formed part of British history. What that term means I hope to discuss further on Saturday night; but it is worth saying now that my own perspective on British history derives from a point thousands of miles south and west of where we now are--from one of the British settler societies of the South Pacific, reminding us that the British have been an oceanic people where the Americans have been a continental. To fly from Baltimore via Chicago to Phoenix is to look down on the scene of an experience which the British peoples have never had, but if I went on to Los Angeles, and then to Tahiti and New Zealand, I should be looking down on something which is not yours, even today.

What I have just said is relevant to what I am to talk of tonight, because conservatism is concerned with the old and the new; and to come from a British society founded and settled in the mid-nineteenth century is to be aware of certain limitations to the often-expressed idea that Britain is an ancient society with its roots in the Middle Ages--because I come from a segment of British society where that certainly doesn't apply--or that America on the contrary is a new civilisation--because, quite simply, I come from a newer one, and America both east and west constantly brings me face-to-face with eighteenth and even seventeenth-century phenomena which I do not encounter in New Zealand. There we see history quite differently; and you will not expect me, I hope, to spend too much time contrasting the aristocratic traditionalism of Edmund Burke with the dynamic

messianism of Walt Whitman, as if that were what the varieties of conservatism were all about. Whitman, as we now know, was a false prophet anyway; the whole of humanity is not sailing in convoy with the American ship of state, and that rather brutal realisation may turn out to have some part to play in what I shall try to discuss with you.

But the problem of old and new opens another door into the question of the various forms taken by conservatism. Arizona has the reputation of a conservative state, and a nursery of conservative statesmen, as that word is ordinarily used in both American and British political speech; and the meaning it has here is that the conservative wants to conserve industrial individualism and free enterprise against attempts to modify these things in the direction of planning and welfare, mixed economy and public ownership. In America the term also implies patriotism and military preparedness, to a greater extent than it does elsewhere; but conservatism in this obvious and familiar sense is also found in the title of the British Conservative party, and in the ideologies of its equivalents in other British countries--though in Australia, it's interesting to note, the equivalent party calls itself the Liberal party; the words liberal and liberalism are fully as ambivalent as those we are discussing tonight. The curious point I want to emphasise, however, is that though anybody who wants to conserve anything is entitled to that extent to be called conservative, there is nothing particularly conservative about industrial individualism itself. On the contrary, as Karl Marx announced as ringingly as any of its apologists, it has been the greatest power for transformation and change in human society and the earth's surface that has ever been known; and now there are those--in general neither Marxists nor individualists--who think this transformation has gone too far and ought to be checked and slowed

down. These people too desire to conserve something, namely the ecosystem as they see it, but when a conservative meets a conservationist, they often do not recognise each other.

We have come to a fundamental difference within the meanings of the word conservatism: one not identical with the difference between British and American conservatism, but one which turns up in different combinations within the context of the British and American political systems. When a historian or a political theorist thinks about conservatism, it is not long before he begins to think about the political vision--it isn't really a philosophy--of Edmund Burke, which is anchored upon notions of prescription and tradition. Whenever a political action is taken, according to this vision of things, it is taken on the presumption of continuity with an action or actions taken before it. The relation between the action and its precedent may be very complex indeed--one is almost never merely repeating an action already taken before one--but relations of this kind are always present, and the whole point of this kind of conservatism is that it is always possible in theory, but always both morally and practically impossible, to behave as if they did not exist. What Burke came to hate above all things, and to regard as profoundly wicked, was the action of people who first established a set of principles and then set out to reconstruct a whole human context--a whole actual human society and way of living--on the basis of those principles. In the first place, he said, such action was illogical; the principles had been abstracted from the society they were now being used to reconstruct. You could not reconstruct the whole on the basis of a selected part of itself, and the part--in this case the principles--was not really intelligible when taken out of the context of the whole; it meant far more, much of it implicitly and indirectly, in context than it could when torn out and looked at as

an isolated fragment, which was bound to simplify and distort it. In the second place, such action was indefinitely destructive. Once you looked at the whole fabric of a human society from the outside, and set out to reconstruct it on the basis of abstract principles--no matter where they came from--there was no limit whatsoever to the human relationships you would become willing to destroy and replace by others formed to your own specifications; no limit to the power you would assume over other human beings in order to carry out plans formed nowhere but in your own head. There's a revolutionary in Pasternak's Dr. Zhivago who declares: "The personal life is dead in Russia; history has killed it." Burke would have had trouble understanding the second part of the statement, but taken as a whole it is precisely what he had in mind when he declared that he knew no wickedness like the wickedness of a thoroughgoing metaphysician. The man in Zhivago, being some kind of Marxist, would have angrily denied that he was any kind of metaphysician, but in Burke's sense he was; he was looking at human life from a point so far outside it that he thought he knew when "the personal life was dead," and was justified in acting on the basis of such knowledge. For Burke that was, in a very sober sense, blasphemy.

Now American conservatives, like the senior senator from this state, probably have a good understanding of the nature of Burkean argument; but it is a different strand in the conservative pattern from the defense of individualism and free enterprise which they intend by the term. What we derive from Burke is a criticism of revolution; it is also a philosophical conservatism founded on a sociology of knowledge. It tells us that all our thoughts and actions are, and ought to be, formed within a context of other people's behaviour; that this context forms our thoughts and actions in ways of which we are, and ought to be, incompletely aware, and that to suppose we

have become so completely aware of this that our thoughts have become completely free to act upon the context is logically impossible and morally wrong, because it leads to our assuming too much knowledge of and power over other people's behaviour. This is a profoundly important argument, but it does tend always to operate against the critic and activist and never in his support. If the conservative has any sense at all, he does not deny that human society often needs to be criticised and acted upon; but the structure of his argument always makes it easier for him to cast the critic and activist in the role of metaphysician--to show how he ought not to be acting--than to show how he ought to be acting so that criticism and reform can be carried out within the political and moral premises laid down by Burke and those like him. This is why the Burkean tradition is conservative; it is more concerned to limit action than to direct it.

This is also why philosophical conservatism is a rather curious companion for a conservatism aimed at the maintenance of industrial free enterprise. Clearly you can construct a Burkean criticism of any legislative program for the social control of industry, because you can construct a Burkean criticism of any legislative program and of the social control of anything; and in an imperfect world, your criticism will very probably be largely right. But philosophical conservatism is not of itself individualist; it does not lead to the conclusion that the unfettered enterprise of individuals has an unlimited power to transform our lives for the better, because it is overwhelmingly concerned with the context which the actions of individuals provide for one another, and with maintaining and continuing that context rather than with seeing it transformed. It is an odd kind of conservatism which contends, first, that technological progress has an unlimited authority to transform our lives and environments; second, that

we have only a limited authority to criticise and control the way in which this is being done--odd, because it would be perfectly possible to construct a Burkean criticism of the transforming power of technological free enterprise, and one suspects that in the special case of the conservatism of conservationists, this is precisely what is going on.

This is the point at which to look again at how the varieties of conservatism have developed in history. The late Clinton Rossiter--a highly intelligent American conservative who was one of the human casualties of the years 1968-70--used to apply the term "The Great Train Robbery" to the process whereby the values of philosophical conservatism became associated with the defence of industrial free enterprise, while in a contrary direction the radical competitiveness of Darwin's struggle for existence became considered as among the conservative values. Rossiter was talking both about this strange if intelligible association between conservatism and individualism, and about the extreme difficulty of establishing a conservative style in American politics and thought--which, incidentally, had something to do with Rossiter's ultimate personal tragedy. Edmund Burke is neither present nor absent in American thought; one cannot consider the nature of conservatism without taking his philosophical variety into account, and yet his profound concern with continuity, texture and tradition has never been a major American preoccupation, and attempts to establish a Burkean school of American political thinking have never been very successful. A consequence is that the differences between British and American conservatism are not simply a matter of the difference between philosophical conservatism on the one hand and individualist conservatism on the other, but rather a matter of differences between various recombinations of the elements making up both. I want now to try and show why this is so, by means of a historical review

which may help us see the varieties of conservatism taking shape in historical experience.

The British political system against which the American colonies rebelled in the eighteenth century was one dominated by a parliamentary aristocracy, few enough in numbers to be called an oligarchy. Because the hereditary peerage was an important element in the making of this aristocracy, it often looked to contemporaries like John Adams as if it retained elements of a feudal nobility; but it is important to our purposes that we should realise that this was not significantly the case. Louis B. Hartz, in a book called The Liberal Tradition in America, argues that since there was never a feudal stage in American history, there was never an alternative in American political ideas and values to what he calls the liberalism of John Locke. He is clearly not using the word to denote that combination of moral indignation and social reform which is what we currently mean by it, and this is rather important; he has in mind a view of both politics and economics which emphasises the freely acting individual and the need for a government which respects his liberty. Liberalism in this sense is obviously compatible with individualist conservatism--this is why the Australian conservatives I mentioned earlier call themselves liberals--and Hartz is also saying that the maintenance of a liberal tradition is the only form of philosophical conservatism possible to Americans, because what he calls the Lockean tradition is the only tradition there is. He has an important point here; but I think his rendering of American history is over-simplified enough to be seriously misleading. I don't believe that American liberal conservatism is the conservatism of people imprisoned within a Lockean tradition, because I don't believe in the overwhelming dominance which Hartz attributes to Locke in the eighteenth century, or thereafter. In both Britain and the

American colonies at that time, I see a far more complex pattern of values; and one starting-point here is the realisation that any antithesis between a Lockean America and a feudal or still-feudal Britain simply won't do.

The Whig parliamentary aristocracy of the eighteenth century were in fact highly conscious of being not feudal but rather post-feudal. They had an image of an England ruled by a feudal king and his magnates until Tudor times, and they thought--as modern historians do--that the civil wars of the seventeenth century were a consequence of the progressive decline of the Tudor aristocracy. In their belief--one largely shared by the gentry of the House of Commons--some kind of aristocracy was necessary to England, to serve in a mediatory role, as what they called a "screen and bank" between the royal government and the proprietors of land who made up the political nation. Once upon a time, they thought, this had been done by having the commons hold their lands from the lords in feudal vassalage; now that was not possible any longer, and there was need of a new kind of aristocracy which managed the relation between government and nation by controlling the medium of politics itself. This parliamentary aristocracy was made up partly of great landowners, partly of great investors in government finance; but their central function was to distribute the plums of patronage and to get the voters to the polls. Because in the mid-eighteenth century they tended to guarantee this system by restricting the electorate, rather than by enlarging it as previously, they got the vote out by far less spectacular methods than the great political bosses of the classical age of American mass democracy; but in that age--now held to survive only in Chicago--the bosses performed an intermediary role historically continuous with that of the Whig parliamentary aristocracy. Among the Founding Fathers were some who saw this coming, and did not much like it.

The Whig aristocracy were therefore a modern far more than a feudal phenomenon. Their system of government was not much more than half a century old at the time of the American Revolution, though its roots lay much further back in British history; and this is a matter of some importance to the understanding of conservatism, because--given the habits of mind of the eighteenth century--it meant that criticism of parliamentary aristocracy could easily take the form of a desire to return to an idealised past. Old classes who felt extruded from power, like urban tradesmen, professional men and artisans; the Virginian and other colonial gentries somewhere in between; all these found it possible to believe in a time when parliament had been far more representative and had not been corrupted, as they put it, by the intervention of an aristocracy of patronage brokers. They said the principles of the constitution might be found in this past, and that the constitution must return to them before it was too late.

Now the interesting point here is that when one desires to return to a past state of things, and another desires to maintain things as they are, it may very well be the former who is the radical and the latter who is the conservative; with the result that the denial of ancient tradition is just as likely to figure as a conservative strategy as the affirmation of ancient tradition. The conservative can make himself out as tough-minded, present-minded, pragmatic and impatient of precedent; and this helps to create, but also to bridge or to blur, the gap between the two sorts of conservatism we are considering. In this case the defenders of parliamentary aristocracy sometimes said openly that their system was modern, not ancient; and they tried at the same time to deny that the ancient principles to which the opposition wanted to return had ever existed at all. They said that the past had been feudal and that there had never been a representative parliament in

it; and they said that Britain was now moving into a modern and commercial phase in its history, in which there could be a representative parliament but it would have to be managed by a patronage-wielding class like themselves. These arguments made the defenders of Whig aristocracy the first progressive conservatives in the history of modern political debate, and their emphasis on the growth of commerce--by which of course their patronage system was financed--set them on the road towards that defence of economic individualism which was to be an important component of conservatism later on.

The eighteenth-century opposition--both British and American--was in a more complex position still. They wished to assert that the principles of good government might be found in the past, and so sometimes located them among Romans or Anglo-Saxons before the rise of feudalism; but the pressure of modernist historical argument was so strong that it was a temptation to locate the principles of good government in natural right or natural law, outside the reach of history altogether. Locke and Algernon Sidney, and other writers of the seventeenth century, helped James Otis to do this in the eighteenth; and Tom Paine was to show just how drastically a radical thinker could reject the past altogether. But the endeavour to locate the principles of government in antiquity was not brought to an end by this--Jefferson wanted to depict the Anglo-Saxons Hengist and Horsa on the great seal of the United States--and we see that the rejection and the maintenance of the past could both be radical strategies as they could both be conservative. In the radical view of history, feudal institutions appeared to have been imposed upon the principles of ancient liberty; and the rise of commerce thus appeared to them in a double light. On the one hand, it had helped to emancipate the individual from feudal controls and was thus admirable, on the other, it was helping to finance the system of patronage and corruption which

the opponents of the Whig aristocracy feared above all else, and was thus to be mistrusted. In this duality of attitude, the modern conservative will perhaps recognise the beginnings of that wish to receive the benefits of economic development while minimising its inconveniences, which is defined as "liberal" by the terms of the modern debate. In the eighteenth century, however, the government and not the economy was the issue, and the problem in debate was how far and by what means principles could be set up as a device for the criticism of governments.

In the American Revolution the language of eighteenth-century opposition reached boiling-point, and it became necessary to establish principles as a basis not merely for criticising and reforming government, but for repudiating its authority totally and setting up a new one. To say that Britain had degenerated from the ancient principles of liberty and that America had maintained them was an attractive means of doing this, and continued to be energetically affirmed; but it was not by itself a sufficient argument, and we therefore hear both from Tom Paine, who held that the principles of good government were rooted in the common sense of the living and not in antiquity, and from the more august language of the Declaration of Independence, which as we all know affirms certain truths to be self-evident--established, that is, in natural right and natural law, rather than in history. Now whatever this utterance meant, it was a revolutionary, not a conservative action. The philosophical conservatism which was to come into being a few years later affirms that it is almost impossible, hardly ever justifiable and always very dangerous to establish principles on the basis of which governments cease to be legitimate; and this makes it as hard to justify the American revolution as any other. But if the language of the Declaration has established in the American mind the Jeffersonian principle

that an outburst of revolutionary criticism every now and then does a government no harm--I doubt if it has, but that's a different story--it has also established there the possibility of a philosophical conservatism rather different from the kind I have so far been describing.

I have had the experience of introducing American conservatives--generally students--to the thought of British conservatism as it has existed from Edmund Burke to Michael Oakeshott, and seeing them shake their heads and say that this is not conservatism as they understand the term. They hold certain truths to be self-evident, they say, and as far as they can tell the English philosophical conservatives hold nothing of the kind. What we have encountered here is that British conservative rhetoric is not grounded upon any assertion of universal right such as is found in the Declaration of Independence, and that Burke can consequently be read as appealing simply to the continuity of human experience and human society, and not to the principles of natural law as existing alongside and apart from it. But since American history begins with a revolutionary assertion of natural right, it has been necessary for American philosophical conservatives to develop a brand of natural-law conservatism of which the British have felt less need. There exists above all governments a higher law, this argument declares, and a government which disregards it may lose its authority; but a government which endeavours to actualise the principles of this law derives from it a legitimacy above and beyond government itself. The difficulty lies of course in ascertaining how the principles apply; both Daniel Ellsberg and Howard Hunt could have appealed to higher law; but the point I want to emphasise is that whenever an attempt has been made--as by Russell Kirk and his colleagues in the nineteen-fifties--to establish a Burkean school in American political thought, those concerned have had to argue persistently that Burke was a

natural-law theorist of the kind I have just described. It is possible that they are right; the question has been much debated; but the point is that British conservatism since his day has found little need to insist upon natural law, whereas in the various kinds of American intellectual conservatism--whether Revolutionary, Catholic or Talmudic in their origins--it has recurrently been very important indeed. What all this has to do with individualist conservatism remains to be seen, but to understand this difference in the styles of philosophical conservatism we have to go back to the history of the late eighteenth century.

The most informative of British conservative responses to the claims of the American revolutionaries came not from Edmund Burke--who endeavoured a moderate and conciliatory response from the standpoint of the Whig aristocracy--but from Josiah Tucker, the Dean of Gloucester Cathedral. He looked upon the American revolt as part of a Lockean and Dissenting conspiracy against the Anglican and parliamentary order--in fact, he was anxious to see the Americans become independent as soon as possible so as to undermine the political base of their supporters at home--and in reply to their claims he reiterated the modernist conservative argument which I described a little while ago. The British constitution was of recent growth, he declared; there were no original principles from which it could be said to have declined, or which the individual might advance to limit his allegiance to it or assert his claim that his consent was necessary before he could be governed by it. Tucker's real target was English radicalism; he found it easier to understand the Americans becoming independent and setting up a government of their own than an English dissenter or democrat remaining under the British government, yet making it at every moment subject to his giving or withholding his consent. When Tucker denied the antiquity of the constitution on historical

grounds, he was denying that there existed any ancient principles of government which might interfere with the established Anglican thesis that authority must take precedence over consent. His conservative modernism is like, and yet profoundly unlike, the argument which Burke--whom he attacked unsparingly for his Whig and American associations in 1775--was to develop over the next fifteen years. As early as 1781 we find Burke saying that the attempt to justify reform by alleging the original principles of the constitution was absurd because the constitution was prescriptive and immemorial and consequently could have no original principles. Here he was reverting to a pattern of thought implicit in the practice of the common law and of great importance in the century before his own. He meant that every detail of the constitution claimed to justify itself by appeal to a precedent, and every precedent by appeal to a previous precedent, until a time was reached of which no memory or record was preserved. In such a continuous there could be no moment of original foundation and so no moment at which original principles had been laid down. What Tucker had achieved by the appeal to modernity, Burke achieved by the appeal to antiquity; the denial that the constitution contained principles which might be quoted against it and used to prove that it had forfeited its authority.

The common law survives in the United States, and American lawyers well understand, in terms of their own practice, the kind of thinking to which Burke appealed. But the United States Constitution could never be adequately defended by means of Burkean argument. It is not a body of precedents, but a body of principles; and though the Supreme Court has established a powerful judicial tradition of constitutional interpretation, that has been kept up by means of higher-law argument as well as common-law. In consequence, though Burke has always been profoundly admired by American intellectual

conservatives, he must remain a profoundly un-American figure. His style of thought goes with an unwritten, not a written constitution, and had the Americans been able to remain under an unwritten constitution, there would never have been an American Revolution.

The fact remains, however, that nobody has ever succeeded in quoting the principles of the U.S. Constitution against itself, in such a way as to prove that its authority has come to an end; not, at least, since the seceding states tried it in 1861. It was this mode of argument, sucessfully practiced by the Americans of 1776, which Burke was trying to stop Englishmen adopting in 1790. The occasion which moved him to write the Reflections on the Revolution in France was, we know, the sermon in which Richard Price--who had been a keen supporter of the American cause and the American contention that British politics were reaching a point of hopeless corruption--declared that the French Revolution of 1789 was a vindication of the English Revolution of 1688 and was carried out on the same principles. Burke saw in this an attempt to maintain for both France and England the premise that a people might depose its government whenever it saw sufficient cause to do so, which he held to be a profound misunderstanding of the nature of politics; and he also saw evidence that the radical Dissenters like Price were preparing once again to make their consent the basis of their allegiance and to withhold their consent on the basis of their grievances. Profoundly disturbed though he was by the actions of the French revolutionaries, it was the British body politic which he thought threatened, from within, by the principles which he denounced in language that has made him the greatest of philosophical conservatives.

With Richard Price--who was a good and high-minded man--there had arrived on the stage of history a type who does much to make us understand the nature of conservative argument ever since: the type of the anti-war

liberal. He decides--he may quite well be right to do so--that the government and society to which his allegiance are due are in the wrong in a war in which they are engaged, or on some issue of equivalent moral gravity; and he discovers--it is enormously difficult to determine how far he is right to do so--that this wrongdoing is grave enough to deprive the government of part or all of the legitimacy and authority by which it commands his allegiance. He first appeared in Britain in the age of the American Revolution; he was commoner in both Britain and America in the age of the French Revolution; and the Mexican War, the Boer War, the Russian Revolution and, superlatively, Vietnam have kept him with us ever since. Burke, with much thunder and lightning, sought to establish the principle that moral assent was not a necessary precondition of allegiance; you did not place yourself under a government because you thought it was a good one, and you did not withdraw yourself from a government as soon as you decided it was not a good one; nor could the conditions under which you might do either be specified in advance, because the moral and social texture in which you lived was deeper and more complex than you could realise at any one moment. Much of his argument seems to have stood the test of time, and to many a modern conservative it seems simple and obvious that the anti-war liberal begins to be wrong once his moral indignation incites him to begin refusing his obedience to law or his allegiance to government. But Burke, as his speeches on the American crisis make clear, knew that there was a case to be made against the government which subjected the individual's allegiance to too much strain; and we are all still digesting the information we have received concerning the extent to which an unlegitimised war can delegitimise the government which engages in it. In retrospect it seems prophetic that many of those in Britain who were opposed to

Anthony Eden's Suez intervention in 1956 were against it on conservative grounds. There was, they said, an unwritten rule that you did not go to war if the parliamentary opposition was known to be against it; Eden had disregarded this rule, and the risks both of breaking the rules and of fighting a war not legitimised by sufficient consensus were too great to be run. Nothing in the much more complex American experience over Vietnam suggests that there was much wrong in this position.

What I am attempting in this lecture is a review of the origins of conservatism in the late eighteenth century, aimed at bringing out the complexity of some of the phenomena and at showing why much in the way of philosophical conservatism is not to be expected as a product of American history. The initial problem was how principles for the criticism of government were to be established in a context where both government and ideas were largely based upon precedent. Since the revolution of 1776 aimed at establishing American independence but not at transforming the government of Britain, the Americans were able to establish a government based upon principle (that is to say, a written constitution) without encountering in their full complexity the problems to be confronted by Burke. But before 1789 it had been made quite clear that the British were not going to follow the American lead, and that their governing classes would continue to rule in ways justified by precedent. Under the shock of the French revolution and the desire of radicals like Price to justify it in British terms, Burke saw two things: first, that the challenge to government produced by the union of English radical and French revolutionary ideas was in theory extremely grave--probably much graver in theory than in practice--second, that a philosophical conservatism based on the idea of precedent could be mobilised against it. Burkean conservatism, as we have just

seen, is largely concerned with the ancient question of allegiance: when does political principle justify us in denying legitimacy to a government? and his Reflections on the Revolution in France were met head on by Paine's The Rights of Man--the second of that amazing person's revolutionary manifestoes--which had a great deal of success in mobilising radical opinion on lines which suggested that the government of Britain was not legitimate at all. But the Americans had had their revolution and established their principles, and the collision of doctrine between Hamilton and Jefferson was a great deal less grave in its implications than that between Burke and Paine. However violent and dangerous the polarisation of opinion which the French Revolution produced in America, Hamilton and Jefferson were statesmen operating a constitution which worked on the basis of its principles, whereas by the end of Burke's life both he and Paine were crazy doctrinaires--though the constitution saluted by Burke was working well enough without him. All that Americans of the 1790's had to debate was whether an aristocratic component was to survive in their new political order, and whether it was to be preserved by Hamilton's plans to re-create Whig techniques of government by the management of patronage. This was a simple old-fashioned eighteenth-century issue, compared with those which war and industrialisation were generating within the older order of Britain. But Burke was a Whig in the long run, and in the long run the Whigs found the way through to the preservation of the parliamentary order by conservative reform from within. In so doing, they adopted much of the Burkean ideology, and congratulated themselves incessantly on reforming gradually instead of by revolutionary leaps. But when Americans want to congratulate themselves in this way, their language can be that of Madison and need not be that of Burke.

Let me return to the problem from which I set out--that of relating philosophical to individualist conservatism. The American Revolution had no very close immediate relationship with the rise of economic individualism. Certainly, the Declaration of Independence was published in the same year as Adam Smith's The Wealth of Nations; but the former no more enacts the principles of the latter than the Constitution--as Justice Holmes once had to remind his brethren--enacts those of Herbert Spencer's Social Statics. The problem of liberty, as Jefferson and Burke and Paine all saw it, was pre-industrial and antedated the rise of free-enterprise capitalism. What is remarkable is that we are still debating the case for and against economic individualism within the political patterns which they saw established; and I don't see much strength in the Marxist explanation that this is so because the values of pre-industrial constitutionalism were those of a pre-industrial bourgeoisie. Given the premise I laid down that industrialisation is not a conservative but a revolutionary force, the desire to maintain it is a desire to continue a revolution as against those who would either mitigate it or transform its character; and it is hard to see how this is to be justified within the premises of philosophical conservatism, which is a critique of revolution if it is anything at all. We have then to decide whether the conjunction of philosophical and individualist conservatism is anything more than a kind of verbal accident, in which once-revolutionary individualists, being thrown upon the defensive, adopt some of the arguments, including the name, of conservatism in a more proper sense. I think there is a closer association than that, and after spending most of my and your time in an attempt to show that they origins of philosophical conservatism are important to the understanding of both British and American history, I would like to explore that closer association a little longer.

The great work by Adam Smith, which appeared in the year of American independence, is traditionally viewed as the masterpiece of economic liberalism, in which capitalist enterprise, trade and manufacture were given their classical principles of organisation. It can at the same time, and with equal truth, be viewed as a masterpiece of that sceptical humanism which we know by the name of the Scottish Enlightenment, in which for the first time, and in full awareness of all the difficulties involved, theorists succeeded in expressing the idea that the processes of trade and manufacture, seen as operating throughout the whole of human history, might provide the whole of what was necessary to a fully cultivated and moral human life. This had never been done before; Smith himself did not think he had done it with absolute completeness; and it was not to be very long before it was challenged again, both by Tories operating in the name of an older criticism and by socialists operating to formulate a newer one. But there are two aspects of Smith's achievement that deserve attention. In the first place, he opened the way to a utopian vision in which the progress of commerce would have attained all its goals and overcome all its contradictions; if he did not claim this himself, he left it possible for others to do so. In the second place, he expressed, in a significant if over-quoted aside about an "invisible hand", the notion that the progress of the exchange economy operated in ways too complex for the individual intelligence to comprehend at any one time, so that the individual might pursue his own ends in the confidence that he was contributing to the progress of society in ways he did not himself understand. If he presumed to criticise or control the free market, however, he might be, as he still regularly is, attacked along Burkean lines and told that he is arrogantly setting his limited intelligence in the place of the wisdom of society. That wisdom,

furthermore, is now expressed by the workings of a process rather than by the continuity of a tradition; and if we hold that Smith or another succeeded in showing that the progress of the economy could supply all the conditions of a human and moral existence--and not merely that the conditions it does not supply can be left out of account--then we hold that a progressive conservatism, in the full sense of the term, briefly glimpsed before Burke, was fully realised after him and replaced his now archaic traditionalism. But Smith did not believe he had done this, and what we have been debating ever since is whether to focus on the ability of industrial production to satisfy our needs--in ways which we may be presumed to desire--or to transform our existence, in ways which we may not. The latter is hard to justify in conservative terms.

Meanwhile the conjunction of Burke and Smith shows us how philosophical and individualist conservatism may at a price be conjoined. Let us, as a last enquiry of all, ask how the progressive conservatism of a capitalist ethos works out in the British and American political traditions when compared. In both systems industrialisation occurred, and gave rise during the nineteenth century first to individual manufacturing capitalists and then to industrial corporations which endeavoured to carry on the individualist ethos. In Britain, however, where parliamentary aristocracy and the landowning classes retained significant power until the end of the century, the manufacturing interest had to confront these forces and contend for its share of power within the parameters of the parliamentary system. It thus came to see itself as the progressive party and its opponents as the conservative, within a scheme of politics to which elements, including the Burkean, of a pre-industrial Whig understanding of politics remained perfectly adequate; and when a parliamentary labour party arose

to challenge the Victorian order, industrial capitalism was able to move smoothly into the conservative role and focus on keeping labour's syndicalist and socialist impulses--wuch as they have been--within the parliamentary system, which tended to frustrate them. Neither its progressive nor its conservative personality has ever lacked an opponent within the two-party system, and this is one reason why British capitalism, however powerful its ideological imperatives, has never identified itself with the nation, or national identity. In America, on the other hand, one detects an overwhelmingly strong impulse to believe that free enterprise is America--is the American way or the American dream--which explains why Justice Holmes found it necessary to speak as he did.

There are a number of ways of explaining this. In the first place, since American politics are founded on principle, not on precedent, there is a felt need to define the principles and to dedicate oneself to them as propositions; whether they are defined as goals to be attained or as standards to be maintained, this explains the strange--and to me, unconservative--character of America as the world's only major political guilt culture, in which the failure of its dream or the end of its innocence has been regularly lamented in every generation since the national beginnings. Since neither Britain nor any of the British countries has ever been dedicated to a proposition--these are Lincoln's words, but Burke would have hated them--the way of life to be maintained is never defined as a dream and neither free enterprise nor anything else has ever had to do duty as the national vision or utopia. Coming from New Zealand, I know that we don't live by dreams, and you do; there are advantages either way.

American free enterprise found itself in the role of defining the national identity, in part because it was never confronted by an alternative

interest in politics, with the partial and disastrous exception of the Southern slave economy. Agriculture and industry, the farmer and the engineer, were integrated into a single system of enterprise, whose function was to determine the national identity by conquering and developing a continent--an effort so gigantic that it often doesn't look very like the progress of civility as Adam Smith defined it. Free enterprise saw itself as the gigantism of America, in part because the two-party system never defined an alternative version of the national economy or the national identity--and will not even if every state west of the Mississippi votes Republican and every state east of it Democratic. So you are not really divided into conservatives and radicals, but are most conservative where you have been most radical; and you define yourselves, not in terms of alternative versions of your goals, but either by lamenting your inability to live up to your own dreams, or by judging yourselves by your relation with the rest of mankind--who in fact don't have the same dreams and never have had. I am therefore returning to the position first laid down by Tocqueville and elaborated, however mistakenly, by Louis B. Hartz, as I said before, according to which there is only one American ideology and its division into conservative and radical variants is really rather superficial. If there ever comes to be a fully developed American conservatism, this suggests, this won't happen because Arizona succeeds in resisting the desire of New York to redistribute the national product in favour of the population of the older urban centres--I hope I sound suitably neutral about that--but because there has appeared an alternative version of the American character and its goals. The only current candidate I see is the thesis that America must now husband its resources and environment instead of exploiting them; and since that can take either a

conservative or a radical form, it could in theory establish itself as a simple redirection of the national consensus, not a division of that consensus into thesis and antithesis. In Britain they have more division of the consensus; there has to be a conservative option because there is a socialist option; but the future of the options depends on their being an autonomous future for Britain itself, which at the moment seems doubtful.