Revolt Against Modernity

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I began working on this book—then a dissertation—during the Bush administration. Ostensibly the nation had undergone a "conservative revolution" during the previous decade, and yet I was confused about what exactly made the times conservative or revolutionary. The key words of the political and ideological debate (words like conservative, liberal, community, rights) signified little, or too much. Politicians, pundits, scholars, virtually everyone relied heavily upon these words to mark groups and beliefs even as it became increasingly evident that few useful semantic conventions governed their usage. The most important words of our political life seemed worse than useless; they obfuscated rather than clarified.

Now, in the mid 1990s, the key words of our political lexicon seem even more divorced from the precise meanings that might allow us to understand one another. This book began, in part, as an attempt to understand better the political discourse of the last fifty years. More precisely, at least in terms of the original motivation for writing it, I attempt to define what it means to be a conservative in modern America. I largely ignore, therefore, the more popular usages that tend to go in so many directions as to make all efforts at generalization hopeless.

It would have made matters easier had I discovered that conservatism is an ideology, but I discovered that the intellectuals of the conservation "movement" reacted to modern and liberal changes (definitions pending) rather than pushing an agenda that would transform society. In their reaction (or because of their reaction) one can detect a persuasion or way of looking at the world that set them apart from liberals—including "right-wing liberals." It was here, at the level of basic attitudes toward the world, that I wanted to explore and chart. I thought as I began this study, as I do today, that any hope
of understanding the competing political views of our time depends upon uncovering the basic philosophical commitments that, consciously or not, shape particular beliefs and political agendas. To understand conservatives and to categorize meaningfully individuals and groups one must get beyond or behind the particular policy issues to uncover people's most basic commitments—their way of seeing the world.

To this end I endeavored to discover the intellectual heart of the conservative movement, not its endless variety, but its irreducible core. Since the conservative intellectual "movement" (that is, a group of intellectuals who understand themselves to be working toward the same "conservative" ends) is largely a product of the post-1945 era, I concentrated on the founders—those men whose books helped energize and define the movement. I came to think of five books as a sort of conservative Pentateuch: Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*, Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, Eric Voegelin's *New Science of Politics*, Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, and Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community*. Many other intellectuals participated in the evolution of the movement during the 1950s (to say nothing of the decades since), but these five not only penned perhaps the five most important books for the creation of a self-conscious conservative movement but also represented the most important divisions among conservative intellectuals.

The original project—which appeals even yet because of its breadth and symmetry—proved too large. As I began working through the beliefs and ideas of the five thinkers, I discovered that the complexity of their thought (that which is all too often missed in books and articles about these men) required an extraordinary amount of space and that at the very least the project would require two books. Rather than add yet another book that deals with conservative intellectuals in thumbnail sketches I decided to concentrate on the two philosophers whose works are the most complex and the most in need of explication—especially by a historian. My decision to concentrate on the two least conservative of the intellectuals, Strauss and Voegelin, was also a result of my belief that the long-term development of the conservative intellectual movement depended (as it still does) upon a thorough philosophical defense of conservative principles. Conservatism is a reactionary movement that emerges only when cherished traditions, folkways, beliefs, and
norms appear threatened, but once constituted conservatism must penetrate to the philosophical issues in order to do battle with the powers of innovation. Intellectual conservatives may not be philosophers, but they do need philosophers.

In recasting my study to focus on Strauss and Voegelin I necessarily moved away from my original purpose, so this book is no longer about what I used to call the conservative imagination. It is instead about the critique of the modern world as articulated by two European emigres. It is most difficult to think of them as American conservatives because they did not inherit the Anglo-American traditions so cherished by Russell Kirk and other traditionalists. Perhaps more to the point, neither Strauss nor Voegelin were able, in my judgment, to provide a thorough philosophical defense of the conservative principles embraced by the promoters of the movement. Still, a complete understanding of the source and nature of the problem necessarily precedes any meaningful attempt at defense. At this task Voegelin and Strauss proved nearly indispensable to the evolution of the movement.

This book is about two philosophers struggling to understand their times. For both men the point of departure was the modern age, against which they revolted. They understood liberalism to be part of modernity, albeit a part largely free from the perverse results of Nazism, communism, and even socialism. Nonetheless, because liberals share modern assumptions in common with other ideologues, Strauss and Voegelin were worried that fidelity to liberal principles would ultimately undermine liberal goals. Consequently they advocated a postliberal order—a society dedicated to basic liberal principles but fortified by a widespread belief that these principles reflect a normative order.

The flow of this book is from the general to the specific, from historical context to close textual analysis. In Chapter 1, I try to sketch out the essential "problem" that Strauss and Voegelin faced; provide key definitions to words like "conservative," "liberal," and "modern"; and supply a brief intellectual biography of each philosopher. In Chapter 2, I describe the American context of the 1950s in which these two German outsiders operated. More precisely, I explore the debate among the dominant intellectual class-liberals. Chapter 3 concerns Voegelin and Strauss as they initially confronted the cluster of problems that would dominate their careers. The context of
this chapter is continental since for both men that remained their main intellectual inheritance. Thus Chapter 2 describes the issues Strauss and Voegelin faced in America while Chapter 3 explores the intellectual and philosophical context of their thinking when they came to America. Voegelin and Strauss saw American problems with European eyes.

Because the problems of modernity emerge, in the thinking of our two protagonists, as a rejection of political philosophy, this is where they began their critiques. Of course, their immediate problems required a historical inquiry into the root of the present difficulties. In Chapter 4, I examine the historical dimension of modernity—what is it and how did it emerge? Chapter 5 continues this historical analysis, but its focus is on the developing crisis of modern beliefs. The chapter ends with the problem of liberal democracy as a version of modernity. In Chapters 6 and 7, I explore the distinctive normative theories of Strauss and Voegelin, respectively. The progression of these chapters imitates the development of the thinkers. From resistance against their own times to a deeper analysis of the nature of the problem, both men struggled, finally, to articulate a postmodern and postliberal alternative. In Chapter 8, I seek to understand the relationship between these two philosophers and the American conservative movement.

I could write this book only because of the love and support that Dena Upton McAllister furnished from beginning to end. She is my wife, my friend, and (more often than she knows) my guide. As I entered a crucial phase of my writing Elisabeth entered the world—my world—full of demands. She diverted me, she charmed me, and because of her everything looks different. My parents, Vernon and Delores McAllister, have provided me with all a son could need or should want. Their undying support of me and my work bolsters me still.

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Kirk and to consult the Voegelin Papers at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace.

I spent an exhilarating four days in, of all places, Mecosta, Michigan. Russell and Annette Kirk welcomed me into their home and suffered sevenil days of questions about the history of the conservative movement. They never tired of their persistent guest. While there, Dr. Kirk gave me complete access to his letters and all his papers. That peek into the constellation of conservative thinkers provided me with insights unattainable anywhere else.

Paul Carringella graciously gave me several hours of his time during my visit to the Hoover Institution, and those conversations about Voegelin helped clarify my thinking on a number of subjects. A large number of people have read parts or all of this book and supplied me with invaluable advice. Many participants in the Conkin Seminar labored through early drafts of chapters—I am especially grateful to Alexander Lian for his serious attention to the many flaws of my work. I also thank the members of my dissertation committee. Michael Bess provided me with well-placed and much-appreciated compliments to help the criticism go down more easily. George Graham, who knows me too well, saw through my feints of objective distance. Because he knew that my dissertation was freighted with deep moral and spiritual concerns, he suffered through more conversations than he ought. Lewis Perry taught me much about the sensibility of a good scholar. Such a gentle soul, he has tolerated my annoying idiosyncrasies while he cultivated my better side. I am more tolerant because of him; as a historian I am more understanding.

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