

## Still Questing

In the retrospect of forty years I can see my book, *The Quest for Community* (first published by Oxford University Press in 1953; currently available from ICS Press, San Francisco), as one of the harbingers of what would become by the end of the 1950s a full-fledged renaissance of conservatism. There had been authentic and forthright individual conservatives before the 50s; among them Albert Jay Nock, H.L. Mencken, Irving Babbitt, and Paul Elmer More. But conservatism had never before the 50s flourished as an intellectual movement as it has since that decade.

My book came out at the very beginning of 1953, as did Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*. Although I had become increasingly conservative in my politics, I didn't think of *The Quest for Community* as a conservative treatise; not, at least, while I was writing it. If I had been pressed to categorize it ideologically I suppose I would have responded: "neoliberal" or "political pluralist."

On the other hand I wasn't taken aback when *The Quest* began to be reviewed or otherwise commented on by its identification as conservative. After all, I had written

my Ph.D. dissertation a decade earlier on the French conservatives of the nineteenth-century and their influence on the social science—and on me, I should add.

Spurring my own gradual conversion to conservatism was the presence in this country and also England of individuals (I think of Malcolm Muggeridge and, in France, Jacques Ellul as examples) undergoing similar ascents to conservatism. There were some spectacular conversions in the West of intellectuals and scholars, once fervid Marxists, who before, during, and especially after World War II joined the ranks of conservatives.

In various ways America became a more conservative nation after the War. The temper of the Depression 30s was gone. What the New Deal had failed to do, that is, defeat the Depression, the war had done. In 1944, Hayek published his *The Road to Serfdom*, a book that drew the attention of tens of thousands of Americans. Hayek always denied that he was a conservative—preferring

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the identity of a classical liberal—but his book was nevertheless solid conservatism.

Hayek, whose book came out in 1944, may well be called the morning star of America's oncoming conservatism. But if not, there is Richard Weaver who published his *Ideas Have Consequences* in 1948 and drew surprisingly good reviews even in the liberal press.

In 1950, Lionel Trilling, in an essay directed primarily to excoriation of the political and cultural left, noted that while there seemed to be no want of conservatives among the ordinary people in the U.S., there was a conspicuous absence of conservatives among the best and the brightest of intellectuals. There was, Trilling said, no particularly luminous body of thought identifiable as conservative in the ranks of the well-educated. Trilling's words could almost be likened to a clarion call, for in the brief period 1950-53 a freshet of books made its appearance which was unmistakably conservative in character. Most of them were of course in preparation when Trilling wrote. But the proximity was dramatic. To the best of my knowledge Trilling never cast himself as a conservative or any offshoot of conservatism such as neoconservatism. But his writings, particularly his late ones, were unambiguous in their criticisms of the left.

The freshet of 1950-53 that I referred to included the following: Russell Kirk's immensely influential *The Conservative Mind*, Eric Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics*, William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*, to be shortly followed by his journal, *National Review*, Gertrude Himmelfarb's brilliant book on the English historian Lord Acton, John Hallowell's *The Moral Foundations of Democracy*, Daniel Boorstin's *The Genius of American Politics*, and, finally, still within the three year freshet, my own *The Quest for Community*. Before the decade of the 50s was ended *Modern Age* had been founded, and such notable schol-

ars as Hugh Kenner, Cleanth Brooks, Wilhelm Röpke, and James Burnham were widely known conservatives.

My *The Quest for Community* was published, as I have said, at the beginning of 1953, a bit too early perhaps to catch some of the favorable vibrations of the developing conservative community. The book was, from the beginning until the Student Revolution of the 1960s, a slow burner. I complaineth not. There was a splendid review by Russell Kirk whom I had not yet met, some excellent newspaper reviews, chiefly in the West and Midwest, and congratulatory letters from, among other notables, T.S. Eliot and Reinhold Niebuhr. I felt thoroughly rewarded for the four years of very hard work I had put into the book, the while carrying a substantial teaching load at Berkeley.

The real success of *Quest* commenced with the Student Revolution by the New Left, self styled, and the issuance of *Quest* as a paperback by Oxford. Oddly and amusingly, the book reached almost cult-book proportions in the 1960s on both the left and the right, the latter, of course, in the lead. I am still today unsure what the book's attraction was to the New Left, or some of it at least. Suffice it to say that they bought it and read it. I used to say that they bought it and never got beyond the title. But the longer I thought about it, the more I became aware that the Student Revolution's primary enemy was liberals. Conservatives they ignored or suffered. Throughout the 60s, when hassling of faculty and administration reached its height, I was never bothered, though my conservatism was well known on the campus. In later years I queried other academic conservatives and discovered that almost without exception they had enjoyed the same fortune I had. It was liberal faculty (the more noted the better thought the New Left) and nationally visible deans and presidents who suffered the

most from the New Left and its revolution.

Contributing significantly to the conservative renaissance of the 1950s was the restoration to proper status of Alexis de Tocqueville and Edmund Burke. For years both had been in the doldrums, not only in this country, but also in England and France. What the concrete forces were that gave them once again heroic status, I don't know. Before I went into the army in 1943 I had questioned a few publishing representatives about their possible willingness to press for a new edition of Tocqueville. There was little interest. I should have talked instead with Alfred A. Knopf. For when I came back to the campus after the war, there was a handsome, boxed, two volume edition edited by Phillips Bradley, published by Knopf, to be found in every bookstore. What a thrill! Over faculty club lunch tables one heard Tocqueville, by the 1950s, referred to as often as Marx. Burke enjoyed a restoration nearly as dramatic, thanks in very considerable part to Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*.

Having at hand the works of the two greatest conservatives of the 18th and 19th centuries now readily available, was bound to give the renascent conservative in academe a great boost. Both titans are still in full glory. As I said, I wrote *The Quest* with the feeling that both Burke and Tocqueville were near at hand.

I have occasionally been asked what the essential sources were of *The Quest for Com-*

*munity*. Like or dislike the book's arguments, concepts such as "intermediate associations," the perpetual tensions between state and family, and individualism conceived as social fragmentation were not run-of-the-mill ideas in America. In Germany and France, yes, but the U.S., no.

The initial enlightenment on my part came out of a seminar on Roman Law that I took as a graduate student at Berkeley in the late 1930s. There in the Roman Law texts themselves, it was possible (with the



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very learned professor as guide) to see the history of Rome, from Republic to Empire, as, among other things, a death struggle between the family, powerful in the Republic, and the state or public power that destroyed the Republic and in the process put the family in permanent bondage to the state. The law of corporations, as the Roman lawyers called it, involved the absorption by the imperial

state of virtually all associations, however traditional or voluntary.

A second source in my own thinking was Otto von Gierke's monumental study of intermediate associations during and after the Middle Ages. His prose and use of the script typography were all but impenetrable, but translations of key parts by F.W. Maitland and Ernest Barker came to my rescue. From Gierke's huge work it is possible to see vividly the clash between family and state, and the pulverizing impact of the modern Western state on the family and all other intermediate groups. From Gierke it

was an easy walk to the texts of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau and their glorification of the unitary state at the expense of pluralistic society.

All the while I was reading these books and assimilating the theory of the unitary versus the pluralist state, I was inevitably reacting to FDR and his New Deal, by far the largest single reform or set of reforms since the American Revolution. I began as an ardent undergraduate Berkeley supporter of the New Deal. But by the late 30s, in FDR's second term, my support of 1932 and 1936 turned sharply to alienation. It seemed to me then, as it still does today, that the New Deal had immersed itself in an impossible combination of political centralization and of administrative bureaucracy.

Studies by Haberler at Harvard and Garraty at Columbia have shown conclusively that the New Deal, considered as an instrument to fight and defeat the Depression, was inferior to approaches taken by England and Germany—the latter considered up to 1938 when Hitler began his rearmament program. With the sharp dip in 1937-38, the U.S. economy was as badly off as it had been in 1932. America didn't end the Depression until it went to war in 1941.

But the New Deal left its mark on governmental consciousness. The increase in Federal bureaucracy and in the national debt has gone on almost uninterruptedly since 1932. It is almost as if centralization and bureaucracy have lives of their own, independent of the convictions of the occupants of the White House and Congress. The consensus during the war was that every bit of the structural apparatus of the wartime home front would be razed and scrapped, as had been the case after World War I. We couldn't have been more wrong. Most efforts after 1945 went into the creation of rhetorical justifications for the continuance in the post-war of the bewildering

network of agencies, bureaus, and Federal institutes. No matter what the spoken philosophy of government by a new president or congressman, we now wearily and jadedly take it for granted that the national debt and the budget deficit will, like the river Jordan, roll on and on. I believe Reagan to have been utterly honest in his declarations on policy and direction before he became president. But both national debt and deficit increased markedly during his two terms of office.

Now we are at it all over again, with this malign difference. More and more we are hearing from Federal government and from the clerisy of power that hangs on to Washington the magic words "National Community." Governor Cuomo gave the words and thoughts a mighty push a few years ago when he electrified his national convention audience with a dozen or more references to the family but meaning in each utterance the *national family*. Never mind the plight of actual families in certain sections of the country. Merely mesmerize the populace with heart-wrenching appeals to a national community—or wagon train, or national family.

It should be the prime business of any serious conservative party or other faction to expose the fraudulence of such a phrase as "national community." Do we dare suppose that any actual national community, with headquarters of course in Washington, D.C., might have in its cabinet a Secretary of Love and another of Intimacy? It is, I repeat, the serious business of any conservative group to recognize "national community" for what it is and to oppose it at every turn. The favorite strategy of proponents of national community is to draw up a purportedly heart-rending account of the disappearance of all the traditional communities such as kinship, neighborhood, church, and voluntary association of every kind, and then with majestic finality declare the national community to be our only

salvation.

The offer of "individualism" as the logical alternative to national community is, I have to stress, misconceived. It wasn't lone individuals who developed this country from one coast to the other. It was groups, meaning neighborhoods, extended families, and voluntary associations that, with log- and quilt-bees of every kind did the work of building schools, churches, and other community enterprises. In any event, a great deal of what we are likely to call "individualism" is the rubble left by dislocated and atomized communities.

I am not, I trust, preaching anarchism. A nation needs a strong government, local and central. There are necessities in our lives simply inconceivable apart from the existence of a strong central government. Military defense is only the start. It is equally true, and today more pertinent, even urgent, that it is the function of government to shore up, to reinforce, and otherwise nurture the natural communities in society. For each of these is at once a psychological support to the individual and, if genuinely

recognized by the state, a bulwark against a plague of bureaucracy.

George Bush ennobled himself a few years ago when he held up the vision of a "nation of communities, of thousands of ethnic, religious, social, business, labor union, neighborhood, regional, and other organizations, all of them varied, voluntary, and unique." Bush's words are worthy of being put beside Edmund Burke's famous defense (against French Revolutionary centralization and state-omnicompetence) of what he called the "smaller patriotisms" and the "little platoons."

Let me repeat, and conclude here, that a conservative party (or other group) has a double task confronting it. The first is to work tirelessly toward the diminution of the centralized, omnicompetent, and unitary state with its ever-soaring debt and deficit. The second and equally important task is that of protecting, reinforcing, nurturing where necessary the varied groups and associations which form the true building blocks of the social order. To these two ends I am bound to believe in the continuing relevance of *The Quest for Community*.



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