

Bill & Irving & Ken & Patrick

di Murray N. Rothbard

Once upon a time in America, there was a left and a right and a center, and within these clearly discernible segments of the ideological spectrum there were distinctly calibrated gradations. Everyone could find an ideological niche without much trouble, and knew pretty well where everyone else stood too. Everyone knew who were the good guys and bad guys, and the varying degrees of rectitude of the guys in between.

By now it is almost a cliché that the old ideological points of reference are no more; that left, right, and center cannot be identified even with a scorecard. One way of describing these changes is to say that left and right have been collapsing toward the center, that is, toward the locus of power. Interests of state have increasingly taken over, leading the “responsible” elements within each ideological group more and more to resemble one another.

We have reached the final pages of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, in which the pigs, who had previously been the vanguard of the successful animal revolution against man, now walk erect and even live in the farmhouse, and “the creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.”

Specifically, it has become almost impossible to distinguish “responsible” *National Review* conservatism from right-wing social democracy or from neoconservatism, and even, in some respects, from left-liberalism or the democratic socialism of the Robert Heilbroner variety.

How much difference is there, after all, among William F. Buckley, Sidney Hook, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, Norman Podhoretz, and Irving Kristol – or even between them and Heilbroner and John Kenneth Galbraith? Admittedly there are differences of style, of traditional rhetoric, of ethnic roots, and especially, different persons and institutions each of these thinkers will salute on days of ritualistic obeisance. But the substance is all too similar. While Galbraith, for example, may twit and needle the Pentagon about this overseas adventure or that bloated budget, he did agree with Moynihan that on Vietnam liberals had to remain in the loyal opposition.

When it comes to Buckley, Moynihan, and Galbraith, even the differences of style and rhetoric begin to disappear. Each is the alleged wit, the aging Peck’s Bad Boy, of his respective ideological camp. Each titillates his audience with a seeming audacity and irreverence that serve only as a cloak for the prejudices both of the establishment and of the constituencies for whose benefit these gentlemen go into their respective acts.

While Galbraith is the WASP ironist, the tall, distinguished chap whom Mary McGrory, in her repellently gushing way, has called “the Rex Harrison” of American politics, Buckley and Moynihan are two peas in a pod. Each is an Irishman-turned-aristocrat, the sort of man whom Irish-Americans used to call “castle Irish.” Each uses his wit and learning as a cover for the verbal mugging of anyone who gets in his way. Each is a supreme exhibitionist, always center stage, always filled with fustian and bravado, playing to the peanut gallery as well as to his peers, and trumpeting his own righteousness and moral heroism. To each man, the principles he champions pale before the aggrandizement of self that makes by far the more lasting impression. In short, two politicians perfectly suited to the age of television.

In Daniel Patrick Moynihan, however, the folding of the ideological spectrum into the center of power, the subordination of principle to self, has reached its apogee. Whoever the President, whatever the party in power, Moynihan always manages to land on his feet, and on top. *A Dangerous Place* is Moynihan trumpeting Moynihan’s exploits at the United Nations, and it is unquestionably the first shot in his own eventual campaign for the presidency. The reviewer of this book in *Business Week* likened Moynihan to Talleyrand, and Moynihan does seem to have a similar talent for political survival. Two men, Moynihan and Ralph de Toledano, instructed Richard Nixon in his early days as President that he was destined to be the “American Disraeli.” De Toledano got short shrift and is now forgotten; Moynihan became a high aide to Nixon, ambassador to India

under Nixon and Ford, ambassador to the United Nations under Ford, and now the Democratic senator from New York, and, indirectly, a considerable power in the Carter administration.

The book bolsters our view of the new grand alliance of the center. It is full of praise for what those stuck in the old categories might think an unlikely collection: Galbraith, Kristol, Buckley, Podhoretz and *Commentary*, Daniel Bell and the *Public Interest*, Bayard Rustin of Social Democrats USA and the *New Leader*, the social democrats' house organ. And it is not lost on the reader that all these personages and institutions have nothing but praise for Moynihan.

The spirit of the encomiums may be gauged from Galbraith's characteristically clubby "wonderfully warm" tribute sent to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the occasion of Moynihan's nomination as ambassador to the United Nations: "my fellow Ambassador to India; my fellow faculty member [Harvard, of course]; my next-door neighbor; and though I have no wish to damage him in the eyes of any of the Republican members of the Committee, my fellow Democrat."

But through all the treacly, above-the-battle in-groupiness and the opportunistic tergiversations, certain consistent tenets come through, not only within Moynihan's career, but also linking Moynihan and his buddies of left, right, and center. There is, first and foremost, virtually unconditional support for the American state, at home and abroad. In military and foreign affairs, this means a highly militaristic and aggressively jingoistic foreign policy, a policy well served by Moynihan's anti-Soviet and anti-Third World bluster at the United Nations.

Moynihan's recent attacks on the "defeatism" of the Carter administration in its response to Soviet efforts in Africa and strategic arms negotiations were heralded by conservative columnist George Will, who concluded, "What is at issue is fundamental. It is the adequacy of the administration's policy affecting the safety of the state." In his book Moynihan enthusiastically quotes Buckley's call, in his *United Nations Journal*, to "concern ourselves with... the order of moral reality." To which Buckley – with Moynihan approving – adds: This "is a point that should not separate American conservatives from American liberals, or British and French conservatives from their domestic socialists."

The second tenet that guides all of these worthies, whatever their rhetoric or alleged ideology, is all-out, down-the-line support for the state of Israel, regardless of circumstances, and regardless of the politicians or parties in charge there. Indeed, most of this book is devoted to Moynihan-as-heroic partisan for Israel, any opposition to which he automatically equates with anti-Semitism. To make sure no one misses the point, one of the blurbs on the cover is by Chaim Herzog, Israel's former ambassador to the United Nations. It would be no coincidence if Moynihan's center-right Democratic constituency were in turn to respond to these themes with an outpouring of political and financial support in his forthcoming senatorial and presidential campaigns.

On the domestic front, the state is to be lean and mean, an efficient backstop to the foreign policy of war and global intervention. Moynihan tells the story of how he first made his mark on the ideological and political scene, and, simultaneously kicked off our current neoconservative mood. It was in the fall of 1967, at a meeting of – as luck would have it – the national board of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). Moynihan, a member of the board, spoke on "The Politics of Stability."

As he tells it: "I proposed first of all that liberals 'see more clearly that their essential interest is in the stability of the social order' and argued that we needed to make effective alliances with informed conservatives who shared that interest. We had to learn the limits of the huge hierarchical structures of central government." His speech was hailed at the time by the same seemingly motley crew that has collaborated ever since: John Kenneth Galbraith (then head of the ADA), William F. Buckley, Bayard Rustin, and the *New Leader*, which printed the full text. As Moynihan comments: "Conservatives and social democrats scarcely knew each other at this time. Yet their concerns were powerfully symmetric, and they were looking, I think, for persons of the center who understood them." They didn't have to look very far. From then on, Daniel Patrick Moynihan continued to follow his star.

The creed that indissolubly links Moynihan and all of his cohorts; left, right, and center, was well summed up in a scroll presented to Moynihan in June 1975, on his nomination as ambassador to the United Nations, by the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, the self-appointed voice of the right and center of the Democratic party. The scroll hailed Moynihan for his devotion to “a strong America in national defense, international affairs, human rights and economic life.” In short, for devotion to big American government, at home and abroad. Symbolism was rife that day in Washington: The scroll was presented by Bayard Rustin, and the ceremony was presided over by Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, while the doyen of ADA liberalism, Hubert Humphrey, “cheered from somewhere across Washington.”

The collapse of ideological groups toward the center and toward the American state has even been going on at the farther extremes of the spectrum. In foreign policy, at least, the Maoists are now ultrahawks, thirsting for war with the Soviet Union, making the Reagans and the Buckleys seem like devoted pacifists. Much of the former New Left, once so scornful of social democracy as a capitulation to corporate liberalism and the New Deal, has either gone back frankly and openly to the Democratic party, or has joined such former enemies as Michael Harrington and Irving Howe in the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, designed as a left-wing ginger group within the Democratic party.

And now Dale Vree, in the *National Review* (Dec. 8, 1978), writes an astonishingly candid article tracing a possible alliance of “traditionalist” conservatives with such socialists as Robert Heilbroner. Why such an alliance? Because Heilbroner, in a symposium on socialism in Howe’s *Dissent* magazine let the cat out of the bag and acknowledged that socialist central planning must include the coercive imposition of a collective moral conformity. Vree is “fascinated” by Heilbroner’s emphasis on “virtue” and by his point that “socialist culture must focus on [the individual’s]... *moral or spiritual achievement*,” in contrast to “bourgeois culture” which “is focused on the *material achievement* of the individual.” In the future, the ideals of the collective must override the rights of the individual to pursue his own cultural achievements and lifestyle.

Vree is intrigued by the “traditionalist ring” to all this, and he sees in the situation the makings of a new ideological “fusionism,” a fusion of economic *and* cultural collectivism, of those socialists and traditionalists who are authoritarian in both of these areas; a fusion, in short, of all those, left, right, or center, who wish to exalt the power of the American state in all aspects of life, personal and economic. As Vree puts it, “If the writings of such different socialists as Robert Heilbroner, Christopher Lasch, Morris Janowitz, Midge Decter, and Daniel Bell are indicative of a tendency, we may see the rise of a. socialist-traditionalist fusionism.” And then Vree concludes wistfully: “One wonders if America contains any ‘Tory Socialists’ on the right side of its aisle who will go out to embrace them.”

Well of course it does: the man who once called Richard Nixon the American Disraeli. Something happened to Richard Nixon on the way to his canonization. But we still have Daniel Patrick Moynihan – bully, buffoon, mountebank, Zionist, castle Irishman, left-wing conservative, right-wing social democrat, and fugelman for the American state.