

Rothbard to Meyer on Conservatism

by Murray N. Rothbard

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Woodstock, N.Y.

Dear Frank,

That Fischer [John Fischer, "Why Is the Conservative Voice So Hoarse?" *Harper's Magazine*, 212 #1270 (March 1956), pp. 17–18, 20, 22] horror in Harpers' set me thinking on this whole "conservatism" shebang. The time has come, I believe, for me to try to blast conservatism out of the water.

The Fischer article exemplifies the fact that perhaps the chief sin in contemporary debate is utter failure to provide definitions. Since no one defines "conservative," anyone can be lumped in the term at the user's pleasure. How will you define conservatism?

It seems to me that a "conservative" can be rationally identified in one of the following ways:

(a) Someone who wants to preserve the political status quo. I say "political" because no one wants to preserve all of the status quo on *all* matters. Well, in that case, Stalin after he captured power was a "conservative" as far as Russia was concerned; Hitler was a "radical" in 1929, a "conservative" in 1939, etc. There is no point to this, since it applies only to form, and not to content. In what conceivable way are you a conservative in this sense? Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and the Alsops are the conservatives now.

(b) Someone who identifies himself with the historical Conservative parties of the 19th Century in Europe. In that case, it means to identify oneself with authoritarianism and hatred of individual liberty and laissez-faire capitalism. The Prussian Conservative Party was formed to block emancipation of the serfs, and to maintain protective tariffs; the Conservative Party in England imposed Corn Laws and Factory Acts, and crushed Ireland. Russell Kirk may want Church (Anglican, Lutheran), landed gentry, and servile peasantry, but you certainly don't.

So there we are. In neither of these two senses are you and I at all conservatives. But to give you every possible benefit of the doubt, let us press on.

(c) A conservative is someone who wants to preserve the good things in the existing political situation. But who *doesn't* want to preserve the good things. Isn't it a matter of what each person thinks is good? So everyone could be called a "conservative" on this ground, which makes it a nonsensical definition.

(d) Perhaps you are a "conservative" because you wish to conserve the "western heritage." But the Western heritage contains quantitatively more bad than good from our point of view – more murder than laissez-faire. So what you really want to promote is not the heritage *en bloc* but part of it – which parts to be picked out by reason. So where can conservatism come in?

(e) And finally, maybe you are a conservative because you prefer gradual to radical change. But do you really? Suppose the unlikely event that the Statists were willing to surrender, after an overnight conversion to liberalism. Suppose they all came to you and said: all right, if you wish, we'll establish liberty tomorrow. Would you refuse?

Cordially,
Murray