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CONSERVATIEVE VOORUITGANG

Thierry Baudet and Michiel Visser.

Prometheus 2010

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CAN BAUDET AND VISSER ENLIGHTEN US ON CONSERVATISM?

*Reijer Passchier**

After fifty years of decline in morality it would appear that rebuilding has begun. The western world is ready for a touch of conservatism. 'Conservative Progress' (Conservatieve Vooruitgang), edited by Thierry Baudet and Michiel Visser, published in March 2010, is one of the many publications on conservatism written during the last ten years. The call for a different approach towards ethical and political questions becomes louder and louder. The old-fashioned left-right thinking has no answers to the problems of the 21st century. In other words: liberalism and socialism do not seem to offer satisfactory solutions. The back cover states that conservative thinking presents a refreshing view on today's issues of durability, responsible entrepreneurship, populism and the importance of *Bildung*, religion and culture.

First impressions

'Conservative Progress' aims to describe what conservatism actually is. Twenty portraits of important 20th century conservative thinkers such as Irving Babbitt, Johan Huizinga, Leo Strauss and Alasdair Macintyre are the result of this quest. Every portrait is covered by a different contemporary thinker. For example, Andreas Kinneging writes about Nicolai Hartmann, Theodore Dalrymple elaborates on Michael Oakeshott, Roger Scruton discusses T.S. Eliot and the editors themselves deal with Irving Babbitt and James Burnham.

The search for the common denominator of conservative thinking could be called a success. The numerous internal references make the book into much more than a series of separate articles on conservative thinkers. Qualifying thinkers such as T.S. Eliot, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Friedrich von Hayek as being conservative could be disputable. The authors' efforts to convince the reader of the correctness of this label make these chapters even more exciting. Each portrait is followed by stimulating suggestions for further study. Therefore, the book can be read as an introduction to modern

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conservative thinking.

Regardless of the reader's political views, he will certainly find a matching conservative philosopher. The socialists will note that Marxists, such as Christopher Lasch influenced many conservative thinkers. Liberals will see their beloved free market defended by Hayek. These differences are interesting but much more important are the similarities, which are the main topic of the book: what is the main plot of the conservative story?

Conservative Thinkers

Conservatives are often pictured as opponents of progress who suffer from *Weltschmerz* and only want to bring the old times back. The term 'conservatism' is frequently used as the antithesis of progression. The introductory chapter of the book directly proves this opposition wrong, as the term 'regression' would be the correct one. Keeping in mind what conservatism *is not*, the next question should be what it actually *is*. Rather than being an opponent of progression, conservatism is sceptical about the widespread modern ideology of moral advancement. According to this ideology going forward in time automatically results in an improvement of morality. A conservative will always point out the importance of tradition as an essential foundation of our cultural values. For example, in the case of human rights, conservatives will not perceive these as simply 'given' or existing because of a constitution, but as the prosperous product of a struggle of power against power (James Burnham).

A second characteristic of conservative political thinking is the immanent presence of an ethical discussion. Conservatives do not wish to shirk the questions of moral philosophy. Safety and fair distribution of goods are not the only problems which have to be solved within a society. The conservative thinker will also have an opinion on the concept of 'the good life'. While expressing his opinion, he approaches the ethical (how ought *I* to live?) and the political question (how ought *we* to live?) at the same time as he considers them to be inseparable. Instead of focusing its attention on the organisation of a society, conservatism concentrates on the inner moral life of its citizens. The background of this doctrine is a concept of man, which does not put 'the individual' in the centre point of deliberation. Determining good and evil are not choices of the individual (subjectivism) but are given notions. Culture, tradition and theories of natural law play a very important role in defining morality. Also religion is an indispensable factor according to many conservatives (such as C.S. Lewis and W. Aalders). Others, like Leo Strauss postulate that an account of moral truth is vital for a society. When moral values are 'given', authority and the cultivation of initially barbaric human beings gain in importance.

The third characteristic of conservatism is the presence of an analysis of culture or cultural criticism. Many contemporary conservatives are alarmed

by the amount power of the state apparatus. The modern state, they argue, is often too potent and could undermine society's creativity and vitality. The state authorities are expected to have a solution to all problems of the citizens and, as a consequence, become too powerful and abstract. According to Ortega Y Gasset, this deprives the individual of the opportunity to carry through any changes. Not only the state but also the individual is subject to criticism. Widespread moral subjectivism is the cause of many problems. Modern man does not acknowledge authority and thinks he is able to do without traditional marriage and Christian morality, argues Christopher Dawson. Related to this topic is the disapproval of the modern man for neglecting his family life. The community he lives in is too big. Individuals think they can be autonomous and be the masters of their own fate. They do not admit to their limitations. The idea of being in control is a widespread illusion among the so-called 'liberated elites', or 'cosmopolitans', according to Christopher Lasch. What is the essence of the problem? Robert Nisbet states that many humans are uprooted, socially alienated, unable to identify their responsibilities and are, on top of all this, confronted with a very powerful state apparatus. Many thinkers see this moral degradation as an important cause of totalitarianism.

Practising Conservatism

Finally, the book reflects on the practical values of conservative thinking. What role can it play in solving today's political problems? It is often said that conservatism is more of an attitude than a ready-made solution. Editor Thierry Baudet remarks: "The dichotomy socialism-liberalism centralizes the choice between state or market. In socialism there is no place for entrepreneurship. Liberalism stimulates entrepreneurship, but at the same time it allows all kinds of activities as long as they are lucrative. At this point conservatism proposes a third dimension while paying special attention to personal responsibility."¹ People are held morally responsible when acting in both the personal and the political domain. That responsibility is not easy to bear. Conservatism demands a lot more from human morality than other movements in political philosophy. Culture, tradition, religion and many other factors must be taken into account while seeking answers to the eternal questions. The extent of the conservative horizon is what makes this doctrine most interesting. Their idea of happiness is more than just freedom, opportunities or money. Conservatives link happiness and morality, which makes their thinking into something all embracing. 'Conservative Progress' is about life.... as it should be.

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¹ Cited by: Pieter van Os, *Beschaving vergt onderhoud. Thierry Baudet over het conservatisme en de misverstanden die daarover bestaan*, in: NRC-Handelsblad, Boeken, 9-4-2010, p.4

