

Mark Henrie
“Progressivism and the Younger Generation”
47th National Meeting of The Philadelphia Society
Dallas, April 3, 2011

As Sigmund Freud *never* said, the great unanswered question is: “What do conservatives want?” You must confess that it is a genuine question, because the characteristic conservative stance for the past two centuries has been one of *opposition*. We are more clear, and unified, about what we oppose than by what we *propose*. Stephen Holmes, in his self-congratulatory and ultimately fatuous book, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, argued that there is no real theoretical substance to conservatism, because those called conservatives through the years have been trying to “conserve” too many contradictory things—sometimes absolute monarchy, sometimes constitutional monarchy, sometimes constitutional republics, sometimes free trade, sometimes protected trade, sometimes corporatist authoritarian regimes, etc. But if conservatives have changed their defensive front, it is perhaps because the Left has, through these same centuries, constantly changed its mode of attack: sometimes advocating Enlightened absolute monarchs, sometimes constitutional republics, sometimes plebiscitary democracies, sometimes parliaments, sometimes executive agencies, and lately advocating the supremacy of constitutional courts and “global governance”—whatever that is. One might say that a sufficient response to Stephen Holmes is: *tu quoque*.

Conservatism has been a matter of opposition, of “standing athwart History yelling ‘Stop!’” But if this is true, then the nature of the opposition is a matter of the first importance. Just yesterday, it seems, our politics was structured by the divide between liberals and conservatives. Today, thanks in no small part to conservative success at diabolizing the L-word, we are invited to consider a politics structured by the divide between *progressives* and conservatives. Is this a distinction that makes any difference?

On first look, the answer seems to be “No.” After all, those who now embrace the label of “modern progressives” are those, like Hillary Clinton, who yesterday were called liberals. What is more, if we examine the new conservatism that has emerged in reaction to the new progressivism—namely, the Tea Party—we discover (the empirical political scientists tell us) much the same people who, just yesterday, were known as the “religious right.” While particular issues may have changed, the underlying fundamentals remain the same.

On second look, the emergence of progressivism as a foil by which to understand conservatism is a clear improvement of our intellectual situation. For those among us who identify conservatism with classical liberalism, the new terminology spares us the irksomeness of explaining the difference between classical and modern liberalism, so confusing to generations of undergraduates. Moreover, for those among us who have developed an intellectually powerful account of the spoliation visited upon America’s natural-rights republic by imported German historicist ideas and political schemes, the new language finally “gets it right,” and Americans are now in a position to understand the real issues that face us. Of course, with gains there are always, also, losses. The new intellectual framing of our politics, precisely in removing liberalism from its polarity vis-à-vis conservatism, threatens to throw into eclipse the critique of “rights-talk” that was one of the more promising theoretical conservative advances of the 1990s.

But I would like to take a third look, and consider the question of the progress/conservative framing in light of the larger question, “What do conservatives want?” It

seems to me that it is of the essence of conservatism to feel oneself on the *losing* side of history. And the reason a conservative might feel this way is because, for the past two centuries and more, he has been. “To stand athwart History yelling ‘Stop!’” Built into that capsule statement of *National Review*’s original mission is precisely an understanding that the implacable forces of History (with a capital H) are washing away all the human goods valued by people like us. Even to arrest this inexorable process, however briefly, thus constitutes an immense achievement of statesmanship. And to actually turn back the clock and retrieve lost goods is simply beyond imagining. Is it not the case that this deep structure of the modern age—the “age of progress”—explains, among other things, how it was that anti-communism functioned as the central tenet of the American conservative movement during its classical, Cold-War period. After all, communism’s proudest boast was that it possessed a *science* of History, by which it *knew* that the future belonged to the revolutionary Left. Arguments about values such as freedom and the individual were, in the end, *pointless* before the “facts” of History’s inevitable course. Generations of conservative reflection on History’s course had well prepared us for greeting with grim recognition Whittaker Chambers’ lapidary statement that on leaving communism for the West, for Liberty, and for God, he was joining History’s *losing side*. Nevertheless, Chambers—and we—would fight the good fight, with a Quixotic nobility, knowing that without a miracle, our doom was assured. At least, in the coming thousand years of darkness, our battle would be worth a song.

In effect, then, communism’s “science” made explicit something only inchoately grasped about the predicament of conservatism in the modern world. What do conservatives want? They want to *stop* the historical forces that threaten to efface things held dear. More deeply, however, what conservatives really want is to forge, or discover, or reach a new historical dispensation in which the historical process would *not* be automatically geared to advancing the values of the Left. If we ever did reach such a non-progressive historical dispensation, then conservatism as such would cease to exist—at least, it would not be called “conservatism” since it would be a set of political ideas seeking to achieve its values and not a set of political ideas tied to anachronistic values always threatened with extinction. What conservatives really want is a world with no conservatives—because History itself is no longer “progressive.”

Now, as it happens, communism did not triumph. By far the most important historical event of my life is communism’s miraculous collapse. Have any of us really absorbed the significance of this? The “inevitable” future never arrived: it was defeated by the individual choices of “the Pope, the President, and the Prime Minister.” Implacable historical forces turned out to be placable. What *should* have been the fruit of this epochal experience was a new historical consciousness, one which brought forward the contingency of history, and one which appropriately recognized the efficacy of human individuals in *making* history: in other words, a new historical consciousness in which we would all speak of history being *made*, but never speak in terms of History “unfolding” or “advancing” or “lurching forward” or any of the other verbs which take History to be, itself, a Subject or an Agent.

(I know of only two examples of writers who have really grappled with this existentially, with the profundity that it deserves. One is the journalist Robert Novak, who had been deeply influenced by Whittaker Chambers’ vision as a young man. In 1990 he wrote an article in *Reader’s Digest* entitled “I was wrong about Communism...and so are all those who deny God’s Power in History.” The other is the French political theorist Chantal Delsol, whose book *Icarus Fallen* is about the meaning of 1989 for the European soul.)

There *should* have been a profound civilizational rejection of the kind of inevitablist historical thinking which is so deeply entwined with the modern age—especially among conservatives. We conservatives should have blinked in the light of a new day and confidently proclaimed that the future will be what we make of it, because impersonal historical forces do *not* have the last word. We should have set our minds to the task of articulating a new—or perhaps very old—vision of the human goods we want to see realized in the now wide-open historical world. Instead, as we know, conservatives and others were drawn to the intoxicating arguments of Francis Fukuyama. What Fukuyama learned from the collapse of communism was *not* that human beings are free and so the future remains inaccessible. Rather, what he learned instead was that Hegel was right where Marx had been wrong. History remained an impersonal realm of irresistible forces, but the end toward which those forces were driving humanity was not Soviet communism but rather American democratic capitalism. We ourselves were the first to reach History’s inevitable and predestined endpoint. Many controversial policy decisions followed from the intellectual inebriation of “End of History” thinking. An intellectual opportunity was lost.

By this point, you might be asking yourselves: What does all this have to do with progressivism? Just this: While there are ambiguities and tensions within progressive thought, one unmistakable dimension of progressivism is its sense that History is *not* working out “the way it is supposed to.” In other words, far from it being the case that, left to itself, impersonal historical forces are moving us inevitably in a left-liberal direction, rather, progressivism seems to be a response to an awareness that the *opposite* is turning out to be true. History is supposed to be moving us to ever-more-equal liberty, ever-freer equality, and ever-greater prosperity. But today’s progressivism proclaims itself to be a response to forty years of stagnant median wage levels and to galloping *inequality*—and this, in turn, is seen as the result of an impersonal and nearly irresistible historical force called “Globalization.” The same might well be said of the first progressive movement that emerged at the end of the Gilded Age. Then too, historical forces were driving some to undreamed-of riches and others to immiseration: the narrative of History was turning out to be a tragedy rather than a comedy. In both cases, progressives set out to deploy all the collective force of an activist state to bring History to heel, to bludgeon historical forces into channels more to their liking. But of course, to admit that History is “not turning out the way it is supposed to,” the progressives relinquish their strongest argument—that of inevitability.

Might the new progressivism provide, therefore—paradoxically—precisely the privileged occasion for shattering once and for all the frame of inevitably leftward progress that has haunted and disabled conservatism, and consigned it to marginality for two hundred years? That, it seems to me, is the most important question for the younger generation of conservatives to answer.