

The Road Not Taken

The Failure of American Conservatism according to philosopher Claes Ryn

Review of the book *The Failure of American Conservatism and the Road not Taken* (Republic Book Publishers, New York, 2023) The author, Claes Ryn, has taught extensively at the Catholic University of America and also at various universities in China, where three of his books have been translated into Mandarin. He had two main teachers: Benedetto Croce and Irving Babbitt.

In this book there is an interesting critique of American conservatives coming from a conservative. The problem that Ryn addresses is the current perceptible imbalance of cultural forces in the US: the so-called 'counterculture' of the radical liberals of the 1970s has not only not been weakened by the era of Republican dominance of Nixon, Reagan, Bush Senior, Bush Junior and Trump, but on the contrary, it has continued to grow stronger both in the mainstream media and especially in schools and universities.

American conservatives in Ryn's view, by failing to predict or counter cancel culture and wokeness, show fundamental errors in their approach. Even in many of the most prestigious Catholic universities in the United States, the typical integration of reason and tradition has broken down. the doctrine of the ancient and medieval classics, church history and theological systematics are no longer considered important in the curriculum and are sometimes omitted, while, on the other hand, the evangelisation of the Amerindians after the discovery of Christopher Columbus is attacked, the subjectivist relativism of the 'gender theory' is promoted, and the church's ideas on sexuality and bioethics are not clearly defended.

That is, there is an imbalance of cultural forces in the dialectic of ideas and their mass dissemination that needs to be investigated, to understand how it came about.

Ryn seems to me to provide an illuminating explanation of this imbalance: conservatives on a strictly political level - both legislative and governmental - have been effective. But they underestimated the university and publishing and left them in the hands of the liberal left. From the 1950s onwards in the name of 'anti-communism' the conservatives tried to build an alliance between the supporters of liberal capitalism and the supporters of traditional religion, particularly Catholicism. Under Reagan, conservatism seemed to win. But it did not, according to Ryn.

Ryn thinks that most US conservatives never understood the great power of culture in influencing human beings and exaggerated the importance of practical and party politics in its more economic and administrative aspects. There has thus been a 'path not taken': that of understanding how culture is the strongest factor in directing the conduct of human beings, and, as a result, on the one hand, conservatives have left cultural praxis (school, university,

publishing, and mass media) to the liberal radicals, and, on the other, have not devised and systematised a deep and reliable alternative culture. They forgot or underestimated the classics and, in the end, paradoxically, came to an unconscious convergence with the basic ideas of left-wing culture itself, turning 'classical liberalism' into 'libertarianism'.

Ryn especially criticises the influence of Leo Strauss's book, *Natural Right and History*, which opposed the tradition of Burke, Hegel, Croce, Collingwood and Babbitt. It is paradoxical, he observes, that conservatives have adopted the idea of anti-historical abstractness, which, on the other hand, had been a characteristic of the left and of revolutionaries, from Jacobins to Bolsheviks, for centuries.

Ryn rightly analyses in detail the first origin of this anti-historicism that pervaded both the left and the right in the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau, who thought that primitive man was better than civilised man and the child better than the adult. Rousseau, as Ryn notes, was not a materialist, he was a 'sentimentalist' and left a legacy based on sentimentalism and the moralistic narcissism of feeling good.

This sentimentalistic moralism rejects the Christian notion of original sin and the need for character to curb vicious tendencies. Instead, the feeling of indignation at injustices done by others prevails. When we conceal unpleasant truths, especially about ourselves, and become indignant about the real or alleged immorality of other people, we depart both from the legacy of the Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic ethics of ancient classicism, and from the ethics of Christianity in the variety of its confessions. Only to the extent that we manage to rein in this drift, can we have an openness of mind capable of receiving new truths.

Indeed, abstract rationalists do not understand that truth presupposes the laborious construction of one's own moral character, and not the flogging of that of others. Ryn writes: 'What stands out in Strauss is his strong prejudice against the possibility that history can be a guide to universal values. This thinker alienated American intellectuals of conservative orientation from historical consciousness and the need to learn from history'.