

The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945

by *George H. Nash*

(Basic Books; 463 + xv pp.; \$20.00)

The Superfluous Men edited by *Robert M. Crunden*

(University of Texas; 289 + xx pp.; \$14.95)

Michael Novak

The words "conservative" and "liberal," like new forms of child's putty, can be made to assume all sorts of shapes and still retain some bounce. Yet of the two, "conservative" probably suffers from more misuse—including failures to use it when, in a straightforward sense, its use would seem to be appropriate. Environmentalists (conservationists), for example, are conservative both in a plain philosophical sense, and perhaps also in terms of their relations to the working class and the poor. But a more stunning example is socialism. Socialists today are probably more "conservative" than any of the rest of us, clinging despite historical evidence to a vision now more than a century old and dying by ceaseless qualification. Socialists of the present generation toil over tortuous exegeses of the 1844 manuscripts of Marx, in order to recover him as a humanist misunderstood. The "community" socialists long for, the "alienation" they wish to end, and the "solidarity" they hope to attain seem clearly to represent nostalgia for *Gemeinschaft* long lost. Socialism, the last of the old-time religions, is now our conservative force *par excellence*.

What do we mean by "conservative," then, if even Paul Goodman in his last writings depicted himself as a "neo-conservative" and if writers so classically "liberal" as Irving Kristol are designated (by his enemies on the Left) as "neo-conservative"? Are the words "liberal" and "conservative" so fluid that they mean almost anything—and nothing?

Not quite. The words are, of course, polemical. And also moral. In one camp to call something "liberal" is to give it moral approval, and to call something else "conservative" is, perhaps politely,

to voice its moral condemnation. For the opposite sort of mind, the moral signals are reversed: "Liberal" signifies morally corrupt, "conservative" genuinely moral. In part, this moral meaning depends upon a vision of history. Belief in "progress" (moral progress) leads to a high valuation upon the "forward-looking" (liberal) mind. The conviction that "moral progress" is, largely, illusory leads to cynicism about "utopians," who are regarded either as dupes or as liars. Needless to say, where visions of history are at stake, interest as well as intellect enters. Those who "promote change" or those who "resist change" do so not only in defense of their own economic, political, and cultural power. There is also hope of gain and fear of loss. Thus, to call someone "liberal" or "conservative" is to place oneself and the other within a vision of history and to assign roles in the competition of interests. No wonder the merely descriptive use of the words—"He's more liberal than she is"—shades off immediately into moral comment.

By and large on the American literary scene, in the most prestigious circles (at Harvard, in New York City, in Washington, in Hollywood), to be called "liberal" is to have higher status and to be called "conservative" is to be placed morally on the defensive. To be on the left is idealistic, heroic, virtuous; to be on the right is to be self-interested. At the moment, to be sure, the Left is in disarray, "neo-conservatives" are in the ascendancy, major newsweeklies have announced that the nation is "turning right." But the mode of those pronouncements is what newspaper editorialists describe as "viewing with alarm." The rebirth of the Right is trumpeted in order to rejuvenate the weary Left, at

the end of an almost undisputed fifteen-year dominance of cultural leadership.

Amid currents such as these, George H. Nash's new intellectual history of conservative thought in America since 1945 provides well-organized, coherent, descriptive reportage, so that the reader senses the sweep of the subject and catches a quite satisfactory glimpse of the landmarks, major and minor, that he will wish to visit again. His book provides a useful and substantial tour.

Nash is wise enough not to try to define *conservative*. It is, he notes, not a set of doctrines but an attitude of "resistance." He writes: "I have designated various people as conservatives either because they called themselves conservatives or because others (who did call themselves conservatives) regarded them as part of their conservative intellectual movement." He gives helpful thumbnail summaries of the positions of scores of writers and teachers, indicating their relationships and disagreements. There is enough meat in these sections to make the book readable as a coherent argument.

Nash distinguishes three main currents in the self-conscious conservatism that developed for the first time in America after World War II: (1) the defense of liberty over against statism (socialism); (2) the rejection of moral relativism and the mass society, in favor of classic communal values; and (3) opposition to communism, led particularly (but not solely) by several ex-radicals and ex-Communists. Nash shows how some conservatives defend capitalism, as in the first of these strands, while others, as in the second, deplore capitalism as one of the agents of shallow modernity. These contrasting traditions of conservatism occupy the first four chapters. Nash treats of Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Frank Chodorov, Henry Hazlitt, Leonard Read, John Chamberlain, Wilhelm Röpke, and others in the first group; Richard M. Weaver, Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Robert Nisbet, Peter Vierek, Ernest van den Haag, Russell Kirk, Francis G. Wilson, Thomas Molnar, and many others in the second; and James Burnham, Whittaker Chambers, Ralph de Toledano, Will Herberg, William A. Rusher, Willmoore Kendall, and others in the third.

From chapters five through eight Nash describes the consolidation of these separate strands and the search for

common traditions, common purposes, and practical alliances. These efforts were not easy. Conservatives tend to be stubbornly faithful to their own minds. ("Open" is often used to describe the liberal mind; the conservative, Nash shows, is "open" too, but less so to the comings and goings of new conventions, more so to the persistent hard questions of skeptical intelligence. The conservative seems to be more willing to say "no" and is harder to organize.)

In his last three chapters—the prose moving more swiftly, less certainly now—Nash tries to bring the mushrooming debates, tendencies, and growing numbers of personalities into the confusions of the present. He notes that the Left is now, where not in disarray, in a conservative phase and that conservatives are making the news. Nash does emphasize that the radical "movement" of the Sixties had an ambivalent effect upon liberalism. In part the radical critique adopted many of the criticisms of "corporate liberalism" well known to the conservative critics of the mass society. In part the radicals moved in an increasingly illiberal direction, especially on matters of race and the "Third World." Thus, classical liberals were forced to abandon their narrow "end-of-ideology" phase and to differentiate genuine liberalism from the radical impulses of the Sixties. In this sense many "neo-liberals" are making at least partial alliance with conservatives and have thus been dubbed "neo-conservatives." This last designation more nearly fits some writers like Irving Kristol, but far less well classical liberals like Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Some who are called "neo-conservatives"—like Edward Banfield and Robert Nisbet—have always been conservatives. Others are, have been, and remain social democrats. On these matters Nash is less successful than on those dealing with conservatives proper.

In sum this is a useful book. It is too bad that many in the literary-intellectual world have paid much less attention than they ought to the work Nash here reports on. It may shed more light on the near future—and lend itself to discriminating liberal uses—than some of the tired strains of statism.

Ralph Crunden's collection of essays, *The Superfluous Men*, fills in the period from 1900-1945, the period just before Nash's book begins. It consists of

classic texts from the conservative critics of American culture, whether in individual essays or in chapters from books. In all, there are twenty-eight selections, five from George Santayana, three from Albert Jay Nock (from whom comes the collection's title), five from Henry Louis Mencken, and others from Ralph Adams Cram, Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, John Crowe Ransom, Walter Lippmann, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Frank L. Owsley. "The most important single doctrine in the conservative frame of reference," writes editor Crunden, "is that the best things in life are not political and cannot be obtained by political means." This is a penetrating way of understanding the issue between conservatives and liberals. It helps to explain how conservatives might think the whole nation has gone liberal, while liberals tend to think of the bulk of the population as conservative—each offers a quite different sort of leadership. It helps to explain why conservatives have so often been

innovative in poetry, the arts, architecture, fiction, and other energies of culture. Americans, says Louis Hartz, are inherently "liberal" in their hopes and believe in progress from their first breath. "Part of the reason conservatives felt so out of place in modern America was that so many half-articulate assumptions seemed to be both universally held and demonstrably untrue," writes Crunden.

It is quite striking to read critiques of American society coming from the right, which might have been written today (in less masterful prose) by writers on the left. Yet one must always ask the purpose of a critique of America. What is the writer up to? It may be too simple to suggest that liberals desire political change, conservatives cultural change. In an odd way writers of both tendencies appeal to the deepest values of the Judeo-Christian tradition. But each thinks the other has misunderstood—and, most probably, serves nefarious interests.

Personal Destinies: A Philosophy of Ethical Individualism by David Norton

(Princeton; 398 pp.; \$22.50/4.95)

Stanley Hauerwas

In making the "individual" the basic unit of the social and political order, liberalism has found it quite difficult to account for social cooperation. Robert Nozick's resort to "invisible hand" explanations is an indication of how difficult it is for a consistent liberalism to justify even minimal forms of societal cooperation. John Rawls appears to be an exception to this, but as David Norton points out, he is able to secure cooperation only by stripping the "individual" of all characteristics that make it worthwhile to be an individual in the first place. Ironically, liberal ethical and political theory has had to generate a theory of nonpersons—in the name of the freedom and autonomy of the individual. In the interest of securing a basis for cooperation, then, philosophers invent individuals who are devoid of particularity and history.

In this important book Norton argues that liberalism's inability to account for social cooperation has been due to an insufficient understanding of the individual. The liberal understanding of the individual (i.e., the rational calculator of satisfactions and/or an instance of disinterested rationality) is a corrupt form of a richer understanding of the individual that Norton sees as being originally associated with Aristotelian eudaimonism. Norton thus calls his position "normative individualism" to indicate clearly that any adequate account of individualism entails substantive commitments concerning how we should *be* individuals.

Norton develops his position through a sympathetic critique of British idealism, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre. Against the numerical individualism of utilitarianism, the British ideal-