

Socialism For Our Time?

Bill Muehlenberg, National Secretary of the Australian Family Association, reviews Conservatism For Our Time by Torbjörn Tännsjö (Routledge, London, 1990).

This is a puzzling book. Early in the preface the author, a philosophy professor at the University of Stockholm, states that the book presents 'a defence of conservatism'. A surprise is in store a few paragraphs later when the author confesses that he is a member of the Swedish Communist Party, and has been for 'quite a while' (p.viii). Surprise turns to alarm when Tännsjö claims that 'there seem to be no strong contemporary defences of conservatism' in circulation, and such thinkers as Oakeshott and Scruton 'have had difficulty in making plausible and "up-to-date" applications of the conservative doctrine' (p.ix). Readers of *The Salisbury Review*, among others, will find this assertion unpalatable, to say the least.

How then does Tännsjö seek to defend conservatism, and what exactly does he mean by conservatism? The conservative attitude, says Tännsjö, is characterised by two central tenets: 'whatever exists as a well established fact ought to continue to exist', and 'the reason why it ought to continue to exist is that it is well established' (p.4). I will return to this definition later, but for the moment it may be noted that such a truncated or reductionistic view of conservatism may stem from the fact that Tännsjö deals with only a very limited range of conservative thinkers in this book. Perhaps he is aware of others, but American conservatives, for example, are excluded altogether (although brief references are made to the neoconservative Irving Kristol, the public-choice theorist Mancur Olson and the libertarian Robert Nozick). One would hope to see such figures as Kirk, Voegelin, Strauss, Nisbet and Buckley, as well as more English

Mokyr distinguishes between what he terms 'macroinventions' (those inventions in which a radical new idea without clear precedent emerges) and 'microinventions' (small incremental steps that improve, adapt and streamline existing techniques, reducing costs, extending durability and reducing energy and material requirements). Macroinventions and microinventions are complementary features of technological progress. This distinction between invention and innovation is not new in the literature. Mokyr's contribution is to seek to understand their successful combination, which results in sustained periods of productive technical progress. It seems that without macroinventions the capacity for improving and refining existing technologies is eventually exhausted.

Whereas microinventions can be more or less understood through standard economic concepts such as the incentive to replace labour with capital in situations of rising demand and severe labour shortage, macroinventions are inexplicable in such terms, but often result from factors like luck and strokes of genius. Macroinventions appear to owe little to the economic climate in which they occur, and, unless followed by innovating applications, contribute little to economic development. Nevertheless, they can, in the appropriate cultural environment, provide the catalyst for new ways of viewing the world conducive to a renewed phase of creative invention and innovation.

As an instance of the power of macroinvention to extend the frontiers of technological possibility, Mokyr cites the invention of ballooning by the Montgolfier brothers in France in 1783. He claims that few inventions did so much to demonstrate the possibilities of technological progress and the ability of human creativity to control natural forces.

In his search for an explanation of the processes of invention and innovation, Mokyr explores the parallels between technological progress and biological evolution. He finds

that technological progress strongly resembles an evolutionary path that, rather than consisting of slow incremental steps, proceeds by leaps and bounds, interspersed with periods of stasis. He considers that earlier attempts to assimilate technological progress to biological evolution made the error of regarding as 'species' whole companies, rather than the techniques they used to produce goods and services in a specific way.

He takes the biological parallel into genetics. Like genetic mutations, new ideas occur blindly, with no prompting from the environment and without any sense of direction or application. Some cultural, scientific or technological ideas are adopted because they suit the needs of the society in the same way that favourable mutations are 'selected' by the environment and maintained. Competition between 'mutations' in technology occurs at the level of techniques themselves, not of the firms that develop and exploit them. Success of a particular technology is determined by cultural and other factors. If this environment is conducive, the technology will flourish, its success depending less on the society's inventiveness than on its capacity to innovate and on a cultural environment that favours innovation.

Analogies between natural and social science, though stimulating, usually fall short of yielding a satisfactory explanation of social and cultural phenomena. Mokyr's effort seems to be no exception, although his historical analysis emphasises the importance of a cultural *milieu* that favours enterprise and places a premium on diversity rather than conformity. Perhaps this is something we already knew. But in view of the Australian government's tightening of central control over research in universities and its apparent belief in the capacity of bureaucrats to dictate the directions of technological innovation, it is a message that needs reiterating. Joel Mokyr's stimulating and readable book certainly does that.

An appreciation of John Fogarty appears on p.40 of this issue of Policy.

and continental thinkers, included in a work that seeks to explore contemporary conservatism.

After defining conservatism, the author sets out various forms of conservatism, such as 'dogmatic' and 'critical'. The latter is subdivided into 'pragmatic' and 'ideal' conservatism; the second of these is again subdivided into 'collectivist' and 'individualist', and so on. Chapter 2, which elaborates upon 'pragmatic conservatism', mainly features lengthy forays into sociobiology and game theory. Chapter 3 discusses 'ideal conservatism' with some extended psychological analyses of personal identity.

The remaining three chapters offer applications of conservatism. Chapter 4 discusses nuclear deterrence and the strategy of mutual assured destruction (which Tännsjö more or less favours, after giving strategic defence a quick brush-off). Chapter 5 looks at genetic engineering (which he thinks in a limited form is defensible). Chapter 6 focuses on 'real socialism' and seems to be the central part of the book. It is in this chapter that Tännsjö seeks to make a conservative case for the Soviet Union and other marxist/socialist/social-democratic states, based on his original definition of conservatism. Simply put, the Soviet state has been in existence since 1917, and is therefore worthy of preservation! This somewhat novel application of conservatism is given little support, except for rather dubious comments such as: 'Capitalism seems to be inherently dynamic, socialism is not. Some may admire capitalism for this reason but the conservative must view it with suspicion' (p.145); 'Conservatives in capitalist countries must look with envy on the reverence with which the traditional culture is taken care of in the Soviet Union' (p.143); and 'At least from a conservative point of view, there exists no serious religious problem in the Soviet Union' (p.148). The first claim is superbly dealt with by Peter Berger, who demonstrates in *The Capitalist Revolution* how all manner of dynamic processes can be seen as the

result of modernisation, be they under capitalist or socialist auspices. On the second claim, anyone remotely familiar with the history of the Soviet Union since the revolution knows that a very large part of traditional culture was smashed under Lenin and Stalin, with only fragments of it re-emerging today. As to the last comment, if there was no religious problem in the Soviet Union, it is only because the Soviet authorities tried to make sure that there was no religion. Several million religious martyrs could say amen to that.

Tännsjö does refer to Roger Scruton's comments in his *The Meaning of Conservatism* about rival traditions, and how three independent criteria must be met before a conservative can rightfully embrace and foster some well-established tradition. First, traditions must 'have the weight of a successful history . . . they must be the palpable reminder of something that has flourished, and not the latest in a series of abortive starts'. Second, 'they must engage the loyalty of their participants'. Finally, 'they must point to something durable, something which survives'. These three criteria, says Scruton, exclude traditions of torture, crime and revolution. Incredibly, Tännsjö says that the political traditions of the Soviet Union have met these criteria. The current wholesale rejection of Soviet political traditions says not a little about their supposed endurance; and as for the loyalty of its members, this surely sprang, not from love of communism, but from fear of the Gulag.

Tännsjö concludes his book with these words: 'there seems to be a conservative defence of real socialism that is at least as strong as any conservative defence of any existing system of capitalism' (p.155). I am afraid his book has not convinced me. Conservatives do not simply want to preserve well-established institutions. Although they may differ from classical liberals on the importance of individual liberty, they do share with them a strong dislike of omnipotent government (to use

von Mises' phrase). They both favour a non-politicised social order; both respect private property; and both emphasise decentralised power. Such tenets are clearly not part of the communist/social democratic tradition. So subscribers to that tradition, like Tännsjö, cannot claim the mantle of conservatism.

Whatever his book is about (and I am still not quite sure what exactly Tännsjö is on about), it surely is not about conservatism for our time. Perhaps the book would be less puzzling — and less frustrating — if it were simply called *Socialism For Our Time*.

Bill Muehlenberg is the author of Modern Conservative Thought: An Annotated Bibliography (IPA, Melbourne, 1990).

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