

Richard Weaver and the Limits of Modernity



February 22, 2007

***Richard Weaver and the
Limits of Modernity***

Defining Conservatism Series

Richard Weaver and the Limits of Modernity

Defining Conservatism Series

Like the several other founders of American conservatism, Richard Weaver began as a socialist and ended as a champion of freedom. His early years at the University of Kentucky (1927-1932) were committed to advocacy work within Norman Thomas's Socialist Party of America. But as a graduate student at Vanderbilt University (1933-1936) he was introduced to the conservative "Southern Agrarian" tradition led by Professors John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson.

He wrote that during this crucial time in his intellectual development, "I began to perceive that many traditional positions in our world had suffered not so much because of inherent defects as because of the stupidity, ineptness, and intellectual sloth of those who for one reason or another were presumed to have their defense in charge." By 1940, he gave up his job teaching at Texas A&M and "went off to start my education over."

Richard Weaver is what younger generations would call "old school." He was not an immediate fan of the latest gadgets, technological miracles borne of the marketplace, or fast-paced cultural changes. Weaver's friend, publisher Henry Regnery, added this insight,

As soon as the teaching term ended in the spring he abandoned his rather dingy, unkempt bachelor apartment in Hyde Park [IL] and set off for Weaverville [NC], always traveling by train, difficult as it became as rail travel deteriorated – he would never fly unless there was no other choice. "You have to draw the line somewhere," he once remarked to me. Distrustful of "progress" and industrialism in general, he regarded the airplane with particular repugnance.¹

To understand Weaver, we must separate the man's personal preferences from his intellect. Weaver was not a Luddite. His conservatism is authentic and his intellectual insights into America's deepening spiritual crisis have been prophetic.

The short outline of his life is simple enough. Professor Weaver was born in Ashville, North Carolina in 1910. Beyond his education at the University of Kentucky and Vanderbilt University, he began teaching English at the University of Chicago in 1944 and remained there until his death in 1964. While there he published his extraordinarily important book, *Ideas Have Consequences*, in 1948.

Richard Weaver's life might seem eccentric to those who exult in the destruction of any traditional limits that impede utopian schemes of perfect equality and individual self-expression. He was a deep critic of the projects of modernity. He unhesitatingly pointed out the costs incurred when these projects are not appropriately limited. He taught, "[t]he conservative holds that man in this world cannot make his will law without regard to limits and to the fixed nature of things."²

His indictment of the forces promulgating the destruction of traditional limits is bracing:

What person taking the affirmative view of life can deny that the world served up daily by press, movie and radio is a world of evil and negation? There is iron in our nature sufficient to withstand any fact that is present in the context of affirmation, but we cannot remain unaffected by the continued assertion of cynicism and brutality.³

Professor Weaver decried those who are "striking at restraints without considering what they preserve."⁴ A powerful passage from *Ideas Have Consequences* describes the loss experienced when tradition is jettisoned for an ideological notion, in this case, "equality":

The comity of peoples in groups large or small rests not upon this chimerical notion of equality but upon fraternity, a concept which long antedates it in history because it goes immeasurably deeper in human sentiment. The ancient feeling of brotherhood carries obligations of which equality knows nothing. It calls for respect and protection, for brotherhood is status in family, and family is by nature hierarchical. It demands patience with little brother, and it may sternly exact duty of big brother. It places people in a network of sentiment, not of rights – that *hortus siccus* of modern vainglory.⁵

He specifically focused on the modern idea that men and women can be treated as essentially fungible. One consequence of the resulting demise of the ideal of a gentleman is that, "[n]o longer protected, the woman now has her career, in which she makes a drab pilgrimage from two-room apartment to job to divorce court."⁶

He connected the conceit of pure equality with the excesses of democracy. He said: "The fanatical democrat insists upon making [people] equal in all departments, regardless of the type of activity and vocation. It is of course the essence of fanaticism to seize upon some fragment of truth or value and to regard it as the exclusive object of man's striving."⁷ Democracy, he recognized, must be limited as it is by our constitutional form of government. "A constitution is a government's better self, able to rebuke and restrain the baser self when it starts off on a vagary. If the mass of every electorate were wholly right at every period, constitutions would be only curious encumbrances."⁸

Another modern trend decried in the work of Professor Weaver was the menacing role of the state. He noted that "[t]he modern state does not comprehend how anyone can be guided by something other than itself. In its eyes, pluralism is treason."⁹ He believed, rather, "that the policy of a state toward the culture or cultures within it should be *laissez faire*, except at those points where collisions may be so severe that they imperil the minimum preservation of order with which the state is charged."¹⁰ A conservative, for Professor Weaver, "in his proper character and role is a defender of liberty. He is such because he takes his stand on the real of order of things and he has a very modest estimate of man's ability to change that order through the coercive power of the state."¹¹

It seems likely that Professor Weaver would have viewed with alarm the spectacle of a state using its educational apparatus to teach children to reject traditional teachings about sexual morality, or a state legislature's attempt to defy specific constitutional requirements in order to prevent a vote on whether to retain a court-ordered policy that all adult relationships must be treated exactly the same, or a tax system that would require an heir to sell inherited property just to pay the tax. The list could go on.

Finally, Professor Weaver criticized what Alexander Solzhenitsyn later called the "cult of novelty." In a late essay, he said: "The pointless series of 'new developments' and expansions which the modern barbarian delights in look poor and hollow when placed beside authentic creations of the spirit."¹² He pointed out that "no government and no ideology which try to cut a people off from its past can be friendly to culture."¹³

Against these destructive trends, he offered a noble view of individualism, "'social bond' individualism" that "battles unremittingly for individual rights, while recognizing that these have to be secured within the social context."¹⁴ He held up John Randolph of Roanoke as an exemplar of this type because of "his belief in the limited though real role of government, and his defense of the smaller but 'natural' unit against the larger one which pretends a right to rule."¹⁵

Ultimately, Professor Weaver's long view allowed for deep optimism. In one of his Southern essays, he concluded with a quote from Robert E. Lee that effectively encapsulates the hope implicit in Richard Weaver's noble teaching:

My experience of men has neither disposed me to think worse of them, nor indisposed to serve them; nor, in spite of failures, which I lament, of errors, which I now see and acknowledge, or of the present state of affairs, do I despair of the future. The march of Providence is so slow, and our desire so impatient, the work of progress is so immense, and our means of aiding it so feeble, the life of humanity is so long, and that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave, and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope.¹⁶

Richard Weaver's achievement lay in exposing the dangers inherent in the cult of novelty and pointing us forward by reminding us of the deep spiritual realities illuminated by the lessons of history. Ultimately, these realities were the foundation of his hope as they can be of ours.

Selected Resources

Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948)

Richard M. Weaver, *Visions of Order* (ISI edition 1995)

The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver (George M. Curtis III and James J. Thompson, Jr., editors 1987)

Richard M. Weaver, "Life Without Prejudice" *Modern Age*, 4 (Summer 1957)

Richard M. Weaver, "Up From Liberalism" *Modern Age*, 219 (Winter 1958-1959)

Richard M. Weaver, "The Importance of Cultural Freedom" *Modern Age*, 21 (Winter 1961-1962)

Richard M. Weaver, "Two Types of American Individualism" *Modern Age*, 119 (Spring 1963)

Richard M. Weaver, "The Image of Culture" *Modern Age*, 186 (Spring 1964)

Frank S. Meyer, "Richard M. Weaver: An Appreciation" *Modern Age*, 243 (Summer-Fall 1970)

Henry Regnery, "Richard Weaver: A Southern Agrarian at the University of Chicago" *Modern Age*, 102 (Spring 1988)

John P. East, "Richard M. Weaver: The Conservatism of Affirmation" *Modern Age*, 338 (Fall 1975)

Endnotes

¹ Henry Regnery, "Richard Weaver: A Southern Agrarian at the University of Chicago" *Modern Age*, 102, 103 (Spring 1988)

² John P. East, "Richard M. Weaver: The Conservatism of Affirmation" *Modern Age*, 338, 340, (Fall 1975)

³ Regnery, *ibid.*, 102, 105

⁴ Richard M. Weaver, *Visions of Order*, 50 (ISI edition 1995)

⁵ Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 42 (1948)

⁶ Regnery, *ibid.*, 102, 106

⁷ Richard M. Weaver, "The Image of Culture" *Modern Age*, 186, 194 (Spring 1964)

⁸ Richard M. Weaver, "Up From Liberalism" *Modern Age*, 21, 29 (Winter 1958-1959)

⁹ Frank S. Meyer, "Richard M. Weaver: An Appreciation" *Modern Age*, 243, 245 (Summer-Fall 1970)

¹⁰ Richard M. Weaver, "The Importance of Cultural Freedom" *Modern Age*, 21, 23-24 (Winter 1961-1962)

¹¹ Meyer, *ibid.*, 243, 248

¹² Richard M. Weaver, "The Image of Culture" *Modern Age*, 186, 197 (Spring 1964)

¹³ Richard M. Weaver, "The Importance of Cultural Freedom" *Modern Age*, 21, 32 note 5 (Winter 1961-1962)

¹⁴ Richard M. Weaver, "Two Types of American Individualism" *Modern Age*, 119, 122 (Spring 1963)

¹⁵ Richard M. Weaver, "Two Types of American Individualism" *Modern Age*, 119, 125 (Spring 1963)

¹⁶ Richard M. Weaver, "Lee the Philosopher" in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, 179-180 (George M. Curtis III and James J. Thompson, Jr., editors 1987)