

*California*

# SOCIAL SCIENCE

*Review*

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## WHAT CONSERVATISM AND LIBERALISM HAVE MEANT IN AMERICAN HISTORY—Charles G. Sellers, Jr.

*Dr. Sellers is Professor of History at the University of California at Berkeley. This article is taken from notes made by Robert Boyle of Dr. Sellers' April 1 talk at Asilomar.*

We are all conservatives; we are all liberals. Discussion of these terms involves us in severe semantic difficulties. We often use these terms in two senses: (1) an attitude towards change, and (2) denoting an ideology.

"Liberal" often refers to "progressive," an attitude which allows the holder to see his utopia in the future. The conservative tends to see his utopia in the present or the past, or at least, in the near future. Extremists of these views are called radicals or reactionaries.

Liberal ideology tends to be one which accepts all men as free and equal, attaching moral worth in maximizing the opportunities of every individual to achieve his goals. Conservative ideology tends to think that society is a dangerous thing. People are not equal; they are not endowed with equal abilities; and, they should not be granted "equality" in society, if that society is to be preserved. Ancient institutions need to be preserved and protected.

We will understand these terms in American history better if we take into account these different aspects of meaning. Not only semantic confusion but our parochialism of seeing all the world in the light of America confuses us. The great fact of America is that we were **born** free. The man-land ratio has been historically different in that we have had an abundance of land and a shortage of labor. This immediately established the importance of individual man.

The advantage of the American was that he was born free and did not have to endure a democratic revolution. This led to some very important differences between liberalism in America and in Europe. Here there had never been an entrenched aristocracy to overcome. If liberalism doesn't have something to war against, you do not need an ideology. American liberalism has always been profoundly pragmatic.

"Liberalism" in American life has been traditional, and it is the "conservatives" who want to keep things as they are. Hence, it is the ideological conservative, who, in reality, tends to want change. It was Hamilton, not Jefferson, who was the great innovator and visionary of his times. Hamiltonians were commercial-minded rather than agrarian-minded, as was the case of the followers of Jefferson. The Jeffersonians were profoundly conservative in wanting to maintain the "utopia" which they felt they had. However, in democratic individualism, the Jeffersonians tended to be more "liberal," but this was less significant at that period of history.

The same comparison may be made regarding Jackson and the Whigs. Jackson actually was a reactionary, in that he wanted to restore the country to its former state.

There is an alternative view of looking at American history. Through most of human history, human society has been a slowly changing thing. In the past 150 years the rapidity of this change has increased tremendously. And it is painful for societies to change. Wholesale change over each generation, a very rapid change, makes some people feel very uncomfortable.

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It was moved and seconded that a "Committee on Curriculum and Instructional Resources" be established. The motion passed.

It was moved and seconded that a "Membership Committee" with the Vice-President as chairman be established. The motion passed.

ed that the position of Executive-Secretary Council for the Social Studies. Mr. College was elected by a unanimous vote.

It was moved and seconded that the annual conference contain a special section for individuals concerned with teacher education in the Social Studies. The motion passed.

Mr. Leslie Wood of Stanford University the California Council for the Social

It was moved and seconded that a student membership in the state organization be allowed for one dollar (\$1.00) to full-time students. The motion passed.

**62; 3:30 p.m.**

y Mr. William Dawson, President. ed that Mr. Leslie Wood develop the be called the CALIFORNIA SOCIAL recognize the heritage of the SOUTH-REVIEW and the NORCAL NEWS 'N

It was moved and seconded that a charter membership be sold for one dollar (\$1.00) to finance the initial development of the California Council for the Social Studies with the charter membership to expire June 30, 1962.

It was moved and seconded that the President and Executive-Secretary carry out the administrative details necessary to the establishment of the California Council for the Social Studies. The motion passed.

The meeting was adjourned until the installation of officers on April 1, 1962, at 9:00 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,  
WILLIAM E. McLAUGHLIN, Secretary  
California Council for the Social Studies

3 statewide conference resulted in a onference facilities be utilized. ture for planning the 1963 Asilomar e President appoint a single commit- tion was seconded and passed. nd local dues was discussed. It was e set at two dollars (\$2.00) over and l by the local council and to be for- tion passed.

the individuals not served by a local p at four dollars (\$4.00). The motion

t the Santa Barbara County Council l by the Executive Board. The motion

**2; 10:00 p.m.**

y Mr. William Dawson, President. olutions to the annual meeting was d that a "Resolutions Committee" be president. The motion passed. he California Teachers Association onced that the California Council the California Teachers Association.

1963 Asilomar Conference was dis- hat some phase of economics be the The motion passed.

discussed with the following actions:

at an "Elementary School Social Stud- he motion passed.

at a "Social Science Disciplines Com- on passed.

**WHAT CONSERVATION—SELLERS**  
(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

America, at first, was implicitly democratic, but not totally democratic. The American Revolution stimulated the change toward democracy. The United States was a static, agrarian economy until the first quarter of the 19th century. Then, people were brought into a money economy. The entrepreneurial activity increased. The old values of the fathers no longer remained.

The slavery issue and the white South drove the liberals of the area to try to bring themselves to conservatism overnight. The people were stuck with an institution which they were too liberal to believe in, but which they tried to rationalize.

Commercialization and the bureaucratization of business, the rise of big business, led to the rise of new liberal-conservatives.

We can and should keep our students acutely conscious about the ways in which they use these terms. We must not confuse the European categories with the way we divide ourselves in the United States. Misunderstanding of this difference has led to trouble in the United States before. Today, part of the panic and hysteria that exist is related to this same kind of misunderstanding. We should be aware of this whenever disturbing incidents arise.