

Progress Foundation Conference
"Liberalism and Conservatism"
Friedrich A. von Hayek, Wilhelm Röpke, Bertrand de Jouvenel
Soazza, 30th September 1999 to 3rd October 1999

(Brief Report)

The texts submitted for discussion all touched on a central theme of the socio-political debate. The philosophers selected are generally regarded as representatives of both conservative and liberal ideals. The central issue under discussion was whether liberal positions rule out conservative values. This was shown to be a question of definition. The discussion group was unanimous in its opinion that that form of conservatism which seeks to use state power to enforce specific values is quite definitely incompatible with liberalism.

In the first text ("Über Konservatismus und Liberalism"), Friedrich August von Hayek vehemently dissociates himself from conservatism since conservatives tend to have an implicit faith in the state and to mistrust anything new. The text was found to have its flaws: it lacked the necessary clarity of definition and failed to clarify the author's concept of liberalism. It was, in fact, held to be more in the nature of a casual polemic work. Others did not share this view although everyone was agreed on one point: that the text performed the political task of securing Hayek against being hailed as the champion of a particular direction of state conservatism.

The second text ("Wahrer und falscher Individualismus") was received more enthusiastically. In it, individualism is grasped as a sociological theory, quite distinct from atomism and the phantom of *homo oeconomicus*. In this context, spontaneous social institutions such as custom, convention, tradition generally in fact, all have their place. Thus a link is forged to the non-state conservatism (of values). Some did, however, maintain that there is an element of force even in spontaneous institutions. Von Hayek interpreted "force" as something purely physical, not, for example, as mere force of opinion. The advantage of custom over law is that it can adapt to changing reality more easily and without any complicated political

values and institutions of its own. This was universally accepted.

The third discourse (Friedrich August von Hayek: "Freiheit, Vernunft und Überlieferung") lent depth to the discussion. The text describes two different traditions of freedom. Hayek propounds a theory on institutions which is briefly discussed. As he says, that institution which contributes most towards the success, e.g. the growth and distribution, of a group will always predominate. One open question remained - on von Hayek's side, too - namely, whether freedom should be desirable chiefly as a value in itself, or for the sake of what it brings forth. The question, in what way did the French concept of liberty demand centralisation and force, was not fully discussed. In this context, reference was made to a Utopian view of emancipation that still continues to exert its influence.

The fourth discussion concerned itself with a text by Wilhelm Röpke ("Der Irrweg des Rationalismus"; "Heimat, Nation und Welt"). Röpke does agree with von Hayek on a number of socio-political issues, yet he did also scare quite a few with his aggressive tone and a certain cultural pessimism. Röpke is held to be the prototype conservative of values who supports a free, liberal economy and the state under the rule of law. The conservative element refers to the traditional institutions, from the family all the way up to the national community. Some gained the impression that Röpke lacked faith in an "open" society; the categorical emphasis he placed on certain values (nature, property, society, history, "roots") was disputed by others who wished to restrict liberalism to a complex of behavioural rules.

In the fifth discussion, of texts by Röpke on the "spiritual and moral parentheses" and "nobilitas naturalia", the debate was even more animated. Some contradicted Röpke's polemics against economism as a destroyer of morality, arguing that competition was not a "prey on morality" and that here he was expressing a groundless scepticism toward the market economy. Nor was his offensive against the "cult of the standard of life" shared to an equal degree by everyone. The friends of big-city life took objection to his predilection for smaller towns and country life. Some resented his crass elitist views. His theory of an aristocracy of the educated,

for example, was taken very much amiss by some participants, although there were some supporters of his view to be found.

The sixth discussion of a text by Bertrand de Jouvenel ("Ordnung oder Sozialprotektorat?"; "Effizienz und Lebensart"; "Das bessere Leben in einer reichen Gesellschaft") met with virtually unanimous opposition. Although de Jouvenel clearly denounced the welfare state and put forward a convincing case against progressive income tax and "social justice", it was felt that he otherwise appeared to subscribe to the ideals of premodern, aristocratic society. Reference was made to his temporary aberration to French fascism (Doriot) and to his later support of Mitterand. It was held that de Jouvenel seemed to tend towards aristocrato-conservative dirigism and that his criticism of rationalism was reactionary, it no longer being possible to return to the Christian-based society and class hierarchy of former times. An objection to this view was expressed on the grounds that Bertrand de Jouvenel actually only adopted the arguments put forward by von Hayek and Röpke against "false" rationalism and that he was therefore only carrying on in the spirit of Montesquieu. A debate on the question of "aesthetic urban planning" also arose. Some were of the opinion that in his emphasis on aesthetics, he spoke as a typical French aristocrat.

Dr. Gerd Habermann (Discussion chairman)