



The Flaw in Conservative Pragmatism

By: Alberto Mingardi - January 4, 2013

Blog posts do not necessarily do justice to a thinker. But trying to shrink your thoughts in a limited space is a good exercise for a thinker indeed: synthesis forces you to select, cut, and clarify.

Bruce Bartlett now blogs at the New York Times Economix blog. One of his latest pieces is “A Conservative Case for the Welfare State”. Such a case has been made in the past too: most prominently, by the intellectual leader of neo-conservatives, Irving Kristol, who wanted the welfare state to be put at the service of conservatives “principles.”

Bartlett’s endorsement of the welfare state is quite different. He doesn’t attempt to steer welfare paternalism in a conservative direction. He defends the welfare state qua the welfare state and maintains that Conservatives—or better to say: Republicans—should do likewise because “Republican presidents from Dwight D. Eisenhower through George H.W. Bush accepted the legitimacy of the welfare state and sought to manage it properly and fund it adequately”. Conservatism has often been described as politics without a theory, but arguments ex autoritate making an appeal to politicians rather than to philosophers are somewhat novel, particularly when the names named are those of Eisenhower and of Bush Sr., neither of whom appeared to have a particularly coherent political vision.

Bartlett comes out against policies that, following the late Milton Friedman, are not trying to remove the welfare state from the political scene, but rather trying to reshape it to make it more effective. Neither social security “privatization” nor “school vouchers” would override compulsory savings or compulsory education. They would just introduce some competitive elements in the system, bringing us back to a point that wasn’t made by any arch-conservative Republican but by the common patron saint of all families of contemporary liberalism: John Stuart Mill.

Mill, a committed advocate of the education of the masses, explained very clearly that:

If the government would make up its mind to require for every child a good education, it might save itself the trouble of providing one. It might leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased, and content itself with helping to pay the school fees of the poorer classes of children, and defraying the entire school expenses of those

who have no one else to pay for them. The objections which are urged with reason against State education, do not apply to the enforcement of education by the State, but to the State's taking upon itself to direct that education: which is a totally different thing. That the whole or any large part of the education of the people should be in State hands, I go as far as any one in deprecating.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Bartlett is not defending the government's role as caretaker of society, as the regulator of education/healthcare/pension provisions and buyer of those very services to the benefit of the poor. He is advocating a bigger and bigger role for government as the provider of those very services itself.

This is not a conservative case for the welfare state: it is a bankrupter's case for the welfare state.

He quotes Europe as a supporting example. In particular, he mentions the European success with national health care insurance. Looking at the health care expenditure/GDP ratio, he sees the U.S. spending too much and getting too little. But if the European social system is so effective, why are European welfare states desperately struggling to reform? Britain has long been flirting with health care reform (though somewhat unsuccessfully). Holland has now a universal health care system financed through competing insurance companies. On the edge of bankruptcy, Spain is taking steps towards a so-called "privatization" of health care, i.e. public-private partnership on the model of the system established in Valencia.

Germany has been increasingly involving private providers in the healthcare system since the Nineties. Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, no radical libertarian, has claimed that the universal health care system may just not be sustainable in an ageing society. If the European model works so well, why are the core countries of Europe striving to reform their very precious social model?

However, what is missing in Bartlett's piece is something more fundamental than a closer look at Europe. If there is a qualifying characteristic of conservatism, it is indeed skepticism. Skepticism, above all, about politics. A welfare state is a form of intermediation: people's money is redistributed, with the goal of providing—compulsorily and universally—some specific services. One may candidly agree with the goals of the welfare state—but be wary of the setting up of a gigantic bureaucratic machine, whose job will ultimately be to feed itself. We do not ask conservatives to be committed to the defense of individual liberty per se—as we libertarians are. But we expect them "to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss" (Oakeshott). If they do not, they might be just confusing conservatism with realpolitik.