

Essays from the Dissident Right

MARK WEGIERSKI

Professor Paul Edward Gottfried, who is credited with coining the terms “paleoconservatism” and “alt-right”, is one of the leading conservative theorists in America today, who also enjoys a following in Europe. This book joins the several volumes of criticism of the current-day system he has published, such as, *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State* (1999), and *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt: Toward a Secular Theocracy* (2002).

In the “Foreword,” Professor Gottfried notes the main themes of the collection: some personal reminiscences combined with a systematic attempt to challenge a number of the currently received opinions of establishment historians.

Gottfried opens with meditations about his youth growing up in his home town of Bridgeport, Connecticut, and how it might have shaped the trajectories of his future. He also writes about his current home, near the campus of Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania, and expresses affection for his old alma mater, Yale. Clearly, Professor Gottfried is attempting to construct a European-type rootedness in America. One can note the salient role that culturally distinct white ethnics played in the Bridgeport of the 1950s.

In his chapter on “Robert Nisbet: Conservative Sociologist,” Gottfried writes intriguingly on how Nisbet identified Emile Durkheim as being akin to a real, pro-social conservative. Nisbet [like Durkheim] “rejects the notion that civil society is a mere contrivance composed of potentially autonomous individuals.... The concept of individuals living apart from each other and trying to achieve

autonomy outside of complex social relations seemed to Durkheim, as much as it did to Nisbet, a total fiction.” Gottfried also criticizes in contrast what he deems to be the relative thinness and shallowness of Russell Kirk.

REVISIONS AND DISSENTS: ESSAYS

Paul E. Gottfried

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Gottfried, in his essay, “Defining Right and Left” argues that “...a classical or essentialist Right is hard to find in the contemporary Western world, where journalists and other assorted intellectuals rush to denounce its bearers — or even partial bearers — as ‘fascists’” (p. 27). In Gottfried’s view, “the Right affirms inherited hierarchy, favors the particularistic while being suspicious of what claims to be universal, aims at preserving social traditions where possible, and opposes the Left by every means at its disposal” (p. 29). Clearly, Gottfried sees the Right today as an embattled and fragmented tradition that is not helped by ossified, archaic conservatives, who mostly lack a political sense. One could question Gottfried’s over-emphasis on the antinomianism of the Left — which has arguably not always been a prominent feature of its thought. A greater outreach could have been made to the more decent parts of the Left tradition — as represented, for example, by the Old Left or old-fashioned social democracy, such as that represented in Canada by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the precursor to today’s much different New Democratic Party (NDP). There were a large number of figures who could historically be called social conservatives of the Left — such as William Morris, George Orwell, and Jack London. It may not be the case that a concern for equality and workers’ rights leads inevitably to the antinomian, deconstructionist Left of today.

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“The Problem of Historical Connections” ably posits against the automatic equation of Bismarck with Hitler. Gottfried also makes a point that should be constantly re-iterated: the Nazis were *not* conservatives. However, despite the attempt to defend Bismarck, it’s clear that he was quite nasty to minorities in the German Empire — notably Roman Catholics (against whom he instituted the so-called *Kulturkampf*) and the Poles.

In his essay on “Liberal Democracy as a God Term,” Gottfried objects to the fetishization by some on the current-day self-described Right. Citing Keith Preston’s series of essays, *Attack the System*, Gottfried sees current-day “liberal democracy” as little more than a managerial-therapeutic regime of big corporations and big government, which seek to exclude traditionalist residues from playing any significant social, political, or cultural role in current-day society. However, Gottfried’s attempt to partially exculpate corporate CEOs and billionaires as supposedly reluctant participants in the system, is highly questionable. The fact is that the major capitalists of today are some of the most enthusiastic social liberals. Plutocracy is one of the more salient aspects of the system, it could be argued.

“Reexamining the Conservative Legacy” is based on a review of two books, Yuval Levin’s *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine and the Birth of Right and Left*, and Domenic Fisichella’s *La Democrazia Contro la Realta: Il Pensiero Politico di Charles Maurras*. While Levin defines himself as a Burkean, Gottfried thinks Levin’s claim to see a lot of Burkeanism in current-day America, is highly questionable. Charles Maurras is a highly controversial figure, but Fisichella and Gottfried argue that the charges against him have been greatly overwrought. Gottfried sees Maurras as valuable because he tried to creatively improvise an effective conservative movement in inhospitable times. This reviewer thinks that Gottfried’s dismissal of Levin is quite appropriate, while the view of Maurras’ creative originality may be a bit exaggerated.

In “Whig History Revisited,” Gottfried takes a retrospective review of Herbert Butterfield’s *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Butterfield criticized the writing of history as a facile march of progress, supposedly culminating in the enlightened historian of today. This reviewer notes that similar criticism has also been prominently expressed by Nietzsche, who indicted the smug, self-satisfied “Last Man” who looks with such disdain at his historical predecessors and views past ages as simply mad.

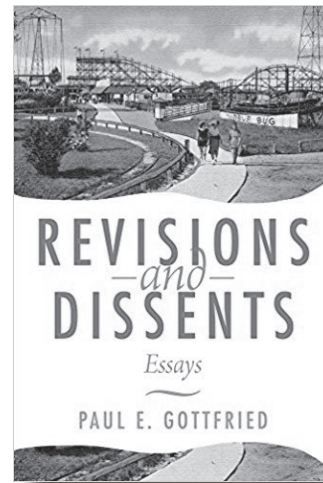
“The European Union Elections, 2014” is a polemic against those who considered the elections’ results as a recrudescence of fascism. This reviewer obviously agrees that the term far-right is greatly over-used today, and

that most European parties described today as such would have easily been considered center-right only a few decades ago.

The English Constitution Reconsidered” (pp. 101-106) is Gottfried’s retrospective review of Walter Bagehot’s *The English Constitution*. Ironically, Gottfried demonstrates that Bagehot was not much of a conservative, with little respect or affection for the monarchy and aristocracy. He was in fact a classical liberal, who was afraid of the results of the extension of the franchise (undertaken by Disraeli’s government).

In “Redefining Classes,” Gottfried critiques a central theme of Charles Murray’s *Coming Apart*. He criticizes Murray for thinking that affluent lifestyles are

synonymous with traditional bourgeois values. While Gottfried largely identifies with the traditional bourgeoisie, it could be argued that many problems of late modern society originated with that class. Perhaps the true Right in Europe could have been better understood as an aristocrat-worker alliance. As for America today, one can perceive the existence of a small but distinct right-wing



intelligentsia, which is to give leadership to the great revolt of the lower middle class and working class.

Gottfried’s essay, “Explaining Trump,” is the most overtly political piece in the collection. Most of it was written in February and March of 2016, when Trump had not yet secured the Republican nomination. There is also a section that was added on November 24, 2016. Gottfried sees the election of Trump as a genuine populist insurgency. He argues that the Trump supporters simply have a different view of “democratic equality” than the politically correct. Nevertheless, the Trump insurgency is the closest thing to a genuine Right that is possible, in today’s highly inhospitable climate. Gottfried is right that the biggest difference between the Trump supporters and the neoconservatives is in their stance towards globalization and the mass immigration policies related to it.

Gottfried concludes his book with a quotation from Heidegger’s translation of Plato: “all great things stand up in a storm” (p. 147). Indeed, throughout his entire life, Paul Edward Gottfried has been able to “remain steadfast in a crisis” (p. 147). ■