

Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn: A Memoir

Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn (EKL) was one of the most extraordinary Central European thinkers and writers in this now closing century. Extraordinary, because both the scope of his knowledge and the direction of his ideology were (and are) different from such famous Central European social thinkers as Weber, Spann, Schmitt, Spengler, Heidegger, Popper, Hayek, v. Mises, Heer, Habermas, et al. Yet he had one thing in common with them: the Austrian-German essence of his character and of the exposition of his thought. At the same time he was *sui generis*: one, but only one, reason why he had not received the wide intellectual recognition he may have deserved—outside of conservative circles (mainly, though not exclusively, American), that is.

His very presence was impressive. Tall and spare, in some ways aristocratic, he stood out among groups of people of all kinds; when he started to talk, in a heady and sometimes high-pitched voice, people were, almost always, forced to listen, since he rather instantly had some stunning (and, to some, even showing) things to say. He had the markings of genius. He spoke *and* understood (not an automatic combina-

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And now another paradox: it was five or six years *after* his departure from America that his influence within—the then only beginning—American conservative movement began to appear. Three elements were involved in this. One was the publication, in English, of his *Liberty or Equality* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1952, reprinted since) which is *still* his most important book: a *summa theologica* of his entire political philosophy. It came to the attention of Bill Buckley a few years before the start of *National Review*, which provided the second element in EKL's career and influence: his frequent articles in *National Review* for more than thirty years—indeed, for awhile he was *National Review's* principal European correspondent. The third, and related, element was his assiduous lecturing across the United States, about three months each year, to various conservative groups. His performances as a lecturer were memorable.

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conservative and, to some extent, hierarchical and authoritarian philosophy of certain Austrian and German thinkers, reacting not only against Socialism but against what seemed to be the antiquated and corrupt institutions of parliamentary democracy and liberalism. It is EKL's merit that—unlike many other young thinkers of that trend—he withstood the temptations of sympathizing with National Socialism (and, at least to some extent, with Italian Fascism). In the United States he was much impressed with the wisdom of some of the Founders, with their insistence of founding not a democracy but a republic. Such conservative theses—together with his stern anti-Communism—evoked the first response from Bill Buckley and others. EKL's main doctrine may be summed up as follows: The cult of Equality is the opposite of that of Liberty; Democracy, almost inevitably, tends to be both Leftist and ochlocratic; civilization rests on the rule of the "Right." In this he was largely in the tradition of such thinkers as Burke, John Adams, Burckhardt, Tocqueville, Ortega y Gasset. He wrote many treatises and books, almost all of them devoted to his favorite arguments. His last publication, *Demokratie—eine Analyse* (Stocker, Graz, 1998) is a masterfully terse summary of the near-encyclopedic and sometimes diffuse *Liberty or Equality*. On his 85th birthday the respectable Viennese newspaper *Die Presse* wrote of EKL, admiringly: "The old lion can still roar." So he was.

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