

A Pioneer American Conservative

Political Philosophy and Cultural Renewal: Selected Essays

by Francis Graham Wilson

edited by H. Lee Cheek, Jr., M. Susan Power, Kathy B. Cheek
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Francis Graham Wilson was a Texan by birth, a Catholic by conversion, and a political scientist by vocation. He taught at the University of Illinois for almost three decades, emerging on campus shortly after his arrival in 1939 as a practicing conservative. A dignified professional with a reserved cast, Wilson spent much of his intellectual life traversing broad expanses of Western culture like a kind of hardshell prospector in quest of deposits of truth. Although perhaps unfamiliar to conservatives of this generation, Wilson marched in the vanguard of the postwar movement that recovered a conservative tradition in the United States and elevated it to national respectability. In 1976, the year of his death, the *National Review* paid tribute to his mature and rigorous presence, “adding cement to the tentative scaffolding which a legion of young [conservative] scholars were painstakingly constructing.”

Wilson had a versatile and capacious mind. During a forty-year career he published dozens of books and articles on such diverse topics as international labor relations, political theory, propaganda and public opinion, American political history, and Spanish traditionalism. His second

book *The Elements of Modern Politics* (1936) stands out both as an erudite primer in Western political principles and as a clothbound relic of a lost world inhabited by professors who actually valued their inheritance highly enough to mandate an undergraduate acquaintance with it.

Wilson’s *American Political Mind* (1949), another interpretive primer, also merits attention and invites comparison with Richard Hofstadter’s far more celebrated text, *The American Political Tradition*, published one year before. Wilson lacked a felicitous prose style, but his volume surpasses Hofstadter’s in historical substance and lasting insights, especially in covering conservative and southern thinkers. (To underscore the point, compare Hofstadter’s overwrought portrayal of John C. Calhoun as the “Marx of the Master Class” with Wilson’s republican formulation of Calhoun’s thinking). Wilson served as an editorial adviser to *Modern Age* from its inception, and a 1972 issue of the journal

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featured what appears to have been his last publication: a critical appreciation of the political thought of Willmoore Kendall, Wilson's most brilliant student.

In the spirit of recovery, H. Lee Cheek, Jr., M. Susan Power, and Kathy B. Cheek have assembled fourteen of Wilson's published and unpublished essays into a coherent whole of three parts. Of the nine previously published essays, all but one date from the 1940s. The first three essays reveal Wilson at work, erecting theoretical scaffolding in response to the foundational question: "What kind of creature is Man?" The five essays in Part 2 speak explicitly to Wilson's development of a philosophy of conservatism. Each of the final six essays in Part 3 delve into significant issues in American political history. The anthology also contains a brief introduction by the editors, an appreciation of Wilson by Power, who completed her dissertation under his supervision, and a bibliography of Wilson's principal writings.

Catholicism and history informed Wilson's view of man as a conflicted being with a God-given moral sense that was engaged in timeless combat with a sinful nature. Modern man, Wilson believed, had lost his moorings in a deluge of ideologies. The totalitarian temptation of his own time derived from what Wilson called "the superstition of the future," a utopian promise predicated on an ahistorical premise about the infinite malleability of man. If man had no innate nature, then the ethical in politics

must remain external to him, sustained by the imperative of what he should be, not by the blunt reality of what he is. In the process of trying to realize the grand illusion of a heaven on earth, modern secular elites, no longer "burdened" by the Christian tradi-

tion, were committing unprecedented crimes—yet justifying them as needed, even salutary, public policy, in trying to effect transcendental goals. In this revolutionary climate of all-is-possible, ideology had shed its original pejorative connotation acquired during the Napoleonic era as a kind of wild speculation, regardless of truth. In the twentieth century the concept had metamorphosed into a potent dynamic of ideas, rousing the masses to disaffection by claiming to offer a solution to their

existential misery. The revolutionary love of mankind, however, turned out to be a grim swindle, for revolutionaries love only abstract man, in whose name revolution becomes perpetual.

Russell Kirk admired Wilson and encouraged the editors to undertake this project. The conservatism of both men had much in common. Wilson's pioneering efforts to define the conservative mind in the early 1940s charted a traditionalist course, and no doubt helped prepare the way for Kirk by clearing away a good deal of the rubbish. In "The Political Philosophy of Conservatism," one of the unpublished essays written during a more senior stage of his life and now published here, Wilson seemed to echo Kirk on the essentials: "The conservative



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mind, even the factual and realistic, has insisted that some truth is knowable, that some social orders are better than others, that there is a transcendent order, and it is not immanent but separated from the human.”

Perhaps because of Kirk’s influence, Wilson changed his mind about Edmund Burke. In “A Theory of Conservatism” (1941), Wilson’s first serious meditation on the meaning of conservatism, he dismisses Burke as a “sentimentalist” and conservative “propagandist,” not a system builder of the stature of “Machiavelli, Hegel, Spengler, Pareto, or Mosca.” But in the unpublished essay on the philosophy of conservatism included in this anthology, Wilson not only recites Burke at length on the rights of man, but reveres him for composing “one of the most impressive lists of the proper qualities of society” ever written.

In 1941 Wilson began by wondering whether conservatives really knew what they were supposed to conserve. The tumultuous times, it seems, had sharpened his own sense of moral obligation, and he challenged conservatives to translate their passive sensibilities into a more formal politics capable of relieving a beleaguered civilization from the combined attack of “mass movement and irresponsible oligarchy.” To his credit, Wilson had more than Germany and the Soviet Union in mind. From the outset Wilson, like Kirk, denied that conservatism was an ideology. Nor did it mean merely a defense of the status quo. Conservatives wanted no new world, to be sure, but conservatism as a philosophy of life embodied a theory of change that, at any given historical moment, could be reformist, restorationist, or reactionary, depending on the status in society of the permanent things.

On one hand, a conservative might readily respond to a call for Christian char-

ity to alleviate the conditions of inequality among the poor. On the other hand, he should recoil at the prospect of a statist crusade designed to abolish the fact of inequality itself. One of the major weaknesses of conservatism, argued Wilson, “appears in not knowing always what are the fundamental propositions supporting its manner of living, and an inability to judge the consequences of political and economic mutation.” Wilson urged a close examination of history to redress the problem. Acceptance of conservative values, after all, required a certain amount of political realism and a refined sense of continuity, for no “opposing philosophy” imposed more limits on the human will. “Anyone is a revolutionary who has no respect for the past.” Respect for history attended by a reasoned valuation of its enduring patterns maintain tradition. And on that rock, moral order invariably rests.

The editors credit Wilson with an original interpretation of the development of American culture and politics. And in truth, long before the idea of an early-American civic republicanism took hold in the academy, Wilson dissented from the ascendant liberal-individualist paradigm for understanding the American founding. Indeed, Wilson’s careful reading of an impressive range of primary sources offered compelling evidence of a vital conservative tradition in the making of the republic, generally, and in the South particularly. Wilson paid homage to America’s British inheritance, but he also extended his vision to a broader European culture that valued community, mixed government, and civil freedom. He detected in American federalism the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, by which the central authority performs only those tasks that cannot be done more effectively at the regional or local level. The Declaration of Independence, he asserted,

contained the lineaments of Saint Thomas Aquinas and his synthesis of Christian and Aristotelian ideas. Thomas Jefferson, about whom Wilson had mixed feelings, inscribed in the Declaration “the doctrine of natural law and rights” with “great simplicity and dignity”—although, in a criticism that also could have been addressed to Wilson, Jefferson “hardly discussed the foundation of his doctrine of natural rights.”

Wilson understood man to be a quintessentially social being. For him, the Great Experiment that was America originated in a triumphant expression of organic unity, not possessive individualism. The Framers wrote the Constitution with anti-majoritarian skepticism, not with an overarching democratic faith. *The Federalist*, like the conservative mind, advocated a

philosophy of limits. What then is American democracy? asked Wilson. “We define democracy as it came to be in Europe since the Whig Revolution in England. In this way, democracy is a system in which a representative body is said to have the right to express, or to arrange for the expression, of the sovereignty of the community.”

Wilson measured up to his own exacting standard of what the conservative spirit should be. He shouldered a great responsibility with elán and moved beyond the defensive, reaching out boldly “to blend the fading past and the emerging future into an imaginative present.” With this rich sampling of Wilson’s work, the editors have measured up to that standard as well.