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A Profound and Lyrical Historian

Equality, Decadence, and Modernity: The Collected Essays of Stephen J. Tonsor. Edited by Gregory L. Schneider. ISI Books, 2005.

Few who were fortunate enough, as I was, to have heard Professor Stephen J. Tonsor (now emeritus) lecture on European intellectual history at the University of Michigan will likely forget the experience. In an age when many educators use technology and informality to disguise their lack of command, Tonsor was a surprising—and most welcome—throwback. Earnest and formal, he peered out across his crowded classroom through black-rimmed glasses, delivering elegant, handwritten lectures with all the confidence of a man who had not only achieved mastery over his subject but who had been given a rare glimpse into the inner philosophical—and spiritual—groundings of his discipline. No effete egghead, this barrel-chested product of small-town Illinois also knew how to cut to the proverbial chase with unforgettable abruptness and wit. I recall his blunt dismissal of Stephen J. Gould's theory of punctuated equilibrium (or sudden evolutionary change): "He is, after all—a Marxist!"

What few of us knew (but perhaps should have suspected) was that our urbane, pugnacious, and decidedly reactionary professor was one of the founding members of the conservative intellectual movement in America. Along with Russell Kirk, Frank

Meyer, M. Stanton Evans, Henry Regnery, and Richard Weaver, Tonsor had helped to define, elucidate, and nurture the ideas that would over the last half-century form the bedrock of what is now America's dominant political philosophy. Although Tonsor never became a household name (he never published a book-length historical monograph), his reputation among traditionalist conservatives—based largely on virtuoso performances at Philadelphia Society meetings, as well as scores of essays published in conservative journals—is considerable. Yet in this age of think-tank television celebrity, Tonsor's legacy seemed destined to be overshadowed, if not entirely lost, to future generations of conservatives.

It is therefore an event of no small importance that ISI Books has chosen to publish *Equality, Decadence, and Modernity: The Collected Essays of Stephen J. Tonsor*. Comprised of articles culled from *National Review*, *Modern Age*, and the *Intercollegiate Review* (among other journals), as well as

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chapters from unfinished works on the history of the idea of equality and the problem of decadence, this collection is nothing less than an intellectual tour de force. If Russell Kirk's *Conservative Mind* provides the definitive analysis of the development of conservative ideas in American history, then Tonsor's readable essays, taken as a whole, represent a parallel—and unapologetically right-wing—disquisition on the interplay of politics and culture in the Western tradition as a whole. Here, Tonsor fearlessly tackles some of the most elemental civilizational questions of interest to modern-day conservatives: What is the role of politics and politicians in creating a just society? Is the West decadent? What is the role of aristocracy in the creation of culture? What is God's imprint on the historical process? Are conservatism and modernity fated to be at war with each other? What are the positive limits of science? How should we understand the workings of myth in civilization? Is human society naturally hierarchical? Should conservatives be Republicans? And on, and on.

In Tonsor, the pithy and polemical exist alongside insights of great lyricism and philosophical power. His celebrated (and infamous) essay, "Why I Too Am Not a Neoconservative," may be best known for this savage swipe at the legitimacy of the neocons:

It has always struck me as odd, even perverse, that former Marxists have been permitted, yes invited, to play such a leading role in the Conservative movement of the twentieth century. It is a splendid thing when the town whore gets religion and joins the church. Now and then she makes a good choir director, but when she begins to tell the minister what he ought to say in his Sunday sermons, matters have been carried too far.

Yet the same essay also contains one of the most penetrating—and admittedly, no less polemical—definitions of conservatism ever written:

Conservatism has its roots in a much older tradition [than the modernism of the neocons]. Its worldview is Roman or Anglo-Catholic; its political philosophy Aristotelian and Thomist; its concerns, moral and ethical; its culture, that of Christian humanism. Most old-fashioned Conservatives are free of metaphysical anxiety and as happy as clams in a world that bears the unmistakable imprint of God's ordering hand. They are free of alienation, and they have absolutely no hopes of a utopian social order. They live with sin and tragedy, not as a consequence of inadequate social engineering but as a consequence of man's sin and disorder. They believe that human institutions and human culture are subject to the judgment of God, and they hold that the most effective political instrument is prayer and a commitment to try to understand and do the will of God.

Yet despite Tonsor's willingness to put his intellectual and ideological cards on the table, the more one reads his work, the more one realizes how difficult it is to place a definitive label on him. "I don't subscribe to a conservative credo—a kind of 39 articles of the Right," he wrote in response to a charge that he was not a "real conservative." "I never have abdicated my moral autonomy and my rationality and don't intend to now that I am an old man." Indeed, some of Tonsor's best writing is as counterintuitive as it is brilliant. In "The United States as a 'Revolutionary Society,'" Tonsor slyly contends—a *la* Jean-François Revel in *Without Marx and Jesus*—that despite the Left's caricature of America as an ossified, retrograde society, it is, on the contrary, the only country to have actually instituted what could be described as a "permanent revolution." In his view, America's radical embrace of market economics along with its delicate balancing act between the demands of equality and liberty has kept it in a perpetual and, to an extent, healthy state of cultural and political flux.

This does not mean, of course, that Tonsor is or has always been content with the status quo—far from it. During the

radicalism and dislocations of the early 1970s, he lashed out with pure Tonsorian bile: “Today we are being overwhelmed by a tidal wave of filth. Every tarnished and disreputable motive, every despicable and ignoble action, every degraded and perverted sentiment, every vulgar and ugly view is paraded and praised in the press and from the pulpit, in the halls of the legislature and from the endowed chairs of the university.”

What concerned Tonsor at the time and what is arguably the central theme of all his writings is that society is most vulnerable when it loses—or denies—its connection to the past. For Tonsor, as for Burke, the steady pull of history not only defines us, it serves to temper and guide our actions—that is, if we are willing to let it:

There is, today, a very real danger that in a revolutionary era we will sever our last ties with the common humanity and common experience that history represents and wholly surrender ourselves to a nihilistic present or to a future empty of everything but the most common materialistic beguilements; that we will forget what being human has meant and will abandon any aspiration to what being more perfectly human might mean. There is a danger that we will impoverish ourselves through a loss of both the past and the future, for the quality of the future is such that it cannot exist in any meaningful sense without the sustaining ground of past experience.

But history, Tonsor knows, can never be completely erased or jettisoned—its persistence a maddening inconvenience to the claims and aspirations of contemporary society:



Stephen J. Tonsor

History has become an unbearable burden for modern man.... To a far greater degree than any contemporary discipline history insists on diversity, complexity, multiplicity, randomness, and in its most mysterious moments general confusion. The demands for generalization, symmetry, unity, predictability, and utilitarian purposefulness that are so much an aspect of the modern zeitgeist are cruelly rebuffed by history. Moreover, in spite of its confusion and multiplicity, history seems constantly to demand human choice, value judgments, and moral actions, insisting that the historical moment par excellence lies not in synthetic generalization but in the individuating moment of choice.... Contemporary man seeks a secure, predictable, and permissive world, and history stands in the way.

Has there ever been a more devastating rejoinder to the anti-historical claims of leftism, postmodernism, and muddle-headed social science?

History is one of the indispensable disciplines of the humanities and Professor Tonsor proved to be as humane as he was inspiring. In the coldest depths of the Michigan winter, he continued a long tradition by inviting our entire class to his home for sherry and a delicious brunch prepared by Mrs. Tonsor. To undergraduates resigned to dorm food and cramped, drafty lodgings, those few hours of civilized conversation amid the glow of a warm fire meant more than he'll ever know. My advice is to find a quiet, comfortable spot and spend a couple of hours this winter with *Equality, Decadence, and Modernity*—your own private tutorial with one of America's most profound teachers of history and conservative cultural critics.