

## *Conservative Statesman*

*Edward B. McLean*

**The American Conservative Movement: The Philosophical Founders,**  
by John P. East, *Chicago: Regnery Gateway, Inc., 1987. 279 pp. \$18.95.*

THIS BOOK CONTAINS a careful examination of seven major writers whose names are familiar to persons who fashion themselves conservative or libertarian. It might be noted that these writers should also be known to those who teach political philosophy in American colleges and universities, for each is a major contributor in the field of political theory.

Senator John P. East's examination of the philosophical founders of the conservative movement in America—Russell Kirk, Richard M. Weaver, Frank S. Meyer, Willmoore Kendall, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and Ludwig von Mises—provides for all readers, academic and non-academic, an accessible examination of these theorists. The book is written in a clear, interesting, straightforward style. Its organization enables a reader to become familiar with the ideas of one theorist and to contrast that theorist with the others. In addition, East's examination of these seven theorists provides insight into the content and scope of the political theory he himself had adopted as a guide to his own public service.

The inclusion of Ludwig von Mises in this book, however, created a problem for East. Mises is recognized as one of the major theorists of the free market and is

usually considered a libertarian. East attempts to justify the inclusion of Mises by pointing out that Mises was not antagonistic to the nature of the inquiry undertaken by the other six writers surveyed in this book. Indeed, Mises valued the examination of what he called "ultimate questions" and had no hostile feeling towards the conservatives who examined them. Nonetheless, Meyer, Kirk, and Strauss condemn libertarian ideas. Such ideas, they maintain, foster the hedonism, self-aggrandizement, and boredom that threaten Western culture. The best they can say of libertarianism is that it evidences concern about the loss of human freedom and choice, but beyond this they can find little to commend it.

On balance, however, East justifies his inclusion of Mises. Conservative thought that ignores the importance of a free market, and what it does in counterbalancing intrusive and expanding government, is weakened in its ability to provide wise counsel. It may be admitted that Mises's inclusion here is stretching the concept of conservative thought a bit too far, but East believes that conservatives do not view Mises as an enemy but as an ally in the struggle to restore the intellectual and spiritual tradition in the West and in combating collectivist and utopian thought. They also admire Mises's personal courage and conviction.

The theorists examined in East's book all decry the state of contemporary

Western culture. Basically they see two existing forms of dissolution and disorder. First, they condemn the growth of utopianism, totalitarianism, and elitism. Utopian ideology, when it dominates political thought and action, assumes that a paradise can be constructed on earth by human will. This aspiration is part of the "gnosticism" of which Voegelin writes. Such a view removes all moral substance from man and pursues the vision of remaking man and the world of which he is a part. This is to be achieved by the unaided will of man. Although such utopian movements are mere replicas of former tyrannies, they are viewed contemporarily, as Strauss says, as a means of "secular redemption." This utopian vision, Meyer points out, requires the elimination of the autonomous person. The individual must be molded to fit into the greater whole that will reap the fruits of a promised utopia. In addressing the phenomenon of utopianism in America, Kendall points out that utopians, when they fail to achieve their object, do not re-examine their views but rather "double their efforts." Utopianism, according to all of these theorists, breeds fanaticism, which in turn breeds the horror of modern death camps and mass exterminations.

However, this utopian vision is not possible unless the concept of man as a creature of God is rejected. Modern political thought does not view man as a part of a cosmic order to which he must accommodate himself. Man is viewed as a creator of himself and his world. Those who fail to understand this vision must be remade by those who do—the elites that are inherent in the very idea of utopia. Men become objects that are forced to conform to an "idea" of what is appropriate for them, as this is conceived by the dominant elite. Humanity, dignity, and sacredness of the individual no longer influence the acting polity. East observes that modernism views men as material objects to be ordered and arranged "as one might order and arrange cinder blocks." Modern collective movements are necessarily dominated by elites that pulverize

differences and diversity in order to form a collective mass which exhibits no distinction or difference except that between the controlling elite and those who are controlled. As Kirk describes it, "the ideologue . . . seeks to impose upon mankind his view of what the perfected good life should be." Such collectivism is evidenced in its milder form in the welfare state and in its most virulent form in modern totalitarian systems such as National Socialism or Communism.

The other development found in modern society is that men become afflicted with boredom. There is no identifiable purpose to life. The concepts of duty, obligation, humility, and awe no longer direct men's lives towards meaningful activity, relations, or contentment. It is at this point that what Kirk calls the "diabolic imagination" begins to dominate man's day-to-day purposes and activities. It is the era of the "decadent society" in which the pursuit of the senses is matched only by the pursuit of power. Kendall cites the perniciousness of the doctrines of John Stuart Mill and the vacuous notions of the "open society" which contribute to the decay of a purposeful order, or what he calls "public orthodoxy." What the advocates of the open society have called for is a cult of "individual eccentricity," which culminates in social dissolution. Perversely, the advocates of libertine individualism seek to create conditions which inevitably produce the opposite of what they advocate—the closed society.

Richard Weaver more thoroughly examines the effects of modernism, with its rejection of the transcendent and integrating ideals of Western culture in all areas of culture—art, literature, music, journalism. He sees nominalism as the cause, but the effect is similar to that conceived by the other figures in this book. The frenzy of politics without anchor in the great tradition of Western thought "is a politics of infinite dispersion." The culmination is the total collapse of the moral order. The same effect is perceived by Strauss and Voegelin: the collapse of the integrating core of belief, the disappearance of value,

and the pursuit of egoistic satisfaction and pleasure. Perhaps Kendall sees the consequence of this development more clearly than others when he points out that when the disintegration has become almost total, it is power that must provide some semblance of order, but it will not be an order that is consonant with man as man.

Each of these theorists is desirous of reinstating good order in the Western world. This restoration would not be of a reactionary nature. Voegelin, Strauss, and Weaver provide their prescriptions in terms of recapturing the essences of the classical and biblical heritage to inform this restoration. Meyer contends that the restoration must be explicitly Christian in its construction, for he feels that such a restoration cannot be one of eclectic choice among variously fragmented political philosophies. For Kendall the restoration would reconstruct and amplify a "public orthodoxy" reflecting the "character and tone of the community." In Kendall's writing this was the political order established by the fundamental documents and doctrines of the American founding, as derived from classical and biblical sources. The failure of a society to affirm this "public orthodoxy" plunges it into political and moral dissolution. For Kirk, on the other hand, the restoration would involve the recapturing of the "moral imagination." Relying heavily on Burke's conception of this term, Kirk feels that it is this "moral imagination" which would serve as the informing principle for the society in recapturing the values that are critical for civilized existence. For Kirk, too, these values are derived from the West's classical and biblical heritage.

Despite differences in emphases among these theorists, they commonly believe that societies which are not predicated on transcendent values are destined to disorder, conflict, and immorality. Virtue is the basic concept to which each of their prescriptions is linked. A virtuous citizenry is essential for a virtuous and just society. Confronting this need is the task of society at large. It is not and cannot be a task consigned to the state. Were the lat-

ter course to be followed, such prescriptions would differ little from the distortion of the state's role that is endorsed by utopians, collectivists, and egalitarians.

What these theorists stress is a matter that seems to be forgotten in the modern dialogue on politics, and that is that the state is a derivative institution in all senses of the term. It is derived from the necessity of the community to have in place an agency equipped to manage disagreement and conflict, but which will do so in conformance with the values shared by the community and not drawn from sources which are not rooted in the conscience and belief of the population. The state's mode of decision, and the substance of those decisions, are derived from these values. Obviously, wrong values can serve to distort the state and its function. What is optimistic in all of these theorists' beliefs is that the choice of values to use is not a random one, but rather a choice that comes directly from the heritage of Western thought. All agree that the sources from which such values should be taken are the classical and biblical legacies of the West.

For each of these theorists the advancement in man's political thought is attributable to ancient Greece, particularly to Plato. Central to Plato's thought was the belief that there was a pre-existing and transcendent order that was accessible, at least in part, to the inquiry of human reason. Such an inquiry is conducted with piety and awe in recognition of the fact that man is merely a part of a design and that his legitimate task is to discern his place in that scheme. At the apex of this order reside Good and Truth, and the arduous and demanding task for man is to ascend to these. Within the realm of man's understanding is the nature of the "good political order," which he is obliged to adopt and institute. To do so is to obtain virtue. In the search for the good political order man will in turn establish Good and Virtue in himself and foster justice. In his quest he will understand the nature of hierarchy, difference, and the proper role for men to play in their societies. Achiev-

ing these aims enables men to comprehend the essentiality of ordering all things in relation to their proper end and function.

Despite their shared appreciation of the role of classical thought in fashioning and informing political theory, all seven theorists agree that political theory was not perfected in the classical world. The wholeness and completeness of political thought must be the result of the biblical heritage. For Strauss the biblical heritage is to be found in the Old Testament and in the reconcilability of Judaism with Platonism, which he felt had been accomplished in the work of Maimonides. As East notes, Strauss was not hostile towards Christianity. Indeed, he felt that there was every reason for mutual respect between Judaism and Christianity, which share a common ground in the war with "scientism and humanism." Whereas Strauss argues that the Western heritage can be sufficient with Judaism, Kirk, Meyer, Voegelin, and Weaver argue that classical thought cannot be made whole without Christianity. According to Meyer the place of the individual as a valued and sacred being is incomplete without the Incarnation.

Despite the cleavages that exist among these theorists regarding the specifics of the West's biblical heritage, they are all in agreement that this biblical heritage, perhaps even more than the classical, enunciates clearly the nature of man as a finite creature, living in an imperfect, and imperfectible, world. The biblical tradition underscores and makes even more central the need for man to live in awe of the

world of which he is a part, to be reverent to a transcendent truth which is not of his fashioning, and to be humble in his approach to his God, to himself, and to his fellow man. His life is given to duty, obligation, and service. The reality of the world is that to which man must adapt and from which he should not seek escape by intellectual fabrications of utopias or the use of power and will.

It is particularly fitting that this volume is the work of the late Senator John P. East. He is one of the "rare figures" in American public life whose service as a national statesman testifies to the possibility the American political order has of attracting men of competence and virtue to serve the Republic. East's contributions to the American political order were extraordinary and admirable. His untimely death was a great loss to the Republic and to the conservative movement in America. Along with his career as a statesman, East was an outstanding teacher, scholar, and political theorist. It is in this latter role that he wrote this posthumously published book, which should be in every college and university library collection, as well as in the private libraries of those who teach political theory, and in the private libraries of those who consider themselves conservatives or libertarians.

The central message of East's book is a hopeful one. There is no promise of an easy task or even a promise of success. What comes out clearly here is that East believes that it is in the effort to help man recognize his duty to himself, to his God, and to his fellow man that one finds his ultimate reward.