

that view is correct, surely we are now moving into an era when the twin ideologies of economic progress and liberationist freedom must be viewed as skeptically as we have learned to view the ideology of political progress. It is to such a chastened cultural conservatism that Wendell Berry calls us.

A Neglected Political Thinker

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The Life and Thought of Aurel Kolnai,

by Francis Dunlop, *Aldershot:*

Ashgate, 2002. 351pp.

THERE ARE CONSERVATIVES, and then there are conservatives. To separate the truly profound ones from the mere dabblers, we might employ what I call the Thorne Standard. Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1867) describes the genuine article, the Thornes of Ullathorne, a nineteenth-century gentry family who are unable to reconcile themselves to the Norman conquest of 1066. By even such an exacting measure, Aurel Thomas Kolnai (1900-1973) passes with flying colors. Indeed, here is a twentieth-century thinker who understands America as a nation suffering still from the original sin of rebellion against King George III!

It can be no surprise that a thinker who holds such views is not very well known. He is not nearly as famous as many of the people he met and engaged, at length, in philosophical conversation: Husserl, Levinas, Maritain, Popper, Freud, and von Mises, to name a few. Nevertheless, and against all odds, there is evidence of new

interest in Kolnai, three decades after his death. Collections of his essays have been appearing in recent years, and Open Court is shortly to publish in book form a long Kolnai essay, which had impressed Husserl, on the phenomenology of disgust. The publication of Francis Dunlop's *The Life and Thought of Aurel Kolnai* will also do much to advance Kolnai's growing reputation.

Dunlop's real contribution here lies in his effort to discuss Kolnai's books and articles along with the private letters he was writing simultaneously. This might not seem much of an accomplishment, but Kolnai wrote in five languages (including his native Hungarian); much of his work appears in obscure places or remained unpublished at his death; and, of course, Dunlop had to hunt down all the various correspondence.

Some of these letters are of enormous theoretical value and deserve to be published in an edited format. For example, one missive sent to a number of Spanish intellectuals, Kolnai's "Carta-Memoria," is a blueprint for a constitution and is as fascinating as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's suggestions for a mixed regime in *Rebuilding Russia* (1991). I would have liked to see this letter printed in full in an appendix. Readers who are introduced to Kolnai's profound reservations about democracy immediately want to know what his alternative might be, and the "Carta-Memoria" is quite an alternative. He proposes a mixed regime that includes the Crown, a "National Institute" dependent on the Crown and charged with the task of elevating public taste, and an "active citizenry," about one sixth of the population, elected for life, who vote for candidates to parliament.

Dunlop has two thoughtful pages on this "compenetration" constitution of Kolnai's. And here is another great value to this biography. The few scholars who work on Kolnai are divided in their judgments of how sympathetic he was to de-

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mocracy and to liberalism. As the pages of this biography progress, it becomes clear that Kolnai's conservatism increasingly hardened and became a very subtle "Throne and Altar" position, far removed from either democracy or liberalism. That "Throne and Altar" conservatism could be arrived at by an original and inquiring philosophical mind in the middle of the twentieth century raises serious questions for those who confidently assert that only some version of liberal democracy is "historically available" to us.

Contemporary conservatives need to read Kolnai for many reasons, but the two most urgent are Kolnai's concept of *privilege* and his ethical theory. His writings from the late 1940s onwards contain careful analyses of the inner dynamic of progressive democracy towards a destruction of political pluralism and liberty. To halt this destruction, Kolnai sought to defend and promote *privilege* as a bulwark against liberal totalitarianism. This idea of privilege is undoubtedly Kolnai's most powerful intervention in political philosophy.

Pierre Manent has commented that Kolnai could hardly have been more scandalous if he had tried: there is no idea more reviled in democratic societies than that of privilege. Kolnai's view may owe something to Tocqueville, who noted that as equality comes to define a society more and more, hostility to privilege will intensify as its effrontery becomes more evident. Kolnai's essays on privilege need to be read, because those committed to ordered liberty have the urgent task of identifying where privilege still exists and where it ought to be defended, and then of mounting the arguments that may ensure that such privilege survives.

Who can doubt, for example, that the push for a multicultural canon at our colleges and universities is animated by a desire to destroy the privilege granted to the accomplishments of the Western, Christian heritage? Or that the advocacy

of gay marriage is motivated by the desire to deny the privileged access of heterosexuals to marriage? Or that advocates of international courts aim to remove the privilege of nations to hold jurisdiction over their nationals? The consequence in all such cases is precisely what Kolnai feared: an identitarianism in value and in practice that eradicates political pluralism and liberty. It is the task of conservative intellectuals to take Kolnai's abstract formulations and put them to work in the political controversies of our day.

Besides his striking and perhaps foundational contributions to political thought, Kolnai developed in the course of many essays an original conservative ethics. He wrote almost all of these ethical essays after he moved to England in 1955. As Dunlop makes clear, it is particularly interesting that Kolnai doggedly presented these papers at academic meetings throughout England and thereby earned the respect of moral philosophers, like Bernard Williams, who otherwise would not have had any attraction to conservative views. Kolnai's "consensual ethics" has barely been studied, but it appears to be a fruitful combination of Scheler's value ethics and something like a Thomistic natural law ethics resting in the very structure of human sensuality. The forthcoming publication of his essay on disgust will prompt new study of Kolnai's ethical thought, and I suspect continuities will be found between it and Leon Kass's seminal essay, "The Wisdom of Repugnance."

A real failing of Dunlop's biography is that it leaves unexplained how exactly Kolnai moved from the Christian left to the Christian right. This failing is all the more glaring because Dunlop also provides no explanation for the sheer intellectual power of the writings that mark Kolnai's political conversion. The essays which began to appear shortly after his arrival in Canada in the late 1940s are simply stunning. Anyone looking for con-

servative political philosophy at the highest level will marvel at the originality and power of this work.

Yet, where did these ideas come from? Who had Kolnai been reading? What reflections on the war had helped him to develop so complex and rigorous a formulation of conservative philosophy? Dunlop leaves these questions unasked. Kolnai is one of those thinkers who never tells you who he has been reading. A reader must work hard to identify his basic intellectual allegiances. These were many, and sometimes unexpected. For instance, Dunlop has found a document in which Kolnai urges Roman Catholic intellectuals to find much of use in Thomas Reid, one of the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Kolnai was a Jewish convert to Catholicism and Dunlop provides an appendix in which he reflects on the character of his Catholicism. He stresses Kolnai's stated criticisms of the Thomism he knew at the Catholic university of Laval, in Quebec, but one ought not hang too much on this. One of the crucial passages in all of Kolnai's work regards what sort of equality ought to characterize the social and political orders once it is accepted that privilege must be defended.

In his essay "The Meaning of the 'Common Man'" Kolnai identifies the central mistake of progressive thinking: the tendency to extend the claims to equality that emerge in extreme circumstances into claims valid in the normal course of social life. A nobleman and a peasant are starving and there is a single loaf of bread: both, says Kolnai, have a natural right to an equal share. However, this marginal situation cannot be taken as normative and regulative of the typical course of social and political life. Clearly, Kolnai here is reprising Aquinas's reflections on property in the *Summa*, with its conclusion that *in extremis* property rights are suspended—albeit to return once the

social situation has normalized. Evidently, Kolnai is a Thomist with respect to natural rights. They may in fact exist, but in the normal run of things they do not help us to understand how the social world ought to be organized.

For those interested in Catholic political philosophy, the work of John Paul II can be fruitfully read alongside Kolnai. Both thinkers share an Eastern European background, both wrote doctoral dissertations on the ethics of Max Scheler, and both have written books on sexual ethics. Actually, there is some urgency to study the relationship between these two thinkers, insofar as the exact character of John Paul II's social philosophy is currently contested. Some commentators want to cast Wojtyla's philosophy as a variety of Catholic progressivism against more conservative interpreters like Alasdair MacIntyre.

Ascertaining the continuities between Kolnai and John Paul II will help identify the real legacy of what is certainly an historical pontificate. In an odd way, one such study does already exist. A perusal of the notes to Roger Scruton's *Sexual Desire* (1986) finds that author acknowledging that his theory is similar to that of both John Paul II and Kolnai. And Scruton's book still excites liberal reactions: see, for example, Martha Nussbaum's *Sex and Social Justice* (1999), pages 202-209.

Despite the odd reservation, Dunlop's biography will surely become the starting point for future studies of Kolnai. He has identified Kolnai's writings, where to find them, in what historical, political, and personal circumstances they were written, and he has discussed the private correspondence that establishes crucial intellectual details of Kolnai's convictions. He has also tried to communicate just how personally eccentric Kolnai was—and in all fairness it must be said that the man was peculiar. The inclusion of these personal vignettes lends the book

a humorous, even grotesque dimension, which Kolnai himself would have much appreciated.

Prophet of Naked Utility

PATRICK J. WALSH

Niccolo's Smile by Maurizio Viroli;
Translated from the Italian by
Antony Shugaar, *New York: Farrar,
Straus & Giroux, 2000. xv + 271 pp.*

MANY ADJECTIVES ARE USED to describe Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). Most of them conjure associations with the devil, the father of lies. Maurizio Viroli's new biography of "Old Nick," however, is an attempt to portray the human side of this controversial figure, and thus to win him a sympathetic hearing. While sometimes elegantly written, Viroli fails to convince us that "Niccolo's smile" is anything but diabolic.

Born in Renaissance Florence, Machiavelli grew up in an Italy of warring city states, principalities, duchies, and corrupt popes. To make matters worse, the warring powers made various alliances with France and Spain, inviting frequent foreign invasion. It was a world in which life was, indeed, nasty, brutish, and short.

Renaissance means "rebirth." But the era was really both a turning back of the clock to a pre-Christian time and the advent of something entirely new. George Santayana described the Renaissance spirit as an exact reversal of one's baptismal vows. The intellectual world was turning from an otherworldly mysticism of dependence and wonder to a new faith in man's independent ability to change the

temporal world. While the thinkers of the Renaissance looked back to the pagan authors of antiquity for guidance, their unprecedented faith in the powers of profane man gave birth to our modern world.

Machiavelli's political philosophy emerged from his experience in the government of Florence, where for fourteen years he served with distinction as an ambassador and high secretary to the republic. He was a dedicated, honest, hard-working, and brilliant public servant. But his short career came to an end with Spain's brutal invasion of Florence in 1512. The republic was dissolved, the Medici restored, and Machiavelli became a sort of government in exile for the rest of his life.

He retreated to his study, yet longed to return to public affairs. He sought consolation from what he considered a decadent present by delving into the glorious books of the past, famously confiding to a friend: "I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients. And for hours at a time I forget all my trouble, I do not dread poverty, and am not terrified by death. I absorb myself in them completely." Though he turned to the past, he had no reverence for it beyond the useful lessons it might teach. Such a dismissal of the mystery of things in favor of naked utility was characteristic of the new reasoning.

Machiavelli extolled ancient Rome because of its practical achievements. The Greeks he liked less because their philosophy sought an order and idealism based on natural law. Machiavelli could see no order in nature or in history. His philosophy celebrated an order imposed by human will through the strong and innovative exercise of power. Modern princes were weak, he argued, because of the Christian religion's reliance on humility and grace, and its belief in the ultimate futility of human striving. Machiavelli advocated a dogma of human power, and held that men could

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