

Back to Althusius

by Thomas Fleming

Democracy, the God that Failed: The Economics and Politics of Monarchy, Democracy, and Natural Order

by Hans-Hermann Hoppe
New Brunswick, NJ:
Transaction Publishers;
304 pp., \$44.95



Hans-Hermann Hoppe may be the most brilliant and original classical liberal alive today. Often lumped together with the libertarians, of whom he is justly critical, Hoppe was a student of Jürgen Habermas before becoming a disciple of Murray Rothbard and, through Rothbard, of Ludwig von Mises. Hoppe is probably the most important philosopher produced by the Austrian School. Friedrich Hayek and Mises were primarily economists, and Rothbard, though a jack-of-all-trades and a master of many, did his best work as an economic historian. Of the Austrians, Hoppe is one of the few to have taken political philosophy seriously as a primary occupation, and while his conclusions may sometimes take him well beyond the limits of liberal thought, his basic concepts and approach make him an authentic member of the school. This volume, which is an excellent introduction to Hoppe's work, is one of the very few important books produced by the American right in recent years.

In defending private property from the predatory state, Hoppe is in the mainstream of the liberal tradition, and he owes the concept of time preference, which is at the heart of much of his theoretical work, to Mises and Rothbard. Although the theory of time preference can be elaborate, the essence is quite simple. People can be classified as having either a high or low time preference, depending on their willingness to forgo current gratification for a future reward. Those with a high time preference are more insistent upon more immediate gratification, and vice versa. Edward Banfield applied the concept to class distinctions, pointing out that, on the continuum from lower to working to middle to upper middle, the higher a person's class, the lower his time preference. This helps to explain, for ex-

ample, why lower-class people want to be paid at the end of the day, while upper-middle-class people reckon their income as an annual salary.

Hoppe's insight—and it is startling in its simplicity—is to apply time-preference theory to regimes and ruling classes. Rulers that somehow own the country or the state, according to the theory, will be willing to forgo the immediate gratification of high taxes (or ruinous wars for the sake of plunder) in order to pass on the commonwealth to their heirs, while rulers with only a short period in power will be tempted to “loot” (one of Hoppe's favorite words) the country through high taxes, corruption, etc. As it turns out, a well-established monarchical dynasty should be the least onerous regime, while a democratic state that imposes term limits on elected officials would inflict the highest taxes. From Hoppe's perspective, members of the U.S. Congress are like Canadian mosquitoes: The summer is so short that the bloodsucking parasites must be ruthless to the point of recklessness if they are to thrive. In the course of his career, Hoppe has applied this insight to taxation, spending, debt, and corruption, almost always to good effect.

Opponents of big government would have reason to be grateful to Hoppe if he had merely limited his analysis to questions of time preference. In fact, he has gone further, offering fundamental criticism of the simplistic libertarian/liberal ideology that reduces all human relations to a conflict between individuals and the state. Instead of treating immigration as a human right or a function of the labor market, he correctly regards current immigration policies as a system of “forced immigration” that destroys authentic communities.

Unlike libertarians, Hoppe is fully aware that an excessive emphasis on individual rights leads directly to the state centralization that destroys civilization, and he demonstrates clearly that, in the case of Germany, civilization is richest when it is most decentralized. His ideal is something like the Althusian vision of a decentralized and federal Holy Roman Empire (though it is not clear that he has actually studied Althusius).

Hoppe is willing to take his decentralist politics down to the lowest level and sees clearly that the institution of the family is fundamental both to civilization and to liberty: “Families and households must be recognized,” he writes in the conclusion to his chapter “On Coopera-

tion, Tribe, City, State,”

as the source of civilization. It is essential that heads of families and households reassert their ultimate authority as judge in all internal family affairs. (Households must be declared extraterritorial territory, like foreign embassies.)

Hoppe's frank declaration of family autonomy, while a refreshing change from the stale “family values” rhetoric of social conservatives, is not entirely new. There is a long conservative tradition on this point, which he seems to have ignored.

In fact, historical research is not Hoppe's strong suit. Unlike Murray Rothbard, whose explorations of American history often took him into uncharted territory, Hoppe is content, for the most part, with textbook surveys and popular books that can often mislead the unwary. It is simply not sufficient, in a discussion of debt in Greece and Rome, to refer to a general history of interest rates, and if he had actually learned something of the functioning of ancient Greek city-states, he might have understood that even the rulers of a democracy, if they are the natural leaders of a small community, may have a serious concern for the future of their country. Hoppe's strength lies in his ability to conceive a theoretical model; he is far less successful in applying that model to historical reality.

Part of the weakness in his work stems from the thin reading he has done outside the province of liberal political and economic theory. Time after time, he contents himself with citations from Mises, Rothbard, and Bernard de Jouvenel when there are historical or scientific classics from which he might have drawn useful (and corrective) information. The lack of a bibliography makes it difficult to check his sources; a far more serious flaw, however, is his fondness for adopting oversimplified categories and applying them as if they were real. In the period leading up to World War I, for example, he regards England as a monarchy and France as a republic—as if a figurehead British monarch constitutes a substantive difference between the two regimes.

These flaws in his approach become more noticeable and more irritating when he discusses the politics of his own time and his adopted country. By taking a few policies and individual phrases out of context, he tries to indict the nationalist ideology of Patrick Buchanan and

Samuel Francis as encouraging economic oppression and political tyranny. In speeches, he has gone so far as to accuse some conservatives of advocating “social nationalism” or even national socialism. This reckless and dangerous rhetoric plays into the hands of those leftists who would like to smear everyone on the right with the Nazi brush. Hoppe himself, with his brash style and take-no-prisoners response to criticism, has more than once opened himself up to a similar attack. I have heard him refer to criminals, gypsies, and “other human garbage”; even in this book, he concludes that proletarian consumers are more or less subhuman beasts. An enemy, or even an unwary reader, might wrongly conclude that Professor Hoppe is a bit of a “social nationalist” himself. In fact, Hans-Hermann Hoppe (despite protestations to the contrary) is a sentimental German monarchist, fond of his nation’s great traditions and committed to the principles of private property and political liberty.

If Hoppe’s dogmatism (too often unsupported by the necessary scholarship) and arrogance are often exasperating even to his admirers, his obvious merits—intellectual rigor, moral courage, originality—would cover a far greater multitude of intellectual sins than he has so far committed. His work is always interesting (if abominably written—writing in a second language is the least of his problems), and any conservative or libertarian with the slightest interest in political history should buy this book.

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A Conservative in Crisis

by George Carey

**Political, Philosophical, and Cultural
Renewal: Collected Essays**
by Francis Graham Wilson
New Brunswick, NJ:
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263 pp., \$49.95



Those who have only a passing acquaintance with the history of post-

World War II conservatism are not likely even to have heard of Francis Graham Wilson. Yet, before the emergence of William F. Buckley, Jr., and *National Review* or the publication of Russell Kirk’s *Conservative Mind*, Wilson had already marked out the grounds for an intellectual conservatism firmly grounded in the natural-law teachings of the Catholic Church. The chief reason for Wilson’s relative obscurity resides in the fact that he was a reserved individual, a professor of political philosophy most at ease in academic surroundings pursuing his scholarly interests. In the course of his academic career—11 years at the University of Washington (1928-39) and 28 at the University of Illinois (1938-67)—he wrote six books, the most notable being a fine American political-theory text, *The American Political Mind* (1949), and *Public Opinion* (1962), the work he treasured most. *The Case for Conservatism* (1951), which seems to have attracted more attention than any of his other works, is very short, consisting of three lectures he gave on this subject at the University of Washington. He had an abiding interest in Spanish thought and culture, which prompted his last published book, *Political Thought of Modern Spain* (1967). At the time of his death in 1976, he was working on a manuscript entitled “An Anchor in the Latin Mind.”

Political, Philosophical, and Cultural Renewal, a collection of 14 articles—most of them written in the late 30’s and early 40’s and five of them never previously published—represents only a very small fraction of what Wilson produced for a variety of professional journals over the course of his career. Nevertheless, the volume provides a comprehensive view of the foundations of Wilson’s political thought, as well as insight into why it changed so markedly over the decades. Part one, consisting of three articles, deals with Wilson’s views of human nature and his appraisal of modern competing ideologies whose distinctive characteristics, in his view, are attempts to explain and predict the dynamics of change. The five essays that compose Part two are all concerned with aspects of conservatism—its theoretical foundations, political character, sense of realism, and ethical nature. Part three, a less cohesive group of essays, deals with the political thought of Thomas Jefferson, the sources of pessimism in American politics over the decades, the treatment of public opinion in *The Federalist*, prob-

lems associated with the meaning of democracy and its justifications, and the fatal shortcomings of “open society” theories.

Even the most casual reader will soon realize that the Francis Graham Wilson who authored the essays written before and during World War II was probably a firm supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. While Wilson does not deal extensively with contemporary politics, there are clear indications of his partisan leanings. At one point, for instance, by way of commenting on the resurgence of the “organic conception” of society, he has nothing but praise for Roosevelt’s third inaugural address. “As Roosevelt interprets the organicity of the American nation,” he writes, “there is a continuity in the structure and morals of our society.” He compares Roosevelt with Edmund Burke: “When Roosevelt speaks of the mind, the body, and the future of the nation, he is speaking as Burke might speak today.” He concludes that Roosevelt’s conception of the organic society “is, withal, a doctrine of conservative nationalism.” Moreover, Wilson did not believe that conservatism was wedded to modern capitalism, at least in the form it had assumed in the United States. On this score, he refers to various papal encyclicals to justify his position that the “current system of capitalistic production” clearly stands in need of “fundamental” change. He was most critical of “industrial and financial leaders” who, “like the old French aristocracy,” shunned their “true responsibilities of leadership.”

In what sense, then, did Wilson write as a professed conservative? His answer, circa 1941, would rely heavily on the Thomistic differentiation between primary and secondary change. As he stresses in his “Theory of Conservatism,” there is “a primary and secondary conservatism.” “The primary or fundamental conservatism,” he asserts, “is broad in nature, though it is constantly intermingled with the secondary or non-essential features of change.” By way of illustration, he points out that “The conservative may well insist on the principle of private property while not maintaining the present system of the relations of production.” Consequently, he claims that conservatism is not necessarily a defense of the *status quo*; it can accept and, indeed, even advocate any number of “secondary changes.” But this is not the case with respect to primary change: Conservatism,