

# Hicks' Town

by Bill Kauffman

## Small Town

by Granville Hicks

New York: Fordham University Press;  
272 pp., \$26.00



In 1932, Marxist literary critic Granville Hicks and his wife, Dorothy, bought an eight-room farmhouse in Grafton, New York, a rural hamlet ten miles east of Troy, where Hicks taught English to the young engineers at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. For three years, they lived as summer people, aestivating intellectuals, divorced from the community. But when RPI fired Hicks for his Communist Party membership in 1935, he and Dorothy settled into Grafton for good—and for better, as it turned out. *Small Town* (1946), which Fordham University Press has republished in a handsome edition graced by an informative, sympathetic Introduction by Warren F. Broderick, is Granville Hicks' account of life in Grafton.

As a boy, Hicks had been something of a sissy, an unhappy New England Unitarian who “did badly in games.” He was high-school valedictorian, but his neighbors “knew that I would be out and away—like all the other bright boys of the towns and the smaller cities of America.” He believed in science, reason, progress: the whole progressive shebang that would give us such marvels of the modern world as Nagasaki, Fox News, and Melissa Etheridge's test-tube baby. Hicks was well on his way to peripatetic professorhood, a placeless existence in which he could theorize about the proletariat without actually having to meet any of it.

But Grafton interfered. “I wanted roots,” he writes. He and Dorothy found their fixer-upper dreamhouse on a dirt road just outside Grafton. Though Hicks was a “radical intellectual . . . I took the same kind of pleasure in the ownership of property that my mother and father would have taken.” Grafton did not undo Granville's communism: Hicks didn't even join the party until he'd been in town for three years. But it refocused his leftism onto the human scale; it reinforced the anti-urban bias of the small-town boy; it taught him things quite beyond the ken of the *New Masses*.

To the bemusement of his urban friends, Hicks pledged his allegiance to Grafton. And the town accepted him. As Warren Broderick writes, Hicks was “viewed as a personable, harmless, over-educated eccentric” with offbeat political views. No one really cared that he was a communist, for as Hicks writes, in rock-ribbed Republican Grafton, “a communist seemed only slightly more dangerous and slightly more bizarre than a Democrat.”

In time, Granville Hicks became a citizen. Grafton became his town. He was part of its daily life. He donated books that became the core of the Grafton Free Library. He edited a biweekly town newsletter. He helped establish the Grafton Fire Company and Grafton Elementary School. He served as a school-district trustee. He organized harvest dances, for which he also wrote skits. His wife was president of the PTA. He was not slumming or playing at quaintness; he came to belong to Grafton. He writes:

I have learned to like trading in a store where I am known by name and can meet friends and swap gossip. I like knowing the storekeeper not only as a man behind a counter but also as a human being. I feel that I know what I am doing when I vote for or against men I have seen again and again in a hundred different situations, men I have talked with, men I have heard talked about. I like the old-timers, too, though they don't always like me, and I know they are no fools. Their talk gives the town a past, and sometimes it makes the smart city folks seem shallow. I find it good . . . that I am thrown with many types of men and not merely with intellectuals. In short, I like living in a small town.

Hicks does not pretend to be one of the boys. He never does get used to the interminable talk about car engines. And he accepts the persistence of memory in Grafton: “A man who has lived here thirty or thirty-five years tells me that you can't become a naturalized citizen in less than a century.” In a passage that still rings true in Interstate-bypassed America, Hicks tells “the outsider bride of a young native, ‘You can say anything you want to about us to anybody in town, but everybody else is somebody else's cousin.’”

Hicks the erstwhile progressive comes

to doubt that rolling icon of the More Abundant Future, the automobile. (“[I]t speeded the decay of the community . . . a disintegrating force.”) The ex-communist searches Grafton in vain for class stratification, finding instead “a basic social equality that results from the smallness of the community and the sense of a common past.” To his satisfaction, Granville Hicks learns that “in the small town you know everybody or nearly everybody, and . . . you know a considerable number of persons in a considerable number of ways.” The man from whom you buy firewood is also a deacon in your church, his son is the point guard on the high-school basketball team on which your son is a bench-warmer, and so on. By contrast, “the city dweller . . . rarely has intimate friends in any social or economic group but that to which he belongs.”

City people, mere orts in the man-swarm, cannot really know more than a tiny fraction of the men and women within their daily orbit. The rest must be reduced to a single dimension, so that real, live, complicated, flesh and blood people with distinct, unique histories are shrunk to fit inside the shorthand used by Henry Luce then, Rush Limbaugh now. Liberal. Religious nut. Red state. Blue state. The language dehumanizes the user as well as his quarry.

Hicks, like every man, has his limitations, some rather severe. He is humorless. His prose is serviceable but never sparkling. He is no more accurate a seer than the rest of us: For instance, he is particularly impressed by the unrealized potential in the exciting new field of . . . social studies! Too, a certain biliousness colors his discussion of local politics, though he concedes that “I couldn't get elected as dogcatcher.” Hicks is no lachrymose sentimentalist. He gets impatient with his neighbors, disturbed by their “intense clannishness, suspicion of outsiders, hostility to new ideas, resistance to change”—which may be necessary defense mechanisms for a small place besieged by school consolidators, draft boards, Taylorized factories, and summer people whose opinions come from the *New Yorker*.

Yet Hicks would become something of an evangelist for the American small town. His old friends probably sniggered when he declared in a 1946 radio debate:

Whenever I am in New York City,  
I wonder how people can live with-

out quietness and without clean, fresh air. I wonder, too, how they can stand the pressure of anonymous humanity. I know people as individual human beings. I don't like the bitter faces and the sharp elbows of the subway.

To Grafton, perhaps Granville Hicks was annoyingly voluble, too articulate by half, resented for his extensive book learning (if privately disparaged for a "lack of common sense"), but, as is said of abrasive or unpopular citizens who sit on boards and organize meetings in all the Graftons of America, he did a lot for the town.

Now and then, Granville Hicks, having jettisoned the juvenile certitude of the ideologue, seems to throw up his hands: "I do not know what should be done to save [Grafton], much less the world." Oh no, Hicks, you knew. Man, you lived it.

*Bill Kauffman's latest book is Dispatches From the Muckdog Gazette: A Mostly Affectionate Account of a Small Town's Fight to Survive (Henry Holt/Picador).*

## Counterrevolutionary Light

by Paul Gottfried

**Critics of the Enlightenment:  
Readings in the French  
Counter-Revolutionary Tradition**  
edited by Christopher Olaf Blum  
Wilmington: ISI Books;  
409 pp., \$18.00



Both ISI and Christopher Olaf Blum, who edited this anthology, deserve our thanks for making available in English the six 19th-century French conservative thinkers whose writings are herein presented. Although these men—François René de Chateaubriand, Louis de Bonald, Joseph de Maistre, Frédéric Le Play, Émile Keller, and René de La Tour du Pin—do not display an equal degree of analytic depth, each should be read for what he had to say about a changing European society that would eventually move toward sexual equality, a centralized administrative state, and consumer capitalism. In *The Sociological Tradition* and *The Social Group in French Thought*,

Robert Nisbet acknowledges the debt of modern social theorists, including Karl Marx, to those who have been labeled "counterrevolutionaries"—in particular, Maistre, Bonald, La Tour de Pin, and Le Play. Without their essentially Aristotelian emphasis on the social bond and their defense of the inequality rooted in the family and community as natural to the human condition, it would be impossible to understand how real—as opposed to constructivist—societies function. The French protosociologists, in their critical rejection of the Enlightenment, made possible an accurate examination of the preconditions for social life. The chatter manufactured by intellectuals about "human rights" did not faze such traditionalists. Rights, for them, came out of specific traditions and tested social arrangements. At the same time, however, these thinkers considered moral authority to be anchored in the Catholic Church, which they viewed as a source of social order and theological truth.

In his introductory essay, Blum attempts to distinguish what is still relevant about his subjects from what he finds deficient or archaic. Although such an exercise may strike some readers as presumptuous, it may also be necessary to permit a long-dead figure to cast his light on the present age. One draws lessons from Aristotle or from Hobbes not primarily to reconstruct a fourth-century-B.C. *polis* or a 17th-century European sovereign state but to understand human nature and structures of authority. While these writers' frame of reference may be focused on their own time, what makes them great is their ability to transcend their age by addressing problems that belong to the human condition. What makes classical conservatives worth studying is their capacity to grasp human weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the context of upholding social authority. Their concern with Original Sin may have less to do with Catholic orthodoxy or Augustinian theology than with their empirical observations about the collapse of long-established authorities. And pointing to revolutionary France or incipient urban capitalism may be less effective as illustrations than what can be found in the urban sewers and alternative lifestyles of late modernity. On such varied subjects as Jacobin politics, intermediate institutions (the defense of which caused the French aristocrat La Tour de Pin to call for a "corporate regime"), and sexu-

al equality, the critical thought of Blum's subjects seem as relevant today as when it was first penned.

Where Blum goes astray is in moralizing (in his Foreword) about the need for a middle ground between his subjects' "complete rejection of the modern world" and the impulse to "reject all of counterrevolutionary thought." We are supposed to embrace simultaneously "what is good in modernity and what is good in counterrevolutionary thought"; "the rejection of unconditional traditionalism and radical constructivism"; "adherence to modern liberty" but reservations about "indeterminate liberty"; "the rejection of the sovereignty of the individual" together with the denial that "human communities have the right to be oppressive." How this "conservative liberalism," once put into practice, would operate is not made clear, though two observations may be in order. We live with the historical hand that we are dealt. No matter which conservative and modern ideas we include in our personalized value-package, we do not act as autonomous individuals. We belong to historical processes that will not likely be changed by our efforts to mix Maistre with John Stuart Mill, or Bonald with "compassionate conservatism." Indeed, this mixing that Blum prescribes is characteristic of what used to pass for American "conservatism," before the neoconservatives closed down the show by imposing democratic centralism. We are placed before an ideological smorgasbord, into which individuals in search of "values" can dig their imaginations. A perception I owe to Tom Fleming is that the postwar conservative movement has been, for the most part, an unconservative enterprise that appeals to posturing individuals. These postwar American "conservatives" could not persuasively defend, even if they wanted to, an ordered society: Not only did they arrive too late, but, assuming that they got what they thought they wanted, they might be horrified by the result.

Note that I am not claiming that classical conservatism, and its unqualified hatred of the French Revolution, is the only sound political tradition. Bourgeois liberalism seems equally worthy of defense. What I am trying to explain is why American conservatism has come to such a pass that Jonah Goldberg, writing in *National Review*, can tell us, with a straight face, that Maistre was a leftist because, unlike American conservatives, he did not believe in human rights. Such a misunder-