

Out of Harm's Way

by Paul Gottfried

Bertrand de Jouvenel: The Conservative Liberal and the Illusions of Modernity

by Daniel J. Mahoney

Wilmington, DE:

Intercollegiate Studies Institute;
216 pp., \$25.00



In this factually and conceptually rich biography of French political thinker Bertrand de Jouvenel (1903-1987), Daniel J. Mahoney has at least begun the task that he sets for himself in the Preface: performing an “act of intellectual recovery” to “rectify the unwarranted neglect of one of the most thoughtful and most humane political thinkers of the previous century.” Perhaps it seems strange to describe a figure who long graced the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences at the University of Paris; lectured at Yale, Berkeley, Cambridge, and Oxford; wrote regularly in the French press; and produced such widely praised tomes as *On Power*, *Sovereignty: An Inquiry Into the Political Good*, *The Pure Theory of Politics*, and *Marx et Engels: La longue marche* as someone who is now “largely unknown in fashionable intellectual circles.”

Mahoney is right on this point, however. Although an astute critic of the managerial state and a once-known critic of economic redistribution, Jouvenel, as Mahoney observes, finds less and less recognition among French neoliberals, outside of the maverick editorial boards of *Commentaire* and *Futuribles*. Although France’s most systematic and prolific 20th-century liberal (in the classical sense) commentator—one, moreover, equipped with an accessible and even elegant prose style—Jouvenel has to all appearances lost his popularity. *Sovereignty* impressed me deeply the first time through. On rereading the book, I realized more clearly how far into the medieval past Jouvenel reaches in search of “makeweights” against centralized power. If he is a bourgeois (as opposed to an egalitarian) liberal, much of the anchoring for his critical position looks distinctly premodern, even aristocratic. Jouvenel has no problem holding up grizzled feudal warriors as once-useful checks

on early-modern political bureaucracy. But Mahoney may exaggerate his luminous Catholic faith, which rarely shines through his discussions of power and the means of counterbalancing it. There is no cause to follow Mahoney’s lead by ascribing Jouvenel’s comments on willfulness in the sovereign (in *Sovereignty*, Part Three) to “the Catholic critique of the sovereign will,” as the same critique would have been available to Jouvenel from multiple other sources. (Though baptized a Catholic, he had, besides a Jewish mother, a Dreyfusard aristocratic French father, from whose politics one must infer that Jouvenel père was an ardent anticlerical.)

Jouvenel stands in the tradition of other French thinkers who, while not ecclesiastically oriented or much influenced by Catholic doctrines, were concerned nevertheless with checks on power (e.g., Montesquieu and Benjamin Constant); nonetheless, he is clearly distinguishable from anti-Catholic liberals (though not from Tocqueville, as Mahoney reminds us, insofar as he looks to ecclesiastical institutions to place limits on the “democratic” state).

Although Jouvenel wrote much that is admirable, at least one aspect of his legacy is objectionable. Mahoney addresses this aspect, while leaving other questions unanswered. Jouvenel, to put it mildly, was a loose cannon politically. After a diatribe (in *Sovereignty*) against the modern bureaucratic state (which I happily endorse), Jouvenel opines that he finds it odd that American judges, citing an 18th-century document, were allowed to retard the New Deal. Mahoney reminds us that Jouvenel, admiring Franklin D. Roosevelt “profoundly,” considered that FDR’s “social experiments” actually had not gone far enough. Yet, in 1936, Jouvenel had thrown support behind political adventurer Jacques Doriot and Doriot’s Parti populaire français. Although Mahoney may go too far in describing Doriot as having been, at the time, a “rightist demagogue” and the head of an “extremist” party, he was, in any case, an impetuous traveler *en route* from the Communist Party to what eventually became a Nazi front organization. And, what is weirder than weird, Jouvenel became an enthusiastic backer of the *soixante-huitards* would-be revolutionaries who tried to bring down the French state in 1968, publishing his sentiments in French newspapers (usually in the context of blasting De Gaulle).

Although it is not ordinarily the case that *les extrêmes se touchent*, or that rightists and leftists are interchangeable, Jouvenel, in his public life—though not in the bulk of his scholarship—may have been an exception.

Mahoney, who never hides these embarrassments, explicitly notes that the “sympathetic student of Jouvenel is torn between profound admiration for the wise and humane political philosopher and unavoidable discomfort with the poor practical judgment that he regularly displayed in the opening and closing periods of his intellectual career.” Mahoney tries to deal with the problem either by making Jouvenel into some kind of Catholic democrat or by offering a meticulous refutation of Jouvenel’s fiercest critics, who have accomplished their worst by dishonestly taking liberties with certain of his statements. Mahoney follows this second strategy to brilliant effect—for example, when he goes after Jean-François Revel for misrepresenting Jouvenel’s alleged Marxist sympathies, supposedly discernible in his book *Marx et Engels*. Mahoney finds little evidence to support the charge in Jouvenel’s generally critical treatment of Marxism and observes (in a footnote) the “surprise” registered by Jouvenel’s friends at his identification of himself with the left.

An explanation that Mahoney does not consider sufficiently is that Jouvenel, like many other intellectuals, began to mimic the left for purposes of self-protection, as Western societies veered sharply leftward in the middle and late 60’s. Generally, this was a measure employed by people with far-right histories (e.g., Heidegger, who attempted to cover up his collaboration with the Nazis partly by becoming a forerunner of the Greens and an opponent of the Cold War) or by those seeking leftist respectability while adhering to reactionary ideas. (Thus, the anti-Enlightenment communitarian Alasdair MacIntyre pays unsettling homage to feminism in presenting his recognizably neomedieval social and moral conceptions.) Jouvenel might well have followed this pattern of concealment, given the fact of his early sojourn on the right and his later reputation as an antileftist political theorist. Although equally wise thinkers have expressed more foolish political views, what distinguishes Jouvenel is the glaring disconnect between his political theory and his eventual support for

radical redistribution and revolutionary egalitarianism. In each case, he was operating from radically different premises and concerns. Circumstances lead me to suspect that the closing, if not the opening, phase of Jouvenel's political life may have been driven by a search to get out of harm's way.

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Britain's Liberal Legacy

by Derek Turner

In Defence of the Realm

by David Conway

Ashgate: Aldershot; 218 pp., £45



One can easily imagine meeting David Conway in the company of Adam Smith or David Hume—an historical conceit that would please him. A quietly spoken, formidably intelligent philosophy professor, he is a senior research fellow at Civitas, the think tank that grew out of the Institute for Economic Affairs—and a very agreeable lunch companion, as I discovered when I interviewed him for *Right Now!* late last year.

Conway's previous books include *A Farewell to Marx: An Outline and Appraisal of His Theories* (1987), *Classical Liberalism: The Unvanquished Ideal* (1995), and *The Rediscovery of Wisdom: From Here to Antiquity in Search of Sophia* (2000). His latest book is a closely argued, carefully expressed defense not just of the Anglo-Saxon-derived nation-state but of classical liberalism, for him the acme of possible politico-economic organization and the indispensable prerequisite for national cohesion and international harmony.

Conway is alive to the complexities of the word *liberal*. Although it has become almost a term of abuse in the United States, in the United Kingdom, it retains some of its traditional meaning of generosity and tolerance and is accordingly laid claim to by most politicians and opinion-formers (many of whom would seem to be in receipt of stolen goods).

Accordingly, Chapter 1 ("Towards the recovery of liberal vision") is a painstaking definition of various kinds of liberalism. Conway distinguishes between "political liberalism" (e.g., Rawls), "cosmopolitan liberalism" (e.g., Dummett), two kinds of "liberal culturalism" (by which he means multiculturalism), "*modus vivendi*" liberalism (e.g., John Gray), and different types of libertarianism. These variants, Conway believes, are fatally flawed by the lack of accommodation they offer to any concept of the divine.

Conway's earlier attempt to appropriate the tatterdemalion mantle of "equality" appears to demonstrate a lack of understanding that equality is incompatible with true liberty. Actually, all Conway means by equality in this context is that "every human being enjoys an equal moral standing—that is, all possess an identical set of basic moral rights." Yet this term has so many other less pleasing connotations that it might have been better had he avoided its use altogether or simply stated that he believes in equality before the law.

Conway is inherently suspicious of all forms of corporatism, including Catholicism, and sees (quite correctly) in the European Union a communitarian integralism inimical to both individualism and national identities. He has little time for those who are opposed to globalization or who distrust big business:

Such Americanization as globalisation is likely to bring in its wake is unlikely to be anything other than benign, provided America remains true to the biblical ideals and values on which it was originally founded.

His subordinate clause neatly differentiates his views from those of many American neoconservatives, for whom conservatism consists of "consumer choice." Nor does Conway believe in bombing those who do not want to follow the Anglo-American model. On the contrary, he closes his book with the famous quotation from Micah 4: "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." Naturally, he strongly opposes the overblown, politically correct, permanent bureaucracies beloved of so many American neoconservatives.

Conway feels that classical liberalism is essentially divinely inspired. Although *In Defence of the Realm* is academic in

its style (albeit lucidly written and cogently argued), it is inspired by a passionate conviction that the best hope for the world is the widest possible expansion of classical liberalism, underpinned by his own (Jewish) religious sensibility. For him, the origins of classical liberalism lie mostly in Judaism. To support this idea, he cites Cecil Roth, author of a book called *The Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (1938):

The Hebrew Monarchy came into existence under the influence of a conception, to be found nowhere else in antiquity, which regarded the constitution as the result of a tripartite agreement, or covenant, between the People, the ruler, and the Deity . . . [Because] the Deity is the embodiment of justice and righteousness it follows that the monarchy is dependent on the maintenance, not only of certain religious, but also of human values.

Roth believed, as does Conway, that this idealism was transferred to Britain by rulers and visionaries who read the Old Testament assiduously and sought to refashion Britain in emulation of the ancient Israelites. English visionaries imbued with Old Testament ambience learned to see England as similar to ancient Israel, "a divinely elect nation surrounded by idolatrous pagans"—a self-image aided by geography and history. These post-Reformation ideals were reinforced by Britain's subsequent commercial development as a globally trading empire, whose swash-buckling merchant-adventurers gradually metamorphosed into the "nation of shopkeepers" underestimated so disastrously by Napoleon (and Hitler). Other European Protestant nations, such as Sweden, were not affected by classical liberalism to the same degree, largely because of their different trading histories, which inclined them to look more toward Europe than to the open seas and new frontiers. The British qualities Conway so admires were eventually exported with the Anglo-Saxon diaspora to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere; and so his patriotic solicitude accordingly extends around the globe.

Today, Britain is the classical-liberal state *par excellence* so far as Conway is concerned, a kind of quiet Utopia where