



Past and Present by Samuel T. Francis

"The handwriting on the wall may be a forgery."
—Ralph Hodgson

Conservatism: Dream and Reality by Robert Nisbet, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The Search for Historical Meaning: Hegel and the Postwar American Right by Paul E. Gottfried, DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press.

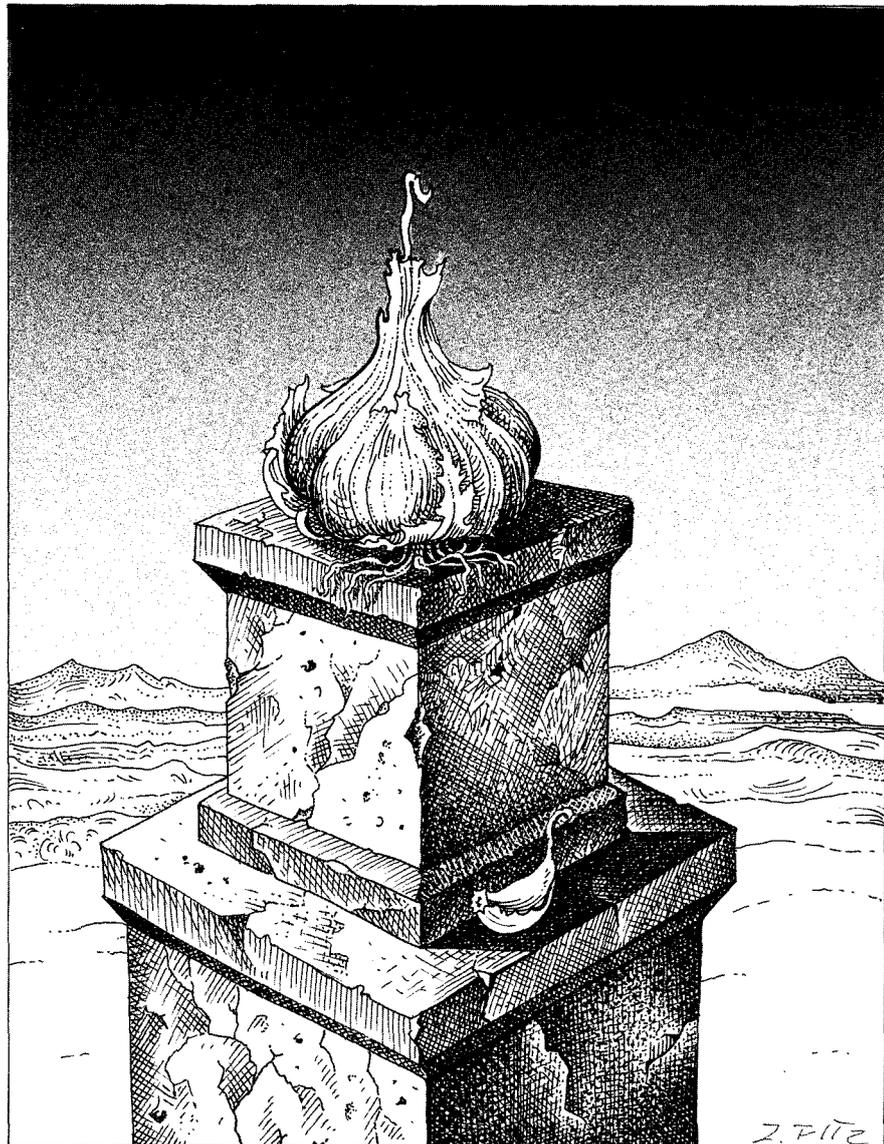
A steady flow of scholarly works on the intellectual roots of modern conservatism has appeared since the 1950's. Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* was and remains the best and the best-known of such books, but similar studies by Peter Viereck, Clinton Rossiter, and others are also well-known and useful. Robert Nisbet's *Conservatism: Dream and Reality* and Paul Gottfried's *The Search for Historical Meaning* will undoubtedly take their proper place as classics within the genre.

Those who have read Nisbet's earlier work, especially his *The Quest for Community* and *The Sociological Tradition*, will find familiar themes in his short essay. It is Nisbet's lifelong argument that the principal concepts of sociology are also the main ideas of classical conservatism and that both originated as reactions to the Industrial and Democratic Revolutions. Although Nisbet has frequently pointed to the parallels before, he has now explored its specifically conservative

dimensions for the first time.

Rejecting the contractarian, natural rights, and individualistic doctrines of the Enlightenment, conservative prophets such as Burke, de Maistre, Bonald, and Hegel viewed man as a

creature of society and the traditions, authorities, and institutions that compose it. "Society," in their view, writes Nisbet, "is not a mechanical thing, not a machine the parts of which are both interchangeable and individually separable. It is organic in its articulation of institutions and interrelationship of functions; also in its necessarily, irreversibly cumulative development over time." Reform, innovation, revolution, liberation, progress,



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and all the other shibboleths of liberalism are predicated on the illusion of man as an autonomous being capable of isolating himself from society and its past and of reshaping social arrangements to suit his "rights," his preferences, and his fantasies.

Nisbet's work on the conservative roots and meaning of sociology has been one of the most important intellectual achievements of our time, for it has helped to move American "conservatism" away from its infantile libertarian drift toward a truer and more serious vision of American society as a functional counterpart to the European societies that early conservatives defended. If the superficial view—that the absence in America of monarchy, aristocracy, and feudalism renders Burke and his ideas irrelevant—is now being rejected, we owe to Nisbet a more profound understanding of how conservative ideas of tradition and authority were formed and how they apply to our own national and cultural experience.

Despite our great debt, some problems arise from any historicism that is taken in isolation from other currents of thought. To Nisbet, and to many of the conservative thinkers he discusses, there is no transhistorical core to human nature by which historical change may be measured. There is, to be sure, an inheritance received from the past that is organic and functional, from which men receive their moral beliefs and character, and change may be judged by the degree to which it conforms to or departs from this inheritance. Once a destabilization occurs, however, it is not at all clear to what extent Nisbet's conservatism allows for its correction. Innovation, whatever its damage, is simply incorporated into the continuing flow of history and eventually is assimilated into a new stable arrangement. "History for the conservative," Nisbet writes,

has been very much the kind of force that natural selection is for the biological evolutionist. No individual has ever lived, nor could possibly be, says the evolutionist, with the powers of decision which could bring into being the species. It is the operation of processes of selection through chance,

through historical trial and error, which alone makes possible the biological world.

There is ingrained in evolutionary selection a wisdom astronomically superior to any wisdom imagined in a man. Efforts of breeders to do more than work *with* these natural processes of change and development are manifestly farcical.

A purely historicist conservatism shares one weakness with all evolutionary theory: It does not appear to allow for any standard outside of history, and it threatens to collapse into an environmentalist and relativist theory that views human beings as the malleable artifacts of their social and historical surroundings. It permits neither a reactionary nor a restorationist tactic, much less a revolutionary effort. Like Old Man River, a given social order just keeps *rollin' along*, and whatever obstacles to the flow it encounters are soon rolling along with it.

What do conservatives do when their society becomes fragmented and loses continuity with the past, when its leadership and many of its citizens cease to believe in or understand the central moral standards that have defined it, or when legitimate authorities and institutions are usurped by forces that seek the subversion of the social and political fabric? Nisbet rejects the restorationist strategy proposed by the Moral Majority and similar New Right groups preoccupied with issues of public morality:

From the traditional conservative's point of view it is fatuous to use the family—as the evangelical crusaders regularly do—as the justification for their tireless crusades to ban abortion categorically, to bring the Department of Justice in on every Baby Doe, to mandate by constitution the imposition of "voluntary" prayers in the public schools, and so on. From Burke on it has been a conservative precept and a sociological principle since Auguste Comte that the surest way of weakening the family, or any vital social group, is for

the government to assume, and then monopolize, the family's historic function.

Nisbet is quite correct on the absurdity of using the government to restore the family, and the "crusaders" have their share of flaws—narrow-mindedness, zealotry, no small amount of dishonesty, and considerable incompetence. However, what the adherents of the New Right understood is that the central moral standards by which American society has always lived and which they took to be absolutely, transhistorically true, are endangered by the legalization and popularization of abortion and infanticide and by the usurpation of legitimate political and educational authority by a militant secularism. What made them interesting was an apparent willingness to use political power as a bulwark against further erosion and subversion.

Their effort may well be futile or misguided; the standard itself may even be obsolescent or false; but it is because they adhere to some such standard that they are able to offer resistance to the "astronomically superior wisdom" that would otherwise lead them and their historical order to extinction. One would rather spend eternity (or an afternoon, for that matter) in the company of Robert Nisbet, but the reactionary populists of the New Right have a legitimate and important place in American politics.

Nisbet's school of conservatism and his functionalist defense of tradition and authority are valuable both in themselves and for the defense of institutions that are still intact, but pure historicism—and it is not clear how far Nisbet himself is willing to go—is of limited value in a society faced with vast historical discontinuities and a radicalized, alienated elite committed to transforming the society. Read in conjunction with Nisbet, Paul Gottfried's new monograph will serve to broaden our perspective on the philosophical legacy of classical conservatism.

It is Gottfried's thesis that several of the major figures of the American conservative intellectual movement since World War II were significantly influenced by G.W.F. Hegel. He specifically examines the thought of Will Herberg and Eric Voegelin, Karl Witt-

foegel, James Burnham, Reinhold Niebuhr, Stefan Possony, Thomas Molnar, and Frank Meyer. Most of these thinkers, Gottfried argues, assimilated Hegelian elements through their formal education in Europe or indirectly through exposure to the Hegelian elements of Marxism during their involvement as Communists. Hegelian themes emerge in their writings despite their frequent and explicit polemics against Hegelianism.

The genius of Gottfried's work is that he transmutes what at first appears to be an obscure or even trivial expedition in intellectual archaeology into a major contribution to contemporary conservative thought, one that seeks to resolve the dilemma between the relativist implications of historicism and the radical thrust of metaphysical absolutism. "Historicists," writes Gottfried,

and among them Hegel, have sometimes treated moral and intellectual truths as being relative to particular epochs and cultures and thus fated to vanish in a changing world. Yet, this exaggerated emphasis on historical change does not represent the whole of historicist thinking. Many historicists, including Hegel, have stressed historical continuity more than change. They have also presented history as a vehicle for teaching and testing values without ascribing the origin of morality to a changing historical process.

Gottfried's defense of this proposition, of a "value-centered" or ethical historicism, in contrast to the relativism conventionally associated with historicism, offers a response both to historicists as well as to the antihistorical universalism of the Straussian school and "the largely hand-to-mouth political philosophy devised by the neoconservatives."

Particularly severe on Strauss and his disciples for their critique of historicism, Gottfried accuses them of an antihistorical philistinism that "blur[s] distinctions between their own *modern* values and the values of earlier generations." At the same time, he points to the historicist conservative thought of

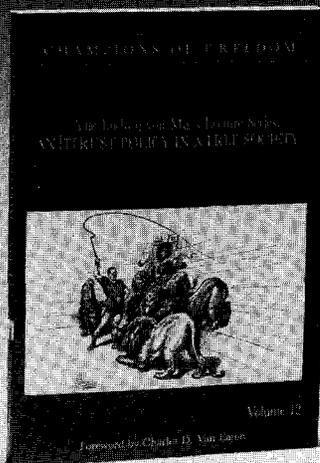
such scholars as Claes Ryn, who "have tried to clarify how 'the transcendent moral order becomes historically immanent and is experienced by man in particular good actions.'"

The relevance of Gottfried's work lies in more than its importance to the fundamental philosophical problems of the contemporary right, for he argues in his final chapter that the abandonment of historical and traditionalist thought by much of the American right in recent years in "the total secularization of the conservative modernist outlook," in pragmatic political movements, policy activism, preoccupation with antihistorical Lockean "rights," "democratic capitalism," and democratist globalism has resulted in the derailment of serious conservatism and the alienation of conservatives from the particular traditions of their own historical order. Although strongly critical of the paganism of Alain de Benoist for its anti-American, pro-Soviet, anti-Christian, and anti-Judaic

content, Gottfried praises Benoist for seriously considering "what may be today the chief obstacle to historical conservatism: the disappearance or continuing radicalization of those cultural and social institutions whose growth and survival conservatives in the past contemplated with pride."

Gottfried concludes his study of American conservatism on a cautiously pessimistic note, a refreshing contrast to the bubbly optimism of Newt Gingrich and other Howdy Doodies of the "conservative renaissance." Although the intellectual resources exist for a historical conservatism—"a philosophy of order based on historically validated traditions that are made to endure amid change"—the cultural ground for its political efflorescence are weak, as "the American social order becomes increasingly identified with postmodern tendencies—for example, feminism, secularism, and governmentally mandated equality." "The passing of the historicist tradition

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of thinking from the postwar conservative movement," Gottfried concludes,

has left a theoretical void that may eventually embarrass American conservatives. The intellectual Right has generally grown cold to the study of history, except as a means of assailing the far Left's

revisionism. Having by now largely lost a shared vision of the past, conservatives may soon find themselves without any vision except that of dehistoricized persons who seek to enrich themselves and the gross national product through the tireless pursuit of self-interest.

In pointing to Hegel as a major source of conservative thought, Paul Gottfried has supplemented Nisbet's more purely historicist emphasis and pointed to enduring standards by which historical flux may be evaluated. Both books offer an expansion of the contemporary conservative mind.

Unraveling the Remnant *by John C. Chalberg*

"Whatever the road to power, that is the road which will be trod."

—Edmund Burke

The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power by Sidney Blumenthal, New York: Times Books; \$19.95.

For years, or at least for that stretch of time between the heady days of Theodore Roosevelt and the hapless days of Jimmy Carter, something called the Eastern establishment benevolently ruled over America. For years, or at least between the demon days of Franklin Roosevelt and the dog days of Jimmy Carter, this behemoth

pulled the country's strings, but never its own punches. If Americans wanted only to be left alone, the liberal establishment was there to plot them into unnecessary wars. If Americans wished to explain away any and all grievances, that same establishment was there to be conveniently whipped.

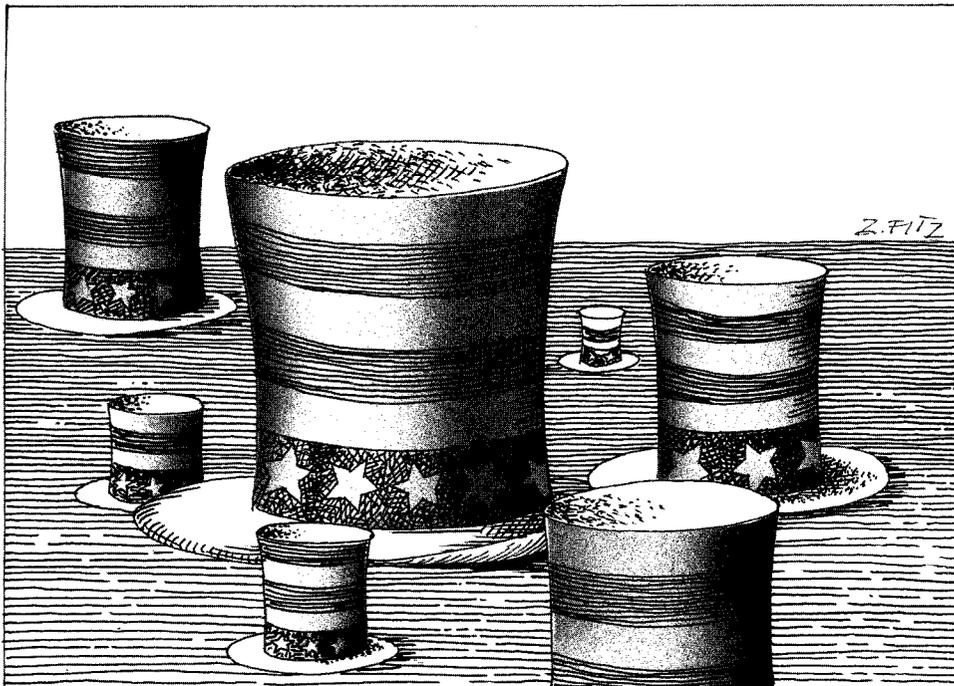
It was only a matter of time before there was something called a conservative counterestablishment. Enter Sidney Blumenthal. A card-carrying member of an embattled, almost endangered species, Blumenthal set out a few years ago to push what's left of the

liberal establishment further leftward. In the face of the Reagan revolution he has tried to counter the counterestablishment from the pages of three publications. Starting out with the socialist *In These Times*, he moved upward to *The* (Cautiously Liberal) *New Republic* before finally establishing himself at the *Washington Post*.

For years, Blumenthal notes, conservatives skewered their New Class enemies, meaning liberals, intellectuals, bureaucrats, and other equally unproductive leeches on the body politic. But on the night of Ronald Reagan's first inauguration, it would be the "ideological spoilsmen" of the right who applauded their new President before they "dispersed into the Washington night and showed up at their New Class jobs the next morning."

Where did they come from? Sidney Blumenthal has written an entire book to answer this very question. Barely 25 years ago conservatism in America was little more than a "remnant." Huddling around *National Review* were ex-Communists, free marketeers, and Burkean traditionalists whom William F. Buckley sought to mold into a unified movement. Fusion was the Buckley goal, but a shaky truce was the best that he could manage.

With the defeat of Barry Goldwater, conservatives woke up to the realization that ideological assertion could not be automatically converted into electoral victories—which explains the emphasis on grass roots politics. With the election of Richard Nixon, conservatives awakened again to a new



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