

Our European Cousins

by Samuel Francis

"All great peoples are conservative . . ."

—Thomas Carlyle

Carl Schmitt: Politics and Theory
by Paul Edward Gottfried
Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood
Press; 168 pp., \$39.95

**Against Democracy and Equality:
The European New Right**
by Tomislav Sunic
New York: Peter Lang;
196 pp., \$39.95



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

What does it mean to be “right-wing”? Since the term and its companion “left-wing” first appeared in the wake of the French Revolution to describe, respectively, those who opposed and those who supported the revolutionary agenda and legacy, one plausible meaning of “right-wing” is that it pertains to those who dissent from the Revolution’s main slogan, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” In its place, men and women of the right would support something like “Authority, Hierarchy, Community,” though admittedly no one is going to start marching through the streets chanting it. More generally, the “right” consists of those who, in opposition to the left’s defense of universality, defend particularity—political, cultural, ethical—or, as Oswald Spengler put it in a phrase quoted by Tomislav Sunic, the right defends the implications of the obvious but often ignored truth that “everybody is born into one people, one religion, one social status, one stretch of time and one culture.”

Except for contemporary pseudo-conservatives, who have convinced themselves that political, economic, and cultural universalism is somehow conservative, the identity of the right with

the defense of particularity covers both its American and European branches. Thus, Americans who have sought to conserve the institutions of the Republic, the Constitution, and the unique political culture on which they rest are no less “right-wing” than the monarchists and ultramontanists of the Continent. The particularity the Yanks want to conserve just happens to be a different one from the one the altar and throne boys like, though both of them perform much of the same social and psychic functions.

The most common response of most American conservative readers to the subjects of Mr. Gottfried’s study of Carl Schmitt and Mr. Sunic’s study of the European New Right will be to wonder what they have in common with the American particularity that American conservatives want to conserve. Schmitt, as Mr. Gottfried acknowledges, was a Hobbesian authoritarian who was too close to National Socialism for comfort, and the New Rightists regard him as one of their forerunners, at the same time that they voice scathing criticisms of Judaism and Christianity, capitalism, and democratic equality. Few American conservatives, who are usually exponents of Old Republicanism, will leap into the arms that Schmitt and his intellectual descendants offer. Yet not the least of the merits of each book is that the authors make it fairly plain why the American right has a good deal to learn from its European cousins.

Mr. Gottfried argues convincingly that Schmitt’s flirtations with the Nazis were opportunistic and that the Nazis themselves had little use for him—indeed, he was lucky to avoid a concentration camp. He also shows that much of the criticism of Schmitt in the Western world has been an *ad hominem* argument that neglects the intrinsic merits of Schmitt’s ideas. Indeed, while Schmitt’s short-lived coziness with the Nazis raises questions about his judgment and his intellectual integrity, Mr. Gottfried shows that one of his main concerns prior to the rise of Hitler was to warn against the spinelessness of the Weimar democracy and the universalist liberalism that animated it precisely because they were unable to constrain totalitarian forces like the Nazis and the Communists.

It was Schmitt’s main contribution

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to conservative political theory to formulate a conflict-based (or, in Julien Freund's term, a "polemological") model of political society, in distinction to the consensus-based model that has been a staple of conservative thought since Aristotle. Probably the only other major conservative thinker of this century who has advanced a conflict model was the late James Burnham, who drew it mainly from Machiavelli and his descendants such as Vilfredo Pareto, and both Burnham and Pareto are also icons of the European New Right. Schmitt, however, drew his conflict theory principally from Thomas Hobbes. He defined the "political" in terms of the "friend-enemy" distinction, stating that any relationship that involves an antagonism between "us" and "them" is by its nature political. The chief problem for Schmitt, as it was with Hobbes, is the settlement of the antagonisms within and among political societies, which are artificial constructs subject to human will rather than the natural organisms that classical and medieval thought conceived.

Schmitt argued that that problem is intensely aggravated by liberal regimes such as Weimar that refuse to abjure a commitment to "pluralism" and enforce order and in which sub-state interest groups contend for power. Using the discourse of "rights," such groups disguise their quest for power while in fact extending it throughout civil society and thereby paralyzing the state at the same time they "totalize" the scope of politics. Democracy, in Schmitt's view, "aims at the total politicization of all of human existence," and he was one of the first to distinguish between authoritarian and totalitarian states and to defend the former on the grounds that they limited rather than expanded the domain of the political.

Similarly, Schmitt saw the sovereign national state as in decline, in part because of the rise of the "total state," which abandons traditional limits on national conflict; in part because of the technological integration of states; and in part because of the emergence of an intellectual class, itself a sub-state interest group, that seeks to capture power and impose its own universalist values on domestic as well as foreign states. The extreme case of such intellectuals contesting for power is the terrorist and

the partisan, but, as Mr. Gottfried argues, there is only a difference of degree between these and such universalizing intellectuals as civil rights activists and global democratists who demand that all states conform to their private goals, but do so by appealing to the universalist premises shared by the liberal state.

Mr. Gottfried's exposition, defense, and criticism of Schmitt's ideas is probably the best account of this maligned but significant thinker, though at times he tends to dwell more on what other commentators have had to say about Schmitt than on Schmitt himself. Nevertheless, in a brilliant concluding chapter, Mr. Gottfried argues for the continuing relevance of Schmitt's ideas to contemporary derailments of the public order by the left and its neoconservative and Straussian sparring partners.

Mr. Sunic is also an admirer of Schmitt, and he devotes a short chapter to him as well as to Pareto and Spengler as intellectual ancestors of the European New Right. Mr. Sunic's book is the first English-language study of this movement, and its main failing, aside from the author's evident discomfort with English, is its brevity. The "European New Right" refers to a multinational constellation of critics of democracy, capitalism, communism, and Christianity, and is perhaps best known in the United States for its "paganism" and alleged racism. So various and complex are the writers and thinkers of this movement that they merit a far larger treatment than Mr. Sunic has attempted.

Yet he has managed to pack in a good deal of information and to discover several important common themes among the writers he surveys. He acknowledges that the term "right" as commonly used does not always apply to them, but since they are offering defenses of what they take to be the particularism of Europe and its specific cultures and launch effective critiques of equality, universalism, and other abstractions affiliated with the left, there is no problem in placing them on the right, despite their debt to Marxists like Antonio Gramsci and their radical alienation from contemporary political, economic, and cultural institutions.

By far the most intriguing part of Mr.

Sunic's book is his account of the New Right's critique of equality, "economicism," and Judeo-Christianity, which, rather than the secularism of the Enlightenment, it sees as the root of egalitarianism and universalism. "For the New Right," writes Mr. Sunic, "the chief axiom of liberalism and socialism is the dogma consisting of human rights and the unity of mankind—a dogma inherited from the Judeo-Christian eschatology and subsequently transposed in a secular form into the modern world." Biblical passages such as Galatians 3:28—"There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither bond nor free; there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus"—as well as a number of studies he cites of the Hebraic origins of egalitarianism would seem to support the New Right's interpretation. But orthodox Christians and Jews would argue that such passages were intended to refer to transcendent realms and not as political blueprints. In the case of Paul's letter to the Galatians, the purpose was to justify Christian evangelism to the Gentiles—not to deny significant cultural distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. Christians would argue that it is the heretical secularization and abridgment of their theological tenets that lead to egalitarianism and universalism, not their true meaning. The New Right, in Mr. Sunic's account, does not seem to have dealt with that response, though it is possible to argue that the temptation to secularize theological doctrines is irresistible and inevitable. Once unchecked, even otherworldly promises of equality will be conscripted for very secular political purposes.

The New Right in fact does see in Judaism and Christianity the sources of secularization, rationalization, and what Max Weber called "the disenchantment of the world," simply by virtue of their monotheistic rejection of a spiritualized nature. "For the New Right," says Mr. Sunic,

the chaos of the modern polity has primarily been caused by the biblical monotheism. In the very beginning of its development in Europe, Judeo-Christian monotheism set out to demystify and desacralize the pagan world by slowly supplanting ancient pagan

beliefs with the reign of the Law. During this century-long process, Christianity has gradually removed all pagan vestiges that coexisted with it. For the authors of the New Right, the desacralization and the "Entzauberung" [disenchantment] of life and politics has not resulted from Europeans' chance departure from Christianity, but rather from the gradual disappearance of the pagan notion of the sacred. Never has Europe been so saturated with Judeo-Christian mentality — at the moment when churches and synagogues are virtually empty.

Alain de Benoist, the chief exponent of the New Right, argues that the triumphs of monotheism meant the victory of exclusion and intolerance and that polytheism "acknowledges also the plurality of cults offered in their honor, and above all, the plurality of customs, political and social systems and conceptions of the world." He is correct, but this is hardly a virtue for those who want to defend a cultural particularism. Benoist does not seem to notice that polytheistic tolerance contains the same flaw to which Schmitt pointed in modern liberal pluralism. By tolerating all cults and the "plurality" of values and institutions, the tolerant pagan imperium of antiquity paved the road for the disintegration of its own unity and its eventual displacement by the oriental cult of Christianity.

The New Right's rejection of equality is not predicated only on its critique of Judaism and Christianity, however. It also makes use of sociobiology and anthropology to refute the claims of egalitarianism, and it finds in modern mass society "basically a sign of the modern refusal to acknowledge man's innate genetic, historical, and national differences as well as his cultural and national particularities — the features that are increasingly being supplanted with a belief that human differences occur only as a result of different cultural environments." Its critique of economism is based on its own rejection of liberal doctrines of individualism and equality of opportunity, which it sees as the basis of the socialist equality of result.

The New Right contains too many different voices and too many complex ideas to be analyzed adequately in a monograph as brief as the one Mr. Sunic has written, though he has performed a masterful job of drawing a concise, composite portrait. The American right may find itself repelled and alarmed by these avant-garde critics of democracy, capitalism, and religious sensibility, but they have had the boldness to say a good deal that is more important than the current babble about "empowerment," "human rights," and "opportunity" that passes for "conservatism" in America today.

Both Carl Schmitt and his intellectual heirs in the European New Right are instances of what may be called "countermodernism" — the broad tendency to make use of modernist ideas, values, and methodologies to criticize the conventional utopian meaning of modernism. Thus, Schmitt relies on the modernist conflict theories of Hobbes rather than the traditional conservative Catholic doctrines to which he was drawn as a young man, and the New Rightists look to sociobiology and anthropology rather than to religious and

pre-modern metaphysical authorities to challenge the left's faith in equality and social manipulation. Jeffrey Herf has included Schmitt as an example of what he calls the Weimar Republic's "reactionary modernist" intelligentsia, and the commonplace that the right must necessarily challenge the whole of modernity, as most American traditionalists have done, needs to be reexamined.

The importance of both Schmitt and the European New Right lies in their use of some elements of modernism to challenge other elements and their exposure of the ideological dynamics and weaknesses of what are now triumphant forces that work to extirpate the particularism of European culture and the political authority that guarded it. They undertook these efforts, moreover, when not only the legitimacy but even the memory of what they defended was the object of vitriolic hatred by those who now posture falsely as the right. Their achievement, and that of Mr. Gottfried and Mr. Sunic in making their ideas accessible in these well-researched studies, ought to justify a strong interest in their ideas on the part of the real American right. ◊

BRIEF MENTIONS



THE TRUTH OF VALUE

by Paul Ramsey

Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press; 139 pp., no price

If there is one thing taken for granted by most serious thinkers, it is the gap between the realm of fact — things like the sun and stars, blood and hormones — and the realm of value — beauty, truth, and good. In recent years philosophers like Stephen Clark, Mary Midgely, and Alisdair MacIntyre have challenged the assumption (either created or popularized by the utilitarians) on a number of grounds. Now Paul Ramsey, poet and essayist, has entered the same thicket of ontology and ethics, and if his answers are less technical than those of the philosophers, his imaginative power is equal to the task.

It is a fact, Ramsey argues, that Shakespeare is a great poet, but what he had for dinner cannot be known. "If value is not real, neither facts nor science can have value," he concludes. Since any use of language entails evaluation, the entire project of analytical philosophy — the value-neutral analysis of expressions — is of doubtful value (as John Searle, among others, points out). Near the end, Ramsey asks the question, "What is compatible with language and experience?" and answers with "The reality of value." To the objection, "But to admit that much is to open the door toward theism, toward Christianity," he replies, "Yes, it opens it wide, an opening which explains some of the fiery resistance to the move."

In little more than 100 pages, Paul Ramsey has grappled with what I believe to be the most serious question troubling the human mind in these times, and he has done so in a prose that is both graceful and lively.

— Thomas Fleming