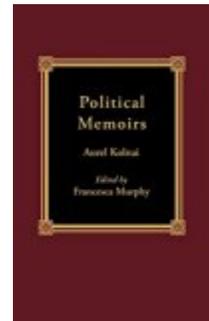


Aurel Kolnai. *Political Memoirs*. Lanham, Maryland and Oxford, England: Lexington Books, 1999. xlii + 252 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0065-3.

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Converging Paths

Aurel Kolnai (1900-1973) was a moral and political philosopher who lived and died in obscurity. Not that he escaped all notice; the distinguished British philosophers David Wiggins and Bernard Williams appreciated his gifts as a teacher and thinker. In support of one of his grant applications, Karl Popper wrote that “I personally think I could learn more from Kolnai, by way of stimulation, than from any other thinker in the field of political philosophy alive.”[1] And the Aronian liberal, Pierre Manent, has promoted the Hungarian’s work in France. But attempts to excite greater interest have been hampered by the fact that Kolnai’s view of the world goes against the contemporary grain; a Catholic convert, he adopted a highly critical attitude toward democracy and humanism.

But due to the persistent efforts of Francis Dunlop, one of his last graduate students at London’s Bedford College, there seems finally to be a (slowly) growing recognition of Kolnai’s achievements. In 1978, Dunlop – with help from Wiggins, Williams, and Brian Klug – found a publisher for a collection of his mentor’s English-language papers.[2] He followed that up with an edited version of the previously unpublished, and unfinished, *Utopian Mind*. [3] Two years later, in 1997, the Hungarian philosophical review *Vilagossag* devoted an entire issue to writings by and about the “unknown Aurel Kolnai.”[4] And now we have Kolnai’s provocative memoirs, nicely edited by Francesca Murphy, Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Aberdeen.[5]

Of Slovak-Jewish extraction, Kolnai was born Aurel

Stein in Budapest; “Kolnay,” the surname he adopted in 1918, was a somewhat timid character in Ferenc Molnar’s famous Hungarian novel, *A Pal-utcai fiuk* (*The Paul Street Boys*). Intellectually precocious, but too young to be called to arms in 1914, he had already resolved that, if war came, he would side with the Entente. “It was,” he wrote in his memoirs, “easier for a Jew – no matter how assimilated, liberal and unequivocally Hungarian in his national consciousness – than for a Gentile to take a detached view of the foreign situation and to choose his side after the mode, as it were, of a disinterested arbiter.”(p. 11) But there was more to it than that; he had been educated in a tradition of Anglophilia that was rooted in the not unreasonable conviction that Hungary’s constitutional history paralleled that of England.

Looking back over his life, Kolnai concluded that the choice he had made as a teenage boy set him on a path that would eventually lead from Hungary to England. There were, to be sure, numerous stations along the way. Having left Hungary for Austria shortly before the 1919 Soviet Republic collapsed, he lived in Vienna as a free-lance writer and sometime editor until 1937.[6] From 1937 to 1940 he moved between London, Zurich, Bern, and Paris. Then, after narrowly escaping from Nazi-dominated Europe, he and his wife Elizabeth eked out a living in New York and Boston. At war’s end, they pushed on to Quebec and to Kolnai’s first academic position, at Laval University. A decade would pass before the couple reached England, their final destination.

As these memoirs attest, Kolnai felt very much at

home among the English. In part that was because of his love of the English language. As early as 1921, he recalled, he had concluded “that nothing could be either thought so soundly or said so validly in another language as in English.”(p. 81) For a man like him, an intellectual to the core of his being, that was of no little importance. Moreover, he admired the English affinity for common sense philosophy. Having received his philosophical training in Austria, not Germany, Kolnai always distrusted systems of thought, including the Thomism taught at Laval, because he detected in them the odor of totalitarianism. For a time in the early 1920s, he himself had fallen under the spell of psychoanalysis, the claims of which could not, in principle, be falsified. In retrospect, he viewed his service to Freudianism with distaste; but at the same time he recognized that his reaction against it had helped to direct him to the path from atheism to Christianity, or more specifically to a Catholicism that shared with the “English mind” an appreciation for common sense, a respect for tradition, and a preference for “the concrete, the casual and the contingent.” (p. 113)

At the age of twelve, Kolnai had let it be known that he was an atheist, and a nonbeliever he remained for nearly a decade. He began to rethink the question of God’s existence around 1922, the year in which he enrolled as a student of philosophy at the University of Vienna. From the first, he was drawn to phenomenology, to Husserl of course, but also to Max Scheler, who, he soon discovered, had written a devastating critique of psychoanalysis. Like many of the phenomenologists, Scheler was, before his apostasy, a Roman Catholic, and his work helped to awaken in Kolnai an unwonted respect for historic Christianity. In the end, however, the Hungarian was won to Catholicism by G. K. Chesterton’s apologetical writings, which he read in the original after struggling to improve his English. He was received into the Church of Rome on the same day in 1926 that he graduated from the university.

Kolnai had some thoughtful things to say about his conversion, and about Christian conversion in general. For example, he observed in his memoirs that “the sincere and fervent convert is no doubt a ‘new man’ in an important sense, but only partial sense; otherwise, he would have lost his personal identity.”(p. 84) His conversion, he testified, was gradual and ongoing, and there were years, from the late 1920s to 1940, when, largely for political reasons, he began to have doubts about the Christian Faith. It was only in America, during Hitler’s war, that he became “a more emphatic Catholic”(p. 206), principally because Catholic Americans seemed prepared to

resist “Americanism,” with its utopian belief in progress and its undue reverence for technology, automobiles, and canned food.

Kolnai’s third path, from leftism to conservatism, also ended in America. As a youth in Hungary he had all but worshiped Oscar Jaszi, the leader of the left-wing liberals who challenged the right-wing liberal governments headed, for many years, by Kalman and Istvan Tisza. Always preoccupied with ethical questions, Kolnai admired his hero’s strength of character and moral approach to politics. Although Jaszi was an anti-materialist and anti-Marxist, he convinced Kolnai of democratic socialism’s merits. So much so that, after Kolnai’s conversion to Catholicism, he did not completely abandon his youthful enthusiasm for the left; instead, he embraced Chesterton’s populist, if relatively conservative, conception of reform, according to which it was man’s duty to patch up the edifice of Creation, not raze it in order to build anew from the ground up. Such a conception paralleled his conviction that conversion resulted in a mended, not a completely new, man.

But about the same time that he began to lose his faith, Kolnai began to question his commitment to conservatism. Out of sympathy with the Christian Social government of Mgr. Ignaz Seipel and influenced by his socialist friend Karl Polanyi (another Jaszi devotee), he lurched back toward the left. In 1930, in fact, he joined the Social Democratic Party and the “League of Austrian Religious Socialists.” And soon thereafter he began work on *The War Against the West*, a study of the National Socialist mind for which he is still best known.[7] Victor Gollancz published the book in 1938 and the Left Book Club made it an “Additional Book” selection.

Well over 600 pages in length, *The War Against the West* was a compendium of citations, with commentary, from Nazi and counterrevolutionary publications. Badly in need of editing, it was repetitious, unfocused, and indiscriminating in its critical assault. Its chief virtue was its recognition that the war against the West was in essence a war of paganism against Christianity. In citation after citation from Hitler, Goebbels, and others, Kolnai laid bare the obsessive Nazi effort to replace Christianity with a crude and barbaric form of pagan religion, to twist the cross of Christ into a swastika. Unfortunately, however, the book also breathed the spirit of the Popular Front. With Polanyi encouraging him, Kolnai argued that Christianity, communism, and democracy were brothers under the skin, members of the Western family. It followed, he concluded, that the West should

form a union with Soviet Russia. That was too much for Jaszi, who by the late 1930s had embraced the doctrine of Natural Law and moved a step or two to the right. In a personal letter, he told Kolnai that he thought him “a little too eager to invite the Bolshies, fresh from their political mass murders, into the camp of the defenders of the democratic world order.”[8]

Ironically, Kolnai discovered in the Nazi (and non-Nazi) literature a critique of democracy that was not entirely unconvincing. And when the war drove him to the United States, where democracy was the civic religion, he “reconverted” to conservatism. America’s Founding Fathers, he recognized, were Whig liberals, not democrats; that is why they established a constitutional republic, not a mass democracy. They sensed intuitively what Kolnai discovered experientially – that a utopian conception of democracy leads to a soft totalitarianism. That did not mean that the American government was tyrannical. “Utopia, in America, displays its more moderate face; but, the protest of human nature against Utopia is more effectively silenced there.”(p. 201) It was a Tocquevillian insight.

The conservatism that Kolnai wished to defend was always, however, critical and reformist, never smug and resistant to change. While his deepest commitment was to Order, he continued to seek a more perfect Order. Somewhat to his surprise, he discovered in Popper, who stood to his political left, one of the most persuasive and important exponents of such a conservatism. For even if, as he believed, the Austrian-born philosopher was too much the democrat and humanist, he was right in his “radical rejection of totalitarianism” and “theory of piecemeal reform.”[9]

By the time he came to write his memoirs, then, Kolnai was fully conscious of the fact that the three paths he had followed had converged – he was “English,” Catholic, and conservative; rather like the Trinity, these identities, while distinct, formed a unity. As a result, Kolnai went on to produce numerous worthy articles and essays in moral and political philosophy, together with some strictly Christian reflections, three of the finest of which Professor Murphy has appended to this volume.

And to the end he waged his own, guerrilla, war against the West, or rather against what he judged to be the totalitarian tendencies in a theory – democracy – that had become an official ideology.

Notes

[1]. Gabor Pallo, “Kolnai Aurel es Karl Popper,” *Vilagossag*, XXXVIII, 5-6 (1997), 48n.

[2]. Aurel Kolnai, *Ethics, Value, and Reality: Selected Papers* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978).

[3]. Aurel Kolnai, *The Utopian Mind and Other Papers: A Critical Study in Moral and Political Philosophy*, edited by Francis Dunlop (London: Athlone, 1995).

[4]. *Vilagossag*, XXXVIII, 5-6 (1997).

[5]. *The Chesterton Review* had previously published some excerpts. See Aurel Kolnai, “Chesterton and Catholicism: Excerpts from Aurel Kolnai’s *Twentieth-Century Memoirs*,” *The Chesterton Review*, VIII, 2 (1982), 127-61.

[6]. On Kolnai’s years in Austria, see Lee Congdon, *Exile and Social Thought: Hungarian Intellectuals in Germany and Austria, 1919-1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[7]. See Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1938).

[8]. Oscar Jaszi’s letter to Aurel Kolnai, October 10, 1938 in “‘Sorai ismet valaszt kovetelnek’: Jaszi Oszkar es Kolnai Aurel levelezesebol,” *Vilagossag*, XXXVIII, 5-6 (1997), 75.

[9]. Aurel Kolnai’s letter to a cousin, December 1952, Aurel Kolnai Papers (in the possession of Professor Francis Dunlop). I am grateful to Professor Dunlop for permission to quote from the Kolnai Papers.

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