REVIEW

A Political Philosophy of Conservatism

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A Political Philosophy of Conservatism: Prudence, Moderation and Tradition by Ferenc Hörcher London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

Ferenc Hörcher, a Hungarian political philosopher, and historian of political thought, has launched a case for conservatism in politics based on the virtue of prudence. His book consists of two main parts, the first a historical survey of the most important thinkers who dealt with prudence from Aristotle through the twentieth century. The second part of the book is more philosophical, and addresses why prudence is a vital concern, given the finite nature of human life.

Hörcher begins by examining ancient and Christian traditions of prudence. First up is Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, which might be translated as "practical wisdom." *Phronesis* is distinct from theoretical knowledge, in that the latter is independent of particular circumstances, while the former consists precisely in how to deal with particularities. In this respect, Hörcher sees Aristotle as advancing from the work of his teacher, Plato, who did not distinguish between theoretical smarts and practical know-how.

Hörcher makes a very important point in his discussion of Aristotle: for the philosopher, what is required for a healthy polity "is not convincing people by argument, but rather through training and experience" (p. 17). If Aristotle is correct, it would certainly explain the interminability of modern political and ethical arguments: for a people not trained in a practice of virtue, arguments in its favor will likely carry little weight. Contemporary philosopher Claes Ryn has emphasized this point in his work on the importance of the will and the imagination.

Moving forward a few centuries, Cicero is understood by Hörcher as offering a conservative defense of the importance of attention to tradition in the face of the radical changes which the Roman Republic was undergoing during his life. However, for Cicero, tradition was not a static idol to be worshipped: "tradition... needs to be updated to meet the demands of the day" (p. 23). Thus, Cicero can be seen as offering an early answer to contemporary critics of conservatism, who contend that it is inflexible in responding to new circumstances.

Augustine is treated only briefly. Hörcher's main contention is that, due to Augustine's view of the will, activities in "the city of man" are inevitably self-centered. This keeps Augustine's politics grounded in realism, even as he stresses the importance of Christian virtue in social life. Somewhat

curiously, a good bit of the section on Augustine is actually devoted to Aquinas, who also gets his own section, however, without another thinker butting in.

Hörcher notes the well recognized influence of Aristotle on Aquinas: human beings are naturally sociable creatures, who could not survive without the shelter of a community. Furthermore, we are "creatures of habit," either good habit or bad habit, and the formation of those habits, while somewhat a matter of individual effort, are also shaped by our families, as well as the legal regime in which we live. The main novelty in Aquinas's political thought, for our author, is his adaptation of Aristotle's ideas to the context of the Medieval kingdom, where, unlike in the Greek polis, the substance that binds the *cives* of the polity together is not face-to-face contact, but loyalty to the monarch. Nevertheless, that loyalty is not unconditional: the polity should be based on a constitutional core that blocks the monarch who is a potential tyrant from achieving such an aim. But even more important is that the monarch himself, before ascending to the throne, should have received training in political virtue that renders him personally averse to tyrannical aspirations.

Moving on to the Renaissance, Hörcher's discussion of Machiavelli, Guicciardini and Botero focuses on a critical turning point in political thought, something noted by Pocock is in magisterial work *The Machiavellian Moment*. Machiavelli seems to divorce practically oriented political action altogether from the sphere of classical/Christian morality. As Hörcher sees things, Guicciardini offers "the proper answer to Machiavelli's challenge from within the Christian Aristotelian framework" (p. 42).

Concluding his historical survey, Hörcher turns to "late modern *prudentia*." Here he sees Gadamer, Geuss, Ricoeur, and Bernard Williams as leading examples of thinkers who contemplated practical action in recent times.

Hörcher next analyzes the key difficulties which face the exercise of prudence in politics, which he calls "agency-constraint," "time-constraint," and "knowledge-constraint."

The challenge in the first case, agency constraint, is to overcome our ego-centered view and realize that the common good is also our own good. Here, Hörcher cites both Kant's concept of *asocial sociability* and the Catholic view of the person as possible means of overcoming this constraint. Discussing the Catholic view, he writes:

> That is made possible by the fact that the Catholic philosophy of personhood preserves and reconciles the valuable elements of both the individualist and the communal perspective... There is a mutual interdependence between personhood and sociability (p. 90).

Grappling with the second constraint, time, means overcoming our present-centered view and extending our perspective, as far as possible, into the past and future.

Hörcher quotes the German Thomist Joseph Pieper: "Realization of the good presupposes that our actions are appropriate to the real situation that is to the concrete realities which formed the… environment… of a concrete human action…" (p. 96).

Hörcher agrees with Aquinas that "emphasis on the variety of human means does not concern the end of the action, which is fixed, but only suggest that to achieve it, different circumstances demand different strategies" (p. 99). It is like reaching the peak of a mountain: all may have the goal of arriving there, but each will have to use different means depending upon how they are equipped, where they are on the mountain, and their innate abilities.

And the third constraint of the trio, knowledge, is notable because we never possess the complete knowledge of our circumstances that would be needed to act with certainty of success. In this section the main figures are Michael Polanyi, Michael Oakeshott, and F. A. Hayek. Their theories, showing how knowledge can be embedded in customs and practices, indicate the importance of traditions for coping with the knowledge constraint: traditional practices are usually not, contrary to modern prejudice, superstitious atavisms best replaced by "scientific" methods: instead, they are the accumulated wisdom of a culture.

There is a small problem in Hörcher's discussion of Oakeshott. Hörcher writes, "To be sure, [for Oakeshott] every practical human activity... requires first of all technical knowledge" (p. 114). This may be merely loose writing, but at the least it is misleading. It is not the case that, in Oakeshott's view, an activity "first of all" requires a technique. Humans did not invent a technique for walking, or hunting, or tool-making, which they then used as a guide to begin that activity. Rather, our technical knowledge is parasitic on an existing practice, from which, over time, we glean various technical rules for how to proceed.

So what are we to make of these considerations? First of all, the prudent individual cannot rely primarily on abstract thought for guidance in political decision making: even more important are the inculcation of the virtues, and the proper character, in the individual. Without those foundations in place, a person's reason serve whatever (non-virtuous) ends that person happens to have embraced.

In discussing the prudent individual, Hörcher quotes a passage particularly relevant to the current debates over the fate of liberalism: "A successful republic cannot be simply a system of procedures for adjusting interests, employing institutional means devoid of any moral orientation" (Hankins, quoted on p. 127).

At the level of the community, we can best grapple with the constraints of our finite existence by acknowledging the beneficial influence of our traditions and our political culture. In the chapter discussing the community's resources, Hörcher makes an important distinction between Ciceronian prudence and Machiavellian prudence: Cicero's prudence was always set in the context of the religious and moral traditions of the Roman people, while for Machiavelli, prudence had degraded into mere "cunning," that allowed one to achieve whatever political outcome one desired.

In summing up, Hörcher claims that although two approaches to dealing with the problem of agency constraint, Kantian "asocial sociability" and Catholic social teaching, are built on different foundations, "the result is the same" (p. 163). I wonder if this is really so; Hörcher's own discussion of the two earlier in this book makes me doubt that it is.

The book ends on a puzzling note: the last sentence is:

> Abstracting a political philosophy from actual historical cases will always remain somewhat lifeless and thus risky; therefore, the conservative politics of prudence has to confine itself and its findings to what has been written so far and, for the moment, give up digging any deeper or further (p. 166).

I must admit I do not grasp the connection between the first part of that sentence and the "therefore," nor what it has to do with the rest of the book.

A minor quibble I have is with the editors: while Hörcher is not a native English speaker, the editors at Bloomsbury presumably are, and they could have done a better job rendering the English more idiomatic. For example, one of the chapter titles, "How to Find the Proper Action in Politics," surely would have been more idiomatic as, "How to Act Properly in Politics."

But that is a small flaw in an otherwise excellent work. This book is a valuable addition to the political theory literature. By pulling together millenia of discussion on prudence and practical action, and showing how the threads of this discussion weave a coherent tapestry, Hörcher makes it clear that prudence is indeed a *virtue* in political practice, and not an unprincipled compromise with a fallen world. In our time of ideological extremes, such a demonstration takes on extra importance.