

# The Gloomy Utopians

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IN THE 17 years since the first edition of *Leftism* appeared, much has happened to vindicate the extraordinary insight and prescience of the author, Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. Paul Johnson's *Modern Times*, Simon Schama's *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, and Armando Valladares's *Against All Hope*—not to mention the monumental achievements of Solzhenitsyn—have all made more popularly available facts about the leftist tradition since 1789 that Mr. Kuehnelt-Leddihn illuminated not only in the earlier edition of this book but also in his equally profound work of 1952, *Liberty or Equality?*

But even to call it merely a profound work of scholarship misses its unique virtue; it suggests the book is another

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***Leftism Revisited: From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Pol Pot, by Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn (Regnery Gateway, 520 pp., \$29.95)***

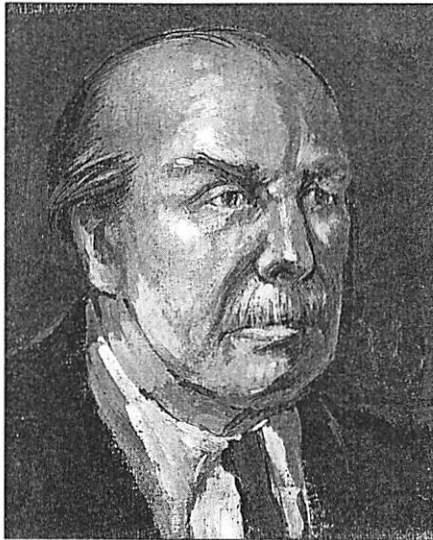
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academic book, which it is not. The scholarship is beyond praise; it includes primary sources in perhaps a dozen languages, handled deftly and deployed brilliantly. Mr. Kuehnelt-Leddihn has lived through much of what he writes about—in Austria, in Germany, in Spain, in Russia, in the United States. The book cries out to be read as a moral document; to be read, page by page, note by note, with the same rational and moral passion with which it was written. I know of no other recent non-fiction book that attempts so successfully to see life steadily and to see it whole.

The French Revolution came about, Thomas Carlyle wrote, because too many men ceased doing their duty; and Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote that its even more calamitous Russian sequel came about because too many people ceased believing that they were moral beings. By contrast, the Jacobins, Bolsheviks, and National Socialists, as Mr. Kuehnelt-Leddihn argues, were filled with zeal, fanatical faith, and even the capacity for self-sacrifice,

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though they preferred sacrificing others on the altars of their collectivist dreams. It is his thesis that Jacobins, Communists (from Russia through China to Cambodia), Fascists, and National Socialists were all leftist collectivists and atheistic radicals whose greatest enemies were the ideas of God and freedom.

Indeed, using the past-tense "were" is over-optimistic, as Mr. Kuehnelt-Leddihn shows. Though the events of the last two years in Eastern Europe have triumphantly vindicated his long-held position, he is well aware that leftism is nevertheless in the ascendant in the West in the "knowledge class" of artists, professors, editors, publishers, and journalists. Contemporary history still consists largely of oscillations between the chronic and the acute phases of secularized nihilism—sometimes represented by the glib, nihilistic aesthete, sometimes by the gloomy, moralistic radical. Since 1914 secular utopian progressivism has had crackup after crackup, each one followed by a hangover of demoralization that always gives us a new form of absurdism or transgressive obscenity.

A novelist and painter himself, Mr. Kuehnelt-Leddihn brings a deep knowledge of human subjectivity to bear in his analysis of the atheistic fanaticism of modern history and culture. Like Aldous Huxley, Jeffrey B. Russell, and Lester G. Crocker, he finds the materialistic hedonism and immorality of the Marquis de Sade at

the root of modern apostasy. Unlike most eighteenth-century *philosophes* and sentimentalists and their modern descendants, Sade knew that "nature" could never replace God as the *summum bonum* providing a moral norm for life. In the words of social psychologist Philip Rieff, "for their highest obedience, humans are compelled by god-terms that will not be treated as mere heuristic devices." Or as Dostoyevsky's haunted and haunting character Kirilov puts it, "If there is no God, I am God." (Max Stirner: "*Ego Deus mihi.*")

Decent utilitarians must live in the light of a moral tradition that they can no longer whole-heartedly defend or transmit, because its animating principle is theological. A post-theological person is ultimately a post-moral one. "We Communists teach no ethics," Mr. Kuehnelt-Leddihn quotes Marx as writing, but neither can liberal agnostic "ethicists," adding to and swimming with the current of relativism. The "whiff from the bottle" of traditional religion may last a generation—inspiring moral decency in those who wish to prove that one can be ethical *without* the religion that introduced the ethical tradition in the first place. This is a point also made by Gertrude Himmelfarb in *A Genealogy of Morals: From Clapham to Bloomsbury*, which Mr. Kuehnelt-Leddihn rightly cites.

Although most would call Mr. Kuehnelt-Leddihn a conservative, it is one of his Quixotic goals to reclaim the word "liberal" in its nineteenth-century sense. He demonstrates why and how the "liberalism" of men like Burke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt, and Acton, as well as contemporaries such as Röpke, was perverted, ignored, or redefined by the leftist campaign. He also brilliantly attacks the dogma of democratism—the vulgar, destructive, and often tyrannical idea that "majorities are always right," that "*vox populi vox Dei est.*" Hitler and Mussolini were unquestionably *popular*; so was anti-Semitic legislation in National Socialist Germany—and indeed the crucifixion of Christ.

The cultural historian Joseph Mazzeo tells us that in our culture "the idiosyncratic has triumphed over the normative." Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's extraordinary book, like his extraordinary life, is a noble answer to the varieties of idiocy and idiosyncrasy that delude us still. □