

4-20-2012

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Recommended Citation

de Oliveira, Tulio S. (2012) "Memoirs of a Paleo," *Pepperdine Policy Review*. Vol. 5, Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/ppr/vol5/iss1/12>

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Memoirs of a Paleo

Túlio S. Borges de Oliveira

Encounters: My Life with Nixon, Marcuse, and Other Friends and Teachers

By Paul Gottfried

Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2009, 275 pp.

\$22.68 (Hardcover)

Paul Gottfried (1941-), an Europeanist who has specialized in the study of ideological movements, has recently retired from his job as a professor at Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania, where he taught Classical Greek, among other exalted, if increasingly unpopular subjects. Although he has written important books (most notably a trilogy on the rise of the administrative state), Gottfried is mostly known, to those who have heard of him, as a battle-scarred veteran of the Right Wars that have plagued the conservative movement in America since the 1980s. He was even responsible for coining the term “paleoconservative,” as if describing a condemned species or a remnant of an irretrievable past, to characterize himself and other traditionally-minded, historically-conscious and anti-ideological thinkers who lost power and influence to neoconservative upstarts as the 20th century drew to a close.

This conflict, not always obvious to foreigners, be they sympathetic outsiders or rabid anti-Americans, is central to *Encounters: My Life with Nixon, Marcuse, and Other Friends and Teachers*, Gottfried’s autobiography, released in 2009 by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. A bit like Albert Jay Nock’s, Gottfried’s life has not been characterized by singular achievements. Unlike Nock, however, Gottfried has counted quite a few notables among his friends, including former president Richard Nixon. As the title makes clear, *Encounters* is less about its author than about the fascinating people whose company he has cultivated for the better part of seven decades.

Like Nock's classic autobiography, *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* (1943), *Encounters* reflects a profound discomfort with the modern world. It is by confronting the modern malaise that Gottfried comes to realize the nature of virtue – the same virtue which is embodied to different degrees by the subjects of his book, some of them notable examples of moral fiber and intellectual probity.

Despite its meager sales, *Encounters* is an important book: a book about courage and integrity; a book about the travails faced by modern scholars; a book about friendship – which, according to the author, seldom lives “up to Aristotle's ideal” (p. 159). It will certainly appeal to those of an aristocratic cast of mind and it must be read and kept by every serious student of American conservatism.

Though not a particularly gifted prose stylist, as he readily admits when discussing the late Russell Kirk, Gottfried writes in a clear, elegant manner. On almost every page, we encounter evidence of his first-rate mind, one capable of brilliant theoretical insights. And if he still seems to be too kind to his friends while too severe when judging his rivals, here he manages to rise above the shallow polemics which sometimes mar the articles he writes for websites like *Alternative Right* and *Taki's Magazine*. This may have something to do with the fact that Gottfried focuses less upon today's vulgar winners than upon the “beautiful losers,” noble figures out of sync with the *Zeitgeist* and largely forgotten by a crass culture that has no use for their talents. One could almost say that Gottfried is an old-fashioned conservative much like the late British historian Tony Judt was an old-fashioned socialist. (Is it a coincidence that both use a train ride as a metaphor for their lives?)

In a celebration of conservative eccentricity, we are treated to affectionate portraits of men such as the best-selling historian John Lukacs, the Southern traditionalist Mel Bradford, the neo-Marxist Herbert Marcuse, and many other eminences, including the author's father, Andrew Gottfried, a sturdy German-speaking Hungarian immigrant.

A natural contrarian, Gottfried does not always agree with his friends on the dissident Right. Unlike most Darwinian conservatives, he does not subscribe to IQ determinism, writing with unconcealed distaste about the elites who may “have mastered the technique of taking standardized exams”, but are also the “last human beings I could imagine trying to preserve what was once understood as high culture” (xi-xii); unlike Pat Buchanan or the Greek magnate and notorious womanizer Taki Theodoracopulos, he is refreshingly pro-Israel; and

unlike Sam Francis and Christopher Lasch, he is unapologetically elitist. Though the comparisons tell us much about Gottfried's opinions, many questions remain unanswered. Some people have called Gottfried a "right-wing Marxist." One might wonder, however, whether he is not, in the phrase of Straussian Harry Jaffa, a nihilist of the Right.

It does not seem so and in any case one of the main virtues of *Encounters* is that it reminds the reader of how foolish it is to try pigeonholing a serious thinker. Gottfried rightly chastises those who view the religious sociologist Will Herberg as "a 'premature neoconservative', (...) a trailblazer for the rise of [that] movement in the 1970s" (p. 67). At this point, it seems legitimate to ask: Has Gottfried not done exactly the same thing to Leo Strauss and his disciples throughout the years, however much he may be justified in his suspicions of their ahistorical mode of thinking?

The biggest problem lies elsewhere, however. Though his tributes are honest and fitting, they could have been more moving, more soulful, and maybe less sad. What is lacking, or not sufficiently present, is an adequate sense of the romance of conservatism, of the sheer joy of being alive – and the one inherent in the pursuit of truth.

Since Gottfried writes for the most part as a political theorist and a historian of political thought, the book lacks the literary imagination which makes John Lucaks' *Confessions of an Original Sinner*, for instance, such a fascinating read. Where are, for instance, the pleasures and consolations of high art? Though the book will not fail to arouse the reader's curiosity about the luminaries it describes, he will yearn for a more vivid idea of what it meant to be around them. Yes, the book is anecdotal, but only to some extent. There are witty remarks, worthy of their colorful speakers, but only a few of them. There are also some interesting incidents, but they are too brief and never described in great detail. Gottfried seems to find the right balance in his single-subject chapters, about his father (chapter 1), Herbert Marcuse (ch. 3), Will Herberg (ch. 4), and the communitarian Marxist Paul Piccone (ch. 5). In the chapter about Marcuse, who "on a visit to Venice told the mayor that there were too many tasteless visitors there" and that one needs a tourism of quality (p.52), Gottfried mentions the Stefan George circle of aesthetes and claims that if he had been living in turn-of-the-century Vienna at the time, he would probably have taken part in it. But he has been a member of other almost equally interesting circles and would do well to present a more vivid insider's perspective. He does so very rarely, as when

discussing the intriguing battle for the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a presidential appointment.

All in all, there is too much political theory and not enough literature; too much departmental/editorial politics, too much conservative infighting, and not enough music or poetry. I am sure Peter Stanlis, the Burke specialist who died last year and was a lifelong friend of Robert Frost, had some interesting comments on the subject. One wishes there was more about the charming Robert Nisbet, though his aesthetic outlook on life has been given a fair treatment. Then what about Ernest von Kuehnelt Leddihn, an aristocrat in every sense of the word? He must have been a fascinating dinner companion. And even if we exclude the arts, the social arts among them, where are the lively philosophical debates? I am sure Gottfried and company were engaged in the most fascinating discussions, which would owe next to nothing to the ones that took place in Plato's Academy or Renaissance Ferrara.

There are other, more mundane, defects. The jacket design is in poor taste, and so is the subtitle. Whatever their relative fame, Marcuse and Nixon are not the most important characters in the narrative. A great part of the personal correspondence which is interspersed among the chapters is of little value, as well. There are exceptions, of course, like the letter in which Robert Nisbet excoriates Leo Strauss, the one in which Nixon discusses Disraeli, and – by far the most interesting of the batch – one from 1998, written by von Kuehnelt-Leddihn in German that goes far in showing how reactionaries despised the Nazis. Finally, it seems the editor overlooked a few mistakes. Were there two Nixon parties in October 1992 or just one? Sam Francis' lifespan is incorrectly dated as beginning in 1923 and ending in 1994. He was born in 1948 and died in 2004.

On the whole, nevertheless, *Encounters* is a very fine book which will probably become a reference of sorts. Its sense of loss, its pessimism, its despair and sadness are far from unwarranted. After all, its pages are filled with much suffering and injustice. Yet I do wish there was more beauty, more hope, more joy. Somehow it is as though the great Josef Suk had stopped his *Asrael* Symphony at the end of the second movement. Maybe a second installment of the book can remedy that and even include the moving tribute written by Gottfried to the late Joseph Sobran.

