

Kirk, Russell, ed. *Orestes Brownson: Selected Political Essays*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1990, 230 pp., \$19.95 (paper).

This book was originally published in 1955 by Henry Regnery Company. With that publication, the late Russell Kirk—dean of American intellectual conservatism and a major figure in the twentieth-century recovery of Brownson—performed a great service by compiling this selection of essays. Otherwise, they would have remained unknown and inaccessible to most modern readers. Transaction Publishers is to be commended for including this volume in its “Library of Conservative Thought.”

The book consists of an introduction by Kirk and five essays by Brownson: “The Present State of Society” (1843), “Socialism and the Church” (1849), “Liberalism and Socialism” (1855), “Liberalism and Progress” (1864), and “The Democratic Principle” (1873). It also includes a brief index. The two major points about Brownson that impress themselves upon the reader of this volume are his insight and his prescience. Kirk observes in a brief note before one of the entries that many of the eminent nineteenth-century political thinker’s essays have “grown in meaning with the passage of the decades.”

The first essay, “The Present State of Society,” was really an extended review of Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present*. In that essay, Brownson makes a deeply intelligent and spirited defense of the Catholic Middle Ages. He also finds the roots of the social and economic injustices of the nineteenth century in the rise of irreligious modernity. His catalogue of the causes of modernity and explanations are masterful. He discusses how these developments led to the obsession with wealth-seeking which in turn spawned the injustices. He emphasizes the need for certain economic reforms, but mostly exhorts captains of industry to consider their immortal souls instead of only profit and to end injustice. Also, in anticipation of Pope Leo XIII’s great encyclicals, he states that political leaders must once again subject themselves to the Law of God.

In “Socialism and the Church,” Brownson shows himself to be an implacable enemy of socialism and egalitarianism—which were becoming potent intellectual forces in the nineteenth century, as they would also be in the twentieth—and also, as a few choice lines make clear, of feminism. In this longest essay in the collection he provides a deep and incisive analysis of why socialism is irreconcilable with Catholicism, despite the determined efforts of the former’s adherents in Brownson’s time to show otherwise. Indeed, such an attempt is not wholly unfamiliar to our times, as witnessed by the Sandanistas and their effort to establish a “people’s church” in Nicaragua, as well as by the various proponents of liberation theology. The bottom line of the evil of socialism for Brownson is that it regards God and the Gospel as dispensable, because “our good lies in the natural order” and can be attained there only by collective effort. The individual cannot overcome evil, but needs a social organization to do it.

Also in this essay, Brownson defends Pope Pius IX's decision to make the governments of the Papal States more representative. He emphasizes a point that many today need to keep in mind: the Church "is wedded to no particular form of government, or of social organization."

The next essay, "Liberalism and Socialism," makes many striking points. The first follows from Brownson's comments about representative or republican government in the previous essay. He makes clear that he has no disagreement with republican constitutionalism, such as checks and balances, but opposes its becoming a substitute religion or the belief that it can succeed without religion. Of course, here he echoes the wisdom of a Tocqueville; this is a point which America in our own time has tragically ignored. The other noteworthy points of this essay are: 1) that all systems, no matter how erroneous, have an element of truth, and it is from this fact that we should begin when we try to bring their adherents around to the fullness of truth; 2) this previous point does not apply, however, when these "erroneous systems are in arms or arming themselves against society;" in such cases we must defeat the erroneous systems (e.g., Nazism and communism in our century); 3) that the friends of religion should be careful not only to oppose the revolutionaries who seek to remove various social ills, but also the evils themselves; 4) that it is certainly fallacious to believe that mere philanthropy is an adequate substitute for Christian charity, but it is even more fallacious to believe that philanthropy has no value; 5) that the "doctrine of equal rights"—given so much stress by nineteenth-century democratic and socialist crusaders—"is not all false nor all antichristian," but "faintly mirrors" Christian doctrine; 6) that the great error of Calvinism—of much of Protestantism—is in denying the natural law; and, 7) that the state's role is not to teach morals—it is not competent to do that—but only to execute them. Thus, the socialists had the object of their efforts misplaced: changing men's hearts "by teaching the doctrine of love," not legislating, was the main way to elevate working men. All in all, we behold in Brownson splendid Catholic balance. (In this essay, Brownson also commends the thought of the great nineteenth-century Spanish thinker, Juan Donoso Cortes.)

In the essay "Liberalism and Progress," written late in the Civil War, Brownson asserts his belief about the nature of this great struggle. Its purpose was not to overthrow Southern culture, which Brownson admired because it spurned the vulgar mass democracy of the North, but to crush the anarchic impulse that culminated in rebellion. He particularly objects to the desire to "new-englandize" the South, pointing out the flaws in the then already secularized New England Puritan character. This essay also develops Brownson's analysis of the social nature of man, the rightful relationship between religion and the state, the true nature of progress (as opposed to the flawed modern liberal conception of it), the dignity of labor, and the universal discontent caused by the modern democratic idea.

Brownson's main critique of democracy is saved for the final essay, published late in his life (1873), after he had already written his major work, *The*

American Republic. Again, we see Brownson as a forerunner of Pope Leo XIII, attacking such notions as excessive democratization, prevalent false notions of liberty, and the subjection of even moral authority to the power of the state. In a striking passage, Brownson is critical of the phrase in the Declaration of Independence that “Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed” because it seems to assert a purely conventional basis for the state.

It is good that the book includes an index, although it is not thorough enough.

After having read this collection, one cannot help but conclude that Brownson was a truly sagacious, deeply reflective, and remarkable thinker. He is certainly unique among American political thinkers in his ability to intertwine Catholic principles and thought with an analysis of the American political order, and to deftly refer to a constellation of both secular and religious thinkers, both major and lesser-known. His writing is also noteworthy for many important short passages that contain deep wisdom, which is as pertinent in our time as it was in his.

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Herrera, Robert, with an introduction by Frederick D. Wilhelmsen. *Donoso Cortes: Cassandra of the Age*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995. xxii + 144 pages. \$20.00.

This is a book on Don Juan Donoso Cortes which many have been long awaiting. Donoso—as he is called in Spain—was born in 1809 in Extremadura to the sounds of the canons of the Peninsular War and died in 1853 in Paris as Spanish Ambassador to the French Court. His life spanned a period in Spanish history marked by the French revolution, the return of absolutism, the development of liberalism and socialism, Spanish civil wars, and the European revolutions of 1848. During this time Donoso pursued his political activities in the service of the Spanish government and contributed a vast literature in his discourses and writings. He was appreciated both in Spain and in the rest of Europe for leaving a heritage of Catholic tradition for contemporary times. But the story of this life is the purpose of the author.

Dr. Herrera is a professor of philosophy at Seton Hall University. He is a medievalist and a perceptive author on medieval thinkers, Spanish mysticism, and contemporary themes. Students of Donoso and the general reader are in debt to Professor Herrera who, with his typical sensitivity, intellectual objectivity, and keen understanding, portrays Donoso in his private and public life and clarifies many obscure and controversial points in his career. In the fore-