

# The Democratic Subversion of Political Liberty and Participation

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Aurel Kolnai made a significant contribution to political philosophy through a series of articles in which he unmask the ideological core of modern liberalism, retrieves the basic principles of an authentic "conservative" political philosophy, and defends liberty and constitutionalism. He fruitfully develops the notion of political "participation" from a metaphysical perspective in order to unveil those tendencies of democratic ideology which in fact subvert the possibility of political participation and liberty itself.<sup>1</sup> This metaphysical perspective is not that of an a priori system, nor is it a detached abstract system which he brings to bear on politics; rather, we find in Kolnai a unique ability to observe and reflect on the political events of his time, so as to arrive at some essential core principles of political life. In a statement of method, Kolnai said that his was a "phenomenological temper ... averse to speculative dogmatism but in revolt against the tyranny of the positivistic, monistic, and naturalistic outlook".<sup>2</sup> Kolnai's political philosophy is well grounded in human experience and aided by careful analysis of precise meanings. Yet it is also a bold and daring attempt to view political life in its metaphysical depth. Kolnai's concern resembles that of Tocqueville's, although Tocqueville is more diffuse and sociological, while Kolnai is more direct and phenomenological.

The core of Kolnai's philosophy may be stated in two broad statements. The first is that political liberty and the democratic ideal require a respect for various forms of "privilege" for their own endurance. Indeed, "Privilege is a

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<sup>1</sup> The series of articles includes: "The Meaning of the Common Man," *The Thomist*, July 1949, pp. 272-335; "Privilege and Liberty," *Université Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, V, 1, 1949, pp. 66-110; "The Humanitarian Versus the Religious Attitude," *The Thomist*, October 1944, pp. 429-57; and "The Cult of the Common Man and the Glory of the Humble," *Integrity*, VI, 2, 1951, pp. 3-43. The first two are included in Aurel Kolnai, *Privilege and Liberty and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. Daniel J. Mahoney, Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 1999. The former will be referred to as "CM" the latter as "PL." Pagination refers to the original publication sources. One should also see his book on Nazism, *The War Against the West*, London: Gollancz, 1938, and New York: Viking Press, 1939. See my articles exploring Kolnai's political philosophy -- "Approaches to Democratic Equality," "Maritain and Simon's Use of Thomas Aquinas in the Justification of Democracy," and "Aurel Kolnai and the Metaphysics of Political Conservatism", in John P. Hittinger, *Liberty, Wisdom and Grace: Thomism and Democratic Political Theory*, Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> "The Concept of Hierarchy," in Aurel Kolnai, *Ethics, Value and Reality*, ed. Francis Dunlop and Brian Klug, introduced by Bernard Williams and David Wiggins, London: Athlone, 1977 and Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1978, p. 167; he also says "Phenomena, especially such as play a great and manifold part in man's mental and practical life, after all *do exist* and cannot be explained away as '*mere appearances*' or *reduced to* more massive and more universally indubitable data of experience ...", p. 166.

rampart of liberty, – not the liberty of 'the privileged' only, but of all classes of the people, of the whole multitude, – because it expresses and safeguards the existence of relatively independent persons... ." (PL 94). And further, privilege inextricably entwines both natural and artificial excellence: "There is no 'natural' distinction which is not the fruit of various 'privileges', and none which is not generative of privileges" (CM 289). Kolnai seeks to demonstrate, not the need for aristocratic government, but the appreciation of diverse pockets of excellence, many of which have been sheltered in the folds of social privilege. Kolnai's second basic thesis is that the hatred of privilege and hierarchy is the bridge to a totalitarian form of democracy (PL 66, CM 272). A political movement which excoriates privilege, and seeks its elimination, must needs resort to a centralised "consciousness" and will. Such centralisation then absorbs or destroys any independent sector of initiative, wealth, or value standing in the way of equal justice. Kolnai had direct experience of both Bolshevism and Nazism; he had the courage and hope to resist communism and he foresaw the eventual demise of the Soviet scourge; but he warned of a similar threat of political danger to liberal democracy from within. The ideology of the common man, or what Kolnai also calls "progressive democracy," uses the resentment against privilege to destroy all vestige of hierarchy and the very notion of transcendence. In a way, progressive democracy is the mother of all totalitarianism, not fascism or socialism.<sup>3</sup> A "dialectical chrysalis is hidden from the outset" in modern political liberalism, which is "ready to develop while feeding, by virtue of that original kinship of stuff, on the flesh of its host, until it may assume full life and cast away the carcass of its devoured relative" (PL 86). At stake is the "metaphysical substructure" of a sound political order of liberty and the contrast of a "metaphysical subversion" (PL 75) of the highest order which comports not simply with a Hitler, a Lenin, or a Mao, but an "inherent tendency towards anti-constitutional, monistic, totalitarian types of power," which tendency may be discerned in America, Britain, or Germany (CM 317). In fact, Kolnai thinks that American political life may well generate the most insidious forms of the "ideology of the common man."

The ideology of the common man is a complex conditioned by at least three interrelated movements of thought and action. They are (i) reduction of the good, (ii) uniformity of reference, and (iii) centralised consciousness and will. By way of contrast, a sound political order, according to Kolnai, requires (i) a notion of hierarchy of value, (ii) analogy of being, and (iii) structural pluralism. Partly as a result of new interpretations of nature and the search for a lowest common

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<sup>3</sup> "Three Riders of the Apocalypse: Communism, Nazism, and Progressive Democracy," *Appraisal*, II, 1, 1998 (ISSN 1358-3336), pp. 4-11. Reprinted in Mahoney, op. cit., pp. 105-118. "Progressive democracy is *the* Rider of the modern Apocalypse", p. 118.

denominator, the good comes to be defined in terms of desire- and want-fulfilment. Rights become means for protecting one's conception of the good life, however defined; Freedom, perhaps, a means for ensuring comfort. Society loses an objective axiology, and good is readily defined in terms of appetite and satisfaction (CM 327-28; PL 94).<sup>4</sup> Kolnai thought that the rhetoric of Roosevelt, his idea of "freedom from want" signalled the transformation of freedom as a high good, a constitutional value for limited government, to the idea of freedom through government (PL 82). Government must do something to make me happy, equal, free etc. So too the desire for comfortable self preservation sets the dynamic for what Tocqueville calls a "soft despotism."<sup>5</sup> Kolnai says the common man "craves security, comfort, and the bliss of never being denied a need" (PL 82). This facet of progressive democracy Kolnai calls the "immanent sovereignty of human needs." The loss of objective value reference is but the first step in the totalitarian impetus of progressive democracy.

Second, the "more recondite" notion in democratic self-understanding derives from a denial of analogy of being; this "carries us straight to the core of the matter" (PL 67). The common good must be interpreted in terms of "sameness of reference, use, enjoyment, and immediacy." This very thesis is hard to grasp at first, yet it "has farther-reaching implications" than mere egalitarian jealousy (PL 68). The core notion is the thesis that "no man must hold more or be more than his fellow man", and if he does happen to

hold more or represent more, this must be ... on behalf, in the name and under the jurisdiction of Society as an actual Unit of Consciousness, an actual Subject of Will entirely contained in the collective thoughts, moods and decisions of the Moment. (PL 68-69)

It is the notion of "the common man" that captures this notion of fundamental sameness of reference and provides the rationale for centralisation of power. The common man is more than a plaintiff, nor simply a victim of spoliation; the common man is the construction of preferable type of man, indeed "a hero, if not a new god" (CM 279). The notion of the common man embodies the modern aspiration to overcome limitations and contingency; to become the master and owner of nature; to be free in the most radical sense of free from limitation by nature and God. Thus, Kolnai claims that the "war against nobility" (hierarchy and

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<sup>4</sup> The connection between liberty and moral relativism may be found in Hobbes and Locke. See John P. Hittinger "Why Locke Rejected an Ethics of Virtue and Turned to an Ethic of Utility", in Hittinger, op. cit., note 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Democracy in America*, ed., J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1969, Vol. Two, IV, 6, "What Sort of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear."

privilege) is "in truth an essential and metaphysical rebellion levelled at something that towers infinitely above kings, dukes, barons, squires, factory owners, generals and admirals, fops or usurpers" (CM 302). The common man must be the generator of value, not submissive to any higher value. The tribunal of the common man, so constituted, must lead to the utopian goal of abolishing alienation and must rely on the means of centralising a mass consciousness and will.

It may be important to compare the notion of the "common man" and the "plain man" as Kolnai does. The "plain man" has a centre of gravity in "his practical concerns" but is attached "by firm, if somewhat elastic, ties to things 'higher than himself'" (CM 310); the plain man is embedded in a particular background; the plain man may be distrustful of elites; he may be indifferent to the concerns of higher culture. As such, Kolnai says, the plain man is necessary as a corrective and supplement to the "higher" or notables of society (CM 309). The common man, on the other hand, is what philosophers now call the "unencumbered self"; Kolnai says this "any one" implies a standard

without the implication of either mature personal judgment or a particular creed or tradition which most members of a community happen to share. It is precisely this foundation of an empty humanistic "universality" in the sense of "any-oneness" upon which *this* "creed", the cult of the Common Man and the mentality bred by that cult, is erected. (CM 323)

He is indeed not a notable (without distinctions of wealth or social position) but can be "any man." Any particular commitment or perspective is a limit to his commonness. He is not only distrustful of power, but is intolerant and covetous of the higher ranks. He cannot "appreciate ... the meaning of any 'ideal' point of view not assimilable to ... 'his welfare'". (CM 310)

According to Kolnai,

only superficial critics can believe that the quasi-religious impetus of Total Equalitarianism draws on no deeper forces than envy and jealousy, competitive self-assertion, the need to overcompensate for one's inferiorities, and the craving for material comforts. (CM 281)

In fact, the Common Man is

Man Divine as "mere man", ... Man above whom is set no Order, no Power, no Being essentially different from him, impervious to his reason, independent of his will; no social authority, therefore, either, which symbolises, expresses, and fructifies, illuminating its

various aspects and corollaries, this fact and this sense of metaphysical subordination". (CM 318)

Tocqueville also connects the vehement hatred of inequality or privilege with a divinisation of man and its concurrent trend towards centralisation.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Kolnai sees the political power of the Common Man become "the ensemble of human consciousness moving and decreeing in complete unison throughout all individual minds" (CM 319); or again, the common man must represent "humanity pure and simple, sheer humanity" such that "all particular determination must be broken up (as) it implies Man's *creaturely limitation*" (CM 281). If hierarchy and privilege, stand for "submission of man to what is highest in man", i.e., participation, then equality

proclaim(s) the equal and joint sovereignty of men (and) speak(s) the idiom of Identity, (which) taunt(s) man with the mirage of "positing" and "generating" reality, including his own, of absorbing the infinite into one human Consciousness, of supplanting or, indeed, "creating" God. (PL 73)

The true goal of the regime of the common man must be the utopian goal of overcoming alienation. What becomes irksome is the sheer otherness, alterity, of social reality, that is, its contingency and dividedness. It is not masterable or controllable by the immediate reason and will of the common man. Therefore, the ideology leads to an "active suppression" of what is alien to self; this suppression may involve branding the other as an outcast or pariah, or an "immature" section of mankind in need of reeducation. We now use such terms as fundamentalist, fanatic, or "mediaeval," or perhaps we elaborate a more refined instrument of uniformity called "public reason."

Hierarchy and privilege are most irksome to the common man in their claim to represent a value higher than private satisfaction or human creation. They are reminders to society that human good is fragile and possessed only in a partial and tentative way. The superior or higher must be brought down and neutralised; that is, whereas the "plain man" may register some indifference or avoid contact with the higher claims, the common man must either eliminate them, or better yet, "annex" and "remodel them", thereby bending them to "the measure of his 'requirements', with the pretension of thus enhancing and intrinsically 'improving' them" (PL 70, cf. CM 311). The institutions of religion and education are particularly vulnerable to the process of annexation and remodelling.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Vol. Two, IV, 3, p. 672. Tocqueville discerns the same fundamental metaphysics as Kolnai – see for example his analysis and denunciation of "pantheism" as the typical democratic religious framework, Vol. Two, I, 7, p. 451.

The idea of the common man as just "anyone" means that "any human subjectivity as such is – equivalently to others – a judge of truth, and similarly any human need an immediately sovereign determinant of the good" (PL 76). The rampant spread of subjectivism and relativism in ethical thought reflects this trend – "who is to say what is right or wrong?" – since anyone's judgment is as good as another's; and so too the notion of a therapeutic society places any felt need as a *prima facie* right to be reckoned with. Kolnai perceptively notes that unity becomes a "self-contained *theme* of society"; no longer is it "a function of the convergency of minds towards a transcendent Cause, Measure and End" (PL 77). Thus, religious differences do not require true civility and dialogue, but rather such differences are suppressed as divisive or remodelled along the lines of a new age substitute for religion, a generic unifying spirituality that takes the place of divided, particular faith traditions.<sup>7</sup> The very claim for truth or a claim for divine privilege is attacked as the source of division and fanaticism. The utopian goal is that of a "tensionless common subjectivity" (CM 320) and this means the destruction of any "objectivisation", be it religious, philosophical, juridical or social. It was with good reason that Kolnai found that the very mildness of its methods rendered progressive democracy more "insidious" than Nazism or Communism: it could assimilate "under the deceptive verbal cloak of liberalism and tolerance, the thinking, moods and wills of everybody to a wholesale standard of the 'socialised' mind."<sup>8</sup>

The contradiction of progressive democracy cannot be hidden or contained. The quest to overcome alienation leads to a super-alienation, it requires an all-powerful central consciousness which can overcome dividedness and otherness, thereby rectifying the injustices of privilege and liberty: "(an) omnipotent levelling power itself needs a distinct supremacy over the power of 'common men' as such" (CM 289). How else shall we secure truly equal conditions; who shall cleanse "the tissue of society from power relationships – from relations of dependence and from 'vertical' principles of articulation"? We must concentrate power in the hands of

"One Subject" of consciousness and will: the subjectified, totalitarian Collective; to make all social order dependent on the decrees of one human Agent supposed to incarnate the "rational will" of "us all". (PL 95)

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<sup>7</sup> On the issue of religious indifference and toleration, see Kolnai's "Cult of the Common Man ...", pp. 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> "Three Riders of the Apocalypse," Mahoney (ed.) p. 108, *Appraisal*, II, 1, p.5.

Kolnai is amazed at the ultimate willingness of the citizens of liberal democracy to be directed by the central consciousness; it amounts to a self-enslavement of man. The real object of hatred is the idea of a concrete natural order of Society's life; of an artificial texture of social relationships and appreciations reposing on a receptive incorporation of "natural" data of value rather than on the opinion and will of an omnipotent collective Subject. (CM 300-1)

This tendency towards centralisation is something more than a sociological trend or fact; it is part of the logic of the common man. Thus, Kolnai thinks that the liberal has become virtually totalitarian in the war against privilege in the Common Man's name.

How can such a movement be resisted or reversed? Kolnai's understanding of a sound political life is centred on the presence of social hierarchy and various forms of "privilege". He shows the vital dependence of political liberty on hierarchy and privilege. "*Normally*", he claims,

i.e. given a certain amount of division, equilibrium, control and manifoldness of social hierarchies, positions of authority, power, rank, prestige, wealth, etc., deserve being respected and honoured not because they warrant personal excellence but because they stand for a vital necessity of social order and are conducive to the recognition by and *in* society of the hierarchical distinction of values ...<sup>9</sup>

The noble is a "notable" – one who is known and is not anonymous (CM 297) and therefore exists and acts with a degree of independence. Notables are members of the higher middle class, urban patriciates, Church organisation – as well as found in "military, academic, and even trade union milieux" (CM 299). Such notables have a claim to social prerogative or leadership in virtue of a "value intrinsic, distinctively qualitative, pervading the essence of its bearer" (CM 298). Yet the sense of hierarchy does not as such mean the noble persons are higher morally or even metaphysically better than another; but they do serve as "a stimulus and a gross *provisional* measure of value" (CM 294). The noble represents a higher value; there is an exemplariness – such as the general of conspicuous courage, the scholar's devotion to truth, the monk's dedication to prayer, the union leader's commitment to justice etc. The idea of "exemplar" reveals the depth of the metaphysical substructure of a well ordered society. Kolnai says that nobility simply means the reception ... by society of a structural principle of order that is not of its own making or positing but originates in a supra-social,

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<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., note 2, p. 185.

quasi "entitative" human value. ... (It is) a recognition of what(ever) is higher and better than its own "thesis", "volition", or "appointment" may be. (CM 299)

This notion of participation means that we receive the good; we hold it precariously and tentatively; we are stewards, if you will, of the good.<sup>10</sup> The notion of participation implies analogy – that is diverse modes of fulfilment of the value, with various sets of primacy and secondary modes of fulfilment and responsibility. Hierarchy and participation mean that a certain *personnel*, by virtue of its very constitution and in a sense penetrating its distinctive "being" as it were, is *primarily ordained* to actualise and to cultivate a certain set of higher values; to attend to, and to serve, certain aspects of the common good. (PL 72)

There are higher values – indeed the noble stands for the idea of Man's participation in values higher than those universally and actually attainable for man, and with it, for Man's *bondage* to an objective order of natural being which essentially and metaphysically surpasses his power and outranges his sovereignty. (CM 302; cf. PL 73).

Kolnai considers the denial of otherness and the utopian projection of unity to be an "impossibility on the border of the 'analytic' and empirical" – it violates the "basic constitution of man" and leads to an "incurable self-contradiction."<sup>11</sup> The violation of human nature involves the very requirement of an object for the human activities of "love, fight, curiosity, understanding, virtue, possessions, rank, equalisation, conquest, adaptation;" and further "alienation constitutes a fount of pleasure, thrill, happiness, vitality, a sense of being alive."<sup>12</sup> Alienation is a condition for human adventure. As Kolnai explains it:

By claiming Identity we estop ourselves, as it were, from Participation; by asserting man's absolute and all-comprehensive Actuality we foil the manifold real potentialities in man which can only thrive in spheres remote from a totalitarian concentration on the "evident needs of the Moment", and prevent them from actualisation; by "emancipating" man from the "divisions," "tensions," "contradictions," "*Verdinglichungen*" and "alienations" that are inherent in his natural status we isolate, "divide" and

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<sup>10</sup> For a metaphysical treatment of participation see Norris Clark, *The One and the Many*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, and John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> "Utopia and Alienation", in Aurel Kolnai, *The Utopian Mind and Other Papers*, ed. Francis Dunlop, London: Athlone, 1995, p. 178. I wish to acknowledge my debt to Margaret Calderon Miller and her father Joseph Calderon who, in 1975, kindly introduced me to the writings of Dr. Kolnai and provided me with copies of some of his then unpublished manuscripts.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., p.176-77.

"alienate" him *integrally* from his proper humanity, set him against whatever represents the reality of freedom and dignity – of nobility and sovereignty, of virtue and wisdom, of perfection and progress – *within* him (and can never be simply *he*, any more than *his*) and reduce him to a mere abject Thing while inflating him into a self-styled Deity. (PL74)

At the end of the day

we are merely creatures and "guests" of God even on earth, not in any sense "claimants" on Him ... (and) we are also, ineliminably and most fortunately for us all, beneficiaries and benefactors, servants and masters, pupils and teachers, imitators and exemplars of one another, ...always in a more proper sense as receivers and followers than as "privileged" spenders or leaders. (PL 70)

Response, not fiat, is the primary gesture of man.

Patience and respect for privilege stand at the heart of a sound political order because

Privilege means the social projection, the institutional recognition, the traditional embodiment of the essentially insurmountable dividedness, imperfection and subjectivity (in the face of a transcendent Object and Good) of Man, ...

and a correction of our smallness and fallenness. Those who have achieved something in some limited respect may make it possible for "others (to) reach out beyond their own immediate possession or proper nature, and enrich themselves... ." (PL 69) What Kolnai has in mind here by privilege would be something like privilege of rank, privilege of attaining a social position like that of a tenured faculty member, member of the bar, physician; or alternatively students at a college, traders in a market, etc. They are able to carry on their business or profession without external interference and to gain access to the information, tools, etc., which they need to perform such activities. It is their independence of the actual will or appetites of society which enables the privilege to serve such an enriching function in society. Privilege is an established positional value in society relatively independent of the will of society, yet fundamentally in tune with it. Privilege allows "a pattern of concrete and specialised 'points of interblending' between the private and the common good". It implies intermediate groups, classes, bodies with their own "perspectives, insights and devotions, virtues and loyalties, responsibilities and vocations, standards of honour and accumulations of values" (PL 93).

Privilege serves as a rampart to liberty; again because of its social role and because of the metaphysics of participation and the dispositions it cultivates in a social body. The historic root of political liberty lies in

"Privilege" and its extension. There were privileges of the barons against the crown; or privileges of universities from political and ecclesiastical control; so citizens' rights are in some way "geared to and dependent upon the subsistence of certain 'exemplary' privileges ... necessarily limited to a minority" (PL 89). In this way then

Privilege is a rampart of (the) liberty ... of all classes of people ..., because it expresses and safeguards the existence of relatively independent persons as quasi *finite* parts of society, as "principles" of the community. (PL 94)

A free society will "be a society rich in privileges, affording manifold means of redress and opportunities of ascent (*not* devised in the spirit of *effacing* the framework of privileges) to the 'underprivileged'" (PL 96). It should be a balanced society involving a plurality and limitation of all social powers and political prerogatives, and an ordering "in deference and in reference to a Power radically beyond and above Man in his social reality, in his political dignity and in all manifestations of his 'will'" (CM 274). Such is the meaning of "liberty under God."

Aurel Kolnai considered himself to be a conservative. But he was well aware of the special illusions, shortcomings, and exaggerations to which that political side might fall prey.<sup>13</sup> He qualified his own "conservative" position as follows:

What we have in mind is not, of course, a proposal to substitute for (Western) "Democracy", along with its ideological biases, a fancy system of Conservative Constitutionalism, nor a "return" to this or that specified stage of the past, but a suggestion to *displace the spiritual stress* from the "common man" aspect of Democracy to its aspect of constitutionalism and of moral continuity with the high tradition of Antiquity, Christendom and the half-surviving Liberal cultures of yesterday. (CM 274)

Kolnai did not want a reactionary return or conservative utopia; his sights were trained on the liberal democracies of the West as high historic achievements requiring support. He championed Democracy, first against fascism and communism, and then against itself. His main concern was the preservation of liberty against the ideology of the common man. As a "conservative", Kolnai did not have in mind an aristocratic, let alone an oligarchic, defence of privilege. The best arrangement for liberty lay in a mixed regime, first recommended by Aristotle. The form of mixed regime Kolnai had in mind is of course a popular democracy in which broad

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<sup>13</sup> See PL 66 on "reactionary aestheticism and fascist hysteria" and PL 99 on Platonist and romantic misconceptions of social hierarchy; as well as "The Moral Theme in Political Division", *Philosophy*, XXXV, 1960, pp. 234-54, reprinted in Francis Dunlop, ed., op. cit., note 12, on right wing hypocrisy, inertia, and dangerous "holism."

strata of society are enfranchised and participate in the political process. It is a society that most of all reflects balance; political checks and balances as well as division of social power. His own best formulation runs as follows:

what has made the concrete reality and duration of liberal-democracy, with its manifold compromises and elements of sanity, possible and practicable has been the "Conservative" – the Christian, hierarchic, pluralistic, and realistic: as it were, "finitistic" – substance of our civilisation ... " (PL 87)<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Western liberal democracy shelters in itself and "has ... guarded against utter peril and extinction, the traditions of civilisation and fragments of liberty ... which its destruction by *any* opposing force would wipe out, beyond repair ...".<sup>15</sup> Because progressive democracy rests upon an "ineliminable" dualism between the utopian ideal and the givenness of human reality, there will be an incompleteness in its totalitarian trends. The liberal democratic order reposes on pre-liberal axioms, conventions and traditions which limit the excess of individual liberty and popular sovereignty; one cannot rely solely nor primarily upon the automatic mechanisms of constitutional order.<sup>16</sup> The

*Liberal* conception of society ... cannot support and protect liberty except in a precarious and self-contradictory fashion, (because it must) rely(ing) on Conservative values unofficially tolerated yet continually harassed, and eaten away, by the immanent dialectic, the "law of evolution", of liberal-democratic society as such. (PL 86)

In that breach between the utopian ideal and the historic reality and achievement of liberal democracy, Aurel Kolnai stood to fight and engage the philosophical issues surrounding democracy.

Kolnai was a spirited defender of liberty, rights and liberal democracy, not their opponent.<sup>17</sup> Some conservative writers today see the very idea of human rights as one of the chief culprits in our political confusion and decline. For example, Robert Kraynack, in his book *Christian Faith and*

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<sup>14</sup> See "The Humanitarian Versus the Religious Attitude", pp. 429-457. See also "The Cult of the Common Man and the Glory of the Humble", pp. 1-43.

<sup>15</sup> "Three Riders," Mahoney, ed., p. 118, *Appraisal*, II,1, p.11.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. George Grant, *English Speaking Justice*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, on the role of theological traditions that supplemented the threadbare philosophy of social contract of Hobbes and Locke.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, his harshest judgment is often reserved for fellow Catholic intellectuals, such as Jacques Maritain, who would sometimes exhibit an excessive zeal for rapprochement with progressive liberalism. See Kolnai's review of Maritain's *Man and the State*, "The Synthesis of Christ and Anti-Christ," in Mahoney, ed. (who gives a different sub-title), pp. 175-181. I compare and contrast Maritain, Yves R. Simon and Kolnai in the articles cited above.

*Modern Democracy*,<sup>18</sup> chastises Jacques Maritain and John Paul II as "Christian Kantians" whose political theory of rights decisively undermines the true defence of liberty. Yet Kolnai accepted the historic reality of rights, a "concrete element of the democratic tradition," which serves as a bar to totalitarian manipulation, alongside of the rule of law, checks and balances, and independent ownership (PL 91).<sup>19</sup> In fact, he accounts for rights as an extension to many of the "exemplary privileges" of the few (PL 89). He affirmed the historic achievement of liberal democracy and did not seek to radically question its compatibility with Christianity; in fact, he seems to think that liberal democracy derives from the "finitistic substance" of the Christian notion of creation. Many liberal thinkers derived their philosophy from this Christian heritage. Political rights are not a "Kantian" reading of politics, but rather Kant borrowed from the tradition a notion of human dignity and human freedom. With good reason did Nietzsche call Kant the "great delayer." He wanted human freedom and dignity without the metaphysical substructure. But the issue, for Kolnai, was not the presence or absence of reference to human and civic rights. The problem was, rather, how to interpret those rights. He sought not a "fancy system" of conservative constitutionalism but merely to "displace the spiritual stress" away from the ideology of the common man. Perhaps his phenomenological realism preserved him from the folly of refounding political philosophy in opposition to a notion of rights. Ironically, Kolnai has much in common with Jacques Maritain and perhaps less with such contemporary writers who denounce the very notion of rights, such as Robert Kraynack. Although Kolnai was harsh with Maritain, he affirmed the fundamental point of agreement between them – the stress on "social pluralism."<sup>20</sup> He rightly pointed out that Maritain did not fully appreciate the conservative implications of this fundamental facet of political life. But unfortunately Kolnai overstated and distorted Maritain's sympathies with "progressive democracy" as Kolnai defined it. Maritain also criticised just this notion of democracy as derived from Locke and Rousseau.<sup>21</sup> And as Kraynack finds reason to criticise the discourse of rights in John Paul II, I believe that Kolnai would have found in John Paul II a deep affinity. Both ranged beyond traditional Thomism and took an interest in realist phenomenology; both were raised in a Catholic culture in Eastern Europe; both were linguists who appreciated the real diversity of human beings and culture; both were scholars and teachers who lend an urgency to their study beyond the merely "academic" enterprise. Thus, Aurel Kolnai and Karol

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<sup>18</sup> Robert P. Kraynack, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. PL 69, 86

<sup>20</sup> Review of *Man and the State*, Mahoney, ed., pp. 178-179.

<sup>21</sup> See my "Maritain and Simon's Use of Thomas Aquinas in the Justification of Democracy," *Liberty, Wisdom and Grace* ..., for ref see note 1.

Wojtyla both developed a deep appreciation for the political reality of Western liberal democracy, and a deep disdain for its totalitarian rivals. But, their orientation to the "sovereignty of the object", their trust in the pull of Truth, and their subordination of human action to "Providence",<sup>22</sup> prevented both a conservative quibbling with the long tradition of human rights as unfolded in the West and a liberal inflating of the rhetoric and ideology of expansive rights. In sum, the full Catholic vision of reality framed their reflections upon man in society. The root of the modern crisis is that men have forgotten God. Kolnai said:

Man has chosen to 'progress' on the wrong track; and he will continue doing so as long as he dreams of 'controlling moral and spiritual forces' ... instead of surrendering to the moral and spiritual Reality outside and above him.<sup>23</sup>

The idea of human rights, like that of federalism, separation of powers, universal suffrage or many other proud achievements of modern political systems, are not in themselves either the markers or the obstacles to human progress. They lie scattered like so many iron filings to be tossed aside or heaped in a meaningless bulk until such time as they are arrayed in line with the sovereign point of attraction, God. In Kolnai's writing, the phrase "liberty under God" is the most adequate and true expression of political order. Perhaps the greatest challenge to contemporary readers of Kolnai is the ease with which he refers to God and the transcendent. He follows the way of faith and reason, being neither a fideist nor a rationalist. In fact, as I have compared Kolnai to Tocqueville, I believe that the comparison to John Paul II is even more fitting. The ultimate remedy for social and political disorder is the recovery of the true God as a counter to the God of the common man. For a student of Kolnai the following passage should be seen as a fitting capstone and statement of Kolnai's political philosophy par excellence:

By formalising, restricting, relaxing and refusing his allegiance to Him Who Is, man has set himself at war ... with Being as such, and condemned himself to seek satisfaction in the dissolution and reduction of all Substantiality and Nobility. By "emancipating" the Image from its Exemplar, the privileged Creature from its sovereign Creator, he has virtually destroyed his very humanity. He will recover his humanity ... as soon as he truly and integrally reasserts the greatest and most vital of his needs, ignored and maimed and stifled by humanitarianism: the need for a meaning of his life which points decisively and majestically beyond the range of "his needs".<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kolnai's phrase from "Three Riders", Mahoney, ed., p. 118, *Appraisal*, II, 1, p.11.

<sup>23</sup> "The Humanitarian versus the Religious Attitude," p. 457.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

The case against the ideology of "the common man" could not be more succinctly made, nor could the root of participation and political liberty be more aptly stated. John Paul II in his encyclical on "Faith and Reason" also traces the crisis of our time to the lack of meaning and the implicit nihilism of much modern thinking.<sup>25</sup> Quick to see the political implications of the search for meaning, John Paul II challenges philosophy to recover its sapiential dimension, affirm the reality of being, and follow the bold range of reason in seeking knowledge of the highest things. I would suggest that Aurel Kolnai, for all of his writings, but especially his political philosophy, belongs in that group of philosophers esteemed by John Paul II for the integrity of their reason in the context of faith – Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, John Henry Newman and Edith Stein.

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<sup>25</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Faith and Reason*, Boston, Mass.: Daughters of St. Paul Press, 1998, §85 and passim. See my "John Paul II and the Exorcism of the Ghost of Descartes," in *Liberty, Wisdom and Grace*; first appeared in Timothy L. Smith, *Faith and Reason: Notre Dame Symposium of 1999*, South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2001.