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## *Panajotis Kondylis and the Obsolescence of Conservatism*

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PANAJOTIS KONDYLIS (1943-), a Greek scholar who lives in Heidelberg and writes in German, may be, unbeknownst to himself, one of the great conservative thinkers of our age. Describing Kondylis as a conservative might leave him and his readers puzzled. His five-hundred page work *Conservatism* (1986) examines "the

historical content and *decline*" of its subject. For Kondylis, conservatism had already declined in the last century as a major political force. It was the ideal of an essentially medieval hierarchical society defended by landed aristocrats and their intellectual followers. What Americans have usually presented as conservative values, Kondylis explains, belongs to a "bourgeois world of thought." Indeed the historical construc-

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tions of American traditionalists have been at most attempts to “exalt an older conceptual legacy and a long dead way of life against the newest developments in the direction of a consumerist mass democracy.”<sup>1</sup> Kondylis cites Russell Kirk and the Southern Agrarians as examples of this tendency to conjure up an ideal organic past in a society that has always been nearer to mass democracy than it has to European traditionalism.

Kondylis identifies himself with Marxism, broadly understood. In a recent essay, “Marxism, Communism, and the History of the Twentieth Century,” Kondylis offers this revealing opinion: “The planetary social project of Communism failed not because of moral or economic inferiority but because the national power of Russia encountered the superior national power of the United States.” Furthermore, “Never before has the Marxist view of history been as true and current as it is now in the initial phase of a planetary history,” particularly in determining social relations and the “ideological” forms that they take.<sup>2</sup> In my German correspondence with him, Kondylis makes the point that, unlike me, “he stands far closer to Marx than to [the German legal thinker] Carl Schmitt.”<sup>3</sup> His detailed analysis of social class and of ideological consciousness as reflected in culture point back to Marx and to the twentieth-century Marxist interpreter of intellectual history, George Lukacs. Kondylis underlines these connections whenever he can.

His transparent dislike for the United States and its current devotion to “human rights” may offend some American patriots. He reduces the American faith in democracy and in universal rights to an instrument of national power. In a caustic piece for the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (August 18, 1996), “Human Rights: Conceptual Confusion and Political Instrumentalization,” he notes that the United States speaks of human rights

in the context of international affairs not as a replacement for its own national laws that still distinguish between citizens and non-citizens: “No state can grant all of humanity the same rights—rights of settlement and voting—without ceasing to exist.” For the American government, “human rights are a political tool within a planetary context where density requires the use of universal ideologies; within this framework, however, great nations continue to determine the binding interpretation of the same constructs.”<sup>4</sup> Kondylis dislikes not only Americans for what he perceives as political hypocrisy but for their consumerist mentality. He has editorials against the corrupting effect of American hedonism, which he thinks is now infecting Europeans.

Kondylis’s brief against the United States occasionally descends into superficial generalization. “Human rights” ideology is by no means accepted by all Americans; and contrary to what Kondylis asserts, “human rights” ideologues are willing to blur the distinction between the rights of citizens and noncitizens. Recent judicial decisions that bear on the “rights” of illegal aliens have interpreted the Fourteenth Amendment as establishing universally binding human rights. Meanwhile, advocates of a human rights-based foreign policy, on the editorial boards of the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, have been equally zealous in upholding an expansionist immigration policy. Conversely, American nationalists on the Old Right have been both isolationists and critics of “human rights.”<sup>5</sup> As for the assurance given that “economic inferiority” has nothing to do with the disintegration of the Soviet empire, this particular statement is never demonstrated. Kondylis goes on to speak of the “superior national power of the United States,” which may be another way of referring to the working economy of the U.S., as oppo-

to the fatally paralyzed one of the former Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Kondylis's Marxist self-labeling and distaste for the United States, one can find in him an identifiable man of the Right. But the Right to which Kondylis belongs is not the European counterpart of the American Right-Center, made up of pro-business supporters of a democratic welfare state and of a consumer economy. Like the intellectual movement called the European New Right, which often quotes him, Kondylis stresses the merits of traditional community, which he believes to be threatened by American mass democracy and American economic expansion. Unfortunately, anti-Americanism has become instinctive for many on the European Right.<sup>7</sup> I say "unfortunately" not because this sentiment is never justified. I think it often is, given the human rights and globalist triumphalism of American state department spokesmen and journalists and the moral pollution produced by our entertainment industry. But anti-Americanism gets in the way of understanding our current political context. Much of what the European New Right blames on the American people are recent developments, such as crusades for human rights with an often changing content; while what is perceived as quintessentially American is equally characteristic of other Western societies. Here a sense of historical change may be necessary. For example, Southern planters and the Northeastern merchant class of the mid-nineteenth century were far removed from late twentieth-century mass democracy. They were in fact as far removed from it as the world of Palmerston and Disraeli was from the social democratic and multicultural England which I visited last year.

Note that the Marxism that Kondylis expounds is highly selective and without the egalitarian and "utopian" aspects of the original product. Kondylis praises

Marx and some Marxists for looking behind ideologies for the social and/or political interests which they incarnate. Like Marx, he considers "ideology" to be "false," a shared body of social and cultural attitudes which distorts historical reality, willfully or unwittingly. Kondylis mocks ethicists for packaging as "human rights" the interests of empires or the political ambitions of particular intellectuals. For Kondylis, such ethicizing conceals a will to power or the force of an expanding consumer economy. But Kondylis rarely seizes on the terms "*ideologeme*" or "false consciousness" when he analyzes the restorationist thought of the early and mid-nineteenth century. Although a sound argument can be made that Joseph de Maistre, Friedrich Stahl, and Le Comte de Bonald were defending a dying European order against a rising bourgeois society, Kondylis discusses such counterrevolutionaries with profound respect. Not all of the foredoomed battles in his work or in his view of world history are traced to "false consciousness," and it may be observed that the closer he gets to the modern era of "mass democracy," planetary politics, and a consumerist culture the more Kondylis talks about dishonest ideologies.

This selectiveness may be partly the result of ingrained attitudes. Though a visceral anti-American fond of Marxist terminology, Kondylis has no use for mass democracy and its cultural and economic accompaniments. Sprung from an illustrious Greek family that produced both statesmen and military officers, he remains proud of his own antecedents. As he explained, with self-deprecation in a letter to me, unlike other Kondylises who accomplished much, "all he has managed to do is write long books in German." His books, by the way, are not only long but recondite, written in exceedingly dense prose and marked by tortuous explications.

This stylistic difficulty and his questionable generalizations about Americans to the contrary notwithstanding, Kondylis reveals two strengths that American conservatives would do well to imitate. One, he contextualizes ideas, without reducing them to mere epiphenomena of other historical forces. Kondylis grasps the necessary relation between cultural and moral ideals and the social and political configurations in which they develop. He demonstrates the disintegration of a conservative vision, one based on fixed orders with corresponding duties and privileges, in a society then undergoing critical changes, namely urbanization and the Industrial Revolution. Those who wished to represent an already superannuated conservative vision lost their social base and were forced to modify their public stance to include bourgeois ideals.

In this modified conservative view that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, defenders of medieval hierarchy and civil order made common cause against revolt from below. They and bourgeois liberals opposed democratic revolutionaries and socialist reformers. In this alliance, however, the truly conservative vision of order became increasingly vestigial.<sup>8</sup> The major lines of division were thereafter between "bourgeois modernity" and "mass democratic postmodernity," a topic minutely discussed in Kondylis's book *The Decline of the Bourgeois Form of Thought and Life* (1991).<sup>9</sup> Social visions remain competitive, Kondylis reminds his reader, for only as long as they are tied to a dominant or powerful class. Once that class is overwhelmed by political or material changes, its ideas inevitably fall out of favor. Though Kondylis points out the historical precondition for the predominance of what he as well as Richard Weaver calls a "vision of order," he does not relativize all such visions. From his descriptions it is clear that

Kondylis favors the restoration of the thought of the early nineteenth century over the liberal bourgeois *Denkform* that replaced it. Despite his attempted detachment in surveying the end of mass democracy, Kondylis despises the chaotic order and boundless self-indulgence which he associates with the postmodern age.

He presents mass democracy as a total way of life that develops in a favorable political and economic climate. He does not use the term simply to express contempt for what he dislikes. Nor does he try to reduce mass democracy to a side effect of some material transformation, for example, by treating it as a byproduct of industrial growth or of the shifting of population toward cities. Kondylis does note certain political and economic preconditions for the rise of mass democracy, most particularly universal suffrage, material abundance, and the identification of self-government with public administration. But he also stresses its cultural and intellectual presuppositions. Among those that preoccupy him are the avant-garde artistic movements of the early twentieth century and the kind of experimental theater that began shortly thereafter. Unlike the Marxist Lukacs, who viewed such movements as sources of bourgeois amusement, Kondylis interprets them as the beginnings of a cultural war. Artists and playwrights collaborated in bringing down the bourgeois liberal world. For they despised precisely what it exalted, social constraint, rationally comprehensible art, and a coherent way of life and civic responsibility.

In their place Western society received a highly subjective, self-expressive, and ideologically inflammatory culture. Once this became wed to material hedonism, the erosion of identity and a fixation on total equality, Kondylis maintains, a mass democratic world was established itself.<sup>10</sup> Kondylis points

the cultural components of this world view as omens of postmodernism. Rather than identifying this phenomenon exclusively with the most recent assaults on fixed or received meanings, Kondylis argues that postmodernism has been extensive with the entire mass democratic age.<sup>11</sup> The relativization of meaning is only the latest strategy for advancing social equality and for evacuating nondemocratic opinions associated with an elitist past.

Mass democracy, as interpreted by Kondylis, is also a global process. Moving from the West where it supplanted "an oligarchic and hierarchical bourgeois liberalism," it is now "merging with a planetary landscape," in which Marxism and Communism have become the preparatory phases in a mass democratic end of history.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the liberal age it ended or the Communism it surpassed in material productiveness, mass democratic society both proclaims and works toward providing material gratification. In a secularized and dehierarchal setting, it does what Marxist socialism promised but only occasionally could produce. Here Marx, according to Kondylis, offered a partially accurate prediction but grafted onto it a happy historical ending that is unlikely to come to pass. Marx "had clung to the idea of a normative-eschatological unification of world history" and "had explained this unitary character of a planetary event through social and economic factors while drawing appropriate political conclusions [from his assumptions]." But this unitary world history which Marx saw as tied to economic modernization is also intensifying the war against social cohesion, in the name of individual gratification and universal sameness. Kondylis observes the irony that the struggle against Communism, "fought not least of all for liberal ideals," has resulted in the victory of a postliberal society, one whose dissimilarity from the bourgeois

age is greater than the distance that had separated Europe before the French Revolution from the Europe of the late nineteenth century. This exemplifies the ideological misrepresentation that Kondylis believes characterizes the promoters of mass democracy. They insist on a fictional continuity with the liberal past.<sup>13</sup>

Kondylis's contextualization of conservative, liberal, and mass democratic world views and his detailed analysis of mass democracy carries implications that he spells out for would-be conservatives. The term "conservative" is now being applied, he explains in an essay, "The Archaic Character of Political Concepts," to those who have nothing to do with an agrarian aristocratic society and less and less to do with a bourgeois liberal order. Kondylis finds it useless to define conservatives as "those who defend existing institutions, no matter what they happen to be."<sup>14</sup> He mocks journalists and academics who indiscriminately apply "conservative" to Chancellor Kohl or to Russian insurgents. They are accused of the same semantic opportunism as those who use "liberal" not to describe the "economic and constitutional conceptions of the European bourgeois but the right to abortion or an unlimited right to asylum." Least of all does Kondylis accept the Marxist practice, common during the Cold War, of designating the anti-Communist West as "conservative." Such a designation is unsuited for a "system which has revolutionized productive forces to an unprecedented extent and which places at the disposal of individuals material and mental possibilities that represent an astonishing and world-historical novum."<sup>15</sup>

Kondylis believes that a conservative politics in the sense that he understands that concept can no longer be fruitfully pursued. The socio-political context for this orientation was already disappear-

ing by the late nineteenth century, and a similar fate overtook bourgeois liberalism, which gave way to mass democracy. Moreover, the mass democratic system that Kondylis analyzes embraces politics, the economy, ethical reasoning, and the arts. It permeates and shapes human relations and expectations, and, despite its war against most of the Western heritage, is now held to be the crowning achievement of Western democratic peoples. It also condemns and dissolves traditional gender, social, and ethnic distinctions, and, ethically and economically, prepares the way for a global society of uprooted and increasingly indistinguishable individuals. Whether or not one accepts Kondylis's view of the United States as the vital source of this mass democratic empire, what he describes in any case is too monolithic and popular to be effectively opposed by eighteenth- or nineteenth-century visionaries.

Inasmuch as Kondylis makes fun of political labels "with changing contents," it is hard to imagine that he would take seriously any conservatism anchored in mass democracy. While an ambitious politician or political journalist might find reasons to praise this state of affairs, their reasoning, he would conclude, has nothing to do with conservatism. Those who exalt "human rights" and call for open borders and global democracy may be taking positions that help their careers and make them part of a respectable opposition. But nothing substantive separates them from other boosters of mass democracy or links them to either classical conservatism or bourgeois liberalism. There is also no evidence that such "conservatism" slows down the dynamism of mass democracy. At most, "moderate" mass democrats may create procedural obstacles that prevent democratic change from moving more quickly; in other situations, however, they may accelerate that

change by their devotion to multinational corporations and by their disinterest for national and regional differences.

In contrast to the bogus, would-be conservatisms that Kondylis finds in the postmodern age, he does view the counterrevolutionary Right as a genuine alternative to mass democracy. But the Right offers not a "conservative" alternative to the present age but a force of resistance to radical change: "the distinguishing characteristic of the Right consists of its willingness to suspend political liberalism for the sake of protecting economic liberalism and private property against leftist assault. In this sense the Right belongs to liberalism, however much the 'enlightened' segments of the bourgeois might show embarrassment about this connection."<sup>16</sup> In crucial respect this authoritarian Right does resemble the counterrevolutionary conservatism of the early nineteenth century: in its willingness to impose "visional dictatorship" to prevent the overthrow of existing institutions through a revolutionary sovereign dictatorship." The distinction between "commissarial" and "sovereign" dictatorship, one that suspends legality (as in the case of Peru) in order to restore peaceful conditions and one that implants a constitutional order by force, is taken from the work of Carl Schmitt, a legal theorist who defended precisely the kind of authoritarian Right that Kondylis describes.<sup>17</sup> But such a Right, which may take over because of a Communist threat or because of the radicalization of mass democracy, may lurch out of hand. It may culminate in sometimes irresponsible violence unleashed by a military coup or in the form of substantive "national revolution" sought by idealistic Italian fascists: in either case the socio-economic upheavals wrought by these events or later reactions to them will far surpass what the order is brought by provisional dicta-

ship.

In other cases, alluded to by Kondylis, the "authoritarian dominance of the Right" has "created the institutional framework for modernization and industrialization in a capitalist direction, to the exclusion of socialist experiments."<sup>18</sup> But these charges have sometimes led, as in the case of Spain, to the establishment of a mass democratic culture. Social democracy, a consumer society, "human rights" ideology and a disintegrating nuclear family have all followed once a welfare state and modern economy have been established. Pointing these problems out is not the same as deploring twentieth-century technology or exaggerating the benevolence of landed aristocrats or Victorian merchants. It is to state a causal connection between postmodernity in its social, political, and cultural forms and a progressive vanishing of inherited identities, civil society, as opposed to the state and economy, parental authority, and anything once understood to be "tradition." Kondylis believes that what has caused this situation is not the failure of public administrators to teach "values" or of manufacturers to promote "democratic capitalism." For him, the problems are systemic and lie in the fit between human appetites and changing institutional arrangements. They are also rooted in what Kondylis sees as the inevitability of struggle as the human condition. In the planetary age, people are fighting over resources but do so while appealing to the human rights slogans invented by intellectuals and the media.<sup>19</sup>

Kondylis claims to be pursuing value-free science and stresses the distinction by nineteenth-century social thinkers between descriptive statements and concepts formed out of observation and value-assertions. He insists that *his* scholarship does not contain expressions of normative morality and is openly con-

temptuous of political advocacy disguised as analytic thought. Yet the non-scientific aspect of his own judgments keeps intruding, seen in the obvious moral passion shown by Kondylis in scolding political utopians. Since 1991, when the "end of history" argument was first advanced by neoconservative publicist Francis Fukuyama, Kondylis has held forth against the notion that human history is ending with the fall of Communism. He has ridiculed the idea and the presumed intent behind it, that all or most of humanity is being drawn into a democratic capitalist orbit marked by peaceful trade and orderly change.

To this Kondylis has responded that history will likely go on, as has been the case until now, with struggles and ideological self-justifications. In a world of expanding population, limited resources, and rising materialist expectations, he finds no reason to think that human conflict is about to end. Moreover the terms "democracy," "capitalism," and "rights" have been made to mean whatever partisan politicians and intellectuals wish them to mean. All of these terms now have been given what Kondylis calls a "polemical" function: they are used to carry on a struggle against political and cultural enemies or obstacles. Here Kondylis may be entirely on the mark. As I myself found in doing research on a book dealing with the managerial state, "democracy," "liberalism," and "right" have lost any specific meaning in "Western democracies." What provides these terms with steady points of reference are their connection to postmodern societies and their sacral use by a particular elite. Public administrators, journalists, and other segments of the political class determine or alter the meaning of political doctrine. Even so, Kondylis, no less than those he argues against, is speaking "polemically." His attempts to refute global democrats are not disinterested scientific statements. They pro-

ceed from a moral stance composed of his tragic view of life and dislike for ideological manipulation. This view does not weaken Kondylis's arguments and in fact may enhance them, but it clearly does not represent the triumph of value-free science.

His interest in the cultural and geographic extensions of mass democracy has resulted in, among other projects, a book on planetary politics published in 1992. The argument of this work features prominently in Kondylis's critical remarks on another recent study of world politics, Samuel Huntington's provocative thesis on impending cultural wars presented in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993. Kondylis disagrees sharply with Huntington's view (which I happen to share), that future planetary conflicts will be fueled by the tensions among cultural-religious blocs. In opposition to this gloomy prediction, he offers another equally somber one, that mass democracy will create both spiritual stu-

por and a growing desire for material well-being. This will lead not to peace but to devastating wars pursued for resources, without much regard for moral self-justification. The belligerents simply trot out the already worn democratic tags about "equality" and "human rights."<sup>20</sup>

For all the pessimism of his work, Kondylis remains cheerful in his demeanor. He attributes this serene character to the kind of stoic *apatheia* which he cultivates. Already in his mid-fifties, he continues to live in austere solitude, dividing his time between two back-country residences, in Heidelberg and in the Kifisia district of Athens. He has never held a full-time academic appointment but has made do with a series of grants and the payment received for his political journalism. Despite the unfavorable comparison he draws between himself and better-known members of his family, Panajotis Kondylis may add further luster to an already distinguished name.

1. Panajotis Kondylis, *Konservativismus: Geschichtlicher Gehalt und Untergang* (Stuttgart, 1986), 51. 2. Panajotis Kondylis, "Marxismus, Kommunismus und die Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts" in *Der Marxismus in seinem Zeitalter* (Leipzig, 1994), 25, 33. 3. Letter from Kondylis dated February 14, 1997. 4. "Menschenrechte, begriffliche Verwirrung und politische Instrumentalisierung," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, August 18, 1996, 12. 5. Cf. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, revised edition (Wilmington, Del., 1996), 329-41; and Paul Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, second edition (New York, 1993), 142-66. 6. *Der Marxismus in seinem Zeitalter*, 25 and 34. 7. For an expansive statement of this anti-American sentiment by Europe's most prominent New Right spokesman, see Alan de Benoist's *Il était une fois l'Amérique* (Paris, 1984); and Thomas Molnar's "American Culture: A Possible Threat," *The World and I* (May 1987), 440-42. 8. See *Konservativismus: Geschichtlicher Gehalt und Untergang*, 387-447 and 507. 9. See Kondylis, *Der Niedergang der bürgerlichen Denk- und Lebensform: Die liberale Moderne und die massendemokratische Postmoderne* (Weinheim, 1991), especially 169-88.

10. *Ibid.*, 208-26. 11. *Ibid.*, 238-67. 12. *Der Marxismus in seinem Zeitalter*, 15-16. 13. *Der Marxismus in seinem Zeitalter*, 18-19. 14. "Die Antiquiertheit politischer Begriffe," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 5, 1991, 8. 15. *Ibid.*, see "Globalisierung, Politik, Verteilung," *Tagesanzeiger*, November 29, 1996, 8. 16. *Konservativismus*, 5. References to Carl Schmitt abound in Kondylis's interview with the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 4 (1994), 683-94; and in his work *Konservativismus*, 504. 17. See Kondylis's foreword to the pieces "Globale Mobilmachung" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 13, 1946, 7: "Blutige Geistesgeschäfte," *ibid.*, December 28, 1995: "heißt schon westlich?," *ibid.*, November 19, 1995; and *Planetarische Politik nach dem Kalten Krieg* (Frankfurt, 1992). 18. See "Globale Mobilmachung" in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 8, 1995, 7; and "Die Ratlosigkeit," *ibid.*, May 7, 1995. The article is particularly revealing of Kondylis's historical and moral outlook, inasmuch as it treats the "information revolution" dismissively and concludes that the "logic of information will remain subordinate to interpersonal relations and ideological entanglements."