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Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. ix + 370 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$37.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-19-515297-2.

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René Guénon (1886-1951) is one of those figures, who, although highly influential in his time, has seemingly disappeared from historical memory. Writing in 1996, Daniel Lindenberg, a leading historian of French intellectuals went as far as claiming that Guénon was “one of the most influential French intellectuals of the century.”[1] Yet Guénon, along with “Traditionalism,” the movement he inspired, has managed to fly largely undetected under historians’ radar.[2] The explanations for this neglect, according to Mark Sedgwick, are easy to understand. Guénon, who failed his *agrégation* and had his doctoral thesis rejected, was never properly credentialed in the French academy; consequently, though a prolific and influential writer, few were ready to openly acknowledge his debt to him. Perhaps even more importantly, Guénon himself was highly selective in his choice of disciples, many of whom organized themselves into occult-like sects, complete with secret initiations and exotic practices. Sedgwick is uniquely positioned to understand how these secretive aspects of the movement might impede historical investigation: he spent almost a decade coming to terms with Guénon and unraveling the complex, often mysterious, and, at times, bizarre history of Traditionalism. The result of his efforts, aptly titled *Against the Modern World*, is well-researched, well-written, and, given the inherent difficulties of the topic, is an impressive scholarly achievement.

At the outset, a few clarifications about vocabulary and organization seem called for. First, let us consider the word “traditionalism” itself. Though followers of Guénon tended to refer to their movement as simply “traditionalism,” Sedgwick employs the upper case to avoid confusing it with the many varieties of traditionalism unrelated to Guénon’s movement. Second, Sedgwick makes a distinction between a “hard” and a “soft” Traditionalism. The “hards” are true Guénonians who follow the letter of his rather strict interpretation of Traditionalist doctrine; they are also relatively few in number and have had little success in realizing the goals of Traditionalism. By contrast, the “softs” tend to look to Guénon as only one of several sources of inspiration and take great liberties in interpreting Traditionalist ideas; they are much larger in number and, correspondingly, have been much more successful in promoting their ideas. Organizationally, *Against the Modern World* follows roughly the stages in the history of Traditionalism. The first stage, which covers the period up to 1930, is in effect a compressed intellectual biography of Guénon and an attempt to summarize the main tenets of Traditionalism. The second stage, which covers the period between 1930 and 1960, looks at the various attempts at putting Traditionalism into “practice”; the two most notable of these attempts—the launching of a Sufi religious order and an attempt to reorient fascism toward Traditionalist ideas—give some indication of the fungible quality of Traditionalism. A last stage in the history of Traditionalism, which begins in the 1960s, is marked by the almost complete victory of the “soft” version and, along with it, a melding of Traditionalist themes with the larger Western cultural trends—or, perhaps more accurately, “countercultural” trends—emerging at about the same time. This last stage also marks the export of Traditionalism to certain non-Western venues like pre-revolutionary Iran and post-communist Russia.

Since the first phase—Guénon’s early life and his formulation of Traditionalism as a “doctrine”—will be of most interest to students of French history, I will focus my attention here. Guénon, who was born in

Blois in 1886 of Catholic, middle-class parents, first established his presence as what would now be called a “public intellectual” with a series of books in the 1920s, most notably: *L’Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues* (1921); *Orient et Occident* (1924); and *La Crise du monde moderne* (1927). Like many other European intellectuals of the postwar period, Guénon became involved with the debate over the “decline of the West,” a decline that he, like many on the political right, associated with the advance of modernity and the assault on traditional institutions and values. Typically, the response among the intellectuals of the right to this *crise de civilisation* was, on the one hand, to circle the wagons around those Western institutions and values deemed properly “traditional” and, on the other, to identify and attack those aspects of the modern world thought most threatening. Henri Massis’s much-discussed *Défense de l’Occident* (1927) was a classic of the genre. Not surprisingly, given his Maurrassian outlook, the values that Massis defended were Catholic orthodoxy, political authoritarianism, and traditional social hierarchy. No less surprising were those forces that Massis identified as threatening. In addition to the usual assortment of domestic enemies (liberals, socialists, etc.), he pointed to the new international specters of Bolshevism and “Orientalism.” This last choice—Orientalism—reflected not only the growing danger posed by colonial unrest but, no less worrisome to Massis, the growing domestic appeal of Eastern “spiritualism.”

Revealingly, Guénon took exception to Massis and, in fact, vigorously attacked *Défense de l’Occident* publicly. The Massis-Guénon controversy, which Sedgwick does not discuss, serves to highlight an important point that Sedgwick makes concerning the nature of Guénon’s antimodernity—namely, by the 1920s Guénon was convinced that the modern West had been so corrupted by modernity that no Western institution or value remained untainted by materialism, rationalism, or the other assorted ills associated with it. Guénon therefore turned toward the East, specifically toward Eastern religions, in order to find forms of traditionalism that had managed to remain untouched by the corrosive acids of modernity. Yet, as Sedgwick insists, Guénon is mistakenly cast as one of the early purveyors of “the wisdom of the East,” someone in the business of culling Eastern mystics for easily digestible morsels that might serve Westerners hungry for a bit of spiritual uplift. Guénon not only aimed his “philosophy” at an elite rather than the masses whom he disdained, but was very precise about what constituted genuine Traditionalism.

Guénon’s Traditionalism, according to Sedgwick, was a composite of three basic elements, none of which, strictly speaking, were original to him. The first of these elements, “inversion,” is an ancient concept but one adapted by Guénon as a companion piece to his implacable anti-modernism: everything that moderns interpreted as “progress” was really “decline,” everything that moderns labelled as “light” was really “darkness,” and so on. In other words, modernity was sustained only by illusion; if that illusion could be punctured, Guénon was convinced, modernity would collapse like a house of cards. A second element, *philosophia perennis*, or Perennial Philosophy, was also old, dating back to the early Italian Renaissance.[3] This notion, updated by Guénon, held that all of the great religions arose from a single primordial religion and, importantly, contained a single, ageless truth. It was this primal truth, obscured and finally obliterated by the illusions of modernity, that *should* have been transmitted across the ages. The essential task of Traditionalism was to recover this truth. But Guénon was convinced that such a recovery would not be easily accomplished for the simple reason that even Western institutions that claimed to be “traditional” had been infected, in reality, by modernity. Here, as a necessary aid in this recovery effort, the third element of Traditionalism came into play—“initiation.” In order to understand the importance of initiation in Traditionalism, Sedgwick takes the reader back into the occult world of pre-1914 Paris, a world in which Guénon was well-traveled. He had passed through a host of occult movements: Theosophy, Masonic lodges, Gnosticism, and, finally, a Sufi religious order. The common denominator was communion with a small circle of believers who, by following certain usually secret esoteric practices, entered into some form of direct contact with the divine. In the aftermath of the First World War, however, Guénon rejected a number of these as “counterinitiativic,”

false initiations. Among the many false paths, he included the traditional Catholic initiatic sacraments of baptism and confirmation, ending his short flirtation with traditionalist Catholicism in the early 1920s.

By the late 1920s, coinciding with the publication of his most successful book, *La Crise du monde moderne* in 1927, Guénon had established a niche for himself in Parisian intellectual circles and had recruited a small, but committed circle of followers. Not long after the publication of *La Crise*, however, Guénon's comfortable life was disrupted. He lost his wife suddenly and, soon thereafter, his teaching post. In 1930, for reasons quite accidental, Guénon found himself in Cairo, where he soon became a devout Muslim and a member of a Sufi order; he would remarry and remain in Cairo until his death in 1951. According to Sedgwick, it was this experience as a Muslim that finally completed Guénon's Traditionalism. He had found in the daily practices of Islam and the esoteric experiences of Sufism a form of spiritualism not derived from books but a "living tradition." Yet, Sedgwick cautions, his embrace of Islam was not, strictly speaking, a "conversion." Guénon wrote not of being converted but rather of having "moved into" Islam: "whoever understands the unity of traditions..." he insisted, "is necessarily... 'unconvertible' to anything" (p. 77). In other words, the exoteric practices of Islam along with the esoteric dimensions of Sufism—both uncontaminated by modernism—were, for Guénon, merely vehicles for approaching the *philosophia perennis*—the truth and unity at the origin of all of the great religions.

From the perspective of the student of French history, what is missing in *Against the Modern World* is much of the historical context of the 1920s, when Guénon was an important voice in the debates over the decline of the West, especially the much-discussed question of the West's relation with "the Orient." Even though Sedgwick calls *La Crise du monde moderne* Guénon's "masterpiece," not much is said about its contents or the controversies that it stimulated. In Sedgwick's defense, it should be pointed out that, as a historian of religion, his major interest is not understanding Guénon's place in French history, but understanding Traditionalism's larger impact. Thus it is hardly surprising that Sedgwick spends much of his time discussing the second and third stages of Traditionalism and attempting to reconstruct how Guénon's ideas could be put to such varied, indeed, seemingly contradictory uses.

Here the main players are a set of larger-than-life personalities. An early disciple of Guénon, Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), founded a Western Sufi order and attempted to realize Traditionalism through Islam. Far more ready than Guénon to modify traditional Islamic practices in the name of a spiritual universalism, Schuon finally broke with his erstwhile master, and, inspired by visions of the Virgin Mary and interest in Native American religious practices, he founded a community near Bloomington, Indiana. Schuon's brand of Traditionalism ended in disaster when he was charged, though not convicted, of child molestation in 1991. Julius Evola's (1898-1974) career was a disaster of a different order. Evola, a disenchanting Italian aristocrat who moved from Dadaism to murky philosophical speculations about a world in decline, found inspiration in Guénon's traditionalism. In fact, Evola, according to Sedgwick, might have been "Guénon's most important collaborator." Evola's ambition was nothing less than to make Italian fascism a vehicle for the realization of Traditionalism. Alarmed by the various accommodations made by Mussolini's regime by the early 1930s, Evola called for "a more radical, more intrepid Fascism, a really absolute Fascism, made of pure force, inaccessible to compromise" (p. 101). After the war, Evola became a leading intellectual force in the revival of neo-fascism and one of the inspirations for the wave of terrorism that swept Italy after 1968.

But not all Traditionalist itineraries ended in such notoriety. One of the most intriguing figures in Sedgwick's account is Mercea Eliade (1907-1986). A highly influential figure in the creation of religious studies as an autonomous discipline, Eliade had been deeply influenced by Guénon and Traditionalism. In fact, if one is to believe Sedgwick, "Eliade's general model of human religiosity is in effect the Perennial Philosophy dressed up in secular clothes." What Guénon called "tradition," Eliade repackaged as "'archaic religion'" (p. 112). However, as Sedgwick admits, Eliade was no simple disciple of Guénon

and thus is best seen as a “soft” Traditionalist. And there were other “softs”—E. F. Schumacher, author of *Small is Beautiful*, for example—who were not influenced directly by Guénon, but by the larger currents of Traditionalist thought that had filtered through the general culture by the 1960s. In fact, as Sedgwick suggests, the “softer” it got, the more successful Traditionalism became—and the more a case can be made for its importance.

All of this, however, raises a nagging question. Can ideas so varied—those of a Sufi mystic, an ideologist of fascism, a respected scholar of religion, and a popularizer of small earthism—be considered as part of the same “movement”? The answer to this question is complicated by the fact that, as Sedgwick readily admits, many Traditionalists were influenced, not only by Guénon, but by a host of others. Even someone like Evola, as close as he was to the center of Traditionalism, was also a student of Nietzsche. Could he, with equal justice, be called a “Nietzschean”? Clearly, Sedgwick runs into one of the classic problems that arise when writing this kind of history—namely, the difficult and elusive task of tracing influences and assigning labels. Sedgwick’s distinction between “hard” and “soft” relieves some of the pressure—one does not have to be a Guénonian to pass muster as a “soft” Traditionalist. But, as Sedgwick describes how Traditionalism dissolves into larger spiritualist and antimodernist cultural trends in the 1960s, even the label “soft Traditionalist” begins to lose any real discriminatory usefulness. Yet, this much said, would this have been a better book had Sedgwick restricted himself to the “hard” Guénonians? I think not. Sedgwick was correct in assuming that, despite all the attendant difficulties, attempting to describe the diffusion of Traditionalism would pay handsome dividends.

NOTES

[1] “Guénon (René),” in Jacques Julliard and Michel Winock, eds., *Dictionnaire des intellectuels français* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996), pp. 566-67.

[2] Neither of the two leading surveys of the history of French intellectuals in the twentieth-century—Michel Winock’s *Le Siècle des intellectuels* (Paris: Seuil, 1997) and Pascal Ory’s and Jean-François Sirinelli’s *Les Intellectuels en France, de l’Affaire Dreyfus à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2002)—even mentions Guénon.

[3] The original inspiration was from Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), but the label *philosophia perennis* was the creation of Agostino Steuco, a Neo-Platonist, in 1540. Sedgwick, p. 23, n.11.

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