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Review: Becoming Europe

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Samuel Gregg's new book, *Becoming Europe: Economic Decline, Culture and How America Can Avoid a European Future*, is a bad book. Its principal shortcomings are its tendentious portrayal of the values that animate those of us who champion the modern welfare state, its simplistic and often distorted reading of events and, most especially damning in a book that aims to make an argument, Gregg makes more assertions than arguments as he sets forth this manifesto for the free market. And, to be clear, while Mr. Gregg may not like to be labeled a libertarian, this is a work of ideology and the closest label that seems appropriate for that ideology is libertarianism. If it quacks like a libertarian duck, it is a libertarian duck, and this book quacks like a libertarian duck.

Gregg tends to label any and all efforts at economic coordination by the state as "dirigiste," happily a French word, which is here deployed with all the contempt and all the subtlety - with which Republicans in Congress once championed "Freedom Fries." He sees the creation and maintenance of the modern welfare state as a reflection of the values of medieval guilds and neo-corporatism and socialist influences, in any events, efforts at control from the top. He repeats criticism of the Marshall Plan that rebuilt Europe after World War II, on page 70, because "the Americans who designed and administered the Marshall Plan were thoroughly imbued with Keynesian and New Deal planning notions." Of course, I think most people would agree that the Marshall Plan worked, but I also think that most people understood that the Plan was about rebuilding a war-ravaged continent, and they used the means at hand that seemed best designed to achieve that rebuilding. A few paragraphs on, Gregg explicitly smears the motives of those who supported Keynesian economics, accusing the majority intellectual economists of "a form of collusion" with government.

A similar sense of suspicion accompanies Gregg's account of the Lisbon Treaty, and its Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. An entire chapter of the charter found under the revealing overall title of 'Solidarity' spells out numerous protections and entitlements to be accorded to all EU citizens. Why revealing? Is there something suspicious about the word 'solidarity'? He then notes the list of rights includes 'relatively uncontroversial ideas such as prohibitions in child labor' evidently unaware that this idea was once quite controversial and was fought by his laissez-faire progenitors, then, as now, aligned with reactionary clerics like Cardinal William Henry O'Connell who thought child labor restrictions were a violation of parental rights. But it is the rest of the list that seems to agitate Gregg. It includes workers' rights to be consulted in the operations of their workplace, the right to collective bargaining, the right to social security and housing and health care. That seems like a very Catholic list to me, no?

Indeed, one of the more shocking facts of his treatment of the rise of the social welfare state is the relatively little attention he gives to the prominent role played by religious leaders. Leo XIII gets a passing mention, Abraham Kuyper, not a word. Msgr. John A. Ryan is also unmentioned, yet it was he who not only introduced FDR and Frances Perkins to Catholic Social Teaching, but who taught many Catholics, including many bishops, how to apply that teaching to the United States. Not for nothing is he known as 'The Right Rev. New Dealer' and I can assure Mr. Gregg, that Msgr. Ryan was not interested in a top-down, materialistic, socialist-tinged agenda. He was interested in advancing the cause of social justice.

It is bad enough to cast doubts on the motives of those who supported and continue to support modern welfare ideas. But, Gregg displays a very superficial, or misleading, understanding of events, recent and historic. On page 46, he speaks about how the *libertas ecclesiae* led other groups and eventually individuals to gain a sense of their own freedom, but does not seem to grasp that the freedom of the Church was a corporate freedom, and that if the Church should enjoy it, perhaps unions should too. On page 82, he admits that the Catholic Church in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was suspicious of liberal economics. He writes:

Yet while affirming the legitimacy of various market practices and institutions such as free prices, contracts, private property, and free exchange, the church was skeptical of the liberal philosophical positions many people associated with these institutions. In the minds of practicing Catholics, 'liberalism' was indelibly also associated with the French Revolution, and the French Revolution meant killing priests and nuns, burning churches, and closing monasteries, convents and church schools.

Actually, Pope Leo XIII, who, so far as we know, was a practicing Catholic, located his suspicions of economic liberalism in the exact same place he located his suspicion of too powerful governments: Both left the individual markedly unfree. And so far from being haunted by visions of the French Revolution, it was this same Pope Leo XIII who adopted a 'ralliement' policy towards the Third Republic, urging French Catholics to get over their hostility to republican governmental forms inherited from the Revolution and 'rally' to the Republic.

Gregg's grasp of modern events is equally troubling. He refers to Greece's 'extravagant welfare state' but, in fact, Greece's welfare state is not nearly as extravagant as that found in Germany, whose economy is robust enough to help bailout Greece. On the third page of the book, he introduces his dark warnings about 'Becoming Europe' with the observation, 'To a good number of Americans, the bailout of banks, Congress's apparently insatiable appetite for spending, the passing of Obamacare into law, the new regulatory regime for the financial industry, and the government's rescue of American car companies increasingly look like a wider pattern. Something seemed to be changing' and not for the better' in

American economic and political life.? Well, the verdict is still out on Obamacare and Dodd-Frank, but he might have allowed the bailing out the banks stopped an economic meltdown, even if it was distasteful, and that the rescue of the auto industry has worked out pretty well ? Detroit is back and profitable and the government got its money back ahead of time. On page 9, Gregg notes that ?very few cultures have claimed that stealing in itself is good,? apparently unaware of these things known as empires, or of the way many multi-national corporations today are profitably involved in land-grabbing and toxic waste dumping in Africa. On page 222, he opens a paragraph, ?Since the beginning of the 2000s, the subjects of debt and deficits have weighed heavily on Americans? minds.? Actually, just about every election I can remember, starting in 1976, featured a lot of talk about debt and deficits. On the next page he cites the ?considerable evidence? assembled by Reinhart and Rogoff ? oops. The book came out before a UMass grad student disproved that theory. And on and on. This book is filled with lightly grasped, or woefully misunderstood ? and hopefully not willfully misunderstood ? facts. It needed a fact-checker as well as an editor.

The greatest failure in a book like this, however, is the substitution of assertions for arguments. (You might say these assertions are ?revealing.?) For example, on pages 144-145, Gregg writes, ?Trade unions are focused on protecting the interests of those who are already employed. Hence, they have no interest in the well-being of the unemployed ? whose numbers reached the highest-ever level of 11 percent in the eurozone in April 2012.? Is this true? Unions, specifically in their political engagement, have been at the forefront of a range of fights to benefit all workers and potential workers, from increases in the minimum wage, to support for unemployment insurance, to worker re-training programs, etc. Later on, Gregg waxes eloquent about how the self-interested capitalist is not really just about profit, there are many humane enterprises to which he can turn his attention. Evidently, such disinterestedness abandons a soul when he or she acquires a union card.

A similar assertion accompanies his treatment of the cost of the welfare state. He quotes several German economists to the effect that the welfare state actually causes a breakdown in solidarity. He explains, ?Not only does this diminish many people?s personal knowledge of and contact with those in need; their sense of responsibility for those in genuine need is reduced to paying taxes.? Again, is this true? Are there not many people who both support taxes for government programs to assist the poor who also volunteer at their church?s soup kitchen? Do not many people recognize, as Gregg apparently does not, that the needs of the poor and the working poor are greater than can be met through private charity? Why does it follow that a higher tax burden for a more robust welfare state makes people insensible to the need to go out and meet the poor and be with them, not only to help them, but to cherish the unique gifts the poor offer to those of us blest with abundance? Again, there is no argument here, just an assertion.

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In discussing subsidiarity, Gregg writes that one of its functions is ?to limit government intervention, outside its core functions, to those cases in which nonpolitical forms of community closer to a given difficulty have proved temporarily incapable of addressing that problem.? Yes, that is true sort of, but then why is Gregg beating up on the social welfare state? It is not like a group of theorists woke up one day and said, ?I have an idea ? let?s build this thing.? They were responding to the systemic injustice created by the kind of laissez-faire policies Gregg advocates. The much-dreaded ?Obamacare? was a response to the decades-long failure of the market, or municipalities, or states, to provide universal health insurance for all Americans. Does subsidiarity permit that? Of course it does, even if it is ?dirigiste.?

A few pages later, Gregg writes: ?If you treat economic and social problems in an abstract rationalist manner and take the view that these are best solved by top-down solutions (attitudes characteristic of

modern American liberalism), you are unlikely to view private bottom-up solutions favorably, but rather as obstacles to the state's intervention in these areas. There are some people I would like Mr. Gregg to meet at the White House Faith-Based Office who spend all their working days trying to help private bottom-up solutions along. Or, perhaps he could meet Lew Daly, someone who actually knows something about the origins, the humane origins and the Christian origins of the modern social welfare state, who could ably argue that it is Gregg and his friends at the Acton institute who adopt the abstract rationalist better to write pseudo-rationalist manner of analyzing social problems with their relentless bowing to the gods of the almighty market.

The most illustrative example of the assertion-pretending-to-be-an-argument phenomenon in this book is found on page 298. Western Europe, however, provides us with numerous examples of what happens when governments and citizens chose to trade of openness, growth, and liberty in return for protection, stability, and equalization of economic outcomes, he writes. Gee, apart from the Balkans, there has not been a war in the heart of Europe in more than sixty years. People live well. Productivity is reasonable. Are there problems? Of course. Will there need to be tweaks to the welfare state? Of course. But, while Gregg bemoans the political consensus for supporting the welfare state, I find in this consensus a cause for happiness. Consensus is a good thing, not a contradiction. And, it appears to me that modern Europe has tried to pull the best traits from capitalism and from socialism and from Catholic Social Teaching and from Kuyper's Calvinism and they have achieved a decent society. I do not dread becoming Europe. In many ways, I hope America will become more like Europe. I like the idea of workers having more time off to spend with their families. I like the idea of guaranteed, decent pensions and recognize that exorbitant pensions are a threat to a regime of decent, modest pensions. I think workers should have a say in the decisions made by the companies where they work.

Gregg introduces some moral discussion at the end of his manifesto. It is too shallow to pay much heed to. But, the book as a whole has a clear purpose and, I think, a dangerous one. Gregg is not trying to develop Catholic Social Teaching. He is trying to bury it. Gregg looks at all the insights of hundreds of Catholic theologians and bishops and popes about the need to make the economy work for man, and not man for the economy, and he says with Lucretius, and with the *philosophes* who admired him, *Hunc igitur terrorem.* In the Acton institute's worldview, these Catholic teachers are, at best, misguided, silently abetting the secularization of society, as if the market was not the principal agent of secularization in the world today! When the need to help actual living, breathing human beings comes up against Gregg's laissez-faire principles, the principles win every time. Property has rights; workers not so much. Do-gooders are naïve in their concern for the poor, but there is nothing naïve about modern marketing in Gregg's observation that creating wealth requires us to be attentive to what others i.e. consumers want or might desire, as if the U.S. bishops were wrong when they wrote of an increasingly dull, sterile, consumer conformism visible especially among so many of our young people created by artificial needs promoted by the media to support powerful economic interests.

The reference to the *philosophes* is precise. The relationship of Catholicism with the Enlightenment remains contentious. But, at the Acton Institute, the Scottish Enlightenment reigns supreme. In this book, it is the Gospel of Adam Smith, not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that is honored. And instead of any attempt at a genuine synthesis of Enlightenment ideas with Catholic thought, Gregg is content to follow the usual neo-con model, trying to wiggle self-interest into a virtue because it is creative, cherry picking Aquinas for his defense of private property while neglecting to mention that Aquinas understood the right to private property as a consequence of original sin, ignoring data that does not confirm Gregg's already arrived at economic certainties.

In the end, Gregg wants Americans to regain their capitalist vigor, trust in the invisible hand, cling to the superstitions of the market, deny workers' rights while enshrining property rights, cut back the welfare

state and hope that private charity can fill the gap. And, somehow, incredibly, he wishes to baptize this project. It can't be done and it high time those charged with teaching in our Church begin to call the Acton Institute out for what it is, a hotbed of dissent from Church teaching. They want the religious impulse behind the welfare state to recede in the face of their economic philosophies. They did not get much of a hearing from Pope Benedict. They managed only one or two paragraphs from Pope John Paul II. And, methinks that Pope Francis will see through their ideology in the twinkling of an eye. And Mr. Gregg should do penance before the tombs of Leo XIII and Pius XI.

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