

# **A reactionary “liberal” in the XXth century. The political philosophy of Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. – Theses**

## 1. Antecedents of the research, raising fundamental questions:

In my diploma thesis at the Eötvös Loránd University (2012), I have analyzed the writings of Edmund Burke regarding the critique of the French Revolution of 1789. (My thesis with additional researches was printed in a form of a book in 2016 with the title: *Edmund Burke and his critiques*.) I was then led organically by my further researches to the study of the intellectual history, in particular of classical liberalism and conservatism. I have studied aesthetics and philosophy in a broader context to develop my areas of research.

My present dissertation sums up the ideas of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s brightest and yet almost unknown political theorists, a critique of modernity, Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. (I have started my research on Kuehnelt-Leddihn about seven years ago.) My dissertation intends to present a “general” picture of his political thought, while it also reviews to what extent Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s political thinking fits into the world of the well-known criticism of the modernity, which may deepen our view on the subject. What was a Catholic political thinker’s relationship, a highly skeptical one of modernity, to the social and political principles which emerged and disappeared during the century? These questions are all the more interesting since Kuehnelt-Leddihn, in his long life, not only analyzed and criticized, but also came into a close physical contact with most of the political regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Methodology:

Regarding the handling of the sources, since the regular scientific evaluation of Kuehnelt-Leddihn's *oeuvre* has not yet taken place, I will draw my references primarily not from the barely existing secondary literature but from the texts themselves. A comprehensive review of the vast amount of material Kuehnelt-Leddihn has accumulated over his long and extremely prolific life — consisting of 31 books and hundreds of shorter writings, essays, portfolios, and newspaper articles — would be a hopeless undertaking within the framework of this dissertation. My goal is though not to write a historiographical or source-critical review of Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s work, but a critical introduction to his world of ideas. My efforts are facilitated by the fact that Kuehnelt-Leddihn liked to re-use his arguments and wordings, rewriting and rewording them so that they reappear in various places: until the author’s death, they show a surprising consistency.

Since there is not yet a scientific consensus on what can be considered to be as Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s most important works, I will focus my dissertation on a few texts that I considered the most comprehensive ones. These works are: *The Menace of the Herd* (pseudonym Francis Stuart Campbell) (1943), *Liberty or Equality* (1952), *The Timeless Christian* (1969), *Leftism, From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Marcuse* (1974) and *Die recht gestellten Weichen -*

*Irrwege, Abwege, Auswege* (1989) / *Konservative Weltsicht als Chance - Entlarvung von Mythen und Klischees* (2010)

In addition to the most important books and articles available in English, I will also refer to books, journal articles, studies, essays, which are currently only available in German. Since I am not writing a biography, I will not analyze the works mentioned in chronological order, but will refer to them as to their function of the author's thinking and background. My aim is not to deviate too much from the texts, while I intend to shed light on their specific place also in the broader context of twentieth century's political philosophy.

Regarding the form of my dissertation, after the introduction, I try to present the philosophical and theological sources of Kuehnelt-Leddihn's thinking. I will analyze in successive chapters how he evaluated conservatism and liberalism, communism, national socialism, and fascism. Then, in a longer chapter, I examine one of his most important topics, his specific and critical relation to democracy, as the dominant political ideology of modernity, and then, I briefly explore his attempt to defend the monarchical form of state. The dissertation ends with a longer conclusion, in which I analyze the dilemmas, problems, contradictions and effects raised by the author, the political and philosophical lessons and conclusions that can be deduced from the whole of his thinking, and then, I try to give a broader biographical outline of him.

The chapter entitled "Characteristic Themes of Kuehnelt-Leddihn" consists of several units: first of all, I analyze the author's general anthropology and the philosophical conceptions of history that can be inferred from the works, and then examine what Kuehnelt-Leddihn meant by 'equality' and why he criticized it. I then analyze the relationship between right-wing and left-wing. In the next part of the chapter I classify the author in the "anti-utopian" line of conservative political thinking, and then present his specific interpretation of utopia as I try to shed light on his thinking about ideology. I then analyze the connections between theology and politics.

In the chapter entitled "Conservatism and Liberalism," firstly, I present Kuehnelt-Leddihn's relationship to conservatism. I will argue that over the course of his long career as a writer-thinker, he tried to have formulate a yet unique position, nourished by many ideological sources, drawing as much from German-rooted "conservative revolution," as from the world of the American „founding fathers." With regard to his liberalism, after counting his immediate ideological predecessors, I argue that the version of liberalism defended by Kuehnelt-Leddihn is very different from the liberalism of authors, who call themselves liberal, not to mention the "vernacular" meaning of the term.

In the chapter "Critique of Totalitarianism," I address Kuehnelt-Leddihn's wide-ranging theses about modern totalitarian regimes: the genesis and nature of communism, of german national socialism (and, in part, of italian fascism). I argue that, although Kuehnelt-Leddihn's interpretation reflects in many cases essential and real phenomena, it leaves many questions that may arise in connection with these political realities unanswered or open.

In the chapter entitled ‘Critique of Democracy’, I argue that Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s thinking on political concepts in many cases started with the evaluation of the phenomenon of democracy and has returned here. Because in the political thinking of the last two centuries — as well as in practical politics, the media, education, or other forums that define public opinion — democracy has so often been portrayed as the best, and even the only, remedy for tyranny that “anti-democratic” ideas we almost automatically associate it with anti-freedom, tyranny, and even - often unspecified - “totalitarianism” as a critique of democracy seems like a bold undertaking. My argument is that, in Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s analyses of democracy, is perhaps the most remarkable that it highlights the possible justification for an ancient concern of medieval and antique political thinking about the „tyranny of the majority.”

In the chapter “In Defense of the Monarchy,” I examine, with what kind of political answers our author tried to address the questions raised by modern democracy. Political science largely agrees that, although debate is possible about the weaknesses and contradictions of democracy, it would be very difficult to imagine a different kind of political system in the modern world. I argue that we should read Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s critique of democracy “together” with his defense of monarchy: for Kuehnelt-Leddihn, monarchy is a definite alternative to democracy. Here, of course, two new questions immediately arise: the one as to how realistically this alternative can be raised in the present, and the other as to whether it is possible to find convincing and rational arguments in favor of the monarchy.

In the chapter entitled “Conclusion - Kuehnelt-Leddihn and Modern Political Philosophy,” I examine the viewpoint of the radical and for Kuehnelt-Leddihn consistent Catholic-Christian position, from which he analyzed the phenomena of the history of ideas and political philosophy.

I briefly compare it to other political thinkers critical to modernity in the XXth century (Tamás Molnár, Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss). I will address the issues raised by ‘aristocratic thinking’, the multifaceted and paradoxical relationship between Christianity and modernity, and then try to illustrate why Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s questions may also be relevant to today’s political science.

### 3. New Findings:

I argue, that the main merit of the author, lies above all in being able to formulate rational questions with which the open-minded reader can dispel the illusion that our contemporary world, with its characteristic political structures, is "the best of all possible worlds." This is especially clear in the context of his critique of democracy - which can be characterised as the strongest and most elaborate motif of his *oeuvre*.

In my view, what the study of Kuehnelt-Leddihn's works — even if one objects to his method or disagrees with most of his conclusions — may shed light, above all, lies not primarily in his answers to the questions, but the questions themselves. As András Láncki notes, in modernity, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, due to the advancement of the positivist approach to science, we can talk about the crisis of philosophy in general and political philosophy in particular.

The questions of classical political philosophy in modern political science, have frequently been branded as unscientific and “subjective”. The current approach no longer seek to find a “just order”, that is, to apply morality and moral philosophy in politics. Instead of exploring the essence and the “nature of things,” the goal of political science has increasingly become a pragmatic grasp of the characteristics of political action and process. However, according to Leo Strauss a return to classical political thinking is necessary because political philosophy is the primary form of political science and the understanding of political things by common sense precedes everything else.

As I see, Kuehnelt-Leddihn's in his intentions, wanted to find this “understanding by common sense”: together with Strauss, of course, he did not see classical philosophy as a mere “cultural-historical curiosity” for lack of scientific value. He firmly argued that political philosophy, the concept and nature of politics, is related to philosophical inquiries about human nature, being, and transcendence. He wanted to avoid a “technocratic” and reductionist attitude that interested only in technical applications, with focusing exclusively on the departmental issues of political philosophy, considering the “political problem” to be solved once and for all.

I argue that the author's work as a whole points to a question that, in my opinion no political philosopher and no „layman” who is interested in politics can postpone for a long time if he wants to talk about the political conditions and problems of the modern world and the history of political thinking in a sober, balanced way. This question is first and foremost in connection with the original beginning and starting point of philosophy, the Socratic “amazement”: the radical “re-questioning.” This is always relevant to the philosopher, even if a particular state of affairs tries to silence the questioner and questions in general.

#### 4. Publications regarding the topic

*Idejétmúlt-e a klasszikus államforma tan? A demokrácia, a diktatúra és a monarchia politikája.* Tanulmány. In. Pánczél Hegedűs János (szerk.) Miles Christi Évkönyv MMXIII. Templárius Alapítvány. (2013), 181-205.

*Katolicizmus és modernitáskritika Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn politikai gondolkodásában.* Tanulmány. In Ekert Mária; Molnár Attila Károly (szerk.) *Teremtés - politika és művészet,*

Budapest, Magyarország : Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem, Molnár Tamás Kutató Központ, 2015. 103-116.

*A józanság politikája. Egedy Gergely az amerikai konzervatív gondolkodásról. Recenzió.* Politikatudományi szemle, 24. évf. 3. szám. 155-161.

*Arisztokratikus liberalizmus: Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn politikai gondolkodásáról.* In: Ekert Mária; MolnárAttila Károly (szerk.) *Eszme és történet*, Budapest, Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem, 2014. 157-170.

*The devastating rule of uniformity. Utopias in Kuehnelt-Leddihn's political thought.* Tanulmány. In. *Conservative Critics of Political Utopia*. L'Harmattan Kiadó, Budapest, 2020. Szerk. Botos Máté. 127-145.