The role of familialism in Counter-Enlightenment social ontology

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Abstract

In countering what they identified as the individualizing implications of the social contract theory as proposed by the likes of Locke and Rousseau, the leading figures on the Counter-Enlightenment in the nineteenth century advocated a distinctly familialist understanding of the nature and structure of human society. Central to the Counter-Enlightenment's social ontology was the idea that the family—both nuclear and extended—is the most basic and vital constitutive unit of human society. In contradistinction to what these traditionalist conservatives saw as Enlightenment liberalism's atomising of the individual, leaving him vulnerable to the rising power of the centralized state, nineteenth-century Counter-Revolutionaries such as Johan Gottfried Herder, Louis de Bonald, Robert Lewis Dabney and Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer proposed a relationship-based social positioning of the individual as ontologically situated within the context of familial blood relationships—relationships which provide the necessary framework for social prosperity. In this regard the nineteenth-century Counter-Enlightenment's social ontology amounts a particularly interesting and noteworthy historical phenomenon as a distinctly modern movement characterized by strong theoretical resistance against the prevailing liberal social ontology which has largely shaped modern Western democracies.

Opsomming

In reaksie tot wat hulle beskou het as die indiwidualiserende implikasies van die sosiale kontrakteorie soos voorgestel deur denkers soos Locke en Rousseau, het leidende figure geassossieer met die Kontra-Verligting van die negentiende eeu 'n kenmerkend familialistiese verstaan van die aard en struktuur van die menslike samelewing voorgestaan. Die idee dat die gesin en die uitgebreide familie die mees basiese en belangrikste boublok van die menslike samelewing vorm, was integraal to die sosiale ontologie van die Kontra-Verligting. In teenstelling met wat hierdie tradisionele konserwatiewes gesien het as die Liberalisme van die Verligting se atomisering van die indiwidu wat hom weerloos laat teen die opkomende mag van die gesentraliseerde staat, het negentiende-eeuse Kontra-Rewolusionêres soos Johan Gottfried Herder, Louis de Bonald, Robert Lewis Dabney en Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer betoog vir 'n verhoudings-gebaseerde sosiale posisionering van die indiwidu as ontologies geplaas binne die konteks van familie en bloedverhoudings—verhoudings wat die noodsaaklike raamwerk verskaf vir sosiale voorspoed. In hierdie opsig verteenwoordig die sosiale ontologie van die negentiende eeuse Kontra-Verligting 'n besonder interessante en noemenswaardige historiese fenomeen as 'n by uitstek moderne beweging wat gekenmerk is deur 'n sterk teoretiese weerstand teen daardie gangbare liberale sosiale ontologie wat grootliks bygedra het tot die vorming van moderne Westerse demokrasieë.

Key words:

Counter-Enlightenment; Dabney, Robert Lewis; De Bonald, Louis; Enlightenment; Familialism; Groen van Prinsterer, Guillaume; Herder, Johan Gottfried; Individualism; Social Contract.

Trefwoorde:

Dabney, Robert Lewis; De Bonald, Louis; Familialisme; Groen van Prinsterer, Guillaume; Herder, Johan Gottfried; Indiwidualisme; Kontra-Verligting; Sosiale Kontrak; Verligting.

1. Introduction

During the eighteenth-century, Enlightenment thinkers brought about an unprecedented change in the Western world's understanding of human society, most notably by virtue of their assertion of the sovereignty and absolute independence of the individual human being by means of the social contract theory associated with the likes of Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau (Wokler, 2012:90). This marked a distinct philosophical shift in terms of the concept of sovereignty—away from traditional notions of sovereignty which had previously been regarded as being of a distinctly divine nature, in which humanity was regarded as the subject under the rule of divine providence—towards an anthropocentric concept of sovereignty as fundamentally belonging to humanity itself (Morgan, 2001:121). This in turn brought about a revolutionary change in terms of the prevalent social ontology, that is, that branch of philosophy which studies the nature, structure and properties of the social world of human interaction and existence (Seele, 2006:51-52).

Milan Zafirovsky (2011:34) from Sociology Department at the University of North Texas points out how the epistemic shift that marked Enlightenment played a central role in bringing about this revolutionary change in terms of the social ontology which has shaped modern Western society: it marked a transition from the traditional understanding of society as status- and relationship-oriented, to an ever-growing emphasis on individual equality and individual autonomy. Whereas the role and legal status of a person in society had traditionally been understood in terms of the place that person occupied in a given society, modern social ontology turned that relationship between individual and society upside down according to the new individualistic framework. It is this framework, Zafirovsky (2011:24, 85) notes, which largely provided the basis of the modern democratic societies in terms of its conceptualization of individual and civil rights, as well as political and individual liberty and progress.

Despite the socio-political successes of Enlightenment social ontology in shaping modern society and in particular modern Western democracies, its historical progression has not remained unopposed, however. In the history of ideas, several philosophical movements can be identified which were characterized by its resistance against this liberal or individualist social ontology. One of the most well-known ideologies developed in resistance to it was the fascism on the early and middle twentieth century, for example (Antliff, 2007:20-21). Nonetheless, it was the Counter-Enlightenment of the nineteenth-century which provided the most notable movement of resistance

to the idea of the social contract and its socio-political implications itself (Zafirovsky ,2011:279).[1]

2. Research methodology

The central research question of this article is how, in terms of the historical development of ideas regarding social ontology, Counter-Enlightenment thinkers resisted the ontological individualization brought about by the social contract theory. The focus is, therefore, in other words, on the core element of the social ontology historically proposed by Counter-Enlightenment theorists in opposition to the revolutionary ideas about human society which characterized eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy. Utilizing the *Ideengeschichte*[2] as research method, the history of the ideas of this historically-significant traditionalist school relating to social ontology in the nineteenth-century will be amplified in a novel manner.

Firstly, the emphasis of this article will be on the profound implications of the Enlightenment upon social ontology, whereafter the focus will shift to how leading thinkers associated with the nineteenth-century Counter-Enlightenment, such as Johan Gottfried Herder, Louis de Bonald, Robert Lewis Dabney and Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, purposefully and consciously opposed the Enlightenment's social ontology, with a special emphasis on the central idea that shaped their distinct social ontology in their historical context.

3. The Enlightenment and its Impact on social ontology

Enlightenment social contract theorists presupposed the sovereignty and independence of the individual as being in their natural state free from all social and political structures, but who, in order to make human society at all

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1   The term "Counter-Enlightenment", derived from the German "Gegen-Aufklärung" coined by Friedrich Nietzsche, was originally popularized in the English-speaking world via the work of Isaiah Berlin in the middle of the twentieth century as a description of the traditionalist conservative reaction to the rationalist philosophy of the Enlightenment (Summerfield, 2008:9).

2   The *Ideengeschichte or History of Ideas* methodologically aims at elucidating the historical development ideas, in particular the historical understanding and rhetorical application of those ideas within a given historical context (Hongtu 2020:136—137)—in the case of this article, late eighteenth and nineteenth-century Counter-Enlightenment ideas related to social ontology.

possible, unconsciously enter into a what they called the social contract by which, as Locke describes it:

> men, when they enter into society, give up the equality, liberty and executive power they had in the state of nature, into the hands of the society, to be far disposed of by the Legislative as the good of the Society shall require; yet it being only with an intention in every one the better to preserve himself, his Liberty and Property (Locke, 1690:93).

Rousseau himself argued that the state of nature, the only state in which humans are truly free, uncorrupted and sovereign, is the very foundation for the "equality of rights and the idea of justice which such equality creates [and which] originate in the preference each man gives to himself, and accordingly in the very nature of man" (Rousseau, 1762:69).[3] To him individual liberty and sovereignty therefore entailed egocentric self-servitude free from all external constraints.

The ontological implications of the social contract theory are profound: society is accordingly viewed as fundamentally made up of naturally sovereign individuals. Each individual as basic constitutive unit of human society share a natural equality with all others, with civil society or the state then being the result of an implicit contract signed by free and equal individuals who sacrifice some of that natural autonomy for the sake of establishing a functional human society (Spahn, 2018:2). This individualist ontological framework has remained the prevailing philosophical foundation underlying the notion of universal human rights throughout the post-World War II world as it is understood and promoted by the United Nations today (Spahn, 2018:2-3).

In Western Christendom prior to the Age of Enlightenment, family and lineage was understood to have played a central role in shaping society as well as in determining the individual's place within and relationship to society. The influential thirteenth-century philosopher-theologian, Thomas Aquinas (2006:4), for example, wrote that

> God holds the first place, for He is supremely excellent, and is for us the first principle of being and government. In the second place, the principles of our being and government are our parents and our country, that have given us birth and nourishment. Consequently, man is debtor chiefly to his parents and his country, after God. Wherefore just as it belongs to religion to give worship to God, so does it belong to piety, in the second place, to give worship to one's parents and one's people. The worship due to our parents includes the worship

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3   "Ce qui prouve que l'egalite de droit et la notion de justice qu'elle produit derive de la preferance que chacin se donne et par consequent de la nature de l'homme."

given to all our kindred, since our kinfolk are those who descend from the same parents.[4]

Even right up until the dawn of the Enlightenment, this medieval family- and kinship-centred notion of society remained prevalent, as evidenced in the work of one of the most prominent political philosophers of the early seventeenth century, Johannes Althusius (1610:715), who, in his magnum opus, *Politica Methodice Digesta, Atque Exemplis Sacris et Profanis Illustrata*, emphasised the decisive role of the family—both nuclear and extended—as the constitutive unit of human society:

> It cannot be denied that provinces are constituted from villages and cities, and commonwealths and realms from provinces. Therefore, just as the cause by its nature precedes the effect and is more perceptible, and just as the simple or primary precedes in order what has been composed or derived from it, so also villages, cities and provinces precede realms and are prior to them. For this is the order and progression of nature, that the conjugal relationship, or the domestic association of man and wife, is called the beginning and foundation of human society. From it are then produced the associations of various blood relations and in-laws. From them in turn come the sodalities and assemblies, out of the union of which arises the composite body that we call a village, town or city … It is necessary, therefore, that the doctrine of the symbiotic life of families, kinship associations, assemblies, cities, and provinces precede the doctrine of the realm or universal symbiotic association that arises from the former associations and is composed of them.[5]

This understanding of social ontology fundamentally relates the individual to the family and to broader blood or ancestral relationships in which he finds

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4   "Deus summum obtinet locum, qui et excellentissimus est, et est nobis essendi et gubernationis primum principium. Secundario vero nostri esse et gubernationis principium sunt parentes et patria, a quibus et in qua et nati et nutriti sumus. Et ideo post Deum, maxime est homo debitor parentibus et patriae. Unde sicut ad religionem pertinet cultum Deo exhibere, ita secundo gradu ad pietatem pertinet exhibere cultum parentibus et patriae. In cultu autem parentum includitur cultus omnium consanguineorum, quia etiam consanguinei ex hoc dicuntur quod ex eisdem parentibus processerunt".

5   "Nam negari non petest ex pagis et urbibus, provincias, ex bisce vicro Respublicae et rega constituta. Sicut igitur cansa sua natura praecedit effectum, eoque, notior est et simplex, seu primum id quod compositum seu ortum a primo est, antecedit ordinare, ita quoque, pagi, civitates et provincia, regna antecedunt et prius quam ea suerunt. Hic enim naturae ordo et processus, ut conjungium, seu consocatio domestica viriet uxoris fundamentum et principium humane societatis dicatur, et ex hac Porro producantur consociationes consanguineorum et adsinium diversorum, ex bis vero sodalitates, collegia, ex quorum conjunctiove corpus compositum, quod pagum, oppidum, vel civitatem dicimus … Necessario igitur doctrina de vita symbiotica coniugum prpinquorum, collegiorum, ci vit atum et provincae antecedit eam, qua est de regno, vel universali consociatone symboitica priore orta est et exea composita.

his social place and identity. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the atomizing tendencies of the social ontology that would later characterize the thought of Enlightenment social contract theorists. The influential eighteenth-century French *Philosophe*, Jacques-Pierre Brissot (1783:157-158), for example, advocated embracing the ideal of cosmopolitan multiculturalism as an alternative to what he considered the prejudice based on familial relations, nationhood, religion and race that had characterized European society until that time.

When the Counter-Enlightenment, a movement that sought to establish a viable antithesis, then emerged as conservative reaction to the Enlightenment's revolutionary notions of the nature of society based in the social contract (McMahon 2001:8-9), it proceeded to counter what it regarded to be as an inversion of true social ontology with a more traditionalist social ontology.

4. Familialism and the Counter-Enlightenment's social ontology

Edmund Burke, widely considered to be the father of modern conservatism, laid the foundations of the main principles of the Counter-Enlightenment's social ontology in his most famous work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Herein he counters the Enlightenment's rationalist notion of a society based upon abstractions by means of an emphasis on the epistemic value of tradition, which ties individuals not only to their community, but also their ancestors and progeny (Burke 1790:107).

Utilizing this historic and traditionalist principle was key to the Counter-Enlightenment view of the nature and structure of society, one of the earliest representatives of this traditionalist Counter-Enlightenment school, the German philosopher-historian Johan Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) wrote the following concerning the character of the family as foundational to human society:

> The most natural state is, therefore, one nation, an extended family, with one national character. This it retains for ages and develops most naturally if the leaders come from the people … Nothing, therefore, is more manifestly contrary to the purposes of political government than the unnatural enlargement of states, the wild mixing of various races and nationalities under one scepter (Herder,1820:298).[6]

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6   "Die Natur erzieht Familien; der natürlichste Staat ist also auch ein Volk, mit einem Nationalcharakter. Jahrtausende lang erhält sich dieser in ihm und kann, wenn seinem

The family then, for Herder, was foundational to the nation, with the nation in the ethnic sense, that is, as an extension of the family and clan, being the unit around which the state is to be built. That states, therefore, should be considered as organic historically-developed extensions of the family as basic unit, as opposed to an aggregate of individuals, was particularly evident in the social ontology of the influential French Counter-Enlightenment philosopher Louis de Bonald (1754-1840). His work entitled *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux dans la société civile démontrée par le raisonnement et par l'histoire* is primarily concerned with the relations between God, man and society by way of response to the ideas of the Enlightenment as embodied by Montesquieu and of Rousseau (Sarah, 2018:69). In it he writes, with reference to the social order that "Man only exists through society, and society shapes him for herself" (De Bonald, 1796:103).[7]

Per De Bonald's traditionalism, therefore, the individual never exists in the abstract but only as a member of society. The nuclear family is the logical and historical precedent for the larger family, i.e., the nation as political society. As a matter of fact, in the opinion of de Bonald, "any system which does not base the constitution of political society on the domestic society … is false and unnatural. This is the standard by which to measure all constitutions" (De Bonald, 1817:413).[8]

Having set the family, therefore, as the basic unit of society, de Bonald (1830:441) applied its very constitution to political society as well: he argued that just as the nuclear family is constituted by a father, mother and infant, so the state is constituted by the state's power as the cause, the ministers as the means and the citizens as subjects. In other words, just as the father embodies the will of the family, the king embodies the will of the nation as political family.

Across the Atlantic, the Counter-Revolutionary Southern Presbyterian pastor and moral philosopher Robert Lewis Dabney (1820-1898) advocated a similar ontological social paradigm:

> The theistic scheme, then traces civil government and the civic obligation to the will and act of God, our sovereign, moral ruler and proprietor, in that He

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nen Fürsten daran liegt, am Natürlichsten ausgebildet werden … Nichts scheint also dem Zweck der Regierungen so offenbar entgegen als die unnatürliche Vergrößerung der Staaten , die wilde Vermischung der Menschengattungen und Nationen unter Einem Scepter."

7   "L'homme n'existe que pour la societe et la societe ne le forme que pour elle."

8   "Tout systeme de constitution pour la societe politique, qu'on ne peut pas appliquer a la societe domestique … est faux et contre nature. C'est la pierre de touche des constitutions."

from the first made social principles a constitutive part of our souls, and placed us under social relations that are as original and natural as our own persons. These relations were: first, the family, then of the clan, and, as men multiplied, of the commonwealth. It follows thence that social government in some form is as natural as man (Dabney, 1892:305).

He also intrinsically connects his familialist conception of the social order with his opposition to the social contract theory proposed by Enlightenment thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, which per Dabney, stands in direct opposition to it (Ibid., p. 308-309):

The claim of a social contract is [a] theory [that] is atheistic and unchristian. Such were Hobbes and the Jacobins. It is true that Locke tried to hold it in a Christian sense, but it is none the less obstinately atheistic in that it wholly discards God, man's relation to Him, his right to determine our condition and moral existence, and the great fact of moral philosophy, that God has formed and ordained us to live under civil government … [In terms of the social contract] civil society is herself a grand robber of my natural rights, which I only tolerate to save myself from other more numerous robbers. How then can any of the rules of government be an expression of essential morality? … Commonwealths have not historically begun in such an optional compact of lordly savages. Such absolute savages, could we find any considerable number of them, would not usually possess the good sense and the self-control which would be sufficient for any permanent good. The only real historical instances of such compacts have been the agreements of outlaws forming companies of banditti, or crews of pirate ships. Those combinations realize precisely the ideals pictured by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Did ever one of them result in the creation of a permanent and well-ordered commonwealth? The well-known answer to this question hopelessly refutes the scheme. Commonwealths have usually arisen, in fact, from the expansion of clans, which were at first but larger families.

Evident from both the likes of Dabney and De Bonald is their proposition that the family as foundational to society falsifies any individualistic notions of liberty which fundamentally underlies the social contract theory. With both these theorists society is fundamentally the organic and historical outgrowth of primarily the nuclear and secondarily the extended family as basic unit of the divinely ordained human social order. Dabney's comment that the implications of the social contract theory is functionally atheistic in that it denies the reality of human relationship to God as sovereign Creator, is particularly telling in terms of how central the opposition to the Enlightenment's social ontology in particular was in the thought of the leading representatives of the Counter-Enlightenment.

This also holds true for the most well-known Dutch representative of the Counter-Enlightenment, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876). He

wrote concerning the Enlightenment's political theory that "[t]he proponents of this sociable order ordained by the state, of this society not of clans and families, but companies and pelotons are, in terms of the implementation of their system, content with the peace and liberty of the government—with the liberty and omnipotence of those who take care for the discipline of society and are the heads of the herd who provide us with this new grazing. They have sadly convinced so many of the greatness and superiority of their ideas" (Groen van Prinsterer, 1847:67).[9]

For Groen van Prinsterer, the individualizing implications of the social contract inevitably leads to government tyranny since a society made up of individuals, isolated from their natural and familial blood relations, is an ideal subject for government despotism. In this way, Groen argued, the social ontology of the Enlightenment inevitably led to isolation from those natural familial relationships in which humans were designed to flourish as well as a consequent loss of true liberty (Groen van Prinsterer, 1867:1). In other words, by virtue of its attempt to liberate the individual from the natural bonds established by blood and birth, it takes away the divinely-ordained creational structure in which humanity was designed to prosper and thrive, thereby enslaving it to the only authoritative social structure that remains, the state.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the nineteenth-century, the leading representatives of the Counter-Enlightenment opposed the social contract theory and its implications with a distinctly familialist conception of the nature and structure of society. This entailed the idea that the family, primarily the nuclear family, but secondarily also the extended family, and not the individual, is the most basic and foundational unit of human society. The consistent prevalence of this theme throughout the polemic writings of leading Counter-Enlightenment theorists from a wide variety of contexts in Germany, France, the Netherlands and the United States against the liberal social ontology of the Enlightenment is quite remarkable. The notion of familialism as propounded by these leading figures associated with the nineteenth-century Counter-Enlightenment furthermore firmly and distinctly stands in the Christian ontological tradition

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9   "De voorstanders van dit gezellig verkeer, van staatswege verordend, van deze samenleving, niet in huisgezinnen, niet in familiën meer, maar in compagniën en pelotons zijn, bij de ten uitvoer leggen van hun stelsel, te vrede met de vrijheid van den Staat, van het bewind, met de vrijheid of het alvermogen dergenen die zorg dragen voor de discipline, die aan het hoofd der kudde staan, die met deze nieuwe soort van vetweiderij belast zijn. Velen hebben zij van de uitnemendheid hunner ontwerpen overreed."

that had characterized pre-modern Western thought. This does not imply that the social ontology of the Counter-Enlightenment can be reduced to some romantic longing for a long-gone *status quo ante*, however. On the contrary, the familialist ideas embodied in the writings of prominent Counter-Enlightenment thinkers such as Herder, De Bonald, Dabney and Groen van Prinsterer were both very practically orientated towards their nineteenth-century historical contexts and also represented an unprecedented development in the history of ideas.

The familialism of these leading traditionalist-conservative thinkers associated with the Counter-Enlightenment amounted to a reaction against what it identified as the socially disruptive social ontological impact of the individualizing tendencies inherent to the social contract theory as proposed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. In countering what they saw as the atomizing of the individual, leaving him vulnerable to the rising power of the centralized state, they proposed a relationship-orientated ontological positioning of the individual as socially situated within the context of blood relationships. Their view of society and the role of the individual marked a distinctly theocentric reaction to the anthropocentric implications of Enlightenment social ontology. In terms of their understanding of the nature, structure and properties of human society, the Counter-Enlightenment advocated a relationship- and status-orientated social order rooted in the creational and providential ordinances of a God who is ultimately sovereign over human society. Their central argument is that by virtue of the Enlightenment's rebellion against this social order, the organic order and structure of society is disrupted, with devastating consequences even for the very individual the Enlightenment claims to have elevated: by virtue of the atomization of the individual, he is isolated from those social relationships in which he is naturally imbedded by virtue of divine providence—relationships which provide the necessary protective social structures which are inescapable for the flourishing of humanity.

This principle that society as fundamentally shaped by divinely-ordained social structures as opposed to being an aggregate of sovereign individuals is principally based in the Counter-Revolutionaries' Christian conviction regarding the sovereignty of God with regard to providentially ordaining the state and nature of all human existence—with the unit of the family forming the most basic and vital divinely-ordained social structure. To the philosophers of the Counter-Enlightenment, the family is the most essential and most basic unit providing structure and vitality to all of human society, with the recognition of its socially constitutive properties being absolutely key to any orthodox social ontology as reflection of divinely-ordained reality.

In this way the Counter-Enlightenment's social ontology should certainly be historically linked to the traditional ideas of the family as basic social unit as advocated by the likes of Aquinas and Althusius prior to the age of Enlightenment, yet at the same time their notion of familialism marks a profound and distinctly modern development in terms of the history of ontological ideas, in particular given their polemic strategies and rhetorical emphasis on the centrality of this concept in terms in countering the individualizing and atomizing tendencies of Enlightenment's social ontology.

The nineteenth-century Counter-Enlightenment's emphasis on familialism in its social ontology is therefore a particularly interesting and noteworthy phenomenon in the history of ideas, namely as a distinctly modern movement of theoretical resistance against the central ideas of the prevailing liberal social ontology which has historically shaped modern Western democracies.

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