Deus Praesens in Jure: The Politics of Ludwig von Gerlach

I. Gerlach’s Composite Picture in Recent Historiography

In the Encyclopaedia Britannica, (Ernst) Ludwig von Gerlach (1795-1877) has been recently recognized as a “leading figure in the movement of romanticism and reaction that determined Prussian politics from the Napoleonic Wars to the end of Frederick Williams IV’s reign, after which Ernst Ludwig lived on to represent conservative opposition to Bismarck’s power politics.” Encyclopedic entries, however, which classify Gerlach’s thoughts and deeds simply as “conservative” or “romantic”, cannot do justice to his role in political and intellectual history. Gerlach’s “conservatism” for instance, did not only “approximate liberalism”, it also shared a common ground with communism whose ideas of class struggle it had anticipated. By the same token, Gerlach’s “romanticism” did not end with an elective affinity for the Middle Ages. It also included an intimate rapport with the ancient world, so that the “Cato of the Conservative Party” would be considered “a Roman who had been transplanted into the nineteenth century.”

Gerlach has been further characterized as both “the only political thinker in nineteenth century Germany, who really developed a consistent

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4 Herzfeld, Mitteldeutsche Lebensbilder, 278.
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conservative world view,” and “the only systematic theocrat in modern history.” Gerlach’s engagement for “throne and altar”, however, did not entail Caesaropapism. On the contrary, Gerlach fought for a separation of the two powers in order to preserve the Augustinian distinction between the sacred and the profane, so that the former would remain a moral force in politics. Just as Descartes located the interaction between mind and matter or body and soul in the pineal gland, so Gerlach placed throne and altar as a bridge of command and personal union between the city of God and the city of men. Throughout his career as judge, lawmaker, counselor of King Frederick William IV, mentor of Bismarck, publicist, party leader and parliamentarian, Gerlach defended the metaphysical meliorism of Augustine’s city of God as a legislative pilot star for all ships of state. Thus he resisted the rise of modern autonomous sovereignty, whether of dynastic, nationalist or socialist provenance, under which the subject owed “everything to Caesar and nothing to God.”

It is one of Gerlach’s many paradoxes that, “the only political thinker in nineteenth century Germany, who really developed a consistent conservative world view”, did not set forth his ideas under one cover, but a series of forty-six pamphlets, one hundred scattered articles, and hundreds of private papers. This way of conveying his message was deliberate policy. Gerlach avoided all “abstractions“, because the essence of

8 The caricature of Bismarck showed in 1849 the later chancellor as a crusader under the leadership of Ludwig labeled “Saint Gerlach”, the “new Peter the Hermit”. Bismarck has been dressed in a crayfish-like armor, because a crayfish is supposed to crawl backwards. He has a slap-stick in his right, and a genealogical tree in his left hand. See Wilhelm Scholz, illustrator, *Bismarck: Album des Kladderadatsch* (Berlin: Hofmann, 1890), 3.
9 See [Ludwig von Gerlach], *Die Civilehe und der Reichskammerger (Berlin: G. van Muyden, 1874), 11. Gerlach’s pamphlets were usually signed “Vom Verfasser der Rundschaun”, his former columns in the *Neue Preussische Zeitung.*