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A Thinker You Should Know: Bertrand de Jouvenel

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Great necessities, angers, and enthusiasms have made us impatient toward everything that stops the will and slows action. . . . [But] wills must acknowledge limits. We have dearly learned old truths that periodically are erased from the social memory: rights exist that it is not just to offend, rules that it isn't prudent to violate. Respect for these rights and these rules imposes itself even when transgressing them appears to provide an opportunity to remedy a great evil or procure a great good. For there is no more profound or durable evil than their discredit, there is no more salutary and fecund good than their being placed outside of assault and attack.

— *Bertrand de Jouvenel*

There are many reasons to recommend the rediscovery of this unduly neglected thinker. To begin with, Jouvenel's voluminous oeuvre managed to combine profound theoretical reflection with remarkable attentiveness to the issues of the age. His work scrupulously addressed the present age without ever losing sight of those permanent verities that inform responsible thought and action. Furthermore, as Pierre Manent has pointed out, Jouvenel had the additional merit of writing with eloquence and charm in an era that too often succumbed to the spirit of abstraction and the allure of "scientificity."

He was a civic-minded moralist as much as a political philosopher and social scientist. In the spirit of his two great nineteenth-century inspirations, [Benjamin Constant](#) and [Alexis de Tocqueville](#), he renewed an older wisdom that

recognized that “there are things too heavy for human hands.” Like these forebears, he set out to rescue liberalism from that revolutionary inebriation that refused to bow before any sacred limits or restraints. Jouvenel never succumbed to the temptation of confusing the Good with an unfolding historical process or with the unfettered will of the one, the few, or the many, even as he accepted the inevitability and desirability of the open or dynamic society. He was the conservative liberal par excellence, a principled critic of progressive illusions who fully appreciated the folly of attempting to stand athwart the historical adventure that is modernity.

In the years before World War II Bertrand de Jouvenel made a living from journalism. He wrote for such prominent newspapers as *Le Petit Journal* and *Paris Soir*. During those years he became a practitioner of political celebrity journalism and had occasion to interview a host of famous statesmen—and tyrants—such as David Lloyd George, Neville Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, Mussolini, and Hitler (as we shall see, his controversial interview with Hitler would haunt him for the rest of his life, even though it was considered to be something of a coup at the time of its publication). In the years after 1945 he was simultaneously a journalist, professor (he taught or lectured at various times at Oxford, Cambridge, Cal-Berkeley, Yale, and at the Institut d'études politiques and the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences of the University of Paris), political philosopher, political commentator, and pioneer author of sober, economically literate, and philosophically informed excursions into ecology and “future studies.” He thus brought to his writings the powers of description typical of a journalist, the philosopher’s appreciation of enduring and universal truths, and an admirable openness to the contribution that social science could make toward understanding the transformations characteristic of modern life. In addition, his writings go a long way toward recovering the classical understanding of political science as the architectonic science whose ultimate subject matter is nothing less than the comprehensive good for human beings. In important respects, then, Jouvenel’s work bridges classicism and modernism, political philosophy and social science, the traditionalist’s preoccupation with “the good life” and the enlightenment Left’s preference for the open or dynamic society.

Bertrand de Jouvenel was a Frenchman intimately familiar with and sympathetic toward the United States; his English (spoken with an American accent) was impeccable. He regularly acknowledged the indispensable contribution that Britain, the cradle of parliamentary liberty, had made to the cause of freedom in the modern world, and he wrote respectfully, even admiringly, about the American constitutional order (the gravitas that still marked the United States Senate in the 1950s particularly impressed him).

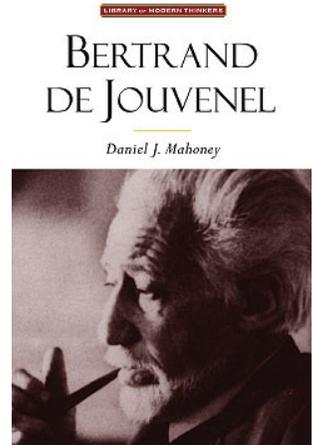
It is not surprising, therefore, that he was the first French political thinker of any note to rediscover the political wisdom of what might be called the “English school” of French political philosophers, those nineteenth-century French liberals such as Constant, Guizot, and Tocqueville who were horrified by revolutionary despotism and who admired the civility and moderation characteristic of Anglo-American political life. Yet for reasons that will be fully explored in the final chapter of this work, Jouvenel has yet to receive his rightful measure of recognition in his native land. In France his reputation has been marred by the lingering impression that he was a collaborator of sorts during the Second World War (he was not) and by the fact that he committed two major faux pas in the period leading up to the war, the first being his aforementioned interview with Adolph Hitler in February 1936, and the second his ill-advised membership in Jacques Doriot’s Parti populaire français (PPF) from 1936 until 1938.

Thus, though there is no shortage of self-proclaimed “liberal” political thinkers in France today, few explicitly acknowledge indebtedness to the political philosophizing of Bertrand de Jouvenel (the intellectual circles around the journals *Commentaire* and *Futuribles* are something of an exception in this regard). In France he remains a rather marginal figure best remembered for his 1945 classic *On Power* and for his forays into political ecology and future studies. Indeed, Jouvenel’s intellectual achievement has never been fully acknowledged by either the French general public or intellectual establishment, not even by those who share his core philosophical principles. As a result, some of Jouvenel’s most important theoretical works are not even in print in France today (this is the case with both *Sovereignty* and *The Pure Theory of Politics*), while many more of his major works are available once again in the United States (thanks especially to the good offices of Liberty Fund and Transaction Publishers). In the

English-speaking world, in fact, Jouvenel is now considered to be a political philosopher of some importance, one of the most penetrating conservative-minded thinkers of the twentieth century.

In the years between 1945 and 1968, Jouvenel produced an impressive body of work belonging to the tradition known as conservative liberalism. These writings explored the inexorable growth of state power in modern times, the difficult but necessary task of articulating a conception of the common good appropriate to a dynamic, “progressive” society, and the challenge of formulating a political science that could reconcile tradition and change while preserving the freedom and dignity of the individual.

Jouvenel was far from doctrinaire in his approach to political matters. A critic of the centralizing propensities of the state, he nonetheless appreciated that political authority was indispensable for maintaining social trust as well as economic equilibrium. A charter member of the classical liberal Mont Pèlerin Society (whose leading light was the distinguished economist and social theorist F. A. Hayek), he rejected the individualist premises underlying modern economics and reminded his contemporaries that the good life entailed something more fundamental than the maximization of individual preferences. In his mature writings, Jouvenel vigorously challenged the “progressivist” conceit at the heart of modern thought, the illusion that social and economic development necessarily entail moral progress. But he never rejected modernity per se. The coherence and insight that characterize Jouvenel’s synthesis is perhaps the foremost reason for studying him today.



Excerpted from Mahoney's excellent book, [Bertrand de Jouvenel](#).

Daniel J. Mahoney holds the Augustine Chair in Distinguished Scholarship at Assumption College. He is the author, most recently, of [The Conservative Foundations of the Liberal Order](#) (ISI Books, 2011) and [The Other Solzhenitsyn: Telling the Truth about a Misunderstood Writer and Thinker](#) (St. Augustine's Press, 2014).

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