

Under the Crown and Stripes

Joseph Cotto

The time is ripe for a good word about the alternatives to democracy.

It is humbling to be the fourth reviewer of this book after David Weinberg and Grady Harp. Their reviews give a thorough and balanced picture of the book. It is an extended essay on the virtues of monarchy, delivered through the biographies of five remarkable people.

Democracy holds such powerful sway in this modern age that the alternatives are relatively rarely considered. We have a fervent, religious belief in the political equality of all peoples. A corollary – false – is that all people are roughly equal in ability. And from this assumption proceeds the conviction that the rich and powerful can only have arrived at their station through chicanery. This inverted situation must be undone! And politicians have arisen through the ages – Lenin, Stalin, Castro, Peron, Chavez, Maduro and Ocasio-Cortez - who promise to set things right.

In setting groups of people in conflict with their betters, on the argument that they are not better but simply crooked, populists are stoking the fires of revolution throughout the world. In attempting to deliver to people the goodies they think they deserve, instead of what their labor can bring them in the free market, they are digging a debt pit out of which their children will never be able to emerge. As the capitalist system appears poised to collapse, it is worth examining the alternative.

Cotto gives a brief history of the philosophical arguments in favor of monarchy. Plato's Republic is a good place to start. The best of all rulers was a philosopher king. However, the opposite end of the scale – the tyrant – was the worst. America's founding fathers, even those they established a representative form of government, were keenly aware of the inherent flaws. It is only in recent decades that democracy has been trumpeted as the absolute best form of government.

Cotto provides a good brief for monarchy and hereditary nobility. Leaders in a Republican form of government must seek election and reelection. This makes them beholden to moneyed interests. The electorate is easily swayed by the media, which in turn is controlled by money. A monarch can afford to be independent-minded, to take in to consideration the long-term welfare of the people instead of his own short-term political advantage.

A titled nobleman does not necessarily hold his position for life. He can be removed by someone higher up the ladder, or displaced by an insurrection from below. Conversely, the nobility continually enriches itself by promoting men of extraordinary ability. The Frenchman Cotto chooses as examples come from such families. Thus, while there is no electoral check on an nobleman's performance in office, there are strong incentives not to work against the interests of the people being governed.

In the end, the aristocrats do tend to be more capable people than the commoners. They do have an interest in protecting the well-being of the commoners. History provides many examples of nobleman who were well loved by their subjects and who served their interests well.

Conversely, in this crass and materialistic age the new robber barons display very little interest in the well-being of the people. They feel little obligation to whatever state or nation to which they may belong. Would we be better served by a hereditary elite than the Internet barons of today? It is a question at least worth asking.

The biographies Cotto chooses illuminate historical periods with which the average reader will not be terribly familiar. The only contemporary figure, King Kigeli of Rwanda, spanned the period from Belgian colonial activity until this decade. The story told is of an honest man in a thoroughly corrupt time and place. A man who wanted to lead a united country in the face of one of the most vicious tribal rivalries on earth, that of the Hutus and the Tutsis.

His biography of Queen Liliuokalani of Hawaii provides an extended history of the Hawaiian royal family going back to Kamehameha. This long prologue as necessary to understand the character of the Hawaiian people – gentle and accepting – and their continual inability to defend themselves against economic opportunists who came to exploit the rich agricultural and touristic resources of the islands. The plunderers were able to call on the military resources

of Great Britain and the United States, and the Hawaiians were left in a position of backpedaling in as dignified a manner as they could is what these essays convey – the dignity, of Queen Liliuokalani in particular, and very trying circumstances.

Whereas the latter two biographies are of sitting royalty of superb moral character who lacked the ability to withstand the advances of baser sorts of people, the first two biographies are of titled nobleman no longer possessed of their dominions who chose to relocate to the young United States, where their native talents allowed them to rise to prominence in a number of different spheres.