
Etceteras . . .

Ludwig von Mises and
Dietrich von Hildebrand
Some Remarkable Parallels

ROBERT HIGGS

According to Herbert J. Gans, “Between 1933 and 1941 approximately 7,600 refugee professionals—scholars, artists, lawyers, doctors, engineers, etc.—came to the United States from Germany, Austria, and other parts of Hitler’s Europe” (1953, 394). This group included many important and highly influential thinkers in a wide variety of fields, including such well-known figures as Albert Einstein, Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Szilard, Leo Strauss, Paul Lazarsfeld, John von Newmann, Erich Fromm, and Karen Horney (Jay 1970; Coser 1984; McClay 1994).

For economists of the Austrian School, the most famous member of this “intellectual migration” (Bailyn and Fleming 1970) was Ludwig von Mises, whose hair-raising escape from Europe, one step ahead of apprehension by the Nazis in 1940, has been recounted by several writers (see especially Hülsmann 2007, 746–57).

Another of the intellectual migrants, seemingly a person altogether different from Mises, was Dietrich von Hildebrand, a famous Catholic theologian and philosopher. While reading recently about Hildebrand, however, I was struck by the many parallels between him and Mises. No doubt other migrants might be found who also shared similar parallels, so I am not suggesting that the occurrence of such parallels in this case is as unlikely as being struck by lightning. Nevertheless, they seem extraordinary to me.

The two men’s life spans overlapped to a high degree. Mises was born in 1881 and died in 1973; Hildebrand was born in 1889 and died in 1977. Although Hildebrand

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was the son of a famous German sculptor, Adolf von Hildebrand, and a German mother, Irene Schäubfelen, he was born and reared in Florence. He later studied under leading German philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, and Adolf Reinach, and he taught philosophy for many years at the University of Munich.

Mises, in contrast, was an ethnic Jew, born in Lemberg, Galicia, in the outer reaches of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the city is now called L'viv and located in Ukraine). He was educated at the University of Vienna, attended lectures by the great Austrian economist Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, and was awarded a Juris Doctor in 1906. Early in the twentieth century, he began to devote his intellectual powers mainly to mastering, teaching, and contributing to the field of economics, activities that occupied him for the rest of his long life. The parallels between him and Hildebrand began to appear with the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.

During the war, both men served in the army. Mises was an artillery officer in the Austro-Hungarian army, first on the Russian front and later on the Italian front, and at times he acted as an economic adviser to the War Ministry in Vienna. Hildebrand was drafted into the German army and served as a physician's assistant in Munich.

After the war, Hildebrand, witnessing the rise of the Nazis in Germany, recognized this movement's intrinsic evil and became a dedicated opponent. "[H]e vociferously denounced Nazism in articles and speeches throughout Germany and the rest of Europe" ("Biographical Note" 1990, 107). Unwilling to live in Germany under the Nazis, Hildebrand moved in 1933 first to Italy and then to Austria, "where he continued teaching philosophy (now at the University of Vienna) and fought the Nazis with even greater vigor, founding and then publishing for a number of years a prominent anti-Nazi newspaper, *Der Christliche Ständestaat*" ("Biographical Note" 1990, 108). The Nazis took unhappy note of his activities. "Orders were given to have [him] assassinated in Austria. However, he evaded the hit squads and, thanks to his Swiss passport, was able to flee the country just as it fell to the Nazis" in 1938 ("Biographical Note" 1990, 108), relocating first to Switzerland and later to France, where he taught briefly at the Catholic University of Toulouse. After France fell to the Germans in 1940, Hildebrand went into hiding for a while; then, with the assistance of friends, he, his wife, their son Franz, and Franz's wife made their way overland across France and Spain to Portugal; from there, they went by ship to Brazil and finally to New York City. There Hildebrand took a position teaching philosophy at Fordham University and remained on the faculty until he retired from teaching in 1960. He continued to write extensively for the remainder of his life.

Like Hildebrand, Mises despised the Nazis and denounced these national socialists along with the international socialists at every opportunity. The Nazis therefore targeted him for suppression. In 1934, anticipating trouble, he moved to Geneva, where he became a professor at the Graduate Institute of International Studies and remained there until 1940. In that year, he began to doubt whether the Swiss

authorities would continue to harbor him from the pursuing Nazis. So, like Hildebrand and his family, Mises and his wife made their way by back roads across France and Spain to Portugal and thence by sea to New York City. There he wrote extensively under grants from the Rockefeller Foundation during the war. In 1945, he became a visiting professor of economics at New York University. He continued to teach there until 1969, although his salary was paid not by the university, but by businessman Lawrence Fertig. Mises's seminar at NYU became legendary and was attended by such luminaries as Israel Kirzner, Ralph Raico, and Murray Rothbard. Like Hildebrand, Mises continued to write extensively during his years in the United States.

Both men were very fond of classical music. Hildebrand even wrote a book titled *Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (1961). Mises was a regular attendee at the opera in New York City.

In view of the many parallels in their life courses, one wonders whether the two men might have known one another. The answer is that they did, although how well I have not been able to discover. In his great biography of Mises, Guido Hülsmann reports the following meeting:

In May 1941, [Mises] took part in the meetings of a group closely associated with the Austrian-American League. The group included Dietrich von Hildebrand, Richard von Schüller, Raoul Auernheimer, Erich Hula, and Otto Kallir (Nirenstein). The front man in the League was von Hildebrand, but the organizational driving force was the secretary, Otto Kallir, who had probably brought his cousin Mises on board. In June 1941, Mises and other members of this group formed the Austrian Committee to promote the independence of Austria after the end of the war. (2007, 804)

Hülsmann tells me that he cannot recall having come across any other evidence of contact between Mises and Hildebrand. Of course, New York City was a big place after the war, and many refugees from Germany and Austria lived there, so it is possible that the two men never had any contact there other than that just mentioned.

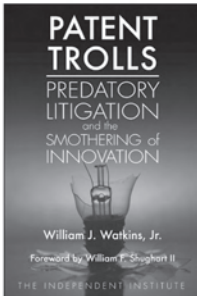
Of the great Catholic theologian and philosopher whom Pope Pius XII called “the twentieth-century Doctor of the Church” and Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI esteemed as a great ethicist, it has been written in summary: “Dietrich von Hildebrand was remarkable for his keen intellect, his profound originality, his prodigious output, his great personal courage, his deep spirituality, and his intense love of truth, goodness, and beauty. These rare qualities made him one of the greatest philosophers and one of the wisest men of the twentieth century” (“Biographical Note” 1990, 109). By striking out the phrase “his deep spirituality” and substituting “greatest economists” for “greatest philosophers,” one might well make exactly the same declaration about Ludwig von Mises.

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