



UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

# What is Conservative Liberalism?

## From Snorri Sturluson to Robert Nozick

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Hannes H. Gissurarson

# Twenty-Four Conservative-Liberal Thinkers

Part I



New  
Direction

Hannes H. Gissurarson TWENTY-FOUR CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL THINKERS Part I

Hannes H. Gissurarson TWENTY-FOUR CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL THINKERS Part II



Hayek's  
Unheeded  
Advice

# Hayek as a Conservative Liberal

- How do we accomplish so much when we know so little?
- Because we can utilise knowledge of others transmitted through the price mechanism and through traditions and practices
- Collective reason, accumulated cultural capital
- Theory of spontaneous order shows that liberty is possible and indeed inevitable
- Articulates and develops a political tradition, traceable to Middle Ages, to Snorri and Aquinas





# Pre-liberal Insights: Snorri and Aquinas

- The king is under the same law as his subjects
- If he seriously violates the law, he could be deposed
- In *Heimskringla* and *Saga of Egil*, Snorri described the individual, making choices, standing up to the king (nowadays the public)
- Aquinas justified private property: brings peace and prosperity
- The liberal Salamanca School was Thomist





## The Classical Thinkers: Locke, Hume, Smith

- Locke: Appropriation from commons need not harm others
- Hume: Private property and free trade responses to scarcity
- Smith: order without commands, profit without loss

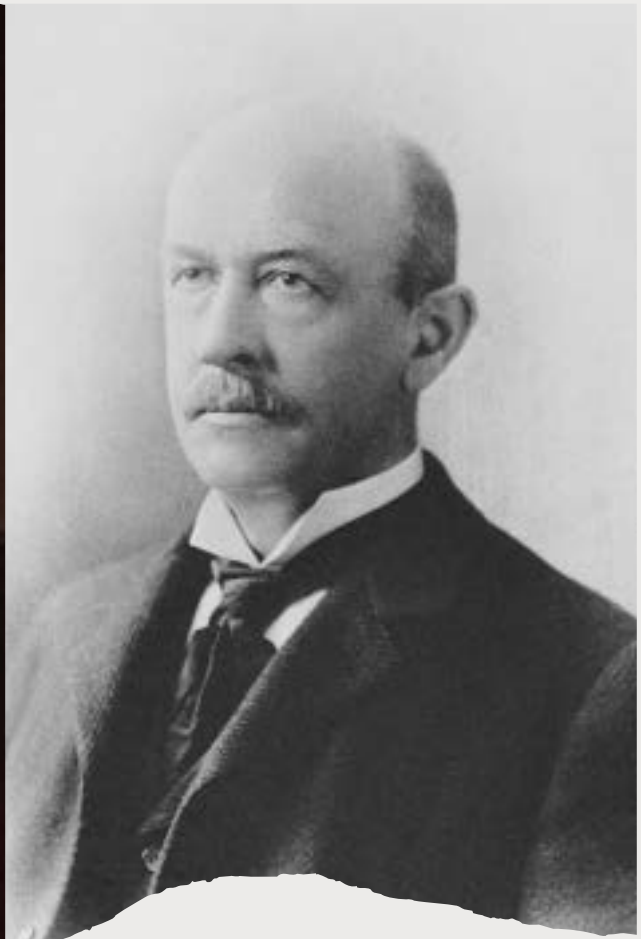


Responses to the French Revolution: Burke, Constant, Tocqueville

# Revolutions: Two Successes, Two Failures

- The 1688 and 1776 revolutions succeeded because they were made to preserve and extend existing liberties
- The 1789 and 1917 revolutions, made to reconstruct society, failed
- Burke: the revolutionaries over-estimated the power of individual reason and under-estimated the potential of social reason, embodied in practices and traditions
- Constant: the revolutionaries did not understand modernity, diversity, freedom of choice and of contract
- Tocqueville: the revolutionaries did not appreciate intermediate institutions, spontaneously developed





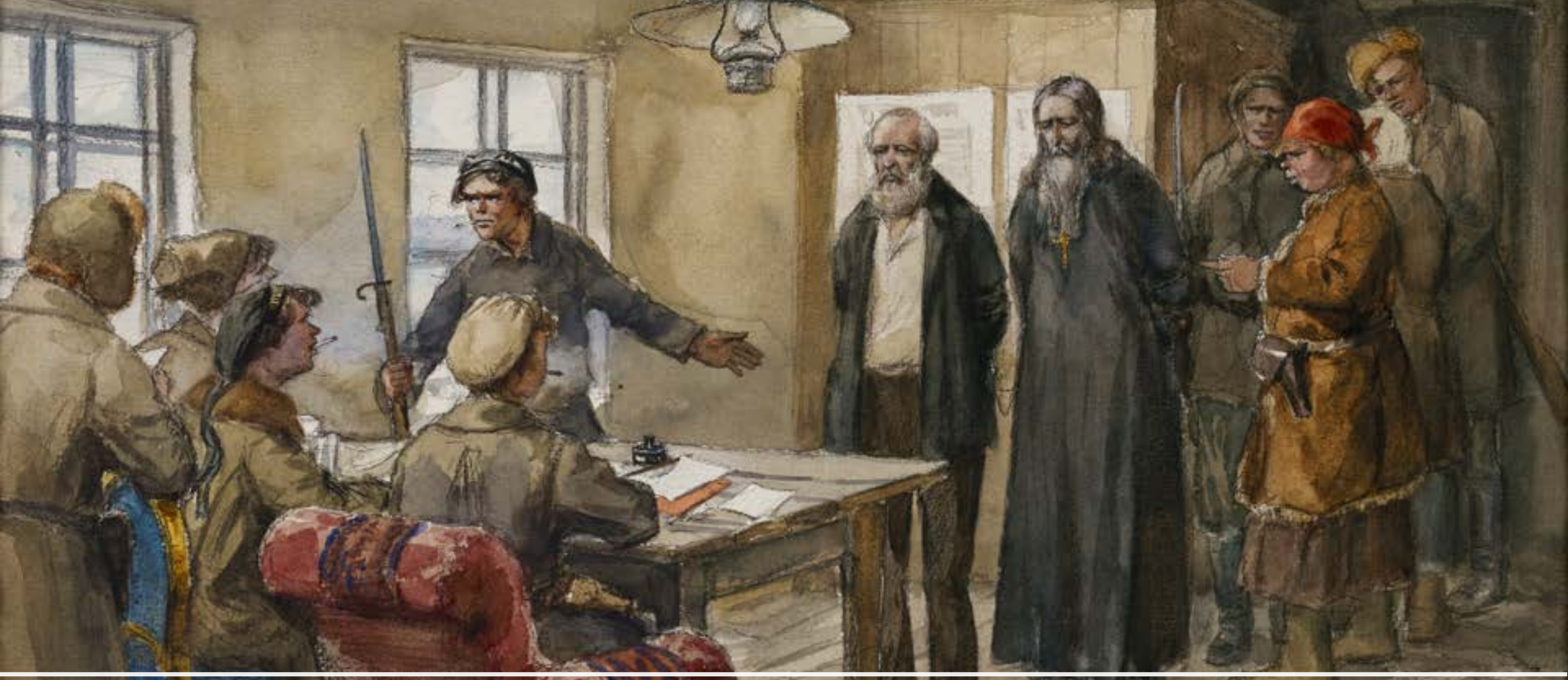
Free trade Champions: Chydenius, Bastiat, Spencer, Sumner



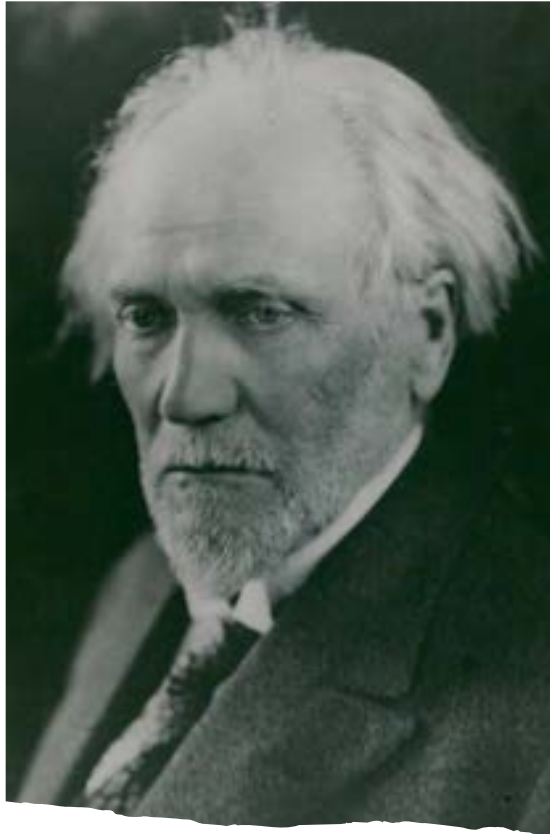
## Café Landtmann, Vienna November 1918

- Weber: 'The Bolshevick Revolution will end in a catastrophe.'
- Schumpeter: 'But it would be a good laboratory to test our theories.'
- Weber: 'A laboratory heaped with corpses!'
  - Schumpeter: 'Every anatomy classroom is the same thing.'
  - Weber: 'This is intolerable!'
- Schumpeter: 'How can somebody carry on like that in a coffeehouse?'





Hayek: Socialism 'The Road to Serfdom'

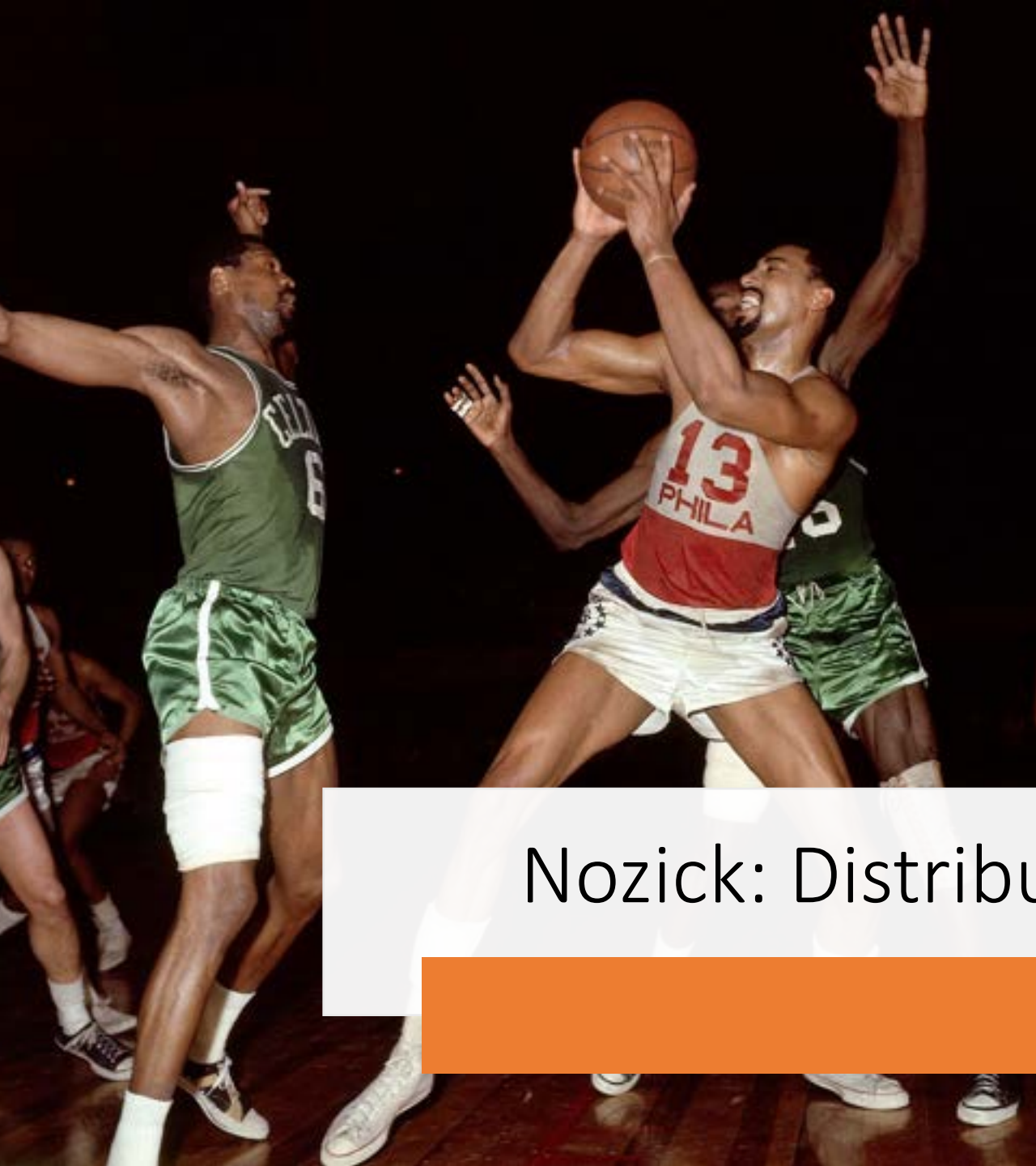


20th century  
Nordic  
conservative  
liberalism:  
Free trade,  
private property,  
and limited  
government  
Gustav Cassel, Eli  
Heckscher, and  
Trygve Hoff



# Oakeshott: Celebrating Individuality

- In a slow historical process, Western individual acquired the will and ability to make choices
- Search of order enabling different individuals to live together peacefully, pursuing different aims
- Purposeless order, not pointless; acceptance of end-independent rules
- Latin *societas* v. *universitas*, German *Genossenschaft* v. *Herrschaft*, English enterprise associations v. civil associations
- Socialism in West a case of mistaken identity, false consciousness



Nozick: Distribution by Choice



# Summing up

- Economics necessary (and a powerful support of conservative liberalism), but not sufficient
- To have and to be, efficiency and identity
- Not everything a matter of choice, also commitments, ties, loyalties by virtue of who we are
- Civil society: family, property, morality
- Combining cosmopolitanism and patriotism, making populism and nationalism servants of and not threats to liberty

