

PRESCRIPTION AND PREJUDICE

REMEMBERING A GOTHIC CONSERVATISM

Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology

W. Wesley McDonald

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Reviewed by David Wilson

As a copy clerk for my hometown newspaper years ago, I asked the token conservative on the editorial board whom I should read to pursue my emerging interest in political conservatism. “Russell Kirk,” he said. “Who’s that?” I asked. “A crustacean,” he answered dryly, without taking his eyes off his computer screen.

The editorialist’s confident citation of Kirk as a primary conservative authority—quickly followed by a half-joking dismissal of his current relevance—captures the Kirk legacy. Mainstream conservative figures will often dutifully list Kirk’s works as among those to be studied, especially the seminal *The Conservative Mind*, published by Henry Regnery in 1953. But what traces of Kirk’s thought inform the “conservative” policy positions of today are difficult to detect.

Russell Kirk was part custodian, part critic. From Aristotle to Burke and beyond, he absorbed and carried forward those elements of Western thought he deemed wisest. To these he added his own, notably decisive rejections of “atomistic” individualism, economic and social leveling, and dogmatic laissez faire. The giddier thinking of the Enlightenment, especially Benthamite utilitarianism, came under his harsh scrutiny. He famously set forth the “six canons of conservative thought,” and advanced conservatism as the rejection of political programs that presume the easy malleability of human nature—really, his definition of “ideology.”

In *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, W. Wesley McDonald carries Kirk’s scholarship forward for another generation, if it will take note. Of late, it has

not. Says the author in the preface, "Much of what today passes for 'conservatism' would not have pleased my subject."

McDonald, a professor of political science at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania, put his own youthful inquiry about conservative fundamentals to Kirk himself—and got in return an invitation to stay at Piety Hill, Kirk's Mecosta, Michigan redoubt. *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* is the author's tribute to Kirk. Those seeking extensive criticism or outright rejection of the man and his work will not find it here. For biographical treatment, McDonald suggests other books. McDonald instead sets out to present, in condensed form, Kirk's thinking, with careful attention paid to the ways in which he rejected libertarian ideology. (So strong was his objection to the libertarian strain that he balked at having his name appear on the masthead of the nascent *National Review* with Frank Meyer, a libertarian and ethnically Jewish convert to Catholicism.)

To Kirk, libertarianism ignored what he considered vital in a conservative: recognition of man's social nature. "Kirk argued that sound defenses against the growth of state power cannot be grounded upon Benthamite notions of 'utility,' but must be based on a conservative individualism that recognizes the social nature of man and the moral prerequisites of true liberty." What Kirk considered the towering problem of the modern age, McDonald says, is the loss of community.

McDonald succeeds in his goal of a thorough presentation of Kirk's ideas, though it could be argued that going straight to *The Conservative Mind* or his other works is a more thorough approach. If one is interested enough to consult McDonald's book, why not the horse's mouth? Brevity is one answer: at 219 pages, the book is a sound summation of Kirkian thinking. An undergraduate charged with digesting the usual stacks of Marxist, feminist, and anti-white volumes before semester's end might appreciate McDonald's effort.

Kirk's discursion was vast, but it was a reflection of his personality and perhaps what he would counsel as something to value. Delving into his lengthy discussions of this or that literary, academic or historical figure who excited him for reasons that aren't always exactly clear is one sure antidote to the hurried life. Call it conservative meditation. McDonald occasionally finds frustration with this tendency, noting, for example, that "although Kirk was convincing in his analysis of reason's limitations, he failed to provide a logic for systematically discussing his preferred alternative to reason, namely, intuitions of the 'permanent things'." To which it might be responded that the intuitive by its very nature resists systematic discussions.

Such is a primary frustration of Kirk. For a man so ardently opposed to the abstractions of Enlightenment or liberal thinking, he did not fire back with much that was concrete. This was likely the source of his obscurity among—and outright rejection by—modern political strategists. Kirk was the anti-Machiavelli.

Yet it cannot be said that Kirk was wholly unconcerned about politics or had no insights of use to policy makers. Even a cursory understanding of his thinking would have provided guidance on (and away from) virtually all forms of social engineering or other policies that either failed to account for human nature or had as their goal its rapid change to suit a bureaucratic vision.

Kirk once said, "This is my case: there ought to be inequality of condition in the world. For without inequality, there is no class; without class, no manners and no beauty; and then a people would sink into a public and private ugliness." Steeply progressive taxation and the "No Child Left Behind" Act do not follow.

McDonald is careful to point out that for all Kirk's rejection of economic leveling, he was not opposed to protectionist measures. It is curious that while Kirk was relatively silent on policy specifics of his own day (though he was a vocal opponent of abortion), the one policy initiative to catch his attention happened more than a century ago in England: the Corn Laws, tariffs Kirk supported as a way to preserve the agricultural way of life and its salutary effects.

What strikes the conservative racial realist about Kirk is how concordant his observations were, at least at a core level, with the notion that racial and ethnic groups cannot be made fungible through political or cultural manipulation. How could it be otherwise, when Kirk and his historical muses did not believe equality was possible among even Englishmen? If in Kirk's words "a true conservatism recognizes man's spiritual and social nature" and "defends and fosters a community of spirit in which generation links with generation," it is impossible to see what is "conservative" about mass Third World immigration, affirmative action, forced racial integration, and a "multiculturalism" that promotes every other culture while denigrating the majority culture. One would employ those policies if his goal were precisely the opposite: to obliterate the community of spirit, and to smash the links between generation and generation. But Kirk was largely silent on a transformative issue of the twentieth century, race. Was he one of the many who, as Jared Taylor has noted, took white racial dominance for granted, and thus did not feel compelled to examine threats to it? Recall that when *The Conservative Mind* was published, the Immigration Act of 1965 was more than a decade away. On the domestic front, *Brown v. Board* was not to be decided until a year later, in 1954. His own multiracial experience was apparently limited to the selected international refugees he took in at Piety Hill, something that might have contributed to the cultural wind-up toy perspective on racial and ethnic diversity so treasured by whites who have not personally experienced versions of "diversity" in which they are truly outnumbered and out-powered.

There is some evidence that Kirk came around on the issue of immigration. In a column for *Vdare.com* written after the publication of *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology*, McDonald wrote that Kirk changed from proponent to

opponent of immigration in the midst of supporting Pat Buchanan's run for the presidency. Kirk said he supported Buchanan because he "would discourage indiscriminate immigration into the United States, for our country cannot play host to all the world and still maintain its established culture, its successful economy, and its social cohesion."

Some readers might have appreciated more about Kirk's scrapes with the predominantly Jewish neoconservatives of the *Commentary* ilk, if not for the cheap thrill of watching a good fight, for more illumination of Kirk's stance. At every turn, whether manifested as opposition to libertarianism or neoconservatism, he seemed to oppose those elements of the American right championed most ardently by Jews. David Frum, in a *Commentary* reflection on him, made sure to repeat the Kirk line that neoconservatives cannot forget: "Not seldom has it seemed as some eminent Neoconservatives mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States." For cracks like that, Midge Decter called him an anti-Semite. However vigorously he or his defenders might deny it, one cannot help but wonder whether Kirk was subconsciously defending white interests.

Needless to say, those interests—along with the truer conservatism defended by Kirk—go undefended today. Why? Could Kirk have predicted his own irrelevance? However learned, however wise, Kirk either failed to see or failed to discuss the larger threats posed to his "permanent things," choosing instead to speak in grand generalities about the "order in the soul" difficult enough to achieve among kinsmen but unthinkable in the globalized multiracial war zone the West is becoming—a war zone in which early fighting was taking place in his lifetime. Yet I would not point to this failure as evidence of Kirk's lack of intelligence, only his lack of foresight. The social decay triggered by multiracialism happens slowly. An encounter with a lone Pakistani on the ancient, quiet campus of The University of St. Andrews in Scotland decades ago (where Kirk wrote much of *The Conservative Mind*) would not have alarmed anyone. Would it have become *The Revolutionary Mind* if written in the flaming suburbs of Paris today?

At one point in his book, McDonald quotes Kirk as saying that conservatism

does not breed fanatics. It does not try to excite the enthusiasm of a secular religion. If you want men who will sacrifice their past and present and future to a set of abstract ideas, you must go to Communism, or Fascism, or Benthamism, but if you want men who seek, reasonably and prudently, to reconcile the best in the wisdom of our ancestors with the change which is essential to a vigorous civil social existence, then you will do well to turn to conservatism.

But after decades of failure and steady retreat, those styling themselves conservatives should ask why so few have turned in the direction Kirk describes. One answer might be found in the first few words of Kirk's quote: "It does not try to excite." And indeed it does not. Competing views offer libertarianism's

brave new world, where marijuana is freely smoked and capitalist utopia achieved, or liberalism's brave new world, where all races and sexes are equal units who dance until sunrise at the joy of it. Kirk's "moral imagination" is precious and good, but it cannot compete with Social Security. Those who seek to defend the permanent things should draw lessons from this reality.

*David Wilson is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to
The Occidental Quarterly.*

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