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## BOOKS and COMMENT

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Page Smith

### RUSSELL KIRK AND THE NEW CONSERVATISM<sup>1</sup>



WHEN RUSSELL KIRK'S *The Conservative Mind* was published almost two years ago, its appearance was greeted with delight by champions of conservatism everywhere. *Time* and *Fortune* carried lengthy reviews in which Mr. Kirk was eulogized as the gifted enunciator of true conservative doctrine. Liberal journals attacked Mr. Kirk's book sharply, but between the extremes of right and left a number of reviewers expressed qualified approval, often less for Mr. Kirk's ideas than for a book which many of them hailed somewhat portentously as marking the emergence of a real American conservatism.

*The Conservative Mind* is skillfully written with much rhetorical glitter and many witty if ill-tempered thrusts at traditional liberalism. Since its publication, it has enjoyed, for a book of its kind, a remarkable success. It has gone through several printings, sold some 20,000 copies, and is about to appear in two new editions, one in England, and the other, as a textbook, here. Doubtless it will soon be dispensed as a paper-back in every drugstore. Mr. Kirk has, as a result of the book's success emerged as the messiah of the new conservatism, while an earlier prophet, Peter Viereck, is revealed as a rather reluctant John the Baptist.

Many of the ideas that Mr. Kirk has put forth have, at this moment, a most seductive quality. There is general agreement, even among ardent liberals, that we need "a healthy American con-

<sup>1</sup> *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana*, by Russell Kirk. Chicago: Regnery, 1953. 488 pp. \$6.50.

servatism." At the same time many young academics have undergone considerable disillusionment with liberalism, and this disillusionment makes them especially susceptible to ideas such as those presented by him. The elevation of Mr. Kirk to the status of a major exponent of conservatism, and the apparent readiness of many people to accept *The Conservative Mind* as a kind of testament of the new conservative faith, perhaps make it worthwhile to point out how unsubstantial is the book itself, how spongy and inept much of the thinking that has gone into it, and how inadequate the work finally is as an effective statement of the philosophy and the practical tasks of conservatism in this age.

The first and in some ways the most serious charge I would bring against Mr. Kirk, and indeed against many of his fellow conservative theorists, is his lack of a genuine sense of history. A conservatism which is without a deep sense of history lacks an essential prop. Ironically, the conservatives have inherited their faulty historical understanding from the very liberals they abhor.

In *The Conservative Mind* Mr. Kirk gives ample evidence of having eaten of the apple of the liberal historical fallacy, which was to assume that there is, at least within a particular culture, a set of ideas which can be identified with the TRUTH and which are equally relevant for all times. The English Whig historians and their American counterparts have generally argued that the meaning of English and American history could be found in the gradual development of certain liberal political and social ideas. Mr. Kirk and his fellows now simply reverse this process and replace the liberal dogmas with conservative ones that are, if anything, more rigid and unrealistic than their liberal counterparts. The folly of the liberal historians has been to maintain that when society conformed to certain liberal postulates it would be the good society. For this liberal illusion which reduced the fantastic complexity of life to a few comforting maxims, the new conservatives have nothing but scorn, yet when they become programmatic, they do the very same thing that they have charged their

enemies with. They offer us a jugful of miscellaneous ideas labeled "conservative thought," and tell us that we must take the mixture for our own good—it is the only thing that will cure us. But we do not swallow ideas like medicine. Ideas exist in tension and must prove themselves in competition with other ideas. They are not counters in an intellectual poker game; they are the responses of living men to the crises of their times. And so they must be judged—by their historic effects, not by reference to some archetypal truth. But the new conservatives do not know this. They are idealists, Hegelians, for whom the only realities are those ideas which they have poured into their conservative jar. The measure of their historical obtuseness is found in their assumption that while the questions are different in different ages, the answers are always substantially the same. As Mr. Kirk puts it "real harmony with natural law is attained through adapting society to the model which external law, natural, physical, and spiritual, sets before us." If this were true we could transmute spiritual absolutes into political and social absolutes and stabilize the world, ruling out the danger and inconvenience of change. But since all the experience of history contradicts the idea of a static society, Mr. Kirk is forced back on the image of history as a "roulette wheel." "There is truth," he writes, "in the old Greek idea of cycles." Thus the temptation which confronts the new conservatism is the same that has tempted decadent liberalism—a return to the sterile cycles of classic paganism, *à la* Spengler and Toynbee.

The historical technique of the new conservatives is similar to that of the old liberals. There are, in this view, good ideas and bad ideas, and there are good men and bad ones (depending largely on the ideas they hold). Since history has an inherent logic and man affects his own destiny, the good ideas must produce good while the bad ideas produce evil. All progress and wisdom are thus attributed to the "good ideas" and their promulgators, and failure, error, and tragedy are simply due to "bad ideas" and, to

a lesser extent, to bad men. (*The Conservative Mind* can, indeed, be read as a modern morality play.) But such judgments are at variance with the deeper historical insight that we might reasonably expect of the conservative, which recognizes that good comes out of bad, and bad out of good (assuming that we could agree on those terms) in the ultimately inscrutable course of history; that the road to hell is paved with good intentions and good ideas; and that all ideas, good or bad, are given an opportunity to prove themselves in history. Thus it is no service to abuse Condorcet for having a distressingly naive view of the nature of man. We might better ask what the function of such enlightenment heresies was in history. Did they not result in the extraordinary broadening and deepening of our view of social responsibility? Have they not had at least a partial justification in our present ideals of social justice and universal education?

The new conservatives have recently made some interesting and indeed spectacular reappraisals of individual conservatives as a part of their conservative revisionism, but the limited nature of their technique is revealed when they tackle a broader span of history. Here they skip from one great conservative figure to another, often leaping decades in their dexterous and agile dance, making witty asides about the desperate plight of nations dominated by liberal ideas. At few points do they pause to consider the relation of the ideas they espouse to the political and social history of a particular era, and when they do the results are often distressingly bad. It seems to me that *The Conservative Mind* reveals very well the grosser failings of this conservative revisionism.

Mr. Kirk bases his political and philosophical system on Burke. One may admire the English theorist and still doubt whether Edmund can, any more than Thomas, bear the entire meaning of human experience in his head. But once Mr. Kirk has established Mr. Burke as his archetypal political theorist, he then fashions a bed on which he forces all subsequent political and social theorists to lie.

It is no accident, moreover, that Mr. Kirk begins his story with

Burke. By doing so he can ignore a tragic dilemma of English history which one dares to say could not have been resolved in reasonable conservative terms, but had rather to be fought out. "That real Jacobinism never has come to Britain or America," Mr. Kirk writes, "is in some considerable measure the work of Edmund Burke's conservative genius." These are the words of a confirmed idealist. Britain had its own Jacobinism in the Civil War of 1640 which indeed made Mr. Burke possible. He was a child of the Great Rebellion as surely as Saint-Simon or Comte were children of the French Revolution.

Mr. Kirk further assures us that "not a single formidable rebellion has occurred in England since Burke retired from politics—nothing worse than riots and eccentric conspiracies." One cannot but admire the aplomb with which Mr. Kirk waves aside the whole Chartist movement and the radical unrest of 19th-century England. In his world there are no burning ricks, no starving unemployed, no Peterloo, no Speenhamland system of rates in aid of wages, just tidy conservative principles preventing an anarchy invited by liberal errors.

Yet Mr. Kirk makes one admission that is perhaps fatal to the infallibility of his hero. "It is one of the few charges that can be preferred successfully against Burke's prescience," he writes, "that he seems to have ignored economic influences spelling death for the 18th-century milieu." One might be excused for asking if there could have been a more serious flaw in Burke's "prescience"?

And how are we to assess the course of English history in the last century? George Trevelyan writes, "The task awaiting [19th-century statesmen] under the later monarchs of the House of Hanover was to adapt the system of parliamentary government to the new social facts created by the Industrial Revolution. . . . A failure to make the adjustments (the admission of the middle and then of the working class as partners in control of the political machine) would have led to the breakdown of the system and a war of classes." But this is not Mr. Kirk's view. For him the cen-

tury is simply a heart-breaking and often, as in the case of the Reform Bill of 1832, a cowardly retreat from the high tide of Burkean politics. He can take this view because he is an idealist. To an idealist the only important things are ideas, and the only important thing about ideas is to keep them pure. As the ideas issued from the brain of Burke, they were pure as water from a mountain stream. Mr. Kirk is horrified to see them contaminated by the muddy stream of history.

He yearns for Burkean figures to lead us, an aristocracy who "through their devotion to the accumulated wisdom of the past, their loyalty to everything old, settled and lofty in society" can be relied on to transcend narrow selfishness and act for the good of all of us who struggle below in darkness. But I wonder if Mr. Kirk can tell us how his conservative aristocrats are to escape the stain of that original sin which he is so ready to impute to the mass of mankind. They must certainly operate under a special dispensation, because the noblest reason is capable of self-delusion and the most high-minded rulers are corruptible.

Mr. Kirk's conservative revisionism does not stop with 19th-century England. Speaking of the French Revolution, he writes, "even the Old Regime could have been preserved and reformed without indiscriminate destruction, granted a little patience and good conduct."

When we move to America Mr. Kirk's technique is the same. John Adams is the American Burke, and all that is good in American political thought is the work of John Adams. When Mr. Kirk declares that "more than anyone else [Adams] kept the American government one of laws and not of men," he so overstates the case for the New England politician that he robs it of all possible meaning.

Faced with the rather embarrassing fact, for his theory, that Adams was not a delegate to the Federal Convention, Kirk implies that Adams' turgid book, *A Defense of the Constitutions of the United States*, influenced the delegates so strongly that their handiwork can be considered largely an expression of Adams'

ideas. But this is not the case. There is no evidence that Adams' book had an important influence on the debates, and a careful reading of Madison's journal will tell quite another story.

John Adams was, by many of Mr. Kirk's standards, a conservative (by some he was not), but his influence on American conservative thought cannot be compared with Hamilton (who fails to satisfy Mr. Kirk's requirements for a conservative hero), or with James Madison, who was an abler and more realistic political theorist.

If John Adams has a secure place in the conservative hagiography, his son, John Quincy, fares less well. He is cast out of heaven because he is tainted with nationalism (the creeping socialism of the early 19th century), abolitionism, and other liberal heresies.

The inheritors of Adams' mantle are John Randolph and John C. Calhoun. These are conservatives with the aristocratic agrarian bent that so appeals to Mr. Kirk—landed gentry, in other words. The fact that they expended their considerable talents in defending the indefensible institution of Negro slavery bothers Mr. Kirk not a whit. For him it is enough "to keep clear . . . of that partisan controversy over slavery and to penetrate instead, beneath the froth of abolitionist harangues and southern fire-eating." In other words, a plague on both houses. Mr. Kirk seems to be accepting a form of liberal revisionism which, as applied to the Civil War, enjoyed considerable popularity in the 1930's. If all parties to the dispute had simply been more reasonable and obedient; if they had left the delicate business in the hands of wise and farsighted leaders (like Calhoun and Webster?) without intruding their own disorderly passions into the affair, everything could have been worked out satisfactorily. The Civil War, it is Mr. Kirk's heartbroken cry, marked the end of the great period of the Republic, the destruction of the landed aristocracy, and the rise of crass liberal materialism.

**ALMOST WITHOUT EXCEPTION** Mr. Kirk and his fellow conservatives affirm their support of Christianity (though not



necessarily their belief in Christ). One has the uneasy feeling, however, that Christianity is esteemed by them largely as a bulwark of the *status quo*. We might almost imagine the voice of Lord Bryce exclaiming, "Good heavens, if the masses don't believe in God, they'll be utterly unstable." Further, we get the impression from Mr. Kirk that by Christianity he has reference to the Anglican Church. Certainly he has nothing good to say about the reform efforts of the Evangelical non-conformists in 19th-century England, and one suspects that he is not in favor of this kind of Christianity at all. It is difficult to see how Mr. Kirk, if he is a convinced Christian, can say with consistency that "only enlightened conservatism" can save the modern world. Must he not say rather that radical Christianity is our only hope?

When enlightened conservatism invokes Christian principles in support of its dogmas, it reveals that it has accepted the bourgeoisization of Christianity, and thereby once again demonstrated its apparently incurable weakness for confusing spirit with historic form. The conservatives cannot have their conservative faith and then place it within Christianity, because Christianity as faith and teaching far transcends any congeries of social and political ideas, whether they be labeled liberal or conservative. Indeed it would seem that this one painful lesson had been learned beyond the need of relearning by our western world. We have endured centuries of conflict between groups who confused their political aims with God's purpose. Yet the neo-conservatives seem determined to exhume these old specters, to forget painfully learned lessons, to make one party the party of God while the other becomes the refuge of atheists and traitors.

Many readers will be troubled by evidences throughout *The Conservative Mind* of the author's persistent bias against democracy and against all the works and manifestations of historic liberalism. Mr. Kirk is right when he insists that democracy is not and should not be made into the final human good, and further that the natural rights which the 18th century so exalted are not absolute but must be maintained by equally important duties.

But his dislike for liberalism blinds him to the essential rightness and urgency of many of the changes and practical reforms that liberalism championed. The liberal forces of the last two centuries, granted their false philosophies, their shallowness, and their naturalistic spirit were historically justified in many of the causes for which they fought. At this moment it is perhaps especially important to recall liberalism's "passion for liberty and justice and hatred for all forms of tyranny, injustice and oppression; its humanitarian idealism; its dynamic faith in the possibilities of human progress; . . . its belief in the value and dignity of the human person and consequent insistence on the equal claims of all men to the rights and freedoms—political, civil, cultural, and personal—which are essential to the development of a full personality."<sup>2</sup>

It is to a considerable degree as a result of this movement that we are today "witnessing the mass-awakening to social and political consciousness of all the peoples of the earth." We are at the end of a period in which tremendous masses lived by proxy through an elite who exercised the civilizing function. The "masses" have today a sense of hope and aspiration which, however distorted by liberal utopianism, may be the first step toward full humanity. We should not be surprised that the elevation of the masses has resulted in the debasement of many of the finest values of civilization. In part this is the fault of our educated classes who have created and pandered to degraded tastes. The question that faces Mr. Kirk is whether only a comparatively few can live human lives, or whether, if we try to extend this opportunity, none can. Mr. Kirk seems to take the latter view. In light, he suggests, of the debasement of values that has taken place, we cannot run any further risks with the remaining shreds of culture that are left. We must retrench. We must return to the tried and true older forms of society where sound principles and right rea-

<sup>2</sup> Conrad Bonacina, "The Catholic Church and Modern Democracy," *Cross Currents*, 5 (Fall, 1951), 7, 13.

son may still create a paradisial land in which a natural aristocracy provides the leadership and the masses toil and spin, happy in the knowledge that they are watched over and guided by their betters. And this involves a rejection of a hundred years or so of history.

The fact is that even if we could accomplish such radical surgery, we dare not risk it. Since we cannot discern the form and needs of the society of the future, we have a responsibility in this transition period, when the middle class mind does not care much for intellectual values, to preserve intact our full heritage. This is hardly the time to start, in a narrowly partisan spirit, throwing out those aspects of the past that do not fit some particular standard of orthodoxy.

At the end of a prolonged essay on the historic forms of conservatism and their betrayal by a soft and decadent liberalism, Mr. Kirk proceeds to paint a brighter picture of the future than one would have expected from his angry indictment of those forces which, by his own admission, have done most to shape our present world. It turns out, however, that things are not so bad largely because of the resourceful rear-guard action of the conservatives against creeping liberalism and socialism. In fact mere survival has given "libertarian democracy," which Mr. Kirk has so often deplored, an aura of tradition, and in view of that he is willing to waive his doubts about it for the moment and rally to its defense as a repository of tradition and order.

We, of course, owe much to our conservative constitution, "the best-written constitution in the world." With it we have "the widest diffusion of property, the strongest sense of common interest, the most prosperous economy, an elevated moral and intellectual tradition, and a spirit of resolute self-reliance unequalled in modern times." But is this confusing? Since the country has been these many years in the paralysing grip of woolly-minded, power-mad, bungling, non-Burkean liberals, we are rather at a loss to account for our present fortunate state.

Mr. Kirk's program for contemporary conservatism is also instructive. It consists largely of maintaining what we have, while avoiding the dangers of collectivism. To do this, conservatives must rally the agricultural classes (which have been one of the most radical elements in our society and are now the most completely socialized), "a very large educated class" (which we should be astonished to find had escaped the poison of Deweyism), the churches (whose mission is quite different: that is to say the radical reform of souls, not the support of secular institutions however prosperous and enlightened), and lastly "an increasing part of the laboring classes, which are likely to be attached increasingly to a stable society through the share in things which they have obtained." One cannot resist asking here "through whom did they obtain this 'share in things' which Mr. Kirk now appeals to them to maintain?" Not even Mr. Kirk would claim, surely, that it was through the beneficence of enlightened conservatives.

As we read on in his program it becomes quite evident that the conservatism of Mr. Kirk, and his fellows, is a luxury that history affords them at this moment. He may now be right, but would he have chanted his conservative litany in 1933? Would he have denied the efforts of the New Deal to ameliorate the effects of the great depression, or would he have stood aside immobilized by the conflict between his conservative principles and the agonizing urgencies of what he calls "the dismal years." If the achievements of liberalism allow Mr. Kirk, and indeed others of us, to be conservative today, is it not fitting that we should be a little grateful or at least a little humble, and cease to exalt ourselves as the formulators of sempiternal truth?

The conservative claims, as distinguished from conservative principles, are another form of the monstrous simplisms of our day which assure us that if we will abandon all doubt and misgiving and accept this or that exclusive and all-encompassing version of TRUTH all will be well with us and with our world. The danger in Mr. Kirk's book and in the pronouncements of the new

conservatives is that at a time when people are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the inadequacies of the old liberal view of the world; they will turn to a set of ideas which are labeled conservative and hope to find refuge there from the terrible dilemmas of our time. Thus when the real battle is for the maturity of the American spirit, we are tempted by an attractive new orthodoxy which contains much less than the necessary truth and which at worst may simply bestow a spurious intellectual respectability upon political reaction.

We Americans would still like to ignore the fact that "everything good has to be done over again, forever." But we had better remember that there is nothing about conservatives or about conservatism that contains any built-in immunity to decadence. The radical triumphs of one age are the conservative values of another, and these conservative values have subsequently to be revalued by another generation, or, if they have become rigid, overthrown. There is in conservatism, moreover, a kind of complacency that tempts it constantly to resign itself to what seem to be the hard and inevitable facts of human pain and want and suffering, just as liberalism or radicalism demonstrates the contrary vice of trying to assert its will over history and thereby committing the equally grave sin of pride.

Actually the position of the new conservatives is fashioned of nostalgia and despair. They are, for the most part, men of little faith who dare not imagine a future that is not a pallid imitation of the past. Their system is a kind of calcified shell constructed out of vestiges of the past to protect them from the present and to conceal a vision of the future.

Perhaps at the heart of the failure of the new conservatives is their lack of an adequate metaphysic. The lack of such a metaphysic is particularly serious in conservative political theory because of its inherent tendency to glorify the *status quo* or even the *status quo ante*. Whatever may be said against liberalism, it has been erected on a pretty thoroughly worked-out metaphysic. Contemporary conservatism lacks this basic metaphysic and in the ab-

sence of it must rely on a patchwork of Burkean insights, elements of Christian dogma, and forms of historic conservatism.

There are, indeed, three principal ways of viewing the past. The true liberal is, on the whole, inclined to give little heed to the past, to speak of it often as "the dead hand." The past is something to be subdued, a record of error and superstition, or at best a promise to be fulfilled in the present. The conservative mind on the other hand harks back to the past, loves it, glorifies it, claims to understand it (and often does), and has faith in its achievements and traditions. The conservative, however, in his idealization of the past is in danger of mistaking the transient elements for the enduring ones. What we might call the post-conservative imagination grapples most successfully with history because it tries to transfigure the past and integrate it in the future in a free and creative spirit. Knowing that historic forms are merely the husks of the once existent realities, it searches out these realities so that they may be separated from the exhausted forms and saved for the future.

We cannot too emphatically reject the dogmas of the new conservatism. But we are fortunate in having Mr. Kirk's book to instruct us. Peering beneath its surface of dazzling rhetoric, we can see quite clearly many of the more egregious fallacies of the new conservatism. If a conservative credo can be effectively stated for our age, and there is much to suggest a need for it, the job remains to be done.