
Russell Kirk and the Prospects for Conservatism

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Russell Kirk (1918-1994) is widely regarded as one of the architects of the postwar conservative intellectual revival. The publication, in 1953, of his *The Conservative Mind*, a monumental 450-page history of conservative ideas from Edmund Burke to T. S. Eliot, dramatically shaped a nascent conservative intellectual movement then struggling for survival. Kirk's rediscovery and articulation of a viable conservative tradition in the English-speaking world including the United States, during a period when the dominant ideological currents were markedly different, helped legitimize a neglected body of ideas. The book established its young author, then a Michigan State College (now Michigan State University) history professor, as a major intellectual force in American politics and letters.

Still only thirty-five and at the height of his intellectual and literary powers, Kirk then penned six more books in just four years: *St. Andrews* (1954), a history of the Scottish university town where he lived from 1948 to 1953 and where he wrote *The Conservative Mind*; *A Program for Conservatives* (1954); *Academic Freedom* (1955); *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* (1956); *The American Cause* (1957); and *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism* (1957). *Newsweek* magazine took note of his achievements and hailed the rising young scholar as "one of the foremost intellectual spokesmen for the conservative position." *Time* magazine, echoing this opinion, shortly thereafter warmly praised him as "a gifted and sorely needed spokesman" for American conservatism. "Kirk is no reac-

tionary," *Time's* book reviewer insisted. He "is in fact considerably more liberal than many self-proclaimed liberals."¹ Alas, Kirk's subsequent treatment by the establishment press would be far less sympathetic.

His total literary output during the approximately four decades of his most active professional writing was impressive: twenty-four nonfiction works; three novels; three books of collected short stories; approximately two thousand articles, essays, and reviews; 2,687 short articles for his nationally syndicated newspaper column, "To the Point," published between April 30, 1962, and August 3, 1975, and his monthly *National Review* column, "From the Academy" (November 1955-April 1981), in which he described and decried the state of American education.² "Russell Kirk has written more," quipped one of his admirers, "than the ordinary American has read." During the last few years of his life, despite the painful hardships of his growing health problems, his Herculean literary labors continued nearly undiminished. He worked on several books simultaneously, some of which were published posthumously: *The Politics of Prudence* (1993); *The Sword of the Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (1995), his long anticipated memoirs; and *Redeeming the Time* (1996).

Although Kirk never regained the celebrity status he enjoyed as an intellectual figure in the 1950s, his works continued to exert considerable influence during the succeeding decades. Some twenty years after the publication of *The Conservative Mind*, Donald Atwell Zoll, once a significant voice in the postwar resurgence of conservative ideas, hailed Kirk as "a premier figure in the twentieth century revival of aesthetic conservatism."³ A steady stream of young disciples over the years made pilgrimages to his ancestral home in rural Michigan to study and learn. Self-identified conservative political leaders also felt indebted to him. The first self-described conservative President of the United States in American history sa-

¹ *Newsweek*, 28 March 1955, 60; *Time*, 13 August 1955. See also *Time's* cover story "America and the Intellectual: The Reconciliation" in the June 11, 1956, issue in which Kirk is included in a listing of America's leading intellectuals.

² See Charles Calvin Brown, *Russell Kirk: A Bibliography* (Mt. Pleasant, Michigan: Clarke Historical Library/Central Michigan University, 1981). I have, of course, included the works that Kirk published since 1981.

³ Donald Atwell Zoll, "The Social Thought of Russell Kirk," *The Political Science Reviewer* 2 (Fall 1972): 113.

luted Kirk in a 1981 speech delivered before the Conservative Political Action Conference held in Washington, D.C., as one of the “intellectual leaders” who, because he had “shaped so much our thoughts,” helped make possible the conservative political victories in the 1980 election.⁴ Though less well known by the general public at the time of his death, his works continue to be read and re-read by serious students of the conservative intellectual tradition.

A Movement Adrift

In the years following World War II, Kirk and a small embattled group of political thinkers, historians, literary critics, economists, and writers—including Richard Weaver, Eric Voegelin, James Burnham, Frank S. Meyer, and Friedrich A. Hayek—challenged the collectivist, egalitarian, and utilitarian dogmas then fashionable in intellectual and political circles. Anticommunists, traditionalists, and libertarians formed an alliance based on shared political and intellectual aspirations which during the succeeding decades grew in prominence and political strength.

*Conservative
euphoria.*

After spending decades on the political fringe, these thinkers and their allies felt that history was moving decisively in their direction. For many of them, including Kirk, the triumph of Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election portended an age of conservative dominance in American politics and society. No longer could they be dismissed as merely disgruntled and politically marginal. Their moment had arrived. History had given them the opportunity to play a formidable role in America’s political and cultural future. Never before had this embattled band of intellectuals expressed their aspirations and purposes with such confidence. Just prior to the 1980 election an elated Kirk expressed the feelings

⁴ Ronald Reagan, “Fellow Conservatives: Our Moment Has Arrived,” *Human Events*, 4 April 1981, 7. This is a transcript of a speech delivered by President Reagan to the Conservative Political Action Conference held at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., on March 20, 1981. This speech was reprinted in *New Guard* 21 (Spring 1981): 2. Speaking to the same conference, Vice President George Bush began his speech with a quotation from Russell Kirk’s works. See George Bush, “This President Not to be Deterred,” *New Guard* 21 (Spring 1981): 5. The newly elected administration, which was the first in American history to declare itself conservative, clearly acknowledged its indebtedness to one of the chief exponents of the conservative position.

of many of them. We are now “entering upon a period of conservative policies in the American Republic,” he proclaimed. “In both the great political parties, I suggest, conservative views will tend to dominate. Men and women who profess conservative convictions will be elected to office. And what matters more, the conservative political imagination will set to work to allay our present discontents and to renew our order.”⁵ While liberalism seemed intellectually exhausted and moribund, fresh ideas and vigor energized conservatism. Conservatives assumed that their principles and programs would supplant a liberalism then widely regarded as a spent force.

Within a few short years this self-confident mood began to dissipate. Heady optimism gave way to doubt and gloom, and the unity of conservatives began to unravel. Kirk and his fellow conservatives were soon disappointed by the direction of the Reagan Administration. Despite impressive conservative electoral victories, they questioned whether much of enduring significance had been achieved during Reagan’s first term. The ideas of the left continued to dominate in colleges and universities, the media, and the bureaucracy. The march toward what conservatives saw as leveling social policies and intrusive managerial politics had not been significantly abated. Conservatism had not moved America to the right, but rather the right had been pushed leftward. In a 1986 symposium on the state of conservatism published in *The Intercollegiate Review*, several prominent conservatives, including Kirk, M. E. Bradford, Clyde Wilson, and Paul Gottfried, expressed misgivings about the future of “conservative” ideas.⁶ They complained that such self-identified conservative politicians as Newt Gingrich, William Bennett, and Jack Kemp were pursuing power and influence in Washington at the expense of true conservative principles. The traditional commitments to a non-imperialistic foreign policy, minimal government, rooted communities and social hierarchies—once the staple principles of the conservative persuasion—were now rarely voiced. Instead, conservative activists were stressing material opportunity and social uplift, and—in the name of global de-

Disappointment sets in.

⁵ Russell Kirk, “The Conservative Movement: Then and Now,” in *Reclaiming a Patrimony* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1982), 1. This lecture was delivered at The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., on June 4, 1980.

⁶ See *The Intercollegiate Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Spring 1986).

mocracy—an interventionist foreign policy. Moreover, the prospect for reining in the social welfare state seemed increasingly remote.

The doubts about the coherence and direction of the conservative movement expressed in the 1986 symposium marked the beginning of the “conservative wars.” By the mid-1980s, the Old Right began questioning whether the so-called neoconservatives—a group of intellectuals, many of them connected with *Commentary* magazine, and Cold War liberals who had “broken ranks” with the Democratic Party—could rightfully be called “conservatives” at all. The neoconservatives, many of them Jewish, retaliated by bitterly denouncing Old Rightists such as Kirk as racists, anti-Semites, or xenophobes.⁷

To the contributors to the 1986 symposium, the conservative movement was fragmented, “adrift,” and “in trouble.” Its character had undoubtedly changed. As a consequence of their influence in government and the media, the neoconservatives had effectively redefined conservatism and steered it in the direction of social democracy.⁸ By the early 1990s it was no longer startling to hear conservatives proclaim their support for the social-welfare state, affirmative action, the removal of Confederate flags from public buildings in the South, and global democracy.⁹ The “politics of nostalgia” seemed all but dead within the conservative ranks. Instead, Kemp, Bennett, Ben Wattenberg, and others in the media identified with the political right praised the march toward greater equality and glorified material wealth. This brand of conservatism owed little to the traditionalism of Edmund Burke, John Adams, Henry Adams, and Irving Babbitt, or even, for that matter, to the libertar-

⁷ See, for example, Richard John Neuhaus, “Democratic Conservatism,” in *First Things*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1990), 65-66. See also David Frum, “Cultural Clash on the Right,” *The Wall Street Journal* (June 2, 1989) in which the split between Pastor Neuhaus and the Rockford Institute, which publishes the paleoconservative magazine *Chronicles*, is described. See the late M. E. Bradford’s “Undone by Victory: Political Success and the Subversion of Conservative Politics,” *Imprimis* 15:6 (June, 1986), 1-4, for the mordant observations of one Old Rightist on the failures of the so-called “Reagan Revolution.”

⁸ Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming, *The Conservative Movement* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 62 and 108.

⁹ As do Jack Kemp, Ben Wattenberg, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Midge Decter, and George F. Will, to name just a few in the neoconservative ranks who subscribe to these policies.

ian principles heard in the 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater.

Popular, media-inspired impressions to the contrary, the post-war American right is not a single movement, but a congeries of movements emerging out of often conflicting philosophical traditions. To demonstrate the contrast between Kirk and his neoconservative adversaries, I shall explicate and then evaluate the historical consciousness that informs his work. I shall also examine the separation of the political and the historical in the writings of prominent neoconservative thinkers who have been in the forefront of Kirk's critics. An exploration of these different views of the historical past will put into sharper focus some of the issues at stake in the "conservative wars" on the American right. Far from being merely a dispute about transient public policy issues or a conflict between personality cults, this struggle involves fundamental differences on first principles. The following examination of ideas will further explain why many conservatives today complain that the movement they helped found has lost its original identity.

The Concept of Tradition in Kirk's Social and Moral Thought

Central to Kirk's moral philosophy is the dualistic view of human nature rooted in the Judeo-Christian and Classical tradition and later developed conceptually in the United States by Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) and Paul Elmer More (1864-1937). The ideas of these two thinkers, who together became founders and leading spokesmen for an intellectual and cultural movement called American Humanism or the New Humanism, influenced Kirk profoundly. They conceived of man's moral predicament in terms of an ineradicable tension between two conflicting orientations—what they called the opposition between the higher and lower self.

Our higher self refers to that aspect of our being which, under the guidance of the authority of a transcendent good, pulls us in the direction of our true humanity, or ultimate spiritual purpose, as defined by a universally valid standard. The lower self, by contrast, refers to that part of our will which is governed by our selfish, temperamental, and arbitrary desires. The moral life understood in these terms involves the structuring of our will to accord with the governing power of a transcendent good.

*Man torn
between
higher and
lower
inclinations.*

In his account of human nature, Kirk likewise conceived of man

Traditions help guide man's higher nature.

as a flawed creature. Man's character consists of mixed impulses. Kirk believed that original sin was a useful concept accounting for selfish and arbitrary behavior. "Men's appetites are voracious and sanguinary" and must be "restrained by this collective and immemorial wisdom we call prejudice, tradition, customary morality."¹⁰ The traditions of a civilization, then, play an indispensable role in developing and guiding man's higher nature. As Kirk wrote, the "moral precepts and the social conventions we obey represent the considered judgments and filtered experience of many generations of prudent and dutiful human beings—the most sagacious of our species."¹¹ They constitute the summing up of previous concrete efforts to achieve the common good and in turn inspire the imagination to further acts of morality.

Sound traditions serve as guides to the good life and aid us in checking or inhibiting our otherwise socially disruptive impulses or desires. By adopting the perspective "of the ages," we apprehend ethical truths that personal experience would never be capable of revealing. Kirk adopted as axiomatic Burke's often quoted aphorism that the "individual is foolish; but the species is wise." Traditional sources of moral wisdom can be ignored only at great peril. In their absence, we would be thrown upon our "meagre resources of private judgment, having run recklessly through the bank and capital that is the wisdom of our ancestors."¹² Private judgment alone can never replace the authority of moral judgments handed down by traditional culture. Throw away traditional ethical and practical ideas, the funded wisdom of humanity, and the individual will find his options and power of creativity not increased, but greatly narrowed. When we speak of traditions, "we mean prescriptive social habits, prejudices, customs and political usages which most people accept with little question, as an intellectual legacy from their ancestors." The bulk of people accept them as good because of their long standing. The fact that previous generations have preserved and transmitted these traditions to rising generations gives them a certain authority, a presumption in their

¹⁰ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, Ltd., 1978), 39.

¹¹ Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969), 209.

¹² Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 298.

favor.¹³ By bringing to bear on a particular situation the “wisdom of the ages,” which the individual has worked up into intuitive ethical wholes, he is able to check his immediate impulses, his expansive self, with reference to a steadily evolving view of the social good. While the good is eternal, it is not in the form of a singular precept or definition. It cannot be predefined since it is always emerging. Each new situation presents unique circumstances. The individual, hence, must be open to what the good may be in any particular situation.

Similarly, the ideal society is not predefined. Both Burke and Kirk regarded with horror all attempts to outline the perfect society into which all men could be fitted forever.¹⁴ Kirk emphatically stressed that

Ideal society not predefined.

there exists no single best form of government for the happiness of all mankind. The most suitable form of government necessarily depends upon the historic experience, the customs, the beliefs, the state of culture, the ancient laws, and the material circumstances of a people, and all these things vary from land to land and age to age. Monarchy may defend the highest possible degree of order, justice, and freedom for a people—as, despite shortcomings, the Abyssinian monarchy did in Ethiopia, until the Marxist revolution there. Aristocracy, under other circumstances, may be found most advantageous for the general welfare. The Swiss form of democracy may work very well in twentieth-century Switzerland; yet it does not follow that the Swiss pattern, imposed abruptly upon Brazil, say, would function at all.

Nor would the American pattern of politics, developed through an intricate process extending over several centuries, be readily transplanted to Uganda or Indonesia.¹⁵

The good society can never be deliberately designed, as the so-

¹³ Kirk, “What are American Traditions?” *The Georgia Review* 9 (Fall 1955), 284.

¹⁴ Leo Strauss, for his part, could find little merit in this view of prescriptive constitutions. Contrary to Kirk or Burke, Strauss conceived of the “best constitution” as “a contrivance of reason, i.e., of conscious activity or of planning on the part of an individual or of a few individuals.” Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 314. Strauss apparently had little faith in the value of historical or customary wisdom; for him the “good” is predefined and ahistorically universal. The principles of prudence and prescription found in Burke’s conservatism represented for Strauss a denial of reason and universal norms. See Strauss’s discussion of Burke’s view of the British constitution, 313-323. For a response to Strauss’s view see Joseph Baldacchino, “The Value-Centered Historicism of Edmund Burke,” *Modern Age* 27, no. 2 (Spring 1983).

¹⁵ Kirk, “Popular Government and Intemperate Minds,” *The World & I* III (November 1988): 596-97.

*Good society
a product of
accumulated
wisdom.*

cial engineers imagine. Rather, it is a product of organic growth and the accumulated wisdom of many generations as transmitted through their cultural achievements, mores, traditions, and institutions. Because the good cannot be predefined and codified for all time, schemes to freeze a society into a preconceived mold or to impose upon it a static concept of the good are doomed to failure.

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the new
continuously
shape each
other.*

Given that the possibilities of the good can never be exhausted, the task of knowing the good is never completed. Each successive generation in an ethically sound society applies the universal standards of the good to the concrete situations in which it finds itself. Some traditions are sloughed off in this process; others are retained unaltered, while the remainder may take on new meanings. Society is thus neither old nor young, but remains in a state of perpetual renewal. Traditions then, Kirk argued, also must obey the natural law of growth and decay. His critics err when they assume that his defense of traditional social and moral arrangements precludes the possibility of change. In a thriving society, he insisted, the old and the new continuously blend and shape each other. A society unable to make necessary changes will not long endure. "Traditions do take on new meanings with the growing experience of a people. And simply to appeal to the wisdom of the species, to tradition, will not of itself provide solutions of all problems," Kirk wrote. "The endeavor of the intelligent believer in tradition is so to blend ancient usage with necessary amendment that society never is wholly old and never wholly new."¹⁶ Therefore, in a healthy nation, "tradition must be balanced by some strong element of curiosity and individual dissent. Some people who today are conservatives because they protest against the tyranny of neoterism, in another age or nation would be radicals, because they could not endure the tyranny of tradition. It is a question of degree and balance."¹⁷ Kirk was not being ambivalent. The people who value a cultural tradition are often the same, Claes Ryn observes, as those "who stress the need for an imaginative and critical assessment of contemporary society." The principle of discrimination must be rooted in a judgment of whether a particular tradition enhances those things that are central and abiding in a culture. The task of each generation, Ryn contends, is to assess whether new beliefs and practices

¹⁶ Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 181.

¹⁷ Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives*, 305.

represent “a superior insight” or “a slackening of the will and the ability to live up to the high demands of true civilization.”¹⁸

The traditionalism of Kirk, furthermore, does not imply, as some of his critics allege, a nostalgic longing for a vanished past. He acknowledged that the past can neither be recovered nor relived. In a soundly traditional society, the collective wisdom of one’s ancestors comes to bear, as Babbitt said, as a living force on the present. A people with a strong disposition toward the good understand that sound traditions are indispensable to social and moral order. Given man’s dualistic nature, traditions play an invaluable and necessary civilizing role by helping to direct man’s will and imagination toward his enduring purpose. Only change occurring within the context of tradition qualifies as true reform. Mere social tinkering may unleash uncontrollable passions and energies previously restrained by long-established customs and habits. Without the experience of communal traditions, it would be impossible, Kirk maintained, for a people to live together without repressive controls on their will and appetite.

Despite the influence of Kirk’s historically minded conservatism on segments of the intellectual right, differences should be noted between his use of the historical past and the theorizing of other historically oriented scholars. Two such thinkers, Paul Gottfried and Ryn, are the subjects of a book by the Italian scholar Germana Paraboschi on the historicism of the American right.¹⁹ While both of these self-identified historicists can be seen as men of the Old Right in important respects and while they speak respectfully of Kirk, their historical thinking differs from his. Gottfried and Ryn have been marked, though in partly different ways, by the tradition of German idealism. Ryn has acknowledged his indebtedness to dialectical philosophy as modified and developed by the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). Ryn has frequently complained that the invocation of history on the postwar American

¹⁸ Ryn, *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community*, 2nd exp. ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 88-89.

¹⁹ Germana Paraboschi, *Leo Strauss e la destra americana* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1993). See Randall Auxier, “Straussianism Descendant? The Historicist Renewal,” *Humanitas* 9, no. 2 (1996): 64-72, for a review of Paraboschi’s book in which the author describes and classifies the various trends found in contemporary conservative thought. The essay is a particularly useful introduction to the historicist thinking of Gottfried and Ryn.

right lacks philosophical depth and stringency and rarely rises above hortatory rhetoric.²⁰ Gottfried, in his recent work, has come to equate historical consciousness with “contextualizing” political ideas. He presents history as a series of concrete situations in which values have become instantiated and raises critical objections to a conservatism based on “abstract universals.” Like Ryn, he dismisses the appeals to disembodied values in neoconservative and Straussian discourse.²¹ Although allied with Ryn and Gottfried, Kirk insisted on the non-German and non-idealist character of his own historical conservatism.

The Assault on the Politics of Tradition

Commenting in 1985 on the isolation of conservative scholars and writers among intellectuals, Thomas Fleming, editor of *Chronicles*, noted that Kirk “was well on his way, in the 1950s, to becoming one of America’s great literary celebrities.” Yet, today, it “would be unusual to find him mentioned in *The New Republic*, much less *The Nation*.”²² After the mass-circulation news magazines hailed Kirk as a promising young intellectual in the 1950s, they promptly forgot him. Kirk’s subsequent work received scant attention outside conservative circles. His articles did not appear in prominent journals. His books were not published by prestigious publishers or reviewed in prominent or mass-circulation publications. Several factors account for his declining visibility and prominence. He lived most of the time in a tiny rural Michigan village far from the centers of literary and political opinion and left only to

²⁰ See Claes G. Ryn, “How Conservatives Failed ‘The Culture,’” *Modern Age* 38, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 117-127.

²¹ See Gottfried, “Panajotis Kondylis and the Obsolescence of Conservatism,” *Modern Age* 39, no. 6 (Fall 1997), especially page 406, and his review of George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America in Right Now* (October-December 1997), 11.

²² Thomas Fleming, “Thunder on the Right,” *Chronicles of Culture* 9 (June 1985): 43. More recently, neoconservative author David Frum has expressed the same opinion in his warmly sympathetic, but not wholly uncritical, assessment of Kirk’s achievement. “Kirk’s voice echoed less powerfully in those later years than in the 1950s and 1960s,” he writes. Kirk “was a victim of his own success,” Frum continues; “with conservatives in a position to exercise national power after 1978,” he “declined to preoccupy himself with the details of public policy. . . .” Moreover, his fuddy-duddy personal demeanor “looked oddly out of place among the sleek Republicans of Reagan-era Washington.” Frum, *What’s Right: The New Conservative Majority and the Remaking of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 160-61.

“speechify” to college audiences or to travel abroad. But his reluctance to be part of the New York and Washington social circuits does not wholly explain why the intellectual establishment ignored him. Perhaps Gottfried placed his finger on a more compelling reason. “Despite the merits of their scholarship,” traditional conservatives such as Kirk “have little chance of sounding credible in a society that values progress and mobility above all else.”²³ Traditional conservatism has acquired an aroma of irrelevancy and quaintness, today even within the conservative ranks. “A distinctive feature of the contemporary American Right,” Thomas Fleming and Paul Gottfried noted in their study of the American conservative movement, “is its emphasis on progress: moving beyond the past toward a future of unlimited material opportunity and social improvement.” Among conservative political activists, the antimodernist influence of writers such as Kirk or the Southern Agrarians “at this time continues to be negligible.”²⁴

Kirk’s traditionalism has been specifically challenged by some members of the American intellectual right who have criticized the historical past that he invokes to vindicate his sociopolitical principles. Among these critics have been neoconservatives Irving Kristol, Michael Novak, Norman Podhoretz, and disciples of the late Leo Strauss. Together, they have helped reshape political conservatism in a way that largely ignores the past, except as something from which the present generation must free itself to become more prosperous and open. In an essay praising the teachings of liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the Catholic theologian Novak declared that neoconservatives “are forward-looking, not backward-looking. We contest with the Left the direction in which true social progress lies.”²⁵

During the 1980 election, the neoconservatives supported Presi-

²³ Paul Gottfried, *The Search for Historical Meaning: Hegel and the Postwar American Right* (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 125.

²⁴ Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming, vi and viii. See, for example, popular “conservative” books such as Newt Gingrich’s *To Renew America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995) and radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh’s two best sellers. Neither Gingrich nor Limbaugh has been influenced by the traditionalism of Kirk. The conservative agenda they propose has little to do with preserving the “wisdom of our ancestors” or traditional, rooted communities. Rather, they worship at the altar of technological progress, democracy, and the “opportunity society.”

²⁵ Novak, “Father of Conservatives,” *National Review* (May 11, 1992), 42.

dent Reagan and were rewarded with prominent positions in his administration. In the beginning, Kirk, like most of the Old Right, welcomed these new allies to their ranks. "Although I paid no very close attention to the emerging of these late recruits to the conservative movement," he recalled in a lecture delivered to the Heritage Foundation in 1988, "I did welcome their appearance, perceiving that not a few among them were people of talent and energy, active in serious journalism and in certain universities, and giving promise of the rise of conservative or quasi-conservative opinions among the Jewish intelligentsia of New York in particular."

But the neoconservatives soon disappointed him: "Perhaps, I expected too much of these Manhattan allies."²⁶ While praising some of their stands on domestic and foreign issues, Kirk was clearly uneasy with their propensity for social reconstruction, their passion for equality, and their presentism. On the fundamental issues of the state's function, the nature of man, and the moral foundations of a humane order, Kirk's principles are not those of most neoconservatives. To the neoconservatives, his traditionalism seemed irrelevant, quaint and out of the mainstream of American politics.

The neoconservatives frequently have been accused of being "children of the Enlightenment." Indeed, taken as a whole, their positions appear to owe more to the tradition of Descartes, Locke, Rousseau and the French *philosophes*, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and John Dewey, than to the views of Kirk's heroes—Burke, Adams, Calhoun, Disraeli, and Babbitt. Michael Novak, for all his opposition to the Catholic left, illustrates this difference. Once a self-proclaimed democratic socialist, he now extols democratic capitalism. The path that led him toward a repudiation of his youthful convictions Novak describes as a kind of spiritual conversion. "I discovered spiritual resources in democratic capitalism I had long repressed in myself," he writes.²⁷ Yet, this conversion amounts less to a repudiation of democratic socialism than to an effort to pour new wine into old bottles. His vision of a democratic

²⁶ Kirk, "The Neoconservatives: An Endangered Species," The Heritage Lectures No. 178 (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation), 2. This lecture was delivered at the Foundation on October 6, 1988. It is republished in Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1993), 172-90.

²⁷ Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1982), 26.

capitalist future bears a startling resemblance to many of the views of the revolutionary left.

Like Marx, Novak admires the enormous productive capability of capitalism. He believes that capitalism is necessary for democracy. Capitalism makes it possible for the first time in history to establish a society with abundant consumption for all. As articulated by Novak, capitalism is the engine of progress that moves the world toward an ultimate stage of history. "Democratic polities depend upon the reality of economic growth," he argues. Democracy and the market economy depend on each other for their existence. They spring "from identical historical impulses," by which Novak means the belief in limited government and individual freedom.²⁸ Like Marx, Novak welcomes capitalism's power to destroy traditional social institutions. "No traditional society, no socialist society—indeed, no society in history—has ever produced strict equality among individuals or classes," but a democratic-capitalist society will produce such sustained economic growth that scarcity will eventually disappear. Novak celebrates capitalism's ability to create abundance sufficient to enable all to share in the economy's bounty. "A democratic system depends for its legitimacy . . . not upon equal results but upon a sense of equal opportunity," he observes. "Such legitimacy flows from the belief of all individuals that they can better their condition. This belief can be realized only under conditions of economic growth."²⁹ Consequently, man's historical yearning for equality now can be fulfilled, or, at least, nearly so. History cannot instruct us in this process, since Novak, like Marx, believes that the society he envisions "in its complexity is unlike the historical societies which preceded it."³⁰

The dawning age of democratic capitalism means, for Novak, that we are now standing at the brink of the final working out of God's plan. Critics of democratic capitalism are not just blocking

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14. Elsewhere, he qualifies this argument. He admits that there is "no logical necessity" for democracy and capitalism to be joined. However, precapitalist and socialist societies tend to exercise both economic and political authoritarian powers. Novak, *Free Persons and the Common Good* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1989), 107. On another occasion, he writes that capitalism "is a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy." Novak, "Father of Conservatism," 40.

²⁹ Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

the path to material progress, but also hindering God's purpose. "It is the religious task of Jews and Christians to change the world as well as to purify their own souls," he contends, "to build up 'the Kingdom of God' in their own hearts and through the work of their hands."³¹ We have, therefore, a moral responsibility to get on the right side of history. Marx's disciples believed that they had discovered the "key to history" in the doctrine of dialectical materialism, by which history could be interpreted and the future predicted. Likewise, Novak imagines that he has discovered the laws of history that will carry us toward previously unimagined peace and plenty: "The world as Adam faced it after the Garden of Eden left mankind in misery and hungry for millennia. Now that the secrets of sustained material progress have been decoded, the responsibility for reducing misery and hunger is no longer God's but ours."³² Novak, a self-identified "Catholic Whig," appears to be suggesting that, contrary to Catholic teaching, the effects of original sin can be largely eradicated if the productive forces of the market can be unleashed. Implicitly, he denies a fixed human nature, suggesting that people can be substantially remade by economic progress.

*Ideology an
"inverted
religion."*

Kirk, for his part, denounced this project to erect an American ideology of democratic capitalism. He repeatedly charged that ideology in general constitutes an "anti-religion" or "inverted religion." For Novak, democratic capitalism is a kind of secular religion that promises to propel man beyond inherited sources of misery, e.g., poverty, inequality, conflict, and so forth. To Kirk, on the other hand, it constituted another misguided effort to eradicate, through governmental and economic reform, ills that arise from human nature. Moreover, Kirk held that democratic capitalism "is a contradiction in terms for capitalism is not democratic, nor should it be, nor can it be. The test of the market is not a matter of counting noses and soliciting votes" but the decisions of "shrewd entrepreneurs and managers. Nor is there any egalitarianism in the distribution of the rewards of a market economy."³³ Neither Kirk nor Novak, then, is an unqualified supporter of the free market though they admire different aspects of capitalism. Kirk valued most its tendency to limit the power of government and to create

³¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³² *Ibid.*, 28.

³³ Kirk, "The Neoconservatives," 6-7.

the wherewithal for independence and the higher life, while Novak celebrates its promise of equality, innovation and material improvement.

Other neoconservatives denounced the Old Rightists and traditionalists for professing antediluvian positions. For example, Richard John Neuhaus, editor-in-chief of *First Things*, writing in the then newly founded neoconservative journal, accused the traditionalist right of being “at war with modernity.” These “anti-democrats,” his harshly worded statement alleged, have brought “back into the conservative movement a list of uglies that had long been consigned to the fever swamps. This list includes nativism, racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, a penchant for authoritarian politics, and related diseases of the *ressentiment* that flourishes on the marginalia of American life.” While these discredited positions typified the thinking of conservatives (read the Old Right) thirty years ago, Neuhaus contended, conservatives have grown under neoconservative direction, embraced democratic pluralism, and cleansed themselves of these embarrassing reactionary views.³⁴

Neoconservatives, furthermore, openly dismiss the influence of the Old Right, which they view as marginal at best. In a 1986 article John B. Judis, Jr., senior editor of *The New Republic*, observed that the neoconservatives regard the traditionalists as “a dying breed who are without significant influence either within the academy or the government.” The intellectual tradition of which they are a part, neoconservative Norman Podhoretz claimed, “has pretty much lost its vitality.” Judis wrote that the then vice president of the Heritage Foundation, a Washington-based conservative think tank, Burton Yale Pines, “compares the traditionalists to the Old Bolsheviks who were passed by during the revolution.”³⁵

Though a consistently strong critic of the libertarians throughout his career, Kirk only aroused himself to respond to the neoconservatives in 1988, long after they had become a major and journalistically dominant force within the conservative movement. His prolonged silence on the neoconservative challenge was curious. Other than sharing the label “conservative,” he and they did not have much in common. Further, the neoconservatives constituted a

³⁴ Richard John Neuhaus, “Democratic Conservatism,” *First Things* I:1 (March 1990), 65-66.

³⁵ John B. Judis, “The Conservative Wars,” *The New Republic* (August 12 & 18, 1986), 18.

more formidable adversary than any he had faced within the conservative movement. Unlike the libertarians, they would redefine conservatism, and this reconstructed conservatism would leave no place for Kirk. They did not for the most part share Kirk's emphasis on literature and art—save as something of political import. Their primary interests were policy studies and social statistics, and their admiration for democratic capitalism can often be traced to a quasi-Marxist appreciation of its power for social and cultural reconstruction. Rooted communities, traditions, and prescriptive rights do not appeal to them because they are viewed as possible barriers to positions of power and preferment. In their new democratic order, they would become a new aristocracy—a managerial elite. In addition, as Gottfried maintains, they “proclaim the world-historical need to transform all societies into democracies patterned on the present American model: political and sexual equality, limited capitalism together with well-organized labor unions, and cultural modernization.” The past—i.e., prior to the New Deal, the civil rights revolution, and other democratizing events—represents for them mostly the “bad old days” from which the present generation must be liberated. Only an America “redeemed by Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin and other civil rights leaders” is “a fit model for universal imitation in the speeches of Neuhaus and the neoconservatives’ favorite politicians, William Bennett and Jack Kemp,” observes Gottfried.³⁶

Acknowledging these differences, Kirk complained:

I had expected the neoconservatives to address themselves to the great social difficulties of the U.S. today, especially to the swelling growth of a dismal urban proletariat, and the decay of the moral order. Instead, with some exceptions, their concern has been mainly with the gross national product and with “global wealth.” They offer few alternatives to the alleged benefits of the Welfare State, shrugging their shoulders, and the creed of most of them is no better than a latter-day Utilitarianism.

I had thought that the neoconservatives might become the champions of diversity in the world. Instead, they aspire to bring about a world of uniformity and dull standardization, Americanized, industrialized, democratized, logicalized, boring. They are cultural and economic imperialists, many of them.³⁷

“Cultural and economic imperialists.”

³⁶ Gottfried, “The War on the Right,” *Rothbard-Rockwell Report* 11:2 (February 1991), 13.

³⁷ Kirk, “The Neoconservatives,” 8-9.

Kirk was convinced, however, that neoconservatives would be only a temporary phenomenon. Although usually a perceptive observer of intellectual trends, in this instance his predictive powers failed him. Calling them an “endangered species,” he expected that “within a very few years we will hear no more” of them.³⁸ Subsequent events, though, would prove him wrong. Neoconservatives continue to exert considerable influence within the conservative movement due to what Gottfried calls their advantage of “money, journalistic clout, and administrative connections.”³⁹ They have “weakened and defunded whatever rightist challenge to the status quo had existed.” The Old Rightists consequently “run the risk of being swallowed up in the alliance that they initiated and sustained.”⁴⁰

Gottfried has also argued that the neoconservatives are one of the primary factors contributing to a “cultural narrowing” of conservatism. Indifferent to a historical understanding of society, they are concerned with immediate public policy issues, or they glorify “abstract individuals or abstract ideals.” As a consequence of their growing influence, historical conservatives such as Kirk have lost ground within the conservative movement. “The passing of the historicist tradition from the postwar conservative movement has left a theoretical void that may eventually embarrass American conservatives,” Gottfried cogently warned in 1986. “Having by now largely lost a shared vision of the past, conservatives may soon find themselves without any vision except that of dishistoricized persons who seek to enrich themselves and the gross national product through the tireless pursuit of self-interest.”⁴¹

A “cultural narrowing.”

Conclusion

Despite these bleak predictions, Kirk is assured a place of prominence in future intellectual histories as one of the foremost thinkers of the century who helped draw American conservatism away from utilitarian premises, toward which it frequently veers, and toward a philosophy rooted in ethics and culture. Unlike the neoconservatives and the members of the New Right who have become more and more preoccupied with public policy questions, Kirk recognized that the key to the recovery of moral order and

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁹ Fleming and Gottfried, 108.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴¹ Gottfried, *The Search for Historical Meaning*, 125.

civilized life lies in the discovery or rediscovery of those permanent norms which give meaning to and enrich the quality of life and community. The central principles and insights of his work have a lasting significance because they address the eternal dilemmas of the human condition. Consequently, his essays and books will continue to be studied long after the works of most of his critics have been relegated to commentaries on late twentieth-century cultural history. However, with regard to the practical implementation of his ideas in the immediate future, I see three major problems:

First, the conservatism of tradition has only a limited appeal in a society in which change and progress are almost universally celebrated as unquestioned goods. Life in a mobile, technological, media-dominated, urban society has accustomed people to equate change with improvement. The past is deemed to have little value since the circumstances in which we find ourselves appear to be always unprecedented. We feel consequently little gratitude or reverence for the achievements of previous generations. Moreover, Kirk's notorious aversion to modern technology won him few converts among Americans who have grown attached to their technological contraptions and will only relinquish them when a new and improved model appears. His critical, and often hostile, attitude toward even some of the most beneficial achievements of modernity raise troubling questions concerning whether Kirk can be always taken as seriously as a social critic and lends some credence to the accusation that he sometimes sought to escape from the uncertainties of the present into an idealized past. In one sense, traditionalists such as Kirk can be fairly accused of having failed to acquire a fully developed historical consciousness. Although he never doubted the wisdom of Edmund Burke's famous observation that change is the means of a society's conservation or of Babbitt's insight that each new generation must creatively adjust to new circumstances, Kirk often displayed in his thought an ahistorical attachment to the past. History became for him almost a sacred garden in which no room could be made for new categories of thought. His instinctive aversion to technological change, for example, led him habitually to deplore the spread in society of computers, automobiles and modern communications technologies rather than to consider ways in which these advances could be imaginatively incorporated into a living tradition.

Second, practical implementation of Kirk's kind of traditional-

ism will be difficult because conservatives professing Kirk's historical consciousness run the risk of being displaced or defined out of existence by the neoconservatives who have maintained their visibility and strength despite their lack of a significant popular following. As a consequence of their access to the establishment media and their control of influential Washington-based public policy institutions and of several major foundations, neoconservatives continue to play a dominant role in shaping popular attitudes and perceptions. Hence, it may be generations before conservatives of Kirk's persuasion can regain the ground they have lost. Moreover, Kirk's particular brand of traditionalism has been vigorously criticized by another faction on the intellectual right. Emerging out of the internecine conservative wars of the 1980s, the paleoconservatives represent a vigorous response to the neoconservatives. Although they share Kirk's distaste for neoconservative ideology and his hostility to the collectivist state, they sharply disagree with him on the value of clinging to traditions in the modern era. Gottfried, who originally coined the term "paleoconservative," notes that this group are "mostly Protestant, with a sprinkling of Central European Jews." Unlike traditionalist conservatives such as Kirk, they have been strongly influenced by "modernist disciplines," basing their arguments on the work of sociologists or political theorists from Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes to Antonio Gramsci and James Burnham. In their eyes the primary threats to individual liberty and civilization are the leveling and collectivist tendencies inherent in the "welfare-warfare" state. Because they perceive themselves to be a counterrevolutionary force against the modern "managerial state," they tend to be indifferent to Kirkean appeals to tradition.⁴² The managerial-therapeutic ideologies espoused by the political class, they claim, have distorted and vitiated the traditions that Kirk invoked. The arguments for conservation of these already weakened "traditions" presents no threat to state managers and their media celebrants. Samuel Francis, a leading paleoconservative, nationally syndicated columnist, and former advisor to Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, describes Kirk by implication as a "beautiful loser," a fine writer

⁴² For a fuller discussion of the paleoconservatives, see Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, Revised Edition (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 153-59.

whose work has had little impact on the course of events.⁴³ Prominent paleoconservative intellectuals, who belong to The John Randolph Club and write for *Chronicles* magazine and the *Telos* journal, repeatedly make this accusation.

Lastly, Kirk's work may be unappealing to today's conservatives because of their emphasis on the importance of practical political struggles and public policy issues. Conservatives are in danger of losing touch with their traditional intellectual and cultural roots. Because they have ignored the ideas of Kirk and other defenders of civilization, Bruce Frohnen, author of books on conservative political thought, asks pointedly whether the present generation of conservatives has "lost its mind."⁴⁴ Frohnen wonders if conservatives have lost the power to expound and defend through reasoned discourse a coherent and morally compelling worldview.

During the 1950s and 1960s when conscious conservatives were a tiny isolated minority, Kirk and other conservative thinkers made impressive conceptual contributions. By 1980, such matters were put on the back burner as conservative and neoconservative activists pursued personal power, prestige and advantage in Washington. Yet, an anti-traditionalist intelligentsia and government, it may be argued, continue to undermine America's traditional civilization and regime. The "Republican Revolution," which by now has run out of steam, shows little interest in the broad cultural renewal that was Kirk's main concern. If conservatism is to endure into the twenty-first century as more than a label, conservatives clearly must rethink what it is they are trying to conserve. They cannot forget, without losing their reason for being, that sound political reform depends upon a healthy cultural environment.

*Sound politics
requires a
healthy
cultural
environment.*

⁴³ See his *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

⁴⁴ Bruce Frohnen, "Has Conservatism Lost Its Mind?: The Half-Remembered Legacy of Russell Kirk," *Policy Review* 64 (Winter 1994), 62.