

## An Economist's Tribute to Russell Kirk

Russell Kirk loved to quote the one passage from Edmund Burke which has found its way into the economist's books of quotations: "The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophists, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever." Would Kirk have wished to be honored by an economist? This economist shares Kirk's predilection for the glory of Europe and the Gods of the Copybook Headings, and, leaving the sophist charge aside, I am definitely not a calculator.

Perhaps the best tribute I can pay is to describe the impact Russell Kirk had on my intellectual life. I was fortunate enough to be brought up in a Christian-libertarian home. The external indoctrination that my father imparted to us was mainly economic and free market rather than traditionalist conservatism. The latter was taken for granted in a decent Midwestern home at that time, and it was the former that needed explaining and justifying since economics was abstract and not simple. Every Sunday after church, we would go to the Hawthorne Room in Indianapolis for lunch. My father took the liberty of using the waiting time to read from the *Freeman* and *Human Events*, or even occasionally the poetry of E. Merrill Root.

I also had the good fortune that my father's law partner was Pierre Goodrich. Although I had little personal contact with

Pierre, he gave me upon graduation a copy of Mises' *Human Action* among other books.

Balanced against my libertarian influences was a first edition of Russell Kirk's *Conservative Mind* that my father had lying around the house. The appeal of Russell Kirk was different from the rigorous analysis of the Austrian school of economists. Here I was captivated not by rational systems, but by Kirk's imagination and beautiful prose style which showed that conservatives could have a heart and soul as well as a mind.

Keeping all these disparate intellectual influences in balance has been the story of my life, but as a general rule, economists and Russell Kirk usually observe a respectful distance. There are intelligible, if not good, reasons for this. Most modern economists are model builders and analyzers who pride themselves on parading professionally without their moral clothes on.

If economists—including here Mises and Hayek—like to parade without their moral clothes on, some are better looking than others. Kirk knew that Ludwig von Mises and F.A. Hayek were the Lady Godivas of the science. They did not suffer from the hubris of the technocrats and knew the

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limitations of human reason.

Both Mises and Hayek were in Kirk's *Conservative Mind*. But from the first to the seventh edition it is significant that the number of bibliographic entries to Mises dropped from three to one. Kirk knew well enough that when he dealt with a F.A. Hayek or a Ludwig von Mises, he should be respectful of their analytical powers. But he always kept his critical hat on. In both cases there was libertarian or individualist baggage which he could not accept.

Russell Kirk continued to play a role in my family beyond the reading of his books. The personal influence of Kirk was mediated in my family through the impact of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute and its then-Midwestern Director Don Lipsett. Then as well as now, ISI was adept at balancing the demands of the traditionalists and libertarian impulses that comprise the effective conservative movement. A tribute to Lipsett's skill is the fact that he could have a close personal relationship with both a Russell Kirk and a Milton Friedman.

At this time in the 1950s my father met Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver, and Henry Regnery. After my father died, I came across a couple of undated index cards which he used to introduce a talk by Russell Kirk at a conservative forum in Indianapolis. As my father worked into the introduction of Russell, he told a story of his attempt to verify the rumor that Archduke Otto Von Habsburg considered Russell Kirk the greatest living scholar in this country. He wrote a cable to our family friend, the Austrian polyglot (who frequently taught in America) Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. The cable read: "Otto von Habsburg has stated that Russell Kirk is the greatest living scholar in this country. Is this true?" The response came back, "The answer is 'NO.' You people have an adopted son from Austria who is in 1st place. Modesty prevents me from nam-

ing him. But my friend Russell Kirk is in 2nd place—this is good because he will try harder. Herr Erik."

The wholeness and completeness of real human beings living in a particular culture and at a particular time was Kirk's forte. He was fond of quoting Burke's "I must see the things; I must see the men." He did not worship at the shrine of the God of Abstraction. The naked public square would have been seen by him as the prelude to the austere public squares of the French Revolution with only the guillotine to adorn them.

G.K. Chesterton, one of Kirk's heroes, once said of Leonardo da Vinci, "Leonardo could take it to pieces but also put it back together again." The economists have the virtue of the analytic half of Leonardo but not the second synthetic half. Russell's strong suit was keeping it altogether.

The spirit of synthesis allowed him consistently to favor free markets, private property, competition, and at the same time to champion virtue. He did not absolutize the institutions of the marketplace or find them self-justifying. Some have found Kirk to be fuzzy and it is true that he did not aspire to a *more geometrico* style. But I never found Kirk inconsistent or logically contradictory. As they say in literary circles, he was nuanced and textured. It is probably more precise to say that his concerns were not economic postulates of self-interest or utility maximization which are favored by economists, but moral-laden goods such as character and public decency.

What might a conservative political economy look like which would incorporate these more expansive goods for human beings? One of the phrases from Burke that has stayed with me over my scholarly life is the "unbought grace of life." Kirk was always reminding economists that there were

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things in this world which could not be bought or sold. There were limits to the economic calculus or the triumph of the will. Markets are not the determinants of true value or the good, but only of things which are merchandisable.

Wilhelm Roepke was Kirk's favorite economist precisely because he did his economics within the full light of this limitation. In fact, Kirk was responsible for the title *Humane Economy* used for the translation of one of Roepke's more important books, the title of which if literally translated would have been *Beyond Supply and Demand*.

Roepke was the only economist of the twentieth century who was a Leonardo da Vinci in the Ches-tertonian sense. He could take the economy or society to pieces with rigorous analysis, but also put it back together again. He never lost the firm foothold in moral philosophy and common sense distinctions which Russell considered so important. Russell reviewed Roepke's work in a very provocative article comparing Roepke to Mises, Hayek, and W.A. Orton—"The New Humanism of Political Economy" in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (1953). Russell continued to refer to Roepke in later essays, publications, and speeches, including an address which he gave to the Heritage Foundation in 1989 (and which was published in his last book, *The Politics of Prudence*).

But Russell was not content to admire an occasional economist from afar. He went so far as to write an elementary economics textbook. Of all things—for Kirk to have written a really good economics textbook is most shocking to the economist! There are probably not more than one or two economists who have read Kirk's *Economics: Work and Prosperity*, which is one or two more than are alleged to have read Smith's *Wealth of Nations* from cover to cover. But it is a good first book in economics that even

professional economists can read to their advantage. Characteristically, Kirk reflects on the moral foundations of a market economy and capitalism. He explicitly deals with moral themes, which economics is only beginning to address—such as emulation versus envy, trust, and integrity. Reflecting the thinking of W. H. Mallock, he stresses the importance of intelligence, but not the desiccated formal rationality of well-ordered preference maps. In this single volume he introduces the student to an intelli-



*ISI Piety Hill Seminars have been central to what one British writer called "The Mecosta Mission."*

gent discussion of American economic history by using the Pilgrims at Plymouth, the story of the du Pont family, and the achievements of Henry Ford (whom he personally met and worked for at Dearborn, Michigan). At the same time the student gets a subtle introduction to Hesiod, Aesop, Midas, St. Paul, and the virtues of the Dutch.

Having provided a short sketch of the legacy of Russell Kirk for economists, the question arises, how do we extend it? From

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*The Conservative Mind* I developed a healthy respect for Edmund Burke, to whom political economists have never done justice. Personally, I hope to begin in the near future a careful study of Burke's political economy—only one way in which we extend Kirk's economic insights.

One of his few criticisms of Burke revolved around Burke's seeming approval of the enclosure movement. Exploration of property rights issues, among others, could nicely draw together Chesterton, Cobbett, Burke, and the Southern Agrarians. The key element in this strange melange of radicals, democrats, and natural aristocrats is respect for the common sense intelligence of men and women rooted in the soil and/or small businesses.

But whatever work scholars do intellectually, they must simultaneously adopt the organizational spirit of the Russell Kirk enterprise. Alternatives to the current academic behemoth must be created in small cells as the Kirks have done in Mecosta. He touched so many lives for good by the influence of his seminars and his in-residence research and literary fellows. But there

must be more cells and nodes of growth in these United States where the truth is pursued, preserved, and propagated. We have lost Russell's direct personal impact which was an enormous influence on young scholars, but we have not lost the authority of his



Russell and Annette Kirk (1991)

example.

He took arms against seas of troubles and never wavered in his fight against injustice and stupidity. He enlisted the energy of his wife, family, and countless friends to carry on the fight and carry on they will. It is our duty to keep the torch of Mecosta lit.

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