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Gerhart Niemeyer

Russell Kirk and Ideology

"Philosophy"—love of wisdom—is a word first used by Heraclitus. "Sophia" as listed in the dictionary means "perfect scientific knowledge, wisdom," but a "sophist" is "a quibbler, a cheat." And Plato made a sharp distinction between *sophistes*, *philosophos*, and the *sophos*, the *sophistes* being a person who, claiming that he possesses wisdom, takes money for teaching it. The *philosophos*, by contrast, knowing that he knows nothing, is one who all his life loves wisdom, seeking and striving for that which is truly possessed only by the gods. Aristotle, who was Plato's student for twenty years, distinguishes between a *philosophos* and a *philomythos*, while Plato already had set the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, off against the philodoxer, the lover of opinion. This shows how anxious the Greeks were to distinguish between the mind's trustworthy productions and its treacherous ones. It is too bad that our language has not adopted "philodoxer" together with its cousin, "philosopher."

But we are lucky to have the word "ideology," enabling us to make a similar, and most important, distinction. It seems that Napoleon came across Destutt the Tracy who believed he could create a science of ideas as such, to be called "ideology." Napoleon sarcastically rejected this plan as something unreal, bombastic, and dangerous, from which action "ideology" got a persisting negative meaning. Later on, Karl Marx devoted an entire book to what he

called "The German Ideology," intending to characterize German philosophy of his time as false thought concealing unworthy interests. When Communism, Fascism, and National Socialism appeared on the world scene, we were fortunate to have a word by which to distinguish philosophy from the idea system of political adventurers. Adventurers they were who assumed that, given total political power, they could change not only laws and institutions but, indeed, being itself, including the nature and destiny of man. Thus we learned to see the ideologies of our age not as something that one could take or leave, but as an abyss threatening mankind with total catastrophe. So much for the concept of "ideology" and its particular importance in our time.

Against this background, let us ask what, precisely, conservatives have against liberals. Liberal ideas may be said to have a characteristically benevolent character. Does benevolence deserve to be rejected? No, but sentimental benevolence does. Liberalism is essentially sentimental benevolence. Liberals are in love with their own feelings rather than the reality at which their benevolence is aiming. If conservatives find liberals repugnant for this reason it must be that they affirm life's reality rather than

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their own emotions. It follows that conservatism cannot be a doctrine, as liberalism and socialism are. So it is true what Irving Kristol, accusing forefinger raised, has said about conservatism: It had and has no ideology. And it is true what William Buckley remarked in *The Jeweler's Eye*, that conservatism cannot be defined because, in its essence, it is an attitude. One can only describe it empirically: "Look—this is a Conservative!"

Conservatives know each other by their intellectual openness toward reality: the immediate reality of social, economic, and political relations, and the divine reality beyond and above this world. Beyond this openness, conservatives cannot say much about themselves. They pretend no firm system of ideas about the means to deal with life's troubles. If they prefer the body of individual reactions to state programs, as a response to life's difficulties, they do so because individuals have concrete experiences of what troubles them, while the state as such has none. On the other hand, individuals, even associated in great numbers, are not as capable of conceiving and enabling programs to deal with such difficulties as the state. It follows that in our modern age there is no such thing as doctrines that are purely individualistic or purely collectivistic—the latter being quietly stealing away since 1988.

All the same, we have not done with ideologies. For ideologies have not merely saddled us with the total state, which would be bad enough: they have deprived us of adequate concepts of reality as such. First, they seduced us to imagine reality without God. Then, they induced us to imagine reality without man. If we, in the West, in the world's democracies, had sense enough to repudiate liberalism and socialism as political recipes, we still were not perceptive enough to note the conceptual shortcomings of our own philosophy. Maybe we had

not sufficient sense to perceive that we had a philosophy and that it was central to our political, cultural, social, economic existence.

At this point, we should remember the figure of Edmund Burke, who in the hour of profound crisis of Europe's political order reminded the Europeans outside of France that they shared, with France, in a common political philosophy, and that the total attack on that philosophy, in France, was their own disaster as well as that of the French. The historical hour demanded that people take a stand, not pretentiously but essentially, as human beings of the European variety. This "taking a stand" should be seen not as an invidious assertion, but rather as a public confession of reality higher than the political one, a reality once commonly embraced, now partially decollated, though not thereby invalidated. Edmund Burke was a unique figure: A writer, rather than a philosopher, a doer political rather than a thinker general, a universal reminder rather than a particular organizer. In his way, he was a reality as striking, as profound and important as the French Revolution. What is more, it was England that produced this unique response to the French Revolution: Burke had not his like in France itself. But Burke, this solitary writer, was the cause that prevented the rest of Europe from falling into the revolutionary pit. Let others speculate, if they wish, on "social causes" which supposedly bring about great transformations of things political without and against the wills of individual men. It is individual men who think, and Burke's power consisted in his ability to persuade individual minds.

This brings us to the point of this essay, which is the phenomenon of Russell Kirk, in twentieth-century America. Let us not forget, at the end of this century, that ours was the century of Communism, Fascism,

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National Socialism, of two world wars, of more than three major revolutions none of which could claim to represent the will of the people, of the Cold War and the division of the world in to two hostile camps. If it was the century of unprecedented national wealth in part of the world, and an ensuing optimistic climate of opinion, it was also the time of abysmal danger for all of human culture. The danger, as a whole, had a socialistic character, for even Hitler's Germany was "National—Socialist" by its own definition. Russell Kirk, it turns out, was the individual writer who had something to say specifically about this danger and how to meet it.

Like Burke, he would not claim to be a philosopher; he spoke of himself as a historian. The categorization is not a matter of great importance. What is important is the ground that Russell Kirk occupied, alone, effectively, with great tenacity. Whatever you may call it, it was a ground still free from the revolutionary forces of our time. It was the ground of common sense, of sobriety, of ultimate verity. It was the ground where prevailed love of being, love of country, love of God. It was the ground of historical continuity, of public loyalty, of personal integrity. It was the ground from which the sanity of our time could not be ousted. It was the ground on which conservative persons could put down roots, from which their minds drew nourishment.

Conservatism cannot be shrunk to the principle that everything in human life should be reduced to the economics of the market place, an idea which in its poverty is first cousin to Marx's historical materialism. Nor can we do better by linking conservatism to John Stuart Mill's individualistic society, which may be compared to an ocean of atomized islands having no communication with one another. Nor can we fall back on Locke's human rights, the condition on which each isolated person enters

human community by the gate of *quid pro quo*. These and other similar worldviews have nothing to say to the reality of living human beings with body and soul, mind and spirit. They have oozed from a consciousness deliberately separated from living reality, which has sweated abstract realities out of itself. This is the ideological mind



William F. Buckley, Jr. [right], with Dr. and Mrs. Kirk at Piety Hill (1977).

building thought systems around utopian fantasies with which to manipulate human beings into false hopes.

There is no way of debating, or negotiating, such aberrations out of distorted minds, which is why no conservative ideology can be dreamed into existence. The man who seeks knowledge in deference to the order of being, who acts in awareness of the mystery of life and the divine mystery beyond, whose memory of a lived past teaches him that men are not utterly malleable but carry within them the marks of centuries of his-

torical choices made or avoided—this man is in his own personality a center of order to which the quality of truth is not wholly inapplicable. He may have grown into this order without fully knowing how, but surely he maintains it by prayer, the discipline of virtue, piety toward the living that has been done before his time and tender concern for the living that will be done after he has gone. There is no conceptual formula that can contract the reality of this order into a discursive syllogism. Let us remember that Plato refused to define both wisdom and the good. But for eyes without ideological blinkers, a conservative is recognizable when we meet him. We intuitively prefer his company to that of liberals with their secular dogmatism. We enjoy the many facets of such a personality, the generosity of his soul, the gentility of his manners, and, seeking to look through all this to

the core of his secret, we faintly taste the peace of God.

The danger of Western civilization is still great. But we have the example of Russell Kirk, who for nearly half a century has warned us of the mental preparedness that our situation requires. His warnings are still needed, for the great danger that yesterday confronted us externally has now shifted to our internal facility for order. Yesterday, Germans, Italians, and Russians were both victims and perpetrators of ideological disorder. Today it is we, ourselves, who must be concerned about mental and spiritual corruptions that beget false hopes, fallacious thoughts, impermissible beliefs. Today, although no black shirts or brown shirts roam our streets, it is we who are the victims, and among whom live the perpetrators, of intellectual disorder. We have every reason to give thanks for Russell Kirk.

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