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Roger Scruton

Combating Multiculturalism

America's British Culture by Russell Kirk.
Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1993.

The word “culture” is used in many senses. Advocates of the multicultural curriculum cheerfully assume that they and their readers know exactly what is meant by such a thing, and that all would agree in recognizing the “monocultural” nature of our traditional education. A typical “multicultural” curriculum will concentrate on the lore, language, and literature of the modern proletariat; on the history and “struggles” of minorities; and on the lowest and most popular forms of music, art, and entertainment. This monotonous study of ephemera can be encountered everywhere in America, Canada, Britain, Australia, and Scandinavia. I would be tempted to describe it as “monocultural,” were I convinced that it is capable of imparting any culture at all. By contrast, our grandparents studied the languages, religions, and literature of ancient Palestine, Greece, and Rome; they were brought up on the fairy tales of Arabia, the folklore and music of Germany, the art and architecture of the Mediterranean, and the history of the world. If the word “multicultural” means anything, then it should certainly be applied to their curriculum. It is precisely this openness toward culture in all its forms that is the essence of European civilization.

Dr. Kirk makes some effective criticisms of the “multiculturalists,” whose program, as he rightly points out, derives less from the love of other cultures, than from the rejection of their own. But his principal purpose, in this wise and interesting book, is to show that, in any normal understanding of the word, America has a single culture, that this culture is British, and that the multifaceted and diverse character of American society is hardly conceivable without the virtues of the British culture that prevails in it.

Kirk identifies a culture in anthropological fashion, as a set of “folkways”—inherited forms, procedures, expectations, and customs, which together define a communal way of life. Four principal folkways define America’s British inheritance: the English language and its literature, the rule of law, representative government, and the moral habits and beliefs which Tocqueville identified as the *moeurs* of the American people. Kirk gives a characteristic account of each of these, and shows how, between them, they have formed modern America as a society that is tolerant, free, welcoming towards newcomers while also proud of its

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traditions, and conscious of its past.

Of course, there are comparable phenomena in other parts of the globe. Latin America has a common language, and (albeit short-lived) spells of lawful and representative government. The *mores* of the British are shared, in part, by the Norwegians and the Danes; while the rule of law is common to European countries outside the former Communist empire, and north of the line of corruption that extends from Lisbon to Athens, via Madrid and Rome. The interest of Dr. Kirk's analysis lies in two facts: first, the attempt to describe what is distinctive in our moral and political heritage; second, in the unshamed defense of these things as the foundation of America's freedom and stability.

As he rightly says, our rule of law is distinctive in deriving from common law rather than statute. The English law stands above and beyond all sovereigns, all parliaments, all usurpers and military powers. Its authority derives from custom and precedent, and, even the most well-established legal decision may have no stable principle in the form of a written statute, or precise legal rule. I would place much more emphasis on this point than does Dr. Kirk. For it shows the inherent *concretion* of the English law. A case can be accepted as rightly decided, even though nobody knows exactly why—even though nobody can agree on the abstract principle from which the decision flows. Since human beings are better at deciding individual disputes than formulating abstract principles of justice, this means that the objectivity and persuasiveness of the English law is superior to anything displayed in the civil (i.e., Roman-law) jurisdictions.

The basic law of England, and of any state that adopts the common law, is a matter of custom and precedent and not of written rules. Americans fondly imagine

that they have a written constitution from which all legitimate decisions derive—and Dr. Kirk flatters them in this illusion. In fact, the American Constitution is contained in some four hundred fat volumes of case law, the principles of which are as hard to state in abstract terms as the details are immediate and comprehensible. The written document is of no independent significance.

Dr. Kirk refers to America's British culture. But it is right to point out that the common law is *English* law—the Scots have a civil system, and it is because of English sovereignty that the other Celtic races came to adopt our law. Moreover our language is English, our literature English (even when written by an Irishman or a Scot), and our Parliament that of Westminster, seat of the English crown. Only in religion do we distinguish the nations—admitting a Church of Ireland and a Church of Scotland besides the Churches of England and Wales. Even so, there is no British church, and no Englishmen ever feels comfortable with the suggestion that his culture is British. This, I believe, is what underlies Dr. Kirk's perceptive analysis of the American settlement—that it sprang from a law and a language which had already freed themselves from national boundaries, and become open to the larger world.

There is so much pertinent history and so much wisdom in Dr. Kirk's 115 pages that his book would serve as a useful summary of America and its culture for the busy student—even for one who is hard pressed by the demands of a multicultural curriculum. I doubt that it would appear on such a curriculum, however, since any student who read it would be so immediately aware of the superiority of his inheritance, that the rival "cultures" in which his teachers seek to interest him would appear quite barbaric. Indeed, that is probably what they are.