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W. Bradford Wilcox

Faith in Ruins

The Politics of Prudence by Russell Kirk.
Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Bryn Mawr, PA, 1993.

Everywhere, faith is in ruins. We are left only with monuments—the bullet-scarred towers of Cabrini Green, the irradiated grounds of Three Mile Island, and the profane halls of Harvard—to memorialize the destructive pieties of government, technology, and rationalism of the modern era. “The exhaustion of Modernism, the aridity of Communist life, the tedium of the unrestrained self, and the meaninglessness of the monolithic political chants,” wrote sociologist Daniel Bell in 1978, “all indicate that a long era is coming to a slow close.”

The collapse of the modern project, and its anthropocentric faith in progress, autonomous rationality, and politics, has left many moderns adrift. Some have turned inwards, adopting an ironic self-consciousness or losing themselves in *fin-de-siècle* indulgences: witness the rise of ironists like talk show host David Letterman and Dionysians like shock jock Howard Stern. At an intellectual and public level, this interior turn has been accompanied by a return to pragmatism. Richard Rorty, one of the most prominent post-moderns, has suggested that the evacuation of meaning from the world—not to mention the deeply plu-

ralistic character of beliefs for those still operating under religious or modernist delusions—paves the way for a practical politics, turning on questions of money and power (what else?). Devoid of the century's ideological fervor, pragmatism is supposed to provide men and women with the means to pursue their private pursuits while avoiding the only *summum malum* post-moderns can agree upon: suffering.

As paradoxical as it may seem, the project of Russell Kirk—the elder statesman of conservatism (particularly its traditionalist wing)—is not as distant from the post-modern one as might first be supposed. There is a mutual recognition of the limits of the Enlightenment and its progeny: rationalism, scientism, and even the liberal faith in mankind. Both suggest that the modern mask of ethical neutrality has worn thin. One might even surmise that Rorty's call for pragmatism fits well with the defense of prudence offered in Kirk's latest book, *The Politics of Prudence*.

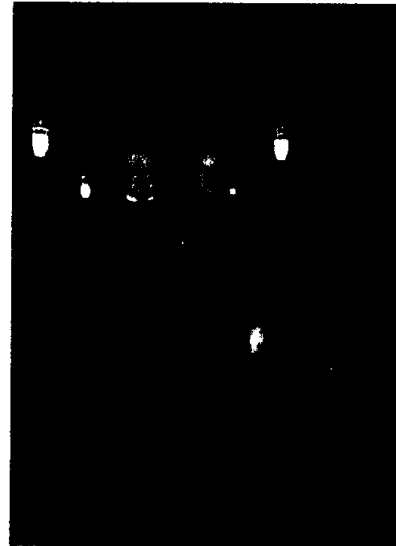
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But the vision Kirk offers in *The Politics of Prudence* differs markedly from the post-modern spirit in three ways. First, the death of modernism, in his view, leads not inwards, but upwards, towards the sacred. Likewise, the reason that politics is concerned with the “art of the possible” is not because hope has been eclipsed and all that is left is *manna* but because the restoration of a sacred horizon places politics in its proper context, as the imperfect enterprise of a fallen race. In Kirk’s formulation, the divide plays out like this: “On one side of that line are all those men and women who fancy that the temporal order is the only order, and that material needs are their only needs, and that they may do as they like with the human patrimony. On the other side of that line are all those people who recognize an enduring moral order in the universe, a constant human nature, and high duties toward the order spiritual and the order temporal.”

Ideology, therefore, is not unhelpful because it prevents man from facing his ironic fate, trapped at the end of history. Rather, ideology is pernicious because it represents an effort to “immanentize the symbols of transcendence” by ascribing political, economic, or social concerns with ultimate meaning. As philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz has written, “This generation has been witness, as none other before it, to the evil which may be perpetrated in the name of fatherland, nation, honor, liberty, equality, and any other human value to which holiness is attributed when men lose sight of the great truth that holiness is resident in a realm which transcends human values.”

Although this is a more modest book (compiled as it is from a series of lectures given primarily at The Heritage Foundation) than some of his earlier works, *The Politics of Prudence* is characteristically lucid and penetrating, devoid of the theoretical effluvium that fills many contemporary

tomies on politics and society. More than anything else, the book seems aimed at preserving Kirk’s patrimony by emphasizing certain key themes in conservative thought such as prudence, simplicity, het-



Russell and Annette Kirk in the chapel of Falkland Palace, in Fife, Scotland, not far from St. Andrew's (1992).

erogeneity, and the spiritual dimension. What makes his approach particularly interesting is that he unmasks distinctly unconservative tendencies among pretenders to the throne.

Prudence, it would be safe to conclude from this work, is the cardinal virtue of conservatism—especially conservatism in politics. For prudence gives God his due, recognizing that “[true] religion is a discipline for the soul, not the state.” Accordingly, the prudential politician—recognizing that his primary duty lies in preserving the peace and the customs of the temporal order—knows that compromise and civility

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are virtues that must guide those who seek to lead the City of Man. A politics of prudence, then, must eschew the tactics of those who think they have found the one best system and are willing to impose it at any cost upon others. This is why, I might add, practitioners of the school of scorched earth politics, such as Rep. Newt Gingrich, need not consider themselves "conservative."

A truly prudential politics also recognizes the totalizing effects of the state and market and thereby aims to preserve and even open up space for a heterogeneous civic sphere. "It seeks cultural diversity, not uniformity," in the words of Robert Nisbet, recognizing that "the claims of freedom and cultural autonomy will never have recognition until the great majority of individuals in society have a sense of cultural membership in the significant and meaningful relationships of kinship, religion, occupation, profession, and locality." Conservatism, according to Kirk, is thus concerned with protecting social distinctions, customs, and voluntary communities from political interference. Organic practices and associations respond better to the material, social, and spiritual needs of men and women than do the utopian homogenizing projects of administrative elites in Washington.

If one is looking for any evidence that Kirk is on target, one need not look further than the current administration. Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders thinks that the problem of teenage sexuality requires earlier and more extensive sex education (in a recent speech she even joked that such education should commence after birth). But Kirk knows better. A citation in his book from Malcolm Muggeridge makes the point: "To the liberal mind, education provides the universal panacea...venereal disease spread-

ing, to the point that girls of ten are found to be infected?—then, for heaven's sake, more sex education, with tiny tots lisp- ing out what happens to mummy's vagina when daddy erects, as once they did the Cate-



The Kirks with Michigan Governor John Engler [left] at a tribute conference celebrating the 40th anniversary of The Conservative Mind.

chism." Here, as elsewhere, government efforts tend to turn, unintentionally or not, traditional practices and pieties on their heads.

It is for this reason that Kirk is happy to recognize the contributions to the conservative cause that libertarians have made. They have been ever attuned to the dangers of collectivism, an overweening foreign policy and egalitarianism. Nevertheless, libertarians must be numbered among the pretenders; they are not truly conservative. They make a fetish of individual liberty, deprived of her roots in an order secured by churches, families, and (prudential) government. In so doing, they fail to see the disintegrative power of their ideological project, a project that would raze the foundations of American order. Kirk notes, for example, that the Constitution was fashioned to overcome the failure of libertarianism as represented by Shays Rebellion in Massachusetts. And he is right to add, "We flawed human creatures are sufficiently self-

ish already, without being exhorted to pursue selfishness on principle.”

Neoconservatives—or at least those who adhere to a vigorous faith in the American way of “democratic capitalism”—also number among those who cannot claim the conservative patrimony, according to Kirk. In heralding the glories of capitalism, they fail to give adequate weight to the corrosive possibilities of the market. As he argues elsewhere in the book, “the nexus of cash payment” and the “cult of efficiency” often exhibit little patience for a settled and human scale of life. Similarly, while democracy may be valid in the American political context, it should not be an over-riding *leitmotif* of domestic or international affairs. As T. S. Eliot counseled, “The term ‘democracy’ does not contain enough positive content to stand alone against the forces that you dislike.” Hence, American efforts to spread democracy around the world are often unjust because they fail to acknowledge that different cultures may have necessarily distinct ways of ordering their own communities.

The larger point that Kirk is making here is that neoconservatives have turned Americanism into an ideology. The problem, as with any effort to ascribe earthly systems with ultimate meaning, is that they end up supporting affronts to the human spirit. In Kirk’s formulation, “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.”

This book has a few minor flaws (it is occasionally repetitive and ungracious towards Kirk’s opponents), but I came away with only one, albeit profound, disagreement. Kirk believes that the “large majority of Americans—nay, a vast majority—are basically conservative in that they do not dream of undoing America’s social order.” The nation’s contemporary perplexities, in his view, are primarily the result of new class manipulations. Ironically, Kirk’s argument here parallels the neoconservative theory of decline. Regardless, both seem wrong. While conservatives did well politically in the 1980s, the cultural practices of Americans (in every class) were decidedly unconservative. For example, premarital sexual activity and violence reached new highs in the 1980s.

Perhaps the reason Kirk joins the neoconservatives in blaming the elites is because any other answer would undercut the faith they share in the American experiment in ordered liberty. But one wonders if such a faith is warranted. Might there now be an elective affinity between the individualistic ethos of America and the expressivist turn of the late twentieth century? I would suggest that the answer is yes, and that our only hope in these dark ages is a holy one—even as the national one fades. For that reason, I finished *The Politics of Prudence* wishing that Kirk had acknowledged the depth of our discontents and focused more on the antidote: repentance and regeneration. I suspect that politics and possibly even prudence would have little to do with such a sacred turn.

