

Reflective Conservatism

R O N A L D L O R A

The Portable Conservative Reader, edited by Russell Kirk, *New York: Viking Press, 1982. xl + 723 pp. \$17.95.*

RUSSELL KIRK, distinguished political and social philosopher, author of twenty-two books, and one of the prime movers in the renaissance of conservatism after World War II, has collected in one volume many of the sources that inspire contemporary conservatives. And a splendid and judicious collection it is. The editor includes, in approximately 750 pages, nearly five-dozen selections from forty-four authors. Some are obvious choices, long famous, while others are less familiar; yet each reveals a significant phase of the conservative imagination.

The Portable Conservative Reader is an ideal adjunct to Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953), for nearly all of its selections served as original sources for Kirk's path-breaking study. One incidental effect is to magnify Kirk's stunning achievement of three decades past. Not the least among the virtues of the present volume is that, in addition to depth of thought, the editor has employed as a criterion of selection the power of style: the incisive and thought-provoking passages are a pleasure to read for their literary qualities, for their tone and texture, irrespective of the particular quality of conservatism each is meant to represent. Readers will enjoy the roll of conservative principle across the pages.

The volume begins with Edmund Burke, who is given nine selections (most of these from the *Reflections*) to discuss the fundamental principles of conservatism and to express its moral imagination; it ends with Kirk's biting, Cassandra-like "Cultural Debris: A Mordant Last Word." Between Alpha and Omega appear selections from *belles-lettres*: Coleridge, Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Robert Louis Stevenson, Kipling, and others. John Adams celebrates the political institutions of the new republic, expresses his contempt for ideology ("that obscure metaphysics"), and in a letter to John Taylor of Caroline explains his belief in the natural inequality of men.

Orestes Brownson, always the trenchant analyst, identifies the perversions of the gospel of political and material success, and in so doing, champions a perennial theme in the literature of conservatism, the minimization of desires. "If you would make a man happy," he advises, "study not to augment his goods; but to diminish his wants." The two most conspicuous exemplars of New Humanist cultural and spiritual values, Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, describe the relationship of property to civilized society, oppose the equalitarianism of the "Second Discourse" and the "general will" of Rousseau's romantic imagination, and counter with a defense of authority and standards rooted in classicism and tradition. C. S. Lewis aims his darts and arrows at the "false

philosophy" of subjectivism: "This whole attempt to jettison traditional values as something subjective and to substitute a new scheme of values for them is wrong." Three women of conservative temperament comprise Part Fifteen: Freya Stark, Phyllis McGinley, and Jacquetta Hawkes, the latter represented with her urbane, telling parable on the unchecked democracy of numbers, "The Woodpeckers and the Starlings." Malcolm Muggeridge, sickened early on by the horrors perpetrated by the Soviet heirs of Marx, and more recently converted to Christianity, describes in "The Great Liberal Death Wish" the descent of relativistic and spiritually impoverished liberalism into a decadent materialism.

These are not the conservatives of self-interest, or of enjoyment, or of fear, but, following Walter Bagehot, the conservatives of reflection. All reject a mechanistic view of man. In life as in letters they oppose the utilitarian, the instrumental, the strictly vocational. None believes that salvation is achievable through science, economics, or politics, nor that a Rousseauist reformation of man awaits the residual legates of the Enlightenment, let alone the rest of humanity.

Kirk has long insisted, to a skeptical audience, that conservatism is not an ideology. However, he does summarize six themes that emerge from the sources. Resembling those emphasized in *The Conservative Mind*, the prudential ethic and the principle of human imperfectibility now assume somewhat greater importance. What we earlier described as the "canons" of the conservative "system of ideas" are now offered as "major premises." There is a small but perceptible shift from definition to description. Phraseology may account for this, or it may spring from the decades of disagreement over the meaning of conservatism and the chronic inability of fusionists to effect a unity of traditionalists and libertarians. Whatever the reason, and whatever the exact list of major premises, Kirk argues that conservatism is at root "a way

of looking at the human condition" propelled by a yearning to preserve order and social harmony.

It is helpful in this connection that Michael Oakeshott's perceptive essay, "On Being Conservative," is among the selections. The English political theorist singles out the conserving disposition as the hallmark of conservatism. Conservatives choose to use and enjoy what is available instead of engaging in futile searches for utopian solutions or in lesser, self-indulgent crusades to eliminate some "pet indignation." "To be conservative . . . is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss."

Seldom is the conservative an ardent innovator. Change is not reform; the smaller good is preferable to the possible greater future good. To respect custom, to protect individual rights, and, more subtly, to nourish the civil bonds of sympathy, change must resemble growth instead of construction. More often than not, insists the conservative, the merely potential gains are too high a price to pay for the certain losses that accompany innovative change. Barrington Moore's troubling question will not disappear: "How much suffering do revolutionaries have a right to impose upon the present generation for the sake of the happiness of future generations?" Knowing that the avoidance of decisions may also cause pain and cruelty, many conservatives have answered "very little" or "none at all." Lord Falkland exaggerated in asserting that "when it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change." Albert Jay Nock was closer to the conservative truth, at least for Burkeans, in believing that "inaction is better than wrong action or premature right action."

Given this assumption, it is not surprising that in conservative justifications of reform one seldom senses the conviction that the future order will be much better than the past. Conservatives distrust

revolutionaries, particularly those determined wielders of justice of whom Burke said, "By hating vices too much, they come to love men too little." Preaching the brotherhood of man, they can as easily produce tyranny instead. It is surely arguable, on the basis of historical evidence, that the price paid by the revolutionaries—and, alas, by tens of millions of others—in the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions was far higher than any ethically stern philosophy could possibly justify. On the other hand, in a revolution undertaken to reclaim lost liberties, conservatives may respond differently, as Burke did. As cases in point, he found justifiable the English Revolution of 1688-1689 and that of the Americans in 1776.

The conviction that reform must go slowly is the pedestal on which rests the ethic of prudence. "Politics is the art of the possible, not the art of the ideal," writes Kirk, a rational formulation echoed in the selections from Burke, Fisher Ames, John Randolph, Fenimore Cooper, Disraeli, Michael Oakeshott, and Irving Kristol. Discretion and provident care of time-honored codes and institutions are more important to the maintenance of an orderly society than are the contrivances of abstract reason. For example, the emergence over centuries of national characteristics makes it unlikely that viable constitutions and governments for the peoples of Vietnam and El Salvador will emerge from the drawing rooms of Western intellectuals. The construction of commonwealths is "not to be taught *a priori*," Burke advised, but is an experimental science based on the culture of a whole people. As John Randolph long ago insisted, changes "do not always operate as the drawer of the bill, or the Legislative leader, may have anticipated: . . . Government . . . is the very last that operates as its framers intended." Such arguments as these have found a respectful audience in the United States, which in recent years has lost a costly war, lost control of its economy, and whose people yearly lose faith in the future as they witness the

destruction of their natural resources and the disintegration of valued institutions. This closing in of the future has sped the emergence of neoconservatism, born of chastened intellectuals who once aligned themselves with the Party of Hope.

Randolph's argument was with King Numbers, the belief that 51-percent majorities are justified in warring on property and other venerable institutions. Calhoun extended Randolph's analysis to the constitution of the federal union. A century later, Jacquetta Hawkes in "The Woodpeckers and the Starlings" extended it to all social relationships. The woodpeckers, having acquired the requisite skills, had become the skilled carpenters of the bird world, but were forced to give way to the starlings, who, lacking decorum and a sense of tradition, were able to defeat their superiors by force of numbers. The issue for conservatives, however, is not merely numbers. The prudential mind is skeptical of activist intellectuals (Burke's sophisters and calculators) who presume, on the basis of abstract theory, to reshape mankind's social intercourse and political activity. More recently, an ambitious "new class" of advanced technical experts in universities, government, and publishing has emerged which neoconservatives fear poses dangers to America's social and economic institutions.

Permeating all their maxims is the one great thing which conservatives believe they know, and which acts to defeat all utopian plans, namely, the corruptibility of the human heart. Alluded to throughout this volume, it is most directly addressed in Nathaniel Hawthorne's disquieting fantasy, "Earth's Holocaust." Anxious to rid society of its trumpery, a band of innovators cast into a bonfire all the badges of nobility, diplomas, bonds, bonnets, spirituous liquors, tea, and coffee. Those newly engulfed in the mad ferment replenish the fire with marriage certificates and paper money; others contribute philosophical theories and priestly garments. In a final paroxysm of rage and frenzy, into the burning heap goes a copy of the Holy Scriptures, obliterated to liberate the pre-

sent from dead men's thought. Everything is sacrificed to the fire but the human heart, which, with all its potential for good, carries a residue of evil that is ultimately unable to resist the blandishments of those who extol the virtues of the imperial self and who in pride and arrogance presume that man can live without God. At a level deeper than intellect exists an insurmountable barrier forever separating ultimate hopes from the transient structures of progress. It is this that settles upon man his tragic destiny. However unacceptable many intellectuals today find the doctrine of human frailty, driven all the way to sin, conservatives through the centuries have enjoyed an advantage in explaining the enormities of human misbehavior.

This knowledge of the heart, together with the realization that we cannot have everything we may want to have, leads the conservative to approve, even applaud, some minimization of desires. Social harmony is the objective toward which all conservative principles tend. The organic society of slow, continuous growth and accepted status and duties, the revolt against rugged individualism, the distrust of the critical faculty of reason, and the defense of an aristocracy of wisdom and leadership are all meant to promote harmony among classes and interests. Conservatives would like nothing better than to remain at rest as automatic governors regulate the tempo and the institutions of civilized society. These governors have of old been loyalty to institutions, reverence for tradition, and a powerful church and state. Virtually all conservatives defend property rights, but not all are convinced—not Coleridge, not Irving Babbitt, and not Irving Kristol—that the free market can adequately regulate society or nourish its cultural accouterments. Appreciative as Kristol is of the creative possibilities of the market for allocating resources, he knows that the imperial self created under conditions of liberal capitalism may come to despise the very conditions that nurtured it, and that, in any case, “if you believe that man's spiritual life is infinitely more important

than his trivial and transient adventures in the marketplace . . . you certainly will have no compunctions about overriding it if you think the free market is interfering with more important things.”

This conservative misgiving that bourgeois-liberal society contains inherent flaws, necessitating an ample measure of state action, makes it difficult for conservatives to break bread with libertarians. Kristol argues that liberal society is a secular society in which the disestablishment of religion eventually led to a decline in religious faith, “especially the consolations offered by a life after death,” one consequence of which is that “the demands placed upon liberal society in the name of temporal ‘happiness’ ” have overburdened the capacity of governments. Internal constraints vanish: “The enemy of liberal capitalism today is not so much socialism as nihilism.” Seeking whatever they can get, people who have abandoned the ethic of self-restraint come to rely on that of the lawsuit. It is not a situation in which the devoted citizenry can take comfort.

The publishers are to be commended for choosing an editor who is so intimate with the sources. One may cavil with this rich collection, however, in that the individualistic strand of conservatism, so significant in American history, is insufficiently represented. The editor readily acknowledges that space was not available for every author who ought to be included in this anthology. Understandably, the Social Darwinist and confirmed rationalist William Graham Sumner does not appear, nor does Herbert Hoover, who was more the professional engineer than a conservative thinker. But surely a niche could have been found for William F. Buckley, whose leadership in the recrudescence of postwar conservatism can scarcely be questioned; and perhaps, too, a spot for the anti-statist and cultivated man of letters, Albert Jay Nock. Friedrich A. Hayek, who so fortified the American Right with his book *The Road to Serfdom*, and who preferred to be known as an “unrepentant Old Whig,” is omitted by virtue of his objection to being labelled a “conservative”—an argument

that, if persuasive, would permit the historian of Anglo-American intellectuals to omit consideration of Russell Kirk and Bertrand Russell, both of whom loathed the term. They nevertheless continued to function effectively as critically thinking personalities, as humanist critics of modern society and culture. There is also the more difficult consideration that Hayek differed with traditionalists on epistemological grounds and, from his European perspective, viewed conservatism as deficient in guiding principles—not a cogent point in light of the evidence presented in this anthology, especially

from Burke, Adams, Calhoun, Tocqueville, Babbitt, and Robert Nisbet.

In part these omissions are ones not only of space but of taste, about which there should be no dispute. Kirk has produced an exciting book that transcends ephemeral concerns and the flux of life to deal with the value of institutions and standards, with quality, measure, and principle. Affirming the traditions of work, discipline, duty, and honor, this book holds fast to the needs and the realities of human history, as against the strands of ideology, whether political or economic.

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