



THE CONSERVATIVE ROUT AND THE DEATH OF LIBERALISM

It is widely known in conservative circles that the manuscript Russell Kirk sent to Henry Regnery, eventually published in 1953 as *The Conservative Mind*, had originally been entitled “The Conservative Rout.” The title may be more appropriate for a book to be published in 2016. Conservatism seems truly to have been routed from the worlds of academe, the arts, the media, and—above all—electoral politics. There is little today that Kirk would recognize as conservative holding much sway in any of these realms. Although in the 1950s, thinkers such as Lionel Trilling and Louis Hartz could dismiss conservatism as an outlook without serious intellectual standing, Kirk might find things worse today, when the term *conservatism* has been so widely misappropriated. To adduce a telling example: Kirk’s name does not even appear in the index to the nearly five hundred pages of Irving Kristol’s *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (1995). Something is surely amiss when the doyen of the movement that seems to have wrested the concept of conservatism to its own purposes has so little interest in the man who remains conservatism’s most prominent exponent.

Nevertheless, conservatism is still living.

Gleeful proclamations of its death emanating from the left would better be applied to liberalism. Kristol does mention Trilling (and also Hartz) respectfully in *Neoconservatism*, but, as he points out, “Trilling remained a skeptical, out-of-step liberal, whom his students in later years would simply describe as ‘conservative.’” Trilling certainly was not a conservative, but he has, so far as I can tell, no following among the current crop of progressives who have assumed the mantle of liberalism. While Kirk may not arouse the interest of Irving Kristol, many current conservatives cite his work with respect, even reverence. Trilling, emblematic of the liberalism of a few decades ago, is either ignored or despised by those who call themselves “liberal” today.

In the twentieth century, liberalism evolved into a form of intellectual suicide. So long as the Soviet Union existed and China maintained a rigorously orthodox Marxism, it was possible for American liberals to avoid the trap of “no enemies on the left”; but since the collapse of the former and the latter’s metamorphosis into something more resembling a fascist corporate state than anything Marx would have recognized, liberals have had no boundaries or limits to their left—no

guardrails or handholds to prevent them from sliding inexorably over the cliff into the abyss of total moral and cultural dissolution. They have either turned into or been displaced by radical secular progressives, who, although occasionally using the word *liberalism*, really have no use for it now that its task of undermining the barriers to total egalitarian liberation is virtually complete.

The results can be succinctly illustrated by a consideration of what happened with the “sexual revolution.” Liberals acquiesced, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, in the 1960s because “sex is good,” even “beautiful,” and all that stood in the way of erotic harmony and bliss was the repression foisted on society by the inhibitions of stodgy conservatives. Nowadays the progressive heirs of liberalism hardly mention *sex* or *sexual* except in the context of harassment, assault, or orientation. They are fonder of the even vaguer term *gender*, which they expropriated from grammarians. Having reduced the traditional structure of sexual custom and morality to a heap of rubble, they are now busily erecting a literally preposterous jape of morality—more stringent, more detailed, and more fiercely policed than anything imagined by the most severe elder of Massachusetts Bay Colony.

There is no cause here to expatiate on the irony of the intolerance of preachers of tolerance, the hatred of fulminators against hate, the smug exclusiveness of the champions of inclusion, or the ideological conformity of the proponents of diversity. Their ascendancy, however, does mark the death of liberalism, which cannot exist among men and women eagerly bent upon dismantling the Bill of Rights. Liberalism’s *raison d’être* has been to *liberate*—to expand the range of human freedom. Its actual content, insofar as it has had any, has diminished rapidly in the course of the twentieth century as more and more of the traditional mores and

restraints conservatism has cherished have crumbled under the blows of liberal skepticism and disdain.

But liberalism has not succeeded in killing conservatism; it has, rather, drained it to the point that liberalism can no longer feed off it. Conservatism has not died and will not die, because, like liberalism, progressivism cannot do without it. As liberalism requires a tradition of norms and prudent restrictions to undermine and chip away at, so progressivism requires an incarnation of evil oppression to demonize. As Eric Voegelin perceived, the progressive mind is essentially gnostic: it can only envisage the world in terms of absolute good and evil. Indeed, its ideal of earthly perfection demands that the devilish maker of the world we know—the world of sin, suffering, and death—be a figure of only irredeemable wickedness.

Conservatism will not merely survive, however, because progressivism must keep reinventing a victim for its venom in the spirit of Voltaire’s *écrasez l’infâme*. The conservative is not, contrary to what current journalism suggests, the last man holding the position that good progressives have all abandoned. Conservatism will survive because it possesses an intellectual resilience that Trilling, Hartz, and many more recent liberals have failed to perceive. It is hardly simplistic—“irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas,” in Trilling’s acidulous formulation.

Conservative thought refines, enhances, corrects, and even transfigures the common awareness and wisdom of mankind, it does not despise it or discard it. Conservatism stands in opposition to the notion, propounded by an increasingly belligerent clique since the seventeenth century, that all thought must utilize the method of the sciences. It is for this reason that conservatism offers no monolithic plan for constructing the perfect society but rather builds upon

the wisdom of tradition and, yes, common sense.

When our current outbreak of progressive cultural brigandage has eventually run its course, as it must, conservatism will once again emerge from the rubble and offer modest reflections on the best way to pick up the pieces with the aim of restoring some semblance of cultural and social order to the extent that the circumstances allow. In the meantime (years, decades, centuries?), conservatives have a duty to speak out fearlessly and frequently, but also with prudence and discriminating judgment, in defense of the traditional norms of Western civilization.

As my tenure as editor draws to a close, there is an opportunity to consider the role of *Modern Age* in these decidedly parlous times. It turns out that nothing much has changed in nearly sixty years. In his “Apology for a New Review,” published in the first issue of the journal, Russell Kirk wrote, “*Modern Age* intends to pursue a conservative policy for the sake of a liberal understanding.” His point, I think, is basically the same as mine, that the good designated by the term “liberal” can only be guarded and nurtured by conservatism: “By ‘conservative,’” he continues, “we mean a journal dedicated to conserving the best elements in our civilization; and those best elements are in peril nowadays.” Liberalism is the enemy of liberality because it foments the relentless corrosiveness of progressivism.

During the nine years I have enjoyed the privilege of editing *Modern Age*, my principal, almost my only, goal has been to produce a journal that contributes to the conservation of the best elements of our civilization. With the good counsel of my editorial colleagues at ISI, I have therefore sought to maintain high standards in scholarship, argument, and style. Doubtless, perceptive readers would be able to forward numer-

ous instances where our editorial acumen has proved inadequate. Still, clear, coherent, thoughtful writing is one of the more valuable elements of our civilization—and in itself helps to conserve that civilization. This zeal for excellence, however it may have fallen short of fulfillment, is one explanation for an acceptance rate that compares favorably with the most rigorous academic journals’. Excluding commissioned articles, we accept—at most—no more than 20 percent of submitted pieces.

A second aspect of the selection process involves deciding what can be considered suitable for inclusion in a *conservative* quarterly review. If *Modern Age* compares favorably with academic journals in the rigor of its selection process, then it compares more than favorably with liberal and progressive magazines and journals in the diversity of outlooks—political, economic, moral, philosophical, religious—that may be found between its covers. There is a simple explanation: conservatism is not an ideology, not a blueprint for Utopia; a conservative attempts to maintain the core values and principles of civilization within the particular historical situation in which he finds himself. In view of the limitations of human nature and of each individual, reasonable men will differ not only over the details of particular sets of circumstances, but even over larger perspectives.

Hence *Modern Age* has published libertarians and traditionalists, enthusiasts for *laissez-faire* capitalism and cautious skeptics, Straussians of various types and anti-Straussians. It is doubtful that two such contrary essays on immigration as appeared in our previous issue would both show up in any liberal or progressive publication. This does not mean that any viewpoint on any topic may be found in this journal, but that there is no set of written criteria for determining what falls over the line, and I should be

hard put to explain the determining factors. It is largely a matter of taste, judgment, and intuition—mine and that of my editorial colleagues. Were I to tell you that we have never disagreed, you would be gullible to believe me. Nevertheless, we have been in accord far more often than not, simply because we are all conservatives who are imbued with something like the “conservative principles” set forth in the second chapter of Kirk’s *Politics of Prudence*—not a set of rules so much as a way of looking at things.

This issue embodies very well the idea of *Modern Age* that I have sought to maintain during the past nine years. We begin by marking three publication anniversaries. John Rodden and John Rossi commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the first American edition of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, and Flagg Taylor of Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. There is no better evidence for the continuing relevance of conservative thought than the fact that, twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, these two novels seem eerily prophetic again. It is, after all, conservatives who have kept the names of these two leftist authors alive, not progressives who now disdain them.

Susan McWilliams takes note of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Christopher Lasch’s *The True and Only Heaven*. Another prophetic book, it analyzes a more subtle and hence more insidious danger to our liberty than open tyranny: the abandonment of the cultural and moral foundations of society, which are the necessary accompaniment to lasting and authentic freedom. Writing amid the euphoria that

attended the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lasch correctly perceived that the belief that there were no limits to our power, wealth, and self-aggrandizement might easily lead to political and cultural malaise.

Finally, William Carroll offers philosophical insight resting on a Thomist foundation, but in touch with current thought on human nature and man’s place in the universe. Dr. Carroll, who has taught in China in the past and who will be there this fall, offers to the Chinese, who have for several decades been so involved with assimilating Western science and technology, a Thomist antidote to the scientism that has so often distorted science over the past three centuries. In addition, he suggests promising avenues for finding parallels with Taoism and Confucianism. Such is the fundamental conservative project: to conserve what is valuable in Western civilization by restraining its excesses and enriching it by an infusion of compatible elements from another civilization—without compromising the integrity of either.

This issue includes a rich array of reviews, all of them dealing with the kinds of books and themes we must engage to maintain our intellectual and ethical footing in a rapidly changing world—a world that tends to value the ephemeral above the permanent. In addition, David Middleton has brought us a selection of thoughtful and resonant poems by Mark Amorose and Ryan Wilson. The publication of new poems in the journal reminds us that Western civilization is not a museum fossil and that we conserve it by nourishing its growth. —RVY