

The Age of Realignment

Every ideology is a tower of Babel, an attempt to raise our earthly estate to heaven itself through our own ingenuity. The hard questions of our lives together are answered once and for all time, simply, and with as little room as possible left to prudence or personal judgment. The economy becomes a machine and politics a science. Religion is redundant once we've saved ourselves in this world, but the less virulent ideologies let it live on as a hobby. In theory, an ideology gives humanity the freedom and security to transcend the limits of the old, disordered life—to become a self-fulfilled individual, or perhaps the New Soviet Man.

The Western world has been an incubator of ideologies, but only sporadically has it succumbed to them. This is because the West is free enough to give rise to heresies—which is what ideologies are—while remaining grounded enough in centuries of successful practice to avoid being swept away by revolutionary passion. Even so, ideology has taken a toll, and few Americans in politics, media, or the academy today are untouched by the tower-building spirit. Indeed, the cultural

left is possessed by it to an extreme degree, while the right has also taken on much of its character.

The past twenty-five years saw ideology make steady gains in the American mind, mostly in the form of liberalism but also in far-from-liberal forms of identity politics. But an ideological economy and failed ideological foreign and domestic policies, under Republicans and Democrats alike, have engendered a revolt by the heartland. So today America

is at a crossroads: conservatives and liberals are each in search of new formulas, or anti-formulas, and new storylines—or else trying desperately to renovate the verities of the Cold War or the 1990s. New configurations are arising in national life, not only in politics but also in the ways that politics, religion, economics, national security, and personal identity relate to one another. Donald Trump's presidency is but one symbol of the upheaval that's under way.

Modern Age is a journal against ideology. It is conservative in the sense revealed by its founder, Russell Kirk, throughout his life's work. Yet to be unideological is not to be without principles or to disregard reason and abstract theories in their proper spheres. Nor is an abhorrence of ideology the same thing as a lack of a program in public affairs or cultural matters. Our conservatism is rather anti-utopian, a politics of imperfection.

The essays in this issue are a guide to the emerging post-ideological era. F.H. Buckley, a scholar who also took an active hand in politics as a speechwriter for the Trump campaign of two years ago, examines how conservatives lost their feeling for their fellow citizens by subordinating their commitments to Christianity and the nation to a heartless economism. He points the way to a conservative party for the working class. My own essay, on Jonah Goldberg's new book, *Suicide of the West*, and its 1964 namesake by James Burnham, looks at the role liberalism has played in our civilization's loss of strength and cohesion. For Burnham, liber-

alism was "the ideology of Western suicide," and so it remains today.

In flight from a suicidal, secular mainstream, many Christians have considered turning to what Rod Dreher has called "The Benedict Option," a retrenchment within the lines of their own communities and institutions. Orthodox Judaism provides a well-attested example of how the faithful can live apart from the secular world, even as they live within it. Yet Jonathan Bronitsky warns that what Orthodox Jews have done cannot be copied by Christians—and should not be, for the good of both religions.

George Nash, meanwhile, the foremost intellectual historian of the American right, reminds us that Ronald Reagan, the twentieth-century president most admired by conservatives, was no prisoner to ideology: he began as a Hollywood liberal, after all, even one with some sympathy for Communism. Experience made him a conservative—his experience as a working actor in Hollywood and an emissary to the factories of General Electric. Actors are also a central feature of our last essay this issue, Carol Iannone's investigation into what *Seinfeld* reveals about life under postmodern liberalism. Iannone is a cultural critic without peer, and here she considers a show that still lays bare painful truths, twenty years after its final episode.

America is changing, and so is the West. The anchors of tradition have been rusted away. But ideology does not yet have a free hand to remake us, so long as we can tell reality from utopia. —*Daniel McCarthy*