

Russell Kirk's Political Economy

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John Attarian, a free-lance writer who holds a Ph.D. in economics, first appeared in *Modern Age* (Spring 1993) when he reviewed Paul Hollander's *Anti-Americanism: Critiques at Home and Abroad, 1965-1990*. In this essay on "Russell Kirk's Political Economy" he shows how in his economic thought the founding editor of *Modern Age* pointed the way not only in his rejection of the economic utopias of the Left and the Right, but also in his affirmation of transcendent reality. How Kirk's religious view of human meaning and destiny informed his economic thinking is, thus, at the very heart of this cogent essay. Attarian declares, for example, how this view led Kirk to reject redistribution of wealth and egalitarianism. Yet Kirk was also repelled by the utopia of affluence and the worship of materialism. Moral character and the order of the soul, as Attarian iterates, were for Kirk fundamental concerns that shaped his disdain for technologico-Benthamite civilization.

AS AMERICAN CONSERVATISM sifts its soul regarding political economy, scrutiny of the economic thought of Dr. Russell Kirk, who more than anyone else gave post-war conservatism coherence and intellectual respectability, is appropriate and timely. Kirk's economics, and its treatment by modern conservatives, afford an invaluable perspective on this controversy.

Kirk believed that economics has been overstressed. "The true contest in our time is not between economies merely, but between opposing concepts of human nature."¹ Are we embodied souls created by a transcendent God, whose purpose it is to struggle upward toward Heaven? Or are we creatures of matter, rational animals, pleasure-seeking and

pain-shunning, with utility maximization as our life's goal? Kirk affirmed the former; economic utopians of Left and Right, the latter.

Underlying this is a metaphysical conflict: between belief in a transcendent reality and the order it implies, and denial of that reality and belief that only matter matters. Like his mentor Irving Babbitt, Russell Kirk concluded that the economic problem is ultimately a religious problem.

Kirk's economic thought sprang from belief in a transcendent God, the author of a natural law governing both societies and individuals. For Kirk this was not merely an intellectual position, a conceptual peg on which to hang an argument, but the central truth of life. As his

memoir *The Sword of Imagination* (1995) abundantly attests, a vivid awareness of the transcendent permeated his waking hours, and informed his understanding of human nature and purpose. He recounts his boyhood insight “that he had a soul; no, that he *was* a soul.”² From this revelation his life’s work unfolded.

Because we are souls, it follows that “Men and women are made for eternity.”³ Put another way, Kirk saw our purpose as loving and serving God and attaining Heaven. “Man was created...for the struggle upward from brute nature toward the world that is not terrestrial.”⁴ This struggle is waged by ordering our souls and by disciplining thought and conduct with the inner check.

Such struggle and discipline are necessary, because while made in God’s image and likeness, man is fallen and imperfect, a mixture of good and evil. Unlike liberals, and many who claim the label “conservative,” Kirk discerned man’s capacity for evil, his anarchic impulse.⁵ He insisted that order, or “systematic and harmonious arrangement,” is our first need. By this he meant order within our souls as well as in society:

Order, in the moral realm, is the realization of a body of transcendent values—indeed, a hierarchy of values—which give purpose to existence and motive to conduct. Order, in society, is the harmonious arrangement of classes and function which guards justice and gives willing consent to law and ensures that we shall all be safe together.⁶

Since we are embodied souls, achieving order in the soul, or the “subordination of one’s life and appetites to divine will, and the harmonious arrangement of mind and conscience which produces the truly human person,” is a causal primary. Given sufficiently widespread ordering of souls, a good or tolerable society results “as a kind of by-product. Good men make good laws, rather than

vice versa.” It follows, too, that “a society in which the religious impulse is forgotten or frustrated” will inevitably become “a miserable domination.... The collapse of inner order soon becomes a destruction of outer order. And a land of empty and decaying churches cannot retain forever even a semblance of material prosperity.”⁷

Our spiritual nature implies that we have needs and yearnings beyond the material, for beauty, love, purpose—and even challenges and adversity, to keep us and our love of life keen:

Something in human nature seems to call for the possibility of a real victory in life—and the possibility of a real defeat. Life is enjoyable only because Hope exists: hope for success of one sort or another. And hope for success cannot exist without a corresponding dread of failure. In a very real sense, life is a battle; we never could be happy were it otherwise.⁸

A crucial corollary is that “life without obstacles is boredom, just as life without purposeful work is infinitely dreary,” and wealth “without duties or challenges” spells lifelong unhappiness.⁹ “Mankind,” Kirk warned, “can endure anything except boredom.” Without challenges, without a purpose, people turn to mischief and escapes. Hence arises much of modernity’s evil, from crime and student disorders to substance abuse.¹⁰ Just as the blight of boredom has profound economic implications, so too does morality:

Any society...requires a moral order for its existence. Indeed, all societies arise originally out of religious belief: culture comes out of the cult. A society’s moral order, for the most part, has for its foundation that society’s religion. If a society has forgotten or repudiated its old religion, it must invent a pseudo-religion to supplant the old faith; and that society’s morals are founded upon that pseudo-religion, or ideology....

...the capitalist market economy is a development from certain moral assumptions of Western civilization.... The primary purpose of morality is to order the soul and to order the human community, not to produce wealth. Nevertheless, moral beliefs or disbeliefs have economic consequences.¹¹

A transcendent God implies that reality is metaphysically given and immutable; “human nature is a constant, and moral truths are permanent.”¹² Being God-given, these enduring moral standards, or “Permanent Things”—norms of courage, duty, justice, integrity, charity—have religious significations; adhering to them is much of what a life pleasing to God means. Hence, loyalty to the permanent things is the proper standard for judging individuals, societies, and institutions. “Real progress consists in the movement of mankind toward the understanding of norms, and toward conformity to norms. Real decadence consists in the movement of mankind away from the understanding of norms, and away from obedience to norms.”¹³

Kirk affirmed two norms of government: First, “a good government allows the more energetic natures among a people to fulfill their promise, while ensuring that these persons shall not tyrannize over the mass of men.” Second, the best form of government “is one in accord with the traditions and prescriptive ways of its people.”¹⁴ As the norm of justice, Kirk embraced “To each man, the things that are his own.”¹⁵

II

Accordingly, Kirk endorsed capitalism, by which he meant “a pattern of private property, competition in price and quality, freedom of economic choice, and satisfactory productivity,” and proclaimed himself “one of capitalism’s friends, though no worshipper of idols.”¹⁶

His friendship was grounded primarily in his view of human nature and

purpose. He recognized that the ordered liberty he cherished requires economic freedom and private property, and that dependence on the state is slavery.¹⁷ More to the point, a free economy is the best economic system for promoting loyalty to the permanent things. It provides the material rewards that virtue deserves and that self-interested human nature requires; and property and enterprise encourage responsibility, initiative, and other desirable qualities.¹⁸

Kirk’s endorsement of economic freedom did not draw on spiritual considerations alone. It sprang from a clear-eyed realism, mindful of Babbitt’s wise admonition that imagination and theorizing should be “disciplined to the facts.”¹⁹ “For expression and action, Aquinas tells us, the soul requires a corporeal envelope,” Kirk wrote²⁰—and he knew that material existence contains stern realities and that some economic systems, recognizing those realities, promote the well-being of our “corporeal envelopes” better than others. Sharing Aldous Huxley’s axiomatic realization that getting something for nothing is impossible, Kirk stressed that “The true source of prosperity is diligent work directed by ingenious intelligence.... unless the large majority of people work with hand and brain, intelligently and regularly, consumer goods become so scarce that a society may not survive.”²¹

The free market, Kirk realized, is unsurpassed at rewarding the intelligent work which prosperity requires. Its incentives suit self-interested human nature better than any others. To charges that it is unjust, he replied that the market, unlike centrally planned economies, does at least ordinarily reward intelligent work justly. He dismissed an altruist economy as unrealistic: a sufficient number of altruists to make it viable would be lacking.²² In sum, Kirk saw free enterprise as the economic system best suited for embodied souls dwelling in a

constrained material world.

III

As a Christian and a realist, Kirk also roundly rejected all utopias. "Genuine conservatives know that man and society are not perfectible; they are realistically aware that Utopia...means literally Nowhere."²³ Believing that positive legislation or spending money can reform society is "the grossest of utopian delusions."

Real improvement, I repeat, can come only from ideas...and from internal improvement of the individual conscience (in which latter, according to Baudelaire, all real progress consists). In one sense, but in one only, the true humanist and the theist and the conservative are utopians: they believe that the possibility of near-perfection does indeed exist, but it exists only within individual human beings...we call it sanctity.²⁴

Not only is life imperfect, but also for Kirk, ultimately mysterious. He knew that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in any philosophy. Untidy, complex, and in large measure irrational and unpredictable, life cannot possibly be rendered artificially tidy and agreeable by any rationalist political doctrine.

Pursuit of utopia is also a disastrous diversion from our proper purpose. The faith and devotion which properly belong to God and religion go instead to ideologies, fanatically-held doctrines promising attainment of a secular heaven. "Ideology is inverted religion," Kirk observed, "the symbols of transcendence being converted to mundane purposes."²⁵ Put another way, utopianism entails disorder in the soul, a transvaluation of values finding apt expression in the enshrinement of various cardinal sins as virtues. Individuals and societies subservient to utopian ideologies may delude themselves that they are progressing, when in fact they are deca-

dent: moving away from norms, not toward them.

Kirk's religious conception of life's purpose informed his conception both of what a good society is and of a conservative's proper view on the matter:

...at the back of every discussion of the good society lies this question, what is the object of human life? The enlightened conservative does not believe that the end or aim of life is competition; or success; or enjoyment; or longevity; or power; or possessions. He believes, instead, that the object of life is Love. He knows that the just and ordered society is that in which Love governs us, so far as Love ever can reign in this world of sorrows; and he knows that the anarchical or the tyrannical society is that in which Love lies corrupt....

He has no intention of converting this human society of ours into an efficient machine for efficient machine-operators, dominated by master mechanics. Men are put into this world, he realizes, to struggle, to suffer, to contend against the evil that is in their neighbors and in themselves, and to aspire toward the triumph of Love. They are put into this world to live like men, and to die like men. He seeks to preserve a society which allows men to attain manhood, rather than keeping them within bonds of perpetual childhood.²⁶

In political economy, too, utopia-spinning is a perversion of proper purpose. Founded by philosophers mainly concerned with extending freedom, political economy is decadent, Kirk warned, "when it becomes no better than an apology for the reduction of men and women to a condition of prosperous servility."²⁷

IV

Kirk stoutly opposed the Left's utopia of statism. When government attempts to go beyond its sharply limited proper economic role, it spawns tyranny and

economic and social harm.²⁸ But while he was well aware of statism's economic forfeits, such as inflationary public finance and depressed living standards, his primary objections to statist utopias were moral and spiritual.

Rent control, for instance, creates crime-ridden slums and promotes the uglification of city life. Another ruinous policy, "urban renewal," destroys established neighborhoods, with their continuity and community, e.g., Detroit's Corktown, whose demise under urban renewal Kirk experienced personally.²⁹ Wrecking cherished ways of life, gratuitously creating ugly settings conducive to alienation, these policies foster soul-stultification.

Emphatically, Kirk rejected redistribution and egalitarianism. Forcible charity is neither Christianity nor charity. "What Christianity offers is *personal* redemption, not some system of economic revolution." While Christianity does enjoin us to practice the Golden Rule, "it does not enjoin us to employ political power to compel others to surrender their property."³⁰

The further charity is removed from family and locality—the more impersonal charity becomes—the less meritorious it becomes. Collective charity, through the agency of the state—and especially through the agency of a remote centralized state—is both less kind and less virtuous than personal giving. And if this collective charity degenerates into mere taxation of the prosperous for the benefit of the less wealthy, through the votes of the benefiting crowd—why, it ceases to be charity, and becomes first cousin to theft. There is no merit in robbing Peter to pay Paul.³¹

Still another evil of redistribution is that "such compulsion may harden hearts to the very idea of personal and private charity."³² Kirk grasped, then, that soul-disorder in utopia's architects fosters soul-disorder in its victims.

Egalitarianism's demands for equality and "social justice," he saw, are often inspired by the capital sin of envy. The soul-disorder springing from envy is manifested in a vicious desire to deny to anyone an advantage that cannot be enjoyed by all. From this flows disorder in governance: egalitarian redistribution and regulation to gratify envy forsake the norms of tolerable government and justice. The result of such soul-disorder can be a crippled economy, as the Dutch welfare state demonstrates. Kirk saw widespread envy as perhaps "a greater menace to a healthy economy than is the power of totalist states." Equality resulting from envy-inspired statism is "an equality in suffering."³³

People are equal only "before the judgment-seat of God," and under the law, and are "not entitled to identical things." Hence egalitarianism is unjust. "True justice secures every man in the possession of what is his own, and provides that he will receive the reward of his talents; but true justice also ensures that no man shall seize the property and the rights that belong to other classes and persons, on the pretext of an abstract equality."³⁴

Kirk's rejection of equality, like his rejection of redistribution, was rooted in his religious view of people not as bodies existing to consume, but as souls created for self-perfection. Poverty and inequality are not evil. Since man was created not for equality but to strive for Heaven, the standard of justice is "not enslavement to a uniform condition, but liberation from arbitrary restraints upon his right to be himself." Egalitarianism and socialism impose such restraints, and deprive people of superior talent and energy of their rightful rewards.³⁵

Kirk also saw redistribution, egalitarianism, and the welfare state as profoundly misreading human nature in their presupposition of economic determinism, and threatening to inflict social bore-

dom. He pointed out that true poverty had been virtually eliminated in Britain, but as the welfare state expanded, so did crime. And it was worst not in old industrial slums but in new public housing developments and light industry sites. "A sentimental utilitarianism argued that prosperity would abolish sin. It was a shallow argument, ignorant of history; for if it had been true, all rich men's sons, these many centuries past, would have been perfectly virtuous." Rather, history teaches that decency results mainly from habit, formed by religion, family life, private responsibilities, and from individual rewards for good conduct. When the state empties life of risk, guarantees material needs, and assumes duties formerly discharged by one's self, church, family, and voluntary association, the old habits decay, boredom ensues, and crime results.³⁶

Leftism's utopia, Kirk warned, is inappropriate for our nature as embodied souls meant to struggle higher:

This is a child's dream of pleasure; but an adult's nightmare. Imagine a whole world of total equality, mediocrity, and uniformity, a domination of boredom, world without end, with nothing to fear and nothing to hope for!.... To anyone with imagination, energy, religious impulses, desire for adventure, or even the simple pleasures of family life, the Marxist paradise would be a hell upon earth.³⁷

V

At the same time Kirk was equally repelled by the utopia of affluence and unlimited economic growth which many contemporary conservatives embrace. Affluence cannot guarantee happiness, he repeatedly warned, and its single-minded pursuit is as hostile to the permanent things as statism. If socialism's egalitarian utopia enshrines envy, capitalism's affluent utopia enshrines avarice, by which Kirk meant, signifi-

cantly, "desiring more wealth than one's soul can support properly"—evidence, again, of the centrality of the soul in his economic thought. The soul-disorder fostered by this utopia feeds on itself. "Wealth can enervate, physically and morally. Gloss over avarice, call it efficient production, and you admit the six other mortal sins and a crowd of inferior ones." Not only does the national character sink into self-pity, sloth and self-indulgence, but rapacity prevails. "If aggrandizement is the common object of society, there remains no moral check upon the means employed to acquire wealth. Every price-gouge is justified, every exorbitant strike-demand, every judicious distribution of presents to public servants."³⁸

Ultimately, the soul-disorder of avarice, like that of envy, has ruinous material effects. Since "our industrial economy, of all systems man ever created, is that most delicately dependent upon public energy, private virtue, and fertility of imagination," the vices spawned by avarice depress production. Inflation of money and credit creates price inflation and its hardships. And an affluent, high-technology economy prizing effortless comfort and convenience shares the aim and effect of socialism's utopia: purging life of challenge, discomfort, real danger, and variety. Hence it too is menaced by social boredom, which undermines economic performance.³⁹

Kirk knew too that vertiginous technological and economic change disrupts an established way of life and threatens to create disorder and disorientation in society and in the soul. Modern market economies with their high labor mobility also suffer from loss of community, with individuals becoming isolated, rootless "atoms in a loveless desolation." Technology and consumerism exact such forfeits as resource depletion, heavy casualties from traffic accidents, ruin of landscapes, pollution, and loss of farm-

land to roadbuilding.⁴⁰

While praising businessmen's efficiency, Kirk lamented their ignorance of humane values and man's true nature and duties. And without such awareness, economists misread reality and get wrong answers. They realize that efficiency brings prosperity, but they also overlook the possibility that because a social order appropriate for man rests on other values too, including beauty, singleminded pursuit of efficiency may yield uglification and provoke a reaction from people rebelling at the starvation of their souls. The advocates of efficiency were not wrong in their economics, but rather, "they have emphasized economic abstractions at the expense of nearly everything else in society."⁴¹

Such concerns led Kirk to a searching critique of Ludwig von Mises, the Austrian economist renowned for presciently demonstrating socialism's unworkability. He lauded Mises's intellectual prowess and his immensely valuable demolition of socialism and vindication of neoclassical economic theory. However, Mises's amoral assertion that the only criterion for appraising human action is "whether or not it is fit to attain the ends aimed at by acting men" puts us "back in murkiest Bentham." Mises's stress on reason as our only means of fighting error was by his own admission quixotic, since hostility toward capitalism persists despite reasoned arguments by its defenders. Moreover, it ignored

...the historical truth that men respect property, private rights, and order in society out of deference to the "myths" von Mises tries to dissipate, the "myths" of divine social intent, of tradition, and of natural law. Capitalism has been imperiled directly in proportion to decay of those principles among men.... once supernatural and traditional sanctions are dissolved, economic self-interest is ridiculously inadequate to hold an economic

system together, and even less adequate to preserve order. Prescription and prejudice are the defenses of justice and peace. Laugh them away, and in come those forces of delusion and unrest which Marxism exemplifies today; men refuse to live by economic reasonableness alone.⁴²

Finally, Mises's attribution of anticapitalistic attitudes to a people's being misled by hostile intellectuals ignored valid complaints like "the ugliness, the monotony, the ennui of modern industrial existence," as well as the threat from "the enormous destructive power of social boredom."⁴³

Kirk also believed that, once people are seduced by affluence and bewitched by efficiency, they become not only blind to the cost to their way of life and to their souls, but make ever greater sacrifices to these Molochs. Their characters rotted by avarice, people will sacrifice family and religious life; essential virtues such as thrift, integrity, justice, mercy, honor, charity and loyalty; and even freedom itself for affluence.⁴⁴

In 1957, Kirk described how this purblind mentality was already affecting American agricultural policy, in words uncannily anticipating the agrarian Wendell Berry's eloquent warnings and protests:

We suffer from the same disease as do the Communists, though in a milder form. Whenever we go about looking for a solution to some great social problem, we rarely recur to the first principle of human nature and society. Instead, we turn back to Benthamite dogmas. "Efficiency," "progress" and "economic security" are our god-terms, as they are those of the Soviets.

When we take up our farm problems, for instance, we phrase it in terms which imply that the farmer is simply a servant of Mammon; that his function is simply to feed the cities. If the farmer is found "inefficient," or in any respect less pros-

perous than his city cousins, then, in our present-day view, either he ought to be shipped off to the city and fitted into the process of automation, or else subsidized as if he were a disagreeable mendicant whose vote, regrettably, does count.

Almost no one asks just what is going to happen to a country in which the rural population, already scarcely a seventh of the total, sinks toward extinction; or whether the rural life is not worth conserving at some cost to total efficiency; or whether the farmer really ought to be expected to live a life, in creature comfort and aims, precisely like that of his city cousin. If we think of aiding the farmer at all, it is merely with a view toward converting him into an agricultural capitalist. I suggest that we are suffering from a decline of social imagination, extending to—and sometimes caused by—economic theory.⁴⁵

But if the “cult of Efficiency” is menacing, the neo-Luddite “cult of Inefficiency” is irresponsible and suicidal. Like Aldous Huxley and D. H. Lawrence, Kirk divined modern humanity’s terrible predicament: machine civilization threatens spiritual death, but “once in an industrial society, we cannot get out of it without starving half the world’s population.”⁴⁶ Rather than abandon capitalism, we need to

...humanize mass-production, and to restore craftsmanship and personal accomplishment to work, and to teach ourselves how to make our leisure something better than boredom. We need to infuse into modern industrial life a sense of community and purpose and hope and deep-rooted security. We need more genuinely educated businessmen and more genuinely responsible labor-union leaders. We need decentralization of industry and more penetrating regard for the claims of rural life.⁴⁷

In short, we must “reconcile personal freedom with the claims of modern tech-

nology”—in some ways a tougher economic problem than previous ones.⁴⁸

As to solving it, Kirk eschewed statism. He called for Babbittian voluntary checks on appetite, and persuasion of businessmen, labor leaders, and opinion leaders of the value of a decentralized, humane-scale economy.⁴⁹ He grasped that virtue cannot be forced; that using coercion as a shortcut to *metanoia* is not only a perennial utopian temptation but also a lethal error; and that voluntary conversion of one’s own soul, while the most difficult reform to achieve, is also the only one worth achieving.

Hence, the economist Wilhelm Roepke’s “Third Way” won Kirk’s praise. With a broad, humane, religion-rooted perspective rare among economists, Roepke deplored the “cult of the colossal,” the rise of the propertyless, dependent proletariat, urbanization, and the loss of community. As cures, he advocated decentralized government, small-scale enterprises *à la* Switzerland, and broad land ownership in family farms. Kirk rightly lauded Roepke for seeking “to restore liberty to men by promoting economic independence” and regarding man “as a member of a civilized community, a true person, not simply a factor in industrial output.”⁵⁰ We may infer that Kirk divined that, being mindful of our nature as embodied souls, Roepke’s “Third Way” was spiritually healthy.

VI

In all these matters, Kirk was absolutely right. His understanding of human nature and purpose was accurate. To all but the unbelieving, the evidence, in the existence of art, music, literature, philosophy, religion, is overwhelming. We are indeed embodied souls; and the richly varied pageant of human existence simply cannot be reduced to matter in motion.

He was right, too, in keeping material concerns in perspective and in reminding us that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). If we cannot be reduced to matter, our purpose and proper social order cannot be reduced to economics. To argue as if it can, to propound a material utopia, is to commit one of the worst idolatries of an era full of them.

Kirk probed far more deeply, extensively and systematically into economics than either Edmund Burke or Irving Babbitt, whose economic writings were, quite understandably, sparse and fragmentary. Kirk’s political economy was, therefore, a major advance in conservative thought toward a systematic and explicitly articulated political economy grounded in awareness of a transcendent reality.

As his life shows, Kirk saw the conservative’s duty as witnessing for the permanent things. Accordingly, he exhorted conservatives to resist the avaricious utopia of consumer capitalism:

The conservative thinker does not believe that men are made happy by creating and stimulating new wants. He does not believe that men are made happy by attempts to satisfy to repletion every physical craving. He believes, instead, that the best way to bring contentment to humanity is to strengthen and restore those old ends of existence, those old motives to integrity.... Stability instead of velocity, community instead of reckless self-expression, satisfying work instead of novel amusement, a decent competence instead of an incessant pursuit of luxuries—these are the ways to the peace which passes all understanding.

At home, the American conservative will endeavor to exert some intelligent check upon material will and appetite.⁵¹

Kirk called for respecting cultures and ways of life different from our own, and

emphatically repudiated the conceit that America has a mission to impose democracy, capitalism, or our way of life on other peoples.⁵²

Alas, Kirk has not been widely listened to. Mainstream conservatism’s central dogmas have become promotion of “the American Dream” (a lucrative career-cum-high material “standard of living”), maximum efficiency, and unlimited economic growth; liquidation of anything impeding their attainment; and making all the world resemble America.

Witness the obsessive economism of the Republican Party, and many neoconservatives’ warm response to Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which argued that history, as a process of ideological conflict, is over; that democracy-cum-capitalism is the endpoint of man’s political evolution; and that the whole world is converging on it. In a sequel, Fukuyama averred that “virtually all political questions today revolve around economic ones,” argued that efficient modern economies require trust and cooperation, and recommended, among other things, that educated Americans “be more tolerant of religion and aware of its potential social benefits” and “look to religion’s social consequences in terms of promoting the American art of association”⁵³—glib, pragmatic blasphemy giving additional point to Kirk’s definition of ideology as “inverted religion.”

Equally significant is what modern conservative political economy does *not* say. Kirk’s central concern, with the economic system most likely to promote proper order in our souls and least likely to foment soul-disorder and divert us from our struggle Heavenward, is ignored. Mainstream conservative advocacy of capitalism is purely utilitarian and materialistic.

Finally, there is neoconservatism’s

“democratic capitalism,” which Kirk emphatically rejected. Its advocates, he saw, were concerned “mainly with the gross national product and with ‘global wealth.’” Moreover, “the creed of many of them is no better than a latter-day Utilitarianism...they aspire to bring about a world of uniformity and dull standardization, Americanized, industrialized, democratized, globalized, boring.”⁵⁴

This loyalty to the permanent things brought retaliation. In a polemical review of Kirk’s *The Conservative Constitution* (1990), James Nuechterlein, editor of *First Things*, a neoconservative journal of religion and public life, wrote that Kirk’s brand of conservatism, “that most resistant to modernity—the world, one might say, of the Tory Harrumph...has very little to do with American reality, but for those of a reactionary bent who imagine themselves superior to that reality, it apparently provides a congenial home.” Nuechterlein stooped to attacking Kirk’s writing style and his “inevitable reference to the ‘Permanent Things.’” The American tradition to be conserved, per Nuechterlein, is “classical liberalism. More specifically ... bourgeois democratic capitalism,” whereas “Kirk’s preferred vision of political economy appears to have its roots in premodern strains of Catholic social doctrine.” Such people, Nuechterlein intoned, “may fancy themselves as more in harmony with the Permanent Things than the rest of us...but in the world of American political thought, they are little more than curiosities.”⁵⁵ This “conservative” treatment of Kirk’s thought is indistinguishable from liberalism at its worst.

Even in death, Kirk was not spared misrepresentation. Martin Morse Wooster’s review of *The Sword of Imagination* called Kirk a “flawed giant” who “never understood or appreciated capitalism”—which is not true, as the evidence here presented attests. Nor is his

conservatism “an incomplete political philosophy, needing the fortification of an appreciation of capitalism and economics.”⁵⁶

Too clearly, what provoked these attacks is the fact that Kirk, by his own admission “no worshipper of idols,” did not “make [his] proper prostrations to the Gods of the Market-Place.” That Kirk’s detractors deemed it appropriate to employ falsehoods underscores the intensity of their attachment to “democratic capitalism.”

This maltreatment of Russell Kirk is profoundly disturbing evidence of an ascendancy of utilitarian economism in modern conservatism. It signifies, too, that conservatism’s purported victories in recent decades—winning the Cold War, capturing Congress, setting the agenda of domestic governance—are hollow.

Fukuyama’s instrumental treatment of religion and Nuechterlein’s derision of the permanent things testify to modern conservatism’s worsening spiritual obtuseness and apparent appreciation of religion merely as a means of social control. Mainstream conservatism is spurning the permanent things and embracing a secular utopia, appealing not to our religious nature but to the dreams of avarice, and shambling toward the Brave New World in the wake of liberalism, whose poor purblind worldlings bear a lesser guilt, since their side never had an awareness of transcendent Reality to betray.

Utopia, Thomas Molnar has noted, is a perennial heresy. It is also a perennial temptation. As the seeming miracles of electronic technology make this temptation more insidiously plausible and as triumphalist conservatism increasingly harkens to it, the struggle between utopia and the permanent things will intensify. Far from an irrelevant Tory Harrumph, Russell Kirk’s political economy is now more germane, and more

desperately needed, than ever. Given the scrutiny it deserves, it may redeem

1. Russell Kirk, "Capitalism and the Moral Basis of Social Order," *Modern Age*, Winter 1992, 102. 2. Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination* (Grand Rapids, 1995), 13. 3. *Ibid.* 4. Russell Kirk, *A Program for Conservatives*, rev. ed. (Chicago, 1962), 179. 5. *Ibid.*, 41. 6. Russell Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things* (New Rochelle, 1969), 283; *The Roots of American Order* (Washington, 1991), 3-6; *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice* (Chicago, 1956), 166. 7. Russell Kirk, *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory* (New York, 1963), 205. 8. Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* (Chicago, 1957), 100-101. 9. *Ibid.*, 101. 10. Kirk, *Sword of Imagination*, 238, 408-412. See also *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, 193-196, 298-300; and *A Program for Conservatives*, rev. ed., Ch. V. 11. Kirk, "Capitalism and the Moral Basis of Social Order," 101, 102. 12. Russell Kirk, *The Politics of Prudence* (Bryn Mawr, 1993), 17. 13. Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 17, 20-21. 14. *Ibid.*, 288. 15. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 167. 16. Kirk, "Capitalism and the Moral Basis of Social Order," 100. 17. Russell Kirk, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Conservatism* (New York, 1957), 106. 18. Addressed further in John Attarian, "Russell Kirk's Economics of the Permanent Things," *The Freeman*, April 1996, 233. 19. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, 1979), 258. 20. Kirk, *Sword of Imagination*, 13. 21. Russell Kirk, *Economics: Work and Prosperity* (Pensacola, 1982), 9, 10, 38, 40. 22. *Ibid.*, 48-50, 122-125, 249-255, 257; Kirk, *American Cause*, 103; *Intelligent Woman's Guide*, 108. 23. Russell Kirk, *Reclaiming a Patrimony* (Washington, 1992), 9. 24. Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, 185. 25. Kirk, "Capitalism and the Moral Basis of Social Order," 100. 26. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 18-19. 27. Kirk, *Intelligent Woman's Guide*, 112. 28. This is addressed further in Attarian, *op. cit.* 29. *Ibid.*, 295-296; *Politics of Prudence*, 261-264. 30. Kirk, *Intelligent*

conservatism from a suicidal heresy.

Woman's Guide, 23. 31. Kirk, *Confessions*, 216. 32. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 190. 33. Kirk, *Economics*, 269-273. 34. Kirk, *Confessions*, 280; *Program for Conservatives*, 170. 35. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 177-179. 36. Kirk, *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, 190-195; *Confessions*, 256. 37. Kirk, "Capitalism and the Moral Basis of Social Order," 103. 38. Kirk, *American Cause*, 120-121; *Program for Conservatives*, 201, 209-210. 39. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 193-196, 103-106, 208-210. 40. Kirk, *Sword of Imagination*, 145-146; *Program for Conservatives*, 90, 148, 160, 219; "Bumper-to-bumper, Britain succumbs to motorcar," *Detroit News*, November 2, 1971. 41. Russell Kirk, *The Intemperate Professor and Other Cultural Splenetics* (Peru, Ill., 1988), 91, 96; *Confessions*, 68; *Program for Conservatives*, 141. 42. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 144-147. 43. *Ibid.*, 148. 44. Kirk, *Ibid.*, 202. 45. Russell Kirk, "Ideology and Political Economy," *America*, Vol. 96, No. 17 (January 5, 1957), 390. Cf. Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (San Francisco, 1987); *What Are People For?* (San Francisco, 1990); *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York, 1993); *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, 1995). 46. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 126 n., 149. Cf. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932), Ch. 3; D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), Ch. 19. 47. Kirk, *American Cause*, 125. 48. Kirk, *Intelligent Woman's Guide*, 108. 49. Kirk, *American Cause*, 125; *Program for Conservatives*, 219. 50. Kirk, *Program for Conservatives*, 150-154. 51. *Ibid.*, 218. 52. *Ibid.*, 219-220; *American Cause*, 110. 53. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust* (New York: 1995), xiii, 319. 54. Kirk, *Politics of Prudence*, 183-184, 187. 55. James Nuechterlein, "The Paleo's Paleo," *First Things*, August/September 1991, 46. 56. Martin Morse Wooster, "Captain Kirk," *The American Enterprise*, January/February 1996, 74.

The Icelandic Sagas and Social Order

James Kalb

James Kalb, an attorney who lives and works in Brooklyn, first appeared in *Modern Age* (Fall 1995) with the publication of his essay on "Confucius Today." Of the aims of "The Icelandic Sagas and Social Order," which follows, Kalb writes: "The sagas have been read variously. Their narrative excellence and truth to concrete experience has attracted devoted readers such as Ezra Pound and W.H. Auden. Contemporary libertarians draw on them for an example of a stateless society. In this essay I attempt to do justice to their complexity and subtlety in order to understand the world they describe more deeply, trace the connections among its political, moral, and spiritual aspects, and understand its relevance to our own times." An attentive reader of this essay will much admire the ways in which its author achieves his particular aims.

THE RELATION BETWEEN the individual, society, and state is a confused one in our time. Is the individual everything and society nothing, or the other way around? Why should one care about the other? Can the state treat the whole social world as the theater for its meddling? If not, what are the limits? Such questions are inescapable and unanswerable in a society like our own, which has no coherent understanding of human life and is dominated by impersonal institutions and abstract relationships that have no hold on our sense of what we are.

The history of the libertarian farmers' republic that was medieval Iceland, and the vivid picture of that society presented in the Icelandic sagas, gives a fresh view of these issues. The similarities and the contrasts to our own society

are noteworthy. Like America, the Icelandic Commonwealth was a new country, founded in the light of history by European settlers and governed by common consent rather than king and priest. Icelandic political life, like ours, emphasized both law and personal independence. However, the Icelanders had no state to enforce rights and obligations. Men pursued their ends without direct protection or hindrance from any public agency, and were obliged to act themselves to secure their safety and legal rights.

The result was neither anarchy nor the tyranny of the strong, but a society that was surprisingly free and equal and more closely knit than our own, ordered by institutions that existed because men found them worth supporting. Out of