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# Up from Populism: Re-visiting the thought of Russell Kirk in a time of divisive politics

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UP FROM POPULISM: RE-VISITING THE THOUGHT OF RUSSELL KIRK IN A  
TIME OF DIVISIVE POLITICS

By

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UP FROM POPULISM: RE-VISITING THE THOUGHT OF RUSSELL KIRK IN A  
TIME OF DIVISIVE POLITICS

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## Abstract

The past five years has seen populist movements emerge on both the left and right in many Western democracies, disrupting traditional politics on both the center-left and center-right. Clearly, the most large-scale manifestation of this phenomena is the rise of Trumpism, with businessman Donald Trump having won the Republican nomination and U.S. presidency in 2016 with a campaign that challenged the political establishment on issues like free trade and immigration. In the following paper, I use the current populist moment as an opportunity to revisit the thought of Russell Kirk (1918 – 1994), an American political theorist most famous for his 1953 book *The Conservative Mind*. As a traditionalist conservative, Kirk emphasized civil society and order in his work over economic liberty, and as a prolific writer, commented on many issues over the course of his career that are highly relevant in our contemporary politics, including trade, immigration, foreign policy, culture, and the environment. Following a discussion of Kirk's thought on each of these issues and how it might be applied to contemporary times, I provide an extended meditation on how a reprisal of traditionalist conservatism inspired by figures like Kirk might heal some of the systemic issues within the Republican Party, before concluding with a look at how having a civil discourse on both sides of the aisle impinges on having a healthy center-right party within any political system.

Table of Contents

v

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: RUSSELL KIRK RE-VISITED	8
CHAPTER 2: ON TRADE	20
CHAPTER 3: ON IMMIGRATION	28
CHAPTER 4: ON FOREIGN POLICY	34
CHAPTER 5: ON CULTURE	43
CHAPTER 6: ON THE ENVIRONMENT	50
CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A CULTURAL RENEWAL	57
EPILOGUE	62
WORKS CITED	65
VITA AUCTORIS	72

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the rise of Donald Trump has seen the Republican Party in the U.S. come in thrall to a crude populism that bares scant resemblance to the political philosophy that historically animated the party. Furthermore, this crude populism has caused the left and right to become so divided as to undermine civil discourse. This situation, in turn, calls for a return to the foundational thinkers of modern conservatism to transcend our current political moment, and move towards a renewed vision of politics on the right that addresses the issues made visible by Trumpism, while also reprising a more civil discourse.

Among those who provided the intellectual ammunition for the Reagan Revolution, one thinker who by today's standards is comparatively overlooked is the political theorist and writer Russell Kirk (b. 1918 – d. 1994). Having spent most of his life in rural Michigan, Kirk throughout his many books posited a literary vision of conservatism that emphasized the maintenance of civil society and traditional values. Notably, while holding relative ambivalence towards the free market, Kirk made the argument for conservatism primarily on spiritual and communal rather than economic grounds, arguing for a state-craft that sought to maintain a transcendent order in society rather than one that relied too heavily on market economics.

In the following paper, I will use our current populist moment as a launch-pad to explore the thought of Russell Kirk. While Kirk's work spans the 1950's to 1990's, it remains remarkably relevant to the contemporary political scene. As such, the writings

that form Russell Kirk's conservative framework can be easily applied to many of today's issues. Ultimately, in applying Kirk's thought to a series of contemporary issues, I will seek to move "up from populism", as my title suggests, to posit a normative vision for what a renewed conservative politics might look like.

Towards this goal, below, I first review the rise of populism both in the United States and globally. Subsequently, after providing a justification for looking specifically at Russell Kirk and providing a brief overview of his life and career, I look at a series of issues that are relevant in contemporary politics (trade, immigration, foreign policy, culture, and the environment), in each case detailing Kirk's thought on the issue and discussing how it might be applied contemporarily. Lastly, I conclude my paper by engaging in a discussion of the need for a renewed emphasis on civil society within conservatism, before providing a brief epilogue where I stress the importance of having a healthy center-right party to challenge the left in a well-functioning political system.

### An overview of the populist revolt

Up until recently, populist movements had gained only occasional traction within Western democracies. However, since the 2007-08 financial crisis, when many large banks that made improvident lending decisions were bailed out to rescue the U.S. economy and a large recession ensued, feelings of popular disaffection have served to embolden many populist movements (Judis, 2017). In what follows, I will describe the recent rise of right-wing populism in the U.S. with the Trump phenomenon, before



partaking in a discussion of populism globally to situate Trump as part of a broader movement sweeping the West.

### Right-wing populism in the U.S. and the Trump phenomenon

Up until mid-June 2015, the politicians who had announced campaigns for the 2016 U.S. presidential election - Hillary Clinton, Jeb Bush - had been somewhat predictable. Then, on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, celebrity real estate tycoon Donald Trump descended on a golden escalator alongside his wife Melania to make a special announcement in the hotel lobby of Trump Tower in Manhattan. After a forty-minute, at times inflammatory speech touching on issues including border security, bringing back manufacturing jobs to the U.S.A, and untangling the influence of special interests in politics, Trump would conclude by announcing a presidential bid on a promise to "Make America Great Again" (Ingraham, 2017).

While Trump was initially dismissed by commentators in the mainstream media, his campaign quickly garnered a significant amount of popular support. During the 2015-16 Republican primaries, Trump chided many of his opponents on stage for being beholden to special interests, positioning himself as the only candidate who could do the right thing for the American people by virtue of being a wealthy businessman beholden to no-one. With the Republican establishment underestimating the amount of disaffection within their own base, Trump - as an outsider candidate hitting notes many people wanted to hear, particularly on issues like trade and immigration - ultimately led a hostile

takeover of the Republican Party, culminating with his nomination at the GOP convention in Cleveland in July 2016 (Judis, 2017; Ingraham, 2017).

During the general election, Trump faced Hillary Clinton as the Democratic nominee, a career politician whose previous roles included First Lady, U.S. Senator from New York, and Secretary of State. Despite her pledge to make it easier for working families to get ahead, Mrs. Clinton – who had, amongst other things, given speeches to wealthy investors, voted in favor of the Iraq war, and enabled some of her husband’s more questionable behaviors – seemed to many Americans iconic of an out-of-touch political establishment. Defying the expectations of virtually all pollsters and pundits, Donald Trump would ultimately defeat Hillary Clinton when Election Day was held in November 2016, carrying all the solidly red states Mitt Romney carried in 2012 alongside a handful of blue-collar swing states in the industrial Midwest that had been negatively impacted by the effects of globalization. An electoral result that almost nobody had anticipated, Trump’s victory would be a shock to the American media and political establishment, and lead to a period of global uncertainty as the transition took place between the outgoing Obama and incoming Trump administrations (Ingraham, 2017).

### Populism around the world

Although at first glance the rise of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency may seem like a unique phenomenon, taking a step back and looking at Trump in the context of more recent political trends around the world suggests otherwise. Particularly, in many countries throughout Europe, populist movements have emerged and disrupted the

traditional debate among parties of the center-left and center-right by bringing up gap issues that have significant resonance with the general public. In what follows, I will provide a broad overview of these movements to situate Trump as merely the most large-scale manifestation of a pan-Western current of reactionary right-wing populism.

The situation that has the strongest parallels with the Trump phenomenon in the U.S. is perhaps the “Brexit” campaign in the U.K. Long-festering antipathy towards the European Union in the U.K. led prime minister David Cameron to hold a referendum on the country’s EU membership in June 2016, with the British people confounding the expectations of pollsters and pundits alike by voting in the aggregate to withdraw from the trade agreement (Ingrahm et al., 2016). As with the Trump victory, the successful “Leave” vote was in large part the result of a sizeable number of working-class citizens voicing their antipathy towards trade and immigration policies that, while being propped up by their country’s financial and cultural elite, had had deleterious effects on their communities and livelihood. (Inglehart et al., 2016; Judis, 2017).

Apart from the U.K., both France and Germany have also seen the rise of Euro-skeptic populist right movements. In France, National Front (FN), a French nationalist party with strong anti-trade and immigration views, has gained prominence under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. In the 2017 French election, Le Pen lost with a historic 34% of the second-round vote, while her opponent, centrist upstart Emmanuel Macron, has subsequently experienced medium to low approval ratings in office (Bastow et al., 2018). Meanwhile, in Germany, the far-right Euro-skeptic party Alternative for Deutschland (AFD) has gained significant popularity since taking on an anti-immigration stance given chancellor Angela Merkel’s “open door” policy. In the 2017 German election, the AFD

gained representation in the Bundestag and earned the third largest vote share at 13%, and have since become a significant opposition voice against the sitting Christian Democratic Union (Siri, 2018). Both examples are also alarming in their evocation of Europe's dark past, with the FN having once been accused of holocaust denial, while the AFD is the first instance of a far-right nationalist party to gain a following in Germany since the 1930's (Judis, 2017; Siri, 2018). Additionally, ethnically-tinged populist right parties have also emerged in Hungary, Italy and Poland (Judis, 2017).

### Conclusion

In November 1989, crowds gathered as the Berlin Wall was torn down in Germany's capital city. A barricade dividing the capitalist west and communist east Germany, the tearing down of the Wall was viewed as a symbolic victory of the Reagan and Thatcherite revolutions as the values they upheld – individualism, free trade, Judeo-Christian ethics – triumphed against the nefarious forces of what Reagan once famously derided as the “Evil Empire”. Within a year, Germany had formally reunified, and by the end of 1991, the Soviet Union, the United States' chief geopolitical rival and the hegemonic communist nation, would also dissolve (Buckley, 2004).

The victory of economic liberalism has subsequently led to an unprecedented period of prosperity in the West over the past few decades. However, the success of the post-Cold War liberal consensus has also led the elite political classes to become increasingly doctrinaire about the virtues of open trade and immigration at the risk of being inattentive to the concerns of ordinary citizens. This inattentiveness has enabled a

more toxic style of politics to emerge in populism, which has in turn caused the global order to exist on an increasingly precarious foundation.

Ultimately, a disconnect between elite and public perception of certain policies created the electoral gap that enabled the rise of populism. Furthermore, in the United States and other countries, this electoral gap has been exploited by opportunistic actors seemingly more concerned with advancing their own political clout than dealing with issues that afflict the public in a substantive way. The success of these movements in many countries has also caused politics to teeter increasingly between an ethnically-tinged right-wing populism and strongly left-wing democratic socialism, fostering a less productive civil discourse and creating systemic imbalance. Ultimately, the current political moment calls not for toxic actors seeking personal gain, but a more normative conservative politics that simultaneously re-orient itself around the issues afflicting a growing number of disenchanted people and restores civility to our political discourse. With this in mind, I now turn to look at the life and work of Russell Kirk, a writer and political theorist who columnist Ross Douthat described as having forged the “path not taken for American conservatism”, to begin to posit what a more normative conservatism might look like in response to the rise of populism (Douthat et al., 2017).

## **Russell Kirk**

Before looking at his commentary on specific issues, it is worth reviewing Russell Kirk's life and career. Looking at Kirk's career holistically provides a framework for his traditional conservatism that helps one to better understand his stance on specific issues. Furthermore, with Kirk having led a politically active life, an overview of Kirk's life also provides a comparative historical look at conservative politics in the United States, demonstrating how the Republican Party has strayed from its more idealistic vision in times past to become the more corporatized party it is today. Ultimately, Kirk's vision, in upholding a vision of conservatism that seeks not only to preserve the free market but also the institutions that make society function as a harmonious eco-system, helps us again to re-orient conservatism away from the lopsidedly economic conservatism that helped beget Trumpism and back to, as Kirk envisioned it, something more multi-dimensional and humane.

## **Why Russell Kirk?**

When looking at this paper, the first question one might ask is: "Why look at Russell Kirk?" With only surface knowledge of Kirk as a conservative thinker, the decision to look at Kirk versus, say, William F. Buckley Jr. or Leo Strauss, may seem a bit arbitrary. However, such a view also betrays a degree of ignorance towards the internecine squabbles that have often been a feature of the right in defining what conservative ought to be.

The conservative movement that culminated with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan was a fusion of two different schools of thought: economic conservatism and traditionalist conservatism (Brooks, 2012). The chief exponents of the former school would have been thinkers like Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, who stressed reducing the scope of the government and getting rid of restraints on the private sector to enhance freedom and promote economic growth (Hayek, 1944; Friedman, 1962). Meanwhile, the chief exponents of the latter would have been figures like Kirk and Richard Weaver, who stressed the maintenance of traditional values to uphold a normative vision of society (Weaver, 1948; Kirk, 1953). Together, these countervailing forces would form the intellectual infrastructure for the Reagan Revolution, a period during the 1980's that saw not only the renewal of economic confidence in America but also the return to a sense of normality within American culture (Troy, 2005).

Unfortunately, with the economic liberalization that began under Reagan, economic conservatism has continued to gain clout over the past few decades as traditionalist conservatism has largely receded from view. While the average person following politics might be familiar with conservatives as politicians who call for tax cuts and deregulation, the notion that a conservative might also want to preserve the environment or uphold the teaching of classics in liberal arts curricula is a less familiar concept, which speaks to the extent the economic conservatism developed through think tanks and other institutions has shaped the conversation in the conservative world in more recent decades. Ultimately, this provides further reason to revisit the life and work of Russell Kirk, the most noteworthy writer and political theorist associated with

traditionalist conservatism, in support of the argument that a reprisal of traditional conservative thought might serve to ameliorate an ailing G.O.P.

### Biography.

Russell Kirk was born on October 19, 1918 in Plymouth, Michigan, a small city twenty miles outside of Detroit. Growing up in a poor but bookish family, Kirk demonstrated precocious literary talent from an early age, earning a scholarship upon graduating high school to attend Michigan State University. After receiving his bachelor's degree from Michigan State in 1940, Kirk would subsequently receive his master's degree from Duke University in 1941 (Person, 1999).

After a brief stint in the military during World War II, Kirk would obtain a teaching post at his alma mater Michigan State while simultaneously pursuing a Doctor of Letters at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Having written on the statesman John Randolph of Roanoke for his master's thesis, Kirk would subsequently attempt to trace the lineage of conservative thought dating back to Edmund Burke with his doctoral thesis. This latter work would ultimately be published as Kirk's first book, *The Conservative Mind*, in 1953 (Person, 1999; Birzer, 2015).

Upon its publication in 1953, *The Conservative Mind* would mark a watershed moment in American intellectual life. In situating conservatism as an intellectually defensible tradition, Kirk would offer a strong rebuke to Lionel Trilling's assertion that liberalism was the sole intellectual tradition in America and that conservatism merely amounted to a series of "irritable mental gestures". Furthermore, Kirk's book helped unify



a disparate group of intellectuals who stood in opposition to the liberal status quo under the banner of a nascent “conservative” movement (Rossiter, 1962; Nash, 1976).

With the publishing success of *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk was able to resign his academic post at Michigan State. Over the years, Kirk had started to become increasingly disenchanted with lowering academic standards and a growing emphasis on intercollegiate athletics at MSU at the expense of the traditional liberal arts, once derisively referring to the university as having turned into “Behemoth University”. After his resignation, Kirk would subsequently move to the rural village of Mecosta, Michigan, some two hours north of Lansing, where he would base himself for the remainder of his career (Pafford, 2010; Birzer, 2015).

While *The Conservative Mind* has endured as Kirk’s most famous work, Kirk authored many influential books over the course of his long and varied career. To give a couple examples, *Eliot and his Age* (1971) has often been cited by literary scholars as an important study of the English poet T.S. Eliot, while *The Roots of American Order* (1974) was another notable work that sought to trace the antecedents of American prosperity through its Judeo-Christian heritage. Additionally, Kirk wrote an education column for William F. Buckley, Jr.’s conservative magazine *National Review* for decades, authored a significant body of horror fiction, and oversaw the publication of two journals, *Modern Age* and *The University Bookman* (Person, 1999).

After a lengthy correspondence by letter, Kirk would marry Annette Courtemanche, a young woman involved in the conservative movement, in 1964. Annette

would inspire Kirk's eventual conversion to the Catholic church, and together the couple would have four daughters: Cecilia, Monica, Felicia and Andrea. In addition to this already large family, the Kirks would also play host to a variety of students, academics, authors and politicians who regularly came to their home as an intellectual bastion for the "permanent things" that Kirk espoused. After a short bout of illness, Kirk ultimately died on April 29th, 1994 at the age of 75, although interest in his work has persisted in the decades since his passing (Honan, 1994; Person, 1999).

### *The Conservative Mind.*

Kirk is best remembered for his 1953 book, *The Conservative Mind*. Challenging John Stuart Mill's assertion that conservatives were the "stupid party", *The Conservative Mind* sought to trace the history of anti-progressive dissent among various distinguished political thinkers, statesmen, and writers, profiling among others Edmund Burke, John Adams, Alexis de Tocqueville and T.S. Eliot. Ultimately, the book would provocatively argue that conservatism existed not only in an ignorant form, but also in a strongly intellectual form well-equipped to take on the issues of society (Rossiter, 1962; Nash, 1976).

Although he later revised the list in one of his final books, Kirk provided a list of the six "canons" of conservative thought in *The Conservative Mind*. The six canons are worth quoting at length:

(1) Belief in a transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems.

(2) Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence, as oppose to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems...

(3) Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes, as against the notion of a “classless society” ... If natural distinctions are effaced among men, oligarchs fill the vacuum. Ultimate equality in the judgement of God, and equality before courts of law, are recognized by conservatives; but equality of condition, they think, means equality in servitude and boredom.

(4) Persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked...Economic leveling, they maintain, is not economic progress.

(5) Faith in prescription and distrust of “sophisters, calculators, and economists” who would reconstruct society upon abstract designs. Custom, convention, and old prescription are checks upon both man’s anarchic impulse and upon the innovator’s lust for power.

(6) Recognition that change may not be salutary reform: hasty innovation may be a devouring conflagration, rather than a torch of progress. Society altering for prudent change is the means of progress... (Kirk, 1953).

Ultimately, *The Conservative Mind* was historically most important for providing the nascent conservative movement with a strong intellectual foundation. While works like F.A. Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* and William F. Buckley, Jr.’s *God and Man at Yale* aroused the curiosity of the reading public, they were still downplayed by the liberal intellectual establishment as the work of individualist cranks and eccentrics. However, with *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk was able to organize these “irritable mental gestures”

into an intellectually coherent world-view to which even liberal critics would have to give due consideration (Nash, 1976; Birzer, 2015).

Upon being issued by Regnery in 1953, *The Conservative Mind* would be an unexpected publishing success. In their July 1953 issue, *Time* magazine would devote their entire books section to an in-depth discussion of Kirk's debut work. Meanwhile, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, Gordon Chalmers commented that Kirk had authored a riposte to Karl Marx and Howard Laski that was "brilliant, and even eloquent" (Chalmers, 1953). Other note-worthy publications like *The Economist*, *U.S. Quarterly Book Review*, and *The Wall Street Journal* would also lavish praise on *The Conservative Mind* upon its publication (Birzer, 2015). Ultimately, Kirk's book heralded the moment when those on the left would have to come to grips with conservatism as an intelligent political philosophy that could hold its own against liberalism and socialism, rather than the curious gestures of a few intellectual reactionaries.

#### Critique of libertarianism.

Early in his career, Kirk embraced libertarianism as a political philosophy. Particularly, Kirk was taken with Albert Jay Nock's *Our Enemy, the State* (1935), a work of political theory that broke with intellectual consensus at the time by arguing a growing state would result in a loss of human freedom. Kirk would engage in a letter correspondence with Nock until his death in 1945, and the libertarian writer was even mentioned favorably in early editions of *The Conservative Mind* (Birzer, 2015).

Additionally, Kirk was influenced for a period by the writer Isabel Patterson, who alongside Ayn Rand and Rose Wilder Lane is often considered one of the female writers integral to the founding of the early libertarian movement (Powell and Reed, 2016). In the bibliography of the first edition of *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk listed Patterson's most famous work *The God of the Machine* (1943), which exalted capitalism for its ability to unleash individual creativity to better society, as an important conservative work. In personal letters, Kirk also praised *The God of the Machine* to friend Bill McCann, asserting that it was one of the more well-written books he ever read on the need for decentralization and economic liberty (Birzer, 2015).

Later in life, however, the more overt libertarianism of Kirk's youth came to fade. In the late 1940's and 1950's, Kirk made several comments suggesting he had grown distant from his early libertarianism with increased maturity. Subsequently, in 1981, Kirk gave a speech at the Heritage Foundation entitled "Libertarians: Chirping Sectaries" where he argued that libertarianism and traditionalist conservatism were incompatible. Ultimately, Kirk took issue with libertarians' upholding of freedom over order, arguing society could only work if a free market system operated within a set of Judeo-Christian traditions and norms (Kirk, 1981; Pafford, 2010).

### Involvement in politics.

Although Kirk held something of a literary distaste for politics, he nonetheless played an active role in the conservative movement he helped found in the 1950's and which culminated in Reagan's 1980 election victory. Although initially the conservative

movement occupied a more marginal right-wing flank within the GOP, the movement would gain a champion with the emergence of Barry Goldwater on the political scene in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Kirk would play an active role in Goldwater's campaign for president in 1964, which saw the Arizona senator capture the Republican nomination but ultimately lose to incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson during the general election due to perceptions of Goldwater as a war-monger and the issue of civil rights (Nash, 1976; Birzer, 2015).

Prior to Kirk's involvement in the Goldwater campaign, the two had each made complimentary statements about one another in public. In many of his contemporaneous articles for *National Review*, Kirk wrote enthusiastically about Goldwater as a man of integrity who would curtail the growing statism of the New Deal and return America to its founding ideals as inscribed in the Constitution. Meanwhile, Goldwater often praised Kirk over the course of his political career, once writing in a syndicated column that Kirk made the case for conservatism "better than any other contemporary scholar" (Birzer, 2015). Additionally, Kirk would pen two notable speeches for Goldwater at the University of Notre-Dame and Yale University in the spring of 1962, with the former upholding the cause of economic liberty at home, while the latter stressed the need for the U.S. to combat the growth of Soviet-style communism abroad (Birzer, 2015).

It is probably fair to say that there was a certain degree of idealism to Kirk's support of Goldwater. In rolling back the state, Kirk believed Goldwater would accord people the dignity of living in a free society, although in gaining this dignity people

might also lose some of the comforts afforded by a nanny state. Not resenting charity because of confiscatory taxes, however, people would also act more benevolently towards one another through engaging in voluntary associations (e.g. church initiatives), lending to a richer civic life in America. Although people should not be made equal through social levelling, Kirk thought, they should remain equal as citizens of a free society and as human beings made in God's image (Birzer, 2015).

Though Kirk became less overtly involved in national politics following Goldwater's defeat in 1964, he remained outspoken on current affairs and continued to occasionally dabble in campaigning over the next few decades. After Goldwater's defeat, the conservative movement did not fully galvanize the Republican Party again until Ronald Reagan won the party's nomination in 1980. Kirk threw his support behind both of Reagan's ultimately successful presidential campaigns in 1980 and 1984, viewing Reagan as a politician who possessed the power of audacity and imagination (Birzer, 2015). Subsequently, in 1992, disillusioned by U.S. foreign policy during the Gulf War, Kirk supported insurgent primary contender Pat Buchanan, serving as the chair of Buchanan's campaign in the state of Michigan (Person, 1999). Interestingly, and tellingly, Kirk also sometimes demonstrated a non-traditional voting record as a conservative, voting for socialist Norman Thomas in 1944, and writing favorably of Democrat Eugene McCarthy's independent bid for president in 1976 (Pafford, 2010).

### Conclusion.

Although some intellectual conservatives continue to have a voice in contemporary debates, it is also probably fair to say that intellectual conservatism does not have nearly the same amount of clout as it did in Kirk and Buckley's time. Following the Reagan years, powerful interests came to have an increasing amount of sway in setting the conservative agenda, with the more poetic vision on offer from figures like Kirk being shouted out by calls to cut taxes and slash regulations. In this increasingly toxic political climate, intellectual conservatives would have their cultural relevance supplanted by the likes of more populist figures like Ann Coulter, someone columnist George Will has described as "an enemy to conservatism's pursuit of an intellectual brand" (Wolf-Sorokin, 2013).

An overview of Kirk's life and career provides an introduction to his brand of traditionalist conservatism. Furthermore, the way in which Kirk's life overlapped with the American conservative movement during the second half of the twentieth century provides a point of comparison for how the Republican Party has experienced a decline from the Reagan years to today. Ultimately, the emergence of populism due to a disaffection with a more singularly economic conservatism gives us reason to revisit traditionalists like Russell Kirk, who saw conservatism as being not only about the preservation of free enterprise but also about the defence of a set of institutions that make society function as a harmonious eco-system. In what follows, I will now look at Kirk's thought as it pertains to a series of prescient contemporary issues, the first being trade, followed by immigration, foreign policy, culture, and the environment, before ending



with a discussion of a Kirkian vision for a renewed emphasis on civil society within American conservatism.

## **Trade**

In contemporary times, citizens have felt increasingly disenfranchised by free trade deals that, while being supported by their country's financial and cultural elite, have had deleterious effects on the communities and livelihoods of working people. With the consensus around free trade having been shared up until recently by major parties of both the center-left and center-right, a gap would be left for a third-party actor questioning free trade that would subsequently be exploited by populist campaigns on both sides of the political spectrum.

In the American context, one of the main targets of populist ire has been the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Signed in 1994, the trilateral pact would entail more liberalized trade between Canada, the United States, and Mexico, resulting in a significant number of factory closures and job losses at home as businesses took advantage of cheaper labor markets south of the U.S. border (Faux, 2013). On the respective left and right, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, though qualitatively different in political style, would criticize these deals for enriching a small elite at the expense of working-class Americans (Judis, 2017).

In what follows, I examine Kirk's writings on economics. While generally expressing ambivalence towards the free market, it is clear from Kirk's writing that he was not a doctrinaire libertarian, once again viewing the goal of any policy as the maintenance of a transcendent order in society. In this regard, Kirk's thought points us towards a normative vision for more sound policy.

### Kirk's perspective on economics

Throughout his career, many in the conservative intellectual community criticized Kirk for not dealing with economics extensively in his writing. However, unlike other traditionalist conservatives like Edmund Burke and Irving Babbitt, Kirk did discuss the issue of economics occasionally in his work. Particularly, Kirk often stressed the need for free enterprise to be conducted within a set of inherited traditions and norms (Attarian, 1996, 1998).

On each side of the political spectrum, Kirk criticized utopian thinking on the part of both centralized planners and free market adherents, and in general was highly skeptical of any sort of ideological orthodoxy regarding economics. On the left, Kirk criticized economic levelling through taxation, which he thought would lead to resentment towards charity, overly intrusive government, and a decline into decadence. Meanwhile, on the right, Kirk criticized when businessmen's pursuit of profit disregarded a larger need for the stewardship of civil society, for instance the flight of trans-national capital leading to the devastation of small communities. Ultimately, while Kirk upheld the classically liberal economic theory of thinkers like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, he also believed that order preceded liberty, and that any economic policy must be conducted within a set of Judeo-Christian traditions and norms (Attarian, 1998).

In short, while Kirk had a largely benevolent sentiment towards the free market, he also warned against market dogmatism among conservatives. In establishing a largely meritocratic society with an unequal distribution of rewards, Kirk believed a free market system forced individuals to use their creativity and ingenuity to compete, leading to a more prosperous society. However, Kirk also stressed that economics constituted only

one component of conservatism, and that conservatives ought not to “emphasize economic abstractions at the expense of nearly everything else in society” (Kirk, 1965; see also Frum, 1996).

### Kirk’s thoughts on NAFTA

Interestingly, Kirk actually commented on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in his lifetime. Although dating back to the Reagan years, the idea to have a trade agreement between Canada, the United States and Mexico wouldn’t be set in motion as a piece of legislation until the Bush administration, and, shortly before Kirk’s death, was ultimately signed by Bill Clinton in December 1993. Breaking ranks with fellow Republicans, Kirk expressed concern regarding the agreement, and the effect it would potentially have on small farming communities (Person, 1999).

Politically, Kirk identified himself with agrarianism, a political philosophy upholding rural life that was particularly strong in the South, and even once called himself a “Northern Agrarian”. Having familiarized himself with the proposed legislation, Kirk expressed concern regarding NAFTA in the early 1990’s, believing it would give the giants of farming an unfair advantage in the farming industry. Particularly, Kirk worried that the agreement would impact the livelihood of many small rural communities centered around agriculture, in that small farms would be at a lopsided disadvantage against large industrial farms with much of the trade liberalization the deal would entail (Person, 1999).

Ultimately, Kirk believed that farms existed not only to feed cities, and that rural communities in the United States were worth preserving for their own sake. In a move to promote economic growth, Kirk thought trade legislation like NAFTA would destroy many of the farming communities that were a part of America's heritage. Although Kirk ultimately resigned himself to the inevitability of NAFTA being signed, he continued to hold serious trepidations about the trade agreement until his death in April 1994 (Person, 1999).

#### NAFTA's impacts

After Bill Clinton signed the NAFTA legislation in late 1993, the trade pact went into effect with the onset of 1994. Although NAFTA was upheld on the principle that it would lower the cost of goods by giving businesses access to cheaper labor markets and reducing the costs of cross-border trade by eliminating tariffs, the deal would have a seriously deleterious effect on America's blue-collar workers. Over the ensuing years and decades, the U.S. lost some 700,000 jobs as companies relocated to Mexico, while threat of further foreclosures would also serve to undermine labor unions' collective bargaining rights (Faux, 2013). Additionally, most workers who lost their jobs because of the trade pact would experience a permanent loss in income (Faux, 2013).

Kirk's concerns about NAFTA's effects on farming were also largely vindicated. Between 1982 and 2007, phenomena like NAFTA and the earlier U.S. farming crisis would result in medium-sized family farms declining by a margin of 40% and going from constituting half to less than a third of the American farming industry (Dreher, 2006;

Hansen-Kuhn, 2013). Meanwhile, consolidations of corporate power would also occur across many sectors of the American farming industry. In sectors including poultry, soybeans, and flour, a small handful of firms would go from taking up roughly half to an overwhelming majority of each sector's market-share in the years following NAFTA's enactment (MacDonald, 2002; Hansen-Kuhn, 2013).

### Discussion

While Russell Kirk would presumably have opposed the presidency of Barack Obama, putting partisanship aside one can also recognize Obama as someone who can occasionally provide insightful commentary that may provide a basis for consensus with a more conservative and even Kirkian point of view. Specifically, a set of comments Obama made at a panel at Georgetown University in 2015 comes to mind with the discussion of economic policy at hand.

During the panel, Obama commented that in times past social mores influenced business leaders to act in a more communitarian way, for example a business making an endowment to a local high school or paying workers at a certain wage (Dolan, 2015). However, under the influence of thinkers like Ayn Rand, who rejected Judeo-Christian values of altruism and self-sacrifice and exalted unfettered self-interest, Obama argued corporate interests have increasingly abnegated a sense of social responsibility in their pursuit of profit. Furthermore, Obama argued that this new set of values is reinforced by the larger business culture, with lists like the Fortune 500 that rank corporations competitively by their bottom line (Dolan, 2015).

While having been a conservative at home in the G.O.P., one suspects Kirk, who once criticized economists for their fixation with the “nexus of cash payment”, would have found some common ground with Obama on this statement (Continetti, 2018). Over the past several decades, as old social institutions have weakened, so too have corporate interests become increasingly concerned about winning in the global market-place over having any fidelity to a sense of community and place. This has led to a less stable and continuous society, which is a development Kirk would have been dismayed by.

Having originally been from Plymouth, Kirk sometimes wrote about the plight of Detroit in his later years (Kirk, 1993). Once the hub of America’s automotive industry, the city subsequently became divested of much of its resources with increased economic liberalization, leading to widespread urban blight and serving as a microcosm for the larger decline of America’s manufacturing base. With Kirk having in general disliked things that fostered a worse society for the sake of profit, one presumes he would at least been sympathetic to some of the grievances of Trump supporters. Indeed, economically liberal legislation like NAFTA served to embolden corporate power at the expense of rural and blue-collar Americans. This contributed to the increased populist angst that enabled a decadent figure like Trump to rise, and arguably serves as a manifestation of Kirk’s prophecy regarding what “an age without veneration does to itself” (Kirk, 1953).

### Conclusion

In summary, the largest takeaway for Kirk’s economic thought was that he emphasized a broader conservative vision and not a singularly economic libertarianism.

This vision of an economics meant to serve social ends serves as a stark contrast to what the G.O.P. has become in more recent years, with the party (and political establishment more broadly) having upheld laissez-faire policies that served the interests of a financial elite rather than those of most Americans. This approach to trade policy would have a deleterious effect on the American middle class, which in turn gave way to the disenchantment that empowered the Trump vote.

Ultimately, Kirk's "economics of the permanent things" would seek to temper an emphasis on economics with a consideration for the other institutions and forms of order (e.g. family values, community) that make for a healthy society. Thus, responses to situations are not fixed but rather depend on context. While in the early 1980's economically liberal reform was what was needed to reinvigorate an ailing U.S. economy during the Reagan administration, a more normative conservative economic policy would seek to be adaptive when a different set of circumstances called for a different response. When liberty supersedes order, and begins to foster disorder, the conservative should be given pause, and subsequently seek to redress the balance in society through prudent reform. What this reform might look like is difficult to say, but perhaps future trade deals or revisions of NAFTA could include more clauses to protect aspects of culture that might be threatened by more liberalized trade. For example, the Canadians have historically included stipulations in many of their trade agreements with the United States in a conservative gesture to protect domestic culture and industry against U.S. influence. Similarly, a new trade agreement might include provisions to protect things like small farms that contribute to American culture. In any case, a more normative trade deal would be a multi-faceted one that balanced accruing economic benefits and maintaining



social continuity while taking account of the less immediately tangible things that make for a good society. In what follows, I now look at a related issue where imprudent policy has caused disorder, immigration, to again channel Kirk's thought towards a normative vision for more sound policy.

## **Immigration**

In recent times, concerns regarding economic displacement, dilution of national culture, and potential crime and terrorism have driven political debates about the role of immigration and immigrants in American society. As with trade, up until recently there had been a certain amount of consensus among parties of the center-left and center-right on immigration, with the political establishment's inability to gauge public opinion again creating a gap that was subsequently exploited by populist movements on both the left and right.

In the American context, the pro-business climate of the Reagan administration during the 1980's saw a re-orientation towards more open immigration policies (MPI, 2017). Subsequently, with the neoliberal consensus shared by Democrat and Republican administrations alike, immigration, and particularly low-skilled immigration, has grown over the ensuing decades, while creating an increasing amount of animus among a sizeable portion of the American electorate. After the GOP predictably lost the 2012 election on a platform calling for increased immigration, Donald Trump's boldly anti-immigration stance would be a key feature of his ultimately successful populist insurgency, while on the left, Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders would dismiss open borders as a "Koch Brothers proposal" (Judis, 2017).

In what follows, I will look at Kirk's writings on immigration. Looking at what Kirk had to say on immigration at different points in his life make clear that his view of immigration fluctuated through changing circumstances, reflecting Kirk's preference for pragmatism over ideology. Ultimately, reconciling Kirk's divergent views once again points the way towards a normative conception for more sound policy.

### Kirk's stance on immigration

On several occasions throughout his life, Russell Kirk commented on the issue of immigration. Interestingly, Kirk's views on the matter shifted over the years as more open immigration policies started being adopted during the first Bush administration (McDonald, 2005). Ultimately, reconciling Kirk's various comments on the issue demonstrate that he advocated a more prudent approach with regards to U.S. immigration policy.

In 1989, Kirk first commented on the issue of immigration in a high school textbook he authored, *Economics: Work and Prosperity in Christian Perspective*. At the time, Kirk argued that immigration was largely a net benefit to the U.S., in that it showed the country was acquiring more human resources, immigrants were largely enterprising people, and immigrants over time adapted to the values of the country to which they immigrated (Kirk, 1989, McDonald, 2005). Rejecting the notion that immigration undermined national cohesion, Kirk admonished high schoolers to welcome new arrivals to America, who he believed overall made for a stronger and more dynamic country (McDonald, 2005).

Only three years later, however, Kirk's views had changed markedly on the issue. In addition to criticizing the Bush administration's foreign policy, Kirk also took issue with the administration's more laissez-faire immigration policies, and later mobilized around the insurgent primary campaign of Pat Buchanan during the 1992 U.S. presidential election. Serving as Buchanan's campaign chair for the state of Michigan,

Kirk wrote in a press release that large flows of low-skilled immigration were undermining the United States' culture, economy and social cohesion, and in a subsequent newspaper interview with his wife Annette, commented he was supporting Buchanan in part because of his opposition to "more liberal immigration policies" (McDonald, 2005).

### Growth of immigration

Although Kirk's shifting views on immigration might at first seem capricious, they reflected a tangible increase in immigration rates between the Reagan and Bush administrations. According to a study by the Center for Immigration Studies, while the number of foreign-born increased by a margin of 5.7% over the span of the entire 1980's, the number of foreign-born increased 3.5% in the span of only four years from 1990 to 1994 (CIS, 1994). Thus, Kirk's views did not come from a place of political opportunism but, rather, were a conservative turn against an increasingly liberal immigration policy under President Bush.

While the arguments of some critics of immigration may be rooted in bigotry, Kirk's belief in a more moderate U.S. immigration policy stemmed from a belief in continuity and stewardship. Pushing back against those who would make platitudinous statements about America being a "land of immigrants", Kirk saw the United States' success as owing to its continuity with British legal tradition and "melting pot" culture that made immigrants adapt to Western values (Pafford, 2010). Thus, in the sense not that individual immigrants are bad but that a stable society cannot sustain an excessive

amount of immigration, Kirk criticized increasingly liberal immigration policies that he argued would undermine the cohesion of American society by letting too many in too quickly (McDonald, 2005).

Unfortunately, the G.O.P. would not take heed of Kirk's warnings about too much immigration. In the time since Kirk's death, rates of immigration would continue to rise astronomically with each passing decade adding roughly ten million additional immigrants to the total number of new immigrants [see Fig. 1] (MPI, 2017). Following his father's example, President George W. Bush continued to enable large flows of immigration, arguing on the campaign trail that migrants from Mexico were decent people who simply wanted to take part in the promise of the American dream (Gonyea, 2018). However, as the G.O.P. continued to pursue more liberal immigration policies, a growing chasm would develop between the party's elite and its base, contributing to the ferment that enabled Trump's rise (Gonyea, 2018).

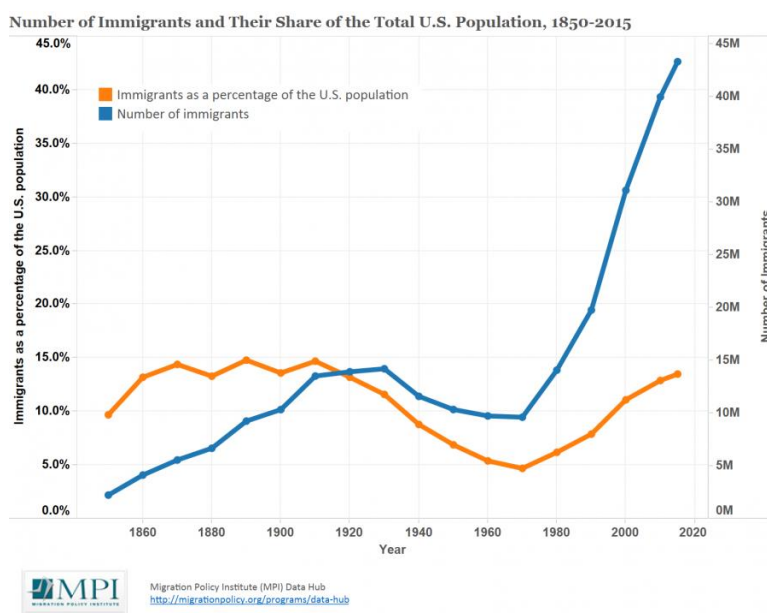


Fig. 1: Immigration to the U.S. since 1840, with drastic increase since the 1990's (© MPI, 2017)

With the respective open and hard-line immigration stances of the Democrat and Republican parties, having an intelligent conversation about immigration has become increasingly difficult in today's partisan political climate. On the left, Democrats often seem to uncritically embrace open immigration policies. Meanwhile, on the right, Republicans under Trump seem to have moved in a white nationalist direction that denies the color and vibrancy immigrants bring to American culture.

Reconciling Kirk's different stances on immigration points towards an idea of what a more normative immigration policy might look like. Rejecting the cultural relativism of the left, a more normative immigration policy would take pride in its British-inherited institutions and seek to conserve them, so they always remained the dominant influence on law and culture. However, be it the Chinese-run convenience store or Polish deli, a more normative immigration policy would also acknowledge and make room for the worldly variety immigrants bring to their adopted communities and recognize that within a generation the children of immigrants often fully absorb the values of the country to which their family immigrated.

Furthermore, a more normative immigration policy would again seek not to "emphasize economic abstractions at the expense of nearly everything else in society" (Kirk, 1965). Though it sometimes expresses itself in bigotry, the desire to protect one's own culture against the forces of the world is an honest one and, were the planning of society left to utilitarian economists and corporate interests, everything that was sacred

and unique about distinctive peoples and places would be threatened in a push to demolish borders and maximize profit. While economic considerations are important, data on how immigration is good for the economy has little to say about a sense of continuity within society. In short, while economic interests should certainly have a seat at the table when decisions about immigration are being made, such decisions should also not be made from a singularly economic perspective.

### Conclusion

In terms of formulating a more normative immigration policy, the United States might look to the example of its Northern neighbor. Under the conservative government of Stephen Harper, Canada would take on a large number of new immigrants, while simultaneously maintaining popular support for these policies (Harper, 2018). Ultimately, in paying heed to public opinion, Harper upheld the political virtue of prudence, a lesson for Republican policy-makers should they want to retrieve their brand of politics from its more populist factions.

A self-described incrementalist in politics, Harper would gradually raise the number of immigrants yearly during his time as Prime Minister from 2006 to 2015, with the number of new arrivals in Canada rising to 280,000 during the final year the Conservatives formed government (Ibbitson, 2014). While largely in favor of immigration, Harper would also strive to remain aware of public opinion on immigration with each yearly increase, recognizing that a truly conservative approach to governance was one that tempered a push towards increased economic liberalism with recognition of

the need for social order. Although Harper was ousted in favor of Justin Trudeau's Liberals in the 2015 Canadian federal election, Harper's immigration policy was one aspect of his agenda that earned consistent popular support. Furthermore, with immigrants often living by values of upward mobility, faith, and family, these new arrivals would form a significant new voting bloc for the Conservatives, with the party winning a majority and significant-minority of the immigrant vote in the respective 2011 and 2015 elections (Ibbitson, 2014; Harper, 2018).

Ultimately, a more normative immigration policy would strive to temper market demands with regard for a sense of culture and permanence. While data supports that immigration is good for the economy, the conservative, being skeptical of libertarian economists that would seek to reconstruct the world upon abstract designs, would strive to moderate immigration to the extent that it did not undermine cultural cohesion. Reconciling Kirk's shifting views on immigration during the Reagan and Bush administration helps us to construct a Kirkian response to immigration that is highly prescient in our current politics, while the prudent governance of former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper provides a tangible example to U.S. policy-makers of what a more sensible immigration policy might look like. In what follows, I will now look at another prescient issue in the age of populism – foreign policy – to once again demonstrate the relevance of Kirk's thought in contemporary times.



## **Foreign Policy**

While not as significant a factor as trade or immigration, another thing that has contributed to the recent rise of populism is a feeling of disaffection among voters regarding U.S. foreign policy. In particular, the foreign policy failures during the George W. Bush administration and the subsequent rise of terrorist groups like ISIS has created a demand for a new approach to military involvement abroad. In this respect, the candidacy of Donald Trump in particular once again resonated with voters who felt disaffected with establishment politics.

During the Republican primaries in 2015, Donald Trump openly mocked candidate Jeb Bush for defending brother George W. Bush's legacy, arguing military entanglements in Afghanistan and Iraq were what led to the liberal presidency of Barack Obama. Subsequently, facing Hillary Clinton, a third way Democrat who once voted in favor of the war in Afghanistan, Trump again chided his opponent as one of the incompetent elite "who'd gotten us into this mess". Ultimately, Trump tapped into a feeling, first among the Republican electorate and then among a larger group of blue-collar swing voters, that U.S. military involvement abroad had failed in its objectives and that Americans would be best served prioritizing their own interests going forward (Ingraham, 2017).

As with trade and immigration, foreign policy is a topic Kirk wrote a significant amount on over his career. Particularly in his later years, Kirk was a strong critic of interventionist U.S. foreign policy, taking issue with neo-conservatives who advocated deeper American involvement in the Middle-East. Ultimately, Kirk's notion of a strong

but largely hands-off foreign policy again points us towards a more normative conservative vision.

### Kirk on World War II

Though largely stoic in temperament, Kirk was heavily impacted by the events of World War II. Particularly, Kirk was disturbed by the internment of Japanese-Americans and bombing of Hiroshima under the successive Democratic administrations of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman (Birzer, 2015). These experiences would profoundly shape the young Kirk and give him a lifelong preference for prudence and restraint in foreign affairs.

In 1942, under war-time pressure, Roosevelt signed an executive order that rounded up many Japanese-Americans and sent them to prisoner of war camps. Though retrospectively viewed as a moral stain on Roosevelt's legacy, Kirk even at the time saw the interment of Japanese-Americans as morally reprehensible. Additionally, Kirk viewed the event an example of the negative consequences of too much centralized power in government.

In August 1945, in a final strike on Japan to bring an end to WWII, the U.S. under Truman subsequently dropped two nuclear bombs on the populations of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Kirk was disturbed by the sheer number of innocent lives lost, but also by the fact Nagasaki and Hiroshima were outlier cities within the larger Japanese culture and host to a large population of Asian Christians. Later, Kirk wrote that the onset of WWII saw a group of individuals unaccustomed to large-scale moral responsibilities commit

grave atrocities at home and abroad, and that in future it was incumbent upon conservatives to curtail the possibility of such impulsive decision-making in foreign affairs (Birzer, 2015).

### Kirk on the Cold War

While largely being averse to U.S. military involvement abroad, one notable exception for Kirk besides his tepid support for World War II was the Cold War. Like many conservatives at the time, Kirk was gravely concerned about the build-up of the hegemonic communist nation, the U.S.S.R, and the threat communism posed to the plight of free people everywhere (Pafford, 2010). A review of some of Kirk's writings of the time demonstrate his more hawkish stance towards the Soviet Union.

As previously mentioned, in the early 1960's Kirk wrote two speeches for Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, with the latter speech at Yale addressing the Soviet issue. Specifically, Kirk wrote that complacency regarding the growth of Nazi Germany as a geopolitical threat helped enable World War II, with the growing Soviet Union now representing a similar threat. Furthermore, Kirk argued that the devastation of Nagasaki and Hiroshima instilled Americans with a guilt complex they now needed to overcome if they wanted to come to grips with the existential threat posed by communism (Birzer, 2015).

Meanwhile, anti-communist messages were also present in much of Kirk's contemporaneous fiction writing. In his novel, *A Creature of Twilight* (1966), for instance, Kirk tells the story of Manfred Arcane, a soldier who heroically leads the army

of a small North African country against a Soviet-backed coup (Kirk, 1966; Pafford, 2010). Ultimately, while largely supporting pacifism and non-interventionism, Kirk made an exception in the case of the Cold War, viewing the spread of communism as a threat to the cause of liberty worldwide that justified a more aggressive foreign policy.

### Kirk vs. Jaffa

As time wore on, the conservative movement would increasingly splinter into different sects. One such sect was the neo-conservatives, a group of intellectuals who migrated from the Democratic to Republican Party because of their belief in a more hawkish U.S. foreign policy. While Kirk had an amicable relationship with the movement's founder, Leo Strauss, Kirk often found himself in intellectual disputes with many of Strauss's disciples (Pafford, 2010).

One of the most famous debates Kirk had was with political theorist and Strauss disciple Harry Jaffa, with the main point at issue in the debate being their interpretation of America's founding documents. Following conventional wisdom, Jaffa viewed the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution as a radical break with Great Britain that heralded a new nation based on enlightenment values of individual rights and liberty. Conversely, Kirk saw the founding documents as expressing a desire for American sovereignty due to grievances with the British government, but otherwise betraying a strong continuity with British law. Additionally, Kirk saw Jaffa, a former liberal who came to the right due to disillusionment regarding U.S. foreign policy, as having too strong a belief in the ability of government to solve societal problems (Pafford, 2010).

In the Reagan years and beyond, neo-conservatives would have an increasing amount of influence on U.S. foreign policy under Republican administrations. Beginning with the Bush years in the late 1980's and early 1990's, Republicans would increasingly use arguments based on natural rights to justify a more interventionist U.S. foreign policy (Cooper, 2010). While Kirk only saw the beginning of this trend with his passing in 1994, he would serve as a strong critic of it within the conservative movement.

### Kirk and Gulf War

In the early 1990's, the first Bush administration set out on the Gulf War. Following an invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein would refuse to leave the country in early 1991, with the U.S. government subsequently intervening to force the Iraqi military out, while also beginning to build permanent military bases and presence across the Persian Gulf region (Cooper, 2010). The Gulf War marked the beginning of an increasingly interventionist U.S. foreign policy, of which Dr. Kirk served an early and outspoken conservative critic.

Interestingly, Kirk and his wife Annette had initially been supporters of George H.W. Bush during the 1988 U.S. presidential election, viewing him as a more tepid and uninspiring Reagan. However, as Bush's term in office progressed, they came to see the president as doing immeasurable harm to the G.O.P.'s reputation for sobriety in foreign affairs. Indeed, while Kirk saw the Cold War as justified given the threat posed by communism, he viewed the Gulf War as the United States beginning to act as a decadent empire in foreign affairs. Ultimately, disillusionment with Bush's foreign policy was a

significant factor in the Kirks' mobilization behind Pat Buchanan's campaign during the 1992 Republican primaries, who advocated the Republican Party take a more isolationist stance in terms of military involvement abroad (Birzer, 2015; Judis, 2017).

Regrettably, the Republican Party continued to move in a neo-conservative foreign policy direction in the years following Kirk's death. In an administration stocked with neo-conservatives, George W. Bush would pursue two unsuccessful wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that served to do little more than to destabilize the Middle-East and foster anti-American sentiment abroad (Cooper, 2010). In so much as they continue to influence politics, a brief review of these events is worthwhile before engaging in a discussion of how Kirk's thought might be applied to contemporary times.

#### Events since Kirk's time and Conclusion

Following Kirk's passing in 1994, the next Republican administration would be that of George W. Bush from 2001 to 2009. While Kirk's surviving family have commented that Russell probably would have supported certain aspects of Bush's domestic policy (e.g. "compassionate conservatism" and faith-based initiatives), one can also safely assume Russell would have probably opposed Bush's foreign policy (Farkas, 2002). Indeed, the George W. Bush administration saw the disastrous continuation of the interventionist U.S. foreign policy that started during the administration of Bush the elder.

Following the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks by the terrorist group Al Qaeda, George W. Bush would declare war on Afghanistan. Subsequently, as the initially

justified war progressed, the U.S. would also become involved in Iraq in early 2003. With both ventures attempts to export “democratic capitalism” abroad, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would result in widespread destruction and the subsequent rise of strong anti-American sentiment in the Middle-East (Cooper, 2010, Lindsay, 2011). With the Obama administration’s partial withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, this virulent anti-American sentiment would subsequently give rise to terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS), who have since claimed responsibility for a series of terrorist attacks across the West in recent years (Lindsay, 2011).

It is difficult to discuss contemporary foreign policy as Trump is such a polarizing figure. While presumably Kirk would have objected to Trump's character as a critic of the vapidness of contemporary popular culture and someone with a preference for the "permanent things", it is possible Kirk would have been sympathetic to some aspects of Trump's foreign policy. In broad terms, the Trump administration, unlike the previous Bush administrations, has avoided implicating the U.S. in nation-building wars abroad, and instead taken an isolationist stance in foreign affairs, while maintaining a strong military. With Kirk having once been a supporter of Pat Buchanan because of his non-interventionist foreign policy, it seems he would have at least seen the movement away from a neo-conservative foreign policy under Trump as a positive development, if still holding serious reservations about Trump’s character.

In summary, Russell Kirk was generally supportive of a non-interventionist U.S. foreign policy because of his aversion to military conflict. Arguably, from a normative perspective, the United States’ trend towards a more interventionist U.S. foreign policy – beginning with the presidency of George H.W. Bush some three decades ago and

particularly during the more recent presidency of George W. Bush – has led to a destabilization of the Middle East that has resulted in an increase in terrorist activity. Furthermore, this increase in terrorist activity has emboldened populism by causing citizens to increasingly turn to strongmen like Donald Trump out of a sense of fear and anxiety. Ultimately, Kirk’s more non-interventionist policy would argue for a reduction in American meddling in foreign affairs that over the long term would result in a denouement of terrorist activity inspired by anti-American sentiment. However, as evidenced by Kirk’s support for the Cold War, a more normative Republican U.S. foreign policy would also be adaptive if need be and not strictly non-interventionist, defending the American way of life should it come under threat from antagonists abroad.



## **Culture**

In 1948, the academic Richard Weaver authored a famous book entitled *Ideas Have Consequences*. The basic concept behind Weaver's book was that ideas were not simply static entities, but things that had a trickle-down effect on culture, and that therefore the elevation of normative ideas was of significant import. In many ways, Weaver's basic insight helps us to understand another significant factor in the rise of populism, and in particular Trumpism.

After a peak around 1960, various studies demonstrate that rates of religiosity in the U.S. have declined markedly over time (Martin, 2005). Against the backdrop of this decline, the U.S. has also seen things like the sexual revolution and rise of neo-liberal economics, which, while normative in certain respects, have also served to foster a more toxic individualistic culture. It was in this cultural void that Donald Trump first emerged as a public figure, with much of The Donald's behaviour a celebration of crass materialism. Media attention to Trump's personality and insult-driven political style demonstrate that both civil discourse and cultural substance are threatened by the populist moment, and by longer-term trends encouraging overt individualism untethered to a sense of moral decency.

Our current cultural malaise provides another significant reason to revisit Kirk's thought. In his many writings, Kirk promoted the presence of Christianity in the public sphere, believing culture sprung from a society's collective sense of spirituality, or lack

thereof. Ultimately, Kirk's writing points us towards a normative vision for how we might both retrieve culture and bring about its renewal.

### Culture and the Cult

In discussing the topic of decadence, Kirk liked to invoke the philosopher C.E.M. Joad, who defined the phenomena as the "loss of an object" (Joad, 1948). In less philosophical terms, what Kirk meant by the "loss of an object" was the loss of a transcendent aim in life beyond the mere material. In his later years, Kirk wrote frequently about an increasing cultural decadence in American society, namely through the decline of traditional Judeo-Christian institutions (Person, 1999).

In his writings, Kirk asserted that culture stemmed from the root word "cult", and furthermore that the cult of Western civilization was Christianity. Paraphrasing Annette Kirk, Russell's widow, while Russell upheld the separation of church and state as enshrined in the first amendment, he also upheld America as a predominantly Christian nation (Kirk, 2019). Furthermore, like Alexis de Tocqueville before him, Kirk believed Americans' religious faith would serve to temper their tendency towards individualism, with civic engagement in voluntary associations like church initiatives off-setting the vagaries of the market-place to create a sort of equilibrium within society.

In Kirk's view, the lamentable decline of religion in America came from the growth of what he termed "scientism". To provide a brief exercise in definition, "scientism" denotes the belief in the scientific method as an ideology that can be applied to all of life's questions (Scruton, 2014). In Kirk's view, the dismissal of religion on

scientific grounds had caused Americans to lose touch with a transcendent spirituality, and that many of the negative features of modern culture – including self-centeredness, substance abuse, and an overt preoccupation with sex and money – were symptoms of this spiritual malaise (Kirk, 1988).

### “The Moral Imagination”

In addition to his lament for the decline of religious institutions in America, Russell Kirk also expressed concern regarding diminishing literacy among the rising generation. Specifically, Dr. Kirk was concerned that young people were increasingly being shaped not by great works of literature but by popular culture as mediated by television (Kirk, 1994). Ultimately, Kirk saw nurturing both the “moral imagination” and a skepticism towards ephemeral fads among the rising generation as another key aspect to renewing culture.

The term “moral imagination” was first used by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In its original context, the term denoted a sense of heritage Burke thought was being cast aside by the Jacobins in their endeavor to overthrow the French monarchy and crush their revolutionary opponents (Burke, 1790). Subsequently, T.S. Eliot would expand on the term, contrasting it with the diabolical imagination, referring to a dangerous imagination untethered to a sense of history. It was Kirk, however, who popularized the concept of the “moral imagination”, which, in the way he used the term, denoted a sense of the poetic and enduring nurtured by the reading of great works of literature and history (Birzer, 2015). More pointedly, Kirk would define the

moral imagination as a “higher power of perception” nurtured by literature that provided the reader with heightened insight into the “human condition in his time” (Kirk, 1996).

In the period leading up to his death in April 1994, Kirk took up the cause of cultural renewal with an increased vigor. In one of his final articles, “Reinvigorating Culture”, Kirk criticized the increasingly utilitarian aims of both K-12 and post-secondary education in America, which viewed the study of English and History as a means of developing practical “communication” skills rather than something that nurtured students’ minds and character. In concluding the article, Kirk would comment that a renewed emphasis on the humane letters in education would be essential in bringing about much-needed cultural renewal, by which he meant a renewed emphasis on the reading of classic works of literature and history alongside more overly practical academic pursuits to nurture students’ sense of the mythopoetic (Kirk, 1994).

### Trumpism and Culture

In late 2016, there was an interesting episode of the current affairs program *Uncommon Knowledge* in which host Peter Robinson discussed the 2016 U.S. presidential election with journalists Matthew Continetti and Andrew Ferguson. Early in the program, Ferguson made an insightful point on how liberals bore a certain amount of culpability for Trump’s rise. Specifically, Ferguson argued liberal control of institutions like Hollywood and the media has led to a “culture of vulgarity”, which has in turn enabled a figure like Trump to rise to prominence (Continetti et al., 2016).

It is interesting to note that *The Conservative Mind* was published the same year that *Playboy* magazine first hit news-stands (Kirk, 2019). While Kirk's work sought to uphold a set of norms that made society function harmoniously, Hugh Hefner's magazine promoted a "Me" attitude and sexual libertinism that would subsequently have an insidious effect on much popular culture. While a comparison of a given film or TV show from the 1950's with a given film or TV show today might seem overly impressionistic, a body of academic literature supports the notion that there has been an increase in explicit content in media over time (Reichert et al., 2004, Bleakley et al., 2012). Furthermore, it is hard to imagine that a figure like Trump, who among other things boasted in *The Art of the Deal* about having affairs with married women, did not in some way benefit from this cultural shift (Trump and Schwartz, 1987).

Statistics demonstrate that this decline in moral standards has also occurred in tandem with a decline in the "moral imagination". According to a survey carried out by the U.S. Bureau of Labor, the number of respective men and women who read daily declined from 25 and 31 percent to 15 and 22 percent between 2003 and 2017 (Ingraham, 2018). Among reading's many benefits, one significant benefit is its ability to nurture critical thinking skills, something sorely needed at a time when culture is becoming increasingly problematic. Furthermore, at a time when the moral imagination is increasingly informed by what's absorbed from social media feeds rather than what's read in good books, it's not surprising that the politicians who gain the most popular traction on both sides of the aisle are those that engage in the most shallow forms of sloganeering, rather than those that engage in a nuanced discussion of the issues.

## Towards a Renewal of Culture

While Kirk was critical of the direction of cultural change, however, he always maintained an optimistic disposition. In a meeting at the Oval Office in 1972, Kirk cheered up a despondent President Nixon by commenting that a cultural renewal was always possible if enough men and women of good faith believed in the cause (Person, 1999). While culture is something more nebulous than some of the other topics addressed in this paper, in what follows I provide some parting thoughts inspired by Kirk on “redeeming the time”.

First and foremost, American society and western societies more generally would do well to remember their Christian-inherited mores. In more recent decades, it seems increasing secularization has caused many to view Christianity as increasingly antiquated and old-fashioned. Ultimately, however, the Christian-influenced mores of times past served to ground society spiritually, and the scientific method, while useful in helping us to derive observations from empirical information, has not proven particularly useful in fostering a society with a strong moral fiber. Although a recovery of old virtues does not necessarily *have* to be Christian, a richer society impinges on us remembering that there are more transcendent aims in life than mere “getting and spending” (Kirk, 1993).

Additionally, society would do well to encourage the act of reading again among young people. Transporting readers through the evocative power of a story well-told, books help one to transcend the specifics of their time and place and nurture a “moral imagination” that makes young people more thoughtful and morally grounded. Furthermore, in fostering this “moral imagination”, reading also serves to rescue young people from being passive recipients of an increasingly vacuous culture.

What the encouragement of reading might look like in terms of policy is difficult to say. One speculative proposition is to include a core curriculum in the Humanities across state and public universities for all undergraduates regardless of major, on the condition that such a curriculum weighs the teaching of classics with some critical theory. With Kirk having once wisely said that it was imagination rather than money that ruled the world, a renewed emphasis on the humane letters might nourish the “moral imagination” among the rising generation, and over the long term lend itself to a richer culture and more civil discourse (Bonagura, 2009).

Ultimately, however, it is perhaps best to give Kirk himself the final word on cultural renewal. For Kirk, the achievement of a good society came not from a disregard for the past, but a heeding of its wisdoms. “Men cannot improve society by setting fire to it”, Kirk wrote. “They must seek out its old virtues and bring them back into the light.” (Kirk, 1953).

## **The Environment**

Although not a directly populist concern, another increasingly prescient issue today is that of the environment. As with the other issues mentioned, the environment is one that necessitates a reconsideration of conservative policy given the negative externalities that have been caused by previous approaches. In this regard, the thought of traditionalists like Kirk once again help point us towards an alternative approach towards conservative policy.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of environmental disasters that a significant majority within the scientific community have attributed to climate change. To look at the issue from a global perspective, droughts in the Middle-East played a significant role in the outbreak of the Syrian war, which in turn resulted in a flood of destabilizing migration – leading to the ultimately successful “Brexit” campaign and a wave of populist movements across Europe. Meanwhile, in the U.S., self-described socialist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has recently gained popularity calling for a “Green New Deal” that would introduce drastic increases on top marginal tax rates and a sweeping set of environmental regulations. The reality of climate change necessitates that conservatives make peace with a certain amount of environmental regulation, lest our politics become galvanized by its more populist factions.

Among conservatives, Kirk’s thoughts on the issue of the environment were somewhat idiosyncratic. Taking into consideration Edmund Burke’s assertion that society was an intergenerational contract, Kirk argued for the stewardship of shared lands as part of an inheritance we pass to those who come after us. Ultimately, Kirk’s writing on the



environment points us towards another way we can lift conservatism from its currently bleak state towards a more normative vision.

### The position of traditionalist conservatives

Asking an ordinary person about conservatism and the environment, they might tell you that the two things are antithetical. As a political ideology associated with the interests of the business class, conservatives have often been viewed as valuing profit and economic growth over environmental concerns. In fairness, this view does have some justification, as many conservative parties, and the U.S. Republican Party in particular, have become increasingly beholden to private sector interests like the fossil fuels industry over the past several decades (Dunlap et al, 2008). Traditionalist conservatives like Russell Kirk, however, once again posited a different way of looking at the issue from a conservative perspective.

The view of traditionalist conservatives on the environment once again stems from their belief in piety as the highest social virtue. With the term being defined as the quality of being reverent, figures like Russell Kirk and Richard Weaver believed the proper role of the state was in the stewardship of civil society, rather than being overly beholden to any particular ideology or interest group. Furthermore, these political thinkers saw a well-kept environment as another aspect of an inheritance of civil society that citizens should seek to maintain across generations (Bliese, 1996).

Kirk, in particular, liked to draw on a quote from the eighteenth-century Irish statesman Edmund Burke, who wrote of society as a “partnership between those who are

living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born” (Burke, 1790). In evoking this quote, Kirk sought to assert that individuals exist not only for themselves, but also as inhabitants of a commons that transcended generations. Thus, as with the maintenance of other norms in society, it was incumbent that conservatives uphold a certain set of environmental standards – clean air and water, a healthy biodiversity, etc.– to ensure the world they passed along to their descendants was as healthy as the one they had inherited from their ancestors (Bliese, 1996).

### Kirk on the environment

In addition to writing an education column for *National Review*, Kirk would also pen a newspaper column entitled “To the Point” that was syndicated in the *Los Angeles Times* from 1962 to 1975 (Young, 2004). Aside from bits of stray commentary in his books, Kirk made most of his commentary on environmental issues in this column. A few examples are worth elaborating on in some depth to get a sense of Kirk’s sensitivity towards environmental issues.

In 1962, Russell Kirk penned a column in “To the Point” criticizing the use of pesticides, with the use of pesticides in Southern Michigan having caused many bird species to migrate north to the Upper Peninsula and disrupt regional ecosystems (Kirk, 1962). After describing this phenomenon, Kirk would reserve praise for Rachel Carson’s then-recent book *Silent Spring*, which detailed how pesticides were undermining biodiversity, before admonishing readers to stop using chemicals and bring pressure on federal, state and local government to reprimand those who did (Kirk, 1962).

Furthermore, in a 1968 column, Russell Kirk criticized depositing of waste that was polluting the Great Lakes (Kirk, 1968). Kirk would begin the article by recounting an anecdote of seeing waste turn up on the shore of a cottage where he was staying on the Muskegon River, before discussing how this type of pollution was increasingly upsetting the balance of the Great Lakes' aquatic eco-systems. Kirk would conclude the article by reminding readers that piety entailed a reverence for the "natural balance in the world", and that disregarding this balance would subject humans to "mysterious forces not subject to human rationality" (Kirk, 1968).

Lastly, in 1973, Russell Kirk wrote an article in response to President Nixon's admonishment of the American people to limit their driving due to the 1973 oil crisis (Kirk, 1973). Specifically, with an international embargo causing oil prices to rise exorbitantly, Nixon told Americans to not drive on Sundays while the crisis was ongoing (Perlstein, 2010). Rather than bemoaning these developments, as many Americans did, Kirk viewed them as positive, believing the cessation of Sunday driving would both reduce environmentally harmful emissions and strengthen the family unit through enabling parents and children to spend more time together (Kirk, 1973).

### Discussion

Given he largely commented on environmental mismanagement rather than offering any explicit policy proposals, it is difficult to speak for Kirk on solutions to contemporary environmental issues. As a political conservative, Kirk would have presumably been skeptical of overtly statist solutions to green problems. However, given his demonstrable

concern for the environment, it seems Kirk would have at least wanted Republicans to engage with the environmental question.

In contemporary politics, it is a somewhat strange spectacle to see conservatives having almost entirely ceded the environmental issue to the left. In Congress, politicians like Ocasio-Cortez float legislation like the “Green New Deal” that call for significant control of private enterprise and wed environmentalism to social justice issues as though the two things cannot be dealt with as separate issues (French, 2019). Meanwhile, the only response conservatives seem to muster is to mumble and look down as they shuffle their feet.

As the environment becomes an increasingly prescient issue, it will no longer be a workable politics in the twenty-first century for conservatives to simply ignore the question. However, the environment could also be a source of tremendous opportunity for conservatives. While progressives are the ones currently proposing a set of solutions, they are also non-optimal solutions that would cripple the economy and cause the U.S. government to incur significant debt. However, from providing incentives to eco-friendly businesses to changing the nature of farm subsidies, conservatives could be the champions of innovative green policies that recover lost ground from the left and offer a more practical, market-friendly set of solutions (Douthat and Salam, 2008).

While concern for social justice issues and the environment often go together, they don't necessarily have to. Indeed, whether one is a liberal, conservative, activist, or suburbanite, all people should have a vested interest in maintaining a sound environment to honour what's been bequeathed to us from previous generations and make the world a hospitable place for those who come after us. Ultimately, the thought of traditionalists

like Kirk provide conservatives with a different framework from which to look at environmental issues. Furthermore, in embracing a more conservationist framework at a time when the environment is a growing issue, conservatives also have the potential to come up with innovative market-friendly solutions to environmental issues that undermine the proposals of the New Left and continue to restrain the scope of the federal government.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the environment will be an issue the conservative movement must increasingly grapple with moving forward. Remembering that the highest political virtue is prudence, politicians will have to reconsider their ties to business interests and find other ways of governing from a conservative political philosophy. Recently, there have been examples of politicians taking a more Kirkian response, however, which shows promise.

Following the 2018 congressional midterm elections, Florida elected a new Republican governor, Ron DeSantis, who has since taken a more prudent course of action on the environment. Recently, the state has experienced a red tide epidemic that has impacted the state's tourism industry and resulted in the deaths of thousands of marine animals. Breaking ranks with his predecessor Rick Scott, DeSantis has made an increasing effort to gain control of Florida's water policy on the grounds that the state's water and natural resources are the "foundation of its economy and way of life" (Luscombe, 2019). Additionally, DeSantis has created a new office for environmental

accountability and transparency, which is set to be led by an expert from the scientific community.

As environmental issues become more significant, it will be worthwhile for conservatives to revisit Kirk's thought on the environment. As with the other issues addressed, Kirk's views on the environment remind us that conservatism is not only about the economy, but also about the place we share. In what now follows, I will move towards a synthesis as I provide a final rumination on Kirk's thought and the need for a renewed emphasis on civil society within conservatism.

## **Conclusion: Towards a Cultural Renewal**

In 1962, Russell Kirk served as a panelist on a talk show alongside another famous figure on the right, the Russian-born novelist and intellectual Ayn Rand. While the two found much to agree on, for instance the notion that “social justice” often amounted merely to punishing the industrious to reward the shiftless, the panel discussion also revealed significant differences between the two. Commenting on the appearance in his subsequent “To the Point” column in *National Review*, Kirk would criticize Rand for elevating the dollar-sign in place of the cross in the closing pages of her 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged*, and argued that transcendent Christian values like love and good will towards others were what ultimately gave life its meaning (Birzer, 2015).

Unfortunately, it seems in recent years the ideas of a thinker like Rand are the ones that have most captured the Republican Party. During the 2012 U.S. presidential election, vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan, in very Randian terms, commented that the nation was divided between “makers” and “takers”, and was revealed to be a devotee of Rand and her novels, despite later attempts to back-pedal and cite Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas as his most significant influence (Weiner, 2012). Americans would ultimately reject the Romney-Ryan campaign with its plutocratic and elitist undertones in favor of a second Obama term, but come the next election cycle, many of the 2016 G.O.P. candidates continued to campaign on an arguably Randian platform that spoke more to the concerns of the Koch Brothers than those of middle-class Americans. The disparity between what the establishment were offering and the sense of angst within the Republican electorate was, ultimately, what enabled a figure like Donald Trump to tap into a feeling of populist discontent and overtake the Republican Party as an institution.

The root word in “conservatism” is “conserve”, which Merriam-Webster defines as “to keep in a safe and sound state”. To be a conservative in politics, thus, means to strive to keep a certain vision of society safe and sound. Of course, an important aspect of this stewardship is having a strong economy, but a strong economy is also only one aspect of a good society. The creative destruction that capitalism takes part in creates profit and growth, to be sure, but in an increasingly technocratic, globalized world, capitalism in and of itself has a limited amount to say about the well-being of a nation’s citizens, their bonds to one another, or the commons they share. It is through revisiting the thought of traditionalists like Kirk, however, that one can reprise a more balanced vision of conservatism that offers a more positive alternative to both a doctrinaire market fundamentalism, and its outgrowth in populism.

A contemporary thinker who follows in the tradition of Kirk is the British political philosopher Roger Scruton. Scruton had been acquainted with Kirk while he was alive, having visited Piety Hill on multiple occasions, and has written an extensive body of work espousing a traditionalist conservative viewpoint. One notable work of Scruton’s is his 2014 book *How to be a Conservative*, wherein Scruton provides the lay reader with an introduction to the conservative disposition on a series of contemporary issues (Scruton, 2014).

In one memorable section of the book, Scruton brings up the famous quote from Margaret Thatcher about there being “no society, only individuals”. While over time this quote has often been used as a piece of evidence by those on the left seeking to portray conservatives as being proponents of a “you’re on your own”-type society, Scruton argues in his book that there is more to conservatism than economic liberalism. Indeed,



Scruton argues that an emphasis on society exists at the center of a more richly imagined conservatism (Scruton, 2014).

It is worth unpacking Mrs. Thatcher's comments in their original context. While commenting that there was "no such thing" as society, Thatcher also added the caveat that there was "only individual men and women and their families" (Frum, 2013). Furthermore, Thatcher added that "the beauty of [the] tapestry" of a family-oriented culture depended on each person's willingness to "help by [their] own efforts those who are unfortunate" (Frum, 2013). With Russell Kirk having once commented that the family was the fundamental unit of society, one might consider how a more normative conservatism would serve to not only foster a culture that is more entrepreneurial, but also one that provides a shepherding hand to children along their way to maturity and a helping hand to the least among us (Dreher, 2006). In terms of moving towards that more normative conservatism, two major points stand above all others.

Firstly, conservatives should look to promote not only economic freedom, but also the various forms of civic life that make for a richer culture. In his writing, Kirk frequently liked to evoke Edmund Burke's idea of the "little platoons" (Person, 1999). By "little platoons", Burke meant the voluntary organizations citizens took part in by their own accord – the local parish, the little-league soccer team, etc. – that make for vibrant and spiritually abundant communities. A flavor of this type of conservatism could be found with George W. Bush's attempt to implement faith-based initiatives, wherein the government would provide aid to churches to do charitable work in their communities. While ultimately unsuccessful, Bush's idea aimed at exactly the kind of civic-minded conservatism that Kirk advocated, and in an increasingly atomized time, a more

normative conservatism would seek not only to encourage the dynamism of the private sector, but also those things that make people leave the home to engage with one another and make society a warmer and more hospitable place.

Secondly, conservatives must fundamentally re-examine their overtly hostile attitude towards government if a more normative conservatism is to be achieved. For Russell Kirk, the question was not whether government was good or bad, but rather whether a piece of legislation would help in upholding a normative social order (Davis, 2019). Thus, while an expansion of social welfare programs that encouraged infantilism and dependency on the state would be bad, laws that upheld normative order, be it a piece of legislation that banned clear-cutting of old-growth forests or a tax credit that encouraged the working poor to continue being productive citizens, would be good. While conservatives are right to harbor a suspicion towards government, all too often this suspicion seems to turn into a knee-jerk reaction towards government in general. A more normative conservatism, while remaining vigilant about the growth of the state, would also acknowledge that government has some role to play in both preserving continuity within society and helping those who can help themselves in leading dignified lives.

The famous Reagan campaign spot “Morning in America”, a center-piece of his 1984 re-election effort, provides a compelling audio-visual expression of the “moral imagination” and normative conservatism that Kirk espoused. Over a narration track about the recovery of the U.S. economy following the stagflation of the Carter years, the spot features a series of soft-focus images fading into one another – a cargo ship entering a city harbor at dusk, a farmer tending to his crop, a flock of professional women skipping to work on a busy cross-walk – to capture the nation’s concurrent cultural

renewal (Troy, 2005). In contrast with the proposals of supply-side economists, the ideas of a thinker like Kirk can sometimes seem ephemeral and hard to grasp. However, in presenting an image of society that is spiritually rich and highly normative, this spot to me aesthetically puts across a deeply Kirkian vision, evoking the notion that norms are virtues, and Kirk's assertion that true conservatism amounts to an "affirmation of normality in the concerns of society" (Kirk, 1993).

The author William S. Burroughs once said of his beatnik contemporary Jack Kerouac that "Woodstock rises from his pages", inferring that the counter-cultural movement that found its apotheosis with the iconic event began with books like *On the Road* that portrayed characters bucking the conformity of 1950's America to pursue alternative, non-materialist lifestyles (Holmes, 1985). While Dr. Kirk was clearly very different from the Beatniks, one might also say that the refreshing sense of normality that underpinned the economic recovery of the Reagan years also rose from his pages. At a time when conservatism finds itself in a strange place, with the balance of traditionalist and economic conservatism having tipped in favor of the latter, and Trumpism emerging as a response, it is worth revisiting the work of the writer who bequeathed the modern-day conservative movement with its name. Ultimately, Kirk's conservatism provides a vision that speaks to the larger breadth of human experience, something that has been lacking from the Republican Party for a long time.

## **Epilogue**

When one thinks of public affairs shows from a bygone era, one often thinks of two intellectuals on the left and right sitting opposite one another and having a polite conversation about public policy. While thinking of such an image in isolation can create a mistaken impression of a bygone time when liberals and conservatives were merely “friends with differences”, there also has been an increasing amount of political partisanship over the past several decades. Indeed, a large body of political science research supports the notion that the two major parties in the United States have become increasingly ideological in recent years (Layman et al., 2006).

While some liberals may boo conservatives, the reality is that within a political system there will always be a reactionary wing. In order to have a healthy political society, it is necessary to have a healthy, electorally viable conservative party. Serving as a check on the left, a center-right party will address a set of issues – attracting capital investment, preserving tradition, etc. – that help to create the counter-vailing balance that makes good government work.

However, while a healthy conservative party can help a political system to maintain equilibrium, a toxic conservative party can also infect a political system. This has arguably been the case in the U.S., where Trump’s narrow defeat of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election has subsequently led Republicans to mobilize around Trump’s swampy brand of politics as Democrats increasingly find themselves in thrall to their activist base. For many people positioned around the center of the political spectrum, the current political environment is not one they see themselves reflected in, and a return to normalcy would be much welcome.

Since the Reagan years, it is worth stressing once again that conservatism has lost the balance between economic and traditionalist conservatism. As moneyed interests in politics became more powerful, so too did the Republican Party harden into something increasingly plutocratic and indifferent to the suffering of ordinary Americans, with stances on trade and immigration that were deeply unpopular with a large portion of Middle-America that made up the party's base. This enabled Trump to lead a hostile take-over of the Republican Party by taking advantage of an electoral gap on these issues, although it seems Trump is more concerned with his own self-aggrandizement than any real desire to help America's aggrieved working class.

More than two years into the Trump presidency, it is difficult to know what its outcome will be. While Trump's chances of re-election appear formidable as an incumbent against a Democrat Party increasingly wedding itself to a far-left agenda unlikely to be accepted by the broader American electorate, the ongoing Mueller investigation and legal problems facing many within Trump's circle also suggest an impending impeachment crisis. In any event, there will come an interval at some point in the future when a post-Trump Republican Party will have to consider a strategy going forward for continuing to compete for political power in the United States.

When this conversation eventually takes place, those within Republican circles would do well to bring the thought of Russell Kirk back into the conversation. At a time when nations are turning away from the post-Cold War order, environmental issues mount, and politics turn increasingly virulent, Kirk reminds conservatives their cause is not only about defending the businessman's pursuit of his self-interest, but also about defending the institutions that make society function as a harmonious eco-system. In so doing, Kirk

offers a more moderate and humane vision for the Republican Party that might serve as a first gesture towards a more civil discourse as well.

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**Vita Auctoris**

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