



**The Inscrutable Question: Potential Ichabod of America: Russell Kirk's *The Roots of American Order*: "Order, the First Need of All"**

**Kirk, Russell. "Order, the First Need of All." Chap. 1 in *The Roots of American Order*. (La Salle: Open Court, 1974), 3-10 passim:**

Simone Weil / Vey / wrote that our twentieth century is a time of disorder very like the disorder of Greece in the fifth century before Christ. In her words, "It is as though we had returned to the age of Protagoras and the Sophists, the age when the art of persuasion took the place of thought and controlled the fate of cities and accomplished coups d'état. So the ninth book of Plato's *Republic* reads like a description of contemporary events."

This analogy of fifth-century Greece with our age is too true. One may add that our time of troubles also is like the disorder of the Roman republic in the first century before Christ, and like the catastrophic collapse of Roman civilization in the fifth century after Christ. As individuals and as a civilization we people in the closing days of the twentieth century grope for order.

**If a society falls into general disorder, many of its members will cease to exist at all. And if the members of a society are disordered in spirit, the outward order of the commonwealth cannot endure.**

We couple the words "law and order"; and indeed they are related, yet they are not identical. Laws arise out of a social order; they are the general rules which make possible the tolerable functioning of an order. Nevertheless an order is bigger than its laws, and many aspects of any social order are determined by beliefs and customs, rather than being governed by positive laws.

This word "order" means a systematic and harmonious arrangement—whether in one's own character or in the commonwealth. Also "order" signifies the performance of certain duties and the enjoyment of certain rights in a community: thus we use the phrase "the civil social order."

The roots of order in the United States of America give life to us all. We can distinguish two sorts of roots, intertwined: the roots of the moral order, of order in the soul; and the roots of the civil social order, of order in the republic.

Seeking for the roots of order, we are led to four cities: Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London. The order which Americans experience is derived from the experience of those four old cities. **If our souls are disordered, we fall into abnormality, unable to control our impulses. If our commonwealth is disordered, we fall into anarchy, every man's hand against every other man's.**

Order is the first need of the soul. It is not possible to love what one ought to love, unless we recognize some principles of order by which to govern ourselves.

Order is the first need of the commonwealth. It is not possible for us to live in peace with one another, unless we recognize some principle of order by which to do justice.

The good society is marked by a high degree of order, justice, and freedom. Among these, order has primacy: for justice cannot be enforced until a tolerable civil social order is attained, nor can freedom be anything better than violence until order gives us laws.

Once I was told by a scholar born in Russia of how he had come to understand through terrible events that order necessarily precedes justice and freedom. He had been a Menshevik, or moderate Socialist, at the time of the Russian Revolution. When the Bolsheviks seized power in St. Petersburg, he fled to Odessa, on the Black Sea, where he found a great city in anarchy. Bands of young men commandeered street-cars and clattered wildly through the heart of Odessa, firing with rifles at any pedestrian, as though they were hunting pigeons. At any moment, one's apartment might be invaded by a casual criminal or fanatic, murdering for the sake of a loaf of bread. In this anarchy, justice and freedom were only words. My friend said, "Then I learned that before we can know justice and freedom, we must have order. Much though I hated the Communists, I saw then that even the grim order of Communism is better than no order at all. Many might survive under Communism; no one could survive in general disorder."



In America, order and justice and freedom have developed together; but they can decay in parallel fashion. In every generation, some human beings bitterly defy the moral order and the social order. Although the hatred of order is suicidal, it must be reckoned with: ignore a fact, and that fact will be your master. Half a century ago, perceiving a widespread disintegration of private and public order, William Butler Yeats wrote of what had become the torment of much of the modern world (in "The Second Coming"):

**Things fall apart: the center [Pivot] cannot hold;**

**Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,**

**The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere**

**The ceremony of innocence is drowned;**

**The best lack all conviction, while the worst**

**Are full of passionate intensity.**

During the past half-century, the center [Pivot] has failed to hold in many nations. Yet once revolution or war has demolished an established order, a people find it imperative to search for principles of order afresh, that they may survive. Once they have undone an old order, revolutionaries proceed to decree a new order—often an order harsher than the order which they had overthrown. [Meet the new boss; same as the old boss.]

A freshman once informed me that we have no need nowadays for the beliefs and institutions of yesteryear: he himself, he said, could outline a better moral system and a better political pattern than those we have inherited. I asked him if he could build a gasoline engine, say, without reference to anything mechanical now existing. He replied that he could not. I observed that moral and social concerns really are more delicate and complex than a mere mechanical contrivance—and that even should his novel order be superior, apparently, to the old order, still no one would accept it but himself and a few followers. For people take the proofs of mankind's experience as evidence of some soundness, and they tend to resist any new creation of some living person not conspicuously a better authority than themselves.

That undergraduate was not singular in his repudiation of the experience of a civilization. Our times resemble those of the concluding years of the Roman Republic, the age of Marcus Tullius Cicero. As disorder washed about him, Cicero examined the causes of private and public confusion. He wrote in his treatise *The Republic*, "Long before our time the customs of our ancestors molded admirable men, and in turn those eminent men upheld the ways and institutions of their forebears. **Our age, however, inherited the Republic as if it were some beautiful painting of bygone ages, its colors already fading through great antiquity and not only has our time neglected to freshen the colors of the picture, but we have failed to preserve its form and outlines.**"

Cicero understood that the problem of order is simultaneously personal and social: Roman men and Roman justice had declined together. It is so still.

Those who ignore history, says George Santayana, are condemned to repeat it. Those who neglect the roots of order, one may add, are compelled to water those roots desperately—after wandering in the parched wasteland of disorder.

Upon our knowledge of those roots may depend what sort of order America and the world will have by the end of this century. It may be the order of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, rich and dehumanized; it may be the garrison-state controlled by ferocious ideology, as in George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*; or it may be an order renewed and improved, yet recognizably linked with the order that arose in Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and London.



The higher kind of order, sheltering freedom and justice, declares the dignity of man. It affirms what G. K. Chesterton called “the democracy of the dead”—that is, it recognizes the judgments of men and women who have preceded us in time, as well as the opinions of people living at this moment. **This higher kind of order is founded upon the practical experience of human beings over many centuries, and upon the judgments of men of vision and intellect who have preceded us in time.**

Against this higher kind of order, there contend in our age various ideologies—fanatic political creeds, often advanced by violence. By definition, “ideology” means servitude to political dogmas, abstract ideas not founded upon historical experience. Communism, fascism, and anarchism have been the most powerful of these ideologies.

The American order of our day was not founded upon ideology. It was not manufactured: rather, it *grew*. This American order is not immutable, for it will change in one respect or another as the circumstances of social existence alter. American laws are not like the laws which Lycurgus gave to the Spartans, never to be altered at all. Nor do we Americans emulate another people of old Greece, the Locrians—whose magistrates put a rope around the neck of any citizen who proposed a change in the laws. As Edmund Burke said, change is the means of our preservation.

But also **we must have permanence in some things, if change is to be improvement.** Americans generally retain a respect for their old moral habits and their old political forms, because those habits and forms express their understanding of order. This attachment to certain enduring principles of order has done much to preserve America from the confused and violent change that plagues most modern nations.

No order is perfect: man himself being imperfect presumably we never will make our way to Utopia. But if the roots of an order are healthy, that order may be reinvigorated and improved. If its roots are withered, “the dead tree gives no shelter.”

What Patrick Henry, in 1776, called “the lamp of experience” is our hope of order refreshed.