

## Realism as a Basis for Social Order: An Anthropologist's Case

Who in human history has proven more durable than the peasant or yeoman farmer, tiller of the small family plot in virtually every arable valley, hillside, forest, or altiplano on earth, and surviving in strength for millennia? Who in human history can lay greater claim to the title of "triumphant realist" than the proverbial peasant farmer? For twenty-five of the past thirty years I have lived and worked among these sturdy men and women in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and have come to know their life ways. Can any social order claim to have served our species more effectively, with practical results, than theirs?—withstanding the tests of history, culture, climate, war, misgovernment, and illness, and all manner of exploitation and challenge since the Neolithic age if not before?

Inasmuch as we all owe our being to the realism of the generations of our peasant forebears down through the ages—forebears that were cultural first-cousins of today's peasant farmers whom I have known—we are living testaments to the rugged principles I have found among them.

What are the principles that these husbandmen of Cuzco, Luo-land, southwestern Iran, and central Luzon *affirm* in their social organization and ritual, in their music and dance, cuisine, dress and dialect, in their affiliations and suspicions, custom-

ary law and myths? What is the realism they have taught their children and continue to pass down through the generations?

Namely, that society is governed by God, not science or human system. That life and society are mysterious, and those who claim to fathom them are up to mischief. That the social order must be rooted in family. That its rich diversity must be maintained, savoring the vigor of local forms and expressions. That social ranking is the mainstay of moral relations. That tradition has held us in good stead by promoting flexibility in change, while outsiders' imposed changes have always spelled rip-off. That community, the indispensable basis of human life, can only cohere through its members' moral responsibility, whose enemy is the state's reductionist rule of formal law.

Throughout the pre-industrial world these planters and herders, craftsmen and traders articulate that the more locally rooted the key decision-making, the more practical it is, the more its process is open to prudent compromise, and hence the less political and less ideological. These hundreds of millions of clever and ever creative, eager, up-beat but wary men and women

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guard the permanent things because time and circumstance harden them into realists. Unable to quote Aristotle or *The Wasteland*, they are traditional conservatives because they cannot afford ideology. And experience has sensitized them to sniff out the faintest smell of an ideologue.

In his article "The Drug of Ideology," Russell Kirk draws the distinction between political theory and principle on the one hand—which, in their own way, peasant farmers

the village of Rahmat Abad, observed: "All our trouble started when the Shah thought his *experts* understood better than *Allah*. We were moving along fast—Islam teaches self-discipline, what else do we need?—until you Westerners relied on our *dowlat*, the state. Real law can't be written down and enforced. And anyway, why not change only what's deficient, instead of everything, bad and good?"

A young Palestinian graduate student of mine, daughter of a village shopkeeper,

found her and her friends' longings articulated in the readings I assigned from Edmund Burke: "That's exactly what we want, to recover our patrimony, our constitution of Palestinians living and dead, *our* culture. Just as in Africa, your intrusions broke up our entailed inheritance. What except chaos can you expect of Somalia, an ancient, culturally homogeneous trading people whose foundations were uprooted and destroyed not by just one but

by three different colonial regimes—British, French, and Italian. How can people overcome human quarrels and look forward to the future if we let you bust up our past?"

A village midwife near Timbuktu, in Mali, told me: "Science can help babies get well, but no one can look to science to cure a sick society or sick leaders. Wherever did you foreigners get *that* idea?"

Have these seasoned people read *Reflections on the Revolution in France* or *Democracy in America*? No, but "on the ground" throughout the developing countries where I work, traditional conservatism flourishes. These societies' cultural diversity says "no!" to the economic engineers and planners,

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PIETY AND RESPECT TOWARD ONE'S ELDERS ARE WAYS IN WHICH A CONSERVATIVE REALISM FLOURISHES IN MALI.

whom I have known, such as Juan, Mahmat, Fatemeh, and Mang Sayas, may be found discussing over a bowl of rice in early evening—and on the other hand, the belief that positive law and positive planning can convert the world into a terrestrial paradise—a belief against which my friends warn village children when they send them off on the first day of school.

A Honduran farm wife asked me several years ago, "Why are you Americans so fired up about our voting next month? As long as the government conducts itself well and our leaders are honorable, why change them for a bunch of strangers, just because the loud-speaker time has come around again?"

Old Mahmat, the turbaned headman of

because as the bottom line of realism, their conservative vision has built edifices that weather the storm.

You will say, "Yes, but as far as modern economic realities and capitalism are concerned, you anthropologists always work among the Darwinian losers: poor village farmers in the likes of Honduras and Mali. Look where conservatism has gotten *them!*" To that I first reply: "Don't knock as a trivial accomplishment survival on a small plot of infertile land under bad governments for most of history! How well are we doing, in our land of plenty? How many of *us* could keep family, community, and culture intact over the generations under the harshest of such real-life demands? . . . But, okay, let's take a glance at some of the 'winners,' then."

For the past five years I have been conducting research at the other end of the "development" spectrum, among the "elites" of the only four societies which have pulled themselves up and out of poverty in the past fifty years: Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—where I have interviewed over 600 businessmen and government officials, including supreme realists like Lee Kuan Yew and giant toughs of the Korean chaebols. I went to these top movers-and-shakers of East Asia's remarkable "Little Dragons" purposefully looking for the secrets not of centuries of pragmatic survival, but of a *complementary* form of realism, their seemingly overnight success under free market capitalism.

For realists, the empirical evidence is overwhelming: Rag-tag Hong Kong, thirty years ago behind Malta in per capita GNP, is now about to surpass Great Britain in per capita wealth, as Singapore, former opium-den which the World Bank proclaimed an "unviable" basket case, already has. Korea, with 75% of its population illiterate in 1952, now sends a higher proportion of its youngsters to college than Japan, having leapt in

one generation from below the Sudan in per capita GNP to the world's seventeenth largest industrial power. Taiwan, where an unskilled male in the 1950s had a caloric intake barely comparable to that of a European in 1400 AD, now enjoys the highest life expectancy in Asia, second only to Japan, and one of the highest in the world. The combined exports of these four tiny countries are double those of all Latin America, which has six times their population and sits next to the world's largest market. Remarkably, the Little Dragons have achieved their extraordinary success with more evenly spread income distributions than our own.

These East Asian elites' interpretation of how they did what no other post-war society has done (and did it much faster than Europe, America, or Japan), and their advice to those who would follow, reiterate in quite different language the same realism of the aforementioned peasant "survivors"—advice about the foundations of successful capitalist development that is far more likely to be found in Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* than in Nobel laureate Milton Friedman's formulas, IMF agreements, or the prescriptions of Mr. Jeffrey Sachs.

"Our economic 'miracle' can only be explained by culture," I often heard, "not economics or political science; indeed, among our four countries you will find conflicting economic and political approaches. What we have in common and what transformed us include:

"Honor the ancestors, never let that cease.

"Never let systematic, confrontational law displace authority.

"Don't let international pressures impose universal rights or expectations. Each nation has its particular vision and needs. The polity is a corporate, moral community jeopardized by strict Western separation of powers, checks and balances, and all Western notions of 'accountability.' Those emphasize power and conflict. Confucius

warned never to *replace* the moral order with law, because law is always adversarial, disrupting moral unity. Foster instead public responsibility, public service, and the obligation to maintain ritual, harmony.

"Government often needs secrecy, based on and deserving of trust. Its legitimacy should rest not in opinion polls and 'transparency,' but in the moral rectitude of those who feel the weight of social rank.

"Intrinsically connected to responsibility are pragmatic results. We did what worked. If it wasn't working we changed. Look at Communist China and North Korea—forty to fifty years as ideologies, politics making *dreams* of reality. In the American camp, the same—Iran, total overhaul. Avoid all theories. We can never know or legislate for the future. Just be close to the action and respond fast, above all, to your own mistakes."

In short, the "winners," too—at least in East Asia—attribute their remarkable achievements to their firm grounding in conservative principles.

These interviews remind us that the dynamic potential latent in a people's down-to-earth realism will always remain localized unless it is complemented by the political realism of an overarching moral order—and this in turn is impossible without the moral integrity of those who govern. Russell Kirk has often pointed out the interdependence of "the inner order of the soul" (to which we might add, "of the community") and "the outer order of the commonwealth." If conservative realism is missing from the practical business of government, its establishment at society's foundation will never constitute the larger social union. East Asia's four mini-commonwealths had both. How tragic that the rich endowment at the base of most societies where I have worked has been held back by ideological governance above it: a thwarting to which we ourselves are vulnerable, both in prac-

tice and in advice to others.

Realists must see and respond to the dire challenges of their time. Surely some of *our* era's particular faces of poverty comprise a great blot on our Judeo-Christian civilization—indeed, comprise a real crisis of our time. While it is true that such an intrinsically moral matter as poverty is especially prone to ideology—as Professor Gerhart Niemeyer defines it, "permeating politics with millenarian ideas of pseudo-religious character"—yet Julius Nyerere accurately warned that we risk our own moral integrity when we ignore the challenge of late twentieth-century poverty. Someone once asked Flannery O'Connor how he could change his way of thinking in order to believe in God. O'Connor replied, "Give alms."

Rather than being afraid to venture because of such ideological traps let us address the crises of our time through a realism such as Burke's, who applied his vision to the destitute of Ireland and to the egregious injustices of British India: Let us show the relevance of courage, order, moral imagination, and republican initiative to the poor tackling their own problems in Bolivia, Botswana, indeed, in inner cities like Detroit and Miami—lest, in looking to conservatism only to hear phrases of magical reassurance, it be we ourselves that condemn our cultural inheritance to mere ideology.

It may be difficult to find more stringent tests of the "realism" of a body of ideas than those on which I have focused here. Nevertheless, I have offered these as but an example, an opening, simply one facet of conservatism's inexhaustible, real-world import. There are, of course, others who can help us to understand further conservatism's realist vision. Those among whom I have worked, in many cultures, send this message to us:

Across the millennia, this is the language of the living. *We* are realists—are you?