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Liberalism

By Russell Kirk



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My Heritage Lectures of 1989 have had to do with eminent conservative men of letters whom I have known. Three of those four have crossed the bar and put out to sea. My proclivity for quoting such vanished friends of mine provoked one auditor, a few years past, into observing aloud, "Dr. Kirk, you're an anomaly: all of your friends are dead."

Today, however, with your permission, I will talk about a gentleman still in the land of the living: Mr. Malcolm Muggeridge, who for some decades has believed himself to be tottering on the brink of eternity, but who has survived most of his generation and stands at the height of his fame. His many books are so quotable that one is tempted to compose a lecture entirely of passages from Muggeridge, unadorned by comments. Restraining myself, nevertheless, I will try to trace for you the course of Malcolm Muggeridge's abhorrence of the political and moral attitude that is called liberalism. With the passage of the years, his detestation of the liberal mentality has steadily swelled.

Muggeridge is the author of the most moving and memorable autobiography of the twentieth century, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*. His memoirs were supposed to run to three volumes, but he has not completed the third, and presumably never will. Last year, however, he published a slim volume, written in the third person, entitled *Confessions of a Twentieth-Century Pilgrim*, the concluding portion of which touches upon the religious perceptions of his later years. Young men and women groping for a clue to guide them through the chaos of our age would do well to look into these witty and candid books. Muggeridge is given to quoting this stanza by William Blake:

I give you the end of a Golden String,
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at Heaven's Gate
Built in Jerusalem's Wall.

At Heaven's Gate Muggeridge has very nearly arrived, after much stumbling and tribulation and fierce combats with the pen as weapon. Others wandering in a dark wood may profit from both his blunders and his successes.

Waking Consciences. But it is not Muggeridge, the Christian apologist of late years, that I mean to discuss with you today. Rather, I give you Muggeridge the satirist, successor to Aristophanes, Juvenal, Rabelais, and Swift. In an age of general decadence, satire may miss its mark. In the dictionary's definition, satire is "directed to the correction of corruption, abuses, or absurdities in religion, politics, law, society, and letters." Mockingly, the satirist contrasts what is with what ought to be, and particularly, he contrasts the squalid present with a nobler past.

Yet when standards or norms have been long flouted and almost forgotten, often satire is thrust before blind eyes, or falls upon deaf ears; for not many people remain who recall that once upon a time there was talk of virtue. Such is the condition, in large part, of our culture

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in the latter half of the 20th century. This considered, Muggeridge's success in waking wits and consciences has been phenomenal. For the past fifty-five years, Muggeridge (to borrow two lines from Ben Jonson) has dared to "strip the ragged follies of the time/ Naked, as at their birth." In particular, he has scourged the moral and political folly called liberalism.

Participating in "New Civilization." A socialist in his upbringing, the young Muggeridge taught for some years in India and Egypt; obtained a post on the staff of the *Manchester Guardian*; and at the age of twenty-nine, accompanied by his wife, Kitty, made his way to Moscow, where he succeeded William Henry Chamberlin as Moscow correspondent of the *Guardian*. The Muggeridges believed earnestly that they were departing from a dying bourgeois culture to participate in a "new civilization," in which the human potential would be fulfilled. They arrived in September 1932. Within six months, Muggeridge came to know the hideousness of the communist regime, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

It destroys everything and everyone; is the essence of destruction – in towns, a darkness; a paralysis; in the country, a blight, sterility; shouting monotonously its empty formula – a classless, socialist society – it attacks with methodical barbarity, not only men and classes and institutions, but the soul of a society. It tears a society up by the roots and leaves it dead. "If we go," Lenin said, "we shall slam the door on an empty house."

So Muggeridge wrote in his Moscow diary.

The editor of the *Manchester Guardian* chose not to print much of the truth that Muggeridge sent him from the heart of darkness. In disgust, Muggeridge resigned from that famous newspaper, leaving himself unemployed and in unhappy circumstances. Out of his Russian months came his sardonic novel, *Winter in Moscow*, recently republished with an introduction by Mr. Michael Aeschliman.

Folly and Knavery. In that grim and witty book, Muggeridge faithfully describes the cowardice, hypocrisy, and stupidity of the journalists from the West, who rejected or ignored the plain evidences of the Great Famine and the Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union and lavishly praised the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. England's liberal conscience complacently accepted the horrors of existence in the USSR, once the Dictatorship was securely established. As Muggeridge writes in *The Green Stick*, the first volume of his autobiography:

Shaw, the Webbs and the other leading Fabians were... strongly opposed to the USSR in its early struggling days; they only began to admire it when it had hardened into an authoritarian terrorist regime. Their admiration turned to besotted adulation when Stalin took on the role, and very much the style, of the deposed Czar, only more brutally, efficiently and vaingloriously.

Muggeridge's indignation at the folly and the knavery, during his Moscow winter, of both Western visitors to Russia and foreign correspondents posted there became the recurring theme of his several books and his almost innumerable periodical pieces. Thirty-seven years later, he returned to his commination of the fatuous liberals that he encountered in Moscow. "In those days, Moscow was the Mecca for every liberal mind, whatever its particular complexion," he would write in 1970.

They flocked there in an unending procession, from the great ones like Shaw and Gide and Barbusse and Julian Huxley and Harold Laski and the Webbs, down to poor little teachers, crazed clergymen and millionaires, and drivelling dons; all utterly convinced that, under the aegis of the great Stalin, a new dawn was breaking in which the human race would at last be united in liberty, equality, and fraternity for evermore....They were prepared to believe anything, however preposterous; to overlook anything, however villainous; to approve anything, however obscurantist and brutally authoritarian, in order to be able to preserve intact the confident expectation that one of the most thoroughgoing, ruthless and bloody tyrannies ever to exist on earth could be relied on to champion human freedom, the brotherhood of man, and all the other good liberal causes to which they had dedicated their lives.

Malcolm and Kitty Muggeridge had arrived in Moscow quite as credulous about the dictatorship of the Proletariat as were the other visitors whose foolishness he soon would denounce. But they had eyes with which to see; and they departed much wiser and overwhelmed by sadness. They had learned the hard truth about the communist regime; they had learned the shallowness and falseness of the Western liberal ideology.

Paying the Price. So Malcolm Muggeridge rejected liberalism – from 1933 onward. And the liberal establishment rejected him. For after he left the *Guardian* in disgust, he could secure no post with any English paper, being found “too extreme” in his words about the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. An interim appointment in Switzerland with the League of Nations bureaucracy was shameful servitude; the attempt to support his household by occasional free-lance writing soon collapsed. A novel based upon his experiences at the *Manchester Guardian* was suppressed foolishly by its publisher, upon the threat of a suit for libel. He came upon an advertisement of an editorial post vacant at an English-language newspaper in India; knowing something of India, he applied, though he had been thinking of suicide. Off he went, perforce, to the *Calcutta Statesman*; but the time would come when he would be the best-known journalist in the world, and the most mordant and dashing adversary of the liberal mentality. His acerbic prose would bring down many an eminent pomposity. One thinks of the lines of John Taylor, the 17th century “Water Poet”:

Pens are most dangerous tools, more sharp by odds
Than swords, and cut more keen than whips or rods.

This lecture of mine not being a biography of Mr. Muggeridge, we turn now to the wit and the invective of his case against liberalism. If one would find a source for his detestation of the liberal mind – aside, that is, from his personal experience of liberalism’s impotence in several quarters of the world today – why, that source is the wisdom of Dr. Samuel Johnson, Muggeridge’s favorite English writer, so often quoted by him. Johnson died before “liberalism” had become a term of morals and politics, but the self-proclaimed Enlighteners of France during the age of Johnson were the intellectual ancestors of our 20th century liberals. The common-sensical reasoning of Johnson was Muggeridge’s weapon, too, and later in life, Johnson’s reliance upon the authority of Christian teaching.

In the 18th century, nobody was more “the true-born Englishman” than Samuel Johnson. In the 20th century, Muggeridge is our best extant example of old English character and the English cast of mind.

Assailing Liberalism. What is this liberalism that Muggeridge so valiantly assails? He is not referring to the economic doctrines of Manchester – not primarily, at least. Muggeridge is not given to quoting John Henry Newman, but a passage from Newman's *Apologia* may suggest Muggeridge's fundamental objection. Newman remarks that he first heard the word "liberalism" in connection with the opinions of Lord Byron and his admirers. "Afterwards," Newman continues, "Liberalism was the badge of a theological school, of a dry and repulsive character, not very dangerous in itself, though dangerous as opening the door to evils which it did not itself either anticipate or comprehend. At present it is nothing else than that deep, plausible skepticism,... the development of human reason, as practically exercised by the natural man." Doubt of tradition, authority, things long established; deep corrosive doubt of the long-received belief in a constant human nature; doubt especially of man's power of moral choice and man's moral responsibility for his actions – these had become the characteristics of liberalism by Muggeridge's day. Their descent from the liberal skeptics of Newman's day, and more remotely from the Enlighteners of Johnson's day, is sufficiently obvious.

Bourgeois society, from which the liberal mentality arose, has been working its own destruction, Muggeridge asserts in *The Green Stick*; far more than any mob of revolutionaries, the bourgeois liberals' innovating notions have gnawed at the footings of personal and social order. Two bourgeoisie – "a typical Viennese general practitioner, and a British Museum Reading Room *enragé* – Freud and Marx...undermined the whole basis of Western European civilization as no avowedly insurrectionary movement ever has or could," Muggeridge writes, "by promoting the notion of determinism, in the one case in morals, in the other in history, thereby-relieving individual men and women of all responsibility for their personal and collective behaviour."

False Gospel. Muggeridge's most burning piece of invective against 20th century liberalism, "The Great Liberal Death Wish," first was published in 1970 and is reprinted in my anthology *The Portable Conservative Reader*. He commences his slashing essay with a reference to his Moscow experiences in 1932-1933, and he then proceeds to trace the misfortunes brought on by liberalism – which, he was to declare later, would bring to pass the disintegration of Christendom.

The fundamental error of liberalism is its false gospel of automatic and ineluctable progress, Muggeridge declares. This fallacy grew out of infatuation with Darwin's theory of natural selection. He despises the evangels of Scientism:

... a Herbert Spencer, or a poor, squeaky H.G. Wells, ardent evolutionist and disciple of Huxley, with his vision of an earthly paradise achieved through science and technology; those twin monsters which have laid waste a whole world, polluting its seas and rivers and lakes with poisons, infecting its very earth and all its creatures, reaching into Man's mind and inner consciousness to control and condition him, at the same time entrusting to irresponsible, irresolute human hands the instruments of universal destruction....

The enthronement of the gospel of progress necessarily required the final discrediting of the gospel of Christ, and the destruction of the whole edifice of ethics, law, culture, human relationships and human behaviour constructed upon it. Our civilization, after all, began with

Christian revelation, not the theory of evolution, and, we may be sure, will perish with it, too – if it has not already.

Cult and Culture. Along with T.S. Eliot and Donald Davidson, whose work I discussed in Heritage Lectures earlier this year, Malcolm Muggeridge tells us that, as Christian belief is rejected, so modern civilization stumbles down to dusty death. So thought the novelist Robert Graves; so the historian Eric Voegelin; so the sociologist Pitirim Sorokin. Culture arises from the cult; when the cult dissolves, so in time does the culture. Thus Muggeridge's declaration that the destruction of religious belief causes the collapse of modern society is not peculiar to him; but he expresses this shattering judgement with high sardonic power. Take this passage from "The Great Liberal Death Wish":

It is, indeed, among Christians themselves that the final decisive assault on Christianity has been mounted; led by the Protestant churches, but with Roman Catholics eagerly, if belatedly, joining in the fray. All they had to show was that when Jesus said that His kingdom was not of this world, He meant that it was. Then, moving on from there, to stand the other basic Christian propositions similarly on their heads. As, that to be carnally minded is life; that it is essential to lay up treasure on earth in the shape of a constantly expanding Gross National Product; that the flesh lusts with the spirit and the spirit with the flesh, so that we can do whatever we have a mind to; that he that loveth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. And so on. One recalls a like adjustment of the rules in Orwell's *Animal Farm*. A whole series of new interpretative 'translations' of the Bible have appeared supporting the new view, and in case there should be any anxiety about the reception of these adjustments in Heaven, God, we are told on the best theological authority, has died.

Christian faith arose upon belief in Christ's promise of the resurrection of the flesh and the life everlasting. What liberalism seeks is not the life eternal, but the oblivion of death: the liberals' doctrinaire advocacy of contraception and abortion is evidence of their overpowering death wish. Copulation without population is their obsession. In Muggeridge's words:

If sex provides the mysticism of the great liberal death wish, it needs, as well, its own special mumbo-jumbo and brainwashing device; a moral equivalent of conversion, whereby the old Adam of ignorance and superstition and the blind acceptance of tradition is put aside, and the new liberal man is born – enlightened, erudite, cultivated. This is readily to hand in education in all its many branches and affiliations. To the liberal mind, education provides the universal panacea. Whatever the problem, education will solve it. Law and order breaking down? – then yet more statistics chasing yet more education; venereal disease spreading, to the point that girls of ten are found to be infected? – then, for heaven's sake, more sex education, with tiny tots lisping out what happens to mummy's vagina when daddy erects, as once they did the Catechism; drug addiction going up by leaps and bounds, especially in the homes where television is looked at... – surely it's obvious that what the kids need is extra classes under

trained psychiatrists to instruct them in the why and the wherefore of narcotics.

Muggeridge touches in this article and elsewhere upon the liberals' perverse attachment to whatever political causes are hostile to things established in our civilization – for example, on why any friends to British or American interests are denounced by the liberals as reactionaries. One instance, “Why, in a world full of oppressive regimes and terrorist practices, in England the venom and fury of the liberal mind should pick on the white South Africans with particular spleen when their oligarchic rule only differs from that of a dozen others – Tito's, Franco's, Ulbricht's, Castro's, etc. – in that they happen to be anxious to be on good terms with the English.”

Life-Denying Freedom. The liberal mentality seems bent upon annihilation of the convictions and circumstances that have made possible a liberal democratic society. Everywhere today's liberals demand more freedom. But freedom from what? Why, freedom from that order, public and personal, which has nurtured justice and true liberty. The typical latter-day liberal is not aware that his proposals and his actions are life denying; nay, he fancies that they are life enhancing; nevertheless, he is driven by his unrecognized death wish. Down with civilization that we may be liberated from all restraints. Indulge me in two more quotations from the concluding pages of Muggeridge's burning essay. He cries prophetically:

I see the great liberal death wish driving through the years ahead in triple harness with the gospel of progress and the pursuit of happiness. These are our three Horsemen of the Apocalypse – progress, happiness, death. Under their auspices, the quest for total affluence leads to total deprivation; for total peace, to total war; for total education, to total illiteracy; for total sex, to total sterility; for total freedom, to total servitude. Seeking only agreement based on a majority, we find a consensus based on a consensocracy, or oligarchy of the liberal mind....

“**Wasteland of Satiety.**” Malcolm Muggeridge abandons all hope for this temporal world of ours, this society in love with death, willing its own dissolution. I have quoted many times the final paragraph of his overwhelming jeremiad:

As the astronauts soar into the vast eternities of space, on earth the garbage piles higher; as the groves of academe extend their domain, their alumni's arms reach lower; as the phallic cult spreads, so does impotence. In great wealth, great poverty; in health, sickness; in numbers, deception. Gorging, left hungry; sedated, left restless; telling all, hiding all; in flesh united, forever separate. So we press on through the valley of abundance that leads to the wasteland of satiety, passing through the gardens of fantasy; seeking happiness ever more ardently, and finding despair ever more surely.

A decade ago, Malcolm and Kitty Muggeridge visited us at Mecosta for three days. We ought to have read aloud Whittier's *Snowbound*, for a great blizzard descended upon us all. The occasion was one of the seminars sponsored by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which are held from time to time at our house of Piety Hill. “Pilgrims in the Dark Wood of Our Time” was the general title I had given to the seminar; possibly that put into Mr. Muggeridge's mind the title of his most recent book, *Confessions of a Twentieth-Century*

Pilgrim. On a Saturday afternoon, my wife and I took the Muggeridges walking in a dark wood of spruces and pines planted by me thirty years before, on my ancestral acres. We have a photograph of the four of us cheerful in a snowy grove, Malcolm wearing a black fur cap, Kitty with a scarf wound over her face, Annette laughing in green cap and muffler, I bareheaded and burly. This perhaps was, and is, one of those moments when, as T.S. Eliot puts it, time and the timeless intersect: the four of us may experience that wintry stroll through eternity.

Good Riddance to Modernity. In his lectures to our ISI seminar, Mr. Muggeridge was so despairing of our bent 20th century culture that the undergraduates in our audience, by contrast, took me for a carefree optimist. Corrupted by our intellectual delusions, intoxicated by our affluence, betrayed by our own gadgets, Muggeridge told our seminar, why, modernity is not long for this world, and good riddance.

The triumph of television seals our doom, he declared: mass inanity and the manipulation of public opinion, the overwhelming of decent taste, the undoing of books and schooling – these are the gifts of the boob tube. It is not possible to un-invent television.

Now it was through his regular and unforgettable appearances on television for the British Broadcasting Company that Malcolm Muggeridge had grown famous and prosperous in the 1960s. His craggy face with its deep-set eyes, his urbanity of manner, his sharpness of wit had won him an immense audience of viewers. The man who speaks from the television screen to gullible millions possesses power, but Malcolm Muggeridge rejected such power.

As Ian Hunter writes in his able biography of Muggeridge:

...[he] has always been fascinated and repelled by the spectacle of power and those who wield it....Power is to the collectivity, he believes, what lust is to the individual – 'an expense of spirit in a waste of shame' in Shakespeare's elegant phrase. Through the practice of half a century of journalism, and particularly since the advent of television, he has been brought in contrast with prime ministers, potentates, and despots, people who have achieved power over their fellowmen by acclamation, birth, persuasion, the ballot box, or the barrel of a gun. Its effect on almost all of them, he has observed, is to corrupt – not in the more obvious sense in which Lord Acton spoke of power corrupting, but in subtler, more insidious ways; principally, by diverting their attention from what is enduring, true, and worthwhile to what is evanescent, circumstantial, and tawdry. 'Here am I, Captain of a Legion of Rome,' runs an inscription Muggeridge is fond of quoting, 'who served in the Libyan desert and learns and ponders this truth – there are in life but two things, love and power, and no man can have both.'

His view has partly been shaped by his own experiences... of ballot boxes and interminable parliamentary debates in Paris and London and Washington, which finish up in societies so aimless and enfeebled that they are unable to resist either external aggressors or internal terrorists, yielding simultaneously to barbarians from without and within, and in their last legislative gasp striving to extinguish individual

freedom through the closed shop and individual life through legalized abortion.

Choose love, not power, Muggeridge tells us. He does not show our society any way of escape from Avernus. But he does exhort us, as souls, to seek our salvation with diligence.

Wise Child. It is a sign of Malcolm Muggeridge's genuineness that children take to him. Our second daughter, Cecilia, ten years old when the Muggeridges made their way to our abode in the Michigan backwoods, sat in the front row during Mr. Muggeridge's lectures, quietly observant. Later we asked her, "Cecilia, did you understand what Mr. Muggeridge was saying?" She replied demurely, "Not everything, but more than I expected." She has been wise ever since.

We lodged Malcolm and Kitty in our own large bedchamber, which has a fireplace; for English people – and no couple is more English than the Muggeridges – are very fond indeed of open fires. Now at that time our youngest daughter, Andrea, aged three years, was in the habit, about the witching hour of creeping into our room from her own and snuggling herself between her parents. Our house, by the way, is notoriously haunted.

Forgetful that her parents had resigned their room to the English guests, tiny Andrea... but here I turn to a report from Kitty Muggeridge.

"We had a visitor in our room last night," Mrs. Muggeridge told us, "a small figure in white. It came silently, and crawled into bed between us."

"It looked at Malcolm, and next at me. Then, after an interval, it said, 'I'd better be going now,' and departed."

"How long did it stay?" we asked Mrs. Muggeridge.

"Long enough so as not to give offense by leaving," she told us.

The Only Happiness. As a pilgrim for eighty-six years in this dark wood of our time, Malcolm Muggeridge has beheld the destruction of much and the ugly alteration of more. Yet, like Democritus, he is always laughing. "All that I can claim to have learnt from the years I have spent in this world is that the only happiness is love," he writes in the first chapter of *The Green Stick*, "and that the world itself only becomes the dear and habitable dwelling place it is when we who inhabit it know we are migrants, due when the time comes to fly away to other more commodious skies."

So, sincerely, writes the most convincing satirist of our age. At whatever risk, ever since 1932, Malcolm Muggeridge has uttered the truth. One of his harder truths is that liberalism now has become rotten to the core. Somewhere Muggeridge remarks that people learn not from exhortation, but from experience. Before this century is out, doubtless the surviving votaries of liberalism will be taught some more disagreeable lessons.

