

Roger Scruton and the Conservation of Culture

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Published online: 11 September 2008
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Roger Scruton, *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged*. Encounter, 2007. 120 pp. \$20.00. (ISBN-10: 1594031940; ISBN-13: 978-1594031946)

Roger Scruton, *A Political Philosophy: Arguments for Conservatism*. Continuum, 2005. 214 pp. \$16.95. (ISBN-10: 0826496156; ISBN-13: 978-0826496157)

Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 3rd ed. St. Augustine's, 2002. 220 pp., \$30.00. (ISBN-10: 189031840X; ISBN-13: 978-1890318406)

As a rule, traditionalist conservatism rarely fares well in American political life. In intellectual circles, its adherents rest uneasily at the margins of discussion, occasionally launching a broadside against modernity's discontents before returning to self-imposed exile in the suburbs—usually living well on the fruits of the very market-driven society for which they express a great deal of ambivalence. Rooted as this sort of ideal is in what we lose in the modern world rather than in an appreciation of the good things it provides, most Americans—and certainly the majority of self-proclaimed conservatives—pay this movement little heed.

Traditionalism is also a brand of thinking that at least in America normally fails in making its case as an intellectually serious political position. In a recent review, Alan Wolfe dismissed Russell Kirk (arguably America's pre-eminent representative of traditionalism in the last half of the twentieth century), somewhat unfairly to be sure, as a grumbling, emotive proponent of nostalgia for a world that

left him behind. Whatever one thinks of this polemical characterization, traditionalists do indeed deal more often in images than in robust philosophical argumentation. They repeatedly assert the failure of modern American life and avoid any serious engagement with opposing ideas.

Not so with Roger Scruton. In his recent works, he provides us with not only insight into where our society departs from the good life but also a deeper set of philosophical justifications on behalf of traditionalist conservatism. While he shares the ordinary traditionalist appreciation for the practices of civil society and rests much of the practical importance of his claims upon them, Scruton roots his conservatism in a developed theory of culture and its meaning for any decent political life. This approach sets his work apart from other sorts of traditionalism and makes it a valuable object of study.

Above all, Scruton defends the importance of ideas in politics. Of course, acting as a proponent for any ideal opens men up to the possibility of becoming possessed by it; he acknowledges that in the last century, this outcome became all too frequent and dangerous and argues that we should maintain our skepticism about grand theoretical visions that seek global change. Nevertheless, against the militantly anti-ideological conservatism of Michael Oakeshott and his contemporary student Andrew Sullivan, Scruton argues that conservatism should not oppose the existence of ideology; instead, he insists “[i]t is part of conservatism to resist the loss of ideology” (*The Meaning of Conservatism*, p. 127. Hereafter, I cite the books under review as MC, PP [*A Political Philosophy*], and CC [*Culture Counts*]). This Hayekian insight regarding the way ideas help constitute our understanding of reality leads Scruton to note that the question is not whether we live by a system of thought but rather *which one*.

If the concepts we carry with us frame our comprehension of the world, Scruton argues that as a people, we need

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something more substantive than the frail intersubjectivity of “conversation” Oakeshott provides us. Culture may indeed be formed through conversation, but it is defended through deep belief—and in Scruton’s understanding, the skepticism of the Oakeshottian position presents difficulties for any society that fully adopts it. Ideology always opens a door to abuse, but a society unable to draw a line between a total, culture-denying ideal and a humane one will not long persist in freedom. Scruton argues “culture is in a certain sense *composed* of judgments, and exists to pass on the habit of judgment from generation to generation” (CC x). Whether we acknowledge it or not, as a set of ideas and ever-present moral judgments, every culture suggests an ideology.

For Scruton, this means we should turn our attention the content of our teaching and culture. In many ways, this is the purpose of his *Meaning of Conservatism*, which he terms “a work of dogmatics” (1). Now in its third edition, the book aims at demonstrating that good government necessitates the propagation of order, which in turn means that the culture that lives within it must help cultivate the residual authorities that we use to guide our conduct in the world. Scruton develops his case that a truly conservative ideal must defend the rule of law, foster the autonomous institutions of civil society that reinforce citizenship, revitalize the fading stability of families, and maintain stability of property. Running through his account is the idea that the aforementioned institutions all stand to some degree as byproducts of a fragile high culture, and this is what Scruton sets out to protect.

All three of these books share a deep concern with how modern politics and society erode our common culture in favor of easy skepticism, if not outright nihilism. Modern critics of Western culture reject it because that social order forms the grounds of membership; its very existence provides reasons for excluding those who refuse to affirm this common culture as a way of life. Scruton argues those who assault Western ideals strike at the heart of our society because “the high culture that is its self-conscious part perpetuates the memory of that membership and exalts it into something natural, unchangeable and serene” (PP 112). Without that gentle, agreed-upon sense of “us” to help guide the polity, the easy assertions of multiculturalism—which for Scruton result in nothing more than an abdication of our own culture in favor of indifference—seem all too plausible.

Yet, culture does more than simply provide the grounds of membership in a society. In many ways, it helps constitute the terms of what Scruton considers the very pillars of our moral life: value, virtue, duty, and piety. This is not to say they are *relative* to culture but rather that we realize our potential for them only *through* cultural membership. All four of these pillars traditionally rested on religious faith—in the West, on Christianity—and in the

wake of secularization find their best support in culture alone. To some degree, their obviousness belies their importance: Value and virtue form the basis of our moral conduct and the aims toward which our society directs itself; the practical duties of men flow inexorably from the order created by these moral imperatives.

Scruton believes that piety, understood as “a certain disposition to acknowledge our weak and dependent state, and to face the surrounding world with due reverence and humility,” serves as most important of these forces (PP 48). When it fades, our political compact no longer acts as the link that binds the living, the dead, and the unborn together in the great chain of being. Without piety, only the present moment deserves consideration. If we cannot maintain a reverence for the past and what we owe to those who came before, Scruton rightly wonders what sort of restraint we shall endure while acting in ways that affect future generations.

Piety cannot persist in a society that turns away from participation in its own traditions and memories. It requires habitual actions that renew its power over the world, that give due credit to the power our memory of the dead should hold over the living, and that remind us of the burdens we plan to pass on to our children. Absent these habits, Scruton suggests we find it all too easy to “externalize” present costs on our children (PP 37). In short, this sort of reverence for our inheritance helps ground our fragile social and political life, and its absence unrelentingly erodes that existence. However, here Scruton ignores the fact piety remains an aristocratic intellectual virtue, one poorly suited to the intellectual tastes of modern, essentially democratic life.

Because of all these concerns, Scruton attacks any intellectual, social, or political force that undermines our fragile cultural inheritance. As such, the relationship between art, language, and meaning in communal life draws his attention throughout these books. In examining how these enemies erode culture’s gifts, Scruton’s principal guide is Orwell, whose observations he frequently invokes, and it is Orwell’s explorations of how a malignant social order can negate life that drive Scruton’s polemics against those who destroy our inheritance. Particularly, in *A Political Philosophy* and *Culture Counts*, two contemporary movements particularly attract his attention for the way they undermine our ability to perceive the world rightly. He finds the first in the cosmopolitan internationalism that informs the European Union in its present incarnation; he identifies the second in the twin forces of pragmatism and postmodernism that increasingly dominate our education systems. Both destroy the sentiments of decent political life; I will discuss each of them in turn.

The way European cosmopolitan ideals steadily undermine sovereignty within the member nations of the

European Union alarms Scruton for several reasons. To begin with, his account of the nation-state's importance rests less on the direct ways politics shape their citizens' lives than it does on the conditions national and local political institutions foster. He stresses that our political loyalties develop in a moral psychology that insists on the *locality* of all affections and obligations. We may tie ourselves to an abstract ideal of cosmopolitanism, but Scruton insists that this bond cannot provide the moral resources necessary for the good life. This is because the cosmopolitan ideal gives us no ground upon which to prefer our own political arrangements or, for that matter, any way of life over another.

Like any other form of abstract, universalizing political aspiration, transnational institutions always come at the cost of local ideas, understandings, and affections. Such movements do not merely seek to create a better world; they must efface difference and impose homogeneity among recalcitrant peoples. To accomplish their ends, elites must sufficiently confuse their intentions and undermine the grounds upon which effective opposition to their agenda might stand. For this reason, it is no surprise for Scruton that the European Union's language has taken on an increasingly Orwellian cast. One example Scruton provides is that of the curious way the European Union transformed "subsidiarity": Instead of its old meaning in an absolute brake upon centralizing state action, what he terms the "Eurospeak" version of it provides only a "comprehensive authorization to the EU institutions, to expropriate whatever powers they might deem to be theirs" (PP 165). No wonder, then, that this mindset leads European elites into direct conflict with all existing civil society.

Civil societies rooted in a nation-state—Burke's "little platoons"—work to complete people in a way that the advocates of transnational order either fail to appreciate or find eminently undesirable. Scruton holds that political power only persists where the government retains the ability to do violence to protect it. Because of this, governments need the local affections and the mediating institutions civil society provide them in order to function without constantly using the naked coercion of administrative and, ultimately, police power to accomplish its ends. Through the consensus they create about how we must live in common, local institutions legitimize the laws and help reduce the sting of force when governments must reveal it to the people. And even where they cannot come to a consensus, civil societies manage disagreements and channel resentments down less destructive paths. By turning enemies into rivals or competitors, a decent civic order works to cool the natural antagonisms of life in common. It lets people exist inside a robustly political order while removing politics from ordinary civic life, creating a "society in which individuals are sovereign over their lives yet confident that they will join

together in defense of their freedoms, engaging in adversarial politics meanwhile" (PP 19). Scruton's logic is clear on this point: Civic order begins with the affections of local life, and transnational political institutions can only erode the capacity to develop them.

It is this assertion that leads Scruton into a critique of any elite project aimed at transnational institution building but most pressingly that found in the European Union. To begin with, projects such as these work toward the elimination of politics as a place where citizens contest differing ideas and interests. Instead, governance is their goal, and it is a concept and mode of operating that presumes we all strive for a set end and that nothing remains to discuss but the means of reaching that goal. Scruton argues compellingly that the European Union reduces all opposition to the status of "merely" parochial interests—and if indeed any effective local opposition emerges, following his argument, we can be certain it is a sign of fugitive civic life striking back at its natural enemy in globalism and transnational institutions.

Scruton tells us that a good civic order tames power with law and that the use of law to compel conformity with an understanding alien to the civic order can only do two things. First, it may successfully erode cultural particularity, but Scruton reminds us that in the second instance, we should never forget laws "designed to control us or to amend our ways, rather than to settle our conflicts, bring the law into disrepute" (PP 66). A political order driven by civil society should fear this outcome because unaccountable transnational institutions rule by coercion regardless—and so they march on unconcerned. Once a society's laws stand in disrepute, a major bulwark against the failure of a state's sovereignty dies. It leads to rule not through the channeling of conflict and preservation of the social bond but rather through the mobilization of resentments and the channeling of envy for an elite's own ends. By fostering resentment and envy, he fears one can effectively destroy the local affections that reinforce decent political life.

Thus, Scruton argues that either covertly or openly, intellectuals and political elites in Europe and elsewhere share an understanding of the world that reverses xenophobia: "Being the opposite of xenophobia we might describe this state of mind as 'oikophobia', meaning (to stretch the Greek a little) the repudiation of inheritance and home" (PP 24). And, in Scruton's account, on this point, the transnational movements like the European Union and the wide variety of cosmopolitan, pragmatist, and postmodern intellectuals stand united. Scruton implies we may find part of the reason the former effort found such success in the scholarly assault on the very idea that our own particular culture has a value. Given what most of them wish to affirm, he argues scholars rightly assailed the traditional pillars of Western intellectual life because it was—and

perhaps in some places still remains—schools, museums, universities, and other institutions that traffic in arts and letters that pass on social meaning across the generations.

Scruton observes that we typically divide knowledge into that regarding fact (knowing *that*) and the sort that orients us toward action (knowing *how*). Yet, we typically ignore a third sort he dubs “knowing *what*” or, in other words, the sort of knowledge that gives us reasons to act and live in the manner we do (CC 36–37). Culture passes along this sort of understanding, and when it departs, we lose what little stable ground for living that is possible in modernity. If our educational system and the elite culture of postmodernism assault what they see as the staid ideas of the “Western Canon” and traditional religions, they do so for good reason. Scruton argues that by undermining the old forms of knowing what, the collection of critics, artists, and scholars that form the postmodern movement create a sort of theoretical disorientation and illusory freedom of choice between different modes of living. Because it obviates the necessity of immersing themselves in a difficult and complex intellectual tradition, this form of solipsism holds an obvious appeal for students. But, Scruton claims that the spread of postmodern ideals also portends other dire consequences.

Effective civil society moderates conflict by creating at the very least a loose consensus about how people should live together. Such a society presupposes a certain commonality of culture. When that set of grounding assumptions present to guide debate falters, so too does the very ground upon which rational discourse and thus disagreement proceeds. For Scruton, this results in a culture of opposition and, more specifically, the sorts of divides between peoples that rest on essentially emotive grounds. Instead of reasoning together, our intellectuals work very hard to eliminate certain principles from discussion entirely, and they do this with a humorlessness and violence that Orwell knew well. This essentially antipolitical impulse to silence their opponents leads the enemies of true cultural education to assert power over reality through language, inventing words and phrases that cloak their true meaning with obscurity while bathing them with moral authority—after all, who easily claims opposition to the idea of social justice?

Yet, in their efforts, Scruton argues the intellectual enemies of Western culture share a “duplicity of purpose: they seek on one hand to undermine all claims to absolute truth, and on the other hand to uphold the orthodoxies upon which their congregation depends,” and in short, this results in a multiculturalism whose central tenet is that we must give no offense to the world with our beliefs while respecting even those things that offend us (PP 117). In embracing a political form that ultimately seeks the death of politics and an intellectual orientation that undercuts any attempt at effective cultural education, Scruton fears that

the nations of the European Union will in time succumb to their own form of tutelary despotism or, worse still, fall prey to the growing population of radicalized Muslims living within its borders. And, of course, his fears may prove well founded. While he does not focus quite so heavily upon them in these works, Scruton also attacks the unrestrained consumer culture of modern life as a force equally corrosive toward civic institutions. And thus, he argues that together, all these forces undermine the remnants of decent life.

Scruton nonetheless sees some hope in our current situation. In all three books, he places a great deal of confidence in the capacities of ordinary people to eventually rebel against these noxious visions so that their communities might survive. Insofar as the remnants of civil society rebel against “the prevailing nihilism—both the nihilism of the university, and the nihilism of the marketplace,” hope for cultural change remains a possibility (CC 107). Note here that Scruton accepts the psychology of action in our essentially democratic age: Nothing changes in our sort of politics until a true crisis confronts the people in such a way they can no longer rest in their private lives. He insists that at some point, the Western world will renew itself precisely because of crisis, or it will continue to fade.

However, given his ardent conservatism and localism, I wonder if Scruton’s hopes for change do not outweigh his obvious understanding of its requirements. Particularly, in *Meaning of Conservatism* and *A Political Philosophy*, his arguments about the restoration of limits to both our consumption and the urban restlessness of modernity do not demonstrate that understanding of what we might call the crisis theory of action in democracy. He rightly fears that democratic peoples pay too little attention to the past and future, but his response is an essentially aristocratic one that hopes for immense self-denial and restraint in personal and economic life and, if that followed, would eventually lead men back into the countryside. However, particularly in *A Political Philosophy*, he makes this argument without reference to the beliefs of ordinary bourgeois society and seems to assume a cultured elite might help guide our politics back to this order.

This aristocratic impulse shows up elsewhere in Scruton’s writings but no more strongly than in his endorsement of constitutional monarchy as “among the wisest” of governmental forms. It may be entirely true that because it is removed from immediate responsibility over day-to-day affairs, “monarchy also represents the entire authority of the state,” and as a consequence gives those who live under it unprecedented political stability, yet that fact may be irrelevant (MC 155–6). We should ask a Tocquevillian question: Is this way of thinking about politics truly still an option in democratic times? Far less than in his discussion of culture, Scruton’s entire account of how localism and

conservation might proceed rests on the assumption that we can return a certain sort of aristocratic life back into practice. Our egalitarian consciousness rules this out entirely. Scruton recognizes only unevenly the democratic context that must inform our response to the crisis of culture and the evisceration of contemporary political life.

Throughout his works, Scruton's watchword for politics is delay, a fact which strikes the reader as a sort of fatality. Until catastrophe occurs in the environment and in our disconnected political and social life, we should not expect movement toward restraint. Without that level of immediacy—which is precisely what he notes we face in cultural life—little will change. Scruton's aristocratic instincts lead him to hopes for self-denial that are unrealistic for commercial societies, yet unlike his enemies, he maintains

a healthy respect for what ordinary people in modern bourgeois society can accomplish. While there is much to learn from Scruton's reasoning, particularly about culture, one wonders if his ideas really fit a world where we all too commonly and paradoxically both assert and deny too much of our control over events. Alas, tradition alone cannot avert the crises of modernity. For insight into democracy's discontents, we finally must look elsewhere.

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