

Roger Scruton on the Prehistory of Liberalism

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Sir Roger Scruton's erudite and highly readable book, *Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition*, begins with the observation that conservatism seems increasingly irrelevant today, crowded out by a newly ascendant populism, on the one hand, which vaults previously unimaginable candidates into high office, and an ever-agitated liberalism, on the other, which dominates the media and the university. Conservatism in this context seems to have "a beleaguered air," writes Scruton, as if it has nothing useful to offer (p. 1).¹ The purpose of Scruton's book is to dispel such appearances. Conservatism is "as valid and relevant today" as ever (p. 2). In fact, Scruton is confident that conservatism will be a "necessary ingredient" in any credible solution to the problems of our age (p. 155). Yet people nowadays are surprisingly ignorant about conservatism's essential message and timeless wisdom. Scruton therefore offers this book in the hope of encouraging people, especially well-meaning liberals, to discover afresh what conservative arguments actually are; and he contends that "politicians everywhere" should make the conservative tradition part of their education (*ibid.*).

In my view, Scruton's book largely succeeds both as a history of modern conservatism and as a penetrating analysis of its complex relationship to liberalism. But because the book is uncommonly concise (a mere hundred and fifty-five pages), some of its arguments are quite compressed; and chances are that readers especially on the left will fail adequately to appreciate all that is there. This is particularly the case with Scruton's first chapter about the prehistory of conservatism, where a line of political thought ranging from Greek antiquity to the mid-eighteenth century is traced in a mere twenty-three pages. Initially, this has the look of a potted history, but it is not. It is rather a lightly sketched but sophisticated answer to a thorny methodological problem: How can one best understand the "beginnings" of political phenomena such as conservatism, which appear in some ways altogether new and in other ways derived from past ideas and conditions? Scruton's unique way of resolving this problem is part of what makes his account

of conservatism so fresh. In what follows, I want to describe his historical method along with the insights it makes possible. I then want to raise a friendly question or two about some aspects of conservatism that Scruton's method may unwittingly obscure.

I. SCRUTON'S HISTORICAL METHOD

Scruton draws attention to his historical method briefly in Chapter 1 of *Conservatism* by mentioning that he intends to avoid two errors. One is that of the Marxists who see ideas as mere epiphenomena, the byproducts of economic forces and class relations. The other is that of certain intellectual historians, who view ideas as "caused" in some sense by antecedent ideas. Both approaches are overly deterministic and too narrow to capture the origins of something as complex as conservatism. For example, the fact that conservatism contains within it strong echoes of Aristotelian political philosophy, an intellectual source far removed from modern economic relations, reveals the inadequacy of the Marxist approach. Similarly, the fact that conservatism takes on distinctly new forms after significant cultural changes in religion, economics, and politics reveals the deficiency of the intellectual-historical approach. Scruton's method is therefore more eclectic. He writes, "to understand the pre-history of conservatism,... one should accept that ideas have far-reaching influence over human affairs; but one should recognize also that they do not arise only from other ideas, and often have roots in biological, social and political conditions that lie deeper than rational argument" (p. 10).

The opening sentences of Scruton's Chapter 1 epitomize the historical method just described. Those sentences announce without fanfare that modern conservatism has three quite different sources to which the historian must attend. First, it is "a product of the Enlightenment." Second, it emerges from "aspects of the human condition that can be witnessed in every civilization and at every period of history." And, third, it is "heir to a philosophical legacy at least

as old as the Greeks” (p. 9). This is to say that conservatism *does* emerge from previous ideas; but also from unchanging, empirical facts about the human condition; and from the circumstances surrounding a specific, monumental, historical event: the Enlightenment.

A brief remark is warranted about Scruton’s emphasis on the Enlightenment before turning to a closer look at each of these three sources of conservatism. That conservatism in its modern form is a product of the Enlightenment is the first claim of Scruton’s book; and he repeats it often. It is therefore a matter of some importance. Why? The answer, I suspect, relates to the tendency of so many liberals today to dismiss conservatives as useless relics of a bygone age, political dinosaurs who lumber out of some premodern tarpit now and again to wreak havoc on social progress. If Scruton can convince readers that conservatism is a distinctly *modern* outlook he will have gone some way toward reasserting its relevance.

But *is* conservatism a modern outlook? Scruton may be right to say so, but the history is complex and, I believe, ambiguous. The word “conservative” (*conservateur, conservatrice*) had been used in France since the fourteenth century to refer to an agent that conserves something. Often this referred to a preservative in food, but it also had political applications. The prince, for example, could be referred to as “*conservateur des biens et de la liberté de ses sujets*.”² Similarly, an English writer in 1745 referred to “parliaments” as “the greatest conservatives of our constitution.”³ This use was alive and well during the aftermath of the French Revolution. It lay behind Napoleon’s creation of a “conservative Senate” in 1799 charged with preserving the constitution. And it is, I believe, the proper interpretation of the final sentence of Napoleon’s declaration from 19 Brumaire 1799: “The rights of *conservative, tutelary, and liberal ideas* have been restored through the dispersal of the dissidents who oppressed the Councils” (Stewart 1951, p. 765). The question is whether Scruton’s claim that modern conservatism dates from the Enlightenment refers to this originally French meaning of conservatism which dates back to the fourteenth century or to something else. I believe Scruton to be saying that conservatism gradually took on a new and contextually charged meaning in response to certain political writers of the Enlightenment beginning with Hobbes. And this is the “conservatism” that emerges as a political *movement* in the early nineteenth century. But exactly how and when the concept of a “conservative” morphed in concrete European history from something that preserves or

der and liberty in general to something that relates more narrowly to the Enlightenment is unclear.

II. PERMANENT ASPECTS OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

According to Scruton, the prehistory of modern conservatism begins with certain insights into the human condition that predate modernity, insights which are indeed cross-cultural and perennial, but which were in danger of being obscured during the Enlightenment. These insights include the fact that humans are social by nature, born to parents (or at least to mothers) and often to extended families that play a crucial role in protecting and nurturing. Humans are also social insofar as we naturally form attachments—not only to family but also to friends, places, customs and social institutions. For Scruton, awareness of man’s natural sociality is “the most important input into conservative thinking,” giving rise to “the desire to sustain the networks of familiarity and trust on which a community depends for its longevity.” Scruton continues: “Conservatism is what its name says it is: the attempt to conserve the community that we have—not in every particular since, as Edmund Burke put it, ‘we must reform in order to conserve,’ but in all matters that ensure our community’s long-term survival” (p. 12).

Scruton faintly gestures toward another insight related to man’s sociality, which is that humans are by nature meaning seekers, more so, evidently, than any other creatures. We are deeply concerned that *who we are* and *what we are doing* is meaningful. Yet it is only in society that we find meaning. Meaning is a relational phenomenon, not something we conjure up for ourselves as mere individuals. Scruton hints at this when he says that social attachments “create the sense that we are at home in the world, among familiar and trustworthy things”—that this “is precious to us,” and that its loss is “an occasion of anxiety and mourning” (ibid.). To the extent that this is true, we can say not only that social membership is important for a community’s long-term survival, but also that it is vital for human fulfillment.

Another aspect of the human condition Scruton stresses is our competitiveness. This contrasts sharply with the practices of cooperation that occur in many of our social relationships, but it is undeniably real: “Competition is fundamental to our nature,” writes Scruton, “being both our way of solving problems, and the most important cause of them” (ibid.). Scruton attributes the failure of much uto-

pian thinking to the neglect of this basic insight. Because competition is a permanent fact, human beings need ways of containing and moderating competition, lest it tear society apart. But how? This has been one of the most intractable problems of political life across the ages. Scruton observes that “kinship moderates competition, replacing ‘I’ by ‘we’ in all disputes that might spill over into violence.” And yet kinship also *creates* violence, the “rivalry between families, like the Montagues and Capulets” (pp. 12-13). Similarly, tribes and religions serve to moderate violence. Yet it is a commonplace that they also cause it when tribal and religious “peace” requires war against the outsider, or the heretic. For Scruton, awareness of the fact that humans are inescapably competitive is not yet an answer to all the problems this fact implies, but it is nevertheless something that should inform political philosophy; and his view is that it does indeed inform conservative thought.

A final insight into the human condition that Scruton wants to stress is that humans are by nature rational, but not purely rational. We are capable of calculation and of remarkable leaps of insight. Most of all, we are capable of *learning*, which means, potentially at least, learning how to live together in justice and peace. Yet (and I take this to be one of the principal teachings of Plato’s *Republic*) human reason seems capable of leading us not only to well-ordered social arrangements, but also to the most horrendous outcomes. This is because the good life for man does not spring from reason alone, nor is it ultimately directed to reason alone. We have myriad attachments that are pre-rational—attachments to such things as family, neighborhood, and country—for which rationalist reformers often fail to account. And we have, moreover, a deep longing for something transcendent and immutable that is likewise beyond the limits of human reason. To deny our longing for transcendence is dangerously to misunderstand human nature. This is why it is so often the case (as Scruton points out, paraphrasing Burke) “that rational plans in the brains of ardent believers... lead of their own accord to disaster” (p. 14).

What we learn by taking seriously the above insights is that at least one element of the “pre-history” of modern conservatism is not modern at all, but quite ancient. This does not mean that Scruton is wrong in his insistence that modern conservatism is a product of the Enlightenment. Conservatism is capable of appropriating past insights in the context of new socio-political conditions. In other words, the *facts* that are discovered in the prehistory of conservatism are virtually timeless, but their *relevance* to

modern conditions is new. As Scruton observes, “most of the ideas purveyed by modern conservatives are foreshadowed in Aristotle’s great work. But they have been adapted to a situation that Aristotle himself could not have foreseen” (p. 9). Let me turn now to this new situation.

III. THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Scruton focuses heavily on the Enlightenment as an epochal event giving rise to modern conservatism. But he does not focus exclusively on the Enlightenment. Instead, he sees this event as part of a much broader sweep of history, what I shall call “modernity.” Whether one is trying to understand liberalism or conservatism, this broader sweep of history matters because most of the problems of political organization to which Enlightenment thinkers responded were created by the birth of modernity in the Reformation. Scruton implicitly recognizes this. He says that the new situation, unforeseen by Aristotle, was “the emergence of the nation state, the loss of a unifying religion, and the growth of the ‘great society,’ composed of millions of cooperating strangers under a single rule of law.”

Many people today fail to appreciate the extent to which the Reformation was a *political*, not merely a religious, event. That is because, whatever its problems with decadence and corruption, the Catholic Church was a key part of the network of powers that held European civilization together during most of the Middle Ages. For this reason, the Reformation caused a major political crisis. Suddenly, territories that had not yet made the modern transition into autonomous nation-states (a transition which France and Spain had already accomplished) were in danger of being attacked by their neighbors. This is, incidentally, *the* principal theme of Machiavelli’s two great political works, the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: how can Italy become a state and thereby secure itself against foreign domination? And even after consolidation was achieved, there was the problem of settling the differences between religious factions *within* each state. This was the problem taken up most famously by Thomas Hobbes in the *Leviathan*. If we count Hobbes as the first major Enlightenment thinker in politics—as I believe Scruton does—then we have to acknowledge that the problems with which Hobbes wrestled were problems resulting from an earlier, cataclysmic event: The Reformation.

In my own thinking about modernity, I find it useful to differentiate a number of waves, each focusing on a specific barrier to freedom. The first wave of modernity focused on religious freedom and produced the fateful rupture be-

tween the Protestant and the Catholic Church, and between Protestant and Catholic areas of Europe. The second followed almost of necessity. It was the wave of state formation aimed at securing freedom from foreign domination. It resulted (eventually) in what is now called state sovereignty. The third wave was the effort to secure domestic freedom from internal religious and political factions by settling the grounds of domestic sovereignty. This third wave arguably marked the beginning of political “Enlightenment” because it involved—as Scruton recognizes—the decision to ground domestic sovereignty in something other than religion, even if religion would still be used in an Erastian way to bolster sovereign authority. The ground of authority starting with Hobbes was individual *reason* (albeit motivated by fear) issuing in consent. Instead of deriving authority downward from divine right or hereditary right, Hobbes set the course for grounding it upward from the reasoning capacity of the individual.

What about these events prompts the rise of conservatism? Scruton’s answer to this question is one of the subtlest aspects of his account, and it is the crux of the difference between contemporary liberals and conservatives. To understand it, we must look not simply at grand historical events but also at the philosophical ideas and political innovations of the Enlightenment thinkers themselves.

IV. THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF MODERN CONSERVATISM

We have already observed that modern conservatism has philosophical roots stretching all the way back to the Greeks. But its philosophical roots also have medieval and Enlightenment sources. The medieval roots, insofar as these factor into Scruton’s account, can be treated very briefly. They include theories of the relationship between church and state authority, between *sacerdotium* and *regnum*, theories which had gradually emerged since the Investiture Controversy. They also include theories about the “law of nature,” the *jus naturale*.

Both church-state theorizing and natural law theorizing were present in Thomas Hobbes’s political works. But whatever the apparent continuities between Hobbes’s thought and that of the Middle Ages, the discontinuity mattered more, according to Scruton. For Scruton, Hobbes inaugurated a new way of thinking about political legitimacy. He assumed that legitimate government must rest on the consent “of freely choosing individuals, motivated by their beliefs and desires” (p. 18). Hobbes also inaugurated a new

understanding of the individual. His individuals were solitary, appetite-driven, unrelentingly competitive, and prone to violence. Yet they were also capable of rational calculation and could thus see that their survival depended upon the establishment of a sovereign authority who might “keep them all in awe” (Hobbes 1996, p. 88). This unique philosophical anthropology led Hobbes to a new conception of domestic sovereignty: an all-powerful, absolute ruler, established by the individual consent of the people, and thereafter untouchable except in the eventuality that he should fail to protect his people from each other and from external threats.

According to Scruton, modern conservatism’s prehistory in the Enlightenment runs from Hobbes to Harrington, to Locke, and to Montesquieu. But his argument at this point is complicated and easy to misconstrue. It is not that these thinkers are the forebears of conservatism while others give rise to liberalism. It is rather (less tidily but more truly) that each of these thinkers contributes simultaneously to liberalism and conservatism in different ways, and sometimes in the same way. Careful attention to Scruton’s concise treatment of each thinker will reveal how this works.

The picture we get in Hobbes—of solitary individuals experiencing fear in a primitive state of nature and using reason and consent to erect a sovereign power—feeds into conservative and liberal thinking alike, but in different ways. Both liberals and conservatives would accept, by and large, Hobbes’s emphasis on the free individual as a component, if not the only component, of political legitimacy. Scruton stresses that this general agreement put an end to the earlier, medieval view that “the freedom of the individual is a privilege, conferred by the monarch in return for military or courtly services” (p. 16). Liberals and conservatives would also agree that the absolutist character of Hobbes’s sovereign power was excessive. “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” Lord Acton wrote in 1887, giving voice to a sentiment that many conservatives embrace today, even though Acton was an ardent Liberal.⁴

However, liberals and conservatives would diverge, at least to some extent, over Hobbes’s portrait of the “individual” and the role he plays in initiating legitimate authority. While the liberal tradition built upon Hobbes’s view, even if tempering it by the more constraining view of natural law in Locke, conservatives took a more ambivalent view. For most conservatives, Hobbes’s “natural condition of mankind” seems a fiction that dangerously overlooks one of the most basic insights into the human condition, namely the natural sociality of man. By denying man’s sociality,

Hobbes obscures the sources of meaning that human beings care about most, as well as the natural grounds of political legitimacy—not individual, rational consent, but the ability of a government to protect the things we love and to maintain our customary way of life. Scruton writes, “we rational beings need customs and institutions that are founded in something other than reason, if we are to use our reason to good effect” (p. 14). And he continues, “this insight, indeed, is probably the principal contribution that conservatism has made to the self-understanding of the human species” (ibid).

At the same time, Scruton admits that there is a “countervailing tendency in conservative thought,” that conceives of the community not “as an organic network bound by habit and submission, but as a free association of rational beings all of whom have, and cherish, an identity of their own” (ibid.). Such is the difficulty of relating conservative and liberal thought to the major figures of the Enlightenment. The details are messy. Scruton is therefore right to insist that “we will understand modern conservatism as a political movement only if we see that some elements of liberal individualism have been programmed into it from the outset” (p. 23). Conservatism does not uniformly oppose liberal individualism, though it does in some instances and to some extent.

Scruton’s treatments of Harrington, Locke, and Montesquieu emphasize a number of familiar themes that influence liberalism and conservatism alike. In Harrington, he points to the advocacy of a republican government organized for economic increase and especially his promotion of a government “of laws, not of men.” In Locke, he points to the importance of the natural law as a source of individual rights and even (*pace* Hobbes) a limiting force upon government. He points also to the “separation of powers” in government and traces this through its more refined appearance in Montesquieu. Almost all these ideas would, according to Scruton, “have a radical influence on both liberal and conservative thinking” (p. 21). Two important exceptions include the whole idea of a “state of nature,” which conservatives tend to reject, and the concomitant idea that civil society is the product of a contract, whether actual or tacit.

Though Scruton does not say so in this first chapter on prehistory, it is worth remarking that some conservatives also harbor reservations about the phase of Enlightenment thinking running from Harrington, through Locke, and Montesquieu. For here marks the beginning of what would arguably become an overemphasis on man’s economic na-

ture. When taken to an extreme, this turns man into little more than *homo economicus* while obscuring other, more meaningful aspects of human nature: our aesthetic sensibility, our love of learning, the importance of local relationships and the forms of sympathy that attend them. Scruton does stress elsewhere, in his chapter on “cultural conservatism,” that some conservatives did eventually distance themselves from the imperatives of economic progress in favor of preserving cultural forms of meaning. But it is probably worth stressing that this aspect of conservatism’s prehistory is as ambiguous as some of the other aspects Scruton takes up. Not all conservatives place economic increase or commerce at the center of their philosophy.

After describing the emergence of modern conservatism out of Enlightenment political thought, Scruton finds himself in a position to offer a thesis, one that I find quite relevant to contemporary political debates. His thesis is that “modern conservatism... began life in Britain and also in France as a *qualification* of liberal individualism” (p. 23). In other words, conservatism was not simply opposed to liberal individualism, but was rather opposed to the tendency to excess in liberal individualism, the tendency to become so zealous about individual liberation that one becomes more or less blind to the profound but fragile value in much that constrains us. Liberalism has always tended to be destructive of what should be maintained in tradition, custom, and other social sources of human order and meaning.

Scruton’s thesis here can be profitably unpacked by differentiating three areas of doctrinal excess in which conservatives would make their qualification, the liberal concepts of “individualism,” “freedom,” and “reason.”

IV. THE CONSERVATIVE QUALIFICATION(S) OF LIBERALISM

Insofar as liberals operate with an understanding of the individual derived from Hobbes, they ground their philosophy in a dangerous fiction. This is not to say that the entire modern emphasis on the individual—on individual conscience, rights, and self-actualization—is all wrong. On the contrary, almost all conservatives accept some form of individualism. But conservatives also see how unrealistic and ultimately destructive is the notion that every individual must personally consent to every obligation placed upon him for such obligations to be legitimate. This is not the way human beings come into the world; it is not the way political communities arise and are maintained; and it is (crucially) not a recipe for individual fulfillment. Scruton

allows Blackstone, Hume, and Dr. Johnson to give voice to this qualification in his chapter on the prehistory of conservatism. But it is a repeated theme throughout the book. It was “the aim of Burke’s argument in the *Reflections*,” claims Scruton in a later chapter, “to uphold the priority of the ‘we’ over the ‘I,’ and to warn against what happens when the forms of social membership are taken away and society disintegrates... into ‘the dust and powder of individuality’” (p. 51). Similarly, it was one of Hegel’s principal criticisms of Rousseau, that “the self does not exist prior to society, but is created in society through the resolution of conflict, and through custom, morality, and civil association” (p. 59). And, once again, with respect to Simone Weil: “Human beings have roots, Weil argued, by virtue of their active participation in a collective, which conserves in living form a social and spiritual inheritance, and which continues to offer presentiments of a shared future” (p. 123).

Scruton’s emphasis on this conservative qualification of liberal individualism is especially timely today as a growing movement on the political Right in Europe and America advocates a wholesale rejection of liberalism on the grounds that its philosophical anthropology is flawed. Apparently forgotten by these reactionary critics is that the philosophical anthropology of liberalism has been the subject of criticism (or, to use Scruton’s term, qualification) since the mid-eighteenth century. Liberalism was never an isolated phenomenon. Conservatism did and can continue to balance it. Here in part lies the significance of Scruton’s claim that conservatism is a product of the Enlightenment. If we forget this fact, we are likely to mischaracterize the actual practice of liberalism, mistaking its extreme philosophical articulation for its more tempered practices.⁵ Worse yet, if we go so far as to deem conservatism “irrelevant,” as Scruton fears we are doing, then we shall unwittingly contribute to the radicalization of liberalism by removing its most effective check.

Conservatism’s role in qualifying the liberal conception of freedom is similar. Liberals have a tendency to approach freedom in absolute terms. Not only is each instance of freedom thought to be absolute, requiring no adjustment to circumstances or to competing human goods, but the whole modern quest for freedom that began with the Reformation has gradually morphed into a quest for absolute emancipation from anything and everything felt as a constraint, an emancipation from the human condition itself. In short, we want to be God. Against this conception of freedom conservatives articulate a corrective. In the first place, no particular instance of freedom can be absolute (set

loose from all contingency) because freedom must always compete with other human goods: social and political order, the predictability and trust that is required for human action, the obligations that accrue from human relationships, and the discipline that is required for all practices of excellence. Not only is absolute freedom incompatible with these other goods, it is also incompatible *with itself* insofar as various freedoms do not fit harmoniously together without regulation. In order for liberals to enjoy one freedom (say, freedom from vast social inequalities) they must temper other freedoms (say, freedom from government interference in the economy).

Secondly and just as importantly, absolute emancipation is neither possible nor desirable for human beings. The most productive and personally rewarding exercises of freedom always occur within limiting structures. Just as the sonata form both constrains and also makes possible the distinct excellence of Beethoven’s *Appassionata*, so do the customs, traditions, obligations and other received constraints make possible the true freedom of the individual. Scruton underscores this insight in the thought of Dr. Johnson. He writes that “freedom for Johnson was not an escape from obligations, but a call to obey them, whether or not they have been consciously chosen.” Johnson’s way of “valuing eccentricity and independence as a sign of a deeper obedience than any sheepish conformity,” remains according to Scruton, “at the heart of English conservatism to this day” (p. 31).

Finally, conservatism serves to qualify the liberal Enlightenment view of reason. The problem with that view, as Scruton rightly observes, is that too much trust is placed in the power of reason alone to guide individual action and to reform age-old social structures. As the conservative Michael Oakeshott pointed out in his brilliant essay, “Rationalism in Politics,” liberal reformers tend to overlook the tangle and variety of human experience, the delicate compromises and practical balancing of competing goods that go into historical arrangements (Oakeshott 1991). Instead they are apt to oversimplify, to offer sweeping solutions and radical changes based on their reasoning in the moment. Such reforms rarely work; and Scruton points to the French Revolution as the quintessential demonstration of this fact (contrasting it with the American Revolution, which he reads as more conservative in orientation).

All in all, Scruton’s account of the origins of modern conservatism is sophisticated and illuminating. Again, he points to three quite different sources. Conservatism is, first, a product of the Enlightenment. Second, it draws

upon important insights into the human condition, insights relating to sociality, conflict, and reason. And, third, it emerges out of a philosophical tradition stretching backward to the Greeks and forward to the foundational texts of liberalism. By understanding conservatism in relation to these three diverse sources, Scruton reveals the extent to which it is simultaneously fixed and dynamic. It is fixed because it contains core ideas that do not change. But it is dynamic because the political conditions to which it responds are constantly changing. In the remainder of Scruton's volume, he identifies four distinct phases of modern conservatism. He writes: "Modern conservatism began as a defense of tradition against the calls for popular sovereignty;" next it became "an appeal on behalf of religion and high culture against the materialist doctrine of progress;" then it "join[ed] forces with the classical liberals in the fight against socialism;" and currently it has become "the champion of Western civilization against its enemies:" political correctness and militant Islamism. Scruton is thus able to capture conservatism in its continuity and change.

This brings us back to Scruton's motivation for writing. By reminding conservatives and liberals alike of the origins of modern conservatism and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, Scruton makes a powerful case for its abiding relevance in our liberal regime. Without conservatism, liberalism goes too far; it destroys too much, too fast, not recognizing the damage this does to social order and individual well-being. Ultimately liberalism, when left unchecked by conservatism, destroys its own social and philosophical foundations and thus becomes unsustainable as a way of life.

V. SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT SCRUTON'S ACCOUNT

Does Scruton's sophisticated method enable him to illuminate conservatism completely or does he leave some aspects of its nature obscure? Conservatism is, of course, a tremendously complex and variegated phenomenon; and completeness is a lot to ask of any account. But still, to inquire into the degree of completeness is a useful test of accuracy. My argument here is that Scruton's method may (for all its virtues) miss something in the complicated relationship of conservatism to "reaction."

In a sloppy and polemical sense, the word "reactionary" can refer to "anyone who opposes changes that the Left desires." But there is also a more precise use of the term according to which a reactionary is someone who wants "to

re-establish a political order that has been overthrown in the name of left-wing ideals" (see Scruton 1983, pp. 394-95). According to the sloppy definition, one would be hard pressed to distinguish a reactionary from a conservative—and this is often the intention of those who use the word in this way. According to the more precise definition, however, they are easy to tell apart: conservatives desire not to re-establish what has been overthrown, but to conserve what is good in the present. Thus, in Scruton's *Dictionary of Political Thought*, from which I have already been quoting, conservatism is defined as "a desire to conserve existing things, held to be either good in themselves, or better than the likely alternatives, or at least safe, familiar, and the objects of trust and affection" (*ibid.*, p. 90).

In Scruton's chapter on the prehistory of conservatism, he takes pains to draw a stark contrast between conservatism and reaction. He does so by quoting a line from Burke: "We must reform in order to conserve." What does this mean? It means that conservatives understand (what reactionaries do not) that adaptation is sometimes necessary "in order to conserve what we are and what we have" (p. 3). In more specific terms, Scruton is referring to the basic attitude one takes to "the revolution," not just the French Revolution, the excesses of which invite the harshest of criticism, but the entire "modern revolution" which vaults the freedom of the individual to the highest of all political goods. Reactionaries regard this revolution as something fundamentally wrong and believe it must be undone before anything good can be politically achieved. Conservatives by contrast adapt to the revolution "in a spirit of conservation and renewal" (p. 22). By casting their relationship in this way, Scruton is able to say definitively: "Conservatives are not reactionaries."

But is there not a single element of reaction in modern conservatism, however faint? Certainly, one can see why Scruton would want to drive a wedge between conservatives and reactionaries. Not only does reaction have a bad name, but it is also, by definition, irrelevant in the modern political dispensation. It makes itself irrelevant by pronouncing a candid "No!" to Enlightenment liberalism. Reactionaries are not interested in contributing valuable insights to contemporary political debates; they are interested in *ending* contemporary debates and returning to the *status quo ante*, the way things were before liberalism rose victorious.⁶ Just to the extent that this is true, Scruton's argument about the abiding relevance of modern conservatism necessitates a dissociation of conservatism from reaction. The closer conservatism comes to reaction the less relevant it can be.

But careful reflection on the various strands of modern conservatism may lead one to wonder whether conservatism is completely divorced from reaction after all. Put another way, the question is how thoroughly and consistently “adaptive” modern conservatives really are. Today it is possible to identify a host of different conservative strands: religious conservatives; foreign policy conservatives—which come in two varieties, American-style isolationists and hawkish realists; law-and-order conservatives, who sometimes border on Hobbesian absolutism, at least when it comes to police powers; constitutional conservatives; economic freedom conservatives; anti-majoritarian or anti-democratic conservatives; social-hierarchy conservatives; and traditional-values conservatives, especially insofar as tradition opposes such innovations as sexual liberation, gender fluidity, and human enhancement. This is a markedly different list of conservative types from the four types offered by Scruton, though there is some overlap.

Why and how am I able to offer a different list? The reason is that whereas Scruton divides modern history into four phases to which conservatives respond—Enlightenment Liberalism, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of Socialism, and the rise of Political Correctness in the west along with religious extremism in parts of the West and the Middle East; I divide modern history into nine waves of liberation to which conservatives respond, sometimes assenting, sometimes dissenting. I have presented the list of nine waves elsewhere, but I shall do so again here in order to comment on its relevance to the questions at hand: What types of conservatism exist? And what relationship do these types have to reaction?

Here are the nine waves of modern freedom followed by a characteristic thinker or two who advanced each wave.

1. Freedom from religious persecution (Luther)
2. Freedom from foreign domination (Machiavelli, enshrined at Westphalia)
3. Freedom from civil war (Bodin, Hobbes)
4. Freedom from arbitrary rule, tyranny (Milton, Locke)
5. Freedom from government interference in the economy (Smith, Say, Cobden)
6. Freedom from rule by another, i.e., by some person or group that does not include oneself or one’s representative (Publius, Rousseau, Kant)
7. Freedom from tyranny of the majority (Tocqueville, Mill)
8. Freedom from exploitation by privileged sub-political groups
 - a. in the social sphere (Mill)
 - b. in the economic sphere (Marx, Hobhouse, Dewey, Croly)
9. Freedom from biological necessity (Nick Bostrom and transhumanists)

The first insight afforded by reflection on the nine waves is that the distinctly modern phenomenon of revolution is more dynamic (one might even say more metastatic) than Scruton’s approach allows. He focuses on the massive political revolution that occurred during the Enlightenment, and on two economic revolutions: The Industrial Revolution and the Marxist-type socialist revolution. But such broad periodization obscures the extent to which modernity can also be viewed as a long series of smaller revolutions running from the Reformation to today.

A second insight follows from this first one. Just as the modern revolution of which Enlightenment liberalism is but a part did not stop with the rise of liberalism but kept unfolding, so too did *conservatism keep unfolding* in reaction to the new frontiers of freedom. And this allows us to classify conservatives by how they react to any one of the revolutionary waves, either “adapting” or by “reacting,” which means saying “No!” Each of the nine waves of freedom except for the ninth has produced conservatives who adapt and conservatives who “react.” The reactionaries refuse further development; they want to arrest the revolution at a certain point and oppose any further change. To just the extent that the revolution moves forward without them, they desire to turn the clock back to the way things were before. This is, to be sure, a form of reaction. It is not as radical as the kind of reactionary who, with De Maistre, rejects modernity *in toto*. Compared to De Maistre, the modern reactionary seems more adaptive. But he is not completely adaptive. He is a reactionary at the moment of his refusal to assent to the revolution in one or more of its later phases and in his desire to return to the *status quo ante*.

This has direct implications for whether some conservatives partake in the character of “reaction” or not. Scruton follows the widely accepted understanding of a reactionary as someone who wants to go back to the most fundamental *status quo ante*, to the dispensation prior to Enlightenment liberalism itself. But if the revolution is not merely a singular cataclysmic event, but also a gradually unfolding series of events, then it is possible to be a reactionary in relation

to any of the nine waves. All the conservative types I listed above are defined by their refusal to evolve politically beyond their fixed attachment to one of the nine waves. And, empirically speaking, we do indeed see distinct strands of conservatism that make such a refusal. This suggests that some forms of modern conservatism have reaction built into them.

If there is a downside to this method of understanding conservatism—a method that I believe to be slightly more empirically explanatory than Scruton’s method—it is that the problem of conservatism’s “relevance” today becomes more complicated. The core ideas associated with conservatism through the ages, ideas centering on human sociality, the ineradicably of competition and violence, and the ambiguous quality of human reason, are as relevant today as ever. I doubt that their relevance will ever fade. But when modern conservatives exercise the “reactionary option” that I have just described, they become by definition less relevant—less relevant at least to political debates surrounding new forms of freedom they categorically reject. They are simply overtaken by the revolution. On this matter, Eric Voegelin (1990, p. 512) once made an apt and humorous point:

One can’t get away from the revolution. Whoever participates in it for a time with the intention of retiring peacefully with a pension which calls itself liberalism will discover sooner or later that the revolutionary convulsion to destroy socially harmful, obsolete institutions is not a good investment for a pensioner.

In the constantly unfolding revolution that courses through modern history, all one has to do is stand still to become a reactionary (and to just that extent a less relevant voice).

VI. CONCLUSION

At the outset of Scruton’s chapter on the prehistory of conservatism, he stressed that he wanted to avoid two methodological errors. The first was the intellectualist error of supposing that conservatism emerges strictly from the history of ideas. The second was the Marxist error of supposing it emerges not from ideas at all but from the social antagonisms surrounding the modern means of economic production. In retrospect, Scruton was wise to avoid these errors, not only because they each fail in their own way to account for the complex emergence of modern conservatism, but also because they each lead to a mode of dismissal. In the distinctly modern way of life in which we find our-

selves, liberalism simply dominates; and liberals place a tremendous value upon progress, including the progress of political ideas. In this milieu, conservatism will appear as nothing but regressive if it is understood strictly in terms of the history of ideas. Because history is moving forwards, not backwards or standing still, conservative ideas are, *ex definitione*, irrelevant.

The Marxist dismissal is slightly different but nevertheless fatal. If all political “ideologies”—including, e.g., feudalism, mercantilism, liberalism, conservatism, and socialism—are mere epiphenomena, stemming from class differences in relation to the means of production, then conservatism can have no inherent truth. It is reduced to propaganda on the part of the “haves” to justify their privileges in the face of the “have nots.” Conservatism in this guise is little more than a powerplay, plainly unjust and doomed to irrelevance as soon as the “have nots” succeed in destroying unjust privilege.

Scruton is right to search for a historical method that is not so negatively charged, one that can help readers understand what conservatism *is*, rather than why it should be dismissed *a priori*. And I have argued that his account largely succeeds. By grounding conservatism in a body of timeless insights into the human condition, he frustrates the intellectualist dismissal of conservative ideas as retrograde. By showing that conservatism is no mouthpiece for Enlightenment liberalism (as Marx would expect) but in fact a *qualification* of liberalism—and not only liberalism, but also crude industrialism, socialism, political correctness, and religious fundamentalism—Scruton shows that conservative ideas transcend any particular set of economic relations. Indeed, they address much more than economics; and what they have to offer is not ideological propaganda, but wise counsel.

However, I have argued in the final section of this reflection that Scruton’s account of conservatism tends to obscure certain empirical realities about its relationship to liberalism and reaction. Because liberalism is better understood as dynamic and evolutionary rather than static, conservatives have the opportunity to “react” not only at its inception, but at any point along its trajectory, as it shifts focus from one form of liberation to another. I have thus argued for the possibility of a “reactionary element” in modern conservatism. And I wish to close by suggesting that this element should not be dismissed (especially not by conservatives) as irrelevant. Let us remember that “relevance” is a relative concept which always invites the question: relevant *to what?* In Scruton’s *Conservatism*, relevance seems

to be defined by the contribution conservatism can make to human flourishing in regimes where the dominance of liberal ideas is accepted as a *fait accompli*. (The conservative “adapts”). But Scruton has relatively little to say about what conservatives should do when late liberalism generates ideas and political movements that are positively inimical to human flourishing. My own view is that at such pivotal moments when liberalism is in all likelihood speeding towards its own destruction, the burden of conservatism is to be “relevant” in a new way—not relevant to the present, destructive ambitions of liberalism itself, but relevant instead to those pockets of local civilization within each liberal regime where individuals still endeavor to pursue human fulfillment in well-ordered communities of freedom, responsibility, and meaning.

NOTES

- 1 Hereafter, references to this text will be cited parenthetically.
- 2 I owe this observation to Dr. Martin Beckstein, and it is well attested in early French dictionaries.
- 3 Oxford English Dictionary under “conservative.”
- 4 For Acton’s famous remark and its immediate context, see (Hill 2000, pp. xi, xxiv, and chapter 17).
- 5 A recent example is Deneen 2018.
- 6 On reactionaries as defenders of the status quo ante in relation to conservatives who defend the status quo, see most recently Alexander 2018, pp. 1-24.

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