
Scruton on Conservatism in Germany and France

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Conservatism is one of the most paradoxical notions within Anglophone political thought. When it is used to signify a mode of political practice in English-speaking societies, it appears to be a very efficient device that certainly dares speak its name. A leading British political party proudly calls itself 'Conservative', and so does a powerful ideological current in the United States of America. But when conservatism chooses to look inward and bring into consciousness its own identity, its self-confidence is usually shattered. For very often the practitioners of the political machinery that calls itself 'conservative', discover that this word is ill-suited for their convictions. The reason for this discontent is obvious: whenever what passes as 'conservatism' in the Anglophone democracies is examined as a pattern of thought and brought to the degree of clarity sufficient for honest self-reflection, it reveals itself as almost indistinguishable from liberalism, with some caveats here and there. Anglo-American conservatism is continuously drifting towards the point of identity loss, readily adopting as its main premises the broad liberal principles, such as individual liberty. But to be considered a full-fledged ideology, conservatism cannot act simply as a gradualist, traditionalist, or sceptical variety of liberalism; it needs to be seen as a clearly-outlined alternative to liberalism. Seeing no such alternative within the leading strains of Anglo-American conservatism, the students of ideology who wish to formulate its postulates often find themselves at loss.

On this landscape Roger Scruton is a brilliant exception: a British philosopher who is a conservative not in name only, but someone whose thorough self-examination leads him to imagine a conservative world view which instead of remaining merely a correction to liberalism, may serve as an alternative to all its main varieties, including what is known as classical liberalism. And in his *Conservatism* Scruton endows this vision with historical depth, as he attempts to re-enact conservative imagination by means of a rich narrative of the history of conservative idea, where instead of the Burkean conservatism-lite with liberal overtones, one is offered a conservative tradition capable of

standing on its own feet that does not bow to liberalism in search for legitimacy. The ideal of individual liberty still plays part in this tradition, yet other themes take a more central stage: those of community, order and obligation. Scruton's ingenious narrative forces the reader to rethink his perception of the genealogy of Anglo-American political thinking, discovering that many familiar names usually perceived as the forefathers of various strains of progressive thought, such as utilitarianism or modern republicanism, can be considered, and with good reason, as part of the grand conservative tradition. Scruton very appropriately includes Adam Smith among them and, perhaps a bit more surprisingly, Thomas Jefferson. From these eighteenth-century thinkers, an interesting genealogy is drawn spanning via nineteenth-century literary figures, such as Coleridge, Arnold and Ruskin, towards twentieth-century thinkers, including Eliot and Leavis.

But no one who wishes to comprehend the conservative tradition in the Western thought may avoid stepping beyond the Anglophone sphere. For however skilfully one may perform the act of giving shape to Anglo-American conservatism, one fundamental fact remains: conservative moments in Anglo-American political thought and experience have hardly ever been able to emancipate themselves fully from liberalism. More often than not, they parasitised on the liberal world view, which rose to the dominant position in these societies. To explain this point somewhat simplistically, the difference between the projects of imagining the 'liberal' and 'conservative' genealogies is this. The liberal tradition can be shaped quite effortlessly, and without recourse to interpretative excuses. Hume, Smith, Burke, Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold and Bernard Bosanquet, all of them can be easily shown to have been liberals at heart in the broad sense. Yet, whenever the conservative story is told, it usually has to attach the word 'also' to its main protagonists: Bentham was not only a radical liberal utilitarian but *also* an authoritarian at times as well as a critic of the idea of rights; Arnold was not only a self-proclaimed liberal, but *also* a critic of the liberal

political mainstream of his time; Bosanquet not only argued for a relatively minimalist state, but his philosophical arguments against methodological individualism *also* contributed to a departure from classical liberalism, etc.

Many authors who wrote on the Anglo-American conservative tradition simply accepted this situation as given. For this reason, most of their descriptions are in fact stories of conservative *liberalism*. And already long ago Karl Mannheim correctly suggested English conservatism had traditionally been diluted by liberalism. In his view, understanding conservatism required studying it where it manifested itself in its paradigmatic form, and for him, such place had been nineteenth-century Germany. This interpretation had a too limited range: important strains of conservative thought emerged also in other areas of continental Europe, such as France and Russia. But Britain was always a case apart. And to the extent that the elaborate illiberal conservative discourse occurred there, its intellectual origins lay on the continent. One can mention in this respect S.T. Coleridge and Matthew Arnold who drew inspiration respectively from Germany and France.

It is no wonder then that Scruton too, unwilling to stop half-way in his elaboration of the conservative world view, does not limit himself to discussing Anglo-American conservatism, and finds inspiration also in the conservative traditions that developed in continental Europe. Names of continental authors are spread throughout the entire book, and there is also an entire chapter (no. 3) dedicated specifically to conservatism in France and Germany. In it, German conservatism is represented by Hegel who, as argued, remedied the liberal abstract exaggerations of Kant and ‘rescued the human individual from the philosophy of individualism’ (p. 66). He modernised the conservative culture of obedience by developing a theory of political order as the communal expression of ethical life, which is ‘the public and outward aspect of morality’ (p. 61). Similar to Burke, he saw family as a key element of political order and the source of unchosen obligations. And while upholding the autonomy of civil society with its protection of contracts, Hegel also upheld the identity of the state as a corporate person.

As for France, Scruton mentions the writings of de Maistre, arguing that the Frenchman’s value for conservatism lies in his attack on the Enlightenment fascination with rebellion against all authority and with the idea of the man-made political order, while acknowledging that this critique is put forward with ‘a certain remorseless extremism’ (p. 69). Then Scruton discusses Chateaubriand who is credited with the defence and advocacy of the Christian faith, com-

bined (in his thought and life) with the yearning for aesthetic and spiritual renewal out of the legacy of revolutionary egalitarianism (p. 73). Finally, Tocqueville’s name is brought to exemplify a critique of the democratic urge for equality in the modern age.

Some other continental thinkers are mentioned in other chapters in different contexts. These include Herder who is presented as a proponent of ‘cultural conservatism’, Simone Weil with its reformulation of patriotism, and José Ortega y Gasset who addressed the problem of the decadence of our civilisation.

All these names make Scruton’s account of conservative thought richer and more distinct. The continental European contribution to conservatism allows to sideline the motif of individual liberty which is too prominent among Anglo-American thinkers classified as ‘conservatives’ and to set instead other parameters: community, order and hierarchy. Scruton accomplishes this task with a much higher degree of sophistication than the standard liberalised accounts of conservatism. Nevertheless, even Scruton’s treatment of this important aspect of the conservative tradition appears to be essentially incomplete.

The instances of continental conservatism in Scruton’s book are carefully disentangled from the context in which they emerged and flourished. Hegel, for example, is not an unambiguous choice to represent German conservatism as such. Many conservative *tropoi* can be indeed squeezed out of his writings. But to the extent that they are conservative, they are not specifically Hegelian, reflecting rather an instinctive critique of individualistic utilitarian liberalism common to the German philosophy of that period. Of all other figures sharing those intuitions, Hegel was perhaps *least* conservative. As Terry Pinkard argues in his biography of Hegel, in strictly political terms the German philosopher—an avid reader of *Edinburgh Review* and sympathiser of Whigs—should be considered as a moderate liberal reformer who was allied with the reformist faction in the Prussian government in the hope to push towards gradual opening of the state which would secure basic liberties, including the freedom of press.

If one wishes to see Prussian conservatism in its purer form, one should rather examine the ideas of thinkers such as Friedrich Julius Stahl and Adam Müller. True, these thinkers may be less helpful to formulating a programme for contemporary conservatism. The former—a critic of Hegel—was an unabashed adept of Christian monarchy and foe of what he considered ‘rationalism’, that he attributed to Hegel. And the latter was too nostalgic about the

mediaeval feudal past to be relevant for the modernising societies. Yet, if Hegel is to be understood as a conservative, he must be examined in the context of this very conservative tradition that includes thinkers such as Stahl, Müller, or even Karl Ludwig von Haller, and as the one who when weighed on some imaginary ‘conservative scales’ should be put rather on the periphery of that tradition.

Or, much space in the book is given to the account of Simone Weil’s adoption of Catholic conservatism and her call for social integration by means of true patriotism (as distinct from nationalism) which is evoked to overcome the rootlessness embedded in the modern civilisation. To cite Scruton:

She identified the chief evil of modern civilisation as *déracinement*, and attempted to analyse the *enracinement* (putting down of roots) that had protected humanity in the past, and might again protect it in the future, from social corrosion. This aspect of her thought was influenced by the agrarian conservatism of Thibon and Giono. Human beings have roots, Weil argued, by virtue of their active participation in a collective, which conserves in living from a social and spiritual inheritance, and which continues to offer presentiments of a shared future (p. 123).

Now, this emphasis on rootlessness in Weil’s thought is indeed not accidental, and it is nurtured in the tradition of the French conservatism of the first half of the twentieth century. Another figure who immediately crops in one’s mind is Maurice Barrès, a conservative republican and the author of the novel *Les déracinés*. Barrès was an integral nationalist and anti-Semite, and these views indeed repelled Weil, a Jewish thinker attracted to Catholic mysticism. Her search for new rootedness by means of patriotism was meant to provide a humane alternative to *that* kind of conservatism. And yet hers was a philosophical performance within the same universe of discourse. And if French conservatism is to be taken as a broad tradition, both Barrès and Weil should belong to it, even if they represent its two different poles.

Similar selectiveness can be spotted not only in the way Scruton chooses thinkers but also in the way he arranges the constituent concepts of illiberal conservatism. As I see it, illiberal conservatism contains two axes on which it dissolves the phantasms of atomistic individualism. One axis is horizontal, referring to the place of an individual within the community. Here the conservative critique of liberalism

is focused on the notion of organic or solidaristic community. But left alone, communitarianism is not the principal characteristic of conservatism; for it plays a no less important role in various strains of socialism. To become itself, conservatism requires the second—vertical—axis that refers to hierarchical relationships within the society, signified by the notions of authority, order and obligation (‘tradition’ being an ambiguous case, capable of bearing both the horizontal and vertical meaning). Scruton does indeed refer to these notions, especially in the later chapter of the books, as his story of conservatism unravels. Yet it is the idea of community that takes the centre stage almost from the beginning, and remains there up to the end. The horizontal axis of conservatism here is more salient than the vertical axis.

This is hardly accidental. The way I read Scruton’s work (and it is likely that I read him very differently from how he understands himself) is that he attempts to find for conservatism a conceptual location which will be situated at the most distant point from liberalism without leaving the liberal galaxy altogether. It is as if Scruton were the captain of Voyager 3 that reaches heliopause but refuses to cross into the interstellar space. Scruton moves as far as he can to formulate a distinctly illiberal conservatism but only to the point which does not require abandoning liberal values altogether. This is why the horizontal aspects of conservatism are emphasised in comparison to its vertical aspects, and why the thinkers adopted from the continent are those who are in fact friends of liberalism: the moderate reformist Hegel, the centrist aristocratic liberal Tocqueville, the tolerant proto-Romantic nationalist Herder and the crypto-Catholic anti-nationalist Weil.

This is by itself merely a feature of the book rather than its fault. In the final account, Scruton writes a philosophical pamphlet and not a scholarly account of the history of conservatism. He does not deny having a *credo*, and there is nothing wrong in trying to reconstruct a rich tradition of thinking through which the *credo* can better understand itself. The question is, however, whether this project of outlining the parameters of illiberal conservatism while disentangling it from the explicitly *anti*-liberal elements present in the tradition can be considered as potentially fruitful. In other words, does the suggested form of speaking about politics and life sharpen or blurs our vision of the contemporary social and political reality?

In order to answer this question, one should determine where the dividing line of the current moral-political dilemmas lies. For the most part of the twentieth century,

in the eyes of adepts of the Western civilisation, such a dividing line lay between liberty and tyranny. And since the ideal of liberty is the key element of broad liberalism, it is not surprising that the victory of the Western principles after the end of the Cold War made liberalism into the dominant ideology. Two decades after, there are many authors who wish to believe that this dividing line is no longer relevant, and that new realities require new dichotomies, such as globalism versus localism. But I believe that this diagnosis is erroneous. Explaining my view in detail would require a separate article. Here I will limit myself to a few remarks which are most essential for elucidating the issue under consideration.

Globalism, populism, localism, nationalism, illiberalism and all other fashionable -isms of today are the consequence of the attack that the liberal order suffered in the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, and its own inability to recognise that it suffered an attack. The twentieth-century slide into illiberalism had nothing to do with ‘inner contradictions’ of liberalism but was a consequence of contingent political choices made by political leaders, of whom two stand out—Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama. In terms of the contemporary categories of globalism etc., they share nothing in common. But both are easily paired when one sticks to the older conceptual dichotomy of liberty versus tyranny. Neither of the two statesmen launched a direct attack against the principle of liberty but both were driven by a deep-rooted conservative suspicion of liberty and spontaneity. To push the direction of the events away from the free way of life, Putin began to implement a kind of Bismarckian conservatism in Russia and outside, without possessing the Bismarck’s habits of modernising and his gentlemanly qualities. What Putin performed openly, Obama was doing in a clandestine way. A former *community* organiser, he felt much more at ease in the *hierarchical* world. He bowed to mediaeval kings, made his White House into the place of polite sycophancy, and disdaining from republican coarseness, did his utmost to corrupt the spirit of the American constitution at home and damage American standing as the leader of the free world abroad. This allegedly progressive president brought about the international multi-polar dynamics which in practice meant punishing the forces across the world that tried to emulate the liberal model while encouraging the forces that posited themselves as ostensibly anti-Western using the value-language quite similar to that of European anti-liberal conservatives. Obama thus turned out to be the best ally of the conservative Muslim Brotherhood at the expense of Sunni

secularisers, of China at the expense of democratic India, and of conservative Iranian mullahs at the expense of pro-Western students. As a result, the conservative forces consolidated their position, without the world noticing it. Moreover, this conservative counter-revolution across the world injected such a strong degree of illiberalism into the Western society itself that even the recovery from Obama proceeds under illiberal slogans and in the conditions of severely damaged civility.

The intellectual prestige of liberalism having been shattered, philosophical conservatives of today offer their solutions. Most of these conservatives are in fact liberals in the broad sense. The reason for my assertion is simple. A conservative must be agnostic towards the alternative of tyranny and liberty. And the true conservatives such as Putin and Obama are indeed agnostic in this respect. But for most Anglo-American conservative thinkers of today the fundamental principles of liberty are of overriding value. This is why, while escaping the Scylla of abstract liberalism, they also wish to avoid the Charybdis of anti-liberal conservatism. But the question is whether there is a sufficient space between proud liberalism and proud anti-liberal conservatism in which an illiberal conservative option can thrive.

Scruton’s intellectual achievement is that he convincingly demonstrates that such an option exists on the level of reflection. But can it also exist as a long-term cooperative enterprise? Is it possible to maintain illiberal conservatism for long as a thriving ideology, taking care that it includes Hegel and Weil but excludes Stahl and Barrès, let alone Russian conservative thinkers, such as Nikolai Karamzin and Konstantin Leontyev? I doubt it.

I understand Scruton’s uneasiness with pure liberalism, even if I am more relaxed than he about the liberalism’s inherent radicalism. But liberalism is a very rich intellectual tradition which is capable of assimilating in itself the critique of individualism, the emphasis on community and the preference for authority and order. All these forms of critique can be and have occasionally been made parts of the liberal tradition. Yet it is the principle of liberty which allows all those elements to obtain civilised forms and it is this principle which is severely undermined, where conservatism is driven first and foremost by disdain of liberalism rather than fear of tyranny, even if it continues to pay lip service to liberty. I do not impute this character to Scruton’s own conservatism, because I still consider him to be a *liberal* conservative, perhaps *malgré lui*, but this evolution will be unavoidable for any conservatism that presents itself in explicitly illiberal clothing.