



# The European Legacy

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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20>

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To cite this article: D. N. Byrne (2023) “Something Other Than Reason”: Conservatism Past and Present, *The European Legacy*, 28:2, 191-195, DOI: [10.1080/10848770.2022.2101974](https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2022.2101974)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2022.2101974>



Published online: 20 Jul 2022.



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## “Something Other Than Reason”: Conservatism Past and Present

**Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition**, by Roger Scruton, New York, All Points Books, 2018, 164 pp., \$13.64 (cloth)

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For many years Sir Roger Scruton’s incendiary pen, his own fine-point flamethrower, provoked outrage in the fields of journalism, literature, and in popular, as well as academic studies. As a philosopher, his erudition canvassed aesthetics, German Idealism and conservative political thought; as a controversialist, he never took a step backwards in confronting those whom he considered “fools, frauds and firebrands” (the title of his 2015 book) whether in relation to politics, the arts, philosophy or *la dolce vita*. Scruton even essayed literary works and operas, with varying degrees of success.

Scruton’s “invitation” surveys conservatism from its earliest days to contemporary times. Since he died in 2020, it represents his final statement on the ideology of which he was for so long the public face, and to which his writings gave theoretical depth. In his *Conversations with Roger Scruton* (2016), he revealed the circumstances that initially attracted him to conservatism. He explains that while residing in Italy in 1966, he witnessed the progress of the communists in politics and the schools. The aftershock of these political developments was exacerbated by the bohemianism of his landlady’s circle of friends. These incidents only served to reinforce his preference for bourgeois values, he confesses. Yet his own then quite distressed circumstances failed to radicalize his worldview (*Conversations*, 34–35).

In the first three chapters of his invitation to conservative intellectual history, Scruton attempts to establish its intellectual pedigree, initially in relation to the intellectual and political traditions of some premodern thinkers, then in relation to the (western) Enlightenment, and the (western) Restoration. Moreover, conservatism is not just a European phenomenon, he reminds the reader; it also has roots in the civic culture of the United States.

Scruton outlines his own traditionalist conservative predilections in the “Preface,” predilections that are often at odds with conservatives such as the neoliberals, the libertarians, the fusionists, and those who might be described as restoration conservatives, or “reactionaries.” The mansion that is conservatism contains many chambers.

His conservatism is the ideology of localism. Thus in contrast to liberalism’s universalist tendency,

[conservatism] takes its character from local questions, and the loves and suspicions that thrive in specific places and times. For conservatives, all disputes over law, liberty and justice are addressed to a historic and existing community. The root of politics, they believe, is *settlement*—the motive in human beings that binds them to the place, the customs, the history, and the people that are theirs. The language of politics is spoken in the first-person plural, and the duty of the politician is to maintain that first-person plural in being. (2–3)

He defines “the need to trust their neighbours” as the most important human need (3), which is the basis of contemporary conservatism’s emphasis on “[t]he defence of the homeland, the maintenance of national borders, and the unity and integrity of the nation” (4).

Accordingly, the values that comprise the basis of democratic political life include trust, the framework within which all democratic movements work whose maintenance is that to which “conservative politics has always been directed” (5). This means “that true liberty arises only from a culture of obedience, in which law and community are shared assets maintained for the common good.” This freedom is “enshrined in our legal and political inheritance, and in the free associations through which our societies renew their legacy of trust” (5).

Scruton expands on these premises in the first chapter concerning conservatism’s “Pre-History.” The basic feature is “social membership,” which includes tribal societies, religious societies and the modern secular state (11). Individual attachment is the second feature, beginning with the family, later expanding to include friends, which builds a “sense of the familiar and the trustworthy” (12). For Scruton, conservatism is “the attempt to conserve the community that we have,” though these are not above reform (12). Unlike most utopias, conservatism acknowledges that people are also competitive and that this competition must be managed in order to prevent violence (12–13). While acknowledging the salience of reason, he argues that it has certain limitations, so that “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” (13).

In the subsequent chapters, Scruton, through a selective survey of the history of political thought, emphasizes the values that conservatism shares with liberalism, such as individual freedom, popular sovereignty, and constitutionalism; that conservatism arose as “a qualification” (23), a “hesitation” (33) with liberalism. He emphasizes such values as tradition and custom, duties and obligations, the role of intermediary institutions in society, especially religious institutions. He rejects the liberal notions of the social origins of the social contract and of the efficacy of reason.

Scruton acknowledges that conceptions of individual freedom form a countervailing tendency to notions of custom and community within conservatism, and that over time ideas of popular sovereignty have displaced older ideas of monarchical sovereignty. Contemporary conservatism is thus a modern ideology as such. Thus, as he explains, Richard Hooker’s *On the Laws of the Ecclesiastical Monarchy* (1594) sought a compromise between ecclesiastical and secular political interests; it was a work with a recognizable conservative tendency (14–17). Other early works such as Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), James Harrington’s *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), and John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690) also evinced ideas of popular sovereignty. Furthermore, Harrington’s and Locke’s idea of the separation of legislative, executive,

and judicial powers was developed further in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1734). These particular ideas later influenced the development of the United States Constitution (19–22).

During the extended political crisis in England in the seventeenth century, the Royalist faction became known as the Tories while the Parliamentary faction became known as the Whigs. These terms thus applied to those who defended the established order and those who sought to reform it, respectively. In his posthumously published *opuscula* and *History of England* (1754–61), Scruton argues that Hume evinced typical Tory arguments skeptical of the idea of the social contract and the power of reason, as well as advocating the merits of the established order and the role of custom. Scruton cites Dr. Johnson as a literary example of the Tory “attitude” (25–31). Similarly, he finds in the writings of Thomas Jefferson a distinctive conservative sensibility, and highlights his advocacy of agrarian society, the role of the common law, and “his insistence on continuity and custom,” as necessary conditions for successful constitution building, as well as his critiques of centralized power (34).

Adam Smith, Scruton maintains, “provided the philosophical insight that gave intellectual conservatism its first real start in life” (37). He highlights Smith’s belief that “a society of free individuals is founded in sympathetic feelings, not in reason,” that the law supports these feelings in society, that the “invisible hand” of the free market will allow the self-interested actions of individuals to benefit everyone (3). For Scruton, Smith’s conception of the “invisible hand” has proved “crucial to the philosophy of conservatism” (40), along with the idea that “moral and legal strictures” will defend the individual against market abuses (42).

But conservatism, according to Scruton, received its first full articulation in the political writings of the British statesman Edmund Burke. Burke stressed the priority of the ‘we’ over the ‘I’, the salience of custom and tradition, forms of knowledge that impart the social wisdom of past generations, which reason cannot convey, and a wisdom that is to be found in the “little platoons.” Moreover, he emphasized the role of private organizations in binding individuals to society and informing them of their obligations and duties to the whole. Finally, as Burke argued, abstract reason and individualism would lead to despotism and violence as evidenced by the French Revolution (42–53).

To emphasize the contrast between abstract individualism and conservatism Scruton compares the political thought of Kant and Hegel. In contrast to Kant’s individualistic conception of “the autonomy of the will,” Hegel’s philosophy is consistent with Scruton’s conception of conservatism. The master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) elaborates on the process by which the relations of domination are transcended and the possibility emerges for the mutual recognition that can only exist in the context of freedom. Similarly, Hegel’s theory of politics in his *Outline of the Philosophy of Right* (1821) is consistent with the conservative vision of the individual emerging into ethical life through the institutions of the family, civil society, and the state. Scruton scorns what he considers the revolutionary implications of Hegel’s dialectical philosophy of history, although his justification that it was misused by his successors is neither convincing nor consistent with the rest of his commentary (57–67). He fails to elucidate how one can accept Hegel’s political thought while rejecting his conception of history.

Scruton concludes his review of conservatism's early intellectual antecedents by briefly commenting on the French conservatives the Comtes de Maistre and de Chateaubriand, and the liberal Alexis de Tocqueville. Maistre and Chateaubriand, Scruton informs us, are regarded as reactionaries who sought the winding back of the Revolution's secular, liberalizing policies, and a return to a system based upon the divine right of kings, the restoration of the Bourbons, and an Ultramontanist Catholic faith. Chateaubriand's writings were influential in relation to the popular revival of Catholicism and the spread of medievalism (67–74). Tocqueville, on the other hand, was a liberal, whose *Democracy in America* (1835) revealed a concern with excessive egalitarianism and the erosion of the rights of minorities. These and his enthusiasm for civil associations also resonate with many conservatives (74–77).

In the last three chapters, Scruton addresses conservatism's recent advocates. The early progress of the Industrial Revolution in Britain provoked a variety of responses from a core of culturally conservative critics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, and T. S. Eliot. The cultural conservatism of these thinkers sought to preserve "a way of life that was under threat or disappearing," as the result of the new commercial, industrial and utilitarian cultural hegemony (90). In the United States, the Southern Agrarian Movement and the work of the German-American political theorist Leo Strauss expressed comparable concerns about the rise of mass, industrial democracy (79–102).

Turning to the case conservative thinkers have made against socialism, Scruton highlights Friedrich Hayek's detailed critique of the socialist planned economies, and the merit of the pricing mechanism under free market capitalism. He outlines Michael Oakeshott's critique of rationalist *dirigisme* and his advocacy of a system of civil association. Scruton also notes the American disillusioned apostates from socialism, John Burnham and Whittaker Chambers; he comments on the modern revival of Catholicism in France and Simone Weil's explanation of the need for roots; and concludes with Jose Ortega y Gasset's critique of mass democratic culture (103–26).

Two central issues—political correctness and multiculturalism—confront contemporary conservatism: "In its most recent attempts to define itself, it has become the champion of Western civilization against its enemies" (127). It was the nineteenth-century constitutional historian F. W. Maitland, he writes, who laid the foundations for reclaiming "English history for the conservative cause" (135). For Maitland the common law and parliamentary representation, and not the Enlightenment, were the basis for individual liberty. In his footsteps followed Maurice Cowling and his circle of historians, which today includes Paul Johnson, Andrew Roberts, Niall Ferguson, and Jane Ridley (127–36).

The United States, Scruton claims, has been more receptive to intellectual conservatism, in part due to its federal nature and in part due to its heritage of civic associations. William F. Buckley Jr. and Russell Kirk were the foremost conservative intellectuals. Buckley's thought was a blend of cultural conservatism, economic liberalism, and anti-communism; he also disassociated conservatism from Ayn Rand's dogmatic libertarianism, as well as from anti-Semitism and racism. Kirk's conservatism was influenced by T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton and ultimately by Edmund Burke. Scruton then mentions in passing Robert Nozick's libertarian response to John Rawls's liberal *Theory of Justice* (1971) (136–47).

In the 1970s, the rise of the New Left was matched by a corresponding movement among conservatives that became known as the New Right. It was a fusion of conservatism and libertarianism and bore fruit with the coming to power of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. It was also, in part, a critique of multiculturalism generally, and of Islamism in particular. Thinkers such as Samuel Huntington in America and Pierre Manent in France, and he himself in Britain, argued that “Muslim immigration poses a challenge to Western civilization, and that the official policy of ‘multiculturalism’ is not a solution but part of the problem” (149). Scruton concludes that “conservatism will be a necessary ingredient in any solution to the emerging problems of today” (155).

In writing this book, Scruton hoped to attract the interest of “well-meaning liberals” (6). This strategy, while evident in the first half of the book, disappears in the second half, where his intent appears to be to polarize the debate, with his critiques of democratic culture and the state. As only few liberals desire the overthrow of either Shakespeare or of capitalism, and as the totalitarianism of the Left and the Right has been both defeated and discredited, just whom he is attacking is not very clear.

Scruton’s focus on the concepts of custom and tradition, obligation and duty and settlement have an abstract quality about them. What is the content of custom and tradition? Slavery was a tradition, as many have observed. Any reasonable rejoinder to Scruton would argue that the many contemporary public policy failures can be better attributed to short-sighted attacks on the Welfare State in the name of tax cuts for the well-to-do. The evisceration of the public health systems, the public education systems, and the public housing systems in the advanced capitalist democracies have resulted in unnecessary suffering. The consequential radical rise in inequality as documented by Thomas Piketty in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) are passed over in silence, as is the current climate emergency.

In sum: Roger Scruton’s book provides a provocative resumé of conservatism’s pedigree and of its evolving preoccupations. Unfortunately, his account appears to be more of an advertisement than an invitation, a catalogue of ad hoc responses to its opponents rather than “a great tradition.”

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