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Hayton, Richard

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Original Citation

Hayton, Richard (2007) Book Review: "A Political Philosophy: Arguments for Conservatism" by Roger Scruton, Continuum, London, 2006. *Political Studies Review*, 5 (3). p. 409. ISSN 1478-9299

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This review published in *Political Studies Review*, vol. 5(3), September 2007, p. 409.

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<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/psr.2007.5.issue-3/issuetoc>

Book Review: *A Political Philosophy: Arguments for Conservatism* by Roger Scruton, Continuum, London, 2006.

Reviewed by Richard Hayton, University of Sheffield.

For a conservative, Roger Scruton does rather a lot of thinking. He wishes to make the intellectual case for conservatism, and counter the prevailing assumption that as a political project it lacks philosophical depth. Scruton's most significant contribution in this regard remains his landmark volume *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980), and readers in search of the definitive statement of Scruton-ism should prefer that text over the one under review here. In spite of its title, this book is less a statement of a political philosophy than a collection of essays informed by one. It provides a useful introduction to much of Scruton's recent work, containing chapters on a diverse range of topics including animal rights, the nation, postmodernism, marriage and T. S. Eliot.

Scruton's central concern is with moral decay, which he attributes to diminishing religious belief. This declining morality manifests itself in the form of an insidious cultural relativism, which is propagated not only by leftist liberals but by conservative modernisers. Let us take just one example, about which Scruton writes with passion and grace. Eating, he suggests, is not just a physical act, but a spiritual one. The fast-food culture of TV dinners obscures 'the distinction between eating and feeding' (p. 54), reducing us to the level of morally incompetent animals. Virtuous meat eating has been replaced by intemperate carnivorous gluttony, hence the appeal of vegetarianism: vegetables 'offer a way of once again incorporating food into the moral life, hedging it with moral scruples, and revitalizing the precious sense of shame' (p. 54).

Scruton sees the decline of faith and morals as the regrettable consequence of modernity, the result of the Enlightenment privileging of scientific knowledge over religious and moral truth. Ideologies such as Marxism and liberalism are the product of this secular modernism. The 'most cunning feature' of Marxism, he argues, is its ability 'to pass itself off as a science' (p. 152). It can therefore make a claim to scientific truth, and dismiss alternative perspectives as ideological falsehoods. It is ironic that Scruton shares a similarly disparaging view of ideology, and like Marx elevates his own above the rest. Scruton's conservatism is a reactionary response to modernity, and it seems doubtful that he is better placed to discern reality than those blinded by 'the truths of science ... [which] hide the truths that matter' (p. 203). But by providing an intellectual challenge and an entertaining read, he does at least remind us that the end of ideology is a good way off yet.