

Authority, allegiance, tradition – the meaning of conservatism by Roger Scruton¹

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When, as a university student of history and aesthetics, I began to study Burke's *Reflections* on the French Revolution (which was the topic of my thesis), the philosophy of Sir Roger Scruton – who was probably the most important voice of modern British conservatism in the 20th century, – immediately attracted my interest. Burke's thoughts on France are considered to be the beginning of conservatism and Scruton's self-identification as a conservative also began with an event in France, which occurred during the 1968 student uprisings. As he says in retrospect:

I suddenly realized I was on the other side. What I saw was an unruly mob of self-indulgent middle-class hooligans. When I asked my friends what they wanted, what were they trying to achieve, all I got back was this ludicrous Marxist gobbledegook. I was disgusted by it, and thought there must be a way back to the defence of western civilization against these things. That's when I became a conservative. I knew I wanted to conserve things rather than pull them down.²

When I read these words, I felt the obvious connection between Burke and Scruton and also a need to delve deeper into the *meaning* of conservatism.

There is no doubt that besides some similarities, there are also differences. Burke of course never used the word "conservatism" and, as many writers considered conservative today still reject this label – he probably would have rejected it too.

Burke argued in a completely different world and from an entirely different personal situation and position from Scruton – from a position of relative power and as a respected member of a leading parliamentary party – against a revolution in which politics in the modern sense, the beginning of the democratized politics, began to emerge. Scruton became a conservative at a time when a number of things – including democracy, which Burke had opposed,³ – had already become not only accepted, but indeed the *only* accepted form of government. Scruton was not a party orator and "politician" like Burke and never held a position of real political power, nor did he become an official member of the Conservative Party of the UK. Burke and Scruton can, however, rightly be seen as embodiments of the same

¹ I would like to extend my thanks to Stephen Patrick for revising the English of this essay.

² Wroe, Nicholas (28 October 2000) „Thinking for England.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/oct/28/politics>

³ Although he was in favor of constitutionality and parliamentarism.

intellectual current: as prominent representatives of a specifically British conservatism, a perception of the world that stems from the British mentality, and rooted in British history and tradition.

The study of their views – although many would argue with them about some the details – is also important to non-British conservatives and scholars of conservative thought. Not because they need to attach themselves to this specific British worldview and perception of things, but because Burke and Scruton both attribute a broader meaning to conservatism than simply preservation, the “maintaining of the status quo”, the maintaining of privileges, habits, or “class differences.” The meaning of their conservatism is not merely party politics, but a manifestation of a type of man who views the things of the world according to their qualitative dimension, and has an “aesthetic” approach to society.⁴ Although they both act *in response* to something, and their political arguments are pitted *against* something, they both use a system of philosophical reasoning to articulate the idea of a world order, an idea that is, in a sense, a continuation of humanity’s eternal idea of the world as a hierarchical order of different qualities. Although neither Scruton nor Burke was a deeply religious thinker or a theologizing philosopher – as for example de Maistre was – the vision of order which they formulated was not the outcome of class struggle or the reflection of economic principles, but reflected instead the profound tendencies of the human spirit, of which transcendence plays an important role.

The original anti-revolutionary approach stemmed from the fact that the opponents of the French Revolution adhered principles which are connected to a metaphysical, non-economic and non-materialistic understanding of existence. The intellectual historian Arthur Lovejoy called this idea “the great chain of being”, that is, the idea of hierarchy. This view of state and society also holds that the order of the world did not arise from the absolute chaos of ontologically “equal” particles, accidentally or “rationally” (as in contractarianism/materialism/economic minded social theories/ egalitarianism) but as a result of the principles inherent in Creation. Conservatives become “reactive” only because they feel a need to protect themselves against attack, an attack directed against their approach of the world-order. Conservatism can even be “revolutionary”, if a situation arises in which one does not see anything worth preserving.⁵

There is no doubt that conservatism has a broader meaning than simple preservation. The most significant of the so-called and self-identified conservative thinkers of the 20th century, such as Russell Kirk and Michael Oakeshott, only reluctantly identified themselves with the idea of conservatism. For them, the word “ism” implied an *ipso facto* meaning of “abstract doctrine”, which they sought to avoid. Roger Scruton did not share these doubts, however.

⁴ Burke’s early work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* brought him into the literary, philosophical and political consciousness of his era. Scruton’s early work – *Art and Imagination* (1974) *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (1979) – is also deals with aesthetics, besides he was a professor of aesthetics at Birkbeck College, London.

⁵ See the approach of the so-called “German Conservative Revolution.” As one of its representatives, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck says if there is nothing to preserve, we have to (re-) create values, which then we should preserve.

The possible differences of the meaning of the word *conservatism* can be interpreted more broadly than Kirk or Oakeshott did. For example, conservatism may be defined not primarily as a worldview, but as an attitude arising from a worldview. Interpreted in this way, it no longer refers primarily to values or to certain dogma of political ideas, but to an attitude that is related to inevitable change. While political ideologies such as liberalism and socialism see the history of mankind as a slow process of moral, intellectual, and social self-perfection – like Darwinian evolution applied to the social-political sphere, with the survival of the fittest, ergo the *best* structures, – conservatism does not see inevitable change necessarily as progress. Burke saw the French Revolution, the beginning of modern politics, not as progress but as a disaster. This is not to say, however, that conservatism finds only degradation in the historical processes. Conservatism can also think in terms of evolution, although this is not related to the biological meaning of the term, as most conservatives tend to see man not as a purely biological being but as a being which is both biological and spiritual. The conservative evaluation of the meaning of evolution in no way contains the idea of development open to infinity, as that would be an idea which is not supported by any empirical experience and which also excludes transcendence. Conservative evolutionism can be linked to the development of civilizations and can be described as the slow accumulation of common experience: this position was emphasized primarily by classical thinkers such as Burke and Hume as a response to the radical's interpretation of the idea of human development as "infinite progress."

This development, conservatives say, is actually due to the interplay of favourable circumstances, such as when the seed of a plant falls just where all the conditions can be found to grow into a huge tree. There is no "inevitability" in it, and a major threat to this development may be posed by revolutionary impatience, which is perplexed by things which are not purely rational or which cannot be derived and deduced from strictly utilitarian principles. In his writings against the revolution, Burke spoke of the continuity of things, arguing that although the facts that make up our world do change, their essence remains the same.

Roger Scruton's third book, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980), has become a particularly influential work of modern conservative thinking. The work aimed to outline concepts "with which conservatives might provide themselves with a creed."⁶

In order to avoid misunderstandings, the author states at the very beginning of the work that the teaching of conservatism must be distinguished from both the underlying philosophy and the specific politics derived from it. Although there is no universal conservative policy, there is a misconception that similarly there is no conservative thinking: it is a misunderstanding to believe there are no strong convictions and principles that encourage conservatives to act, nor is there a general view of society.

⁶ Roger Scruton: *The meaning of conservatism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. p. 9. Our summary on Scruton's work here, refers mainly to the thoughts of Gergely Egedy. (Egedy Gergely: *Brit konzervatív gondolkodás és politika (XIX-XX. század)*. Századvég, 2005. 257-263.)

At the same time, conservatives themselves must recognize that without theoretically exposed principles, their worldview may lose its intellectual appeal, and, even if many of them do not want to believe it, it is “by intellectuals that modern politics is made.”⁷

For Scruton, a suitable starting point for articulating these principles derives from the fact that conservatives’ political approach to civil society differs from that of both liberals and socialists. Liberalism, which tends to see the state as an instrument of individual freedom, seeks to separate society from the state as much as possible, so that the state restricts the *individuum* as little as possible. Conservatives, on the other hand, according to Scruton, see the state as an end in itself, and this constitutes a great difference between Scruton’s notion of the state and the “neoliberal” concept of it, which is often subscribed to by modern conservative parties.⁸ According to conservatives, the state is not a machine, but an organism and in fact a person. The idea of the state requires the idea of a corporate person. The conservative state must protect conservative society, in which it is not departments but corporate persons (from companies to churches to clubs and schools) which play the main role. By strengthening autonomous institutions, the state strengthens itself, hence the conservative conception of society is inseparable from its conception of the state. This approach, according to Scruton, is founded upon three key concepts: authority, allegiance, and tradition.

What does authority mean? Above all, it is a recognized, legitimate power, which can best be imagined through the analogy of the family, as a social unit which, like civil society, is not based on contract or choice but on natural need.⁹

From the beginning, the child is subject to the “power” of the parents; it is the inalienable duty of parents to direct their children. Power, that is, power based on authority, is something which the parent already possesses when the child is born. Authority, however, is not identical to power: it signifies the acceptance of the right to exercise power and this recognition thus presupposes the legitimacy of power. Power without authority is pathetic: it breeds violence without arousing respect. Power and authority seek each other; their pursuit is the core of politics, and the state created when they meet is the existing institutional order.

The conservative assumes that the state needs power in order to possess authority. Furthermore, he does not want to see this power “naked” in the sphere of politics, but “clothed in the constitution”, operating through the legal system.

According to Scruton, our obligations to the state, like those to the family, do not arise from a free commitment. The possibility of a treaty in itself presupposes an existing social order, not only because without one it would hardly be possible to adhere to a treaty, but also, and more importantly, because the concept of the treaty presupposes common institutions and

⁷ Scruton 2001, 2.

⁸ Although Scruton did not emphasize that, but his approach is related to the notion of the state of the pre-Enlightenment political tradition. For this tradition, the state itself, was far from being seen as a purely economic and political organization. For example, in Dante’s *De Monarchia.*, the ruler does not represent society but the state is embodied in the ruler, who acts as a “shaping” force that organizes the dispersing forces of society that, in the absence of an impact from above, would collide with each other.

⁹ Scruton 2001, 22.

a common concept of freedom. These cannot derive from a contract that is only possible if they are already present. It can be said that society exists due to authority, and the recognition of this authority also means an allegiance to a bond that is not based on a treaty. Allegiance is undoubtedly a condition of social existence as it makes society more than a set of individuals, – as liberals tend to think of it. As Scruton argues: “The condition of mankind requires that individuals, while they exist and act as autonomous beings, do so only because they can first identify themselves as something greater - as members of a society, group, class, state or nation.”¹⁰

Allegiance necessitates the observance of traditions – and this thought leads to the third concept required to describe a conservative conception of society. The essence of tradition can be grasped from the fact that it can be traced back to an intention which is directed not towards the future, but towards the past.

According to Scruton, tradition is not simply a custom or a rite, but a very important form of social knowledge. Burke was thinking of this kind of knowledge when he criticized the *a priori* thinking of the French revolutionaries. Tradition enables the individual to “tacitly understand” social habits, and thereby knows what to do when he or she enters into the social contact. Tradition can also be a factor, which can be the antagonist of “freedom” – or at least, the abstract and ideological view of freedom.

In Scruton's view, however, freedom cannot be at the heart of conservative thought: “Hence to aim at freedom is at the same time to aim at the constraint which is its precondition.”¹¹ According to him, freedom is not a precondition but a consequence of accepted social relations.

If we value freedom, we must also value what makes it possible, that is, the social order as a cornerstone of personality and identity. The main difference between conservatism and liberalism lies in the fact that for the former, individual freedom is not of absolute value, but is subordinated to other, higher values, primarily the authority of legitimate government.

Scruton's conviction evokes Burke: in politics, it is not primarily freedom that satisfies people, but good government and without functioning institutions freedom is worth nothing. The freedom enjoyed and respected by the English was not born as the realization of some kind of abstract idea of freedom, but was a legacy of historically established institutions without which it would not have been viable.

This emphasis on the limits of freedom leads to a kind of suspicion of democracy. Democracy is one of the most widespread forms of state in the world of today, and the term itself has become a quasi-equivalent to “good governance” and “political freedom.” Since the period of the Enlightenment, democracy has been associated with the “rule of the people,” as the free selection and election of the state's government. What seems reasonable, good, or

¹⁰ *ibid.* 24.

¹¹ *ibid.* 8.

desirable in the world of politics almost automatically tends to be regarded as some sort of democracy and thus the idea of democracy is clearly in a privileged position.

However, according to Scruton, conservatives need to be aware that governmental legitimacy cannot be gained purely from democratic elections. For this reason Burke did not consider, in his *Reflections*, that universal suffrage has anything to do with governmental legitimacy.¹²

Democratic elections are neither a necessary nor a sufficient principle of representation, because the principle of representation belongs to institutions that can only fulfil their purpose on the basis of solid authority. The indiscriminate democratization of all institutions with authority can lead to power falling into the hands of those who can circumvent the responsibility of exercising it. Even democracy must be based on a *continuum* that does not stem from the principle of democracy itself, but from the continuity of institutions and authorities. Democracy needs a constitution, and that must be outside the control of democratic change.

What, then, is the value of democracy? Why do modern conservatives accept democracy – even if in their hearts they are still not “democrats” and often do not believe in majoritarian principles? According to Gergely Egedy, Scruton identifies six political virtues that are rightly associated with democracy.

1. limited power
2. constitutional government
3. consensus
4. autonomous institutions
5. rule of law
6. legitimate opposition

He adds, however, that these positive virtues already existed before democracy and can arise without it. The coexistence of these traits does not really mean democracy, but constitutional constraints on power. Democracy can either underpin these or be a possible source of their destruction.¹³ Scruton rightly sees, that in a political system, power may be limited, but it does not automatically become a democracy, and the principle of limiting power was present in the ideas of classical political theory that did not specifically apply to democracy. Limitation of power and democracy are therefore not necessarily linked. The doctrine of the division of power is not a democratic principle *par excellence*, and indeed shared sovereignty seems to run counter to the limitlessness of the doctrine of popular sovereignty in the Rousseau sense. Existing Democracies are forced to incorporate certain brakes into their systems, and thus equality-based systems, called democracies, are forced to give more or less space to the oft-denied, albeit natural, differences between people. Strict egalitarianism does not prevail in any working state, and existing democracies also accept principles that are not egalitarian:

¹² *ibid.* 46.

¹³ Egedy Gergely: *Konzervativizmus az ezredfordulón*, Magyar Szemle Könyvek, 2001, p. 129.

above all, the principle of parliamentarism, which can also not be identified simply with democracy. As Scruton writes in his work entitled, *England, an elegy*:

Almost all popular historians and political analysts see the English system as an experiment in parliamentary democracy. In fact, however, the key notion was not democracy but representation, and it was as a means to represent the interests of the English people that we should understand the institutions of Parliament.¹⁴

There is another reason why conservatives are often skeptical of democratic procedures, one which can be traced back to the realization that even if a democracy happens to work fairly, it will always serve the needs of those living in the present. It does not take into account those who are no longer with us or who are not yet with us. Burke has already articulated the importance of taking into account the deceased and the unborn, but, according to Scruton, it is worth emphasizing this again. Since the beginning of time, respect for the dead has been the foundation of institution building –the respect shown them forbids us from treating their heritage arbitrarily. By respecting the dead, we also protect the interests of our descendants. Democracy must therefore be limited, so that the voices of the dead and the unborn are heard in the political process. The transition from a monarchic to a democratic age is often portrayed as a “natural” and benevolent transition from the era of political oppression to the age of freedom, an idea closely linked n with faith in “progress.” Scruton, however, sees in the British system of constitutional monarchy, “the light above politics”

[w]hich shines down on the human bustle from a calmer and more exalted sphere. Not being elected by popular vote, the monarch cannot be understood as representing the interests only of the present generation. He or she is born into the position, and also passes it on to a legally defined successor. The monarch is in a real sense the voice of history, and the very accidental way in which the office is acquired emphasises the grounds of the monarch's legitimacy, in the history of a place and a culture.[...] [t]hey owe their authority and their influence precisely to the fact that they speak for something other than the present desires of present voters, something vital to the continuity and community which the act of voting assumes. Hence, if they are heard at all, they are heard as limiting the democratic process, in just the way that it must be limited if it is to issue in reasonable legislation. It was in such a way that the English conceived their Queen, in the sunset days of Queen Victoria.¹⁵

In Scruton’s well-articulated argument, we can see why conservatives tend to see the traditional (and also constitutional) monarchy as a fortunate form of political order: since the ruler is not elected by the votes of the citizens, he cannot be seen merely as representing the interests of present generations.

And to argue that the hereditary principle confers office and responsibility at random, and without consideration to the fitness of the person who receives them, is to repeat an objection to every mode of preferment. Is it to be supposed that the ability to fascinate an electorate (as Hitler did) has some connection with the fitness for public office?¹⁶

¹⁴ Roger Scruton: *England, and Elegy*, Chatto and Windus, 2000, 174.

¹⁵ *ibid.* 188.

¹⁶ Scruton 2001, pp. 51-52.

Regarding monarchy, and in connection with the British system of rule, Burke wrote the following: “We are members in a great and ancient MONARCHY; and we must preserve religiously the true legal rights of the sovereign, which form the key-stone that binds together the noble and well-constructed arch of our empire and our constitution.”¹⁷

In other words, according to him, it is possible that in some individuals true excellence can be recognized, and that this recognition does not diminish the excellence and autonomy of those who recognized it, but rather multiplies it by their “proud submission”, “dignified obedience” and “generous loyalty”.¹⁸ In his defence of monarchy, we can clearly see the notion of the “Great Chain” referred to above, and Scruton saw in the end of the old concept of British constitutional monarchy a disintegration – an “elegiac” process which can be a disaster for authority, allegiance and tradition, the three pillars of society for the British conservative.

The old equilibrium was disturbed, and Parliament remade, not as a court of law, but as an instrument of social engineering. The rise of political parties, instead of alleviating social conflict, exacerbated it, by encouraging the electorate to divide along party lines.¹⁹

¹⁷ Edmund Burke: *An appeal from the new to the old Whigs*. Dodsley, London, 1791
p. 36.

¹⁸ Quoted from Burke by Isaak Kramnick: *Eighteenth-Century Science and Radical Social Theory: The Case of Joseph Priestley's Scientific liberalism*. In: *The Scientific Enterprise*. Boston Studies in the philosophy of science. Vol 146. Springer Science + Business Media Dordrecht, 1992, p. 17.

¹⁹ Scruton 2000, 197.