

The New Criterion

Features February 2003

Why I became a conservative

by Roger Scruton

On the author's student days in Paris.

I was brought up at a time when half the English people voted Conservative at national elections and almost all English intellectuals regarded the term “conservative” as a term of abuse. To be a conservative, I was told, was to be on the side of age against youth, the past against the future, authority against innovation, the “structures” against spontaneity and life. It was enough to understand this, to recognize that one had no choice, as a free-thinking intellectual, save to reject conservatism. The choice remaining was between reform and revolution. Do we improve society bit by bit, or do we rub it out and start again? On the whole my contemporaries favored the second option, and it was when witnessing what this meant, in May 1968 in Paris, that I discovered my vocation.

In the narrow street below my window the students were shouting and smashing. The plate-glass windows of the shops appeared to step back, shudder for a second, and then give up the ghost, as the reflections suddenly left them and they slid in jagged fragments to the ground. Cars rose into the air and landed on their sides, their juices flowing from unseen wounds. The air was filled with triumphant shouts, as one by one lamp-posts and bollards were uprooted and piled on the tarmac, to form a barricade against the next van-load of policemen.

The van—known then as a *panier de salade* on account of the wire mesh that covered its windows—came cautiously round the corner from the Rue Descartes, jerked to a halt, and disgorged a score of frightened policemen. They were greeted by flying cobble-stones and several of them fell. One rolled over on the ground clutching his face, from which the blood streamed through tightly clenched fingers. There was an exultant shout, the injured policeman was helped into the van, and the students ran off down a side-street, sneering at the *cochons* and throwing Parthian cobbles as they went.

That evening a friend came round: she had been all day on the barricades with a troupe of theater people, under the captainship of Armand Gatti. She was very excited by the events, which Gatti, a follower of Antonin Artaud, had taught her to regard as the high point of situationist theater—the

artistic transfiguration of an absurdity which is the day-to-day meaning of bourgeois life. Great victories had been scored: policemen injured, cars set alight, slogans chanted, graffiti daubed. The bourgeoisie were on the run and soon the Old Fascist and his régime would be begging for mercy.

The Old Fascist was de Gaulle, whose *Mémoires de guerre* I had been reading that day. The *Mémoires* begin with a striking sentence—“*Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France*”—a sentence so alike in its rhythm and so contrary in its direction to that equally striking sentence which begins *A la recherche du temps perdu*: “*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure.*” How amazing it had been, to discover a politician who begins his self-vindication by *suggesting* something—and something so deeply hidden behind the bold mask of his words! I had been equally struck by the description of the state funeral for Valéry—de Gaulle’s first public gesture on liberating Paris—since it too suggested priorities unimaginable in an English politician. The image of the cortège, as it took its way to the cathedral of Notre Dame, the proud general first among the mourners, and here and there a German sniper still looking down from the rooftops, had made a vivid impression on me. I irresistibly compared the two bird’s-eye views of Paris, that of the sniper, and my own on to the riots in the *quartier latin*. They were related as yes and no, the affirmation and denial of a national idea. According to the Gaullist vision, a nation is defined not by institutions or borders but by language, religion, and high culture; in times of turmoil and conquest it is those spiritual things that must be protected and reaffirmed. The funeral for Valéry followed naturally from this way of seeing things. And I associated the France of de Gaulle with Valéry’s *Cimetière marin*—that haunting invocation of the dead which conveyed to me, much more profoundly than any politician’s words or gestures, the true meaning of a national idea.

Of course I was naïve—as naïve as my friend. But the ensuing argument is one to which I have often returned in my thoughts. What, I asked, do you propose to put in the place of this “bourgeoisie” whom you so despise, and to whom you owe the freedom and prosperity that enable you to play on your toy barricades? What vision of France and its culture compels you? And are you prepared to die for your beliefs, or merely to put others at risk in order to display them? I was obnoxiously pompous: but for the first time in my life I had felt a surge of political anger, finding myself on the other side of the barricades from all the people I knew.

She replied with a book: Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses*, the bible of the *soixante-huitards*, the text which seemed to justify every form of transgression, by showing that obedience is merely defeat. It is an artful book, composed with a satanic mendacity, selectively appropriating facts in order to show that culture and knowledge are nothing but the “discourses” of power. The book is not a work of philosophy but an exercise in rhetoric. Its goal is subversion, not truth, and it is careful to argue—by the old nominalist sleight of hand that was surely invented by the Father of Lies—that “truth” requires inverted commas, that it changes from epoch to epoch, and is tied to the form of consciousness, the “*episteme*,” imposed by the class which profits from its propagation. The revolutionary spirit, which searches the world for things to hate, has found in Foucault a new literary formula. Look everywhere for power, he tells his readers, and you will find it. Where there is power there is oppression. And where there is oppression there is the right to destroy. In the

street below my window was the translation of that message into deeds.

My friend is now a good bourgeoisie like the rest of them. Armand Gatti is forgotten; and the works of Antonin Artaud have a quaint and *dépassé* air. The French intellectuals have turned their backs on '68, and the late Louis Pauwels, the greatest of their post-war novelists, has, in *Les Orphelins*, written the damning obituary of their adolescent rage. And Foucault? He is dead from AIDS, the result of sprees in the bath-houses of San Francisco, visited during well-funded tours as an intellectual celebrity. But his books are on university reading lists all over Europe and America. His vision of European culture as the institutionalized form of oppressive power is taught everywhere as gospel, to students who have neither the culture nor the religion to resist it. Only in France is he widely regarded as a fraud.

By 1971, when I moved from Cambridge to a permanent lectureship at Birkbeck College, London, I had become a conservative. So far as I could discover there was only one other conservative at Birkbeck, and that was Nunzia—Maria Annunziata—the Neapolitan lady who served meals in the Senior Common Room and who cocked a snook at the lecturers by plastering her counter with kitschy photos of the Pope.

One of those lecturers, towards whom Nunzia conceived a particular antipathy, was Eric Hobsbawm, the lionized historian of the Industrial Revolution, whose Marxist vision of our country is now the orthodoxy taught in British schools. Hobsbawm came as a refugee to Britain, bringing with him the Marxist commitment and Communist Party membership that he retained until he could retain it no longer—the Party, to his chagrin, having dissolved itself in embarrassment at the lies that could no longer be repeated. No doubt in recognition of this heroic career, Hobsbawm was rewarded, at Mr. Blair's behest, with the second highest award that the Queen can bestow—that of "Companion of Honour." This little story is of enormous significance to a British conservative. For it is a symptom and a symbol of what has happened to our intellectual life since the Sixties. We should ponder the extraordinary fact that Oxford University, which granted an honorary degree to Bill Clinton on the grounds that he had once hung around its precincts, refused the same honor to Margaret Thatcher, its most distinguished post-war graduate and Britain's first woman Prime Minister. We should ponder some of the other recipients of honorary degrees from British academic institutions—Robert Mugabe, for example, or the late Mrs. Ceausescu—or count (on the fingers of one hand) the number of conservatives who are elected to the British Academy.

Suffice it to say that I found myself, on arrival in Birkbeck College, at the heart of the left establishment which governed British scholarship. Birkbeck College had grown from the Mechanics Institution founded by George Birkbeck in 1823 and was devoted to the education of people in full-time employment. It was connected to the socialist idealists of the Workers' Education Association, and had links of a tenacious but undiscoverable kind to the Labour Party. My failure to conceal my conservative beliefs was both noticed and disapproved of, and I began to think that I should look for another career.

Because of Birkbeck's mission as a center of adult education, lectures began at 6 P.M. and the days were nominally free. I used my mornings to study for the Bar: my intention was to embark on a career which gave no advantage to utopians and malcontents. In fact I never practiced at the Bar and received from my studies only an intellectual benefit—though a benefit for which I have always been profoundly grateful. Law is constrained at every point by reality, and utopian visions have no place in it. Moreover the common law of England is proof that there is a real distinction between legitimate and illegitimate power, that power can exist without oppression, and that authority is a living force in human conduct. English law, I discovered, is the answer to Foucault.

Inspired by my new studies I began to search for a conservative philosophy. In America this search could be conducted in a university. American departments of political science encourage their students to read Montesquieu, Burke, Tocqueville, and the Founding Fathers. Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and others have grafted the metaphysical conservatism of Central Europe on to American roots, forming effective and durable schools of political thought. American intellectual life benefits from American patriotism, which has made it possible to defend American customs and institutions without fear of being laughed to scorn. It has benefited too from the Cold War, which sharpened native wits against the Marxist enemy, in a way that they were never sharpened in Europe: the conversion of important parts of the social democratic Jewish intelligentsia of New York to the cause of neo-conservatism is a case in point. In 1970s Britain, conservative philosophy was the preoccupation of a few half-mad recluses. Searching the library of my college, I found Marx, Lenin, and Mao, but no Strauss, Voegelin, Hayek, or Friedman. I found every variety of socialist monthly, weekly, or quarterly, but not a single journal that confessed to being conservative.

The view has for a long time prevailed in England that conservatism is simply no longer available—even if it ever has been really available to an intelligent person—as a social and political creed. Maybe, if you are an aristocrat or a child of wealthy and settled parents, you might *inherit* conservative beliefs, in the way that you might inherit a speech impediment or a Habsburg jaw. But you couldn't possibly *acquire* them—certainly not by any process of rational enquiry or serious thought. And yet there I was, in the early 1970s, fresh from the shock of 1968, and from the countervailing shock of legal studies, with a fully articulate set of conservative beliefs. Where could I look for the people who shared them, for the thinkers who had spelled them out at proper length, for the social, economic, and political theory that would give them force and authority

sufficient to argue them in the forum of academic opinion?

To my rescue came Burke. Although not widely read at the time in our universities, he had not been dismissed as stupid, reactionary, or absurd. He was simply irrelevant, of interest largely because he got everything wrong about the French Revolution and therefore could be studied as illustrating an episode in intellectual pathology. Students were still permitted to read him, usually in conjunction with the immeasurably less interesting Tom Paine, and from time to time you heard tell of a “Burkean” philosophy, which was one strand within nineteenth-century British conservatism.

Burke was of additional interest to me on account of the intellectual path that he had trod. His first work, like mine, was in aesthetics. And although I didn't find much of philosophical significance in his *Essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful*, I could see that, in the right cultural climate, it would convey a powerful sense of the meaning of aesthetic judgment and of its indispensable place in our lives. I suppose that, in so far as I had received any intimations of my future career as an intellectual pariah, it was through my early reactions to modern architecture, and to the desecration of my childhood landscape by the faceless boxes of suburbia. I learned as a teenager that aesthetic judgment matters, that it is not merely a subjective opinion, unargued because unarguable, and of no significance to anyone besides oneself. I saw—though I did not have the philosophy to justify this—that aesthetic judgment lays a claim upon the world, that it issues from a deep social imperative, and that it matters to us in just the way that other people matter to us, when we strive to live with them in a community. And, so it seemed to me, the aesthetics of modernism, with its denial of the past, its vandalization of the landscape and townscape, and its attempt to purge the world of history, was also a denial of community, home, and settlement. Modernism in architecture was an attempt to remake the world as though it contained nothing save atomic individuals, disinfected of the past, and living like ants within their metallic and functional shells.

Like Burke, therefore, I made the passage from aesthetics to conservative politics with no sense of intellectual incongruity, believing that, in each case, I was in search of a lost experience of home. And I suppose that, underlying that sense of loss is the permanent belief that what has been lost can also be recaptured—not necessarily as it was when it first slipped from our grasp, but as it will be when consciously regained and remodelled, to reward us for all the toil of separation through which we are condemned by our original transgression. That belief is the romantic core of conservatism, as you find it—very differently expressed—in Burke and Hegel, and also in T. S. Eliot, whose poetry was the greatest influence on me during my teenage years.

When I first read Burke's account of the French Revolution I was inclined to accept, since I knew no other, the liberal humanist view of the Revolution as a triumph of freedom over oppression, a liberation of a people from the yoke of absolute power. Although there were excesses—and no honest historian had ever denied this—the official humanist view was that they should be seen in retrospect as the birth-pangs of a new order, which would offer a model of

popular sovereignty to the world. I therefore assumed that Burke's early doubts—expressed, remember, when the Revolution was in its very first infancy, and the King had not yet been executed nor the Terror begun—were simply alarmist reactions to an ill-understood event. What interested me in the *Reflections* was the positive political philosophy, distinguished from all the leftist literature that was currently à la mode, by its absolute concreteness, and its close reading of the human psyche in its ordinary and unexalted forms. Burke was not writing about socialism, but about revolution. Nevertheless he persuaded me that the utopian promises of socialism go hand in hand with a wholly abstract vision of the human mind—a geometrical version of our mental processes which has only the vaguest relation to the thoughts and feelings by which real human beings live. He persuaded me that societies are not and cannot be organized according to a plan or a goal, that there is no direction to history, and no such thing as moral or spiritual progress.

Most of all he emphasized that the new forms of politics, which hope to organize society around the rational pursuit of liberty, equality, fraternity, or their modernist equivalents, are actually forms of militant irrationality. There is no way in which people can collectively pursue liberty, equality, and fraternity, not only because those things are lamentably underdescribed and merely abstractly defined, but also because collective reason doesn't work that way. People reason collectively towards a common goal only in times of emergency—when there is a threat to be vanquished, or a conquest to be achieved. Even then, they need organization, hierarchy, and a structure of command if they are to pursue their goal effectively. Nevertheless, a form of collective rationality does emerge in these cases, and its popular name is war.

Moreover—and here is the corollary that came home to me with a shock of recognition—any attempt to organize society according to this kind of rationality would involve exactly the same conditions: the declaration of war against some real or imagined enemy. Hence the strident and militant language of the socialist literature—the hate-filled, purpose-filled, bourgeois-baiting prose, one example of which had been offered to me in 1968, as the final vindication of the violence beneath my attic window, but other examples of which, starting with the *Communist Manifesto*, were the basic diet of political studies in my university. The literature of left-wing political science is a literature of conflict, in which the main variables are those identified by Lenin: “Kto? Kogo?” — “Who? Whom?” The opening sentence of de Gaulle's memoirs is framed in the language of love, about an object of love—and I had spontaneously resonated to this in the years of the student “struggle.” De Gaulle's allusion to Proust is to a masterly evocation of maternal love, and to a dim premonition of its loss.

Three other arguments of Burke's made a comparable impression. The first was the defense of authority and obedience. Far from being the evil and obnoxious thing that my contemporaries held it to be, authority was, for Burke, the root of political order. Society, he argued, is not held together by the abstract rights of the citizen, as the French Revolutionaries supposed. It is held together by authority—by which is meant the right to obedience, rather than the mere power to compel it. And obedience, in its turn, is the prime virtue of political beings, the disposition which makes it possible to govern them, and without which societies crumble into “the

dust and powder of individuality." Those thoughts seemed as obvious to me as they were shocking to my contemporaries. In effect Burke was upholding the old view of man in society, as subject of a sovereign, against the new view of him, as citizen of a state. And what struck me vividly was that, in defending this old view, Burke demonstrated that it was a far more effective guarantee of the liberties of the individual than the new idea, which was founded in the promise of those very liberties, only abstractly, universally, and therefore unreal defined. Real freedom, concrete freedom, the freedom that can actually be defined, claimed, and granted, was not the opposite of obedience but its other side. The abstract, unreal freedom of the liberal intellect was really nothing more than childish disobedience, amplified into anarchy. Those ideas exhilarated me, since they made sense of what I had seen in 1968. But when I expressed them, in a book published in 1979 as *The Meaning of Conservatism*, I blighted what remained of my academic career.

The second argument of Burke's that impressed me was the subtle defense of tradition, prejudice, and custom, against the enlightened plans of the reformers. This defense engaged, once again, with my study of aesthetics. Already as a schoolboy I had encountered the elaborate defense of artistic and literary tradition given by Eliot and F. R. Leavis. I had been struck by Eliot's essay entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which tradition is represented as a constantly evolving, yet continuous thing, which is remade with every addition to it, and which adapts the past to the present and the present to the past. This conception, which seemed to make sense of Eliot's kind of modernism (a modernism that is the polar opposite of that which has prevailed in architecture), also rescued the study of the past, and made my own love of the classics in art, literature, and music into a valid part of my psyche as a modern human being.

Burke's defense of tradition seemed to translate this very concept into the world of politics, and to make respect for custom, establishment, and settled communal ways, into a political virtue, rather than a sign, as my contemporaries mostly believed, of complacency. And Burke's provocative defense, in this connection, of "prejudice" —by which he meant the set of beliefs and ideas that arise instinctively in social beings, and which reflect the root experiences of social life—was a revelation of something that until then I had entirely overlooked. Burke brought home to me that our most necessary beliefs may be both unjustified and unjustifiable from our own perspective, and that the attempt to justify them will lead merely to their loss. Replacing them with the abstract rational systems of the philosophers, we may think ourselves more rational and better equipped for life in the modern world. But in fact we are less well equipped, and our new beliefs are far less justified, for the very reason that they are justified by ourselves. The real justification for a prejudice is the one which justifies it *as* a prejudice, rather than as a rational conclusion of an argument. In other words it is a justification that cannot be conducted from our own perspective, but only from outside, as it were, as an anthropologist might justify the customs and rituals of an alien tribe.

An example will illustrate the point: the prejudices surrounding sexual relations. These vary from society to society; but until recently they have had a common feature, which is that people distinguish seemly from unseemly conduct, abhor explicit sexual display, and require modesty in

women and chivalry in men in the negotiations that precede sexual union. There are very good anthropological reasons for this, in terms of the long-term stability of sexual relations, and the commitment that is necessary if children are to be inducted into society. But these are not the reasons that motivate the traditional conduct of men and women. This conduct is guided by deep and immovable prejudice, in which outrage, shame, and honor are the ultimate grounds. The sexual liberator has no difficulty in showing that those motives are irrational, in the sense of being founded on no reasoned justification available to the person whose motives they are. And he may propose sexual liberation as a rational alternative, a code of conduct that is rational from the first-person viewpoint, since it derives a complete code of practice from a transparently reasonable aim, which is sexual pleasure.

This substitution of reason for prejudice has indeed occurred. And the result is exactly as Burke would have anticipated. Not merely a breakdown in trust between the sexes, but a faltering in the reproductive process—a failing and enfeebled commitment of parents, not merely to each other, but also to their offspring. At the same time, individual feelings, which were shored up and fulfilled by the traditional prejudices, are left exposed and unprotected by the skeletal structures of rationality. Hence the extraordinary situation in America, where lawsuits have replaced common courtesy, where post-coital accusations of “date-rape” take the place of pre-coital modesty, and where advances made by the unattractive are routinely penalized as “sexual harassment.” This is an example of what happens, when prejudice is wiped away in the name of reason, without regard for the real social function that prejudice alone can fulfill. And indeed, it was partly by reflecting on the disaster of sexual liberation, and the joyless world that it has produced around us, that I came to see the truth of Burke’s otherwise somewhat paradoxical defense of prejudice.

The final argument that impressed me was Burke’s response to the theory of the social contract. Although society can be seen as a contract, he argued, we must recognize that most parties to the contract are either dead or not yet born. The effect of the contemporary Rousseauist ideas of social contract was to place the present members of society in a position of dictatorial dominance over those who went before and those who came after them. Hence these ideas led directly to the massive squandering of inherited resources at the Revolution, and to the cultural and ecological vandalism that Burke was perhaps the first to recognize as the principal danger of modern politics. In Burke’s eyes the self-righteous contempt for ancestors which characterized the Revolutionaries was also a disinheritance of the unborn. Rightly understood, he argued, society is a partnership among the dead, the living, and the unborn, and without what he called the “hereditary principle,” according to which rights could be inherited as well as acquired, both the dead and the unborn would be disenfranchised. Indeed, respect for the dead was, in Burke’s view, the only real safeguard that the unborn could obtain, in a world that gave all its privileges to the living. His preferred vision of society was not as a contract, in fact, but as a trust, with the living members as trustees of an inheritance that they must strive to enhance and pass on.

I was more exhilarated by those ideas than by anything else in Burke, since they seemed to explain with the utmost clarity the dim intuitions that I had had in 1968, as I watched the riots from my

window and thought of Valéry's *Cimetière marin*. In those deft, cool thoughts, Burke summarized all my instinctive doubts about the cry for liberation, all my hesitations about progress and about the unscrupulous belief in the future that has dominated and perverted modern politics. In effect, Burke was joining in the old Platonic cry, for a form of politics that would also be a form of care—"care of the soul," as Plato put it, which would also be a care for absent generations. The graffiti paradoxes of the *soixante-huitards* were the very opposite of this: a kind of adolescent insouciance, a throwing away of all customs, institutions, and achievements, for the sake of a momentary exultation which could have no lasting sense save anarchy.

It was not until much later, after my first visit to communist Europe, that I came to understand and sympathize with the negative energy in Burke. I had grasped the positive thesis—the defense of prejudice, tradition, and heredity, and of a politics of trusteeship in which the past and the future had equal weight to the present—but I had not grasped the deep negative thesis, the glimpse into Hell, contained in his vision of the Revolution. As I said, I shared the liberal humanist view of the French Revolution, and knew nothing of the facts that decisively refuted that view and which vindicated the argument of Burke's astonishingly prescient essay. My encounter with Communism entirely rectified this.

Perhaps the most fascinating and terrifying aspect of Communism was its ability to banish truth from human affairs, and to force whole populations to "live within the lie," as President Havel put it. George Orwell wrote a prophetic and penetrating novel about this; but few Western readers of that novel knew the extent to which its prophecies had come true in Central Europe. To me it was the greatest revelation, when first I travelled to Czechoslovakia in 1979, to come face to face with a situation in which people could, at any moment, be removed from the book of history, in which truth could not be uttered, and in which the Party could decide from day to day not only what would happen tomorrow, but also what had happened today, what had happened yesterday, and what had happened before its leaders had been born. This, I realized, was the situation that Burke was describing, to a largely incredulous readership, in 1790. And two hundred years later the situation still existed, and the incredulity along with it.

Until 1979 my knowledge of Communism had been entirely theoretical. I did not like what I had read, of course, and was hostile in any case to the socialist ideas of equality and state control, of which I had already seen enough in France and Britain. But I knew nothing of what it is like to live under Communism—nothing of the day-to-day humiliation of being a non-person, to whom all avenues of self-expression are closed. As for Czechoslovakia, as it then was, I knew only what I had gleaned from its music—the music of Smetana, Dvořák, and Janáček in particular, to all three of whom I owe the greatest of debts for the happiness they have brought me. Of course, I had read Kafka and Hašek—but they belonged to another world, the world of a dying empire, and it was only subsequently that I was able to see that they too were prophets, and that they were describing not the present but the future of their city.

I had been asked to give a talk to a private seminar in Prague. This seminar was organized by

Julius Tomin, a Prague philosopher, who had taken advantage of the Helsinki Accords of 1975, which supposedly obliged the Czechoslovak government to uphold freedom of information and the basic rights defined by the U.N. Charter. The Helsinki Accords were a farce, used by the Communists to identify potential trouble-makers, while presenting a face of civilized government to gullible intellectuals in the West. Nevertheless, I was told that Dr. Tomin's seminar met on a regular basis, that I would be welcome to attend it, and that they were indeed expecting me.

I arrived at the house, after walking through those silent and deserted streets, in which the few who stood seemed occupied by some dark official business, and in which Party slogans and symbols disfigured every building. The staircase of the apartment building was also deserted. Everywhere the same expectant silence hung in the air, as when an air-raid has been announced, and the town hides from its imminent destruction. Outside the apartment, however, I encountered two policemen, who seized me as I rang the bell and demanded my papers. Dr. Tomin came out, and an altercation ensued, during which I was thrown down the stairs. But the argument continued and I was able to push my way past the guard and enter the apartment. I found a room full of people, and the same expectant silence. I realized that there really was going to be an air-raid, and that the air-raid was me.

In that room was a battered remnant of Prague's intelligentsia—old professors in their shabby waistcoats; long-haired poets; fresh-faced students who had been denied admission to university for their parents' political "crimes"; priests and religious in plain clothes; novelists and theologians; a would-be rabbi; and even a psychoanalyst. And in all of them I saw the same marks of suffering, tempered by hope; and the same eager desire for the sign that someone cared enough to help them. They all belonged, I discovered, to the same profession: that of the stoker. Some stoked boilers in hospitals; others in apartment blocks; one stoked at a railway station, another in a school. Some stoked where there were no boilers to stoke, and these imaginary boilers came to be, for me, a fitting symbol of the communist economy.

This was my first encounter with "dissidents": the people who, to my astonishment, would be the first democratically elected leaders of post-war Czechoslovakia. And I felt towards these people an immediate affinity. Nothing was of such importance for them as the survival of their national culture. Deprived of material and professional advancement, their days were filled with a forced meditation on their country and its past, and on the great Question of Czech History which has preoccupied the Czechs since Palacky's day. They were forbidden to publish; the authorities had concealed their existence from the world and had resolved to remove their traces from the book of history. Hence the dissidents were acutely conscious of the value of memory. Their lives were an exercise in what Plato calls *anamnesis*: the bringing to consciousness of forgotten things. Something in me responded to this poignant ambition, and I was at once eager to join with them and make their situation known to the world.

Briefly, I spent the next ten years in daily meditation on Communism, on the myths of equality and fraternity that underlay its oppressive routines, just as they had underlain the routines of the

French Revolution. And I came to see that Burke's account of the Revolution was not merely a piece of contemporary history. It was like Milton's account of *Paradise Lost*—an exploration of a region of the human psyche: a region that lies always ready to be visited, but from which return is by way of a miracle, to a world whose beauty is thereafter tainted by the memories of Hell. To put it very simply, I had been granted a vision of Satan and his work—the very same vision that had shaken Burke to the depths of his being. And I at last recognized the positive aspect of Burke's philosophy as a response to that vision, as a description of the best that human beings can hope for, and as the sole and sufficient vindication of our life on earth.

Henceforth I understood conservatism not as a political credo only, but as a lasting vision of human society, one whose truth would always be hard to perceive, harder still to communicate, and hardest of all to act upon. And especially hard is it now, when religious sentiments follow the whims of fashion, when the global economy throws our local loyalties into disarray, and when materialism and luxury deflect the spirit from the proper business of living. But I do not despair, since experience has taught me that men and women can flee from the truth only for so long, that they will always, in the end, be reminded of the permanent values, and that the dreams of liberty, equality, and fraternity will excite them only in the short-term.

As to the task of transcribing, into the practice and process of modern politics, the philosophy that Burke made plain to the world, this is perhaps the greatest task that we now confront. I do not despair of it; but the task cannot be described or embraced by a slogan. It requires not a collective change of mind but a collective change of heart.

Roger Scruton (1944–2020) was an English philosopher and writer who first contributed to *The New Criterion* in 1982.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 21 Number 6 , on page 4
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