



ROGER SCRUTON: A SCAPEGOAT FOR OUR TIMES

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I briefly learnt of and met Roger Scruton some forty years ago when his colleague, the philosopher Ruby Meagre, invited me to sit in on a lecture and tutorial he gave on Kant. From then on Roger Scruton has been a constant presence in my life, due to the seemingly endless parade of his writings on all manner of subjects that appeared in the new books section of my university library, or were reviewed in literary magazines, or journals, and through the outpouring of his opinion pieces in British newspapers and magazines, and the stream of radio and television interviews, and more recently Youtube lectures. Almost as numerous were the denunciations and attacks that were regularly launched against him. And although Scruton had carved out an enviable reputation for himself as a philosopher, he is, I think, most likely to be remembered for his role as a public intellectual and public gadfly irritating the progressive cause.

While *The Meaning of Conservatism*, which had appeared shortly before I met him, and which my friend Ruby assured me was 'reactionary tosh', had already put him in great disfavour with the academic consensus very early in his career, it was an essay in the *Salisbury Review* about declining education standards in multi-cultural Britain that rocketed Scruton, along with its author, the headmaster of a Bradford school, Ray Honeyford, into the public eye as a 'racist.' When I read the essay, I thought Honeyford had expressed serious concerns about what was happening in British schools, and that the response to him, Scruton and the *Salisbury Review* was a disgrace. But given that the *Review* was one of the earliest forums drawing people's attention to the institutional damage being done by the elite ideological consensus in the Western world, there was nothing surprising in the hostile reactions it generated.

It was around the same time I also learnt of Scruton's role in helping Czech and Polish dissidents. And the magazine that was commonly denounced as reactionary bile by Western academics who earned their living by 'critiquing' everything about their society that did not follow their leadership by conforming to their ideas of what a just society and economy should be like, was treated by Eastern dissidents as a blast of freedom. In the East where the tacit and trans-generational accumulated social knowledge of tradition had been replaced by the ideology of the 'know-all' (i.e. for the party leaders, knowing their Marx and Lenin, knew all that was necessary about the objective laws of economics, society, and history), Scruton's Burkean insights about collective life and tradition were a reminder of a more spirited life than that being made by the party.

In the West, though, where tradition had been defined as the enemy, and every pumpkin head who had read a few books on Marx or feminism knew how to bring about peace on earth, Scruton was a

scapegoat who took on all the crimes and sins of the 'right' for academics, journalists et. al. that could be sacrificed to the god of virtuous abstraction that they faithfully served. Ultimately it was this scapegoat status that accompanied a general defiance of the consensus of the elites of our age, rather than any single philosophical contribution that made Scruton one of the most important public intellectuals of our time. (The role of favoured scape-goat, however, even during his life-time would be taken from Scruton and passed onto the less philosophically, and less conservatively inclined Jordan Peterson).

In his role as scapegoat (and ironically enough René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and the scapegoat would be a frequent point of reference in Scruton's later writing), Scruton reflected back everything that is appalling about his enemies and the kind of world they are making, as they attempted to block his career and smear his reputation, often in underhanded and secret ways, and just as often with a megaphone as they purported to speak on behalf of a public good, that they ostensibly represented. The last "hit job" on Scruton, not long before he died, was when George Eaton charmed his way into Scruton's confidence and then twisted and decontextualized his position in an infamous essay in the April 2019 issue of the New Statesman, a magazine for which Scruton had often published. It was a cipher of the manner of behaviour that our ideas-brokering class now engages in.

The work by Scruton that I have most enjoyed is *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands* (originally published as *Thinkers of the New Left*.) For it goes back to what is probably the most defining event in Scruton's intellectual life (apart from hunting, farming, and drinking wine), the Paris revolt of 1968. Scruton realized then that this discontented youth thought they knew so much more than they did, and the book sets about exposing just how little the great bastions of the New Left actually do know.

In many ways this Socratic twist, that we all know very little, is the essence of Scruton's conservative political commitment. For he held that we need to factor in that we dwell in processes about which we understand far too little, and hence we should take seriously the accumulated stock of social knowledge of previous generations that is our heritage instead of puffing ourselves up as 'judges' of history, and replace it with our relatively paltry intellectual principles and abstractions.

In that book Scruton also made the salutary point that the New Left view of politics as power fails to understand the very nature of politics, as a means of mediating between different interests, to achieve peace. In spite of the New Left presenting itself as the representatives of the oppressed, they were bourgeois who have not only wanted their narratives about past, present and future to prevail, but have

wanted to ensure their economic advancement in leading the rest of us.

Scruton was a significant obstacle to that interest because he urged us to think more rather than think we know everything. Now that he is dead there is one less major obstacle to the intellectual, spiritual, and social suicide of the West.

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The [image](#) shows, "The Mockers," by Hannah Höch, painted in 1935.

