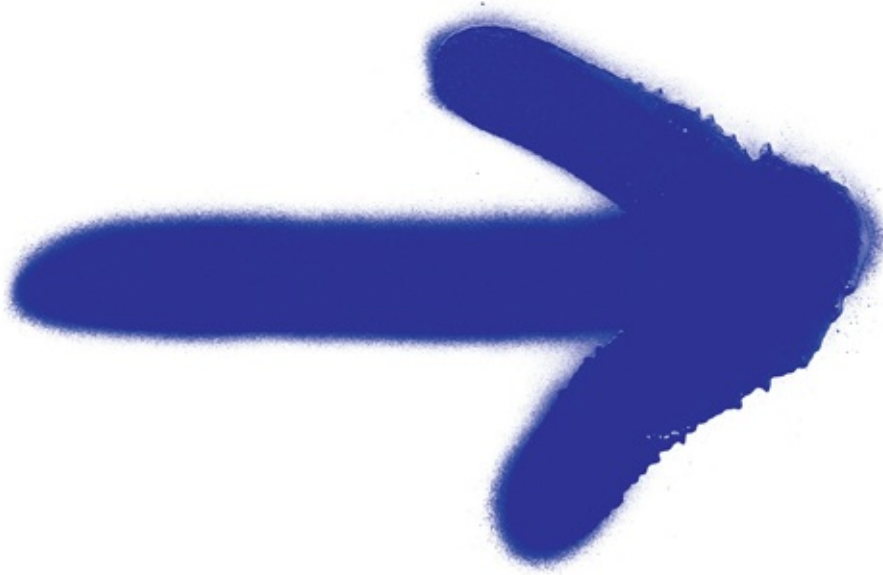


ROGER SCRUTON



**HOW TO BE A
CONSERVATIVE**

B L O O M S B U R Y

How to be a Conservative

Roger Scruton

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Contents

Preface

- 1 My Journey
 - 2 Starting from Home
 - 3 The Truth in Nationalism
 - 4 The Truth in Socialism
 - 5 The Truth in Capitalism
 - 6 The Truth in Liberalism
 - 7 The Truth in Multiculturalism
 - 8 The Truth in Environmentalism
 - 9 The Truth in Internationalism
 - 10 The Truth in Conservatism
 - 11 Realms of Value
 - 12 Practical Matters
 - 13 A Valediction Forbidding Mourning but Admitting Loss
- Index

The conservative temperament is an acknowledged feature of human societies everywhere. But it is largely in English-speaking countries that political parties and movements call themselves conservative. This curious fact reminds us of the enormous and unacknowledged divide that exists between those places that have inherited the traditions of English common-law government, and those that have not. Britain and America entered the modern world acutely conscious of their shared history. Later, through the traumas of the twentieth century, the two countries stayed together in defence of the civilization that united them, and even today, when Britain, to the general discontent of its people, has joined the European Union, the Atlantic Alliance retains its hold on popular affection, as a sign that we stand for something greater than our creature comforts. Just what is that thing? In the time of Thatcher and Reagan the answer was given in one word: freedom. But that word demands a context. Whose freedom, how exercised, how circumscribed and how defined?

A book has been written in America devoted to the medieval writ of *Habeas corpus* – a writ sent in the king's name commanding whoever might be holding one of his subjects to release that person or bring him to trial before the king's courts. The continuing validity of this writ, the author argues, underpins American freedom, by making government the servant and not the master of the citizen. Nowhere outside the anglosphere is there the equivalent of *Habeas corpus*, and all attempts to curtail its extent or effect are greeted by English-speaking people with defiance. It expresses, in the simplest possible terms, the unique relation between the government and the governed that has grown from the English common law. That relation is one part of what conservatives uphold in freedom's name.

In explaining and defending conservatism, therefore, I am addressing my remarks primarily to the English-speaking world. I am assuming a readership for whom common-law justice, parliamentary democracy, private charity, public spirit and the 'little platoons' of volunteers describe the default position of civil society, and who have yet to become entirely accustomed to the top-down authority of the modern welfare state, still less to the transnational bureaucracies that are striving to absorb it.

There are two kinds of conservatism, one metaphysical, the other empirical. The first resides in the belief in sacred things and the desire to defend them against desecration. This belief has been exemplified at every point in history and will always be a powerful influence in human affairs. In the concluding chapters of this book I therefore return to it. But for most of the preceding pages I shall be concerned with more down-to-earth matters. In its empirical manifestation, conservatism is a more specifically modern phenomenon, a reaction to the vast changes unleashed by the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

The conservatism I shall be defending tells us that we have collectively inherited good things that we must strive to keep. In the situation in which we, the inheritors both of Western civilization and of the English-speaking part of it, find ourselves, we are well aware of what those good things are. They are the opportunity to live our lives as we will; the security of impartial law, through which our grievances are answered and our hurts restored; the protection of our environment as a shared asset, which cannot be seized or destroyed at the whim of powerful interests; the open and enquiring culture that has

shaped our schools and universities; the democratic procedures that enable us to elect our representatives and to pass our own laws – these and many other things are familiar to us and taken for granted. All are under threat. And conservatism is the rational response to that threat. Maybe it is a response that requires more understanding than the ordinary person is prepared to devote to it. But conservatism is the only response that answers to the emerging realities, and in this book I try to say as succinctly as I can, why it would be irrational to adopt any other.

Conservatism starts from a sentiment that all mature people can readily share: the sentiment that good things are easily destroyed, but not easily created. This is especially true of the good things that come to us as collective assets: peace, freedom, law, civility, public spirit, the security of property and family life, in all of which we depend on the cooperation of others while having no means of obtaining it singlehandedly. In respect of such things, the work of destruction is quick, easy and exhilarating; the work of creation slow, laborious and dull. That is one of the lessons of the twentieth century. It is also one reason why conservatives suffer such a disadvantage when it comes to public opinion. Their position is true but boring, that of their opponents exciting but false.

Because of this rhetorical disadvantage, conservatives often present their case in the language of mourning. Lamentations can sweep everything before them, like the Lamentations of Jeremiah, in just the way that the literature of revolution sweeps away the world of our frail achievements. And mourning is sometimes necessary; without ‘the work of mourning’, as Freud described it, the heart cannot move on from the thing that is lost to the thing that will replace it. Nevertheless, the case for conservatism does not have to be presented in elegiac accents.² It is not about what we have lost, but about what we have retained, and how to hold on to it. Such is the case that I present in this book, which therefore ends on a more personal note, with a valediction forbidding mourning.

I have greatly benefited from critical comments made by Bob Grant, Alicja Gescinska and Sarah Hughes. It would not have been possible to get my thoughts on to the page without the inspiration, scepticism and occasional satire provided by my wife Sophie, and I dedicate the result to her and our children.

Malmesbury, January 2013

Notes

¹ Anthony Gregory, *The Power of Habeas Corpus in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

² For those interested in the elegiac aspect of my position, see *England: an Elegy* (London: Pimlico, 2001).

My Journey

It is not unusual to be a conservative. But it is unusual to be an intellectual conservative. In both Britain and America some 70 per cent of academics identify themselves as ‘on the left’, while the surrounding culture is increasingly hostile to traditional values, or to any claim that might be made for the high achievements of Western civilization.¹ Ordinary conservatives – and many, possibly most people fall into this category – are constantly told that their ideas and sentiments are reactionary, prejudiced, sexist or racist. Just by being the thing they are they offend against the new norms of inclusiveness and non-discrimination. Their honest attempts to live by their lights, raising families, enjoying communities, worshipping their gods, and adopting a settled and affirmative culture – the attempts are scorned and ridiculed by the *Guardian* class. In intellectual circles conservatives therefore move quietly and discreetly, catching each other’s eyes across the room like the homosexuals in Proust, whom that great writer compared to Homer’s gods, known only to each other as they move in disguise around the world of mortals.

We, the supposed excluders, are therefore under pressure to hide what we are, for fear of being excluded. I have resisted that pressure, and as a result my life has been far more interesting than I ever intended it to be.

I was born towards the end of the Second World War and raised in a lower middle-class household. My father was a trade unionist and a member of the Labour Party, who always wondered whether he had, in becoming a teacher in a primary school, betrayed his working-class origins. For politics, in Jack Scruton’s eyes, was the pursuit of class war by other means. Thanks to the unions and the Labour Party, he believed, the working class had begun to drive the upper classes into the corner from where they would be forced to deliver up their stolen assets. The major obstacle to this cherished outcome was the Conservative Party, which was an establishment of big business, property developers and landed aristocrats who were hoping to sell the inheritance of the British people to the highest bidder and then move to the Bahamas. Jack regarded himself as locked in a lifelong struggle with the establishment, on behalf of the Anglo-Saxon peasantry whose birthright had been stolen a thousand years earlier by the Norman knights.

It was a story that he found confirmed in our school histories, in the socialist tracts of William Morris and H. J. Massingham, and in his own experience of childhood in the slums of Manchester from which he had escaped to one of the remaining bits of Old England in the vicinity of the River Thames. There, thanks to a crash course in teacher training, he was able to settle down with my mother, whom he had met when they were both serving with RAF Bomber Command during the war. And his love of Old England grew in him side by side with his resentment at the aristocrats who had stolen it. He believed in socialism, not as an economic doctrine, but as a restoration to the common people of the land that was theirs.

It was difficult living with such a man, especially after I had entered the local grammar school and was on my way to Cambridge, there to be recruited by the class enemy. Nevertheless, I understood from my father just how deeply class feeling had been inscribed in the experience of his generation and in the northern industrial communities from which he came. I also learned from a very early age that this deep experience had been embellished with a gallery of exciting fictions. The class war, for my father, was the true national epic, sounding in the background to his life as the Trojan War sounded in the background of Greek literature. I did not understand the economic theories of socialism, which I studied in George Bernard Shaw's *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*. But I knew already that the theories were of little real importance. The fictions were far more persuasive than the facts, and more persuasive than both was the longing to be caught up in a mass movement of solidarity, with the promise of emancipation at the end. My father's grievances were real and well-founded. But his solutions were dreams.

There was another side to my father's character, however, and this too greatly influenced me. Robert Conquest once announced three laws of politics, the first of which says that everyone is right in the matters he knows about.² My father perfectly illustrated this law. He knew about the countryside, about local history, about the old ways of living, working and building. He studied the villages around High Wycombe, where we lived, and the history and architecture of the town. And through knowing about these matters, he became, in respect of them, an ardent conservative. He saw that there were good things that he wished to conserve. He urged others to join in his campaign to protect High Wycombe and its villages from destruction, threatened as they were by the unscrupulous tactics of developers and motorway fanatics. He founded the High Wycombe Society, gathered signatures for petitions, and gradually raised the consciousness of our town to the point where it made a serious and lasting effort to conserve itself. I shared his love of the countryside and of the old ways of building; I believed, as he did, that the modernist styles of architecture that were desecrating our town were also destroying its social fabric; and I saw, for the first time in my life, that it is always right to conserve good things, when worse things are proposed in their place. That *a priori* law of practical reason is also the truth in conservatism.

At the heart of my father's socialism, therefore, lay a deep conservative instinct. And in time I came to understand that the class war that defined his approach to politics was less important to him than the love concealed beneath it. My father deeply loved his country – not the 'UK' of official documents but the England of his walks and reflections. Like the rest of his generation he had seen England in danger and had been called to her defence. He had been inspired by A. G. Street's farming programmes on the BBC Home Service, by Paul Nash's evocative paintings of the English landscape, by H. J. Massingham's writings in *The Countryman*, and by the poetry of John Clare. He had a deep love of English liberty: he believed that the freedom to say what you think and live as you will was something that we English have defended over centuries, and something that would always unite us against tyrants. *Habeas corpus* was inscribed in his heart. He fully bore out the picture of the English working class that had been painted by George Orwell in *The Lion and the Unicorn*. When the chips are down, Orwell argued, our workers do not defend their class but their country, and they associate their country with a gentle way of life in which unusual and eccentric habits – such as not killing one another – are accepted as the way things are. In these respects, Orwell also thought, the leftists

intellectuals will always misunderstand the workers, who want nothing to do with a self-vaunting disloyalty that only intellectuals can afford.

But I too was an intellectual, or fast becoming one. At school and university I rebelled against authority. Institutions, I believed, were there to be subverted, and no codes or norms should be allowed to impede the work of the imagination. But like my father I was also an instance of Conquest's law. The thing I most cared about and which I was determined to make my own was culture – and I included philosophy, as well as art, literature and music under this label. And about culture I was 'right-wing': that is to say, respectful of order and discipline, acknowledging the need for judgement, and wishing to conserve the great tradition of the masters and to work for its survival. This cultural conservatism came to me from the literary critic F. R. Leavis, from T. S. Eliot, whose *Four Quartets* and literary essays entered all our hearts at school, and from classical music. I was deeply struck by Schoenberg's claim that his atonal experiments were not designed to replace the great tradition of German music but to prolong it. The tonal language had lapsed into cliché and kitsch, and it was necessary therefore to 'purify the dialect of the tribe', as Eliot (borrowing from Mallarmé) had expressed the point in *Four Quartets*. This idea, that we must be modern in defence of the past, and creative in defence of tradition had a profound effect on me, and in due course shaped my political leanings.

Leaving Cambridge, and spending a year as *lecteur* in a French *collège universitaire*, I fell in love with France as Eliot once had done. And this led to the decisive change in the focus of my thinking from culture to politics. May 1968 led me to understand what I value in the customs, institutions and culture of Europe. Being in Paris at the time, I read the attacks on 'bourgeois' civilization with a growing sense that if there is anything half decent in the way of life so freely available in the world's greatest city, the word 'bourgeois' is the proper name for it. The *soixante-huitards* were inheritors of this bourgeois way of life, and enjoyed the freedom, security and wide culture that the French state dispensed to all its citizens. They had every reason to appreciate what France had become under the leadership of General de Gaulle, who had made the French Communist Party as ridiculous in the eyes of the people as it ought also to have been in the eyes of the intellectuals.

To my astonishment, however, the *soixante-huitards* were busy recycling the old Marxist promise of a radical freedom, which will come when private property and the 'bourgeois' rule of law are abolished. The imperfect freedom that property and law make possible, and on which the *soixante-huitards* depended for their comforts and their excitements, was not enough. That real but relative freedom must be destroyed for the sake of its illusory but absolute shadow. The new 'theories' that poured from the pens of Parisian intellectuals in their battle against the 'structures' of bourgeois society were not theories at all, but bundles of paradox, designed to reassure the student revolutionaries that, since law, order, science and truth are merely masks for bourgeois domination, no longer matters what you think so long as you are on the side of the workers in their 'struggle'. The genocides inspired by that struggle earned no mention in the writings of Althusser, Deleuze, Foucault and Lacan, even though one such genocide was beginning at that very moment in Cambodia, led by Pol Pot, a Paris-educated member of the French Communist Party.

It is true that only someone raised in the anglosphere could believe, as I believed in the aftermath of 1968, that the political alternative to revolutionary socialism is conservatism. But when I found

myself teaching in London University I discovered that my colleagues were standing to a man against something that they described with that very word. Conservatism, they told me, is the enemy, not just of the intellectuals, but also of everyone working for a fair share of the social product, and of everyone 'struggling for peace' against American imperialism. My colleagues were sympathetic to the Soviet Union, whose difficulties, caused by 'capitalist encirclement', had still not been overcome, despite the necessary liquidation of counter-revolutionary elements. But there was an alternative to the revolutionary socialism of Lenin, they believed, which would cure the defects of the Soviet model and that was the Marxist humanism of the *New Left Review*.

Birkbeck College, where I taught, had begun in the early nineteenth century as the Mechanical Institute, and still upheld its founder George Birkbeck's wish to offer evening classes to people without full-time employment. I therefore had free time during the day, which I devoted to reading for the Bar, thinking that it was only a matter of time before I should need another career. Birkbeck was a secure bastion of the left establishment. Its presiding guru was the communist Eric Hobsbawm, whose histories of the Industrial Revolution remain standard fare in our schools. Its ethos was that of the 'long march through the institutions', which meant rebuilding Britain on the socialist model.

Reading for the Bar, and studying the English law as it was before the pollution injected by the European Courts and before the constitutional changes haphazardly introduced by Tony Blair, I was granted a completely different vision of our society. Common-law justice spoke to me of a community built from below, through the guarantee offered by the courts to all who came before them with clean hands. This vision stayed with me thereafter as a narrative of home. In the English law there are valuable statutes and leading cases that date from the thirteenth century, and progressive people would regard this as an absurdity. For me, it was proof that the English law is the property of the English people, not the weapon of their rulers. That thought is not one that you will find in the history books of Hobsbawm.

The political realities of the day had little enough relation to the settled community evoked by Lord Denning in his leading cases, or so clearly observable in our land law and our law of trusts. I vividly recall the surprise I felt, on learning that, under the law of corporations, businesses are obliged to make a profit. How was it that profit, in the 'Ingsoc' of the 1970s, was even allowed, let alone required? At the time the entire management of the country seemed to be devoted to maintaining the steady pace of cultural and economic decline, in the hope of reaching the new and equal society in which everybody would have the same, since nobody would have anything.

Indeed, for many people of conservative temperament, it looked in the late 1970s as though Britain were ready to surrender all that it stood for: its pride, its enterprise, its ideals of freedom and citizenship, even its borders and its national defence. This was the time of CND, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the Soviet 'peace offensive', which aimed to disarm the Western Alliance through the work of 'useful idiots', as Lenin had famously described them. The country seemed to be wallowing in feelings of collective guilt, reinforced by a growing culture of dependency. For politicians on the left, 'patriotism' had become a dirty word. For politicians on the right, nothing seemed to matter, save the rush to be a part of the new Europe, whose markets would protect us from the worst effects of post-war stagnation. The *national* interest had been displaced by *vested* interests by the unions, the establishments and the 'captains of industry'.

The situation was especially discouraging for conservatives. Edward Heath, their nominal leader, believed that to govern is to surrender: we were to surrender the economy to the managers, the education system to the socialists and sovereignty to Europe. The old guard of the Tory Party largely agreed with him, and had joined in the scapegoating of Enoch Powell, the only one among them who had publicly dissented from the post-war consensus. In the bleak years of the 1970s, when a culture of repudiation spread through the universities and the opinion-forming elites, it seemed that there was no way back to the great country that had successfully defended our civilization in two world wars.

Then, in the midst of our discouragement, Margaret Thatcher appeared, as though by a miracle, at the head of the Conservative Party. I well remember the joy that spread through the University of London. At last there was someone to hate! After all those dreary years of socialist consensus, poking us in the drab corners of British society for the dingy fascists who were the best that could be found by way of an enemy, a real demon had come on the scene: a leader of the Tory Party, no less, who had the effrontery to declare her commitment to the market economy, private enterprise, the freedom of the individual, national sovereignty and the rule of law – in short to all the things that Marx had dismissed as ‘bourgeois ideology’. And the surprise was that she did not mind being hated by the left, that she gave as good as she got, and was able to carry the people with her.

I never swallowed in its entirety the free-market rhetoric of the Thatcherites. But I deeply sympathized with Thatcher’s motives. She wanted the electorate to recognize that the individual’s life is his own and the responsibility of living it cannot be borne by anyone else, still less by the state. She hoped to release the talent and enterprise that, notwithstanding decades of egalitarian claptrap, still believed yet to exist in British society. The situation she inherited was typified by the National Economic Development Council, set up under a lame Conservative government in 1962, in order to manage the country’s economic decline. Staffed by big-wigs from industry and the civil service, ‘Neddy’, as it was known, devoted itself to perpetuating the illusion that the country was in ‘safe hands’, that there was a plan, that managers, politicians and union leaders were in it together and working for the common good. It epitomized the post-war British establishment, which addressed the nation’s problems by appointing committees of the people who had caused them.

Neddy’s ruling idea was that economic life consists in the management of existing industries rather than the creation of new ones. Wilson, Heath and Callaghan had all relied upon Neddy to confirm their shared belief that, if you held on long enough, things would come out OK and any blame would fall on your successor. By contrast, Margaret Thatcher believed that, in business as in politics, the buck stops here. The important person in a free economy is not the manager but the entrepreneur – the one who takes risks and meets the cost of them. Whether Thatcher succeeded in replacing an economy of management and vested interests with one of entrepreneurship and risk may of course be doubted. By liberating the labour market she put the economy on an upward climb. But the long-term result has been the emergence of a new managerial class, as the multinationals move in with their takeover bids, their legal privileges and their transnational lobbyists for whom small businesses and entrepreneurs are the enemy. Those who object to this new managerialism (and I am one of them) should nevertheless recognize that what is bad in it is precisely what was bad in the old corporatist economy that Thatcher set out to destroy. When she claimed that entrepreneurs create things, which managers entomb them, it was immediately apparent that she was right, since the effects of the

management culture lay all around us.

I say it was immediately apparent, but it was not apparent to the intellectual class, which has remained largely wedded to the post-war consensus to this day. The idea of the state as a benign father-figure, who guides the collective assets of society to the place where they are needed, and who is always there to rescue us from poverty, ill health or unemployment, has remained in the foreground of academic political science in Britain. On the day of Margaret Thatcher's death I was preparing a lecture in political philosophy at the University of St Andrews. I was interested to discover that the prescribed text identified something called the New Right, associated by the author with Thatcher and Reagan, as a radical assault on the vulnerable members of society. The author assumed that the main task of government is to distribute the collective wealth of society among its members, and that, in that matter of distribution, the government is uniquely competent. The fact that wealth can be distributed only if it is first created seemed to have escaped his notice.

Of course Thatcher was not an intellectual, and was motivated more by instinct than by a properly worked out philosophy. Pressed for arguments, she leaned too readily on market economics, and ignored the deeper roots of conservatism in the theory and practice of civil society. Her passing remark that 'there is no such thing as society' was gleefully seized upon by my university colleagues as proof of her crass individualism, her ignorance of social philosophy, and her allegiance to the values of the new generation of businessmen, which could be summarized in three words: money, money, money.

Actually what Thatcher meant on that occasion was quite true, though the opposite of what she said. She meant that there *is* such a thing as society, but that society is not identical with the state. Society is composed of people, freely associating and forming communities of interest that socialists have no right to control and no authority to outlaw. To express it in that way, however, was not Thatcher's style and not what her followers expected of her. What the British public wanted, and what they got, was the kind of instinctive politician whom they could see at once to be speaking for the nation, whether or not she had the right fund of abstract arguments.

Understandably, she felt the winds of intellectual scorn that blew around her, and sheltered behind a praetorian guard of economic advisers versed in 'market solutions', 'supply-side economics', 'consumer sovereignty', and the rest. But those fashionable slogans did not capture her core beliefs. All her most important speeches as well as her enduring policies stemmed from a consciousness of national loyalty. She believed in our country and its institutions, and saw them as the embodiment of social affections nurtured and stored over centuries. Family, civil association, the Christian religion and the common law were all integrated into her ideal of freedom under law. The pity was that she had no philosophy with which to articulate that ideal, so that 'Thatcherism' came to denote a kind of caricature of conservative thinking, created by the left in order to cover the right with ridicule.

Not that Thatcher was without influence on her leftist critics. She so changed things that it became impossible for the Labour Party to wrap itself again in its Victorian cobwebs: Clause IV (the commitment to a socialist economy) was dropped from its constitution, and a new middle-class party emerged, retaining nothing of the old agenda apart from the desire to punish the upper class, and the belief that the way to do this is by banning fox-hunting, to which cause 220 hours of Parliamentary time were devoted under the administration of Tony Blair (who allowed just 18 hours of discussion

before going to war in Iraq).

At the time, however, it was not Thatcher's impact on domestic policy that was most vividly felt but her presence on the international stage. Her commitment to the Atlantic alliance, and preparedness to stand side by side with President Reagan in defiance of the Soviet threat, entirely changed the atmosphere in Eastern Europe. Quite suddenly people who had been broken and subdued by the totalitarian routine learned that there were Western leaders who were prepared to press for their liberation. John O'Sullivan has forcefully argued that the simultaneous presence in the highest offices of Reagan, Thatcher and Pope John Paul II was the cause of the Soviet collapse.³ And my own experience confirms this.

For it was about this time that I underwent a new political awakening. During the 1970s, I had worked with a group of friends to set up the Conservative Philosophy Group, with the intention of bringing Parliamentarians, conservative journalists and academics together to discuss the foundations of their shared worldview. And then in 1979, I wrote *The Meaning of Conservatism* – an impetuous attempt to counter the free market ideology of the Thatcherite think tanks. I wanted to remind conservatives that there *is* such a thing as society, and that society is what conservatism is all about. I believed that 'freedom' is not a clear or sufficient answer to the question of what conservatives believe in. Like Matthew Arnold, I held that 'freedom is a very good horse to ride, but to ride *somewhere*'.

I had not troubled myself to imagine, during those years of Thatcher's rise, what would happen if our still secure and comfortable world, where all basic freedoms were to be taken away. I was cocooned in the false security of an introspective island, with no knowledge of the realm of fear and negation that the communists had installed just a little way to the east of us. A visit to Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1979 awoke me to the reality. I encountered first-hand the thing that Orwell perceived while fighting alongside the communists in the Spanish Civil War and which he expressed in telling images in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I saw the translation into fact of the fictions that swam in the brains of my Marxist colleagues. I entered Hobsbawm-land, and felt the malign enchantment of a wholly disenchanted world.

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 UN Charter. The Helsinki Accords were a farce, used by the communists to identify potential troublemakers, 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 on 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 hidden 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 pushed down the stairs. But the argument continued and I was able to push my way

up again, past the guards and into 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; 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 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 later astonishment, would be the first democratically elected leaders of post-communist Czechoslovakia. And I felt towards these people an immediate affinity. Nothing was of such importance for them as the survival of the national culture. Deprived of material and professional advancement, their days were filled with forced meditation on their country and its past, and on the great Question of Czech History that had preoccupied the Czechs since the movement for national revival in the nineteenth century. 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 called *anamnesis*: the bringing to consciousness of forgotten things. Something in me responded immediately to this poignant ambition, and I was once eager to join with them and make their situation known to the world. And I recognized that *anamnesis* described the meaning of my life too.

Thus began a long connection with the unofficial networks in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary through which I learned to see socialism in another way – not as a dream of idealists, but as a real system of government, imposed from above and maintained by force. I awoke to the fraud that had been committed in socialism's name, and felt an immediate obligation to do something about it. And those laws formulated by the British Labour Party, which set out to organize society for the great good of everyone, by controlling, marginalizing or forbidding some natural human activity, took on another meaning for me. I was suddenly struck by the impertinence of a political party that sets out to confiscate whole industries from those who had created them, to abolish the grammar schools in which I owed my education, to force schools to amalgamate, to control relations in the workplace, to regulate hours of work, to compel workers to join a union, to ban hunting, to take property from a landlord and bestow it on his tenant, to compel businesses to sell themselves to the government at a dictated price, to police all our activities through quangos designed to check us for political correctness. And I saw that this desire to control society in the name of equality expresses exactly the contempt for human freedom that I encountered in Eastern Europe. There is indeed such a thing as a controlled society; but it is composed of individuals. And individuals must be free, which means being free from the insolent claims of those who wish to redesign them.

My adventures in the communist world coincided with another adventure at home – the establishment of a journal of conservative thought, the *Salisbury Review*, named after the great prin

minister whose greatness consists in the fact that nobody knows anything about him, even though I held office for close on 20 years. The *Review* was run on a shoestring, and for a while I had great difficulty in persuading the few conservatives of my acquaintance to write for it. My original intention was to stimulate intellectual debate concerning the concepts of modern political thought, so as to move conservatism away from free-market economics. But things took an explosive turn when Ray Honeyford, headmaster of a school in Bradford, sent me an article advocating the integration of the new minorities through the educational system, and lamenting the isolationism of the Pakistani families whose children he was striving to teach. I published the article and immediately the thought police got wind of it.

Ray Honeyford was an upright, conscientious teacher, who believed it to be his duty to prepare children for responsible life in society, and who was confronted with the question of how to do this when the children are the offspring of Muslim peasants from Pakistan, and the society is that of England. Honeyford's article honestly conveyed the problem, together with his proposed solution, which was to integrate the children into the surrounding secular culture, while protecting them from the punishments administered in their pre-school classes in the local *madrassah*, meanwhile opposing their parents' plans to take them away whenever it suited them to Pakistan. He saw no sense in the doctrine of multiculturalism, and believed that the future of our country depends upon our ability to integrate its recently arrived minorities, through a shared curriculum in the schools and a secular rule of law that could protect women and girls from the kind of abuse to which he was a distressed witness.

Everything Ray Honeyford said is now the official doctrine of our major political parties: too late, of course, to achieve the results that he hoped for, but nevertheless not too late to point out that those who persecuted him and who surrounded his school with their inane chants of 'Ray-cist' have never suffered, as he suffered, for their part in the conflict. Notwithstanding his frequently exasperated tone, Ray Honeyford was a profoundly gentle man, who was prepared to pay the price of truthfulness at any time of lies. But he was sacked from his job, and the teaching profession lost one of its most humane and public-spirited representatives. This was one example of a prolonged Stalinist purge by the educational establishment, designed to remove all signs of patriotism from our schools and to erase the memory of England from the cultural record. Henceforth the *Salisbury Review* was branded as a 'racist' publication, and my own academic career thrown into doubt.

The conflicts in which I became involved over the ensuing years, brought home to me just how low the level of public debate had sunk in Britain. On the left there seemed to be no response to the enormous changes introduced by mass immigration except to describe everyone who attempted to discuss the matter as a 'racist'. This crime resembled the crime of being an *émigré* in Revolutionary France, or a bourgeois in Lenin's Russia: the accusation was proof of guilt. And yet nobody ever told us what the crime consisted in. I was reminded of Defoe's comment, at the time of the Popery Act of 1698, that 'the streets of London are full of stout fellows prepared to fight to the death against Popery without knowing whether it be a man or a horse'.

I was the more astonished to discover that this elementary intellectual defect had entirely invaded the political science departments of our universities, and that the intellectual world was in a fever about the presence among us of 'racists' whose conspiracy could never be discovered and whose nature could never be clearly defined. Being classed as a racist gave me a faint intimation of what

has been like, in other times, to belong to some despised and persecuted minority. After a particularly frightening episode in which I was chased from a public lecture in the University of York, and following libels by the BBC and *The Observer* I decided to leave the academic world and live by my wits.

By this time – 1989 – the Berlin wall had fallen, and I was able to return to Czechoslovakia, where I had been arrested and expelled in 1985. Together with friends and colleagues, I set up a government relations business that bumped along for a few years, providing me with a small income. Observing the volatile nature of the new democracies, I came vividly to see how unimportant a part of democracy are elections, in comparison with the enduring institutions and public spirit that make elected politicians accountable. The rule in Eastern Europe, following the collapse of communism, was for a group of adventurers to form a political party, to win an election on the strength of grandiose promises, and then to privatize as much as possible to themselves before being wiped out at the next election. To my amazement, the European Union nevertheless decided to extend its reach into these new democracies. The market-based legal order of the Brussels bureaucracy helped to fill the legal vacuum created by communism, and was warmly received on that account. But, because of the unwieldy provisions of the Treaty of Rome regarding freedom of movement, it has led to the mass emigration of the professional classes, and to the loss of the educated young from countries that stand desperately in need of them. The ‘enlargement’ agenda has therefore become controversial all across Europe, and I return to the controversy in what follows.

Those experiences helped to convince me that European civilization depends upon the maintenance of national borders, and that the EU, which is a conspiracy to dissolve those borders, has become a threat to European democracy. Through the operation of the European courts and the shape of its legislation, the EU has created a political class which is no longer accountable to the people – a class typified by Baroness Ashton, a former CND *apparatchik* who has never stood for an election in her life and who has advanced through Labour Party quangos and leftist NGOs to become Commissioner in charge of Foreign Relations, in other words, the foreign minister of our continent. The European Commission itself passes laws that cannot be overridden by national parliaments, following discussion behind closed doors among bureaucrats who need never answer for their decisions.

The comic attempt to draw up a constitution for Europe produced a document so long and involved as to be all but unintelligible. The preamble managed to exclude the Christian religion from the identity of Europe, while the rest of the document – which was far more about extending the powers of the European institutions than setting limits to them – was calculated to kill off democracy. Given that Europe’s legacy to the world consists in the two great goods of Christianity and democracy it is hardly surprising if the EU no longer has the endorsement of the European people, even if it has created a network of clients upon whose support it can always rely.

At a certain point in the 1980s I found myself in Lebanon, visiting the communities that were striving to survive in the face of Hafiz al-Assad’s brutal attempt to create a Greater Syria. My experiences there awoke me to two vital truths about the world in which we live. The first is that you do not create boundaries by drawing lines on the map, as the French and British had done at the end of the First World War. Boundaries arise through the emergence of national identities, which in turn require that religious obedience take second place to the feeling for home, territory and settlement.

Moreover, as the example of Lebanon in so many ways illustrates, democracy will always be jeopardized in places where identities are confessional rather than territorial.

The second truth impressed on me was that, for the very reason that Islam puts religion above nationality as the test of membership, Islamism poses a threat to political order. This is particularly true of the Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood and its erstwhile leader Sayyid Qutb, for whom, in the contest between the *shar‘iah* and the modern world, it is the modern world that must go. In response to the Lebanese tragedy I wrote a short book – *A Land Held Hostage* – in which I pleaded for the old Lebanese order. I defended the Lebanese constitution, which had been designed to foster a shared national identity that would stand above the confessional identities that divide village from village and neighbour from neighbour all across the land that they share. And I warned against the ambitions of Hezbollah, the ‘Party of God’, which was attempting to establish a regional Shi‘ite power network, under the aegis of Syria and Iran.

The conflict between Sunni and Shi‘a has now come to dominate the region, and my futile plea on behalf of the old Lebanon counted for nothing. But this experience taught me that our civilization cannot survive if we continue to appease the Islamists. I later argued the point in *The West and the Rest*, a book published in 2002, in response to the atrocities of 9/11; in writing it I came to see that more precious though national boundaries are, yet more precious is the civilization that has made national boundaries perceivable.

That civilization is rooted in Christianity, and it is by seeing our world in Christian terms that we have been able to accept the vast changes that have shaken it. Acceptance comes from sacrifice: that is the message conveyed by so many of the memorable works of our culture. And in the Christian tradition the primary acts of sacrifice are confession and forgiveness. Those who confess, sacrifice their pride, while those who forgive, sacrifice their resentment, renouncing thereby something that has been dear to their hearts. Confession and forgiveness are the habits that made our civilization possible.

Forgiveness can be offered only on certain conditions, and a culture of forgiveness is one that implants those conditions in the individual soul. You can forgive those who have injured you only if they acknowledge their fault. This acknowledgement is not achieved by saying ‘yes, that’s true, that’s what I did’. It requires penitence and atonement. Through these self-abasing acts, the wrongdoer goes out to his victim and re-establishes the moral equality that makes forgiveness possible. In the Jewish and Christian tradition all this is well known, and incorporated into the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church as well as the rituals and liturgy of Yom Kippur. We have inherited from those religious sources the culture that enables us to confess to our faults, to make recompense to our victims, and to hold each other to account in all matters where our free conduct can harm those who have cause to rely on us.

Accountability in public office is but one manifestation of this cultural inheritance, and we should not be surprised that it is the first thing to disappear when the utopians and the planners take over. Nor should we be surprised that it is absent from the world of the Islamists – even though forgiveness has an important place in the practice of Islam and in the morality of the Koran.⁴ What we are now seeing in the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’ is the inside of governments in which accountability had no place, governments in which power was the only commodity. And the experience reminds us of an important truth, which is that accountable government does not come through elections. It comes through respect

for law, through public spirit and through a culture of confession. To think that there is a mere accidental connection between those virtues and our Judaeo-Christian heritage is to live in clove cuckoo land. It is to overlook the culture that has focused, down the centuries, on the business of repentance. Understanding this in my own life has made me see it all the more clearly in the context of politics. It is precisely this aspect of the human condition that was denied by the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. And the desire to deny it underlies the anti-Christian turn of the European Union and the sly dictatorship of its elites.

Having said that, I acknowledge that the conservative philosophy that I summarize in what follows in no way depends on the Christian faith. The relation between them is subtler and more personal than that implies. The argument of this book is addressed to the reader, regardless of his or her religious convictions, since it is about living in the empirical world, not believing in the transcendent. Whatever our religion and our private convictions, we are the collective inheritors of things both excellent and rare, and political life, for us, ought to have one overriding goal, which is to hold fast to those things, in order to pass them on to our children.

Notes

- ¹ See Scott Jaschik, 'Moving Further to the Left', on the website of insidehighered.com (accessed 2 October 2012).
- ² The other two laws are: any organization not explicitly right-wing becomes left-wing in the end; and the simplest way to explain the behaviour of any bureaucratic organization is to assume that it is controlled by a cabal of its enemies.
- ³ See John O'Sullivan, *The President, the Pope and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2006).
- ⁴ See, for example, Koran, 13, 22. This is not to say that the message of the Koran is identical in this respect with that contained in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Both Jesus and Rabbi Hillel place love and forgiveness at the centre of morality; for the Koran that central place is occupied by submission. Love and forgiveness may be *signs* of submission; but they are not what it essentially is.

Starting from Home

We live in great societies, and depend in a thousand ways on the actions and desires of strangers. We are bound to those strangers by citizenship, by law, by nationality and neighbourhood. But those bonds between us do not, in themselves, suffice to solve the great problem that we share, which is the problem of coordination. How is it that we can pursue our lives in relative harmony, each enjoying a sphere of freedom and all pursuing goals of our own? In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argued that self-interest can solve this problem. Given a free economy and an impartial rule of law, self-interest leads towards an optimal distribution of resources. Smith did not regard economic freedom as the sum of politics, nor did he believe that self-interest is the only, or even the most important, motive governing our economic behaviour. A market can deliver a rational allocation of goods and services only where there is trust between its participants, and trust exists only where people take responsibility for their actions and make themselves accountable to those with whom they deal. In other words, economic order depends on moral order.

In *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, Smith emphasized that trust, responsibility and accountability exist only in a society that respects them, and only where the spontaneous fruit of human sympathy is allowed to ripen. It is where sympathy, duty and virtue achieve their proper place that self-interest leads, by an invisible hand, to a result that benefits everyone. And this means that people can best satisfy their interests only in a context where they are also on occasion moved to renounce them. Beneath every society where self-interest pays off, lies a foundation of self-sacrifice.

We are not built on the model of *homo oeconomicus* – the rational chooser who acts always to maximize his own utility, at whatever cost to the rest of us. We are subject to motives that we do not necessarily understand, and which can be displayed in terms of utilities and preference orderings only by misrepresenting them. These motives make war on our circumstantial desires. Some of them – the fear of the dark, the revulsion towards incest, the impulse to cling to the mother – are adaptations that lie deeper than reason. Others – guilt, shame, the love of beauty, the sense of justice – arise from reason itself, and reflect the web of interpersonal relations and understandings through which we situate ourselves as free subjects, in a community of others like ourselves. At both levels – the instinctive and the personal – the capacity for sacrifice arises, in the one case as a blind attachment, in the other case as a sense of responsibility to others and to the moral way of life.

The error of reducing political order to the operations of the market parallels the error of revolutionary socialism, in reducing politics to a plan. In his *Reflections on the French Revolution* Edmund Burke argued against the ‘geometrical’ politics, as he called it, of the French revolutionaries – a politics that proposed a rational goal, and a collective procedure for achieving it, and which mobilized the whole of society behind the resulting programme. Burke saw society as an association of the dead, the living and the unborn. Its binding principle is not contract, but something more akin

love. Society is a shared inheritance for the sake of which we learn to circumscribe our demands, see our own place in things as part of a continuous chain of giving and receiving, and to recognize that the good things we inherit are not ours to spoil. There is a line of obligation that connects us to those who gave us what we have; and our concern for the future is an extension of that line. We take the future of our community into account not by fictitious cost-benefit calculations, but more concretely by seeing ourselves as inheriting benefits and passing them on.

Burke's complaint against the revolutionaries was that they assumed the right to spend all trusts and endowments on their own self-made emergency. Schools, church foundations, hospitals – all institutions that had been founded by people, now dead, for the benefit of their successors – were expropriated or destroyed, the result being the total waste of accumulated savings, leading to massive inflation, the collapse of education and the loss of the traditional forms of social and medical relief. In this way, contempt for the dead leads to the disenfranchisement of the unborn, and although that result is not, perhaps, inevitable, it has been repeated by all subsequent revolutions. Through their contempt for the intentions and emotions of those who had laid things by, revolutions have systematically destroyed the stock of social capital, and always revolutionaries justify this by impeccable utilitarian reasoning. *Homo oeconomicus* enters the world without social capital of his own, and he consumes whatever he finds.

Society, Burke believed, depends upon relations of affection and loyalty, and these can be built only from below, through face-to-face interaction. It is in the family, in local clubs and societies, in school, workplace, church, team, regiment and university that people learn to interact as free beings, taking responsibility for their actions and accounting to their neighbours. When society is organized from above, either by the top-down government of a revolutionary dictatorship, or by the impersonal edicts of an inscrutable bureaucracy, then accountability rapidly disappears from the political order and from society too. Top-down government breeds irresponsible individuals, and the confiscation of civil society by the state leads to a widespread refusal among the citizens to act for themselves.

In place of top-down government, Burke made the case for a society shaped from below, by traditions that have grown from our natural need to associate. The important social traditions are not just arbitrary customs, which might or might not have survived into the modern world. They are forms of knowledge. They contain the residues of many trials and errors, as people attempt to adjust their conduct to the conduct of others. To put it in the language of game theory, they are the discovered solutions to problems of coordination, emerging over time. They exist because they provide necessary information, without which a society may not be able to reproduce itself. Destroy them heedlessly and you remove the guarantee offered by one generation to the next.

In discussing tradition, we are not discussing arbitrary rules and conventions. We are discussing *answers* that have been discovered to enduring *questions*. These answers are tacit, shared, embodied in social practices and inarticulate expectations. Those who adopt them are not necessarily able to explain them, still less to justify them. Hence Burke described them as 'prejudices', and defended them on the ground that, though the stock of reason in each individual is small, there is a cumulative accumulation of reason in society that we question and reject at our peril. Reason shows itself in those about which we do not, and maybe cannot, reason – and this is what we see in our traditions, including those that contain sacrifice at the heart of them, such as military honour, family attachment, the form

and curricula of education, the institutions of charity and the rules of good manners.

Tradition is not theoretical knowledge, concerning facts and truths; and not ordinary know-how either. There is another kind of knowledge, which involves the mastery of situations – knowing *what to do*, in order to accomplish a task successfully, where success is not measured in any exact or pre-*envisaged* goal, but in the harmony of the result with our human needs and interests. Knowing what to do in company, what to say, what to feel – these are things we acquire by immersion in society. They cannot be taught by spelling them out but only by osmosis; yet the person who has not acquired the things is rightly described as ignorant. The divisions of the day, the assignment of tasks in a family, the routines of a school, a team or a court, the liturgy of a church, the weights and measures used in everyday business, the clothes that are chosen for this or that social need: all these embody tacit social knowledge without which our societies would crumble. There are examples nearer to the heart of politics too: the British Crown, incorporating a myriad subtle roles and offices; the common law evolving from the steady flow of precedents; parliamentary and congressional procedures, with their prerogatives and formalities.

Political philosophers of the Enlightenment, from Hobbes and Locke, reaching down to John Rawls and his followers today, have found the roots of political order and the motive of political obligation in a social contract – an agreement, overt or implied, to be bound by principles to which all reasonable citizens can assent. Although the social contract exists in many forms, its ruling principle was first announced by Hobbes with the assertion that there can be ‘no obligation on any man which ariseth not from some act of his own’.¹ My obligations are my own creation, binding because freely chosen. When you and I exchange promises, the resulting contract is freely undertaken, and any breach done with violence not merely to the other but also to the self, since it is a repudiation of a well-grounded rational choice. If we could construe our obligation to the state on the model of a contract, therefore, we would have justified it in terms that all rational beings must accept. Contracts are the paradigms of self-chosen obligations – obligations that are not imposed, commanded or coerced but freely undertaken. When law is founded in a social contract, therefore, obedience to the law is simply the other side of free choice. Freedom and obedience are one and the same.

Such a contract is addressed to the abstract and universal *Homo oeconomicus* who comes into the world without attachments, without, as Rawls puts it, a ‘conception of the good’, and with nothing but his rational self-interest to guide him. But human societies are by their nature exclusively concerned with establishing privileges and benefits that are offered only to the insider, and which cannot be freely bestowed on all-comers without sacrificing the trust on which social harmony depends. The social contract begins from a thought-experiment, in which a group of people gather together to decide on their common future. But if they are in a position to decide on their common future, it is because they already have one: because they recognize their mutual togetherness and reciprocal dependence, which makes it incumbent upon them to settle how they might be governed under a common jurisdiction in their common territory. In short, the social contract requires a relation of membership. Theorists of the social contract write as though it presupposes only the first-person singular of free rational choice. In fact, it presupposes a first-person plural, in which the burdens of belonging have already been assumed.

Even in the American case, in which a decision was made to adopt a constitution and make

jurisdiction *ab initio*, it is nevertheless true that a first-person plural was involved in the very making of the social contract. This is confessed to in the document itself. 'We, the people ...' Which people? Why, *us*; we who have *already belong*, whose historic tie is now to be transcribed into law. We can make sense of the social contract only on the assumption of some such pre-contractual 'we'. For who is to be included in the contract? And why? And what do we do with the one who opts out? The obvious answer is that the founders of the new social order already belong together: they have already imagined themselves as a community, through the long process of social interaction that enables people to determine who should participate in their future and who should not.

Furthermore, the social contract makes sense only if future generations are included in it. The purpose is to establish an enduring society. At once, therefore, there arises that web of non-contractual obligations that links parents to children and children to parents and that ensures, willy-nilly, that within a generation the society will be encumbered by non-voting members, dead and unborn, who will rely on something other than a mere contract between the living if their rights are to be respected and their love deserved. Even when there arises, as in America, an idea of 'elective nationality', so that newcomers may choose to belong, *what* is chosen is precisely not a contract but a bond of membership, whose obligations and privileges transcend anything that could be contained in a defeasible agreement.

There cannot be a society without this experience of membership. For it is this that enables me to regard the interests and needs of strangers as my concern; that enables me to recognize the authority of decisions and laws that I must obey, even though they are not directly in my interest; that gives me a criterion to distinguish those who are entitled to the benefit of the sacrifices that my membership calls from me, from those who are interloping. Take away the experience of membership and the ground of the social contract disappears: social obligations become temporary, troubled and defeasible, and the idea that one might be called upon to lay down one's life for a collection of strangers begins to border on the absurd. Moreover, without the experience of membership, the dead will be disenfranchised, and the unborn, of whom the dead are the metaphysical guardians, will be deprived of their inheritance. Unless the 'contract between the living' can be phrased in such a way that the dead and the unborn are a part of it, it becomes a contract to appropriate the earth's resources for the benefit of its temporary residents. Philosophers of the social contract, such as John Rawls, are aware of this problem;² but to my mind they have failed to discover the motives that would lead ordinary people to sign up to a contract that spreads their obligations into the distant future. Critics of Western societies do not hesitate to point out that the squandering of resources is exactly what has happened, since the contractual vision of society gained ground over the experience of membership that made it possible.³

We can envisage society as founded in a contract only if we see its members as capable of the free and responsible choice that a contract requires. But only in certain circumstances will human beings develop into rational choosers, capable of undertaking obligations and honouring promises, and oriented towards one another in a posture of responsibility. In the course of acquiring this posture towards others, people acquire obligations of quite another kind – obligations to parents, to family, to place and community, upon all of which they have depended for the nurture without which the human animal cannot develop into the human person. Those obligations are not obligations of justice, such

arise from the free dealings of human adults. The Romans knew them as obligations of piety (*pietas*) meaning that they stem from the natural gratitude towards what is *given*, a gratitude that is spontaneously direct to the gods. Today we are reluctant to provide these obligations with such theological backing, though it is important to see that, for religious believers, unchosen obligations are not only vital to the building from below of a durable social order, but also properly owed to God.

Human beings, in their settled condition, are animated by *oikophilia*: the love of the *oikos*, which means not only the home but the people contained in it, and the surrounding settlements that endow that home with lasting contours and an enduring smile.⁴ The *oikos* is the place that is not just mine and yours but *ours*. It is the stage-set for the first-person plural of politics, the locus, both real and imagined, where 'it all takes place'. Virtues like thrift and self-sacrifice, the habit of offering and receiving respect, the sense of responsibility – all those aspects of the human condition that shape us as stewards and guardians of our common inheritance – arise through our growth as persons, by creating islands of value in the sea of price. To acquire these virtues we must circumscribe the 'instrumental reasoning' that governs the life of *Homo oeconomicus*. We must vest our love and desire in things to which we assign an intrinsic, rather than an instrumental, value, so that the pursuit of our means can come to rest, for us, in a place of ends. That is what we mean by settlement: putting the *oikos* back in the *oikonomia*. And that is what conservatism is about.⁵

People settle by acquiring a first-person plural – a place, a community and a way of life that is 'ours'. The need for this 'we' is not accepted by internationalists, by revolutionary socialists, or by intellectuals wedded to the Enlightenment's timeless, placeless vision of the ideal community. But it is a fact, and indeed the primary fact from which all community and all politics begin. George Orwell noticed this, during the course of the Second World War. The disloyalty of the left intelligentsia was, for Orwell, all the more evident and all the more shocking, when set beside the simple, dogged 'we' of the ordinary people. And the real political choice, about which Orwell had no hesitation, was whether to join the intellectuals in their work of destruction, or to stand by the ordinary people in defending their country in its hour of need.

There are two ways in which the first-person plural can emerge: it can emerge through a shared purpose, or it can emerge through a shared lack of purpose. Purposeless things are not necessarily useless things, nor are all useless things worthless. Consider friendship. Friends are valued for their own sake; and the benefits of friendship are not what we value, but by-products of the thing that we value, obtainable only by the person who does not pursue them. In the scope of human life, purposeless things like friendship are supremely useful: they are ends, not means, the places of fulfilment and homecoming, the goal of every pilgrimage. Without them, our purposes are null and void.

The lesson of recent history, for me, is that purposeful arrangements crumble as the purpose fades while purposeless arrangements endure. We saw this clearly in communist Europe. In all countries under Soviet control, the party was outside the law, without legal personality, and unaccountable to the citizens or to its members. It was shaped by the ruling purpose, which was to create a new society on socialist principles, abolishing everything that stood in the way. All of politics was justified in terms of the future socialist order, towards which society was moving inexorably, the party leading from the front, the secret police whipping behind. No institution was permitted to exist that was not

subject to party control, with one exception, the Polish Catholic Church, which had been able to negotiate special terms for itself – a dispensation that proved fatal to the communist experiment when a Polish priest was elected to the papacy. Charities were illegal and there was no way in which private individuals could hold property in trust for a communal use. Society was entirely *instrumentalized*, in the pursuit of the one overriding purpose of ‘building socialism’. All associations were kept together by the top-down commands of the party, and those commands were justified in terms of a purpose, which, as it happened, nobody believed. The work of the secret police was to control and if possible prevent free association, so that society would be entirely atomized by suspicion and fear. Each person would be allowed to secure what he or she could in his own private corner, behind the back of the great machine that gave the orders. But all association was to occur under the guidance of the party. The communist citizen was to be the perfect *Homo oeconomicus*, motivated by rational self-interest to advance a purpose that was no one’s.

To the dismay of the authorities, however, people formed friendships; they got together to read, to study, to make music. And even if the ever-vigilant secret police from time to time disrupted the meetings, the fact is that through these meetings the life of society renewed itself, in little platoons that were insulated from the all-obliterating commands of the socialist state. People discovered, in their personal lives, that civil society is not goal-directed. It comes into being, in whatever circumstances, as an end in itself, a form of life that is appreciated for what it is, not for what it does.

Michael Oakeshott earned a well-deserved reputation as a political thinker through his lifelong attempt to understand the nature of ‘civil association’, as he called it – the kind of association in which our political aspirations find equilibrium and completion. In *On Human Conduct*, he based his theory of political order on a contrast between civil association and ‘enterprise association’.⁶ In enterprise, people combine for a purpose, and their association is predicated on the need to cooperate in order to achieve it. Enterprise associations are of many kinds: for example, there is the army, in which top-down commands, relayed through the ranks of subordinates, point always to the single end of defeating the enemy; there is business, in which purposes may fluctuate from day to day, though with the overriding need for profit in the long run; there are the various forms of learning that train people for the professions and the trades.

Oakeshott believed that civil association has been increasingly displaced by enterprise, under the pressure from political elites, managers, parties and ideologues. It is not only socialists with the goals of equality and social justice who have contributed to this displacement. The liberal attempt to adopt the contours of an abstract and universal idea of justice and human rights; the supposed conservative pursuit of economic growth as the root of social order and the goal of government – they too have a tendency to displace civil association with a new kind of political practice, in which the institutions of society are bent towards a goal that may be incompatible with their inner dynamic.

The distinction between civil and enterprise association is not hard and fast: many of our social spheres partake of both arrangements. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that enterprise tends in a different direction from ordinary forms of community. In enterprise there are instructions coming down from above; there are rivalries and rebellions; there is ruinous failure as well as temporary success. The whole depends on a forward-going energy that must be constantly maintained if things are not to fragment and fall apart. Hence the invocations of ‘progress’, of ‘growth’, of constant

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