

Reading the State of Britain with Roger Scruton

by Theodore Dalrymple



Sir Roger Scruton is a man of such intellect and polymathic erudition that he is always worth attending to whatever he chooses to write. He is also a man of courage. With one or two others (but very few) he kept alive a tradition of intelligent conservatism in an era when to be conservative was thought by intellectuals and academics to be a manifestation of malevolent stupidity at best, and outright mental incapacity at worst. He suffered disdain, abuse and mockery for his steadfastness, and it took many years for him to receive the recognition that he deserved.

In [*Where We Are*](#), Scruton tackles the subject of Britain's projected exit from the European Union, thank goodness not from the point of view of its economic effects, splendid or disastrous, or from that of the details of the negotiations,

complex and mind-numbing, but from that, loosely-speaking, of political philosophy.

Scruton is broadly in favour of Brexit, though he recognizes the great benefit that it has brought to Anglo-Irish relations. His extended argument, if I have him correctly, is mainly two-fold: first that Britain has a very different (and incompatible) political and legal tradition from that of the rest of Europe, and second that people need a sense of identity rooted in land and culture, and not just in an abstract idea. There may be some genuine citizens of the world who feel equally at home anywhere, but they are few, and the great majority of people feel a need for some kind of physical and cultural rootedness. The most satisfactory way of finding such rootedness in the modern world, that permits both freedom and a degree of democratic control, is via the nation state. It commands overarching loyalty, affection and a sense of duty to a degree that no other polity does. It has its deformations, of course, but at least it gives its citizens a sense that the polity under which they live is theirs and is capable of responding to their concerns. A faceless international bureaucracy, composed largely of superannuated politicians of a variety of countries, clinging to unelected power and influence like limpets to a rock, will never replace the nation state in the affections of most people. And, as Sir Roger himself instantiates, patriotism for a particular nation state does not entail hatred of, or disdain for, other nations: it is perfectly possible for a true patriot to harbour deep feelings of affection for other countries. A patriotic American does not cease to be a patriotic American because he loves Spain or Denmark.

Unfortunately, a healthy patriotism seems to be denied to the most powerful nation of the European Union, namely Germany. The historical reasons for this are perfectly obvious, of course. But it is more difficult to rid oneself of pride than one might think: one can become proud of one's lack of pride.

When Mrs Merkel agreed to take more than a million migrants, it was easy in her gesture to see her desire to restore the moral reputation of her nation. A motive widely touted for her gesture, namely that with its ageing and declining population, Germany needed more young labour is absurd: there are millions of unemployed young Spaniards, Italians and Greeks on its doorstep, relatively-speaking, who could have been absorbed with much less difficulty.

The problem arises when Germany, newly-proud of its openness to refugees, tries to make other countries suffer the consequences of its policy, in the name of some kind of abstract principle. Thus other countries, such as Hungary, are to be bullied into taking refugees or face hostility and ostracism. No one, of course, asks the refugees themselves whether they *want* to be resettled in Hungary. They are abstractions in the European psychodrama, not people of flesh and blood, with desires and ambitions of their own.

The desire of the Germans to overcome or dissolve their German-ness in the tepid bath of European Union-ness is the consequence of a certain historiography, in which all of Germans history is but a run-up to Nazism: in other words that Nazism is immanent in the German soul, and the only way to control it is to tie it down as Gulliver was tied down in Lilliput. But this supposed need does not exist to anything like the same extent in other countries, which may nevertheless be constrained by German power, influence and financial might to follow suit. The key to contemporary Europe may perhaps be found in the character of Uriah Heep.

Britain has not yet achieved the levels of German prideful breast-beating, but it is fast catching up. Scruton is right to stress the importance of historiography in determining the political attitudes of the population. One way of explaining the difference between the way the generations voted in the recent referendum on Brexit is that the younger generation has been brought up on post-colonial guilt and absence of any

pride in national achievement other than that which was oppositional. For them, the nation state (in this case the British) brought nothing but oppression, misery and exploitation into the world, and therefore the dissolution of its power in a multinational union can be nothing but good. Even the Scottish, or the Scottish nationalists, manage to represent themselves as victims of the British Empire, analogously to the Austrians who represent themselves as victim of Nazism, when in fact they were disproportionate enthusiasts for it. Historiography thus becomes a historical force in itself, more easily for evil than for good; and a case might be made that it has disarmed the west in advance from the challenges it faces. If you are not aware of freedom as a rare achievement, you will not do much to defend it: a lacuna of which freedom's enemies are acutely aware.

While I am in broad agreement and sympathy with Scruton's outlook, which is that of a broad and tolerant patriotism, I am afraid I find him overoptimistic ([despite his recent book on the virtues of a rational pessimism](#)) about the current state of Britain. The fact is that its lamentable condition in many respects is self-inflicted, not inflicted by the European Union, and I see little evidence of much will to reverse the harmful policies so assiduously pursued over the last few decades by governments of various stripes, and which now serve so many vested interests.

Let me take a small problem, that of litter. Scruton says that the British are particularly attached to their gardens, which are themselves a reflection of their love for the countryside. This was once true, and is no doubt still true of much of the population. But in huge numbers of streets in Britain, gardens have been concreted over to accommodate cars, which are incomparably more important to them than flowers or grass, and which instantly transforms those streets from pleasant locations into slums. Moreover, anyone travelling through the British countryside would now conclude that the British regard

it not with love or veneration, but merely as a vast litter bin, into which they throw the wrappings of their vile and incontinent refreshments (they are, not coincidentally, the fattest people in Europe, as well as the most slovenly where litter is concerned).

As if this were not bad enough, there is no evidence that any attempt is being made to alter this situation. Local government believes it has more important things to do than keep roads and streets clean: not only does it have to use a growing proportion of its income to pay the unfunded pensions of past workers, but it has more important things to do such as develop anti-discrimination policies and rectify the natural consequences of the personal improvidence of so large a proportion of the population. Britain, in effect, is not a large garden, but a large trash can.

The corruption of its public administration is very great, not in the sense that officialdom takes bribes (that at least would be illegal and in principle preventable) but in the moral and intellectual sense: public employment is largely divorced from the production of any public good. Scruton correctly mentions the appallingly low educational level in Britain: 17 per cent of British children leave school barely able to read and write, though \$100,000 each has been spent on their education. How is such a miracle possible? It is not the European Union that has produced it.

As to the free-born Englishman, the person who is supposed to be viscerally and hereditarily attached to his freedom in a way that distinguishes him from his continental opposite number, thanks to the immemorial common-law tradition, he now conceives of it mostly as the freedom to be drunk in public, take whatever drugs he likes, and be sexually promiscuous, without the interference of others. The more intellectual portion of the population increasingly sees freedom as the right to suppress the opinions of those with whom they strongly disapprove. And the greatest freedom of all, the one

that is most ardently desired, is the freedom to be protected from the consequences of one's own improvidence and foolishness.

Britain's difficulties, then, are deep and cultural. Some of Scruton's proposed solutions would have to be carried out by the very cadre of people which has inflicted such terrible damage and which combines ideological malevolence with practical incompetence in everything except the acquisition of power. The exit from the EU offers us an opportunity to bethink ourselves, then, but I doubt that we shall take it. The first desirable step would be for everyone to read Scruton's book.

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