

How I Became a Conservative

In praise of beauty, order, history, and Edmund Burke

By Roger Scruton

I WAS BROUGHT UP at a time when half the English people voted Conservative and almost all English intellectuals regarded “conservative” as a term of abuse. To be a conservative was to be on the side of age against youth, the past against the future, authority against innovation, the “structures” against spontaneity and life. One had no choice, as a free-thinking intellectual, but 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? My contemporaries favored the second option, and it was when witnessing what this meant, in Paris in May 1968, that I discovered my vocation.

In the street below my window the students were shouting and smashing. The plate-glass windows of the shops appeared to shudder 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 lamp-posts were uprooted and piled to form a barricade against the next vanload of policemen.

The van came cautiously round the corner, jerked to a halt, and disgorged a score of frightened policemen. They were greeted by flying cobblestones and several of them fell. One rolled over on the ground clutching his face, from which the blood streamed through 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 cobbles as they went.

That evening a friend came round: she had been on the barricades and was very excited. 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 regime would be begging for mercy.

The Old Fascist was de Gaulle, whose *Mémoires de Guerre* I had been reading that day. The memoirs begin with a striking sentence—*Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France*. I had been equally struck by the description of the state funeral for Valéry—de Gaulle’s first public gesture on liberating Paris. The image of the cortège, as it made its way to 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 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.

Of course I was naïve—as naïve as my friend. But the ensuing argument is one to which I have often returned. 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 pompous, but for the first time in my life I felt a surge of political anger, finding myself on the other side of the barricades from the people I knew.

She replied with a book: Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses*, the bible of the *soixante-huitards*, the text that seemed to justify every 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. Its goal is subversion, and it argues that “truth” is tied to the form of consciousness imposed by the class that profits from its propagation. 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.

My friend is now a good bourgeoisie like the rest of them. The French intellectuals have turned their backs on 1968. Foucault is dead from AIDS. However, 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 as gospel to students who have

neither the culture nor the religion to resist. Only in France is he widely regarded as a charlatan.

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, the Neapolitan lady who served meals and cocked a snook at the lecturers by plastering her counter with kitschy photos of the pope.

My failure to conceal my conservative beliefs was both noticed and disapproved, and I began to think that I should look for another career.

I used my mornings to study for the bar. In fact I never practiced since I had a mortgage by then and could not afford the unpaid year of pupillage without which barristers cannot take cases of their own. I therefore received from my studies only an intellectual benefit—for which I have always been profoundly grateful. The common law of England is proof that there is a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate power, that power can exist without oppression, and that authority is a living force in human conduct.

Inspired by my new studies, I began to search for a conservative philosophy. American intellectual life benefits from 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 '70s 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.

The view has long prevailed in England that conservatism is no longer available as a social and political creed. Maybe, if you are a child of wealthy and settled parents, you might inherit conser-

vative beliefs. But you couldn't possibly acquire them by any process of rational enquiry. And yet there I was, fresh from the shock of 1968 with a fully articulated set of conservative beliefs. Where could I look for the people who shared them, for the thinkers who had spelled them out, for the social, economic, and political theory that would give them force and authority sufficient to argue 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.

Burke was of interest to me on account of the intellectual path that he had trodden. 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 learned as a teenager that aesthetic judgment matters, that it is not merely a subjective opinion. 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. Like Burke, therefore, I made the passage from aesthetics to conservative politics with no sense of intellectual incongruity, believing that I was in search of a lost experience of home. Underlying that sense of loss is the belief that what has been lost can also be recaptured—not necessarily as it was when it first slipped our grasp, but as it will be when consciously regained and remodeled to reward us for all the toil of

separation through which we are condemned by our original transgression.

Burke persuaded me that the utopian promises of socialism go hand in hand with a wholly abstract vision of the human mind. He persuaded me that societies are not and cannot be organized according to a plan, that there is no direction to history. 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 abstractly defined but also because collective reason doesn't work that way.

Three other arguments of Burke's made a comparable impression. The first was the defense of authority and obedience. 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—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 that makes it possible to govern them and without which societies crumble into "the dust and powder of individuality." 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. 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 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 nothing more than childish disobedience, amplified into anarchy.

The second argument of Burke's that impressed me was the subtle defense of tradition, prejudice, and custom. As a schoolboy I had been struck by Eliot's "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 made my love of the classics into a valid part of my psyche as a modern human being.

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Burke's defense of "prejudice"—the set of beliefs and ideas that arise instinctively and reflect the root experiences of social life—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 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 that justifies it as a prejudice, rather than as a rational conclusion.

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 contemporary Rousseauid ideas was to place the present members of society in a position of dominance over those who went before and

those who come after. These ideas led directly to the massive squandering of inherited resources at the Revolution and to the cultural and ecological vandalism that is the principal danger of modern politics.

In those deft, cool thoughts, Burke summarized my instinctive doubts about the cry for liberation, my hesitations about progress and about the unscrupulous belief in the future that has 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 nurture, a care for absent generations.

The graffiti paradoxes of 1968 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.

Most of my friends at the time were literary people with no interest in politics. Among the exceptions were two academics—John Casey and Maurice Cowling. I also had the good fortune to meet one or two Conservative politicians, the most notable and likeable of whom was Hugh Fraser. Thus was founded the Conservative Philosophy Group. John Casey and I were to search the intellectual world for conservatives; Hugh and Jonathan Aitken were to search the Conservative Party for members who could think.

None of us had much success. Nevertheless, the Conservative Philosophy Group existed for 20 or more years, addressed at first by some of the most serious postwar political thinkers—Hayek, Oakeshott, Friedman, and Elie Kedourie—but gradually succumbing to inanition as the Conservative Party drifted in the stagnant days of John

Major. Once or twice Mrs. Thatcher looked in—an unwelcome intrusion, since politicians lose all self-respect in the presence of their leader and seem quite unable to appreciate that the shabby academic who is speaking might have more to say. In any case, we had little influence on the high command of the party, and none whatsoever on the academic world. Our meetings were attended by backbenchers too sincere to expect promotion, dons too contrary to learn from others, and—that most creative and under-acknowledged segment of our intellectual heritage—drunken right-wing journalists.

After four years of the Conservative Philosophy Group, and by now a barrister, I applied to join the Conservative Party's list of candidates. A veteran Member of Parliament, Dame Something Something, who conformed exactly to the old image of the blue-rinse maiden aunt, demanded what I had done for the party.

I mentioned that I had founded the Conservative Philosophy Group. She made it clear that the conjunction of "conservative" and "philosophy" was so absurd that she could only doubt the existence of such an organization. She asked me whether I wrote in the press, and I replied that I had written book reviews for the *Spectator*, so confirming her suspicion that if my name ever did appear in newspapers it would be in the wrong parts of them. I added that I had also written a book.

"A book? On what subject?"

I hesitated. "Aesthetics."

Her stare became suddenly vacant. She closed the file containing my application and turned to her colleague, a young MP.

"I suppose he could apply for this new European Parliament thing, could he?"

I indicated that I did not believe in parliaments where there was no national loyalty. She laughed at the

quaintness of my words—the first sign that laughter lay within her behavioral repertoire. And then, after brief handshakes, I was dismissed.

I ceased to be an intellectual Conservative and became a conservative intellectual instead. This was an even worse idea. Vociferous conservatives are accepted in politics but not in the intellectual world. I should have learned from Spinoza, who refused to publish his *Ethics*, and who chose for his device the single word *caute*—“be cautious”—inscribed beneath a rose, the symbol of secrecy. Instead I decided to go public, with *The Meaning of Conservatism*. My credentials as an anachronism were

CONSERVATISM IS A POLITICAL PRACTICE, THE LEGACY OF A LONG TRADITION OF PRAGMATIC DECISION-MAKING AND HIGH-TONED CONTEMPT FOR HUMAN FOLLY.

thereby established, and when the Salisbury Group, a loose collection of reactionaries founded in memory of the great third Marquess of Salisbury, decided to found a journal, they alighted on me.

The first difficulty was that of finding people to write. I had friends in the academic world who were prepared in private to confess to conservative sympathies, but they were acutely aware of the risks attached to “coming out.”

The second difficulty was establishing a readership. To pay for itself, *The Salisbury Review* would require 600 subscribers or more. I was confident that there were at least 600 intellectual conservatives in Britain. The problem was finding them.

The third difficulty was that of conservatism itself. I was told by Maurice Cowling that I was deceiving myself if I thought that conservative politics could be given a philosophical backing sufficient to put it on a par with socialism, liberalism, nationalism, and all the other -isms that conservatism isn't. Conser-

vatism, Maurice told me, is a political practice, the legacy of a long tradition of pragmatic decision-making and high-toned contempt for human folly. To try to encapsulate it in a philosophy was the kind of naïve project that Americans might undertake.

One of our earliest contributors was Ray Honeyford, the Bradford headmaster who argued for a policy of integration in our schools as the only way of averting ethnic conflict. Honeyford was branded a racist, horribly pilloried, and eventually sacked for saying what everyone now admits to be true. This episode was our first great success, and led to the 600 subscriptions that we needed.

It was not only the issues of ethnic relations and national identity that provoked the British intellectual establishment. *The Salisbury Review* was belligerently anti-communist, it was explicitly critical of feminism, modernism, post-modernism, and deconstruction. Above all, it was anti-egalitarian, defending achievement against mediocrity, virtue against vice. Although all those positions are now widely accepted, we had the good fortune to express them at a time when each was actively censored by some group of sanctimonious halfwits. Hence we survived.

Still, there was a price to pay. It became a matter of honor among intellectuals to disassociate themselves from me, to write, if possible, damning and contemptuous reviews of my books, and to block my chances of promotion.

In time I came to see that they were right. Someone who believes in real distinctions between people has no place in a humanities department, the main purpose of which is to deliver the ideology

required by life in the postmodern world. What the *soixante-huitards* hoped to achieve by violence has been accomplished far more effectively by the peaceful self-censorship natural to the academic mind. Perceiving the rightness and necessity of this, I left the university and took up farming.

Nevertheless I remain what I have been since May 1968—a conservative intellectual who not only loves the high culture of Europe but believes it to be the repository of what we Europeans should know. It is, to put it bluntly, our best hope for the past. Such a hope animated de Gaulle; it enabled him to save his country not once but twice. And, by deflecting us from our self-centered projects, it offers a guarantee of national survival.

The years of conflict have taught me that few share my convictions and that all attempts to conserve things come too late. But the philosopher who most clearly perceived this truth brought a message of peace: “when philosophy paints its grey-in-grey, then is a form of life grown old. The Owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the gathering of the dusk.” Hegel's words describe not the view from that attic window in the Quartier Latin, but the soul that absorbed it. It was not to change things, or to be part of things, or to be swept along by things, that I made my pilgrimage to Paris. It was to observe, to know, to understand. And so I acquired the consciousness of death and dying, without which the world cannot be loved for what it is. That, in essence, is what it means to be a conservative. ■

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Selling Out - \$1.3 Trillion of American Companies Sold to Foreign Corps

The following staggering amount of our wealth producing companies has been sold to foreign owners in the 10 years from 1995 through 2005. Below is a partial list of the 8,600 U.S. companies sold.

It is critical to understand that even if these are not all familiar corporate names, they are all very valuable strategic companies with vast amounts of technology, assets, production facilities, tax base, and employment attached to each one. In fact, many of the smallest, most unfamiliar acquisitions represent some of the most significant strategic and proprietary technology losses to this country. Many of these companies took decades, and in some cases generations, to build to their size and scope prior to acquisition. Not only does the US lose control of the assets and technologies of these companies as of the date they were acquired, the US also loses all future profit and title to all future advancements of these companies.

These companies were the means through which America created much of its present wealth. With the loss of these companies and having no comparable replacement, it's easy to see that our future will not be as good as our past, especially since the countries that acquired these companies are now able to compete with us in almost all industries. Why are we doing this? Don't we have alternatives? Who is responsible, demand answers from your congressperson.

The following table lists only a few of the 8,600 foreign acquisitions during this period. The \$1.3 Trillion figure and complete list can be verified at the US Bureau of Economic Analysis.

FORMER AMERICAN CORP	NEW FOREIGN OWNER	PURCHASING COUNTRY	AMOUNT PAID
Amoco Corp	British Petroleum Co	United Kingdom	\$48.174 Billion
Arco	BP Amoco	United Kingdom	\$27.224 Billion
AirTouch Communications	Vodafone Group	United Kingdom	\$60.287 Billion
VoiceStream Wireless	Deutsche Telekom AG	Germany	\$29.404 Billion
Chrysler Corp	Daimler-Benz AG	Germany	\$40.466 Billion
Simon & Schuster	Pearson PLC	United Kingdom	\$4.600 Billion
Household International	HSBC Holdings	United Kingdom	\$15.294 Billion
CIT Group Inc	Tyco International Ltd	Bermuda	\$9.341 Billion
PacifiCorp	Scottish Power PLC	United Kingdom	\$12.600 Billion
Niagara Mohawk Holdings	National Grid Group PLC	United Kingdom	\$8.048 Billion
Ernst & Young	Cap Gemini SA	France	\$11.774 Billion
MCI Communications	Cable & Wireless PLC	United Kingdom	\$1.750 Billion
Knight-Ridder Information	MAID PLC	United Kingdom	\$0.420 Billion
MCA Inc	Matsushita Electric	Japan	\$7.406 Billion
Columbia Pictures	Sony USA Inc	Japan	\$4.792 Billion
MGM/UA Communications	Pathe Communications	Luxembourg	\$1.709 Billion
Firestone Tire & Rubber	Bridgestone Corp	Japan	\$2.533 Billion
Uniroyal Goodrich Tire Co	Michelin SA	France	\$1.500 Billion
Miller Brewing	South African Breweries	United Kingdom	\$5.574 Billion
International Steel Group	Ispat International	Netherlands	\$3.813 Billion
PaineWebber Group Inc	UBS AG	Switzerland	\$12.243 Billion
Aetna-Financial Services	ING Group NV	Netherlands	\$4.933 Billion
PIMCO Advisor Holdings	Allianz AG	Germany	\$1.930 Billion
Bankers Trust New York	Deutsche Bank AG	Germany	\$8.082 Billion
SmithKline Beckman Corp	Beecham Group PLC	United Kingdom	\$7.922 Billion
Chiron Diagnostics Corp	Bayer AG	Germany	\$1.100 Billion
IBM Corp - Hard Disk Drive	Hitachi Ltd	Japan	\$2.050 Billion
IBM Personal Computers	Lenovo	Hong Kong	\$1.751 Billion
Houghton Mifflin Co	Vivendi Universal	France	\$2.272 Billion
Random House Inc	Bertelsmann AG	Germany	\$1.300 Billion
Doubleday Publishing	Bertelsmann AG	Germany	\$0.500 Billion
John Hancock Financial	Manulife Financial	Canada	\$11.063 Billion
TransAmerica Corp	Aegon NV	Netherlands	\$9.691 Billion
United Defense Industries	BAE Systems	United Kingdom	\$4.199 Billion

To view additional companies sold go to www.EconomyInCrisis.org.

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[North Country]

A Woman's Place Is in the Mine

By Steve Sailer

FOR YEARS AFTER the Anita Hill brouhaha of 1991, the American news media obsessed over her sexually harassed sistren. Remember how shocked the press was when it discovered that Navy fighter jocks celebrating the Desert Storm victory at their 1991 Tailhook convention in a Las Vegas hotel did not behave like officers and gentlemen?

The press declared 1992 the Year of the Woman, and Bill and Hillary Clinton rode feminist outrage into the White House ... which posed a sticky problem. Governor Clinton had made uncounted sexual advances toward his state employees, and the laws of probability suggested that at least a few of them were unwanted and thus legally actionable. In December 1992, I wrote an article (which nobody would publish) forecasting, "Some enterprising reporter is going to think it worth his while to go Pulitzer hunting among the secretarial pools and law offices of Little Rock," and the revelations could threaten the Clinton presidency.

Indeed, David Brock's investigative reporting led to Paula Jones's sexual-harassment lawsuit—which Clinton eventually settled for \$850,000—in which Clinton perjured himself over Monica Lewinsky, causing his impeachment.

You might assume that the sexual-harassment issue died of hypocrisy in

1998 when feminists stood by the wounded Clinton, but the Left's long march through the institutions is immune to shame. The media is perhaps the key institution—because, as Orwell noted in 1984, "Who controls the past," ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.'"

So now we have "North Country," a thoroughly fictionalized retelling of the landmark *Jenson v. Eveleth* sexual-harassment case. Charlize Theron, the 2003 Best Actress winner for "Monster," stars as a gorgeous miner who learns that the men who labor in the open pits of the Mesabi Iron Range are crude. Ultimately, she wins a "hostile environment" lawsuit against the mine.

Unlike in "Monster," where Charlize famously had her lovely complexion artificially weathered, here she looks like what she is, a former model posing amidst vast heaps of rubble. (Charlize recently attributed her beauty to thinking nice thoughts, burbling to Oprah, "I really believe that we look physically the way we do because of the emotional impact that we've made on our bodies during our life." Well, sure ...)

Still, Charlize's face is bland, distinguishable from all the gaunt blondes in Hollywood only by a layer of adorable baby fat.

Her "North Country" heroine is equally dull. Feminist victimism has rendered actresses' roles more two-dimensional—notice how few *femme fatale* characters there are anymore?—denying them any less-than-saintly motivations while insisting, stupidly, that they compete with men in physical strength.

Still, "North Country" works fairly well until the cliché-addled courtroom climax. The supporting cast—Sean Bean, Sissy Spacek as the iron miner's mother, and Richard Jenkins as Charlize's long-suffering miner father—is

strong. As Charlize's best friend, the always terrific Frances McDormand dusts off the Northern Plains accent that won her an Oscar as the pregnant sheriff in "Fargo," but McDormand's mastery just highlights how vague Charlize's attempted accent is.

Strikingly, even an agitprop film like "North Country" is more informative about sexual harassment cases than most journalism has been. Screenwriters need dramatic conflict, so "North Country" explores the clashing interests of women, while the press coverage mostly bought into the fiction of female solidarity against men. Perhaps the best scene comes when the homemaker wife of Charlize's abusive boss screams at her to keep her hands off her husband at work.

Moreover, reporters took their storylines straight from the plaintiff attorney's press releases and thus ignored—because contingency fee lawyers focus upon the deeper-pocketed defendants—that the union is often more culpable than the corporation.

In contrast, "North Country" makes clear that the union members were more upset than the mine's owner by women entering the workforce. Well-paid industrial unions disliked admitting women members because doubling the potential supply of labor made high wages harder to sustain. Moreover, management finds it easier to browbeat women into believing they don't deserve a raise, and their presence undermines the fraternal solidarity needed for successful strikes.

It's no coincidence that industrial unions became moribund during the feminist era when the government forced heavy industry to hire women. With only 7.9 percent of private-sector workers unionized today, this latest denigration of organized labor seems like overkill. ■

Rated R for much vulgar abuse.