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## Conservatism and Conservation

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**How to Think Seriously about the Planet: The Case for an Environmental Conservatism**, by Roger Scruton. *New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 464 pp. \$29.95.*

The British philosopher Roger Scruton has emerged as one of a rare breed today: the prominent public intellectual who writes on matters of broad interest in ways that, while accessible to nonspecialists, are sophisticated and truly intelligent, and who is not bound to some shallow partisan agenda. In *How to Think Seriously about the Planet* Scruton seeks in part to re-establish, or to remind us of, the close relationship between conservatism and concern for the environment. He also argues that the only really sound and successful environmentalism is a conservative environmentalism, and describes such an approach. In the process, he offers a broadly Burkean understanding of what conservatism is.

Scruton explains: "My intention

in this book has been to argue the case for an approach to environmental problems in which local affections are made central to policy, and in which homeostasis and resilience, rather than social reordering and central control, are the primary outcomes" (325). Many of the ideas which appear in *How to Think Seriously* are drawn from prior works by Scruton, but they are here organized around, and applied to, the practical problems of the environment and environmentalism. The environment and environmentalism are in fact two distinct—though of course intimately related—problems. Scruton argues that environmentalism as it has been typically exhibited by the left is generally not good for society, and often not even good for the environment. Yet legitimate conservative aversion to such environmentalism has contributed to a tendency of many self-identified conservatives to

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ignore, reject, or simply not involve themselves in real environmental concerns, ceding this policy area to the left. The book attempts both to address what is wrong with typical left-leaning ways of approaching environmental issues today and to offer alternative ways of thinking about, and caring for, the environment that should be embraced by conservatives.

While large-scale efforts are sometimes needed to address environmental concerns, environmentalism has become too much associated with bureaucratic centralization. Scruton offers numerous examples of how political and economic centralization and socialism have been environmental nightmares. It has long been recognized that a central problem in addressing environmental concerns is that of externalities; polluters are essentially evading costs which are borne by others in the form of environmental degradation. For Scruton an important conservative ethic underlying pollution-fighting efforts is therefore that of responsibility. One might think that a socialized state, in which there are no large private polluters because industries are owned by the government, would solve the problem. But, of course, given the limitations of human nature this actually amplifies the difficulty: "Public bodies are able to externalize their costs in a way that private bodies seldom manage. . . ." (95). Governments can police private polluters much more effectively than they can police themselves; inevitably, officials take advantage of their pow-

ers to sacrifice the environment for short-term gains. The examples offered by Scruton are drawn not only from the most heavily socialized states, such as the old Soviet Union and its satellites, but from Western Europe as well. And, more broadly, Scruton shows how regulations aimed at reducing risk often actually increase risk and reduce safety.

Scruton argues: "When it comes to environmental policy . . . the worst thing that can happen is that the left-wing movements and their mobilized spokesmen should prevail. The best thing is that ordinary people, motivated by old-fashioned oikophilia, should volunteer to localize the problem, and then try to solve it. If they are losing the habit of doing this, it is in part because governments, responding to pressure groups and activists, have progressively confiscated the duties of the citizens, and poured them down the drain of regulation" (251-52). Scruton's concepts of oikophobia and oikophilia, which have entered the conservative lexicon, play a prominent role in his analysis. Oikophilia is love and affection for home, for that which is ours and which we partake of with others, and from which we spring; oikophobia is its opposite. Scruton sees kinship between oikophobia and adolescent rebellion, and sees this essentially psychological phenomenon as a driver of a great deal of activity on the left, including rejection of tradition, efforts at social engineering, and affinity for remote but intrusive government.

For Scruton, it is in part because

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of the rise of oikophobia that the locus of environmentalism has shifted away from local communities to remote centralized bureaucracies, international bodies, and NGOs. Anthropogenic global warming or climate change has become the almost-exclusive focus of the environmental movement in part because it seems to demand action at these levels. And, more broadly, old antagonisms between 'left' and 'right' which once centered on economic issues and poverty have been transferred to the environmental realm: "Egalitarians, who might once have blamed unbridled capitalism for the inequalities of the industrial society, now blame unbridled capitalism for the unjust appropriation of the earth . . ." (75). Global, catastrophic environmental issues perfectly fit the "salvationist" tendencies of the left (81), and anti-global warming proposals, including those considered by the U.S. government, "emanate a sense of dream-like unreality" in their impracticality (58). In Scruton's discussion one may hear echoes of Eric Voegelin's concept of modern Gnosticism and Irving Babbitt's concept of the Rousseauesque romantic imagination, though neither thinker is cited. At any rate, there is clearly much more going on in contemporary environmentalism than concern for the environment *per se*.

Scruton emphasizes instead an oikophilic environmentalism, primarily local in nature, though sometimes centered on the nation-state. He offers numerous examples of how citi-

zens have come together to address local environmental issues; such environmentalism is not just good for the environment, but may be good for communities, society, and people. His discussion takes in not just the natural environment but the built, human environment as well, displaying an affinity for the New Urbanism and deploring much about modern building and development, including, notably, their impermanence, which contributes to the rootlessness and alienation of contemporary man. For Scruton, aesthetics—the appreciation of beauty—inspires a kind of reverence and piety which is a key driver of environmental protection. Invoking Burke, he also finds that love for our heritage contributes to "the transgenerational view of society that is the best guarantee that we will moderate our present appetites in the interests of those who are yet to be" (216). Effective environmentalism is inherently conservative in its nature and in its inspiration.

While preparing this essay, this reviewer read in a local New Jersey newspaper of a current environmental conflict that highlights much that Scruton discusses. A hastily formed grassroots citizens group, the Burnt Hills Preservation Alliance, is battling a plan to completely develop a 53-acre patch of long-fallow, naturalized, formerly protected farmland within a suburban area. The well-funded, remote, multinational behemoth they are fighting is the Sierra Club, which seeks to put a solar power plant on the property. Having used its political clout to secure

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privileges for such projects, which override existing protections of open land, it has initiated solar plants across the crowded state against the wishes of local communities. While members of the Alliance cite the rich animal habitat the land has become, it is evident that they are primarily motivated by aesthetic and, one could say, “humanistic” concerns; they like having this natural area in their community and draw psychic benefits from it. From the Sierra Club’s perspective such interests are selfish—such grassroots groups are NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) organizations standing in the way of the environmentalists’ new global agenda of reducing carbon emissions. To concede that some land, by virtue of its location, may be more valuable to people if left in a natural or agricultural state might jeopardize the entire national and global project. Ironically, the Sierra Club’s origins can be traced to largely aesthetic, humanistic, local concerns not unlike those that it now, as a far-flung but centralized organization, rejects. It is true that John Muir’s “backyard”—part of which became Yosemite National Park—is of far greater national and global value than a patch of scrubby pineland in a New Jersey suburb, but the old farm is of significant *local* value, and this should matter.

It is important to note that *How to Think Seriously* does not merely cheer conservatives and bash the left. Scruton notes the alienating nature of the contemporary world, and holds “conservatives” partly respon-

sible: “If the addictive [technological] culture seems to be so resistant to opposition, this is partly because of the reluctance of conservatives to condemn it—seeing consumerism and technophilia as integral to the ‘market solutions’ that must be protected from the socialist state. In fact, it is precisely in the fight against consumerism that left and right should be united, establishing an alliance on behalf of the environment that would also heal the rift in our civilization” (246). While there are in fact many conservatives who share Scruton’s view, he is correct that many self-identified “conservatives,” sensing the socialistic and freedom-reducing effects of many policies advanced by environmentalists and others on the left, assume a knee-jerk stance in defense of whatever order and culture and built world happens to arise. But, as Wilhelm Röpke (not cited by Scruton) noted, there is no such thing as “the” free market; markets are unique and exist within particular legal and social frameworks. Stifling bureaucratic centralization is not necessarily the only alternative to undesirable ‘market’-driven situations. Scruton is correct that a great deal is wrong with our consumerist “technophile” society; major cultural change is needed, not just to protect the environment but to save our civilization and promote human flourishing within it, and conservatives must be at the forefront of that change.

While there is much to commend about *How to Think Seriously*, the book also has its weaknesses or

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quirks. For one, Scruton sometimes equates “local” and “national,” declaring that “local loyalty” should often take the form of the nation-state (20-21). To Americans, using “local” and “national” interchangeably seems absurd; to Europeans it is less so, both because of the more compact nature of European states and because of the tendency to consider them as parts of a greater European entity. (Indeed, at times Scruton seems less driven by environmental concerns than by concerns about the relationships of nation-states to international bodies, and particularly the relationship of European states—and very particularly of the U.K.—to the E.U.) Still, the “local” and the “national” are distinctly different and should not be conflated. Few would deny that all problems cannot be addressed on a purely local level, and Scruton offers good arguments why activity at the nation-state level (among people bound by a particular culture, politics, and “love of territory”) is usually preferable to activity by international bodies and NGOs. But his best defenses and examples of the “local” are of the truly local, and while Scruton prefers the truly local to the national where workable, his arguments centered on the local too easily double as unexamined defenses of the national.

Another weakness or quirk is the book’s last chapter, “Modest Proposals” (not all of which are so modest). Scruton offers a few good suggestions in keeping with the rest of the book, such as noting the need to amend regulations which have

helped to destroy local food economies in North America and Europe and which are hampering their return despite the desires and efforts of consumers and small producers. But most of the chapter focuses on ways to reduce global carbon output (which Scruton suddenly appears to accept unquestioningly as a top priority, after having earlier treated it skeptically), and tends to consist of largely top-down, partly international public policy proposals mixed with Jimmy Carter-like exhortations to turn down our thermostats. It is a jarring shift from the rest of the book, not just because Scruton has moved beyond his expertise or because complex technical issues cannot be properly treated so briefly. One may see it as a symptom of the broader problem of demands for “solutions.” On the one hand, it is far easier to bemoan problems than to solve them, so publishers, sponsors, reviewers, and readers are right to press writers to offer paths to addressing the problems they highlight. On the other hand, the sorts of solutions which are typically desired are quick-fixes. Scruton’s book is mostly about the cultural and systemic dimensions of addressing environmental problems effectively, which is the opposite of the quick-fix.

What’s happening here may be compared to the disconnect between a traditional conservative worldview and “conservative politics” as it is commonly manifested in the U.S. When politicians, even of a somewhat conservative bent, are elected to office, they are exhorted by voters

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to “do something” about the concerns of the day. What may really be needed are cultural shifts and fundamental changes in thinking, but these are somewhat amorphous, and are certainly not easily ordered-up. So the politicians instead take stabs at problems through new laws and government programs which may not be very effective, and which, even when they aim to achieve nominally “conservative” ends, may by their very nature not actually be very conservative, particularly in their long-term effects.

While the above two weaknesses or quirks may be overlooked, the third and last is more troubling. It begins with distinctions Scruton draws between Europe and the U.S., and between conservatism in Europe and the U.S. Scruton tells us that “American conservatives have something important to learn” because “conservatism” in the U.S. consists almost exclusively of the sort of thought associated with Milton Friedman (13). He notes that “conservatives in America emphasize economic freedoms, and associate this emphasis with a rugged individualism and a belief in the virtues of risk-taking and enterprise. Conservatives in Europe have favoured tradition, custom and civil society, emphasizing the need to contain enterprise within a durable social order” (12). Scruton’s distinction is rooted in some truth, but the generalization is overbroad and seems particularly problematic coming from a Brit, given that, at the popular level, Britain’s Conservative Party has at times been even more

closely and exclusively associated with free markets, privatization, and individualism than has been either the Republican Party or the popular conservative movement in the U.S. In-your-face counter-examples, such as Rod Dreher’s popular book *Crunchy Cons* and a great deal of current activity on the Internet, must be ignored in order to sustain the sweeping generalization Scruton makes.

More disturbing is that Scruton’s blanket characterization applies not just to popular conservatism but to more intellectual forms of conservative thought, and he sustains his generalization here the same way. Readers of this journal know that a vibrant and extensive tradition of conservative thought exists in the U.S. which aligns closely with the perspective articulated by Scruton. This notable body of broadly Burkean thought, today sometimes called “traditional conservatism” and typically acknowledging Irving Babbitt and Russell Kirk as prominent twentieth-century articulators, is entirely ignored by Scruton. The one possible exception is a brief mention of Wendell Berry, though the mention is far too brief for a book on environmental conservatism, and Berry is not known primarily as a theorist. There are so many conservative thinkers, of both the recent past and present, who could have been referenced and drawn upon but are not. For example, Scruton cites Robert Putnam’s largely statistical *Bowling Alone* (365) but makes no mention of Robert Nisbet’s iconic

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*The Quest for Community*, a far more substantive and sophisticated book, and one (unlike *Bowling Alone*) widely seen as important in American traditional conservatism. This is the case even though passages in *How to Think Seriously* essentially recapitulate some of Nisbet's work.

*How to Think Seriously about the Planet*, though intellectually solid and sophisticated, is not intended to be a strictly scholarly or academic book; it is a popular-intellectual work aimed at the broader, thinking public. Its most important contribution may not be in the area of environmentalism at all, but in educating readers about a form of conservatism that is different from, and deeper than, that which they may have encountered in newspa-

per columns, political speeches, or cable TV shows, and which may offer much more promise in addressing what ails us. A book like this should help open the reader's door to the wealth of writings and organizations that exist to develop and promulgate like-minded perspectives. Unfortunately, by casting his thought as unique and essentially telling the reader that related conservative thought does not exist in the U.S., Scruton shuts the door instead. Consequently the book's positive impact may not be all that it could have been. Nevertheless, it performs an important service, and may help us move both to more sound and effective environmentalism and to the prominence of more sound and effective conservatism.