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ROGER SCRUTON

Global Democracy?

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Global Democracy?

Dr. Roger Scruton is Research Professor for the Institute for the Psychological Sciences, in Arlington, Virginia, the United States of America, where he teaches philosophy at their graduate school in both Washington and Oxford. He is a writer, philosopher and public commentator. He has specialised in aesthetics with particular attention to music and architecture.



Philosopher Roger Scruton (right) and Marco Respinti, president of the Columbia Institute, in Abadía de la Santa Cruz del Valle de los Caídos, San Lorenzo de El Escorial (Madrid), Spain, July 2008

He engages in contemporary political and cultural debates from the standpoint of a conservative thinker and is well known as a powerful

polemicist. He has written widely in the press on political and cultural issues. Scruton's most recent books are England: an Elegy (London: Continuum, Books, 2000), an attempt to give identity to the idea of England and a tribute to its values and institutions; News from Somewhere: On Settling (Continuum Books, 2003), an evocative account of the author's attempt to put down roots in rural Wiltshire; A Political Philosophy

(Continuum Books, 2006), *The West and the Rest* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2001), *an analysis of the values held by the ‘West’ and how they are distinct from those held by other cultures*, and *Culture Counts: Faith and Healing in a World besieged* (New York: Encounter Books 2007) and a third edition of *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Notable is his “trilogy” on various aspects of the unbought grace of life published in 2010, *Music: Philosophy and Interpretation* (Continuum Books), *Beauty* (Oxford University Press), and *I Drink Therefore I am* and (Continuum Books).

Dr. Roger Scruton serves in the Board of Advisors of the Columbia Institute.



The present text is the original English version of the speech delivered on October 15, 2010, in Rome, Italy, by Dr. Roger Scruton. The speech Global Democracy? was in fact read by Dr. Scruton in an Italian translation, entitled Una democrazia globale? Dr. Scruton spoke at the Italian House of Representatives, Palazzo Montecitorio, Sala della Lupa, during the second edition of the international conference Il volume della democrazia. Giornate del libro politico a Montecitorio.



Global Democracy?

We Europeans esteem democracy because it gives us control over our government. We envisage few political evils worse than that of a government that controls us, but which we cannot control. However, most laws imposed upon the European people are now drafted by bureaucrats who were never elected and who need not account for their mistakes. Some of the most important decisions affecting our lives are taken by the European Court of Human Rights, composed of unelected judges, many from countries with no enduring experience of the rule of law. You in Italy have recently had experience of this, with a ruling that crucifixes should be removed from your classrooms, as an offense against human rights. Most of us, confronting the irreversible

‘directives’ that issue in their thousands from the Commission, and the ideologically motivated ‘judgments’ of the European Court of Human Rights, see these things as a threat to democracy. But there seems to be no way of reforming those institutions that will escape the problem. Without anyone intending it, we Europeans have arrived at a situation in which most of our laws are imposed on us by people who were never elected and who do not bear the cost of their mistakes.

Some people are prepared to live with the problem, believing that the benefits of the European Union outweigh the costs. Others – and especially the ‘Eurosceptics’ in my country – believe that the costs outweigh the benefits. For them, this confiscation of decision-making by unelected elites is a fatal flaw in the European project. Whichever view we take it is surely evident that the movement towards global governance is a movement *away* from democracy. We may believe that globalisation is inevitable. But we may also believe that it should not extend to the realm of government. For the true democrat globalisation is something to be *countered* by politics, not something to be absorbed by it.

Imagine a village that trades with its neighbours, with which it lives on peaceful terms. All decisions that affect the village as a whole are taken by an elected council. And this council in turn sends a representative to the central government, to argue the interests of the village in a national assembly. That process, history tells us, is the best that we can achieve by way of democracy. We can envisage more layers of representation between the village and the government: representation at the level of county, region, canton or whatever. But the principle is clear: democracy means control from the bottom, in which the people decide.

But now suppose that there is a movement for political reform, which tells us that the village is too small a unit to take the decisions that are necessary for the common good. The village must be considered, for electoral purposes, as part of the large town ten kilometres away. The arguments for this are easy to imagine: trade relations, mutual interests and the demands of neighbourliness are all jeopardised by the autonomy of the village. For example, a road is needed to by-pass the town, which has become too congested with traffic. But the only route for it goes next to the village, so destroying the tranquillity that the villagers had previously enjoyed. Naturally the village will vote to oppose the road, and it will not be built. If

the village is incorporated into the town, however, the votes of the villagers are outweighed by those of the town-residents, and the road will be built.

This gain in the scope of government has been purchased by the loss of village democracy. And it illustrates a general principal: the larger the scope of government, the less control to people have over their immediate environment.

This is illustrated very clearly in matters of planning and infrastructure. The Swiss villages have retained many of the democratic rights that have elsewhere been confiscated by central government. As a result it has proved impossible to built large motorways across many of the Alpine passes, since local people vote constantly against them. Traffic in rural Switzerland is notably slower than elsewhere, and village boundaries notably clearer and crisper. In France motorways are ordained by the government, the land is acquired by decree, and nobody other than the National Assembly has much of a say in the matter. As a result traffic moves rapidly in France, the national economy benefits, and life beside the motorway is Hell. Is France more democratic than Switzerland or less so? Some would say that the power of the Swiss villages and cantons impedes projects that would be good for the country as a whole, and therefore goes against the wishes of the

majority. In France, by contrast, the ability of central government to override local interests means that the common good can be promoted in the face of local selfishness, and the majority has a greater part in the decisions that affect them. Others would say that this confiscation of decision-making powers from local communities, and their exercise by central government, means a *loss* of democracy, since it means that decisions are no longer taken by those who are most immediately affected by them, and that the voice of real human communities is seldom heard. Which interpretation do we take?

When a group of nation-states join together to establish a Union with legislative powers, each of them loses the right to make decisions concerning matters of national concern, in exchange for a voice in decisions that affect the group as a whole. When, and in connection with what, is this justified? A treaty between neighbouring states to defend each other's territory from external attack is a straightforward contract. Neither party loses more than it gains, and each retains sovereign control over internal affairs. Such a contract for mutual defence involves no real surrender of sovereignty and is itself subject to democratic control. The people of each state can vote to rescind the deal at any time. Bilateral treaties have therefore seldom been seen as threats to democracy: on the contrary, they have been

regarded as a natural outcome of the democratic process, whereby people confer on their governments the freedom and the duty to act on their behalf.

Multilateral treaties may offer no threat either to the sovereignty of nation states, or to the democratic process. Even when such treaties establish bureaucratic institutions devoted to the shared agenda – as with NATO, for example – they are not a threat to democracy, so long as they do not go beyond the purpose for which they were signed. The signatories retain sovereignty in all matters, including those governed by the treaty. Although they have obligations under the treaty, these arise only under specified circumstances, and are freely accepted by the national legislature as the price to be paid for the benefits. Multilateral treaties are a way of managing globalisation. As the nation states become subject to more and more external pressures, they can unite to establish the treaties and procedures necessary to resist those pressures: treaties to protect their shared environment, shared natural resources (such as fish and water), and shared security concerns. The important point here is that a treaty, like any contract, confers a veto power on its individual signatories. If the terms are not upheld, by one member, others are free to withdraw, and the treaty is at an end.

In that way treaties can be used to control globalisation, and to subject it to the discipline of democracy, just as the political process in Switzerland is subjected to the discipline of local democracy, through requiring the consent of local communities for the decisions that affect them. But not all treaties have the character of contracts. Since the end of the Second World War a new kind of Treaty has become common – one in which the parties agree to renounce their decision-making capacity in the areas covered by the treaty, and to transfer it to bodies that their national electorates cannot control. The European Union is a paradigm case of this. Like the International Criminal Court, the World Trade Organisation and the European Court of Human Rights, the EU is a *form* of globalisation, and not a way of resisting it. Although established by treaty these institutions confiscate the legislative powers of their members, and impose laws and regulations on the nation states that their people would never vote for, but which they are prevented from rejecting.

Consider the freedom of movement provisions under the Treaty of Rome. This gives the right to EU citizens to move to any place in the Union in search of work and to settle wherever that work is provided. When the original Treaty of Rome was signed there was rough parity of income and

employment among the nations involved, and no-one envisaged that the result would be mass migrations from one end of the continent to the other. Had the people of Italy been consulted in the matter, they would certainly have voted either to amend the Treaty so as not to include the Freedom of Movement clause, or not to extend membership of the EU to Romania. But the people were not consulted. Hence Italians are compelled to accept the immigration of people from Romania regardless of the fact that most of them are deeply opposed to this. I don't say that the Italian people are right in this. But that is what they feel. And they also believe that it is their democratic right, through their political representatives, to impose controls on immigration: after all it is *their country*. This right has been confiscated. In whatever way they vote at an election, the Italian people can do nothing to reclaim their country for themselves.

That is one example of a grievance that is experienced all across the Western and Northern states of the Union. We have lost control of our borders, and there is no way in which we can reassert that control, compatible with membership of the EU. Moreover, there is no way in which the EU institutions can be amended to take account of this. Provisions incorporated into a Treaty are not like ordinary laws: they cannot be corrected by

Parliament, and are, once in place, effectively irreversible – or reversible only by rejecting the Treaty and all the superstructure of institutions and procedures that have been built on it.

No political party has the courage to do that, since the consequences are incalculable.

Now those who devised the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties were aware that the EU has been losing credibility with the people of Europe. But they were members of a new political class, transnational in its loyalties, well rewarded in its professional life, and dependent upon the European machine for its privileges. This political class is part of the global economy. It relates more easily to multinational business than to local communities. It deals openly with the elites of other places and it fulfils the artificial offices that it has created within the EU without friction. A typical member of this class is our new foreign minister, Baroness Ashford. None of us in Britain knew who she was when her appointment was announced. She has never stood for election to any of the offices that she has occupied, has risen through the Labour Party and its network of NGOs to the House of Lords without once attracting attention to herself, and has been appointed as our representative in foreign affairs without anyone in my country having any say in the matter

other than her fellow members of the new political class. This political class is far more interesting to multinational business than the ordinary people, since it controls a legislative machine that by-passes the people. By lobbying through the bureaucracies of Brussels the big businesses of the world can change the laws of any nation state in their favour.

As members of this political class those who draft the EU treaties are naturally eager to safeguard their position. Much effort has been devoted to creating a kind of ‘pretend democracy’ in which a Potemkin Parliament pretends to examine legislation and pretends to exercise a veto over it, but in which no nation within the Union can in fact assert any veto power. The Treaties reassure us that a principle of ‘subsidiarity’ obtains, according to which decisions must always be taken at the lowest possible level – but they also imply that it is the EU and its Commission that decides what level that is. Hence subsidiarity is simply another name for the top-down control that has confiscated our national legislative powers, and allows us to exercise them only when unelected officials allow us to do so.

What we see in the EU, and also in the new forms of International Court and law-giving agencies like the WTO and the UN subsidiaries, is a

globalisation of politics. Instead of defending national sovereignty from global invasion, the political process now advocates global invasion against the nation state.

Why not? You ask. What is so bad about that? If we live in a global society, don't we need a global government to solve our shared problems?

The problem with that approach is that it ignores the fact on which all democracies depend for their legitimacy – the fact of national identity. In a democracy people identify themselves as part of a first person plural – a 'we' established by inheritance and history, manifest in language, religion and the attachment to territory and community. In Europe this 'we' is a national 'we', and it is by appeal to it that politicians can gain the consent of the people for policies that may hurt them in the short term. Italians want a government that defends and advances the Italian national interest. They do not want a government that advances the interest of an international political class, or the global network of multinational businesses. But more and more of their laws are imposed on them by that political class, under pressure from the businesses that lobby them.

What should we do about this? My own view is that, without radical changes, the EU will enter a period of crisis. More and more of its decisions will be evaded or rejected, and the people will strive to recapture the powers that were wrongly relinquished to it. One way or another the EU must cease to be an agent of globalisation and become a centre of resistance to it – a way of imposing political order on social and economic entropy. I think this will be possible only by restoring national sovereignty in all the areas where it has been lost, though how that could be done is for the politicians, and not for a mere philosopher, to decide.



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- 2 Howard Segermark, *Obamanomics, “Tea Party” e politica statunitense: osservazioni di un veterano conservatore “di lungo corso”*, 2010
- 3 Roger Scruton, *Global Democracy?*, 2010
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