



IN DEFENSE OF ELITISM

An edited transcription of the lecture delivered by

ROGER SCRUTON

THANK YOU VERY MUCH for the kind introduction. Always in America you praise people to the skies, which is extremely embarrassing if you happen to be the person in question. In Britain, we actually believe in elites but pretend that they don't exist. And we only give very, very modest introductions of people, usually mentioning their faults so that you won't be too put off by their performance. I won't mention my faults, but you will understand them as I go along.

The Tyranny of the Majority

There's a very famous phrase, "the tyranny of the majority," that was introduced into political discourse by two near contemporaries in the nineteenth century. Alexis de Tocqueville, the famous French writer who wrote *Democracy in America*, travelled around this country trying to understand how it is that people can survive without an aristocracy. He was amazed to discover that they *did*, he being a member of the aristocracy. And while he thought that human life could change in a democratic direction, he discerned a permanent danger, which he described in these terms: the tyranny of the majority – that is to say, the danger that every public decision will be taken *by* the majority *for* the majority and disregard both the rights of minorities and the possibility of disagreement. He discovered that in America this tyranny of the majority

had not emerged. So he asked the question, *why?*

John Stuart Mill, the famous English political philosopher, issued a similar warning. He worried that if one had a real democracy, which was then beginning to emerge in England and had already emerged in America, individuals, minorities, and legitimate groups would lose protection against majority opinion. And, as we know, majorities have more power than minorities. If they have the power to impose their views, then what happens to the minorities? What happens to the people who disagree?

Both Tocqueville and Mill recognized that a true political order can only exist if there is discussion about the issues of the day. There can only be discussion if there is legitimacy of disagreement. But people don't actually like disagreement. So how do you make disagreement possible? How do you get the majority to accept the fact that there are people who are not part of it?

And it was understood, in America at least, that you need a constitution that in some way stands above popular sentiment and also sets a limit to it. There are many reasons for this, but one in particular is what I call "the liberal fantasy": the fantasy that people are basically nice, whereas power and privilege are nasty. And so we mustn't have these powerful things like constitutions or rule of law, people who hold judicial office, or people who stand above the majority and tell them what to do. That's because people, being basically nice, will always do

the right thing as long as you leave them free to do so.

Now, most of you are young and have not yet had the full experience of the nastiness of other people – or the nastiness of yourselves. But there are plenty of opportunities out there, and that will, no doubt, change over time. Although some powers and purposes are nasty, others are necessary in order to make people nice. Incidentally, I think that's part of what education is: we hope that you young people will emerge from your time here in some measure improved – not just having more knowledge, but having perhaps more ability to get on with others, to make your mark in society, to cooperate, to be the kind of person who doesn't have to punch somebody in the face in order to have his way.

So people, in general, need managing. And I think all political philosophy needs, in the end, to reflect on what it is in human nature that creates this need for managing. There are certain aspects of the human condition which people are reluctant to think about. You are all reluctant to think about things in yourselves which you know not to be agreeable to yourself and to others. But there are also general features of the human condition which we find difficult to think about.

Envy and Resentment

The first is envy and resentment. People feel resentment towards the goods, the status, the talents of others, and this is normal. Nietzsche, the German nineteenth-century philosopher who I'm sure you've encountered in one aspect or another, thought that *ressentiment* – he used the French word for reasons of his own – was the default position of human communities. In the end, it's resentment that makes the world go round, and it's why the world is so awful. And Nietzsche didn't really belong to the world himself. He was a curmudgeonly kind of guy. He advocated a much more solitary approach to things than most of you would be able to manage. Leaving aside his so-called 'positive philosophy,' I think most people would recognize that he's onto something. Sure, people resent each other, and one thing we most resent in others is the fact that they are doing better than we are. And that resentment is going to be always there – especially when we're in close competition for something that we really

want. We're in competition for, say, a job or a lover or a social position or status, and we see the other person get it. And we can't control what we feel.

Orthodoxy and the Scapegoat

There's another part of people that needs managing, however. This was much more interesting to John Stuart Mill, and it is the desire for orthodoxy. Mill believed that orthodoxy, rather than freedom of opinion, is the default position for human societies. He believed that orthodoxies prevail and that we take refuge in them. We know that if we repeat what everybody else is saying, even if we don't believe it to be entirely true, nevertheless we're safe, we're not going to be attacked. And to stand out and say the thing that is generally disapproved of, even if it's staring everybody in the face, requires courage.

Another feature of the human condition, which has been much emphasized by the French philosopher, critic, and anthropologist René Girard, is that we have an inbuilt need for scapegoating, for persecuting the heretic. If society's in a difficult position, people are at loggerheads with each other, they're not able to agree about some issue of the day, or perhaps there's some threat facing them, it helps in a way to find a person to blame. It doesn't matter that he isn't actually to blame; we get hold of him and we persecute him, and we all unite against him and we all feel good about it. We all feel that we found the trouble and we're getting rid of it.

This is what Hitler did, of course, with the Jews in Germany in the inter-war period: he said, "Don't worry. The reason our society is in total chaos is not because I'm in charge of it. On the contrary, it's because of all those Jews who are uniting against us, conspiring to undermine the pure behavior of the Aryan majority. So we're going to persecute them and get rid of them." And I think if you look back over history, you will see scapegoating as one of the most important features of human society.

Forgiveness

And all these three features point to the fact that forgiveness is hard for human communities and hard for individuals. It is difficult to forgive people for being better

than yourself, to forgive people for standing out with an opinion of their own, to forgive people for just being the heretic. And penitence is rare. People don't very often confess to their faults, nor do they undergo any kind of penitence or repentance in order to atone for them or to make amends. And I think you all know this from your own life. And we also know, however – partly because of our Judeo-Christian inheritance – that forgiveness is absolutely fundamental to the kind of social order that we enjoy. People can live at peace with each other in this society because they are ready to forgive others' faults and to confess to their own faults.

Now, in the light of all these, you can see why it is dangerous to be – or to aim to be – a member of an elite. And in America it's a fairly normal thing to apologize for being such a thing. Apology is an excellent thing, but it can be taken too far. You're all used to the American habit of apologizing when someone bumps into you in the street – you spontaneously take the blame for everything that's going wrong in order to have a kind of preemptive, peaceful relation. Apology in America is a kind of peaceful exit from the ghastliness of human society. Whenever it thrusts itself upon you, you say, "Sorry, sorry," and you move off. Well, I'm not saying that's a bad thing, but of course it doesn't solve all problems.

Dissolving Distinctions

The consequences of those features of the human condition are that, first of all, there is a kind of clamour for equality – and this is obviously the case, especially in this society. In every sphere today there is a desire to equalize. People don't like hierarchies and privileges, and there is a natural disposition to say that they're not deserved. When anybody claims some kind of hierarchical position, the question is raised, "Who is *he*? Who does he think he is? And by what right does he claim this superiority over me?" And hierarchical organizations, therefore, such as the Catholic Church, are attacked frequently as anachronisms. People say, "That was fine in the Middle Ages, but we don't need things like that now – in fact, they're somehow inherently incompatible with the kind of society that has evolved since." And the Catholic Church, as you know, I'm sure, is suffering from

this – and from other things, too – because people don't accept this idea that there's an authority handed down from above, embodied in the person and the office of the Pope and filtering down through all the bishoprics and so on, to the ordinary worshiper. In opposition to that idea you have the Evangelical churches that want to bring everything up from below, saying that the Holy Spirit visits us all equally.

Then again, wealth and privilege, culture and intellect, are all targets of resentment in our society. This is because it's very hard to take pleasure in assets that you do not share. To take pleasure in somebody else's good fortune is a rare thing. It involves a work of forgiveness: you have to forgive him for being better than you, for getting the girl that you wanted, and so on. And, as I say, forgiveness is rare. And yet, it is one of the traditional virtues of the American people to take pleasure in somebody else's success. And I think this is one of the things that makes this society so hopeful. In Europe, it is extremely rare for people to take pleasure in any success except their own. And even then, the first thing that they do with their success is hide it, in case anybody else should know about it. Here, however, being successful, you go out and say, "Yeah, I've done it!" And other people who haven't done it will nevertheless pat you on the back and say, "Great, I'm really pleased for you." That's partly because people in this society do recognize that there are opportunities for themselves as well. The sight of somebody achieving something reassures them that maybe one day they're going to achieve, too.

But, because of the legacy of resentment and because forgiveness is rare, there is a desire to bring down the mighty and to make distinction either nonexistent or worthless. Not in every sphere – and I think this is extremely interesting. In sport, for example, talent is still universally recognized and widely praised. In some way, we feel we are not judged by another person's sporting success. I would never have had a chance at American football, or indeed at any sporting enterprise, so I don't worry. I measured my life so that I don't compete in that sphere, so to speak. But it's a very interesting question: why people in general don't really worry much about distinctions in the realm of sport. One suggestion is that it's so obvious there – that there couldn't be a realm of

sport if there weren't people who excelled at it, and how could you possibly play a game if you didn't have the goal of succeeding? It's built into the very enterprise. But people doubt that it's built into other enterprises which are really important to us.

There's a downside to all this. The German sociologist Max Weber famously argued that in every human community there is a motive for the debtors to gang up to dispossess the creditors. And we see this happening in the political process, too: the majority will vote to dispossess the successful, because they believe that wealth doesn't really belong to those people who've got it. Rather, it's a social asset and it should be distributed more fairly. And through the state we *can* distribute it more fairly. We can tax the rich and distribute it amongst the rest of us.

And many political philosophers justify this – not quite in the crude terms that I've just uttered or the terms that Weber uses. Weber is just speaking the truth. Political philosophy is a wonderful tapestry of lies designed to hide this kind of truth. But John Rawls in his famous book on justice essentially thinks in the same way: wealth is a social asset and it is not owned until it's distributed. Moreover, it has to be distributed according to a plan which takes account of the social needs of all people, and which, of course, has therefore to be put into action by the state. So, because of this feeling that assets are really in some way socially owned, the majority of people vote not only to redistribute the economic assets of society but also in some way to abolish the threat that is posed by universal education.

There's been a move towards a curriculum without distinctions – so that everybody gets an 'A,' everybody emerges with an honors degree. And this, of course, has the effect of downgrading the value of a degree to the point where maybe there's no reason to have one anyway. This poses a kind of threat to the education that you're working so hard to achieve. I know you're working hard or else you wouldn't have come here today. You're working hard not to be given a worthless document, but to be given something which actually shows that you've *achieved*, that your work was worthwhile.

But again, the majority can't easily distinguish genuine culture, which is the province of a minority, from fake culture, which we can all acquire. And this is

something which much concerns the advocate of classical music, because he knows that the classical tradition of music contains within it precious achievements, precious knowledge, and a precious world of feeling which requires a certain effort to enter. Many people say, "No, let's not bother with that. Let's just stay with Lady Gaga." But, without saying anything about Lady Gaga, it is, nevertheless, worthwhile to make that effort. Until you've made it, though, you don't know why. There are a lot of things like this in human life: you know the value of something only when you have become acquainted with it. But to get acquainted with it, you've got to be persuaded of its value. It's a kind of paradox, isn't it? It's like Groucho Marx's famous paradox of club membership: "Why should I belong to a club that would have me as a member?"

Consequences

As a result of these things, people begin to suspect the whole idea of judgment, concluding that it's wrong to be judgmental. And the judge is becoming a kind of social outcast in our society.

There are some consequences of this fact. One is the attempt to seize and redistribute the assets of the successful. The problem with this, of course, is that it penalizes success so that the assets are no longer there. And this is what we saw in Communist Europe: the confiscation of all the profits of any enterprise led to the disappearance of those profits, so there was nothing to redistribute in the end and society became poorer and poorer. But nevertheless, the majority clamours for more, which, as a result, forces governments to borrow from the future. We must have what we're used to – not just the opportunities, but the entitlements that our government has promised us, even though there are less and less economic assets from which to renew those entitlements.

And we've seen this in our societies all through the Western world, too – this borrowing from the future, about which many people are now extremely alarmed. What happens when the creditors say, "It's time to pay us back"? We saw what happened in Greece and Portugal recently. Greece was rescued, of course, by the European Union, but only by transferring the problem to the rest

of the Union. The problem hasn't *actually* gone away. So there's a growing indebtedness and a looming fiscal crisis, and most people would say that the day of reckoning has to come. And we don't know what it will look like.

Another consequence is the destruction of high culture – the kind of culture that universities should be committed to purveying. Few people have a critical understanding of their own motives. The appetites trump reflection. And people are always looking around for the other person who is really to blame. And this leads in turn to hostility towards distinction in all its forms and a kind of expanding culture of mediocrity. "It's okay to be what I am, and I don't care if you think you're better than me. I'm just happy as I am."

But there's an upside to all this. We can get through it. We all know that if you keep your head down, people will leave you alone. And that's already at least a temporary solution to the problem. I, unfortunately, throughout my life have not kept my head down, and it's a very bruised part of my anatomy. But it's still here and I'm soldiering on. And now, having entered my seventies, it doesn't really matter much what happens to me.

More importantly, we have accepted the need to protect minorities, even educated minorities. And that's because we recognize in our hearts, especially if we have children, that we want opportunities not only for ourselves but for them. And therefore we do need a culture in which success *is* distinguished from failure. We may not know what sphere our children are going to be competing in, but nevertheless we *do* know that there is a difference between success and failure and we certainly don't want them to fail. So people are not totally committed to mediocrity. I think all parents have a desire for standards in education. And all people who are making a sacrifice to achieve an educated worldview themselves accept that there must be standards. Why else would they be they doing it?

Moreover, parents are competitive. Competition lies in the nature of the reproductive process. Reproduction is not yet a thing of the past, which I'm sure you realize because here you are in this room. I know it doesn't get a good press today and the numbers are going down, but, still, people do regard reproduction, if only as an unwanted byproduct, as something that happens. And

then there those children are, and we do want them to succeed. Competition lies in the very nature of this process. Everybody in the room who has children knows this. You're in charge of the life of this thing, you're going to protect it, you're going to make sure that it's okay. And that is an essentially competitive attitude because the world is harsh. Real egalitarians, people who believe that equality is everything, tend to be childless – or else, like our politicians, they secretly secure advantages for their children while imposing mediocrity on everyone else.

Defenses Against Mediocrity

So, I'll offer a few defenses against mediocrity. As I say, minorities have rights, and one is the right of association. The right of association serves to protect their assets. We have a right to set up schools and colleges of our own. In a majoritarian culture, these two are under threat – in my country of Britain, they are under threat. Under a Labour government it may not be possible for private schools to exist anymore. But as long as we think there is a right of association, people will get together and try to rescue themselves. And that's how things perhaps should be.

The lesson of the 20th century, however, is that everything beautiful has been prepared as a sacrifice. If you look back at what happened to Europe in the 20th century – if you look back at the most beautiful culture that has existed, really – you'll see that everything beautiful in it was sacrificed. Not just the people, but the cities, the institutions, the beautiful systems of law that we inherited, everything was sacrificed – except in Britain, and even there it was fatally damaged. And I think that this is something that all human beings must acknowledge in the end: that everything beautiful is prepared as a sacrifice.

But we must go on, and to some extent we can. We should devise constitutions that contain something of the old idea of inheritance – constitutions which are obstacles to majorities so that they can't tyrannize over the minorities that want to improve themselves. Then we need a kind of political discourse that conceals this fact from the majority. This is where things become difficult. You have to tell, in the end, a few lies. You have to say, "Of course, this society is all about equality." And Americans

have always said so even though they have a constitution which was carefully designed to *prevent* that from being the sole truth. The American constitution was designed to protect minorities, to protect people's abilities to advance and to obey stricter standards than would be available for the majority alone.

And that's the hardest task, but I think young people go along with it. They instinctively want to regard their activities as achievements. Meanwhile, however, you have to practice the art of concealment. There's a beautiful Arabic word for this: *taqiyya*. It was introduced into the thinking of the Shiites in the Middle Ages in Iran, when they were living under Ottoman or Sunnite rule which forbade their particular form of religion. And the word *taqiyya* comes from their word for holiness, actually. They said, "You must practice these things: whenever confronted by another, learn how to say that you believe *exactly* as he believes, that you live your life *exactly* as he does. And inside, suffering plaintively but not revealing itself, is that soul which knows the truth."

Granted, that's an exaggerated way of describing the condition of people like me, but it is still the case that one must make an effort to conceal sometimes. Now I'm not making an effort to conceal what I think so I'm in a dangerous position. I might become like that sacrificial victim, the scapegoat.

But this is the problem that afflicts us. The advice that must be given cannot easily be given openly. And you have to conceal your distinction in many circumstances of modern life. You don't necessarily let on that you are less ignorant than your neighbor. Don't confess to your culture or make any effort to criticize his lack of it. Joyfully condemn yourself as an idiot like him.

One of my old students from Princeton came to stay the other day. He's working at a high-flying financial institution in London, and I said to him, "Well, that's great, what you've got there. It's terrific. It's worth all that effort you put into learning classical languages and the works of Goethe in German and all that philosophy I taught you." And he said, "Yes, but much more useful was learning to talk about football because it's the only thing they talk about in the office. Once I let slip a remark about Goethe and it became very clear that my career was on the line." I replied, "Yes, of course, but didn't I tell you

about that?" And he said, "Yes, sorry, but I forgot."

In the end you have to humbly confess to the right of the other as a member of the majority to determine the future of the society that includes you. You don't let on that you have the secret desire to pass on another kind of culture. *What kind of culture?* These will be my concluding remarks.

I THINK WE DO WANT TO PASS ON, especially in universities, a culture that is based in knowledge and in the distinction between real knowledge and mere opinion. Obviously, it is very difficult for you personally to distinguish among your opinions the ones that are real knowledge from the ones that are not, because they're all the same from your point of view. But, in the context of open debate in a university, you'll come to realize that your opinions have different weight. Some of them are fragile and mean nothing. They don't go into the balance of discussion in an effective way. But some, when you put them forward rightly, you can get others to believe in and to accept, because they are founded in something else.

And this knowledge must make judgments and set standards, it must distinguish the true from the false, the good from the bad, the virtuous from the vicious, and so on.

It must respect, I think, institutions, inheritances, and enduring traditions. That is one of the difficult things for people of my generation to put across to people of your generation. Obviously, the institutions that I inherited have changed an awful lot over the fifty years that I've been conscious of them. But I still believe, not in the value of all of them, of course – some of them have changed and some of them have been got rid of rightly – but nevertheless I believe in their core inheritance that's responsible for me standing up here now and speaking my mind. And I want to pass that on. And I think it can only be passed on if we respect the idea that it's already *there*.

It's already there because it's been bequeathed to us by people who made sacrifices in order that it should be. And we I think should learn to honour those sacrifices and to do our part in passing on these institutions and traditions in our turn. That doesn't mean that we have to accept everything about them. We have to, on the

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contrary, make our own living contributions to them. And they have to be amended in lots of ways.

But I think, above all, we have to keep alive the collective memory of what *we* are as a people. That doesn't reduce to merely what the majority of people presently happen to want. In America, especially, the demographic nature of the country changes rapidly from generation to generation, and yet there is a sense that we belong together and that we share the thing that we've inherited. We want

to change aspects of it, but nevertheless without it we wouldn't *be* peacefully together in the same place. And I think this involves an active work of memory in which we confront some of the bad things that have happened and nevertheless rescue from them the good things that we want to perpetuate. I think this collective memory must, in turn, be open to the idea of achievement and to the aspirations and ideals that people can still have in the changed circumstances of education today.