

What Trump Doesn't Get About Conservatism

By Roger Scruton

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The New York Times - July 4, 2018

I have devoted a substantial part of my intellectual life to defining and defending conservatism, as a social philosophy and a political program. Each time I think I have hit the nail on the head, the nail slips to one side and the hammer blow falls on my fingers.

Like many others, both conservative and liberal, I did not foresee the political career of Donald Trump, nor did I imagine that such a man could occupy the highest office of state, in the name of a party that specifically makes appeal to conservative voters. Is this simply an aberration, or are there some deep links that tie the president to the great tradition of thought that I describe in my recent book, "Conservatism: An Invitation to the Great Tradition"?

When describing the history of an idea, one naturally looks for its best expression. A history of liberalism will have a lot to say about John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, somewhat less to say about Hillary Clinton. A survey of the conservative idea will dwell at length on Edmund Burke and Thomas Jefferson and devote only a paragraph or two to Margaret Thatcher.

On the other hand, Mrs. Thatcher, and to some extent Mrs. Clinton, are known for invoking the great figures of political philosophy and for showing an educated awareness that "ideas have consequences," as the American conservative Richard Weaver expressed the point. In Mr. Trump we encounter a politician who uses social media to bypass the realm of ideas entirely, addressing the sentiments of his followers without a filter of educated argument and with only a marginal interest in what anyone with a mind might have said.

Americans are conscious of their constitutional rights and freedoms. These assets are not guaranteed by human nature and

exist only because Americans have fought for them. And they have fought for them as a nation, facing the future together. National identity is the origin of the trust on which political order depends. Such trust does not exist in Libya or Syria. But it exists in America, and the country has no more precious asset than the mutual loyalty that enables the words “we, the people” to resonate with every American, regardless of whether it is a liberal or a conservative who utters them.

Those first words of the United States Constitution do not refer to all people everywhere. They refer to the people who reside *here*, in this place and under this rule of law, and who are the guardians and beneficiaries of a shared political inheritance. Grasping that point is the first principle of conservatism.

Our political inheritance is not the property of humanity in general but of our country in particular. Unlike liberalism, with its philosophy of abstract human rights, conservatism is based not in a universal doctrine but in a particular tradition, and this point at least the president has grasped. Moreover he has understood that the legal order of the United States is rooted in customs that the Constitution was designed to protect. In this, too, Mr. Trump has shown himself to belong to the wider conservative tradition, seeking a Supreme Court that applies the Constitution, rather than one that constantly revises it, regardless of the elected legislature.

But as Edmund Burke pointed out in one of the founding documents of modern conservatism, his “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” we must “reform in order to conserve.” Institutions, traditions and allegiances survive by adapting, not by remaining forever in the condition in which a political leader might inherit them. Conservative thinkers have in general understood this. And the principle of adaptability applies not only to law but also to the economy on which all citizens depend.

In another of conservatism’s founding documents, “The Wealth of Nations,” Adam Smith argued that trade barriers and protections offered to dying industries will not, in the long run, serve the

interests of the people. On the contrary, they will lead to an ossified economy that will splinter in the face of competition. President Trump seems not to have grasped this point. His protectionist policies resemble those of postwar socialist governments in Europe, which insulated dysfunctional industries from competition and led not merely to economic stagnation but also to a kind of cultural pessimism that surely goes entirely against the American grain.

Conservative thinkers have on the whole praised the free market, but they do not think that market values are the only values there are. Their primary concern is with the aspects of society in which markets have little or no part to play: education, culture, religion, marriage and the family. Such spheres of social endeavor arise not through buying and selling but through cherishing what cannot be bought and sold: things like love, loyalty, art and knowledge, which are not means to an end but ends in themselves.

About such things it is fair to say that Mr. Trump has at best only a distorted vision. He is a product of the cultural decline that is rapidly consigning our artistic and philosophical inheritance to oblivion. And perhaps the principal reason for doubting Mr. Trump's conservative credentials is that being a creation of social media, he has lost the sense that there is a civilization out there that stands above his deals and his tweets in a posture of disinterested judgment.