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Roger Scruton: Culture Matters Study Guide

Steven Alan Samson

Liberty University, ssamson@liberty.edu

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ROGER SCRUTON: CULTURE MATTERS
STUDY GUIDE, 2007
Steven Alan Samson

Delivered on the occasion of receiving the Richard Weaver-Ingersoll Prize at Belmont Abbey, NC.
<http://www.isi.org/lectures/text/pdf/scruton10-15-04.pdf>

Study Questions

1. What was the state of Europe and its colonies at the end of the Second World War? What source of hope remained? What was the goal of education? [In *From Plato to NATO*, David Gress has written similarly of the Great Narrative in history that developed after the First World War]. What assumption was made about the curriculum? Why did the conflict between Christianity and Enlightenment serve to strengthen rather than weaken the curriculum? What does Scruton mean by “the dialectic of reason and faith” and its place in Western culture?
2. Why was an attachment of Western culture not considered parochial? How were the heroes of Western culture “building bridges across the world?” What discipline protected the culture from decay? Who were some of its great exemplars? What temptation did they fight against? The difference between philosophers and Sophists (“philodoxers”) is suggested in Scruton’s distinction between culture and politics. What made culture like a great cathedral in the minds of its students? [Parliament was rebuilt in neo-Gothic style, Henry Adams wrote *Mont St. Michel and Chartres*, and T.S. Eliot’s best-known play is *Murder in the Cathedral*].
3. What changes have cast that vision of culture in doubt? How is Western culture approached by the average Department of English? What are some of the methods by which the teacher distances himself from the texts and works of art he studies? [Philip Rieff addressed one of his books to his *Fellow Teachers* and Jacques Barzun has been another such culture warrior]. What do their “methods” have in common?
4. What does Scruton mean by gobbledygook?” How does it clothe a political agenda? What makes literary theory a “joke-free zone?” What is Western culture to the advocates of literary theory? What is the character of their project? Why is gobbledygook more effective than reasoned argument in propagating left-wing and progressive opinions? What makes the language of “theory” a kind of gangland code? What makes such theories “theological” rather than scientific?
5. How does Gresham’s law hold true of the cultural coin of the realm? [My 1982 essay, “The Character of Inflation,” which is available on-line, addresses much the same issue]. What is the important point that contributes to the survival of a literary theory? [Machiavelli made a similar point about how new princes should protect themselves against the old ruling elite]. Why do such new theories come quickly to dominate academic discourse? [Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* provides a theory of “theory” in this regard just as Kenneth Minogue provides a “pure theory of ideology”]. What are such theories incapable of formulating?
6. What does Scruton mean by **perspectivalism**? What is Foucault’s theory about “truth?” From such a “perspective,” what makes “opposition between doctrines . . . merely a contest of the powers that require them?” Basically, each culture (“culture” is considered to be a “social construct”) has its rules of knowledge (*episteme*) that belong to the “ruling discourse,” *i.e.*, the set of power relationships that rule over the culture. Minogue’s “political moralism” is another way of characterizing this “postmodern project” whose “gist is opposition” to the established culture. The result is what Scruton calls a “culture of

repudiation," a.k.a. the Counterculture. [See Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counterculture*, which is a countercultural manifesto].

7. Why does this perspectivalism appeal to students? By contrast, how do the exponents of the new literary theories see the matter? What "poisonous" residues do they seek to purge from our tradition? How does the Marx and Engels "theory of ideology" operate? How does the new humanities differ from the old curriculum?
8. Could multiculturalism, feminism, gays rights, *et al.*, survive for long outside a Western city? By raising that issue, Scruton is making the point that the new humanities is parasitical, but also acknowledges that such a "merely *ad hominem* argument . . . does nothing to overthrow the central claim of the new curriculum." In fact, it is an illustration of a logical fallacy: *post hoc, propter hoc*. How then should the old curriculum be upheld?
9. Identify two uses of the word **culture**? What did Johann Gottfried von **Herder**, and later Oswald **Spengler**, mean by **Kultur** and **Zivilization**? [ch. Tönnies: **Gemeinschaft** and **Gesellschaft**].
10. What is high culture? What happens to the common culture when religion is taken away? What is the place of Enlightenment in examining what remains of the common culture? What distinguishes western culture from Islam?
11. What is Scruton's evidence that a shared secular order has always been part of the culture of Christianity? What is the significance of "the Christian habit of forgiveness?" What sort of customs and habits are young people likely to have acquired before entering university? J. S. Mill also believed these customs and values are a permanent legacy of Christianity, but the coarsening of popular culture suggests otherwise].
12. How did Western culture give rise to a university curriculum in the humanities that sidelined theology? What does the new curriculum seek to accomplish? What does Scruton mean by its "theological nature?" What is the true purpose of its "inclusive" language?
13. Why did the old curriculum fall so widely into disrepute? What is the nature of a common culture? What happens when religious faith declines? What does Scruton mean by a culture of repudiation? What kind of hope does he hold out?

Review

dialectic of reason and faith	universalism of the Enlightenment	
discipline of criticism	<i>Four Quartets</i>	methods of literary theory
gobbledygook	Gresham's law	perspectival viewpoint
theory of ideology	new humanities	old curriculum
culture	Herder	Spengler
<i>Kultur</i>	<i>Zivilization</i>	common vs. high culture
Christian habit of forgiveness	exclusion of the opponent	ensorship
culture of repudiation		