UNDERSTANDING NATIONAL IDENTITY

This article is an attempt to tackle the issue of national identity in terms of analysing a book by the Conservative philosopher Roger Scruton entitled: ‘Where We Are’ (Bloomsbury, London 2017). It could be argued that Marxism has generally ignored issues of national identity because of a rigid emphasis on the significance of internationalism. The result is that it has been unable to explain the durability and popularity of the role of nationalism within society. This article is an attempt to rectify this neglect and instead suggest that a progressive sense of national identity is not necessarily in contradiction with the political importance of internationalism. It is necessary to maintain that is not reactionary to be proud of the achievements of a national culture in terms of the contribution of William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, the Beatles, and many others. But this does not mean that recognition of the advances of a national culture imply political support for the reactionary role of the capitalist nation state in terms of imperialism and the defence of an unequal world order. However, in contrast the standpoint of defenders of the capitalist system is to justify the significance of the cultural advances of a given society in connection with political support for actions that are problematical in terms of their contribution for the interests of humanity. The point being made is that we make a distinction between the fact that we unavoidably reside and act within a given nation state from the political actions that the state carries out to uphold the interests of the capitalist system.

Scruton is attempting to blur these principled distinctions. He wants to indicate that the understanding of being proud of the country is connected to the development of its political policy. Consequently, he introduces his book with support for an analysis of George Orwell that the ordinary people of Britain were prepared to defend the country in the Second World War when compared to the defeatism of intellectuals. (p9-10) He insists that his approach is based on the concept of patriotism rather than aggressive nationalism: “Nationalism….displays a fear and contempt towards other forms of life. It is vigilant to the point of paranoia, and quickly turns on the enemy within…. for its credibility, as Nazism did. Patriotism is based on respect and love for the form of life that we have. It seeks to include, not to exclude, and to combine in the face of an external threat. A patriot respects the patriotism of others, including that of the enemy.”(p10) In other words nationalism as modified and civilised by the ideology of patriotism is about the defence of the country in situations of conflict and represents a genuine love of the most advanced and civilised aspects of the national culture. Thus, patriotism is a disapproval of aggressive nationalism and instead upholds the defence of a country against external threats, as was expressed in relation to the Second World War. But what he does not mention was that there was a difference between the attitudes of the people and government in the Second World War. The British government was concerned to uphold the interests of its economy and empire in terms of opposing Nazi Germany, whilst the patriotism of the people was connected to the influence of anti-fascism. This was the point being made by George Orwell. Hence there was a political and ideological divide between the motives of the people and the Coalition government. In order to overcome this contradiction would have meant the overthrow of the Coalition and the establishment of a genuine workers government. This would have combined the sentiment of patriotism with internationalism. The aims of the workers government would have been to extend the aims of international socialism as the alternative to fascism. In contrast, Scruton is arguing that principled patriotism could be expressed in terms of the defence of British capitalism. Indeed, this view implies that it would be an act of denial of the national interest to strive to realise socialism in these circumstances. Thus, he can only contemplate a concept of progressive patriotism which is about the support and defence of the existing form of the British state. Indeed, he is implying that this is the effective motivation of the British people, to defend and uphold what they are familiar with and consider to be part of the traditional British heritage. In this conservative conception of the British heritage there is no place for the conception of socialism or any form of radical change to society. Thus, he is outlining a biased and one-sided form of patriotism. Consequently, it is not surprising that he comments: “It tells us that patriotism …arises spontaneously in the ordinary human heart. It does not depend on any grand narrative of triumph of the kind put about by the fascists and communists, but grows from the habits of free association that we British have been fortunate to inherit.”(p11) So, patriotism is what we are familiar with, what has been traditional, and is mistrustful of change. Scruton would deny this assessment and argue that people should not oppose necessary change, but what he primarily is concerned about is to defend the integrity of traditional institutions. Hence, his approach is a conservative standpoint that equates change with the expression of dogmatic ideologies that do not uphold the patriotic heritage of the UK, such as socialism. Instead he is suggesting that it is conservatism that is the most logical and inherent expression pf patriotism. Some forms of Social Democracy would attempt to outline their rival conceptions of patriotism in terms of defence of the welfare state. Whilst revolutionary Marxism has effectively rejected any credibility to patriotism or nationalism in the name of principles and the international perspectives of proletarian revolution. The problem with the former stance is that reformism becomes an uncritical expression of the interests of the capitalist nation state, whilst the latter denies any progressive aspects to patriotism. This means that it is often difficult for revolutionary Marxists to establish a dialogue with workers who are influenced by patriotism. The question that arises: is it possible to establish a credible and progressive form of patriotism or nationalism within the imperialist countries? If the Marxist absolutely rejects any suggestion of the importance of nationality it can make no sense of the role of struggles that have occurred, with Britain such as the Chartists, in order to realise the development of political democracy, or the increasing importance of the trade unions regarding establishing improvements for the workers. This history of struggles of people against exploitation and oppression is part of a national history which we should be proud. These mass actions contributed to the improvement of society and promoted a balance of class forces that was increasingly in favour of the interests of working people. The point being made is that the character and significance of the nation is not exclusively defined by the role of traditional institutions like the monarchy.

In contrast, Scruton does want to portray the nation in terms of the traditional importance of institutions like the monarchy, and the role of the working class is reduced to being part of the established communities of the UK. The result of his analysis is that he defines nationality in the following terms: “For the…. neighbourliness that is so familiar to us is not a shallow thing. It is the product of a long experiment in community, issuing in a culture of ‘side-by-sideness’…which is also the way in which the British people solve their conflicts and cooperate in building trust. For us, political choices are underpinned by the sovereignty of the people, mediated by Parliament and the Common Law, and a people are united because they share a home and a long-established way of governing it. We are not unique in this: on the contrary, we are one instance of a European ideal, the ideal of neighbourhood as the source of political order. Although we have been subject to an experiment in religious an ethnic diversity, it remains true that national sovereignty and the sense of place are the cornerstones of our social capital and the foundation of the home we have built with it.”(p23) We can agree that the principles of a good neighbour and goodwill between people is part of what it means to be good socialists. This type of solidarity and cooperation will be necessary in the socialist society that we aim to create. But these aspects of any type of civilised society is not necessarily connected to the role of traditional institutions and the principles of national sovereignty. Indeed, it could be argued that capitalism generates alienation and a sense of estrangement between people. Thus the aspects of what are considered to be the essence of the British national character are being undermined by the contrasting development of modernisation which transforms people into isolated individuals. There is even the gradual undermining of the family. Therefore, the ability to create genuine forms of solidarity between people requires the consolidation of connections between neighbours in terms of the creation of a society based on the consistent application of these principles in terms of the creation of socialism which is based on the expression of the role of cooperation within society. In other words the aspect of being a good neighbour within capitalism is undermined by the contrasting influence of new technologies that constantly promote the role of people as isolated individuals. This situation is in order to create profits for the companies involved in this development. Hence it is not satisfactory to contend that there is an inherent British essence based on the standpoint of the good neighbour. This very principle can be modified, or even undermined by the important changes taking place within society. The basis to establish a consistent expression of relations based on cooperation within society is to create a situation in which this principle has primacy. This means overcoming the emphasis on private profit and instead establishing the interests of developing non-alienating relations between people. Furthermore, it is utopian to claim that national sovereignty is an inherent principle of the character of the nation state. The role of the nation is constantly influenced by the importance of globalisation, and each nation needs trade and relations with other countries. Thus Philip Hammond was right to suggest the UK needs the closest possible relations with the EU after BREXIT. In other words, the decision to leave the EU does not mean the illusory assertion of national sovereignty in contrast to what has been perceived as integration into the EU. Instead the UK will have to negotiate new trading and political relations with the rest of the world. For example, the British government is presently trying to increase trade with China. Thus, the concept of national sovereignty represents a nostalgic and illusory view that has little relationship to the actual inter-connections of the world economy. Instead it is a concept that refers to the traditional sense of people in the UK being a distinct and special nation. But this sensibility has little connection with the actual complex inter-connections between nations within the world economy. No nation can absolutely act in terms of the principles of national sovereignty or a sense of distinctness. Hence the BREXIT view that we are taking control of our borders is completely illusory. Instead what is being established is a new form of the connections between the UK, the EU and the world in general.

But Scruton is not wrong to suggest that the UK is often defined by its associations and organisations for various activities and sports. This part of the culture makes any nation civilised and is based on the importance of interactions between people. But the problem is that the various cooperative principles that express the role of these organisations is undermined by the competitive character of the economic activity of capitalism. Instead it is necessary that a type of economy be established which is consistent with the character of the various forms of voluntary associations within society. But in order that this prospect becomes possible it will be necessary to overcome the domination of capital within the economy. In contrast, Scruton praises the expression of British culture and does not recognise that this role is constantly undermined by the influence of the economy and by the isolationist character of social trends. The point is that his standpoint is nostalgic and does not allow for the process of social development. He is effectively describing a situation that would be more familiar in the 1950’s than today. But the reason for this limitation is because he wants to limit recognition of the social tensions within the UK in the recent past. Instead he wants to present a conception of a unified and homogenous society, or a society that has never been real. Indeed, this is the limitation of consistent conservatism: it must make an appeal to the attractions of the past when compared to the limitations of the present. This means that the present is discussed in one-sided and often derogatory terms and instead the past is described in uncritical terms. But this point can also be made about some Marxists who constantly refer to the struggles of the past, and so imply that the present is defined by an inherent situation of consensus. What is necessary is to relate the past to the present and in that manner try to overcome any tendency towards nostalgia or one-sidedness.

Indeed, Scruton inclines towards irrationalism when he contends that the British are based on a mistrust of reason. (p27) There is no elaborate explanation of this astonishing claim except to imply that it is based on the influence of tradition. The implicit assumption is that the reactionary ideas associated with the defence of the existing system implies that this has to be based on the role of forms of prejudice or the related rejection of the significance of reasoned reflection concerning the character of society. It is effectively accepted that the process of intellectual expression will have a progressive aspect that is critical of the existing character of society. In contrast, the defence of the system will mean that an emphasis on tradition implies the importance of habit and the expression of prejudice. This implies the rejection of the role of reason. However, this standpoint is one-sided and dogmatic because we could argue that all attempts of understanding express some form of reasoned reflection, but what is also important in this regard is the role of ideology. In this context the connection between conservatism and patriotism is a powerful ideology that has popular influence within society. The result of this situation is support for the concept of a nation that is opposed to any form of progressive change, which is defined as being in some sense opposed to the interests of the nation. However, there is no inherent reason why the aim of progressive change should be considered to be against the interests of the nation. Instead it is opposed to the interests of those that believe in conserving society as it is, but this aim is contradictory because society is subject to constant change in both national and international terms. Hence, in actuality the standpoint of conservatism must make choices between that type of change it supports and that which it rejects as being against the interests of the nation. Ironically, the supporters of a progressive view can also be opposed to change, such as that which undermines the credibility of the welfare state. Progressive thought cannot be dogmatically in favour of all change within society, and so must also differentiate between that change it considers desirable, such as economic reform and increased political democracy, and reject that change which increases the power of the rich corporations.

Scruton also suggests that the natural conservatism of the British people is connected to the view that the EU should be a collection of sovereign states, and so the apparent bureaucratic centralism of the EU is against this perspective. (p30) This understanding is connected to the view that it is against the British approach to support state centralisation of the economy and politics. But this is a selective view of the history of Britain and ignores the importance of the state, especially with the development of the welfare state that has promoted the modification of the application of the economic laws of capitalism and instead introduced elements of social justice within society. Instead of this recognition, Scruton outlines the character of the history of the UK in the following terms: “In our country, by contrast, private foundations, amateur circles, clubs and friendly societies were reshaping civil society without explicit help from government, while law remained in essence common law, extracted from the judgments of the courts and not dictated by the legislature. It was not the state, but the churches, chapels and philanthropic associations of citizens associations of citizens that brought education to the people.”(pp31-32) This description may have been accurate for the nineteenth century, but in the 20th century the role of the state immensely increased in providing education and public services. Indeed, it could be argued that the very development of the welfare state became part of what could be described as the national character of the UK. Indeed, this is one reason why it has been difficult for the Conservatives to undermine the welfare state in the name of the interests of austerity. Thus, the description of the national character provided by Scruton involving the role of private associations is not inaccurate but it is one-sided. Instead it could be suggested that the dynamics of British society have involved a contradictory relationship between the private and public forms of organisation. It is interesting that he omits to mention one of the most important private types of association which is the trade unions. This is because he is trying to present the character of British society as essentially united and uniform, and without important social tensions. But the role of the trade unions and Labour Party is part of what it means to be British. They are very British institutions, and so express institutional opposition to the conservative conception of the nation.

But in an interesting and contradictory manner, Scruton admits to the importance of the labour movement in the UK: “However….the British do not, as a rule, confront problems with an attitude of resignation and laissez faire. Their instinct is to combine in order to resolve them. The Factory Acts, the Friendly Societies, Building Societies, church schools and peoples dispensaries, the Chartist movement, the second reform bill extending the franchise to large sections of working class men, the growth of the Labour movement – these and many other social and political initiatives overcame the worst problems in England and ensured that the pre-political ‘we’ of Britain was strong enough to reconcile the many resentments.”(p35) Thus, he is implying that the period of necessary economic and political struggles is now over, and that the major grievances have been resolved, apart from contemporary issues like the role of the EU and immigration. Thus, what is being assumed is that the present character of British capitalism is generally both efficient and just, and so the task is to preserve the vital aspects of the supposed British character. In other words: “Britons came to see themselves as living in a ‘free country’, and to regard their freedom as a quality of the institutions under which they live, and the space in which those institutions operate. They were, for the most part, aware of their good fortune in enjoying a universal education system and a free health service, and they acknowledged, despite a dissenting minority, that their Parliamentary institutions and constitutional monarchy were the guarantee of order and stability. But all these great benefits were secondary in their minds to the quite special freedom enjoyed in their daily lives.”(p36) So, Scruton effectively eclectically combined the merits of the welfare state with the role of more historical institutions like Parliament and Monarchy in order to provide a conception of what constitutes the features of British national identity. He does not accept that increasingly the Conservative national government has acted in order to undermine the effectiveness of the welfare state, and that the most dynamic manner in which the welfare state can be defended is by the militant actions of the trade unions. Such a perspective would obviously undermine his conception of a united nation based on acceptance of conservative values and institutions which includes the role of the National Health Service and the welfare state. Thus, Scruton is not a neo-liberal, but he does not seem to recognise that the policies of the present Conservative party is often motivated by neo-liberal concerns which include undermining the role of the welfare state in the name of the interests of capital. So, his conception of the relationship of conservatism to capitalism is old-fashioned and based on priorities established in the 1950’s. This perspective is then projected onto the present, and the actual politics of the present is not outlined in any coherent detail. The tensions of the present are not allowed to undermine the emphasis on the past, apart from the importance of the EU and immigration.

The selective character of his approach means that he can represent the British as being motivated by a sense of fair-play and tolerance, and who united to uphold these values in 1939. This approach is not entirely unreal and did explain the motivation of many people at given moments in history. But the problem is that it is not possible and feasible to elaborate a conception of the past and project it onto the present. Instead at some point it is necessary to elaborate the importance of the present, and how this influences the conception of the British national character, and Scruton considers that the present is disturbing and is undermining the very cohesion and integrity of the national identity: “Nothing in history stays still, however. Years of peace and prosperity, the decline of the Christian faith, mass migration and the spread of global trade and communications – these and other vast changes have produced a generation of young people more attuned to networks that connect them to their peers than to the liberties that their grandparents fought for. They have not been confronted in their lives to which patriotism is the only cogent response….So what broad conception of the British settlement and British character can we now rely upon, in exhorting our compatriots to identify with their own country, as an independent body politic in a place of its own.”(p37-38) This comment is a very intolerant view that considers that young people are motivated by merely superficial concerns and have no real understanding of the significance of political decisions and the role of Britain. The point is that it could be argued that many young people are motivated by progressive concerns such as opposing leaving the EU, which contradict the standpoint of Scruton. He supports a form of popular nationalism which is opposed to the internationalism and idealism of the young. But this radical standpoint is also connected to a more principled defence of the welfare state than the old-fashioned and nostalgic standpoint of Scruton. The result is that the youth have become inclined to support the radicalism of the new left leadership of the Labour party. In contrast, the romantic views of Scruton provide no effective strategy for defending the welfare state. Instead the only definite political policy that he is able to uphold is withdrawal from the EU. The result of this standpoint is not a generous and open-minded conception of nationalism, instead what is primarily being advocated is an end to free movement of labour. Like many supporters of popular nationalism, we know what Scruton is against, but he is more vague in relation to what he is constructively in favour of. In contrast, the young people want a society based on tolerance and equal opportunities, or a democratisation of society. To the extent that this sentiment is progressive it can be supported. But Marxists also must go against the stream and advocate militant politics of class struggle. We have to be adamant that naïve and vague support for change is not sufficient. Instead it is vital that the vague sentiment for change be transformed into an expression of a definite aim, the aspiration for socialism. This is an internationalist vision that potentially can unite people of diverse backgrounds within the UK.

In contrast, Scruton defines national unity and political stability in terms of the various people within the UK developing a sense of being British. (p38-39) He contends that this is more than about developing shared values but is instead about a sense of attachment, or belonging. But how is this conception of unity to be realise without the promotion of common values? At present there are many social and ethnic groups, often with their own concerns, and who lack a sense of cohesion and genuine unity. What can create this unity? Marxists would imply that the answer is socialism because in the last analysis it is capitalism which creates inequality within society and so generates divisions. In contrast, Scruton argues that people can be united in terms of realising a common British identity or sense of belonging. But what does this mean when it is based on the popular nationalism of sections of the white working class and middle class? How can this have an appeal to the other sections of society? What would represent a common unifying conception of British patriotism when Scruton is vehemently against the free movement of people to the UK from other countries in the EU? The point is that the nostalgic understanding of British patriotism outlined by Scruton will have little appeal to newly arrived ethnic groups from other countries. Indeed, most migrants are against conservatism and all that it represents. In contrast, it is possible for the Labour Party to unify the different people within the UK in terms of its radicalising message of a better society. This standpoint provides a sense of hope that is the most effective manner to providing a sense of belonging to the nation. It is hope for a better future that is the basis for unifying what have been diverse social and ethnic groups. In contrast, Scruton cannot provide this type of hope because all that he can offer is the conception of a sentimental and antiquated description of the nation. Thus, the ability to provide a tolerant and democratic understanding of belonging to the nation is connected to whether the message of the Labour Parry and other socialists is truly effective. But it also has to be emphasised that this task is connected to an elaboration of internationalism. There is no contradiction between the aims of encouraging national identity and genuine internationalism. In contrast the popular nationalism of right wing conservatives is insular, exclusive and based on opposition to various groups of migrants. The role of the Labour party should be to reject this politics of divide and rule and instead promote maximum unity within the nation in terms of the advocacy of socialism and internationalism.

Scruton can define the principle of belonging in terms of various emotions, but this is vague and indefinite. Instead we should relate the issue of belonging to a definite programme, or a collection of policies that we aim to realise in practice. The point is that the concept of belonging, such as in relation to the role of family, community, and nation, need not represent the expression of conservative politics. Instead these aspects of social activity could be considered to represent the basis of the development of the principle of cooperation within society. In this manner these aspects of reality express the possibility to develop an expression of solidarity within society. What is important is the development of the conception of belonging. There is no reason to suggest that this emphasis on the importance of belonging has to be exclusively nationalist or an expression of the influence of nostalgia. Instead belonging could also be about support for the approach of internationalism such as the view that belonging represents being European or a citizen of the world. However, traditionally belonging has been associated with reactionary and conservative politics, but this is what can be contested. Instead belonging, from the point of view of socialism, could represent a cosmopolitan conception of citizenship, in which the importance of the international is reconciled with the role of the national. In this context the connection of belonging exclusively with the national is being disputed. Indeed, it could be argued that such an interpretation is anachronistic in a globalised world of international production and trade. However, the Marxist Left has often denied the significance of belonging because of its apparent reactionary connotations, but this disdain has meant that the role of the family and community is ignored and replaced by a more abstract emphasis on the importance of class which lacks these important biological and social connections. Instead of this narrow view it is vital that Marxism begins to develop a conception of belonging which does not contradict these important aspects of human activity. In contrast, Scruton defines a major aspect of belonging in terms of the importance of the countryside for defining what it means to be British. This, rural approach may have had relevance in the past, but it has been replaced by the development of the cities and the significance of the role of the urban area. The point is that Scruton’s conception of belonging is backward looking and ignores the process of modernity and technological development. He cannot establish a standpoint that is without its expression of nostalgia for a past that no longer exists, but which should be re-created in the present. However, the Marxist left are also one-sided because they emphasise the importance of the class struggle and reject any sense of the importance of belonging. This dogmatism should be rejected and instead we should outline and elaborate a conception of belonging which is complex and able to rival the standpoint of people like Scruton. But the purpose of elaborating this understanding of belonging will be in order to indicate how its aspects such as family, community and nation can contribute towards the promotion of the aim of establishing socialism.

Scruton contends that one of the recent manifestations of belonging was the revolt of the countryside areas against the ban on fox hunting and the BREXIT vote. In contrast he contends that the Left cannot uphold a conception of belonging because: “Such examples of popular protest raise an important question, however, and it is one that troubled Orwell can there really be a patriotism of the Left? Isn’t the whole tendency of left-wing thought to repudiate those old forms of belonging with their implicit hierarchies, their pieties, their deference in the face of established privilege and power? Isn’t the gaol to side with the working class, rather than nation, which is in the hands of the bourgeois enemy? And if there is a further goal, is it not to create an international order, in which an egalitarian government erases the boundary between them and us?”(p47) But this understanding of belonging is one-sided and unable to accept that this principle need not be about the defence of the status quo and instead can be dramatically modified to involve a reconciliation of the national and international, and to outline how the class struggle is one expression of belonging that is opposed to the alienation and exploitation represented by capitalism. But Marxists should not reject the concept of belonging in the dogmatic terms outlined by Scruton. Instead we contest the view that belonging is an exclusive right wing principle based on the supposed natural conservatism of the people. However, this does not mean that we should also reject the importance of the class struggle. Contrary to Scruton’s views it is wishful thinking to suggest that the importance of nationality will always subsume and gloss over the importance of the class struggle. Instead we understand how an appeal to nationality is utilised in order to deny the role of the class struggle, but this development means that we should elaborate a conception of class struggle that reconciles the importance of the national with the primary role of the international. In the last analysis the character of the class struggle is international, but this does not undermine the importance of developing tactic for also promoting the revolutionary process in national terms. Scruton suggests that the national sense of belonging will also undermine the ideological appeal of the class struggle. This point has often been historically accurate in the past, but this development has often been because of the opportunist limitations of the leaders of the trade unions and Labour Party, who have rejected the principled standpoint of an internationalist strategy for realising socialism. We would suggest that this tendency for workers to accept the appeal of nationalism can be undermined not merely by promoting what could be considered an abstract an irrelevant alternative of internationalism, but instead emphasise how the class struggle is an inherent aspect of the traditions of the national identity or is part of what it means to belong to the nation. In contrast, the interests of the capitalist class is about profit, and they lack any genuine sense of what it means to be a part of the nation because their narrow and exclusive concern is with profit making. However, this understanding of the importance of belonging should not dilute the continued recognition that the victory of socialism is an international task.

In contrast to this approach Scruton suggests that the Labour Party will only become a party of government when it adapts to the popular nationalism within the working class: “It soon becomes clear, however, that the Labour party will regain its status as a party of government only if it recognizes the residual patriotism of its traditional voters, and concedes that it is possible to be a working class socialist, a believer in national sovereignty, and a normal decent human being, who is neither racist or xenophobic when it comes to dealing with the wider world. The party therefore has the task that confronts us all, which is that of defining patriotism anew, so that every age group, every temperament and every career can belong to a shared first person plural. In particular, it must revise its attitude to globalization, in order to acknowledge that the principal victim of the emerging global networks is the old working class.”(p48) But the point is that the Labour should not define the importance of national belonging in terms of an adaptation to a popular nationalism which is based on a reactionary rejection of the role of the EU in terms of opposition to immigration. Instead it is necessary to outline a progressive argument in favour of the EU on the basis of international unity of the working class and the defence of jobs and the interests of the working class in the UK. The point is that it has been the influence of an anachronistic conception of national belonging that has led to mass support for leaving the EU. This is an irrational approach which is apparently indifferent about the fact that the UK outside the EU will result in mass unemployment and the decline of living standards. Instead the arguments for being within the EU should be made more energetically, and this means the irrationalism of a popular nationalism should be opposed. In other words, a socialist argument should be developed as to why the UK should remain within the EU. Hence this would mean that a progressive form of nationalism is reconciled with the standpoint of internationalism. The failure to develop this type of argument meant that the right-wing popular nationalism at the time of the EU referendum was not challenged. Scruton is only in favour of working class revolt when it favours reactionary aims and upholds a reactionary sense of national belonging. He is not genuinely in favour of the interests of the working class which would mean the promotion of the primacy of internationalism. Instead his right-wing conservatism is reconciled with the narrow interests represented by the popular nationalism of the working class as expressed in the EU referendum. However, the Conservative party in general has adopted his standpoint in order to try and win elections. The result is that the Conservatives inconsistently represent the interests of capital. The Labour party can gain from the political crisis of the Conservatives.

Scruton contends that it is possible to develop a patriotic response to BREXIT, but he does not outline what this would mean. The point is that he conveniently ignores the fact that over 40% of British exports are with the EU. The very economic integrity of the UK is connected to its relations with the EU. All this has been undermined by the BREXIT vote, and so the negotiations are effectively about how to modify the consequences of the vote. Scruton does not discuss such economic consequences because this is merely a distraction from the political logic of his understanding of belonging. But this means that in a one-sided manner he tries to ignore the awkward fact that the UK is part of a globalised world. Indeed, he wants in a populist manner to try to outline the role of the UK in terms of the illusion of national independence. This perspective of isolationism is utopian in relation to the inter-connected character of the world economy. The point is that the role of the national has no meaning outside of the significance of the international. But he cannot recognise this point because it would undermine his attempt to uphold the myth of the UK as an independent island. In contrast a progressive and rational approach would recognise that the progressive political role is to improve the global economy and to enhance the transformation of it into a more egalitarian and humane order. In contrast, the standpoint of Scruton is insular and antiquated. He cannot in an objective manner accept the importance of the world economy as the basis for his political perspectives. Instead in an anachronistic manner he must imply that the Britain will be great again when it reasserts an illusory sense of economic and political independence. Scruton considers that the impetus for globalisation within the UK is based on the aims of an elite who have no particular allegiance to the UK. But this form of a conspiracy theory ignores the uncomfortable fact that what is occurring is a process of globalisation in which the UK is an interconnected part of the world economy. In this manner just about everyone in the UK has some relationship or connection to the global order. Hence it is idealist and illusory to suggest that some form of national renewal can overcome the effects of this situation. Instead the most relevant question is what should be the terms of the relationship of the UK to the global system? This means Marxists would ask how can socialism be possible in the context of globalisation? Instead in antiquated manner, Scruton tries to deny the importance of globalisation and instead implies that the culture and traditions of the nation can provide the basis for the restoration of a proud and independent country. This perspective is an illusion. It is effectively a subjective approach which denies the importance of objective economic connections between the UK and the world economy. As a result of his idealism Scruton cannot provide an economic programme that is valid and plausible. Therefore, although Scruton can outline in eloquent terms about the historical development of nations, and the specific character of the UK, he cannot effectively connect this understanding to its role in the global order in the contemporary period. Instead he can only repeat that nations are based on the importance of national sovereignty. But the point is that this principle has been compromised with the effective end of the imperialist based nation states and their replacement by the global order under American hegemony. This has meant the progress of all nations has become dependent on its level of international connections and the result of this logic was the creation of the EU. But in the name of national belonging and of custom and traditions, Scruton wants to nostalgically and unrealistically deny the importance of the globalised order, but he cannot outline in any definite manner how this is to be realised. Instead he can only provide a descriptive impression of what it would mean to regain the sense of national independence which has been undermined by the UK being in the EU and because of globalisation.

Scruton can outline the importance of a nation based on relations of trust and toleration of difference, and this may be a valid point, but the problem with his approach is that it is ultimately a-historical. He is unable to outline a conception of the nation that could apply in the present. The point is that it is not adequate and sufficient to suggest that the UK has been based on the tradition of being subjects of the monarchy. Such a formulation is anachronistic in the era of modern political economy and has no appeal to people who do not believe in the virtues of deference. The point being made is that a conception of a traditional based society is totally inadequate for the modern world. What is important to recognise is the necessity to acknowledge the role of change within society. This means that we cannot be content with a static and dogmatic conception of what is meant by national identity. Thus, there is no British essence which defines national identity in some definitive and unchallengeable manner. Instead we have to recognise the importance of the role of economics, politics, and culture, for constantly modifying what is meant by national identity, but the conservative refuses to recognise the importance of these developments. This is why the approach of Scruton is based on the projection of a nineteenth century understanding of what it means to be British onto the present. In contrast, he can only express criticism of aspects of modernity for undermining the cohesion and durability of the British character.

Indeed, his standpoint is based on opposition to the apparent intolerance and repression represented by the French revolution. He contends that this development led to a regime that promoted an intolerant conception of nationalism which led to aggression against other nations and the Declaration of the Rights of Man was utilised in order to replace the importance of the role of custom and tradition. He comments: “National loyalty, construed as the low-key patriotism of custom and place, is precisely what prevents ‘extremism’ from taking hold of the ordinary conscience. It is at the root of all that is best in human society, namely that we are attached to what goes on around us, grow together with it, and learn the ways of peaceful association as our ways, which are right because they are ours and because they unite us with those who came before us and those who will replace us in our turn. Seen in that way patriotic feelings are not just natural, they are essentially legitimizing They call upon the sources of social affection, and bestow that affection on customs that have proved their worth over time, by enabling a community to settle its disputes and achieve equilibrium in the changing circumstances of life.”(p72) Thus he is suggesting that a revolutionary regime based on upheaval and intolerance cannot realise the stability necessary to establish a situation in which tolerance and custom become the basis of society. Only a condition of continuity can generate the acceptance of the views of others and so express the ability to construct a type of society in which different views can be accommodated. However, this standpoint ignores the fact that the French revolution introduced the principle of democracy within society and led to improvements in the conditions of the urban poor and the peasants. The regime of terror was not an inherent part of the revolutionary process, and instead was utilised in order to consolidate the Jacobin regime. In contrast, Britain was based on the domination of the monarchy and there was no effective and plausible system of democracy, and instead it was a society based on the domination of traditional elites. This meant the French revolutionary regime was opposed within Europe not because of the revolutionary terror but instead because it represented an example for the people of Europe to emulate. This meant the regime had to be overcome by the armies of Europe. The result was the Napoleonic wars, but the example of democracy inspired by the French revolution could not be overcome by military intervention. Instead what was generated were mass movements for democracy which eventually led to the 1848 revolutions. Even the UK was influenced by this situation with the development of the Chartist movement. But Scruton ignores all these developments because, in an ahistorical manner, he outlines the merits of a nation based on the traditions of custom and patriotism. He does not relate these aspects to a process of political change, and nor does he accept that the nation often became an expression of imperialism and the domination of other nations. The point being made is that his eulogy of what it means to be British is not connected with any elaboration of its actual history. Indeed, Scruton is reluctant to accept that what has been of primary importance in the history of the UK in the last three hundred years has been the role of capitalism and imperialism. These aspects indicate that the supposed patriotic aspects of a tolerant nation have actually been undermined by the importance of its tendency to impose repressive domination of other nations.

However, Scruton is not wrong to elaborate how the UK has also been able to promote the role of democracy and the toleration of different political views, but it is also necessary to establish that this situation was connected to the agitation of the Chartists and Suffragettes. The point is that the UK was a society based on the importance of the privileges of elites if it was not for the development of mass struggle in order to promote the principles of democracy. These aspects were also improved by the election of Labour governments which were dedicated to the improvement of the situation of society. The point is that Conservatism has effectively been opposed to any reform of society, and has only reluctantly accepted these developments. In other words, the development of a political situation based on the importance of toleration between rival views was not an expression of some inherent virtues of the British character. Instead this possibility had to be struggled for in terms of the role of mass struggle and agitation. Only the influence of socialism meant that the authoritarianism of the Conservative party could be modified. It was the growing importance of the forces of socialism that led to the creation of a genuinely democratic society. In this context it was possible for the principles of toleration to become a vital aspect of British society. The major aspect of intolerance is expressed by the assumption of the Conservatives that they should be the natural party of government, and so consider that the election of a Labour government undermines the realisation of this sentiment. Indeed, it is the influence of deference within the electorate which often means that the Conservatives are able to achieve electoral success and become the government. The only manner in which this ideological view can be undermined is to elect a genuinely left-wing Labour government. The limitations of the prolonged austerity policy and the tensions caused by BREXIT are developing the political conditions for this possibility.

What is most reactionary in the approach of Scruton is that he assumes that there is a homogenous British nation which is being undermined by immigration. (p74) However, this standpoint is illusory because in the age of globalisation there will be a constant tendency for immigration to occur, and indeed it is necessary in order to generate the development of dynamic economies. The question that this causes increased pressure on the utilisation of public services and housing can be overcome by the development of a programme of increased public spending and creating more houses. However, this possibility is undermined by the present austerity policies of many governments within the EU. In this situation the concept of a homogenous nation acquires support and results in reactionary views. This means there is the generation of popular nationalism and this led to the vote within the UK to leave the EU. The only effective response to these developments is to create a more inclusive conception of what is a nation, or a nation that is not based on exclusive ethnic groups, and this task is connected to the necessity to develop internationalism. In practice people are often spontaneously internationalist in terms of their willingness to accept the importance of relations between different ethnic groups, but the difficulties caused by austerity also lead to the generation of the influence of intolerance.

There are tensions within the standpoint of Scruton, because on the one hand he implies that he is against immigration to the UK but on the other hand he comments: “The crucial thing is not that we can avail ourselves of some eternal community, with fixed borders, unalterable beliefs and a ring-fenced genetic inheritance. What is crucial is that….. there should be place of belonging, which we can identify as our home, where the inhabitants can be relied upon, and which we are all committed to defending and improving for the common good. It is crucial that our home be defended by institutions to which we tacitly subscribe – a law making and law enforcing process on which we can rely in settlement of disputes and in which our many interests are represented. This is the residual idea of national identity ….. the idea of a shared home and a territorial jurisdiction. It is neither belligerent nor mystical, and does not depend on extinguishing the many other loyalties that its participants may have.”(p74-75) The problem is that this apparently principled conception of the reconciliation of the role of the general with the specific in terms of the view that belonging is about the recognition of the importance of diversity and difference is at odds with the other aspect of the view of Scruton which upholds the understanding that there is a generalised approach towards the perspective of national belonging. He defines the character of the nation in terms of conservative values to which people should be obliged to support. Therefore, his contrasting emphasis on the importance of diversity is in a tense relationship to this general advocacy of monolithic values of the nation. There is a contradiction between his essentialism, or elaboration of the specific aspects of what it means to be British, and the other tendency to accept cultural pluralism. The problem is that his overall conception of the nation is traditional and is opposed to the importance of change, and so this implies an anachronistic, rigid and exclusive understanding of what it means to be British. This means that he tends to justify a connected ethnic homogeneity. On the other hand, he is also committed to the standpoint of cultural pluralism and diversity. The overall emphasis on the virtues of conservatism means that his bias must be towards the justification of a traditional view of the nation, and so he is mistrustful of change and pluralism. Thus it is not surprising that one of his major criticisms of the EU is because it allows free movement of labour within members states.(p78-80) This type of criticism can only be motivated by the assumption that the character of the Britain is based on a particular type of ethnic character, which the regulations of the EU are undermining. He does not seem to recognise that this approach of the EU is based on the requirements of globalisation and the necessity to develop a globally mobile working class. Instead of acknowledging these aspects of the present situation, Scruton is motivated by his sense of what constitutes the necessary homogeneity of the UK. This is connected to his defence of a conservative view of the nation.

Therefore it is not surprising that he concludes: “We belong to this place, our country and this country defines us. And if we extend a welcome to newcomers then we must be clear that we are inviting them to belong here in the same way that we do. It is citizenship that we offer them: not the rights of citizenship only, but the duties too. And these rights and duties belong to the place where we are.”(p82) But this defensive recognition of the possibility of ethnic diversity within a nation provides no conception of the possible contribution that new groups of people can provide in both economic and cultural terms. His comments do not seem to express the potential of ethnic diversity for developing the possibilities for new forms of development and instead his emphasis is on obligations and duties. But the major duty is not about the creation of a sense of national belonging but is instead about recognising the toleration represented by the traditions of democracy. It is about becoming a genuine political citizen who promotes their views and listens to the views of others. In this manner people become part of a genuine political community, and in this manner contribute to what it means to have an authentic national identity. But this very conception of the active political citizen actually challenges the inertia and passivity of the conservative view of the nation held by Scruton. Active participation in democratic politics can only favour the interests of the Labour Party and of those groups critical of society. In contrast, the standpoint of Scruton must rely on the role of passivity and deference to the role of elites and is based on the influence of political complacency rather than involvement in the institutions of society. The approach of Scruton is about acceptance of the domination of elites or deferring to the importance of our so-called ‘betters’. The people who are exploited should accept their situation, and this condition will be made palatable by conserving ourselves as belonging to the nation. However, Scruton cannot justify this view in explicit terms and this is why he has to outline the concept of national identity in the most attractive terms.

Scruton expresses a sense of intolerance when he criticises those that he defines as Oikophobes, or people with a mistrust of home, nation, or a sense of belonging. He comments: “Oikophobes define their goals and ideals against some cherished form of membership – against the family, the nation, indeed against anything that makes a claim, however justified on their loyalty. They promote transnational institutions over national governments, defining their political vision in terms of universal values that have been purged of all reference to the particular attachments of real historical communities. In their own eyes oikophobes are defenders of enlightened universalism against local chauvinism. And they view with alarm the rise of populist politicians who claim to speak for the people against the political class – an alarm abundantly illustrated in the reaction to the BREXIT vote.”(p89) This standpoint is a travesty of the truth. It ignores the honourable motives of the people who voted in favour of the UK remaining inside the EU, and who were primarily concerned about the economic situation if the UK left the EU. They were concerned about issues like employment and were not motivated by some dogmatic and irrational conception of universalism. Instead it was possible to hold progressive views about politics and yet still have concerns about the prospects for British society. In other words, they did not uphold a negative doctrine of rejection of anything that represented a sense of belonging to Britain. Instead they combined values of tolerance and internationalism together with a sense of belonging. In contrast, it was the supporters of the leave campaign who were more likely to be motivated by dislike of recent migrants to the UK. This tendency for xenophobia was combined with the type of nostalgia being promoted by people like Scruton.

However, it is necessary to also outline how internationalism and universalism is not opposed to a conception of belonging. Everyone has an attachment to the family because of biological necessity and the need for love by parents or a partner. This form of affection is connected to an attachment to the local community in which we are part of, and its welcome familiarity means that it become something that is reassuring and comforting. However, this does not mean that we also necessarily become uncritical defenders of the role of the nation. We may consider that the nation carries out morally unacceptable policies and that as a result it is necessary to oppose them. We may also conclude from this criticism that the only alternative to the political limitations of the nation is to oppose it in terms of elaborating a politics of internationalism. But this does not mean that we develop a dislike of the people who disagree with us within the nation. Instead we aim to win their support to our point of view, and in that manner to try and develop a majority opinion in favour of an internationalist approach. This task would be impossible if we denied our affinity with our fellow citizens in terms of rejection of a sense of belonging. Hence the people who express similarities with the concept of the Oikophobe is very small. Instead those of us who are internationalists try to obtain the support of the people for our universal political project. In this sense we engage in conservation with our fellow citizens in order to obtain their support. If we disliked people in British society because of an elitist mistrust of their apparent conservatism it would not be possible to carry out fruitful political dialogue with them. Thus, any sense of elitism on the part of an internationalist would be politically counterproductive. Therefore, because an internationalist is trying to persuade other people of the moral rightness of their standpoint they must have an inherent sense of the humanity of individuals within the nation. Any sense of superiority, as defined by Scruton, would be contrary to the aim of trying to persuade people to support the UK being within the EU. In this sense it would be wrong for an internationalist to have contempt of the customs and traditions of any group of people, but he would also suggest that any support for reactionary views would be opposed to the actual interests of the various people within the UK. Any hint of intellectual snobbery and contempt for any group within British society would not generate support for the internationalist and socialist aims of the supposedly Oikophobe.

Scruton contends that he has a constructive alternative to supposedly Oikophobia. This is the standpoint of inclusive patriotism: “What is needed, not in Britain only but throughout the Western democracies, is a serious attempt to achieve the kind of extended patriotism that will include as many as possible of those who are tempted in this way by the path of non-belonging.”(p90) But this apparent attempt at reconciliation of his conservative conception of belonging with the approach of dogmatic internationalism is not possible. Instead the only form of reconciliation that is both principled and feasible is one that is based on the genuine attempt to combine universalism with national concerns. This would mean rejection of the insular approach of Scruton and instead the adoption of a genuine syntheses that would be able to indicate how it was possible to combine internationalism with a sense of national belonging. But this would mean the development of what was principled and progressive politics which Scruton is against.

UNDERSTANDING NATIONAL IDENTITY PART TWO

Scruton contends that to oppose the conception of national identity is justified in terms of it being considered to be reactionary by advocates of progressive thought. But this is not the logical standpoint of what is means to be universalist and internationalist. Instead what is being contested is a reactionary and nostalgic conception of the character of the nation. What is being opposed is the view that the character of a nation can only be defined in terms of the approach of conservatism. This means the attributes of the nation cannot be reduced to being the expression of a reactionary understanding of belonging. Instead it is possible to connect the concept of identity with universalist and internationalist values. But Scruton would dispute this and instead reduce what is meant by belonging to a nostalgic standpoint located in a glorious past. But Marxists would dispute this approach and instead outline how the past was characterised by struggle and the striving of the people to develop their democratic rights. The past was not based on deference towards the rule of elites but was instead connected to the increasing progress of the exploited to acquire increasing rights and economic advances. But Scruton cannot outline a conception of the nation based on the role of class conflict and instead must outline a myth of a united people because of a mutual sense of belonging. This approach has to ignore the importance of the fact that it was mass struggle that enable the possibility of democratic rights to be realised. Hence his conception of a people united by rule of the monarchy is a myth that may have some relationship to reality, but it is still a one-sided approach. Instead the UK like all nations was characterised by the increasing importance of the role of economic and political conflict. In this manner the domination of the ruling class was never uncontested, and instead was subject to being contested by the development of mass unrest. In this manner the formation of communities was based on the expression of discontent and opposition to the domination of elites. Indeed this is how a sense of belonging was created, it was based on the sense of solidarity of the oppressed, who cooperated together in order to realise democratic rights and economic advances. The Russian revolution led to a popular realisation of the influence of Marxism and opposition to capitalism. Consequently, Scruton is actually projecting the present onto the past. He is recognising the development of popular nationalism within sections of the working class which has resulted in a sense of deference towards the ruling class and Conservative party. This development of popular nationalism is then projected back to the past in order to explain the history of a united UK. But this is a travesty of the truth. The promotion of popular nationalism is because of demoralisation within the contemporary working class caused by the advent of mass unemployment and prolonged austerity. The result has been resentment of affluence within newly migrant communities who are blamed for supposedly taking jobs from the indigenous population. The result of this resentment has been increasing support for an increasingly populist Conservative party and support for BREXIT. This situation is connected to a decline of support for the Labour party within the more demoralised sections of the working class. Therefore, Scruton can utilise these reactionary trends in order to project them onto the past. The result is the elaboration of a one-sided conception of a united UK based on a common sense of national identity. He outlines his standpoint in terms of the projection of the past onto the present, but in actuality he has elaborated a method based on projecting the present onto the past. The result of his reactionary conception of the present and past is to sustain a myth of a united nation. But increasingly this standpoint is being undermined by the social tensions of the present. The increasing problems of the NHS is resulting in demands for higher public expenditure, and the austerity politics of the Conservatives is being questioned. In this context Scruton is carrying out a task of trying to uphold the popularity of the Conservative government by considering its actions within the context of a nation united by a sense of belonging. But this standpoint is being increasingly contested in terms of growing support for the left wing politics of the contemporary Labour party. The result is that the perspective of a united nation is being shown to be a myth. But Scruton acts to try and uphold this myth.

Scruton also suggests that national identity must be connected to a sense of exclusion, and that there must be criteria to differentiate between one group and another. He argues: “A policy of complete inclusion, which repudiates every group identity, is a policy that does not recognize membership, and is therefore a policy for no conceivable community.”(p98-99) This point has validity to the extent that there will be distinct differences between groups because of reasons of class, ethnicity or religion. But this does not mean that it is impossible to develop aspects of what could be in common between the different groups. For example, Marxists aspire to unite different sections of the working class in order to strive for socialism, and it is possible to establish what is common between nations in terms of economic interests and the desire to realise international peace. In contrast, if the differences between distinct groups became the basis for tension and rivalry this would result in a situation of social disharmony and conflict within society. Instead of this possibility it is both progressive and feasible to try and realise what is in common between the different groups within society. For example it is the interests of white men to oppose the promotion of sexual and racial oppression. In other words, if there is unity within society it is far more feasible to oppose aspects of social injustice and discrimination. In contrast, Scruton seems to imply that he can only consider the feasibility of a situation of hostility between the different groups within society because he considers that this development is what it means to be part of the national identity of a country based on conservative values. But his standpoint also implies that he upholds the justification of a privileged position for particular groups as opposed to others. He implicitly assumes that white people should have a pre-eminent position within British society. It is this type of reactionary elitism that needs to be challenged, but it does not mean denying the distinctiveness and importance of the different groups within society, but what is being argued is that these differences are compatible and can be reconciled in terms of establishing aspects of a common interest. This means that the justification of separatism or divergent interests between groups is being rejected in terms of the establishment of a potential common programme to unite these distinct groups to strive for general improvements within society. In contrast, Scruton is defending the conception of a passive nation in which the various groups within society accepts its various limitations in the name of national identity.

His approach is based on a complacent view that the UK is a superior nation and only disgruntled and embittered people would attempt to change it. But the result of his approach is justification of limitations within society in the name of the traditions of the UK. But in order to defend this sense of the superiority of tradition and national identity he has to be opposed to change which is considered to be disorganising and based on the rejection of the importance of a sense of historical continuity. Hence change is defined as being effectively of an artificial character and based on the preoccupations of a disgruntled elite. Thus, he cannot recognise that the impetus for change may be because of profound structural limitations within society. Instead his romantic conception of the inherent goodness and superiority of the UK means that he is intransigently opposed to the suggestion that it should be improved. In this manner he mistrusts the coming together of the various groups within society in order to generate the possibility of its transformation. Instead he upholds the inherent conservatism and opposition to change that is supported by many traditional communities within the UK.

He contends that the opposition to a valid nostalgia is a conception of an abstract and universal world which has no sense of belonging. But this criticism of a progressive standpoint is a caricature of the aims and objectives of those that have serious questions to raise about the character of capitalist society in the UK. The point is that the advocates of change are not motivated by a dogmatic conception based upon an unreasonable hatred of existing society. Instead the perspective to improve society is based on recognition of genuine instances of injustice and oppression. Furthermore, this critique is motivated by reasoned reflection concerning the limitations of society and is based on the motivation to bring about definite and authentic improvement. Indeed, Scruton denies that his position is based on unthinking nostalgia. He comments: “Still the warnings against nostalgia have a point. It is right and dutiful to maintain a memory of home, and right to seek the way to rediscover it. But to live for a home that has been irretrievably lost is to live without hope or solace. And that is not to live at all. We need to take note of all the ways in which the world has changed, and in particular to avoid imposing on young people a vision of their country that corresponds to nothing in their experience, and which is rooted in a world that global forces have swept away. It is right to praise the virtues of a vanished world…But it is wrong to advocate that world as a real life possibility.”(p105) This view represents a major contradiction in Scruton’s approach. On the one hand he outlines an important appeal to the virtues of nostalgia and tradition, but on the other hand insists that his approach is also based on recognition of the importance of economic, political and cultural changes. This indicates that he accepts that it is not sufficient or adequate to merely outline a conception of the nation that is based on a yearning for the past. Instead he accepts that his approach has to be connected to a recognition of the importance of change. But what does this mean in practice? The point is that he has outlined in detail how he rejects the apparent standpoint of the justification of change for the sake of change, and this view is connected to a description of the traditional virtues of what it means to be British. Thus, his standpoint is situated in the glories of a past history, and so this would imply that change can only undermine the validity of this perspective. Yet, in an inconsistent manner he also pragmatically accepts that it is not adequate to reject the importance of change. But his apparent commitment to this recognition of change is immediately compromised by the fact that he rejects any sense of the decline of the UK. He considers that this standpoint is superficial and is based on impressions that cannot be substantiated. Instead what he wants to promote is the superficial view that change has only contributed to the economic and political greatness of the UK. Hence, he is trying to graft the role of the present and the future onto a conception of the glorious past. In this manner the conception of change becomes an integral part of the romantic notion of the UK which is still located in the great traditions of the past. His motto seems to be that Britain is still great. The point being made is that his commitment to the principle of change lacks convincing premises and arguments. Instead it is grafted onto the continued emphasis on the role of tradition and nostalgia. His motto is that the UK is still great. What is impressive about the present is not outlined in convincing detail. Instead he concludes: “For that reason, however, I am acutely aware conscious of the fact that place, and the networks that grow up in a place, are the heart of belonging.”(p110) Thus the importance of change is still entirely secondary when compared to the traditional connections of place and belonging. Indeed, it could be argued that he is effectively subsuming change within the limitations and premises of tradition and the sense of stability brought about by a sense of identity. He is effectively suggesting that change does not alter our sense of what and who we are. Thus, change becomes part of the importance of cultural heritage which has been established and developed in the glorious past. It is significant that Scruton cannot outline how and why change is of importance in relation to a sense of identity. Instead it is defined as an empty principle which is eclectically connected to an expression of national traditions. But in actuality, the position of Scruton is based on opposition to the principles of change. This is because genuine change is about improving society as with the introduction of the National Health Service. In contrast, Scruton cannot concretely support a programme of social justice. Instead change becomes merely an impression which is connected to his more coherent understanding of the traditions of national identity.

The conception of society which is upheld by Scruton is one that is based on the alienation of power from the citizen to the primary institutions of authority such as the legal system and Parliament. He comments: “The British idea of government has been founded on the conception that authority flows upwards, from the citizen, through the courts, to Parliament and the offices of the state, and not downwards from the sovereign to the citizen. Hence British people have the unshakeable belief that anyone who, in the hierarchy of decision making has power over others, is also accountable to those others for the way that power is exercised.”(p117) This conception of the traditional character of power in society is based on the rule of an elite who may defer to the citizens in terms of explaining their decisions as with the role of the House of Commons. But there is no suggestion that this situation is based on the exercise of the actual political power of the people. Instead the role of the people is to accept the wisdom of the elite and accept that they will rule in a moderate and wise manner. Hence, he also contends that the Labour government of 1945 acted against this approach and utilised an immoderate exercise of power in order to carry out their policies which was against the customs and traditions of the UK. Thus, according to the standpoint of Scruton the only type of government that is able to act in accordance with the conception of wise rule by the elite is one that is based on the acceptance of a conservative view of the nation. In this context he even considers that the moderate Blair government often acted in an immoderate manner. Therefore, he often considers that it is private associations that uphold the interests of British customs and the environment against the attempt to transform the situation by reforming governments in the name of change. The point being made is that Scruton’s conception of the system of government is that it should be based on the acceptance of tradition and the rule of law. Any attempt to implement radical measures should be rejected as being against the interests of the customs of the people of the UK. This means that he does not genuinely accept the possibility for a left-wing government to act in accordance with its electoral mandate. He obviously considers that the establishment of the welfare state expressed some distortions and undermining of the principles of national identity in terms of the role of nationalisation of sectors of the economy.

However, he would deny this criticism and claim that his approach is flexible. Thus: “National Assemblies and Parliaments can also adapt to changing circumstances, and their law too, although less flexible and more removed from the initiatives of the citizen, can answer to new problems as they arise. And if governments fail in this, they can be replaced at the next election.”(p127) But this standpoint is problematic because there is obviously some type of change that he considers to be abhorrent and should be opposed such as the membership of the EU by the UK. He considers that this type of change is against the interests of the UK and results in the imposition of EU legislation onto the institutions of the UK and results in social upheaval such as mass migration that undermines the social cohesion of the communities in the UK. Hence, he assumes that the only situation that is acceptable is one in which the UK is effectively self-sufficient and has limited migration and is able to act in accordance with its own laws passed by Parliament. Thus, he effectively rejects any form of association between the UK and other nations, especially those of the EU, as being opposed to the promotion of the national cohesion and identity of the UK. Hence his apparent support for the principle of economic, political and cultural change, is very limited. He justifies this narrow standpoint in terms of the view that the role of the EU has been to undermine the British sense of national identity because of mass migration and that the approach of the EU has been bureaucratic and authoritarian. But these apparent limitations of the EU would suggest that measures should be taken to improve its rules and approach and so does not require the drastic action of actually leaving the EU. But such an approach does not satisfy Scruton because he is only satisfied with leaving the EU because only in that sense can he uphold realisation of a traditional and self-sufficient conception of the UK. In contrast to this limited and static approach, a supporter of socialism would consider that the EU has progressive possibilities in terms of the creation of the potential for international trade and political co-operation. However, this possibility is undermined by the imposition of the narrow interests of capitalism, which has meant the imposition of an austerity regime in Greece. These limitations can be overcome by the perspective of trying to transform the EU into an international socialist organisation which would act more consistently in order to promote the role of an international economy in more effective terms. However, such a prospect would be abhorrent to Scruton. Indeed, his opposition to the EU is because he does consider it as an expression of bureaucratic socialism. Therefore, he wants to uphold the pristine and yet independent character of the UK in opposition to this expression of authoritarianism. The point being made is that his approach is based on an inherent opposition to any expression of internationalism, except in the limited form of cooperation between the UK and the USA, and the role of global trade. What he does not contemplate is that there can be any genuine cooperation between nations in order to perpetuate a condition of the self-imposed isolation of the UK in order to promote its sense of national identity. This is an anachronistic and regressive approach in a situation in which globalisation has undermined the importance of national self-sufficiency. However, he is only able to justify his standpoint in terms of vehement denunciations of the bureaucracy of the EU. But like all the other BREXITERS he has no valid or coherent conception of what the UK would be like outside of the EU. Instead he has to emphasise the glorious traditions of British history.

Scruton implies that the very freedom of thought of the British people is being undermined by an ideological conformity imposed by supporters of a progressive approach. But it has been the legislation of the elite that has generally undermined the principle of free expression. Scruton argues any principled supporter of a progressive approach would not be interested in the genuine expression of different ideas about society. But the supporters of a minority standpoint can only benefit if their views are seriously considered within the society of the UK. Instead the actual supporters of a stifling conformity are the proponents of conservatism. It is in this spirit that Scruton defends the principles of free speech. What he effectively means by it is the ability and capacity to promote his type of views without their being contested. Scruton comments: “Threats to free speech in our country do not stem from our national identity or our legal inheritance. On the contrary they come from minority factions that cannot easily live with those things and which for that reason are at the root of some of the problems we are now confronting. Free speech…..enables people who disagree over fundamental things to live together in a condition of mutual toleration.”(p134) This is a conception of free speech that can be supported. But we also have to ensure that this means that everyone is able to participate in the process of a mutual exchange of ideas. There should be no favoured groups and so those who have been silenced in the past, like women and oppressed minorities, should be able to voice dissatisfaction with the various limitations within society that undermine their ability to resolve their grievances. But instead of standpoint being assumed by Scruton, he is actually assuming that the views of traditional elites should not be contested in the name of the principles of free speech. In contrast, he considers that the articulation of the views of those less favoured within society is an expression of authoritarianism because it undermines the sense of conformity which he is upholding. Furthermore, the control of the press by a few rich and privileged people means that a sense of narrow conformity is being perpetuated. Scruton does not challenge this privileged situation because he knows that the right-wing press owners generally support his standpoint.

But Scruton is more concerned about what the situation will be like after BREXIT. He considers that what is important is regaining a sense of national sovereignty which has been undermined by the restrictions of the EU: “Reclaiming our national sovereignty means reclaiming the culture of accountability. And to think that this will jeopardize our economic performance, our trade relations or our ability to negotiate a place in the world is to fail to see what British freedom has really meant for us. It is precisely through the exercise of accountability that we can go most easily forwards, in economic relations as well as much as in ties of friendship and good-will. To re-establish the principles of accountability once again at the centre of political life is the take the first step to overcome the widespread sense of alienation from government, and to placing the people -both the rooted and mobile – where they need be at the centre of decisions that affect them.”(p139-140) This is an extreme justification of BREXIT which seems to be indifferent to its actual economic consequences. Instead what motivates Scruton is the perspective that what is important is the regaining of a sense of national belonging even if the economic consequences of this expression are uncertain. Thus, he does not discuss the possibility of dramatically reduced trade with the EU, or the fact that trade with the rest of the world may be uncertain. Furthermore, he is not motivated by the necessity to develop a post BREXIT Plan for the economic regeneration of the UK under these difficult circumstances. Instead his indifference to these important economic issues is because of his emphasis on the perspective that what is crucial is that the UK has been able to re-establish its sense of national identity. But this standpoint is an expression of indifference to the actual consequences of the UK leaving the EU. However, when it becomes apparent that the result of the UK leaving the EU will be adverse in terms of the effects on employment, and the standard of living there will be a tremendous recognition that a mistake has been made because of the detrimental influence of nationalist nostalgia. Scruton ignores this possibility because he is effectively subordinating his perspectives about the EU to the dogmatic certainties of nationalist sentiment. Hence, he is apparently indifferent to what will occur in economic terms when the UK leaves the EU after the initial transition period. The point that Scruton does not want to rationalise is that over 40% of the trade of the UK is with the EU. What will happen to this trade is uncertain because the UK will leave the Single Market and Customs Union as has been promised by the Conservative government. Scruton ignores the uncomfortable economic point because he is merely concerned with political and ideological concerns. He is only satisfied with the vague nation that the UK has regained its sense of sovereignty because of BREXIT. The problem with his standpoint is that it is based on an illusory notion that tries to ignore the important economic significance of the role of the EU and globalisation.

Scruton outlines the process of globalisation in terms of the influence of unaccountable institutions like the WTO and IMF, and the power of multinational companies who are able to move labour and capital in terms of their profit imperatives, and he also outlines the transnational character of the social network. But he cannot outline a constructive perspective of what this should mean in terms of developing a genuine criticism of globalisation apart from advocating the importance of a resurgence of support for national sovereignty. But how will this political sentiment be able to establish methods of control and supervision of the global economy in a progressive manner that is able to develop accountability of the process of globalisation by the people? The problem in the approach of Scruton is that he has a political standpoint that is not able to comprehend the character of economic processes like globalisation. The crucial aspect of this process is that it is about intensifying the domination of capital over labour in an international scale. The only genuine and effective alternative is to strive to develop an international economy that is based on the emancipation of the forces of labour. Obviously, Scruton cannot strive for this aim because it would represent the alternative of socialism that he is ideologically against. Instead in a vague and ambiguous manner he tries to establish a reconciliation of globalisation with the aims of national sovereignty. But what does this mean except as an expression of futile protest against globalisation. The point is that Scruton cannot establish a constructive and convincing programme of how globalisation can be regulated in the interests of the people because in the last analysis he supports capitalism. Thus, he is against any expression of a socialist alternative to globalisation. Instead he contends: “The search for identity, and the valuing of identity against global finance is likely to become the critical factor in national elections….What this will mean in the long run is anyone guess. But it is surely a sign that globalisation, even for the networked generation, is a force to be governed, not a command to be obeyed.”(p177-178) This perspective is unsatisfactory. What is being justified is a collection of vague sentiments rather than an analysis that is the basis of a definite strategy for transforming the character of globalisation. Indeed, his comments indicate that nationalism cannot provide a coherent and definite programme for the control and supervision of globalisation. Instead only international socialism is the basis of a convincing programme for the transformation of globalisation in a progressive manner that could emancipate the peoples of the world. In contrast the logic of nationalism is to promote the process of economic regression which would actually undermine the gains represented by globalisation.

Scruton argues that his position on the EU does not mean that he is denying the importance of the heritage of the European civilisation which has promoted the idea of national sovereignty, the rule of law and the role of the principles of a Christian civilisation. But what he is against is he implicit domination of the EU by the aims of Germany and this aspect is connected to the development of an alliance between France and Germany to dominate the EU. Scruton contends that if the UK leaves the EU it will be rejecting the domination of this alliance but this does not mean that the result will be the justification of isolation. Instead: “We must show that our newly regained independence does not mean turning our backs either on our European allies or on the global economy, that opportunities are as great outside the Union as within it, and that the benefits of leaving will outweigh the costs. To show this will involve radical and comprehensive policies, demanding a shared commitment to living together, and a reaching out to those for whom voting for BREXIT was a visceral response to decades of neglect and humiliation.”(p192-193) But this understanding does not outline in any definite and detailed manner how the UK economy could benefit from being outside the EU. Indeed, it could not establish this aspect in convincing detail. Instead in a vague and sentimental manner the only aspect that can be established is that being outside the EU will enhance the sense of national belonging. The problem is that an alienated sense of national identity will not resolve complex and increasingly urgent problems with the UK being outside of the EU. Instead the most urgent problem will become whether the UK can establish a satisfactory trading agreement with the EU despite being outside the single market and customs union. The fact that this policy is being contemplated by the Conservative government indicates the extent to which they are increasingly motivated by populist concerns rather than the interests of British capitalism. Indeed, this is the very type of dogmatic populism being upheld by Scruton. But the result of this approach can only be to intensify the problem of an uncertain economic situation for the EU when it finally leaves the EU. The point being made is that there is an obvious economic contradiction between the logic of the populist approach of Scruton and the interests of the British economy. The result is the problem of declining trade and rising unemployment in the name of a sense of national belonging. Scruton tries to deny the importance of this point by suggesting that the UK can gain from the advantages represented by its service economy and by enhancing trade with other countries. But the point is that these prospects are uncertain, and do not necessarily overcome the apparent problem of the fact that the UK will no longer have a guaranteed market for its goods, which was the role of the UK. Furthermore, the service economy of the UK benefitted from the UK being part of the EU. The point being made is that definite economic advantages will be ended and the prospects of new countries to trade with is not guaranteed. This issue could be resolved if the UK government was determined to continue its relationship with the EU single market and customs union, but because of the influence of the BREXIT supporters this is not its policy. Hence in the name of national sovereignty tremendous economic problems will be created by the UK leaving the EU. Scruton tries to gloss over these problems in the name of the principle of national sovereignty.

The major problem with the approach of Scruton is the emphasis on the standpoint of voluntarism. In other words he ignores the importance of economics in order to uphold the importance of cultural and political traditions. This means that he does not carry out an extensive or serious analysis of the economic consequences of the UK no longer being part of the EU. Nor does he outline any serious methodology for understanding the influence of globalisation on the character of the UK economy. Instead he considers that the EU and globalisation are essentially an intrusion that undermines the national identity of the UK. Thus, the only logical conclusion is to suggest that the UK should separate itself from the EU and have only the most modest relationship to globalisation. He does not recognise that this approach is untenable. Instead a developed economy like the UK can only thrive if it is connected closely to the EU, and is an integral aspect of a globalised world. But Scruton rejects the validity of these arguments and instead contends that it is possible to develop an economy based on small scale agriculture and rejection of the importance of migrant labour from the EU. He comments: “In the debates prior to the Brexit referendum, the experts came forward to warn the people of the threatened economic catastrophe, and the Confederation of British Industry was prominent among them, telling the voters that the Single Market is indispensable to our prosperity. Many voters, however, were persuaded of only one thing which is that the single market was of benefit to the CBI. When a large business outsources its labour supply to a foreign country, so that its product is brought in from abroad, the local workers lose their jobs. That is bad, but at least the person who has lost his job has no knowledge of the one who has taken it from him. When, however, it is the workforce rather than the product that is imported, and established in the heart of the community whose jobs it has taken, the community suffers an altogether new kind of humiliation.”(p202-203) This is a demagogic criticism of capitalism and its utilisation of migrant labour. The point is that it is not resentment of migrants that will defend and maintain jobs and social conditions. Instead what results from resentment of migrants is only a futile situation of divide and rule. What will be of benefit for both indigenous workers and migrants is a united struggle to defend jobs and conditions. This means the promotion of the importance of trade union organisation and the development of militant action against the domination of the employers. But this is not what is being advocated by Scruton. Instead he approves of the national chauvinist animosity by indigenous workers towards migrants. He considers that this approach of divide and rule is integral to his perspective of national belonging. He seems to advocate treating migrants as unwanted outsiders and in this manner is advocating an intolerant and exclusive type of society. This is the logical and practical conclusion of his nostalgic and inward conception of national belonging. In contrast genuine socialists would argue that the interests of indigenous workers are best advanced in terms of the promotion of principled internationalism and the principle of workers of all countries uniting to defend conditions and interests. Therefore, disunity can only contribute to increasing the power of the forces of capital over labour. In contrast, Scruton proposes an illusory form of national capitalism in which workers and capitalists can establish a common sense of purpose, and there would be controlled immigration based on the establishment of agreements with other countries. This standpoint is an anachronism which ignores the modern creation of an international economy in which there are constant tendencies for immigration and movement of labour. In this inter-connected world economy - rather than trying to establish a reactionary utopia of national capitalism - it would be more realistic and progressive to advocate the promotion of trade union rights for all workers. In this manner it would be possible to defend and further the interests of both indigenous and migrant workers. But Scruton is indifferent to the actual interests of the workers, despite his false sympathy for indigenous workers. Instead his major criticism is of the EU for allowing free movement of labour and so undermining the sense of national identity within the UK. Scruton is supportive of a policy of developing and encouraging the role of apprenticeships and the creation of a skilled workforce. But the point is that this development cannot be realised in terms of an overall perspective of rejecting the importance of the global economy in the name of a national sense of belonging. Instead only the influence of the trade unions can encourage the realisation of a policy of encouraging the development of apprenticeships and the formation of a more skilled workforce.

Scruton outlines an economic programme based on decreasing reliance on globalisation and increased investment in the neglected Northern areas of the UK. He also advocates increased attention to the interests of the rural areas and tackling environmental issues. These issues are not without importance, but the point is how can they be resolved? The point is that a sense of national isolation is not the answer. This standpoint is as illusory and reactionary as Stalin’s policy of so-called socialism in one country. What is required in order to develop a balanced economic policy that tackles the issue of economic inequality, and is able to tackle rural neglect, is the realisation of socialism. In that manner it would be possible to develop an economic policy that was genuinely based on the interests of people within the UK, but this would not mean the justification of an insular policy that attempted to isolate the UK from the rest of the world. Instead the UK would attempt to establish close relations with the people of other countries in order to promote an internationalist conception of a society based on social justice. This process would mean that it would be possible to reconcile the sense of national belonging with wider internationalist perspectives that would aim to improve the situation within the world. In contrast, Scruton attempts to uphold a regressive view of what the UK was in the past and attempts to impose it on the present. This an illusory and naïve conception that is unable to tackle the tasks posed by the modern world. Instead of this nostalgia for a UK that never was possible it would be more imaginative and progressive to strive to improve the present in terms of the most innovative and feasible policies.

Scruton summarises his standpoint in the following terms: “Our leaving the European Union does not mean that we are leaving Europe. It is we, the nation states, who have adopted and refined the practice of accountable citizenship, who have established our borders and embellished our national homes with cities, institutions, laws and landscapes that gather our people around a shared sense of belonging. And that represents the true European ideal. We in Britain are not without our problems; we suffer from tensions of class and ethnicity that often threaten to divide our loyalties; we have suffered from spiritual and cultural decline from losing our religion. But those problems are problems for all communities in the contemporary world, and do not erase the greatest asset that we have, which is our civil society. The British people remain bound to each other by ties of mutual responsibility and social trust, and these bonds have been strengthened by recent troubles. For our ties are not the creation of shallow agreements or passing whims, but they belong to our way of being, in the place where we are.”(p226-227) This comment begins with a commitment to a European community not in terms of the institution of the EU but instead because of a shared sense of national belonging. This aspect of what it means to be human cannot be denied, but its importance can be interpreted in either a reactionary or progressive manner. Scruton supports the reactionary approach in terms of a conception of what it is to be a nation that is established in the past, and which he aspires to perpetuate in the present. But this standpoint means that he is indifferent or opposed to aspects of modernity which he dislikes or believes are responsible for undermining a sense of national cohesion. But the problem is that his approach justifies an anachronistic standpoint that tries to deny the importance of progress and change. Instead of this nostalgic approach we should attempt to connect what we mean by national belonging to the process of the transformation of the world economy. However, this perspective is not recognition of change in an uncritical manner but instead is aware that it is possible for humans to control this process of transformation in terms of the interests of the people of the UK and internationally. There is an alternative to being a supporter of either a nostalgic concept of the nation or alternatively uncritically accepting capitalism. This is the standpoint of international socialism.