

Scruton, Roger (Ed.): *Conservative Thinkers: Essays from "The Salisbury Review"*.

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These two volumes present usually intelligent political and philosophical essays from a periodical which is clearly by no means as rigidly right-wing as Anglo-Saxon Academe fames it. The first volume, *Conservative Thinkers*, is of little direct use to students of matters Czechoslovak and central European. One exception would be the ingenious essay on Hegel by the editor where one is persuaded of the importance of the German as a creative conservative philosopher. Otherwise, when considering central European history and politics, one might find here useful stimuli on problems like corporate or collective guilt (pp. 11, 116–118), moral relativism (pp. 157, 263) and prejudice as a virtue (pp. 81 and 136). This volume needs a subject index.

That is also true of the second volume, *Conservative Thoughts*, which contains two essays by Czechs, "Totalitarian Language" by Petr Fideľius and "Politics and Conscience", Václav Havel's address to Toulouse University when he received an honorary doctorate *in absentia*. Fideľius's piece reflects the fixation with Truth which has marked Czech writing particularly over the last twenty years. Fideľius writes rather banally of the impossibility of attaining a "uniform, all-embracing truth" and melodramatically states that we are "buried beneath the rubble of fragmentary half-truths" (p. 42). Fideľius considers that the source of totalitarian thinking lies in the "violent unification of truth" (p. 43), and one presumes he is including various Christian missionary activities as well as Nazism and Communism. No one would argue with Fideľius that the way a limited number of Marxist-Leninist writers, usually in senior or influential positions, write about the "real truth", "the only truth" and so forth is irksome or foolish, to say the least. The trouble is that Fideľius claims that we would all "dearly like to separate truth from falsehood [...] for good", which seems to me a barely tenable supposition. Fideľius's point that totalitarian propaganda's method of persuasion tends to rest on informing the recipient simply that there are only two alternatives, is well made (p. 47 f.), but hardly original. He omits the essential element of either-or propaganda: initially decency forces the recipient to accept the premise of the propagator's statement.

Havel's essay or address, "Politics and Conscience", is fairly well-known and it is not one of his strongest, though, as usual, he chooses an impressive central image, here the smoke-belching chimney. It is a cry against mindless modernisation, which might indeed be a conservative thought, but it is also a liberal thought. His statement that Western civilisation is far more threatened by itself than by Soviet missiles (p. 197) would certainly be accepted by most liberals and conservatives, and indeed socialists. Havel's messianic dissidentism ("I cannot avoid the impression that many people in the West still understand little of what is actually at stake in our time" p. 195) high-

lights the main weakness of the whole Charter 77 group and its associates. Havel actually uses the concept "salvation" (p. 194). Messianism has almost never brought anything but evil to the world.

Other essays in this volume which one would expect to have a bearing on the studies pursued by specialists on central Europe, are disappointing. For example, Sally Shreir's "The Politics of Language" is uninformed nonsense; Shreir is clearly still under the influence of Fichtean mythology when she writes things like "national identity is founded on natural emotions and natural allegiances" (p. 31). Wolfgang Grassl and Barry Smith's essay on Austria-Hungary, "The Politics of National Diversity", is muddled and idealising, although here the basic conception of nation, nationhood and nation-state are understood. It is ludicrous to repeat the flimsy legend of some great Renaissance culture at Matthias Corvinus's court (p. 104). It is misleading to imply that the mass nobilities of Poland and Hungary were the same thing as the nobility of the Austrian Crown Lands (p. 105), and it is certainly not altogether true that the Western Powers disliked Austria-Hungary from the turn of the century onwards (cf. Wickham Steed's memoirs, for example). The authors have two theories to explain the cultural creativity which emerged from Austria-Hungary in the *Fin-de-siècle*: 1. the old theory which they do not claim as theirs – that innovation arose as a result of "the stimulatory consequences of decay and political collapse" (p. 112) and 2. that innovation arose in the cultural centres of Cracow, Lemberg, Prague and Vienna "because they enjoyed the peculiar benefits of a supranational order" (p. 108). The authors go some way towards explaining that second theory on the basis of the notions of Gestalt-psychology.

The general reader will sometimes be annoyed by the sloppiness of essays in *Conservative Thinkers* and *Conservative Thoughts*, but on the whole they do read well and offer stimulating ideas, for example Anthony O'Hear on "Education Beyond Present Desire", Joanna North on "The Politics of Forgiveness", R.A.D. Grant on "The Politics of Death" and Mark le Fanu on "George Santayana".