

Conservatism

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Abstract: Conservatism is a political ideology which problematizes change, resists modernity and values stability, tradition and order. It emerged in the Enlightenment (often in reaction to it), in the work of Hume, Montesquieu, Madison and Burke, but its roots go back to Ancient Greek scepticism.

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Conservatism is a political ideology which problematizes change, resists modernity and values stability, tradition and order. It rejects individualism, and focuses instead on the health of society and its institutions. Conservative ideas often intersect with the politics of religion. In many cases conservatives highlight venerable religious institutions as paradigm cases of stabilising elements threatened by innovation and social change in society. Equally, they can be suspicious of multiculturalism and other forms of internationalism that dilute the importance of place and delegitimise the privileging of a particular culture.

The content of conservatism is a matter of discussion and dispute. For example, (Kirk 1982: xv-xviii) suggests that conservatives (largely) agree that: (i) there is a transcendent (religious) moral order; (ii) social continuity is preferable to rapid, radical or revolutionary change; (iii) immemorial usage and tradition is preferable to rationalism and new ideas; (iv) political action should be prudent and cautious; (v) variety and diverse sources of value are better than universal systems of rights, morals or politics; and (vi) people are morally and epistemologically imperfect. (Muller 1997: 9-22) gives a similar set of tenets, but argues that although the social utility of religion as a set of structures and institutions is important, the radicalising tendency of religious 'enthusiasm' is regrettable. (O'Hara 2011: 190-201) argues that when religious traditions are co-opted by conservatives, their arguments are no longer accessible to public reason, and cannot appeal outside the tradition.

As well as historical studies of conservative thinkers in context, there are more philosophical approaches. (Oakeshott 1991) locates conservatism's core in a rejection of rationalist planning. (O'Hara 2011) argues that if conservatism is considered as a consistent problematisation of change whose arguments are open to public reason, it is best seen as an epistemological ideology. Its major tenets can be derived from the *knowledge principle*, that society is too complex to understand and model accurately, and the *change principle*, that any change to society must be understood as inherently risky, so there should be a high burden of proof on an innovator to show that existing institutions will not be damaged by change.

Broadly speaking, conservatives argue that rationalists overestimate both the problems of existing societies (Scruton 2010) and their ability to do anything about them (Oakeshott 1991). Critics reply that conservatism is at best pessimistic and timid (Hayek 1960: 397-411, Hirschman 1991), and at worst a means to protect vested interests and rent-seekers from social progress and justice (Honderich 2005). For instance, John Randolph (1773-1833) and John C. Calhoun (1782-1850) used essentially conservative arguments in the antebellum Southern United States to defend its social arrangements, including the practice of slavery (Kirk 1985: 150-184).

As an ideology concerned with change, the content of conservatism will be different across different societies – in other words, it is a *positional* ideology (Huntington 1957). Conservatism is often linked directly with the history and geography of a particular territory (Scruton 2012: 209-252). A policy may exhibit continuity in one society, but may be an innovation elsewhere. However, this entails that conservatives from different societies may wish to protect different things.

Conservatism is also often wrongly conflated with free-market neo-liberalism (although in practice, conservatives and neo-liberals often band together against common enemies). Yet neo-liberal certainty about free markets' superiority in allocating resources is inconsistent with conservative scepticism and imperfectionism (Gray 1995: 87-119, O'Hara 2011: 211-234). Free markets, with their lack of central control, are certainly part of the conservative toolkit, but can disrupt social stability; neo-liberals who valorise Adam Smith's (1723-1790) theory of the market often neglect his sophisticated social philosophy (Muller 1993).

Furthermore, because of its journalistic use in quotidian politics, 'conservative' has become an ambiguous term, whose political meaning is increasingly synonymous with 'right wing'. In the United Kingdom, the largest political party of the right is the Conservative Party (which on many occasions has supported radical policies). In the United States, 'conservative' is a catch-all to denote those opposed to 'liberals' (another abused ideological term). In many accounts of Islamic fundamentalism, people whose views are nothing short of revolutionary are called 'conservative' (presumably because they hark back to laws and customs formulated several centuries ago).

These various ambiguities encourage hostile commentators to detect incoherence or inconsistency, and to demonise conservatism by focusing on its perceived failings. Political scientist Robert Eccleshall claims its purpose is to preserve inequalities (Eccleshall 2003: 54-55), while philosopher Ted Honderich goes so far as to argue that "organized selfishness is the rationale of [conservatives'] politics, and they have no other rationale" (Honderich 2005: 302). Such extreme views can be undercut if we are alert to the unhelpful use of the label 'conservative' to refer to neo-liberals or right-wingers indiscriminately.

Conservatism as a self-conscious view first appeared in the Enlightenment (sometimes but not always in reaction against it). Even some of the political philosophers of the early Enlightenment, such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704), worked to preserve relationships of authority and rights of property. David Hume's (1711-1776) scepticism implied that custom and habit were at least as effective as abstract reasoning, while his notion of 'sympathy', like Adam Smith's idea of the 'impartial observer' providing an internal moral compass, widened the scope of moral reasoning from the individual, and socialised it.

Montesquieu's (1689-1755) *The Spirit of the Laws* (1747) was a discussion of how a constitution might preserve freedom while restricting radical and dangerous change. This proved highly influential during the American Revolution, and its spirit is detectable not only in *The Federalist Papers* (1788) of James Madison (1751-1836) and others, but also in the American Constitution itself, which is designed to promote prudent discussion and compromise, and inhibit the ability of a majority to impose partisan change. Indeed, the Constitution still functions well when its politicians reject partisan entrenchment.

Meanwhile, the radical ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) were absorbed by the French Revolutionaries, and the events of 1789 prompted the publication of the most influential and representative conservative text, Edmund Burke's (1729-1797) *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). The Revolution was a key reference point; after its consolidation, conservatism diminished into the pessimism of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), the reaction of Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), and the futile politicking of the counter-Enlightenment (McMahon 2001). Still, conservatives like to contrast the French Revolution (lots of bloodshed, descent into imperialism within a decade) with its American equivalent (relatively peaceful, with a lasting settlement to the present day).

Despite its emergence in the Enlightenment, the conservative intuition dates back much further, and is strongly connected with philosophical or epistemological scepticism (Popkin 2003), from Sextus Empiricus (c.160-210) to Montaigne (1533-1592). Later conservative thinkers include Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), George Santayana (1863-1952), Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990), Russell Kirk (1918-1994) and Roger Scruton (b.1944). Writers of a conservative disposition include James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) and T.S. Eliot (1888-1965). (Kirk 1982) and (Muller 1997) are useful anthologies, while (Kirk 1985) is the most comprehensive and readable history.

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