

What Conservatives Value: Reply to Blackburn

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Abstract

In reply to Dean Blackburn's 'In the Shadows', it is argued that the situated nature of the conservative ideology entails that its adherents cannot have a substantive set of shared values, but that their values will typically be a cultural inheritance. The epistemological element of conservatism may not be the most electorally salient in any concrete context, but has strategic value as the common element of conservatism most likely to support a public reason defence.

Keywords

conservatism, epistemology, ideology, value

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If we take the dictionary definition of 'conservatism' seriously, as the problematisation of change, then it has to be a situated ideology (Huntington, 1957), because the nature of the changes to be attacked and the institutions to be preserved will necessarily vary across contexts. If conservatism has any common core, then it can only be its appraisal of the risks of change. In my own work, I boiled this down to two principles:

The knowledge principle: because society and its mediating institutions are highly complex and dynamic with natures that are constantly evolving as they are co-constituted with the individuals who are their members, both data and theories about society are highly uncertain (O'Hara, 2011: 49–50).

The change principle: because the current state of society is typically undervalued, and because the effects of social innovations cannot be known fully in advance, then social change (a) must always risk destroying beneficial institutions and norms and (b) cannot be guaranteed to achieve the aims for which it was implemented. It therefore follows that societies should be risk-averse with respect to social change, and the burden of proof placed on the innovator, not his or her opponents (O'Hara, 2011: 88).

Neither will deliver conservatism on its own, jointly they are sufficient, and I refer to their combination as *kp + cp*. Note that these are general epistemological arguments that demand

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a response from rationalist social engineers, not dependent upon the conservative's specific nationalistic, social, political and religious convictions, standards and value-frame.

Viewed this way, argues Dean Blackburn (2021), 'conservatism can only supply its own justification by reaching beyond its own resources of reason'. Indeed – but he says it like it is a bad thing. Deciding which institutions, traditions, practices and values are to be defended against rationalist social engineering will involve analysis external to kp + cp.

To see how kp + cp interacts with culturally inherited values, let us begin by contrasting the following four conservatives:

- A likes things as they are, an existing value conservative (Cohen, 2011). If he has political power, he can prevent change, although not necessarily democratically.
- B is like A, but additionally believes her value-frame is a social good. If there is a social consensus behind it, its supporters may achieve power. In a plural democracy, they will struggle to convince dissenters.
- C actively wants to campaign for his value-frame. He uses it to persuade the like-minded, while kp + cp gives him public reason resources to persuade dissenters.
- D wants to form a Conservative Party. She need not abandon her value-frame, but she may have to compromise on it, because her party must develop a common position on what to preserve and why. kp + cp will be part of its strategy, as will the aggregated value-frame. The value-frame is the unique selling point that excites the activists; the value of kp + cp is instrumental.

Only C and D need public reason principles, because they want to persuade others with different value-frames, and the reasoned anti-rationalist stance kp + cp plays that role (A and B are also anti-rationalists, but do not need to articulate it). Conservatism is thus a style of argument, a cast of mind, not a set of values. C and D are chiefly motivated by their own value-frames. Their conservatism depends, inter alia, on how their value-frames are embedded in their society.

To see this, let us invent three more people, E, F and G. To understand their attachment to conservatism, we need to make them less abstract. Let us give them a Catholic value-frame, so they have some history and a predisposition to take past experience seriously (nothing hangs on the choice of this specific value-frame). Let us give them something to worry about: they want to defend Catholic orthodoxy on abortion.

Let us put E in Ireland in April 2018, and F and G in England at the same time. This is during the Irish abortion referendum campaign, so E wants to campaign. She can argue within her value-frame that it is a dreadful sin, which will be persuasive for some in what is still a Catholic country. But the majority resists. She needs public reason arguments to spread the word further, and kp + cp provides them: 'We have prohibited abortion here for the life of the Republic, social cohesion depends on it, our national identity, we don't know the unintended consequences, etc. etc'. She espouses her Catholic views, and is a conservative precisely because she has them.

F, in England, has no conservative resources to draw upon. Abortion has been legal for 50-odd years, so all he can do is to repeat arguments from within his value-frame, which may make common cause with some others (e.g. evangelicals), but are not going to make an impression on most people. If he does happen to achieve his aims and bans abortion, then it is a massive reactionary social change.

Reactionary change is unconservative, as Blackburn points out in his discussion of Burke, but there may be a window of conservative opportunity to restore (some of) the

value put at risk by change. Burke was justified in making that assumption, especially given his framing of the Revolution in the wider context of a royalist continental Europe. However, by, say, the 1820s, a counter-Enlightenment restoration would clearly have been a radical, unconservative change, as the revolution's innovations had bedded in for a generation. One could then defend the revolutionary settlement with conservative arguments, if one had a mind to.

Could F claim to be a conservative, if he also accepts the force of $kp + cp$? 'If a conservative inhabits a social order that they dislike, they will be compelled to innovate in order to change'. Yes – possibly. Conservatism is risk management, innovation is a risk. But doing nothing is a risk as well. Where a society falls short of the conservative's values, change may be needed, with a more or less heavy heart. And 'in order for an actor to assess risk, they must make value judgements about the status quo'. Yes, but why is that a problem, as long as the 'argument for innovation [is], according to the change principle, . . . subjected to a greater burden of proof' (all quotes from Blackburn, 2021)?

This will be a matter of conservative judgement. A historical example: when Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, Britain was 'the sick man of Europe' on several measures. For the sake of argument, let us assume Thatcher was an unconservative Hayekian iconoclast, but even so the option of a radical, change-focused government introducing sound money, repairing the public finances, taking on the unions and facing down social resistance, could and did appeal to conservatives disgusted and embarrassed by the state of the nation. Some conservatives, like Norman St John Stevas and Sir Ian Gilmour, ultimately opposed it. Others, such as Willie Whitelaw and Lord Carrington, thought the radical programme met the higher threshold dictated by cp . Still others, such as James Prior, tried to intervene to ameliorate its more divisive effects. All three reactions were authentically conservative. The Thatcher government succeeded in its own terms, and so Whitelaw et al look better in conservative history, but without the Falklands, say, it might have gone the other way and Gilmour would have been the hero.

Finally, although G is a Catholic, she is also persuaded independently of $kp + cp$. She regrets much about the society she lives in, but accepts that she has not the legitimacy to impose her views. Britain has its institutions and norms, and they are important for making society legible to its citizens (O'Hara, 2021). There is a risk in changing these, and G accepts the fact graciously. Her conservatism is tested by her dislike of some aspects of modern-day Britain, especially legal abortion, but she is enough of one to lump it.

Are there any limits to the societies amenable to conservative defence? Blackburn posits 'a socialist state that has survived for several centuries'. An unlikely scenario but there would be conservative defences of it. The conservative 'could not condone the status quo on the ground that the state's authority was derived from . . . rationalist theories'. No indeed, she would condone it on the ground that the state functioned and delivered goods for its population; the rationalist foundation is neither here nor there. cp would also dictate 'that the burden of proof would be on the innovator who wished to change it' (all quotes from Blackburn, 2021). Yep.

What about a society in which innovation was prized? Maybe they change all laws every third Tuesday? If the society has been around for a long time, and appears to function, with happy people and a high standard of living and no obvious injustice or evils, then it can be defended conservatively. Let us keep innovating and changing the laws! In advance, the conservative thinks it a rubbish idea (for good reasons grounded in $kp + cp$, although kp also tells her she cannot be certain), but the proof of the political pudding is always, always, in the historical eating.

kp, Blackburn notes, relies on a theory of the world. Indeed – that modern societies are highly networked and complex, with emergent macro-scale properties which are intrinsically hard to predict from individual micro-level interventions. Nevertheless, ‘the knowledge principle can only stipulate that the social order is not easily understood’ (Blackburn, 2021) – sure, but there are good, public, epistemological reasons to believe it.

Blackburn raises the possibility of a simple, intelligible society. It is unlikely, but the social engineer’s argument would indeed be stronger there (and the mistake that rationalists tend to make is that they persuade themselves that full-scale modern societies *are* simple and intelligible enough to be encompassed in their Powerpoint presentations). But a persisting society that is genuinely simple enough to falsify kp is probably going to be quite conservative anyway, since a constantly and rapidly innovating yet simple society is unlikely to be resilient to exogenous shocks (kp made me insert the words ‘probably’ and ‘unlikely’ in that sentence).

Conservatism is a situated ideology. It follows that conservatives do not have anything in common except their aversion to change, although I believe that kp + cp does express a common thread justifying that aversion connecting many conservative thinkers. But while we might see it as a kind of ‘essence’ of conservatism, it need not be what gets real-world conservatives excited when they do their politics.

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