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Course code: POL 202

Course title: POLITICAL IDEAS

Assignment:

In not more than five (5) Pages discuss and evaluate the idea of conservatism.

Whether conservatism is understood as the ideological articulation of a reactionary tendency to defend establishment and social privilege or merely a prudent manifestation of risk aversion and scepticism towards grand schemes for improving society, it has coalesced into a body of thought inseparable from the question of how to manage change. As emphasised in a recent study by O’Hara (2011), conservatives do not simply reject and resist all forms of change in social, political and economic arrangements of any given society. Instead they accept that change is inevitable and have articulated a distinct approach to identifying and understanding circumstances in which change might contribute to resolving contradictions and discord in existing arrangements. In doing so, conservatives aim to aid in the preservation of institutions and practices, rather than rendering them unviable and thus tearing them asunder by rejecting any change at all. As O’Sullivan (1976: 9) puts it in his introduction to the ‘philosophy of imperfection’:

**Conservatism as an ideology, then, is characterized in the first instance, by opposition to the idea of total or radical change, and not by the absurd idea of opposition to change as such, or by any commitment to preserving all existing institutions**

Conservatism in a broad sense, as a social attitude, has always existed. It expresses the instinctive human fear of sudden change, and tendency to habitual action. Cecil, for instance, contrasts “modern Conservatism” with the “natural conservatism” from which it arises and depends on, found “in almost every human mind” (Cecil, 1912: 8). The arch-royalist and anti-populist Earl of Clarendon, writing the history of the 17th century English Civil War soon after it happened, was instinctively conservative in this broader, un-self-conscious sense. Thus Beiser contrasts the “conservatism [that] had always existed in Germany as a social attitude”, with a self-conscious conservatism that developed as a social force in the 1790s, opposed to the Aufklärung or Enlightenment, and in reaction to the French Revolution (Beiser 1992: 281). “Self-conscious” here means not merely implicit in behaviour, but consciously avowed, and ascribed to others. The most distinctive and historically important version of this narrower, self-conscious conservatism rests on scepticism concerning reason in politics.

**Forms of conservatism**

* Liberal conservatism
* Conservative liberalism
* Libertarian conservatism
* Fiscal conservatism
* National and traditional conservatism
* Cultural and social conservatism
* Religious conservatism
* Paternalistic conservatism
* Authoritarian conservatism

**History of conservatism**

Conservatism was founded in different countries but the main focus in this paper is Great Britain.

In Great Britain, conservative ideas (though not yet called that) emerged in the Tory movement during the Restoration period (1660–1688). Toryism supported a hierarchical society with a monarch who ruled by divine right. Tories opposed the idea that sovereignty derived from the people and rejected the authority of parliament and freedom of religion. Robert Filmer's Patriarcha: or the Natural Power of Kings (published posthumously in 1680, but written before the English Civil War of 1642–1651) became accepted as the statement of their doctrine. However, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 destroyed this principle to some degree by establishing a constitutional government in England, leading to the hegemony of the Tory-opposed Whig ideology. Faced with defeat, the Tories reformed their movement, now holding that sovereignty was vested in the three estates of Crown, Lords and Commons rather than solely in the Crown. Toryism became marginalized during the long period of Whig ascendancy in the 18th century.

Conservatives typically see Richard Hooker (1554–1600) as the founding father of conservatism, along with the Marquess of Halifax (1633–1695), David Hume (1711–1776) and Edmund Burke (1729–1797). Halifax promoted pragmatism in government whilst Hume argued against political rationalism and utopianism.[55][56] Burke served as the private secretary to the Marquis of Rockingham and as official pamphleteer to the Rockingham branch of the Whig party. Together with the Tories, they were the conservatives in the late 18th century United Kingdom. Burke's views were a mixture of liberal and conservative. He supported the American Revolution of 1765–1783, but abhorred the violence of the French Revolution (1789–1799). He accepted the liberal ideals of private property and the economics of Adam Smith (1723–1790), but thought that economics should remain subordinate to the conservative social ethic, that capitalism should be subordinate to the medieval social tradition and that the business class should be subordinate to aristocracy. He insisted on standards of honor derived from the medieval aristocratic tradition and saw the aristocracy as the nation's natural leaders. That meant limits on the powers of the Crown, since he found the institutions of Parliament to be better informed than commissions appointed by the executive. He favored an established church, but allowed for a degree of religious toleration. Burke justified the social order on the basis of tradition: tradition represented the wisdom of the species and he valued community and social harmony over social reforms. Burke was a leading theorist in his day, finding extreme idealism (either Tory or Whig) an endangerment to broader liberties and (like Hume) rejecting abstract reason as an unsound guide for political theory. Despite their influence on future conservative thought, none of these early contributors were explicitly involved in Tory politics. Hooker lived in the 16th century, long before the advent of toryism, whilst Hume was an apolitical philosopher and Halifax similarly politically independent. Burke described himself as a Whig.