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**DEPARTMENT:INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY**

**Question: in not more than five(5) pages, discuss and evaluate the idea of conservatism**

**Abstract**

*Conservatism is a notoriously protean word among contemporary political ideas and ideologies. Not only is its tenet diversified among its various versions, but also its usage as an analytical terminology differs sharply among scholars. Some take it as a set of political tenets, some simply as an attitude to be found in any society in any time when it comes to be jeopardized. The word “conservatism” was coined in the early nineteenth century, and its meaning remained relatively stable until the end of the century by being associated with the names of the political parties of the then-declining aristocracy. The proliferation of its meaning grew with the progress of the twentieth century. Despite such varieties, however, it is possible to describe the common features of diverse conservative ideologies by assuming a hypothetical pure conservative. They are:preference for things long existed, positive acceptance of the multiplicity of human institutions and customs, emphasis on prudence as the essence of the activity of politics, and a detached attitude toward history. By and large, all of the various versions of conservatism from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries can be classified into three types, i.e., cynic, teleologist, and evolutionist conservatisms. These three share commonly the disposition and beliefs of a pure conservative, particularly their preference for things long existed, but they differ from each other about the cognitive reasons for their arguments.*

*Conservatism is rarely abstract, merely reactive or inertial. Usually it has something behind it, some ideal that is not simply holding on to what one has. This ideal is not an abstract value, or an expectation of deliverance from history or in history. Conservatives look back- wards, not forwards, and so look to the very traditions which liberalism and socialists put into question. This is why they are less securely secular than liberals or socialists. Even if a conservative is not religious, he tends to respect religion. Unlike the liberal or the socialist, who attempts to liberate man from tradition, the conservative seeks no libera- tion from tradition. He has a criterion which is an extension of the original criterion, but which is extended so far that it appears to require the restoration of a traditional order, even religious order, which, according to the criterion, cannot be restored. Or, to put it another way, the conservative has to accept the existence of an order that emerged from a revolution he could never have sanctioned at the time.Conservatism expects far less of the future or even the present than does liberalism or socialism because even when it is not religious, it locates eschatology in, and only in, religion. The oddity of conservatism has to be emphasised. Conservatism accepts the enlightened view that we need a criterion but extends the criterion so far that instead of offering an almost total transformation it offers an almost total restoration. It agrees with socialism that emancipation should not only be that of an abstract individual, but it lays such emphasis on the debt to the past that it makes any sort of utopian or scientific socialism impossible. This is a great problem for the conservative.*

Conservatism as an ideology, 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. The word “protean” means tending to change frequently or easily. Among widely discussed ideas and ideologies in politics, “conservatism” is by far the most protean one. This will be apparent at a glance over the current catalogue of the “principles” of various versions of conservatism. It includes: the belief that there existed an ideal state of society sometime in past history; the recognition of the basic framework of the existing social and political order; the imperative necessity of authority, power and social hierarchy; respect for tradition, long established habit and prejudice; emphasis on the religious basis of society and the role of “natural law”; insistence on the organic nature of society, stability and slow gradual change; politics of prudence and “muddling through”; preference of a-political values to political ones; vindication of the sacredness of private property; stress on small government and free market mechanism; priority of liberty over equality; criticism of “rationalism in politics”; call for civic virtues; and so forth.

This catalogue is by no means exhaustive, and can be extended further. Yet it already includes some mutually incompatible claims that may induce us to conclude there is nothing in common among various versions of conservatism except the name. Besides this diversity of principles, there is a fundamental disagreement as to the discussion on conservatism. While some thinkers are expatiating the “world view” of a particular conservative doctrine, others maintain that conservatism is not a set of fixed dogmas. From this point of view, conservatism is denied the very status of a political thought, and is considered merely as a political attitude capable of being combined with any ideology whenever the legitimacy of a regime is challenged either from within or without. This is a functional rather than a substantive view of conservatism. One may say that this extreme diversity, or ambiguity, of the meaning of the word “conservatism” is, in a sense, intrinsic to it.

Given that it stems from the verb “to conserve” which means “to preserve in its existing state from destruction or change” (Oxford English Dictionary), and that there are virtually indefinite varieties of actual “existing state” that require preservation, it may be natural that its content and meaning proliferate almost endlessly over time and space. Still, in face of this ambiguity, one may well be tempted to ask how, why and when “conservatism” came to be such a protean word, and, if it is possible, to understand such diversity in a systematic way. This article first tries to give a glimpse of the history of the usage of the word “conservatism” to show that its original meaning was not so ambiguous in the nineteenth century as in the twentieth, and that the proliferation came in, and grew along with the progress of democracy in the twentieth century. Secondly, it tries to define some common features of the understanding of human reality that seem to lie beneath the protean surface of conservative political thinking. Thirdly, it proposes to distinguish the three types of logic, or the reason, for preservation advocated by conservatism throughout modern history up to the middle of the twentieth century.

The word “conservatism” believed to have been coined by a French Romantic thinker Chateaubriand in 1818 when he named his journal Le Conservateur. As a term of political idea or ideology, it came to be generally employed, like similar other terms such as “liberalism,” “nationalism” and “socialism,” since the middle of the nineteenth century. When it first gained currency in politics, it was associated with the name of various conservative political parties in European countries at that time. Among them were the British Conservative (Tory) Party, the Prussian Conservative Party and the Danish Conservative People’s Party. All of them stood for the defense of traditional aristocratic political order against the European wide upsurge of democracy and the rise of the laboring classes. For this reason, the meaning of the word “conservatism” remained fairly unequivocal until the beginning of the twentieth century. It was a term, which belonged primarily to the world of practical politics, and was linked with a particular political program and attitude. An examination of the historical origins of modern conservatism in the wake of the Enlightenment and its crowning achievement, the French revolution, and of a conservative critique of grand schemes for social transformation based on assumptions of a melioristic character of human nature and the existence of universal values, suggests a consistent approach to change which sets conservatism apart from liberalism and socialism, its rival ideological alternatives in the modern era. To discern the defining features of a conservative body of political thought, they must be examined in comparison with, and in contrast to, the ascendant radical and progressive ideological forces of that era.

Yet, in retrospect, the sign of its protean character was audible even in its very founding father. Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), which has been commonly (and rightly) considered as the most cardinal canon of all conservatism since the early nineteenth century, not only emphasized the importance of traditional aristocracy for the stability and prosperity of British civil society, but also laid emphasis on the liberty of people, although the “people” he conceived was not the promiscuous adult members of the whole society as we understand now but those who had a certain amount of property more than was necessary for bare existence. He conceived the system of parliamentary government as the organ of liberty of this people. Burke himself did not know the word “conservatism” since he lived in the era before it was coined. But it remains true that he defended the mixed but essentially aristocratic regime of eighteenth century England in the name of European civilization. For this purpose, he elaborated an extremely eloquent and flamboyant apologetic for the beauty and moral excellence of the whole historical British society and way of life, ranging from its government and law to religion and manners. Yet, what was central to Burke’s conservatism was not mere sentimental adoration of the halcyon of ancient feudalistic order (as later romantics did), but a strenuous call for an Aristotelian political prudence. It was with the progress of the twentieth century that the protean face of conservatism became fully visible. As early as the first half of the nineteenth century, British conservatism recognized clearly that the power of ordinary people was acquiring a strength it had never attained in previous history. But, toward the twentieth century, this tendency proved not to have been restricted to Britain alone. All over the world, the ever-widening suffrage rendered the claim of conservatism for restoring good old aristocracy simply nostalgia, and not a valid agenda in practical politics. By the end of the 1920s, highly developed capitalist economy and democracy, in the formal sense of universal suffrage, were becoming a fait accomplis everywhere in Europe (see Election and Voting). Of course it was possible for conservatives to continue singing the song of lost, good old society, but, with a diminishing sense of reality, their identity as well as their object of criticism became increasingly uncertain, and got sometimes seemed to evaporate into thin air.

When it comes to Conservatism and change 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. It is said that 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. 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. Willingness on the part of conservatives to accept change where necessary must however be distinguished from accepting any change, or generously promoting it. Neither the radical reactionary nor progressive mind-sets capture the conservatives’ outlook on social change. In making any decisions to alter, for instance, the basis for a monarch’s authority, the scope of participation by citizens in parliamentary affairs or the extent to which private property can be taxed to provide public goods, a careful balance must be struck between a need to adjust disequilibrium in existing social arrangements and the importance of not overestimating the degree to which the status quo might be improved upon, as opposed to create worse problems than the ones already at hand: from the French to the Russian and Chinese revolutions, history provides ample evidence of radical change to existing social arrangements producing evils in some instances far surpassing those they succeeded.From this point of view, conservatism is not a mere negative reaction to social change, brought on in the modern era by the ideational and socio-economic transformations of, respectively, Enlightenment and industrial revolution.On this view, conservatism constitutes a positive engagement with change to mitigate its destructive potential and to preserve established ways of societies as they actually exist and wherein, the living bear responsibilities not only to their own generation, and not merely contractual ones, but to those of generations past and those still to come.

Conservatism may rarely announce itself in maxims, formulaes and aims. Its essence is inarticulate, and its expression, when compelled, sceptical. But it is capable of expression, and in times of crisis, forced either by political necessity, or by the clamour for doctrine, conservatism does its best, though not always with any confidence that the words it finds will match the instinct that required them. This lack of confidence stems not from diffidence or dismay, but from an awareness of the complexity of human things, and from an attachment to values which cannot be understood with the abstract clarity of utopian theory. This tendency to define conservatism in defensive terms, by arguing against its purported deficiencies, implies an ideology quite distinct from both liberalism and socialism. It suggests to a much greater extent a pragmatic and even tentative approach, or, as Oakeshott would have it, disposition to politics and societal organisation generally. For conservatives, however, avoiding the articulation of any prescribed and specific order or set of preferences that are universally applicable is not an inherent weakness. Rather it equips conservatism with a sensitivity and adaptability which, as an ideology, makes it particularly suitable to account for politics in culturally and socially diverse settings very different from those in which the Enlightenment ideologies arose and where, in a state of flux, momentous decisions are forced.

Even though conservatism can be considered as an approach to managing change and preserving tradition, rather than a mere vindication of inequality, it remains by comparison to liberalism and socialism hampered by lack of a positive vision according to which the ideology can be clearly evaluated and which contributes to a sense of ideological, if not necessarily intellectual, elusiveness. Whether or not this is the case, conservatism’s historical lineage is well established, its judgement on revolution and radicalism for conservatives themselves vindicated by history and its import as an alternative understanding of modernity and social change to those offered by the triumphant ideologies of the Enlightenment undeniable.

**Conclusion**

Conservatism does not ask ultimate questions and hence does not give final answers. But it does remind men of the institutional prerequisites of social order. This tendency to define conservatism in defensive terms, by arguing against its purported deficiencies, implies an ideology quite distinct from both liberalism and socialism. It suggests to a much greater extent a pragmatic and even tentative approach, would have itdisposition to politics and societal organisation generally. For conservatives, however, avoiding the articulation of any prescribed and specific order or set of preferences that are universally applicable is not an inherent weakness. Rather it equips conservatism with a sensitivity and adaptability which, as an ideology, makes it particularly suitable to account for politics in culturally and socially diverse settings very different from those in which the Enlightenment ideologies arose and where, in a state of flux, momentous decisions are forced. Indeed, the essence of conservatism is articulated more forcefully and lucidly in times of crisis where the status quo is fundamentally challenged, as in Burke’s Reflections and Huntington’s Social Order, perhaps even in the cultural criticism of Scruton’s England: An Elegy. For conservatives there is, in this sense, clarity in the inherent pragmatism of their approach to politics which arguably provides an advantage in adapting to changing circumstances and in remaining a relevant ideological approach across a range of socio-cultural settings. Conservatism becomes particularly suitable for accommodating cultural and political diversity in ways that, liberalism and, especially, socialism, cannot. This is notably the case if we extend our view beyond Western societies and examine conservatism as it applies to the rapid changes that have transformed the formerly colonised world.

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