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Political Ideas

**QUESTION**

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

INTRODUCTION

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.

**THE IDEA OF CONSERVATISM**

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

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.

Admitting the complexity of the archconservative Burke’s theory, it still remains true that the basic character as well as the contemporary image of conservatism as a political idea remained relatively stable until the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, it started as a counter-ideology of old regime against triumphant capitalism and liberalism. It was both a reaction to, and a criticism of the inhumanity of organized and demoralizing urban industrialism, and a defense of a rural, organic and stratified social order and way of life. In this respect, just born conservatism in the early nineteenth century was exactly the twin to then-emerging socialism (see Socialism and Communism). However, it regarded the laboring classes sometimes as its ally when they acquiesced to being protected under the custody of the old ruling classes, and sometimes as its enemy when they were regimented along the line of socialist’s class struggle theory and strategy. In this sense, Karl Mannheim was right when, in his classical work Conservatism (1927), he characterized conservatism as the self-conscious world view of old aristocratic order who had become aware of their identity for the first time in history under the threat of the French Revolution and its aftermath. In doing so, Mannheim depicted actually the ideology of German aristocratic order, which was strongly inspired by Burke. In his later, and more monumental work Ideology and Utopia (1929), however, he came nearer to functional analysis as compared with the substantive one in his former Conservatism. There he defined “conservative quietism” as tending to justify, by irrational means, everything that exists at all.” Although he defined conservatism as a counter-ideology in this case, too, the target it tried to counter be described in a more abstract way as “the liberal idea translated

**CONCLUSION**

In the interwar years, anti-socialist conservatism, anti-liberalist conservatism, anti-politics conservatism, the theory of conservative revolution, and antiFrench and anti-democrat German conservatism, all of which have had their own seasons in turn, but this was not the end of the story. If we take a look at the Post-World War Two years, we can continue to add to this list aesthete conservatism, religious conservatism, secular civic virtue conservatism, chauvinistic nationalist conservatism, and free market economy conservatism (see Nationalism). No one can foretell what the next conservatism will be at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In a sense, this is something like what has happened to democracy. Just as the term democracy came to be much abused when it was raised to position of sole legitimate ideology in politics, so everything came to be defended in the name of conservatism. In the face of this chaos, it is inevitable that all books and treatises that aim at proposing some viable analysis of conservatism, of course including the present one, start (and in most cases end) with the classification of its various types. This is certainly the peculiar circumstance about the study of conservatism that has rarely happened to that of other modern political ideologies such as liberalism, socialism and democracy.

**REFERENCES**

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