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**COURSE CODE:** POL 202

**COURSE TITLE:** POLITICAL IDEAS

**QUESTION:** IN NOT MORE THAN FIVE (5) PAGES DISCUSS AND EVALUATE THE IDEA OF CONSERVATISM.

**INTRODUCTION**

Conservatism is an infamously inconsistent word among contemporary political ideas and ideologies. Conservatism is a political doctrine that emphasizes the value of traditional institutions and practices. Other definitions have been offered. In Ambrose Bierce’s Devil’s Dictionary one encounters this; “Conservative, n. A statesman who is enamoured of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.” Also the Oxford English Dictionary defines it thus; “to preserve in its existing state from destruction or change”. It is a preference for the historically inherited rather than the abstract and ideal. This preference has traditionally rested on an organic conception of society, on the belief that society is not merely a loose collection of individuals but a living organism comprising closely connected, interdependent members. 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 central tenets of conservatism include tradition, organic society, hierarchy, authority, and property rights. Conservatives seek to preserve a range of institutions such as religion, parliamentary government, and property rights, with the aim of emphasizing social stability and continuity. There is no single set of policies regarded as conservative because the meaning of conservatism depends on what is considered traditional in a given place and time. Thus conservatives from different parts of the world, each upholding their respective traditions, may disagree on a wide range of issues. While some thinkers are expanding 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. Thus, the attitude we call conservatism is sustained by a body of sentiments, rather than by a system of ideological dogmata.

It was not until the late 18th century, in reaction to the upheavals of the French Revolution (1789), that conservatism began to develop as a distinct political attitude and movement. The first explicitly conservative political theorist is generally considered to be Edmund Burke. In 1790, Burke predicted that the revolution would descend into terror and dictatorship. According to him, the revolutionaries were destroying time-tested institutions without any assurance that they could replace them with anything better. Political power is not a license to rebuild society according to some abstract, untested scheme; it is a trust to be held by those who are mindful of both the value of what they have inherited and of their duties to their inheritors. For Burke, the idea of inheritance extended far beyond property to include language, manners and morals, and appropriate responses to the human condition. To be human is to inherit a culture, and politics cannot be understood outside that culture. Burke’s conservatism was not an abstract doctrine; it represented the particular conservatism of the unwritten British constitution. In the politics of his time Burke was a Whig, and he bequeathed to later conservative thinkers the Whig belief in limited government. This belief was partly why Burke defended the American Revolution (1775–83), which he believed, was a justified defence of the traditional liberties of Englishmen. Burke, 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.

The word “conservatism” believed to have been coined by a French Romantic thinker Chateaubriand in 1818 when he named his journal *Le Conservateur*. Burke himself did not know the word “conservatism” since he lived in the era before it was coined. 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. 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 defence of traditional aristocratic political order against the European wide upsurge of democracy and the rise of the labouring classes.

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. 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 cacophony in existing arrangements. In doing so, conservatives aim to aid in the preservation of institutions and practices, rather than rendering them unfeasible and consequently tearing them apart by rejecting any change at all. Willingness on the part of conservatives to accept change where necessary must however be distinguished from accepting any change, or generously promoting it. 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. Conservatives aim to prevent instances like these; it can be likened to a situation of preferring the devil you know to the angel you do not know. 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 note, conservatism constitutes a positive engagement with change to moderate its destructive potential and to preserve established ways of societies as they actually exist. The idea, then, is to conserve to the extent possible, but not absolutely. 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.

When considering conservatism not only as a body of political thought, but as an ideology with concrete implications for actual political developments across time and space, there is perhaps no other issue through which the conservative ideology can be better perceived to be in action than in the conservative’s response to revolutionary social change. Originating in the radical challenges to established order in Europe, conservatism according to Samuel Huntington is the product of intense ideological and social conflict where men are driven to conservatism by the shock of events. The prospect of revolution played an important role in shaping conservatism.

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