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DEPARTMENT: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY

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COURSE TITLE: POLITICAL IDEAS

QUESTION: DISCUSS AND EVALUATE THE IDEA OF CONSERVATISM

The Nature and Definition of Conservatism:

Conservatism can be defined as a political and social philosophy encouraging traditional social institutions in the framework of culture and civilization. Conservatism as an ideology is characterized by the opposition to the idea of total or radical change and not by the absurd idea of opposition to change or by any commitment to preserving all existing institutions.

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, Conservatives criticize their rivals for making a utopian exaggeration of the power of theoretical reason, and of human perfectibility.

A clear view of the nature of conservatism is difficult to reach because of the changing character of immediate issues. Such issues do not cover the scope of social experiences and they are changing constantly from one aspect of political or economic challenge to another. With each change of issues or the movement of issues, new alignment of forces is provoked which last only so long as the issues remains. The central tenets of conservatism include tradition, organic society, hierarchy, authority, and property rights.

Forms of Conservatism

There are different forms of conservatism which include Liberal conservatism, Conservative liberalism, Authoritarian conservatism, Religious conservatism, Cultural and social Conservatism etc.

Liberal conservatism: This form of conservatism involves the liberals view of minimal government intervention in the economy, Individuals should be free to participate in the market and generate wealth without government interference. However, individuals cannot be thoroughly depended on to act responsibly in other spheres of life, therefore liberal conservatives believe that a strong state is necessary to ensure law and order and social institutions are needed to nurture a sense of duty and responsibility to the nation. Liberal conservatism is a variant of conservatism that is strongly influenced by liberal deportments.

However, the liberal conservative ideology in many countries adopted economic liberal arguments and the term liberal conservatism was replaced with conservatism. This is also the case in countries where liberal economic ideas have been the tradition such as the United States and are thus considered conservative. In other countries where liberal conservative movements have entered the political mainstream, such as Italy and Spain the terms liberal and conservative may be synonymous.

Conservative Liberalism: This form of conservatism is a variant of liberalism that combines liberal values and policies with conservative stances. The roots of conservative liberalism are found at the beginning of the history of liberalism. Until the two World war, in most European countries the political class was formed by conservative liberals, from Germany to Italy.

Authoritarian Liberalism: This form of conservatism is referred to as a tyrannical regime that center their ideology around conservative nationalism rather than ethnic nationalism though certain racial components such as antisemitism may exist. Authoritarian conservative movements show strong devotion towards religion, tradition and culture while also expressing fervent nationalism alike to other far-right nationalist movements. Examples of authoritarian conservative leaders include Antonio Oliveira and Engelbart Dollfuss. Although both ideologies shared core values such as nationalism and had common enemies such as communism and materialism there was nonetheless a contrast between the traditionalist nature of authoritarian conservatism and the revolutionary, palingenetic and populist nature of fascism—thus it was common for authoritarian conservative regimes to suppress rising fascist and National Socialist movements. The hostility between the two ideologies is highlighted by the struggle for power for the National Socialists in Austria, which was marked by the assassination of Engelbart Dollfuss.

Religious Conservatism: This form of conservatism is principally applying the teachings of particular religions to politics, sometimes by merely proclaiming the value of those teachings, at other times by having those teachings influence laws. In most democracies, political conservatism seeks to uphold traditional family structures and social values. Religious conservatives typically oppose abortion, lesbian, gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) behavior, drug use, and sexual activity outside of marriage. In some cases, conservative values are grounded in religious beliefs, and conservatives seek to increase the role of religion in public life.

Cultural and social Conservatism: This form of conservatism is categorized into two types which include Cultural conservatives which support the preservation of the heritage of one nation, or of a shared culture that is not defined by national boundaries. The shared culture may be as divergent as Western culture or Chinese culture. In the United States, the term cultural conservative may imply a conservative position in the culture war. Cultural conservatives hold fast to traditional ways of thinking even in the face of monumental change. They believe strongly in traditional values and traditional politics and often have an urgent sense of nationalism. Social conservatism the other type is distinct from cultural conservatism, although there are some overlaps. Social conservatives may believe that society is built upon a fragile network of relationships which need to be upheld through duty, traditional values and established institutions and that the government has a role in encouraging or enforcing traditional values or behaviors. A social conservative wants to preserve traditional morality and social mores, often by opposing what they consider radical policies or social engineering.

Features of conservatism

A common way of distinguishing conservatism from both liberalism and radicalism is to say that conservatives reject the optimistic view that human beings can be morally improved through political and social change. Conservatives who are Christians sometimes express this point by saying that human beings are guilty of original sin. Skeptical conservatives merely observe that human history, under almost all imaginable political and social circumstances, has been filled with a great deal of evil. Far from believing that human nature is essentially good or that human beings are fundamentally rational, conservatives tend to assume that human beings are driven by their passions and desires and are therefore naturally prone to selfishness, anarchy, irrationality, and violence. Accordingly, conservatives look to traditional political and cultural institutions to curb humans’ base and destructive instincts. In Burke’s words, people need “a sufficient restraint upon their passions,” which it is the office of government to bridle and subdue. Families, churches, and schools must teach the value of self-discipline, and those who fail to learn this lesson must have discipline imposed upon them by government and law. Without the restraining power of such institutions, conservatives believe, there can be no ethical behaviour and no responsible use of liberty.

The second characteristic of the conservative temperament, which is closely related to the first, is an aversion to abstract argument and theorizing. Attempts by philosophers and revolutionaries to plan society in advance, using political principles purportedly derived from reason alone, are misguided and likely to end in disaster, conservatives say. In this respect the conservative temperament contrasts markedly with that of the liberal. Whereas the liberal consciously articulates abstract theories, the conservative instinctively embraces concrete traditions. For just this reason, many authorities on conservatism have been led to deny that it is a genuine ideology, regarding it instead as a relatively inarticulate state of mind. Whatever the merits of this view, it remains true that the best insights of conservatism seldom have been developed into sustained theoretical works comparable to those of liberalism and radicalism.

Historical conservatism in different countries:

Conservative political parties vary widely from country to country in the goals they wish to achieve. Both conservative and liberal parties tend to favor private ownership of property, in opposition to communist, socialist and green parties, which favor communal ownership or laws requiring social responsibility on the part of property owners. Where conservatives and liberals differ is primarily on social issues. Conservatives tend to reject behavior that does not conform to some social norm. Modern conservative parties often define themselves by their opposition to liberal or labor parties.

According to Alan Ware, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom retained viable conservative parties into the 1980s. Ware said that Australia, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Malta, New Zealand, Spain, and the United States had no conservative parties, although they had either Christian democrats or liberals as major right-wing parties. Canada, Ireland and Portugal had right-wing political parties that defied categorization: The Progressive Conservative Party of Canada; Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Progressive Democrats in Ireland; and the Social Democratic Party of Portugal.

Louis Hartz explained the absence of conservatism in Australia or the United States as a result of their settlement as radical or liberal fragments of Great Britain. Although he said English Canada had a negligible conservative influence, subsequent writers claimed that loyalists opposed to the American Revolution brought a Tory ideology into Canada. Hartz explained conservatism in Quebec and Latin America as a result of their settlement as feudal societies. The American conservative writer Russell Kirk provided the opinion that conservatism had been brought to the United States and interpreted the American Revolution as a "conservative revolution".

Conservative elites have long dominated Latin American nations. Mostly, this has been achieved through control of and support for civil institutions, the church and the armed forces, rather than through party politics. Typically, the church was exempt from taxes and its employee’s immune from civil prosecution. Where national conservative parties were weak or non-existent, conservatives were more likely to rely on military dictatorship as a preferred form of government. However, in some nations where the elites were able to mobilize popular support for conservative parties, longer periods of political stability were achieved. Chile, Colombia and Venezuela are examples of nations that developed strong conservative parties. Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador and Peru are examples of nations where this did not occur. The Conservative Party of Venezuela disappeared following the of 1858–1863. Chile's conservative party, the National Party, disbanded in 1973 following a military coup and did not re-emerge as a political force following the subsequent return to democracy.

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