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**POL 202 - ASSIGNMENT**

## Conservatism Defined

Conservatism is a political ideology that values the creation and maintenance of stable societies based upon a hierarchy of power lodged in a traditional class of leaders and deep respect for traditional values and institutions. Conservatism isn't suspicious of the power of the state nor does it seek to limit its power. Traditional institutions, such as government and religion, along with traditional values are to be respected. Consequently, conservatism is suspicious of change, and if change is required, it seeks an evolutionary approach rather than a revolutionary approach. Let's look at an example.

## An Example

Imagine a country called Conservia, which is a state that closely adheres to conservative ideology. Conservia is a small country run by a hereditary aristocracy consisting of a small group of families that founded the country several hundred years ago. Only members of the aristocracy may hold political office. Each family holds a seat in the country's Senate, which is the legislature. The Senator's vote in one of their members as Doge. Conservia has only one recognized religion and that has recognized moral authority over citizens. While citizens are eligible to become clergy, only members of the aristocracy hold high clerical offices.

The citizens of Conservia accept their position in the community and understand their responsibilities, including a patriotic duty to the State and the obligation to be productive members of the community. They also recognize the importance of their traditional values and institutions, including the Senate, the Church and the family. Citizens understand that they are part of a larger community, which may mean placing the needs of their community above their individual goals or aspirations.

Everybody knows their place in Conservia and does not seek to change it. When change is needed, the leadership takes its time and carefully considers what actions need to be taken. If change occurs, it does so incrementally and within the values and institutions of Conservia so as not to shock the tranquility of society.

## History

The modern conservative school of thought can be traced to the 18th century British philosopher Edmund Burke and his 1790 work Reflections on the Revolution in France. Burke found that humans were not just rational but also full of passion and prejudice and inherently unequal. However, according to Burke, despite the reality of unequal status and wealth, humans are interdependent. Society is 'organic,' or real, rather than just an abstraction created by the musings of philosophers. Burke believed that the state holds the wisdom accumulated by society over time and should be given a great deal of respect.

An important aspect of Burke's conservatism is the suspicion of change. According to Burke, change should only occur if absolutely necessary in order to avoid a greater evil. For example, a country that has remained neutral in times of war would only change that policy of neutrality to avoid the greater evil of being invaded and conquered. Any proposed change should be reviewed carefully in light of the facts on the ground rather than through a prism of abstract theory. In other words, change should be based on pragmatism. Likewise, the process of change should not be guided by abstract theory but be based on tradition and previous practice. According to Burke, radical change is always dangerous and can seriously disrupt society.

Conservatism

Conservatism and its modernising, anti-traditionalist rivals, liberalism and socialism, are the most influential political philosophies and ideologies of the post-Enlightenment era. Conservatives criticise their rivals for making a utopian exaggeration of the power of theoretical reason, and of human perfectibility. Conservative prescriptions are based on what they regard as experience rather than reason; for them, the ideal and the practical are inseparable. Most commentators regard conservatism as a modern political philosophy, even though it exhibits the standpoint of paternalism or authority, rather than freedom. As John Gray writes, while liberalism is the dominant political theory of the modern age, conservatism, despite appealing to tradition, is also a response to the challenges of modernity. It is contested both what conservatism is, and what it could or ought to be—both among the public and politicians, and among the philosophers and political theorists that this article focuses on. Popularly, “conservative” is a generic term for “right-wing viewpoint occupying the political spectrum between liberalism and fascism”. Philosophical commentators offer a more distinctive characterisation. Many treat it as a standpoint that is sceptical of abstract reasoning in politics, and that appeals instead to living tradition, allowing for the possibility of limited political reform. On this view, conservatism is neither dogmatic reaction, nor the right-wing radicalism of Margaret Thatcher or contemporary American “neo-conservatives”. Other commentators, however, contrast this “pragmatic conservatism” with a universalist “rational conservatism” that is not sceptical of reason, and that regards a community with a hierarchy of authority as most conducive to human well-being

Compared to liberalism and socialism, conservatism has suffered philosophical neglect Many deny that it is an ideology, or even a political philosophy, regarding it instead as a disposition that resists theoretical expression—a “non-ideology” that attempts to avoid the errors of ideologies. Is it an ancient attitude, or one that developed only in response to Enlightenment rationality and its political products, liberalism and socialism? How is it related to contemporary “neo-conservatism”? Is it a coherent position, or does it, as many have argued, fail to distinguish what is worth conserving from what is not? These are some of the questions commonly raised about conservatism, and explored here.

Conservatism and liberalism: the standpoint of freedom vs. standpoint of paternalism

Conservatism can be further elucidated by contrasting it with liberalism. Both liberalism and socialism are more theoretically complex than conservatism, for two reasons: conservatism self-consciously rejects philosophical theorizing; and, since academics tend towards the left, conservatism as a political philosophy continues to be neglected. (For instance, Scruton describes his book it is often argued that modern political philosophy is animated by the idea of freedom, while ancient political philosophy rests on a natural order discernible by reason to which humans must conform). But conservatism is a modern standpoint whose commitment to freedom is contested; it can be argued that the liberal standpoint of freedom is opposed by the conservative standpoint of paternalism or authority. The dividing line between ancient and modern may be Rousseau, for whom the purpose of the state is not merely security of life and property, as Hobbes, Locke and conservatives maintain; rather, it is freedom itself. Rousseau’s works were held to influence the French revolutionaries, and late 18th and early 19th century thinkers were convinced that the Revolution was caused by philosophers’ ideas of equality, democracy, freedom). (In fact, Rousseau regarded the revolutionary cure as worse than the disease, and was pessimistic about political progress.) In expressing the standpoint of freedom, philosophical liberalism embraces ethical individualism—that all value and right reduces to value of or for individuals, and the rights of individuals—respect for persons, and freedom of thought and discussion, based on individual autonomy For classical liberals, liberty thrives only when traditional sources of authority—monarchical, aristocratic, religious—are rejected.

The contrast with liberalism and its standpoint of freedom should be qualified, however – the contrast is not an absolute one, but a matter of balance and tone. For instance, the visceral opposition of Western conservatives to the Soviet Union was motivated by a commitment to freedom. Burke himself wanted to enhance freedom, but held that it is realised imperfectly in our institutions; pursuit of an abstract ideal may lose us what freedom we have. Both conservatives and classical liberals advocate limited government; it is particularist scepticism and an associated pessimism that define conservatism. Liberals concurred with Burke’s limits on government, concern for private property, and judicious reform. However, although Burke agreed that government originates from the need to protect property, he disavowed many of Locke’s principles

2. The Development of Conservative Thought

Burkean conservatism influenced Continental European traditions, but these also had a separate development. Indeed, as Clark argues, his continental admirers were normally ignorant of Burke’s background as a Whig constitutionalist, and saw him as merely the most eloquent critic of Jacobinism: “In Germany, constitutionalism became a liberal rather than a conservative ideology, standing for revolution rather than for the anti-libertarian, holistic views of order and authority with which German admirers wrongly associated Burke.

Conservatives have sometimes disdained theoretical reflection on political life, implying that political knowledge is…best left inarticulate, uncorrupted by rationalist systematising. The [19th and 20th] centuries are nevertheless replete with conservative thought…as systematic and reflective as any found in the liberal tradition.

Hegel is a key figure in the understanding of rational conservatism. Surprisingly for a standpoint that stresses the value of experience, conservatism—Hume accepted—has been associated more with Idealism than with empiricism; philosophical empiricists have commonly been radicals. Hegel has been claimed by conservatives, but his

Critiques of conservatism

Liberal critique

While acknowledging his prescience about the Terror, liberals found Burke’s fears concerning the French Revolution excessive. They took a different view when confronted with the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, which Marxists regard as completing its “bourgeois” predecessor. Thus conservative historian Richard Pipes holds that the French Terror was a “brief… countercurrent”, while the Red Terror was an “essential element of the regime” Conservatives criticise “atomistic” liberalism for treating society as a mere collection of self-regarding individuals, held together by rational norms and abstract laws rather than gaining their identity through an organic community; like communitarians, conservatives object to the primacy of abstract rights. Liberals reply that “atomism” refers simply to the conviction that although people live in society, individuals are, as Rawls writes, “self-authenticating sources of valid claims”, claims that do not require validation by larger social structures

For many left critics, conservatism is “organised selfishness”

Socialist critics respond that those in poverty cannot be said to “enjoy” many resources at all, and so any aspiration they have for big changes cannot be “fidgeting”. The socialist critic points out that when Oakeshott describes conservatism as a “disposition” to enjoy the present, Manchester factory workers of the 1840s, or slum dwellers in contemporary Mumbai or Mexico City, would find little to enjoy. Socialists point out that the status quo is itself a construction. This indeed is Kant’s view, when he writes that

One must take people as they are, our politicians tell us, and not as the world’s uninformed pedants or good-natured dreamers fancy that they ought to be. But as they are ought to read as we have made them by unjust coercion, by treacherous designs which the government is in a good position to carry out.

Cultural conservatism and conservation

Especially since the advent of green politics, there have been conservatives who have advocated ecological conservation. Scruton argues that “conservatism and conservation” are two aspects of a single policy of husbanding resources, including social capital embodied in laws, customs, and institutions, and material capital of the environment. A less noticed parallel is that between two oppositions: cultural conservation v. modernism, and conservatism v. revolutionary Jacobinism. In Britain after World War II, for instance, restorable bomb-damaged buildings were demolished to make way for modernist schemes later revealed as shoddy and cheap. Analogously, in Continental Europe, classical composers treated 1945 as “year zero”, rejecting all tradition. Conservatives would criticize both developments.

In this sense, everyone is conservative to some degree—for instance, if they prefer to have cash in their pocket rather than converting to cashless payment. Thus a William Morris-based socialism is conservative in rejecting what planners and developers do to the environment that one loves; Robert Conquest allegedly commented that everyone is conservative about what they know best Conservation originated in the Victorian era. The Camden Society, in early Victorian Cambridge, was concerned with the proper and edifying construction and restoration of Gothic churches and other public buildings. Later in the 19th century, William Morris’s anti-scrape campaign introduced the idea that good buildings of different periods complement each other and should be cherished. Morris argued that we should take delight in the history of old public buildings, and not seek to restore them to some pristine state of perfection.

Conservatism in this sense might be regarded as a relatively expensive taste, because it sacrifices value, in order not to sacrifice things that have value.

Some planners might accept that a building’s existing is a reason to keep it, Cohen allows, but usually they require a more general consideration—something that it does well, or a majority’s desire that it remain. This is not the majority’s reason for keeping it, however: Market and planning logics tend against the truth that people want particular valuable things, not just satisfaction of general desiderata…market mania is deeply anti-conservative…If you want everything to be optimal, nothing will be good. Some things have to just be…there, if anything is to be good.

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