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DEPARTMENT: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY

QUESTION

In not more than Five (5) Pages discuss and evaluate the idea of conservatism.

Conservatism is a [political](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_philosophy) and [social philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_philosophy) promoting traditional social institutions in the context of [culture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture) and [civilization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civilization). The central tenets of conservatism include [tradition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tradition), [organic society](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organic_society), [hierarchy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hierarchy), [authority](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authority), and rights. Conservatives seek to preserve a range of institutions such as [religion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion), [parliamentary government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliamentary_government), and property rights, with the aim of emphasizing [social stability](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_dynamics) and continuity. The more traditional elements—[reactionaries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reactionaries)—oppose modernism and seek a return to "the way things were"

According to [Quintin Hogg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quintin_Hogg,_Baron_Hailsham_of_St_Marylebone), the chairman of the British [Conservative Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservative_Party_(UK)) in 1959: "Conservatism is not so much a philosophy as an attitude, a constant force, performing a timeless function in the development of a free society, and corresponding to a deep and permanent requirement of human nature itself".

[Conservatism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Conservatism) is a preference for the historically inherited rather than the abstract and ideal. This preference has traditionally rested on an organic [conception](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conception) of society—that is, on the belief that society is not merely a loose collection of individuals but a living organism [comprising](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprising) closely connected, interdependent members. [Conservatives](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Conservatives) thus favour institutions and practices that have evolved gradually and are [manifestations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifestations) of [continuity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/continuity) and stability. Government’s responsibility is to be the servant, not the master, of existing ways of life, and politicians must therefore resist the temptation to transform society and politics. This suspicion of government activism distinguishes conservatism not only from [radical](https://www.britannica.com/topic/radical-ideologist) forms of political thought but also from liberalism, which is a modernizing, anti-traditionalist movement dedicated to correcting the evils and abuses resulting from the misuse of social and political power. In [The Devil’s Dictionary](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Devils-Dictionary) (1906), the American writer [Ambrose Bierce](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ambrose-Bierce) cynically (but not inappropriately) defined the [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) as “a statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.” Conservatism must also be distinguished from the reactionary outlook, which favour the restoration of a previous, and usually outmoded, political or social order.

It was not until the late 18th century, in reaction to the upheavals of the [French Revolution](https://www.britannica.com/event/French-Revolution) (1789), that conservatism began to develop as a distinct political attitude and movement. The term conservative was introduced after 1815 by supporters of the newly restored [Bourbon](https://www.britannica.com/topic/house-of-Bourbon) monarchy in [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France/History#ref237252), including the author and diplomat Franƈois-Auguste-René, vicomte de Chateaubriand. In 1830 the British politician and writer [John Wilson Croker](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Wilson-Croker) used the term to describe the British Tory Party (see [Whig and Tory](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Whig-Party-England)), and [John C. Calhoun](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-C-Calhoun), an [ardent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ardent) defender of [states’ rights](https://www.britannica.com/topic/states-rights) in the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States), adopted it soon afterward. The originator of modern, [articulated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/articulated) conservatism (though he never used the term himself) is generally acknowledged to be the British parliamentarian and political writer Edmund Burke, whose [Reflections on the Revolution in France](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Reflections-on-the-Revolution-in-France) (1790) was a forceful expression of conservatives’ rejection of the French Revolution and a major inspiration for counterrevolutionary theorists in the 19th century. For Burke and other pro-parliamentarian conservatives, the violent, untraditional, and uprooting methods of the revolution outweighed and corrupted its liberating ideals. The general revulsion against the violent course of the revolution provided conservatives with an opportunity to restore pre-Revolutionary traditions, and several brands of conservative philosophy soon developed.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSERVATISM**

The first is a distrust of human nature, rootlessness (social disconnectedness), and untested innovations, together with a corresponding trust in unbroken historical continuity and in the traditional frameworks for conducting human affairs. Such frameworks may be political, cultural, or religious, or they may have no abstract or institutional expression at all.

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.

The third characteristic he claim that society is too complex to be improved through social engineering naturally raises the question, “What kind of understanding of society is possible?” The most common conservative answer emphasizes the idea of tradition. People are what they are because they have inherited the skills, manners, morality, and other cultural resources of their ancestors. An understanding of tradition—specifically, a knowledge of the history of one’s own society or country—is therefore the most valuable cognitive resource available to a political leader, not because it is a source of abstract lessons but because it puts him directly in touch with the society whose rules he may be modifying.

**BELIEF OF CONSERVATISM**

1. Transcendent Order

First, conservatives generally believe that there exists a transcendent moral order, to which we ought to try to conform the ways of society. A divine tactic, however dimly descried, is at work in human society. Such convictions may take the form of belief in “natural law” or may assume some other expression; but with few exceptions conservatives recognize the need for enduring moral authority. This conviction contrasts strongly with the liberals’ utilitarian view of the state (most consistently expressed by Bentham’s disciples), and with the radicals’ detestation of theological postulates.

2. Social Continuity

Second, conservatives uphold the principle of social continuity. They prefer the devil they know to the devil they don’t know. Order and justice and freedom, they believe, are the artificial products of a long and painful social experience, the results of centuries of trial and reflection and sacrifice. Thus the body social is a kind of spiritual corporation, comparable to the church; it may even be called a community of souls. Human society is no machine, to be treated mechanically. The continuity, the lifeblood, of a society must not be interrupted. Burke’s reminder of the social necessity for prudent change is in the minds of conservatives. But necessary change, they argue, ought to be gradual and discriminatory, never “unfixing old interests at once.” Revolution slices through the arteries of a culture, a cure that kills.

3. Prescription

Third, conservatives believe in what may be called the principle of prescription. “The wisdom of our ancestors” is one of the more important phrases in the writings of Burke; presumably Burke derived it from Richard Hooker. Conservatives sense that modern men and women are dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, able to see farther than their ancestors only because of the great stature of those who have preceded us in time. Therefore conservatives very frequently emphasize the importance of “prescription”—that is, of things established by immemorial usage, so “that the mind of man runneth not to the contrary.” There exist rights of which the chief sanction is their antiquity—including rights in property, often. Similarly, our morals are prescriptive in great part. Conservatives argue that we are unlikely, we moderns, to make any brave new discoveries in morals or politics or taste. It is perilous to weigh every passing issue on the basis of private judgment and private rationality. “The individual is foolish, but the species is wise,” Burke declared. In politics we do well to abide by precedent and precept and even prejudice, for “the great mysterious incorporation of the human race” has acquired habits, customs, and conventions of remote origin which are woven into the fabric of our social being; the innovator, in Santayana’s phrase, never knows how near to the taproot of the tree he is hacking.

4. Prudence

Fourth, conservatives are guided by their principle of prudence. Burke agrees with Plato that in the statesman, prudence is chief among virtues. Any public measure ought to be judged by its probable long-run consequences, not merely by temporary advantage or popularity. Liberals and radicals, the conservative holds, are imprudent: for they dash at their objectives without giving much heed to the risk of new abuses worse than the evils they hope to sweep away. Human society being complex, remedies cannot be simple if they are to be effective. The conservative declares that he acts only after sufficient reflection, having weighed the consequences. Sudden and slashing reforms are perilous as sudden and slashing surgery. The march of providence is slow; it is the devil who always hurries.

5. Variety

Fifth, conservatives pay attention to the principle of variety. They feel affection for the proliferating intricacy of long-established social institutions and modes of life, as distinguished from the narrowing uniformity and deadening egalitarianism of radical systems. For the preservation of a healthy diversity in any civilization, there must survive orders and classes, differences in material condition, and many sorts of inequality. The only true forms of equality are equality in the Last Judgment and equality before a just court of law; all other attempts at leveling lead, at best, to social stagnation. Society longs for honest and able leadership; and if natural and institutional differences among people are destroyed, presently some tyrant or host of squalid oligarchs will create new forms of inequality. Similarly, conservatives uphold the institution of private property as productive of human variety: without private property, liberty is reduced and culture is impoverished.

6. Imperfection

Sixth, conservatives are chastened by their principle of imperfectability. Human nature suffers irremediably from certain faults, the conservatives know. Man being imperfect, no perfect social order ever can be created. Because of human restlessness, mankind would grow rebellious under any utopian domination, and would break out once more in violent discontent—or else expire of boredom. To aim for utopia is to end in disaster, the conservative says: we are not made for perfect things. All that we reasonably can expect is a tolerably ordered, just, and free society, in which some evils, maladjustments, and suffering continue to lurk. By proper attention to prudent reform, we may preserve and improve this tolerable order. But if the old institutional and moral safeguards of a nation are forgotten, then the anarchic impulses in man break loose: “the ceremony of innocence is drowned.”

Such are six of the major premises of what Walter Bagehot, a century ago, called “reflective conservatism.” To have set down some principal convictions of conservative thinkers, in the fashion above, may be misleading: for conservative thought is not a body of immutable secular dogmas. Our purpose here has been broad description, not fixed definition. If one requires a single sentence—why, let it be said that for the conservative, politics is the art of the possible, not the art of the ideal.

Edmund Burke turned to first principles in politics only with reluctance, believing that “metaphysical” politicians let loose dreadful mischief by attempting to govern nations according to abstract notions. Conservatives have believed, following Burke, that general principles always must be tempered, in any particular circumstances, by what Burke called expedience, or prudence; for particular circumstances vary infinitely, and every nation must observe its own traditions and historical experience—which should take precedence over universal notions drawn up in some quiet study. Yet Burke did not abjure general ideas; he distinguished between “abstraction” (or a priori notions divorced from a nation’s history and necessities) and “principle” (or sound general ideas derived from a knowledge of human nature and of the past). Principles are necessary to a statesman, but they must be applied discreetly and with infinite caution to the workaday world. The preceding six conservative principles, therefore, are to be taken as a rough catalog of the general assumptions of conservatives, and not as a tidy system of doctrines for governing a state.

**REFERENCES**

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