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Conservatism is a preference for the historically inherited rather than the abstract and ideal. This preference has traditionally rested on an organic conception of society—that is, on the belief that society is not merely a loose collection of individuals but a living organism comprising closely connected, interdependent members. Conservatives thus favour institutions and practices that have evolved gradually and are manifestations of 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 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 (1906), the American writer Ambrose Bierce cynically (but not inappropriately) defined the 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 favours 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 (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 monarchy in France, including the author and diplomat Franƈois-Auguste-René, vicomte de Chateaubriand. In 1830 the British politician and writer John Wilson Croker used the term to describe the British Tory Party (see Whig and Tory), and John C. Calhoun, an ardent defender of states’ rights in the United States, adopted it soon afterward. The originator of modern, 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 (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.

**General characteristics**

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.

Conservatism is as much a matter of temperament as of doctrine. It may sometimes even accompany left-wing politics or economics—as it did, for example, in the late 1980s, when hard-line communists in the Soviet Union were often referred to as “conservatives.” Typically, however, the conservative temperament displays two characteristics that are scarcely compatible with communism. 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.

In opposition to the “rationalist blueprints” of liberals and radicals, conservatives often insist that societies are so complex that there is no reliable and predictable connection between what governments try to do and what actually happens. It is therefore futile and dangerous, they believe, for governments to interfere with social or economic realities—as happens, for example, in government attempts to control wages, prices, or rents (see incomes policy).

The 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.

Conservative influences operate indirectly—i.e., other than via the programs of political parties—largely by virtue of the fact that there is much in the general human temperament that is naturally or instinctively conservative, such as the fear of sudden change and the tendency to act habitually. These traits may find collective expression in, for example, a resistance to imposed political change and in the entire range of convictions and preferences that contribute to the stability of a particular culture. In all societies, the existence of such cultural restraints on political innovation constitutes a fundamental conservative bias, the implications of which were aphoristically expressed by the 17th-century English statesman Viscount Falkland: “If it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change.” Mere inertia, however, has rarely sufficed to protect conservative values in an age dominated by rationalist dogma and by social change related to continuous technological progress.

Although conservatives sometimes claim philosophers as ancient as Aristotle and Cicero as their forebears, the first explicitly conservative political theorist is generally considered to be Edmund Burke. In 1790, when the French Revolution still seemed to promise a bloodless utopia, Burke predicted in his Reflections on the Revolution in France—and not by any lucky blind guess but by an analysis of its rejection of tradition and inherited values—that the revolution would descend into terror and dictatorship. In their rationalist contempt for the past, he charged, 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.

Because the social contract as Burke understood it involves future generations as well as those of the present and the past, he was able to urge improvement through political change, but only as long as the change is evolutionary: “A disposition to preserve and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman.”

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 defense of the traditional liberties of Englishmen.

Burke shocked his contemporaries by insisting with brutal frankness that “illusions” and “prejudices” are socially necessary. He believed that most human beings are innately depraved, steeped in original sin, and unable to better themselves with their feeble reason. Better, he said, to rely on the “latent wisdom” of prejudice, which accumulates slowly through the years, than to “put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason.” Among such prejudices are those that favour an established church and a landed aristocracy; members of the latter, according to Burke, are the “great oaks” and “proper chieftains” of society, provided that they temper their rule with a spirit of timely reform and remain within the constitutional framework.

In Burke’s writings the entire political wisdom of Europe is formulated in a new idiom, designed to bring out the folly of French revolutionaries intoxicated by sudden power and abstract ideas of a perfect society. For Burke, modern states are so complex that any attempt to reform them on the basis of metaphysical doctrines alone is bound to end in despotism. The passion and eloquence with which he developed this argument contributed significantly to the powerful conservative reactions against the French Revolution throughout Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

**Maistre and Latin conservatism**

Among the thinkers influenced by Burke was the French diplomat and polemicist Joseph de Maistre, who developed his own more extreme brand of conservatism, known as Latin conservatism, early in the 19th century. Whereas Burkean conservatism was evolutionary, the conservatism of Maistre was counterrevolutionary. Both men favoured tradition over the radical innovations of the French Revolution, but the traditions they favoured were very different: Burke rejected the revolution for the sake of traditional liberties, Maistre for the sake of traditional authority—especially the authority of monarch and church. Burke was not authoritarian but constitutionalist—and always parliamentary—whereas Maistre, in stressing the authority of the traditional elite, is often justifiably called not conservative but reactionary.

Joseph de Maistre

Joseph de Maistre

Joseph de Maistre, engraving.

Giraudon/Art Resource, New York

Indeed, Maistre rejected the entire heritage of the Enlightenment, attributing the revolutionary disorders of Europe to pernicious Enlightenment ideas. He presented a picture of human beings as essentially emotional and prone to disorder and evil unless controlled within a tight political structure dominated by rulers, priests, and the threat of the public executioner. Against the French Revolutionary slogan “Liberty, equality, fraternity,” Maistre proclaimed the value of “Throne and altar.” His program called for a restoration of hereditary and absolute monarchy in France, though it would be a more religious and less frivolous monarchy than before. The Bourbon Restoration in France after 1815 did in fact attempt to create a modified version of the ancien régime somewhat resembling that suggested by Maistre, but the Bourbons were overthrown in 1830.

Maistre’s writings were an important source of conservative thought in Spain, Italy, and France in the first half of the 19th century. But no work by Maistre or any other enemy of the Jacobins (the radical leaders of the French Revolution from 1793 to 1794) has approached the influence of Burke’s classic essay, which became the basis of all subsequent conservative arguments against the French Revolution. Whereas Maistre’s rigid, hierarchical conservatism has died out, Burke’s more flexible brand is stronger than ever, permeating all political parties of the West that stress gradual, as opposed to radical or revolutionary, change.

**Conservatism in the 19th century**

The 19th century was in many ways antithetical to conservatism, both as a political philosophy and as a program of particular parties identified with conservative interests. The Enlightenment had engendered widespread belief in the possibility of improving the human condition—a belief, that is, in the idea of progress—and a rationalist disposition to tamper with or discard existing institutions or practices in pursuit of that goal. The French Revolution gave powerful expression to this belief, and the early Industrial Revolution and advances in science reinforced it. The resulting rationalist politics embraced a broad segment of the political spectrum, including liberal reformism, trade-union socialism (or social democracy), and ultimately Marxism. In the face of this constant rationalist innovation, conservatives often found themselves forced to adopt a merely defensive role, so that the political initiative lay always in the other camp.