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ASSIGNMENT

In not more than five pages discuss and evaluate the idea of conservatism

ANSWER

INTRODUCTION

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 Grey writes, while liberalism is the dominant political theory of the modern age, conservatism despite appealing to tradition is also a response to the challenge of modernity. The roots of all three standpoint “may be traced back to the crisis of seventeenth century England, but they crystallised into definite traditions of thoughts and practice only after the French revolution” (Grey 1995:78).

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 charactisation. Many treat it as a standpoint that is sceptical of abstract reasoning in politics and those 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, and that regards a community as most conducive to human wellbeing 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. It is 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 conservation”? 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 question commonly raised about conservatism.

THE NATURE OF CONSERVATISM

In a broad sense, as a social attitude has always existed. It expresses the instinctive human fear of sudden change, and tendency to habitual action. Cecil for instance, contrasts “modern conservatism” with the natural conservatism from which it rises and depends on found in almost every human mind the arch royalist and anti-populist earl of Clerendon, writing the history of the 17th century England civil war soon after it happened was instinctively conservative in this broader, un self-conscious sense. Thus Beiser contrasts the “conservative that had always existed in Germany as a social attitude”, with a self-conscious conservatism that developed as a social force in the 1790s, opposed to the Aufklarung or enlightenment, and in reaction to the French revolution “self- conscious here means not merely implicit in behaviour, but consciously avowed, and ascribed to others. The most distinctive and historically important version of this narrower, self-conscious conservatism rests on scepticism concerning reason in politics.

TRADITIONAL AND GRADUAL REFORM: CONSERVATISM VS. REACTION

As we have seen, it is generally recognised that conservatism is not dogmatic reaction. It advocates piecemeal, moderate reform, which follows from its scepticism concerning reason, and its valuing of experience concerning human affairs. Burke argued that “a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation”. But change must be cautious, because knowledge is imperfect and consequences can be unintended. According to conservatives, institutions and moral evolve, their weaknesses become apparent and obvious political abuses are corrected; but ancient institutions embody tacit wisdom that deserves respect. Conservatives are sceptical of large scale constitutional, economic or cultural planning, because behaviour and institution have evolved through the wisdom of generations, which cannot easily be articulated.

FORMAL PROCEDURAL VS. SUBSTANSIVE SENSE OF CONSERVATISM; CONTRAST WITH NEO-CONSERVATISM AND LIBRATARIANISM

Conservatism has been equated with pragmatism or political realism; Gamble (2012) argues that conservative political “thought” is all practice self-interested practice. But conservatism is generally regarded as a philosophy, if not a systematic one. Two contrasting interpretation of conservatism distinguish it from mere pragmatic. Both reject a priori reasoning revolution and social experiments; both trust experiences, look for gradual improvement of tried and tested arrangements, and sympathise with the pragmatist’s motto “if it ain’t broke, don’t force it”; both are sceptical of reason, and are particulatist.

CONSERVATISM AND LIBRALISM: THE STANDPOINT OF FREEDOM VS. STANDPOINT OF PATERNALISM

Conservatism can be further elucidated by contrasted it with liberalism. Both liberalism and socialism are more theoretically complex than conservatism, for two reasons: conservatism self-consciously rejects philosophical theorising; and, since academics tends towards the left, conservatism as a political philosophy continues to be neglected. (For instance, Scruton describes his book *The Meaning of Conservatism* as “dogmatics” rather than philosophy,) there could be no conservative theory of distributive justice to rival Rawls, since, for conservatives, the problems that Rawls addresses do not exist. For them, politics does not concern the theoretically complex justification of ends, but rather facilitates the enjoyment of “non-political” ends such as “country”, family and religion.

REFERENCES

1. Alexander, J, 2013, “the contradictions of conservatism”, government and opposition, 48(4): 594-615.
2. Arnold, M, 1993, Cultural and Anarchy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.