

CONSERVATISM

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Summary

Conservatism is a notoriously protean word among contemporary political ideas and ideologies. Not only is its tenet diversified among its various versions, but also its usage as an analytical terminology differs sharply among scholars. Some take it as a set of political tenets, some simply as an attitude to be found in any society in any time when it comes to be jeopardized. The word "conservatism" was coined in the early nineteenth century, and its meaning remained relatively stable until the end of the century by being associated with the names of the political parties of the then-declining aristocracy. The proliferation of its meaning grew with the progress of the twentieth century. Despite such varieties, however, it is possible to describe the common features of diverse conservative ideologies by assuming a hypothetical pure conservative. They are:

preference for things long existed, positive acceptance of the multiplicity of human institutions and customs, emphasis on prudence as the essence of the activity of politics, and a detached attitude toward history. By and large, all of the various versions of conservatism from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries can be classified into three types, i.e., cynic, teleologist, and evolutionist conservatisms. These three share commonly the disposition and beliefs of a pure conservative, particularly their preference for things long existed, but they differ from each other about the cognitive reasons for their arguments.

1. Introduction: “Conservatism”—a Protean Word

Among widely discussed ideas and ideologies in politics, “conservatism” is by far the most protean one. This will be apparent at a glance over the current catalogue of the “principles” of various versions of conservatism. It includes: the belief that there existed an ideal state of society sometime in past history; the recognition of the basic framework of the existing social and political order; the imperative necessity of authority, power and social hierarchy; respect for tradition, long established habit and prejudice; emphasis on the religious basis of society and the role of “natural law”; insistence on the organic nature of society, stability and slow gradual change; politics of prudence and “muddling through”; preference of a-political values to political ones; vindication of the sacredness of private property; stress on small government and free market mechanism; priority of liberty over equality; criticism of “rationalism in politics”; call for civic virtues; and so forth.

This catalogue is by no means exhaustive, and can be extended further. Yet it already includes some mutually incompatible claims that may induce us to conclude there is nothing in common among various versions of conservatism except the name. Besides this diversity of principles, there is a fundamental disagreement as to the discussion on conservatism. While some thinkers are expatiating the “world view” of a particular conservative doctrine, others maintain that conservatism is not a set of fixed dogmas. From this point of view, conservatism is denied the very status of a political thought, and is considered merely as a political attitude capable of being combined with any ideology whenever the legitimacy of a regime is challenged either from within or without. This is a functional rather than a substantive view of conservatism. One may say that this extreme diversity, or ambiguity, of the meaning of the word “conservatism” is, in a sense, intrinsic to it.

Given that it stems from the verb “to conserve” which means “to preserve in its existing state from destruction or change” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), and that there are virtually indefinite varieties of actual “existing state” that require preservation, it may be natural that its content and meaning proliferate almost endlessly over time and space. Still, in face of this ambiguity, one may well be tempted to ask how, why and when “conservatism” came to be such a protean word, and, if it is possible, to understand such diversity in a systematic way. This article first tries to give a glimpse of the history of the usage of the word “conservatism” to show that its original meaning was not so ambiguous in the nineteenth century as in the twentieth, and that the proliferation came in, and grew along with the progress of democracy in the twentieth century. Secondly, it tries to define some common features of the understanding of human reality that seem to

lie beneath the protean surface of conservative political thinking. Thirdly, it proposes to distinguish the three types of logic, or the reason, for preservation advocated by conservatism throughout modern history up to the middle of the twentieth century.

2. A Brief Historical Retrospect

2.1 The Emergence of Conservatism in the Nineteenth Century

The word “conservatism” believed to have been coined by a French Romantic thinker Chateaubriand in 1818 when he named his journal *Le Conservateur*. As a term of political idea or ideology, it came to be generally employed, like similar other terms such as “liberalism,” “nationalism” and “socialism,” since the middle of the nineteenth century. When it first gained currency in politics, it was associated with the name of various conservative political parties in European countries at that time. Among them were the British Conservative (Tory) Party, the Prussian Conservative Party and the Danish Conservative People’s Party. All of them stood for the defense of traditional aristocratic political order against the European wide upsurge of democracy and the rise of the laboring classes. For this reason, the meaning of the word “conservatism” remained fairly unequivocal until the beginning of the twentieth century. It was a term, which belonged primarily to the world of practical politics, and was linked with a particular political program and attitude.

Yet, in retrospect, the sign of its protean character was audible even in its very founding father. Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which has been commonly (and rightly) considered as the most cardinal canon of all conservatism since the early nineteenth century, not only emphasized the importance of traditional aristocracy for the stability and prosperity of British civil society, but also laid emphasis on the liberty of people, although the “people” he conceived was not the promiscuous adult members of the whole society as we understand now but those who had a certain amount of property more than was necessary for bare existence. He conceived the system of parliamentary government as the organ of liberty of this people. Burke himself did not know the word “conservatism” since he lived in the era before it was coined. But it remains true that he defended the mixed but essentially aristocratic regime of eighteenth century England in the name of European civilization. For this purpose, he elaborated an extremely eloquent and flamboyant apologetic for the beauty and moral excellence of the whole historical British society and way of life, ranging from its government and law to religion and manners. Yet, what was central to Burke’s conservatism was not mere sentimental adoration of the halcyon of ancient feudalistic order (as later romantics did), but a strenuous call for an Aristotelian political prudence. Being an ardent admirer of Adam Smith, he was never against modern commercial society. Because of this complex structure of his argument, Burke has been sometimes exalted as a great liberalist, a utilitarian, and sometimes as a natural law theorist of Thomistic tradition, at the same time being criticized as an out-and-out reactionary (see *Liberalism*). All of these mutually contradictory appraisals have their roots in the very multi-faceted structure of his conservatism.

Admitting the complexity of the archconservative Burke’s theory, it still remains true that the basic character as well as the contemporary image of conservatism as a political

idea remained relatively stable until the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, it started as a counter-ideology of old regime against triumphant capitalism and liberalism. It was both a reaction to, and a criticism of the inhumanity of organized and demoralizing urban industrialism, and a defense of a rural, organic and stratified social order and way of life. In this respect, just born conservatism in the early nineteenth century was exactly the twin to then-emerging socialism (see *Socialism and Communism*). However, it regarded the laboring classes sometimes as its ally when they acquiesced to being protected under the custody of the old ruling classes, and sometimes as its enemy when they were regimented along the line of socialist's class struggle theory and strategy. In this sense, Karl Mannheim was right when, in his classical work *Conservatism* (1927), he characterized conservatism as the self-conscious world view of old aristocratic order who had become aware of their identity for the first time in history under the threat of the French Revolution and its aftermath. In doing so, Mannheim depicted actually the ideology of German aristocratic order, which was strongly inspired by Burke. In his later, and more monumental work *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), however, he came nearer to functional analysis as compared with the substantive one in his former *Conservatism*. There he defined "conservative quietism" as tending to justify, by irrational means, everything that exists at all." Although he defined conservatism as a counter-ideology in this case, too, the target it tried to counter be described in a more abstract way as "the liberal idea translated into rationalistic terms."

2.2 The Proliferation of Conservatism in the Twentieth Century

It was with the progress of the twentieth century that the protean face of conservatism became fully visible. As early as the first half of the nineteenth century, British conservatism recognized clearly that the power of ordinary people was acquiring a strength it had never attained in previous history. But, toward the twentieth century, this tendency proved not to have been restricted to Britain alone. All over the world, the ever-widening suffrage rendered the claim of conservatism for restoring good old aristocracy simply nostalgia, and not a valid agenda in practical politics. By the end of the 1920s, highly developed capitalist economy and democracy, in the formal sense of universal suffrage, were becoming a *fait accomplis* everywhere in Europe (see *Election and Voting*). Of course it was possible for conservatives to continue singing the song of lost, good old society, but, with a diminishing sense of reality, their identity as well as their object of criticism became increasingly uncertain, and got sometimes seemed to evaporate into thin air.

The above-mentioned difference in the object of reaction from conservatism, which Mannheim presupposed in each of his two consecutive works, illustrates this transition. Once conservatism was the vindication of the ideology of declining yet still influential social orders, but it became transfigured into the abstract idea of *status quo* simply to oppose that of progress or modernity.

Within a few decades, democracy was to become not only the sole legitimate form of government but also the only justifiable way of social life throughout the world (see *Democracy*). This implied that, from a realistic point of view, any claim put forward by any party in a society had to possess morally equal status eligible of being treated on the same footing as political claims or else the majority would consider it unacceptably

antisocial. Significantly, this tendency in turn implied accelerating the endless proliferation of conservative “principles.” Now, any existing state of things or ideas that anyone considers to be worth defending against attack in the name of progress, acquired the status of the object of conservation. Hereafter, the battles were to be waged not merely vertically as they used to be, but also horizontally within a society, and sometimes even beyond national boundaries.

Thus we find, in the interwar years, anti-socialist conservatism, anti-liberalist conservatism, anti-politics conservatism, the theory of conservative revolution, and anti-French and anti-democrat German conservatism, all of which have had their own seasons in turn, but this was not the end of the story. If we take a look at the Post-World War Two years, we can continue to add to this list aesthete conservatism, religious conservatism, secular civic virtue conservatism, chauvinistic nationalist conservatism, and free market economy conservatism (see *Nationalism*). No one can foretell what the next conservatism will be at the dawn of the twenty-first century. In a sense, this is something like what has happened to democracy. Just as the term democracy came to be much abused when it was raised to position of sole legitimate ideology in politics, so everything came to be defended in the name of conservatism. In the face of this chaos, it is inevitable that all books and treatises that aim at proposing some viable analysis of conservatism, of course including the present one, start (and in most cases end) with the classification of its various types. This is certainly the peculiar circumstance about the study of conservatism that has rarely happened to that of other modern political ideologies such as liberalism, socialism and even democracy.

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Biographical Sketch

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