

CONSERVATISM

Conservatism, as the term indicates, is rooted in conserving. Conservatism opposes radical social and political change which it believes is based on erroneous presumptions such as the inherent pliability of human nature, the belief that through sheer will, human nature can sculpt history and society to the ideal forms required, that society is borne of a contract between free individuals working towards the common good, and that it is possible to eliminate evil as a feature of human reality. Edmund Burke, considered to be the founder of the modern conservative tradition, predicted that striving to put these presuppositions into practice would dismantle traditions and render the state more powerful as it implemented social order in an atomised context. Conservatives then, in accordance with the above and by being critical of rationally grounded order in society, refuse to envision state power as an instrument of the human will that can be utilised to achieve kind and functional ends in the service of human welfare. Therefore, a theme of conservatism is a support of limited politics, with a view towards avoidance of arbitrary power, which various strands of conservatism have defined in various ways. The four main strands of conservatism are reactionary conservatism, radical conservatism, moderate conservatism, and the New Right.

Reactionary Conservatism

This earliest form of conservatism posits that no society can endure if it does not have political institutions which are undergirded by common, basic religious and moral values. Reactionary ideology points to modern democracy as a spiritual wasteland driven by a false confidence in the ability of humans to supplant religion with political action in the pursuit of happiness. It is critical of how modern democracy in concert with capitalism gives license to an ethic of relentless self-serving, making it even harder to arrive upon uniform fundamental values. Some reactionary critics of liberal democracy also maintained that democratic egalitarianism erodes the standard of education making it unfeasible to convey the historical thread of cultural traditions to each successive generation. This categorical refutation of democratic modernity has meant that reactionary movements are highly marginalised in today's politics. In the face of being relegated to fringe politics, reactionary politicians have embraced certain strategic positions over the ages such as applying extra-constitutional methods to upset social order, attempting to circumvent political impotence by affixing to a political party with revolutionary ambitions and momentum to overthrow an existing order, and working with modern democracy by espousing a concept of popular leadership that unites people wary of institutions.

Radical Conservatism

This form of conservatism is diametrically opposed to the reactionary school. It contends that to be relevant, conservatism must accept and welcome democratic modernity and view it in a positive light rather than in a hostile manner. Radical conservatives strive to accomplish this by regrouping around leaders who repudiate both liberal obligations to parliamentary institutions and class conflict driven formulations of social structuring in favour of a vision which synthesises

nationalism and socialism that unites and galvanises the entire population. If reactionary conservatives expound a 'top down' ideology, implemented by elites, radical conservatives expound a 'bottom up' ideology, where the masses rally to build a conservative movement. As such, radical conservatives embrace mass-based politics while repudiating parliamentary democracy. Some problems that the radical stream encounters include putting complete faith upon a leader who is not politically answerable to anyone, which fundamentally contravenes Hume's conceptualisation of all politicians by necessity as knaves. Other problems faced are the relative political inactivity of modern populations and the tendency to view with hostility groups that disavow the popular leader.

Moderate Conservatism

In this form of conservatism the ideal state is a limited one bounded within the rule of law and consisting of representative institutions and a constitution which makes provisions for checking the power of the executive. While this may appear to be consonant with liberal ideology, moderate conservatives disavow rationalist theoretical frameworks for the above ideal. Instead, moderates interpret the idea of a limited state in theological, tragic, or sceptical terms.

The New Right

This strain of conservatism which arose in the UK is a reaction to fears that parliamentary constitutionalism is being eroded and supplanted by interest politics creating a system of rule dictated by private bargains between governments, industries, and trade unions none of which are accountable to the country. The New Right's other concerns included increasing inflation, the state's increasing share of the GNP, the expanding welfare state and the dependence upon it, the erosion of family values and the creation of an 'underclass' with no social mobility, and the demise of a defined British conservative identity. A later version of the New Right was founded on upholding free market economic policies rather than an espousal of national identity based on culture and tradition.

Adapted from Noel O'Sullivan, 'Conservatism' in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargeant and Marc Stears (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (OUP 2013)