

CONSERVATISM: A DEFENCE FOR THE PRIVILEGED AND PROSPEROUS?

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Political ideologies are commonly portrayed as, essentially, vehicles for advancing or defending the social position of classes or social groups. In this view, ideologies 'belong' to a specific class or group and are configured in line with its interests. Socialism is thus linked to industrial working class, liberalism to the rising middle classes, feminism to women, and so on. Conservatism, for its part, has either been seen, narrowly, as a defence for the aristocracy or landed nobility, or, more generally, as a means of upholding the interests of those in society who are privileged and prosperous. This has allowed critics to dismiss conservatism as mere ruling-class ideology. Nevertheless, there are also drawbacks to seeing ideologies in such terms. Not the least of these is that it fails to take account of historical change and the extent to which ideologies adapt or are reshaped as they are exposed to changing social pressures. In the case of conservatism, this has occurred particularly through the advent of democracy and the emergence of mass politics, both consequences of industrialisation. In what ways do conservatism's core values reflect a bias in favour of dominant or elite groups? How has conservative ideology been reshaped in the light of changing social circumstances. To what extent have the social concerns of conservatism expanded beyond those of the privileged and prosperous?

Core values: upholding wealth and privilege?

It is difficult to argue that, in origin, conservatism was not closely aligned to the interests of dominant or elite groups. Conservative ideas arose in reaction to the growing pace of political, social and economic change, which, in many ways, was symbolized by the 1789 French Revolution. In seeking to uphold the *ancien régime*, conservatives acted in defence of an increasingly embattled landed nobility and the institution of monarchy, even though in Britain in particular this stance assumed a distinctly pragmatic character, influenced by Edmund Burke's (1729-97) idea of 'change in order to conserve'. The bias that this implied in favour of the interests of the privileged and prosperous was clearly reflected in the theoretical make-up of conservatism, especially in its commitment to the values of tradition, hierarchy and property.

In demanding respect for tradition, conservatism sought to legitimise a profoundly inegalitarian political and social *status quo*, one characterised by endemic privilege and rule from above. From the conservative perspective, institutions and practices that have been passed down from one generation to the next have, in effect, stood the 'test of time'. Having proved their value, they should be preserved for the benefit of the present generation as well as future generations. Tradition therefore constitutes the accumulated wisdom of the past. Such thinking was nevertheless also entangled with a belief in hierarchy.

Hierarchy implies that society is naturally stratified, divided into different levels on the basis of factors such as wealth, status and power. All attempts to promote social equality are thus doomed to failure. Such thinking stems from the tendency within conservatism to view society as an organism, a living entity that is shaped by natural forces rather than by human intervention. A key implication of this view is that society, together with all organisms, comprises a collection of unequal or different parts. So, just as the human body is composed of organs - the heart, liver, spleen and so on – which each have a distinct function, society is made up of classes, social groups and institutions that each have a specific role. Divisions within society between the rulers and the ruled, the elite and the masses and, for that matter, the rich and the poor can therefore be seen to have been ordained by nature.

Finally, strong support within conservatism for private property implies that the established economic order should be upheld, leaving limited scope for legitimate wealth redistribution. For conservatives, property has a range of psychological and social advantages, which go beyond the liberal emphasis on property as an economic incentive and a reflection of individual effort. These include that property provides people with security in an uncertain and unpredictable world, giving them something to 'fall back on', and that, in giving people a 'stake' in society, property helps to breed the 'conservative' values of respect for law, authority and social order. At a still deeper level, conservatives have supported property on the grounds that it is an extension of an individual's personality, in the sense that people 'realize' themselves, even see themselves, in what they own.

Key concepts

Hierarchy: A gradation of social positions or status; hierarchy implies structural or fixed inequality in which position is unconnected with individual ability.

Meritocracy: Literally, rule by those with merit, merit being intelligence plus effort; a meritocratic society is one in which social position is determined exclusively by ability and hard work.

Neoliberalism: An updated version of classical liberalism, particularly classical political economy; the central theme of neoliberalism is that the economy works best when left alone by government.

Paternalism: Literally, to act in a fatherly fashion; as a political principle, paternalism refers to power or authority being exercised with the intention of conferring benefit on others or protecting them from harm.

Privilege: Advantages or opportunities that are enjoyed by a small and usually powerful group or class; privilege reflects social good fortune, not individual ability or effort.

Tradition: Values, practices or institutions that have endured through time; traditions are usually seen to have been passed down from one generation to the next.

Trickle-down: The theory that the introduction of free-market policies will, in time, benefit the poor and not only the rich, ensuring that the rise in living standards is general.

One Nationism: a conservatism for the poor?

The main way in which British conservatism responded to the pressures generated by industrialisation was through the emergence, in the mid-nineteenth century, of One Nation ideas and values. Some, indeed, have argued that this process profoundly revised the social orientation of conservatism, allowing it, in particular, to take account of the needs of the poor and less well-off. The origins of One Nation conservatism are usually traced back to the ideas that Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81) developed in novels such as *Coningsby* (1844) and *Sybil* (1845), which were written before he assumed government office. Writing against the backdrop of widening social inequality and, in continental Europe at least, revolutionary upheaval, Disraeli drew attention to the danger of Britain being divided into 'two nations: the Rich and the Poor'. One aspect of this was an appeal to prudence. Disraeli feared that the poor and oppressed working masses would not simply accept their growing misery, a lesson that seemed to be borne out by the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, which had affected much of continental Europe. For Disraeli, social reform designed to alleviate the suffering of the poor was the surest way of stemming the tide of revolution. Reform, in short, was the antidote to revolution.

However, Disraeli did not only appeal to prudence, his thinking was also based on moral principles, and especially paternalism. In his view, wealth and privilege brought with them social obligations, in particular a responsibility to care for the disadvantaged and less well-off. Such thinking harked back to the feudal

principle of *noblesse oblige*, the obligation of the aristocracy to be honourable and generous. In Disraeli's neo-feudalism, *noblesse oblige* was reinterpreted in explicitly social terms. One of the crucial aspects of One Nation thinking was, nevertheless, that social position is essentially a consequence of the accident of birth. The wealthy are, in effect, the fortunate, while the poor are the unfortunate. Not only does this imply that, blighted by misfortune, the poor are 'deserving' of support, but it also suggests that the compassion of the rich is spurred by the reflection: 'There but for the grace of God go I'.

Nevertheless, although the advent of One Nationism may have ended British conservatism's *exclusive* concern for the interests of the privileged and prosperous, it is questionable whether it altered conservatism's social orientation in a fundamental way. This can be seen in at least three ways. In the first place, the purpose of One Nationism was to preserve hierarchy, not to revise it, still less to abolish it altogether. Reforms, such as those introduced under Disraeli in the 1860s and 1870s, to extend voting rights to the working class and to improve hygiene and housing conditions, are perhaps best understood as strategic concessions to the poor, designed, most basically, to reconcile them to their traditional position in society. One Nation reformism is therefore an example of Burke's idea of 'change in order to conserve', and it is driven less by a concern for the poor for its own sake and more by 'enlightened' self-interest on the part of the rich.

Second, One Nation thinking presents the rich in a broadly positive light, while being less flattering about the poor. This is because it holds that compassion and social responsibility increase in line with people's economic and social position. Whereas the rich are seen as generous and morally concerned, the poor, though 'deserving' in the sense that they are not the architects of their own misfortune, are portrayed as essentially passive. As 'victims' of social circumstance, the poor lack the ability to help themselves and so rely on the charity of others. Third, One Nation principles are consistent with only limited welfare provision and minimal levels of wealth redistribution. Rather than seeking to narrow the gap between rich and poor on principled grounds, linked, for instance, to equality and social justice, One Nation reformism is geared to a less ambitious and more pragmatic goal, namely rendering the working masses politically quiescent. Once that goal is achieved, further or more radical reform is deemed 'excessive'.

Neoliberalism: beyond hierarchy and privilege?

The other major transformation in conservative ideology that has stimulated debate about its possibly changed social orientation is the rise of neoliberalism, a trend that in Britain is usually associated with the emergence, since the 1970s, of economic Thatcherism. Neoliberalism is defined by the goal of 'rolling back' social and economic intervention and the attempt to establish an unregulated capitalist economy, based on the principles of the free market and 'rugged' individualism. Its supporters argue that, in ridding conservatism of social biases of any kind, neoliberalism has effectively decoupled the ideology from the notions of hierarchy and privilege. This is because neoliberalism, in line with the classical liberalism on which it is based, sees society in strictly individual terms. Society (if it exists at all) consists of a collection of separate and independent individuals, each of whom is solely responsible for his or her economic well-being. Although some individuals are rich and others are poor, it is meaningless to think of society being made up of collective entities such as 'the rich' and 'the poor'. Hierarchy has therefore been displaced by meritocracy, and privilege has been rendered entirely irrelevant.

Neoliberals nevertheless go further and stress that there are ways in which the establishment of unregulated capitalism will particularly benefit those individuals who are less well-off. This occurs, first, because the scaling-back the benefits system releases welfare recipients from a 'dependency culture' that both saps initiative and enterprise and robs them of dignity and self-respect. In such a view, welfare is a cause of poverty, not its cause. Second, neoliberals insist that the boost to the economy that occurs as the 'dead hand' of government is removed brings benefit to all, including those who are economically less successful. This is known as the theory of 'trickle down', and it is based on the assumption that although poorer individuals may receive a smaller portion of the economic cake in a free-market economy, they will enjoy rising absolute living standards, because the cake itself expands.

Significant doubts have nevertheless been expressed about whether, by embracing neoliberalism, conservatism has abandoned its bias in favour of the privileged and prosperous. Apart from anything else, to the degree to which they remain faithful to conservative values and beliefs, neoliberals conservatives are only able to embrace meritocracy to a limited extent. For example, the application of strict meritocratic principles implies that inheritance should be heavily taxed or severely curtailed, a position that runs clearly counter to the conservative belief in private property. Similarly, meritocracy is inconsistent with the survival of traditional institutions such as public schools and 'Oxbridge' universities, which give some people educational and social advantages over others which have little to do with personal ability or hard work.

Furthermore, critics of neoliberalism argue that it is strongly linked to economic inequality. While businesses and wealthy people prosper from tax cuts and economic deregulation, poorer people are made more vulnerable by the withdrawal of social supports and the weakening of trade unions. Empirical trends have also been used to support such assertions, notably the trend for the countries that have embraced neoliberalism with greatest enthusiasm to also have witness growing inequality and declining social mobility, as has happened in Britain and the USA since the 1980s. Finally, neoliberalism may not only promote economic inequality but also help to legitimise it. If people's economic and social position is believed to be determined solely by their ability and appetite for hard work, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that rich people 'deserve' to be rich while poor people 'deserve' to be poor.

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