

Round One: What Is Conservatism?

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No champion of conservatism is ever comfortable defining it, because to define conservatism is to put oneself in tension with it. There is not, nor could there ever be, such a thing as a Little Blue Book or Tory Torah, for it is the perennial predicament of the conservative to be so alive to the human horror justified by the clinical certainties of political creeds that he will always feel unease at any invitation to write down one of his own.

A crisply distilled ideological schema that purports to be applicable to all people at all times and in all places disturbs the conservative's instinct for the particular over the universal, the empirical over the rational, the concrete over the abstract, the pragmatic over the ideal, or—in that memorable phrase of Michael Oakeshott—"present laughter over utopian bliss."¹

Another reason for scepticism at condensing a political outlook into a manifesto is the suppleness of conservatism, responsive as it is to the situations in which a given community finds itself. The conservative recognises the messy contingency from which every society emerges and the catastrophic effects of forcing it to conform itself to a blueprint that assumes it can reset itself to year zero.

When confronted with the question of how to describe the ideal form of government, the conservative will reply, with Solon of Athens, for whom and at what time? The conservative sees no contradiction at

¹ Michael Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative," in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), p. 408.

all in defending the longstanding constitutional rights of gun owners in the United States and criticising the loosening gun laws in jurisdictions where no such rights have existed before. At the high noon of the Cold War, to be conservative was to see and prize the good in liberalism, to defend spontaneous order against central planning, individual liberty in the face of collective coercion, and the freedom of a sovereign people from a tyrannical will. But at the dawn of the digital age in which the market state has defeated the centrally planned one, many conservatives are as quick to sound the alarm as loudly as any on the Left at the power of technology and unfettered global markets to liquefy the ties that bind us to each other and suffuse our lives with the blessings of belonging.

And yet for all that, there are certain habits of thought and guiding impulses that distinguish the conservative temperament from its rivals. If one were to isolate a single organising idea behind conservatism, one might well point to the notion of order. On this view, the real foe of conservatism is neither the liberal nor the socialist, but rather the anarchist and the libertarian. Without order as the enabling condition of its flourishing, no society can be truly free, as Edmund Burke saw long ago when he observed “the only liberty ... is a liberty connected with order.”²

Crucially, though, political and social order cannot be imposed arbitrarily from above nor can it be dictated by an atavistic devotion to a golden age that never was, but must rather be permitted to emerge organically as a response to the structures and patterns of the world as we find it, including the conditions that nature itself affords for our flourishing as mortal animals.

What most discomforts conservatism’s critics is its insistence on forms of hierarchy without which order is impossible, an unease that springs from the mistaken egalitarian impulse that social distinctions, cultural norms, and individual talents are suspect and any enlightened society should wish to eradicate them. And yet, as conservatives observe, the belief that the distribution of social goods should be as equal as possible has motivated constraints on agency and enterprise that no

² Edmund Burke, “Speech at His Arrival at Bristol,” in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, vol. 2 (London: John C. Nimmo, 1887), p. 87.

honest liberal could accept. Moreover, the hostility to hierarchy also overlooks the degree to which the countless many interlocking systems—legal, economic, technological, constitutional—that generate and sustain social cooperation at scale rely on an inconceivably vast and granular distribution of functions. While many of these roles can be competently discharged by most individuals, in the modern age increasingly many of them require such a narrow range of skills—some innate, some instilled—that, given their scarcity, they will inevitably confer on those who possess them the gleam of social regard.

It is inevitable that a hierarchy of social regard will then emerge. Indeed, the conservative will argue that such hierarchies should be celebrated if a society is to motivate future generations to emulate the contributions of their forbears to its flourishing. “Take but degree away,” observes William Shakespeare’s Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, “untune that string, / And hark what discord follows.”³ Attempts to remove the gradations are, in reality, attempts to dissolve the order on which any society depends. No program of social engineering can dissolve the basic facts of human psychology or prevent the radically uneven distribution of human aptitudes in a given environment from crystallising itself into a hierarchy of honour. Moreover, as anyone who has lived in a socialist society can attest, every revolution brings a new aristocracy in its wake. The dissolution of one hierarchy simply ushers in a more arbitrary stratification, one more pernicious and difficult to dislodge for being cloaked in the illusion of equality.

As Gustav Mahler is alleged to have remarked, tradition is not the worship of ashes but the preservation of fire.⁴ But what is the fire that conservatives take themselves to be preserving in tradition and why? Tackling this question takes us to the animating core of the

³ William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Act 1, Scene 3, lines 85–86.

⁴ While frequently attributed to Mahler, this quotation is most likely a paraphrase of “they but preserve the ashes, thou the flame,” from a poem by John Denham, “To Sir Richard Fanshaw, Upon His Translation of ‘Pastor Fido’,” accessed online at: <https://allpoetry.com/To-Sir-Richard-Fanshaw.-Upon-His-Translation-Of-'Pastor-Fido'>.

conservative vision and helpfully distinguishes that vision from positions frequently mistaken for conservatism. For tradition itself is indeed no more than ash if it involves nothing more than recursive allegiance to people and place simply because they are ours. Reflective conservatives grasp that what tradition preserves is those basic goods—life, family, friendship, knowledge, beauty, meaning, play—that, though refracted necessarily through the prism of a particular set of human experiences, are in fact intrinsic to human flourishing as such. Where a tradition imperils those goods, the conservative insists, it should be rejected; but what distinguishes his outlook is the view that tradition is the repository of tried solutions to perennial problems and the recognition that—as Nassim Nicholas Taleb points out while discussing the Lindy Effect⁵—ideas age in reverse: the longer a precept or habit has survived, the more conducive it is likely to be to overcoming the challenges of those who inherit it. However staggering the advances the West has made in the past two centuries or so, the knowledge needed to solve coordination problems confronting us rarely if ever resides in a single mind. That is because it is dispersed and sedimented in laws, customs, norms, and rituals—a cumulative inheritance that should be applied in the present and passed on to the future in the absence of pressing and plausible reasons for abandoning them.

Rarely has it been more fashionable than today to dismiss conservatism as a reactionary resistance against the long march towards the sunlit uplands of an emancipated egalitarian utopia, the settlement of which is assumed to be the fruit of the progressive Left’s radical quest for justice tempered by the influence of liberalism. As a narrative, that is as false as it is pervasive because only conservatism charts the middle course between ideologies that elevate the self over the collective and ones that swallow up the self in the collective. Stripped of the many and various accretions with which the Enlightenment has burdened it, conservatism at its core continues to offer the most accurate picture of what settles us in our world and joins us to one another. The conservative outlook orients a society towards everything that it must protect and preserve if it is to enjoy the ordered freedom and relational flourishing that liberalism rightly craves but can never achieve.

⁵ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile* (New York: Random House, 2012), pp. 316–20, 329.