

British conservatism

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The two strands of the conservative thought have ostensibly different views on how the society ought to be organised. The paternalistic strand derives from the 18th century based on an organic society in which privileges and obligations were classified according to hierarchy, with the consequence that the rich should take responsibility as custodians for the poor, *noblesse oblige*, this rhetoric is used to provide social assistance.

The liberal strand derives from the 19th century classic liberalism in which individuals pursue their own interests in a self-help society based on the free market system in which any form of interference in the economy will lead not only to bureaucratic inefficiency but could also be dangerous as a means for totalitarianism. 1 According to W. H. Greenleaf, a distinguished historian of the British political tradition, the two strands share principles which separate them from other ideologies even though they have different conceptions of the society².

Already in the early nineteenth century different outlooks of the two strands began to appear. In 1835, the conservative Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel advocated a firm government in a free market economy. When Disraeli led the conservative party, however, this attitude changed completely. He believed that competitive capitalism harmed the traditional community. He blamed Peel for selfishness and when the electorate expanded he used the 'one-nation' appeal referring to the feudal ideal, in which the rich took their responsibility as custodians for the poor.

Disraeli did not believe that without social assistance the mass of the electorate would endorse traditional institutions³. This paternalistic strand

proclaimed by Disraeli has been the ascendant strand in British conservatism until 1970's. The liberal strand has been rarely represented by the mainstream conservative thinkers until 1975, when Margaret Thatcher became the leader of the party. Which does not mean that liberal thinkers were absent in this doctrine, throughout the history of British conservatism individualist principles have been proposed.

Perhaps it should be noted that in the United Kingdom Liberals have been displaced by the Conservative Party, absorbing many liberal principles on the way which explains the liberal conservative tradition not found in continental Europe⁴. It was during the French Enlightenment that many conservative principles were developed as a defence for the establishment, the ancient regime. They countered progressive ideals such as liberty with contrasting theories about history, tradition and moral community.

According to Joseph de Maistre individuals are social beings deriving from traditions in the society. Social continuity is guaranteed by moral guardians such as the family, the church and the state. There is no state of nature such as posited by Rousseau; the society reflects the authority of God. The notion of rights was therefore nonsense as obligations always precede. They stood for hierarchy, aristocracy, the primacy of the collective over the individual and the importance of the sacred. All of these traits were also present in Burke's writings.

Edmund Burke is one of the first who developed conservative principles in England, and although he and his contemporaries have advocated principles now regarded as dead many contemporary conservative thinkers like to

trace back their ideas to this heritage⁵. Although Burke, a Whig, supported a constitutional Monarchy in which the sovereign was constrained by parliament and the parliament by a small and exclusive electorate, he believed in representation of the independent wise derived from 'natural aristocracy'. ⁶ When conservatives relate to Burke they mean his themes about organism, test of time and reform.

Like Burke, conservatives distrust social change and accept human inequality. Human beings are naturally diverse in energy and talent which also implies that levelling classes is futile, egalitarian programmes are dangerous as they entail authoritarian measures which will crush individual liberty and social hierarchy is desirable because the majority will benefit from the leadership of the few. Because conservatives prefer tradition they do not have any illusion that future times can eliminate imperfections of human arrangements, in contrast with their ideological adversaries.

But the proposition that conservatism is rooted in a natural dislike of change is blameworthy as they have merged ahistorical patterns of individual behaviour in the Western culture with specific ideals about how the government and the society ought to be organised. Those who equate conservatism with opposition are therefore unsophisticated. A. O. Hirschman has defined three theses in which conservatives vindicate their position advocating tradition. The perversity thesis in which they warn for the opposite of the intended goal, for example; the bid for liberty during the French Revolution would lead to tyranny.

The futility thesis, by which social engineering will never eliminate inequalities as it is impossible. And they warn for too high cost outweighing reform in the jeopardy thesis⁷. Therefore conservatism is best positioned as a device against unproven and thus false optimism. In Edmunds Burke's book, *Reflections on the Revolutions in France* in 1790 he claimed that historical experience is more reliable than abstract speculation. The society is a product of organic growth, according to Burke, accumulating the wisdom of generations rather than by impractical ideals.

In this same context he advocated the age of reason, comparing the small 'individual stock' with the inexhaustible 'general bank and capital of nation and ages'. According to Burke the individual is sinful and react more often passionate than rational, prone to selfishness and mistaken judgement and therefore incapable of understanding the complexity of public interest. He warned against rationalism, a faulty judgement of individual formulation intoxicated with their capacity of abstract thinking disconnected from historical realities⁸.

It is this disconnection of traditions what Burke shares with conservatives throughout the history. John Reeves who opposed to the natural rights advocated by progressive liberals in the late 18th century, because they rested on rational thinking. In 1872 Benjamin Disraeli blamed Whigs for abstract thinking fashionable in continental Europe, substituting cosmopolitan for national principles. And in the last century Michael Oakeshott depicted politics as an art of where to go next, not as science of setting up a permanent society.

Wise politicians use tradition as experience to decide what to do next and are not concerned with ideals such as a classless society. He used the enfranchisement as an example; women were granted the vote not by logic but by their gradually improving legal and social status. Oakeshott defined therefore two types of knowledge, practical knowledge based on tradition and technical knowledge based on abstract thinking. 9 According to Oakeshott technical thinking is incomplete without practice through time; abstract thinking in pursuit of 'loose metaphysical' thinking is therefore bound to fail.

Clearly, conservatives have vindicated tradition to blame their adversaries of admitting to impractical rational schemes, but concluding that the heart of conservatism lies in traditionalism would not be sustainable. The conservative tradition has shown us that they do sometimes admit to idealistic speculation. While Disraeli blamed Whigs of 'loose metaphysical' speculation, he himself referred to an idealistic ideal of the feudal society to dismiss the capitalist market system and to provide social assistance.

But also liberal conservatives have been prone to support dogmatic schemes in order to achieve the political formulae they believed consists out of the 'sound' conduct. Those Thatcherites have also put aside Oakeshott's notion of art, as they knew where to go next. And the New Right broke with tradition as they advocated radical change. This implies that conservatism does not advocate tradition per se and therefore stands for something as they have an image of a sound political order, which determines their attitude to social change.

It is the essence of this sound political order which is not clear; there is no future plan which they pursue, perhaps because conservatives do not believe in utopia¹⁰. If the conservative standpoint to established institutions distinguishes a set of principles contrasting other ideologies, this would imply that both strands are in pursuit of the same 'sound' political conduct, but using different means. Or, although the two strands hold contrasting views on society they ought to be in pursuit of the same ends.

As mentioned above the paternalist strand used the feudal ideal to provide social assistance for the poor since Disraeli. Harold Macmillan who presented 'the middle way' as an updated expression of this 'one-nation' ideal as a means to attack the increasingly growing inequalities between two nations, the rich and the poor. The providence of welfare in 1954 was presented by R. A. Butler in a conservative manner; the Disraelian approach to modern politics did not require conservatives to abandon their traditional vindication of inequality. Disraeli provided us with inspiration and he cautioned us We should seek to secure greater quality not by levelling the few, but by elevating the many'.

The modernised Disraelian strand became party orthodoxy until the 1970's and created a consensus between the major parties over social Welfare. When the liberal strand took over from the collective strand as the mainstream of the British Conservative Party some fundamental differences became clear between the two strands, like the disagreement over the responsibilities of the powerful and the justification of wealth. ¹ When collective conservatives talked about decent housing and adequate welfare

they often cite Disraeli when urging the aristocratic ethos of noblesse oblige to be adapted in modern conditions. The collectivists felt morally justified to distribute money from the rich to the poor. Which does not mean liberal conservatives did not have a moral justification for their approach to social assistance. They feel that a competitive market is just as it rewards individuals reflecting the diversity of human talent and it nurtures habits of prudence and self-reliance.

For liberal conservatives poverty is related to skill and effort, when you give provide welfare you create therefore an environment in which they do not have to work. Another justification of an unfettered economy is that the rich, people with special talent, create wealth which will eventually trickle down to the poor. In this sense the rich are creators of prosperity instead of plunderers of the poor. In this same context they justified the distribution of power and wealth. This is in contrast with the collective strand who justifies wealth and power on social breeding of the elite.

Common to these strands is the acceptance of inequality and the social obedience of the majority to firm leadership. 12 The arrival of Margaret Thatcher did not only underline these disagreements over justification and distribution of wealth and power, but was a departure from the paternalist strand in general. Many people would argue that the New Right represented classic liberalism instead of conservatism ends. Keith Joseph denied that there was a break with traditional conservative thinking.

As long as institutions, culture, conservative responsibilities and political practices were recognisable or at least would be recognisable in the near

future, conservatives could be tolerant. According to them conservatives could no longer be confident that this was so by the ends of the 1970's. In these circumstances conservatives had to advocate in areconstructionof a social, economical and political order in an attempt to restore lost values. 13 But it is the advocacy of a free-market economy what causes contradiction.

Hayek, one of the leading neo-liberalist thought, himself wanted to link the free-market with the reason of test of time, which is in principle incompatible. When you support an unfettered market system you will have to accept the spontaneous outcomes it produces and accept any regime which survives, which is in contrast of Hayek's refusal of certain institutions and mechanisms such as income distribution. The explanation of Hayek's refusal is his particular use of tradition. 14 Without this he would be dependent on the outcome of the market. It is his use of spontaneous which is misleading.

Although Hayek describes the social order to be spontaneous he probably means that the outcome of the innumerate individual decisions is spontaneous. The social order is constituted out of decisions taken, influenced by tradition and practice. Society is spontaneous as social order comes from within the society, which sits ill with the notion of evolution. According to the evolution theory the society is the result of social arrangement which have survived¹⁵. The incompatibility in Hayek's notions of tradition and the spontaneous market was underlined by people like Letwin.

Those liberal conservatives claimed that there was a clear distinction between the free market theory and Thatcherism. Whereas classical liberals favour the spontaneous outcome of the free market in both economical and social sphere, liberal conservatives distinguishes them. The economic consideration of Thatcherism is secondary to the programme of moral regeneration. The extension of ownership promotes rather than reduces traditional continuity in families. Private ownership of properties gives families the opportunity to hand on property which provides them with continuity.

Thatcherism was a programme for radical change in many areas but recognised the importance of tradition in other contexts, attacking 'entrenched' institutions rather than traditional ones¹⁶. In this sense Thatcherism is in a direct line with conservatism. Other people find the connection between classic liberalism and conservatism illogical. Liberal conservatives accept much of the teachings of the laissez-faire theory and yet they insist on nationality and a strong state. In a free market system boundaries constrain the economy and are therefore harmful rather than desired.

In principle markets ignore social and cultural differences between individuals and nations. A strong state is desirable as it preserves competition within the economy and encourages individual to participate and to buy private property¹⁷. When Letwin proclaimed that private ownership promotes continuity in family life, the influence of paid labour was not taken into consideration. The new Right stimulates structural changes of the

economy in which demand and supply determine paid labour. The contradiction in the neo-liberal thought is damaging.

On one hand they encourage market competition with detraditionalisation effects, and on the other hand they proclaim to promote the very traditional symbols which it also helps to dissolve and which are held as essential for social solidarity, like the family. Conservatives like Oakeshott, do not believe that market institutions can prosper in an autonomous way; this would namely imply mechanisms of thrust¹⁸. Thrust can only be protected by law to a certain extent. Norms and values are part of a wider nexus of social institutions not inherent in economical contracts but in tradition.

Accepting the market as an autonomous mechanism which produces endless economical growth also contradicts with the conservative acknowledgement of imperfectability. According to most forms of conservatism humans have often wrongly tried to encompass the world with rational and abstract thinking, which is why they preferred tradition. The New Right does accept Imperfectability in the social sphere and believes that the government is incapable of economic planning, but see the market place as a frictionless machine.

According to the New Right their doctrine flourished because they had discovered flaws and failures in the organisation the collectivist and socialist had supported after the Second World War¹⁹. These problems could be solved by letting free markets flourish and by renewing the core of moral institutions such as the state and the family. The most obvious change of the New Right was the departure from Keynesianism. In the decades before the

arrival of Thatcher in British government there was a consensus over welfare policy.

Keynes' management of demand theory had controlled tendencies of capitalism towards cycles of boom and depression fairly well. This era, which is often referred to as a 'golden age', was characterised with economical growth. According to some, Keynesianism became ineffective as a result of intensified globalisation and the transformation of everyday life. The Management of demand theory could not cope with the 24-hour international market which typified 'new' globalisation²⁰. Keynesian and other welfare programmes presumed a society with more stable lifestyle habits than are characteristic in contemporary 24-hours market economies.

Unconstrained markets intensify globalisation which will lead to more detraditionalisation in social life and thus in the family. The New Right proclaimed that the family was central to their theory, but in the context of globalisation as positioned above this is certainly contradictory. As mentioned above conservatives use the notion of tradition in a particular way. The new Right has showed us that conservatism is not always opposed to radical change. According to Roger Scruton the radical change does not have to be a departure of the notion tradition²¹.

Conservatives, he says, place faith in institutions which have been tried before and wishes to give as much as necessary authority to constitute an accepted and objective public realm. Authority is opposed to social contract and all other social arrangements based on choice; authority comes from the transcendent qualities of established institutions. Allegiance is what a

member of a collectivity owes to authority. People relate to collectivities, but this is not determined by individual choice or conscious but by the socially and morally transcendent.

Transcendence is also the core of tradition. Conservatives are therefore not concerned with any form of authority, but authority legitimised by traditional symbols and allegiance is not just a matter of belonging to some corporate body but it refers to an affiliation with organised groups based on tradition. Srupton also said that practices worth conserving need to have the weight of a successful history of something that has flourished. Such practices must have the 'allegiance' and 'authority' of their participants and must give a durable meaning to the emergence to be preserved²².

These considerations, he says, rule out traditions such as torture, crime and revolution. This test of time is based on a sort of evolutionism in which symbols of traditions have survived through time interpreted for their social function, which is at least suspicious and certainly does not explain the position of conservatives to tradition. The objective distinction which separates the quality of tradition with habits, customs and Oakshott's notion of technical knowledge is that it is determined by and ritual or revealed truth which is also the origin of its authority.

In this sense tradition is not embedded in the practice but in certain rituals transmitted by guardians of tradition such as priests, wise men and respected elderly. The past is therefore essential for tradition, not because it must persist over an indefinite time but because it has to be passed on by practice, like in an apprenticeship²³. In the past decades in which

globalisation and thus detraditionalisation had intensified preserving tradition has become more like fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism is nothing more than securing tradition with traditional means, according to Giddens, as it asserts its ritual truth without moral and cultural communication in conditions where traditions are under challenge²⁴. This is potentially dangerous as it excludes social groups within the cosmopolitan society. The New Right, then, proclaims to be linked with conservatism advocated by people like Burke and Oakshott but is better to be viewed as radicalism in pursuit to preserve and restore institutions they value. My conclusion, therefore, is that the two strands of conservatism are incompatible.