

Why do conservatives put an emphasis on tradition politics essay



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In this essay I am going to attempt to answer the question enclosed in the title of this paper. First I will define the term conservatism; secondly I will present conservatism seen from different perspectives, such as traditional and modern conservatives. My investigation will then focus on attempting to answer the title question. In the last part I will construct an answer to the second question enclosed above and conclude with my own opinion on the subject matter.

The term Conservative and Conservatism has been widely described and defined in literature. This depends on the area of the subject it has been elaborated upon. The concept of conservatism has always been controversial in a sense.[1]A conservative is disposed to preserve existing conditions, institutions, etc., or to restore traditional ones, and to limit change[2]. This can be seen as a way of favouring traditional views and values and tending to oppose change. This has been the foundation of conservatives throughout history and still being upheld in today's world and society. As an ideological and social system conservatism is characterised by the preservation of the existing conditions of society, including the polity, from significant changes, as well as restoration of a pre-existing social state to substitute for a non-conservative, notably liberal one. Therefore conservatism, when redefined can be segmented into several types such as; political, economic, social or cultural.[3]Huntington brings the view of conservatism seen through aristocratic theory " as the ideology of a single and unique historical movement". (Huntington, 1957; 454) He further explores other theories which relate to specific classes in society. Liberalism is the ideology reserved for bourgeoisie; Socialism and Marxism are regarded as ideologies of the

working class or proletariat whereas the Conservatism becomes the ideology of the aristocracy. (Huntington, 1957; 454) The doctrines of conservative belief derive from both Tory and Whig thought[4]. They contain a belief of loyalty to the rule of law, property ownership, upholding institutions, belief in organic nature of society and limited government.[5]

Notably in England conservatism has become part of political speech around 1830. David Hume is often portrayed as the first conservative political theorist. He was the first major thinker to offer a philosophical defence of conservatism. Hume rejects the idea that the reason goes above what can be observed. In Hume's view morality is concerned with action for a person's motives or 'reasons for action' whether an act is right or wrong. Hume further argues that sentiment is a pre-rational feeling towards somebody or something. (Hoffman and Graham, 2009; 202) Conservative thinker Edmund Burke does not accept abstractions, such as the natural right proclaimed by the French Revolutionaries in 1789. Burke defends habit, taste and prejudice. For Burke, the knowledge of other people, including previous generations, is the resource that must be highly respected and followed if we are to avoid disastrous social consequences. Burke in Reflection on the Revolution in France compares contrasts societies- French which has neglected prejudice in favour of theory and British, which has remained close to its traditions : "(..)that we have made no discoveries, and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality; not many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born, altogether as well as they will be after the grave has heaped its

mould upon our presumption, and the silent tomb shall have imposed its law on our pert loquacity". (Burke, 1969; 84 in Hoffman & Graham 2009; 202)

Burke was on the side of what he saw as Britain's ' Great Tradition' in political history. (Nisbet 1986; 4) Tory Party was older and favoured by the monarchy and much of aristocracy. Turning to the past for inspiration and for models on which to base policy in the present is deeply embedded in the conservative tradition and is sufficient reason for liberal and radical epithets of " reactionary" or " anarchic". Emile Faguet refers to all of the conservatives as ' prophets from the past'. (Nisbet 1986; 18) Nisbet refers to Churchill's emphasis on relating to past in the following " I like to live in the past; I don't think people are going to get much fun in the future". (Nisbet 1986; 19) For Burke legitimacy is the work of history and of traditions which go far beyond the resources of any single generations. (Nisbet 1986; 23) To see things authentically as a conservative Mannheim writes "(...) is to experience events in term of an attitude derived from circumstances and situations anchored in the past". (Nisbet 1986; 23) The concreteness of experience and history is persisting conservative emphasis. (Nisbet 1986; 24)

Strauss is regarded as an important influence on what is called neo-conservatism. His view on conservatism is very different to that of Hume, Burke and Oakeshott. Strauss sought to revive both, the reading of text in the history of political thought and the natural right tradition. Use of " Tory" by modern British Conservatives has been somewhat more affection than anything really substantive. (Nisbet, 1986; 11) Jeremy Bentham and his utilitarian philosophy reject Enlightenment, French Revolution and all <https://assignbuster.com/why-do-conservatives-put-an-emphasis-on-tradition-politics-essay/>

philosophers of natural right. He said “ the past is of no use”. (Nisbet, 1986; 17)

Michael Oakeshott was one of the most important conservative thinkers of the 20th Century. Oakeshott offered a critique of modern conservatives, who in fact are liberal rationalists. A rationalist’s stands for independence of mind on all occasions, for thought free from obligation to any authority as he puts it “ save the authority of reason”. (Oakeshott 1962: 1 in Hoffman and Graham 2009; 203) The rationalist rejects Burkean prejudice, custom and habit. He believes that it is possible to reason about political institutions and the fact that something exists, and has existed in past, is no justification for respecting or retaining it. This lack of respect causes a political attitude of radical change rather than gradual reform. The rationalist disrespect for institution extends to the world of ideas; instead of a careful engagement with the complex intellectual traditions that have shaped western societies. (Oakeshott 1962; 7 in Hoffman and Graham 2009; 205)

Tradition is a practice or institution that has continuedx through time and has been inherited from an earlier period.[6]Conservatives have defended tradition of different grounds. For some conservatives, tradition reflects their religious faith. If the world is thought to have been fashioned by a creator, traditional customs and practices in society should be regarded as “ God given”. Therefore to change the tradition or “ natural laws” would be to challenge the will of God. However after the acceleration of historical change old traditions were replaced by new ones. “ Man-made “ laws were being created such as universal suffrage and free elections. This certainly weakened fundamentalist conservatism. Most conservatives, however, <https://assignbuster.com/why-do-conservatives-put-an-emphasis-on-tradition-politics-essay/>

support tradition without needing to argue it has divine origins. Burke for example, describes society as a partnership between “ those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born”. (Nisbet, 1986; 23) Nisbet uses Chesterton’s quote, who claims that “ tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes: our ancestors. It is democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about”. (Nisbet, 1986; 24) Tradition is therefore seen by conservatives as wisdom of the past. The institutions and traditions have been “ tested by time”, and therefore should be preserved for the benefits of future generations.

In a sense, conservatives take a Darwinian view on tradition, that tradition has gone through a period of “ natural selection” and has only survived because it has worked and been found of real value. (Nisbet, 1986; 28) An example of this is the British Monarchy. As historical wisdom and experience is gained from it, as well as gives a focus of national loyalty, it should be preserved. In this sense, tradition also generates a feeling of identity for society and individuals. (Hoffman and Graham 2009; 213) As traditional practices can be recognised from generation to generation, it allows people to feel a sense of belonging. Change on the other hand is like ‘ walking into unknown’ and is therefore dangerous because it creates a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty, in fact threatening happiness. Tradition is therefore seen as fundamental principle of conservatism. (Hoffman and Graham 2009; 214)

The philosophy of traditionalism is selective. A tradition must come from the past but it must be also desirable in itself. It is our link with the past. There is <https://assignbuster.com/why-do-conservatives-put-an-emphasis-on-tradition-politics-essay/>

another attribute of conservative respect of the old and traditional; belief that no matter how archaic a given structure or modern may be, there may be in it a continuity, still vital, function that man profits from; psychologically or sociologically. (Nisbet 1986; 27) T. S Elliot in his essay on individual talent and tradition has written as confirmed traditionalist as well as revolutionist in poetic form and imaginary. The individual talent is simply impotent, condemned to spinning of wheels without a chosen tradition to work with. (Nisbet, 1986; 29)

The Conservative Party is the mean in today's society through which Conservatism is introduced into public's spheres. It has a set of beliefs that comprise British Conservatism and those beliefs that have been preserved and developed over time by Conservative thinkers and politicians. However looking at the recent years it is clear that the link between conservation and development of those beliefs and policies has not been very close as it should have been. Having analysed the above areas of conservatism it is clear in a sense that today's Conservatism and Conservative Party is not really conservative. Margaret Thatcher's government 1979-1990 was rather rationalist if we analyse it in Oakeshott's view. (Hoffman and Graham 2009; 206) For Oakeshott experience comes with tradition, therefore rationalism for him is the politics of the "inexperienced". (Hoffman and Graham 2009; 207) The contemporary significance of traditional conservatism is seen less as an active ideology. Current conservative party is no longer "fully conservative", but heading towards more of a liberal approach which is their source of ideas. (Hoffman and Graham 2009; 208) It can be argued that there has been a significant shift in policies and philosophy of Conservative

party under David Cameron's leadership.[7]He has adopted a significantly different approach to his predecessors which can be characterised by focusing on new areas of concern, avoiding specific commitments, considering better policy options and being more value-oriented than in former Parliaments.[8]

In my opinion conservatives party and its internal disputes are clear reflection of the contradicting interests present within their ideology. Having in mind that conservative view presents that society does not exist, and the world is only a collection of self-seeking, egotistic individuals I do not believe they are able to invent a coherent way of thinking and going forward with a positive and constructive outlook upon the future. The fact that conservatives seem to be emphasising tradition and history of 'good times', praising the life and the level of society was during previous decades, will not improve but hinder their progression. I believe by looking backward to the past, 'conserving' the reality cannot be perceived as it really is, but as it would like to be seen from the past perspective. I believe any modern ideology; system has to be addressed to current affairs and relevant to present issues and look forward to the future, rather than the past. However having said that it is clearly noticeable that modern conservative party is collaborating with Liberal-Democrats seems to be a new beginning or 'transformation' that might bring positive results for the people and State.