

Is friedrich von hayek
a liberal or
conservative politics
essay



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In his essay "Why I am not a conservative", within *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek not only argues that he is not a conservative, but also that conservatism is at odds with liberalism, the political philosophy to which he subscribes. I would argue that despite this, Hayek's philosophy nonetheless displays a number of the central features of conservatism; Hayek's argument must therefore be based on a mischaracterisation of the concept, which he describes as "a legitimate, probably necessary, and certainly widespread attitude of opposition to drastic change" (in part 1). Nonetheless, the broad framework in which his theories operate is unmistakably liberal, depending as it does on assumptions shared to a great extent with key liberal theories. I shall start by examining Hayek's rejection of what he calls "conservatism". At a number of points, however, this rejection appears to either be based on distinctions which are inessential to conservative philosophy, or with little practical difference to his own beliefs.

Hayek's rejection of conservatism is based on several grounds. Firstly, he argues that the fundamental flaw is that conservatism is based on the fact that it offers no alternative to any existing political theory: that is, it serves simply as a theory that would slow the implementation of others - "it may succeed by its resistance to current tendencies in slowing down undesirable developments, but, since it does not indicate another direction, it cannot prevent their continuance" (p1). It is simply a check on the progress of other theories, without distinctive principles of its own. However, this would not appear to provide either an argument for Hayek's avoidance of conservatism, or rather against conservatism in general; as Hayek admits, "there is a need for a brake on the vehicle of progress" (p1). His argument is

merely that it is not a sufficient theory, and thus that it requires another theory to operate in conjunction: this does not lead to the conclusion that conservatism and other theories are mutually exclusive, and thus cannot be said to lead to the conclusion that Hayek's theories could be described as "not conservative". A person could be described, therefore, as a "liberal conservative", and indeed, it may be argued that Hayek has some elements of this in his own theory.

Secondly, Hayek argues that conservatism does not simply operate to slow progress simply out of desire to prevent too rapid a change; additionally, it rejects these changes on the wrong basis. What change is allowed under conservatism is based on "whatever appeals to the more timid mind" (p3) - it lacks the supposed courage in its convictions that liberalism is said to have, and so is driven to accept the situation which has already been established. As he remarks, "they lack the faith in the spontaneous forces of adjustment which makes the liberal accept changes without apprehension" (p3). If this is accepted, we could perhaps draw a distinction between Hayek and these theories: it cannot be doubted he has faith in such forces, these underpinning his entire conception of the free market. However, again, I would argue that this does not provide a convincing argument against conservatism in general. Even within liberalism, it is accepted that there is a need for resistance to certain changes - however, it is difficult to think of a reason for doing this that is not based on 'timidity of mind'. Any failure to make societal progress is surely the product of a lack of sound convictions (if not of resources, but this is not relevant to the philosophy): there is little to distinguish between conservatism based on general timidity of mind, and

that based on timidity of political convictions. Thus, any “brake on the wheels of progress” is difficult to distinguish from conservatism as a philosophy. Again, there would appear to be little in terms of a concrete distinction.

However, one particularly strong aspect of Hayek’s argument comes in his exposing of the internal contradictions that the lack of principles within conservatism causes it to espouse. The example is given of “collectivist and directivist measures in the industrial field” (p3); conservatives will tend to oppose such measures, while at the same time supporting protectionist measures within the market. It is difficult to reconcile the two positions: one appears to militate in favour of the unfettered economy (through the prevention of strikes, for example), whereas the second would work against it. This is a more general point than those made above: that an unprincipled development of policies results in manifest contradictions – as opposed to many of Hayek’s previous arguments, that attempt to focus on the conservatives’ convictions or tendencies rather than an actual application of his definition. It would appear from this that Hayek has succeeded in creating a dichotomy: liberalism might be said to require a principled approach towards economic decision-making.

A further argument is based on the supposed intellectual scepticism of the conservatives: he argues that conservatism, “unlike liberalism, with its fundamental belief in the long-range power of ideas, conservatism is bound by the stock of ideas inherited at a given time. And since it does not really believe in the power of argument, its last resort is generally a claim to superior wisdom, based on some self-arrogated superior quality.” (p4) This <https://assignbuster.com/is-friedrich-von-hayek-a-liberal-or-conservative-politics-essay/>

argument is based on the apparent propensity of conservatives to reject even well-founded new facts and ideas, for example because they dislike the conclusions that such theories may entail: this is in contrast to the liberal, who is “ prepared to come to terms with new knowledge” (p4), and will subject all new assertions to a process of scrutiny and debate, this ‘ marketplace of ideas’ guiding society to the most correct conclusions. Though again it may be said that this, if true, draws a distinction between the conservatives and liberals, I would argue that it perhaps rests on a picture of conservatism which fails to portray the whole width of the doctrine. There is nothing within conservatism – even taking Hayek’s definition of “ a widespread attitude of opposition to drastic change” – that necessitates a hostility towards newer ideas. A conservative may well, in contrast, assimilate newer concepts and ideas into his political mindset, and use this to rationalise their attitude of opposition towards change. The inherited stock of ideas is unlikely to have remained unchanged across all time, meaning that the acceptance of new ideas was at some point deemed a necessity. The distinction, it may be argued, is, largely, one of degree – with conservatives being less inclined to discuss and accept new ideas, but with no black-line distinction between it and other theories. The only other difference is the use to which these conclusions are then put – which in the conservative case, will be against change.

However, the conclusion that the acceptance of conservatism does not lead inevitably to the rejection of new ideas does not mean that liberalism is not perhaps at odd with some versions of the theory. For example, Michael Oakeshott argues that it is impossible to do more than simply accept the

views and traditions that we inherit as a society; the reason for this is that there is no way to judge a new idea or policy by any sort of “higher standards”, of the kind that would allow us to determine its objective truth. Those new ideas that we as a society do try to formulate will simply end up as reflections of those ideas that we have inherited, as we will have to use these pre-existing conceptions in judgment over the new ones. Thus, intellectual conservatism is not a political choice, as much as it is simply unavoidable – given that we are unable to formulate the objective standards against which we would normally criticise new ideas. If we do accept that this represents conservatism, it might be argued that it stands in contrast with Hayek’s portrayal of liberalism – and that we have found another sense in which Hayek is affirmatively a liberal. However, the two formulations do not appear to be normative in character – rather, they are descriptive, the only difference being that conservatism believes that existing ideas have a role to play in formulating the standards used to evaluate new ones. In all practical terms, the two theories come close to convergence here.

Hayek admits that to an extent, he shares attributes with the conservatives – namely, that he lacks the “crude rationalism” (p5) of the socialists, who seek (he claims) to reconstruct all of society’s institutions in a pattern prescribed by their own reason. The liberal, he admits, is less willing to allow such changes – though the liberal and the conservative do so for differing reasons. Whereas the conservative does so through “mysticism” and “non-rational institutions and habits”, the liberal does so because he is aware that “we do not have all the answers” (p5), or even doubts that the answers can be found. That is, though a liberal may believe in an objective ‘correctness’,

the way in which they attempt to discern this is through a process of argument, which will at the very least tend towards truth; the conservative, on the other hand, may attribute certain bodies or forces with the ability to determine this themselves ("non-rational institutions" almost certainly referring to religion). Again, however, it is difficult to distinguish between the two of these: there is nothing within his definition of "conservative" which necessitates that its hesitance towards change is based on irrational or mystic reasons; a philosophy based against change can surely also be based on rational principles. It is on this basis, surely, that Hayek characterises conservatism as being to an extent necessary - he would surely not advocate the use of irrational principles within his philosophy. Thus in this sense, Hayek admits similarities between his liberalism and conservatism, but fails to offer a solid basis for this similarity which still allows us to conclude that the two approaches are ultimately distinct.

Thus, though Hayek argues for his own part that he rejects conservatism, two points can be made. Firstly, his arguments do not amount to a coherent rejection of conservatism, and at certain points rely on the supposed "propensity" of a conservative, or conjecture as to the "conservative attitude", rather than the deconstruction of any sort of clear political philosophy. Admittedly, it would be difficult to formulate a coherent version of conservatism which one could then criticise, if we accept Hayek's point that it exists simply as an unprincipled philosophy working against change - but certainly, this form of conservatism does not necessitate many of the features (such as a reliance on "mysticism") that Hayek attributes to it.

Though there is strength in his argument, when he points out the extent to

which an unprincipled development of policies is apt to lead almost to self-contradiction, I would argue that this does not defeat the conclusion that a principled political position cannot nonetheless have conservative characteristics.

Secondly, despite his apparently rejecting conservatism, he does not conclude that liberalism is his position, as much as he chooses to associate himself with the "party of liberty" (p6). He does not move, as some might expect, from the conclusion that he is 'not a conservative', to the conclusion that he is a 'liberal'. Indeed, he seeks to find a new term which more aptly describes his position, as part of "the party of life, the party that favors free growth and spontaneous evolution. But I have racked my brain unsuccessfully to find a descriptive term which commends itself" (p6). For a time, he considers "Old Whig". As he points out, the name is perhaps unimportant - both in general, and for our own purposes in answering this question - but the very fact that he requires such a search may lead us to the conclusion that Hayek is neither wholly "liberal" or "conservative". Rather, he takes strands of each, and we must examine to what extent he engages with each position.

Firstly, it must be pointed out that the extent to which one can be counted amongst the ranks of "conservatives" is dependent on one's contemporary society, rather than entirely on one's own views - conservative or reformist tendencies are a reaction to the society that exists at the time, and therefore labels such as "conservatism" cannot be considered in isolation from society as a whole. Thus, liberals and socialists alike can be classified as "conservatives" alternately, at different points in history; as Machlup points

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out, a liberal in an illiberal society must be a reformer, but in a liberal society, a liberal will have to be a conservative (Kelley, 1969). There is therefore no strict dichotomy between the two; a liberal will always, to some extent, be a conservative.

However, in a number of his expressed attitudes towards society, and through the implications of his economic theories, Hayek arguably demonstrates an outlook more in keeping with liberal traditions. Firstly, it is a vital tenet of the liberal position that there is a degree of faith in the ability of society to make beneficial social change - as may be seen in Hayek's theories of spontaneous order, which states that social orders (such as societies, or financial markets) can arise through the unplanned actions of individuals acting in a self-interested manner. Applied to the personal arena, this (as Hayek puts it), would lead to the conclusion that aspects of one's personality such as religion, are not proper objects of coercion. Hayek's theories would certainly be closest to the liberal position: the concept of spontaneous order would be most in keeping with the maximisation of personal freedom, this being the most likely to generate the circumstances in which the most efficient equilibrium can be generated. In this sense, Hayek is inevitably tied to the liberal position.

Secondly, in *The Road to Serfdom*, Hayek sets out his argument against a socialist state: he argues that a planned economy could only come about through a central planning "authority", and that this will inevitably be inefficient, given that the planners will only ever have access to a limited supply of information. The market, on the other hand, will have the optimal supply of information - it contains the 'information' of all its participants, <https://assignbuster.com/is-friedrich-von-hayek-a-liberal-or-conservative-politics-essay/>

which though admittedly less than perfect, is much more complete than that held by any smaller group or individual. Again, however, this argument depends entirely on the defence of personal liberty: any restrictions on citizens would affect their participation within the market, and would by extension affect this optimal supply. Once again, Hayek's economic arguments are tied inextricably to broader liberal arguments concerning personal autonomy: if this is not maximised, then his argument becomes unsustainable. This can also be seen to underpin his theories on money - that state intervention (in the form of central banks) is unlikely to ever be effective: the banks, having a sub-optimal supply of information, are likely to allow an over-expansion of bank credit, leading to an unsustainable "boom" based on cheap credit. This leads to the creation of market "cycles" - recessions occurring when the availability of credit is suddenly lessened. Again, the role of sustaining the economy is unplanned and informed by citizens rather than government.

This again shows itself within Hayek's social philosophy, regarding the role of the state, for example: he argues that the role of government should be minimised, and limited only to enforcing the rule of law. Though the justifications for this are economic, the practical consequences correspond almost perfectly with the ideals of liberalism - for example, we may compare it to Mill's theories on liberty, based on the "harm principle"[1], this being that the only justifiable basis for state intervention could be the prevention of harm to other citizens. Applying the force of the state to upholding the rule of law alone would have much the same practical consequences, in that

the rule of law would presumably include within it the prevention of harm done willingly to others.

In conclusion, then, Hayek's arguments on why he is not a conservative - his negative arguments - fail to convince. However, there are elements of his wider economic theory which tend towards the conclusion that he is towards the "liberal" end of the political system - that is, that he would much prefer for individual control both on a social and economic level, rather than having central planning or coercion by the state. Nonetheless, there are inevitably elements of conservatism: firstly, to the extent that all plausible political theories must embrace some element of conservatism, in not reforming that which already corresponds to their theories. Secondly, in common with the conservatives, he recognises the necessity of a degree of restraint, lacking as he does socialism's "crude rationalism" - a degree of belief in a manifest truth, found rationally, which can then be applied to social institutions. Of course, very few liberal theories have ever embraced repudiation of all existing customs - it may be said that Hayek's position does not set him apart from most liberals. However, this may be seen as further proof for the proposition that all political theories is to some extent conservative. Hayek may therefore be described as chiefly liberal, but with necessary conservative characteristics.