

back of the clock, but a renewal of conservative attitudes and values transposed by the pressure of current events. Thus what links conservatives of succeeding centuries is not so much policy as attitude, temper, and overall philosophy.

Conservatism is, in turn, criticized on the grounds that it expresses an elitist and class-dominated view of the world, has often relied upon the sanctions and prescriptions of religion, and gains the consent of men and women only because they are deceived, that is, because they are suffering the effects of false consciousness derived from their class position. It is characteristic of conservative responses to such criticisms that it refuses to join in any such theoretical analysis of society and its travails but emphasizes the surface commitments, loyalties, and enjoyments which are characteristic of a people's life together.

NB

Further reading

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CONSERVATIVE THEORY

The very idea of a conservative theory, or conservative philosophy, is paradoxical. For the conservative is one who likes to take as it comes the given order of worldly affairs, and the very idea of expressing a theory of these matters, even a theory to the effect that it is a Good Thing to take as it comes the given order of worldly affairs, seems already to constitute an interference in that order of precisely the sort that the conservative spurns. Some conservative theorists like Tolstoy and Wittgenstein have been willing to shoulder the full weight of this paradox, and have insisted that conservatism cannot be said, but only shown, or hinted at darkly, or borne in silence. Conservatism, as Scruton expressed it, is characteristically inarticulate.

A further reason for this inarticulateness lies in the fact that whenever conservative attitudes have enjoyed a historical importance they have been characterized by a certain conditionality. Where the classical liberal is able to claim unconditional validity for the theories in which he believes, a validity that would be independent of time and circumstance, the thinking and attitudes of the conservative have tended to arise in reaction to specific political or historical events wherein something that is (or is seen as being) especially valuable in and of itself – and something that has hitherto been taken for granted as such (and hence not seen as requiring a theory) – comes under threat.

Conservative theorizing, too, therefore has been often part and parcel of the reaction to specific social or political developments. Hence such theorizing is often marked also by a certain particularism: it is infused by the spirit of a particular place and time and culture, and claims validity only in relation thereto. Above all, conservative theorizing has been associated with nationalism, and it has tended to come to full force where the nation is seen as being under threat from without. Such theorizing is, however, riddled with impurities of a non-theoretical sort, as is seen not least in the fact that it derives much of its vocabulary from the language and symbolism of national defence (glory, loyalty, patriotism, treachery, sanctity of national boundaries, etc.). The conservative sentiment that is brought to expression by such impure theorizing may be further intensified by appeals to political or social arrangements of the past, arrangements which were (or which are now perceived as having been) superior to those of the present. Typically, however, conservative attitudes that have come to play an important political role are, for all the backward-looking rhetoric, very much of the present day and arise in reflection of shifts in the relative economic strengths of particular groups in society. Conservative attitudes have typically arisen among the members of one group as arrangements which are valuable to its members come to be threatened by the aspirations of other groups who have suddenly become relatively more articulate or more powerful. The threatened arrangements will then be identified as essential to the order of society itself, or to the very survival of the nation.

Some modern-day conservative thinkers have, however, sought to transcend the particularism and self-seeking nature of conservative theorizing of this sort, and conservatism has to this extent become to different degrees articulate: it has been brought to the level of a theory in the strict and proper sense.

We can imagine, first of all, a purely theoretical conservatism of someone who sees all political (and other, related sorts of) institutions, and all changes therein as being, like the weather, inevitable and unavoidable, and as being valuable as such. Even proponents of this, the purest of all forms of conservative theory, are not, therefore, against change as such. Change, they reason, will come in any case. Rather, they are uncomfortable in the face of exertions on the part of their fellow men designed to bring about further, avoidable change, as they would be uncomfortable in the face of exertions designed to bring about changes in climatic conditions or in the velocity of rotation of the earth.

Hayek, perhaps, has come closest to expressing a theoretical conservatism of this sort. He has argued in his writings that many, if not all, of the institutions of society have grown up over long periods by processes about which the participants have in every stage understood little, so that we, in

particular, cannot know how these institutions achieve their results. In some cases, perhaps, we may have quite mistaken notions as to what these results are. Hence ideas which might be brought forward as to how these institutions might be improved, through more or less drastic changes, are to be treated with the utmost suspicion.

Another, closely related idea, which has been articulated especially by Oakeshott though it is to be found in different forms also in the writings of Wittgenstein, Polanyi, and Hayek himself, consists in the idea that many of the most valuable human institutions and practices rest not on rules and recipes and theories that can be conveyed explicitly from one generation to the next, but rather on what can be transmitted only through enculturation. True culture presupposes a rich and complex established order, it presupposes disciplines which take time to develop, both on the level of the individual and on the level of society as a whole. And disciplines, or ways of doing things (of speaking, reasoning, cooking, violin-playing), cannot be acquired through explanations of what is right and wrong; they must, rather, be internalized, through practice and example, empathy and intuition.

The conservative theorist is generally suspicious of explanations, and of the role of explanations, in the workings of society. He is suspicious also of the cult of science, especially in the field of politics (which explains why political science departments contain so few theorists of conservative disposition). He stresses in contrast the importance of slow, gradual development and of what is tried and tested, and points out how it is in effect the wisdom of the ages that has contributed the most complex and valuable institutions of society, including language, the arts, the family, and the law. The same principles have been at work in the development of these institutions as have brought about the evolution of biological species and of man himself.

BS

Further reading

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