INTRODUCTION

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WHAT IS CONSERVATIVE
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL
THOUGHT?

An intuitive procedure for defining conservatism is to begin by listing the institutions which conservatives have sought to conserve. That will not get us very far. For conservatives have, at one time and place or another, defended royal power, constitutional monarchy, aristocratic prerogative, representative democracy, and presidential dictatorship; high tariffs and free trade; nationalism and internationalism; centralism and federalism; a society of inherited estates, a capitalist, market society, and one or another version of the welfare state. They have defended religion in general, established churches, and the need for government to defend itself against the claims of religious enthusiasts. There are, no doubt, self-described conservatives today who cannot imagine that conservatives could defend institutions and practices other than those they hold dear. Yet they might find, to their surprise, that conservatives in their own national past have defended institutions which contemporary conservatives abhor. And were they to look beyond their own national borders, they might find that some of the institutions and practices they seek to conserve are regarded as implausible or risible by their conservative counterparts in other nations.

In one of the most perceptive scholarly analyses of the subject, Samuel Huntington argued that conservatism is best understood not as an *inherent* theory in defense of particular institutions, but as a *positional* ideology. "When the foundations of society are threatened, the conservative ideology reminds men of the necessity of some institutions and the desirability of the existing ones," Huntington suggested.[1] Rather than representing the self-satisfied and complacent acceptance of the institutional status quo, ideological conservatism arises from the anxiety that valuable institutions are endangered by contemporary developments or by proposed reforms. The awareness that the legitimacy of

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[1] Samuel Huntington, "Conservatism as an Ideology," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 51, 1957, pp. 454–73.

existing institutions is under attack leads conservative theorists to attempt to provide an articulate defense of the usefulness of those institutions.[2] Huntington claimed that because "the articulation of conservatism is a response to a specific social situation. . . . The manifestation of conservatism at any one time and place has little connection with its manifestation at any other time and place." As we will see, this exaggerates the lack of continuity of conservative social and political thought.

For if the specific institutions which conservative thinkers have sought to conserve have varied over time and space, a set of conservative assumptions, themes, and images *has* endured. It is the purpose of this book to present and explicate the characteristic features of conservative analysis which were first articulated in the eighteenth century and which have consistently recurred, in a variety of national contexts, until the present day.[3]

Conservatism and Orthodoxy

It is sometimes said that conservatism is defined by the assumption "that there exists a transcendent moral order, to which we ought to try to conform the ways of society."[4] Yet the notion that human institutions should reflect some transcendent order predates conservatism, is shared by a variety of nonconservative religious ideologies, and is contested by some of the most significant and influential conservative thinkers. It will be instructive, therefore, to begin by distinguishing this conception from conservatism.

Crucial to understanding conservatism as a distinctive mode of social and political thought is the distinction between *orthodoxy* and *conservatism*. While the orthodox defense of institutions depends on belief in their correspondence to some ultimate truth, the conservative tends more skeptically to avoid justifying institutions on the basis of their ultimate foundations. The orthodox theoretician defends existing institutions and practices because they are metaphysically *true*: the truth pro-

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[2] Or, in the formulation of Peter Berger, "[T]he facticity of the social world or of any part of it suffices for self-legitimation as long as there is no challenge. When a challenge appears, in whatever form, the facticity can no longer be taken for granted. The validity of the social order must then be explicated, both for the sake of the challengers and of those meeting the challenge. . . . The seriousness of the challenge will determine the degree of elaborateness of the answering legitimations." Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, 1967), p. 31.

[3] Most of the primary works referred to in this introduction are reprinted below, in whole or in part.

[4] Russell Kirk, ed., *The Portable Conservative Reader* (New York, 1982), p. xv. A similar conception in a variety of formulations appears in many works of conservative self-representation.

claimed may be based on particular revelation or on natural laws purportedly accessible to all rational men, it may be religious or secular in origin. The conservative defends existing institutions because their very existence creates a presumption that they have served some useful function, because eliminating them may lead to harmful, unintended consequences, or because the veneration which attaches to institutions that have existed over time makes them potentially usable for new purposes.[5] Although orthodox and conservative thinkers may sometimes reach common conclusions, they reach those conclusions by different intellectual routes. The distinction between conservatism and orthodoxy is often elided in conservative self-representations, at times because conservative thinkers may regard it as useful for most people to believe that existing institutions correspond closely to some ultimate truth.

As misleading as the confusion between conservatism and orthodoxy is the false dichotomy of conservatism and Enlightenment. Contrary to the frequent characterization of conservatism as the enemy of the Enlightenment, it is more historically accurate to say that there were many currents within the Enlightenment, and some of them were conservative. Indeed, conservatism as a distinct mode of thought is a product of the Enlightenment. What makes social and political arguments *conservative* as opposed to *orthodox* is that the critique of liberal or progressive arguments takes place on the enlightened grounds of the search for human happiness, based on the use of reason.

Even conservatives who purport to rest their conservatism on orthodox religious principles do not base their arguments on the traditional religious grounds of the quest for ultimate salvation. Thomas Aquinas, an orthodox Christian religious thinker, began his political thought from the premise that "since the beatitude of heaven is the end of that virtuous life which we live at present, it pertains to the king's office to promote the good life of the multitude in such a way as to make it suitable for the attainment of heavenly happiness, that is to say, he should command those things which lead to the happiness of Heaven and, as far as possible, forbid the contrary."[6] Edmund Burke, by contrast, though also a Christian, was a conservative rather than an orthodox thinker, who repeatedly cited worldly utility as the dominant criterion for politi-

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[5] Peter Berger has distinguished "conservatives by faith" from skeptical "conservatives by lack of faith" which corresponds to the distinction between orthodoxy and conservatism suggested here. Peter L. Berger and Richard J. Neuhaus, *Movement and Revolution* (New York, 1970), p. 21.

[6] Aquinas, *De Regno*, iv (i.15) [115], translated as *St. Thomas Aquinas on Kingship* (Toronto, 1949) and quoted in Robert George, *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 29–30.

cal decision-making.[7] "The practical consequences of any political tenet go a great way in deciding upon its value," he noted, "Political problems do not primarily concern truth or falsehood. They relate to good or evil. What in the result is likely to produce evil, is politically false: that which is productive of good, politically is true."[8] Burke was famously averse to founding the legitimacy of institutions upon their correspondence with some metaphysical truth. In his last major work, "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," for example, he wrote that "nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral, or any political subject. . . . Metaphysics cannot live without definition; but prudence is cautious how she defines."[9] "Theocratic" conservative theorists such as Louis de Bonald and Joseph de Maistre were more inclined than Burke to argue that the specific institutions which they favored were rooted in divine will. But forced to address an audience for whom this argument was no longer considered persuasive, they too made their case on the basis of utility. That is why de Maistre begins his chapter on "The best species of government" in *Of the Sovereignty of the People* with a statement that could have been penned by Jeremy Bentham, the founder of the Utilitarian school of philosophy. "The best government for each nation," he writes, "is that which, in the territory occupied by this nation, is capable of producing the greatest possible sum of happiness and strength, for the greatest possible number of men, during the longest possible time."[10]

While some conservative theorists have been religious believers, and most affirm the social function of religious belief in maintaining individual morality and social cohesion, none base their social and political arguments primarily on conformity with ultimate religious truth. The search for earthly happiness, broadly construed, is one assumption

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[7] "In reality there are two, and only two, foundations of Law; and they are both of them conditions without which nothing can give it any force; I mean equity and utility. . . . [U]tility must be understood, not of partial or limited, but of general and public utility, connected in the same manner with, and derived directly from, our rational nature." Edmund Burke, "Tracts relating to the Popery Laws" (1765), in R. B. McDowell, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke: Vol. IX* (Oxford, 1991), p. 456.

[8] Edmund Burke, "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs" (1791), in Daniel Ritchie, ed., *Edmund Burke: Further Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis, 1992), p. 163.

[9] Burke, "Appeal," p. 91. Without using our terminology of orthodoxy and conservatism, Leo Strauss makes a similar point about Burke, in Leo Strauss, *Natural Rights and History* (Chicago, 1953), pp. 318–20.

[10] Quoted in Garrard Graeme, "Rousseau, Maistre, and the Counter-Enlightenment," *History of Political Thought*, vol. XV, no.1, Spring 1994, pp. 97–120, esp. p. 117. As Garrard notes, "While the positions that the author of *Du Pape* defends are very conservative and supportive of the Catholic Church, the social and political functions of religion are central to his outlook, whereas strictly theological arguments are quite peripheral."

which distinguishes conservative social and political analysis from religious orthodoxy. Conservative arguments are thus utilitarian, when the term is understood loosely as the criterion of contributing to worldly well-being. Of course "Utilitarianism" also exists as a formal philosophical and political doctrine which seeks to provide measurable criteria— usually the sum total of the expressed wants of individuals—by which to make policy decisions. Conservatism parts company with this sense of "Utilitarianism" because of the conservative emphasis upon social complexity, the functional inter-relationship between social institutions, and the importance of latent functions. For these reasons and for others to be explored below, conservatives tend to be skeptical of doctrines like Utilitarianism which try to cut through complexity on the assumption that there is a single and readily ascertainable measure of human happiness.

Conservatism is also distinguished from orthodoxy by the conservative emphasis upon history. Combining the emphases on history and utility, the common denominator of conservative social and political analysis might be termed "historical utilitarianism."[11] Though the term may be unfamiliar, it usefully captures a number of characteristic features of conservative thought.

For the conservative, the historical survival of an institution or practice—be it marriage, monarchy, or the market—creates a *prima facie* case that it has served some human need. That need may be the institution's explicit purpose, but just as often it will be a need other than that to which the institution is explicitly devoted. Conservatism, as Irving Kristol notes, assumes "that institutions which have existed over a long period of time have a reason and a purpose inherent in them, a collective wisdom incarnate in them, and the fact that we don't perfectly understand or cannot perfectly explain why they 'work' is no defect in them but merely a limitation in us."[12] Or, in the words of the contemporary German philosopher, Hans Blumenberg, "What the term 'institution' conveys is, above all, a distribution of the burdens of proof. Where an institution exists, the question of its rational foundation is not, of itself, urgent, and the burden of proof always lies on the person who objects to the arrangement the institution carries with it."[13] This propensity is

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[11] This term, with a somewhat different meaning, has been used by Jack Lively, "Introduction," to Lively, ed., *The Works of Joseph de Maistre* (New York, 1971), p. 27 and Wyger R. E. Velema, *Enlightenment and Conservatism in the Dutch Republic: The Political Thought of Elie Luzac (1721–1796)* (Assen, The Netherlands, 1993), p. 185.

[12] Irving Kristol, "Utopianism, Ancient and Modern," in his *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York, 1978), p. 161.

[13] Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. by Robert W. Wallace (Cambridge, MA, 1985), p. 166, translation altered slightly.

captured in the dictum of the eighteenth-century German conservative, Justus Möser: "When I come across some old custom or old habit which simply will not fit into modern ways of reasoning, I keep turning around in my head the idea that 'after all, our forefathers were no fools either,' until I find some sensible reason for it . . ."[14]

The conservative emphasis on "experience" is linked to the assumption that the historical survival of an institution or practice is evidence of its fitness in serving human needs. Burke's conservatism owed a great deal to the common law tradition, which had long assumed that the common law was a body of rules which had developed historically to meet changing human needs.[15] In America, conservative Whigs like Rufus Choate (1799–1859) similarly appealed to the common law as the embodiment of historical experience.[16] Later conservatives, such as William Graham Sumner or Friedrich Hayek would defend the capitalist market on the grounds that it had proved itself the fittest institution to provide for the material basis of collective survival—another variation on the theme of historical utilitarianism.[17]

Conservative social and political thought is further distinguished from orthodoxy by what we might call its "historical consequentialism": institutions are to be judged, conservatives repeatedly assert, not by the motives and intentions of their founders, and not by their explicit purposes, but by their results in furthering human well-being.[18]

"Historical utilitarianism" is the basis of conservatism in another sense as well. Since custom and habit are important features of human conduct, some of the usefulness of a practice comes from the fact that those engaged in it are already "used" to it, and are apt to be discomfited by change. Familiarity, on this logic, breeds comfort. Thus

[14] Quoted in Karl Mannheim, "Conservative Thought," in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *From Karl Mannheim* (New York, 1971), pp. 132–222, esp. p. 198, from Justus Möser, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. B. R. Abeken (Berlin, 1842–43), vol. 5, p. 260.

[15] See J.G.A. Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas," in his *Politics, Language and Time* (New York, 1973), pp. 202–32; and Harold J. Berman, "The Origins of Historical Jurisprudence: Coke, Selden, Hale," *Yale Law Review*, vol. 103, no.7 (May 1994), pp. 1651–1738.

[16] See Rufus Choate, "The Position and Functions of the American Bar, as an Element of Conservatism in the State" (1845) in *The Works of Rufus Choate*, ed. Samual Gilman Brown, vol. 1. (Boston, 1862), excerpted below. On Choate's appeal to the common law, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979), p. 226.

[17] See, for example, William Graham Sumner, "Sociological Fallacies" (1884), in *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays*, ed. Albert Galloway Keller (New Haven, 1914), pp. 357–64, reprinted below; and Friedrich Hayek, "The Errors of Constructivism" (1976), in his *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (University of Chicago, 1978), reprinted below.

[18] See the quote from Burke above. Among other examples, William Graham Sumner, "Purposes and Consequences," in *Earth Hunger*, ed. Albert Galloway Keller (New Haven, 1914), pp. 67–75.

"usage"—the fact that a practice is already in place—is often interpreted by conservatives as a presumption in favor of retaining it.[19]

In a related argument, conservatives maintain that the existence of a long historical past (or, at least, belief in the existence of a long historical past) contributes to the sense of veneration in which institutions are held. Historical continuity thus increases the emotional hold of the institution upon its members, adding emotional weight to institutionally prescribed duties. A sense of historical continuity thus adds to the stability and effective functioning of an institution and hence to its utility. In de Maistre's pithy formulation: "Custom is the mother of legitimacy."[20] David Hume articulated this connection between historical time and the effective functioning of institutions,[21] and Burke dilated upon the "benefit from considering our liberties in the light of an inheritance" as a means of procuring "reverence to our civil institutions."[22] That is one reason why conservatives recommend that reform (even radical reform) be presented in a manner which makes it appear continuous with past institutional practice.[23]

There are several recurrent arguments put forth by conservatives which combine history and utility. Conservatives contend that existing institutions ought to be maintained because their ongoing existence indicates their *superiority* in meeting human needs. Another variation asserts that while existing institutions are not *intrinsically* superior to possible alternatives, they are superior under the circumstances by virtue of their familiarity and the veneration that attends institutional continuity.

Recurrent Conservative Assumptions and Predispositions

What follows is an outline of the recurrent constellation of assumptions, predispositions, arguments, themes, and metaphors that characterize conservative social and political thought. None of these are exclusive to

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[19] Michael Oakeshott's essay, "On being conservative," in his *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (London, 1962; Expanded edition, Indianapolis, 1991), is an extended reflection on this theme.

[20] Joseph de Maistre, *Du Pape*, livre II, chap. X, quoted in Peter Richard Rohden, *Joseph de Maistre als politischer Theoretiker* (Munich, 1929; reprinted New York, 1979), pp. 175–76, which has a good discussion of the role of time and continuity in Maistre's thought.

[21] Sheldon Wolin, "Hume and Conservatism," *American Political Science Review* 48, no. 4, 1954, pp. 999–1016, esp. p. 1008.

[22] Burke, "Reflections on the Revolution in France," in L. G. Mitchell, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke: Volume VIII: The French Revolution, 1790–1794* (Oxford, 1989), p. 85; excerpted below.

[23] That is the thrust of Burke's analysis, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, of the departure from the line of succession during the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

conservatism, nor does every conservative analyst share them all. But it is in conservative thought that these features occur with greatest frequency and in combination with one another.

Human Imperfection

Conservative thought has typically emphasized the imperfection of the individual, an imperfection at once biological, emotional, and cognitive. More than any other animal, man is dependent upon other members of his species, and hence upon social institutions for guidance and direction.[24] Though this assumption may be grounded in a religious doctrine of original sin, it has often been argued upon entirely secular grounds, including the biological facts of limited human instinctual preparedness for survival, an argument advanced by de Bonald and developed most extensively by Arnold Gehlen.[25]

Conservatives typically contend that human moral imperfection leads men to act badly when they act upon their uncontrolled impulses, and that they require the restraints and constraints imposed by institutions as a limit upon subjective impulse. Conservatives thus are skeptical of attempts at "liberation": they maintain that liberals over-value freedom and autonomy, and that liberals fail to consider the social conditions that make autonomous individuals possible and freedom desirable.[26]

Epistemological Modesty

Conservatives have also stressed the cognitive element of human imperfection, insisting upon the limits of human knowledge, especially of the social and political world. They warn that society is too complex to lend itself to theoretical simplification, and that this fact must temper all plans for institutional innovation.[27] Such epistemological modesty may be based upon philosophical skepticism as in the case of Hume, or a

[24] In keeping with standard English usage, here and elsewhere the term "man" is used to refer to members of the human species, males and females included. The term "male" is reserved for circumstances in which only the masculine sex is intended.

[25] See Louis de Bonald, *On Divorce*, edited and translated by Nicholas Davidson (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992), p. 43, excerpted below; Arnold Gehlen, "Mensch und Institutionen" (1960), in Arnold Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung* (Hamburg, 1961), pp. 69–77; partially translated below.

[26] Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection: The religious and secular traditions of conservative thought in England from Hooker to Oakeshott* (London, 1978), p. 13; Roger Scruton, "Introduction" to Scruton, *Conservative Texts* (London, 1991), p. 9. For a recent example of such an analysis, see Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, D.C., 1977), excerpted below.

[27] There is a good discussion of this element of conservative thought, as well as much else, in Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection*, p. 17.

religiously derived belief in the limits of human knowledge, as in the case of Burke or de Maistre, or on some general sense of the fallibility of human knowledge, as in the case of Friedrich Hayek or Edward Banfield.[28]

Institutions

These assumptions explain the emphasis of conservative social and political thought upon *institutions*, that is, patterned social formations with their own rules, norms, rewards, and sanctions. While liberals typically view with suspicion the restraints and penalties imposed upon the individual by institutions, conservatives are disposed to protect the authority and legitimacy of existing institutions because they believe human society cannot flourish without them. The restraints imposed by institutions, they argue, are necessary to constrain and guide human passions. Hence Burke's dictum, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, that "the restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights." The positive value ascribed to institutions by conservatism contributes to its natural affinity for the *status quo*, in contrast to liberalism's innate hostility toward authority and establishments.

Custom, Habit, and Prejudice

Burke used the term "prejudice" to refer to rules of action which are the product of historical experience and are inculcated by habit. Like Hume and Möser before him, he argued in favor of relying upon customary moral rules even when they had not been subject to rational justification. Subsequent conservatives too assume that most men and women lack the time, energy, ability, and inclination to reevaluate or reinvent social rules. Therefore, "duty," the subjective acceptance of existing social rules conveyed through socialization and habit, is regarded as the best guide for most people, most of the time.

Historicism and Particularism

Many valuable institutions, according to conservatives, arise not from natural rights, or from universal human propensities, or from explicit contract, but rather are a product of historical development. To the extent that human groups differ, conservatives argue, the institutions

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[28] Edward Banfield, "Policy Science as Metaphysical Madness" (1980), in Banfield, *Here the People Rule: Selected Essays* (2nd ed., Washington, D.C, 1991).

which they develop will differ as well. Hence the institutions which conservatives seek to conserve vary over time, and from group to group.[29] Since, for the conservative, the desirability of specific institutions is dependent upon time and place, conservatism tends to be procedural and methodological, rather than substantive.[30] Stated differently, conservatism is defined in part by its affirmation of institutions as such, rather than by its commitment to specific institutions. In facing foreign institutions and practices which differ from those of his native culture, the conservative, unlike the adherent to orthodoxy or the liberal, does not begin with the assumption that because foreign institutions differ from his own at least one set of institutions must necessarily be flawed. Rather he is inclined to suspect that the foreign institution reflects a different historical experience, and may be as useful in the foreign context as his native institutions are in their context. For the conservative, then, the fact that an institution or practice has withstood the test of time leads to a presumption of its suitability to its context.

Anti-contractualism

Unlike liberals who favor voluntary, contractual social relations, conservatives emphasize the importance of nonvoluntary duties, obligations, and allegiances. Hume, for example, argued that social contract theories of political obligation which derived the duty to obey government from the explicit will of the governed were historically untenable and had the undesirable effect of delegitimating all established governments.[31] "What would become of the World if the Practice of all moral Duties, and the Foundations of Society, rested upon having their Reasons made clear and demonstrative to every Individual?" Burke asked rhetorically in his *Vindication of Natural Society*. Here as for many other elements of conservative thought, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* provides an exemplary formulation in his redefinition of the social contract as "a partnership not only between those who are living,

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[29] See, for example, Justus Möser, "Der jetzige Hang zu allgemeinen Gesetzen und Verordnungen ist der gemeinen Freiheit gefährlich" (1772), in *Justus Mösers Sämtliche Werke: Historisch-kritische Ausgabe in 14 Bänden* (Oldenburg and Berlin, 1943), vol. 5, pp. 22–27.

Burke's analysis of American peculiarities in his speech on "Conciliation with America," provides a model of this element of conservative analysis. Edmund Burke, "Conciliation with America" (1775), in Ian Harris, ed., *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 206–69, esp. pp. 220ff.

[30] See the discussion in Anthony Quinton, "Conservatism," in Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds., *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 1993).

[31] See David Hume's essays, "Of the Origin of Government," "Of the Original Contract," and "Of Passive Obedience," in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (revised edition, Indianapolis, 1987), reprinted below.

but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."[32] Because the dissolution of the social order would mean the end of social institutions by which men's passions are guided, restrained, and perfected, Burke argued, the individual has no right to opt out of the "social contract" with the state. "Men without their choice derive benefits from that association; without their choice they are subjected to duties in consequence of these benefits; and without their choice they enter into a virtual obligation as binding as any that is actual."[33] This noncontractual basis of society, Burke wrote, was evident in other social relations as well. Marriage was a matter of choice, but the duties attendant upon marriage were not: parents and children were bound by duties which were involuntary.[34] This emphasis on the non-voluntary bases of obedience and allegiance has remained a distinctively conservative theme.

The Utility of Religion

There is no necessary link between conservatism and religious belief. Devout Christians or Jews have embraced a variety of political viewpoints, including liberalism, socialism, and nationalism, while many of the most distinguished conservative theorists have been agnostics or atheists. Conservatism arose in good part out of the need to defend existing institutions from the threat posed by "enthusiasm," that is, religious inspiration which seeks to overturn the social order. The critique of religious enthusiasm, which was central to Hume's conservatism, was later extended, first by Hume himself, and more emphatically by Burke, into a critique of political radicalism.[35]

Yet despite disagreements as to the *veracity* of religion, conservatives have tended to affirm its *social utility*. Conservatives make several arguments for the utility of religion: that it legitimates the state; that the hope of future reward offers men solace for the trials of their earthly existence and thus helps to diffuse current discontent which might disrupt the social order; and that belief in ultimate reward and punishment leads men to act morally by giving them an incentive to do so. Recognition of the social utility of religion is no reflection upon the truth or

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[32] Burke, "Reflections," p. 147; reprinted below.
[33] Burke, "Appeal," p. 160.
[34] Ibid., pp. 160–61.
[35] On Hume, see Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 318–23. On the theme of enthusiasm in Burke, see J.G.A. Pocock, "Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-Revolution," in François Furet and Mona Ozouf, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture: Vol. 3: The Transformation of Political Culture 1789–1848* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 19–36.

falsity of religious doctrine. It is quite possible to believe that religion is false but useful. But it is also possible to believe that religion is both useful and true. Or one may believe that religion is "true" in a more rational and universalistic sense than in its particular, historical embodiments, but that those particular embodiments are necessary to make religion accessible to the mass of citizens in a way which is less rationalist and abstract than more intellectual versions of the faith.[36]

Recurrent Conservative Arguments

The Critique of "Theory"

Conservative theorists repeatedly decry the application to society and politics of a mode of thought which they characterize as overly abstract, rationalistic, and removed from experience. Whether termed "the abuse of reason" (by Burke), "rationalism in politics" (by Oakeshott), or "constructivism" (by Hayek), the conservative accusation against liberal and radical thought is fundamentally the same: liberals and radicals are said to depend upon a systematic, deductivist, universalistic form of reasoning which fails to account for the complexity and peculiarity of the actual institutions they seek to transform.[37]

Conservative theorists are not opposed to the use of knowledge and intellect in the analysis of social and political affairs.[38] They oppose what they regard as epistemologically pretentious forms of knowledge and analysis.[39] Radical reformers and revolutionaries are said by conservatives to be insufficiently cognizant of the complexity of life and of the need to balance conflicting considerations. They fail, conservatives contend, to understand the working of existing institutions, and take for granted the benefits of existing institutions without appreciating their prerequisites.

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[36] As Hume wrote in his essay, "The Sceptic," "An abstract, invisible object, like that which *natural* religion alone presents to us, cannot long actuate the mind, or be of any moment in life. To render the passion of continuance, we must find some method of affecting the senses and imagination, and must embrace some *historical*, as well as *philosophical* account of the divinity. Popular superstitions and observances are even found to be of use in this particular." (Hume, *Essays*, p. 167.) Although Hume does not always write in his own voice in the set of four essays from which the quotation is taken, he may well be conveying his own view in this instance.

[37] See also, in this regard, Karl Mannheim's schematic comparison of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century natural-law thinking and counterrevolutionary thought, in Karl Mannheim, *Conservatism: A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. David Kettler, Volker Meja, and Nico Stehr (London, 1986), pp. 107–9.

[38] With the exception of some romantic conservatives, who are not represented in this collection.

[39] See Quinton, *Politics of Imperfection*, pp. 12–13.

Especially suspect to conservatives are projects undertaken to reform institutions in order to make them reflect universalistic theories of natural rights, theories which are supposed to be applicable to all men at all times. Of natural rights, Burke wrote that "their abstract perfection is their practical defect. . . . [T]he restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights. But as the liberties and the restrictions vary with times and circumstances and admit to infinite modifications, they cannot be settled upon any abstract rule; and nothing is so foolish as to discuss them upon that principle."[40] There is no consensus among conservative theorists as to whether and in what sense natural rights may be said to exist. But most conservatives stress the hazards of rejecting existing institutions merely on the grounds that they fail to guarantee some posited natural right.

*Unanticipated Consequences, Latent Functions, and the
Functional Interdependence of Social Elements*

The following quote from Burke's *Reflections* links the conservative critique of theory to three of the most common arrows in the quiver of conservative argument: the unanticipated negative consequences of reformist action, the importance of latent functions, and the interdependence of social elements:

> The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every experimental science, not to be taught *a priori*. Nor is it a short experience that can instruct us in that practical science; because the real effects of moral causes are not always immediate; but that which in the first instance is prejudicial may be excellent in its remoter operation; and its excellence may arise even from the ill effects it produces in the beginning. The reverse also happens; and very plausible schemes, with very pleasing commencements, have often shameful and lamentable conclusions. In states there are often some obscure and almost latent causes, things which appear at first view of little moment, on which a very great part of its prosperity or adversity may most essentially depend.

The subject of the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action is one of the most important themes in modern social science—and by no means a particularly conservative one.[41] Liberals tend to focus

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[40] Burke, *Reflections*, reprinted below.
[41] See the classic article by Robert K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action" (1936), reprinted in Merton, *Sociological Ambivalence* (New York, 1976). On the use of the concept by Adam Smith, see Jerry Z. Muller, *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours* (New York, 1993), pp. 84–92.

upon the unintended *positive* consequences of actions. The most striking example of this is the competitive market, in which (if a host of conditions apply) the quest of individual actors to increase their material well-being results in an increase of the economic well-being of most of society. It is typical of conservatives, by contrast, to emphasize the unanticipated *negative* consequences of deliberate social action.[42]

Such negative consequences, conservatives typically argue, occur because reformers are unaware of the latent functions of existing practices and institutions.[43] Reformers are insufficiently cognizant, it is said, of the contribution of the practice to the preservation or adaptation of the larger social system in which it is implicated. For the larger function of a practice may be different from its explicit or avowed purpose. That contribution may be unintended by those engaged in the practice. And most important, its function may be unrecognized, or recognized only retrospectively, once the reform of the practice has brought about negative unintended consequences.

The conservative stress on the positive latent functions of practices typically arises in response to reformist diagnoses of manifest dysfunctions, that is, the costs inflicted upon individuals by the practices in question. The characteristic conservative retort to the reformer's complaint of the burdens imposed by some social practice is, "It looks bad, indeed it is bad. But it can get much worse, for reasons that you have overlooked, indeed haven't even imagined." In the 1770s, for example, Justus Möser would argue against governmental measures to do away with the social sanctions against illegitimate children, on the grounds that such measures decreased the incentives to marry, thus weakening the institution of marriage, on which so much of social well-being depended.

Among the misleading characterizations of conservative thought is the claim that it is necessarily "organic." Not all conservatives have adopted the image of society as an organism. When such imagery is used, it serves to convey in metaphorical terms what can be stated as a sociological proposition, namely, that social institutions are functionally interdependent and are often mutually sustaining, so that attempts to

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[42] A theme explored in Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA, 1991). Hirschman distinguishes three forms of negative unanticipated consequences. The *perversity* thesis maintains that "any purposive action to improve some feature of the political, social, or economic order only serves to exacerbate the condition one wishes to remedy" or, stated another way, "the attempt to push society in a certain direction will result in its moving all right, but in the opposite direction." The *futility* thesis holds that purposive attempts at social transformation will be unavailing. The *jeopardy* thesis argues that "the cost of the proposed change or reform is too high as it endangers some previous, precious accomplishment."

[43] On the concept of latent functions, see Robert K. Merton, "Manifest and Latent Functions," in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, third, enlarged edition (New York, 1968), to which my discussion is very much indebted.

reform or eliminate one institution may have unanticipated negative effects on other, valued institutions.

Together, the concepts of unanticipated negative consequences, latent functions, and functional interdependence serve as recurrent arguments against radical or wholesale reform, though not against reform as such. In fact, self-conscious conservatism has frequently sought to distinguish itself, through a commitment to orderly and timely reform, from simple reaction or wholesale preservation of the status quo.[44]

Anti-humanitarianism

Flowing from these conservative arguments regarding abstract theory, latent functions, and unanticipated consequences is a recurrent polemic of anti-humanitarianism. Whether it is David Hume noting the conflict between our subjective sense of humanity and those general rules of justice which make sustained cooperation possible, James Fitzjames Stephen decrying the religion of humanity, William Graham Sumner excoriating the confusion of purposes and consequences, or Philip Rieff lamenting the predominance of remissive over interdictory elements in the therapeutic mentality of contemporary liberalism, the complaint retains a recognizable continuity.[45] Time and again conservative analysts argue that humanitarian motivation, combined with abstraction from reality, lead reformers to policies that promote behavior which is destructive of the institutions upon which human flourishing depends. If it is institutions rather than individuals which have always been the prime object of conservative concern, it is because conservatives assume that it is the functioning of institutions upon which the well-being of individuals ultimately depends.[46]

Moral earnestness devoid of the knowledge of the institutions that make beneficent social life possible is a recipe for disaster, conservatives argue. This is the gravamen of recurrent conservative warnings about the inadequacy of "compassion" or "good intentions" in the formation of social policy. When conservatives acknowledge the tension between the demands of institutions and the needs of individuals, their thought

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[44] Rudolf Vierhaus "Konservativ, Konservatismus," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck; vol. 3 (Stuttgart, 1982), pp. 531–65, esp. p. 563.

[45] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1740] (Oxford, 1978), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch; Book III (Of Morals), Section I, p. 579. See also the useful secondary discussion in Frederick G. Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 1985), p. 230. James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Democracy, Fraternity* (London, 1874). William Graham Sumner, "Purposes and Consequences," in *Earth Hunger*, ed. Albert Galloway Keller (New Haven, 1914), pp. 67–75. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966); excerpted below.

[46] Scruton, "Introduction," p. 9.

may take on a tragic dimension and an insistence upon the limits of human happiness.

When conservative analysts accept the premises of their opponents regarding the desirability of human happiness but argue that happiness cannot be attained through the means proposed by progressives, the characteristic mode of conservative social and political analysis will be ironic. As in dramatic irony, the conservative analyst assumes superior insight into the actions of the progressive actor, for the conservative is aware of the gap between the progressive's intentions and the likely results of his actions.

Recurrent Substantive Themes

Although conservatism is characterized above all by its historical utilitarianism and by its recurrent assumptions and arguments, the range of institutions defended by conservatives is not unlimited, and a few have been the special object of conservative solicitude. The recurrent *substantive* themes of conservative social and political thought include:

1. a skepticism regarding the efficacy of written constitutions, as opposed to the informal, sub-political, and inherited norms and mores of society. For conservatives, the real "constitution" of society lies in its historical institutions and practices, which are inculcated primarily through custom and habit;
2. the central role of cultural manners and mores in shaping character and restraining the passions, and hence the *political* importance of the social institutions in which such manners and mores are conveyed;
3. the need of the individual for socially imposed restraint and identity, and hence skepticism regarding projects intended to liberate the individual from existing sources of social and cultural authority;
4. an emphasis on the family as the most important institution of socialization, and despite considerable divergence among conservatives over the proper roles of men and women within the family, the assertion that some degree of sexual division of labor is both inevitable and desirable;
5. the legitimacy of inequality, and the need for elites, cultural, political, and economic;
6. security of possession of property as a prime function of the political order;
7. the importance of the state as the ultimate guarantor of property and the rule of law, and hence the need to maintain political authority;

8. the ineluctability of the possibility of the use of force in international relations.

9. Conservatives have a propensity to assert that the successful functioning of a capitalist society depends on premarket and nonmarket institutions and cultural practices. Anxiety over whether the cultural effects of the market will erode these institutions and practices is the most consistent tension within conservative social and political thought.[47]

RECURRENT IMAGES AND METAPHORS

Nature and Second Nature

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle declared that "virtue of character results from habit [*ethos*]," and asserted that "the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature, but we are by nature able to acquire them, and reach our complete perfection through habit."[48] This emphasis on custom and habit would become a hallmark of conservative social theory. It is prominent in Hume's thought,[49] but it was Burke who characteristically combined the concept with its most enduring metaphor. "Men are made of two parts, the physical and the moral," he wrote. "The former he has in common with brute creation. . . . [But] Man in his moral nature, becomes, in his progress through life, a creature of prejudice—a creature of opinions—a creature of habits, and of sentiments growing out of them. They form our second nature, as inhabitants of the country and members of the society in which Providence has placed us."[50] Conservatives have ever since made recurrent use of the trope of "second nature," employing it at various times is a rough synonym for habit, custom, and culture.[51]

[47] Albert Hirschman has dubbed this "the self-destruction thesis" in the eponymous essay of *Rival Views of Market Society and Other Essays* (New York, 1986), pp. 109ff. On conservative anxieties regarding the effects of capitalism, see Jerry Z. Muller, "Justus Möser and the Conservative Critique of Early Modern Capitalism," *Central European History*, vol. 23 #2/3 (June/Sept. 1990), pp. 153–78.

[48] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, 1985), Book 2, chap. 1, 1, 1103a15, 1103a24-25.

[49] See the discussion in Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy*, p. 293.

[50] The quote is from Burke's speech of 1794 at the trial of Warren Hastings, quoted in James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago, 1984), p. 71.

[51] Plutarch, who in his *Rules for the Preservation of Health* declared that "Custom is almost a second nature" may have been the first to coin the metaphor. On the Roman association of custom, second nature, and law, see Donald R. Kelley, *The Human Measure: Social Thought in the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 44.

The metaphor of "second nature" has had several functions. Conservatives assert the importance of inherited custom and culture against arguments which assume the natural or pre-social goodness of man. Only by virtue of the inculcation of culture through social institutions, conservative theorists insist, is man made decent; it is institutions which humanize him. From Hume and Burke through the twentieth-century German conservative, Arnold Gehlen, the image of second nature has served as a foil against what conservatives regard as overly optimistic and excessively rationalist accounts of moral behavior.[52] It may also be used to counter excessively pessimistic accounts of human behavior as marked by a relentless and inexorable search for power or domination. The image of "second nature" is used to convey the notion that many of the advantages of internalized cultural rules comes from the fact that they are taken for granted, and are acted upon without continuous reflection.

The dual connotations of the metaphor of "second nature" lead to an ongoing tension in the role of the conservative theorist. For insofar as the conservative theorist's role is scientific and analytic, emphasis is placed on the distinction between nature and acquired, historical, particular culture. Yet to call attention to the particularity of what is taken for granted is to raise awareness of the "artificial" feature of cultural norms, of the fact that they might be otherwise. This detracts from their taken-for-grantedness, from their perceived necessity. Yet a culture in which key norms are subject to continuous reflection and reconsideration may become incapable of inculcating the unselfconscious acceptance of norms which, conservative theorists argue, is a fundamental part of character formation.[53] Hence a recurrent temptation of conservative theorists is to conflate culture with nature, to treat "second nature" as "nature" in order to make the contingent appear inevitable.[54] This helps account for the frequent use by conservatives of the metaphor of society as an organism, a naturalistic metaphor which reinforces the belief that existing institutions are inevitable.

Transparency versus Veiling

The most important metaphor in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is that of veiling, which became a recurrent metaphor of

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[52] See Arnold Gehlen, "Über Kultur, Natur, und Natürlichkeit,"[1958], in Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung* (Reinbek, 1961); translated below.

[53] See, for example, the acute formulation by Leo Strauss (attributed by him to Burke), "by opening up a larger vista, by thus revealing the limitations of any practical pursuit, theory is liable to endanger full devotion to practice." Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 309.

[54] There are some suggestive remarks on this theme in Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature*, pp. 67ff.

subsequent conservative thought. Burke made brilliant use of imagery not as a substitute for argument, but as a metaphorical restatement of arguments laid out elsewhere in declarative form. Burke ridicules the "great acquisitions of light" of the Enlightenment, the "new conquering empire of light and reason" and of "naked reason."[55] The imagery of veiling and drapery functions as an implicit attack on the metaphors of light and transparency which were so dominant in the discourse of his age.[56]

Burke used the metaphor of culture as a "veil," a fabric of understandings which hides the direct object of the natural passions. Culture, for Burke as for later conservatives, is a means of sublimation, restraining the expression of the passions of domination and self-gratification and diverting the passions to more elevated goals. Burke believed that the effect of the *philosophes'* relentless critique of inherited beliefs and institutions was not only to delegitimate all existing political authority, it was to tear away the veil of culture which leads men to restrain themselves, and so to leave them open to act on their more primitive and antisocial urges. The result, he feared, would be a return of man to his "natural" state, a state not elevated and benign, but brutish and barbaric.

The image of culture as a veil therefore serves much the same function as the metaphor of "second nature." Here too a tension or ambiguity is built into the metaphor. For the very image of the veil implies that there is something unpleasant or dangerous beneath the veil; the veil reminds the reader that things could be otherwise, that the redirection of desire is a contingent product of existing institutions.

The metaphor of the veil is also employed in a different sense by conservatives. As we have seen, conservatives contend that institutions and practices acquire their utility in part because their continuity over time increases their venerability. What are conservatives to do when institutional continuity has been disrupted and historical precedent has been broken? The metaphor of veiling is used to convey the proper conservative strategy for interpreting such occasions so as to preserve the illusion of continuity. Describing the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which Parliament replaced King James with William of Orange, who was married to James's daughter Mary, Burke emphasizes that Parliament maintained all the ceremonies of regular succession, thus casting "a well-wrought veil" over the irregularities which the circumstances of the time

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[55] There is a good analysis of this imagery in F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1985), pp. 127–28.

[56] On the Enlightenment metaphor of the "naked truth," see Hans Blumenberg, "Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, vol. 6, 1960, pp. 7–142, esp. pp. 49–54.

had made necessary. Later, the American conservative Whig, Rufus Choate, used the same image when reflecting on the dangers of continued focus on the founding doctrine of the right of men to remake their political institutions. He cautioned that "true wisdom would advise to place the power of revolution, overturning all to begin anew, rather in the background, to throw over it a politic, well-wrought veil, to reserve it for crises, exigencies, the rare and distant days of great historical epochs. . . ."[57] This second use of the veil metaphor also has an implicit tension, for it suggests that the foundations beneath the veil may not bear the closest historical scrutiny.

It was de Maistre, with his propensity for extreme and scandalizing propositions, who typically offered the most radical proposal for veiling. Beginning with the premise "the more divine the basis of an institution, the more durable it is," he came to the conclusion, "If therefore you wish to *conserve* all, *consecrate* all."[58] The scandal and fascination of de Maistre's dictum is that it is self-subverting, for an awareness of the fact that a practice has been designated sacred by an act of will and for the sake of durability detracts from its sacredness and hence from its durability. The logic behind de Maistre's recommendation seems to be that since the reverence in which institutions are held may be weakened by the discovery of their contingent and even ignoble historical origins, it is safer to ground that reverence beyond time and beyond historical investigation.

The recurrent temptation of conservative thinkers—especially when they write to reinforce existing belief rather than to analyze the functioning of institutions—is therefore to blur the distinction between conservatism and orthodoxy: to insist that existing political institutions, social structures, and cultural practices must be conserved because they correspond to some ultimate and ineluctable metaphysical reality, rather than because of their demonstrated usefulness.

The Difficulties of Defining Conservatism

One distinguished student of conservatism has suggested that it may be impossible to write a history of conservative doctrine because "too many minds have been trying to 'conserve' too many things for too many rea-

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[57] Rufus Choate, "The Position And Functions Of The American Bar, As An Element Of Conservatism In The State," [1845] in Samuel Gilman Brown, ed., *The Works of Rufus Choate* (two volumes, Boston, 1862), vol. 1, pp. 414–38, excerpted below.

[58] Joseph de Maistre, *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques et des autres institutions humaines* [1814] (Lyon and Paris, 1828), excerpted and translated below.

sons."[59] It is difficult to arrive at meaningful generalizations about the specific policies favored by conservatives. Clearly it is misguided to expect unity among conservatives on questions of first philosophical or theological principles, since a propensity to slight such questions or to regard them as futile or dangerous is a defining element of modern conservatism. Moreover, conservatism tends to be more nationally particular than liberalism or socialism, which aspire to be universal in their reach. And because conservative thought often arises as a response to attacks on existing institutions and practices, the conservative reply is determined in good part by the specific nature of those attacks, which vary across time and space. Moreover, since conservatism emphasizes the need for institutional and symbolic continuity with the particular past, its symbols and institutional ideals tend to be more tied to specific, usually national, contexts.[60] That is why some scholars regard the notion of a transnational conservatism as a self-contradiction.[61]

The conception of conservatism adopted here—as a constellation of recurrent assumptions, themes, and images—tries to do justice to the historical and national diversity of conservatism while calling attention to its continuities over time and across national contexts. It differs from two common approaches to definitions which appear either too narrow or too broad to be useful. Overly narrow are attempts to define conservatism as the defense of a historically particular set of institutions, such as a landed aristocracy and an established Church, thus restricting the label to a limited swath of recognizably conservative thought. To define conservatism as primarily a traditionalistic psychological propensity which exists in all times and places,[62] by contrast, seems too broad, since these psychological propensities may be shared by those who do not advance conservative modes of analysis.

[59] J.G.A. Pocock, "Introduction," to the Hackett edition of Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Pocock (Indianapolis, 1987), pp. vii, xlix. Klaus Epstein made a similar point about the obstacles to writing a transnational history of conservatism, but thought they could be resolved by immersion in specific national histories in order to understand what conservatives wanted to conserve in each case. Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton, 1966), pp. 6–7.

[60] F.J.C. Hearnshaw, *Conservatism in England: An Analytical, Historical, and Political Survey* (London,1933; reprinted New York, 1967), p. 35.

[61] See, for example, Martin Greiffenhagen, *Das Dilemma des Konservatismus in Deutschland* (Munich, 1971), pp. 17–18, and the German authors cited in his footnotes who arrive at similar conclusions.

A related claim is that conservatism is invariably linked to a landed aristocracy and an established Church, and because neither institution has existed in the United States an established American conservatism is a contradiction in terms. See, for example, Bernard Crick, "The Strange Quest for An American Conservatism," *The Review of Politics* XVII, 1955, pp. 359–76. This argument is taken up in the introductions to the selections from James Madison and Rufus Choate below.

[62] On the distinction between traditionalism and conservatism, see Mannheim, *Conservatism*, especially pp. 72–73.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Given the historical utilitarianism of conservative thought and the wide range of institutions it has been used to defend, an accurate understanding of conservatism requires consideration of the changing historical contexts in which it has evolved. Only when the survival of current institutions and practices is no longer taken for granted does conservatism arise to explicate the often hidden usefulness of those institutions in order to justify their continued existence. A brief indication of the changing contexts and polemical targets of conservative thought is therefore necessary. Indeed, whether or not an argument may be classified as conservative will depend in part on the context in which it is made, since the defense of institutions that are historically superannuated is the hallmark not of conservatives but of reactionaries, and in extreme cases, of cranks.

The contention that conservatism arose in opposition to the Enlightenment and to the French Revolution reflects Edmund Burke's polemical characterization of the Enlightenment in his critique of the French Revolution. Though frequently reiterated, the contention is historically untenable. So too is the conception that conservatives such as Möser and Burke were part of a distinct "counter-Enlightenment."[63] Conservatism arose not *against* the Enlightenment but *within* it.

The thought of David Hume marks a watershed in the development of conservative social and political thought into a coherent, secular doctrine. The precursors of conservatism may be found in the Anglican critique of the Puritan contention that the elect or the inspired congregation, guided by their individual interpretations of the Bible, were entitled to exercise political authority.[64] Hume began by borrowing and expanding upon this critique of the politics of religious "enthusiasm." And he went on to criticize what he saw as its secular counterparts in the philosophically implausible and politically subversive doctrines of natural rights and of voluntary contract as the sole legitimate basis of political obligation.[65] In 1757, Burke used similar terms to attack what he called the "abuse of reason" among some enlightened thinkers. On the Continent, conservative social and political thought arose as a critique of the policies of enlightened absolutism. Among the foremost practitioners of this criticism was Justus Möser, himself a part of the German

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[63] The term was coined by Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in his *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York, 1980).

[64] Quinton, *Politics of Perfection*, p. 21. Pocock, "Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm."

[65] On Hume's conservatism, see, in addition to Quinton, *Politics of Perfection*; Sheldon Wolin, "Hume and Conservatism"; Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy*; Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*.

Enlightenment, and a reformer of a conservative and corporatist tinge. (Much the same could be said of Montesquieu.) In Holland, another Enlightenment figure, Jean de Luzac, articulated politically conservative arguments opposing the claims of "patriots" for a more democratic constitution.[66] Much of post-1789 intellectual conservatism is continuous with the analytic strategies, if not with the tone, of prerevolutionary conservative analysis.

It was the democratic radicalism of the French Revolution that evoked Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which remains the most influential work in the history of conservative thought. The attempt of the revolutionary government to annex Voltaire and Rousseau to the revolutionary cause, and Burke's identification of the Revolution with the *philosophes*, led many subsequent historians to conflate the Enlightenment and the Revolution, and both with what subsequently came to be called liberalism. Yet these conflations are mistaken and misleading on several counts. First, much of the Enlightenment was not politically radical, and few of the major figures in the Enlightenment would have favored a popular revolution. Nor were those who opposed the Revolution necessarily antipathetic to the Enlightenment. The anti-revolutionary French press drew heavily on conservative strands in Enlightenment thought,[67] while Louis XVI and his minister of finance, Jacques Necker, immersed themselves in Hume's *History of England*, drawing upon Hume's defense of the Stuarts to buttress their own cause.[68] Later liberals who identified with one or another element of the Enlightenment's legacy, such as Benjamin Constant, were as likely to regret the course taken by the French Revolution as to consider themselves its heirs.

Burke's defense of monarchy, aristocracy, and the established church stamped conservative thought at the end of the eighteenth century and in the early decades of the nineteenth. Yet a similar critique of democratic radicalism appears, with a more republican but nevertheless recognizably conservative thrust, in the United States, first in the writings of the American Federalists, and later in the work of the conservative Whig critic of Jacksonianism, Rufus Choate. Hume's combination of political conservatism with the championing of commerce was to remain characteristic of subsequent British and American conservatism. By contrast, the French, Catholic strains of conservatism of de Bonald and de Maistre, as well as the romantic German strains of conservatism shared Burke's substantive commitments to monarchy, aristocracy, and

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[66] See Wyger R. E. Velema, *Enlightenment and Conservatism in the Dutch Republic*.

[67] See Jeremy Popkin, *The Right-Wing Press in France, 1792–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

[68] David Bongie, *David Hume: Prophet of the Counter-Revolution* (Oxford, 1965), esp. pp. 126ff.

one or another form of church establishment, while remaining less accepting of capitalist economic development than the British and American strains.

As with so many other historical developments, the phenomenon of conservatism long preceded the use of the term in political life. Terms related to "conservative" first found their way into political discourse in the title of a French weekly journal, *Le Conservateur*, founded in 1818 by François-René de Chateaubriand with the aid of Louis de Bonald. "The *Conservateur* upholds religion, the King, liberty, the Charter and respectable people (*les honnêtes gens*)," it proclaimed in its first issue.[69] In England, the label "Conservative Party" was first applied to the Tories by the publicist John Wilson Crocker in 1830.[70] In Germany the term "conservative" came into use later in the same decade: it was wielded primarily by the opponents of those designated as conservative, who were charged with seeking to preserve existing institutions at any price.[71]

The development of conservative social and political thought after the mid-nineteenth century shows a movement from substance to function: from the defense of particular institutions to the defense of institutions in general; from the defense of the landed aristocracy to a defense of elites in general; from an emphasis on the role of the established Church to the function of culture in linking the individual to communal purposes; from monarchical authority to the authority of the state in general.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, conservatism underwent an important shift, reflecting a change in opponents and in institutional substance. The increasing dominance of industrial capitalism, the expansion of the suffrage, the rise of socialist movements and of a new brand of liberalism which was more economically redistributionist and more culturally permissive, all led to a substantial transformation of conservatism. Many of the economic institutions and policies once associated with European liberalism now became that which conservatives sought to conserve.[72] This new brand of conservatism is reflected in the works of James Fitzjames Stephen, W. H. Mallock, William Graham Sumner, and in the first selection by Joseph Schumpeter.

The rhetoric by means of which institutions were defended also changed. It placed less emphasis on the veneration of tradition as such,

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[69] *Le Conservateur*, 5.10.1818, p. 7, quoted in Vierhaus, "Konservativ," p. 538.

[70] "International Policy" in *Quarterly Review* 42, 1830, p. 276, quoted in Vierhaus, "Konservativ," p. 539.

[71] Vierhaus, "Konservativ," p. 540.

[72] Rudolf Vierhaus, "Conservatism," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 1, pp. 477–85, esp. p. 484; Noël O'Sullivan, *Conservatism* (London, 1976), pp. 111–18.

while seeking to increase reverence for existing institutions by showing that they were in accord with the needs of historical development. The language of common law and of inherited tradition was increasingly abandoned in favor of the language of science. The justification of the social utility of landed elites was replaced in the work of Mallock, Stephen, and Schumpeter by a more general defense of the need for elites in the realms of economics and politics, while in the work of Matthew Arnold the defense of the established Church was transformed into a defense of cultural elites. In Germany, too, the substance of conservatism was transformed, from a defense of aristocracy, a social order based on fixed estates, and paternalist monarchism, toward an emphasis on the functions of the state as such, a transformation exemplified in the selection from Carl Schmitt.[73]

In the course of the twentieth century, conservatism was defined not only by its opposition to the radical left but by antipathy to the spread of the welfare state and attempts to bring about economic redistribution, and by skepticism regarding the solution of social problems through massive governmental action. In the late 1960s and 1970s, as established liberal institutions came under attack from the New Left, conservatives engaged in an attempt to defend such institutions, while trying to limit the purported damage of liberal policies to institutions valued by conservatives. As the selections from Kristol, Berger and Neuhaus, and Lübbe indicate, conservatives increasingly called attention to the pre-liberal and non-liberal prerequisites of a viable liberal society.

Radical Conservatism

Conservatism can be distinguished—definitionally if not always in practice—from reaction. The conservative seeks to conserve existing institutions, usually recognizing that the process of conservation may include the need for evolutionary reform. The reactionary, by contrast, is at odds with existing institutions, and seeks to return to some institutional *status quo ante*, often in a form transfigured by memory and ideology.[74] One recurrent strand of thought which is related to conservatism yet politically and analytically distinct from both conservatism and reaction is radical conservatism. The radical conservative shares some of the concerns of more conventional conservatism, such as the need for institutional authority and continuity with the past. But he believes that the processes characteristic of modernity have destroyed the valuable legacy

[73] Vierhaus, "Konservativ," p. 564.
[74] On the distinction between conservatives and reactionaries, see Epstein, *Genesis of German Conservatism*, pp. 10–11.

of the past for the present, so that a restoration of the purported virtues of the past demands radical or revolutionary action. Hence the self-description of one radical conservative, Paul de Lagarde, as "too conservative not to be radical," and the credo of another, Moeller van den Bruck, who professed that "conservative means creating things that are worth conserving."[75] When the foundations of society and of existing institutions are perceived as decayed beyond restoration, the radical conservative ideology reminds men of the desirability of strong institutions, and the necessity of new ones.

Like the conservative, the radical conservative has an acute appreciation for the positive role of authoritative institutions in the life of the individual and of society. But while the conservative seeks to shore up the authority of existing institutions, these institutions lack legitimacy in the eyes of the radical conservative. For him existing institutions are unworthy of assent or incapable of garnering it. Radical conservatism is a revolt against existing institutions in the name of the need for authority.[76]

Radical conservatism unites several predilections which, in combination, make it a recognizably distinct and recurrent phenomenon. It shares with conservatism an emphasis on the role of institutions in providing restraint and direction to the individual, but seeks to create new institutions which will exert a far stronger hold on the individual than do existing ones, which because of their relative tolerance are perceived by radical conservatives as "decayed." Radical conservatives typically look to *state power* to reach their goals (except in the United States, where populism and anti-statism are more deeply ingrained on the right). These aims typically include the *reassertion of collective particularity* (of the nation, the *Volk*, the race, or the community of the faithful) against a twofold threat. The internal threat arises from ideas and institutions identified by radical conservatives as corrosive of collective particularity and incapable of providing worthy goals for the collectivity and the individuals who comprise it. These threats usually include the market, parliamentary democracy, and the pluralism of value systems which capital-

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[75] Paul de Lagarde, *Deutsche Schriften* (Göttingen, 1878), p. 5, quoted in Rudolph Hermann, *Kulturkritik und konservative Revolution* (Tübingen, 1971), p. 241; Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Das dritte Reich*, 3rd ed. (Hamburg, 1931), quoted in Greiffenhagen, *Dilemma*, p. 243.

[76] The term "conservative revolution" and the notion of a revolt for authority were first articulated in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's lecture of 1927, *Das Schrifttum als geistiger Raum der Nation*; see also Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, 1974), p. 225 and passim; and Jerry Z. Muller, *The Other God that Failed: Hans Freyer and the Deradicalization of German Conservatism* (Princeton, 1987). On comparable developments in France, see Zeev Sternhell, *La Droite Révolutionnaire 1885–1914: Les Origines françaises du Fascisme* (Paris, 1978), and Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Berkeley, 1986).

ism and liberal democracy are thought to promote. But the ideas and institutions perceived as threatening may also include those of internationalist socialism, which is similarly perceived as corrosive of collective particularity. The external threat arises from powerful foreign states which are perceived as using their power to spread ideas and institutions identified by radical conservatives as corrosive.

"Radical conservatism" as we have defined it conveys the common sensibilities which European intellectuals who advocated a "conservative revolution" shared with National Socialism and with other fascist movements of the interwar period. It also calls attention to the common denominator among a range of intellectual and political movements which extend beyond Europe and beyond the interwar era.

Radical Conservatism and Conservatism Compared

Conservative social and political thought represents an attempt to halt the deteriorating legitimacy or functioning of valued institutions. Conservative theorists frequently assert that the institutions they admire are being corroded by cultural, social, or political developments. Anxiety about the legitimacy of existing institutions is shared by both conservatives and radical conservatives. But to radical conservatives, existing institutions are too decrepit to make them worth conserving. In their eyes, existing institutions lack legitimacy and fail to provide the transcendent goals which make possible the subordination of the individual to a collective purpose. Radical conservatives typically loathe the mundane, and criticize existing society for the triumph of the prosaic concerns of economic or familial life over more heroic or transcendent goals.[77] As a result, many recurrent conservative assumptions, arguments, and themes are jettisoned by radical conservatives, or transformed into radically different directions.

Take, for example, the historical utilitarianism so characteristic of conservative thought. For the radical conservative, the historical survival of an existing institution creates no presumption in its favor, and the importance of custom and habit is similarly discounted. The conservative propensity to epistemological modesty and the related arguments regarding the importance of latent functions and unanticipated negative consequences, all of which lead to caution in reform, are not only absent from the discourse of radical conservatives but scorned by them. Instead radical conservatives typically emphasize the role of "will" on

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[77] On the theme of modern liberal society as the economization of existence in the writings of two radical conservative thinkers, see Jerry Z. Muller "Carl Schmitt, Hans Freyer, and the Radical Conservative Critique of Liberal Democracy in the Weimar Republic," *History of Political Thought*, vol. XII, no. 4, Winter 1991, pp. 695–715.

the grounds that only radical action can lead from the unworthy present to a more glorious future.[78]

Radicals of the right tend to agree with conservatives that a sense of historical continuity increases the emotional hold of an institution upon its members. But since they do not regard existing institutions as worthy, radical conservatives often turn to some mythic past as a source or object of veneration.[79] The conservative critique of theory and the conservative theme of the need to "veil" the less usable past of current institutions is transformed by radical conservatives into an embrace of myth, which is valued precisely for its irrational attraction.[80] The conservative theme of the importance of "second nature," in the sense of inherited culture, is replaced by an emphasis on nature in the most physical and mythical sense, of consanguinity and geography—blood and soil.

The distinction between conservatism and radical conservatism is in part a matter of belief and temperament, in part a matter of experience. In interwar Europe, many erstwhile radical conservatives supported fascist regimes, whether out of conviction or circumstance, before frequently becoming disillusioned with the radical regimes they had supported. After the defeat of the Axis powers some of the most acute conservative analysis and critique stemmed from those who had been radical conservatives but now saw no plausible alternative to the liberal democratic welfare state.[81]

The distinction between conservatism and radical conservatism may sometimes be one of circumstance. For a recurrent problem for conservatives is what to do when the existing institutions which conservatives value are so threatened that only radical action will preserve their essence. That threat may come from antidemocratic movements which seek to overthrow the existing order by violence. But in some historical contexts it has also come from the workings of democratic institutions, from the effects of the market, or from cultural movements. The issue is not one that can be settled abstractly: it has proven a continuing dilemma not only for conservative politics but for conservative analysis as well.

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[78] On the voluntaristic element in radical conservative thought, see among other works, Christian Graf von Krockow, *Die Entscheidung. Eine Untersuchung über Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger* (Stuttgart, 1958), and Muller, *The Other God that Failed*, p. 197.

[79] Among the most recent, and least plausible, of such myths is the embrace of the pre-Christian pagan past by the French New Right. For an overview, see Mark Wegierski, "The New Right in Europe," *Telos*, no. 98–99, 1994, pp. 55–70.

[80] Here the seminal figure was Georges Sorel. On his ubiquitous influence, see most recently Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton, 1994).

[81] See Muller, *The Other God that Failed*, chapters 9, 10, and appendix.

The Inevitable Varieties of Conservatism

The content of conservatism varies not only over time and across national contexts, but often among self-proclaimed conservatives at the same time and place. The declaration that one is conservative, while it signifies a certain respect for tradition and for the value of historically evolved institutions, tells us little of operational significance. The most self-conscious conservatives have always been aware of the constructed character of tradition; they have recognized that conservatives face what Burke called a "choice of inheritance."[82] The conservation of the institutional legacy of the past inevitably involves a selection from among existing traditions and legacies. Conservative theory, like all theory, cannot be applied without judgment.[83] Decisions must be made about which historical institutions and traditions are viable under changed circumstances, decisions as to how inherited institutions and practices ought to be revised or revamped, decisions as to what should be interpreted as the core of institutions to be salvaged as opposed to the chaff which may be discarded. Even among those who regard themselves as conservative these questions will inevitably elicit a variety of responses.

The selections in this book, then, cannot provide a guide to "authentic" contemporary conservative social and political analysis. The book may, however, help to lift the study of conservative thought out of the national and ideological provincialism in which it has all too often been mired.

[82] I owe my appreciation of this point to Professor Louis Hunt.

[83] A point made by Kant in regard to theory in general, in his essay, "On the Common Saying: 'This may be true in theory, but it does not apply in practice,'" [1793], in Hans Reiss, ed., *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 61–92.