

COMMUNICATION

Comprehending conservatism: A new framework for analysis

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ABSTRACT *This essay argues against the view—frequently put forward by conservatives themselves—that conservatism cannot be analyzed as a coherent political ideology. It then proposes a multidimensional approach to understanding conservatism, defining (and defending a particular interpretation of) four dimensions which are termed sociological, methodological, dispositional and philosophical. It is argued that only if two of these four dimensions are present in a particular variety of political thought is it justified to speak of political conservatism.*

The study of conservatism as an ideology has been beset with difficulties. It is widely held that conservatism is hard to define precisely; it is frequently assumed that conservatism is more prone to internal contradictions than other varieties of political thought; and finally, as Michael Freeden has pointed out, it appears that it is mainly conservatives themselves who write about conservatism—giving rise to the suspicion that it might be hard to come by unbiased analyses.² It is certainly the case that analytical philosophers only very rarely lower themselves to deal with what John Stuart Mill famously (or infamously) called ‘the stupidest party’; when they do, the results tend not in any obvious way to help the case of comprehending conservatism, or in giving us clear criteria for classifying certain strands of political thinking as conservative or not.³ The overall result has often been a somewhat desperate resort to nominalism (‘conservative is who calls themselves conservative’), or historicism (‘conservatism is changing all the time’), or what one might call ‘conceptual changism’ (‘there is a concept but it’s changing in crucial periods, like a *Sattelzeit*’).

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In this brief essay I want tentatively to suggest a new framework for making sense of conservatism. I do not claim that this framework in its emphasis on different *dimensions* of political thought is confined to analyzing conservatism; it might well be applied to other strands of political thought, even though the dimensions clearly would then have to be described differently. Equally, I cannot claim with any confidence that the framework will be of help in definitively classifying *all* kinds of thinking that some would label conservatism, especially outside the West; I merely claim that it is an advance over existing approaches. Future work will have to show whether such a framework can make sense of the sheer variety of strands of political thought that tends to get called 'conservative' in different national contexts, and in different time periods.

Before presenting the framework, I want briefly to review some of the reasons why students of ideologies have found it so difficult to find consensus on a definition of conservatism. First, there is simply no foundational text, except perhaps for Burke's *Reflections*. However, as has been pointed out numerous times, 'Burke the conservative' was to a significant degree a 19th-century invention that necessarily had to do violence to parts of Burke's oeuvre other than the *Reflections* (especially his, broadly speaking, anti-imperialism); in any case, though, Burke's text is impossible to reduce to anything like a systematic set of political propositions; and while its unsystematic (and aesthetic) character has, for some conservatives, precisely been proof that Burke *is* the father of conservatism, no actual *political* conservatism ever rests content with a purely aesthetic approach. This is a point to which I shall return shortly, in connection with the suspicion that defining conservatism would inevitably be a form of 'rationalism'.

Second, there is the claim that conservatism itself is necessarily opposed to universal definitions, since—so the often unargued premise goes—conservatism is inevitably committed to 'particularism'. If nations and communities are irreducibly different, there cannot be any universally valid and uniform political prescriptions; and there cannot be anything resembling a 'Conservative International'. Indeed, has anyone ever proclaimed: 'Conservatives of all Nations, Unite!'

And yet all will here in turn depend on the definition (and justification) of 'particularism'. The prescription that particular circumstances matter, and that political practitioners should pay attention to them, is not exclusive to conservatives; in other words, what one might call 'prudential particularism' is in itself hardly a sufficient reason to stop thinking about more general characteristics or at least 'family resemblances' among alleged conservatisms. It would be something different again if particularism really meant a thoroughgoing commitment to relativism or certain kinds of value pluralism, in which case ignoring or destroying difference is problematic not so much for prudential reasons, but because diversity is in itself a value of some or perhaps even supreme importance. One might think here of Herder and his assumption that irreducible diversity is part of a providential divine plan.

Third among the prime difficulties of defining conservatism, there is the claim that defining conservatism would already constitute an instance of 'rationalism';

it would force conservatives to make claims (and act) on the territory of their 'rationalist' enemies, and therefore not only disadvantage them strategically in the political battle, but also necessarily distort their beliefs. As Clinton Rossiter once put it, 'the mere intention to spin out a theory of conservatism is somehow an unconservative impulse'.⁴

I do not want to deny that some people sincerely hold such principled anti-theoretical views; but they are not what I would call *political* conservatives. They are *aesthetic* conservatives, more concerned with protecting the purity of sentimental or intuitive commitments that cannot (and in a sense should not) be articulated as prescriptions which relate back to a world of political institutions and forms of political action as we have come to know them. Purely aesthetic conservatives are arguably a very rare species, but they do exist, and they are often engaged in what might without injustice be called a (more or less pure) politics of nostalgia.

Aesthetic conservatives tend to see in literature, and in poetry in particular, a privileged mode of articulating what they take to be conservatism. In other words, they are less interested in putting forth a political doctrine than in expressing a disposition. Often, this nostalgic mode comes with an implicit or explicit claim for an epistemic privilege: It is the nostalgic glance backwards that allows conservatives to see more clearly—even if conservatives always arrive too late actually to conserve. The principle 'lament illuminates' is at work here.⁵ But this aesthetic conservatism, if it is to be consistent, goes together with political passivity.

I conclude that the reasons usually advanced for giving up on any common definition of conservatism, at least if we are to understand by that term a *political* ideology, in fact do not compel the student of conservatism to stop the quest for understanding (what luck, you might say). The fact that these reasons often form part of the self-presentation of conservatives does not mean that the same conservatives are or are not ultimately committed to a set of beliefs that, with the right approach, one could conclusively judge to be or not to be a variety of conservatism.

How, then, should one analyze conservatism as a political ideology? I want to argue for a multidimensional approach; this means, among other things, that conservatism is never reducible to a *single* belief, disposition or practice. More particularly, I want to claim that only if two of the four dimensions to be outlined momentarily are present, should we speak of conservatism as a political ideology.

First, there is what one might call a *sociological* dimension: conservatism, from this point of view, is simply the ideology or the specific political program of a particular social group trying to hold onto its privileges.⁶ The original template for this kind conservatism is of course the European aristocracy defending itself against the rising bourgeoisie and subsequently against mass democracy, but there is no reason not to think that the same pattern can be found elsewhere. The precondition for this kind of conservatism, however, is some distinct threat to an existing social order; in other words, it is about an active defence, not an existing status quo that would more or less persist by itself.

Second, there is the dimension of what I would call *methodological* conservatism, which to some degree overlaps with what I have already described

earlier as ‘prudential particularism’. Methodological conservatism states a number of propositions in response to the fact that all politics takes place in time, and, tacitly or not so tacitly, has to rely on an image of historical change and development. Now, no conservative ever claims that there ought to be no change at all—a commitment in favour of pure ‘stationariness’ is either quixotic or in fact a highly selective commitment to a particular set of present circumstances. Even those who—like William F. Buckley Jr.—want to ‘yell stop’, would not want to stop everything.

More typical and more coherent is the open admission—as famously made by Burke—that ‘a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation’.⁷ In other words, methodological conservatism is not a claim about complete preservation—and turning the world into a museum—but about the nature, or if you like, the *process* of political change. Reforms are necessary from time to time, but they ought to work with (and carefully save or even cautiously improve) what is already there. It is about a carefully managed process of change, or, put differently, of rendering safe the change that is desirable (and, in many cases, simply inevitable).

Now, methodological conservatism is neither a sufficient nor a necessary dimension of conservatism. It is likely to be present in many varieties of conservatism, but it can be part of other political ideologies on account of—at least on the surface—its sheer reasonableness. It is, by itself, purely relative or ‘positional’, depending as it does on the particular point in time and the historical circumstances in which political actors find themselves. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that ‘the essence of conservatism is the rationalization of existing institutions in terms of history, God, nature, and man’.⁸ It is one and only one potential dimension of conservatism; and we should not assume that, by definitional fiat, conservatism is not ‘ideational’ at all, but purely institutional and immanent.

Third, there is what I would call dispositional or perhaps aesthetic conservatism. Central here, on the one hand, is a presumption in favour of the past (or sometimes even a peculiar vision of the present), and, on the other, a presumption in favour of the particular (or the concrete). These dispositions do not automatically have to result in any specific form of political prescriptions, however; they can just as well give rise to the stances of passive nostalgia alluded to earlier, or also to forms of thought that can without injustice be called postmodern (hence the affinity between postmodernism and poststructuralism on the one hand and certain strands of conservative thought on the other—although such *partial*, and by no means obviously political, affinities do not vindicate the famous accusation by Jürgen Habermas that poststructuralists are really ‘Young Conservatives’). The classic expression of dispositional conservatism is arguably Michael Oakeshott’s:

To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.⁹

Dispositional conservatism does not have to come out as the oddly fearful quasi-hedonism focused on the present which Oakeshott expresses here. In other words, it does not have to be the delight in what is present or available, but can also be about avoiding any instrumentalization of experience (or of other human beings, for that matter). Put differently, it can also be a predisposition to pay attention to the marginal, the potential victims of history and of ideologies of progress in particular. This attitude clearly is not one generally espoused by the powerful and the privileged.

Fourth, there is what I would call *philosophical* (or also anthropological) conservatism, that in turn is rooted in a particular philosophical anthropology or perhaps social ontology. This stance implies a commitment to realizing a set of substantive values, irrespective of whether these values are already instantiated in the present. In other words, for philosophical conservatives, the primary question is not about what the past suggests, or how, or by which proven method, these values should be implemented. The question is of course what sets of values we are talking about in this context. I claim that philosophical conservatives are primarily invested in the importance of hierarchical relationships, or some more or less naturalized conception of inequality. They do not simply emphasize the particular and the potential importance of its preservation; they attribute differential value to particular sets of human beings, and they emphasize that certain social arrangements distributing power unequally are unalterable.¹⁰ When in fact such arrangements are being altered, they often switch from ‘futility’ to ‘perversity’ or ‘jeopardy’ arguments.¹¹

Now, this has of course been a very rough sketch. The main point of the argument is that for us properly to speak of a political conservatism, at least two of the four dimensions outlined earlier need to be present. If there is only one present in a particular structure of beliefs, we might perhaps want to speak of resonances of conservatism, but we should not classify such an ideational structure as a proper form of political conservatism.

Now, it is always possible, as one can perhaps see easily, that the sociological or the philosophical dimensions outlined earlier could actually subsume all the other ones. One can always argue that all claims made by conservative thinkers are really made in bad faith—all that matters is the preservation of privilege. Or conversely, one can always argue that all the points mentioned earlier, including the preservation of privilege, and a certain psychological set of dispositions, are really values and could be subsumed under ‘philosophical conservatism’. There is no knock-down argument why one should not do this (although such subsuming would actually require a great deal of work and justification)—but such collapsing of dimensions, I contend, would make us lose the possibility of a discriminating, fine-grained analysis—it would mean either treating all conservative claims as ‘ideological’ in the pejorative sense; or dignifying all conservative claims as philosophical propositions.

One might also object that what performs the conceptual work in the framework I propose is a rather conventional—many might say outdated—definition of ‘the political’. In other words, one could claim that ‘political conservatism’ is only

distinguished by a link to state institutions or conventional definitions of political power. But this is not so. For instance, a combination of dispositional and philosophical conservatism for me is still a form of political conservatism, because the vision of a world ordered according to a conservative scheme of values tends to imply a desire to act, to realize such a vision, whether inside or outside existing political institutions, though protecting customs and traditions.

What follows from such an analysis? By way of illustration and, hopefully, clarification, let me suggest where a number of thinkers or movements might be placed in such a scheme. First, there really is something to be said for Edmund Burke as a founding father of conservatism, since his thought more or less clearly does encompass all four dimensions of conservatism outlined earlier. On the other hand, a thinker like de Maistre—often elevated into the conservative pantheon—is not conservative, but reactionary. His commitment to hierarchy and inequality is obvious, but he cares neither for how these values are implemented (in fact, he is almost a quietist at times, trusting in Providence and abjuring all forms of political action), nor does he particularly want to preserve existing privileges. He really is an authoritarian and a reactionary.¹²

What about present day phenomena over which there hangs a question as to their being conservative or not? Libertarianism is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a form of conservatism—clever conservative strategists and historians succeeded in making it part of a broad conservative coalition, especially in the United States, but it can hardly be said to contain any two of the relevant dimensions outlined earlier.

Then what about present-day neoconservatism? Whether it really is a form of conservatism or not will depend not least on one's view about the sincerity of a number of neoconservative statements about foreign policy. If global democratization is primarily to serve the national interest of the US, and in particular its hegemonic position, and if it is said that there is something intrinsically superior about the American way of life which predisposes the US to be persistently at the top of a hierarchy of nation-states, then we might indeed say that neoconservatism combines two relevant dimensions of conservatism. Otherwise, however, this quest for global democratization would put neoconservatism beyond the variants of political conservatism. After all, neoconservatives clearly have abandoned a certain kind of prudential methodological conservatism, as critics have asserted ever more fiercely; and there is little by way of a conservative disposition along the lines of Oakeshott's thoughts, or, in the American context, the kind of nostalgic, literary and, in particular, poetic conservatism for which a thinker like Russell Kirk became famous.¹³

Finally, I should like to suggest that other ideologies might also be analyzed through the multidimensional model suggested here. After all, nearly every ideology needs an account of 'method' as well as its relationship to history; all espouse core values, and all might be related to particular interests and contexts; and all, I would say have an emotional component, or tend to be associated with a particular 'structures of feeling'. Perhaps, in a modest way, this brief sketch will encourage a multidimensional approach to other strands of political thought.

Notes and References

1. I wish to thank Erika A. Kiss, Olivier Rемаud and Andreas Rödder for comments and suggestions. This research note attempts to refine and develop further themes and distinctions I first dealt with in *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought* (London and New Haven: Yale UP, 2003).
2. Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 319.
3. See for instance Ted Honderich, *Conservatism: Burke, Nozick, Bush, Blair?* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).
4. Quoted in Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, op cit, Ref 2, p. 317.
5. Mark C. Henrie, 'Understanding traditionalist conservatism', in: Peter Berkowitz (Ed.), *Varieties of Conservatism in America* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 2004), pp. 3–30.
6. See in particular Panajotis Kondylis, *Konservatismus: Geschichtlicher Gehalt und Untergang* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986).
7. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in L. G. Mitchell (Ed.) (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 21.
8. Samuel P. Huntington, 'Conservatism as an ideology', *APSR*, 51, 1957, pp. 454–473.
9. Michael Oakeshott, 'One being conservative', in *Rationalism in Politics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), pp. 407–437; here p. 408.
10. I leave here aside the values contained in and derived from negative philosophical anthropologies, as most clearly spelled out by Carl Schmitt in the twentieth century. See my *A Dangerous Mind* on this question.
11. Albert Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1991).
12. Clearly de Maistre's case is more complicated than this brief sketch can suggest; in particular, one has to be careful to distinguish between the history of the word reaction during de Maistre's time, when it began to acquire its current political meaning, and reactionary as an analytical category. See Jean Starobinski, *Action and Reaction: The Life and Adventures of a Couple*, trans. Sophie Hawkes and Jeff Fort (New York, Zone Books, 2003), pp. 327–328.
13. Francis Fukuyama, 'The neoconservative moment', *The National Interest* (Summer 2004), pp. 57–68.