

Conservatism

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In its earliest meanings **conservation** possessed a strongly ecological significance, such as the term has regained in our own times. By the IC14 it could speak more generally about a state of affairs, in the human or social world, remaining unchanged or intact. Not until much later was the idea of conservation in the political field adumbrated, carrying with it an explicit conviction that the polity itself was an organic entity which needed careful husbanding. The idea, commonly heard in our own times, that "the fabric" of society needs to be preserved draws directly from this mode of thinking, regarding as inherently destructive any action which upsets the putatively organic nature of social life.

Conservatism, notwithstanding the protestations of its ideologues, is a historical product of the modern period, inextricably bound to the epistemologies and political practices of modernity. Its discursive codification came into being in the IC18, inventing the temporality of the traditional or national past. Here the life of the nation was represented as a continuum, the people in the present being depicted as the natural inheritors of those whose lives had made the nation in the past. Conservatism in this sense worked as a philosophy of the national past, its conception of historical time ineluctably organic. It preceded what was to become its great historic contender – the Jacobin dream of Year One, inaugurated in the calendar of the French Revolution and signifying the virtue of a historical time subject both to the imperative of the present and to the imperative of active human intervention.

Conservative temperaments can be discerned in politics long before the C18. In the social upheaval of mC17 England, for example, Lord Clarendon – arch-royalist and vitriolic enemy of any whisper of popular sentiment – would seem to the modern eye to be an unambiguous **conservative**. And yet such retrospective readings mislead, for his distaste for social change of any sort was bereft of any larger philosophy in which conservation and advance could be thought together (Clarendon, 1958 [1702–4]). What emerged at the moment of the French Revolution, in the making of the division between left and right, was what on the contrary can properly be called a philosophy of **conservative politics**. Its roots lay in the democratic revolutions of the United States and France and in the rather more muted democratic struggles in Britain and Ireland. Its leading location turned out to be counter-revolutionary England, where its master intellectual, acknowledged by subsequent **conservatives** of nearly every conceivable hue, was the Irish Whig Edmund Burke. In Burke's magisterial *Reflections on the revolution in France* (1978 [1790]) – where **conserve** appears as a verb – "the past" was mobilized as an explicit political resource, from which could be divined the sum of human wisdom. (This *mobilization* of the past for political ends is closely connected, in turn, to later manifestations at the end of the C19 of the invention of tradition [Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983], in which fabricated artifacts or memories of the past were mass produced in the present, establishing a *fictively* organic relation between past and present.) Wisdom, for Burke, was passed through the generations and, supremely, was embodied in the medium of the

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family: individual life could only have meaning within this larger collective. True knowledge was thus empirical and experiential, a function of the covenant between past, present, and future. It stood in antithesis to a politics driven by abstraction, by reason, and – above all else – by self-conscious ideological commitment. Burkean wisdom, in its ideal form, expressed simultaneously the truths of the divinity, of human nature, and of history itself.

In 1818 Chateaubriand's *Le Conservateur* described as a conservative "one who is a partisan of the maintenance of the established social and political order." In Britain, shortly after, conservatism as a political institution became associated with the duke of Wellington at the end of the 1820s. The idea of the **Conservative Party** first appeared in 1830 to describe the old landed faction of the Tories. On January 1, 1830, the *Quarterly Review* commented that "what is called the Tory might with more propriety be called the Conservative party." By 1840 Thomas Carlyle was writing of **conservatism** to describe what he believed to be the antidote to progress.

Through the C19, and for much of the C20, "conservatism" signified quite distinct political formations. In the continental European sense, conservatism was most often understood to be strictly reactionary, ready to turn back historical time, especially when confronting the challenge of mass democracy. In mC20 continental Europe these forces of reaction found themselves outflanked by a variety of fascist movements, in which they were absorbed, or by which they were destroyed, or with which they had to enter into uneasy alliance. In the Anglophone world "conservative" represented a more deeply liberal politics than it did in continental Europe. In Britain especially, inherited traditions of statecraft (maintenance of order) combined in Conservative politics to embrace – indeed, to advance – mass democracy (Hogg, 1947). Five years after he introduced an unprecedented expansion of the franchise the Conservative prime minister Benjamin Disraeli could declare (in 1872): "Gentlemen, the program of the Conservative party is to maintain the constitution of the country." By the second half of the C19 these strictly political meanings carried broader connotations, describing a psychological disposition as much as a political practice. Thus by 1865 the periodical press could announce: "We find girls naturally timid, prone to dependence, born conservatives."

In Britain the C20 sometimes came to be referred to by political scientists as the **Conservative century**, owing to the prolonged dominance of the Conservative Party in the political life of the nation (Gilmour, 1977). But in the IC20, as a result of the collapse of Bretton Woods and of the financial-industrial arrangements which underpinned the post-war settlements in the advanced nations, there emerged in many different variations parties and governments of the New Right. These were radical programmatically (thus alternatively termed the Radical Right), based upon a genuine determination to outflank the social-democratic advances of welfarization. These movements combined in varying degrees a populist authoritarianism – bringing together incessant "calls to the people" at the same time as the state imposed a deepening authority within civil society – with ever-

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increasing commitments to the free market, creating in the process a quite new conception of conservative politics.

These shifts could first be noted in the United States during the presidency of Richard Nixon, who evolved a peculiarly effective form of **conservative radicalism**, honing the precedents put in place by a generation of white demagogues in the south. Most of all, this was a conservatism organized by those who believed that they needed to fight on every front – in civil society as well as in the state, on the cultural terrain as well as the economic – in order to save the nation from destruction.

Colloquially, this larger, global political transformation was frequently referred to, in generic form, as Thatcherism, after the leading exponent of the new politics in Britain (S. Hall and Jacques, 1983). This was a politics which aimed to outflank its political opponents by seeking their destruction, rather than looking for a measure of accommodation: and in spurning an administrative or managerialist conception of politics, it revived – at least rhetorically – an active conception of “the people.” The great paradox of this new radicalism, however, was the degree to which the traditional conservative parties themselves came to be regarded as upholders of the now-discredited anciens régimes, and thus suitable candidates for political destruction.

Certain unintended consequences followed. In 1985 one of Margaret Thatcher’s original political footsoldiers, Michael Heseltine, could boast that the British Conservative Party was “the most successful political force in the history of mankind.” Less than a decade later, having been identified by the Thatcherite zealots as a haven for the old thinking, and having suffered accordingly, it was dead in the water. Despite this prolonged weakening of the institutions of political conservatism at the start of the C21, the term remains readily associated with those who regard themselves as defenders of the – imagined – past, and whose fears rest upon the radical subversion of existent systems of social authority.

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See: **LIBERALISM, SOCIALISM.**