

CONSERVATISM

ROGER SCRUTON

P

PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

Copyright © Horsell's Morsels Ltd

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright holder and the publisher of this book.

All reasonable efforts have been made to obtain copyright permissions where required. Any omissions and errors of attribution are unintentional and will, if notified in writing to the publisher, be corrected in future printings.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 752 4

eISBN 978 1 78283 310 9

Designed by Jade Design *www.jadedesign.co.uk*

Printed and bound in Italy by L.E.G.O. S.p.A.



The paper this book is printed on is certified by the © 1996 Forest Stewardship Council A.C. (FSC). It is ancient-forest friendly. The printer holds FSC chain of custody SGS-COC-2061

CONTENTS

PREFACE	1
1 PRE-HISTORY	3
2 THE BIRTH OF PHILOSOPHICAL CONSERVATISM	27
3 CONSERVATISM IN GERMANY AND FRANCE	49
4 CULTURAL CONSERVATISM	73
5 THE IMPACT OF SOCIALISM	97
6 CONSERVATISM NOW	121
Further reading and bibliography	151
Index	159

PREFACE

Being conservative is a distinct way of being human, and in every sphere of life the conservative temperament has staked its claim: in art, music, literature, science and religion. My concern in this book is with the political philosophy, rather than the political practice, that has attracted the ‘conservative’ label. So understood, conservatism is a rich source of reflection on political order, and the aim of this book is to show the underlying coherence of the conservative vision and the way in which it might be defended. Whether or not readers agree with the politics, they will recognise, I hope, that conservative ideas are intrinsically interesting, and a necessary part of our attempt to understand who we are, where we are, and why.

Although the conservative attitude is instinctive, conservatism as a political philosophy is a recent phenomenon, which arose during the course of three great revolutions – the English Glorious Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution that ended in 1783, and the French Revolution of 1789. This history has marked all subsequent conservative movements, and partly explains why it is largely in the English-speaking world that the word ‘conservative’ is used by politicians and parties to recommend what they stand for. Elsewhere the word is more often a term of abuse. Understanding why this is so is one part of grasping the difference between Anglo-American and continental politics. At the same time, conservatism has been as real a force in

CONSERVATISM

continental Europe as it has been in the Anglosphere, and I have included thinkers from France, Austria, Germany and Spain in order to show the breadth and complexity of the conservative intellectual tradition, which has been part of Western civilisation throughout modern times.

Necessarily I have confined myself to arguments and ideas. Conservatism, as an intellectual and spiritual force, has found expression as much in art, poetry and music as in philosophical discussion. The greatest conservative thinkers have devoted much of their attention to the nature of art and the messages contained in it. Burke's first major publication was an influential treatise on the ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* are the high point of his contribution to nineteenth-century thought, while many of the 'cultural conservatives' whose thoughts I summarise were also major artists in verse and prose: Chateaubriand, for example, and Coleridge, Ruskin, Eliot. Those who wish fully to understand what was at stake in the Austrian discussion of spontaneous order should not look only at the writings of Hayek and his school. Just as relevant, in their way, are the symphonies of Mahler, the poems of Rilke, and the operas of Hofmannsthal and Strauss. I touch on such things here and there; but their proper treatment belongs to another book.

As always I owe a great debt of gratitude to Bob Grant, upon whose insight and erudition I have depended at every point.

1

PRE-HISTORY

Modern conservatism is a product of the Enlightenment. But it calls upon aspects of the human condition that can be witnessed in every civilisation and at every period of history. Moreover, it is heir to a philosophical legacy at least as old as the Greeks. Aristotle, in the *Politics*, defended constitutional government in terms that are as influential among conservative thinkers today as they were in the ancient world. Indeed, most of the ideas purveyed by modern conservatives are foreshadowed in Aristotle's great work. But they have been adapted to a situation that Aristotle himself could not have foreseen, which is the emergence of the nation state, the loss of a unifying religion, and the growth of the 'great society', composed of millions of cooperating strangers under a single rule of law.

It is a repeated error among intellectual historians to assume that ideas have a self-contained history of their own, and that one idea gives rise to another in something like the way one weather system gives rise to the next. Marxists, who regard ideas as by-products of economic forces, commit the opposite error, dismissing the intellectual life as entirely subservient to material causes. The vast and destructive influence of Marxist theory is a clear disproof of what it says. As the American conservative Richard Weaver put it, in the title of a famous and influential book,

CONSERVATISM

Ideas Have Consequences (1948), and this is as true of conservative ideas as it is of ideas propagated on the left. To understand the pre-history of conservatism, therefore, one should accept that ideas have a far-reaching influence over human affairs; but one should recognise also that they do not arise only from other ideas, and often have roots in biological, social and political conditions that lie deeper than rational argument.

We human beings live naturally in communities, bound together by mutual trust. We have a need for a shared home, a place of safety where our claim to occupancy is undisputed and where we can call on others to assist us in times of threat. We need peace with our neighbours and the procedures for securing it. And we need the love and protection afforded by family life. To revise the human condition in any of those respects is to violate imperatives rooted in biology and in the needs of social reproduction. But to conduct political argument as though these factors are too far from the realm of ideas to deserve a mention is to ignore all the limits that must be borne in mind, if our political philosophy is to be remotely believable. It is precisely the character of modern utopias to ignore these limits – to imagine societies without law (Marx and Engels), without families (Laing), without borders or defences (Sartre).¹ And much

1 Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, Part 3, Chapter 2, on the ‘withering away of the State’; R. D. Laing, *The Politics of the Family*, London, 1971, decrying the ‘bourgeois family’ as the source of collective mental sickness; J.-P. Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, translated by J. Matthews, London, 1974, arguing that all boundaries will dissolve after the ‘totalising’ revolution, when nations, classes, borders will be replaced by the constantly evolving ‘*groupe en fusion*’.

PRE-HISTORY

conservative ink has been wasted (by me among others) in rebutting such views, which can be believed only by people who are unable to perceive realities, and who therefore will never be persuaded by argument.

Let us begin, therefore, by listing some of the features of the human condition that define the limits of political thinking and that, most conservatives will claim, are given due prominence in their philosophy. First among these features is social membership. Human beings live in communities, and depend on communities for their safety and happiness. In a tribal society people relate to each other through kinship (which may be partly mythical); in a religious society membership is determined by ritual and faith; in a political society relations are governed by law, and in the modern secular state law is made by the citizens, usually through their elected representatives, and imposed by a sovereign authority. All three forms of society – tribal, religious and political – can be witnessed in the world today, though it was the emergence of political order that was the original inspiration for modern conservatism. On one reading of events, indeed, conservatism arose as an attempt to hold on to the values of kinship and religion in communities that were being reorganised by a purely political law.

Social membership goes hand in hand with individual attachment. Human beings begin life in a state of attachment to the mother and to the household that shields and nurtures her. As they grow to adulthood the bond of attachment loosens and widens. The young adult needs the mother and the family less, but friends and cooperation more. In the course of a lifetime customs, places, networks, institutions,

CONSERVATISM

shared ways of being all amplify our attachments, and create the sense that we are at home in the world, among familiar and trustworthy things. That sense of the familiar and the trustworthy is precious to us, and its loss is an occasion of anxiety and mourning. The most important input into conservative thinking is the desire to sustain the networks of familiarity and trust on which a community depends for its longevity. Conservatism is what its name says it is: the attempt to conserve the community that we have – not in every particular since, as Edmund Burke put it, ‘we must reform in order to conserve’, but in all matters that ensure our community’s long-term survival.

But human beings do not only cooperate. They also compete, and it is a primary need, therefore, to ensure that competition is peaceful, and that conflicts can be resolved. Almost all the utopias that have been devised by modern writers are based on the assumption that human beings can exist in arrangements where cooperation alone binds people to their neighbours, and from which the element of competition has been refined away. And this is why utopias are unbelievable – being either purely abstract arrangements of noumenal beings, like the ‘full communism’ foretold by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* (1845), or sentimental fairylands, like the neo-Gothic England of William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890). Competition is fundamental to our nature, being both our way of solving problems, and the most important human cause of them. Kinship moderates competition, replacing ‘I’ by ‘we’ in all disputes that might spill over into violence. But it also creates rivalry between families, like the Montagues and

PRE-HISTORY

Capulets, and between tribes, like those brought to order by Muhammad, with the discovery of a religion that demanded 'submission', and therefore 'peace'. That religious 'peace' in turn meant war against the heretics and infidels.

In the modern world of the Enlightenment the old forms of social membership had run their course in a series of religious wars. People were searching for new ways of implanting reconciliation in the heart of the social order, and secular government under a rule of law seemed to be the best hope for the future, since it promised to put reason rather than passion in charge. The Enlightenment inspired the collective recognition that human beings had been fighting over fictions, and that it was time to agree about realities instead.

In the pre-history of conservative thinking, when Aristotle was the supreme master, it was usual to follow him in emphasising reason as distinctive of the human condition. By exercising our reason we have a unique means of resolving conflict and overcoming obstacles. But it was already apparent to Aristotle, and has been made explicit by modern studies in collective decision-making, that when a group of people all apply their reason to a shared problem, a reasonable solution may nevertheless not emerge – in other words, that the rational and the reasonable may diverge. This is shown clearly by the Prisoners' Dilemma, in which two prisoners, each choosing rationally, will act in a way that is counter to the best interests of both.² And it was a crucial observation of Burke's, in his polemic against

2 This is the starting point for a discussion of collective choice, and if you don't know what the Prisoners' Dilemma is you should consult one of a million references to it on the internet.

CONSERVATISM

the French Revolution, that rational plans in the brains of ardent believers may lead of their own accord to disaster.

Conservatives tend to share Aristotle's conception of human rationality and, like him, recognise that one aim of political life is to refine the use of reason, and to implant in the citizen the virtues that are necessary for its collective exercise. But the point has been made differently at different times that we rational beings need customs and institutions that are founded in something other than reason, if we are to use our reason to good effect. This insight, indeed, is probably the principal contribution that conservatism has made to the self-understanding of the human species. In the following chapters I will spell it out in more detail.

That said, however, we should recognise the countervailing tendency in conservative thought. As well as emphasising the need for custom and community, conservative philosophy has advocated the freedom of the individual, conceiving community not as an organic network bound by habit and submission, but as a free association of rational beings, all of whom have, and cherish, an identity of their own. Conservatism as we know it today is a distinctively modern outlook, shaped by the Enlightenment and by the emergence of societies in which the 'we' of social membership is balanced at every point against the 'I' of individual ambition.

The idea of society as a collection of individuals, each with a sphere of autonomous choice and all pursuing personal fulfilment along a path of their own, is not a recent one. In a famous study, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt attributed the emergence of the individual to

PRE-HISTORY

the intellectual and political awakening of the Renaissance, while in a recent book, Sir Larry Siedentop has traced the idea further back, to the religion of Jesus and St Paul, which places the salvation of the individual soul at the heart of God's concern for us.³ Whatever the truth of those views, it is surely evident that individualism took on a new character at the Enlightenment, with the emphasis on the connection between legitimacy and consent. The modern conception of political society, as an assembly of citizens who cooperate in establishing the laws under which they live, is to be distinguished from older ideas of monarchical sovereignty, qualified, in whatever way, by the need for the monarch to consult and conciliate the powerful groups within the kingdom.

But it should not be thought that the transition from that older idea to modern forms of parliamentary democracy is clear-cut and absolute. On the contrary, in the British case it has been established at least since the reign of Edward III (r. 1327–77) that the king cannot tax his subjects without consent of the House of Commons, and the subsequent history of the English Crown has revolved around the increasingly successful attempts of Parliament to gain control over important decisions. By the time of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, with the deposition of James II, the last Stuart king, in favour of William of Orange, and with the adoption by Parliament in 1689 of a Bill of Rights, it was clear that England had become a constitutional

3 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1860; Sir Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, 2014.

CONSERVATISM

monarchy, in which the power of the monarch was limited by customs and conventions that transferred the main business of government to the two houses of Parliament.

It was at this time that the principal ideas behind the modern conservative movement began to emerge in both Britain and France, and some of these ideas were shared at first with the liberal individualists who were to provide the intellectual fuel for the French Revolution. The first and most far-reaching idea was that the legitimacy of a government depends on the consent of those who are subject to it. Authority is conferred on the government by the people, who are the ultimate source of sovereign power. This – to us obvious – idea involves a reversal of the medieval view of government, according to which the monarch, appointed by historical (which usually meant divine) right, is the source of all authority in the state. In the medieval view, the freedom of the individual is a privilege, conferred by the monarch in return for military or courtly services. Even if individualism was on the rise throughout the medieval period, it had yet to find expression in a philosophy, and theories of government saw legitimacy as flowing down to individuals from their sovereigns, and not, as was later accepted, flowing up to the sovereigns from those who consented to their rule.

At the same time, medieval discussions contain fruitful explorations of two issues that were to emerge as pivotal at the Enlightenment: the relation between ecclesiastical and secular government, and the limits to government contained in the law of nature. The Greek Stoics had argued that laws are of two kinds, man-made and ‘natural’. The natural law

PRE-HISTORY

owes its authority to our innate reasoning powers, and the existence of such a law was defended by the great scholastic philosopher St Thomas Aquinas (1226–1274), who saw it as providing a standard against which the justice of all merely human arrangements could be measured. Discussions of this went hand in hand with attempts both to circumscribe and to define the power of the church, and to reconcile the competing needs for an inclusive secular order and for sacred institutions devoted to the spiritual well-being of the community. The growing conflict between church and state at the Reformation, and the increasing emphasis on natural law as setting limits to the sovereign power, were powerful factors in displacing the medieval idea, that legitimacy flows downwards from the sovereign to the subject, and replacing it with the liberal view, that legitimacy flows upwards from the people to the sovereign power.

In one of the first works of political philosophy to be marked by the recognisable tone of voice of British conservatism, Richard Hooker (1554–1600), in *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (from 1594), attempted to justify a compromise between church and state. Each, Hooker believed, should limit the scope of the other, in the interests of the natural law that would guarantee the liberties of the individual and ensure peace between the spiritual and temporal powers.

That work, esteemed though it is by many conservatives today, belongs to the pre-modern period of political debate. The modern vision of legitimacy was first fully expressed in the English-speaking world by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), whose celebrated *Leviathan* (1651) attempts to derive

CONSERVATISM

an account of good government from the assumption that the 'commonwealth' is composed of freely choosing individuals, motivated by their beliefs and desires. In a state of nature, Hobbes argued, these appetite-driven individuals will be in competition for the resources needed to survive and prosper, and the result will be the war of all against all. In that condition, life will be, in his famous words, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. But individuals have the means to rise above the state of nature, since they make rational choices and agree with each other to act for their mutual benefit. Hence they will contract among themselves to establish a government, which will have sovereignty over them all and provide protection to each. The sovereign created by the social contract will not be party to the contract, but will enjoy the absolute power to enforce the contract against those who strive to bypass or renege on it.

The detail of Hobbes's theory need not concern us. What is important is the concept of sovereignty that he justified. It might be thought that a philosopher who sees the source of political authority as lying in the consent of the individual subject would end with a mild, flexible and negotiable idea of legitimate order. But not so. Hobbes had lived through the civil war and witnessed (from the safe distance of Paris) the profound disorder and cruelty that followed from the collapse of government. Anything was better than the chaos that he had observed, and if the absolute power of a sovereign is the only thing that can prevent it, then that is how things must be. Moreover, rational beings, understanding this, would sign up to the contract whereby the absolute sovereign is brought into being.

IDEAS IN PROFILE

SMALL INTRODUCTIONS TO BIG TOPICS

Ideas in Profile is a landmark series that offers concise and entertaining introductions to topics that matter.

ALREADY PUBLISHED

The Ancient World Jerry Toner
Art in History Martin Kemp
Criticism Catherine Belsey
Geography Carl Lee and Danny Dorling
Music Andrew Gant
Politics David Runciman
Shakespeare Paul Edmondson
Social Theory William Outhwaite
Theories of Everything Frank Close
Truth Simon Blackburn

FORTHCOMING

Feminism Deborah Cameron
Language Alexandra Aikhenvald
Socialism Mark Stears

