

This definition of conservatism from Roger Scruton is about as valid as any, but as with most attempts flawed because it baulks at conservatism's central theme, that of protection of privilege. I will discuss the problems in attempting to define this ideology and then using Scruton's definition examine conservatism as a justification of an elite lifestyle.

Defining conservatism is not easy, but the problem is a modern one. What we now call conservatism has existed as long as inequality. As an ideology it has only existed since challenged, and so it is to the French Revolution that we owe attempts to beat together some sort of body of thought to fit the pre-existing body of people with something to lose in any change. Attempts fall into three categories: those merely listing beliefs conservative thinkers tend to hold; those damned to incompleteness either due to focussing on one aspect only (eg *Politics of Imperfection*), or because they leave further indefinables to sort out, like Scruton's; or those who emphasise the mystery and majesty of the conservative mystique to the point where attempts at definition are made to appear impertinent.

That remnants of the latter are still noticeable emphasises how recent actually trying to frame conservative thought is. White, in his introduction to "The Conservative Tradition" expresses this lack of intellectual basis, and feeling that it just is:

For conservatism is less a political doctrine than a habit of mind, a mode of feeling, a way of living...not so much a body of intellectually formulated principles as a number of instincts.<sup>1</sup>

The impression that conservatism involves being above any dissection of doctrine, carries through to the attitude towards politics, that is, politics is secondary to enjoying the good life privilege allows. Quentin Hogg sets this out at least for British conservatism:

Conservatives do not believe that political struggle is the most important thing in life. The simplest among them prefer fox-hunting — the wisest religion. To the great majority of Conservatives, religion, art, study, family, country, friends, music, fun,

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<sup>1</sup> White, R.J. *The Conservative Tradition*, New York UP, 1957, 1.

duty, all the joy and riches of existence of the which the poor no less than the rich are the indefeasible freeholders... are higher in scale than...the political struggle.<sup>2</sup>

Hogg appears to believe that conservatives really do think the poor can afford the whims and enjoyments of the rich, such ignorance being a direct throwback to an isolated aristocracy, and the sort of comment that led John Stuart Mill to call them “the Stupid party.”<sup>3</sup>

Another approach is to list things all good conservatives believe in, which tend to be nothing more than a catalogue of prejudices and instincts. Kirk for example gives “six canons”, a predictably religious approach, which for him are a distillation of what conservatives believe:

1. Belief that a divine intent rules society...
2. Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of traditional life...
3. Conviction that civilised society requires order and classes...
4. Persuasion that property and freedom are inseparably connected...
5. Faith in prescription...
6. Recognition that change and reform are not identical and that innovation is a devouring configuration more often than it is a torch of progress.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Gould and Truitt list nine “themes”<sup>5</sup>, and Hearnshaw a “dozen principles.”<sup>6</sup> This approach in the end is no more than an extension of not offering an explanation at all. It is merely listing the instincts that conservatives have without any logic, except that they protect privilege. Only parenthetically is the conservation of wealth and prestige mentioned.

The last approach is to try to boil conservatism down to a single statement as in the quotation under discussion. This can be done by latching on the one aspect and reconstructing other “canons” around it, as proponents of the “Politics of Imperfection”

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<sup>2</sup> Hogg, Q., *ibid*, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Kirk, R.J., *The Conservative Mind*, Faber and Faber: London, 1954, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 17-18.

<sup>5</sup> Gould, J. A. and Truitt, W. H. *Political Ideologies*, Macmillan, New York, 1973, 134.

<sup>6</sup> Hearnshaw, F.J.C. in *ibid*, 138-145.

have done by dragging out original sin and using it to justify conservatism “as the defence of a limited style of politics, based upon the idea of imperfection.”<sup>7</sup>

O’Sullivan then points out that the “advantage” of this approach is that “it does not require one to identify an ‘essence’ or ‘hard core’ of conservative ideology.”<sup>8</sup> This would be more an advantage however if you are trying not to define an ideology.

A single statement form of definition can also be an all-embracing as is Scruton’s, but the danger here is to be so general as to be meaningless, or to fill the definition with words that need a lot of defining. Similar definitions to Scruton’s, for example:

...a state of mind in which the relationship between attitudes to the present and past and attitudes to possible futures generates a general tendency to protect present institutions and to mistrust proposals for change.<sup>9</sup>

and

The conservative is led by disposition, not unmixed with pecuniary self-interest to adhere to the familiar and the established;<sup>10</sup>

say no more than that change is not welcome.

Gailbraith’s understandably less generous definition points to the obvious problem with defining conservatism, that its basis is to look after the interest of a section of the community, and the more you look for an essence of conservatism the more you find only privilege and its protection.

It is implicit in Scruton’s definition that to be conservative you must have something to lose. It is only a privileged class which needs to play “safe” to protect what it has, as if you have nothing, you have nothing to lose. Scruton is therefore declaring conservatism an ideology of class privilege, albeit in a soft-peddalling fashion.

An ideology preserving “existing things” as “better than the likely alternatives” is again a philosophy of privilege, but more than that that is intolerant of any threat to its status. This has

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<sup>7</sup> O’Sullivan, N., *Conservatism*, J.M. Dent and Sons, London, 1976, 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Allison, L.

<sup>10</sup> Galbraith, J.K., *The Affluent Society*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1969, 8.

been justified by appeals to the organic view of society. Qunton has defined organicism as taking a society to be:

a unitary natural growth, an organised living whole... It is not composed of bare abstract individuals but of social beings, related to one another within a texture of inherited customs and institutions which endow them with their specific social nature.<sup>11</sup>

Inequality is therefore not injustice but a necessary part of society. The organic nature of society emphasises slow change which happens naturally, as growth in a plant, as opposed to radical change which in this model is life threatening. Taken to its extreme this justifies complete disregard of social injustice and failure to help others, as exemplified by Ayn Rand:

The only good which men can do for one another ... is — Hands off!<sup>12</sup>

As aristocratic conservatism with its noblesse oblige has died out, conservatism tends to this liberal-conservative laissez-faire attitude. If the organism of society is too complex to intervene, even to address obvious social problems, a conservative need have no qualms in enjoying his position and washing his hands of the rest of society.

Conservatism has traditionally been associated with a form of Christianity, generally protestant, certainly “familiar”, which emphasises authority and original sin.<sup>13</sup> The charitable New Testament Christ of the beatitudes is unacceptable to conservative ideology, with a vengeful Old Testament God of Wrath a more appropriate agency to damn the poor and oppressed to their pitiful lot as punishment for man’s sinfulness. As it is man’s sinful nature that causes social problems, they are insolvable and therefore of no useful concern. The converse of this argument is the often unstated but tacit feeling that it is rather nice to be chosen by God to be privileged and to have seemingly escaped the taint of original sin.

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<sup>11</sup> Quinton, A. *The Politics of Imperfection*, Faber and Faber, London, 1978, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Rand, A., in O’Sullivan, *op.cit.*, 140.

<sup>13</sup> Viereck, P.M., *Conservatism*, D. Van Nostrand, New Jersey, 1956, 14.

Roger Scruton has a definition for conservatism that in its apologetic form says more about its subject than it does in actual content. Conservatism is revealed in his definition as merely an apology for a privileged class, an excuse for non-intervention in social problems and thus a tool of class exploitation, and in the final analysis reeking of the smug, self-righteous aura of a “God-chosen” elite.

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