



## Introduction to Political Science

*Classical Conservatism* Reading

Ole J. Forsberg, Ph.D.

*University of Tennessee*

### Classical Conservatism

*Ole J. Forsberg*

The meaning and the implications of the term “classical conservatism” vary between countries and across time. As such, it is difficult to formulate a single definition with a single set of prescribed outcomes. However, one universal reality is that periods of conservatism in the population have always followed, and have always been followed by, periods of swift political change. Political philosophy, even at its beginnings, has contained strains of what we would consider conservatism. However, most early conservatives did not create an integrated political theory beyond advocacy of slow, evolutionary changes in traditional institutions. It was not until the late eighteenth century that Conservatism became a coherent theory of politics, when, in 1790, Edmund Burke wrote the *Vulgate* for conservatives.

The French Revolution of 1789 served as Burke’s catalyst. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke predicted that the French Revolution would eventually degenerate into anarchy and horror because the revolutionary government had created a complete break with the past—a rupture so complete, that no connection existed between what was and what was to come. This lack of historical continuity in the government eliminated the usual constraints on tyranny. As a result, the French people, according to Burke, would find themselves without any traditional, civil checks on their behavior. Thus, either the new government would have to become tyrannical to force the French to follow the new rules, or it would completely fail. In other words, the people are protected from power by tradition; without tradition, power is raw, naked, and extremely dangerous. Both the people and the state suffer because of it—the former because they are exposed to tyranny; the latter, because they must expend so much energy in control. To understand this, it is necessary to examine the underpinnings of Burke’s traditional conservatism.

As with the other Contractarians,<sup>1</sup> Burke reflected on humans in the state of nature. Where Hobbes felt that humanity was a battle between passions and reason, with reason ultimately checking passion in the willing formation of the state, Burke denied this triumph of reason. Where Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all held that men were created equal in nature, Burke did not. For Burke, two fundamental points characterize human nature: inability of reason to *consistently* trump human passions, and natural inequality of humans. These two points, in conjunction with the presupposition that stability is a good, lead to the three basic arguments of Burke’s Traditional Conservatism. First, traditional institutions are of paramount importance. Traditional institutions include the family, the church, and the government in its guise as

---

<sup>1</sup> A Contractarian is a political philosopher who considers and philosophizes on the Social Contract

lawgiver. These institutions have the duty of passing on traditional moral teachings, which constrain the acceptable practices of the people.

Second, because of the human tendency toward irrational behavior, we need guidance from traditional authorities in order for society to enjoy stability. Because he lacked faith in the individual, Burke elevated the collective rationality of people above the rights of the individual much in the same manner as Rousseau. Burke's *collective rationality* compares easily to Rousseau's *sovereign*. However, while Rousseau held that private property was the prime source of corruption, Burke held that private property was one of the more important traditions. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke stated, "The power of perpetuating our property in our families is one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to it, and that which tends most to the perpetuation of society itself."

Third, compliance with traditional morality is more important than individual liberty; that is, people should not have the liberty to contravene moral principles. This also conflicts with Rousseau's liberalism. For Rousseau, society's restrictions on personal liberty were the chains that fettered man's natural goodness. For Burke, these restrictions provided man a framework within which he knew ethical behavior and responsible liberty.

For conservatives, stability is of utmost importance; the stability of the state and the stability of the society are inseparable. This requires neither a stagnant society nor a regressive one; change is allowed. However, because of the premium placed on stability, conservatism logic results in two major tenets: first, reforms must contribute to the well-being of the community; second, present generations have a responsibility to both past and future generations. These two principles illustrate why Burke supported the American Revolution. While a Member of Parliament, Burke pled the cause of the colonists, even calling for the repeal of the Stamp Act, not because Britain had no right to tax the colonists, but because it was unfair to them. After the Treaty of Paris, the Americans refused to break completely with their history. The government they created drew heavily from English institutions. Furthermore, the Framers created the new constitution with the expressed purpose of restricting the power of the government to help the society.

The very structure of the American government is conservative. Madison built upon Montesquieu's separation of powers with his own system of checks and balances. This helped to ensure that no single branch of government would be able to seize power at the expense of society. To further circumscribe the powers of the government and to check populist demagogues, the Federalists allowed only the House of Representatives to be popularly elected, and thus subject to the passions of the governed. The Electoral College, the state legislatures, and the president chose the other three bodies. Furthermore, the Constitution became the new Holy Scripture. The law is supreme; the Constitution even more so. Each of these guarantees that the government changes slowly. Moreover, basing the American legal system on Common Law and *stare decisis* makes even clearer this dedication to tradition, to legal conservatism.

Today, there are two contradicting aspects to those labeled conservative. In the economic sphere, conservatives believe in fewer regulations on industry. In the social sphere, conservatives echo the traditional values of Burke. They still tend to adhere to the three basic arguments of

Burke's conservatism; that is, they still emphasize American heritage over American progress; and they still emphasize traditional over progressive institutions. The "Faith-Based Initiatives" of President Bush demonstrate the continuing power of Burke in modern American politics, as does the ongoing debate over "gay marriage." The government continues to strengthen the traditional institutions of the family and the church in order to strengthen American society.

Is this surge in conservatism a new event? Not at all. Political scientist Clinton Rossiter identified this increase in activity as a cyclical phenomenon. After each period of intense political change, be it Reconstruction, the New Deal, the Civil Rights Movement, or globalization, society reacted by becoming more conservative, less willing to change again. Thus, do the conservative strains echo through the ages: evolution, not revolution.

### *Questions*

1. In what ways does classical conservatism support the Constitution?
2. In what ways does classical conservatism conflict with the Constitution?
3. Even with the fundamental contradiction deep within the modern conservative, the Republican Party is monolithic. How is it able to keep together?
4. Would a classical conservative support Gulf War II? What about the USA PATRIOT Act?
5. Could a classical conservative realistically be labeled a socialist?