

## Conservatism and Classical Liberalism: A Rapprochement

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*Why I am Not a Liberal*

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If Hayek (1992) had been right about conservatism I would not be one either. But there are good reasons to be conservative, and in this essay I will attempt to examine what it is classical liberals dislike about conservatism, ask whether or not such criticisms are justified, and see if a reconciliation is possible. I believe on many points it is, and that the work of the British philosopher Oakeshott is a useful means to achieve it. First though, speaking as a conservative, and in a spirit of reconciliation, I offer a concession to classical liberalism.

My concession is this: the professed conservative disposition of aversion to change is in reality not confined to conservatives at all. Conservatives will often warn that change ought not to be embarked upon 'for its own sake', but when is this ever the case? It would surely constitute a certain form of mental illness to prefer change for its own sake rather than for the perceived benefits that this change is likely to bring (One interesting exception to this which Oakeshott himself identifies is the fashion industry. Here change is indeed indulged in for its own sake, to the extent that annual or even seasonal change has itself become a tradition. This raises the question of whether tradition and innovation are opposites, or whether innovation can become a tradition). This scepticism is something common to all people of right mind. The real difference between conservatives and liberals is that conservatives have not been infected with the spirit of improvement. They are much more content with what they have rather than constantly striving for something better.

The other difference is that liberals feel the need for reasons to retain a thing. A conservative is happy to keep this same thing unquestioningly, all the time with a vague feeling that the wisdom of the ages is in any case superior to his own, and that there is therefore little profit in questioning such matters. For liberals, the status quo needs to be defended just as change does – on rational grounds. Appeal to tradition ('Because we have always done it this way.') is to the liberal as impoverished and miserable a

response as one could find, but is the source of great nourishment for the conservative.

Classical liberals also consider conservatives anti-individualist, or at least not individualist enough. As I hinted at above, the work of Michael Oakeshott could be said to provide a middle ground here, in that although he makes a strong case for individuality, he distinguishes this from individualism, the latter being a rather crude ideological construct which is to classical liberals what 'traditionalism' is to conservatives. For Oakeshott the emergence of the individual as a free moral agent is the defining event of modern history, but contrary to much French Enlightenment thought, which argued that the shackles of tradition needed to be thrown off for man to be truly free, he is at pains to point out that the individual can only flourish within an established framework of tradition.

### Hayek: 'Why I am Not a Conservative'

Oakeshott can also help us to meet some of Hayek's objections to conservatism, as at some points Hayek is too far off the mark on conservatism for reconciliation to be possible. In particular his depiction of conservatism as nationalist (Hayek 1992: 9) is wildly at odds with most conservative sentiment on the subject. A cursory reading of Burke's views on European affairs (such as his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, for instance, in which he describes a common European society (Vincent 1984: 211)) would have been enough to put Hayek right here. However the main point of departure for a conservative, particularly

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one familiar with Oakeshott, comes very much earlier in Hayek's essay. In the opening paragraphs Hayek puts what he takes to be a 'decisive objection' to conservatism, namely that although it is useful in putting the brakes on change, it can itself offer no alternative to change. 'It may succeed by its resistance to current tendencies in slowing down undesirable developments,' he says, 'but since it does not indicate another direction, it cannot prevent their continuance.' (Hayek 1992: 1-2) For a liberal, on the other hand, the pace of change is not as important as the direction of movement.

For an Oakeshottian the substance of this objection would meet with immediate and vigorous agreement, except of course that rather than seeing it as an objection they would count this seeming poverty of ideas as a strength of the conservative disposition. For Oakeshott there ought to be no single 'direction of movement', rather (and this should appeal to classical liberals), the state should be so constituted as to allow individuals to pursue their own purposes, with the role of the state being to simply allow this to occur as smoothly and peacefully as possible without imposing a higher purpose of its own (Oakeshott 1991: 407-437). Oakeshott's great enemy throughout his intellectual life was the Rationalist planner, the one who sought to impose an abstract blueprint on society without thought of historical or local circumstance. On the face of it Hayek would seem to be an obvious ally in this cause, but in a famous passage in his essay 'Rationalism in Politics', Oakeshott says of Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* that 'although a plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite...it belongs to the same style of politics' (Oakeshott 1991: 26).

Later Hayek restates his case against conservatism in slightly different terms, arguing that by its distrust of theory, conservatism deprives itself of weapons in the battle of ideas. A number of things strike the Oakeshottian about this line of argument. One concerns the use of the word 'ideas', by which Hayek presumably means ideologies. Oakeshott's concern in much of his writing is that the world of ideas is in fact abused by the bogus assumption that better theory can lead to better practice. For Oakeshott the two are entirely separate realms, and the world of ideas is corrupted into ideology when one attempts to apply it to the 'real world' (Oakeshott 1975: 29-30). Another notable aspect of Hayek's case is the imagery of 'battle', which tends to jar with one more used to Oakeshott's metaphor of 'conversation'. The rather beautiful image of

civilisation defined as a conversation between all those (be they alive or dead) schooled in the 'language' of a particular discourse is one of the most appealing facets of Oakeshott's thought (Oakeshott 1991: 184-218). Whereas a 'battle of ideas' implies steadfast commitment, violent confrontation and eventual victory or defeat, Oakeshott's conversation metaphor begets images of accommodation, compromise and inconclusiveness.

### Natural Law and Natural Rights

Moving on from Hayek to some other points of disagreement between conservatives and classical liberals, there is a rich strain of conservative political philosophy which takes natural law moral philosophy as its starting point, of which classical liberals are intensely suspicious. The notion of a pre-ordained universal moral order is antithetical to liberal belief in individual liberty and the sovereignty of an individual's reason to determine his own moral path. Oakeshott again can be seen as a means to overcome differences between liberalism and conservatism here, in that although his political philosophy is positivist in the legal sense, and he firmly rejects the role of a natural law or any other type of pre-ordained moral order as being a guide to political action because of its claims to universal truth, he nevertheless is not antithetical to religious tradition. The large role he ascribes to 'traditions of behaviour' as guides to conduct leaves ample room for a given society's religious heritage to form part of the political discourse, not because that religious doctrine is infallible, but because it is a major part of that society's 'tradition of behaviour' (Oakeshott 1993: 13-15).

Just as liberals will attack conservatism for its links with natural law, they will criticise it for ignoring natural rights. Burke, for instance, is said to be 'no friend of individuals' rights, of religious toleration or freedom of the press and therefore no friend of liberalism or a liberal society...(t)he idea of self-government and any sort of substantive individual freedom certainly has no place in a Burkean community' (Davidson and Spegele 1991: 30). Certainly Burke had little time for talk of abstract rights, but he was a staunch defender of rights he believed were derived from the traditions of a given society; this is why he supported the American Revolution and so firmly rejected the French one. For Burke the former was an attempt to restore rights the American colonists had enjoyed as Englishmen, while the latter was an attempt to

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impose a set of abstract rights, totally divorced from historical practice. It is also worth pointing out that at various times during his career as an MP, despite the obvious political risks, Burke publicly defended Irish Catholics, criticised the persecution of homosexuals, and fought for the abolition of slavery.

In still stronger language the authors of the above passage go on to claim that ‘the “organic community” of Burke offers a society of status and hierarchy ... such a community subverts both equality and freedom and paves the way for fascist nightmares of one sort or another’ (Davidson and Spegele 1991: 47). This is absurd and baseless in and of itself, but is interesting in that it reveals the link some liberals see between conservatism and fascism. The point Hayek makes about conservatism tending to be nationalist might have its roots in this perceived link. The idea seems to be based on the old linear representation of ideology we all learnt at high school, with communism on the extreme left, then moving across we have socialism, liberalism, conservatism, and finally fascism on the extreme right. However, a great deal of scholarship has been focussed on the common totalitarian roots of the extreme left and right (most notably that of Hannah Arendt), and indeed these two seem to have more in common with each other than with their nearest neighbours, socialism and conservatism.

Further, Oakeshott would claim that conservatism stands outside this spectrum altogether, in the sense that it is not an ideology but a disposition. This, indeed, is one of the problems of reconciling liberalism with conservatism, in that in Oakeshottian terms, the former is regarded as an ideology and the latter a disposition. For Oakeshott conservatism is not a model to be applied to a particular society in competition with other models such as ‘socialism’ or ‘liberalism’, rather conservatism stands outside this arena. Of course conservatism can itself fall into the ideological mode, in which guise it might best be called ‘traditionalism’. Tradition here is simply put in the place of say, *The Road to Serfdom*, *The Communist Manifesto* or *The Second Treatise of Government*, as an infallible guide to political conduct.

### Political Economy

To descend slightly from the heights of theory, what is it that typically divides classical liberals and conservatives in modern Western politics? An example from London concerning that city’s famous double-decker buses serves

as a useful example. Some years ago the Tory-run local government decided that in the interests of ‘freeing up’ the public transport market, the law prohibiting buses from being any other colour than the famous traditional red would be removed from the statute books. Conservatives would, I think, be instinctively suspicious of this, firstly because conservatives style themselves as defenders of tradition, and certainly red buses are an important enough part of London’s cultural heritage to deserve protection on these grounds.

Even if we put the arguments of tradition aside, though, I think conservatives would still have doubts about such a scheme. Assume for the sake of argument that the potential economic benefits of allowing London buses to be painted in all colours are obvious. Nevertheless the gain remains potential, and this is the key word. Indeed, it reveals the reason why all of us, and not just those who define themselves as politically conservative, are suspicious of change – by definition it involves certain loss (in this case, a part of London’s cultural heritage) but only potential gain (cheaper bus fares).

In the days of the Cold War the internal divisions of the Western political Right were to a large extent subsumed by a common desire to oppose communism. Today these divisions are all too apparent, although they manifest themselves differently in the various parts of the English-speaking world. In the United States we saw a battle between the nationalism of Pat Buchanan and the free-marketeer ‘Contract with America’ Republicans. In Australia and New Zealand, the labour parties began the free-market revolution, and the conservative parties were forced to accommodate this change. In Britain, the Conservatives combined liberal economics with social conservatism, resulting, late in the piece, in the political hash known as ‘Back to Basics.’

In trying to bring order to this confusion, the temptation has been to lump conservatives in with economic nationalism and liberals with economic rationalism, although this is rather too simplistic to pass some basic tests of history. For instance classical liberals like to point out that Burke was a very close ally of Adam Smith, and wrote of the laws of economics as if they were divinely ordained. This side of Burke’s philosophy is brilliantly exposed in C. B. Macpherson’s *Burke* (1980: 51-70), but modern social conservatives who express doubts about the effects of economic rationalism can at times be rather reticent, even embarrassed about emphasising this aspect of his thought. There is no doubt

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## Conservatism is not an ideology but a disposition.

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that some conservatives have been less than enthusiastic about the free market revolution of the eighties. Where classical liberals scare conservatives is in the former's fanaticism about large-scale reform. Roger Douglas' claim that 'speed is essential: it is impossible to go too fast' (Douglas 1990: 3) is typical of this attitude.

Muddying these waters is the abuse which the term 'conservative' has received, especially in the United States. In American politics, and in particular amongst the factions of the Republican Party, the word 'conservative' is commonly juxtaposed with 'moderate'. Prefixes like 'hard-line' or 'arch' are also commonly attached. Of course conservatives can be extremist in extreme circumstances (Burke advocated full scale war against France after the revolution), but this permanent division between 'conservatives' and 'moderates' in American politics is surely a corruption of the former term (what else is conservatism about but moderation?), and results in conservatism being linked with what is really New Right economic radicalism.

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Oakeshott's position would seem to offer a point of accommodation between classical liberals and conservatives on economic issues. Oakeshott, of course, was no libertarian, in that he firmly believed in the authority and legitimacy of government, and its right to collect taxes in order to attend to its duties. Nevertheless, he is suspicious of government intervention in a society's social and economic life, but not because he thinks, as the economic rationalists do, that such freedom will lead to certain desirable ends. Rather, Oakeshott argues that government should not be concerned with ends at all. States which favour capitalism to socialism are often referred to as free enterprise states, but for Oakeshott the proper description is 'no enterprise' state (Oakeshott 1975: 318).

Typical of Oakeshott's broader view that the state ought not to serve any particular purpose are his opinions on education. Increasingly in Western countries where the

economic rationalist mood has taken hold, the education system has come to be seen as a cog in the machine which is the national economy. Universities themselves have become captive to this doctrine, with the increased investment in vocational courses a typical experience. But even the most purely academic subjects are these days justified on economic grounds: the promotional material for a philosophy major at a given university is more likely to emphasise the 'thinking skills' which it can teach ('so important in today's competitive job market'), than the rather odd notion that one might study this subject simply as a means to immerse oneself in the rich history of Western civilization. Yet this latter view is the one Oakeshott defended, and despite his reputation as a philosophical ally of Thatcherism, higher education is one area where he surely had the gravest doubts about that government's policies.

**Conclusions**

In closing, it is well to say that even as we attempt to reconcile conservatism with classical liberalism by way of Oakeshott's political philosophy, it would be fatuous in the extreme to suggest that 'Oakeshottian liberal conservatism' provides answers to particular political problems. It is one of the tragedies of the modern world that we have in effect come to believe that an abstract ideological blueprint for political conduct can tell us what colour we ought to paint our buses. The political reformer's dreams of an earthly utopia have resulted in the bloodiest century in our history. If conservatives and classical liberals can agree on nothing else, they can surely agree that these utopians are their common enemy. *Policy*

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