

The Six Core Beliefs of Conservatism

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February 5, 2016



The following is excerpted from The Essential Russell Kirk, a collection of his finest essays and writings.

“What is conservatism?” Abraham Lincoln inquired rhetorically, as he campaigned for the presidency of the United States. “Is it not adherence to the old and tried, against the new and untried?” By that test, the candidate told his audience, Abraham Lincoln was a conservative.

Other definitions have been offered. In Ambrose Bierce’s *Devil’s Dictionary* one encounters this:

“Conservative, n. A statesman who is enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others.” . . .

Although it is no ideology, conservatism may be apprehended reasonably well by attention to what leading writers and politicians, generally called conservative, have said and done. . . .

“Conservatism,” to put the matter another way, amounts to the consensus of the leading conservative thinkers and actors over the past two centuries. For our present purpose, however, we may set down below several general principles upon which most eminent conservatives in some degree may be said to have agreed implicitly. The following first principles are best discerned in the theoretical and practical politics of British and American conservatives.

1. Transcendent Order

First, conservatives generally believe that there exists a transcendent moral order, to which we ought to try to conform the ways of society. A divine tactic, however dimly described, is at work in human society. Such convictions may take the form of belief in “natural law” or may assume some other expression; but with few exceptions conservatives recognize the need for enduring moral authority. This conviction contrasts strongly with the liberals' utilitarian view of the state (most consistently expressed by Bentham's disciples), and with the radicals' detestation of theological postulates.

2. Social Continuity

Second, conservatives uphold the principle of social continuity. They prefer the devil they know to the devil they don't know. Order and justice and freedom, they believe, are the artificial products of a long and painful social experience, the results of centuries of trial and reflection and sacrifice. Thus the body social is a kind of spiritual corporation, comparable to the church; it may even be called a community of souls. Human society is no machine, to be treated mechanically. The continuity, the lifeblood, of a society must not be interrupted. Burke's reminder of the social necessity for prudent change is in the minds of conservatives. But necessary change, they argue, ought to be gradual and discriminatory, never “unfixing old interests at once.” Revolution slices through the arteries of a culture, a cure that kills.

3. Prescription

Third, conservatives believe in what may be called the principle of prescription. “The wisdom of our ancestors” is one of the more important phrases in the writings of Burke; presumably Burke derived it from Richard Hooker. Conservatives sense that modern men and women are dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, able to see farther than their ancestors only because of the great stature of those who have preceded us in time. Therefore conservatives very frequently emphasize the importance of “prescription”—that is, of things established by immemorial usage, so “that the mind of man runneth not to the contrary.” There exist rights of which the chief sanction is their antiquity—including rights in property, often. Similarly, our morals are prescriptive in great part. Conservatives argue that we are unlikely, we moderns, to make any brave new discoveries in morals or politics or taste. It is perilous to weigh every passing issue on the basis of private judgment and private rationality. “The individual is foolish, but the species is wise,” Burke declared. In politics we do well to abide by precedent and precept and even prejudice, for “the great mysterious incorporation of the human race” has acquired habits, customs, and conventions of remote origin which are woven into the fabric of our social being; the innovator, in Santayana's phrase, never knows how near to the taproot of the tree he is hacking.

4. Prudence

Fourth, conservatives are guided by their principle of prudence. Burke agrees with Plato that in the statesman, prudence is chief among virtues. Any public measure ought to be judged by its probable long-run consequences, not merely by temporary advantage or popularity. Liberals and radicals, the conservative holds, are imprudent: for they dash at their objectives without giving much heed to the risk of new abuses worse than the evils they hope to sweep away. Human society being complex, remedies cannot be simple if they are to be effective. The conservative declares that he acts only after sufficient reflection, having weighed the consequences. Sudden and slashing reforms are perilous as sudden and slashing surgery. The march of providence is slow; it is the devil who always hurries.

5. Variety

Fifth, conservatives pay attention to the principle of variety. They feel affection for the proliferating intricacy of long-established social institutions and modes of life, as distinguished from the narrowing uniformity and deadening egalitarianism of radical systems. For the preservation of a healthy diversity in any civilization, there must survive orders and classes, differences in material condition, and many sorts of inequality. The only true forms of equality are equality in the Last Judgment and equality before a just court of law; all other attempts at leveling lead, at best, to social stagnation. Society longs for honest and able leadership; and if natural and institutional differences among people are destroyed, presently some tyrant or host of squalid oligarchs will create new forms of inequality. Similarly, conservatives uphold the institution of private property as productive of human variety: without private property, liberty is reduced and culture is impoverished.

6. Imperfection

Sixth, conservatives are chastened by their principle of imperfectibility. Human nature suffers irremediably from certain faults, the conservatives know. Man being imperfect, no perfect social order ever can be created. Because of human restlessness, mankind would grow rebellious under any utopian domination, and would break out once more in violent discontent—or else expire of boredom. To aim for utopia is to end in disaster, the conservative says: we are not made for perfect things. All that we reasonably can expect is a tolerably ordered, just, and free society, in which some evils, maladjustments, and suffering continue to lurk. By proper attention to prudent reform, we may preserve and improve this tolerable order. But if the old institutional and moral safeguards of a nation are forgotten, then the anarchic impulses in man break loose: “the ceremony of innocence is drowned.”

Such are six of the major premises of what Walter Bagehot, a century ago, called “reflective conservatism.” To have set down some principal convictions of conservative thinkers, in the fashion above, may be misleading: for conservative thought is not a body of immutable secular dogmas. Our purpose here has been broad description, not fixed definition. If one requires a single sentence—why, let it be said that for the conservative, politics is the art of the possible, not the art of the ideal.

Edmund Burke turned to first principles in politics only with reluctance, believing that “metaphysical” politicians let loose dreadful mischief by attempting to govern nations according to abstract notions. Conservatives have believed, following Burke, that general principles always must be tempered, in any particular circumstances, by what Burke called expedience, or prudence; for particular circumstances vary infinitely, and every nation must observe its own traditions and historical experience—which should take precedence over universal notions drawn up in some quiet study. Yet Burke did not abjure general ideas; he distinguished between “abstraction” (or a priori notions divorced from a nation’s history and necessities) and “principle” (or sound general ideas derived from a knowledge of human nature and of the past). Principles are necessary to a statesman, but they must be applied discreetly and with infinite caution to the workaday world. The preceding six conservative principles, therefore, are to be taken as a rough catalog of the general assumptions of conservatives, and not as a tidy system of doctrines for governing a state.

Russell Kirk (1918–1994) was one of the twentieth century’s foremost men of letters and one of the principal founders of the modern conservative movement.

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