

Political Ideologies
Contexts, Ideas, and Practices
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Background and Forms of Conservatism

Well, hello everyone, and welcome to our second topic in this series of lectures on Political Ideologies, this NPTEL ideologies course, for 2019-20. Last time, we did fascism, that was our first topic. Our second one is conservatism and we look at the subheadings for this topic first, which I hope will help you navigate, will give you a sense of where you are, as I talk through it, and will then cover the topics themselves.

So here are the subheadings, not all of them, there's more to come. We start with the introductory passage, we'll then do continental European conservatism, conservatism in East Asia, conservatism in the United States, we'll do United States neo-conservatism as well. And then we'll move on to the main themes in conservatism, that is tradition, an organic view of society, respect for authority and hierarchy, and the conservative view of human nature.

We'll then look at problems in conservatism, specifically, tradition and the free market. And we look at Indian conservatism, which is quite a complex phenomenon. We look at it in its some of its manifestations or main manifestations. So those are the sub headings for this topic. I'll now start on the topic itself.

Well, conservatism is, it is not obviously an ideology in the conventional sense of the term. It is more like an attitude of mind or an outlook on life. It also has considerable strengths, and that may explain or help explain its enduring character. It takes different forms in different cultures, and it can seem to offer grounded and pragmatic ways of responding to new problems and new challenges. Conservative outlooks and attitudes now almost certainly exist in all societies throughout history, because particular individuals may have been of a cautious temperament, or because institutions or customs have been difficult to change.

But an identifiable attitude or broad grouping of attitudes broadly makes up modern conservatism, and it has indeed been given much of its current form by events and processes which were decisive in shaping political modernity. So what were these decisive events and processes? One of the main ones was the French Revolution, which started on the 14th of July 1789. And another set of events were the industrial revolutions, which had already been in progress for some decades, particularly in Britain.

Now among the most accessible of statements on conservatism, or of conservatism, are those by various British thinkers, for example, Edmund Burke in the 18th century, and Michael Oakeshott, in the 20th century. Burke was both a politician and a writer, and he saw the French Revolution as a great threat to the established order in Europe, which it was, it was a threat.

But he also saw that the violence and the terror which followed it, among other things resulted from the revolutionary leaders' attempts to create radically new societies, which, according to Burke, were to be based on abstract and implicitly universal principles. For Burke, obvious examples of such principles were concepts such as liberty, equality and the like.

The rallying cry, the famous rallying cry of the French Revolution was *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, or in English, liberty, equality, fraternity. Another 18th century figure, around Burke's time, was the Scottish philosopher David Hume. He is often taken to be a conservative thinker, mainly as a result of his opposition to what has, what have been called, rationalist schools of philosophy.

Hume is somewhat different from Burke. He rejects reason as a guiding principle or a test for political systems; so does Burke, but in Hume's case, this has not so much to do with the effects of imposing vast rational systems on human societies. It has more to do with Hume's own theory of knowledge, or epistemology. Hume's central epistemological principle is that all knowledge is gained from sense experience, things we see, hear, taste, touch. Hume calls these impressions. And for him, all our ideas are only fainter copies of earlier sense-impressions.

That, according to Hume, means that truth or falsehood is a matter of agreement or disagreement between ideas, that is, copies of earlier impressions, or it can also mean a matter confined to agreement or otherwise with facts. If something cannot be settled, or decided, either by agreement between ideas or agreement on the facts, then that it can, as Hume himself says, never be an object of reason, may sound theoretical. But let us see the implications. Hume asserts equally strongly that, therefore reason, reason itself cannot serve to settle moral questions or moral disagreements or political disagreements.

Indeed, his whole philosophic project was to replace speculative philosophy with knowledge grounded solely in experience. And his great work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, has the subtitle, '*An attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects*'. One of Hume's major conclusions is that reason alone can never be, as he says, a motive to

any action. A little later he says, reason is an (())(06:54) lead to be the slave of the passions and can never pretend to be anything else.

This is certainly not a repudiation of reason. But it puts tight limits on the scope and power of reason. It also sets Hume apart, makes him rather different from other conservatives. Some of them say that if an institutional practice has withstood the test of time, then it is both natural and rational. Hume accepts that habituation or long familiarity with an institutional practice may lead us to see, see it as natural. But for him, reasoning and rationality have nothing to do with that. That is just custom and familiarity.

Hume does not make any sharp distinction between society and government; in a way neither does Burke. And he sees institutions as customs, as things that have developed in response to human needs. But for him institutions and customs, even if they are very ancient, are more than just the product of needs, that facts of our existence, and we need them. So they are desirable because they meet our needs. But at this point, the factual and the desirable coincide in our institutions, we have them because we need them.

Therefore, we also want them, the institutions which exist, as those which are useful. Hume himself says that justice may result from the motivation to preserve and protect self-interest. But what makes us approve of justice is sympathy with public interest. Well, that is a form of conservatism which is very different. Hume has his own form of it, of conservatism, and it is very different from, for example, Burke's version of it.

A second point is that Hume often adopted positions which we would probably call liberal today. He admired the Quakers, the Christian sect, but not for their religious principles. He himself was extremely unpopular with the religious authorities. He admired the Quakers for that refusal to compromise their principles. Another point here is that one of Hume's major works, the *History of England*, which was published in six volumes between 1754 and 1761. Well, this history of England was attacked by Tories, later the conservatives, and by Whigs, later the Liberal Party.

Well in the history, Hume speaks approvingly of the English document the Magna Carta, and of those principles in British government which protect liberty; the Magna Carta was taken to be a statement of the liberty of Parliament against the monarch. Hume even says, 'My own views of things are more conformable to Whig principles', but my representation of persons is closer to Tory prejudices. That is not the exact quotation, but that is what he says. So Hume is a conservative. He is certainly a complex and thoughtful one.

Well, what about more recent conservatives? In the 20th century, one of the main conservative thinkers writing in English was the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott; and he showed similar concerns and anxieties to those shown by Edmund Burke. In a famous paper called 'Rationalism in Politics', Oakeshott severely criticises what he calls rationalism. That is the practice of imposing planned schemes for society by applying some form of universal reasoning, which according to rationalism is shared by all humanity.

Well, Burke is explicit and Oakeshott is a little less explicit in cautioning us about the dangers of such impositions, that is, about the dangers of social transformation on the basis of abstract principles. Oakeshott's version of these abstract principles is something he calls technical knowledge; that may be closer to what we might call managerialism. And that is an ideology in its own right. We shall cover that in more detail in our tenth topic, technocracy and managerialism.

But Oakeshott's argument has a lot of strengths. There is a lot of argument evidence, I beg your pardon, there is a lot of evidence that could be used to support Oakeshott in his criticism of his version of rationalism. For example, in the first two decades after the war, many Western European countries tried to improve the lives of millions of people by building concrete states on the outskirts of cities, so that the beneficiaries did not have to continue living in what had often been very squalid slums before the war. Some of those, of course, had been destroyed by bombing in European cities during the war. And so it seemed a relatively obvious move to create new estates, using new materials, concrete in particular, outside the cities, so that they could have piped water and all the rest of it.

But the new estates themselves created their own problems. People were dislocated from familiar surroundings. They were moved to remote and unfamiliar areas, and often had to live in tower blocks, blocks of apartments instead of houses. Several countries abandoned the relevant policies in the 1950s. But by then a lot of social damage had been done in the form of generally persistent low level vandalism and crime, unsocial behaviour or anti-social behaviour, a sense of isolation on the part of the people who were moved to these blocks, and so on.

After that, some countries started improving people's neighbourhoods without moving or dislocating the people involved. A conservative might say that the problem here was the initial obsession with theory or a theory of social planning, and despite the enormous material improvements in the physical conditions of order in people's lives, almost all of those improvements that had resulted from well, the explicitly leading economic and political role of the social democratic state in industrial countries for 30 years after the war.

So according to thinkers like Oakeshott, it was the imposition of social planning, sometimes called social engineering, that had caused the problems. The improvements in people's lives, which were very obvious in the physical condition of their lives, were the result largely of social democratic states in industrial countries where the state was the main guarantor of the economy.

Well, it is likely that conservative opposition to the relocation schemes was partly informed by an ideological hostility to public provision of almost any kind. But we must remember here, it is very important for conservatism and to the major exemplars - Burke and Oakeshott do not oppose change, neither of them is against change. Burke was not rigidly opposed to change and he famously said, a state without the means of some change is without the means of concept, its conservation.

In fact, in Burke's own time, Britain had already undergone enormous changes. In 1688, a century or so earlier, the English revolution replaced an almost all powerful monarch with a largely ceremonial, a figurehead, monarch and the monarch's powers were taken by an almost all-powerful parliament, even though at that time, the new parliament was composed mainly of aristocrats, who had inherited their status and their wealth and their authority.

Secondly, in 1707, the Scottish and English Parliaments were both separately abolished by decisions made in each separate parliament, and they were replaced with a single Parliament based at Westminster in London. So, at this point, the union of Parliaments was completed, and Britain came under a single parliament.

The third major change was the Industrial Revolution. This started in the middle of the 18th century. It created an urban industrial work force, formerly an agricultural population, and it generated a new class, which acquired great wealth and power. This was the emerging class of industrial capitalists. They were a mercantile, a trading and financial bourgeoisie, whose main concerns were trade and finance. They were not, largely not, members of the landed aristocracy or the hereditary aristocracy or royalty. They were a mercantile class.

So, Burke was not opposed to change; he had seen serious and significant changes. But he wanted a cautious approach to change and a sceptical approach as well, so that we would not accept change hastily or wholesale, we would think about it - because if we did not, we were at risk of losing stability and other valuable aspects of our lives.

Similarly, Oakeshott sees a person he calls the rationalist as being unaware of the value of things we inherit; such a person this rationalist, has according to Oakeshott, I quote, no

aptitude for that close and detailed appreciation of what actually presents itself. That is, such a person has no appreciation of the cultivated enjoyment of a civilizational inheritance.

This kind of outlook has been called a distinctively English form of conservatism, that is, a form which is not against change, but which requires of us that we pay attention to what we already have, and to the value of its continuity and the values embodied in what we already have, by way of social and political institutions, processes, customs, and so on. In other words, pay attention to what we have, in case we throw away something valuable by discarding it without thinking.

Now that is rather different from continental European conservatism, the second form that we shall look at; conservatism in other countries has taken different forms from the English form. For a long time in France and Germany, conservatism was more rigid and authoritarian than it was in Britain, possibly because both countries retained strong monarchies, as did other countries in continental Europe until late into the 19th century. That form of authoritarian conservatism did not change substantially until after the Second World War.

After the Second World War, with the exception of Spain and Portugal, the great majority of the now reconstituted western European countries became, in effect social democracies, where the state was the main guarantor of the economy, not a director but a guarantor. Now, in these new post war states, after the Second World War, what had been authoritarian conservatism became more a form of Christian democracy. For example, a German political party, the Christian Democratic Union, is a strong example of that change, and so is the Italian Christian Democratic Party.

Broadly, these kinds of parties favour a kind of group orientated but paternalistic, a kind of old fashioned, paternalistic approach to political economy and this is more associated with Catholic social theory than with Protestant thinking. This in turn, implies that such conservatives broadly accept Keynesian-type economics, inherited from the economist and philosopher John Maynard Keynes.

And in such an economics the state acts to protect people against the worst effects of the free market. So the state is therefore involved in coordinating the larger groupings in civil society, that is, the sphere of private interests, and these groupings would include trade unions, churches, larger business corporations and associations and so on.

So, the state would be broadly a sort of coordinator and guarantor against the worst effects of the free market, but would do so in a fairly paternalistic manner without being a director of the economy. Well, there is another form, apart from that taken by conservatism in Europe,

in East Asia. The obvious example is Japan, where the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party, which is the Conservative Party there, has held office for most of the time since 1955. Japan was reconstituted as a democracy after the Second World War.

And this party, the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party, has held power for most the time since 1955. It is one of the few political parties outside Europe which shows similar features to its European counterparts. It favours free market economics, and favours what it sees as traditional Japanese values, such as duty, loyalty, and hierarchy; we'll meet those again when we look at the main ideas in conservatism.

What about the United States, where conservatism features very substantially in social and political discourse? Conservatism in the United States is very different from the other forms; the founding principles of the state show a strong liberal inheritance, for example in the rejection of inherited privilege. Another example is the explicit separation of powers and personnel between the main institutions of state, that is, the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary.

This means that if somebody is a member of an elected assembly, they cannot serve on a court bench. They cannot be a judge, which they used to be in the United Kingdom until quite recently. For example, in parliamentary systems we're familiar with this, in almost all parliamentary systems. The winning power in Parliament after an election is invited to form a government and therefore members of the government that is the cabinet are also members of parliament.

In the United States, the separation is very severe and, if I am not mistaken, the President may not even be allowed to set foot in Congress without invitation, without an invitation. So this is a very severe separation of powers; there appears to be no foreseeable aim to introduce, for example, inherited status or privilege as an organisation of social practice either. Well, and that is true even though the huge and increasing inequalities in today's American society mean that the children of the rich inherit very great advantages.

But these are, at least in theory, not official social advantages. So this is, these are two very significant differences from other forms of conservatism and US conservatism relies on a strong liberal separation between institutions of the state and the personnel in those institution, and secondly, in rejecting inherited privilege, even though in practice people do inherit opportunities that poor people do not have.

So, American conservatism is therefore, expressed in different ways. It usually takes the form of rigid and severe moral principles, such as bitter, entrenched opposition to abortion,

such as very strong support for the sanctity of the family, such as very deep hostility to anything even remotely related to socialism, such as trade unions, or other forms of work, workers organisation. Some of the attitudes involved have their origins in religion, in the culture and faith of the white Northern European Protestants who settled in North America in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Now, there are favourite targets for those with such attitudes, for example, unemployment benefits, and, of course, public health care provision, with the exception of the retired and military veterans; there is great hostility to public health care provision, though more recently, a version of it was introduced by President Barack Obama in 2009, on a model introduced by the republican governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney. It has gained a lot of subscribers, but this is still private provision. It is not public health care provision of a kind recognised, for example, through the Commonwealth, and particularly in the United Kingdom.

Now, one possible reason for the tone and the nature of American conservatism is that the United States has never had a mass labour movement or mass labour or social democratic parties of the kinds which are very common in western Scandinavia, and also in Australia, New Zealand, and various other parts of the world.

Now, the absence of mass labour parties is the case, even though historically, at one time in the 19th century, there were no fewer than 325 radical newspapers in the United States. Some of these were published by the United States Socialist Party and in the early 20th century, the trade union leader Eugene Debs, was a major political figure and stood in one of the presidential elections, I think, in 1912, I am not sure.

In Europe and Scandinavia, left movements, the Labour parties, have had a moderating effect on conservative parties' statements of position and also on conservative policies, which has limited scope for the policies of certain conservative governments over many decades. For example, it took the British Conservative Party a very long time to live down the fact that they voted against the National Health Service in 1946.

They did this repeatedly during the drafting of the legislation at the time. At least in public. the Conservatives are still committed to retaining the National Health Service, even though they continue to bring private providers into specific areas of NHS work, and that includes clinical work the direct provision of treatment services.

Well, in the United States, things are rather different. There has long been an association of conservative attitudes with various rigid or severe forms of Protestantism and this means

that United States conservatism is not confined to Republican voters and politicians. Conservative attitudes are often held by Democrat supporters, and in the Deep South white populations in all classes were really deeply embittered when Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, abolished slavery in 1865.

So they started voting Democrat, almost *en masse*. The republicans did not get the Southern Democrats' support again until the early 1980s, nearly 120 years later. Then in the 1980s, under Ronald Reagan's leadership, they resumed the very strident exposition of positions which they had earlier moderated during the New Deal period, which the direct democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt had started in 1933.

And since the 1980s, we are now looking at 40 years or so since then, the southern states have voted solidly Republican. Now the moral positions the republicans have taken in this period - the last four decades or so - are motivated by much more than just their moral opposition to the so-called 1960s permissiveness.

Now, that permissiveness would allow people to adopt, or at least to be much more explicit about a range of attitudes and practices which a conservative would consider immoral, in particular attitudes to soft drugs and to the explicit recognition and acceptance of sexual variety in preference and orientation.

Now, United States republicans see this as the spread of moral diversity with an implication of moral decline, and they consider this a threat to the cohesion and stability, the order of society. A general term for the many groups which hold these kinds of Republican attitudes is the New Christian Right and we shall encounter them again, in our ninth topic, which is on theocracy and fundamentalism.

Well, what about neo-conservatism? This gets a lot of talk in the analysis of United States political developments. It is a specific form of conservatism; neo-conservatism is a specific form that is said to have developed in the United States in the late 1960s and the 1970s. At that time, several political thinkers and politicians had grown uncomfortable with what they considered social excesses on the left, and they were very angry over the left's criticism of military spending by the state, because they feared that this would weaken the United States domestically and especially internationally, particularly as for conservative politicians and conservative followers at the time, the Soviet Union was the great ideological and military enemy. Now, this also means that neoconservatives reject, neoliberal and libertarian demands for a minimal state.

For them, the political community is the primary unit and most neoconservatives call for the United States to be militarily strong, with what they call a muscular foreign policy, and that includes a willingness to use force in other parts of the world to impose democracy if needed. United States neoconservative foreign policy also includes a willingness to act independently wWhen multilateral institutions such as the United States, I beg your pardon, multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, adopt policies that might harm US interests.

That means that the United States, according to neoconservatives, has to be prepared to go it alone when international bodies or multinational bodies do things they do not like, or that might harm what American neoconservatives consider might harm US interests. This willingness to act independently in the world requires a large and powerful military, and it requires substantial state funding - and neoconservatives consider that in order to be powerful and robust internationally, the United States also needs a reinvigoration of its own internal moral principles.

So what is their moral vision? It is our society in which I quote from Thompson (2011), I quote, in this kind of society, 'ordinary people work hard, reads the Bible, go to church, recite the Pledge of Allegiance, practice homespun virtues, sacrifice themselves to the common good, obey the commands of the government, fight wars and die for the state'. That is a short, terse summary of neoconservative United States attitudes.

This is a comprehensive or systematic political philosophy. And it is much more prescriptive than, for example, British conservatism. It is also very hostile to liberalism, which asserts individual freedom, including freedom and moral matters, and that will include sexual matters, and this neoconservatism is also very hostile to libertarianism, which goes much further than liberalism because it requires a really minimal state or no state, and it can look like an extreme form of anarchism we'll cover liberalism and anarchism in our fourth and six topics in this course.

Now, neoconservatism has been described as a consequence of [the work of a] 20th century political theorist called Leo Strauss. Critics have pointed to its many and series failures. For example, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was a disaster. United States troops are still based there, and are still it looks, it seems, in no position to pull out.

Another obvious failure is the catastrophic consequences of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This was based on the entirely fictitious claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, and that it was an immediate and present threat to the west, particularly certain

Western countries. But the conceptual commitments of neoconservatism are still very significant and very influential, particularly within the United States.

They include a focus on great leaders and they include, being prepared to neglect or override constitutional procedures. That is they favour a rule by a particular class, who might possess superior knowledge and superior judgement in comparison to ordinary people. Ordinary people under this theory are considered incapable of knowing their own best interests.

These kinds of principles have been combined with the sort of great-nation collective political collectivism. And as a result, neo-conservatism has been described as a form of soft American style fascism, even though people who use that kind of terminology do stress that neoconservatives are not fascists.

Now, Indian conservatism shows some similarities to US conservatism including neoconservatism; we shall look at it after we look at the main ideas in conservatism, particularly conservatism in its British forms, because these show similarities with Indian conservatism. So, we need to look at the main ideas first, and then see, we'll see that it is similar in certain ways to British conservatism and differs in significant ways as well.