

**Political Ideologies**  
**Contexts, Ideas, and Practices**  
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**Lecture 05**  
**Main ideas and Main problems in Conservatism**

What about the main ideas in conservatism? Tradition, an organic view of society, respect for hierarchy and authority, the conservative view of human nature, tradition and organic view of society, respect for hierarchy and authority; a conservative or the conservative view of human nature.

We'll start with tradition; conservative thinkers almost without exception, set great store by tradition. Traditional institutions and customs and practices, according to them, have withstood the test of time. They have faced challenges and they have survived or adapted to the challenges. This means that according to conservative thought, such institutions have retained their strengths and good qualities. Other aspects which were not so good have been abandoned or have withered away with the passage of time.

Furthermore, tradition, according to a conservative, helps us to know who we are. It gives us a sense of continuity and stability. It was taught to us by our forebears, and they, in turn, learning it from their own forebears, and we then teach it to our descendants, without needing grand theories or formulas to justify it. This also means we need to respect traditions by observing them, by carrying out the practices traditions require, and by altering them only in response to sufficiently serious problems or questions which arise in the everyday course of events.

So, it follows that traditions cannot be invented. It also follows that institutions cannot be designed or planned in great detail, because we cannot know in advance which of their features, which features of a tradition, will or will not stand the test of time. The Conservative attitude to tradition has been called a Darwinian outlook, because according to it, whatever is fit to survive will survive and is therefore worth maintaining and preserving. Conservatives therefore resist, generally resist, things like very substantial changes in the law, such as the introduction of the universe and franchise or significant widening of the grounds for divorce. These have often faced severe, strong resistance from conservatives.

Well, the second main feature of conservative thinking consists of two elements. One is an organic view of society. The other is respect for hierarchy and authority. So the conservative view of tradition is accompanied by a view of society as an organic whole. Those institutions

and customs which withstand the test of time are worth preserving. And they show that they serve a necessary purpose in society. Because they have survived, we probably needed them and we still need them. Examples would be the longer lasting religions or judicial systems or marriage and the family, or education systems, and so on.

According to conservative thought, such institutions have turned out to be necessary because they have endured for a long time and therefore they serve functions, rather as the organs of a function of a body serve the body. I'll repeat that. Institutions which have survived for a long time and endured for a long time are, we can conclude, necessary, because they serve functions in the same way as the organs of a living body, serve the body.

This in turn means that some institutions and practices are more important than others. Historically, hierarchy and authority seem to survive in all societies. And so for conservatism, they are both necessary and inevitable. For conservatives, society is naturally divided into classes.

Some people are born to rule in such classes; each generation teaches the next generation how to accept and use authority and power and privilege. Many conservative political parties show this clearly. For example, the British Conservative and Unionist Party - that is its actual title -the Conservative and Unionist Party had no leadership elections until 1965, because the conservative philosophy was that leaders would emerge naturally.

Indeed, the party did not even register itself as a political party until 1997. At the time it registered as a party, partly in response to changes in funding law on the funding of political parties, and these changes were introduced by the newly elected Labour government. But, yes, there have been changes in the internal structure of the Conservative Party. It is theoretically based on local associations. It was always just an assemblage of local associations even though it was called the Conservative Party.

But it still does not involve local branches significantly in policymaking. Most policy, if not all, in the Conservative Party is decided by the leader at other senior figures, and then declared at the party's main annual conference. Yet, the party famously relies on grassroots members for its election campaigns, particularly to get supporters out to vote during elections. That kind of local loyalty is a conservative strength.

What about the conservative view of human nature? Conservatism rejects grand theories, especially grand social or economic theories for the organisation of countries and societies

and so on. According to conservatism, humans - we - are flawed and imperfect beings, we're basically self-seeking.

So we cannot be made into perfect beings - that is not our nature. There is therefore no point in trying to plan or create perfect institutions or perfect people by creating institutions which shape us to be perfect. If we tried to do that, we would be acting on a misconception about human nature itself.

According to a conservative outlook, our tendency to selfishness or envy or malice, or worse, means that our institutions and societies will always reflect those features of human nature. They are flawed because we are flawed, and they cannot be perfected because we cannot be perfected.

Conservatism also sees us as needing possibly some kind of counterweight to our inherent imperfections, such as a sense of order and continuity, a sense of the familiar and the known, and therefore, attempts to create radically new societies or political systems are doomed before they start, because they destroy our continuity and remove any sense of constraints on our conduct.

The obvious examples for conservatives are the French Revolution and the terror which followed it, and the terror which followed the creation of the Soviet Union, particularly after the initial few years. And, of course, Nazi Germany, which we have already looked at in our topic on fascism. Now, this pessimistic view of human nature has several consequences for a conservative view of society; we fear the unfamiliar, we should therefore keep things as they are, including existing hierarchies.

Secondly, we are inherently selfish, we are even greedy, and therefore crime is an expression of the worst features of human nature. For conservative thinkers, crime is not a product of inequality or social disadvantage, and therefore, a conservative view of crime has it that the only response to crime is tough law with strict enforcement. Because as individuals who seek our own advancement, we are also responsible for our own actions.

Conservative policies around the world are consistently associated with tough statements on law and order, often irrespective of the success or failure of such policies. For example, creating new law, creates new offences. Something is now a crime which was not a crime before the law was created - and by definition that increases crime rates.

In addition, tough prison conditions may be electorally popular and consistent with a conservative outlook. But the evidence is that they do little to prevent those who serve

sentences from reoffending. Now the view of humans as inherently self-seeking also means that for conservatives, society is best organised by being left to itself.

This is consistent with the organic view of society. For a conservative the family is the basic unit of society. In conservative thinking individuals naturally seek to advance their own and their family's interests. And according to this view, any attempt to stop them doing that, or to redirect their efforts towards wider public goods or whatever, will always fail, because it is based on a misconception about humanity, about human nature.

For conservatives, the best and only feasible organisation of society is that which arises naturally from peoples own advancement of their own and their families interests. Some conservatives have even greatly embarrassed their own parties by saying this. For example, the British Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once said in an interview with the weekly magazine *Woman's Own* - this I quote. 'There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and their families, and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.' That was said in 1987.

This was a great shock to very large numbers of conservative voters, who overwhelmingly favour strict social norms and strict enforcement of such norms. The party's propagandists and publicity managers, not to mention Tory MPs, had to work very hard to moderate the political damage that their leader's comment had caused.

But Thatcher had in fact expressed a core principle of conservatism. That principle also has enormous consequences for political economy. It rules out large scale economic planning and regulation and it requires that we give people the maximum possible amount of economic freedom in order to advance their own interests.

So conservatism is committed to the free market and to the kind of society that results from the free market. It is also committed to letting failed businesses fail and, at least in theory, it rules out government refinancing or bailouts for businesses which fail. The idea is that good ideas and good businesses will succeed, and those which fail deserve to fail, because they are not good enough to withstand the test of the market.

So, in sum. conservatism involves avoiding grand theories of society, especially large scale attempts to plan societies or economies or to create perfect societies. Conservatism also involves a general caution about change, and that is particularly hasty or substantial change. It requires respect for tradition, hierarchy, and authority, and its political economy rests on a pessimistic sense of human nature.

This is not at all an implausible outlook on life, and some of its most powerful arguments use substantial evidence of the terrible brutality and caught catastrophic failures of visionary or ill-considered attempts to redesign society in the light of a grand theory, or attempts to plan and regulate whole societies. All the same, conservatism has its problems, and we need to identify the main ones.

So what are these? The two main sets of problems have to do with tradition and the free market. Now, Conservatism's respect for tradition can be a powerful asset in election campaigns, and voters often very much like it; they are reminded of who they are, reminded of what is valuable in a culture, and so on. But traditions are often much more complex than conservatism allows for.

To start with, many traditions are no more than practices which happens to be repeated and repeated often enough to start being regarded as traditions. Secondly, the origins of many traditions are much more modest than they seem to be. For example, in the British House of Commons, the time allocated to Prime Minister's questions has repeatedly changed.

There was no special timetabled place for it until the early 1880s. Today, it is half an hour starting at noon every Wednesday when parliament is in session. But in May 1997 - at that time, there was a split session of 15 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays - and the 30-minute session was introduced in May 1997.

And when that happened, a Conservative MP on one of BBC radio's main news broadcasts lamented this change, and he used terms so florid that a listener might have thought all of civilization had collapsed. But this Tory MP was totally deflated when the news anchor told him that the split sessions had themselves been introduced only in 1953, because the then Prime Minister Winston Churchill, himself a Conservative, was too frail to stand at the despatch box for half an hour at a time.

Now, it is often difficult for conservatives to justify tradition, precisely because traditions are often much more complex and unpredictable in their own origins and because many of them have much more modest origins than conservatives seem to be able to recognise or conservatism seems to recognise. Now conservatism does not encourage the detailed questioning or scrutiny of traditions, because that reluctance to question is part of the general conservative caution over theorising about society.

The problem here is that this approach offers us no way of deciding when to change or abandon a traditional practice or institution, because that would involve wider questions about the origins and the worth and the purpose of the tradition concerned. And that carries

the further risk that those traditions may turn out to be a great deal less exalted than conservatism requires them to be or imagines them to be.

Now that can have very serious consequences. The Conservative belief is that an institutional practice which endures is worth maintaining. But this could well imply, for example, that the institution of caste, which has endured for 2 millennia, if not longer, and has resisted countless challenges, is worth preserving, simply because it has endured for such a long time. We shall look at this kind of issue a little later, when we look at conservatism in its Indian forms. But what about the second main challenge to conservatism, that is the free market?

According to conservatism, people are self-seeking beings. Therefore, attempts to restrict or control the free market would go against the grain of human nature, and would be bound to fail. But if the operation of the market requires that we change or abolish established traditions or institutions, then we face a problem in conservative thought.

Conservatism requires an unrestricted market because we are self-seeking beings, or it considers us to be self-seeking beings - but any reasoning about whether or not to alter or abandon a tradition because the market requires it would mean reasoning about restrictions on the market and reasoning about traditions. And that is something that conservatism rejects.

Conservatism has no conceptual resources with which to resolve this problem. This supposedly pragmatic and practical outlook on life gives us no guidance on how to decide when to alter or when to abandon a tradition, and it gives us no advice on deciding how to respond to market-driven challenges.

There are other conceptual problems in conservatism and we need to note some of those. For example, conservatives are suspicious of grand theory or of society or human nature, but conservative thinking is itself based on a very substantial theory of human nature. And that is the idea that we humans are naturally self-seeking beings, and we are inherently flawed beings as well.

Secondly, the conservative reliance on piecemeal change carries the implication that human knowledge is inherently limited; it is provisional and it is temporary. This is itself a theory of knowledge an epistemology. It may sound like a very persuasive one, but it cannot accommodate the possibility that new discoveries say about very harmful foods - refined sugar might be one example, or very destructive global practices, such as our dependence on fossil fuels, could well require wholesale changes to entire our ways of life and whole

societies and whole even global economies. Conservatism may reject substantial theories, but it is founded on at least two very substantial theories.

Well, we need to conclude by looking at another form of conservatism. This is a particularly complex and indeed very interesting form. It is a form found in India. The title of this section is: 'Indian Conservatism'. But it is a complex phenomenon. Indian conservatism is rarely if ever adopted as a single position or a single set of positions. Instead, it is more often shown or expressed in a complex range of ways. For example, no political party in India has called itself conservative or put forward an explicitly conservative policy programme.

But several groups and some political parties have taken positions and stated policies which are in effect conservative and are best understood as conservative in the Indian context. Of course, there is no doubt that conservatism and conservative forces are very powerful and very deep in India. This is only to be expected in a society noted for its age and continuity, and also noted for the endurance and strength of its social structure and institutions.

Secondly, the major faiths in India, such as Hinduism, have often been doctrinally and structurally adaptable. But the pervasiveness of the caste system means that challenges to the caste system or even demands for the elevation of particular castes in the hierarchy have often been met with bitter resistance, including intimidation and murder, sometimes even mass murder. Many of the challenges have amounted to threats to an existing economic order, or even to symbols of - symbols that is, symbols of changes in the economic order, such as signs of greater prosperity among castes which were formerly held to occupy poorer positions in society, or restricted to occupations which made them poorer.

Now it is also the case that there have been strongly stated commitments to structural reform in India, or at least reform to create a social democratic economy, and there have been commitments to a great deal or else that would have transformed Indian society. And yet, the political party which has held office for the longest time, often with huge majorities, that is, the Indian National Congress, has documentedly never seriously challenged established interests, or much of the existing social order. That is very well documented.

Now, the Congress has at times tried to introduce significant reforms. But many of these have been fiercely resisted, even during the period of the party's greatest dominance. It took even Jawaharlal Nehru ten years to persuade parliament to pass four major acts on Hindu Family Law. The one, ending polygamy in Hinduism, was passed only in 1955.

Now, during those debates on those particular Hindu code bills, conservative opponents put forward three main arguments. The first was that if the new legislation would apply only to Hindus, it would violate constitutional concepts of equality before the law.

The second objection was that the government of the day, and by implication the Congress party as a whole, had no electoral mandate for such changes in the existing law. The third was that giving women land ownership rights as proposed in the new code, would fragment land holdings and would therefore make it impossible to implement progressive agricultural methods. In effect, conservatives were using social democratic or progressive language to assert a conservative end, namely the preservation of the status quo.

Now, the debates around the new laws were in any case largely confined to urban areas, and there was little or no will to implement them even though Parliament passed them. Nehru himself seems to imply that a form of passive conservatism exists in what has been called, I quote, the 'obscurantism and inertia of the people' - that's Nehru's own comment. Well, that means that conservatism in its Indian forms has tended to be resistive, and possibly even passive for long periods.

Furthermore, groups which might have been expected to state their conservatism explicitly have not done so. For example, at the time India attained independence in 1947, there were 561 princely states; very few of the rulers of these wanted to merge with the Indian Union. The leaders of many political parties, on the left and the right, strongly pressed those rulers to join the union. And ultimately, the central government wielded great power over the princely states in the form of privy purses - which were later abolished some decades later.

Central Government could, and often did, also offer inducements in the form of ambassadorships and various ceremonial appointments. The Indian princes themselves were divided, of course, with one cause, one cause of their divisions being status differences among themselves.

Now, the rulers of the princely states were certainly not the only ones aware of what an independent, democratic and soon-to-be republican India would mean. For example, some of the Congress leaders led powerful resistance to the very idea of the universal franchise, the idea that every citizen of India over the age of 21, now 18, would have the vote.

Many of the constituent assembly debates before independence showed that the Indian elites wanted - I quote 'to share the benefits of modernization without surrendering the social advantages they enjoyed'.

Now, conservative politicians in India are still different from their counterparts in other parts of the world, particularly in Europe, because they have had little apparent contact with the hereditary aristocracy. Now the hereditary aristocracy seem to have regarded conservative politicians, at least before and for some time after independence as - I quote - 'tradesmen who were not fit to rule'; that is the exact quotation.

Some parties which have had conservative policies have tried to attract the aristocracy. The Swatantra Party, which C. Rajagopalachari founded in 1959, partly in response to potential disturbance in fear of nationwide social economic change, was one such explicitly conservative party. But the party never did well in elections. And in 1997, it was incorporated into a, into a larger assemblage, the Janata party, and that in turn has been supplanted by the Bhartiya Janata party, the BJP.

Now, therefore, in India, conservatism is an obvious feature of society in all its forms. And conservative attitudes in all classes and communities are so deep and so powerful that almost no political party or policy seems to have much effect on them. That makes Indian conservatism less of a political movement than an attitude or outlook or a cast of mind.

And therefore, social change is almost automatically treated with caution or suspicion. If there is change, it seems to proceed locally and by very small steps with little or no change tolerated in the established economic structure and system. In effect, India's conservatives, or rather those other conservative cast of mind in India, are indeed active, but not as a single conservative grouping, and obviously, not as a single explicitly conservative party.

So, it follows that all parties and movements in India have conservative and even strongly conservative elements. And it follows that they can have, they can often have, significant effects on policy. This is true of the Congress party, then Jan Sangh, the most tightly organised right wing grouping the Jan Sangh, and it is also true of various groups who saw themselves as Gandhians.

Gandhians' own favourable view of harmony and consensus, and his favourable view of the virtues in traditional occupations gave many Indian conservatives an opportunity to proclaim themselves Gandhians while yet avoiding Gandhi's commitment to ending the caste system and the rigid hierarchies of Indian society.

Therefore, conservatism around the world, in its many forms, remains a difficult ideology to evaluate in simple terms. The Conservative reluctance to articulate specific theories or detailed political economic plans means that the central themes of conservatism, as we have

seen, often conflict with one another. Sometimes, those themes conflict to the point where conservatism looks completely incoherent; yet, as an outlook, conservatism endures in several forms, and it continues to be a powerful political force, not least when societies face uncertainty, or very rapid change.

Well, that completes my exposition of the main themes in conservatism. We shall go on to look at conservatives (*sic*) with the help of several current affairs materials. And we shall evaluate the main themes of conservatism and its main problems in the light of current affairs documents and current affairs analyses of both economic and social matters. That is for our next session, and we should stop there for the moment.