

What is Conservatism?

In these days mention is often made of “conservatism”, but its philosophical basis is seldom explored. Undoubtedly, one of the most profound writers on conservatism was Edmund Burke (1729–1797) and, in our own time, T. S. Eliot sought to describe its essential features in his insightful essay “The Literature of Politics”. In the following article, which is not political in intention, Titus Burckhardt traces the origin and development of conservatism in the history of Europe of the last few centuries, and explains the underlying philosophy that gives it its meaning and its strength.

Leaving aside any political overtones which the word may have, the conservative is someone who seeks to conserve. In order to say whether he is right or wrong, it should be enough to consider what it is he wishes to conserve. If the social forms he stands for—for it is always a case of social forms—are in conformity with man’s highest goal and correspond to man’s deepest needs, why shouldn’t they be as good as, or better than, anything novel that the passage of time may bring forth? To think in this way would be normal. But the man of today no longer thinks normally. Even when he does not automatically despise the past and look to technical progress for humanity’s every good, he usually has a prejudice against any conservative attitude, because, consciously or unconsciously, he is influenced by the materialistic thesis that all “conserving” is inimical to constantly changing life and so leads to stagnation.

The state of need in which, today, every community that has not kept up with “progress” finds itself, seems to confirm this thesis; but it is overlooked that this is not so much an explanation as a stimulus for even further development. That all must change is a modern dogma that seeks to make man subject to itself; and it is eagerly proclaimed, even by people who consider themselves to be believing Christians, that man himself is in the grip of change; that not only such feeling and thinking as may be influenced by our surroundings are subject to change, but also man’s very being. Man is said to be in the course of developing mentally and spiritually into a superman, and consequently, 20th century man is looked on as being a different creature from the man of earlier times. In all of this, one overlooks the truth, proclaimed by every religion, that man is man, and not merely an animal, because he has within him a spiritual center which is not subject to the flux of things. Without this center, which is the source of man’s capacity to make judge-

ments—and so may be called the spiritual organ that vehicles the sense of truth—we could not even recognize change in the surrounding world, for, as Aristotle said, those who declare everything, including truth, to be in a state of flux, contradict themselves: for, if everything is in flux, on what basis can they formulate a valid statement?

Is it necessary to say that the spiritual center of man is more than the psyche, subject as this is to instincts and impressions, and also more than rational thought? There is something in man that links him to the Eternal, and this is to be found precisely at the point where “the Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9) touches the level of the psycho-physical faculties.

If this immutable kernel in man cannot be directly grasped—any more than can the dimensionless center of a circle—the approaches to it can nevertheless be known: they are like the radii which run towards the center of a circle. These approaches constitute the permanent element in every spiritual tradition and, as guidelines both for action and for those social forms that are directed towards the center, they constitute the real basis of every truly conservative attitude. For the wish to conserve certain social forms only has meaning—and the forms themselves can only last—if they depend on the timeless center of the human condition.

In a culture which, from its very foundations (thanks to its sacred origin), is directed towards the spiritual center and thereby towards the eternal, the question of the value, or otherwise of the conservative attitude, does not arise; the very word for it is lacking. In a Christian society, one is Christian, more or less consciously and deliberately, in an Islamic society one is Muslim, in a Buddhist society Buddhist, and so on; otherwise, one does not belong to the respective community and is not a part of it, but stands outside it or is secretly inimical to it.

Such a culture lives from a spiritual strength that puts its stamp on all forms from the highest downwards, and in doing this, it is truly creative; at the same time it has need of conservational forces, without which the forms would soon disappear. It suffices that such a society be more or less integral and homogeneous, for faith, loyalty to tradition, and a conserving or conservative attitude mirror one another like concentric circles.

The conservative attitude only becomes problematical when the order of society, as in the modern West, is no longer determined by the eternal; the question then arises, in any given case, which frag-

ments or echoes of the erstwhile all-inclusive order are worth preserving. In each condition of society (one condition now following the other in ever more rapid succession) the original prototypes are reflected in some way or other. Even if the earlier structure is destroyed, individual elements of it are still effective; a new equilibrium—however dislocated and uncertain—is established after every break with the past. Certain central values are irretrievably lost; others, more peripheral to the original plan, come to the fore. In order that these may not also be lost, it may be better to preserve the existing equilibrium than to risk all in an uncertain attempt to renew the whole.

As soon as this choice presents itself, the word “conservative” makes its appearance—in Europe, it first received currency at the time of the Napoleonic wars—and the term remains saddled with the dilemma inherent in the choice itself. Every conservative is immediately suspected of seeking only to preserve his social privileges, however small these may be. And in this process, the question as to whether the object to be preserved is worth preserving goes by default. But why shouldn’t the personal advantage of this or that group coincide with what is right? And why shouldn’t particular social structures and duties be conducive to a certain intelligence?

That man seldom develops intelligence when the corresponding outward stimuli are lacking, is proved by the thinking of the average man of today: only very few—generally only those who in their youth experienced a fragment of the “old order”, or who chanced to visit a still traditional Oriental culture—can imagine how much happiness and inward peace a social order that is stratified according to natural vocations and spiritual functions can bring, not only to the ruling, but also to the laboring classes.

In no human society, however just it may be as a whole, are things perfect for every individual; but there is a sure proof as to whether an existing order does or does not offer happiness to the majority: this proof inheres in all those things which are made, not for some physical purpose, but with joy and devotion. A culture in which the arts are the exclusive preserve of a specially educated class—so that there is no longer any popular art or any universally understood artistic language—fails completely in this respect. The outward reward of a profession is the profit which its practice may secure; but its inner reward is that it should remind man of what, by nature and from God, he is, and in this respect it is not always the most successful occupations that are the happiest. To till the earth,

to pray for rain, to create something meaningful from raw material, to compensate the lack of some with the surplus of others, to rule, while being ready to sacrifice one's life for the ruled, to teach for the sake of truth—these, amongst others, are the inwardly privileged occupations. It may be asked whether, as a result of “progress”, they have been increased or diminished.

Many today will say that man has been brought to his proper measure, when, as a worker, he stands in front of a machine. But the true measure of man is that he should pray and bless, struggle and rule, build and create, sow and reap, serve and obey—all these things pertain to man.

When certain urban elements today demand that the priest should divest himself of the signs of his office and live as far as possible like other men, this merely proves that these groups no longer know what man fundamentally is; to perceive man in the priest means to recognize that priestly dignity corresponds infinitely more to original human nature than does the role of the “ordinary” man. Every theocentric culture knows a more or less explicit hierarchy of social classes or “castes”. This does not mean that it regards man as a mere part which finds its fulfillment only in the people as a whole; on the contrary, it means that human nature as such is far too rich for everyone at every moment to be able to realize all its various aspects. The perfect man is not the sum total, but the kernel or essence of all the various functions. If hierarchically structured societies were able to maintain themselves for millennia, this was not because of the passivity of men or the might of the rulers, but because such a social order corresponded to human nature.

There is a widespread error to the effect that the naturally conservative class is the bourgeoisie, which originally was identified with the culture of the cities, in which all the revolutions of the last five hundred years originated. Admittedly the bourgeoisie, especially in the aftermath of the French revolution, has played a conservative role, and has occasionally assumed some aristocratic ideals—not, however, without exploiting them and gradually falsifying them. There have always been, amongst the bourgeoisie, conservatives on the basis of intelligence, but from the start they have been in the minority.

The peasant is generally conservative; he is so, as it were, from experience, for he knows—but how many still know it?—that the life of nature depends on the constant self-renewal of an equilibrium of innumerable mutually interconnected forces, and that one

cannot alter any element of this equilibrium without dragging the whole along with it. Alter the course of a stream, and the flora of a whole area will be changed; eliminate an animal species, and another will be given immediate and overwhelming increase. The peasant does not believe that it will ever be possible to produce rain or shine at will.

It would be wrong to conclude from this that the conservative viewpoint is above all linked with sedentarism and man's attachment to the soil, since it has been demonstrated that no human collectivity is more conservative than the nomads. In all his constant wandering, the nomad is intent on preserving his heritage of language and custom; he consciously resists the erosion of time, for to be conservative means not to be passive.

This is a fundamentally aristocratic characteristic; in this the nomad resembles the noble, or, more exactly, the nobility of warrior-caste origin necessarily has much in common with the nomad. At the same time, however, the experience of a nobility that has not been spoiled by court and city life, but is still close to the land, resembles that of the peasant, with the difference that it comprises much wider territorial and human relationships. When the nobility, by heredity and education, is aware of the essential oneness of the powers of nature and the powers of the soul, it possesses a superiority that can hardly be acquired in any other way; and whoever is aware of a genuine superiority has the right to insist upon it, just as the master of any art has the right to prefer his own judgement to that of the unskilled.

It must be understood that the ascendancy of the aristocracy depends on both a natural and an ethical condition: the natural condition is that, within the same tribe or family, one can, in general terms, depend on the transmission by inheritance of certain qualities and capabilities; the ethical condition is expressed in the saying *noblesse oblige*: the higher the social rank—and its corresponding privilege—the greater the responsibility and the burden of duties; the lower the rank, the smaller the power and the fewer the duties, right down to the ethically unconcerned existence of passive people. If things are not always perfect, this is not principally because of the natural condition of heredity, for this is sufficient to guarantee indefinitely the homogeneous nature of a "caste"; what is much more uncertain is the accomplishment of the ethical law that demands a just combination of freedom and duty. There is no social system that excludes the misuse of power; and if there were, it would

not be human, since man can only be man if he simultaneously fulfills a natural and a spiritual law. The misuse of hereditary power therefore proves nothing against the law of nobility. On the contrary, the example alone of those few people, who, when deprived of hereditary privilege, did not therefore renounce their inherited responsibility, proves the ethical calling of the aristocracy.

When, in many countries, the aristocracy fell because of its own autocracy, this was not so much because it was autocratic towards the lower orders, but rather because it was autocratic towards the higher law of religion, which alone provided the aristocracy with its ethical basis, and moderated by mercy the right of the strong.

Since the fall, not merely of the hierarchic nature of society, but of almost all traditional forms, the consciously conservative man stands as it were in a vacuum. He stands alone in a world which, in its all opaque enslavement, boasts of being free, and, in all its crushing uniformity, boasts of being rich. It is screamed in his ears that humanity is continually developing upwards, that human nature, after developing for so and so many millions of years, has now undergone a decisive mutation, which will lead to its final victory over matter. The consciously conservative man stands alone amongst manifest drunks, is alone awake amongst sleep-walkers who take their dreams for reality. From understanding and experience he knows that man, with all his passion for novelty, has remained fundamentally the same, for good or ill; the fundamental questions in human life have always remained the same; the answers to them have always been known, and, to the extent that they can be expressed in words, have been handed down from one generation to the next. The consciously conservative man is concerned with this inheritance.

Since nearly all traditional forms in life are now destroyed, it is seldom vouchsafed to him to engage in a wholly useful and meaningful activity. But every loss spells gain: the disappearance of forms calls for a trial and a discernment; and the confusion in the surrounding world is a summons to turn, by-passing all accidents, to the essential.

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