Garnett, Mark. "Introduction." *Conservative Moments: Reading Conservative Texts*. Ed. Mark Garnett. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. xiii–xxii. Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350001565-006>>.

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INTRODUCTION

Mark Garnett

In a vivid phrase, the editors of another volume in this series have observed that ‘To write about a tradition of political thought as rich as liberalism is something like trying to carry water in a leaky bucket.’¹ While conceding the difficulty of encapsulating the complexity of the liberal tradition in an edited collection of this nature, anyone undertaking the same task in relation to conservatism can (hopefully) be forgiven for feeling a twinge of envy. A bucket of any kind would be a luxury: compared to the liberal tradition, conservatism seems more like a sieve.

It would not be too difficult to track down two or more academic commentators who have broadly similar understandings of the nature of conservatism. However, this level of agreement is most commonly found among those who are openly *hostile* towards the conservative tradition. More sympathetic observers will usually find ample grounds for disagreement. Indeed, it is not uncommon to encounter the view that the hunt for any distinctive conservative ‘tradition’ will prove fruitless. Michael Oakeshott was not alone in eschewing the idea that conservatism could be classed as an approach to governance which could be considered to share key characteristics with socialism, liberalism, and the rest. ‘Being Conservative’, in Oakeshott’s view, denoted a psychological state – a ‘disposition’ – rather than adherence to political ideas which could be boiled down into a set of precepts. Oakeshott’s ‘Conservative’ turns out to be an individual who is far too balanced to take an obsessive interest in politics. As the mischievous Oakeshott probably realized, he was setting a standard which would deny the label of ‘Conservative’ to the overwhelming majority of British politicians and political theorists since the word started to be used in the early nineteenth century. Certainly on Oakeshott’s evaluation, the great Liberal Party leader, Gladstone, who indulged in the non-political pastimes of chopping down trees and rescuing ‘fallen women’, exhibited more ‘conservative’ characteristics than his Conservative rival, Disraeli, whose extracurricular activities consisted chiefly of writing novels – about politics.

It could be argued that it would be easier to supply a satisfactory definition of conservatism if the subject had attracted more scholarly attention. More

likely, there would have been a larger number of individuals expressing disagreement, or talking at cross-purposes. Nevertheless, it certainly is the case that, particularly in the English-speaking world, conservatism has not been studied as much as one might reasonably expect, given the success of political movements which, rightly or wrongly, are designated as being 'conservative' in nature. John Stuart Mill thought it 'obvious and undeniable' that, even if Conservatives were not generally stupid, 'stupid persons are generally Conservative'. Maybe Mill was right, and conservatism is just intellectually unrewarding. But, in addition, many open-minded academics have regarded conservatism as antipathetic to their vocation. If the greatest wisdom lies in recognition of the value of things as they are, for all their imperfections, why should anyone develop his or her own critical faculties, or help youthful minds to become more questioning? Others, undoubtedly, simply support political parties which are strongly opposed to rivals who either accept the 'conservative' label or have it imposed on them. From this perspective, all too often, attempts to understand the nature of conservatism are equated with unthinking opposition to people who want to change the world for the better.

Whatever the reasons for relative scholarly neglect, the result has been a host of questions about conservatism which are more often addressed by critics than by those who wish to provide plausible answers. For example, is conservatism inherently authoritarian? Does it lend itself to populist politics (epitomized by the 'Tea Party' movement in the United States and the subsequent phenomenon of a Trump presidency)? Is it reasonable to equate conservatives with 'reactionaries', who seek to restore an illusory golden age? To what extent does conservatism depend on religious faith? Does it foster a pugnacious brand of nationalism? Not least, can it be characterized as a more or less cynical attempt to justify inequalities of various kinds? – or do conservatives, rightly understood, regard inequality as an inescapable facet of the human condition?²²

Perhaps the most intractable question relating to conservatism is whether it can be understood as a specific approach to politics, regardless of differences of time or place, or whether its meaning is context dependent? In other words, does 'conservatism' have an unchanging 'essence', or can it be susceptible to different interpretations depending on circumstances? The problem with the 'elastic' approach to 'conservatism' is that it reduces the value of the term as a tool of ideological analysis. At its least enlightening it can lead to apparent absurdities like the tendency in the 1980s to use the same word, 'conservative', in relation to free-market enthusiasts in the United States and the United Kingdom and the inflexible advocates of state control in the Soviet Union. Admittedly, this kind of muddle is more typical of media commentary than of academic analysis, but it undoubtedly affects the latter to some extent. Thus, for example, Leo Strauss (see Chapter 8) was educated in Europe, but his influence has been more significant in the United States. Strauss's main intellectual purpose was to disclose the intentions of

the authors of classical texts in political thought. However, he did draw a clear distinction between liberalism and conservatism, and it is evident that he was strongly antipathetic to the former. Even quite well-informed observers might not be surprised, on this basis, to learn that Strauss is sometimes identified as the spiritual founder of ‘neo-conservatism’ in the United States. However, the neo-conservatives under President George W. Bush favoured an ideological crusade on behalf of liberal democracy – an initiative which would have horrified Strauss. The main problem, one could argue, is that Strauss’s message was misunderstood by some of his self-styled disciples; but if some basic principles of conservatism could be agreed, there would be a much better chance of avoiding the kind of terminological confusion which presents opponents of liberalism as the inspiration for a group of neo-conservatives who were really radical liberals!

If dictionary definitions could resolve conflicts over the meaning of political labels, there would be no dispute about at least one feature of conservatism. The adjective ‘conservative’ denotes a desire to preserve existing conditions. It was first imported to the political context when the French writer François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848) founded the journal *Le Conservateur* in 1818. This provenance is not particularly helpful to an understanding of the ideology, since Chateaubriand’s views oscillated between ‘reactionary’ support for a return to the pre-Revolutionary monarchical regime, and a much more liberal outlook, particularly on issues like freedom of speech.

There is a much better case for identifying an earlier writer, Edmund Burke (1729–97), as the ‘founder’ of modern conservatism (see Chapter 5). Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) was not an attempt to turn back the clock, since it was composed before the French monarchy was overthrown. Rather, it could be read as an attempt to explain why the clock should be stopped from ticking. But even if Burke invited this interpretation by extolling the virtues of the French royal family – and seeming to favour a ‘reactionary’ turn, by evoking the far-distant ‘age of chivalry’ and convincing himself that life was good in mediaeval times – his tract included a defence of moderate reform, which was actually more consistent with his own activities as a middle-ranking politician.

As a playbook for politicians in late-eighteenth-century Europe (rather than a mere quarry of sparkling quotations) Burke’s *Reflections* can be distilled into the advice that although ‘existing conditions’ were unlikely to be perfect, any attempt to remedy them through radical measures was likely to end in something far worse than the original disease. This was because, contrary to the assumptions of French Revolutionary ideologues, human beings were creatures of emotion rather than reason, and this was most unlikely to change. This claim about the human condition was certainly not original to Burke – it could be detected at least as far back as Plato (see Chapter 1), more than three centuries before the birth of Christ. Despite the very different context, Plato had wrestled with the questions that interested Burke, and from a broadly similar perspective – they shared

an assumption that the ‘average’ human being was not equipped for rational decision-making on issues which concerned the community as a whole, and a corresponding concern that, in the interests of stability, political decisions should be left to those who were able to exercise considered judgement.

On this basis, we have a licence to carry our search for ‘conservative moments’ far beyond the controversy over the French Revolution, even if this condemns us to using a sieve rather than a leaky bucket. If conservatism can be defined very broadly as an aversion towards radical change, reflecting a belief in the imperfection of human nature, it could be identified across geographical as well as historical boundaries. Thus, the quest for ‘early’ conservative moments can encompass the Christian theologian St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) as well as the Islamic scholar and politician Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406: see Chapters 2 and 3). Augustine’s *The City of God against the Pagans* provides an answer of sorts to Plato; while the latter envisaged a solution to political problems in a ‘utopian’ state governed by experts who had been trained from birth to overlook any personal interests, Augustine enjoined his readers to accept the imperfections of life on earth in the expectation of better things to come. Despite his piety, Ibn Khaldun took a keen interest in worldly matters – indeed, in the range of his intellectual achievements he is reminiscent of Aristotle, while his political insights, as both an observer and a practitioner, anticipate Machiavelli. While his thought is particularly difficult to categorize in ideological terms, his focus on the disruptive effects on social solidarity of luxury, greed and urban living in general makes it profitable to examine his thought in a volume on conservatism.

It could be suggested that these early writers contributed some fertile hints rather than self-conscious ‘conservative moments’; and this remark could also be applied to David Hume (1771–76), who has often been characterized as a conservative but who did not live to witness the French Revolution, which polarized opinions in Europe. Hume did comment on the early stages of the American Revolutionary War (1775–83; see Chapter 4), in a way which provides suggestive comparisons with the reaction of Edmund Burke (who was sympathetic enough to make some observers believe that he would be equally supportive of subsequent developments in France). Certainly, if one accepts Oakeshott’s notion that ‘being Conservative’ is related to an individual’s ‘disposition’, the amiable Hume was a far better example than the volcanic Burke. Hume’s view that ‘Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions’ can be compared to Burke’s defence of ‘prejudice’ as a motive for action.

Hume’s writings were well known to key figures in the early history of the American Republic, such as James Madison and Alexander Hamilton (1775–1804). The latter’s ideological identity – like that of Hume himself – is warmly contested (see Chapter 6). However, the case for regarding Hamilton as a conservative seems particularly strong. After all, he was a direct participant in debates concerning the best form of government for his

own country, while Burke was reflecting on developments in a neighbouring state, of which he had imperfect knowledge. In addition, Burke's main purpose was to reassert a 'conservative' reading of the political upheavals which had affected Britain in the seventeenth century, against radicals who argued that those events were merely the first instalment in an unfinished campaign to transform Britain's monarchical system into a 'rational' republic. In contrast, once the American colonies rejected British rule, Hamilton exerted his influence to ensure that the final constitutional settlement would incorporate some elements of the British system, in the interests of political and social stability. However, in his remarkable multiple careers as soldier, lawyer and politician, Hamilton never undertook a theoretical work whose breadth could compare to the *Reflections*, which perhaps explains why his ideological allegiance is still contested.

Despite these ambiguities, it is reasonable to summarize the conservative case against the French Revolution as one which was antipathetic to principles which would now be recognized as *liberal* in nature. Contrasting views of human nature lay at the heart of this dispute – liberals believed that human beings were susceptible to improvement (even to 'perfection'), in keeping with the Enlightenment emphasis on the potential advantages which could arise from the cultivation of 'reason'. For their part, conservatives doubted whether humanity could ever 'progress' in real terms, since most people would always be swayed by 'passion' directed to one object or another, and (in spite of Plato's hopes) even the best educated individual would be prone to egregious errors. The work of the British poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834: see Chapter 7) is particularly instructive in this context.

Unlike Burke or Hamilton, Coleridge never aspired to a political career; but in his early days his enthusiasm for the ideas of the French Revolution inspired a dream of emigration to the United States, where he and his friends would establish a utopian community, in which (among other things) they would regard marriage as a token of affection which could be honoured or broken in accordance with changing moods. However, when Britain's security was threatened by the prospect of a French invasion via Ireland, Coleridge reassessed his position. Tacitly accepting Burke's charge that intellectuals had endangered their country by judging its practices against unrealizable standards, Coleridge argued that a loosely defined body of opinion-leaders – the 'clerisy' – should enhance political and social stability by illustrating the importance of shared cultural and institutional traditions. In other words, there is a good case for arguing that Coleridge underwent an ideological 'conversion' – from a broadly liberal outlook to a conservative viewpoint.

Coleridge (again unlike Burke in this respect) was highly sensitive to the possibility that technological change would prove a more potent threat to the conservative world view than the speculative writings of French ideologues. From this perspective, it could be argued that conservatism, as a practical

basis for political action, was beginning to lose its persuasive power at around the time of its most eloquent and systematic articulation. Wherever it took root, the process of industrialization had obvious potential to undermine the rural, 'organic' society whose continuance had been a crucial presupposition for Burke, as for earlier 'conservatives' like Ibn Khaldun. It was not *inevitable* that the rapid transition to a mechanical, urban-based populace would result in the replacement of traditional structures of authority by democratic institutions. As Daniel Ziblatt has argued, within Europe, the establishment of democratic governance depended crucially on the attitude of the old elites. In Britain, conservatives (most, but not all of whom supported the upper-case 'Conservative' Party, which adopted the name in 1834) took the path of minimal resistance, and by the 1860s the party had accepted the extension of political participation to the level of organizing itself for a fight for mass support against the Liberals.³ In France, and (especially) Germany, the acceptance of democracy was grudging at best. In every case, however, the process of acceptance marked a defeat for conservatism as a distinctive ideology. Formal equality in terms of civil rights, notably the ability to vote, could be accepted by conservatives on the understanding that the effects would be tempered (if not completely undermined) by the workings of an economic system in which the old elites retained their dominant position; but even this was eroded by the emerging liberal idea of 'meritocracy', against which hereditary privilege could find no persuasive arguments.

As a result, while the ideological identity of thinkers up to the mid-nineteenth century is open to dispute between commentators who take special interest in such matters, after that time the question of definition becomes fraught with unavoidable difficulties. In the United States, the problem seemed less onerous, since the stable, hierarchical order envisaged by Burke had never taken root – indeed, one could argue that the inhabitants of the thirteen colonies took up arms *against* the kind of sociopolitical settlement which Burke's writings extolled.

This suggests that 'conservatism', as a distinctive ideology, has always been alien to the American ethos, making it more noteworthy that conservative-minded politicians like Alexander Hamilton were able to negotiate a constitutional balance which could guard against 'the tyranny of the majority'. On the other hand, if conservatism is closely related to respect for cultural and political traditions, it seems possible to effect reconciliation between conservatism and liberalism in the unique US context. An American 'conservative', on this view, is someone who wants to preserve cultural and political traditions which have always been predominantly *liberal* in nature. The remaining problem is why contemporary Americans should wish to identify themselves as 'conservatives', rather than being content with the Republican party label. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that 'conservatism' emerged as a prominent element of debate in the United States after 1945 – that is, in the context of the Cold War. After the descent

of the 'Iron Curtain', a key consideration in US politics at the national level was whether or not one could be considered to be 'soft on Communism'. Hardliners (regardless of party) adopted the word 'conservative' to distinguish them from their soft-hearted 'liberal' contemporaries. The label appealed across party boundaries, and was also applied to southern Democrats who sought to defend their distinctive traditions.

By 1945, most of the self-styled 'conservatives' in Europe had reached a broadly similar position, albeit by a very different route. The war of 1914–18 had been a catastrophe for the 'Burkean' conservative position, in the supposedly 'victorious' states as well as on the losing side. The old hereditary elites had blundered into a 'total war' which discredited their political leadership, as well as denuding their ranks through the sacrifice of the next generation of aristocrats in profitless combat. Ironically, in Europe, the First World War had a marked tendency to foster a 'conservative' mindset, in that many individuals who had previously endorsed Enlightenment optimism had been forced to recognize the possibility that human 'progress' did not necessarily imply increased happiness. But since much of the adult population of Europe had been mobilized for war – and millions had died – it was now increasingly difficult to sustain the conservative argument against liberal democratic institutions. If conflict in the fields of Flanders meant the levelling of distinctions of rank (or indeed of merit) through the use of bullets, a more positive application of the same principle should be extended to ballots in the post-war order.

Thus, between 1918 and 1945, Europeans who rejected the premises of individualistic liberal rationalism were essentially faced with two choices. In the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution they could follow the US model, and argue in a style which tacitly accepted an overlap between liberalism and conservatism – that is, they could continue (as in the British case) to call themselves 'Conservative', even though in ideological terms they would have to operate within liberal institutions, and run for elected office on policy programmes which promised to provide 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. Alternatively, they could continue to hanker after an effectual antidote both to liberalism and communism. In some notorious cases (e.g. Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt), this brought them into close proximity (or worse) with movements like the German National Socialists. Once the Nazis had been defeated, conservatives in West Germany and other liberated countries could seek a safe haven in Christian Democracy (see Chapter 12). Parties which accepted this label offered the prospect of political and social stability after the tumultuous years since 1914, thanks to their anchorage in long-established religious communities and a consensual approach to industrial relations. The prominence of Christian Democrats in European politics coincided with a period of remarkable economic prosperity, and they were at the forefront of moves to end centuries of European conflict through economic and political union.

American leadership of the 'free world' after 1945 ensured a considerable degree of transatlantic terminological spillover, encouraging the tendency to dub vehement European anti-communists as 'conservatives', even if (as in the case of Christian Democrats) they had accepted liberal free-market principles. In France, at least, opponents of liberalism could rally around the war hero Charles de Gaulle, whose determination to lead a national revival was unconstrained by the usual ideological considerations, and who accepted support from all quarters (like the novelist André Malraux, who had previously regarded himself as a Marxist). De Gaulle's self-evident patriotism, and his embodiment of traditional French institutions (the state, the Catholic Church and the army) ensured that he could command considerable support from conservatives even as the country underwent the painful transition from a fading global power to a potent force within Europe (see Chapter 14).

In this respect, de Gaulle invites comparison with the other two 'practitioners' featured in this volume. It is possible to identify some similarities between the former soldier de Gaulle and the ex-actor Ronald Reagan (see Chapter 15), although it is unlikely that either of them would have felt flattered by the association. But, in their very different countries, both were capable of offering reassurance in an insecure environment. To his opponents on both sides of the Atlantic, Reagan was a doctrinaire economic liberal, who, while claiming to be patriotic, polarized his country along ideological lines. However, a 'conservative' reading of Reagan's career is possible if one takes account of the strongly liberal traditions of his country and his pragmatic recognition of the limits of political possibilities.

Margaret Thatcher, however, is a more contentious case (see Chapter 16). If conservative supporters of Ronald Reagan could argue that he was merely reaffirming at the national level ideas which had a long and uninterrupted history in numerous US states, Thatcher's critics could portray her as a relentless radical, a reactionary, or both. In the name of economic liberalism, she sought to 'roll back the state' from its previous interventionist economic role; but at the same time, she was prepared to use legislation in the hope of re-animating values which, on her own reckoning, had been undermined since the apogee of enterprise, prosperity and virtue in the Victorian era. This can be seen as an attempt to bring Britain into conformity with Reagan's vision for the United States – that is, to sweep away any obstacles to the free play of 'market forces' in the economic arena, while trying to reverse changes in moral thinking which had occurred over previous decades. The obvious problem for Thatcher was that in Britain (unlike the United States), this programme depended on the application of force against recalcitrant groups, particularly the trade unions. Thatcher's belief that such methods were compatible with a resolute defence of liberty in other respects is aptly summarized in the title of Andrew Gamble's classic account – *The Free Economy and the Strong State*.⁴ From the perspective of the present volume, a more damaging criticism of Thatcher was delivered by her erstwhile

supporter John Gray, who argued that no political party which embraced free-market liberalism could possibly be regarded as ‘conservative’, since its economic approach was a recipe for incessant instability; indeed, in the context of ‘globalization’, the application of such ideas would undermine the cultural and legal prerequisites of liberalism itself.⁵ However, Thatcher, like Reagan, can be portrayed as a politician who, in her first term of office at least, was more concerned with pragmatic ‘problem-solving’ than with a ‘war of ideas’.⁶

The notion that Reagan and Thatcher were ideological liberals who, consciously or not, identified with ‘conservatism’ only because the word conveyed connotations of stability which were electorally useful, seems to apply in reverse to post-war Japan, which has been governed for most of the period since 1945 by a party whose name translates as ‘Liberal Democrat’, but which is usually designated (especially in media reports) as ‘conservative’. In this instance, the ideological terminology looks even less helpful than usual, since the LDP has been a favoured vehicle for US influence over Japan, which enjoyed something akin to the West German ‘economic miracle’ thanks to the party’s liberal policies. ‘Japanese conservatism’, on this showing, implies an acceptance of the constitution imposed by the United States in 1947. Yet it would be at least equally plausible to identify ‘conservatism in Japan’ with *resistance* to that constitution, whose provisions entailed a radical change from pre-war practices and institutional arrangements (see Chapter 11).

Turkey also experienced a radical change after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. In some respects, Kemal Atatürk could be compared to General de Gaulle – a nationalist who would adopt any policy which promised to promote national revival. However, unlike de Gaulle, Atatürk showed contempt, rather than empathy, for his nation’s traditions; his desire to repress Islam, rather than trying to co-opt it into his enterprise, suggests an outlook which is impossible to square with any tenable definition of ‘conservatism’ (see Chapter 13). The secular regime maintained by Atatürk’s successors was resisted by a variety of forces, none of which could find a formula which would allow them to make headway under the terms of the constitution. This situation was transformed after 2001, with the formation of the Justice and Development Parti (AKP). This movement, drawing support from several existing Islamic parties, presented itself to the Turkish electorate and the world as a ‘conservative-democratic’ party. On closer inspection, its stated ideals were reminiscent of Christian Democratic parties within the European Union which Turkey, at the time, was anxious to join. As such, in ideological terms, it projected a mixture of conservatism (respect for tradition) and liberalism (acceptance of the free market, tempered by welfare provisions). At the time of writing (November 2017), one might conclude that the party’s principles were either inapplicable to the Turkish context or that they were proclaimed as part of a tactical ruse to disguise the real intention of restoring an Islamic state inspired by nostalgic memories of the Ottoman Empire.

Thus, three of the four geographical case studies included in this volume could be seen as complementary: European Christian Democracy, ‘conservatism in Japan’, and the AKP’s ‘conservative-democracy’ in Turkey reflect, in varying degrees, the consequences of defeat in the wars of the twentieth century. The exceptional case, among our case studies, is Russia (Chapter 10). While the political and cultural heritage of the United States is heavily interlaced with liberalism, Russia’s encounter with that ideology has been fleeting at best. Whatever its effect on Russian citizens, this experience has at least fostered a relatively continuous tradition of writing which could be described as authentically conservative – even if distinguished authors (like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn) were forced to express their views in exile during the Soviet era. This tradition is marked by a strong streak of fatalism, which might encourage an acceptance of President Putin’s regime as distinctively ‘conservative’, in the Russian context. Others, no doubt, will regard it as a blend of market liberalism and authoritarianism, and thus just one of many contemporary examples of a state which exhibits nothing more than a superficial semblance of stability.

The principle of selection for this volume – both in terms of subjects and contributors – could have been dictated by a desire to promote one particular understanding of conservatism. That approach, however, would have created a highly misleading impression of the academic discipline, as well as running the risk of distorting the subject matter. The alternative is to accept the disagreements over definitions and attributions, and to compile a volume which allows readers to make up their own minds.⁷ The subjects have been chosen from examples which are commonly supposed to display ‘conservative’ characteristics, and the contributors are recognized authorities, who were given a licence to develop their own arguments rather than being asked to adhere to any specific interpretation of conservatism. There has not even been an attempt to impose uniformity in the use of upper- or lower-case ‘c’ in relation to ‘conservatism’, since disagreement on this matter is merely a symptom of the ongoing dispute over definitions and thus an unfortunate occupational hazard.

The chapters can be read as free-standing contributions to the existing literature on the various thinkers and themes. Hopefully, though, most readers will tackle the book as a whole, and end up thinking that although a sieve seems a less promising receptacle than a leaky bucket, it can have its uses: like gold prospectors of the old school, they could find themselves in possession of some valuable nuggets.