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The Contradictions of Conservatism

This article is a study of the contradictions of conservatism. It shows that most modern writers since Oakeshott have defined conservatism in an abstract manner. Here I argue that their definition, although not wrong, is an incomplete definition which is only coherent because it is incomplete. It is only the first stage in understanding conservatism, which has to be understood also as a negation of rival ideologies and, further, as a political position which points to a tradition or truth outside itself and which can, in service of this tradition or truth, be radical. Since it is part of the standard definition of conservatism that it cannot be radical, this means conservatism, taken as a whole, contradicts itself.

Unless these things can somehow or other be seen in the right historical perspective and philosophical proportion, they are not worth seeing at all. (Chesterton 2001: 251).

CONSERVATISM HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT MANY TIMES IN THE LAST CENTURY OR so. But to mention only some of the works which have offered some sort of definition of conservatism, there are (in order of date of original publication):

Cecil's *Conservatism* (1912),
Mannheim's *Conservatism* (1925),
Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1954),
Oakeshott's essay 'On Being Conservative' (1956),
Huntington's essay 'Conservatism as an Ideology' (1957),
Hayek's essay 'Why I am Not a Conservative' (1960),
Kedourie's essay 'Conservatism and the Conservative Party' (1970),
O'Sullivan's *Conservatism* (1976),
Quinton's *Politics of Imperfection* (1978),
Cowling's introduction to *Conservative Essays* (1978),
Scruton's *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980),
Nisbet's *Conservatism* (1986),

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Stove's essay 'Why you Should be Conservative' (1988),
 Honderich's *Conservatism* (1991),
 Freeden's chapter 'Conservatism' in his *Ideologies and Political Theory*
 (1996) and
 O'Hara's *Conservatism* (2011).

The study of conservatism is well established and, of course, comes in various forms. Many historians, politicians and journalists have contributed to the literature on this subject. But in this article I would like to do something none of these writers has done: to offer a definition of conservatism in such a way that I can treat the contradictions of conservatism as internal to that definition. The characteristic modern definition of conservatism – explicitly first advocated by Oakeshott and commonly assumed by most writers since – is a coherent definition only because it is one which is partial and incomplete. I hope to indicate that a complete definition of conservatism is necessarily a contradictory one.

It may seem to us that any attempt to define conservatism is a mistake. We might say, with C.S. Lewis (1967: 19), that 'we must view all definitions with grave distrust' because almost all definitions are 'tactical definitions'. Or we might say, with T.S. Eliot (1963: 167), that 'when we define an experience, we substitute the definition for the experience, and then experience the definition.' If we distrust definition for either of these reasons, as we probably should, then we might conclude that conservatism can only be understood historically. And then we might say, like Kedourie, that conservatism is nothing other than what conservatives have done.

Conservatism . . . is the outcome of activity in normal circumstances and over a long period of the Conservative Party, an abridgement, and so to speak a codification of this activity. Conservatism follows and does not precede the existence of the Conservative Party. It is a natural attempt by a body with a long continuous existence to articulate and make intelligible to itself its own character. (Kedourie 1984: 38)

This is still the standard assumption of most historians of conservatism (see, for example, Green 2002, Dorey 2010). It is, ironically – since not all historians of conservatism are conservative – also the standard assumption of many conservative politicians.¹ If these historians are right, then conservatism can only be enacted practically, and then studied historically, not philosophically. But there are reasons to think that philosophical consideration is possible.

One is a general reason, about the nature of definition. It is difficult to avoid definition. Most historians simply conceal definitions – tactical or substitutive – behind their history. Some do not conceal them: Kedourie's account of conservatism was a definition. And a definition need not be something we begin with: on the contrary, it can be what Collingwood (1933: 96) called an extended definition, so that an entire book or an article such as this would consist 'from beginning to end of an attempt to expound the concept in a statement which may properly be described as an extended and reasoned definition'.

The other reason is specific, about the nature of conservatism. Kedourie's definition is inadequate. It would have been true, or truer, if he had said it of the British Tory Party, because the word 'Tory' had no meaning prior to its emergence as a name. But the word 'conservative', like the similar words 'liberal' and 'socialist', has a meaning which can be considered as if it is independent of the existence of any party – even if it is a meaning which is contested or contradictory, and a meaning which we can admit was brought to our attention contingently in history because of the emergence of a particular party. In principle, such a meaning can be defined. And here it will be defined in such a way that it does not exclude or ignore contradictions.

There are many obvious contradictions in conservatism. It is against change; and yet it accepts change. It is against ideology; and yet it is an ideology. It is against reaction; and yet it involves reaction. It advocates no ideals; and yet it advocates ideals. It is secular; but it is religious. It is in favour of tradition; but there is nothing in it which prevents it from eventually abandoning any tradition. All of these apparent contradictions will be encountered in the course of this article. But the argument here is that none of these contradictions is fundamental. The contradiction which *is* fundamental – as I shall argue in the third section of this article – is that conservatism cannot sanction revolution and yet has to sanction the order which follows revolution. And it is because a revolution is an historical event that this contradiction cannot be understood only in philosophical terms. It requires what Chesterton called historical perspective as well as philosophical proportion.

It is with philosophical proportion that the article begins, since it gives us the simplest definition of conservatism.

THE DEFINITION

Conservatism was not seen in philosophical proportion until the middle of the twentieth century. No one had stripped conservatism of historical perspective in order to see it in philosophical proportion until Oakeshott wrote his essay 'On Being Conservative' in 1956. Quinton (1978) later wrote that there have been for several centuries at least 'two traditions of conservative thought': one of Hooker, Hyde, Johnson, Burke, Coleridge and Newman, which was religious, and another of Halifax, Bolingbroke and Hume, which was secular. But the latter was not much of a tradition until Oakeshott made it seem like one. Definitions of conservatism before Oakeshott were like Kedourie's, historical or practical: unconcerned with the meaning of 'conservatism' as such – what it means in the abstract to be conservative – because concerned with the actual concerns of those called conservatives. It is for this reason that Russell Kirk and others could still define conservatism in religious terms as late as the middle of the twentieth century (Kirk 1954; Quinton 1978: 9). But Oakeshott made it clear that conservatism should be defined in secular terms, appealing to Hume, not Burke.² He also made it clear that conservatism is not a set of ideals, and that it is not to be confused with reaction.

He did this by abstracting conservatism from its association with party, state or church in order to establish something he thought more fundamental than any set of apparently conservative ideals or institutions, namely, the elements of what it is 'to be conservative'. According to Oakeshott, conservatism is a disposition – the disposition simply to hold onto whatever one has. To be conservative is to be concerned with the present, not the past or the future: with 'what is present rather than what was or what may be'. It is 'to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss' (Oakeshott 1991: 408).

What was original in Oakeshott was the suggestion that conservatism has nothing to do with reaction.³ The conservative cannot resist change by 'swimming against the tide', by becoming 'a faded, timid, nostalgic character, provoking pity as an outcast and contempt as a reactionary'. The conservative is reluctant to accept

change, but is not opposed to it. And the conservative is concerned not only with politics but with all or any situation in which change is considered. 'To be conservative is disclosed, not as prejudiced hostility to a "progressive" attitude' but 'as a disposition exclusively appropriate in a large and significant field of human activity' (Oakeshott 1991: 415). It is a matter of 'attachment' and 'affection'. It sees change as something to be suffered, and sees any attempt to introduce deliberate change as 'certain loss and possible gain'. And its particular virtue is therefore 'rational prudence' (Oakeshott 1991: 412). Of course, it is a disposition which is found in politics, where it sees that 'governing is a specific and limited activity' (Oakeshott 1991: 424). Since the conservative lacks 'a vision of another, different and better world', he assumes that 'the intimations of government are to be found in ritual, not in religion or philosophy; in the enjoyment of orderly and peaceable behaviour, not in the search for truth or perfection' (Oakeshott 1991: 428).

Oakeshott wanted to point to the fact that the conservative attempts to treat the world as something experienced in itself, and not a world to be altered in terms of abstractions taken from part of experience. This is why he distinguished tradition and ideology: where tradition is something we have, and where ideology is an abridgement of or an abstraction from what we have, a part rather than a whole, an ideal rather than an actuality. Almost all political ideals which were ideological were, he claimed, nothing other than fragments torn from a tradition. We have a world, which *is*, and – if we are not conservative – we counter to this an ideal, of a world which *ought to be*, but this world which ought be is nothing other than a sort of political synecdoche, making a part stand for the whole.

Oakeshott tended to suggest that conservatism had a long history. In 'On Being Conservative' he wrote that for 'five centuries' we have loved change: we have had a 'prejudice' in favour of the 'untried'. He characterized this prejudice as follows: 'Pieties are fleeting, loyalties evanescent, and the pace of change warns us against too deep attachments. We are willing to try anything once, regardless of the consequences' (Oakeshott 1991: 414). He never referred to the emergence of a consciously conservative thought in the nineteenth century. He spoke of Burke not as the founder of conservatism but as the inheritor of a much older traditional way of thinking. In Oakeshott, then, there was some recognition of the historical status of conservatism, but not much.

Oakeshott's characterization of conservatism has been extremely influential. It explains why conservatives are critical of change but not opposed to change as such. Even Burke (1999: 108), who was, to say the least, not an exponent of this abstract form of conservatism, wrote that 'a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation'.⁴ And this is now part of the standard definition of conservatism. It is directed towards the present, not the past, and so, as Quinton (1978: 20) puts it, is not 'immobilist'. Or, as Scruton (1984: 11) more elegantly phrases it, it is 'compatible with all manner of change, provided only that change is also continuity'. This sort of conservatism can appeal even to those who are inclined to be critical of conservative ideals, and so it of course appeals to conservatives, who see how effective the theory can be in making conservatism seem unobjectionable.⁵ Part of the subtlety of Oakeshott's characterization of conservatism was that it offered a definition of conservatism without offering an argument for it. But later, others suggested arguments for this sort of conservatism, of which the most important is the argument which can be put in two ways: objectively in terms of unforeseen consequences or subjectively in terms of human imperfection.

On the one hand, 'the oldest and best argument for conservatism', according to Stove (2003: 174), 'is the argument from the fact that our actions must always have unforeseen consequences,'

It does not follow, from something's being morally wrong, that it ought to be removed. It does not follow that we have any moral obligation to *try* to remove it. X might be wrong, yet every alternative to X may be as wrong as X is, or more wrong. It might be that even any attempt to remove X is as wrong as X is, or more so. It might be that every alternative to X, and any attempt to remove X, though not itself wrong, inevitably has effects which are as wrong as X, or worse. The inference fails yet again if (as most philosophers believe), 'ought' implies 'can'. For in that case there are at least some evils, namely the necessarily evils, which no one can have any obligation to remove. (Stove 2003: 171)

On the other hand, Quinton (1978: 16–17) has suggested that all of the characteristic attitudes of conservatism – the hostility to 'sudden, precipitate and, *a fortiori*, revolutionary change', the corresponding 'attachment to and reverence for, established customs and institutions', the sense that society is a 'unitary, natural growth' of humans related by customs and traditions, and the underlying scepticism about any sort of theoretical politics – all

derive from the doctrine of human imperfection.⁶ So that, as O'Sullivan (1976: 12) puts it, conservatism could be 'defined as a philosophy of imperfection'.

Whether one emphasizes the objective side or the subjective side of the difficulties involved in changing the world is unimportant. For the argument is always the same: if humans are not in control of the world, then it is right to suggest, not that change be resisted at all costs, but that the burden of proof is on he who proposes change. The conservative – he who suffers change – has to be convinced by whoever seeks change. And this is because the conservative conceives himself as existing in a world which already exists, a concrete world, not an abstract world – the world as it is, not a higher world. So conservatism involves, as Mannheim (1986: 88) puts it, 'clinging to what is immediate and *concrete* in a practical way', and expressing an 'aversion' to the 'possible' or the 'speculative'. And, in practice, as Huntington (1957: 459, n. 7) puts it – giving us the classic textbook definition – it is 'the ideological justification of actual social and political institutions'. This is the standard modern theory of conservatism, then: it recognizes human imperfection; it is critical of systematic change; it encourages only cautious change; and it depends on traditions, for the banal reason that – as McTaggart (1908: 10) observed when writing about time (not that one needs McTaggart's philosophical subtlety to understand this point) – causality flows, or appears to flow, from the past to the present and not from the future to the present. But it is not reactionary; it depends on traditions only in so far as traditions exist in the present. It is, above all, a consequence of a sense that what we have in the concrete is far greater in significance than what we might have in the abstract.

The argument here is that this is an incomplete conception of conservatism, even by its own standards. It is what Hegel would have called the 'concept' of conservatism, a conservatism in the abstract, a conservatism *in itself*. It is abstract because it is the inclination to hold onto what exists now, *whatever that is*. Nothing at all is specified. So 'actuality' – although it is, in any situation, a fact – is an abstraction. It has no content. It applies to any or every situation. And this seems inadequate, for conservatism is not simply something in itself, an independent disposition, applicable to any situation, postulating a quite empty infinity of possible situations. It exists within a context, a situation. And this context is – although, as we

shall see, it is *more* than this – one in which conservatism encounters rival or antagonistic points of view as equals.

COMPLICATING THE DEFINITION

It is necessary to note the irony involved in the abstract conception of a conservatism *in itself*. It is opposed to all ‘abridgement’ or ‘abstraction’ in politics, but it is itself an abstraction, shorn of all determination, shorn of all history, shorn of all situation.⁷ This is inadequate. So I suggest that instead of only considering conservatism as a solitary disposition, something we all possess, it should be considered as one doctrine or ideology among others. This further situation may still be relatively abstract, but it is an abstraction which has the merit of recognizing that the conservative is not – as he might, after reading Oakeshott, consider himself to be – a solitary sane man alone in a world in which change is proposed as if demonically, but in a world in which some men think they have good reason to propose change.

The simplest version of this situation is the one in which conservatives encounter progressives – where those who are against principled change encounter those who are for it. We could say, as Oakeshott did, that conservatives are for ‘tradition’ while progressives are for ‘ideology’. But since there is no reason not to admit that conservatism may be seen as one ideology among others, it seems preferable to say, as Huntington did, that conservatives have an ‘institutional’ ideology while progressives have an ‘ideational’ one. This situation is complicated when we then see that progressives divide according to their ideas. There are at least two major ideologies which have stood opposed to conservatism with their own distinctive determinacies, and which, along with conservatism, form a primary triad of ideologies – liberalism and socialism.⁸ It is in this context that we cannot be satisfied with an abstract conservatism. Conservatism *in itself* is an abstraction, a conservatism considered in its own terms; but conservatism nonetheless also exists within the cut and thrust of actual politics. It exists as one ideology among other ideologies. It is, moreover, opposed to them.

The reason why conservatism is opposed to other ideologies can be explained in terms of Oakeshott’s suggestion, already quoted, that conservatives lack ‘a vision of another, different and better world’. If this is so, then it could be argued that conservatives tend to

live in a one-world system, where this world supplies its own criterion for change, whereas liberals, socialists and the rest live in a two-world system, where another world – an ideal world of normative principles or perhaps an irrupting world of revolutionary praxis – supplies us with what conservatives would call an ‘abstract’ critique of the world we live in. It is the lack of such a second world in conservatism – a lack of ideals – which encourages Honderich (1991: 238) to suppose that conservatism is a cover for nothing more than selfishness. Of course, this is a trivial objection. For, as Quinton (1978: 302) observes, ‘If conservatism appeals to those who want to hold onto what they have got, socialism appeals to those who want to deprive them of it by force of law, [and] liberal[ism] to those who want to acquire it by unrestricted competition’. Although it does not mean that it is without some truth.

Some commentators lay great emphasis on the apparent contradiction by which conservatism is opposed to ideologies and yet is an ideology itself. This is not a problem when we see that the conservative would rather not be involved in politics, but becomes involved, against his original will. The conservative does not want to argue with liberals and socialists: he does not see the necessity. He does not even want to call himself ‘conservative’. It is not until he is compelled to become involved in politics out of a sense that socialists and liberals have understood it incorrectly that he becomes conscious that he is conservative.⁹ This is why Huntington (1957) says that conservatism is ‘situational’ or ‘positional’ or ‘institutional’. It is motivated by the recognition that ideas threaten established institutions. So conservatism is silent until it is forced by the exponents of ‘ideational ideologies’ to respond. Then – at this stage – it is ‘the articulate, systematic, theoretical resistance to change’ (Huntington 1957: 461). And here we see why conservatism is reaction: it is a reaction to the action of others, although in reaction it is no longer passive but becomes active, develops policies as responses to the policies of the others and becomes what we call an ideology.

The corollary of the fact that conservatism is reactive in relation to its rival ideologies is that it is, as Utley puts it, ‘concessionary’. Ever since Peel, conservatism has involved the view ‘that the highest virtue in politics is to resist change until change becomes inevitable, and then to concede to it with as little fuss and as much obeisance to tradition as possible’ (Utley 1989: 87). The obvious problem with this is that it is fatalistic. ‘Peel assumed’, Utley tells us, ‘that his

political opponents represented the future. Their excesses must be resisted, but most of their causes in the end would prevail and the business of the Conservative Party was to make the transition as smooth as possible.' Here conservatism is not only a matter of prudence; it seems to be a matter of pessimism, the 'rational pessimism' which, according to Cowling (1978: 2), is 'the strongest justification for a conservative politics'. In the situation in which it encounters rival ideologies, conservatism resists their ideals, and then finally takes them over. So conservatism has no original content: it is simply inertia in rational form. As Mannheim (1986: 80) puts it, 'conservatism represents the *vis inertiae* of society, that is, a passive force, which has in itself no impulse to action'. It refuses to accept rational ideals as rational until they have become established in actuality, at which point it accepts them, whatever they are. This is why Freedman (1996: 333) is right to say that 'to ransack conservatism for substantial core concepts' such as equality or liberty or even more likely ones, such as *travail, famille, patrie*, 'is to look in the wrong place'.

In fact, conservatism – in relation to other ideologies – is not only situational, reactive, concessionary and inertial. It is empty. If the conservatism of the first stage is the inclination to have and hold, then at this second stage it is the negation of all attempts to change what is had and held for the sake of an idea. It is a *via negationis*. This means that it is impossible to say what conservatism conserves. In fact, it can conserve *anything*. As Harbour puts it:

All too frequently one hears Conservatism defined solely in terms of support for the status quo and opposition to fundamental changes in a social system. This view would tie Conservatives to the basic forms of any social system regardless of the contents. This perception is even encouraged by those Conservatives, like Oakeshott, who try to define Conservatism in terms of sentiments in favour of that which is. But this view, which deals with only one aspect of Conservative thought, leads to much confusion, and leaves important questions unanswered. (Harbour 1982: 1)

It would, for a start, commit conservatives to conserving liberalism, socialism, communism, fascism – *anything*, if these were established traditions. This is clearly not very admirable; indeed, almost all modern political thinkers assume it is so morally appalling or intellectually loose that it is not even worth arguing against.

At this stage, the judgement might be even harsher because where conservatism is reactive it is conscious of itself in a way that an abstract conservatism need not be. All an abstract conservatism need

be conscious of is its situation, whatever that is – and it could be anything. But, at this stage, a conservative cannot simply use the actuality of what is a continual criterion to criticize proposals for change, as if this is an adequate response. Mannheim wrote:

the conservative only thinks systematically when he is moved to reaction, perhaps because he is forced to set up a system counter to that of the progressive, or because the process has progressed to a point where he has lost touch with the present state of things, so that he is compelled to intervene in order to reverse the process of history. (Mannheim 1986: 88–9)

If conservatism were only directed towards the present, as Oakeshott suggested, then only the actuality we experience now in the present moment could offer a criterion for judgement. No other moment – for instance, a moment which was present but now is past – could offer such a criterion, because that would be to employ as a criterion for action an abstraction which is torn from actuality, and not actuality itself. Oakeshott wanted to exclude this: his conservatism was not only abstract but ideally unconscious.

But, as Mannheim saw, conservatism is conscious. When it encounters the ideals of other ideologies such as socialism and liberalism, it opposes to those ideals other ideals. But these ideals are actually not ideals in the same sense at all. The ideals of the liberal or socialist are rational, or argued, ideals. But the ideals of the conservative are the shadows of ideals: negative ideals which are intended to point back to the actuality which the rational, or argued, ideals will damage or destroy. One example of such a shadow ideal is ‘inequality’. Kymlicka (1990: 4) once wrote that ‘every plausible political theory has the same ultimate value, which is equality’. This is nonsense, but in its confidence it expresses exactly why conservatives find it difficult to use the language of ideals. For if liberals and socialists advocate some sort of equality – legal or economic – then what is left to conservatives? Cowling’s answer (1978: 9) was that ‘what they want is the sort of freedom that will maintain existing inequalities or restore lost ones’.¹⁰ Now, ‘inequality’ is clearly not an ideal in the same sense as equality is. It is the shadow of an ideal. It is an abstraction, this ‘inequality’, which is meant to point to the actual world in which inequalities are inevitable. Cowling (1978: 10) saw the difficulty of defending this as an ideal, even though many people, even among the poor, ‘recognize that inequalities exist and, in some obscure sense, assume that they

ought to'.¹¹ So the question was how conservatives, 'in pursuit of the inequalities that they want, but do not wish to say they want', could draw out the 'poetry and dignity' in other ideals which would enable them to maintain 'a scepticism about political improvement, an hostility towards political priggishness and a commitment to whatever socio-political structure it has been necessary to defend at any particular time?' (Cowling 1978: 15–18). The answer was that a conspiratorial politics was required in which some ideals would be used as counters to minimize the damage caused by other ideals.

A reactive conservatism, then, taken by itself, is simply abstract conservatism brought to consciousness by being situated in an argument. It is conscious, and even conspiratorial, in deploying ideals it would otherwise distrust in order to conserve an actuality which is threatened by ideals. But it still has no content, other than the content it is lent by the absolutely contingent nature of whatever 'actuality' is at any moment in time *or* by the absolutely contingent nature of whatever it is conservatives do. And that content is only ordered by the language of liberalism, socialism etc., which the conservative attempts to exploit in order to rebut the ideals of liberals, socialists etc., before eventually, if the rebuttal fails, accepting them. At which point, conservatism seems not only concessionary and conspiratorial, but also corrupt.

CONTRADICTING THE DEFINITION

This is as far as the modern theories of conservatism usually get in complicating and confounding the definition of an abstract conservatism. But there is further to go. For we can not only see what conservatism is in any situation, and what conservatism is when we place it in the situation where it encounters rival ideologies; we can also see what conservatism is when we place it in the actual historical situation from which it emerged and in which it continues to exist.

The author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* would not have called himself a conservative. But he was certainly an important figure in the emergence of the historical consciousness that something is lost in revolution. As Cowling puts it,

Burke's system was an attack, before they had prevailed, on almost all the assumptions which have dominated political discussion in the modern world.

The attack was made from mixed motives in a political context. It is not for that reason less useful in reminding us that what has been held up for conservation by even Conservative thinkers since has been the Jacobinism which Burke attacked, and that Burke's importance lies in the fact that he provided a massive indictment of the regime of the future before it had been established. (Cowling 2001: 34)

Burke indicted the entire post-revolutionary order – the order which conservatives came to accept. This is why Oakeshott appealed to Hume, not Burke. And it brings us to what I would like to suggest is the fundamental contradiction of conservatism, which is that conservatism cannot sanction its own constitutive event.

According to Oakeshott's theory of conservatism, change can only be sanctioned by a conservative if, as Scruton put it, change is continuity. But a problem arises if change is not continuity but discontinuity. If there is a revolution, such as the one Burke wrote about, a change in the entire order, then can it be accepted by a conservative schooled in politics of concession? The obvious answer is 'No', and here Oakeshott would find himself in agreement with Burke. But the problem is not about the attitude of the conservative to a revolution before it happens (where Burke and Oakeshott would agree): the problem is about the reaction of the conservative to a revolution after it has happened. And here Oakeshott and Burke would disagree. The conservative should, if he agrees with Burke, reject the change, and continue to reject it – as if the date is always 1790. But then he will become a reactionary, which is explicitly barred by Oakeshott's definition. So a conservative committed to an abstract conservatism is in the strange position of having to accept what he rejects. He rejects revolution: it happens anyway: he subsequently accepts it.

This contradiction is beyond any simple philosophical resolution. It can only be understood as a historical problem. Conservatism was a consequence of an event which it could not itself have accepted. Yet conservatism is constituted by the acceptance of it. The relevant English revolution, for instance, occurred between 1828 and 1832, when the *ancien régime* – the regime which had existed since at least 1688, possibly 1530, or even 531 – was fundamentally changed by the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, by Catholic Emancipation, and by the Reform Act. An earlier revolution – the one Burke admired – had adjusted the relation between Crown and Parliament. But this was the revolution which put all of the traditions of England

to the question. As Seeley (1896: 146) saw, 50 years later, this revolution established that henceforth the kingdom would be a 'Legislation-State'. And its legislation would be judged politically in terms of liberalism, socialism and conservatism.

The word 'conservative' became a significant political term during the enactment of this revolutionary legislation. It was first used by the *Quarterly Review* in January 1830 and was soon recognized to be 'the fashionable term, the new-fangled phrase', as Daniel O'Connell put it, for the 'Tory ascendancy' (Stewart 1978: 69). But whereas the word 'Tory' stood for those who defended the old constitution, the word 'conservative' suggested something different: it stood for those who accepted that a revolution had occurred, that any attempt to reverse it would cause the sort of suffering they wanted to prevent, and that any successive changes to the constitution should be considered in full before enactment. This was the conservatism of Peel – and Hume and Oakeshott – not that of Burke.

Conservatives, then, accepted the post-revolutionary legislative necessity as completely as those who favoured revolution did. But there was a difference. All three of the ideologies referred to so far – liberalism, socialism, conservatism – are post-revolutionary ideologies. But whereas liberalism and socialism do not depend on knowledge of what existed before revolution, conservatism does. Liberalism and socialism both suppose that a revolution is a *terminus a quo*, a point of origin, so that everything which happened before this moment is simply without characteristics – a murderous and meaningless history of the world before humanity recognized that it had to establish the ideals of *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité* across the world. Conservatism is different: it has to remember what happened before the revolutionary moment. What happened before is extremely important, not just causally but also conscientiously, for the conservative's view about what humans can ever hope to achieve in this world. Conservatives are therefore in some sense committed to recalling and perhaps even restoring elements of the pre-revolutionary order. Otherwise, they have no reason to be conservative – except perhaps Honderich's selfishness.

Anyone who has only an abstract conservatism – anyone who has what Oakeshott called the 'disposition' to be conservative – will not be concerned with this older order. But then there is no institution or tradition which such a conservative could not cease to conserve – if it were changed – or come to conserve – if it were established.

Such a conservative would not care about (to offer some eighteenth-century examples) Cobbett's bacon, bread and beer, Hogarth's roast beef or Burke's cattle 'reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak' (Burke 1999: 180). But any conservatism which is complete rather than contingent or concessionary sees that a revolution happened, that something was lost, and that conservatism itself is only a relative attempt to make the best of a bad situation.

So what is lost in revolution which could be restored? Surely not only bacon or beef. If this is a philosophical question, the answer must be a formal or wholly abstract one: the *idea* of something which lent meaning to existence in some fundamental way but no longer does. It could be, for instance, an important tradition, one which conditioned our lives in some important way, one which concerned law, or government, or religion. If the question is a historical question, about what was lost and could be restored, then the answer is more definite. The events of 1828 to 1832 were a revolution – or part of a longer revolution – because they altered the British constitution so that the balance between executive, legislature and judiciary was now resolved so that the House of Commons became *de facto* sovereign (Kedourie 1984: 45). This was important, but since king remained king, and lords remained lords, there was continuity of a sort. So perhaps even more significant – as Newman and his Oxford friends saw – was that the Church of England, which had formerly been considered the same as the kingdom, was now distinguished from it, although, again, not entirely (Clark 2000). Tories opposed these changes. But Conservatives *both* opposed the changes *and* accepted them. Conservatism in England is a consequence of this fundamental contradiction.

This is why conservatism sometimes seems to be something like love, a subject about which everything is true. 'Conservatism', wrote Auerbach (1959: 2), 'is an illusion which never has been and never will be able to translate its own ideas into reality'. This may be so. Conservatism, unlike liberalism and socialism, does not possess obvious ideals. It adopts ideals as counters to the ideals of its rivals. But it does nonetheless have an ideal – or 'illusion'. This is not, as Oakeshott thought, or not only, the ideal of an enjoyed actuality but the ideal of a lost actuality. Whether this should be recalled or restored is never clear. But conservatism has an absolute ideal in relation to which conservatism itself in practice has only a relative status. If it is conscious of this fact, it is reactionary. If it is not

conscious of this, it is not. A conservative is, of course, a defender of the traditions he has, the traditions of conservatism – whatever they are (usually traditions of concession). But more importantly, he is also the defender of the traditions he does not have, and, perhaps even more important, of the truth which those traditions were intended to conserve.¹² But yet again there is the question, *what* traditions, *what* truth?

The most likely historical answer, it seems to me, is not to be found in a set of abstractions like the ‘Roman trinity’ of tradition, authority and religion which Arendt (1990: 117) thought had been lost in the revolution. It is to be found instead in the entity or institution or embodiment of an idea which united the elements of that trinity and which enabled men to accept the sorts of hierarchies, inequalities and injustices which conservatives still consider inevitable. This is sacral monarchy – the sort of monarchy where (as in ancient Rome) the *imperator* is divine, or where (as in medieval France) the king is *Rex Christianissimus*, or where (as in modern England) the Queen is the Defender of the Faith. Sacral monarchy is not only antique but absolutely authoritative. It is not Buber’s ‘kingship of God’ of the Old Testament (when Gideon refused to become King of the Israelites on the grounds that God was already King); it is nothing to do with Jesus’s ‘Kingdom of God’ or Kant’s ‘Kingdom of Ends’. It is the attempt to establish a kingship of God in *this* world (Buber 1967). It is the relative ideal of the Josiah who knows the Law, or of the Seleucid who is *nomos empsychos*. And so it is not a mere ideal, but the actuality of an ideal, in the form of a person. For Foucault (1980: 94), this is ‘the central personage in the legal edifice of the West’. It is what Burke thought the Jacobins had destroyed in the French Revolution. It is what a revolution comes to destroy. A revolution, of course, may happen over centuries, or in days: it may still be happening. But conservatives are, if this is right, and whether they know it or not, committed to conserving or restoring sacral monarchy. Such a monarchy is neither political, nor religious, but political *and* religious; everything else in conservatism follows from its establishment.

Only one recent commentator, as far as I know, has observed that the doctrine of human imperfection, which Quinton and O’Sullivan made the fundamental doctrine of conservatism, is incomplete without a doctrine of perfection.¹³ But it is not only a doctrine of perfection which is required to complete conservatism – not only

a *logos* – but the establishment, or image of the establishment, of an order which recognizes, somehow embodies the recognition of, and somehow enacts our response to imperfection in the world in terms of a vision of perfection. A word made flesh. Without this, conservatism is incomplete, unconscious, criterionless – something which, lacking a criterion for anything, can only point to ‘what is’, as if it supplies its own criterion. Even the more substantial conservatism which is conscious, reactive and concessionary is empty until the conservative sees that there *is* an ideal order – which somehow gestures beyond momentariness towards historical continuity, and gestures even beyond continuity to eternity. And this order, in *our* history, is the one associated with sacral monarchy, a monarchy which points to the sacred, and especially what is true about what should be held sacred – in other words, to divine truth. This is why for the last few centuries most conservatives have thought conservatism *is*, contra Oakeshott, somehow fundamentally concerned with religion as well as politics. And it is why we can say that for the conservative politics *is* concerned with truth.¹⁴

Conservatism at this stage is not only reactionary, in the sense of reacting, returning, restoring: it *is* radical, and capable of revolution, of changing an entire order because something is (or was – tenses are irrelevant here) true. Then conservatism is not the reassuring disposition which conservative politicians and conservative theorists like to claim it is. Cowling (1980: 453) called it a ‘Jacobitism of the mind’.¹⁵ It conspires not only against other ideologies, but also against the revolution which made those ideologies relevant in the first place. If it had its way, it would like to make itself unnecessary. It seeks to unwind the dialectic of the enlightenment so far back that conservatism itself, along with liberalism and socialism, can be forgotten.

CONCLUSION

Any definition of conservatism must be what Collingwood called a ‘reasoned and extended definition’ if it is to encompass the complications and contradictions of conservatism. Here I have offered a definition in three stages. Each stage of the theory involves a successively greater emphasis on actuality. It is trivial to say all conservatives are concerned with actuality – the world of ‘what is’, and not with some hypothetical world of ‘what ought to be’. But ‘actuality’

is of course itself an abstraction, a word which is supposed to represent (or point to) 'what is' but which may be more or less abstract or more or less actual, depending on how it is characterized. Here 'actuality' takes three forms:

- (1) actuality is the situation in which one finds oneself responding to the possibility of change;
- (2) actuality is the situation in which one finds oneself opposed to others about what it is right or useful to do about the situation in which one finds oneself responding to the possibility of change; and
- (3) actuality is the situation in which one finds oneself having lost something which one did not want to lose and finds that this loss conditions what one supposes is going on in the situation in which one finds oneself opposed to others about what it is right or useful to do about the situation in which one finds oneself responding to the possibility of change.

It should be clear from the repetition involved that each situation, and each actuality, is successively less abstract and more actual. Conservatism could be understood as a response to any of these three situations. But in this reasoned and extended definition it is all three. Conservatism, therefore is:

- (1) what it is in any situation: a disposition to have and hold whatever traditions we have: that is, an abstract conservatism;
- (2) what it is in the situation where it encounters rival ideologies, such as liberalism and socialism, which ignore the existence of our traditions when they posit ideals derived from abstract principles or universal programmes: that is, a reactive, or concessionary, ideology, a sort of *via negationis*; and
- (3) what it is in the situation where it is conscious of its fundamental historical condition of having emerged after a historical discontinuity it cannot sanction: that is, a recollection of traditions which we accept we cannot establish because we have accepted the order which marked the destruction of those traditions, but also, and at the same time, potentially a radical or revolutionary attempt to restore elements of those traditions or, most radically, the truth served by that tradition – which, in our history, at least, are most likely to be the truth and traditions of sacral monarchy.

If it is asked what the relevance of this definition is to actual politics, the answer is that it indicates that the difficulty in discussing

conservatism is fundamental, since conservatism, which reluctantly retrospectively sanctions a situation it could not have prospectively sanctioned, is fundamentally contradictory. Conservatism appears to be a very different thing when it is seen as a disposition, when it seen as one ideology among others in modern politics, and when it seen as the legacy of a conviction that modern politics is founded on an error.

NOTES

- ¹ It is the assumption of David Willetts in Gray and Willetts (1997). He makes a practical point while Gray makes a theoretical point – both of which are true (hence the sense that they are talking past each other). Conservatives can adopt more or less any policy – as Willetts argues – but that does not mean that the policy will be ‘conservative’ – as Gray argues.
- ² ‘It would perhaps have been more fortunate if modern conservatives had paid more attention to Hume and less to Burke’ (Oakeshott 2008: 83).
- ³ The clearest statement of this claim (‘a conservative proper is not a reactionary’) is to be found in Quinton (1978: 19).
- ⁴ It should be noted that he said this in the middle of a passage on ‘hereditary succession’. It is often quoted out of context. See, for instance, O’Hara (2011: 204).
- ⁵ For an instance of a book which uses it to make conservatism seem unobjectionable, see O’Hara (2011). Although I cannot discuss this book at length, it deserves a note here. O’Hara outlines a conservatism which can trade both in contemporary politics and in political theory. He refers to Habermas on ‘public reason’ and Beck on ‘risk’, and proposes two principles, in possible imitation of Rawls’s two principles of justice: a ‘knowledge principle’, by which we accept there are limits to what we know; and a ‘change’ principle, by which we accept that change should always be incremental, reversible and continually evaluated. See O’Hara (2011: 49–50, 88) for a statement of the two principles. The principles are just a restatement of abstract conservatism, which is then allied to a rather miscellaneous selection of policies. The book is therefore a fusion of practical conservatism – of the sort I associate with Kedourie (the view that conservatism is whatever conservatives do) – and an abstract theoretical conservatism – of the sort I associate with Oakeshott. This is an effective combination as propaganda for a modern conservatism, but is clearly ad hoc. It does not consider the possibility that conservatism is contradictory, or perhaps even objectionable.
- ⁶ Much of the general literature on conservatism discusses conservatism under various heads, e.g. divinity, tradition, hierarchy, authority, property, scepticism, limited government, rejection of ideals, organicism and communitarianism (see Heywood 2003: 72; Kirk 1954: 17–18; Thomas 2000: 206).
- ⁷ It almost ‘stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction’ (Burke 1999: 93). Almost, but not quite: for of course it is not, in Oakeshott’s characterization, metaphysical.

- ⁸ For the primacy of liberalism, conservatism and socialism see, for instance, Heywood (2003) and Freeden (1996), who both deal with them – in *this* order as the first three major chapters of their books – before discussing, in Heywood’s case, nationalism, anarchism, fascism, feminism, ecologism and fundamentalism, and, in Freeden’s case, feminism and environmentalism.
- ⁹ ‘A few years ago I should be ashamed to overload a matter, so capable of supporting itself, by the then unnecessary support of any argument’ (Burke 1999: 112–13).
- ¹⁰ ‘To put this in terms of inequality is to adopt a socialist analysis’ (Cowling 1978: 11).
- ¹¹ This is probably why O’Hara, in *Conservatism*, claims that conservatism does not sanction inequality in the way Cowling suggests. See O’Hara (2011: 171, 340, n. 5). The *reason* is that O’Hara’s is an abstract conservatism, whereas Cowling’s is here a reactive conservatism. The *motive* is probably political, since O’Hara is in part offering a practical case for conservatism.
- ¹² No one has yet come up with a theory of tradition which reconciles the different views of Shils (1981), Leavis (1948) and Pieper (1958). For some of the problems, see Alexander (2012).
- ¹³ See Freeden (1996: 344–5), for his four components of conservatism, of which the second is ‘an attempt to subordinate change to the belief that the laws and forces guiding human behaviour have extra-human origins and therefore cannot and ought not to be subject to human wills and whims’. Needless to say, defined this way, abstractly, the ‘extra-human’ factor need not be God.
- ¹⁴ Most modern accounts of politics assume it is not. For a conscious statement of this see Arendt (2006).
- ¹⁵ For Jacobitism, see Clark (1988).

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