

Political Ideologies II



GVPT 100
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OUTLINE



- The History of Conservatism in Europe and the US
- John Kekes, “What is Conservatism?”

The Founding Fathers of Conservatism



EUROPE



Painted to commemorate the July Revolution of 1830 when the people rose and dethroned the French Bourbon monarch, the painting shows the allegorical figure of Liberty as a half-draped woman wearing the traditional Phrygian cap of liberty and holding a gun in one hand and the tricolor in the other.




“Liberty Leading the People,” by Eugène Delacroix, 1830



In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke opposed Jacobinism and championed reverence for established institutions, urged distrust of innovation, and defended prejudice.



Edmund Burke (1729-1797), Irish-British statesman, parliamentary orator, and political thinker.



De Maistre became a formidable critic of the French Revolution and an enthusiastic defender of the “throne and altar.” He is associated with the reactionary or counter-revolutionary strain of conservatism.



Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), French author, moralist, and diplomat .


Classical/Traditionalist Conservatism



- Conservatism is a preference for the historically inherited rather than the abstract and ideal. Conservatives prefer institutions and practices that have evolved gradually and are manifestations of continuity and stability. In answer to the question “What should be the scope of government?” conservatives insist that government must be the servant, not the master, of existing ways of life and must resist the temptation to transform society and politics. Conservatives are generally, though not invariably, suspicious of government activism.

The Founding Fathers of American Conservatism






Adams is considered by Russell Kirk to be the founder of “true conservatism in America.”

Adams held that there is a natural aristocracy of virtues and talents distinguishing men irrespective of their equality in moral and political senses.

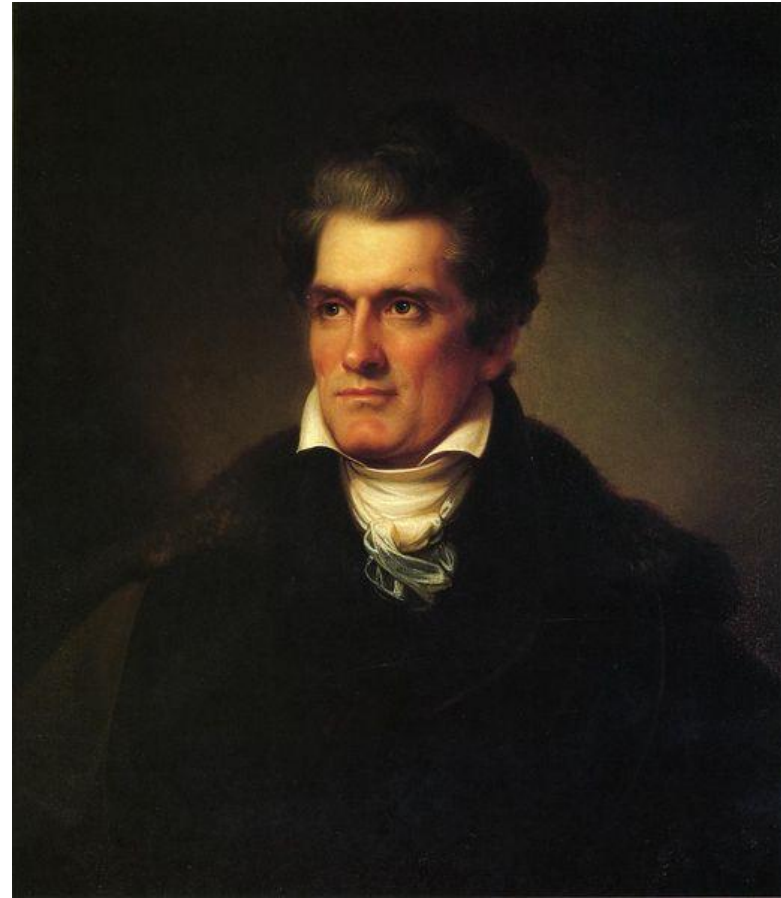


John Adams (1735-1826), the first vice president and second president of the United States.

“By *natural aristocracy*, in general, may be understood those superiorities of influence in society which grow out of the constitution of human nature. By *artificial aristocracy*, those inequalities of weight and superiorities of influence which are created and established by civil laws. . . . By aristocracy, I understand all those men who can command, influence, or procure more than an average of votes; by an aristocrat, every man who can and will influence one man to vote besides himself. Few men will deny that there is a natural aristocracy of virtues and talents in every nation and in every party, in every city and village. Inequalities are a part of the natural history of man.” John Adams, Letter to John Taylor, 1814



American political leader who was a congressman, secretary of war, seventh vice president, senator from South Carolina, and secretary of state. He championed states' rights and slavery, and was a symbol of the Old South.




John C. Calhoun (1782-1850)

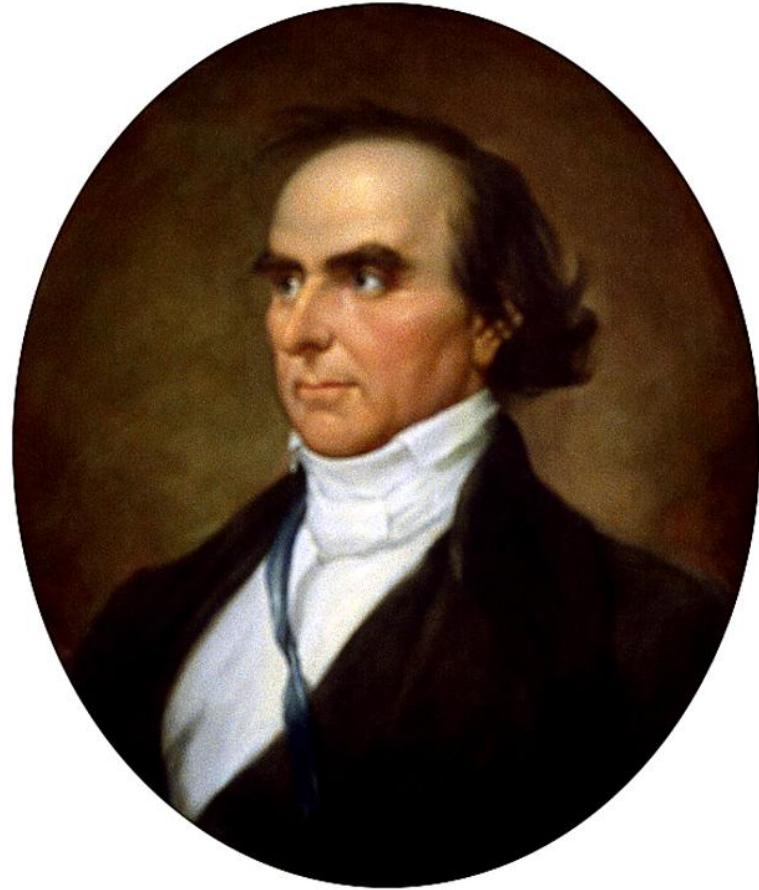
John C. Calhoun in 1836:



- “We are the real conservative body, equally opposed to aristocracy and agrarianism. So long as the tendency at the North was towards the former our natural union was with the democracy; but now that the democracy of the north tends to agrarianism, our natural union is the other way.”



American orator and politician who practiced prominently as a lawyer before the U.S. Supreme Court and served as a congressman, senator, and secretary of state. He is best known as an enthusiastic nationalist and as an advocate of business interests during the period of the Jacksonian era.



Daniel Webster (1782-1852)

The growth of industry and a wave of immigrants marked this period in American history. All this industry produced a lot of wealth for a number of businessmen like John D. Rockefeller (in oil) and Andrew Carnegie (in steel), known as robber barons (people who got rich through ruthless business deals). The Gilded Age (coined by Mark Twain) gets its name from the many great fortunes created during this period and the way of life this wealth supported.



The “Gilded Age” (1878-1889) & The Robber Barons

The corruption of politics in the Gilded Age was an impetus for the rise of the Progressive Movement.






The Progressive Movement (1890-1914) was a middle-class movement to reform politics and improve the social conditions of the slums. The Progressives advocated government regulation of big corporations and economy, and wanted to improve the lot of the working class.



Jane Addams (1860-1935), American social reformer and pacifist, cowinner of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1931.



The Great Depression (1929-1939) was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world, sparking fundamental changes in economic institutions, macroeconomic policy, and economic theory. Its social and cultural effects were considerable.




Unemployed men vying for jobs at the American Legion Employment Bureau in Los Angeles during the Great Depression.

FDR & The New Deal



- President Franklin D. Roosevelt promised a “new deal” for the “forgotten man” and took action to bring about immediate economic relief as well as reforms in industry, agriculture, finance, waterpower, labor, and housing, vastly increasing the scope of the federal government’s activities.

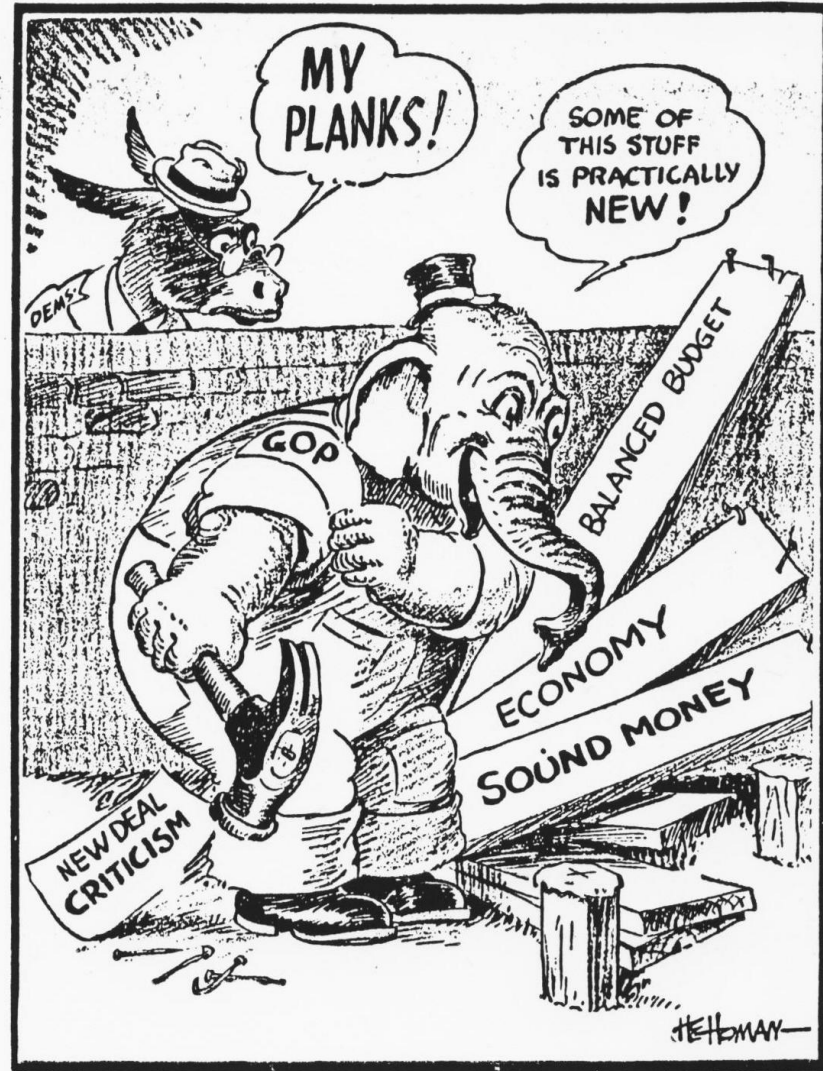


The Roosevelt administration's first objective was to alleviate the suffering of the nation's huge number of unemployed workers. New government agencies were established to dispense emergency and short-term governmental aid and to provide temporary jobs, employment on construction projects, and youth work in the national forests.



New members of the Civilian Conservation Corps waiting to be fitted for shoes at Camp Dix, New Jersey, 1935.

This 1936 cartoon shows GOP building its platform from the conservative planks abandoned by the Democrats.



By Homan, in the Los Angeles News

Contemporary/Modern Conservatism



**CONSERVATISM IS NOT A UNITARY
POSITION: IT HAS DIFFERENT VERSIONS,
AND THEIR ADVOCATES DISAGREE WITH
EACH OTHER ABOUT WHAT POLITICAL
ARRANGEMENTS OUGHT TO BE CONSERVED**



In 1955 Buckley founded National Review the biweekly magazine of news and opinion and the leading conservative journal in the United States.



William F. Buckley, Jr. (b. 1925)

Contemporary/Modern Conservatives



- Usually stress the right of people to pursue happiness in their own individual ways when it comes to economic measures such as employment, property, wealth, etc.;
- Tend to defend the interests of business and corporate industry;
- Tend to oppose state intervention in the marketplace and bureaucratic intrusion into business affairs;

Contemporary/Modern Conservatives




- Tend to be pessimistic about human nature believing that crime, poverty, racism, and other problems arise out of individual choices rather than social conditions and that government can't fix these conditions;
- Tend to believe that things are getting worse and that we should return to past traditions and values in order to fix the present.

Neoconservatism



- Much like modern conservatism but came from disillusioned American liberals and leftists around 1960s-70s
 - Charged that the Democratic party had moved too far to the left with unrealistic ideas on domestic reforms and a pacifist foreign policy
- Generally oppose such programs as food stamps, medical care for the elderly, affirmative action, and any emphasis on multiculturalism.



" Ever since I can remember, I've been a neo-something: a neo-Marxist, a neo-Trotskyist, a neo-liberal, a neo-conservative; in religion a neo-orthodox even while I was a neo-Trotskyist and a neo-Marxist. I'm going to end up a neo- that's all, neo dash nothing."



Irving Kristol (b. 1920), the founder of American neoconservatism



What is Conservatism?



John Kekes

Conservatism: A Political Morality



- It is political because it is a view about the political arrangements that make a society good;
- It is also moral because it takes it to be the justification of these arrangements that they foster good lives.
- The conservative view is that the history of their country is the best guide to understanding the present and planning for the future because it indicates what political arrangements are likely to make lives good or bad.

“Conserving political arrangements is like making one’s house a home. It requires constant repair, refurbishment, additions if circumstances warrant it, anticipating problems and coping with them if they occur unexpectedly, being on good terms with neighbors, having trustworthy people to do the upkeep, and generally making and keeping it a comfortable framework conducive to living as one wishes. But throughout all the necessary changes it remains the house that, for better or worse, one lives in. The reason for taking pains with it is to make living in it better.”

FOUR QUESTIONS



**METAPHYSICS OR SKEPTICISM?
ABSOLUTISM OR RELATIVISM?
INDIVIDUAL OR SOCIETY?
OPTIMISM OR PESSIMISM?**

The Argument of Kekes' Article



- Conservatives may differ both among themselves and from other ideologies according to the kinds of reasons they give on these four questions in justifying the specific political arrangements a good society ought to have.
- John Kekes argues that the best case for conservatism depends on choosing, in preference to either of the extremes, an alternative that is intermediate between them.

Metaphysics or Skepticism?



- The first distinction poses the question of whether or not conservatives should look beyond their history for the reasons that determine what political arrangements they ought to favor.
- The metaphysically oriented conservatives claim that the ultimate reasons for or against specific political arrangements are to be found by understanding the nature and implications of the order in reality.

Metaphysics or Skepticism *Cont'ed*



- Radically skeptical conservatives reject reason as a guide to the political arrangements that a good society ought to have.
- Conservatives who are moderate in their skepticism do not deny that there is a rational and moral order in reality. They are committed only to denying that reliable knowledge of it can be had. They are far more impressed by human fallibility than by the success of efforts to overcome it.

Absolutism or Relativism?



- The second distinction that poses questions for conservatives is between two views about the diversity of values.
- Absolutists believe that the diversity of values is apparent, not real. They concede that there are many values, but they think that there is a universal and objective standard that can be appealed to in evaluating the respective importance of all these values.

Absolutism or Relativism *Cont'ed*



- Relativists regard the diversity of values as real: there are many values and there are many ways of combining and ranking them. There is no universal and objective standard that could be appealed to in resolving disagreements about the identity and importance of the satisfactions and benefits that form the substance of values.
- Pluralists are in partial agreement and disagreement with both absolutists and relativists. According to pluralists, there is a universal and objective standard, but it is applicable only to some values.

Individual or Society?



- The question posed by the third distinction is about the relationship that ought to hold between individuals and the society in which they live.
- If it is said that the individual constituent should dominate over the social one, then the desirable political arrangements will be those that foster individual autonomy at the expense of social authority.
- If, on the other hand, the social constituent is thought to be ultimately more important, then the favored political arrangements will have the strengthening of social authority as their primary purpose.

Individual or Society *Cont'ed*



- Putting individual autonomy before social authority faces two very serious problems.
- First, it assumes that good lives must be autonomous and cannot involve the systematic domination of their individual constituents by some form of social authority.
- Second, if a good society is one that fosters the good lives of the individuals who live in it, then giving precedence to autonomy over authority cannot be right, since autonomous lives may be bad, that is, frustrating and harmful.

Individual or Society *Cont'ed*



- The problems of letting social authority override individual autonomy are no less serious. What is the reason for thinking that if social authority prevails over individual autonomy, then the resulting lives will be good?
- Lives cannot be good just because some social authority pronounces them to be such. The result could be a repressive society whose dogmatism is reinforced by specious moralizing.

“Instead of engaging in futile arguments about their comparative importance, it is far more illuminating to try to understand the connection between them. That connection is that they are parts of two interdependent aspects of the same underlying activity. The activity is that of individuals trying to make good lives for themselves. Its two aspects are the individual and the social; autonomy and authority are their respective parts; and the connecting link between them is tradition. The intermediate position that is reasonably favored by conservatives may therefore be called traditionalism.”

Optimism or Pessimism



- One of the safest generalizations about conservatism is that conservatives tend to be pessimists. Conservatives take a dim view of progress. Conservatives tend to be pessimistic because they doubt that more economic or technological possibilities will make lives on the whole better. Their doubt is based on what they believe are permanent conditions that stand in the way of a significant improvement in the human condition.

Human Imperfection & the Prevalence of Evil



- Conservatives think that the prevalence of evil is a permanent condition that cannot be significantly altered. The human propensity for evil is itself a manifestation of a deeper and more pervasive contingency, which operates through genetic inheritance, environmental factors, the confluence of events that places people at certain places at certain times, the crimes, accidents, pieces of fortune and misfortune that happen or do not happen to them, the historical period, society, and family into which they are born, and so forth.

“Conservatives do not think that the human condition is devoid of hope. Their view is not that human beings are evil and that their evil propensities are uncontrollable. Their view is rather that human beings have both good and evil propensities and neither they nor their societies can exercise sufficient control to make the realization of good propensities reliably prevail over the realization of evil ones. The right sort of political arrangements will help, of course; just as the wrong sort will make matters worse. But even under the best conceivable political arrangements a great deal of contingency will remain, and it will place beyond human control much good and evil.”

Conservative Politics



- The resulting political arrangements favored by conservatives look in two directions: toward fostering what is taken to be good and toward hindering what is regarded as evil.
- One significant difference between conservative politics and liberalism or socialism is the insistence of conservatives on the importance of political arrangements whose purpose is to hinder evil. This difference is a direct result of the pessimism of conservatives and the optimism of others.

Conservative Politics *Cont'ed*



- Conservatives will stress moral education, the enforcement of morality, the treatment of people according to their moral merit or demerit, the importance of swift and severe punishment for serious crimes, and so on.
- This leads to another major difference between conservatism, on the one hand, and various forms of liberalism and socialism, on the other. Conservatives are not egalitarians, whereas their opponents are. Conservatives are opposed, not to political and legal equality, but to the idea that on some basic level all human beings have equal worth.

CONCLUSION



- The reasons for or against particular political arrangements are to be found by reflection on the success or failure of social beliefs, values, and practices in fostering the traditions and the participation of individuals in them.
- The moderately skeptical, pluralistic, traditionalist, and realistically pessimistic conception of conservatism that John Kekes defends tries to strike a middle ground between the two extreme possibilities on each of the four questions.