On the nature of Anglophone conservatism and its applicability to the analysis of postcolonial politics

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This essay examines the nature and development of an Anglophone tradition of conservative political thought (conservatism). It considers how, in contrast to a more reactionary European tradition, conservatism has evolved over time in its variously diverging and converging Anglo-American historical and cultural contexts and what relevance – what analytical utility – this body of political thought may have today for understanding politics and socio-cultural developments in a postcolonial world beyond its Western origins. In considering the relative merits of conservatism as compared to other theoretical approaches, the essay asks whether this conservatism can offer a superior analysis of postcolonial politics by avoiding the pitfalls of the universalizing values on which liberal and Marxist accounts are based.

Central to this task is the evolution of an Anglophone conservatism with its primary origin in the works of Edmund Burke, whose ideas remain central to postwar popularisers of conservatism like Russell Kirk in America and present day conservative thinkers like Roger Scruton in Britain. This conservative intellectual tradition has been transplanted onto American soil from its origins in the complicated, and at times contradictory, amalgamation of classical liberalism and anti-Enlightenment thinking in which Burke’s philosophy emerged. This conservatism is characterized by a gradualism and pragmatism which notably sets it apart from a reactionary and more explicitly anti-Enlightenment and anti-liberal tradition of (Catholic) conservatism in Europe as manifest in, for example, the works of Joseph de Maistre and Carl Schmitt. It is suggested that the inherent pragmatism of Anglophone conservatism, notably (when compared to liberalism) its superior ability to embrace pluralism and accommodate difference, ensures its viability as a relevant project in the postcolonial context of present day global politics.

The nature of conservatism

Considering the theoretical nature and scholarly relevance of conservative political thought entails an engagement with persistently thorny, even frustrating, issues of definition. It also requires confrontation with a formidable scholarly scepticism regarding the pedigree and merits of conservatism as a coherent body of thought. These are problems exacerbated by the fact that conservatism is, according to Wilson, a political ideology “weak in its statement of purpose.”

Leaving aside conservative party political developments and John Stuart Mill’s notorious slight about the “stupid party”, normative accounts of conservatism, and of conservatism’s relation to the pantheon of political thought, often begin on the defensive. Symptomatic of this approach is Scruton’s The Meaning of Conservatism. Noting in the first paragraph commonplace criticisms of conservatism as devoid of genuine essence, core beliefs and vision, being instead an attitude of “mere reaction ... procrastination ... [and] nostalgia” and, according to Honderich, ultimately lacking in morality on account of the conservatives’ utter selfishness, Scruton humbly insists that conservatism is in fact both “systematic” and “reasonable.” It is not merely a poor substitute for a systematic theory of politics – what Lionel Trilling, in reference to American conservatives, memorably dismissed as “irritable mental gestures which seem to resemble ideas.” Hence Scruton:

Conservatism may rarely announce itself in maxims, formulae and aims. Its essence is inarticulate, and its expression, when compelled, sceptical. But it is capable of expression, and in times of crisis, forced either by political necessity, or by the clamour for doctrine, conservatism does its best, though not always with any confidence that the words it finds will match the instinct that required them. This lack of confidence stems not from diffidence or dismay, but from an awareness of the complexity of human things, and from an attachment to values which cannot be understood with the abstract clarity of utopian theory.

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The tendency to begin a definition of conservatism in negative terms, suggests that conservatism is not an ideology comparable to liberalism or socialism, but rather a general approach to politics, or an attitude. And like radicalism, conservatism lacks a “substantive ideal”; it is a politics without Wunschbilder, as “[n]o political philosopher has ever described a conservative utopia.” While otherwise standing in stark opposition to each other – most obviously on account of the conservative’s preference for order and aversion to risk which permeates his thinking on political and social action – both radicals and conservatives are, depending on circumstances, able to accommodate a range of different features of their in any particular case preferred politics. This resemblance should not be surprising, when recalling that German conservatives like Görres, Gentz and Müller, and Englishmen like Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey were “initially enthusiasts for the French revolution” and that “the careers of most conservatives and reactionaries show revolutionary periods in their youth.”

But this avoidance of stating any (universally) prescribed and specific order or set of preferences is not an inherent weakness. Rather it equips conservatism with a sensitivity and adaptability which makes it particularly suitable to account for politics in diverse settings and where, in a state of flux, momentous decisions must be made. Indeed, the essence of conservatism is articulated more forcefully and lucidly in times of crisis where the status quo – venerable tradition and sacrosanct settlement – is fundamentally challenged. There is, in this sense, clarity in the inherent eclecticism of the conservative approach to politics in general and social change in particular. Somewhat ironically perhaps, the conservative pragmatist (but not the reactionary dogmatist) is therefore very well equipped ideologically to make prudent decisions in revolutionary times. This is a key strength of the conservative approach as it is thus able to accommodate diversity – cultural and political – in ways that its rival Western ideologies, liberalism and especially socialism, cannot. Compared to the liberal focus on the (abstracted) rational individual and universal values, and the socialist reliance on an inevitable march of history towards a communist utopia in the context of a rationalist collectivism, conservatism can accommodate a wide range of polities and societal characteristics where most of the values constituting modern liberalism are actually incompatible with a genuine commitment to pluralism.

But if weak in statement of purpose and lacking in systematic exposition, what is conservatism? To provide an answer it is necessary to consider several interrelated questions. How does a conservatism developing in Britain and later also America differ from forms of conservatism as they develop in Europe more directly in response to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution? How is conservatism in the Anglo-American context distinct from the classical liberal tradition? While Rothschild casts serious aspersion on accounts asserting an affinity between the economic thinking of Burke and Adam Smith in particular, Precece notes significant overlap between conservatism and classical liberalism in economic and political sentiments and prescriptions, and Viereck stated about postwar American conservatism that “our conservatism in the absence of medieval feudal relics, must grudgingly admit it has real little tradition to conserve except that of liberalism.” And how to best account for the sometimes divergent and conflicting nature of British and American conservatism in a postwar era where, on one hand, a Straussian ethos and, on the other hand, a libertarian tendency have in crucial ways reshaped American conservatism while the Thatcherite legacy in Britain is generally considered a more awkward episode within the context of a more continuous (Tory) conservative tradition?

Anglophone conservatism

We can discern an Anglophone intellectual tradition of conservative thinking stretching back to at least the writings of the Elizabethan theologian Richard Hooker and his late sixteenth-century magnum opus, the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity. Samuel Huntington goes so far as to suggest that in Hooker’s Laws, written two hundred years before Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France, are “delineated every significant strand of Burkean thought.” It is in essence a tradition of thought which has most profoundly been shaped by the Anglo-Irish statesman Burke. Burke’s influence – his concern with the practice of politics as much as philosophical deliberation (never mind systematic exposition) – partly explains Anglophone conservatism’s affinity to classical liberalism as well as the obvious differences between these two bodies of thought. Indeed, Burke is more appropriately thought of as a statesman, politician and orator than as a philosopher per se. He was, according to Lock, “not primarily a writer or thinker, but a party politician” whose “rhetorical genius” and “ability to generalise” was such that in particular his Reflections continue to be read “as a classic of conservative political thought.” Sternhell, whose assessment of Burke and his legacy is harshly critical, also considers him “one of the first great intellectuals to make a profession of politics.” Symptomatic of conservatives generally,
Burke’s writings lack the systematic exposition of academic philosophers. Whether this constitutes an inherent strength or weakness of Burke’s thought, or of conservative thought in general, remains a contentious issue.

In any case, Burke’s Reflections stands as the seminal contribution to what has become a greater Anglophone tradition of conservatism, the exponents of which are “[united] in identifying Edmund Burke as the conservative archetype and in assuming that the basic elements of his thought are the basic elements of conservatism.” In its Burkean form, this is a tradition broadly characterized by scepticism and pragmatism in its approach to political and social reform, constituting a “via media between the dangerous extremes of Utopian [and rationalistic] politics and the [fideistic] repudiation of reason”22, and which stands in stark contrast to the universalism and progressive ideas on which its rival ideologies, (modern) liberalism and socialism, are based.23 This conservative attitude, and in particular its scepticism vis-à-vis bold claims regarding human rationality, is exemplified in the works of Oakeshott and, if more controversially so, Hayek.24 Although Hayek is primarily known as a classical, or laissez-faire, liberal, even including in The Constitution of Liberty an appendix entitled “Why I am Not a Conservative,”25 his later works espouse sentiments that in important aspects are conservative. John Gray argues that “[absorbing] some of the deepest insights of conservative philosophy,” Hayek provides a “restatement of classical liberalism” purified of its most significant shortcomings – the “errors of abstract individualism and uncritical rationalism.”26

In addition to the commonly acknowledged scepticism and pragmatism inherent in conservatism, and the easily recognizable conservative aversion to radicalism, there are additional hallmarks of conservative thought which must be included in any meaningful definition of an Anglophone conservative philosophy. Huntington considers three theories of conservatism in order to arrive at a definition.27 His first theory is the “aristocratic” one, where conservatism is basically a reaction to a unique historical moment: the reaction of the “feudal-aristocratic-agrarian classes” to the French revolution. Second is the “autonomous definition,” whereby conservatism is not connected to any specific class but rather defined by an “autonomous system of ideas” based on “universal values such as justice, order, balance, moderation.” Third is the “situational definition” which understands conservatism as originating in a “distinct but recurring type of historical situation” in which an established order is fundamentally challenged and where conservatism “is that system of ideas employed to justify [that] social order.”28 Of course, the (Anglo-Saxon) conservative will not justify any social order.29 He would not endorse absolutist monarchy or totalitarian rule; whereas Maistre’s reactionary anti-liberalism and ultramontanism could be seen as an endorsement of absolutist monarchy and theocracy. Huntington suggests that the situational definition most closely approximates a set of criteria essential to conservatism. Avoiding the aristocratic theory makes it easier to accommodate forms of conservatism, including non-Western ones, unrelated to the historical and cultural context of the French Revolution. And not opting for the autonomous definition makes it possible to distinguish conservatism from rival ideologies based on universal values.

Huntington’s six “components of the conservative creed,” which he suggests also constitute the “essential elements of Burke’s theory,”30 remain useful as a summary of key characteristics of Anglophone conservatism and for evaluating its relevance as an analytical approach to, and normative prescription for, the politics of postcolonial societies. Firstly, “[m]an is basically a religious animal, and religion is the foundation of civil society.”31 From archetypal conservatives like Burke to modern ones like Alasdair MacIntyre and Robert P. George, legitimate social order is sanctioned by the divine, that is, God, whether or not the divine is in all specific instances a directly influential or even perceptible factor.32 Secondly, “[s]ociety is the natural, organic product of slow historical growth.”33 When deformed by revolutionary fervour and thus divorced from the accumulated wisdom of the ages, Burke’s “bank and capital,” institutions lose legitimacy and cannot last. Likewise “[r]ight is a function of time” in that rights cannot simply be proclaimed34, as have been the rights proudly issued forth by supranational organizations like the United Nations and the European Union, but can only be derived from the traditions and customs of a society in which people live and which they can therefore hope to properly understand and genuinely accept.35

Thirdly, “[m]an is a creature of instinct and emotion as well as reason.”36 The excessive faith placed by Enlighten thinkers in rationality provokes hubris and encourages reforms doomed to fail as they are predicated on unrealistic and overly optimistic notions of a human nature which in fact is inherently fallible and characterized by a propensity for evil.37 The fallibility of human nature is for most conservative thinkers rooted in the Christian teachings of the Fall of Man and Original Sin, and a general pessimism about human nature, characteristic of the conservative mindset, can, according to Kekes, be found in Sophocles’s Antigone, Thucydides’s The Peloponnesian War, Machiavelli’s The Prince and Discourses, Montaigne’s Essays, Bradley’s Ethical Studies and Santayana’s Dominations and Powers.38 “Prudence, prejudice, experience, and habit” are superior foundations on which to build a durable social order because “[t]ruth exists not in universal
propositions but in concrete experiences.” Fourthly, “[t]he community is superior to the individual.” Because “rights of men derive from their duties,” it is not possible to pass judgement on any social arrangement merely by asking how it conforms to a set of universal ideals. Rather it is the case that each society, each regime and each particular situation must be judged on its own merits, that is, in the context of its specific historical development and in the context of the duties and obligations, as well as rights and expectations, inherent in that historical context.

Fifthly, “[e]xcept in an ultimate moral sense, men are unequal.” All social arrangements, like any organization, produce complex hierarchies (formal and informal) including classes, orders and groups. These are, pace Michels’s “iron law” of organizations inevitable characteristics of any society. Political philosophies that cannot accommodate inequality are unable to account for societies as they actually exist and always have existed. Sixthly, following Burke “[a] presumption exists ‘in favour of any settled scheme of government against any untried project’.” Because “[m]an’s hopes are high, but his vision is short” it is necessary to accommodate an intrinsic risk aversion in any account of social action and proposed reform of an existing order. This is because the higher the reach of ambition and the bolder the promise of improvement, the greater the risk of failure. While arguments in favour of changing the world, as famously Marx in his Theses on Feuerbach, can certainly be justified such arguments for change must be based on realistic, as in empirically grounded and historically sensitive, expectations as opposed to an a priori reasoning from which derives abstractions such as Homo Oeconomicus and the Rights of Man.

“Liberal conservatism”

The relationship between classical liberalism and conservatism is, in the Anglo-American context, very complex. One of the reasons that conservatism and liberalism become viewed as distinct opposites is that conservatism is conflated with Toryism and liberalism defined solely by its methodological individualism derived from a selective reading of Smith’s – the “most commonly maligned and misrepresented of thinkers” – The Wealth of Nations while ignoring the important caveats to that vision as outlined in his earlier and less widely read Theory of Moral Sentiments. Preece shows that to understand the conservative tradition in Britain as merely Tory – that is, defined by “organism, corporatism and collectivism,” where the latter two characteristics are obviously discordant with most understandings of Anglo-American conservatism today – while in America defining conservatism as a laissez-faire liberalism based on an “abstracted” reading of Locke (and Smith) rather than the Locke who by invocation of the “ever judicious [Richard Hooker]” defends English medieval tradition, masks the fact that British and American conservatives have more in common than is generally assumed. It is in fact a common strand of conservatism, anchored in classical (Whig) liberalism, which sets apart “the Anglo-Saxon nations” from other Western polities.

In contrast to Huntington, Preece understands the nature of “Anglo-Saxon” conservatism as primarily constituted by the historical and ideational characteristics of what Huntington describes as the aristocratic and autonomous definitions. For Preece there is a key historical context out of which conservatism arises, namely the desire to conserve the (Whig liberal) values and arrangements of the Glorious Revolution rather than those of the Ancien Régime ripped apart a century later by the French revolution. To conserve this settlement in Britain, Burke must to some extent defend a set of classical liberal values – tempered and qualified by conservative sentiment and key conservative concerns about change – which places him closer to Locke than his liberal detractors give him credit for and which also remains insufficiently recognized by many conservatives in the modern American tradition who trace the values of the American Republic back to a controversial understanding of Locke’s liberalism. In fact, Burke can best be described, as can Tocqueville, as a “liberal conservative” – both “leery of abstract dogmas and of all else that smacked of l’esprit de système.”

In Britain, where ideas of divine right had held little sway […] what was being conserved was the orderly institutionalization of Whig ideas of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 […] the England which Montesquieu [for whom Burke expressed great admiration] had described as the nation par excellence of constitutional liberty […] [E]ven the most Tory Duke of Wellington recommended government “on liberal principles” and numbered The Wealth of Nations among his favourite books.

The major Tory thinkers of this time – Burke, the Marquis of Halifax, Lord Bolingbroke – all “wrote in the new liberal context expressed most completely by John Locke.” What the exponents of this emerging conservative tradition had in common was a “desire to reconcile liberty and authority”; they “admired … the principles of the Lockeian constitution” but were also “concerned to limit its potential excesses.” Concerns
shared by these British conservatives and Whig liberals are important as they make it possible to better understand how attempts by some postwar conservatives to realign economic policymaking in Britain and America more closely with classical liberal principles need not be understood merely as a radical rejection of the status quo – a collectivist settlement subscribed to in Britain by both One Nation Tories and Gaitskellites, and broad consensus in favour of the New Deal and attendant progressive policymaking in postwar America – but rather a desire to rediscover the classical liberal principles emerging in symbiosis with industrialization and expanding capitalist power and on which stable democracy ultimately depended. Zuckerman is wrong to suggest that attempting to “subvert and overturn” the New Deal legacy in America – a legacy based on a modern American liberalism represented by Dewey channelling T.H. Green and Hobhouse rather than Locke and Smith which, through Bentham, becomes “a friend of radical rationalism” and, through Mill, “an ally of relativist social democracy” – is driven by radical rather than conservative sentiments. The means by which the New Deal era transforms the meaning of “liberalism” in America, from one denoting its classical origin into one signifying progressivism and even social democracy, explains why the postwar conservative project is considered more radical than it really is, even if aspects of the Thatcherite and Reaganite programmes were unduly influenced by the “rationalist version of Locke’s studiously complex philosophy” as represented by the French and American Enlightenment.

Anti-Enlightenment reaction

But if similarities between Anglophone conservatism and classical liberalism are insufficiently recognized, there is an opposite danger whereby Anglophone conservatism is insufficiently distinguished as a form of conservatism apart from that more reactionary, and indeed radical, tradition which develops in Europe. Sternhell, in his magisterial The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition, argues that the enduring clash between Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment values constitutes the fundamental intellectual confrontation of the modern era, unfolding in stages since the late seventeenth century and culminating in the “European catastrophe” of the twentieth century. A key problem with Sternhell’s account is his insistence on locating Burke, together with Herder, as the “founder of anti-Enlightenment thought.” This although he acknowledges that the ongoing revolt against the Enlightenment takes aim not only against “Franco-Kantian” rationalism, but also the Glorious Revolution and the thinking of Locke and Hume in Britain. Instead of recognizing the affinity in several instances between the thinking of “liberal conservatives” like Burke with Locke and the values of the Glorious Revolution, Sternhell places Burke alongside not only the great proponent of German cultural nationalism but also with the “clerical philosophers” (Bonald, Chateaubriand, Maistre) and others like them who mounted the most ferocious attacks on the philosophes and the French Enlightenment’s notions of human rationality, universal values and the Rights of Man. Indeed, Sternhell forcefully rejects the notion that Burke is a “liberal conservative” and considers his legacy as a direct precursor to Berlin and eventually America’s postwar “neoconservatives.”

But although Burke’s rhetoric may in instances match the ferocity of a Maistre the conservatism developing in Europe is surely of a different kind, even if scepticism vis-à-vis the Enlightenment and rejection of the French Revolution are common denominators. On the Continent, conservatives engaged in a much more direct reaction to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution by strongly defending feudalism and the restoration of absolute monarchy. The reactionary and absolutist character of this European conservatism sets it apart quite clearly from the Anglophone conservatism more closely affiliated with classical liberalism that we find developing in Britain, and from British Toryism which also is less reactionary in nature. We can also in this European context discern a radicalization of conservatism which develops from Maistre’s reaction against the French Revolution to Schnitt’s agitation against the Weimar republic and European communism. Greifer charts the transition of Maistre, bête noir of Holmes’s The Anatomy of Antiliberalism, from conservative to reactionary. Maistre’s intellectual journey is highly instructive for understanding how political theories and the politics which they promote can easily shift in the context of volatile social circumstances. As late as 1791, Maistre wrote of the “admirable Burke” with whom he shared a generally conservative frame of mind.

But with the [French] revolution Maistre’s situation is no longer Burke’s. The French disease was more contagious in Savoy than in England... Maistre’s very first [post-revolutionary] writing... has the confident air of the recent emigré who expects to return promptly to his rightful place. Consequently its outlook is still rather conservative [...] But Maistre’s situation does not long allow him confidence in a quick Restoration. Thus his scope of attention is soon broadened to France and government in general... [but he] cannot simply return to an Eighteenth Century that produced the Revolution. He must return to a purer, better version of the past. The rightful essential past must be stripped of its corrupt accidents...
In the case of Schmitt his intellectual journey constitutes a prime example of twentieth century conservatism, in this particular case informed by a socially and theologically conservative Catholicism, turned into radical reaction. Schmitt’s political radicalization, although displaying unique features of his own intellectual development, follows an intellectual route along which in the interwar years “an entire generation of like-minded German conservative and nationalist intellectuals” travelled and which ends up with Nazism as its terminal point. Given that this historical context, where reactionary politics were clearly inspired by thinkers like Maistre and Schmitt, looms large in Western history of political thought it is not surprising that conservatism in the postcolonial context too often becomes equated with a violently reactionary traditionalism. Hence Anglophone conservatism must be carefully distinguished from a reactionary and more explicitly anti-Enlightenment conservatism when considering postcolonial politics and issues to do with cultural relativism, traditionalism, reactionary politics and general propensities for oppression.

Colonial legacy and postcolonial promise

Two events, separated by half a century and continents apart illustrate the essence of the postcolonial era: the expectation that a fundamental shift is underway world history and that those formerly colonized peoples who have cast off the yoke of imperialism will in significant ways add their own imprints to the common heritage of mankind. On the eve of Indian independence in 1947, Nehru famously spoke of the Indian nation having made a “tryst with destiny” and of that rare moment in history when “stepping out from the old to the new ... an age ends.” At this moment, “the soul of a nation ... finds utterance.” This moment heralded India’s coming into its own, to contribute to “the larger cause of humanity” and the shaping of events globally. In 1998, South African President Thabo Mbeki, whose nation had by means of its remarkable transition from apartheid captured the world’s imagination and raised the hopes of a new beginning for Africa, spoke at the United Nations University on the concept of an African Renaissance. Recalling Pliny the Elder’s adage, Ex Africa semper aliquid novi (out of Africa always something new) Mbeki outlined his vision for a renaissance, an “Africa reborn,” rooted in popular rule and “political rebirth,” by means of which would spring forth “modern products of human economic activity, significant contributions to the world of knowledge, in the arts, science and technology, new images of an Africa of peace and prosperity.”

These visions represent an urgent sense of destiny. They are progressive, if not necessarily radical or revolutionary visions. Long relegated to peripheral roles in global events, peoples of the formerly colonized world will inevitably play significant roles in shaping a new world order. These are visions that still captivate not only the spirits of inhabitants of “developing” nations, but the imaginations of all who wonder what will come of the postcolonial nations emerging out of that epoch once described by Heilbroner as the Great Ascent. But the postcolonial era remains plagued by persistent failures to deliver on the grand promises of independence. Elusive societal stability and order, inadequate improvements in living conditions and persistent difficulties managing tensions between tradition and modernity suggests fundamental inadequacies in the theoretical and empirical grounds on which the high expectations of the postcolonial era have been based – liberal and Marxist analyses of colonialism and the postcolonial (and, more recently, postmodern theorising) have promoted a radicalization of post-independence politics undoubtedly bearing some responsibility for squandering the promises of independence.

Thus one way to rejuvenate the analysis of postcolonial politics is to bring new perspectives and original ways of thinking about the world shaped by the experience of European colonialism into the mainstream. Where postcolonial studies have become over-reliant and complacently dependent on neo-Marxist and postmodern theories in engaging with and confronting liberal theories of international relations and development, thus offering diminishing returns analytically and becoming unable to effectively interpret and account for the political and developmental disappointments of the postcolonial era, conservatism can offer an improved perspective. And where conservatism has failed to systematically engage with and comprehend non-Western politics, a postcolonial focus can offer a new vision for the continued relevance of conservatism in a twenty-first century increasingly shaped by developments in the formerly colonized world. This is a new era in which the demise of “really existing” socialism, and the increasingly post-secular (and anti-liberal) nature of politics, poses direct challenges to the liberal and Marxist paradigms through which global developments have been analysed.

Decolonization, initiated by complex interactions in imperial metropoles between maturing liberalism and emergent socialism, eventually yielded to radical nationalist projects where conservatism had little enduring appeal or influence. In these exhilarating times, conservatism lost its claim to relevance and became
considered a by-word for reaction and resistance to freedom and democratization as exemplified in India by Nehru’s dominance and the Congress party’s rejection of tradition and its consequent commitment to radicalism in the early post-independence decades. Political actors emerging victorious were often those willing to take on increasingly radical agendas to move post-independence politics towards socialist and other variants of progressive politics and who therefore were also supported by Western and Western-educated scholars interpreting social and political change from Marxist, postmodern and a range of “critical” or otherwise radical perspectives.

Postcolonial societies have, however, in many ways remained resistant to liberalization and modernization. Despite major ruptures and continual attempts at transformation, these societies can still in several important aspects best be characterized by traditional attributes such as deference to authority and hierarchy, the imperatives of religious duties and familial obligations and a lingering respect for traditional knowledge and ways of conduct in society and in public office. They retain conservative principles more so than they come to approximate the ideals of liberal individualism, socialist collectivism or other variations on the ideological and political themes of progressivism and modernism. From this point of view it is conservatism, rooted in tradition, hierarchy and duty, and inherently sceptical of excessive progressivism and rationalism, which provides a superior framework for understanding and engaging with the formerly colonized world than do the liberal and Marxist foundations on which Western thinking about colonialism initially depended, as in the ambivalent views on imperialism found in the works of Mill and Marx and the unequivocal critiques by Hobson and Lenin.

**Anti-revolutionary sentiment**

To better understand its relevance in the postcolonial context, we must first consider how conservatism has been shaped by radical challenges to established orders in the imperial metropoles and great powers of Europe. Conservatism is, according to Huntington, “the product of intense ideological and social conflict”\(^75\), and “men are driven to conservatism by the shock of events.”\(^76\)

Before its descent into a Reign of Terror, the French revolutionaries proclaimed the universal Rights of Man and a future to be defined by liberty, equality and fraternity. A new world order was to be ushered in, so complete in its rupture with the Ancien Régime that even a new way of keeping time had to be introduced whereby the Gregorian calendar was replaced by a new Republican one. Jacobinism became the very embodiment of radicalism as a means to transformation, an overwhelming theme echoed in many revolutions since. Half a century later, Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* called on the working men of all countries to unite in overturning the history of all civilization to thereby usher in the inevitable and classless society of communism by means of a revolution to end all revolutions. Thus the major social and political ruptures of the last two centuries constitute violent reactions against established order that in each case were based on radical premises and utopian aspirations.\(^77\)

Where revolutionaries succeeded in bringing down the existing order, radicalism gave birth to terrors greater than those which the revolutionaries sought to end. As Madame Guillotine terminated the moment of freedom in France, so did Stalin’s Great Terror finally end the dreams of those who had hoped that Russians could free themselves from centuries of autocracy and despotism. Radical, revolutionary and progressive premises would later underpin the emerging nationalist movements and waves of decolonization sweeping across the European empires.\(^78\) Speaking as the Congo’s first elected Prime Minister in 1960, less than a year before his murder at the hands of Belgian and Congolese officers, Lumumba proclaimed the beginning of a “new struggle ... [to] lead [the Congo] to peace, prosperity, and greatness ... [where] all ... citizens enjoy to the full the fundamental liberties foreseen in the Declaration of the Rights of Man.”\(^79\) In 1967, Nyerere’s Arusha Declaration articulated the lofty goal of ushering in a socialism based on African values in Tanzania.\(^80\) Although Mwalimu (“teacher”) Nyerere was widely recognized as one of the truly humble and honest leaders of African independence, indeed as the Conscience of Africa, the African socialism he championed and which was symbolized by the policy of *Ujamaa* (“familyhood”) nevertheless led to the establishment of a one-party state, collectivization of agriculture, the consequently forced relocation of peasants (“villagization”) at gun-point and, as elsewhere where similar attempts at uprooting and collectivising the peasantry according to socialist formulae were carried out, the ruin of agriculture and further impoverishment of the populace.\(^81\) These developments eventually turned Tanzania into one of Africa’s poorest states, if not a war-torn or, by post-independence African standards, a particularly violent one.
Similarly grand proclamations were articulated by leaders across the decolonising world, the radical and utopian visions of a Mao or a Pol Pot merely the most extreme and lethal ones. As with previous revolutions, however, those who managed to cast off the yoke of European colonialism found themselves saddled with governments and rulers every bit as oppressive as those previously endured. When contemplating the legacies of Amin, Bokassa, Mengistu and many other African leaders similarly willing to employ violence and provoke economic ruin in pursuit of personal power, it is difficult not to argue that matters indeed got worse. At a fundamental level, psychological as much as it is social, cultural or political, it is the sense of horror when contemplating revolutions degenerating into destruction that animates the conservative aversion to radicalism and to those grand projects which promise comprehensive change and a guaranteed end to the ills of contemporary society.

Conservatism does not hold that all and any change is necessarily ruinous. It is possible to improve conditions of life, but the revolutionary road is not the one which will provide deliverance. Indeed revolution becomes for the conservative something “unthinkable,” tantamount to “murdering a sick mother out of impatience to snatch some rumoured infant from her womb.”85 The conservative approach to revolution is however complicated, especially when considering Burke’s involvement as a Whig politician in the debates and politics surrounding the American Revolution.85 But the American Revolution, to which Burke was notably sympathetic,84, constitutes a rather different form of revolution than did the French. Driven by a desire of colonialists to reassert their rights as freeborn Englishmen, it did not like the Jacobins’ revolution seek to create a new society by means of rejecting the past and has consequently been criticized for being conservative in terms of (successfully) aiming to maintaining existing social structures and privileges.85 The persistent complexity of conservatives’ views on revolution is evident in Scruton’s somewhat convoluted argument that

[t]here occurred in Poland the first genuine working-class revolution in history. It was a revolution against socialism, against the planned economy, against atheism, propaganda and party government; a revolution in favour of patriotism of a redeemed tradition and a rediscovered history, in favour of private property, autonomous institutions, religious principle, judicial independence and a rule of law. In short, it was a movement in the direction recommended at the time by conservatives.86

In a somewhat counterintuitive manner of arguing which rhymes uneasily with the reverence for tradition whereby “one generation links with another,” the necessity of which Burke so eloquently spoke and without which “[m]en would become little better than the flies of a summer,”87 Huntington insists that “conservatism comes from the challenge before the theorist, not the intellectual tradition behind him.”88 And, as a consequence, “conservative thinkers of one age … have little influence on those of the next.”89 This is however only a problem if one accords history unduly great determining powers over future events. Clearly the past, as in actually lived experiences transmitted over generations, is crucial for any conservative’s considerations of whether a particular polity is good or bad, and whether proposed change can be considered promising or dangerous. But contra Marx’s argument in The Eighteenth Brumaire, the history and tradition of dead generations does not have to weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living. Of course, conservatives cannot rely on that discounting of history by means of which liberals proceed to deduce a priori the fundamental principles of how society ought to ideally be organized. But because conservatism is inherently pragmatic and rejects deterministic conceptualizations of history that hamper flexibility in adjusting to new and unforeseen events, the conservative is as well equipped intellectually to adapt to events as they occur as he is to recognize the merits in what has gone before. *Pace* Tacitus, custom does adapt itself to experience.

**Tradition against rationalism**

The conservative emphasis on the importance of tradition and established order, which entails mutual obligations and duties for all as opposed to that illegitimate order which is simply established by violence from above and comes with no obligations on part of its rulers, also suggests a body of thought particularly instructive for analysing postcolonial politics. Related conservative concepts such as social discipline, deference and corporate solidarity were ones that “liberal thinkers beginning with Hobbes and Locke continuing in the English Utilitarians were unable to generate from liberal assumptions about free, equal and consciously consenting individuals.”90 Hence Locke’s need for tradition and for individualism tempered with circumspection.91

Already in the eighteenth century, Burke criticized power exercised without restraint or consideration for those over whom it is exercised. This was particularly the case with what Burke perceived as the
rapaciousness of colonialism in India under East India Company rule, his opposition to which was expressed forcefully in his 1783 speech on Fox’s India Bill. Because the young Englishmen in India lacked any sympathy for the Indians whom they governed, and because they governed “without society” while having “[drunk] the intoxicating draught of authority and dominion before their heads are able to bear it,” Burke maintained that “[w]ere we to be driven out ... this day, nothing would remain to tell that [India] had been possessed, during the inglorious period of our dominion, by anything better than the ouran-outang or the tiger.”

This separation of rulers from obligations to their people remains a persistent concern and, indeed, it has been an all too common outcome of postcolonial trajectories in the wake of decolonization. It remains a consistent theme in conservative critiques of regimes of many different ideological stripes, and Lock argues that, as a “sincere champion of Irish interests” and intimately familiar with rule by the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, Burke was “better equipped than most English politicians to appreciate the likely ill-effects of alien rule in India...” Of course, Lock adds that while in no other case does Burke appear more clearly as the “champion of the oppressed” as in the case of India, “it is remarkable how often ... his tears flow not so much at the plight of the miserable millions ... as at the pathos of formerly wealthy and powerful Indians now reduced to indigence and distress.”

Conservatism also recognizes the importance of continuity in social arrangements as a mitigating factor for the potentially disruptive effects of any social change and the merits of scepticism towards blueprints for reformed social orders. In India, the secularization of post-independence politics has exacerbated social fragmentation and conflict. Likewise in Africa, modernization and secularization has exacerbated the divide between modern and traditional, and between urban and rural, often by means of economically and developmentally ruinous policies pursued for the supposed benefit of the former at the expense of the latter. In contrast to liberalism and socialism, the conservative mindset is highly sensitive to the importance of legitimacy derived from tradition as a necessary source for stable rule and also to the idea that roots of social harmony and (individual) satisfaction are to be found in established order. Change must in all cases be undertaken with the utmost of consideration of the consequences of that change for the legitimacy and stability which is necessary for any functioning society. The potential danger of a “revolution of rising expectations” is ever present.

Most importantly, conservatism denies that reasons for social change, or for any particular political arrangement, “are to be derived from a contract that fully rational people may make in a hypothetical situation; or from an imagined ideal society; or from what is supposed to be most beneficial for the whole of humanity.” And Hayek argues that

[t]he demands of socialism are not moral conclusions derived from the traditions that formed ... [Western civilization]. Rather, they endeavour to overthrow these traditions by a rationally designed moral system whose appeal depends on the instinctual appeal of its promised consequences. They assume that since people had been able to generate some system of rules coordinating their efforts, they must also be able to design an even better and more gratifying system.

In times of great upheaval and change, rationality is hardly the guiding principle of debates that rage throughout society. This regardless of what self-confident and generally self-appointed leaders of the masses may claim for themselves in terms of clarity and foresightedness as opposed to that “idiocy of rural life” which, according to the Communist Manifesto, infused the thinking of too many of socialism’s reluctant but ostensibly intended beneficiaries – an idiocy which Marx even credits the bourgeoisie with attempting to rescue the peasants from before similarly enlightening efforts were exerted by the Marxist revolutionaries themselves. Perhaps it is not too uncharitable to discern an echo of this sentiment in the great modernizer Nehru’s assertion that the “opposition forces” which the Indian Congress party had to confront in the post-independence era were “the obscurantism and inertia of the people.”

Reasons for change must, according to Scruton, instead be derived from that “social knowledge” which is embodied in already existing institutions such as “in parliamentary procedures, in manners, costume and social conventions, and also in morality.” In his argument about the emergence of “two publics” in postcolonial Africa, one civic (modern) and one primordial (traditional), Ekeh suggests that a fundamental problem is that the “civic public is starved of badly needed morality” and that “any politics without morality is destructive,” thus creating a situation whereby “the amorality of the civic public” is to blame for many of the “destructive results” of postcolonial African politics.

Change contained within the parameters of established social knowledge is most likely to generate legitimacy and acceptance, to thereby potentially improve upon existing arrangements rather than render them unstable and therefore in the end unmanageable.
Such knowledge arises ‘by an invisible hand’ from the open-ended business of society, from problems which have been confronted and solved, from agreements which have been perpetuated by custom, from conventions which coordinate our otherwise conflicting passions, and from the unending process of negotiation and compromise whereby we quieten the dogs of war.\textsuperscript{104}

Such knowledge arises not from the inevitably fickle and ephemeral knowledge distilled from opportunism and revolutionary zeal. Hence Burke’s insistence that “[t]he science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught a priori.”\textsuperscript{105} Indeed “[w]e are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.”\textsuperscript{106} On societal knowledge embodied in nations and experience derived from the ages depends any lasting order – a lesson seldom heeded by those who led the colonial world towards independence.

**A conservative postcolonialism?**

To conclude, conservatism provides a useful starting point for normative arguments promoting a new kind of postcolonial politics in formerly colonized societies aspiring to emancipation and autonomous development. When considering the degree to which liberal and Marxist theories in particular are contingent on the Western historical trajectory in terms of its cultural, socioeconomic and political developments – the Enlightenment, individualism, industrialization, secularization, and so on – it is possible to argue that these dominant ideological and theoretical lenses through which we have read postcolonial developments and predicaments are in fact those most clearly characterized by an imperialistic standpoint vis-à-vis non-Western societies.

Despite the sometimes boastful and strident pronouncements of defenders like Burke, conservatism provides a more humble vision. This conservative vision does not insists on the universality of those values which emerge with the European Enlightenment tradition, and it does not place undue faith in the rationality of visions for improvement based on Western experience which can then be grafted onto non-Western societies. Rather, the conservative vision modestly suggests certain virtues, based on a preference for tradition, moderation and order, to be considered and nourished, according to local circumstances, by those poised to lead the postcolonial world who wish to avoid the excessive risks and potential ruin that comes with grand schemes for change rooted in externally derived philosophies and their attendant abstract notions of human nature and universal values.

From this point of view, conservatism is generally misread and too easily dismissed as inimical to the postcolonial project and its aspirations as commonly envisioned. Conservatism was largely neglected by early postcolonial scholarship which seemed to “ignore conservatism out of the conviction that it is simply inconsequential in the new nations.”\textsuperscript{107} When conservatism is rejected on grounds that it offers only apologies, or at worst justification, for the injustices of the colonial era (in addition to philosophical critiques of conservatism as a poorly defined theoretical system), its ability to address precisely those questions and dilemmas which remain of great importance and often continue to bedevil postcolonial societies is unfortunately overlooked.

Why, for example, did independence movements and post-independence politicians in almost every case opted for Western visions as a basis for their newly rearranged societies? Why was such a strong momentum in favour of deriving a new political order from the Western experience promoted not only by those in the West who genuinely saw themselves as critical of the actual practices of colonialism, but also by those leaders and movements who, although they may have been educated in the West or by means of Western ideological frameworks, knew they would be held responsible for failing to live up to the transformative ideals of modern and progressive theories? Why did actual historical processes of change almost inevitably speed up, if not in every case become thoroughly corrupted by radicalism, rather than proceed apace with caution and guided by a gradualist mindset? What were the reasons for political projects and social reforms based on modernity’s assumptions almost invariably trumping those of tradition, and for the secular being promoted above that of the religious, with the inevitable backlash eventually coming in the shape of various forms of hard-line religious/communal reaction? These are but some of the highly relevant questions which are difficult to ask from a standpoint where the rational, the modern and the secular are understood as the natural starting points from which one must analyse a particular society and its organization, as is the case with both liberal and Marxist analyses of postcolonial societies and politics.
The conservative approach does not require this ideologically imperialistic imposition of a Western philosophical worldview. What it requires is critical reflection upon the intellectual and historical basis on which are articulated grand projects aiming to transform societies. It requires consideration of alternatives to dominant rationalist and modernist thinking about colonialism and postcolonial politics. Thus postcolonial societies can begin to rethink their choices and so attempt to recast social and political reforms in ways that more readily respond, if not simply conform, to traditions that were marginalized during the quickening march towards modernity. Where revolutionaries have smashed icons, razed statues, torn down palaces and houses of worship, levelled cities and otherwise violently rejected ancient heritage – as did the Bolsheviks, the Chinese cultural revolutionists and, more recently, the Taliban – to thereby recreate that supposed tabula rasa on which to imprint their new society, the conservative approach stands as a stark reminder of what happens when change is deemed as necessarily coming at the expense of, rather than in tune with, ancestry and tradition.

From this point of view, it is not difficult to see how the Anglophone conservative tradition can also be sympathetic to reform and change in postcolonial societies when the content of that change is to reposition societies more in accordance with – but not simply dictated by – tradition. It is possible to accommodate at both theoretical and practical levels a meeting of indigenous conservatism and traditionalism with a Western conservative approach open to different claims about how societies ought to be organized and governed. In this manner it is conceivable to discern political dynamics allowing for a postcolonial project which is sceptical rather than hubristic in its view on the ability of political leadership and institutional reform to bring about comprehensive improvements in any society; which is inclined to gradualism and against radicalism in any prescription for change and reform; which values stability and avoids volatility as means to consolidate and gain legitimacy for any change eventually undertaken; which emphasizes the contingent over the deterministic in its analysis of historical trajectories and its approach to change; which embraces diversity across societies as opposed to the homogenising tendency inherent in universalizing aspirations of rival theoretical approaches; and, finally, which therefore understands processes of development and change as inherently open-ended rather than teleological. In theorizing about, and providing normative prescriptions for, the postcolonial, Anglophone conservatism stands in stark contrast to the radical and progressivist postcolonialism which has dominated (Western) scholarship and postcolonial trajectories as shaped by independence movements. It is a conservatism on which can be based a more insightful and culturally sensitive analysis of the postcolonial world and its challenges.

13 Ibid., p. 470.
15 Kekes, Against Liberalism, pp. 159-79.

32 Huntington, ‘Conservatism as an Ideology’.
33 Ibid., pp. 454-5.
36 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
41 Huntington, ‘Conservatism as an Ideology’, p. 456.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
51 Ibid., p. 18.
52 Ibid., p. 16.
53 Ibid., p. 3.
56 Ibid., p. 10.
57 Ibid., p. 19.
60 Sternhell, The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition.
61 Ibid., p. 2.
65 Greifer, ‘Joseph de Maistre and the Reaction Against the Eighteenth Century’.
66 Ibid., pp. 592-3 (emphasis added).
86. Ibid., p. 470.
99. Ibid.
103. Lock, Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France, pp. 11-12.
104. Ibid., p. 29.
116. Ibid., p. 183.