

# The Case for Cautious Conservatism

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**T**heorists of political economy nowadays have an aversion to general principles. They much prefer their deliberations regarding public affairs to be linked to the empirical realities of concrete conditions rather than consider how the proper management of those affairs might inhere in matters of abstract fundamentals. But one occasionally does well to make exceptions to the rules, and the present discussion proposes to highlight one of them.

“Conservatism” is here understood as the political doctrine that the status quo enjoys pride of place and that policies and procedures that involve substantial change from the accepted ways are to be met with skepticism and mistrust. And the ensuing deliberations will endeavor to argue that the theoretical case for such conservatism is stronger and more firmly grounded than generally acknowledged.

However, to reach this destination one must first distinguish some variant versions of the doctrine, for there are conservatisms and conservatisms, with significant differences among them.

## Dogmatic Conservatism

In considering conservatism, a good place to start is with a rather extreme version of the position—a version that for this very reason conservatism’s opponents would

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*The Independent Review*, v. 19, n. 3, Winter 2015, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2015, pp. 435-442.

like to saddle on its advocates. The line of thought at issue in what might be termed *dogmatic conservatism* is predicated on the following ideas:

In the management of public affairs, the status quo is optimal: any change in policy or process will make matters worse. There is no practicable way of improving on the existing arrangement in these matters.

To be sure, the advocates of such a position need not maintain that the status quo is *perfect*—that it involves no negativities of any sort. They may well concede that in various ways the status quo is pretty awful. All they actually need and do hold is that the prevailing situation cannot be improved upon, that although improvements can be imagined in thought, they cannot possibly be realized—there just is no way to get there from here. The substantiation of the position is accordingly predicated on a conditional prediction: namely, that if any changes of policy and procedure were instituted, then matters would get worse—possibly in ways that we may or may not presently be able to foresee. The conservative stance at issue is thus predicated on the idea that the status quo—imperfect though it may be—is nevertheless optimal in the sense of affording the best actually available option.

However, maintaining this version of the position is clearly a rough row to hoe exactly because it generally seems only too easy to envision promising improvements in the conduct of public business. Most people have little difficulty in conjuring up fixes for the world's deficiencies.

### Ad Hoc Conservatism

Conservatives are sometimes portrayed as the “fat cats” who sit smugly at the top of the heap in the status quo. But this is not a viable proposition, for there simply is no one who has “nothing to lose” through possible changes in the current state of things. The sad reality of the human condition is that *things can always get worse!* And this is true for everyone, not just the haves but the have-nots as well, who are only a step away from being have-even-lesses.

Conservatism roots in the crucial fact that one cannot just *abandon* the status quo but has to *replace* it with something detailed and specific. And this replacement invariably takes the potentially risky step from the known to the unknown. In this regard, there comes the prospect of what might be termed *ad hoc conservatism*, whose position runs roughly as follows:

The status quo may well not be optimal: it doubtless can and should be improved upon. But the particular changes being presently contemplated (whatever they be!) will not serve this end: there may well be practicable improvements, but these changes are not among them. Well intentioned

though they doubtless are, they are going to result in conditions that will make matters even worse in certain foreseeable ways.

And so when an innovation is proposed with a view of improvement, the ad hoc conservative produces a multitude of objections, obstacles, and impediments. He does not deny the *possibility* of improvement: he merely insists on its unavailability in the contemplated case—*whatever* that is.

However, this sort of conservatism does not come cheap. It requires a great deal of case-specific detail work because a situation-specific change or negativity has to be built up in detail.

### Presumptive Conservatism

Yet another and decidedly different mode of conservatism opens up at this point. It also flatly acknowledges the suboptimal nature of the status quo. And it even acknowledges that the particular measures being contemplated may well provide for a needed improvement. But it insists that there are nevertheless substantial obstacles in the way because those measures come at too great a price in potential collateral damage.

The adherents of this mode of what might be termed *presumptive conservatism* develop the case for their change-resistant position along the following lines:

There are unquestionably flaws and failings in the status quo, and the contemplated measures may hold promise to remedy them. But two considerations constitute a serious impediment: (1) that the measures may well have unforeseeable negative consequences, and (2) should these consequences occur, there is no prospect of a return to the status quo ante: the changes at issue are irreversible.

A key feature of this presumptive conservatism is that it does not call for a total embargo on innovative change. All it does is impose a significant burden of proof, for it envisions a hurdle to surmount by way of assurances that the specific changes being proposed—whatever they might be—are unlikely to have available results or else are of such a nature that if damage should come about, it can be undone.

The defining factor of this sort of consideration is set by the consideration that proposed changes must overcome the presumption of counterproductiveness—and the more radical the change, the more difficult an obstacle posed by that counterpresumption.

These considerations would clearly constitute an obstacle to the proposed changes and correspondingly create a strong presumption in favor of the status quo. In this regard, this third version of the doctrine is conservatism's most cautious version.

What is it that speaks for adopting such a point of view?

## Allies of the Status Quo: Unpredictability

Modern liberalism takes comfort in a triad of considerations:

- The status quo is imperfect and in principle admits of improvement.
- If no changes are made, there will certainly be no improvement.
- The specific measures being contemplated offer the promise of improvement.

Significantly, conservatism need have no quarrel with any of these considerations, but it insists on a larger contextualization that adds a pivotal further consideration:

- The specific measures being contemplated carry the prospect of making matters worse.

And the question now becomes one of balancing promises against dangers, the positive prospects against the negative.

The pivot of the presumptive conservatism now at issue inheres in the fog of futurity. With large and complex advanced societies, the actual results of sociopolitical innovations are extremely difficult—indeed often virtually impossible—to foresee.

The position at issue is not so much ideologically attitudinal with respect to evaluating proposed changes as it is cognitively skeptical with respect to the prospects of benefiting from the changes. After all, the proportion of revolutions that came anywhere near to realizing the aspirations of their inaugurators is contemptibly small. As ample experience shows, no matter how sensible seeming and well intentioned a measure might be, the emergence of unexpected side effects can never be confidently precluded. The recent history of every advanced society is replete with examples of such policy disasters.

At this point, we confront what might be called the *Induction Paradox*, which inheres in four incontestable facts:

- The rational choice among alternative measures of public policy must rest on considerations of their potential efficacy.
- On this issue (as on others), the only evidence at our disposal relates to how compatible measures have worked in the past.
- How measures work out is always correlative to the prevailing conditions.
- Conditions change, and the conditions of the past are not going to be replicated in the future.

Given these home truths, there is little choice but to be extremely modest in our expectation regarding the efficiency of substantial innovation in matters of public policy. Our ability to see into the future is blurred by the future's inherent unpredictability. And so it is exactly because of conservatives' skepticism regarding man's

ability to make sensible judgments about the management of affairs that they are reluctant to make changes in the status quo.

### Allies of the Status Quo: Irreversibility

In the wake of our predictive limitation, the proper way to proceed is quite straightforward: Don't burn your bridges when you adopt policy innovations! Leave open a way to retract. Avoid steps that are critically irreversible. The genie won't fit back in the bottle.

In democracies, this irreversibility comes about when policies secure a supportive constituency in their favor sufficiently large and powerful that their reversal becomes politically impossible. Thus, consider such examples as (1) the enlargement of the franchise, (2) the decriminalization of some sort of activity, (3) the establishment of some claim or other as a "right," (4) the abolition of a special entitlement for some substantial group, (5) the initiation of a war or other military action,<sup>1</sup> (6) the creation of a government agency or program, such as Social Security.<sup>2</sup> All too obviously, any attempt to reverse a measure in any of these categories will result in automatic rejection.

So, in the end, once the irreversibility of sociopolitical innovation is acknowledged, the most telling argument for conservatism is not a flat-out commitment to the status quo on the grounds of its merits, let alone a visceral aversion to change. Rather, it is a conviction (1) that the actual effects of change of policy and procedure are matters of uncertainty and (2) that if things don't work out as expected, the damage cannot be undone, thanks to the powers of irreversibility.

### Allies of the Status Quo: Systemic Interconnectedness

Consider the following objection: "How can one possibly deny that the status quo—with all its manifest deficiencies—can readily be improved upon?"

In this regard, it is instructive to look at the issue from another angle. A *chaotic condition*, as natural scientists now use this term, obtains when there prevails a situation that is viable in the prevailing circumstances but that will destabilize owing to a change in these circumstances, even one that is extremely minute, with imponderable consequences that cannot possibly be foreseen in informative detail. And for all we can tell, the status quo of a sociopolitical system is just like that.

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1. Robert Higgs (2013) has convincingly shown the irreversibility of government growth during and after times of crisis and war via the "ratchet effect."

2. Echoing this point, when Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act, he is reported to have said, "We put those payroll contributions there so as to give the contributors a legal, moral, and political right to collect their pensions and their unemployment benefits. With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my social security program" (qtd. in Schlesinger 1988, 308–9).

Consideration regards the prevailing sociopolitical system in much this light, with the removal of even a major negativity carrying in its wake the prospect of yet greater misfortune. As conservatives see the system, the sociopolitical arrangements currently in place constitute a coordinated and tight-woven whole. With ill-considered departures from the status quo, one embarks upon a voyage into uncharted seas.

On this basis, the rationale for a judicious conservatism becomes straightforward: problematic though the status quo may be, the contemplated changes may well make matters yet worse. And should it turn out that they do, they are likely to be irreversible so that we cannot just “go back again.” Viewed from this angle, the case for conservatism has a clear and telling rationale: a prudent case for the long-term best interests of the group that constitutes the individual’s life context.

### A Matter of Balance

The preceding discussion has considered a series of increasingly less radical conservative position:

- *Dogmatic conservatism*: The status quo is superior to any practicable alternative position.
- *Ad hoc conservatism*: The status quo is superior to the presently contemplated alternative positions.
- *Presumptive conservatism*: The status quo is such that no available alternatives are demonstrably superior to it.

To be sure, nothing in the presently contemplated case for conservatism contradicts the idea that the status quo may admit of improvement. But the problem is the prospect that certain definitions and specifically identified measures are going to get us from here to there. The present question is: Are these presently contemplated changes likely to realize their intended objectives? The conservative envisions a negative presumption there and sees the burden of proof to lie with the proponents of change. The liberal envisions a positive presumption and sees the burden of proof to lie with his status quo-supporting opponents. And public life being what it is, the weight of bitter experience is on conservation’s side. (Few are the resolutions that have realized the visions of their initiations.)

Four quantities are in play in the cost–benefit calculation for the rational assessment of proposed changes:

- The extent of the possible gains that can reasonably be expected if things go as planned
- The probability of realizing these gains
- The extent of possible losses that can be expected if things go wrong
- The probability of realizing these losses

The conservative envisions the natural human tendency on the part of change proponents to exaggerate the first two quantities. Accordingly, his concern is not just with the political-ideological issues of evaluating the first and third items. Promised on his agenda is the purely factual matter of the probabilities at issue in the second and fourth. He need not undervalue the good things being promised by the advocates of change and will worry about the prospects of their actual delivery.

And so in the final analysis the matter comes down to the question of whether the options on offer are such that the balance of possible gain versus actual risk is sufficiently favorable to the former to support the proposed changes. And this question in turn leads to the problem of how high to set the bar of risk acceptability, which must in large measure hinge on the particular circumstances and conditions of the specific context at hand. At each step here, the cautious conservative insists upon erring on the side of safety, with not so much risk aversion but prudence as the watchword.

### The Moral Dimension

The cost-benefit calculation is not quite the end of the matter, for although such a perspective puts stress on the rational evaluation of prospective change, this evaluation is only part of conservatism's rationale because there is also a moral dimension. Due care for the interests of the larger community is a key moral demand not only upon public servants but upon citizens at large. And as ethically sensitive conservatives see it, the status quo also has moral validity in addition to whatever politicoeconomic advantages it may afford—either (with Hegel) because it has emerged from the natural processuality of communal endeavor or (with Hobbes) because it serves the indispensable interests of the public good. The status quo also obtains moral authority (1) through the very fact of its acceptance (or at least acquiescence) by the community and (2) through the correlative circumstance of its serving (to whatever credit it does) the felt interests of the community that initially grounded its formation. Overall, then, the moral foundation of conservatism resides in a combination of two key factors: a *respect* for the stance of the wider community that acknowledges the limitations of the individual's personal judgment and a *benevolent concern* for the well-being of others that refrains from putting their interests at risk in the absence of due consultation and well-informed consent.<sup>3</sup>

### Coda

A cautious conservative of the presently contemplated stripe does not oppose change through viewing the status quo as something perfect beyond any possibility of

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3. The moral dimension of conservatism is emphasized in Russell Kirk's works. See in particular his classic *The Conservative Mind* (1986) as well as *Prospects for Conservatives* (1989).

improvement, but rather because he views the contemplated changes—whatever they be—as likely to make matters yet worse. His pathway to the status quo is actually a *via negativa*, for he is deeply pessimistic regarding the prospects of the putative improvements currently on offer.

Approached from this perspective, the difference between liberalism and conservatism is not so much one of political—let alone economic—ideology. Rather, it reflects a difference in temperament, a difference in attitude regarding the possibilities of the future, which in turn carries in its wake an attitudinal difference of expectation regarding the ultimate results of contemplated change.

To be sure, at this point a critical reader might perhaps object: “But the whole story that has been unfolded here—unpredictability, unwelcome consequences, irreversibility, presumption, pessimism, and the rest—is only old news. Nothing is really novel here; it’s all a matter of prosaic common sense.” Perhaps so, dear critic. You are likely quite right. But what you are claiming is really no objection. It is, rather, just exactly what constitutes the core of cautious conservatism’s case. And at this point, the world being what it is, the key factor is likely to be simply that of how much experience regarding public affairs one has under one’s belt.

However, conservatism’s cautious attitude is the product not so much of psychological dispositions as of experiential contextualization. Its nature is not so much personally dispositional as observationally empirical, reflecting the extent to which “bitter experience” casts disillusion upon hopeful but disappointed expectations regarding sociopolitical innovations. The standpoint of cautious conservatism is not so much hard-hearted as hard-headed, for there is much truth in the dictum, dubiously attributed to Walter Churchill, “Show me a young conservative, and I’ll show you someone with no heart; show me an old liberal, and I’ll show you someone with no head.”

The signpost that sensible conservatism insists on posting at the construction projects along life’s road read neither STOP nor RESUME SPEED but rather CAUTION.

And so although this discussion has unfolded under the heading “The Case for Cautious Conservatism,” it might just as well have been entitled “The Case for Conservative Caution,” for in the end the two conceptions are correlative.

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