

Conservatism: Conceptual Perspectives

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Abstract

From authors of different political orientations, we analyze in this article some definitions about the conservative persuasion. In addition, we highlight common themes and political and rhetoric articulation particular to that philosophic tradition. We emphasize primarily the studies of Samuel Huntington and Albert Hirschman about the specificity of this thinking and language.

Keywords

Conservatism, Edmund Burke and Political Theory.

One of the most interesting social consequences of the historian's profession is the demonstration that certain schemes of thinking, often manifested in day-to-day language, cannot be submitted to immanent and timeless judgment. Indeed, on the contrary. Only historicization makes it possible to realize that they are not static and etched in stone, as it were, regarding semantics and its proper historical content. We argue that these claims are particularly true in the case of conservatism. The concept will be discussed in what follows. Let us proceed.

Before expatiating on the many definitions of conservatism I believe it is important to enunciate some peculiarities that pertain particularly to the History of Concepts. To this end, I shall resort to the formulations elaborated by Reinhart Koselleck (2012), which will certainly be useful in the clarifying the concept of conservatism. The first point discussed deals with the epistemological imbrications in the fields of Social History and the History of Concepts. Koselleck (2012) affirms that without common concepts there is no society.

Neither – and in this regard I see a causal relationship – can there be a space of unity of political action (KOSELLECK, 2012, p. 98). Furthermore, Koselleck (2012) interprets concepts as fundamental in complex *social-political systems*, and not as mere abstractions decoupled from historical specificities and the social system they represent – in more or less evident ways.

Also there is what Koselleck calls a *semantic battle* (2012, 98), that is, the intersections between language and daily language that seek to impose, maintain or even alter social positions and, eventually, enunciate new political positions. According to the historian, it was with the advent of the French Revolution that these semantic battles intensify and started provoking more visible results in a reality that is not exclusively discursive.

Since after the French Revolution, according to him, the scope of concepts is broadened. They no longer simply acted as cognitive keys of the real, but began pointing to the future. Political privileges yet to be translated into concrete experiences would start being articulated by language. This process would translated into the watering down of the empirical content of concepts but, consequently there would be an increase in the expectation of “future realization contained within” (KOSELLECK, 2012, p. 102).

It is in this context that Koselleck points to the emergence of several isms, concepts that arose to group, order and galvanize the “structurally unarticulated” masses (KOSELLECK, 2012, p. 103). This *semantic umbrella* regards terms such as conservatism, liberalism and socialism, for example.

Another particularly relevant issue is Koselleck's warning (2012) with respect to the notion that any analysis of concepts that deems itself historical cannot be merely limited to the linguistic aspects of expressions. It is equally imperative to pay due attention to

social history and not only the history of language. Thus is it not advisable to ignore the contact area between semantics and the contents of social and historical order, for example. It is not for any other reason that he states that the “scientific redefinition of past lexical meanings is one of the basic commandments of diachronic studies” (KOSELLECK, 2012, p. 104-105).

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It is precisely this diachronic perspective which informs us that we should take the necessary precautions, for example, regarding words that keep the same form yet whose meanings vary through time. It is also necessary to take further precautions with perfect homonyms – when we say conservatism, according to the continental European purview, we might be evoking something rather distinct from the North American brand of conservatism. It is important to remain attentive to cultural, social and political specificities of the expression under analysis.

Even so, despite all the emphasis above on difference, one ought to remember that a concept must always be clear, polysemic and general (KOSELLECK, 2012, p. 108). Koselleck also was the one who reminded us that “a word becomes a concept if the totality of social-political and empirical circumstances in which and for which the word is used is aggregated” (2012, p. 109).

The theoretical premise of the History of Concepts is related to the mediation of continuities and alteration of such concepts, with the social, political and historical always as the backdrop. Furthermore, according to Koselleck (2012, p. 115), a concept possesses “the possibility of being employed in a generalizing fashion, of building types and allowing angles of comparison.” A history of concepts must always be capable of inducing structural question that must be responded by Social History (KOSELLECK, 20102, p. 116). In this article, we propose some possible forms of defining conservative thought, both as a political phenomenon, and also a philosophical tradition in a broader sense. To this ends, we resorted to author who at one point or another attempted to do the same: the American historian George H. Nash, the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott, the political scientists Corey Robin, the French-American critic George Steiner, the American political scientist Samuel Huntington and, lastly, the German economists and specialist of political ideology, Albert O. Hirschman.

In Nash’s work (1976) there is, specifically, a historical interpretation of the North American strand of conservative thinking. His main concern is to create not only a genealogy of the movement but also, in equal measure, a kind of Social History, with main and secondary characters, sociability networks, intellectual and political affinities, general context, etc.

In turn, Michael Oakeshott (1991), is not so concerned with historical and cultural aspects of tradition, but rather inscribes it within a broader philosophical perspective, much more related to political theory, strictly conceived, that historical interpretation circumscribed to one particular case, as in Nash (1976).

In Robin’s case (2011), as in Nash (1976), the main reference for the interpretation of tradition is the North American Tradition. His analysis focuses on the classist thrust of conservative arguments, as well as on the dissonance between concerns that refer to social and political issues in public and private domains of communities.

For Steiner (1989), the main interpretative key to understand the conservative argument is the theological aspect of the problem. That is, for him, conservative thinking and discourse are not structured in merely rational and/or secular manner. Whether explicitly or tangentially, there is always a metaphysical appeal to a sense of transcendence and absolute. Hence, it is not otherwise that the conservative argument is articulated based on anthropological pessimism, even if the foundation of this pessimism is secular. As Anthony Quinton (1978) demonstrated, often its origin is derived from a Christian theological *weltanschauung*.

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Be it as it may, notwithstanding the varied degree of analytical power of these different arguments, here we have chosen to highlight the analyses of conservative thinking carried out by Huntington (1957) and Hirschman (1991). We believe that both are not only the most complete and sophisticated but that are also, especially when jointly employed, capable of shedding light upon interesting and infrequent angles of this tradition.

The main merit of Huntington (1957) is that of avoiding analytical idiosyncrasies in examining conservative thought. First, he never slipped into historicist excess or particularism. His exposition and analysis pay special attention to the dynamism and pluralism of conservative philosophy, but is also attuned to common – and hence generalizable – distinctive traits of tradition. On the other hand, the political though he presents is never decoupled from historical contingencies nor reduced to a mere system of abstract ideas removed from daily existence. Huntington (1957) treats it as a *situational ideology*, an expression that will be seen in further detail at the end of this article.

On the other hand, Hirschman's argument (1991) gives attention to the language employed in the conservative political discourse. In fact, its main virtue goes beyond, it lies in the identification of certain rhetorical patterns dear to the lexicon of conservatism. Hirschman (1991) creates a simple and extremely functional analytical typology. Based on this typology with the addition of Huntington's argument (1957) as to the "situational" character of conservative ideology that we shall examine the distinctive elements of this philosophical and political tradition.

1. George Nash and North American Conservatism

Hewing closely to the concept of conservatism, it is important to proceed to the examination of a few possible definitions. First, we can resort to the classic *The Conservative Intellectual Movements in America*, of the North American historian George H. Nash (1976).¹

In his work, Nash (1976) deals with something he classifies as a movement. In other words, he emphasizes to the action of intellectuals "who did not simply try to understand the world, but also strived to transform, restore and preserve it (NASH, 1976, p.xi). The focus, therefore, is not on daily party politics, although, of course, one issue is never completely unlinked from the other.

The first problem alluded to by Nash (1976) regarding the search for an objective and coherent definition of conservatism is that fact that a substantial part of the intellectuals who classify themselves as conservatives point to the non-systematization of an intelligible doctrine able to inform them, politically and philosophically, regarding agenda x or y. This is partially a true perception. In the absence of foundational texts or a cohesive

program, conservatives have claimed for themselves a non-ideological status. Ideology would be a term applied only to their political antipodes, that is, to the other.

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However, if it is possible to state that conservatism is not a doctrine that possesses a theoretical and philosophical orthodoxy, it is equally plausible to identify some distinctive traits that inform what we could indeed call a conservative cosmivision. However, this point will be further examined ahead.

It is also interesting to observe that Nash (1976) always remained critical to the idea that a genuinely conservative movement could emerge in America, given that this phenomenon is supposedly exclusive to European institutions. Let me explain. This pertains to the notion that only certain European historical experiences – feudalism, aristocracy, the presence of States with official religions in the Middles Ages, for example – could, so to speak, generate a conservative movement.

According to this interpretation, there would not even be such a thing as North American conservatism. The diverse political culture in the USA would thus be strictly informed by a political perception derived from a liberal ethos. Here we must resort to the oft-cited and famous preface of *The Liberal Imagination*, in which cultural critic Lionel Trilling (2008) argues that in the USA, liberalism was not only a dominant political tradition, but the only existent tradition. According to him, at the time conservative or reactionary ideas did not widely circulate (TRILLING, 2008, p. xv).

Here, however, I will briefly digress from Trilling's argument (2008). Curiously, and although it is often cited, the excerpt in which he points to the absence of conservative ideas and, on the other hand, the hegemonic domination of a liberal tradition in the US does not end there. According to Trilling, even if conservative ideas weren't present in the public debate, it would not be possible to jump to conclusion of the absence of conservative and reactionary impulses in society. Here it is important to highlight the expression used by the author: impulse. I understand it is analogous to another expression I will use ahead: *disposition*, as Oakeshott (1991) chose to call it.

2. On Oakeshott's "Conservative Disposition"

In a classic essay on the subject, the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1991) would classify conservatism as a *disposition*, hence, something analogous to the impulse described by Trilling (2008). According to Oakeshott (1991), and here we enter a recurring subject dear to the hear of conservative thought, conservatism could never be taken as a creed or doctrine. If, on one hand, it is not possible to understand, according to him, conservatism as a unified and coherent corps of principles and norms, on the other one, it is possible to point out some peculiarities regarding *disposition*.

First, Oakeshott (1991) affirms that conservatism is the sum of a disposition in becoming content with what is available in the present, with the refusal to search for something else – yet to be defined – in the future. This is an interesting aspect of his conception of conservatism as it reinforces a conservatism of the present, and not of the past. According to him, it is important to be grateful towards the past as it bequeathed us with what must be conserved in the present. However, it is important not to idolize the past. Once again: conservatism such as described by Oakeshott (1991) is a conservatism that affirms the present, and never the past.

It must be said, nevertheless, that this concept must be relativized, given that the notions of present and past are, by definition, naturally, imbricated. Indeed, each critique of the present can be, even if obliquely, as an elegy of a certain past, deemed superior to a decadent and degenerated present.

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For the British philosopher, conservatism is founded often on the imminence of a sense of loss, that is, the idea that something valued in the present is about to be obliterated by some radical political agenda. It is also true that conservatism usually voices grievance of something lost. When we speak of loss it is hard not to associate this feeling to the Romantic ethos. In *The Roots of Romanticism*, Isaiah Berlin (2010) affirms that it was precisely with advent of Romanticism that failure and loss became an aesthetic experience. Loss was in a level morally superior to victory, given that frequently the first was the practical consequence of an idealist life, being idealism another typically Romantic trait. It is not surprising therefore that many southern US states called the Civil War the War of Aggression to the North or The Lost Cause, in a narrative exercise that was basically Romantic, conservative and pre-modern.

Another of Oakeshott's argument (1991) is that the *conservative disposition* is founded in a notion of human nature. That is, on the idea that human character is resilient to abrupt change and innovation. With regard to social change an interesting analogy is made. According to Oakeshott, the conservative disposition pays greater respect to tools than projects since if projects normally demand changes – usually drastic ones – in real life, the tools are capable of acting discretely in an entire class of projects. Furthermore, the use of tools cannot be dissociated from *practice* and *familiarity*, elements dear to the “conservative disposition”.

With regard specifically to politics, he argues that the *conservative disposition* should privilege a government that does not inflame the passions present in society. The ideal government, in these terms, is that which is guided by moderation. According to him, government must reconcile and pacify and not inflame passions. And this is so, according to the British philosopher, not because passions are vices and moderation is tantamount to virtue but because there is an imperative of moderation in a society in which many segments are guided by passion.

If Oakeshott's *conservative disposition* (1991) is a definition of conservatism postulated by a conservative intellectual it is interesting to pay keen attention to the reading by an intellectual from the opposite field: the American political scientist, Corey Robin (2011).

3. Conservatism and the Question of Power

According to Robin (2011, p.04),² conservatism can be understood as a meditation on the experience of wielding this power, having this power threatened and later trying to reassume it or simply keep it.

For him, it is the “theoretical voice of the animus contrary to the agency of subaltern classes” (ROBIN, 2011, p. 07). According to him, conservatism takes the prize for providing the most consistent argument against the independent and autonomous exercise of the will of the *lower classes*.

Robin (2011, p.07-08) argues that an erroneous and often perpetuated notion regarding the differences between left and right has to do with the idea that while the former privileges equality the latter prioritizes freedom. In his view, conservatives invariably position themselves in favor of freedom for the *upper classes* and contrary to the freedom of the *lower classes*. What they see and fear in equality is not only the potential threat to freedom but in reality its extension to the *lower classes*.

To illustrate, he cites the case of Edmund Burke (ROBIN, 2011, p.08), for whom the main threat posed by the French Revolution was precisely the “inversion of the obligation of command and deferral.” In Burke’s words “a perversion of the natural order of things”.

Robin (2011, p. 13) argues that when conservatives look *from above* at the agitation provoked by the democratic movements, what they see is “a terrible disturbance of private life in power.” Once again, recurring to Burke, he remembers of the warnings made by the Irish politician concerning the annihilation of the bonds of subordination between classes, “no manor would be safe from its serfs and no official from its soldiers”.

Robin (2011, p. 14), enunciates the general distinctive elements of conservatism through anecdote, the particular. For example, he argues that the mere possibility of an irruption in the private power structure is capable of transforming a “man of reform into a man of reaction”. He refers to the case of John Adams, someone unequivocally guided by the principles of enlightenment who believed that the “consensus among people was the only moral foundation of a government”. However, when instigated by his wife to extend these principles to families and the particular situation of women in American society, Adams replies with disdain. For him, women already were the most powerful and numerous group in the USA and, thus, it was strange for them to voice any discontent with the status quo.

According to Robin (2011), the conservative argument always acted upon two social spheres: the public and private. According to this perception, there were no significant problems in eventually acceding entitlements and democratic benefits to citizens, at least concerning public participation in the State’s functioning. However, the true issue is when the *lower classes* desire to increase in size, truly and significantly, their participation in more or less private instances, as in the case of the family, the factory and the fields.

Besides, the author describes a typical reactive disposition within conservatism. Without the presence of a radical antagonistic agenda, it ceases to exist. All the conservative appeal targeted towards organic changes, tacit knowledge, liberty, prudence, and precedent ends up sapped of its strength, losing its rhetorical potency, if not facing an opposing radical political program.

Another particular and important characteristic of the conservative argument is that, according to the author, while it structures itself philosophically in opposition to the left’s political program, it simultaneously mimics the radical tone of its agenda. It proposes, broadly speaking, the following: there is a political/cultural establishment currently dominated by radicals; consequentially, there is an imperative to vigorously oppose this establishment (ROBIN, 2011, p. 25). In other words, under specific circumstances, the conservative argument is not only the denial of the idea of defending the *status quo*, but frequently its own first line of attack. The conservative perception tells us to come to the defense of institutions and traditions that might be threatened by a radical force. Therefore, it would be adequate, even advisable, following this logic, to adopt the adversary’s *modus operandi* when organizing political resistance, counter-attacking, or adopting any other similar measure.

It is also important to point out, according to Robin (2011), the contingent character of conservatism. This contingent character is derived by the fact that it is reactive to the left. I will explain. The radical programs that must be resisted, being historically variable, also require variable methods to oppose them. From the French Revolution to women's liberation: as soon as the threat changes, as a consequence, we see a change in the method to fight it (ROBIN, 2011, p. 35). It is then possible to affirm, according to Robin's critique (2011), that conservatism is reactive, contingent, and complementary to the left.

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4. Steiner and the Theological Dimension of Conservatism

Regarding possible definitions of the concept of conservatism, we are well suited reading the arguments of cultural critic George Steiner (1989).

He points out, for example, the anti-theoretical character of counterrevolutionary writing:³ it is a type of argument that frequently turned its back on what it perceived as the use of an "abstract political theory and the attempt to impose analytical and systematic projections into what constitutes the essentially irrational, instinctive, and contingent character of human issues" (STEINER, 1989, p. 135).

Also, Steiner (1989) noticed a recurring psychological and stylistic aspect in what he called the "counterrevolutionary sensibility": an ardent nostalgia for a tainted period, something created discursively by embellishing links to arcadia - an approach opposite to the one followed by Oakeshott (1991) and his conservatism of the present.

Besides, he emphasizes as well, how conservative skepticism towards attempts of social engineering could, one way or another, threaten an intuitive and communitarian lifestyle - distinctive traces of which can be found, all of them, in Edmund Burke's classic (1982).

Steiner (1989) views the conservative or counterrevolutionary *modus operandi* differently than Robin (2011). Less a conscious strategy to maintain a certain power structure, Steiner (1989, p. 148), sees the conservative political tradition as informed by a philosophically pessimistic point of view. Even beyond that, it is an unequivocally pessimistic *vision of history*. For conservatives, human history can be aptly described as the uninterrupted succession of injustices, miseries - public and private -, wars and devastations. For the author, this value-based condition of history is explained by the man's inherently *fallen state*.

It is possible, therefore, if we choose to follow Steiner's reasoning (1989), to notice a philosophical substrate similar, or at least analogous, to the Christian theological perspective. Human *disgrace* - literally, the absence of divine grace -, is considered an axiomatic data point. If man is naturally fallible, any attempt of revolution or social engineering is doomed to fail and should be considered a *sinful* action.

According to this perspective, the only and true revolution is the one described by the Book of Revelations, in which the *injustices and absurdities* of humanity would be resolved by a final system of reward and punishment. Any impulse to anticipate this process of judgment would leave us with nothing less than *blasphemy* (STEINER, 1989, p. 148). From there we reach the inevitable corollary of the conservative argument: any attempts of social engineering would result in an even worse scenario. The Jacobin terror and the Stalinist gulags were what Edmund Burke classified as the - natural - consequence of a *homicidal philanthropy* (STEINER, 1989, p.149).

It is interesting to point out that, although Steiner mentions Burke frequently, this theological type of conservatism is closer to someone like Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) than the Irish politician and man of letters.

In chapter 17 of Alan Ryan's *On Politics*, we can clearly see that most of Maistre's reactions to the French Revolution differ from Burke's. While the latter reacted, despite his rhetorical affectation, to the events of 1789 as a liberal-conservative, the former behaved as a conservative informed by, basically, a reactionary, theological, and absolutist impulse (RYAN, 2012).

Maistre had read and admired Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). However, when he published his own book on the subject, *Considérations sur la France* (1791), he made use of the one of Burke's main premises in his critique of the Revolution, the idea that it was a series of *non-natural* events, but expanded the effects of the argument. That is, according to him, what was happening in France was not only something that went against nature, in Burke's vision, but also some kind of divine punishment. And it seemed that way to him because humanity as a whole was made up of sinful and degenerate individuals.

While Burke (1790) believes the appeal to authority emanates from institutions that withstood the *test of time* - the monarchy and the church, to cite the most frequent examples -, for Maistre (1791) there is only one source of legitimate authority: God.

To Alan Ryan, Joseph de Maistre's logic was based on the idea that the problem with Enlightenment was not limited to the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, but encompassed, equally, the Lockean argument - to some extent, endorsed by Burke, nonetheless. Unlike Burke, Maistre did not partially reject the Enlightenment - and its more radical consequences -, its rejection, on the contrary, was wholehearted.

Anyway, Steiner (1989) describes the conservative argument as having an essentially theological and prophetic character. According to him, these characteristics made it impermeable to negotiations in merely positivist and ideological terms, since it was not a strictly secular system of thought, and this, it seems to me, is his great insight for interpreting this phenomenon.

5. Huntington and Hirschman: Ideological Analysis, Rhetorical Analysis

Regardless of the type of reading we choose, as a *disposition*, in Oakeshott (1991), as the maintenance of a power structure that would be under threat by the "lower classes," in Robin (2011), or as an argument informed by a theological cosmology, in Steiner (1989), it is important to pay attention to the polysemic character of the concept of conservatism.

We are analyzing conservatism as a complex and multifaceted political tradition. The best way to understand it is, certainly, to interpret the definitions mentioned above as complementary and not as mutually exclusive. And, besides that, it is imperative to be aware that, even though some basic distinctive principles are discernible, conservatism invariably molds and adapts itself to the culture that hosts it - it is not an accident that the United States saw the rise of conservative intellectual tradition with a clear liberal bias and discourse. We need, therefore, to avoid an *essentializing* perspective, which considers immutable and normal political and historical realities that possess varying degrees of similarities and divergences.

Still, I believe that the more interesting analyses of the conservative phenomenon, due to their clarity and depth, were done by Samuel Huntington (1957) and Albert O. Hirschman (1991). While the former delves into what he classifies as the “situational” character of the conservative tradition, the latter establishes a rhetorical typology of its political discourse.

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a) Huntington and the Conservative Ideology

In June 1957, Samuel Huntington published, in *The American Political Science Review*, his famous essay *Conservatism as an Ideology*. In the article, the author defines ideology as being “the system of ideas concerned with the distribution of political and social values and acquiesced in by a significant social group” (HUNTINGTON, 1957, p.454). He lists three major, conflicting interpretations of the nature of conservatism.

First, we have the aristocratic argument, or aristocratic theory, which defines modern conservatism as the reaction of an agrarian nobility to the French Revolution as well as to the liberal principles and ascension of the bourgeois class throughout the 18th and until the mid-19th century. According to this perspective, liberalism is a bourgeois ideology, socialism and Marxism a proletariat one, and conservatism the ideology of the aristocratic class.

Still according to this interpretation, conservatism is connected to the land, feudalism, mediavalism, and a certain class system. It is in opposition, therefore, to the bourgeoisie, industrialism, liberalism, and individualism. To critics who have made this argument, such as Louis Hartz, for example, a political tradition like the conservative one would be doomed to fail in a place such as the United States, given the absence of a historic feudal period and contrarianism with a political culture possessing a strong bourgeois and liberal bias.

On the other hand, we also have the autonomous argument, or autonomous theory, which states that conservatism is not, *a priori*, linked to any class interest, nor is its rise dependent on any specific historical variables or a specific stage of societal correlations of force. According to this interpretation, conservatism is an autonomous system of ideas, defined by certain *universal values*, such as justice, order, moderation, and balance.

Undoubtedly, the autonomous theory was especially popular among the main American conservatives as a philosophical/intellectual/political system available to any individual, independently of social class or any other variable.

Finally, we have the situational argument, or situational theory, which sees conservatism as an answer, or tactic, adopted when established institutions are under threat. According to this interpretation, the conservative tradition is a system of ideas committed to the defense of a certain social order.

According to this argument, the conservative tradition cherishes the existing value of present institutions and practices, something analogous to what Oakeshott (1991) discussed, which did not necessary translate into a congenital aversion to change *per se*. By the way, if the idea is to preserve the primary elements of social/political order, it becomes necessary to allow, gradually, changes in the secondary elements of this same order.

Huntington (1957) argues that the common thread within these three theories of conservatism is the fact that all of them relate ideology with the historical process, even

if they deny this relationship. The aristocratic theory limits conservatism to a specific social class and adapts it to a specific type of society. The autonomous theory argues that conservatism can arise at any *historical stage* of a society. The situational theory posits that conservative principles emerge when a certain group defends institutions under attack by other social/political groups. Still, all three theories agree on a specific point: conservatism is an ideology.

According to Huntington (1957), another element common to all three theories is the belief that Edmund Burke was the archetypal conservative, that is, the one who perfectly embodied the beliefs and values of this political tradition throughout history. Therefore, the methodology that he applies involves, on one hand, listing the distinctive major tenets of the *Burkean ideology*, and on the other, analyzing during which historical circumstances they manifested themselves. For Huntington (1957), of the three theories on the conservative tradition, the situational possesses the most explanatory power.

As mentioned above, Huntington (1957) initially lists the distinctive characteristics of the *Burkean ideology*, which are, let's say, consensual among the three theories, then he goes on to analyze them. They are:

a) first, there is the belief that man is a *religious animal*, that is, the belief that civil society is based on, necessarily, a religious substrate;

b) second, we have the interpretation of society as a natural organism, whose growth happens slowly and organically. According to this interpretation, institutions must be respected because they represent the *accumulated knowledge of previous generations*, and there we have the importance of the prescription⁴ statute in burkean thought (BROMWICH, 2014);

c) the idea of *truth* does not exist in an universal and abstract mode, it is a concept that can only be derived from concrete experiences. To the burkean ideology, man is not only a being guided by reason and logic, but also and equally by other more reliable guides, such as instincts, emotions, prejudices, and experience;

d) the belief that, if there is such a thing as the *rights of man*, they derive from the *obligations of individuals*, and not from an universal and abstract foundation of values. In this reading, the sense of community is always superior to the idea of the individual. Also, *evil* is inherent in *human nature* and not in any societal institution;

e) individuals are intrinsically unequal, except in a moral sense. Societies are excessively complex and plural organisms, so there is no concept of social organization not based on a system of hierarchies, leadership, differentiation, classes, and orders;

f) a skepticism regarding any project, governmental or political, untested and not based on concrete experiences - "human ambitions are high, but men's vision is short" (HUNTINGTON, 1957, p.456).

Taking these six principles as basic ones in the constitution of the conservative ideology we can analyze the merit of the three theories mentioned above. First, we must state that none of the six principles is exclusively linked to an agrarian, aristocratic, or feudal class. Even though there are allusions to the inevitability of a society with class divisions and inequality, there is no normative argument that deals with a specific type of society or even political organization.

On the other hand, if we think about the autonomous theory, there is nothing in the principles we have analyzed that shows an universal and timeless appeal of the Burkean ideology. On the contrary, there is an unequivocally refractory attitude towards principles which are abstract, imbued with universal validity, and not based on concrete experience and established traditions.

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Therefore, the aristocratic theory fails because it mistakenly circumscribes conservatism to only one social class and to feudalism, while the autonomous theory stumbles by believing that conservative principles are capable of arising, indistinctly, from any historical process. The main problem of the aristocratic theory is to pay too much attention to the *social process*, while main problem of the autonomous theory is to ignore the same variable.

However, it is the situational theory that elicits an affinity with all six of the basic principles of the Burkean ideology. To Huntington (1957), conservatism relies on "God, nature, and man, always, in order to justify a certain existing order (HUNTINGTON, 1957, p.457).

Another important point, discussed by Huntington (1957) is the fact that, unlike other philosophical systems, such as liberalism, socialism, and fascism, the conservative tradition lacks a normative and autonomous character with regards to the ideal configuration of a State or society. Based on conservative Burkean principles, it is not possible to deduce any kind of social/military/economic organization of society x or y. Conservatism does not show what must be, only what it can not be.

Even though non-conservative ideologies must be understood based on their plural and heterogenous characters - there are diverse formulators, there is always a complex agenda - they are always committed to their basic principles and to the idea of changing some aspect of reality. Therefore, it is possible to state that they are *ideational*, their nature is *transcendent*. The conservative ideology, on the other hand, flows in the opposite direction, it is institutional, its nature is *immanent*. In this instance, perhaps Huntington (1957) disagreed with Steiner's (1989) argument for example.

In any case, the conservative ideology must always be understood as the product of intense social and ideological conflicts. It shows up only when some social/political group challenges the basic characteristics of institutions and the current social/political order and seeks to transcend, with varying degrees of radicalism, the nature of these same institutions and orders. The conservative ideology is a reaction, a defense against the attacks by groups committed to ideologies with an ideational and transcendent character.

Another interesting aspect of Huntington's essay (1957) is the characterization of what he calls *reactionary*, someone so driven to recreate the ideal version of the past, a supposed *Golden Age*, and contains within its epistemology, strong *ideational* and *transcendent* characteristics. That is, reactionarism, according to this interpretation, is as much a negation of conservatism as any other radical philosophy. As Huntington (1957) states, a "change towards the past" is as much of a change as a "change towards the future" (HUNTINGTON, 1957, p.460).

If we consider Edmund Burke to be the modern conservative archetype, something all three theories do not hesitate to do, the inadequacy of the aristocratic and autonomous arguments become even more evident. The situational argument, on the other hand, shows total analytical applicability.

For instance, the aristocratic theory fails in the following points: a) the English society defended by Burke was not exclusively feudal, nor exclusively aristocratic; b) if Burke defended English society, he equally and vigorously defended Indian and American societies, which had completely different social and political foundations; c) even though his world vision had strong conservative features, it also contained liberal - *whigs* - elements, which were equally important.

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The autonomous theory does not provide us with reasonable explanations, since it: a) ignores the fact that Burke's writings always seek to answer relevant and specific questions; b) does not take into account Burke's conscious effort to not propose solutions to problems with a universal and abstract character; c) does not realize that the main distinctive features of burkean political thought sought to justify institutions that had *withstood the test of time*.

John Locke, Adam Smith, and Montesquieu were the main figures responsible for the *ideational* creation of institutions defended, most of the time, by Burke. However, Burke basically worked to preserve them. It is important to emphasize that, in addition to Burke's defense of the British constitutional system and the *whigs'* government structure, we also find a vigorous defense of democratic institutions in America, autocratic institutions in France, and Hindu institutions in India. With this example, we can clearly see the *situational impulse* burkean ideology.

For Huntington (1957), conservatism, ironically an ideology that always appeals to history and traditions, had a recurring problem: the lack of a concrete sense of history and tradition. This is explained, in some measure, by taking into account the situational character of burkean ideology. That is, for Huntington (1957), conservative ideology must always be understood as an impulse that arises with the purpose to counter a particular threat, or a potential threat, and always circumscribed to a singular, specific historical framework.

According to this interpretation, there is a frail connection between the many manifestations and conservative reactions throughout history, in the most varied contexts. Actually, the conservative ideology always established an immediate connection to the threat it wished to combat. Regarding the structure of conservative thought, it is possible to describe it as having an unequivocally adaptive and contingent character.

According to Huntington (1957), it is precisely the situational character of the conservative ideology that explains the fact that many people have gone through a *revolutionary phase* during their youth. Since there is no precedence of a tradition in the conservative ideology, it only emerges as an option for individuals when a certain historical framework arises, and with it a threat to certain institutions and a social/political order cherished by these same individuals.

Huntington (1957) was a critic of the burgeoning conservative American movement of the post-war period. According to the author, the individuals who were part of that group had three main problems. First, they were not quite sure of what they wanted to defend. These conservatives oscillated, basically, between two groups: 1) those who defended a liberal economy; 2) those who were constantly motivated by a radical European aristocratic impulse, profoundly dissatisfied with American institutions and practices. Also, regarding this second group, Huntington (1957) points out that, a world vision based on the almost complete rejection of the social/political order of the United States while

also preaching the emulation of European institutions and practices foreign to American tradition and culture, can not be characterized as a true conservatism.

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Second, Huntington (1957) did not believe the threat these conservatives wanted to counter was very well defined. To some of them, the enemy was liberalism, though exactly what they meant by liberalism was not quite clear. To others, the threat was secularism, materialism, modernism, and totalitarianism.

The affluence and ample space of political consensus, at least in mainstream politics at that moment in American society, made any effort to find enemies and domestic threats futile except, of course, in the case of communism. Actually, if there is any criticism that can be levied at Huntington (1957), it is the fact that he may have underestimated the power of catalyzation generated by combatting communism - which worked in two distinct spheres: external and internal - to diverse groups of American conservatives.

Third, according to Huntington (1957) post-W.W. II conservatives frequently attempted to trace an intellectual and philosophical genealogy in the United States, but ended creating a not quite realistic ascendancy, whose historical foundations were easily questionable. Instead of worrying about American institutions as well as the social/political order, these conservative were motivated by a kind of status anxiety and intellectual self-affirmation.

If, on the one hand, he underestimated the unfolding of the domestic battle against communism, on the other hand, he pointed out, whenever possible, the great threat posed by the USSR in the external sphere. To him, the social and political context of 1950s America was analogous to the one faced by the South in 1850, an analogy that proves to be quite revealing of his thought process. According to Huntington (1957), the communist threat represented a similar danger to the one posed by the Union, in the mid-19th century, to the social and political order. There we find the unequivocal situational character of American conservatism.

The institutional character of a certain society, according to Huntington, should always condition the type of conservatism it generates. For example, considering the liberal and democratic characteristics of American institutions, any conservatism emerging out of such framework would adopt, therefore, a lexicon and epistemology with liberal inclinations.

He also argued that, taking into account the situational character of American conservatism, it was important for liberals to pay attention to the fact that, facing the political context, in which the soviet spectre seemed to encroach more and more, the American institutions were under grave threat, and should be defended/preserved by a vigorous conservatism emanating from *American liberals*. This is the main point of Huntington's (1957) argument. In 1950s America, it would fall upon the liberal tradition the same historical role played by, for example, the 1820s Prussian aristocrats. That is, an urgent and inflexible defense of threatened institutions. In many ways, Huntington (1957) anticipated the birth of a specific tradition of American conservatism: neoconservatism.

b) Hirschman and the Conservative Rhetoric

For Albert O. Hirschman (1991), the conservative discourse can be interpreted with three main variables or theses: 1) perversity; 2) futility; 3) danger.

According to the perversity thesis, a certain political action could generate, due to a “chain of unpredicted events” (HIRSCHMAN, 1991, p. 10), the exact opposite of its initial intention. It is, basically, the idea that by trying to guide society towards a certain direction, it ends up veering it towards the opposite one.

A good historical example of this type of argument can be found in Burke’s rhetoric in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, that is, the perception that the universal and abstracts ideals of *liberty, equality, and fraternity* can only lead to, at first, jacobin despotism, and then bonapartism.

Here, the burkean argument shares some parallels with Montesquieu and Tocqueville: for Burke (1982), jacobinism was nothing more than a type of oligarchy that had paved its way with the rubble of the aristocracy, church, and the people. To Hirschman (1991), however, what were simply Burke’s conjectures, applied within a specific historical/social/political context, would become rigid *historical laws* entrenched in the world vision of a number of conservatives.

Hirschman (1991) also refers to another example of the theory of perversity, the influential article *The Limits of Social Policy*, written in 1971 by the sociologist and intellectual Nathan Glazer, frequently associated with the neoconservative movement, in which he affirms that following the tocquevillian argument in which the series of social programs of the American welfare state tended to weaken the traditional *intermediary associations*, such as the family, church, and other community groups. The unforeseen consequence, in these cases, was an aggravation of the social problems that needed to be fixed.

Even though the perversity theory has gained momentum, starting with the counterrevolutionary thought during French Revolution, its intellectual genealogy can be traced back to Greek thought. For example, the idea of hubris is a great example of this argument, in the sense that, it is always up to man to exercise parsimony, humility, and temperance. Otherwise, all that is left for him is a trap door and a tragic end.

Regarding the futility thesis, the central argument is that the proposed change will end up revealing itself to be *superficial, cosmetic, and useless*. There is the constant idea that even if this or that progressive agenda is adopted, *society’s profound structures* will remain unshaken, immobile.

A historical example that portrays perfectly the futility thesis are Tocqueville’s arguments from his *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*. If Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, points out the exceptionalism of events beginning in 1789, and above all their intrinsic *perversity*, Tocqueville goes in the opposite direction and characterizes a significant part of the supposed victories of the French Revolution as elements that were already present during the Ancien Regime, the *administrative centralization* and the *division of land* being two of his primary examples.

The tocquevillian approach had less to do with the denial of a series of social changes, which were conspicuous during the 18th century in France, and more with the question of when exactly did they start to happen. His main question was: what causal chain had precipitated these changes? Also, exactly what variables were in play? Where before there was absolute judgement - by apologists and detractors, we should point out - about the abrupt and disjointed character of the Revolution, Tocqueville’s thinking brought doubts and questions. Moreover he suggested the hypothesis of futility regarding the process as a whole.

The danger thesis is a warning, stating that the search for new political changes, frequently associated to greater individual rights, can lead to the loss of a series of already established benefits and rights. It is, therefore, an argument based on the idea that to achieve change one always has to pay a high price. According to this interpretation, for example, democracy was once regarded as a potential threat to liberty. It was something analogous to the reading many made of the welfare state, that is, at times a threat to liberty, a threat to democracy, and at times a threat to both.

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The danger thesis becomes more clear if we examine the distinctions around the concept of liberty, explored by Benjamin Constant in his 1819 *Liberty of the Ancients and the Moderns*. To Constant, *the liberty of the ancients* was related to the idea of active civic participation of the citizens of the Greek *polis*. *The liberty of the moderns*, on the other hand, is about the possibility of individuals to adopt any religion they find fitting, and also having their liberty of conscience assured, as well the possibility of administering their business without external interference. However, to him, Rousseau and the Jacobin revolutionaries, influenced by his work, deemed *the liberty of the ancients* as paradigmatic. Constant (HIRSCHMAN, 1991, p. 88) would argue that the main negative collateral effect was the choice of an *utopian* and *anachronistic* model of liberty.

At this point it would be interesting to use some historical examples to illustrate the argument underlying the danger thesis. Besides, by taking into account its historical dimensions, we end up reiterating Huntington's (1957) main argument regarding the *situational character* of conservatism. For example, Hirschman (1991) tells us that Great Britain, throughout the 19th century, perfectly exemplifies the danger thesis. During this period, the idea of individual liberty was well consolidated and entrenched in local politics and culture - just think of the Magna Carta, liberty of the press, the principle of *habeas corpus*, among others. At the same time, we had a government run by and for a small nobility.

During most of the 19th century we witnessed a number of political disputes involving this small nobility and their antagonists, the other actors interested in the expansion and extension of the political rights. These disputes took place in the Parliament, the press, and the streets. The so-called *Reform Acts* of 1832 and 1867 would be politically responsible for the catalyzation of this process.

The Reform Act of 1832, for example, expanded the right to vote to all men who had property in urban areas - which still excluded around 90% of the male population (HIRSCHMAN, 1991, p. 89). However, for the first time, an upper class - commercial and industrial - managed to gain a series of political privileges, thus far limited to the British aristocracy.

We should note how the debate was structured: on one side you had the *tories*, resistant to the Reform Act *per se*; on the other, the *whigs*, favorable to the idea of providing political rights - only available to the nobility - to an upper commercial and industrial class but against extending the same rights to the masses. However, both extremities of the political spectrum, *tories* and *whigs*, converged in one point: the broadening of British democracy could put at risk existing political liberties.

Another example of the danger thesis is what Hirschman (1991) calls the *Cult of the British Constitution*. This is something that emerged during the 18th century, as a direct consequence, on one hand, of the revolutionary process in France, and on the other, of

the Burkean response to the jacobin political agenda. Like Montesquieu, the burkean argument was sympathetic not only to the *institutional* idea of, say, *checks and balances* present in the British political framework. Something equally important was this same idea of *checks and balances* applied in an organic way to the social constitution of the British community. That is, the notion that the complex hybridization of royalty, aristocracy, and democracy was particularly British, which made it immune to all types of despotisms, whether it came from the king or the people. For the aristocracy of the early decades of the 19th century, the 1832 Reform Act would endanger this organic system of *checks and balances*. Expanding voting rights, therefore, was the main concept to be resisted.

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In 1867, during the Second Reform Act, the democratic idea would expand even more. Male voting rights were now extended to the *middle class* and even some segments of the working class. However, many restrictions that excluded broad sectors of society were still in place: financial ones and also ones applicable to those who lived in rural districts. Still, we can state that between the first Act in 1832 and the second one in 1867 there was an unequivocal expansion of political rights, always moving towards a democratic ideal of broadening of guarantees. Those who opposed the process argued that the consequence would be the inevitable implosion of already established liberties.

Another fine historical example of the danger thesis is described by Friederich Hayek in the beginning of the 20th century, both in his 1944 *Road to Serfdom* and also in 1960's *The Constitution of Liberty*. Even though Hayek never called himself a *conservative*⁵, his style of argumentation always appealed to members of that political tradition.

As Hirschman (1991) reminds us, it is a rhetorical model organized in a very simple way and following a logical process: 1) individuals rarely reach consensus in a large number of tasks/actions; 2) in order to be democratic, a government must be consensual; 3) a democratic government is only possible when the State limits its actions to the few individuals with whom society is in consensus, or agrees; 4) the corollary states that whenever the State wants to expand its functions, democracy and liberty are in grave danger.

Based on this logic, we can understand why Hayek interpreted the advance of the British welfare state as a potential threat to established liberties.

Besides, a series of events during the 1970s potentialized Hayek's 1960 warnings: the American political crisis, caused by the Watergate scandal; the *weakness* of the British political system - which applied to the Conservative and Labour parties - East Germany's terrorism problem, and the period of uncertainty hovering over a post-de Gaulle France (HIRSCHMAN, 1991, p. 119-120).

Facing this unstable global scenario, a number of politicians searched for common causes for the ongoing phenomena. The prevalent diagnosis claimed that what was happening was what some classified as a *governability crisis* in democratic regimes. As a result of this diagnosis, this crisis scenario came under the scrutiny of the Trilateral Commission - a non-governmental group created in 1973 and composed of prominent social scientists and analysts from the United States, Japan, and Western Europe, and its purpose was to study problems and issues afflicting the relevant actors.

In 1975 the commission released its first report called *The Crisis of Democracy*, and Samuel Huntington wrote the chapter on the United States. He argued that there was a

direct correlation between the expansion of the American welfare state and the national governability crisis.

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Broadly speaking, he argued that “the vitality of the American democratic regime” (HIRSCHMAN, 1991, p. 118), during the 1960s was responsible for the expansionist impulse of the State’s responsibilities, which generated a considerable diminishment of its authority leading to a governability crisis.

The argument used by Huntington, regarding the noxious role of the welfare state in the erosion of individual liberties, as well as his analytical sociological and empirical approach was analogous to the one used, years later, by the first generation of intellectuals linked to the neoconservative movement.

6. Final Considerations

George Nash (1976) points out the non-systematic and circumstantial character of conservative philosophy. As stated above, in the absence of foundational texts, intellectuals who identified with this tradition frequently claimed a non-ideological status. With Oakeshott (1991), conservatism was interpreted as an impulse, or in his own terms, a *disposition*. Besides, he associated conservatism with the present, not the past. He also emphasized the notion that human nature is constantly averse to sudden change and social engineering projects.

According to Corey Robin (2011), for example, there is always a classist side in the conservative argument. To him, this side of the conservative rhetoric is in tune with the idea of interdiction, in varying degrees, of liberty and autonomy of the lower classes. Conservatism always looks with a skeptical eye at possible radical movements in society, even more in the private than in the public sphere, in his view. To Steiner (1989), the conservative sensibility has an antitheoretical tone and a character close to Christian metaphysics, especially its anthropological pessimism.

All these definitions possess varying degrees of precision, and to some degree, complementarity. However, we believe that a more coherent reading of the conservative argument can be done when we take into consideration Huntington’s (1957) and Hirschman’s (1991) arguments. And that happens because, while the first emphasizes the *situational* aspect of conservative ideology, the second points out some common and important rhetorical patterns.

Still, the eminently modern character of conservative thought must always be taken into account, since it is a tradition, even though its ground zero may not be found in the burkean critique of the French, it at least begins to take shape during that historic episode. It is possible, therefore, to treat conservatism, at least in some ways, as an epiphenomenon of the French Revolution.

Furthermore, it is important to point that its constant appeals to organicism, contingency, skepticism, and the importance of religions as the sustaining basic of the civilian and political pact (HUNTINGTON, 1957), besides the discursive typology described by Hirschman (1991) - the perversity, futility, and danger theses -, are recurring and dear elements to the political lexicon of conservatism.

The conservative tradition has a number of variations and since it is not a closed system of ideas, there is always some degree of adaptation to local variables. The conservative thought is not, in this regard, different from other political traditions and frequently

adopts regional colors and tones, even as a corollary of its emphasis on *history* and *tradition*, and also its historicist character. Anyway, by discussing several definitions, especially the ones by Huntington (1957) and Hirschman (1991) it will be possible to understand the complex mode of articulation and also the main axes of argumentation present in conservative thought.

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Notes

1. Nash is a frequent contributor in a number of periodicals, some with a sizable circulation, such as the *New York Times*, as well other publications with an intellectual conservative bent, such as *American Spectator* and *Modern Age*, to mention a few.

2. Robin is a political scientist and associate professor at the City University of New York. His main area of interest is Intellectual History, especially the study of American conservatism and leftist movements.

3. For analytical purposes, I'm considering *conservative* and *counterrevolutionary* as semantic equivalents. Steiner (1989), usually adopts the former rather than the latter. As we will see, he is referring to the same political phenomenon/movement/tradition I am

4. By *prescription*, we mean the legal codification of social practices that have withstood the test of time.

5. Remember, for example, Hayek's famous essay: *Why I am Not a Conservative*". In: _____. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960. Available at: <<http://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/articles/hayek-why-i-am-not-conservative.pdf>>. Accessed on: March 11, 2015. However, for a counter-argument, see: BLOOM, J. Arthur. "Why Hayek Is a Conservative". *The American Conservative*. [S.l.]: maio 2013. Available at: <<http://www.theamericanconservative.com/why-hayek-is-a-conservative/>>. Accessed on: March 11, 2015.

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