CONSERVATISM

The main feature of this first chapter of Noel O'Sullivan's *Conservatism* is the discussion of the theoretical and political developments in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe that provoked a critical counter-response, a response that became known as (political) conservatism. The new theories about man and society arose from a cluster of abstract ideas about the autonomy of human reason and potency of will, and the corresponding right to recast state and society according to the dictates of unaided human reason. The chief fault of these ideas and their promoters was, according to the conservative critique, a loss of a sense of man's imperfect nature, and the conviction that state and society could be perfected. The slide to oppression and tyranny lay inevitably ahead in theory and practice. In this sense it is right to talk about conservatism as a "philosophy of imperfection".

The deficiency in O'Sullivan's otherwise enlightening account of philosophical conservatism is in giving the impression that the imperfect nature of man – and the prescription of a limited style of political action that flows from it – is the core feature of conservative thought. O'Sullivan's brief discussion of Edmund Burke's response – a theological vision that claims the rightful form of state and society is dictated by God's order in the world – does not do justice to the extent and depth of Burke's thought. For example, it is clear that a distinct epistemological and metaphysical framework is presupposed by Burke's speeches and writings, which brought Burke to challenge the revolutionary theorists' ideas on the nature of human reason. This is philosophical, the conclusions of reason without Revelation - not theological. Sullivan unfortunately commits an interpretative blunder that is all too common in those who unreflectively presuppose (metaphysical) materialism. The philosophical framework of Burke's thought will, of course, be the central focus of this website.

Below is an abridged version of the first chapter of O'Sullivan's highly recommended book.

CONSERVATISM
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1. Conservative Ideology: a Philosophy of Imperfection

CONSERVATISM, as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the term, is a word used to describe the attitude of one 'disposed to maintain existing institutions'. Unfortunately, such a definition could be applied just as well to the caveman who clung to stone-age practices, or to the rustic who instinctively and unthinkingly follows traditional usages, as it would be to a highly articulate thinker like Edmund Burke. The everyday meaning of the word consequently gives no indication about where a study of conservatism should begin, or about who should be included in it, or excluded from it.

This initial difficulty, however, disappears once it is recalled that it is with conservatism as an ideology, and not as a subjective attitude (like that of the caveman or the follower of tradition, for example), that we have to deal. An ideology, unlike an attitude, requires a self-conscious attempt to provide an explicit and coherent theory of man, society and the world. Now in this form – that is, as an ideology – conservatism is a phenomenon which appeared only at a relatively recent point in modern history. It was defined (as it has continued to be defined) in opposition to a very novel and quite specific idea. The point at which it emerged was the French Revolution, and the idea to which it was opposed was the one embodied in the theory and practice of the French revolutionaries. This was the idea that man's reason and will were powerful enough to regenerate human nature by creating a completely new social order, constructed in accordance with the requirements of liberty, equality and fraternity. Conservatism as an ideology, then, is characterized, in the first instance, by opposition to the idea of total or radical change, and not by the absurd idea of opposition to change as such, or by any commitment to preserving all existing institutions…

The idea of total social and political change did not, of course, appear out of the blue, and to consider briefly the intellectual ingredients which produced it will illuminate the view of man and the world which conservative thinkers have endeavoured to refute in the period since the Revolution. The principal feature of the two centuries which preceded the Revolution had been an increasing tendency to abandon the traditional pessimism about the human condition reflected in the Christian *myth* of the Fall and in the idea of original sin. A new optimism gradually replaced the old pessimism. This optimism, which had emerged with the Renaissance and then been bolstered by the growth of scientific knowledge, had two consequences. It produced, in the first place, a belief that the world is an order which is intelligible to human reason without the need for divine revelation, and is responsive to human will, once reason has comprehended its structure. It is, in fact, nothing more than a huge machine or watch, which can in principle be dismantled and reassembled just as a watch can be. The world, in short, now came to be regarded as far more malleable than men had previously considered it to be.

The growth of optimism was reflected, in the second place, in a new, more benign conception of man's own nature. This is clearly discernible at the end of the seventeenth century in, for example, Locke's rejection (in his essay *On The Reasonableness of Christianity, 1695)* of the traditional belief that the nature of man was blighted by the Fall. Adam alone, Locke said, was responsible for original sin. Successive generations of men obviously could not have been implicated in it, and there is no reason to think that a just God would treat them as if they had been affected in any way by Adam's personal shortcomings.

The story of the Fall, then, was gradually discarded as a means of explaining human suffering; but the fact of suffering remained, of course, and it was therefore necessary to find an alternative means of accounting for it. The great achievement of Rousseau was to put forward an explanation which has ever since remained the most popular one, and still constitutes the foundation of all radical political ideologies. In place of Adam he offered

society as the source of human misery. Reform society, he argued, and evil and suffering will eventually disappear from the world.

The idea that a corrupt social organization is the chief cause of evil did not, however, lead Rousseau himself to draw the conclusion that man could perfect his nature by using political methods to change his social environment. That was something which would require (so he wrote in the *Social Contract)* the work of a supra-human Legislator. In the two centuries since Rousseau's death, however, radical thinkers have become much more ready to recommend purely human devices as sufficient for the purpose of regenerating man. Now the confident, ambitious style of politics they have since come to favour clearly could not emerge until Rousseau's reservations and misgivings had been swept to one side; and of themselves neither the increasingly rationalist conception of the world nor the belief in man's natural innocence would have been sufficient to bring that about.

Far more effective than any theoretical considerations was the demonstration provided by the Revolution of man's power to destroy completely a social order which had previously been accepted as natural and immutable. After the massive demonstration of the potency of the human will it provided, it was easy to conclude that power great enough to destroy on so vast a scale could equally well be used to reconstruct society in the same grand fashion. It was the Revolution, then, which gave practical relevance to the conception of the world and of human nature as plastic, and hence as responsive to deliberate change aimed at realizing all man's desires and dreams of happiness. And it was the Revolution, accordingly, which called forth the need for a reply to the new view of man and the world upon which it rested, and whose validity it appeared to confirm. It created, in short, the need for a statement of conservative principles.

The form which this statement had to take is not difficult to discern. In order to oppose the ideal of radical change it was necessary for conservative thinkers to show, in the first place, that the world was by no means as intelligible and malleable as men had come to assume; and, secondly, that pain, evil and suffering were not purely temporary elements in the human condition, originating in an unjust organization of society, and therefore capable of being eliminated by sweeping away kings and tyrants and enthroning the will of the people. They had to show, in other words, that the world imposes limitations upon what either the individual or the state can hope to achieve without destroying the stability of society. Conservative ideology, accordingly, may be defined as a philosophy of imperfection, committed to the idea of limits, and directed towards the defence of a limited style of politics.

By a limited style of politics is meant one which has as its primary aim the preservation of the distinction between private and public life (or between the state and society) which emerged in Europe at the end of the medieval period. It is this distinction that moderate conservatives have believed to be increasingly threatened by the ideal of radical change – an ideal which has meant in practice the constant extension of state power into every sphere of life, in the name of equality, social justice and welfare.

Used in this broad sense, the term 'limited' does not entail the identification of conservatism with any commitment either to representative or to paternalist government. Both modes of government have been defended by conservative thinkers, who have naturally been as ready as other ideologists to endow their political preferences with intrinsic merit; but when prejudices of this kind are disregarded, it becomes evident that the primary commitment of the moderate conservative is not to this or that form of government, but is, as Burke observed in the *Defense of His [Own] Life (1795),* to the 'manifest, marked distinction ... between change and reformation'. Change, he continued,

> alters the substance of the objects themselves, and gets rid of all their essential good as well as of all the accidental evil annexed to hem.... Reform, on the other hand, is not a change in the substance or in the primary modification of the objects, but a direct application of a remedy to the grievance complained of. So far as that is removed, all is sure. It stops there; and if it fails the substance which underwent he operation, at the very worst, is but where it was..

In practice, what constitutes the 'reform' upon which a limited style of politics concentrates will, of course, vary in different situations; sometimes it may involve defensive action, whilst on other occasions (as when Disraeli 'dished the Whigs' by extending the suffrage in 1867, for example) it may mean taking the initiative in changing the status quo. Sometimes, again, it may mean defending authority, while at others it may mean supporting the cause of liberty against high-handed and over-mighty governments. As a result, the conservative may find himself exposed (as Burke himself did) to the charge of inconsistency; and he may be told, in addition, that the notion of a limited style of politics is too negative a conception of political activity. But since the meaning of reform cannot be specified in advance of events, and since the content of a limited style of politics must inevitably vary with changing circumstances, neither of these charges carries much weight. The rejection of radical change which underlies the idea of a limited style of politics may, of course, easily be presented as deriving from too great a regard for vested interests, along with insensitivity to the condition of the mass of the population; but as Burke made clear in the essay just referred to, the real purpose behind the conservative commitment is quite otherwise. It is, he said, 'to screen every man, in every class, from oppression'. In a century like the present, in which radical ideologies have generally done more to strengthen the chains which bind the masses than to improve their condition, it is worth pondering a little before dismissing the conservative preference for reform as nothing more than a desire to perpetuate inequality and social injustice.

But if conservative ideology is defined in terms of the commitment to a limited style of politics, then one major disadvantage immediately appears to arise. This is that conservatism then seems difficult to distinguish from liberalism, which is also generally considered to be an ideology dedicated to the defence of such a political style. The history of liberal ideology, however, is the story of a retreat from the idea of a limited style of politics, for during the nineteenth century liberals came increasingly to value something with which such a style is ultimately incompatible. This was 'progress' or the

‘improvement’ of mankind, in the name of which a government could, in principle at least, interfere in every aspect of life. As John Stuart Mill made clear, progress or improvement might even mean interfering with the inner life of man through the inculcation of a new religion, which he described as a ‘religion of humanity’. Now the conservative conception of a limited style of politics, it is true, is one which has sometimes been assumed by conservative thinkers to require intensive supervision of the spiritual life of subjects, through censorship for example; but it has not been considered (by moderate conservatives at least) to permit the regeneration of human nature through the imposition of new creeds which politicize the inner, spiritual life of man.

The simple definition of conservatism as the defence of a limited style of politics, based upon the idea of imperfection, has two tangible advantages which it will be useful to notice immediately. The first is that although the definition directs attention towards the central theme of conservative philosophy, which is its stress upon human imperfection, it does not require one to identify an ‘essence’ or ‘hard core’ of conservative ideology, by fixing upon the writings of one particular conservative thinker, or upon some one strain in conservative thought. Burke, of course, is the obvious candidate for such treatment, and it is no surprise to find one writer on conservatism asserting that, ‘That theory of conservatism is to be preferred which most ‘adequately and completely explains the manifestations of the Burkean ideology’, on the ground that Burke is ‘the conservative archetype’. The alternative to fixing upon a particular thinker is to list various doctrines which all conservative thought is supposed to display, with relatively little change, at all times. In this vein, Russell Kirk, for example, lists six ‘canons of conservative thought’, in order to provide a framework for his essay on *The Conservative Mind,* and his list (or any other list) could of course be extended. The objection to the procedure followed in each of these cases is twofold. There is the difficulty presented by the fact that not every conservative thinker will be found to subscribe to all the ideas found on the list of ‘canons of conservative thought’; and there is the further difficulty that not all who do subscribe to them would invariably be described as conservative. The present definition avoids both difficulties since it is broad enough to fit all thinkers who have considered themselves conservative, or are generally regarded as such, whilst at the same time directing attention towards the idea upon which all conservative thought depends; the idea, that is, of imperfection.

In the second place, the definition provides the means of distinguishing conservative ideology not only from liberalism, but also from the radical ideologies which lie to its left and to its radical right. Considering the radical right first, it is evident that the ideologies found there allow far more potency to the human will than is compatible with the conservative belief in imperfection. Both Nazism and fascism, in other words, present the world and the social order as more malleable and plastic than conservative ideology considers them to be. That is why conservative ideology is not co-extensive with what may be called ‘the right wing’ of European political thought. It is true, nevertheless, that a conservative may sometimes conceive of the imperfections of the existing social order as so deep and all-pervasive that he ends by adopting a notion of ‘corruption’ or ‘degeneration’ which resembles that from which Nazism and fascism take their rise. Such, for example, was the tendency of de Maistre, and more recently of Charles

Maurras, the founder of the *Action Francaise.* When the idea of imperfection is pursued to this extreme, conservatism passes into reaction, the essence of which is that the present appears as a state of unrelieved degeneracy, from which an escape can only be found by restoring some imaginary past golden age. Even reactionary conservatism, however, remains clearly distinguishable from the ideology of the radical right, since the reactionary does not share its characteristic belief in the redemptive power of human will, or its equally characteristic demand for a dynamic mass movement which would serve as a political instrument for regenerating human nature. It would therefore be a mistake to regard reactionary ideology as a species of radical right-wing thought; but the common suspicion that some close relationship exists between the two is nevertheless well founded. The depth of his pessimism naturally leads the reactionary to despair of moderation, with the result that he rejects a limited style of politics. Reactionary ideology, consequently, is best regarded as a twilight zone between conservatism and the radical right: a zone, that is, in which the belief in man's ineradicable imperfection continues to distinguish the reactionary position from that of Nazism and fascism, but in which the moderation and flexibility inherent in the conservative commitment to a limited style of politics no longer have a secure place. That is why a movement like the *Action Francaise,* for example, could serve in the inter-war years as the training ground for many young intellectuals with authoritarian and national socialist leanings, although it was not itself a fascist movement; and why, in the late thirties, the literary critic of the *Action Francaise* newspaper (Robert Brasillach) could at the same time write for the fascist weekly *Je Suis Partout.*

But (it may be said) even if the idea of imperfection differentiates conservatism from ideologies of the radical right, it yet fails to distinguish it clearly from those of the left. Marxism, for example, places great stress upon the independence of the external world from man's will. It rests upon the idea that historical change is governed by inner laws which determine the socio-economic structure of a community, and this seems to be one way of acknowledging that the will is subject to limitations or imperfections which are only partially responsive to deliberate action. It has already been indicated, however, that imperfection, in the conservative sense, means ineradicable (or ineliminable) imperfection, and the idea of ineradicable imperfection is one which Marxism, in common with all other ideologies of the radical left, rejects. For Marxism, imperfection continues to be treated as the product of a particular organization of society, and not as something; inherent in the human condition. Thus once the proletariat has become conscious of the exploitation it suffers under the capitalist order, Marxism maintains, a revolution must occur which will eliminate evil and eventually inaugurate the communist millennium. Marxism, then, is no exception to the generalization that all radical ideologies maintain that imperfection can be removed (in principle at least) from the human condition by radical social and political change.

In spite of the advantages just mentioned, the definition of conservatism as a philosophy of imperfection may yet be felt to suffer from one overriding defect. This is that the idea of imperfection might seem 'to distinguish conservatism chiefly from forms of ideological extremism' found only outside Western democracies. On this definition, in other words, conservatism might seem rather remote from the everyday politics of liberal

democratic societies. The rejection of imperfection, however, is not a peculiarity of left- and right-wing extremist ideologies; on the contrary it has found its way into all modern democratic ideology, in the seemingly innocuous guise of the doctrine of popular sovereignty.

The connection between the rejection of imperfection and the democratic doctrine of popular sovereignty may be traced back to Rousseau's insistence upon man's natural innocence.

If man is naturally good, as Rousseau's novel theory of evil implies, and if man's will can bring every aspect of his life under his control, as the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the destructive work of the French revolutionaries encouraged men to believe, then only one form of limit or restraint upon the human will can ever be acceptable. This must take the form of a self-imposed restraint, since any other kind of restraint must necessarily be incompatible with the freedom and majesty of creatures who are naturally good. In liberal democracies, then, the rejection of imperfection is more familiar in the form of the ideal of self-imposed restraints as the condition for moral and political obligation than in the form of utopian dreams of a communist millennium or a thousand-year Reich.

Now this theory of moral and political obligation is not one which conservatives have rejected out of hand; indeed, they have themselves professed that individuals should be subject, wherever possible, to self-imposed limits, rather than to ones imposed by governments. The crucial point, however, is that the radical identifies the only acceptable self-imposed limits with 'internal' ones – with ones, that is, which flow solely from the reason and conscience within each individual. Having made this identification, he then naturally regards the limits imposed by law, and by the whole fabric of social life, as 'external' and therefore unacceptable. In other words the radical, as Swift observed, wants man to be like the spider, whose web comprises an environment spun wholly out of its own innards; the life of the honey-bee, which lives by gathering pollen it has not itself created, has no place in the spider's scheme of things. When pushed to the extreme, the contrast between the spider and the honey-bee is obviously an unfair one, but the analogy serves to highlight the fundamental difference between conservative and radical attitudes towards experience. Unlike the radical, the conservative does not begin by conceiving of self-imposed restraints so narrowly that everything he finds already in existence around him is an unacceptable and illegitimate restraint, simply because he cannot see in it the reflection of his own reason and will.

In political terms, the problem created by the desire to live within a social web of self-imposed restraints was given definitive expression by Rousseau in the *Social Contract.* The great political problem of the modern world, he wrote, is to find 'some form of association ... as a result of which the whole strength of the community will be enlisted for the protection of the person and property of each constituent member, in such a way that each, when united to his fellows, *renders obedience to his own will,* and remains as free as he was before' (emphasis added). Since no major European country has ever found such a form of association, Rousseau concluded that none of them could rightfully

claim the obedience of their subjects. What is extraordinary about this high-handed conclusion is Rousseau's refusal to pause and consider whether any of these governments ruled justly and humanely, before dismissing them as illegitimate; but then prudence, circumstance and expedience, which would require the consideration of such obvious matters, are not important for a theory which makes obedience to one's own will the principal condition for obligation. In a wider perspective, however, the interest of Rousseau's view is that it provided the basis of the doctrine of popular sovereignty, subsequently enshrined in the French Constitution of I793, and later passed down in a variety of forms to all Western democratic ideologies. It is through the doctrine of popular sovereignty that the idea of self-imposed limits, and the rejection of imperfection upon which it depends, have found their way into even the most familiar forms of Western political thought.

The ideal of popular sovereignty, then, in the shape of the commitment to self-government as the only legitimate form of government, has for long been familiar even amongst peoples who think of themselves as politically moderate. This familiarity, however, has appeared to conservatives as one of the principal misfortunes of the present age, since it obscures only too effectively the fact that the modern manner of thinking about democracy is at least as likely to produce political extremism as political moderation.

In particular, conservatives have tried to draw attention to three disastrous implications of the modern democratic ideal. All of them derive from the idea that only self-imposed restrictions can create a duty of political obedience, just as that idea can be derived, in turn, from the disappearance of the idea of ineradicable imperfection first of all in Rousseau's political writings, and thereafter in democratic ideology at large.

In the first place, if the individual can be bound only by his own will then only laws and institutions which accurately reflect his wishes are politically and socially acceptable. But in that case it also follows, of course, that immediately his wishes change the existing institutions lose their right to his respect. Now if reason and conscience spoke to every man with the same voice this would perhaps present no great difficulty, but since they speak to Professor Marcuse (for example) in one voice and to President Ford in another, the ideal clearly has anarchic implications. It is not, one must add, a question of deciding whether Professor Marcuse or the President is correct, but of observing that within this theory there is no conceivable way of ever drawing a firm line between legitimate authority and the illegitimate use of force. Since reason and conscience convey different but equally convincing messages to even the most sincere and intelligent of men, the result is that the theory leaves democratic government perpetually exposed to the terrorism of groups which acknowledge only their own self-imposed principles. The ideal of self-imposed limits used to defend the democratic conception of self-government, in short, is as readily available for the subversion of constitutional government as for its defence, and in logic at least there is nothing in this that the advocate of self-government can complain about.

But the idea that the individual can be bound only by his own will may lead, in the second place, in a diametrically opposite direction. Instead of legitimizing terrorism and creating a constant threat of anarchy, it may equally well be used to defend despotic government. It can be used for that purpose because the democratic ideal of self-government (or popular sovereignty) shifts attention away from the exercise of power to its origin. It is, that is to say, no longer what a government does, but the title by which it claims to do it, that now becomes crucial. Consequently a modern government may, without absurdity, defend any policy at all, no matter how inimical to law, liberty and the security of property it may be, by merely claiming that it acted on behalf of the people, or in fulfilment of some electoral mandate.

Finally, the idea that only self-imposed restraints are legitimate tends naturally to support an intransigent, inflexible style of politics in which there is no place for compromise with one's fellow men or accommodation to the external world. It supports this style because the ideal of self-imposed limits or restraints makes it possible to reject all established institutions and authorities, not because they have been tried and found wanting, but merely because they have not been self-imposed. This might seem to be fanciful exaggeration, were it not for the fact that it is the only possible way (as Burke was the first to appreciate) of explaining the more extreme aspects of the French Revolution. That men act violently when oppressed, and cannot be blamed for responding to extreme oppression in an even more extreme way, are matters which may readily be granted (even though Burke was notoriously reluctant to do so in the French case). No amount of oppression, however, can explain by itself the desire of the revolutionaries to create not only a new time-scale of their own, but even to erect a new God above themselves…

None of the three implications of the idea that only self-imposed limits upon the will are legitimate is a new phenomenon, of course; the world has always known terrorism, despotism and fanaticism in one form or another. What is novel, however, is that these things should have been fostered in the modern world by a view of man which began by stressing the intrinsic goodness of his nature, rather than its ineliminable imperfection. It is also novel that the loss of a sense of imperfection should have worked not so much to improve man’s control over society and the world as to insulate him from reality at every point. To criticize and reject what exists in favour of something better, after what exists has been found oppressive, is a response which even de Maistre found difficult to reject altogether; but to reject what exists without having tried it, and merely because it has not been self-imposed, is a response to the world which is unique in Western history. The man who walks with his eyes shut does not usually expect sympathy when he bangs his head; but the odd thing is that men who detach their political principles from reality do expect it, and blame the world, and never their principles, for the problems they encounter. When Kant, for example, was confronted by the degeneration of revolutionary idealism into the terror of Robespierre, it did not occur to him that there might be any parallel between his own rejection, on the one hand, of established authority in favour of the dictates of conscience, and Robespierre’s attempt, on the other hand, to institute perfect freedom and justice by erasing the need for authority. Instead of considering this possibility, Kant kept his principles safely apart from reality by maintaining, in the *Critique of,Judgement*, that man’s path to perfection was bound to be a bit unpleasant.

‘To be sure,’ he observed, ‘the first attempts [to be perfectly free] will be brutal, and will bring about a more painful, more dangerous state than when one was under the orders, but also under the protection of a third party.’ It is an answer whose logical structure would be painfully familiar perhaps to the man who went, as yet only half bald, into a hair clinic. After six months of intensive and expensive treatment he was entirely bald. Annoyed and anxious, he confronted the trichologist. To his surprise, the trichologist congratulated him, assured him that the remedy was working well, and explained that until all his hair had been eliminated, no new growth could begin.

The definition of conservatism as a philosophy of imperfection, then, is not one which is defined only against ideological extremes that have no connection with Western liberal-democracies such as those that exist in England and the U.S.A. The rejection of imperfection is not peculiar to totalitarian governments under the sway of manifestly radical ideologies, but is implicit also in the democratic identification of good government with self-government. The dangers presented by this identification have been indicated, and the principal task of conservative ideology has been to alert men to them. To weigh what exists before discarding it, to test what is proposed in the light of circumstances, prudence and expedience, are familiar conservative lessons which only cease to sound quite so banal when the development of European political and intellectual life since 1789 is borne in mind.

How, it must now be asked, have conservative thinkers attempted to defend the idea of man as an imperfect, dependent and limited creature; a creature, that is, incapable of being regenerated by radical social and political change, and consequently doomed to make the best of things by the more modest policies of compromise and accommodation? In fact not one, but three very different schools of thought are discernible within conservative ideology, each of which offers a different conception of imperfection, and hence of the limits to which the human will is subject. Each, accordingly, presents a different case against radical political change.

There is, firstly, the oldest and best-known conservative school of thought, according to which the inevitable imperfection of man’s condition is derived from a moral or theological vision of the world. For defenders of this position, who include Burke and the leading French reactionary thinkers, de Maistre and Bonald, the limits to which human action is subject are determined by the conception of the world as an ordered, hierarchical whole in which everything, including man, has had a place assigned to it by God, who created the universe. On this view, change is bad in so far as it threatens to disrupt the original perfection of creation, and man is singled out as especially liable to attempt such change. He is dangerous, because he is distinguished from the rest of creation by his capacity for deliberate evil, which is often (but not always) attributed to the Fall and the appearance of original sin.

From a theoretical point of view, this school of thought is principally distinguished from other schools of conservatism by its search for what may be called an absolute principle of order – for a principle, that is, which is eternally valid. The school finds such a principle in the plan upon which God originally organized creation, and it derives its con-

ception of limits, therefore, from a supra-historical world of absolute values. For that reason, its conception of order is predominantly static. In practice, of course, it is necessary to identify some specific historical period as the one in which society conformed most closely to the divine plan, and then use that period as a yardstick by reference to which judgment can be passed on proposals for change, or upon changes actually taking place. For Burke, the English constitution of 1688 provided such a yardstick. The beauty of the constitution which was then established, he believed, was that it conformed more closely than any other to what he described as 'the natural order' of the universe (that is, the divine plan upon which it was created). He was also prepared to argue that the durability and flexibility of the old constitution were strongly in its favour, but in the last resort the anchorage point for his conservatism was an appeal to a timeless, supra-historical order of things. The same idea, in a much more pronounced form, also characterizes the French reactionary school, although in their case the social order ordained by God could not be identified, as it was by Burke in England, with the one that actually existed. They found it in the France of the *Ancien Regime,* but that France had of course been destroyed by the Revolution. Their alienation from the new status quo created by the Revolution was therefore profound – so profound, indeed, that it severely undermined the logical stability of their thought and sometimes drove them to more radical conclusions than those of their revolutionary opponents. It remains true, however, that the most systematic and ambitious exploration of the theological framework for conservative thought is to be found amongst the French thinkers…

The other two schools – historical and skeptical – are discussed in the rest of the chapter. I will leave it to the reader to consult further O'Sullivan's highly informative book on the different philosophical, national and historical strands of conservative thought.