Conservatism, liberalism, and Socialism

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# Introduction

The western world has been shaped by a number of competing political ideologies. Even if one ideology has dominated the other, the former still managed to leave a considerable influence behind. Certain restrictive ideologies such as Communism and Fascism were predominantly rejected by western societies, yet socialism has remained relevant in American politics to this day. Liberalism, conservatism, and socialism are ideologies that understand liberty, rights, and freedoms in different ways, and while each have been subject to criticism, modern western societies have more or less preferred variations of reform liberalism to govern themselves. The paper will explore these three major ideologies, their major tenets, influence, and history, and examine their relevance to western civilization. Although, it is difficult to come to a certain conclusion on what ideology would specifically work under contemporary circumstances, however, classical liberalism has left a major impact on the West's ideological leanings, historical narrative, and political thought.

# Conservatism

Conservatism is a major political philosophy that values the maintenance and stability of societies that is based on upholding societal institutions and traditional values, such as religion or government, which are both valued and respected. One of the defining traits of conservatism is its suspicion of change and a strong discouragement of a revolutionary approach towards change in favor of a more evolutionary approach if change is absolutely required. Conservative values stem from the premise that a transcendent moral order exists to which the society must try to confirm with, yet the emphasis is not as much on divine law as it is on natural law. It contrasts with the utilitarian view of the liberals, as espoused by Bentham, as well as deviates from theocratic views. For conservatives, the most important principles to be upheld include social continuity, freedom, justice, and order, which they view as a product of a collective social experience developed over the course of centuries through human reflection, or trial and error. The collective human experience has incorporated certain customs, habits, and conventions that serve as precedents to regulate behavior and are integral to keeping the social fabric intact. Thus, any political decision has to be taken by examining not just its popularity or temporary advantage but long-term consequences. A slow move towards devising complex remedies to a problem is preferred after sufficient reflection has taken place to avoid any moral hazards or unintended social consequences.

The conservative distrust of radical change can be seen in various historical documents such as the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819, where one of the conservative rules asserted by political leaders in public universities, against growing nationalism or liberalism, or revolutionary plots was that the “confederated governments (of Austria and Prussia) mutually pledge themselves to remove from the universities or other public educational institutions all teachers who, by obvious deviation from their duty or by exceeding the limits of their functions, or by abuse of their legitimate influence over the youthful minds, or by propagating harmful doctrines hostile to public order or subversive of existing governmental institutions, shall have unmistakably provide their unfitness for the important office entrusted to them"5. The change through of nationalism and liberalism emerging from the French revolution was perceived by The Congress of Vienna as a threat. Their conservative position can be seen through the way they see uncertainty. "Kings have to calculate the chances of their very existence in the immediate feature; passions are let loose, and league together to overthrow everything which society respects as the basis of its existence religion, public morality, laws, customs, rights, and duties, all are attacked, confounded, overthrown, or called in question”. The changes were attributed to liberalism and individualism which could threaten order due to “Religion, morality, legislation, economy politics, administration, all have become common and accessible to everyone”2. These views accurately reflect the conservative position that man individually is unable to fathom how individually inherited characteristics may have influenced their thinking, thus explaining the movement’s suspicion of change. For conservatives, the notion of change itself is only necessary to avoid the greater evil.

Conservatism has left a profound influence on modern western civilization, influencing what came to be defined as right-wing politics that advocates private ownership and preservation of personal wealth, while emphasizing individualism and self-reliance. In general, conservative thought has influenced political opinion that prefers harsher punishment towards criminals, hostility towards homosexuality, adherence to orthodox religious ideas and a general dislike of immigration and multi-culturalism. The modern conservative movement also defines itself through its strong opposition to liberalism, emphasizing aspects such as free market economics, free trade, disapproval of countercultures and approval of interventionist foreign policies. Today, it is a major political ideology commonly associated with the Republican Party and became a distinctive political identity during the 1950s, polarizing American politics since then.

# Liberalism & Capitalism

The political ideology of liberalism was a product of the age of enlightenment. Liberalism as an idea values equal rights and the individual’s power of choice by means of positive law and one’s state of nature. The natural state of man is one that values goodwill, peace, mutual assistance, civility, and preservation. The freedom of the individual became a core and distinct political issue that has to be enhanced, preserved and protected. Generally, liberals hold that the role of the government is to protect individuals from harming each other, yet the government itself can threaten liberty. As time progressed, liberalism became divided into distinct strands, classical and reform/modern liberalism. Classical liberalism is heavily based on the laissez-faire principles espoused by Adam Smith in his *The Wealth of Nations.* The government has no role in bringing about a specific economic outcome and should let the ‘invisible hand' guide a free market, in which individuals freely pursue their economic self-interest which will eventually lead them to collective prosperity. According to Smith, "By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it"4. An executive decree cannot create social or economic order. The only sustainable and successful economic order would be one that arises spontaneously from forces acting on the free market. Thus, instead of collective actions intended to achieve potential outcomes, the natural human interest towards avoiding harm by controlling their actions would lead them to security. A liberal political order can thus reap the benefits of a free market economy and individual liberty without neglecting basic human needs or social cohesion.

Eventually, with time, the idea that the powers of the government itself can protect the individual's freedom began to take root. A new form of liberalism emerged that built upon classical liberalism, which saw the government's role expand to protect individuals from obstacles that prevent them from realizing their potential or living freely. These obstacles can include discrimination, poverty, ignorance, or disease. A clear difference from early thought could be seen when the role of the government changed from merely protecting individual freedom to promoting it, which in turn led to significant consequences. The New (modern/reform) liberalism became associated with welfare-policies that were first widely seen during the Roosevelt administration in the U.S. It was a social form of liberalism which was influenced by the utilitarian thought of philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham. “The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work”1. For the social liberal, protecting liberties entailed ensuring positive rights because of the idea that "a thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest of an individual when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures"1.As a result, schools, healthcare, museums, or even libraries started to be publicly funded along with certain economic regulations in place, ranging from minimum wage laws to anti-trust measures. The government was now expected to generate tax revenue to spend on public welfare and the common good to justify its legitimacy.

Classical liberalism profoundly shaped the institutions and culture of nearly all modern democratic governments. Even conservative and socialist parties visibly accept the notion of individual rights, that are now protected by courts of law. The notion of legal and political equality became central to all mature democratic governments, with the idea of democracy itself emerging from this principle. These ideas further manifested themselves in the adoption of federalism, checks and balances, and the separation of powers that went to define the predominant system of contemporary governance among western societies. Although some of the values central to classical liberalism might be abstract in nature, however in the U.S., it carried immense significance owing to its influence on America's political institutions and in the characteristics and development of American political culture. Subsequently, reform liberalism integrated certain socialist values with individual freedom, contrasting the original idea that a government's expanding role is inherently evil.

# Socialism & Marxism

Socialism is another social and economic ideology and system, which in sharp contrast form classical liberalism, insists that the distribution of wealth and control of production belongs to the society as a whole. Moreover, it denies private property ownership to be an absolute individual right. The theory was devised in response to capitalist industrialism that dominated 18th and 19th century America and Europe. Although, there was considerable variation within different strands of socialism regarding the extent of free trade and ownership of private property, yet a social regulation of behavior and state management of economy were common aspects. Both liberalism and socialism commonly aimed towards human evolution yet liberalism espoused a hierarchical view of society entitling individuals to the profits of their work, while socialism advocated abolishing social classes, favoring overall state developing and recognition of community, preferring the collective over the individual. Socialism is generally associated with the working class and its interest, due to its emphasis on preventing industrial workers from being exploited. The individual contribution of workers determines the distribution of profits among workers while developing a cooperative system to meet the needs of other members of the society, especially those who cannot work. Thereby equal education and health care access are preferred with no discrimination among socio-economic classes.

Socialist philosopher Robert Owen believed that the entire economic and social order must be substituted with one that emphasizes harmonious, collective living instead of competition. In this social order "The poor and the unemployed working class cannot, must not, be abandoned to their fate, lest the consequences entail misfortune on us all…they should, on the contrary, be afforded the means of procuring a certain and comfortable subsistence by their labour, under a system which will not only direct that labour and its earnings to the best advantage, but, at the same time, place them under circumstances the most favorable to the growth of morals and of happiness"3. The key premise behind the idea was that people will be more creative, happy, kind and work harder if their basic necessities are met through social cooperation. Owen also criticized the welfare system and proposed an alternate socialist system in which a "plan for the amelioration of the poor should combine means to prevent their children from acquiring bad habits, and to give them good one – to provide useful training and instruction to them – to provide proper labour for the adults – to direct their labour and expenditure so as to produce the greatest benefit to themselves and to society"3. This viewpoint was based on the idea that human beings were a reflection of their environment, therefore the progress of humanity requires creating new socialist relations among them.

Like capitalism, socialism too has left its impact on western civilization. The idea initiated during the time when industrial capitalism created the wealth and class inequalities, seeing itself as part of the evolution of an urban industrial society. It morally protested the idea of the bourgeoisie and saw capitalism has a failing system that had to be replaced with the more superior socialist system of ‘communism'. The latter was developed by Friedrick Engels and Karl Marx and presented in the 1848 book, ‘the Communist Manifesto'. The book provided an idea of how a classless society could be created by applying communist principles. Although, communism was rejected by the West, yet events such as the Great Depression led to the adoption and integration of several socialist policies in western liberal economics. As a result, a soft form of socialism was developed in America wherein a part socialist, part administrative and a democratic welfare state began to be advocated. However, as the Soviet Union disintegrated, it fortified the belief that capitalism was the only workable and practical ideology. Yet, the success of certain socialist democratic models in western Europe, combined with the recent successes gained by socialist parties in South America and Europe calls into question the viability of a pure unregulated capitalist system.

**Preferred Ideology**

An examination of various prominent ideologies that have shaped western societies reveal that fascist and communist regimes were predominantly rejected in favor of ideologies that do not find value in controlling and regulating human beings and action. Instead, individualist ideologies that encourage every person to lead their own destiny were immensely favored over the former. Conservatism and liberalism promised that freedom to the individual and limited the role of the government in their normal everyday lives. This suggests that human progress and learning correlated with a limited government which controls only a few vital aspects of their lives.

In my view, socialism, despite intending well, has certain drawbacks that tie to its assumptions about the cooperative nature of individuals when it comes to working. The idea fails to appreciate that there are many elements within society that are nearly always in competition with one another instead of being cooperative. This competition may lead certain segments of society to disrupt, overthrow, or bother another part for their own self-interest. This sense of competition is harnessed by classical liberalism and capitalism for the public good, while Socialism tends to pretend that this competition does not exist. Moreover, this thought leads socialist societies towards underappreciating entrepreneurism and individual achievement, thereby reducing the incentive for innovation, which otherwise exists in a liberal society.

Another reason why I do not prefer socialism is because of an expanded role of government. The government is assumed to be always representing its citizen's best wishes, whereas it is known that governments tend to abuse their powers often disregarding its citizen's rights arising from the personal greed of its constituents. Classical liberalism, on the other hand, upholds the idea that individuals are free to forge their own destiny, deciding themselves what they wish to produce, what they want to do in life, or who they wish to see as their leader. An individual is held responsible for his or her choices, while the exercise of choice based on their rational self-interest is not viewed to be wrong. A common notion is that classical liberalism makes people selfish, however, the idea fails to take into account that human beings to look after their own self-interest at a lesser or greater extent. A classical liberal pursues his or her own goals while exercising his liberty to decide what is best for him in life. When individuals follow their own rational self-interest in a free market and a free society, the entire society eventually becomes better off due to the invisible-hand at play, which explains why I would prefer classical liberalism over other ideologies.

# References

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