

## CONSERVATISM: HISTORICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS

M. Çağatay OKUTAN<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the historical-philosophical origins of conservatism. Therefore, an analysis of conservatism, with its diversities up to our time, was not aimed. The study is believed to be useful when it is read with the presupposition that knowing the original form of an ideology, which sees history as an indispensable part of its systematic integrity, would facilitate to understand this ideology as a whole.

**Keywords:** Conservatism, Modernizing, Society, Religion, Change.

**JEL Classification:** Z19

## MUHAFAZAKÂRLIK: TARİHSEL-FELSEFİ KÖKLER

### ÖZ

Bu yazı, muhafazakârlığın tarihsel-felsefî kökleri üzerinde durmaktadır. Bu nedenle, günümüze kadar gelen çeşitliliğiyle bir muhafazakâr analiz amaçlanmamıştır. Geçmiş sistematiğin bütünlüğünün vazgeçilmez olarak gören bir ideolojinin ilk halini bilmenin, bir bütün olarak anlaşılmasını kolaylaştıracağı ön kabulüyle okunmasının faydalı olacağı düşünülmüştür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Muhafazakârlık, Modernleşme, Toplum, Din, Değişme.

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<sup>1</sup> Doç.Dr. KTÜ İİBF, Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü, mcokutan@gmail.com

Although having achieved a significant systematic integrity with its emphasis on protecting the existing order and on longing for the past, conservatism, which has preoccupied political thoughts with its various practices; expresses a reactionary stance in one way, and is positioned as an extension of the sensitivity or rejection for the intention of ideologies to convert societies, in another way, as also described by H. Çetin (Çetin, 2007: 224).

### **1. Historical Background**

It can be said that conservative reactions started simultaneously with the establishment of civil society order. In this respect, conservatism can be perceived as a human reflex or a reflex related to social elements. Without doubt, conservatism had a systematic for much later, however, despite all of his “revolutionism”, it should not be forgotten that Plato demonstrated a conservative stance with the hierarchical social order fictionalized in his Ideal Government, which was not meant to be changed.

In order to establish the ideology of Conservatism as a systematical integrity of ideas, destructive practices against society had to be experienced. Certainly, the era, where thought and practices developed in the most productive way in human history, corresponds to the period after the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The periods before the said era, was the product of a social motion, which was established as the internalization of “change”, as a result of man’s challenge with nature. As B. Girvin stated, the peripheral spread, which began with population increase, made human adaptation obligatory human-nature relationship and facing the nature became inevitable. The option between destruction and adaptation forced the unwilling acceptance of change. Conservative internalization, embodied in a stable environment and inert economic structure (Girvin, 1994: 3), became obsolete with the destructive practices of the modern world. When economic and socio-political developments disconcerted the system of values, it became impossible to internalize the reactions.

The concerns were obvious and the situation was most directly expressed by the words of Burke (Burke, 2010: 946) as he said; “I should suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France until I am informed how it is combined with government; with public force; with the discipline and obedience of armies; with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order; with civil and social manners”.

For understanding Burke’s concerns, it would be appropriate to opt for explaining Z. Güler’s conservative state of reason through two main aspects. According to Güler, distrust to human nature and to the rootless, and emphasis to traditionalism within the concept of historical continuity are the apparent characteristics of conservative state of reason (Güler, 2007: 118). Indeed, Burke began to express his ideas on civil liberties with the words “the path is still dark” (Burke, 1982: 3).

It was the French Revolution that was pointed as the beginning of the “Dark Path”. Conservatives, who started to express their ideas over the indefiniteness of the revolution, attempted to justify themselves through the practices of the Jacobeans. As a matter of fact, as described by R. Nisbet, French Revolution removed the Catholic-Monarchic-Aristocratic compound with radical changes after 1791. However, this compound was vital for most conservatives; they were either a part or the foremost defenders of it. According to the Conservatives; values such as life, ownership, authority and fair liberty were removed one by one (Nisbet, 1997: 100-101).

In their opinions; order and stability were about to vanish. French Revolution ignored social institutions and this lead the way to political instability. It became the doctrine of conservative thought to resist against the type of change, which shattered social dynamics, and to focus on the criticisms of practices that aimed to convert the society through rational projects (Yılmaz, 2003: 97). Time worked for the conservatives. Post revolution France went into chaos. After this, neither parliamentary democracy nor pluralism had any meaning for conservatives. As Woods defined, both innovations were perceived as the “foreign” institutions of modernity (Woods, 1989: 124).

## 2. Modernization versus Tradition

Rejection by the conservatives of the social and political order preached by Modernity, was based on the concern that the links, which had been believed to be necessary to be established between the “past”, were about to be disconnected at the most basic level. So much so that, for conservatives, who emphasized the values of economic, social and political beliefs (Honderich, 1991: 26), all values pertaining to the past had to be maintained within the continuing institutions and practiced within the political life (Aughey, 1989: 100-101).

According to conservatism, which put forward the requirement of societies for being regarded with their characteristic values; modernization meant the spread of universal ethic values. Modernization of societies was progressing simultaneously with the destruction of traditional values. For example; the family institution, being the real bearer of socialization for all conservatives, was pushed to a status of secondary importance in modern societies. Moreover, due to the mobility, which is an exclusive characteristic of modern societies, traditional values began to be forgotten, and while social priorities were pushed away one by one, the “individual” became the subject of political and social relationships. It didn’t seem possible that a social order, which is embodied under these circumstances, would internalize conservative values and institutions. For conservatives, the “past”, as well as being a concept implying the protection and nostalgia for the former, also became the expression of a reflex against modernizing.

Conservatives, respecting and even hallowing the historical institutions and values, also showed the way to understand today (Nisbet, 1997: 118). In this regard; culture and tradition were presented as the conveyors of social memory. The empha-

sis on the continuity of culture facilitated the perception of today's national identities as the extensions of formations from the past. It has been stated that a similar function was also carried out by traditions. The experiences from the past were shown as exits from social problems. The success of traditional institutions in remaining still, and their proving their reliability through trial-error method within the historical processes became sufficient to push away the approaches of reasoning. Indeed, for conservatives; experience and traditions had much more capacity to solve problems, compared to reasoning (Erdoğan, 1993: 82).

### 3. Sin of Enlightenment: Sapere Aude

The idea of Enlightenment, achieving a significant maturity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, suggested a social conversion that would be materialized by the lead of intelligence and science. Organizing its philosophy and socio-political project on the basis of humanity, Enlightenment had separations while moving forward with its belief in rationality. Indeed, importance attached to reason in Continental Europe was not accepted by the Scottish at the same level. Scottish enlightenment was not enthusiastic on the form of change, which focused on destroying the social. So, the first criticisms against the infinite trust on reasoning came from the Enlightenment itself. D. Hume emerged as the most influential name and creator of this critical view or "conservative reaction".

Placing empiricism on the center of his thought, Hume emphasized the importance of information obtained by experience and preferred to explain social life through traditions and habits. This approach led the way to a skeptical approach for the capability of human reasoning in Scottish Enlightenment. However, this method did not mean so much in the Continent. Actually Kant also preferred to synthesize rationalism with empiricism; however, he eventually embraced the doctrine of Enlightenment, too: Sapere Aude.

The idea of reforming a social order consisting of individuals, who "dare to use their own minds", became rationalized by trivializing the values of the past. It was not possible for conservatives to approve such a change. In Burke's sense, it was not possible for a reasoning, which progressed inductively, to single-handedly shape a country or a society. The doubt felt by conservatives against individual reasoning, emphasized the importance of the historical line that connected the past to today or of the continuity of the concept of tradition (Nisbet, 1997: 118).

As opposed to the optimism of Enlightenment, for conservatives, who adopted a philosophical approach based on skepticism towards human nature and reasoning, the human is a limited being, incapable of making the world better. Against the optimism of Enlightenment on human and reasoning; conservative pessimism had both practical and theoretical resources. The practical basis was the sociologic and political destructions, occurring right after the Age of Reason, caused by political projects based on reasoning. As a theoretical basis "Original Sin" doctrine was presented (Özipek, 2004: 45-46).

M. A. Ağaoğulları tells that it wouldn't be right to mention only one thought approach as specific to Enlightenment. Accordingly, reasoning was presented as a universal value as well as being perceived as an individual capability. Meanings attached by Enlightenment philosophers to reasoning, varied greatly. For some, it was a value that had to be referred with absoluteness; and for some, it had to be evaluated together with emotions and passions, not individually. For example; Hume, Diderot and Helvetius pointed out the importance of emotions and passions. Kant focused on the limitations of the mind. Despite such variety, reasoning was perceived as the most important guide by all Enlightenment philosophers. In this context, especially critical reasoning was emphasized it created an intellectual basis for the expectation of the bourgeoisie to destroy feudal order (Ağaoğulları, 2011: 521).

Özipek states that Enlightenment does not point out a homogenous historical period. In a way, Enlightenment also influenced conservative philosophers or their relation progressed through a dialectic process. In this sense, it is understandable that most conservatives are also referred to as Enlightenment philosophers (Özipek, 2004: 33-34). Although there is such a transitive environment, a decisive element in Enlightenment-Conservatism dialectic is the value attached to humanity. For conservatism, which believes that human is a defective being, Enlightenment reasoning did not mean much.

#### **4. Authority for the Welfare of the Society**

According to many ideologies, human is a good being or can be directed to goodness when his social conditions are corrected. However, conservatives claimed that humans could not be attached such a value; and that it is an incomplete and defected being, which could not be perfected. As a basis, they presented the tendency of human psychology to the secure. In this context, order was seen as a much more important value than individual liberties. Indeed, it is not the social dynamics that pushed people to crime, it is the moral deficiencies embodied within the individual (Heywood, 2007: 92-93).

Prioritizing what is social, reasoning was not attached much importance. This also closed the way to have an "individual" become a historical subject for conservatives. Society was positioned before the individual. In Louis de Bonald's view, an individual was shaped in a society, which is a work of God, and there was no necessity for the social life to provide individual freedom. On the contrary, a human being could only achieve welfare under the authority of family, society and church. Thus, in Bonald's point of view, the idea of natural rights lost its meaning completely. From then on, the only thing that mattered for an individual was his duties and he had to provide these duties of his to the institutions, which ensured that authority was established. This stance, which rendered individual demands obsolete, searched for other elements that could explain the formation of a society. Family substituted the individual. Society was defined as a social organization comprised of families (Nisbet, 1997: 103, 108, 114).

For Conservatives, family is embodied with humane-natural instincts. According to this approach; “love, responsibility and care” are based on the center of family formation. This view became very functional for conservatives. Indeed, their seeing society as a living organism and that this living thing is not the work of humans, became a distinguishing aspect for conservatives, who focused on the understanding that society was formed by natural factors. So, they stood against the mechanical society approach, which claimed that society could be changed, and they could argue that it could, as an organism, was shaped by powers beyond humans. Then, social institutions have to be respected and preserved. Since they were able to maintain their existences, they are valuable and desired. A demand of reform or change on them would create social problems (Heywood, 2007: 96-97).

Organic society approach was not taken as if there couldn't be any change. A way of this approach implied that change may be compulsory and performed gradually in any organism. Indeed, Burke told that social organisms needed change as much as natural organisms. Such that, it was possible for an organ not to be in perfect harmony with the organism and develop faster than the others. Then, the thing that would be done for harmony is to reform the inharmonious organ. However, Burke expressed that this procedure should not be as abruptly as in the example of France (Yılmaz, 2003: 101).

### **5. Can Everything Change? What about Religion?**

Conservatives carried out their first criticisms on the issue of religion, over the Reform movement. Actually, they blamed the Reform movement for disconnecting individual faith from the supportive ties of religious society and authority. Bonald asserted an attitude in favor of the absolute freedom of church within the government and found it unnatural for a government to control religion. According to Bonald, who perceived Religion as a form of society beyond its dimension of faith; the sin of Protestantism was that it imprisoned religion into the world of an individual (Nisbet, 1997: 107, 108, 113).

All first conservatives were intimidated by the impacts of the Jacobins on the churches in France (Nisbet, 1986: 68). Enlightenment, in contrast with conservatism, meant a stance against Christianity and actually, all religions. For Conservatives, religion was a value that could not be considered separately from society and it was natural for them to react against the opposition of Enlightenment against religion (Erdoğan, 1991: 51).

Enlightenment reasoning was criticized in two angles. The first one was that Enlightenment philosophy ignored what is superior and metaphysical. The second was that Enlightenment caused practices that would destroy religious institutions. Özipek's below explanation, with quotations from Ernest Van Den Haag, is a kind of a summary of the conservative criticism on Enlightenment (Özipek, 2004: 39-40):

*What did Enlightenment put instead of faith, which it ousted? The intention was to bring reason, which would be the actual god. (...) We were finally free. There were no threats. There were no limitations over joy. However, when reasoning was left alone, it couldn't provide the moral limitations and purposes, for which Nietzsche and Dostoyevski said that without them, humanity would morally collapse.*

*Whether this was or was not the intention, religion was weakened. As Nietzsche stated, God was dead in the mind of people. Just like Dostoyevski, Nietzsche was afraid that the absence of God would legitimize nihilism. Without God, everything was morally possible and free, just as displayed first by the communists, and then the Nazis. (...) ... if there isn't a final/higher justice, what could restrict evil? ... Philosophers could not think that reasoning could destroy a society, but it could only be created by religion....*

Attitude of Enlightenment against religion always had a place in the minds of conservatives and became the main argument of their criticisms. Again, the idea of change, expressed from inside religion, was partially accepted by some conservatives. For example, creation of the movements against the slavery of black people in USA, was not criticized by American conservatives. Moreover, it was regarded positively that such a demand of change was expressed by religious institutions. Without doubt, this affirmation must be sought within the Anglo-American conservatism, founded by Burke. This influence or conservative vein exists deeply within the historical and philosophical roots of conservatism, and it has been the starting point of many various conservative approaches up to today. Of course this topic has content, deserving a separate study.

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