Cultural conservatism

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Abstract. Trying to preserve cultural forms as faithfully as possible is a key motivation for cultural transmission. This chapter reviews two possible accounts of it. One, evolutionary conservatism, is premised on the superiority of accumulated cultural knowledge compared to individual judgement—a theme that runs strongly through both the cultural evolution literature and conservative political philosophy. I argue for a clear distinction between evolutionary conservatism and status quo conservatism, which is motivated by loss- and risk-aversion. I proceed to tackle some outstanding issues regarding status quo conservatism: its association with attachment to social hierarchies; the kind of cultural practices that tend to elicit it; and the question why an attitude motivated by considerations of costs and benefits might be manifested as rigid or absolute principles. Seeing some cultural practices as equilibria in a coordination game helps answer these questions.

Keywords: Status quo conservatism; Rigidity of the right; Risk-aversion; Coordination game; Focal point; Cultural evolution.

1. Introduction

This paper will try to make some progress in explaining cultural conservatism, defined as an explicit and *a priori* reluctance towards cultural change, implying that change should be resisted by default, regardless of any particular argument on the strengths or weaknesses of a particular innovation. Conservatism in this sense differs from simple cultural inertia: some cultures stay the same simply for want of resources or reasons to change, rather than out of an explicit prevention against change. It is also quite distinct from authoritarianism (Stenner, 2009) or cultural "tightness" (Gelfand, 2019), understood as preferences for strong leaders and rigid norms. It may be related to what social psychologists call "conservatism", but some assumptions routinely made in that field won't be taken on board here. In particular I do not assume that people are characterized by stable liberal or conservative dispositions, or that these dispositions are reflected in voting behaviors. My focus here is on what might compel people to be conservative regarding particular cultural practices, in the sense of explicitly resisting changes to those. This is related to what social psychologists call "resistance to change", deemed to be but one component of conservatism (Jost et al., 2003; White et al., 2020).

This paper will examine two accounts of conservatism, both of them starting from the assumption that cultural conservatives take the costs of change seriously — more seriously than the non-conservative do. Cultural change carries two broad kinds of costs: the costs incurred when the new practice is inferior to the old, and the costs of transitioning between two practices. How we characterize cultural conservatism depends a great deal on the kind of cost we choose to focus on.

The costs of adopting an inferior practice. A common conservative position is general skepticism that innovations may be superior to established cultural practices. This skepticism applies to all innovations, even when they seem to be a neat improvement (Burke 1790; Hamilton 2015; Quinton 1978). The main argument in favor of this claim contrasts the limited powers of unaided individual cognition against the mass of knowledge accumulated by collectives and passed down over centuries. This argument has been recently revived by cultural evolutionists (most clearly Henrich 2015).

The costs of transitioning between two practices are less often stressed in the conservative philosophical tradition, at least not explicitly (Sidgwick being a possible exception, see Hamilton 2015; also Brennan and Hamlin 2016). Yet, the simple act of switching from one practice to another carries costs of its own, even if the new practice is superior to the new one. There are the cognitive costs of forming new habits and acquiring new skills or reflexes, and also the costs that come from modifying other practices to fit the new one.

Table 1. Two types of conservatism.

	Cognitive mechanisms	**Most relevant costs of change**	**Is the deep past relevant?**	**Is gradual, reversible change a good thing?**	**Is the traditional way better than the alternative?**
Evolutionary conservatism	Conformity; Deference to prestige; Overimitation	Switch to an inferior practice	Yes	Yes	Yes, most of the time
Status quo conservatism	Loss and risk aversion	Costs of transitioning, uncertainty of the change	No	No	Not necessarily

Table 1 provides a synthetic summary of two types of conservatism, based on the type of cost that they seek to avoid. "Evolutionary conservatism" (**Section 2**) is a type of conservatism based on the perception that cultural evolution is smarter than each of us individually, so that abruptly transforming a long-standing practice is more likely to damage it than to improve it. I call this an evolutionary form of conservatism because it rests on the assumption that cultural progress is a matter of gradual and collective accumulation rather than single-handed innovation. The name also indicates that evolutionary conservatism is not averse to change, as long as change is slow and reversible. "Status quo conservatism" (surveyed in **Section 3**) is motivated above all by the costs of transitioning between practices and by the uncertainties that change brings about. Unlike evolutionary conservatism, it does not rest on a positive evaluation of traditional practices, nor does it assume that long-standing traditions are intrinsically superior to innovations. Instead, status quo conservatism is rooted in a desire to avoid the costs and risks linked to the transition between two practices.

The rest of this paper is an attempt to describe and solve some lacunas in current theories of status quo conservatism. Three aspects of conservative psychology that current accounts fail to address satisfactorily, in my view, are the link between conservatism and the preservation of a hierarchical social order, the relationship between conservatism and rigidity or adherence to sacred values, and the question of knowing why some cultural practices, such as religious ritual or family structure, are much more likely to elicit conservative intuitions compared to, say, technology. **Sections 4** and **5** proposes that viewing some cultural practices as equilibria in a coordination game helps answer these questions. **Section 4** recapitulates some classic game theoretical results on the power of precedent in such games, and elaborates on the edge that this can give to conservative agents. **Section 5** argues that the power of precedent in coordination games may explain why conservative dispositions are associated with a propensity to maintain social hierarchies; it also explains why conservative intuitions

target some domains of culture more than others; and it suggests that conservatives have strategic reasons to be rigid in their conservatism.

2. Evolutionary conservatism

Our first type of conservatism can be grounded in two assumptions. First, the practices we inherit from cultural evolution solve problems (which could be anything from designing a voting system to building a canoe) that are to some extent intractable for unaided individual cognition (what Boyd et al. 2013 call the failure of "improvisational intelligence"). Second, the problem can be solved by trying out a vast number of tiny changes to a basic design, most of which will fail to improve it, and retaining the few changes that do improve the design. This is, of course, a cultural equivalent of Darwinian selection. The classical example for such a problem is Boyd & Richerson's claim that canoe building cannot be optimized by unaided human minds, because canoe hydrodynamics is determined by a large number of interdependent parameters (Richerson & Boyd, 2005), but can be solved by the vast experiment in trial-and-error learning that is cultural selection. In this view of cultural change, the only role that individual cognition plays is that of a random generator of innovations, most of them destined for failure. Cultural selection does all the rest. If we accept this argument, its consequences are clearly conservative, in the sense that it calls into question the capacity of any individual to evaluate existing cultural practices, and to replace them with better ones. If "culture is smarter than we are", as the slogan goes (Henrich, 2015), this would justify deferring to the wisdom embodied in traditional practices instead of trying to change them (Campbell, 1975; Henrich, 2015).

This argument relies on implicit assumptions about the design space of cultural practices (Dennett, 1995). A design space (modelled on Sewall Wright's work in evolutionary biology) is a representation of the quality of the solutions to a given problem, plotted against

their resemblance to one another. A set of similar good solutions is represented as a peak in the design space, while a group of mediocre solutions will appear as a valley or a plain. An important property of any design space is its smoothness. In a smooth design space, the best solutions are accessible by a gradual climb; in a jagged space, in contrast, the best solutions are surrounded by poor ones, so that they can only be reached by jumping from a distance, not through a gradual walk. Another important property is the number of peaks in the landscape. Some problems have multiple solutions of varying quality, others only one or a few. These would be represented as peaks in the space. If there is only one peak (or a few), and it can be accessed by a smooth climb, there is a high probability that cultural evolution already brought us there, or nearby; and most faraway positions will be below our current one. In contrast, a space with multiple peaks makes the conservative position less strong: it increases the likelihood that a move to a distant solution improves upon the status quo (Acerbi et al., 2009; Caldwell & Millen, 2010).

Long before the notion of a design space was articulated, theoreticians of political conservatism rested their case on assumptions about the inferiority of practices that are too distant from inherited tradition (Burke, 1790; Hamilton, 2015; Oakeshott, 1991; Quinton , 1978; Scruton, 2015). They started from the same skepticism regarding the individual mind's capacity to judge or improve traditions, and drew two consequences. First, gradual and blind (or myopic) change over centuries could and did lead societies to the best solutions to its problems: we should respect traditional practices, even when we do not understand them. Second, change is welcome as long as it is incremental and reversible. Most conservative theoreticians were emphatically not defenders of the status quo, and many saw themselves as reformists for this reason (Scruton, 2015). This meant rejecting changes only insofar as they are abrupt or hard to reverse. As the name indicates, evolutionary conservatism is compatible with a belief in cultural progress — past and future.

Here lies the key difference between evolutionary conservatism and status quo conservatism. A succession of small changes, with possible backward moves, is a sure way to maximize the transition costs that status quo conservatives worry about. Keeping those costs down is much more easily done by staying with the status quo or, if change is inescapable, making one big change and never going back. Kieron O'Hara (2016) makes a persuasive case for drawing a clear distinction between, on the one hand, a bias in favor of the status quo, and on the other hand a conservative attitude defined by skepticism of individual reason and concern about the unintended consequences of change. I follow his advice, making as clear a contrast as can be made between evolutionary conservatism and status quo conservatism.

The way I describe it so far, evolutionary conservatism is a theoretical justification for a certain brand of conservatism. It does not directly explain conservatism in regular people. However, cultural evolutionists have proposed accounts of conservative ideologies that explain their prevalence by the evolutionary advantages that they bring to groups that embrace them. The most elaborate attempt may be Craig Palmer's account of conservatism among the Amish and native Australians (Palmer, 2009). His account targets institutions like the Amish *Ordnung*, a kind of unwritten constitution maintained by each local order, and codifying every aspect of life. Palmer argues that conservative institutions like the Ordnung provide two kinds of group-level benefits. They increase the fidelity of cultural transmission, allowing the group to benefit from the knowledge embodied in inherited traditions; and they promote group cohesion.

This is not the place to discuss the merits of the view of cultural change that underpins evolutionary conservatism (see Morin 2016 for a general critique). Instead, in what follows, I point to an entirely different kind of motivation for conservatism, which hinges not on the alleged superiority of tradition relative to invention, but on the costs of transitioning between the two. For the two types of conservatism that will be described next, it makes sense to

conserve a practice even when that practice is not in any way better than the innovation set to replace it (Brennan & Hamlin, 2016; Cohen, 2011).

3. Status quo conservatism

September 3, 1967, remembered in Sweden as "Dagen H", was the day the whole country shifted from driving on the left hand-side of the road, to driving on the right hand-side of the road[1]. Swedes had been using left-handside traffic for centuries, but their neighbours drove on the right, and most of the cars that could be bought in the country were designed for right-handside traffic. In spite of these clear advantages for right-handside traffic over left-handside traffic, a vast majority of Swedes (83% in the 1955 referendum on the issue) rejected it, and the change was passed in defiance of public opinion. The case against the shift hinged on transition costs. Driving on the right may be the better option in the absolute, but Swedes had learnt to drive on the left. Many drivers would struggle with the new rules of the road, starting with the less skilled and the elderly. A spike in accidents was feared. The shift did not, eventually, cause accidents to increase; but neither did it improve road safety in the middle run. Proponents of the shift could boast that the dire consequences that anti-shifters expected did not materialize. Detractors of the shift could point out the absence of clear benefits, compared to the costs of refitting road signs and preparing drivers for the change. The case of the Swedish shift to right-side driving suggests the existence of a type of conservatism that cannot be reduced to the evolutionary account. Driving on the left-handside of the road was neither the more ancient practice nor the most widespread, globally. Successful shifts had occurred before, in other countries and within Sweden itself. There was nothing mysterious about the problem or its solution — nothing a normal individual brain could not grasp.

[1] I borrow this example and most of the accompanying information from (Brennan & Hamlin, 2016).

Status quo conservatism is tied to the costs of cultural change itself, regardless of its direction. In theory, this kind of conservatism can resist even changes that are likely to be beneficial, because it is concerned not with the difference between the traditional and the reformed way, but with the price that must be paid in order to transition between them. Anyone can see and evaluate the costs I just described; what remains to be explained is why certain people may be more sensitive to them than others.

From a behavioral economics perspective, status quo conservatism could be explained as a consequence of loss and risk-aversion. Loss aversion is an asymmetry in the estimation of costs compared to benefits, with costs being given more weight (Kahneman & Tversky, 2012; Mrkva et al., 2020). Conservatives would weigh the costs of transitioning more heavily than the benefits provided by the reformed practice. Risk aversion is a willingness to forego uncertain gains for gains that are smaller but more certain (see Henrich and McElreath 2002 for a discussion in the context of cultural evolution). Correlations between risk aversion and political conservatism have been deduced theoretically by Clarke (2017), who argues that a bundle of preferences including a bias for the status quo, loss aversion, and absence of political ideals, can all be derived from Prospect Theory.

Social psychologists consider mechanisms that seem quite similar, under different names. The mainstream view in the field considers that conservatives present higher-than-average aversion to threat and uncertainty (Jost et al. 2003). This position has been criticized on various grounds (e.g., Proulx & Brandt, 2017, Costello 2021), the main charge against them being the fact that measures of risk or loss aversion overlap too much with the measures of political conservatism they are predicted to correlate with (for instance, a threat sensitivity questionnaire may mention terrorist attacks while the conservatism survey probes attitudes toward repressive security policies). But even critics (e.g. Proulx & Brandt 2017)

acknowledge the multiple links between threat or uncertainty sensitivity and some aspects of conservatism, such as the one we are interested in here, resistance to change.

The remainder of this paper will attempt to solve three problems that a loss- and risk-aversion account of conservatism does not seem to solve on its own.

Why is resistance to change linked with endorsement of hierarchies? Political psychologists studying conservatism usually define it as a combination of "resistance to change" and "social dominance" (White et al., 2020) or opposition to equality (Jost et al. 2003). Resistance to change, as assessed through measurements such as White et al.'s resistance to change scale, overlaps closely with what is called here "status quo conservatism" (after Stenner, 2009). "Social dominance", usually assessed by the social dominance orientation scale, is usually seen as reflecting a tendency to enforce social hierarchies. Conservatism understood as resistance to change is robustly associated with social dominance (Jost et al., 2003; White et al., 2020). Why would that be? Loss aversion and risk aversion apply, in principle, to a wide range of cultural practices — all those things that it would be costly to change, or risky to replace. This includes things like left-handside driving, table manners, daylight saving time, etc., that have no obvious relation to the enforcement of social hierarchies. Furthermore, there is nothing contradictory about wanting to conserve an egalitarian social order; indeed, conservatism about egalitarian norms is arguably a crucial feature of some small-scale societies (Boehm 1999).

Why do conservatives focus on certain cultural practices more than others? Political psychologists naturally study people's attitudes towards politically sensitive topics, but the literature on conservatism rarely asks why conservative intuitions are triggered by specific topics. This paper deals with cultural conservatism in general, not just its political variety; I thus need an account of which cultural practices conservative intuitions more readily apply to.

Why is conservatism principled? Loss- and risk-aversion rest on considerations of costs and benefits; so do aversion to threat and uncertainty. In reality, conservative attitudes are seldom voiced in such terms. They are more often presented as absolute matters, not open to compromise. Status quo conservatism seems especially resistant to alternative views, compared to other political stances (Peterson et al., 2009). Social psychologists usually explain this using the famous and debated "rigidity of the right hypothesis" (Costello et al., 2021; Jost et al., 2003), which holds that inter-individual differences in conservatism (and resistance to change in particular) are caused by differences in such constructs as aversion to ambiguity or the need for cognitive closure — all linked to a motivation to see the world as simpler, more predictable, and more reassuring than it really is. This account has been extensively criticized on empirical grounds (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Proulx & Brandt, 2017); on theoretical grounds, one can wonder at the evolutionary plausibility of a cognitive mechanism designed to produce psychological contentment at the expense of accuracy (Weeden & Kurzban, 2014). Without entering into this debate, I will attempt to provide a different (possibly complementary) explanation.

4. Status quo conservatism and coordination games

The next sections attempt to answer these questions. I argue that, because of the way conventions work to facilitate coordination between agents, there is often a group of people who benefits from keeping the current convention unchanged, even when they are not especially favored by the hierarchical order that it creates. We may view cultural practices as equilibria in coordination games (Lewis 1969 / 2002; Guala 2016), and status quo conservatism as a preference for staying with the current equilibrium.

Table 2. Standard pure coordination game.

	Player 2 chose option A	Player 2 chose option B
Player 1 chose option A	1,1	0,0
Player 1 chose option B	0,0	1,1

A typical pure coordination game is one where it is beneficial for the two players to make the same move, regardless of what particular move they play. (Table 2.) The issue of which side of the road to drive on is a case in point. The main difficulty in such games consists in breaking the symmetry between the two equivalent moves, so that both players systematically choose one of the two in spite of their equivalent payoffs. The standard solution involves making one move more salient than the others (Schelling 1960 / 1990; Mehta, Starmer, and Sugden 1994). Precedent — the fact that the same move was played repeatedly in the past — is a major source of salience. As Brennan & Hamlin (2015) note, the power of precedent makes any one-sided attempt at transitioning costly. Based on their model, they argue that the costs of transitioning between different conventions can be high enough to recommend sticking with the status quo, even when another equilibrium would be better for everyone involved. This argument is an example of what I call status quo conservatism, since it is only motivated by the costs of transitioning between two practices. The case of the Swedish shift to right-side driving, as we saw, is typical.

In a standard pure coordination game, agents are interchangeable: the game's payoff structure is identical for players A and B. Real life is different: some agents are better off in certain equilibria compared to others. In the Swedish example, the shift to right-side driving would have benefitted some people more than others: those who lived close to the border

more than those who resided further inland; young drivers more than elderly ones; etc. The simplest way to model such dynamics is a game that has been variously called “mixed-motive game” (Schelling 1960), “Battle of the sexes”, or “Bach-Stravinsky game” (O’Connor 2019) (Table 3). In this last version, two friends each want to go to a concert, but one prefers Bach, the other Stravinsky. Each of them values going to a concert together above going alone, so the payoff for failing to coordinate is the lowest of all; but if they coordinate, one agent will be better off than the other.

Table 3. The Bach-Stravinsky game.

	B chose Bach	B chose Stravinsky
A chose Bach	2,1	0,0
A chose Stravinsky	0,0	1,2

The major difference between the Bach-Stravinsky game and a standard pure coordination game is the unfair nature of any stable equilibrium that might be reached — unfair in the sense that they bestow an arbitrary advantage on one player. As students of this game argue, social conventions that are unfair in this sense may persist indefinitely, because everyone prefers them to the option of a lack of coordination (O’Connor, 2019 being the most comprehensive treatment of this issue, using much more elaborate versions of this basic model). Under certain condition, the Bach equilibrium may endure even if a majority of players actually prefer Stravinsky, provided the costs of transitioning to the Stravinsky equilibrium are high enough. These two elements — the power of precedent in coordination

game, and the possibility that it stabilizes unfair equilibria — add to the appeal of status quo conservatism, for social practices that solve coordination problem.

5. Three implications

Conservatism and hierarchy. This account helps explain why resistance to change due to loss aversion can be particularly pronounced in people who strongly adhere to social hierarchies, even when those hierarchies do not favor them. Social practices that strongly rely on coordination are costlier to change, all else being equal, because any change has to be agreed upon by various agents whose interests may diverge. At the same time, practices that solve coordination problems are more likely to stabilize unfair hierarchies, compared to practices that an agent may change unilaterally. Together, these two facts— the fact that loss- or risk-averse agents have more to lose when a practice solves a coordination problem, and the fact that such practices tend to entrench unfair equilibria—lead to a convergence of interests between the agents who benefit the most from the unfair equilibrium, and those that are most averse to loss or risk. Both categories benefit from maintaining the status quo.

What conservatives are conservative about. The account sketched here could be used to predict which cultural practices most likely elicit conservative intuitions. Two crucial properties are (1) the importance of the stakes—how much participants stand to gain or lose from the practice, and (2) to what extent the practice relies on a difficult-to-achieve degree of coordination. Cultural practices differ widely on each one of those parameters (Table 4).

Table 4. Types of cultural practices, ordered according to the importance of coordination in making them succeed, and to the evolutionary importance of their outcome.

	Stakes: low	**Stakes: high**
Coordination: Difficult and important	Lexicon and grammar; Music and dance; Games.	Signals of membership in a large coalition; Norms governing mating and reproduction; political institutions.
Coordination: Less difficult, or unimportant	Story-telling; Sleeping routines; Producing visual art.	Subsistence technologies; Child care.

The first parameter—the importance of the costs and benefits at stake—should matter on the assumption that conservatism is a rational strategy, as opposed to an impulse to follow tradition blindly. This assumption is nothing trivial. After all, conservatives have been known to resist changes in the most trivial of practices, from fashion to children's games. My account nonetheless predicts that the intensity of conservative sentiment should vary with a practice's impact. The second parameter is straightforwardly derived from the view that conservatism emerges from the use of precedent to solve coordination problems. The more difficult coordination is, the costlier conventions become to revise, making conservatism more appealing. Conservatism should thus be particularly acute for practices located in the upper right corner of Table 4. Building a coalition is a complex political endeavor, thus signals of coalition membership (for instance, publicly performed rituals — Chwe, 2003) should be conservatively adhered to. Likewise, solutions to high-stakes evolutionary problems

such as competition over mates and reproduction, are likely to elicit strong conservative sentiments.

Testing this coarse-grained prediction would require precise metrics for (at least) conservatism and for the difficulty of coordination. Counter-examples would need to be examined, first and foremost cases of technological conservatism. Amish (and other Anabaptist communities) come to mind again, some of them being well known for refusing telephones, motorized vehicles, washing machines, etc. Yet we should be wary not to let this apparent exception mislead us. Amish luddism is notorious precisely because it is extreme; few other cultures push conservatism as far as that; but many more cultures do resist changes in other areas like rituals, traditional clothing, or family organization. And even the Amish are arguably much less conservative about technology than they are about their language, religion, or family organization.

What conservatives gain from being principled conservatives. Thinking of conservatism as a response to the challenges raised by social coordination helps us understand why conservatives would tend to uphold the cultural status quo in a principled way, sometimes making its defense a matter of sacred values (*sensu* Atran and Axelrod 2008). The capacity to credibly commit to a move and block communication is a key advantage in many games involving coordination, including the Stravinsky-Bach game (Frank 1991; Schelling 1960 / 1990). The key to winning such a game is to convince the other player that you cannot and will not change your mind, forcing them to align on your chosen move. As we saw, agents whose move aligns with precedent are at an advantage here. Playing the move that was played most of the time in preceding rounds means playing the move the other player expects you to play. It makes it easier to credibly commit to that move. But this advantage would be entirely lost if you declared you were open to negotiations with the other player. In contrast, a player who does not benefit from playing precedent has everything to gain from negotiating.

Rigidity, thus, is a natural ally of the conservative. If they failed to play rigidly, the conservative would lose the key advantage of their position — protection from attempted negotiation.

A recurrent motif of conservative thought is a paradoxical defense of irrationalism in political thought, dating back at least to Burke's famous celebration of prejudice (Burke, 1790). This feature of Burkean conservatism is a difficult one for political philosophy to accommodate, as it seems to undermine any possibility of justifying conservatism on rational grounds. One can understand, then, that conservative theorists mostly focused their efforts on rationalizing away this feature of conservative thought (Oakeshott, 1991; Scruton, 2015), or even contradicting it, presenting conservatism as a celebration of pragmatism and adaptation to circumstances (Quinton 1978). Yet political psychology suggests that Burke's views do resonate with deep conservative intuitions, which the current account can explain.

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