

The background of the slide is a Romantic-style landscape painting. It depicts a wide river or stream flowing through a lush, green landscape. On the left bank, there are large, leafy trees. In the distance, a small bridge or structure is visible. Two figures are standing on the right bank, looking towards the river. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall atmosphere is peaceful and idyllic.

Conservatism

Introduction to Political Theory
Department of Political Economy
King's College London

A Romantic-style landscape painting depicting a serene river scene. In the foreground, a fisherman in a hat and boots stands on the left bank, casting a long fishing rod into the water. The river flows from the background towards the viewer, featuring a small, white-water waterfall in the middle ground. The banks are lush with green grass and large, leafy trees. In the distance, another figure is visible on the right bank, and the horizon is hazy under a soft, cloudy sky. The overall mood is peaceful and idyllic, characteristic of 19th-century landscape art.

I. Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

II. Political Conservatism

I. Dispositional Conservatism

Political Theory Papers

Clear Thesis Statement

Does the thesis statement tell me what you will be arguing?

Can you imagine defending the *opposite* thesis?

Take a clear side in debate – no middle ground!

Political Theory Papers

Analysis, Not Description and Summary

“Rogers says x...”

“Roger argues for x by using the thought experiment y. There are three assumptions behind Roger’s argument.”

Political Theory Papers

State, Evaluate, and Respond to Counter-Arguments

Include strongest objection from defender of opposite thesis

Provide substantive response to thesis

Provide reasons response is successful

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

Socialism: *Equality* and *community* as guiding ideals

But how do we realize those ideals? What model of *social change* is implied in socialism?

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

Marx: “ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.”

Historical *direction* towards socialism

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

Cohen: Get the ideals right, and change will follow

Reform is a matter of “social technology,” the functioning of which we can reliably predict

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

Conservatism

How we get there is as important as where we are going



Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

Principle of Intellectual Humility

Given *complexity*, we can never fully know
why particular traditions exist or the
consequences of altering a tradition or
practice

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

Complexity

Society is not something that has been
deliberately planned or designed
according to a blueprint

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

All institutions are gradually evolved responses to *local circumstances*, the result of countless past *experimental responses to particular problems*

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

Tradition

We can never fully understand why a tradition exists or what purpose it serves

However, we know it is the result of a past success in navigating circumstances

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences


Consequences

All political action will have unintended consequences, and given complexity we can never fully predict those consequences

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

But does this set the bar for knowledge too high?

Do we need to know every potential consequence of a reform before we evaluate whether, on the whole, it will be good? Can we adjust to unintended consequences over time?

The background of the slide is a soft-focus, painterly image of a river scene. On the left, there are large, leafy trees. In the center, a person is visible from the back, standing on a rocky bank and fishing with a rod. The river flows towards the right, with more trees and foliage on the opposite bank. The overall tone is warm and slightly hazy, suggesting a peaceful, natural setting.

Complexity, Tradition, and Consequences

Is conservatism *really just a disposition or approach to social change?*

Or is there also a *substantive vision of the best ordering of society* in the conservative worldview?



Political Conservatism

Edmund Burke

Political Conservatism: Not just dispositional. A set of substantive principles that can guide the *ordering of society*.



Political Conservatism

Society is about *constraining passions and preserving order through justified hierarchies*

Best done through *property* and institutions that embody the *beautiful* and the *sublime*



Political Conservatism

Society is not grounded in rational principles

Rather, institutions must appeal to our *character* and *aesthetic sensibility*



Political Conservatism

“Society is...a contract...but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade.... It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable “



Political Conservatism

“It is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”

The background is a historical painting depicting a crowd of people in 18th-century clothing. In the center, a man in a dark coat and bicorne hat looks towards the left. To his right, a woman in a white dress and bonnet looks upwards. The scene is filled with other figures, some holding poles or flags, creating a sense of a public gathering or protest. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the text.

Political Conservatism

The institution of *property* binds generations together

“The power of perpetuating our property in our families is one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to it, and that which tends the most to the perpetuation of society itself.”



Political Conservatism

But if the value of property arises from its *intergeneration stability*, then its distribution over time will be unequal

“The characteristic essence of property, formed out of the combined principles of its acquisition and conservation, is to be *unequal*.”



Political Conservatism

Two Additional Principles: Beautiful and Sublime

Beautiful: Covers human coarseness in manners and chivalry. Embodied in aristocracy.

Sublime: Tames human pride. Embodied in religion.

Dispositional Conservatism

Burke presents a theory, not just of *how* we should approach social change, but of the *actual value of his existing order*

Dispositional Conservatism: Much more modest *bias* in favor of the *status quo*

Dispositional Conservatism

Two Sources of Conservatism

1. Activities the enjoyment of which resides in the activity

The conservative disposition is particularly focused on such activities, as they are more *vulnerable and so easily lost*

Dispositional Conservatism

Two Sources of Conservatism

2. The means for instrumental activities (projects)

“In general, it may be said that our disposition in respect of tools is appropriately more conservative than our attitude towards projects” p. 179

Dispositional Conservatism

Oakeshott's argument *focuses on politics as preserving the tools that frame projects* (rules of conduct)

But can we totally abstain from pursuing “projects” in politics?

Dispositional Conservatism

The status of *status quo bias*

Two Assumptions:

Diminishing Marginal Utility

Uncertainty About Outcomes

Dispositional Conservatism

If there is, in general, an equal probability that a change will make us better off or worse off, then we should choose not to make that change, as the expected losses are larger than the expected gains

Dispositional Conservatism

More radical claim: We may have *deep, fundamental uncertainty about which value is best or how to rank values*

Even deeper presumption in favor of the status quo

Dispositional Conservatism

Some Assumptions Behind Argument


1. Ignore *interpersonal comparisons* and so *distributional questions*
2. Goal of policy is *preference satisfaction* and then that those preferences can be modeled off of utility

Dispositional Conservatism

Political Theory: General a theory of *ideals*, with assumption that *change is the linear realization of those ideals*

Challenged by intellectual humility in the face of complexity, presumption in favor of status quo

Also substantive position about value of certain hierarches?

The background of the slide is a classical landscape painting. It depicts a lush, green valley with a prominent white building, possibly a temple or a villa, situated on a hill in the middle ground. In the foreground, there are figures, including a person sitting on the ground and another standing, amidst trees and foliage. The sky is filled with soft, golden clouds, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall style is reminiscent of 18th or 19th-century landscape art.

Political Theory and Ideologies

Debates within political theory are often efforts to clarify and refine guiding conceptual core of ideological traditions

Liberalism vs. Republicanism: Liberty

Socialism vs. Conservatism: Equality

The background of the slide is a classical landscape painting. It features a white, classical-style building with columns situated on a hill in the middle ground. In the foreground, there are several figures: one person is lying on the ground, and another is standing nearby. The landscape is filled with trees and rolling hills, with a soft, hazy atmosphere. The sky is filled with large, billowing clouds.

Up Next

What justifies democracy? What institutions best realize the ideal behind democracy?

How should our political representatives and political leaders act?