

Spécialité/option :

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Appréciation du correcteur (uniquement s'il s'agit d'un examen) :

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When David Cameron made a plea for the adoption of gay marriage, he explained that it is right because he is a conservative and cares about family that he thinks it is a right thing to do. Yet, many in his party but also among American conservatives, are opposed to such a change, as they prefer to leave the institution of marriage unaltered.

This set of text tackles that idea that conservatism can have multiple definitions. In the extract from the book American Exceptionalism: A double Edged Sword (1996), American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset differentiates American and European conservatism. Whereas European conservatism attempts at protecting the poor and is not against the limitation of freedom in relation to capitalism, American conservatism, which in Europe would be called liberalism, is anti-State and against all laws limiting individual freedom. The author traces back that distinction to the American revolution, just as Ayn Rand does in « The nature of Government » (from The virtue of Selfishness - A New Concept of Egoism, 1963). The author, a libertarian theorist famous for Atlas Shrugged, explains how the Founding Fathers put in place a control of state power. She advocates a strong limitation of government actions by law, which is a prerequisite for individual freedom but also the only way to prevent tyranny. That fear of tyranny is also tackled by

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M. Thatcher in her speech at the conservative American think tank The Heritage Foundation, where she made a plea for Western civilization against the one of the socialist countries. Besides that, she talks about liberal conservatism and the changes that occurred since R. Reagan and herself came to power. By making a very positive portrait of the former American President, she mentions the virtues of small government and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, Jonathan Derbyshire, in an article from The New Statesman, in 2009, criticizes conservatism by linking it to an ideology. Conservatism in England in the 19th century was not an opponent of public services, he explains. Moreover, to him, conservatism is not inherently reactionary and has the ability to adapt to social changes. Shortly after the 2012 election, David Brooks, in an article from The New-York Times, ~~retakes~~ links the loss of Republicans within the minorities electorate to an absence of pragmatism. Hispanics and Asian-Americans, he explains, do not oppose work ethic and government intervention. Therefore, all these texts highlight the fact that conservatism is plural. Its definition has evolved throughout history and it cannot be reduced to one school of thought. Between all these different outlooks on conservatism, is it possible to actually define it?

Conservatism as it is thought nowadays can in fact be linked to liberalism and imposed itself rather recently. Yet, this ideology of individual freedom can be opposed to another form of conservatism, more pragmatic and in favor of adaptation. In a third time, I will wonder if conservatism can in fact be defined precisely.

First, I will analyze what characterizes the most dominant form of conservatism today, how liberal conservatism sees the questions of freedom, regulation and change.

As David Brooks explains through the words of Seymour Martin Lipset, liberty and individualism were at the core of the "American creed" (doc. 5, p. 3). This love of liberty ~~was observable~~ could be noticed in the mobility of these people who "moved to the frontier when life got too confining" (doc. 5, p. 3). In liberal conservatism, individual freedom is an absolute that shall not be infringed. Therefore, as G. Grant puts it, it "ignores communal rights and obligations" (doc. 1, pp. 45-46). Ayn Rand traces back the birth of liberal conservatism to the American revolution and the Constitution that was then written. The need for a "complex legal system" (doc. 4, p. 27) is a necessity to prevent tyranny and to implement and preserve individual liberty. The system of checks and balances that was created by the American constitution is to Ayn Rand the only way to control effectively the government, which must be an "impersonal robot" (doc. 4, p. 12) where laws guide rule, and not men. Thus, liberal conservatism is rooted in a firm belief in the absolute of liberty and an anti-State position. To Ayn Rand, government should only deal with its monopoly of physical force, through the police, the army and justice.

As a consequence, State should have not interfere with the economy. Indeed, the fiscal monopoly (N. Elia) is not

considered as legitimate by American conservatives who proclaim "the unconstitutional character of the federal income tax", as Quintan noted (doc. 3, ll. 11-12). Conservatism today has been "captured" by "the neoliberal New Right" (doc. 3, ll. 7-8) on economic issues. M. Thatcher, the former conservative Prime Minister of Britain (1979-1990) belongs to that line of thought. In her speech at The Heritage Foundation she mentions Democrats as "instinctive spenders and regulators" (doc 2, p. 31) and makes a plea for confidence in people and businessmen. To liberal conservatism, government always play too big a role in the economy. As Thatcher puts it: "if you believe that it's business success that creates prosperity and jobs, you leave business as free as you can" (doc 2, ll. 23-24). As David Brooks explains, these issues were central in the 2012 election. Republicans thought that government programs were leading to a sense of entitlement. Mitt Romney came under strong criticism when he accused the 47% of Americans who do not pay income tax to be "takers" (doc. 5, p. 20). When Democrats highlighted the positive effect on communities that the government can have when it builds roads and bridges ("you did not build that", doc. 5, p. 20), Republicans were outraged. At the roots of liberal conservatism therefore lies the idea of a small government.

Moreover, conservatism today is most of the time associated with reactionary positions. Jules Simon said regarding that matter that "to be a conservative is to be afraid for what is". The "counter-revolutionary" (doc. 3, p. 50) approach can be seen in Ayn Rand's words, which link every change as possible decay or a way towards tyranny. When she wrote, at the time of the "imperial presidency", she saw government as a "dangerous violator" (doc. 4, p. 41) of

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man's rights and an "establishing slavery" (doc 4, p. 41). If she predicted a time when soon government would "rule by brute force" (doc 4, p. 43), it did not happen, even if Conservatives such as Reagan and Thatcher used the power of government to violently end strikes. This fear for change can also be spotted in Thatcher's words, when she says that if Western civilization is not upheld, the world will fall into tyranny. To her, every other way of living is necessary a limitation on liberty.

Yet, if the ideology of liberal conservatism relies on the absence of restriction to individual freedom by the government, it is not the case of "old English conservatism". By highlighting the differences between these two types of conservatism, I will show that conservatism is quite heterogeneous.

In a second time, I will focus ^{on} conservatism as it was first thought to show that pragmatism and conservatism are not always to be opposed.

As I have ^{seen} shown, liberal conservatism is mostly defined

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by "a set of inflexible principles", making it an "ideology" (doc. 3, p. 14). David Brooker criticizes the Republican party for that reason. According to him, American conservatives today are too much focused on "abstract frameworks" (doc. 5, p. 51) and are therefore separated from reality. To Brooker, Republicans should "study specifics" (doc. 5, p. 52), reconnect with the way most Americans live, if they want to be elected again. It appears that these advice were followed by Conservatives such as Disraeli in 19th century England. J. Derbyshire mentions Edmund Burke, a Whig politician of 18th century Britain, who warned "about the dangers of a priori theorising in politics" (doc. 3, p. 17) and saw "political knowledge [not] as a matter of logic, but of accumulated collective wisdom" (doc. 3, pp. 45-46).

In relation to the economy, Adam Smith, the famous liberal theorist, talked about the "disadvantages of commercial spirit" (doc. 3, pp. 71-72). Indeed, he observed that rationalised organisation in factories lead to a loss of a sense of self and to a diminution of creativity. The importance given to the observation of the application of theories was strong among the conservatives in 19th century England, as J. Derbyshire explain. They were in favor of regulation not by principle, but because the theory of liberalism led to "ravaging" consequences, according to Disraeli (doc. 3, p. 19). It was him that pushed for legislation that restricted capitalism (Employers and Workmen Act of 1875) and provided public services (Public Health Act of 1875), paving the way for the welfare state. Indeed, Lipset writes that these conservatives attempted to "protect the less fortunate" (doc. 3, p. 28) and believed in "the right of the community to restrain freedom in the name of the

common good" (doc 1, ll. 43-44). David Brooks, analysing American demographics today, explains that Hispanics and Asian-Americans are in favor of government intervention, and thus of this sort of pragmatism. He points that they "value industriousness more than whites" (doc. 5, l. 31) and do not deny work ethic. To these voters, entrepreneurship and state intervention are not incompatible.

What they reject is the lack of regulation, for example of the banking sector during the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis of 2008.

But David Brooks could also have pointed out that Hispanics, despite being majorly catholic, support issues such as gay marriage in a greater proportion than Republican voters. They could therefore be linked to the conservatism J. Derbyshire ^{describes} ~~exists~~, one not only rooted in the desire to keep things as they are. Burke, in the 18th century, already saw that the "disposition to preserve" (doc. 3, l. 35) was not enough. Conservatism is not necessarily reactionary, as David Cameron has shown in recent years. By reaching "an accommodation with the 'cultural, sexual and moral revolution'" (doc 3, l. 55), the British Conservative party showed pragmatism, as the British people was in favor of that evolution. When they restored Section 28 and they pushed for gay marriage, they showed their attachment to individual freedom. In fact, it can be said that there is a contradiction in liberal conservatism as it advocates a small government that implements restrictions on fields such as family life.

Overall, the differences between these two forms of conservatism are neat. Nevertheless, the frontier is not always rigid, as one can be liberal regarding the economy and more pragmatic on social matters.

At this point of the reflection one question remains unanswered:
can conservatism be defined?

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In a last time, I will put forward the diversity that is present within conservatism and try to define it among all the differences.

Throughout history, conservatism appears as not homogeneous. For a certain amount of time, conservatism was a European thing. The fact that American liberalism became known as conservatism outside of the USA (where it always called itself that) is something quite recent, that can be traced back to the rise of M. Thatcher in the 1970s. Since then, liberalism has more or less defined conservatism. There are some contradictions that the same word relates to two different political thoughts: one advocating freedom at all costs, the other pleading for pragmatism and thus not opposed by principle to a restriction of liberty if it would benefit to the common good.

Nevertheless, it is also a mistake to see liberal conservatism and old British conservatism as having neat frontiers. "Ranching Republicans" (doc. 5, p. 7) are liberal in economics but reject individualism when it comes to family or church authority, which associate them with liberal conservatism. Yet, David Cameron's Conservative party appears as liberal in economics and quite liberal on family issues, without going as far as libertarianism, which makes them in between the two forms of conservatism described until now. Moreover, if we take into account pragmatic conservatism, in favor of regulation in economics and adaptation

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Examen ou concours :

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to social evolution, it could be linked with the Democratic party of today. Yet, Democrats would never call themselves Conservatives, as they see themselves more as progressists. Therefore, it seems that this multiplication of definitions by these five authors regarding conservatism does not really help define it precisely. Conservatives seem to agree on the idea of freedom and the importance of entrepreneurship, but they diverge on the question of regulation. In the end, it seems that conservatism is not a precise enough word to describe the reality of politics.

Conservatism seems to be tied with two political thoughts : a more ideological one characterized by the absolute of individual freedom and a fear of change ; and another one, more pragmatic, not opposed to the notion of regulation. Yet, lines separating them are blurred and conservatism as a word does not seem to be precise enough. To distinguish the different political thoughts that have been analyzed throughout this essay, maybe the notions of progressivism, liberal conservatism and libertarianism would be more accurate. Nevertheless, as always when dealing with words, they would have to be defined precisely to highlight the nuances that always exist in reality.

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What seems certain is that in a time of rising inequalities, as shown by T. Piketty in Capital in the 21st century, and moral revolution, with gay marriage and marijuana becoming legal in more states lately, conservatism as it is today will have to evolve. Indeed, since David Brooks wrote his article, the rise of a "populist" left in the United States, with people such as Elizabeth Warren or the new mayor of New-York City winning elections, may force conservatism to question itself.