

**SOCIAL THEORY:
CONTINUITY AND CONFRONTATION**

A READER

SECOND EDITION

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THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE CONSERVATIVE REACTION

The Enlightenment emerged in western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Intellectuals, continuing the work of scientists, attempted to understand the world as a design inherent in nature, possibly set in motion by God as a Prime Mover, but not micro-managed by God's personal intervention. Scientists such as Galileo, Newton, and Harvey brought this attitude into studies of the solar system, the behaviour of objects in the earth's gravitational field, and processes in the human body. Observation, experimentation, and analysis replaced the sense that the nature of the world could be defined by ecclesiastical authority or a single sacred text. The Enlightenment, and especially the French *philosophes* as a community of public intellectuals, expanded this perspective into the study of social institutions.

Faith in reason together with observation are at the heart of all social theory. These two linked elements in the pursuit of knowledge do not necessarily lead to a single set of conclusions. They can produce multiple interpretations of reality, based on selection from the enormous range of possible observations and different paths of analysis. Inquiry guided by reason does not produce a single, unquestionable truth, but a discussion among contending views. Disagreement between perspectives is a positive step in the growth of natural and social sciences.

The work of Enlightenment thinkers was not dispassionate inquiry. They were deeply disturbed by the power of the Church and its secular allies in the monarchy to stifle inquiry and punish freedom and diversity of thought. They were appalled by the use of torture and gruesome methods of execution such as burning heretics at the stake and breaking people on racks and wheels. These tortures and punishments were used to crush freedom of thought and to defend social inequality and injustice. Enlightenment thinkers called for an end to torture and "cruel and unusual punishment." They demanded freedom of speech and an end to the criminalization of ideas about religion, politics, and society.

The Enlightenment and the French Revolution created a powerful backlash. Intellectuals who represented the interests of the absolute monarchy and the aristocracy wrote against the new ideas of freedom of thought, civil liberties, religious tolerance, and human rights. They argued for a return to rigid hierarchies, fixed status groups, and established religion. Although leading thinkers of the conservative reaction such as Bonald and de Maistre are not widely read today, their challenge to liberal views of society continues to be of interest. They question the atomistic liberal perspective on society that empha-

sizes individual rights and the individual pursuit of happiness; they argue that society is not merely a collection of individuals, but must be understood as a social order in its own right. These ideas, stripped of their underlying political position, have a role in sociological analysis.

Irving Zeitlin, a professor at the University of Toronto, is a contemporary social theorist who summarizes the thought of the French Enlightenment and the conservative reaction. He “translates” the legacy of the conservative reaction from its archaic original wording into the language of the modern social sciences and summarizes it in ten propositions about society that continue to shape sociology and social thought.

In contrast to the medieval era, the men of the Enlightenment regarded all aspects of human life and works as subject to critical examination—the various sciences, religious beliefs, metaphysics, aesthetics, education, and so on. Self-examination, a scrutiny of their own actions and their own society, was an essential function of thought. By gaining an understanding of the main forces and tendencies of their epoch, human beings could determine their direction and control their consequences. Through reason and science, humanity could attain ever greater degrees of freedom and, hence, ever greater degrees of perfection. Intellectual progress, an idea permeating the thinking of that era, would serve to further humanity’s general progress.

The *Philosophes* waged an unceasing war against superstition, bigotry, and intolerance; they fought against censorship and demanded freedom of thought. They attacked the privileges of the feudal classes and their restraints upon the commercial and industrial classes. It was the Enlightenment faith in science and education that provided so powerful an impetus to their work, making them humanitarian, optimistic, and confident. Philosophy was no longer merely a matter of abstract thinking. It acquired the practical function of asking critical questions about existing institutions and demanding that the unreasonable ones, those contrary to human nature, be changed. All obstacles to human perfectibility were to be progressively eliminated. Enlightenment thinking, then, had a *negative-critical* as well as a positive side....

Reason bows neither to the merely factual, the simple data of experience, nor to the “evidence” of revelation, tradition, or authority. Reason together with observation is a facility for the acquisition of truth....¹

Note

1. Irving Zeitlin, *Ideology and the Development of Sociological Theory*, 6th ed. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1997) 2, 4.



The Conservative Reaction

IRVING M. ZEITLIN

Conservative Philosophy and Sociology: A Summary

We have seen how the principles of the Enlightenment, as they became manifest in the Revolution, engendered a conservative philosophical reaction. That reaction, in turn, engendered a new interest in *social order* and various related problems and concepts.

Conservatives, like Burke, Hegel, Bonald, and Maistre, are so called because they desired quite literally to conserve and maintain the prevailing order. Moreover, some of them, as we have seen, sought not so much to conserve the existing order as to regress to a *status quo ante*. The disorder, anarchy, and radical changes those thinkers observed after the Revolution led them to generate concepts that relate to aspects of order and stability: tradition, authority, status, cohesion, adjustment, function, norm, symbol, ritual. As compared with the eighteenth century, the conservative concepts constituted a definite shift of interest from the individual to the group, from criticism of the existing order to its defense, and from social change to social stability.¹

From the conservative standpoint, the social changes following in the wake of the Revolution had undermined and destroyed fundamental social institutions and had resulted in the loss of political stability. The conservatives traced those results to certain preceding events and processes in European history that had led, they believed, to the progressive weakening of the medieval order and hence to the upheaval of the Revolution. Quite precisely, they singled out Protestantism, capitalism, and science as the major forces. Those processes, furthermore, which were hailed as progressive by their liberal and radical contemporaries, were leading even now to an increasing atomization of peoples. Large "masses" now appeared, presumably unanchored in any stable social groups; widespread insecurity, frustration, and alienation became evident; and, finally, a monolithic secular power had emerged that was dependent for its existence on the mass of rootless individuals.

The conservatives had idealized the medieval order, and from that standpoint the modern era was very wanting indeed. As an antidote to the principles of the *philosophes*, and as a critique of the post-Revolutionary "*disorder*," the conservatives advanced a number of propositions about society:

1. It is an organic unity with internal laws and development and deep roots in the past, not simply a mechanical aggregate of individual elements. The

- conservatives were “social realists” in the sense that they firmly believed in society as a reality greater than the individuals who comprise it. That was in a direct opposition to the social nominalism of the Enlightenment, the view that only individuals exist and that society is simply the name one gives to those individuals in their interrelationships.
2. Society antedates the individual and is ethically superior to him. Man has no existence outside of a social group or context, and he becomes human only by participating in society. Far from individuals constituting society, it is society that creates the individual by means of moral education, to employ Durkheim’s term.
 3. The individual is an abstraction and not the basic element of a society. Society is composed of relationships and institutions; individuals are simply members of society who fulfill certain statuses and roles—father, son, priest, and so on.
 4. The parts of a society are interdependent and interrelated. Customs, beliefs, and institutions are organically intertwined so that changing or remaking one part will undermine the complex relationships maintaining the stability of society as a whole.
 5. Man has constant and unalterable needs, which every society and each of its institutions serve to fulfill. Institutions are thus positive agencies by which basic human needs are met. If those agencies are disturbed or disrupted, suffering and disorder will result.
 6. The various customs and institutions of a society are positively functional; they either fulfill human needs directly or indirectly by serving other indispensable institutions. Even prejudice is viewed in those terms; it tends to unify certain groups and also increases their sense of security.
 7. The existence and maintenance of small groups is essential to society. The family, neighborhood, province, religious groups, occupational groups—those are the basic units of a society, the basic supports of people’s lives.
 8. The conservatives also conceived of “social organization.” The Revolution, as they saw it, had led not to a higher form of organization, but to social and moral disintegration. They wanted to preserve the older religious forms, Catholicism not Protestantism, and sought to restore the religious unity of medieval Europe. Protestantism, in teaching the importance of individual faith, had undermined the spiritual unity of society. And, as we have seen in the case of Bonald, the disorganizing consequences of urbanism, industry, and commerce were recognized.
 9. The conservatives insisted, in addition, on the essential importance and positive value of the nonrational aspects of human existence. Man needs ritual, ceremony, and worship. The Philosophes, in their merciless criticism of those activities as irrational vestiges of the past, had weakened the sacred supports of society.
 10. Status and hierarchy were also treated as essential to society. The conservatives feared that equality would destroy the “natural” and time-honored

agencies by which values were passed on from one generation to another. Hierarchy was necessary in the family, the Church, and the State, without which social stability was impossible.

Those are some of the major sociological tenets of the conservative legacy—a legacy that greatly influenced such thinkers as Saint-Simon, Comte, and, later, Durkheim. Those thinkers attempted to take conservative ideas and concepts out of their theological-reactionary context and to make them part and parcel of a scientific sociology....

Note

1. In the present discussion, I have drawn upon a number of points made by Robert A. Nisbet in his article entitled "Conservatism and Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* (September 1952).