

**Conservative and Liberal Attitudes to Change:
A Russian Case Study**

Vanessa Rampton

vanessa.rampton@gmail.com

University of Zurich

*No sane conservative is wholly devoid of the instincts dominant in the progressive;
no sane progressive entirely lacks the instincts dominant in the conservative.*

F. J. C. Hearnshaw, *Conservatism in England* (1933)

At the theoretical level, conservatism differs from other political ideologies with regards to how it approaches the prospects of social, political and economic change.¹ While socialism and feminism, to take two well-known examples, have been far more vocal in their commitment to the idea of historical change in a specific direction, the conservative emphasis on conservation and preservation has often been considered in opposition to the desire for change.² Conservatism has sometimes been described as the ‘opposite’ of progress, on the side of retrogression, reaction, stasis and inertia.³

At the same time, recent theoretical studies have shed new light on the limits of describing conservatism simply as the ‘desire to conserve’.⁴ Rather than recounting a conservative attachment to stasis or the existing political situation, they have

¹ For the purposes of this essay, conservatism is an ideology associated with the traits, loosely adapted from Anthony Quinton, ‘Conservatism’, in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. by Robert E. Goodin, Philip Pettit and Thomas Pogge, 2nd edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), vol. 1, pp. 285-311, of traditionalism, political skepticism and organicism.

² One scholar has called ‘[d]reams about an ideal future, when women and men would occupy equal positions in society [...] the driving force of feminist thought’. See Jill Ker Conway, ‘Feminist Views of Progress’, in *Progress: Fact or Illusion?*, ed. by Leo Marx and Bruce Mazlish (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 111. Meanwhile, socialism has been described succinctly as ‘on the side of the future’. Robert A. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009 [1980]), p. xvi.

³ On this issue see Michael Freeden, ‘Progress and Progressivism: Thoughts on an Elusive Term’, *Political Studies Review*, 12 (2014), pp. 68-74 (p. 68).

⁴ Roger Scruton has pointed out that ‘it is a limp definition of conservatism to describe it as the desire to conserve’. Cited in Kieron O’Hara, *Conservatism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), p. 16.

emphasized to what extent a theory of change is fundamental for conservative thinking. Michael Freeden, for example, has written that conservatism is ‘predominantly an ideology concerned with the problem of change: not necessarily proposing to eliminate it, but to render it safe’.⁵ In a similar fashion, Kieron O’Hara has argued that ‘the headline characterization of conservatism [is] a concern with managing change’.⁶

This paper draws on this and other research into the conservative approach to change in order to explore how it differs – and to some extent overlaps with – that of liberalism in particular.⁷ As a moral and political philosophy, liberalism has a long-standing engagement with notions of progress – in the sense of irreversible meliorative change – to the extent that the terms liberal and progressive are semantically linked.⁸ Liberals have been described as irrevocably committed to the idea of teleological historical change, associated with the expectation that human beings have the potential to become more rational through time.⁹ And yet, the liberal tradition also has a history of being skeptical of the utopian schemes for development it associates with the Left, and has, at times, argued in a markedly conservative fashion for the need for gradual, incrementalist forms of change.

My purpose in this paper is to explore some of the instances in which a conservative attitude toward change, in the sense of a desire to foster natural, gradual historical transformations, has resurfaced among thinkers with liberal sympathies. My concern, therefore, is not so much with the philosophical distinction between conservatism and liberalism at an analytical level, but rather with the contingent instances in which their approaches to the problem of change overlap. I shall, however, attempt to show that a traditionally conservative view of desirable change has roots in liberal theory, too.

With a view to pursuing this agenda, this paper is divided into three separate

⁵ Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 332.

⁶ O’Hara, *Conservatism*, p. 17.

⁷ In this essay I associate liberalism with the view that politics consists in striking a balance between competing ideals, and a persistent cluster of ideas including individualism, universalism, egalitarianism and autonomy.

⁸ This is the definition of progress of Charles van Doren. See his *The Idea of Progress* (New York et al.: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 3. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, ed. by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) lists ‘liberal’ under one of its definitions of the term ‘progressive’, vol. 12, p. 595.

⁹ Charles Frankel, ‘Progress, Idea of’, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd edn, ed. by Donald M. Borcherdt (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006), vol. 8, p. 47.

yet interrelated parts. A first section is devoted to outlining what kind of change conservatives consider desirable, and conservative criticisms of the idea of progress, which is often associated with liberalism. A second section briefly takes up the liberal relationship to the idea of progress, as well as what liberal responses to these criticisms might be. A third and final section is concerned with illustrating how practice complicates some of these theoretical distinctions. While the French Revolution played a liminal role in developing conservative ideas about change, the Russian Revolution is often cited as further proof that attempts to improve humanity are futile. Despite this, the Russian contribution to this aspect of conservative ideology has been rarely discussed. And yet, the decades before the October Revolution illustrate particularly well the insoluble dilemma of those who seek to preach moderation and gradual improvement in turbulent historical circumstances. In particular, the Russian example reveals a persistent overlap between liberal and conservative positions with regards both to preventing change and trying to make it occur. As I shall attempt to show, the experience of those early-twentieth-century Russian thinkers remains relevant when discussing what conservatism means today.

Conservative Ideas of Change

If a concern with precisely how to manage change is increasingly acknowledged as a fundamental element of conservative theory, what kind of change is it that conservatives are willing to support? A recurrent theme in conservative discussions of change is the extent to which that notion facilitates maintaining a balance over time. ‘A state without the means of some change’, Edmund Burke (1729-1797) wrote, ‘is without the means of its conservation’.¹⁰ More recently, Samuel Huntington has argued that the conservative may ‘acquiesce in change on secondary issues’, ‘in order to preserve the fundamental elements of society’.¹¹ Roger Scruton, meanwhile, has noted that ‘[t]he desire to conserve is compatible with all manner of change, provided only that change is also continuity’.¹² Philosophical

¹⁰ Burke, ‘Reflections on the Revolution in France’ (1790), in Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution and Other Essays* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, [1910] 1951), pp. 19-20.

¹¹ Samuel Huntington, ‘Conservatism as an Ideology’, *The American Political Science Review*, 51, 2 (1957), pp. 454-73 (p. 455).

¹² Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (New York: Penguin, 1980), p. 22.

conservatives, it would seem, are willing to support change as long as it involves ‘the notion of alteration combined with the notion of remaining the same’.¹³

At first glance, the idea that change is inherently compatible with continuity seems to have little etymological backing. The English verb *change*, for example, is traced back to the Latin *cambiare* ‘exchange, to barter’, and as of the thirteenth century was used as a transitive verb ‘to substitute another for; to give up in exchange for something else’. Yet the term *change* also acquired an intransitive meaning, ‘to become different, undergo alteration, alter, vary’ or ‘to turn *into* or *to* something else’, which emphasizes that the very identity of the object is modified by transformations that occur. In this sense, the verb has been commonly used to describe organic transformations, which can illustrate the interplay between difference and identity at the heart of conservative approaches to change.¹⁴ By and large, conservatives have tended to identify change with what occurs gradually and naturally, and therefore with growth that nevertheless preserves elements of the past.

From its inception as a political tradition, conservatism was marked by the sense of shock and rupture associated with the French Revolution, which was considered a paradigmatic example of the extent to which large and sudden political change can have deleterious, unintended consequences. By rejecting the revolutionary premise that the lives and personal existence of individuals could be remade *ab initio*, philosophical conservatives developed views of change designed to reinstate harmony both within individuals and between individuals and their surroundings. At times associated with a broadly Romantic view of the self as the expression of a larger current of life, conservative thinkers privileged forms of change that consider human beings not as individual specimens of a universal human nature, but organically related to the particular culture units where they belong. Beneficial change, in this view, can never be dissociated from the particular cultural unit in which it occurs.¹⁵

This anti-universalist view of individual existence, paired with a skepticism in the powers of individual reason, explains traditional conservative mistrust of large-scale, systematic programmes for social reform. Burke wrote in 1790 that human beings are, by and large, incapable of sufficiently comprehending the full value and

¹³ Michael Oakeshott, ‘Historical Change’, in *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 97-118 (p. 98).

¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by Simpson and Weiner, vol. 3, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ On this point see, for example, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973 (1957-2002)), vol. 3, p. 4109.

impact of social and political institutions and processes, because the ‘private stock of reason’ in each individual is small; instead ‘individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and ages’.¹⁶ While noting the potential dangers posed by ‘rational’ reforms, conservatives have stressed the role that affective attachments – including love, trusteeship and friendship – play in human motivation. What Roger Scruton has called the laudable conservative emphasis on ‘small-scale, observable and believable human motives’ informs a view of a gradual process whereby institutions and laws are slowly transformed to better reflect the multifaceted nature of citizens’ concerns.¹⁷

Quintin Hogg summarizes the conservative understanding of change as not ‘some impersonal law of nature, nor yet a matter of coincidence [...], but the sum of an infinite number of tiny impulses created by the individual efforts of innumerable men and women’.¹⁸ In the organic view of human history sketched in above, institutions and practices reflect how a community and its leaders have sought to respond to specific social, political and economic problems.¹⁹ The give-and-take between difference and identity is illustrated by the fact that philosophical conservatives favour dynamic factors such as individual enterprise, that bring ‘into the world good things which are new’ along with values such as stability and continuity, which enable ‘us to preserve them when brought in’.²⁰ Oakeshott further clarifies that for the conservative temperament, innovation is desirable ‘the more closely [it] resembles growth (that is, the more clearly it is intimated in and not merely imposed upon the situation) the less likely it is to result in a preponderance of loss’.²¹

Particularly interesting for our purposes are the concrete outcomes such preferences might entail. In practice, as Noël O’Sullivan has observed, what constitutes ‘reform’ for conservatively-inclined thinkers will vary in different

¹⁶ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution*, p. 84.

¹⁷ Roger Scruton, ‘Conservatism’, in *Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge*, ed. by Andrew Dobson and Robyn Eckersley (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2006), pp. 7-19 (p. 11).

¹⁸ Quintin Hogg, *The Case for Conservatism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1948), p. 89.

¹⁹ See also Quinton, ‘Conservatism’, in *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. by Goodin et al., p. 286.

²⁰ Hogg, *Case for Conservatism*, p. 85. Iain Hampsher-Monk expands this point in relation to Burke’s writings; see ‘Reflections on the Revolution in France’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, ed. by David Dwan and Christopher J. Insole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 195-208 (p. 205).

²¹ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London, 1967), p. 172. Cited in Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, p. 332.

situations.²² Since conservatives tend to reject the view that any one political or economic system can be used as a standard to measure human development, ultimately conservative preferences depend on the political culture they are trying to preserve. Thus conceived, conservatives might act in a purely defensive fashion, but at other times may find themselves taking the initiative in order to bring about changes they consider to be safe. Just as conservatives in different cultural contexts seek to conserve different things, it seems plausible that the specific tactics they employ would vary as well.

The conservative temperament, therefore, rejects teleological accounts of beneficial change; while progress in certain fields – such as medicine and education, for example – might be empirically observable, it is not without what Hogg characterizes as ‘notable setbacks, frequent disappointments and some complete breakdowns’. In the light of the imperfectible nature of humankind, and the ‘fragile and precarious’ nature of progress in fields such as ethics and politics, any achievements made can be admired, but should not be considered irreversible.²³

These remarks are important for a discussion of how liberal moderatism fades into conservatism and vice-versa. For historical but also theoretical reasons the conservative rejection of meliorism is often depicted as a rejection of liberalism. Conservatives, in Hogg’s words, ‘have always differed from their Liberal friends by denying there was anything automatic about [progress]’.²⁴ O’Sullivan, in turn, has stressed that it is liberalism’s commitment to ‘progress’ or the ‘improvement’ of humankind that is also what enables us to distinguish it from conservative ideology.²⁵ And in terms that recall the conservative critique of revolutionary impulses, Christopher Lasch has described ‘the vision of men and women released from outward constraints’ as ‘the essence of liberalism and the core of the belief in progress’.²⁶

Yet despite this seeming dichotomy – liberalism/progress vs. conservatism/gradual change – the remainder of this paper will attempt to complicate that distinction. Part 2 discusses briefly why liberal views of change are more varied

²² Noël O’Sullivan, *Conservatism* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1976), p. 12.

²³ Hogg, *Case for Conservatism*, pp. 84-5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁵ O’Sullivan, *Conservatism*, p. 13.

²⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), p. 78.

than the above citations suggest, and to what extent liberalism contains the philosophical resources allowing it to develop a more nuanced view of change, while Part 3 continues the argument using an empirical example.

Liberal Arguments for Progress

The nominal opposition between liberal and conservative views of change can be traced back to the French Revolution, which has been portrayed as the moment liberalism ceased to exist merely on a theoretical level and came of age as a concrete historical phenomenon.²⁷ Liberalism has a significant geographical and intellectual overlap with Enlightenment philosophies, and has absorbed some of their universalist assumptions and optimism concerning the liberating powers of reason. Many of liberalism's most prominent thinkers have, in various ways, tried to associate their political views with a general faith in society's steady improvement. Liberals including John Locke (1632-1704), Adam Smith (1723-1790) and Friedrich von Hayek (1899-1992) all believed in the possibility of economic progress, and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) thought of man as an inherently 'progressive being' and was convinced of individuals' ability to make advances in morality and culture.²⁸ American Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) made the link between progress and liberal values more concrete, arguing that it was embodied in America's existence as a predestined nation.²⁹ And liberals have at times claimed that the practices of liberalism in their own societies, such as particular varieties of market institutions or political democracy, are universally applicable, reinforcing the idea that one regime may act as the standard by which all others are measured.³⁰

Nevertheless, despite its longstanding engagement with notions of teleological historical change, not all of liberalism's representatives have been indiscriminately

²⁷ See, for example, Anthony Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 203-24, who refers to the Revolution as 'the Climax of Liberalism'.

²⁸ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 2nd edn (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1859), p. 24.

²⁹ Jefferson, for example, refers to the passage from the American west coast, populated by 'our own semi-barbarous citizens', to the 'most improved' man of the eastern seaport towns as 'equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day'. See 'To William Ludlow', 6 September 1824, in *Jefferson: Political Writings*, ed. by Joyce Appleby and Terrence Ball (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 590.

³⁰ To cite one example, a report by a U.S. Congress group concluded in 2000 that '[t]he United States offers the quintessential model for Russia's future'. Cited in Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia*, 2nd edn (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 276.

attached to the idea. The diversity of liberal views of selfhood and a longstanding tradition of using observation and experience to critically re-examine views of the ‘rationality’ of history, go some way towards explaining why some of the most nuanced views of change have been articulated within the liberal tradition itself. Thinkers as fundamental for the liberal canon as Benjamin Constant (1767-1830), Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), and Isaiah Berlin have eschewed abstract notions of historical change, and emphasized an ineliminable tension between human values, whose balance depends on the particularities of time and place. Twentieth-century challenges from thinkers associated with the liberal tradition ranging from Václav Havel to Charles Taylor and John Gray have offered further reexaminations of the liberal commitment to progress.³¹ Their views of how political and social progress might occur overlap with the conservative tradition in interesting ways.

In particular, numerous thinkers associated with liberalism have explicitly criticized the view that progress will occur as individuals become increasingly rational. Drawing on arguments that can be traced back to Romanticism and the conservative critique of the French Revolution, numerous liberals have approached the self, not as something that could be grasped exclusively by disengaged reason, but rather as linked to self-expression and subjectivity.³² In an influential formulation, Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) argued that individuals are subject to both rational and sensual drives, and can develop to their fullest potential by freely calibrating the relations between them.³³ This skeptical attitude to the opportunities offered by individual reason meshes well with the idea of human imperfectability; inspired by his reading of Schiller, the nineteenth-century liberal thinker Alexander Herzen (1812-1870) stressed the existence of ‘some limit concealed in the very nature of man, some physiological conditions that one cannot surmount and remain human’.³⁴

³¹ On the affinities of these thinkers with the liberal tradition see Delia Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel's Thought: The Responsibility of Resistance* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012); Stephen Mulhall ‘Articulating the Horizons of Liberalism’, in *Charles Taylor*, ed. by Ruth Abbey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 105-26; John Gray’s political evolution is reflected in his book *Liberalisms* (London: Routledge, 1989), see also Loren E. Lomasky, ‘Liberal Obituary?’, *Ethics*, 102 (1991), pp. 140-54.

³² Charles Taylor groups some of these thinkers together under the label ‘expressivist’, see his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 368-90.

³³ See, for example, Letter VI in his *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (*Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 1794).

³⁴ Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore, and The Russian People and Socialism*, intro. by Isaiah Berlin, trans. by Moura Budberg and Richard Wollheim (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 39. For an essay in Russian on Herzen’s liberal credentials see Aileen Kelly, ‘Byl li Gertsen

This articulation of the need to balance between reason and instinct continues to mark attitudes toward historical change within the liberal tradition today; Richard Rorty, for example, has highlighted the importance of ‘sentimental education’ in increasing our sympathy for and sense of solidarity with strangers, and emphasized the role this would play in any progress that might occur.³⁵ Another contemporary liberal, Martha Nussbaum, has argued for ‘strongly valuing the whole of our animality and not just our rationality’.³⁶

This emphasis on the non-rational aspects of human existence underpins a recognisably liberal scepticism of utopian attempts to remake society, as well as a concern with maintaining social cohesion. Benjamin Constant, for one, used the example of the Terror that followed the French Revolution to mount a philosophical critique of top-down endeavours to reorganise society in accordance with the so-called general will. Like many other liberals, Constant saw the pursuit of individual freedom as a crucial human motive, but he insisted that it could have grave consequences if it miscarried in the pursuit of perfection in politics.³⁷ Constant followed Montesquieu (1689-1755) in his conviction that freedom is dependent on the conditions of a specific time and place, making him stress the way in which existing conditions must be factored in to any account of historical change. Alexis de Tocqueville further documented the danger that Constant and conservative thinkers had highlighted, namely that the rational pursuit of self-interest in politics can disrupt social stability and lead to revolution, and argued for change based on commonsense principles and prudence.³⁸ The notion that change must take into account customs and tradition, and cannot be determined by abstract reasoning alone, has a persistent place in liberal political thought.

In his book *From the Other Shore* (*S togo berega*, 1850), Alexander Herzen formulated well the indictment of faith in an abstract noun such as progress from a liberal perspective, and explored the idea that history depends on time and chance.

liberalom?’ (‘Was Herzen a liberal?’), trans. by S. Silakova and E. Kanishcheva, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 58 (2002), in *Russkii zhurnal* <<http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2002/58/kell.html>> [accessed 13 October 2014].

³⁵ Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), vol. 3, p. 180.

³⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, ‘Aristotle, Politics, and Human Capabilities: A Response to Antony, Arneson, Charlesworth, and Mulgan’, *Ethics*, vol. 111, no. 1, Symposium on Martha Nussbaum’s Political Philosophy, ed. by R. Goodin and D. Parker (2000), pp. 102-40 (p. 122).

³⁷ See Benjamin Constant, ‘De la liberté des anciens’ (1819), reprinted in *De la liberté chez les modernes: écrits politiques*, ed. by Marcel Gauchet (Paris: Le livre de poche, 1980), pp. 490-515.

³⁸ See his *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835, 1840), particularly vol. 2.

There he proclaims his mistrust of all teleological positions in favour of the unpredictability of the historical process. History, he writes, has ‘no libretto’, and if ‘humanity marched straight towards some kind of result, then there would be no history, only logic’. History is not a random process, as certain probabilities exist, but rather an ‘improvisation’ based on a specific set of circumstances and possibilities available at any given historical moment.³⁹ Other liberals have drawn on this Darwinian idea to develop nuanced views of historical change. Richard Rorty, for example, has argued from a pragmatist perspective that beneficial change should be seen ‘as a matter of solving more problems’ by reacting to environmental exigencies.⁴⁰ It is, according to him, possible to tell the stories of concrete human beings:

as a story of increasing freedom. But we could drop, along with any sense of inevitable progress, any sense of immanent teleology. [...] Both political and cultural history would be seen as a tissue of chances, mischances, and lost chances – a tissue from which, occasionally and briefly, beauty flashes forth, but to which sublimity is entirely irrelevant.⁴¹

Thus described, a liberal view of change would have much in common with ideas about natural, organic transformations, and the awareness that what has been gained can also be lost.

These similarities between conservative and liberal approaches to change at the theoretical level are also observable in practical politics. O’Hara has pointed out that the nature of politics and political competition means that figures from all parties – including conservatives – often position themselves as advocates of change, and then endeavor to carry it through, regardless of its effects.⁴² Conversely, it is common, even among those who do not self-identify as conservatives, to adopt conservative categories and concerns when dealing with complex social problems. A pragmatic approach to the tensions resulting from rapid social change and an awareness of the permanence of habits are naturally affiliated with concerns often described as conservative. Former United States Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, for example, in her recent memoir stressed ‘the unintended consequences of every decision’, and

³⁹ Herzen, *From the Other Shore*, pp. 38-9.

⁴⁰ Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴² See O’Hara, *Conservatism*, p. 89.

vowed to face ‘future hard choices with more experience, wisdom, skepticism, and humility’.⁴³ Finally, the suspicion of change has been described as ‘simply a widespread human disposition, present to some extent in everyone, though by no means universally predominant, to love the familiar and to fear the unknown’.⁴⁴ The next section highlights some of the ways in which the affinities between conservative and liberal approaches to change might play out in concrete circumstances.

Change in Practice: A Russian Example

Conservative arguments that large-scale change is inherently distressing, and can produce a number of unplanned consequences, are often reinforced by specific examples. The experience of revolution, in Anthony Quinton’s words, confirms the intuition of conservatives that ‘changes designed to augment the realization of any one [contestable and plural end] are likely to undermine the realization of others’.⁴⁵ As previously stated, for conservatives the French Revolution has long served as the paramount example of the way in which a concern with furthering the values of liberty and equality can degenerate into despotism.⁴⁶ Yet beyond the French Revolution, those parts of history where conservatism’s problems have emerged and have a recognizable connection with the situation today remain of great interest. The theoretical background of the Russian Revolution, which is commonly held by conservatives to have ‘maximized the diametrical opposite of its intended ends, carrying exploitation to undreamed-of heights’, has traditionally been of less interest to scholars concerned with conservatism’s philosophical and practical incarnations.⁴⁷ In what follows, I want to suggest some of the ways that the Russian case might be used to reflect on the conservative concern with the problem of change, as well as the potential affinities between liberalism and conservatism.

⁴³ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 137). Current usage in America has led Clinton to say she preferred to define herself as a ‘progressive’, rather than a ‘liberal’. See Timothy Garton Ash, ‘A Liberal Translation’, *The New York Times*, 24 January 2009, available online at *The New York Times* <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/opinion/25gartonash-1.html?th&emc=th>> [accessed 28 September 2014]. See also Samuel Huntington, ‘Conservatism as an Ideology’, *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 51, no. 2 (1957), pp. 454-73 (p. 473).

⁴⁴ Quinton, ‘Conservatism’, in *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. by Goodin et al., p. 286.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁴⁶ Of the large body of literature on conservative interpretations of the French Revolution see, for example, Thomas Philip Schofield, ‘Conservative Political Thought in Britain in Response to the French Revolution’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 29, no. 3 (1986), pp. 601-22.

⁴⁷ Quinton, ‘Conservatism’, in *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. by Goodin et al., p. 296.

Attempting to translate political categories into different cultural and historical contexts is problematic; this seems to be compounded in the case of conservatism which, in Roger Scruton's words, 'is inherently local'.⁴⁸ In the context of pre-revolutionary Russia, it is particularly important to differentiate between those who held a recognizably 'conservative' attitude to change, and those who simply defended the authoritarianism of an absolute monarch.⁴⁹ As I use the term here, conservatism in the decades leading up to the Revolution of 1917 did not mean support for unalloyed royal absolutism, but rather – as noted above – an organic approach to society that values continuity and tradition, and that nevertheless sought to further the rule of law by engaging in limited, incremental reforms to existing institutions.⁵⁰ A number of factors including Russia's immense terrain, the inherent vulnerability of its open borders, the diversity of the populations within them, and the uneducated nature of its population led political actors to adopt positions that differed in important ways from their European counterparts. Broadly speaking, both Russian thinkers with liberal and conservative sympathies subscribed to the view that a strong, centralized government was necessary given their country's situation.

In the course of the nineteenth century, many Russian thinkers who sympathized profoundly with conservative principles, and abhorred the idea of dramatic changes to their country's situation, reluctantly came to believe that a through-going transformation of the existing order was a necessary precondition for its continued existence. In the circumstances of the most absolutist regime of nineteenth-century European powers, calls for slow, limited reforms within the existing system could be construed as support for despotism, and simultaneously as a threat to the regime's very existence. The attempt to combine elementary forms of civil rights with an unlimited monarchy proved unrealistic; the last Tsar, Nicholas II (reigned 1895-1917), began his tenure by dismissing constitutional liberties as

⁴⁸ Roger Scruton, 'Conservatism', *Political Theory and the Ecological Challenge*, ed. by Andrew Dobson and Robyn Eckersley (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2006), pp. 7-19 (p. 9).

⁴⁹ Interesting studies of Russian conservatism, even if they do not always respect this distinction, include Richard Pipes, *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics: A Study in Political Culture* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005) and *Russkii konservatizm XIX stoletii: Ideologiya i praktika (Russian Conservatism of the 19th Century: Ideology and Practice)*, ed. by Vladislav Grosul (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2000). An overview of some recent literature on the topic is given in Gary Hamburg, 'The Revival of Russian Conservatism', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2005), pp. 107-27.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of conservatism's commitment to the rule of law, see O'Hara, *Conservatism*, pp. 116-18.

‘senseless dreams’ (*bessmyslennye mechtaniia*).⁵¹ In this context, where even gradual reforms were seen as an existential threat to the existing regime, the distinction between devoted conservatives, liberals and uncompromising revolutionaries became significantly blurred.

The diaries of Aleksandr Nikitenko (1804-1877), written over the course of 50 years, provide a rich source of materials documenting the predicament of those who advocated moderation and cautious reform in nineteenth-century Russia.⁵² Nikitenko was born a serf but, unusually for the period, was able to gain his freedom at an early age, and went on to have a successful career as an academic, literary critic and an active member of numerous governmental committees and commissions.⁵³ The writings and philosophical musings of someone who has been described as ‘one of the most prominent public figures of his time’, illustrate particularly well how a specific context and difficult problems forced him to reach conclusions that were in direct conflict with his sympathies for gradual change and moderation.⁵⁴

By all scholarly accounts, Nikitenko was a ‘very conservative liberal’.⁵⁵ He condemned what he saw as doctrinaire calls for radical change on the part of the Left, which he felt would ‘produce chaos and nothing more’, and exhorted Russian radicals to do no more than campaign against existing abuses within the imperial system.⁵⁶ Like other liberals, he sympathized with the administrative and legal reforms proposed by Tsar Alexander II that promised to establish elements of a lawful state and to emancipate the serfs.⁵⁷ But his conservative sympathies are visible in his denunciations of the ‘despotism’ of ‘extremist liberals’ who favoured an ‘abstract’ freedom rather than one ‘which history has produced, which no one has imposed upon a people, which has not emerged as an abstract doctrine but as the fruit of genuine toil and genuine inspiration’.⁵⁸ Nikitenko summarized his own views about change when

⁵¹ He made the statement in his coronation speech of January 1895.

⁵² An abridged version of the diaries exists in English; see Aleksandr Nikitenko, *The Diary of a Russian Censor*, abr., ed. and trans. by Helen Saltz Jacobson (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), from which the quotes below are taken.

⁵³ He held high office in the Ministry of Education and the Censorship Department.

⁵⁴ Aileen Kelly, ‘Liberal Dilemmas, Populist Solutions’, in *Towards Another Shore* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 123.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁵⁶ Nikitenko, *Diary of a Russian Censor*, p. 196.

⁵⁷ At the time of independence in 1861, roughly 45 percent of the Russian population, or some 35,000,000 people were serfs, without any property or ability to testify in court. See Nicholas Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 4th edn (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 345.

⁵⁸ Nikitenko, *Diary of a Russian Censor*, p. 176.

he wrote: 'I have little faith in those doctrines which promise society infinite happiness and perfection, but I do believe in mankind's need to develop. At every stage of this development there emerges for mankind certain blessings along with an unavoidable admixture of certain evils'.⁵⁹ Believing it impossible to destroy new ideas, 'turn things back, or maintain the status quo' for all eternity, Nikitenko repeatedly called for 'time and gradual progress to do their work',⁶⁰ and emphasized the importance of preserving history and culture. 'The old', he wrote in 1861, 'is the totality from which emerges the new'.⁶¹

As he observed society around him, Nikitenko was well-aware that the government was intent on resisting even the most moderate reforms, and that it played on the threat of revolution to recast every attempt at reform as subversive.⁶² His dilemma, therefore, was that he favoured gradual, organic change, but by highlighting abuses within the system he defended he was labeled an extremist by the authorities. The tsarist regime saw little difference between the tactics he advocated and those of radical socialists, and the special circumstances of oppression it maintained blurred the distinction between conservative partisans of change and those willing to resort to violence in the hopes of overthrowing the regime. Nikitenko consistently disparaged the idea of progress – which he considered an 'empty phrase'⁶³ – but he implicitly conceded in his diaries that his vision of historical transformation was impossible to defend under the circumstances; the government's bad faith and lack of sincerity were sufficient to turn a moderate and devoted civil servant such as him into a revolutionary. Writing in his diary in the 1860s he foresaw a 'radical reform of all civilization and culture' which should not be resisted, and mused that there may be some truth to the socialist reaction to despotism: 'perhaps we shall have to be cleansed in fire and revolution'.⁶⁴

A number of thinkers and political actors in the generation that followed Nikitenko came to a similar conclusion. While they shared his conservative sympathies, and detested violence and atheistic, socialist morality, they were

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 210, 217.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 238.

⁶² The reign of Tsar Alexander III (1881-94) and that of Nicholas II until the Revolution of 1905 (1894-1905) has been described as 'a period of continuous reaction'. Riasanovsky, *History of Russia*, p. 391.

⁶³ Nikitenko, *Diary of a Russian Censor*, p. 342.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 335.

begrudgingly forced to concede that the current state of affairs was worthy of contempt. One well-known public figure who went on to become one of Russia's foremost conservative philosophers, Pëtr Struve, wrote in 1902: '[we] must recognize that when it comes to national liberation, both the revolutionary struggle and peaceful and moderate opposition cannot do without one another'.⁶⁵ The Russian Revolution of 1905 was a direct product of what has been called 'a kind of war coalition of diverse groups, monarchists and republicans, liberals and socialists, temporarily united to carry on a guerilla fight against the common enemy – autocracy'.⁶⁶ A common factor uniting these disparate individuals was their belief that the autocratic system could be improved, and that participating in its transformation was both morally necessary and safer than leaving it to revolutionary groups.

The experience of the Revolution of 1905 marked Russia's political elite profoundly. Both liberals and conservatives had been instrumental in bringing about the country's nominal transformation into a constitutional monarchy, but the victory of a lawful system in Russia was short-lived, and autocratic power structures quickly reasserted themselves.⁶⁷ Roughly speaking, if prior to 1905 those who intuitively favoured conservative forms of change had been temporarily converted to revolutionary optimism, the feeling in the Revolution's aftermath was one of profound malaise. In particular, the views of a number of thinkers who had been intimately involved in elaborating a liberal social philosophy for Russia now distanced themselves from an optimistic theory of historical change, in favour of a much more nuanced view that bears a substantial debt to conservative philosophy. The result was a sustained reflection on the merits of a conservative approach to change from precisely those thinkers who had done the most to articulate a liberal philosophy for Russia in the first place.

In the years leading up to 1905, men such as Pëtr Struve (1870-1944), Pavel Novgorodtsev (1866-1924), Semën Frank (1877-1950) and Sergei Kotliarevskii

⁶⁵ 'Liberalizm i t. n. "revoliutsionnye" napravleniia' ('Liberalism and So-Called "Revolutionary" Groups'), *Osvobozhdenie*, 7 (1902), pp. 104-05.

⁶⁶ Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, 'The Cadet Party', *Russian Review*, 12 (1953), pp. 173-86 (p. 173). As a rule, the Social Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries did not cooperate with this movement, known as the Liberation Movement. See Shmuel Galai, *The Liberation Movement in Russia, 1900-1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

⁶⁷ In 1906 the Tsar granted the country a constitution and an elected legislature. The Constitutional-Democratic (Kadet) Party, a recognisably liberal party, was created in 1905 and won majorities in the first two Russian parliaments in 1906 and 1907, but was adversely affected by changes to the electoral law in 1907, which were arbitrary and unconstitutional, and inaugurated a new era which significantly favored candidates close to the government.

(1873-1941) had all emphasized the progressive and open-ended nature of neo-idealism, and the connections they saw between that philosophy, constitutional reform and rule-of-law liberalism.⁶⁸ In the revolution's aftermath, they mounted a sophisticated critique of liberal philosophies of progress, directed at the Russian intelligentsia as a whole and members of the Constitutional-Democratic (Kadet) party in particular, which – as Struve pointed out in 1909 – ‘feels duty bound to wear’ the ‘intelligentsia uniform’.⁶⁹ In 1902 the future head of the Kadet Party, Pavel Miliukov, had described the advent of a liberal system in Russia as both desirable and inevitable: ‘the free forms of political life as such are no more national than use of the alphabet or the printing press, steam or electricity’, he wrote. ‘They become inevitable when social life has become so complex that it can no longer be accommodated within the framework of a more primitive order’.⁷⁰ In a series of articles and monographs published in the decade preceding the Revolution of 1917, Struve and his colleagues sought to draw attention to the dangerous implications of such assumptions.⁷¹

A recurring leitmotif in their writings of the period was that changes to political institutions are not enough; instead these changes must be accompanied by a broader concern for cultural renewal. Democracy, Kotliarevskii wrote, is one form of collective action, but it remains merely a form. Formal ideas of law and political freedom are useless foundations for historical transformation if they are divorced from cultural convictions and deeper beliefs.⁷² By linking culture and constitutional liberties, Kotliarevskii and his colleagues sought to emphasize that all historical change must remain firmly embedded to an empirical present, rather than fixated on a

⁶⁸ All of these thinkers were organizers of the Liberation Movement, founders of the Kadet Party and played active roles in Russia's constitutional experiment until 1907. In the following decade they worked primarily as scholars, concerned with Russia's social and cultural transformation. On the development of philosophical liberalism in Russia see, in particular, *Problems of Idealism. Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, ed., trans. and intro. by Randall Poole (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) and Frances Nethercott, ‘Russian Liberalism and the Philosophy of Law’, in *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830-1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, ed. by Gary Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 248-65.

⁶⁹ Pëtr Struve, ‘The Intelligentsia and Revolution’, in *Vekhi. Landmarks: A Collection of Articles about the Russian Intelligentsia*, ed. and trans. by Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), pp. 115-29 (p. 121). Translation slightly modified.

⁷⁰ Miliukov, ‘Ot russkikh konstitutsionalistov’ (‘From the Russian Constitutionalist’), *Osvobozhdenie*, 18 June/1 July 1902, pp. 7-12.

⁷¹ Judith Zimmerman refers to these authors, among others, as attempting to create ‘a form of liberalism which differs from the mainstream of Russian political thought’. ‘The Political Views of the Vekhi Authors’, *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 10 (1976), pp. 307-27 (p. 307).

⁷² See, for example, Sergei Kotliarevskii, ‘Politika i kul'tura’ (‘Politics and Culture’), *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii*, 17:4, vol. 84 (1906), pp. 353-67.

remote future. Semën Frank stressed that culture could not be sacrificed to a distant vision of human happiness when he wrote that ‘culture exists not for some good or purpose, but only for itself’.⁷³ For him this emphasis on culture was what would enable politics to take the form of ‘direct, altruistic, day-to-day service to the people’s immediate needs’. He warned that revolutionary optimism devalues ‘simple, individual person-to-person aid, mere relief of current sorrows and anxieties, [which] not only pales and loses its moral attractiveness but even seems a harmful waste of time and energy on petty, useless concerns, a betrayal of all mankind and its eternal salvation for the sake of a few individuals close at hand’.⁷⁴ Culture, in this view, represents what one scholar has called ‘tangible and visible proof that we should think of humanity’s freedom and self-fulfilment not as a future goal but as a present process’, embodied in the various artifacts, institutions and structures of a given society.⁷⁵

These thinkers argued that a further problem with the Russian liberal worldview and project was that it focused not on preserving values such as culture and order (*gosudarstvennost’*), but on destroying government authority. Even though they were suspicious of tsarist authorities, Kotliarevskii, Novgorodtsev and others emphasized the legitimizing role of the state in a transitional order for a new society.⁷⁶ Struve, for one, insisted that the state is ‘an organism of an entirely special kind’;⁷⁷ even though he was opposed to autocracy in principle, he argued that it was undeniable that Russian society had been shaped by the particular form of statehood which marked its history. And he observed ruefully that: ‘[a] regime which had taken shape historically, over centuries, was supposed to fall to pieces as soon as it had made the concession which settled in principle the question of a Russian constitution’.⁷⁸ For Struve in particular, a fundamental problem of the intelligentsia was its permanent ‘dissociation’ from the state, which went beyond any rejection of absolutism to a persistent disavowal of the state’s role in any form of beneficial

⁷³ Semën Frank, ‘The Ethic of Nihilism: A Characterization of the Russian Intelligentsia’s Moral Outlook’, in *Vekhi*, ed. by Shatz and Zimmerman, pp. 131-55 (p. 139).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁷⁵ Kelly, *Toward Another Shore*, p. 111.

⁷⁶ See Kotliarevskii’s important treatise, *Vlast’ i pravo. Problema pravovogo gosudarstva (Power and Law: The Problem of the Lawful State)* (Moscow, 1915).

⁷⁷ Struve, ‘Velikaia Rossiia: Iz razmyshlenii o probleme russkogo mogushchestva’ (‘Great Russia: From Reflections on the Problem of Russian Power’), *Russkaia mysl’*, no. 1, part 2 (1908), pp. 143-57 (p. 144).

⁷⁸ Struve, ‘Intelligentsia and Revolution’, in *Vekhi*, ed. by Shatz and Zimmerman, pp. 115-29 (p. 123).

change. Instead, what was needed was a clear statement of the role of the Russian state in maintaining the stability of society.

With hindsight Kotliarevskii wrote of Russia's compromised Revolution: 'We placed excessive value on law, which also implies the duty not to create idols (*kumiry*) for oneself, but to look life directly in the face – poor, cramped, and earthly'.⁷⁹ In a study explicitly concerned with the problem of how to pass from autocracy to a rule of law state, Novgorodtsev agreed that individual imperfectability must be the starting point for any theory of change. Human nature, he observed, cannot be transformed, nor can a perfect society be established; individuals will maintain their 'selfish impulses' and 'self-serving aspirations', and these must be factored in to any account of change.⁸⁰ Correspondingly, he insisted that prescriptions for social improvement should be modest and that any progress made will only be partial and slow: development is a complex process, involving the interaction between the complementary institutions of society, including the church, government and family structures.⁸¹ In practice, he observed, all aspirations for freedom and progress are reduced to 'tireless work' aimed at achieving 'increasingly complex goals'.⁸² Those desiring beneficial change could address this dilemma through their participation in practical politics, but they could not hope to overcome it. In this way Novgorodtsev and others distanced themselves from an optimistic belief in the development of history in the direction of constitutional democracy.

Conclusion

For understandable reasons, conservatism and liberalism are often opposed at the levels of political theory and political practice. The first two sections of this paper attempted to highlight some theoretical reasons why this opposition might nevertheless be questioned in the case of historical change. The examples discussed in the third section further illustrate how, in polarized political circumstances, conservative and liberal approaches to change may collapse into one another.

⁷⁹ Kotliarevskii, 'Filosofia kontsa' ('Philosophy of the End'), *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* 24, no. 4, bk. 119 (1913), p. 331.

⁸⁰ Novgorodtsev, *Krizis sovremennogo pravosoznaniia* (*The Crisis of Modern Legal Consciousness*) (Moscow, 1909), p. 329.

⁸¹ Novgorodtsev, *Ob obshchestvennom ideale* (*On the Social Ideal*), 3rd edn (Berlin: Slovo, 1921 [1911-16]), pp. 23, 77.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Indeed, it is difficult to align any Russian thinker examined here with a given political ideology. Rather, this discussion has highlighted their shifting views as to whether safe forms of change were primarily threatened by revolutionary socialists or the tsarist government, and their evolving insights into how political theories of Western origin – both conservative and liberal – might apply in Russia's situation.⁸³ The individuals presented here all desired that the tsarist autocracy would become a lawful state (in most cases a constitutional monarchy), and ardently wished that this transformation would occur gradually, organically, and without violence. At times, these philosophical premises led Nikitenko, Novgorodtsev, Struve and others to argue for circumscribed changes to the status quo, at others they took a more active, and even revolutionary, role. In this, they exemplify a preference for a conservative theory of change that they felt impelled to modify on the ground, in tumultuous political circumstances.

At the same time, the Russian example also illustrates the impossibility of defending a conservative theory of change in a polarized political environment. These thinkers understood that the prospects for incremental change and arguments in favour of tradition ultimately depended on the extent to which the system they defended had an alternative morality to offer. The attractiveness of their views on change – and political philosophies generally – was damaged by the fact that the imperial Russian state never did pass from a private to a public conception of law.⁸⁴ While the Revolution of 1905 ostensibly marked the transition to a constitutional era, in practice the Russian Empire remained an autocratic rather than a rule of law state. Faced with the dilemma of defending the rule of law under despotism, the thinkers discussed here temporarily and tentatively explored how participating in a revolution could nevertheless bring about change that was respectful of the past. But by and large their experience merely confirmed the view that no revolution can proceed in a considered and controlled fashion. Nikitenko's sympathy for revolution was confined to his diaries, but the radicalism that Struve and others experienced firsthand ultimately reinforced their conviction of the value of a conservative approach to change.

⁸³ To be sure, Russian thinkers themselves were not overly concerned with labels they associated with European theory, but felt were not wholly applicable to their own circumstances. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries they did not consistently self-identify as liberals or conservatives, though they sometimes used the terminology when addressing foreign audiences.

⁸⁴ This argument has been developed by Richard Wortman in his *The Development of a Russian Legal Consciousness* (University of Chicago Press, 1976).

Ultimately, these thinkers did not live to see their project of overseeing Russia's peaceful transformation in a rule of law state come to fruition. Following the Revolution of 1917, Russians with conservative and liberal sympathies alike were denounced as fundamentally reactionary by Soviet authorities. Nevertheless, their example provides a relevant reminder of what it means to be a conservative on the ground, operating within the constraints of politics and culture.