

Civilization

Third year

Good morning,

This is lecture number 9 and our third lecture since the suspension of lectures. I hope all of you are doing well and are making the best use of your time.

We will continue our analysis of the structure of Western thought in the nineteenth century. The romantics supported the French Revolution. Against them, there was a bunch of conservative thinkers who were outright against it. This kind of thought is conservative by nature. It supports tradition and monarchy.

To the traditional rulers of Europe—kings, aristocrats, and clergy—the French Revolution was a great evil that had inflicted a near-fatal wound on civilization. As far as they were concerned, the revolutionaries heralded chaos when they executed Louis XVI, confiscated the land of the church, destroyed the special privileges of the aristocracy, and instituted the Reign of Terror. Then the Revolution gave rise to Napoleon, who deposed kings, continued the assault on the traditional aristocracy, and sought to dominate Europe. Disgusted and frightened by the revolutionary violence, terror, and warfare, the traditional rulers sought to refute the philosophes' worldview, which had spawned the Revolution. To them, natural rights, equality, the goodness of man, and perpetual progress were perverse doctrines that had produced the Jacobin “assassins.” In conservatism, they found a political philosophy to counter the Enlightenment ideology.

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) was instrumental in shaping conservative thought. Burke (1729–1797), an Anglo- Irish philosopher and statesman, wanted to warn his countrymen of the dangers inherent

in the ideology of the revolutionaries. Although writing in 1790, Burke astutely predicted that the Revolution would lead to terror and military dictatorship. In Burke's view, fanatics armed with abstract ideas divorced from historical experience had dragged France through the mire of revolution. Burke developed a coherent political philosophy, which served as a counterweight to the ideology of the Enlightenment and the Revolution. The leading conservative theorists on the Continent—more aptly called *reactionaries*—were Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) and Vicomte Louis de Bonald (1754–1840). De Maistre, who fled his native Piedmont (northern Italy) in 1792 and again in 1793, after the invasion by the armies of the new French republic, vociferously denounced the philosophes for undermining belief and authority. He called their activity an “insurrection against God.” In *Reflections on the State of France* (1796) and other works, he attacked the philosophes and the French Revolution, which he blamed them for inciting. Committed to authority and order, de Maistre fought any kind of political or religious liberalism. To him, the Revolution was a satanic evil; all its pronouncements must be totally condemned and its roots expunged from the soil of Christian Europe.

Like de Maistre, de Bonald, a French émigré, detested the French Revolution, staunchly defended monarchy, and attacked the rational spirit of the Enlightenment as an enemy of faith. His Catholicism and monarchism are summarized in his famous remark: “When God wished to punish France, he took away the Bourbon from her governance.” Hostility to the French Revolution Entranced by the great discoveries in science, the philosophes and French reformers had believed that the human mind could also transform social institutions and ancient traditions according to rational models. Progress through reason became their faith. Intent on creating a new future, the revolutionaries abruptly dispensed with old habits, traditional authority, and familiar ways of thought. For them, these traditional ways were a form of bondage

that retarded progress. To conservatives, who, like the romantics, venerated the past, this was supreme arrogance and wickedness. They regarded the revolutionaries as presumptuous men who recklessly severed society's links with ancient institutions and traditions and condemned venerable religious and moral beliefs as ignorance. De Maistre called Voltaire the man "into whose hands hell has given all its power." Moreover, the revolutionaries forgot— or never knew—that the traditions and institutions that they wanted to destroy did not belong solely to them. Past generations and, indeed, future generations had a claim on these creations of French genius. By attacking time-honored ways, the revolutionaries had deprived French society of moral leadership and opened the door to anarchy and terror. "You began ill," wrote Burke of the revolutionaries, "because you began by despising everything that belonged to you. . . . When ancient opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment we have no compass to govern us; nor can we know distinctly to what port we steer." The philosophes and French reformers had expressed unlimited confidence in the power of human reason to understand and to change society. Although conservatives also appreciated human rational capacities, they recognized the limitations of reason. "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason," said Burke, "because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages." Conservatives saw the Revolution as a natural outgrowth of an arrogant Enlightenment philosophy that overvalued reason and sought to reshape society in accordance with abstract principles. Conservatives did not regard human beings as good by nature. Human wickedness was not due to a faulty environment, as the philosophes had proclaimed, but was at the core of human nature, as Christianity taught. Evil was held in check not by reason but by tried and tested institutions—

monarchy, church, and aristocracy—traditions, and beliefs. Without these habits inherited from ancestors, said conservatives, the social order was threatened by sinful human nature.

Because monarchy, aristocracy, and the church had endured for centuries, argued the conservatives, they had worth. The clergy taught proper moral values; monarchs preserved order and property; aristocrats guarded against despotic kings and the tyranny of the common people. All protected and spread civilized ways. By despising and uprooting these ancient institutions, the revolutionaries had hardened the people's hearts, perverted their morals, and caused them to commit terrible outrages on one another and on society. Conservatives detested attempts to transform society according to a theoretical model. They considered human nature too intricate and social relations too complex for such social engineering. In the conservatives' view, the revolutionaries had reduced people and society to abstractions divorced from their historical settings. Consequently, they had destroyed ancient patterns that seemed inconvenient and had drawn up constitutions based on the unacceptable principle that government derives its power from the consent of the governed. The art of politics, argued Burke, entails practical reason: pursuing limited and realizable goals for a particular community at a particular time. The wise statesman, said traditionalists, abhors abstract principles and spurns ideal models. Rather, he values the historical experiences of his nation and is concerned with real people in specific historical situations. He recognizes that institutions and beliefs do not require theoretical excellence; they do not have to meet the test of reason or of nature in order to benefit society. Statesmen who ignore these truisms and strive to reform a commonwealth according to a priori models—political formulas that do not fit the realities of history and the social order—plunge the nation into anarchy. To Burke, the revolutionaries were zealots who, like the religious radicals during the

Reformation, resorted to force and terror in order to create a new man and a new society. In politics, experience is the best teacher and prudence the best method of procedure. Burke warned:

It is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again, without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.

For conservatives, God and history were the only legitimate sources of political authority. States were not made; rather, they were an expression of the nation's moral, religious, and historical experience. No legitimate or sound constitution could be drawn up by a group assembled for that purpose. Scraps of paper with legal terminology and philosophic visions could not produce an effective government. Instead, a sound political system evolved gradually and inexplicably in response to circumstances. For this reason, conservatives admired the English constitution. It was not a product of abstract thought; no assembly had convened to fashion it. Because it was an unwritten arrangement that grew imperceptibly out of the historical experience and needs of the English people, it was durable and effective. Conservatives viewed society not as a machine with replaceable parts but as a complex and delicate organism. Tamper with its vital organs, as the revolutionaries had done, and it would die.

The Quest for Social Stability:

The liberal philosophy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution started with the individual. The philosophes and the revolutionaries envisioned a society in which the individual was free and autonomous. Conservatives, in contrast, began with the community; they believed that the individual could function well only as part of a

social group: family, church, or state. Alone, a person would be selfish, unreliable, and frail. Through membership in a social group, however, individuals learned cooperation and manners. From the conservative perspective, by exalting the individual, the revolutionaries had threatened to dissolve society into disconnected parts. Individualism would imperil social stability, destroy obedience to law, and fragment society into self-seeking isolated atoms. Holding that the community was more important than the individual, conservatives rejected the philosophy of natural rights. Rights were not abstractions that preceded an individual's entrance into society and pertained to all people everywhere. Rather, the state, always remembering the needs of the entire community and its links to past generations, determined what rights and privileges its citizens might have. There were no "rights of man," only rights of the French, the English, and so forth, as determined and allocated by the particular state.

Conservatives viewed equality as another pernicious abstraction that contradicted all historical experience. For conservatives, society was naturally hierarchical, and so they believed that some men, by virtue of their intelligence, education, wealth, and birth, were best qualified to rule and instruct the less able. They blamed the revolutionaries for uprooting a long-established and divinely ordained ruling elite, thereby depriving society of effective leaders, causing internal disorder, and paving the way for a military dictatorship. Whereas the philosophes had attacked Christianity for promoting superstition and fanaticism, conservatives saw religion as the basis of civil society. They were convinced that excess liberty and the weakening of religion had brutalized people and shattered the foundations of society. Conservatives denounced the Enlightenment for unshackling dangerous instincts that religion had held in check. Catholic conservatives, in particular, held that God had constituted the church and monarchy to rein in sinful human nature.

“Christian monarchs are the final creation of the development of political society and of religious society,” said Louis de Bonald. “The proof of this lies in the fact that when monarchy and Christianity are both abolished society returns to savagery.” Conservatism exposed a limitation of the Enlightenment by pointing out that human beings and social relationships are far more complex than the philosophes had imagined. People do not always accept the rigorous logic of the philosopher and are not eager to break with ancient ways, however illogical they appear to the intellect. They often find familiar customs and ancestral religions more satisfying guides to life than the blueprints of philosophers. The granite might of tradition remains an obstacle to the visions of reformers. Conservative theorists warned that revolutionary violence in the pursuit of utopian dreams transforms politics into an ideological crusade that ends in terror and despotism. These warnings bore bitter fruit in the twentieth century.