

Oakeshott Turned Conservatism Into a Creed of Liberty

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Michael Oakeshott's great work *On Human Conduct* was initially not at all well received (Franco 2004, p. 145). As a comparison, the contemporary American conservative thinker Russell Kirk immediately rose to fame when in the mid 1950s he published his major work *The Conservative Mind*. Oakeshott and Kirk can both, in different ways, be said to have been the internationally most important intellectual champions of the new form of conservatism evolving during the second half of the 20th century, which holds the idea of ordered liberty at its core and also has given conservatism its greatest political victories internationally since the French revolution.

Oakeshott's most important books from a conservative point of view is, firstly, the essay collection *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1962). And, secondly, *On Human Conduct* (1975), where he elaborates further on the basic ideas in the essay *On Being Conservative* from the previously mentioned essay collection. In *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott formulates both in-depth and in much detail the philosophy of civil society, the nature of freedom and the prerequisites of freedom in human societies. He argues for a clear distinction between moral conduct and prudent action, explaining that activities in the civil society belongs to the former category, basically proving, in line with Burke and with the support of Hegel, that ordered liberty needs morality.

In this paper, I argue that Oakeshott's contribution to modern conservatism is fundamental, and that his importance in this matter is plausibly even greater than that of Kirk's.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF CONSERVATISM

The year after the French revolution in 1789, Edmund Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In the history of politics, this is considered as the ignition of conservatism both as a political theory and as a self-conscious political movement internationally. Since then, conservatism as a political theory has basically split into two lines of development—roughly speaking one with its base on the European continent and another with its base in the Anglosphere. Burke has played a crucial role, however in different ways, in both of these lines of development.

On the European continent, the publishing of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* immediately made him internationally famous. He influenced both counter-revolutionary movements in several countries, and was together with G. W. F. Hegel the most internationally significant thinker of the counter-revolutionary ideology

(Tingsten 1939/1966, pp. 18, 74)—even though, back then in the early 19th century, Burke was only one of many important counter-revolutionary thinkers alongside other internationally famous ones, such as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald. The counter-revolutionary ideology eventually turned into what today can be called *social conservatism*, which as a contrast to the other line *liberal conservatism* is characterized by its focus on national sovereignty and social responsibility.

The development of social conservatism is to a large extent connected with conservative intellectuals and movements on the European continent. But it is also clear that it is an important political force in the United Kingdom. Benjamin Disraeli also stood for “one nation-conservatism” and was pro-welfare with certain similarities in this respect with two other conservative statesmen of the 19th century, namely the German Otto von Bismarck and the Swede Rudolf Kjellén who also had a focus on national sovereignty and building welfare models. With Hegel as a strong and long-term influential thinker in this social conservative line of thought, it is here also important to point out that Hegel influenced the British idealist movement which maintained the idea of organicism. It so happened that it was the rise of the increasing importance of organicism for British conservative thought in the 1870s that marked the real start of the process of making Burke into “the father of conservatism” that we know him as today (Jones 2017, p. 161).

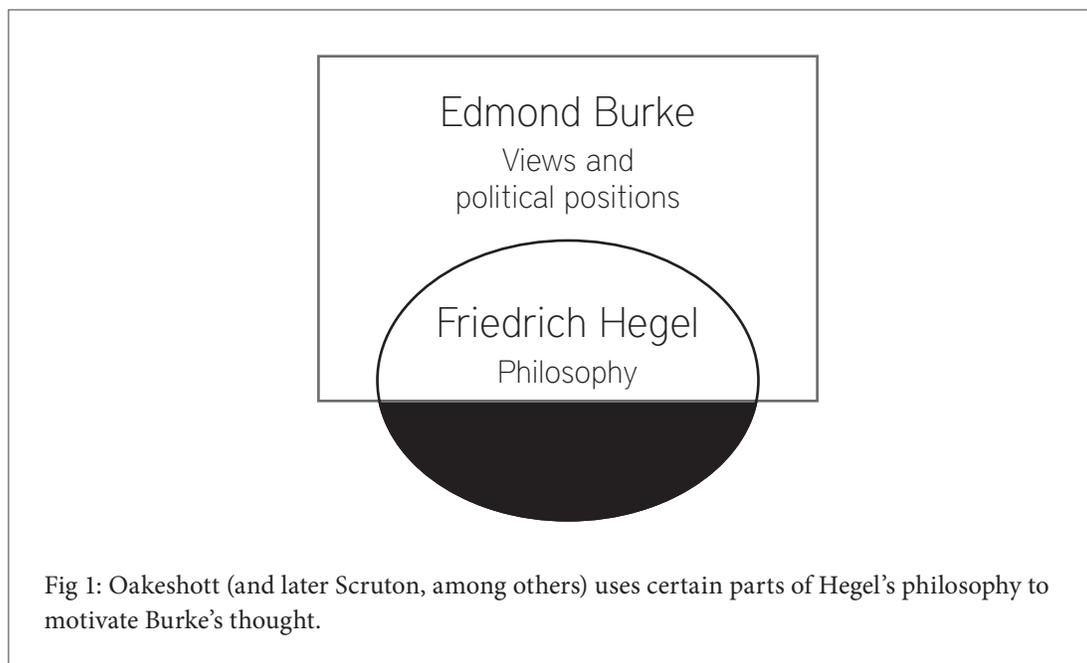
The original international conservative cause about restoring the fallen European monarchies after the Napoleonic wars, led by prince Clemens von Metternich, ultimately failed, and this ambition died with the socialist revolutions of 1848. At this point in time, conservatism can be said to internationally have lost its sense of unity and a common political cause, and it became ideologically shattered between different countries and their different traditions, making the conservatism of the second half of the 19th century look like there were only very few ideas that united the movements considering themselves to be conservative. Losing its common cause was of course a major problem for conservative movements all over the Western world that really needed to be resolved eventually, because, as Burke himself had noted, “the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing”.

Meanwhile in the United Kingdom, Burke turned to be “the father of conservatism” in the mid 1880s—as late as that (Jones 2017, pp. 154, 196). Lord Hugh Cecil’s *Conservatism* published in 1912 is the first book ever to mention Burke as “the father of conservatism”—this being approximately 120 years after Burke’s death. In the history of ideas, Cecil’s book both reflected something that was by then established about Burke—but it also marked the beginning of a new way of viewing conservatism intellectually.

Notable here is that when Cecil conceptualizes the thought of Burke in this book, he writes about liberty only briefly and in the terms that conservatism on the one hand defends the particular kind of “personal liberty” which exists in society, but solely based on the fact that this form of liberty now exists (i.e. a defence of *status quo*). And, on the other hand, the form of societal liberty which is the consequence of the rule of law. Cecil writes very little on this topic, and he also claims that conservatism holds a position in between “authority and liberty”, whereas the embracing of liberty in politics is particularly connected with liberalism and not conservatism.

OAKESHOTT’S IMPORTANCE FOR MODERN CONSERVATISM

And this is where Michael Oakeshott comes in, in being one of the earliest intellectuals to add philosophical substance to Burkean conservatism—and how he does it. Oakeshott was a student in Cambridge in the 1920s, only a few years after Cecil’s book was published. As a student, Oakeshott was influenced by the British idealism (Franco 2004, p. 67) who was one of the few surviving intellectual heirs of right-wing Hegelianism in Europe at this time. What Oakeshott later in his life does as a political philosopher, is that he makes use of certain parts of Hegel’s thought—namely the *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The Philosophy of Right*—as a philosophical substantiation of Burke’s predominant views and political positions. This is illustrated below.



Roger Scruton can be said to have carried on the same concept of conservative philosophy—a synthesis of Burke's and Hegel's thought—keeping laying the jigsaw puzzle of conservative philosophy and philosophically true conservatism which was invented by Oakeshott (e.g. Covell 1986), and developing all of this much further in a large number of books. A Swedish conservative thinker who also makes use of this same synthesis is Claes G. Ryn, active in the US since the 1970s.

So, while it had been considered in the United Kingdom since the early 20th century that Burke is “the father of conservatism”, and while even British conservatism in this era obviously had no focus at all on liberty, it took until 1953 (and after) before Russell Kirk started to establish Burke in the same way in the USA. The controversy arising from Kirk's claim that Burke is the true intellectual father of conservatism, and that all “true” (small-c) conservatism springs from Burke's political thought, sparked an immense intellectual debate in the USA. The impact of this has, among other important achievements for conservatism, been proven to lead to the political success of Ronald Reagan (Nash 2009, pp. 342-345; Continetti 2018). Oakeshott, too, had a distinct impact on the conservative movement around Reagan.

OAKESHOTT AS THE “GAME CHANGER”

Today, conservatism is generally throughout the Western world recognized as a creed of liberty. At the centre of this creed are the concepts of “ordered liberty” and “freedom with responsibility”. Both of these concepts are clearly important in Burke's writings—you could say that Burke puts checks on liberty to make more citizens in a society get more liberty together and also in relation to each other. But—this view of conservatism is actually a 20th century construction, formulated well after Cecil's era. It can also be easy to view Kirk, with his popularity both in the USA and internationally, and with the USA being the major defender of liberty and freedom on the global political arena, as “the” pioneer for making modern conservatism into a creed of liberty. However, I also see much that suggests that Oakeshott is the real game changer here, regarding the successful transformation of the whole perception of conservatism among academics as well as self-proclaiming (and intellectually respected) conservatives internationally.

In *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk—like Cecil before him but with a different focus—published 6 “canons of Burke”. Here, however, Kirk doesn't mention liberty or freedom except for in canon #6 where he merely writes that “freedom and property are closely linked”. Forty years after *The Conservative Mind* was origi-

nally published, in 1993, Kirk published *The Politics of Prudence* where he develops the original 6 canons of Burke into 10 canons. Here, Kirk writes about the value of liberty and freedom in as much as four different canons: 2, 7, 8 and 9 (Kirk nd). It is also notable that Kirk 1993 in his canon # 8 speaks about the liberty of civil society, which we all know is the great achievement of Oakeshott to develop and prove philosophically in his *On Human Conduct* from 1975. The Burke-purist Kirk has also described Oakeshott in later versions of *The Conservative Mind* as “a learned disciple of Burke’s”, thus recognizing the importance of Oakeshott as one of few notable developers of Burkean thought in Kirk’s view.

Now, the historical development of liberal conservatism, alongside that of social conservatism, is closely related on the one hand to the intellectual pursuit of “true conservatism” in the line of Burke, with Kirk as the great intellectual champion of the 20th century, and related on the other hand politically to the political heritage of Thatcher and Reagan. Kirk is to a certain extent the most important thinker in the line of liberal conservatism, because of his great popularity both in the USA and internationally. But so also is Oakeshott. Oakeshott is recognized alongside Leo Strauss as being the European thinker who has asserted the most influence on American conservatism during the 20th century (Franco 2004, p. 16).

Thus, it can be argued that with Oakeshott laying the philosophical foundation for ordered liberty in his *On Human Conduct*, and meanwhile also highlighting the importance of liberty and freedom under responsibility in Burke’s thought, he proved liberty to be a central value within conservatism directly inherited from Burke. And then—after Oakeshott—Kirk, Reagan and Thatcher made this view internationally popular. I think it is beyond doubt that this couldn’t have happened without Reagan or Kirk. But it was also undoubtedly Oakeshott who did the philosophical work, and while he had a strong general impact on American conservative thought, there is also much that suggests that Kirk’s personal change of view in 1993 was inspired by Oakeshott.

OAKESHOTT TOGETHER WITH KIRK HELPED UNITE CONSERVATIVES INTERNATIONALLY AGAIN

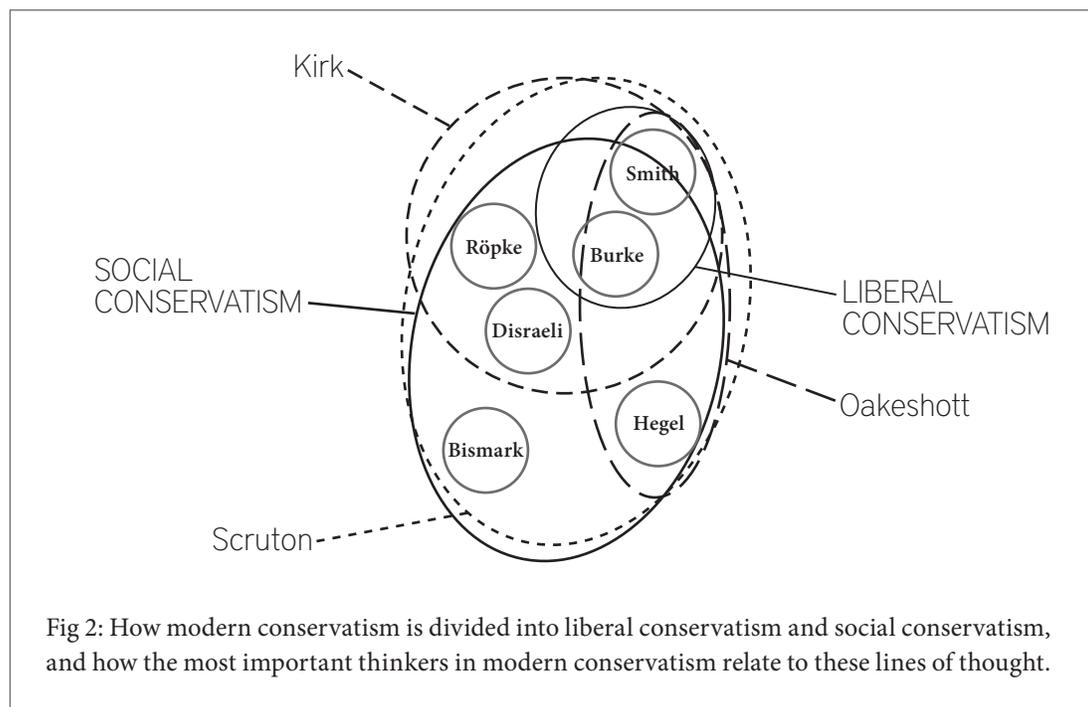
I believe Oakeshott’s *On Human Conduct* to be as important a milestone in the development of modern conservatism as is Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, if not even more important. Oakeshott’s great philosophical work here resulted in a turning point for the international understanding of conservatism as such—not only of liberal conservatism—and this also meant that conservatism once again obtained a common international cause.

For a relevant perspective on this, it is here important to understand that Kirk refused Hegel as a conservative thinker, while Oakeshott (and Scruton and Ryn among others) view Hegel as an equally central thinker to modern (Burkean) conservatism as Burke himself, and have built a whole concept of “conservative philosophy” based on a kind of synthesis of these two thinkers. Giving conservatism a deep intellectual foundation this way, and making it relevant again in our time in a developed form, is of course a great political achievement in its own right. But the relevance of Oakeshott’s contribution to modern conservative thought is even greater than this consequence. Because by merging Burke with Hegel this way, the concept of conservative philosophy that springs from this also connects a larger amount of European conservative thinkers and movements from the last two hundred years than the ones who, like Kirk, relate directly and/or mainly to Burke. This fact in itself can be seen as another reason why Oakeshott’s more liberal view of conservatism managed to get internationally established. And, finally, this conceptualization opens up for social conservatism and liberal conservatism to be viewed as two sides of the same coin instead of just two different lines of thought with Burke as some kind of root for both.

Mapping the major ideas of modern conservatism and the major thinkers concerned with those ideas, as I have done in my book (Söderbaum 2020 with an upcoming edition in English), all of this can also be understood in the following perspective. To begin with, Kirk’s refusal of Hegel as a conservative thinker marks the difference between liberal conservatism (without Hegel), and social conservatism (with Hegel). Thus, we can today speak of modern conservatism in the line of Burke (this is Cecil’s original concept, and

also used in our time for instance by Emily Jones) as a two-sided coin with liberal conservatism on the one side and social conservatism on the other, both stemming from Burke in different ways and today united with Burke but separated by Hegel. Oakeshott, with his conservative philosophy concerned with the philosophical essence of true conservatism and ordered liberty at the heart of civil society, has contributed to both modern liberal conservatism and modern social conservatism. This is proven by the influence on, among others, Kirk and Scruton, where Kirk today can be seen as a liberal conservative thinker and Scruton as a social conservative thinker. While Kirk reached out from the USA to Europe to agree upon the common heritage from Burke, it was Oakeshott who made modern conservatism truly international by combining Hegel with Burke, and it was Oakeshott who this way put the emphasis of ordered liberty at the core of modern conservatism, both (true philosophical) social conservatism and liberal conservatism. Figure 2 visualises how these lines of thought and several of the mentioned thinkers, unite in what in our time can be viewed as the core of modern conservative thought.

Oakeshott's reputation today as being the greatest political philosopher in the UK of the 20th century (Franco 2004, p. ix, s 1), is likely to help maintain his groundbreaking achievements also for intellectual conservatism in the long term.



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