

**Are conservative and socialist understandings of
the role of State necessarily irreconcilable?**

Introduction

Few political ideologies engender more differing characteristics than that of Conservatism and Socialism. Indeed, one need only look at the political debates that take place in elected legislatures around the world to see the stark and vehement arguments that Conservative and Socialist ideologies create. A number of academic study has been undertaken with regards to political ideologies and thus comparative assessments of the key tenets of Conservatism and Socialism are widely documented (Geoghegan & Wilford, 2014). Above all, one key difference that is often suggested to exist between Conservative and Socialist ideological outlooks occurs in relation to the perceived role of the state (Vincent, 2009; Eccleshall, 1990). Thus, the comparative assessment of how each ideology conceptualises state action represents a pertinent source of study.

Given the above, the purpose of this work is to engage in a critical comparative assessment with regards to how Conservative and Socialist ideological frameworks understand the role of the state. In particular, this work seeks to explore the possibility that traditional assumptions of a dialectic opposition with regards the role of the state has been overstated. Thus, detailed assessment is undertaken which aims to account for whether Socialist and Conservative assumptions of the role of the state are irreconcilable. It will be clearly shown that the understanding of the role of state differs considerably between the two ideologies. However, it is important to note that this ideological divergence differs depending on the nature of the ideologies themselves and the manner in which they are adopted. Thus, the difference between Socialism and Conservatism in terms of the role of the state is not as stark as one would first think and varies depending on national settings and historical periods.

Discussion

In order to meet the aims and objectives outlined above, it is first prudent to provide definitional parameters in relation to the two ideologies in question. Above all, it is essential to highlight the fact that many political ideologies engender significant internal divergence and difference. Socialism presents perhaps the starkest example of this tendency. In terms of

offering a concrete definition, Bevir (2011) suggests that “Socialism was defined by one or more core ideas, such as common ownership of the means of production”. This definitional parameter highlights the degree to which socialist ideology often remains inextricably linked to the writings and assumptions of Karl Marx. Indeed, in his assessment of capitalism, Marx argued vehemently that the means to produce economic wealth in society (the means of production) should be owned in a communal fashion, as opposed to the private ownership that personified economic relations within capitalism, which Marx viewed as the foundation of class exploitation in society (Roemer, 2013). Ultimately, although reference to collective ownership and wholesale public provision of health and social care are useful in providing a definitional foundation for socialism, the ideology itself is immensely diverse.

The definitional problems found with regards to diversity in Socialism are somewhat mirrored by related problems in relation to Conservatism. In particular, it is often easier to highlight what Conservatives are opposed to, rather than believe in. This problem is personified by the assessment provided by Geoghegan & Wilford (2014: 59) who point out that there is a common tendency to “define conservatism in defensive terms”. Moreover, as with Socialism, Conservatism can be considered a diverse ideology in that its tenets may differ from country to country. Nonetheless, an innate willingness to *conserve* the status quo and a general antipathy towards institutional change within the political and social realms is generally considered the hallmarks of the Conservative outlook (Dagnes, 2012). Moreover, within its British and North American context, Conservatism has been closely associated with liberal economics and a willingness to ensure that state intrusion into the lives of ordinary people is reduced as far as is possible or desirable (Krieger & Crahan, 2001). In addition, the wish to preserve the freedom of the individual has been closely associated with Conservative ideological outlooks (Krieger & Crahan, 2001). In this sense, Conservatism has much in common with classical liberalism.

As such, the above discussions highlight the key tenets that can be applied when defining Socialism and Conservatism. Regardless of the inherent diversity that exists within these political ideologies, it is now necessary to engage in critical comparative assessment as to how these apparent dialectic political outlooks conceptualise the role of the state. Firstly, in addressing how Socialist outlooks view the role of the state, it is once again essential to reassert the point that inherent divergence exists within the Socialist ideological paradigm.

For example, the most extreme interpretation of Socialist political thinking is generally considered to be Communism, the Socialist utopia first described by Marx. When one considers the practical implementation of Communist political outlooks, such as those in the former Soviet Union, Cuba or China, it is clearly possible to see a central role ascribed to the state in a whole array of forms. Thus, although perhaps not what Marx himself had in mind, Communist ideology, the most extreme variant of Socialism, dictates that the state should direct and largely control a wide array of policy areas and thus impact directly on the lives of individuals (Holmes, 2009). The term often used to describe this Socialist willingness to see the state control vast areas of political, economic and social policy is “State Socialism” (Higley & Lengyel, 2000: 126). Above all, at its core lies the assumption that the capitalist state itself is beyond redemption and thus cannot be reformed from within. As such, in cases where State Socialism has been applied, there has been an evident willingness to remove the entire structure of the capitalist state and replace it wholesale. Given this, the Conservative inclination to maintain the freedom of the individual at all costs is evidently at odds with the Communist/State Socialist outlook. In this sense, the manner in which the ideologies of Socialism and Conservatism conceptualise the role of the state is certainly irreconcilable.

Naturally, Communism represents the extreme end of the Socialist ideology. Given this, it is clearly important to account for how less extreme Socialist outlooks view the role of the state and compare these to ideological tenets of Conservatism. Britain is a useful place to undertake such an assessment. In particular, unlike continental Europe where the writings of Marx were taken as sacrament, British Socialism grew from the Trade Union movement and as a consequence has always engendered somewhat moderate inclinations in comparison (Worley, 2009). Nonetheless, when one views the historical development of Britain’s leading Socialist party, the Labour Party, it is clearly possible to see how there has often existed a central role for the state in domestic affairs. For example, the 1945 Labour Party election manifesto *Let Us Face the Future* contains a detailed outline of how the future Labour government would seek to nationalise large sections of the British economy and thus ensure “industry in the service of the nation” (Hanover College, 2014: [online]). Indeed, following the election of the Atlee government in 1945, some 25% of the British economy was brought under the control of the state, including; coal, steel, public utilities and transport (Francis, 1997).

Therefore, even within fairly moderate Socialist settings like Britain, it is possible to see a central role ascribed to the state in everyday life. On the face of it, it would be credible to argue that this measure of state intrusion into industry and the economy is fundamentally at odds with Conservative assumptions of a limited state where individual freedom prevails. In many respects this is indeed a pertinent argument, however, it is important to highlight the degree to which Conservative policies have often allowed similar state intrusion as that of Socialist policies. In particular, in post war Britain, although the Conservative opposition to Labour's nationalisation programme was vehement between 1945 and 1951, the Conservative governments between 1951 and 1964 did little to alter the level of state control over the British economy, with the notable exception of the steel industry (Mullard, 2013). This period is often termed "the post war consensus", where there existed general agreement between both parties as to the role the state should play in areas like the economy (Mullard, 2013: 17). Furthermore, the establishment of the National Health Service in 1948, along with wholesale social insurance provision, represented a clear implementation of the Socialist political ideology, reinforced by the Labour Party's declaration, "Labour is a Socialist party, and proud of it" (Hanover College, 2014: [online]). As with nationalisation, later Conservative governments did nothing to alter the role played by the state in policy areas like health and social insurance (Mullard, 2013). Thus, the consensus prevailed. Naturally, any consensus that did exist, particularly that in relation to nationalised industries, crumbled after 1979 with the election of Margaret Thatcher and the imposition of free market privatisation on a massive scale (Burton, 2013). Nonetheless, this example remains pertinent and relevant to the aims and objectives of this essay. Above all, for some three decades, there existed a general agreement between the British Conservative and Labour party's regarding the role of the state in large areas of policy. Far from being irreconcilable, it is credible to argue that the ideological position assumed towards the state was not only reconciled, but remained so for many years.

As such, the above discussions provide a fine example of where harmony and agreement has existed between the competing ideologies of Socialism and Conservatism with regards to the role of the state. Naturally, the assessment undertaken above suggests that this convergence occurred essentially because of an alteration in Conservative outlooks from the 1950s onwards. This alteration did indeed occur and in many respects reinforces the suggestion made by Geoghegan & Wilford (2014: 60) that Conservatism as an ideology is often based

on “sensitivity and adaptability”. Nonetheless, although the example of Britain during the post war decades supports the assumption that Conservative and Socialist outlooks do not necessarily assume irreconcilable positions in relation to the role of the state, a plethora of examples can be utilised to argue the opposite. For example, the United States is often considered the bastion of individual freedom where an innate hostility towards intrusion on the part of the state has existed ever since independence was gained from Britain in the latter 18th century. State involvement in the lives of ordinary people is thus widely condemned by those who consider themselves Conservatives. Practical examples of this hostility towards state intrusion can be seen with regards to the widespread opposition that emerged towards state-directed healthcare provision in the Presidencies of Bill Clinton, not to mention more recent opposition to similar policies on the part of Democratic President Barak Obama (Zengerle, 2012). Thus, within the context of the United States, the role ascribed to the state by Conservative and Socialist outlooks are vehemently and polemically opposed to one another. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that during the financial crisis of 2008, Conservative Republican President George W Bush oversaw some of the largest state intervention in the American economy since the 1930s (New York Times, 2008). Naturally, the unique features of the crisis rendered state action essential, however, this remains a clear example of how during times of crisis, Conservative and Socialist conceptions of the role of the state often converge.

Conclusion

Above all, this work has aimed to provide a comparative assessment of how the ideologies of Conservatism and Socialism perceive and conceptualise the role of the state. The definitional parameters that were provided at the outset of this work clearly exemplified the degree to which both ideologies are divergent, with each engendering differing features. Ultimately, it is very credible to argue that the features, characteristics and tenets of both Socialism and Conservatism diverge depending on the country in question. Thus, historical Socialist approaches in continental Europe with their focus on the assumptions of Marx differ considerably from that of the reformist Labour Party in Britain. Nonetheless, regardless of such diversity, this work has clearly shown that Socialist and Conservative interpretations of the role of the state both differ and converge at different points. The case of Britain during the 1950s and 1960s highlights how the ideological assumptions between Socialism and

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Conservatism regarding state action can often be in harmony with one another. Conversely, the American story, with its preeminent focus on the freedom of the individual paints a very different and much more dialectic opposition between the two ideologies. Ultimately, the role ascribed to the state differs depending on national setting and historical epoch in question.

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