Conservatism

A Lecture by
Christopher Dawson (1932)

Introduction and Notes
by Joseph T. Stuart

Introduction

The handwritten manuscript for this lecture “Conservatism” was found recently among the papers of the Catholic historian of culture Christopher Dawson (1889–1970),¹ housed at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. The lecture was never published. While it is not clear where or even if this lecture was actually delivered, Dawson seems to have addressed himself to a Conservative group, as is evident in his reference to his audience in section I. It is dated June 1932.

Unlike other historians of his day, such as Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), G. P. Gooch (1873–1968), and H. A. L. Fisher (1865–1940), Dawson was never involved more deeply in politics than his brief and unpleasant tenure in 1912 as unpaid private secretary to the Conservative Member of Parliament for Birmingham East, Arthur Steel-Maitland (1876–1935). Rather than politics, his studies during the 1910s and 1920s focused on the social sciences, the idea of progress, cultural development, ancient history, and religion. However, around 1929 or 1930 and the deepening of economic and political darkness, Dawson’s concerns began to shift. Now forty years old with two decades of independent study and two well-received

¹. Christopher Dawson was elected to the British Academy in 1943, gave the Gifford Lectures in 1947–1949, and taught at Harvard University in the Chair of Roman Catholic Studies from 1958–1962. He published over twenty books on world and medieval history, culture, social criticism, religion, politics, and education—many of which have recently been republished by the Catholic University of America.
books behind him, he began to feel the need to interpret current events in the light of history. Social problems, in his view, were no longer only the result of rampant individualism, but also of a new economic and political collectivism. One sees in his essays such new phrases (for him) as “mass-culture,” “crowd spirit,” “group-opinion,” “slogans” (a term Dawson highlighted as a significant modern expression), and “totalitarian.” Dawson would go on to write many political articles during the 1930s, such as “Bolshevism and the Bourgeoisie” (1932), and three books on political subjects: Religion and the Modern State (1935), Beyond Politics (1939), and The Judgment of the Nations (1942). He would also participate in an international conference in Mussolini’s Rome in 1932, a high-brow discussion group (the Moot) in Britain, and a wartime British activist movement (the Sword of the Spirit), all of which had political implications.

This lecture on Conservatism begins in a detached manner as Dawson examines the historical background to Liberalism, Socialism, and Conservatism. As it continues, however, Dawson identifies himself with the Conservative position, as in his use of “we” toward the end of section III: “This renders the task of Conservatism very difficult, for we cannot compete with Socialism on this religious ground and we are forced to meet what is really a religious attack with purely political arguments.” Two notable themes of the lecture are the religious appeal of Socialism and the need, according to Dawson, for a Conservative sociology (theory of society) and a renaissance of Conservative ideas. The word “sociological” appears

2. The Age of the Gods (1928) and Progress and Religion (1929).
3. Christopher Dawson, “European Democracy and the New Economic Forces,” Sociological Review 22 (1930): 39. This word was actually used as early as the sixteenth century in Scotland and Ireland to mean a “war-cry.”
four times in the lecture. This is startling because Dawson viewed the Conservative theory of society as superior to its Socialist counterpart—challenging it on its own grounds.

Dawson spoke in this lecture of the Whig, Liberal, Labour, Tory, and Conservative parties in British politics, so a brief introduction to them may be helpful:

(1) The Whigs were one of the two main political parties in Britain between the late seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. The appellation “Whig” was first used by the Tories for their opponents around 1680. It was derived from “whiggamore,” the derogatory name for the Scottish Covenanters who supported the Scottish National Covenant (1638) by seeking to preserve Presbyterianism in Scotland and oppose royal interference. Whiggery thus began as an oppositional and populist movement that viewed political authority as stemming from the people. A “contract” existed between them and their king, whom they might resist if he overrode their interests. The Whigs naturally placed emphasis on parliamentary, as opposed to monarchical, authority, and they supported toleration for Protestant dissenters, the rule of law, and limited suffrage. By the nineteenth century some Whigs identified with commercial wealth, enlightenment, and progress and were absorbed into Liberalism.

(2) The Liberal Party drew together Whigs and radicals during the second half of the nineteenth century. By mid-century these groups supported an individualist creed, popular sovereignty, laissez faire, disestablishment of the Church of England, extension of the franchise, and limits on the power of government (which should not interfere in economic or social affairs). The Liberal Party was a political force from the 1840s until 1922, when the last prime minister who could be described as a Liberal (David Lloyd George, 1863–1945) fell from power. During their political hegemony between 1906 and 1915 the Liberals succeeded in curtailing the powers of the House of Lords and disestablishing the Church of England in Wales. Their noninterventionist approach to social and economic problems changed somewhat during these later years, as they introduced old-age pensions (1908) and a National Insurance Act (1911). The interwar years were dominated by
the Conservatives and Labour, but this did not end the influence of Liberalism as a creed on British politics in general.

(3) By the late nineteenth century, radicals had left individualism behind in favor of a collectivism that fed into the Labour Party and into the British Communist movement, as in *Forward From Liberalism* (1937) by Stephen Spender (1909–1995). Spender, the son of a Liberal journalist, was a British poet, novelist, and essayist who focused on themes of social injustice and class struggle. The Labour Party formed during the early twentieth century and the Great War proved to be a decisive turning point at which the party formally adopted the Socialist objective of public ownership of the means of production. Labour formed its first government under Ramsay MacDonald in 1924 and would dominate British politics in the 1960s and 1970s.

(4) The existence of the Tories as a parliamentary “party” was not continuous, though Tory values often held an important place in political arguments. The name, originally used in Ireland to mean “outlaw,” was first applied to them by the Whigs around 1680, as they supported royal authority. They held to the divinely ordained theory of kingly authority and for most Tories crown and church were the chief representatives of the political, social, and religious order.

(5) Conservatism grew out of crown-and-church Toryism and out of resistance to the French Revolution after 1789. “Tory” has sometimes been interchangeable with “Conservative” in common language. The Conservative Party took shape during the 1830s and during the later nineteenth century it clearly supported the monarchy, the House of Lords, the established churches, Union with Ireland, land ownership, the Empire, and a limited franchise.

Conservatives often looked for inspiration to the legacy of the Whig politician and political thinker Edmund Burke (1729–1797), who vigorously opposed the French Revolution. In the 1912 book *Conservatism* (Home University Library) by Lord Hugh Cecil (1869–1956), MP for Oxford University, Cecil urged all students of politics to study Burke:

In the first place Burke insisted on the importance of religion and the value of its recognition by the State. Secondly, he
hated and denounced with his whole heart injustice to individuals committed in the course of political or social reform. Thirdly, he attacked the revolutionary conception of equality, and maintained the reality and necessity of the distinctions of rank and station. Fourthly, he upheld private property as an institution sacred in itself and vital to the well-being of society. Fifthly, he regarded human society rather as an organism than a mechanism, and an organism about which there is much that is mysterious. Sixthly, in close connection with this sense of the organic character of society, he urged the necessity of keeping continuity with the past and making changes as gradually and with as slight a dislocation as possible.6

Most of these principles of Burke would be taken up in Dawson’s 1932 lecture.

In what way was Dawson conservative? Lord Cecil distinguished between “natural conservatism” and the Conservatism of the Conservative Party. “Natural conservatism is a tendency of the human mind,” he wrote. “It is a disposition averse from change; and it springs partly from a distrust of the unknown and a corresponding reliance on experience rather than on theoretic reasoning; partly from a faculty in men to adapt themselves to their surroundings so that what is familiar merely because of its familiarity becomes more acceptable or more tolerable than what is unfamiliar.”7 A conservative disposition attached to the past, to tradition, and to experience is obvious throughout Dawson’s writings, as when he opened his short memoir with the following two sentences: “The changes that have been taking place during the present century are so far-reaching that no one can foresee what their ultimate effect on human life will be. But already they have caused the loss of social tradition and a dislocation of human experience such as no previous generation has known since the beginning of history.”8

7. Ibid., 9.
This conservative disposition did not mean that Dawson was “backward looking” as a Catholic and as a scholar, however. On the contrary, Dawson was spiritually close to the Catholic modernist Friedrich von Hügel (1852–1925), was an early pioneer in the ecumenical movement, and worked all of his life to convince his readers of the importance of modern disciplines such as sociology and anthropology for historical study.

Dawson’s relationship to political Conservatism was not so obvious. In all of his books and articles he wrote broad-mindedly and never as a propagandist for the Conservative Party. This unpublished lecture was the nearest he came to such a role, and even here he argued at the level of broad ideas and culture—not in support of any specific policies or politicians of his day. It is true that when he emerged from the political background he did so in the company of Conservatives—as when he spoke at a conference in Rome in 1932 against Nazi racialism. He attended that event as part of a British delegation that included Gerard Wallop (Vicount Lymington) (1898–1984), the environmentalist and Conservative MP for Basingstoke at the time of the conference, and Charles Petrie (1895–1977), the Conservative and Catholic historian. But Dawson’s writings always attempted to probe “beyond politics,” the title of his 1939 book, as in the following passage from Religion and the Modern State (1935):

It may, I think, even be argued that Communism in Russia, National Socialism in Germany, and Capitalism and Liberal Democracy in the Western countries are really three forms of the same thing, and that they are all moving by different but parallel paths to the same goal, which is the mechanization of human life and the complete subordination of the individual to the state and to the economic process. Of course I do not mean to say that they are all absolutely equivalent, and that we have no right to prefer one to another. But I do believe that a Christian cannot regard any of them as a final solution of the problem of civilization, or even as a tolerable one. Christianity is bound to protest against any social system which claims the whole of man and sets itself up as the final end of human
action, for it asserts that man’s essential nature transcends all political and economic forms. Civilization is a road by which man travels, not a house for him to dwell in. His true city is elsewhere.9

Andrew Vincent10 classifies Conservatism five ways: traditionalist, romantic, paternalist, liberal, and New Right. Dawson did not fit into the last two. Liberal Conservatives like Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) and Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992) shared most of the tenets of classical Liberalism in their emphasis on individualism and on economics before politics. The New Right arose after the Second World War and includes strains of liberal Conservatism, Austrian economics, libertarianism, and populism. The first three classifications relate best to the views that Dawson presents in this lecture. Traditionalist Conservatism, inspired by Edmund Burke, emphasizes custom, convention, tradition, practical reason (rather than theoretical reason), society as an organism, and the growth of human constitutions and social change as results of natural historical growth. Romantic Conservatism, which Vincent writes is associated with figures such as Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), William Cobbett (1763–1835), Christopher Dawson, and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), emphasizes nostalgia for a rural past, a utopian vision of how a restored society might look, anti-industrialism and anticlassical economics, and the importance of community and the naturalness of hierarchy. This form of Conservatism is less concerned with minimizing the role of reason. Paternalist Conservatism, long associated with the Conservative Party from the time of Lord Shaftesbury (1801–1885) to Harold Macmillan (1894–1986), emphasizes the responsibility of property, the extension of political rights, the possibility of using the state to foster the good of the whole society (politics before economics), and humanitarianism. There is continual overlap between all five forms

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10. Vincent is Professor of Political Theory at Sheffield University and Director of the Sheffield Centre for Political Theory and Ideologies.
of Conservatism, otherwise, the first three most clearly influenced Dawson’s thinking.

**Note:** All of the footnotes in the following lecture are my own explanatory notes of various historical persons and events referred to in the text. I have made only very minor changes to the original text to ease reading, such as making capitalization consistent and adding a comma here and there. The division headings, such as “The Decline of Liberalism” below, while not appearing within the manuscript itself, are Dawson’s own as they appeared in an outline he made of the talk on the back page of the manuscript. I am grateful to the following people who helped make the publication of this lecture possible: Julian Scott, Annette Kirk, Edward King, and Fae Presley. The lecture is published by permission of the Department of Special Collections, University of St. Thomas, and the copyright (2010) of the lecture is held by Julian Scott, literary executor of estate of the late Christopher Dawson.

**THE LECTURE:**

**“CONSERVATISM,” BY CHRISTOPHER DAWSON**

I. The Decline of Liberalism

The need for a reassertion of Conservative principles is greater than at any other time in the last one hundred years. The whole system of European political life as it was developed in the last century on the basis of parliamentarism, constitutionalism, and democracy seems in a state of dissolution. It is being threatened both from the left and the right—by Communism and by Dictatorship. All over Europe the Liberal parties that were so powerful and influential during the nineteenth century and even up to the War have lost their prestige and importance. In some countries they have disappeared altogether: in the rest they are little more than a miserable shadow of their former selves. And it is not merely that their place has been taken by new parties that are carrying on their work. Af-

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ter the War it did seem as though the Socialists and the forces of organized Labour would take the place of the Liberals and carry on the tradition of parliamentary democracy. But the same process of disintegration that destroyed Liberalism has affected Socialism also. The fact is that Socialism derives from Liberalism all those elements that make it a constitutional democratic party, and as the strength of liberal ideas and liberal traditions declines, Socialism itself is forced to choose between sharing the fate of Liberalism or adopting a revolutionary policy.

This breakdown of Liberalism is no local or temporary phenomenon. It marks the passing of an epoch. Broadly speaking, Liberalism was the dominant force in nineteenth-century culture both in Europe and America. In England it was responsible not only for the political and social reconstruction of the age of the Reform Bill, but also for the Victorian compromise with its optimism, its prosperity, and its Philistinism. On the continent [Liberalism] produced the new bourgeois culture which has so much in common with the Victorian tradition and yet at the same time is so characteristically distinct from it. And even today when its political influence has almost disappeared and its ideals of Progress and Liberty and Free Trade and Free Thought are so largely discredited, [Liberalism] still forms the unacknowledged and half-

13. The Great Reform Act (or Bill) of 1832 extended the franchise and began the long transition to full British democracy in the twentieth century. This was the first major reform of the representative system since the time of Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658). Many feared reform because of the legacy of the French Revolution, but the great achievement of the Whig Prime Minister Charles Grey (1764–1845) was to satisfy the desire for reform while—as he saw it—preserving the essential elements of the existing constitution. E. A. Smith writes that the “Reform Act bears the stamp of Grey’s character—pragmatic, moderate, and fundamentally conservative—and its ultimate passage owes much to his ability to manage the king and his divided colleagues” (E. A. Smith, “Grey, Charles,” in The Oxford Companion to British History, rev. ed., ed. by John Cannon [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 436). The Act generally met the needs of the middle classes but the working classes pushed for more radical reform (e.g., universal manhood suffrage) through the Chartist movement (1837–1854). The transition in Britain after 1830 to full democracy in the twentieth century occurred through seven franchise acts (1832, 1867, 1884, 1918, 1928, 1948, and 1969).
recognized background of the political thought and social ideas of the great majority of men, whether they call themselves Liberals or Conservatives or Socialists.

Consequently, unless we can find some constructive element to take its place, the decay of Liberalism will have a most serious effect on the whole of our Western culture. A society like that of Russia which had never assimilated the Liberal tradition may be able to rebuild itself on completely revolutionary lines. Countries like Italy or Poland or Hungary or Spain that have been affected by it only in a relatively superficial way may find the solution of their difficulties in a dictatorship; but with the Western societies that were the leaders of the nineteenth-century development the case is different. They are far too deeply committed to that development to throw over the democratic tradition altogether, and they are too highly organized and mature to survive a violent revolutionary change in their culture and social economy. Their problem is essentially one of conservation rather than of revolution, and their political traditions—at any rate in this country and America—make it impossible for them to achieve conservation by the crude simplicity of Fascist methods. Fortunately, we are not faced with a choice of two dictatorships—the dilemma of Fascism or Bolshevism. There still remains the Conservative tradition which is no less deeply associated with our Western civilization than Liberalism, but which, unlike Liberalism, is not compromised by the passing of the nineteenth-century traditions and the discrediting of nineteenth-century ideals.

14. During the Second World War Dawson clearly supported Britain and her government. However, during the mid to late 1930s Dawson’s criticism of democracy and his sociological approach to understanding the origins, rise, and extent of Fascism confused some people about his own position. For example, he wrote: “Fascism is a real thing, a spontaneous reaction of Western or Central European society to the new conditions of the post-war epoch”; see Religion and the Modern State (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1935), 8. Viewed out of context, and combined with his comparison and contrast of Catholic (papal) social teaching with Fascism, this sentence could lead to misinterpretation of Dawson’s position on Fascism—which did happen and which led Dawson to refuse to allow for the republication of Religion and the Modern State (1935). Despite misunderstandings, however, Dawson did not at any point advocate Fascism.
I know this will sound paradoxical to many people—though not, I hope, to the present audience. It is one of the many common delusions about Conservatism, that it is the party of the past as opposed to Liberalism and Socialism which are the “progressive” forces in society. If, however, we take the trouble to analyse the causes for the decline of Liberalism, we shall see that these factors are not necessarily hostile to Conservatism and are to some extent at least just the conditions that make for a Conservative revival.

1. The party system. In the first place the chief cause of the political decline of Liberalism is the weakness of the party system, a system which was the creation of Liberalism and which—alike in England and America and on the Continent—is essential to the Liberal conception of democratic government. The party system rests on the agreement to differ. It requires a measure of agreement if it is to function in a satisfactory manner. Any fundamental difference of opinion either on political or economic principles, or on social ideals, renders it unworkable. It works best in a state like Victorian England in which political power is confined to the middle classes and where the different parties share the same social outlook and the same cultural ideals. I do not mean that the old party system was the corrupt sham that Mr. Belloc describes in his political novels. So far as they went the issues were genuine and the differences of opinion were sincere, but they were confined to very narrow limits and left the vital issues untouched.

All this has been changed by the coming of Socialism. For in the first place (1) the coming of a third party destroyed the balance of the political machine and threatened to produce the same state of deadlock that has become the normal condition of many

15. Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), Anglo-French writer, historian, and Catholic. After serving as a Liberal MP for Salford South (1906–1910), Belloc wrote a scathing attack of corruption in the British Parliament in his book The Party System (1911). Dawson may have had in mind his novels such as Mr. Clutterbuck’s Election (1908) and A Change in the Cabinet (1909).

16. The Great War was a turning point for the British Labour Party, which successfully challenged the Liberal and Conservative parties to form its first government in 1924 under Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937). In 1918 Labour had formally committed itself to the Socialist objective of public ownership of the means of production.
continental parliaments, and secondly (2) the mere suggestion of a revolutionary change in the economic constitution of society at once destroys the tacit understanding on which the party system rests and renders the normal rotation of power impossible. No society could survive a complete change of economic constitution every five or ten years. If the means of production are once nationalized they must remain nationalized and consequently a Socialist majority that was determined to realize the full Socialist programme could never envisage the loss of office and the return of their opponents to power, as the old parties were accustomed to do. If they come, they come to stay. And consequently Liberalism is forced to abandon its old attitude toward the constitutional opposition and adapt itself to a new state of things in which defeat means destruction and a change of government means a new state.

2. The economic change. In the second place, the weakness of Liberalism is due to the decline of the social forces and the economic doctrines on which its prestige has hitherto rested. The tradition of Liberalism is the tradition of economic individualism, of free trade and laissez faire, and though it has been forced to throw over a great deal of this tradition in deference to the demand for social reform, it has done so at the expense of its consistency and with considerable damage to its prestige. It cannot abandon its individualist principles altogether; and yet it has gone so far that it is difficult or it to decide where and when the line must be drawn. It cannot go back to Cobden and Bright, and yet it is equally impossible for

17. Richard Cobden (1804–1865) and John Bright (1811–1889) were radical British politicians and effective orators devoted to free trade and international peace. They were both prominent members of the Anti-Corn Law League (Cobden was its leader), which campaigned against the Corn Laws. These laws were first passed in 1815 to protect British agriculture after the French wars, imposing duties on imported foodstuffs. Galvanized by money raised from industrialists who resented the aristocracy and the protection of agriculture, the League worked to undermine the Corn Laws by preaching free trade and more affordable food. Their political efforts helped convert the Whigs to free trade. Occasioned by the 1845 and 1846 failures of the Irish potato crop, Conservative Prime Minister Robert Peel (1788–1850) decided to join with the Whigs and the League to repeal the Corn Laws in 1846. Peel believed that it was necessary to turn away from Conservative Party com-
[it] to go back on them. It must remain uneasily balanced on a semi-individualist compromise that is equally indefensible and difficult to maintain in practice. But even more serious in their effects on Liberalism are the social changes that are destroying the power and independence of those classes that were its chief source of strength. The fate of Liberalism is bound up with that of the Middle Classes, by which I do not mean the bourgeois in the Socialist sense—the class of great capitalists and financiers, but the genuine European bourgeois—the man of property who had an independent stake in society and who could afford to maintain the cultural ideals of a leisured class. As Lucien Romier has shown so well, this class is everywhere undergoing a process of disintegration, due to the pressure of mass economics and mass culture. The man of independent means and the small independent business can no longer maintain their independence between the upper and nether millstones of the bureaucratic state and the forces of organized labour. And with this loss of social and economic independence goes the loss of their political independence and their cultural ideals.

II. The Situation of Conservatism

Now all of these changes naturally affect Conservatism also, but they do not have any disintegrating effect on it. On the contrary, they should help towards a recovery of the true Conservative tradition and a return to its first principles. Conservatism has never identified itself with the party system in the same way as Liberalism. It accepted party government as a necessary evil rather than as a political ideal. Its ideal has always been that of a national government that stands above party and incorporates every element in the national

mitments to the Corn Laws for the sake of political stability—splitting and damaging the Conservative Party and ending Peel’s political career. This was seen as a victory for free trade. Peel was viewed by many as having preferred the public good to his own political power. See Norman McCord, “Peel, Sir Robert,” in The Oxford Companion to British History, rev. ed., ed. by John Cannon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 736.

18. Lucien Romier (1885–1944), journalist, historian, and French politician; Dawson may be referring to one of Romier’s books such as Explication de notre temps (Paris: B. Grasset, 1925) about French society, politics, and civilization.
life. It had its beginnings in the defence of the monarchy against
the party of revolution and though it subsequently adapted itself to
the practical necessities of the new situation, it never made a fetish
of party dogmas as did both the old Whigs and the new Liberals. It
always based its appeal on the spirit of national or imperial unity.

And at the same time Conservatism has never identified itself
with a class. The strength of Toryism was neither in the aristocracy
as with the Whigs, nor in the middle classes as with the Liber-
als, but in the common Englishman—no doubt to some extent in
the prejudices of the common Englishman as we see in the case of
the great Conservative Dr. Johnson,19 but still more in his common
sense and loyalty and public spirit.

This tradition of popular Conservatism has its roots very deep
in the national character and is perhaps the most distinctive feature
of English political life; for it has rendered possible that intimate
union of representative and monarchical institutions which is the
basis of the English polity. Liberal theory never really assimilated
the monarchy, though the individual Liberal was as loyal as any-
body else. It could not quite square the undoubted importance of
the monarchy with its theory of representative government. But
from the Conservative point of view the monarchy is itself the most
perfect embodiment of the representative principle. For while the
politician represents his party or the interests that have brought

19. Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) wrote the first English dictionary (1755) and
such works as Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (1775) and Prayers
and Meditations (1785). He was famous for his personality and conversation.
In 1735 he married a widow, Elizabeth Porter, who was twenty years older; it
was a love match on both sides. He met the writer James Boswell (1740–1795)
in 1763 and Boswell’s Life of Johnson (1791) became a milestone in English
literature. Johnson was a ferocious debater but kind and loyal to friends (one
of his friends was the Whig politician Edmund Burke, 1729–1797). His Lon-
don house was filled with the needy and on his death he gave it to his black
servant. Dawson refers to Johnson as a Conservative because of sentiments
such as the following: “The mental disease of the present generation, is impa-
tience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a dispo-
sition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity” (Rambler,
154, 1751, available at http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/28670/,
accessed 28 October 2010). Johnson is often seen as a personification of the
eighteenth century.
about his election, the king represents the whole. He is in a real sense the common possession of the nation. Perhaps the greatest of all the services that Conservatism has rendered to English politics has been the preservation of this older and more organic conception of the representative principle throughout the process of political rationalization that transformed the English constitution in the last century.

Equally, Conservatism differs from Liberalism in its economic traditions. It has never shared the Liberal veneration for the shibboleths of Free Trade and Free Competition. It is no accident that the beginnings of modern social legislation and the first breach in the rigid individualism of Liberal economic orthodoxy was due to the work of Tories like Sadler and Southey and Shaftesbury.\(^20\) Both the principles and the traditions of Conservatism are opposed to that subordination of social to economic values that was the most striking feature of classical nineteenth-century Liberalism. According to Conservative principles, the business of the government was not limited to keeping the field free for economic competition, it was its essential duty to safeguard the social traditions of national life. It was on this ground that the great battle of the Corn Laws was fought, and Peel's surrender, inevitable as it was, involved not only the temporary decline of Conservatism, but also the passing of the old England and the victory of the individualistic ideals of the middles classes in every department of social life.

III. The Appeal of Socialism

Today the age of individualism and compromise is over, and a genuine Conservatism, conscious of its principles and ideals, is the only

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20. Michael Thomas Sadler (1780–1835), radical Tory MP, opponent of Catholic emancipation as well as classical economics, and leader of the factory reform movement. Robert Southey (1774–1843), English poet of the Romantic school, initially supported the French Revolution but steadily moved toward Conservatism until he was embraced by the Tory establishment; he opposed the new factory system and supported social reform. Antony Ashley Cooper, seventh earl of Shaftesbury (1801–1885), Tory MP and devout evangelical social reformer opposed to all forms of popular democracy, devoted his whole life to reform causes such as limited work hours, child labor, public health, and poor agricultural laborers.
alternative to an uncompromisingly Socialist régime which also makes its appeal to first principles. The need for a return to order is admitted on both sides, the only question is whether it is by the complete subordination of the individual to the state and of the state to the economic machine, or by a return to the organic conception of society\textsuperscript{21} and the reassertion of the traditional principle of political authority.\textsuperscript{22} Conservatism stands above all for the preservation of the inherited traditions of our civilization and the defence of the higher cultural values against the new mass movements that threaten Europe with a return to barbarism. No doubt the individual Socialist is often no less opposed to that process than is the Conservative, but he is bound by the rigidity of his own principles. For Socialism, the only social values are the economic ones and no cultural ideal possesses any validity unless it can be enlisted in the proletarian cause. There is no longer a common inheritance of culture which is shared by every member of the nation irrespective of rank and party, but culture is subordinated to class, so that, in the eyes of the Socialist, the English worker has more in common with the workers of China or Russia than with the other elements in his own society. Above all the doctrine of class war which is inseparable from any genuine Socialist theory makes inevitably for social disintegration, since it transforms what is really the most fatal of social maladies into a necessary instrument of social progress.

Of course to the Socialist the class war is only a means to an end, it passes away with the final victory of Socialism when the proletarian sheep are finally separated from the bourgeois goats and the elect will spend a happy eternity under the shadow of the collectivist state. But this goal is a somewhat distant one and even from the Socialist point of view the process of reaching it must be very painful. Even in Russia after fifteen years of the most drastic

\textsuperscript{21} Dawson describes below the “organic conception of society” as the cooperation of the different classes and economic interests in the nation towards a common cultural end.

\textsuperscript{22} “The traditional principle of political authority”—here Dawson seems to refer to the previous paragraph where he said that, “According to Conservative principles, the business of the government was not limited to keeping the field free for economic competition, it was its essential duty to safeguard the social traditions of national life.”
dictatorship, the class struggle still goes on, and it must necessarily take far longer in countries like our own in which the whole society is penetrated by bourgeois culture and where the Bolshevik methods of dealing with recalcitrant minorities are hardly conceivable.

There is no doubt that the Conservative conception of the organic nature of society and its ideal of the cooperation of the different classes and economic interests in the nation towards a common cultural end is far more sympathetic to the national genius than is the Socialist absolutism, whether in its revolutionary or in its Fabian\textsuperscript{23} form. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to underestimate the strength of the appeal that Socialism makes to the modern mind. The basis of this appeal is, however, not so much political or economic as religious. Socialism offers men not political order but social salvation; not responsible government but a deliverance from the sense of moral guilt that oppresses modern society: or rather, the shifting of that burden from society as a whole to some abstract power such as capitalism or finance or bourgeois civilization which is endowed with the attributes of a powerful and malevolent spirit. Thus, Socialism is able to enlist all those religious emotions and impulses which no longer find an outlet through their old religious channels. The type of man who a century ago would have been a revivalist or even the founder of a new sect, today devotes himself to social and political propaganda. And this gives Socialism a spiritual power which the older political parties did not possess, though Liberalism, especially on the Continent, sometimes showed similar tendencies. It shows itself in the movement of propaganda that aims at the spreading of Socialist ideas for their own sake, quite apart from whether they are likely to bear fruit in political victories in the elections or the House of Commons, and at the same time it gives the Socialist a

\textsuperscript{23} The Fabian Society was founded in Britain in 1884 by a group of middle-class intellectuals for the gradual (as opposed to revolutionary) reconstruction of society along Socialist lines and according to moral principles. Sidney Webb (1859–1947) and George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) were its most famous members. The Fabian Society served as an important source of ideas for the emerging Labour movement and exists today as Britain’s oldest Socialist organization.
feeling of unbounded moral superiority over his opponents, whom he regards very much as the old fashioned evangelist regarded the unconverted worldling.  

24. Throughout his political writings Dawson described Fascism, Communism, and Nazism in terms of “pseudo-religion[s],” “public religions,” or “secular religions”; for example, see: Christopher Dawson, Beyond Politics (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 104, 105. In 1912 Lord Hugh Cecil also noticed the link between Socialism and religion: “it is frequently claimed that Christianity has a strong affinity to one particular political system, and that its authority may be appealed to to justify that system’s advocates. The system for which this claim is made is, strangely enough, Socialism, which exalts especially the function of the State. This claim is so strongly made and meets with such wide acceptance that it will not be a waste of time to consider carefully how far it is well founded.” Unsurprisingly, Cecil argued that there is no ground in the New Testament for enlarging the state. “The socialist dreams of something like a heaven upon earth and that it is to be attained by State action. . . .” Christians should have much concern for the reform of social evils, but this should operate through a reform of characters not of governmental machinery. See Cecil, Conservatism, 80–81, 82, 92. This view of the appeal of Socialism in religious terms was not exclusive to Conservatives like Cecil and Dawson. For example, the poet and historian A. L. Rowse (1903–1997), a Socialist during the interwar years, wrote the following: “One great political movement, more than any other, has the power of attracting devotion to it, and unpaid service and unquestioning loyalty like a religion; it is this power that drives the Labour Party on. . . . Of this movement, perhaps it is only certain groups, like the Independent Labour Party, the communists and the pacifists, who find in their politics a complete substitution for religion. These people have found in it an idealism, which influences their lives and for good, a way of life more exacting, which demands above all the submergence of self and common-mindedness. What are these but characteristics of religion?” See Politics and the Younger Generation (London: Faber & Faber, 1931), 200. Another example comes from the opening sentence of Forward from Liberalism (1937), by the (at that time) Communist-leaning poet and novelist Stephen Spender (1909–1995). “‘Religion is politics, and politics is Brotherhood,’ wrote William Blake. These words take us back to the time when Thomas Paine, his friend William Blake, Godwin, and later the romantics, inspired by events in France and America, believed that their political faith, interpreted in action, would overthrow kings and tyrants and make all men brothers. Politics became a religion without God, that is to say, a way of life.” Later on, Spender affirmed that the “communist faith” and “communist morality” are a “way of life” but should not be referred to as a “religion” because religion
This renders the task of Conservatism very difficult, for we cannot compete with Socialism on this religious ground and we are forced to meet what is really a religious attack with purely political arguments. For while Liberalism is a philosophy and Socialism is a religion, Conservatism does not pretend to go beyond the social and political sphere. I do not mean to say that Conservatism is or ought to be indifferent to religion. On the contrary, it has always maintained the vital importance of religion in national life and for that very reason it recognizes its own limits and the essential distinction of political from religious action.  

IV. Conservative Principles

If Conservatism cannot make use of this kind of pseudo-religious appeal, it is the more necessary that it should make use of all the legitimate intellectual weapons that it may possess. Under the new conditions the ultimate issues will be fought out not on the floor of the House of Commons or even in the electoral contests but in the battle of ideas which determines the general social beliefs and ideals of the educated democratic public. This is where Socialism has at present so great an advantage. It is strongly entrenched not only in the Trade Unions, but in the universities and schools, among the teaching profession and in the intellectual classes generally. We have got to meet the Socialist propaganda in this wider field no less than in parliament and in the constituencies. Otherwise, we may some day find ourselves with a nominally Conservative government that has lost all hold on Conservative principles and merely dispenses the collectivist panacea in somewhat milder doses than those of its Socialist opponents.

In this intellectual field Conservatism has never possessed the prestige that the intrinsic value of its principles deserves. The old-possesses aims that are not realizable in this life. See Stephen Spender, Forward from Liberalism (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), 13, 23–24. After the Second World War, Spender distanced himself from some of his more Communist views of the 1930s.  

25. Lord Hugh Cecil also recognized the distinction between spiritual and secular matters: “obedience is due to the authority of the State within its own sphere, but that sphere does not extend to purely spiritual matters.” See Cecil, Conservatism, 75.
fashioned Tory\textsuperscript{26} was so confident in the strength of his position that he was content to leave to the Radicals the reputation of the clever party. He believed, no doubt with some justification, that the forty-shillings freeholder\textsuperscript{27} did not read the \textit{Edinburgh Review}\textsuperscript{28} and that John Bull\textsuperscript{29} had no use for John Stuart Mill.\textsuperscript{30} Nevertheless, even in those days, events showed that he was wrong and that a contempt for ideas leads to political extinction.

Today there is no longer any excuse for intellectual apathy or cynicism. There is nothing that the ordinary man dislikes more than to feel that the politicians do not treat him seriously, and any contempt for the intelligence of the electorate will always be repaid by them with interest. The discredit into which modern politics has fallen is largely due to an uneasy feeling that the political struggle is a sham fight and that the politicians are really interested in matters that are kept behind the scenes. The national victory at the last elections\textsuperscript{31} was largely due to the fact that the electorate believed

\begin{itemize}
\item The “old-fashioned Tory” of the nineteenth century supported the establishment, believing that the crown and the church were the chief preservers of the political, religious, and social order.
\item A “forty-shillings freeholder” is an obscure term used in Ireland during the early nineteenth century designating a small landholder of the lowest class whose income from land met a forty-shilling voting qualification.
\item The \textit{Edinburgh Review} was founded in 1802 and served as a forum for somewhat radical Whig ideas. Contributors included the Whig orator and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859) and the historian and political moralist Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881).
\item “John Bull,” the personification of the sturdy and honest Englishman, became popular with cartoonists during the nineteenth century. He often appeared in top hat and Union Jack waistcoat.
\item John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), son of the utilitarian philosopher James Mill (1773–1836), was a utilitarian and liberal philosopher who served as an independent Member of Parliament arguing for radical measures such as votes for women. Because of works such as \textit{Principles of Political Economy} (1848), \textit{On Liberty} (1859), and \textit{Subjection of Women} (1869), Mill is viewed as a founding father of liberal thought.
\item In the general election of October 1931 a National Government came to power in Britain. The prior Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937) faced a severe economic crisis in 1931 and so a coalition of Labour, Conservative, and Liberal parties formed. This coalition, the National Government, stayed in power until Winston Churchill (1874–
that the government was in deadly earnest and that they were at least face to face with facts.

If Conservatism is to survive it will be by the strength of its principles and the sincerity of its purpose, not by an unintelligent traditionalism or by the superiority of its parliamentary tactics. For my part I do not see any reason why Conservatives should avoid this issue. For though Conservatism is no religious creed like Socialism and no abstract philosophy like Liberalism, it rests on a sound foundation of sociological principle that is far more capable of scientific justification than are the dogmatic beliefs of its adversaries. It is true that the Socialist is never tired of insisting that he and he alone possesses a scientific theory of society. But the Marxian theory involves an arbitrary simplification of the facts which is the very reverse of a genuinely scientific procedure. It ignores all the elements in society and culture that are inconsistent with its theory and reduces the complex reality of social life to its economic functions. Even within this economic sphere it carries out a still further simplification by regarding labour as the only creative factor in the economic process and ignoring the economic contribution of the non proletarian elements in society.

Conservatism does not deny the importance of the economic factor or the need for safeguarding the economic foundations of national life: but it refuses to admit the economic monism of the Socialist or his materialist interpretation of history. Economics are but one function of the social organism and its non-economic functions have their independent value and their own sociological importance. Historically, the Conservative view is derived from the traditional Christian idea of society as a moral organism, each member of which is spiritually equal, but differentiated by its function.32

1965) formed a wartime Coalition Government in 1940.

32. Dawson often used the word “function” in his sociological writings. The function of something or someone implies a definite role within a larger whole or organism, a role with both rights and duties. The word was used by certain medievalists such as A. J. Penty (1875–1937) and Eileen Power (1889–1940) during the 1920s and by certain social critics such as R. H. Tawney (1880–1962). For example, the main point of Tawney’s The Acquisitive Society (1921) was that society should be based on function, not rights. A functional activity was one that embodied social purpose, and proprietary rights
Thus, instead of the simple dualism of labour and capital or proletarian and bourgeois, there was an organized hierarchy of classes each with its specific function in the life of the whole. The merchant who provides for the economic needs of society may well be richer than the priest who provides for its spiritual needs, the soldier who defends it, and the peasant who feeds it, but he is not on that account of any more importance. In the same way, the political power may be in the hands of a single class, but it is their business to exercise that power in the interests of the whole and not for their personal or corporate profit. This traditional conception of society was undermined by the individualism that replaced the organic unity of society by a chaos of competitive units. Economic interest took the place of social function as the ruling principle of society. And this in turn led to the Socialist reaction by which all human values are sacrificed to the economic absolutism of the omnipotent state. Only one social function remains: that of the economic producer who himself becomes no more than a cog in the soulless mechanism of world industry.

V. Conservative and Socialist Principles in Relation to Modern Political Problems: (a) The Empire

It will of course be said that these changes are inevitable. In modern circumstances there is no room for the old conception of a settled social hierarchy that is essentially bound up with the conditions of

depended on performance of a service. Such a political philosophy, however, relied on society having a common mind, and it was the responsibility of the Christian churches to promote that common thinking. See R. H. Tawney, _The Acquisitive Society_ (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1921), 9, 222, 227. Tawney was an economic historian and a Christian Socialist. One whole section of his book _Religion and the Rise of Capitalism_ (1926) was called “The Social Organism.” He described the social organism as it existed in the Middle Ages as “a community of unequal classes with varying functions, organized for a common end.” This contrasted with society viewed as a “mechanism adjusting itself through the play of economic motives to the supply of economic needs.” See R. H. Tawney, _Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study_ (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926), 13. Tawney’s highly influential thought fed into Labour policy and the development of the welfare state in Britain. Nevertheless, Dawson would have undoubtedly agreed with his portrayal of the social organism.
a self sufficient agrarian state. Today the two cornerstones of the old conservative order—the land and the church—have lost their importance and we have to deal with the problems of world industry and cosmopolitan culture. This is in a sense true enough, and the old social hierarchy passed away with the industrial revolution and the Conservative theory of society in its traditional form passed away with it. Nevertheless, though that theory was pre-scientific, it rests upon sound sociological foundations and it is capable of being restated in terms of modern conditions. The more complex our civilization becomes, the more necessary it is to recognize both the autonomous value and the interdependent relations of the different social functions. Indeed, the social monism of Marxism and the labour theory of value are even more false today than they were in the pre-industrial age. For example, the Socialist sees in England nothing but the industrial proletariat: that is the source of all wealth and the only class that possesses moral and political rights. But in reality it exists only as part of a vast organic development. Our national wealth is due above all to the organizers of the intricate web of social and economic relations that Britain has thrown round the world. Instead of being a self-sufficient economic entity, the British working classes owe their relative prosperity to their rather precarious position on the summit of this immense structure and the collapse of that structure would injure them far more seriously than any defeat in the internal feud between the employers and the trade unions.

Moreover, this great organism is not merely an economic one. It involves all sorts of heterogeneous factors, geographical, racial, economic, and religious.33 It is a complicated system of socio-political relations with other communities—foreign nations and dependent

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33. These four “heterogeneous factors” comprise Dawson’s theory of culture as a common way of life and a common way of thought of a particular people in relation to its environment. “Culture” is thus both a spiritual/intellectual unity and a material unity of place, race (people and folk ways), and work. This conception of culture, which Dawson partly drew from his close association during the 1920s with the Sociological Review, the biologist Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), and Geddes’s interpretation of the French sociologist Pierre Frédéric Guillaume Le Play (1806–1882), underlay much of Dawson’s work on history, social criticism, and education.
people, self-governing dominions and crown colonies. If the British Empire was regarded merely as an organization for the economic exploitation of the world in the interests of the British capitalist or the British workman, it could not command either the loyalty of its subjects or the goodwill of its neighbors. Its final justification consists in the cultural mission that it fulfills and the contribution that it makes towards a world order. I do not of course mean that the economic aspect of the Empire is an unimportant one. On the contrary, as I have said, the imperial economic structure is an essential foundation of our national life. But even from an economic point of view the imperial system must be viewed in relation not merely to economic interests but to social functions. For the imperial economic ideal is not purely self-centered and self-regarding like that of the old continental protectionism; it looks to the needs of the whole and makes a constructive effort towards the creation of that economic world order which the doctrinaire ideals of free trade were powerless to achieve. It is clear that neither Liberal individualism nor the economic absolutism of the Socialists do justice to the complex reality of the facts that are involved in the British imperial system. Either they shut their eyes to the elements in it that conflict with their theories, or they reject the whole system with the passionate conviction of a religious fanatic.

34. “Dominions” designated the self-governing state of the interwar British Commonwealth (such as Canada, Australia, and South Africa). “They were to be regarded, proclaimed the 1926 imperial conference, as ‘autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, although united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations’ (italics added).” See Bernard Porter, “dominion status,” in The Oxford Companion to British History, rev. ed., ed. by John Cannon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 299.

35. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, protectionism increased on the Continent of Europe. Protectionism is an economic policy of restraining trade through methods such as tariffs and governmental regulations in order to protect native markets and companies.

36. Dawson opposed what he saw as a false moralism in international relations and in the study of history. For example, in a critique of Isaiah Berlin’s Historical Inevitability (1954), with words peculiarly poignant today, he warned against reacting so far against extreme moral relativism as to fall
realize that an empire cannot be discarded or explained away like a political programme. It stands like the armed man in the Gospel until a stronger power comes to take its place, and when it falls, many other things fall with it.

VI. Conservative and Socialist Principles in Relation to Modern Political Problems: (b) The Social Problem

In the same way the one-sided simplicity of Socialist theory is inadequate to explain the internal structure of modern society. Conservatism has always recognized the essentially heterogeneous nature of society and is constitutionally averse from disturbing the delicate balance of social forces on which civilization rests. Socialism, on the other hand, is ready to sacrifice social equilibrium to an abstract ideal of equality which is based on moral prejudices rather than on economic or sociological facts. Even the Socialist, however, admits in practice that absolute equality is unattainable. Every society is governed by an élite and the only difference in this respect between democratic and aristocratic societies is that in the former “the circulation of the élites” (to use Pareto’s terminology)\(^37\) is more

\(^37\) Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) was an Italian industrialist, sociologist, philosopher, and economist. His famous *Tratto di sociologia generale* (1916) was translated into English as *The Mind and Society* (1935). Dawson praised this book in his essay “Sociology as a Science” in *Science Today: The Scientific Outlook on World Problems Explained by Leading Exponents of Modern
rapid and more intense than in the latter. It is true that a plutocratic élite is not the ideal type of governing class. Here the Conservative will agree with the Socialist. But it is a very different matter to maintain that the élite can be deprived of an economic foundation whatsoever without damage to its social function. No doubt this can be done to a great extent in the case of the governing class itself but the natural consequence of this is to accentuate its political predominance, as we see in Russia today. The Communist élite is less greedy for profit than the governing class in capitalist countries but it is more greedy for power. It is not content with the political and economic direction of society, but aspires to an absolute control over the life and thought of society. Its economic asceticism is compensated by the satisfaction of its lust for spiritual domination.

But the governing class in the strict sense of the word is not the only élite. Even more important from a social point of view is the non-governmental élite, for that is the class which has done more than any other for intellectual and scientific progress and for the maintenance of cultural values. It is here that Socialism is more dangerous, for the doctrine of class war inexorably demands the destruction of the non-governmental élite in the interests of class unity and economic equality. Even the moderate Socialist demands that the rentier\textsuperscript{38} should be mercilessly fleeced, while the Communist is satisfied with nothing short of his extermination, and even his children and grandchildren are liable to be deprived of a higher education and other social advantages. And yet the rentier is the typical representative of the non-governmental élite and he has no less important a function to fulfill in society than the industrial worker or the practical administrator. No doubt he may fulfill his function badly; but so may the workman and the bureaucrat. On the whole, however, I do not think that it can be said that the non-governmental and the non-industrial élite of the Western European countries


\textsuperscript{38} The word “rentier” is a French word referring to one who has a fixed income as from lands, bonds, etc.
have deserved badly of society, or failed to make an adequate cultural return for what they have received. One may even ask where Socialism itself would have been without the intellectual contribution of this class: of men like Bentham and J. S. Mill and W. Morris\textsuperscript{39} in this country, of St. Simon and Lassalle and Engels\textsuperscript{40} on the Continent and of Herzen and Bakunin and Tolstoi and Kropotkin in Russia.\textsuperscript{41} “The theory of Socialism grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals. The very founders of modern scientific Socialism, Marx and Engels themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia.” These are not my words: these are the words of no less an authority than Lenin.\textsuperscript{42}

A society of workers and peasants produces workers and peasants. It will not produce scientists or philosophers or social theorists: they are essentially the product of the culture of a leisure class, such as the citizen class in ancient Greece or the rentier class in modern Europe. No doubt the Socialist state will in practice endeavor to create a new élite to take the place of that which it has destroyed,

\textsuperscript{39} Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was an English utilitarian and philosophical radical; he was born into a wealthy Tory family and was educated at Oxford, qualifying as a barrister before he was twenty. John Stuart Mill— see footnote 30. William Morris (1834–1896), son of a partner in the firm of Sanderson & Co. (bill brokers in the City of London), was a poet, artist, craftsman, and Socialist who was educated at Marlborough and Oxford.

\textsuperscript{40} Saint-Simon (1760–1825), early French Socialist who was born an aristocrat in Paris; Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864), German-Jewish jurist and Socialist political activist who was born to a prosperous Jewish silk merchant in Prussia; and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), German social scientist and father of Communist theory along with Karl Marx (1818–1883); Engels was born in Prussia to a German textile manufacturer.

\textsuperscript{41} Aleksandr Herzen (1812–1870), pro-Western thinker and writer known as the “father of Russian Socialism” who was the illegitimate son of a rich Russian landowner; Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), revolutionary and theorist of collectivist anarchism who was born into a family of Russian nobles; Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), novelist, was born into a family of Russian nobles; and Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), geographer, zoologist, and one of Russia’s leading anarchist Communists, was the son of Prince Alexei Petrovich Kropotkin (who owned large tracts of land as well as many serfs).

\textsuperscript{42} Dawsson quoted from Lenin’s pamphlet \textit{What is to be Done?} (Stuttgart, Dietz: 1902).
but since such an élite would rest on state organization it would eventually result in the formation of a class system more rigid than that of bourgeois society.

The real danger that faces modern society, as Pareto has shown in his masterly analysis of social equilibrium in history, is the same as that which transformed the Roman society of the later Empire. It is the progressive destruction of social mobility by a process of crystallization that fixes the social system in a rigid mould under the control of an all powerful bureaucracy. This is the inevitable doom of the Socialist state, and even the moderate degree of socialization that has taken place in England during the last thirty years is not without its dangers. All the real benefits that the nation has derived from social legislation and the social services will be dearly bought, if they have to be paid for by the loss of social mobility and the senile decay of the social organism.43

VII. Cultural Policy of Conservatism

It is one of the strangest paradoxes of the present situation that Conservatism stands almost alone for the preservation of the progressive powers of society, while the so-called progressive parties advocate a policy that leads to social stagnation and a static civilization. For the progress of society depends on the quality of its élite, and the future lies with those peoples that value high quality more than contented mediocrity. But it is impossible to achieve this by purely economic means. Civilization does not live by bread alone. The higher cultural values are spiritual things and can only be attained by spiritual effort. How society is to be inspired to make this effort is perhaps the most vital of all the problems of the present age. In the past this was the business of the Church, and the teaching of Christianity was not only the universal basis of popular education but also found expression in the external forms of public life. Today this is no longer the case. The life of the state has been secularized, and religion seems steadily losing its influence over the life of the

43. “This danger is not generally realized owing to the domination that the old liberal commonplaces about democracy and progress have obtained over the modern mind.” Dawson wrote this sentence on the blank page opposite this final paragraph of section VI.
community. Whatever may be the view of the causes of this change, we cannot treat it as of minor importance. It is impossible for the cinema to take the place of the Church and the illustrated paper to take the place of the Bible without producing a certain lowering of the tone of public life and a degradation of moral standards. The Socialist also sees this danger but he is prepared to meet it by the compulsory inculcation of his own political ideals, which are, as I have said, of a quasi-religious character. This, however, is to restore state religion in its most dangerous form. It leads logically to the a-theocracy of Soviet Russia with its complete negation of spiritual freedom and its reduction of literature and art to instruments of state propaganda.

The Conservative cannot look for a solution along these lines for he is bound by his principles to admit the primacy and independence of the spiritual order. There are Conservatives who are mystics like de Maistre and Conservatives who are skeptics like Metternich. But in either case they admit that religion is an independent kingdom subject to its own laws in which the politician as such has no right to interfere.

But this does not mean that he is bound to take up a passive attitude and leave the field free to Socialist propaganda. Under the old order Conservatism was bound up with the cause of the Established Church by which it maintained the essential place of religion in the national life. Under modern conditions it is equally bound to defend not only religion but all the spiritual values in our culture. An educational and cultural policy is essential to Conservatism. Otherwise whatever we gain in the elections will be lost in the schools. There is no reason to suppose, as for instance Mr. Rowse

44. Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), Savoyard lawyer, diplomat, writer, philosopher, and Catholic; Maistre argued for the restoration of hereditary monarchy, which he regarded as a divinely sanctioned institution, and for the indirect authority of the Pope over temporal matters.
45. Prince Metternich (1773–1859), German-Austrian diplomat and statesman; he was the archetypal practitioner of nineteenth-century diplomatic realism, being deeply rooted in the postulates of the balance of power. He was a major figure in the Congress of Vienna (1815) which sought to settle the many issues arising from the French Revolutionary Wars, the Napoleonic Wars, and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire.
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does, in his interesting statement of the Socialist position, that the average Englishman has a rooted distrust for Conservative ideas and a natural sympathy with Liberal and Socialist ideology. The fact is that theirs is the only ideology he hears about. And we can hardly be surprised if he accepts the progressive myth as a matter of course when it has been preached to him as gospel by his teachers and social leaders for more than a generation. The official creed of the progressive parties has taken the place that the church catechism occupied in popular education in Victorian times.

VIII. Intellectual Propaganda

It is one of the strong points of Socialism that it has spared no pains in the organization of this propaganda. It has had intellectual as well as political organization. The Fabian Society made Socialist principles and ideals familiar to the intelligentsia, when they were still unpopular and ignored by the general public and the result has been the conversion of public opinion so that the paradoxes of yesterday have become the political commonplaces of today.

It is necessary for Conservatives to develop similar intellectual propaganda, for the modern political conflict goes much deeper


47. This was also argued in A Defence of Conservatism (1927), by the British writer Anthony M. Ludovici (1882–1971). Combining an interest in Edmund Burke with nationalism, the “aristocratic tradition,” and a form of eugenics reasoning, Ludovici called for a renaissance of Conservative ideas through an organization like the Fabian Society. He wrote: “Nevertheless, the framing of a Conservative policy to meet the needs of the Age, to correct the abuses that have not yet been tracked down, and to avert the disasters that threaten in the future, is not an impossible task, it is not even an undertaking demanding superlatively high genius. But it certainly depends on one condition, which, so far as can be judged, no Conservative leader, or member of the rank and file,
than the old party struggle. It has become a battle of ideas and beliefs. Practical politics are not enough. We need a Conservative sociology to set against the Socialist theory of society, and a spiritual ideal of Conservative order to meet the idealism of revolution. The elements are there, but it is not enough to leave things to the private initiative of isolated writers and thinkers. Intellectual cooperation and organization are essential. I believe, as I said before, that the present situation offers a greater opportunity to Conservatism than it has had for a hundred years, but this opportunity cannot be realized apart from a renaissance of Conservative ideas.

[signed]
Christopher Dawson   June 1932

has hitherto seriously contemplated, and that is the immediate formation of a body of men who will be prepared and equipped to do for Tory politics what the Fabian Society has done for Socialism and the Labour Party. Let it not be imagined for one moment that the only function of such a body would consist in restocking the intellectual arsenal of Toryism, although this would indeed be one of its principal aims. Like the Fabian Society, it would have wider duties to perform than the mere purveying of ideas. It would require to undertake that which is the direst need of modern times, both in England and in every quarter of the civilised world, and that is the re-education of public opinion in the matter of sound and realistic political and economic doctrine.” See Anthony M. Ludovici, *A Defence of Conservatism: A Further Text-Book for Tories* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1927), available at http://www.anthonymludovici.com/dc_01.htm, (accessed 20 April 2010).