

Tensions within conservatism

- **Human nature:** traditional conservatives, such as Burke and Oakeshott, take a sceptical view of human nature, drawing attention to the gap between aspiration and achievement while warning against the grand, utopian schemes of progressive politicians. For them, the horrors of supposedly idealistic movements — such as the French and Russian Revolutions — are not tragic accidents, they arise from a misreading and overestimation of human potential. By contrast, New Right thinkers take a more optimistic view, emphasising the possibilities of individuals with initiative and liberty. Key thinkers like Nozick and Rand take an especially positive view of what individuals can achieve in the economic sphere, arguing that the key to unlocking human potential lies in fostering a pro-capitalist environment where individual energies are unleashed.
- **Society:** traditional conservatives see society as a collection of small communities (what Burke termed 'little platoons'), overseen by a hierarchical structure in which 'paternalistic' elites exercise their inherited power in the interests of the majority. Such communities are considered organic, in the sense that they emerge in a natural and unplanned way, and place great store upon tradition and continuity. By contrast, New Right conservatives are ambivalent about society's very existence, drawing upon the libertarian belief that society is a mere collection of atomised individuals seeking self-determination. New Right conservatives are more sceptical about paternalistic communities, preferring a society defined by those who have achieved, rather than inherited, power, status and property — in other words, a society that is meritocratic rather than aristocratic.
- **The state:** traditional conservatives like Burke defend a state where political power is wielded by those who are 'born to rule'. As such, traditional conservatives believe the best states have a natural 'ruling class', reared according to the principles of duty and sacrifice, and instilled with a sense of responsibility towards the governed. Traditional conservatives are pragmatic about the extent of the state and are prepared to enlarge it in the name of social stability and 'one nation'. By contrast, New Right conservatives wish to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' (outside areas such as security and defence) so as to advance individual freedom and reverse the dependency culture. New Right conservatives are hostile to the principle of aristocratic rule — they fear that ruling classes have too much stake in the status quo and are therefore reluctant to admit the need for radical change by New Right governments.
- **Economy:** traditional conservatives, while keen to defend an economy based on private ownership, are sceptical about free-market capitalism, fearful that its dynamic effects exacerbate inequality, threaten 'one nation' and fuel support for socialism. As capitalism becomes more globalised, traditional conservatives also fear that market forces promote a more cosmopolitan society that erodes national identity and national culture. As a result, traditional conservatives have been prepared to countenance state intervention via Keynesian economics, higher taxation and high public spending on state welfare. By contrast, New Right conservatives like Nozick zealously advocate free-market economies where state functions are privatised and deregulated, and where levels of taxation and state spending are significantly reduced.