

Burke, Disraeli, and the Lost Art of Conservative Balance

Sam Tanenhaus argues in *The Death of Conservatism* the American Right fractured when it abandoned an older conservative tradition rooted in Edmund Burke and his political heirs. Burke articulated a conservatism defined not by ideology but by prudence, historical continuity, and a deep suspicion of abstract political systems. Burkean conservatism found its most important practical expression in Benjamin Disraeli, whom Tanenhaus treats—often implicitly—as the crucial missing link between *Burkean theory and conservative governance*. Together Burke and Disraeli exemplify a conservatism defined by balance rather than doctrine.

Burke's conservatism rested not on a fixed body of doctrines but on a distrust of ideology itself. He warned against totalizing political schemes and the destabilizing effects of political extremism. As he famously observed, *"A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation."* For Burke, governing required maintaining an equilibrium between preservation and correction—often through compromise, sometimes between competing goods, and at times between lesser evils. In such a framework, ideological purism and political absolutism had no constructive role.

While Burke articulated the philosophical foundations of this non-ideological conservatism, Disraeli translated them into a governing strategy suited to an industrial and democratic age. Like Burke, Disraeli rejected ideological rigidity, insisting that political stability depended on adapting inherited institutions to changing social conditions rather than defending them unchanged. His conservatism was practical rather than theoretical, oriented toward sustaining social cohesion under the pressures of mass politics.

Disraeli's *One-Nation* conservatism echoed Burke's emphasis on organic continuity and moral obligation across generations. Where Burke stressed the partnership binding the living, the dead, and the unborn, Disraeli confronted the danger that those bonds might fracture under industrial inequality and class conflict. His response was not ideological transformation but selective, corrective reform—social legislation designed to preserve national unity while leaving the underlying structure of society intact. In this sense, Disraeli embodied Burke's maxim that preservation requires change, demonstrating how reform could serve continuity rather than revolution.

The difference between Burke and Disraeli, then, is not one of principle but of context and execution. Burke theorized conservatism amid revolutionary upheaval; Disraeli practiced it within a democratic and industrial society. Together, *they represent a conservative tradition defined less by fixed doctrine than by an enduring commitment to balance—between stability and reform, continuity and adaptation, authority and obligation.*

Seen in this light, Tanenhaus's critique comes into sharper focus. In *The Death of Conservatism*, he argues that modern American conservatism rejected the Burkean–Disraelian ethic of balance in

favor of rigid doctrinal politics. By severing conservatism from its historical role as a flexible, integrative governing tradition, the contemporary Right reduced it to ideological rigidity. The result, in Tanenhaus's account, is not only polarization but the erosion of conservatism's capacity for statesmanship itself.

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Abstract. Note:

This essay revisits the conservative tradition of Edmund Burke and Benjamin Disraeli as influenced by Sam Tanenhaus's critique of modern American conservatism. Burke rejected ideology in favor of prudence continuity and restraint. Disraeli often implicit in Tanenhaus's account – often served as the bridge between Burkean theory and governance, translating anti-ideological balance into selective reform. The essay argues that conservatism's embrace of rigid ideology marks the loss of this governing tradition within democratic industrial politics of the modern age.

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