

# **PhD in Politics**

## **Research Proposal**

**The spontaneous order and the role of tradition in  
classical liberalism in face of modern rationalism and  
post-modern relativism**

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## **Abstract (150 palavras)**

Adhering to the Enlightenment Project, modern and postmodern authors developed a chaos in moral enquiry, in which the abuses of reason, objectivism and relativism created a cultural, social and intellectual framework inimical to tradition. By proposing to anchor morality on rationalism, positivism, scientism, historicism and scepticism have naturally led to nihilism, constructivism, social planning, utilitarianism and emotivism. This may be overcome by rediscovering the role of tradition and enquiring into the moral foundations of modernity and post-modernity. Drawing on the concept of spontaneous order and evolutionary or critical rationalism, both tributary of the Scottish Enlightenment, Friedrich Hayek, Michael Polanyi and Karl Popper are essential for this rediscovery; but we must also consider the importance of others who are critical of classical liberalism, such as Alasdair MacIntyre and John Gray. It is by reassessing them that we can try to overcome the dead end of modernity and the errors of post-modernism.

## **State of the art (500 palavras)**

The concept of tradition is a pluralist one which accounts for diversified approaches, but that we shall approach through the lens of classic liberalism, mainly considering the works of Hayek, Polanyi and Popper, but also contrasting them with MacIntyre, Rorty and Gray.

Firstly, to understand Hayek, we must turn to his philosophy of the mind, and his take on the abuse of reason. Only by understanding the epistemological implications of the mind being a spontaneous order, a cultural product that results from evolutionary processes between a physical structure and sensory qualities, whose knowledge is mostly tacit and implicit, can we then comprehensively apply the concept to the social world, as Hayek does. He develops an approach to society based on cultural evolutionism, attributing great importance to tradition as a way to ensure social order by transmitting knowledge and rules of conduct and to use reason against its own abuse.

Polanyi stresses that reason does not oppose tradition and that, in fact, all reasoning must occur inside a tradition, a fiduciary framework, which is not static but dynamic since it embodies the possibility of internal conflict, the ability to rebel against the consensus and the possibility of cultivating radical progress in a framework of continuity. MacIntyre parallels Polanyi. Also lamenting the rejection of tradition by modernity and post-modernity, he realizes, as Polanyi does, the false dilemma between objectivism and relativism that can only be overcome by tradition, in which reason can only be impersonal and universal if it is neither neutral nor disinterested. Thus reason requires personal participation, the submission to the authority of tradition and the mastery of someone belonging to the tradition.

Popper, on the other hand, resorts to rationalism but overcomes cartesianism and replaces it with critical rationalism. In "Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition" he distinguishes between traditions of practice, traditions of thought and composites of both, and asserts that we can accept tradition in two ways: uncritically and critically. Popper is mainly concerned with the latter. He does not believe in dogmatic rejection of tradition but in submitting it to critical assessment. Only after this analysis can a tradition be either rejected or accepted rationally. He is mainly interested in explaining how traditions

originate, develop and persist and their functions in social life, so that one is able to instrumentally compare traditions, and he does so by focusing on the tradition of science.

We are thus faced with a state of the art which asserts that spontaneous order and tradition are composed of common experience between individuals that coordinate their behaviour with one another without communicating. One might ask how order and predictability could be possible if there were no regularities in the social world. In one sense, traditions constrain our behaviour, but, on the other side, in the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment, those traditions might be faced as liberating, because in a world of fragmented, tacit and dispersed knowledge, institutions that arise from traditions account for some kind of social order.

### **Detailed Description (background, research questions, methodology) (1000 palavras)**

Taking into consideration the intellectual outlook of modernity, John Gray stresses that it has produced a framework which is deeply destructive of the intellectual and moral European traditions and institutions. This framework has taken secure root not only on popular culture but also in social sciences. The combination of constructivist rationalism and relativism has produced what Hayek calls unviable moralities, “systems of moral thought and sentiment incapable of sustaining any stable social order” (Gray, 2009:131), that through sociological theorizations and the corruption of architecture and arts create a cultural atmosphere “which is profoundly hostile, not only to its traditional inheritance, but even to its own continued existence. We confront the phenomenon of a culture permeated throughout by a hatred of its own identity, and by a sense of its purely provisional character” (Gray, 2009:131). It is no wonder that one of Popper’s (2009:419) most famous quotes is that “The main philosophical malady of our time is an intellectual and moral relativism, the latter being at least in part based upon the former.”

Rejection of any kind of institution or code of behaviour which is not rationally justified appears to be a distinguishing feature of modernity. This provides a chance for inquiring into the moral foundations of modernity and post-modernity and debating the possibility of reaffirming the concept of tradition in the sense of the Scottish Enlightenment, in order to “open to us the abandoned road to genuine knowledge of man and of the conditions of his freedom and welfare first laid down by the thinkers of classical liberalism” (Gray, 1998:140) because, according to José Adelino Maltez (2011:509), “To be for tradition is to know how to go back, in thought and enthusiasm, in order to give roots to the future, by deepening the present, and better be able to move forward, denying the false dialectic of old against modern. Tradition is both the act of transmission of a set of moral and spiritual values, and the integration of each one of these in a stream of knowledge and wisdom originated in plural cultural sources.”

Tradition is interconnected with the concept of spontaneous order, the self-organization of the elements that compose it, which obey to common rules without having a defined single purpose, but that pursue different purposes. It is the case of the free market or society, which result of the interaction between millions of individuals; these are endogenous orders, which are not deliberately or consciously designed, what is only natural considering the epistemological limits of the human mind and knowledge. As Hayek (1998:38) puts it, “Its degree of complexity is not limited to what a human mind can master. Its existence need not manifest itself to our senses but may be based on purely

*abstract* relations which we can only mentally reconstruct.”

Hayek, Polanyi and Popper have made important contributions to tradition and spontaneous order. And if the first two made it extensively, it was Popper who most accurately understood what needed to be addressed in a research project on tradition. But Hayek also points out that for a rational theory of tradition one must come to terms with modernist Enlightenment ideas, and that is possible through a Darwinist approach. Hayek develops a full account of how systems of rules and practices evolve. They do so by a double process: internally, by gradually developing; and externally, by competing with other evolving systems. The latter is the one that Hayek’s theory of cultural evolution is concerned with. Our main research question and sub-questions are drawn from these concerns.

**Main research question:** *What is the role of tradition in classical liberalism faced with the outlook of modern rationalism and objectivism and post-modern relativism?*

**Sub-question 1:** How do traditions arise?

**Sub-question 2:** How do traditions develop and culturally evolve?

**Sub-question 3:** How do traditions persist?

**Sub-question 4:** How do traditions die?

**Sub-question 5:** What is the function of traditions in social life?

**Sub-question 6:** How are traditions compared?

**Sub-question 7:** How does natural selection operate in what regards competing traditions?

**Sub-question 8:** Are modernity and post-modernity morally sound without the notion of tradition?

**Sub-question 9:** What role is there for tradition confronted with the dilemma of objectivism vs. relativism?

Since this project requires a qualitative methodology, the research design will not be structured through hypotheses, aiming at their empirical confirmation, but rather through the formulation of questions that guide the research, and through which the study object is circumscribed and interpreted inside a field more or less vast and complex. Considering that these questions must be answered in individualist terms, it is only natural that we adopt the methodological perspective of methodological individualism.

Bearing in mind that to attain the true scientific character one must undertake a rigorous effort to “replace opinion (*doxa*) with knowledge (*episteme*) (...) searching for truth through the elaboration of an account (*logos*) which, in this sense, contrasts with the mythical (*mythos*)” (Maltez, 1996:41), we must adopt methodological individualism, for this is the only perspective that has in the individual and his activities its basic unit of analysis, thus not falling into the traps of scientism or historicism.

Despite the different perspectives inside methodological individualism, they all have in common the emphasis on the importance of individuals and their intentions to the analysis of social phenomena. As Kenneth Arrow (1994:1) synthesizes, methodological individualism bases all accounts on a starting point which has in the actions and reactions of individuals the determinant variable, whose interaction produces results that determine, for example, the functioning of an economy. We shall resort to two of the methodological individualism perspectives, strictly connected with Hayek and Popper: *Austrian school of economics methodological individualism*, “which first proceeded by assuming the isolated

individual, or Robinson Crusoe, but which later conceived of individuals as social or cultural beings who attach subjective meaning to their own actions and to human artifacts”; and *Popperian methodological individualism*, “which accepts objectively existing social institutions in the antecedent of social scientific explanations, or as exogenous variables in social scientific models” (Udehn, 2002:499).

## **Objectives (300 palavras)**

The objectives of the research project derive mostly from the research questions, as well as from the motives of the researcher. Thus, we intend to go back to the tradition of thought of classical liberalism that remounts to John Locke and the Scottish thinkers Adam Smith, David Hume, Adam Ferguson and Bernard Mandeville, and that has found in the Old Whig party of Edmund Burke an exponent of its practice, and in Montesquieu, Tocqueville and Lord Acton some of its most important thinkers. We shall have as starting points the idea that government is a necessary evil and that we need constitutional checks and balances to avoid its abuses of power - and that is why the rule of law is of paramount importance – and the significance of private property for individual freedom and civil society. Assuming an evolutionary and anti-constructivist conception of social life and politics, we must approach the concepts of spontaneous order and tradition by articulating their components through the lens of the tradition of thought of classical liberalism, in order to be able to understand how traditions arise, develop, evolve, persist, die and what their functions are. Comparison and competition between traditions are processes that we also need to analyse. Our main goals are to inquire into the moral foundations of modernity and post-modernity and contribute to the formulation of a political theory reaffirming the rationality of traditionalism that might serve as a starting point for systematically overcoming the morally and intellectually chaotic outlook of modern rationalism combined with post-modern relativism.

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