

Diverging Paths? Conservatism in Britain and West Germany from the 1960s to the 1980s

Workshop to be held at the German Historical Institute London, 26-28 January 2012

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Both in the UK and in West Germany the history of the 1960s to the 1980s dominates the recent research agenda of contemporary history. Historians agree that these decades were marked by far-reaching political, economic, social and cultural change, and that its outcome was decisive for the decades to follow. In political terms, Britain and the Federal Republic of Germany seemed to have opted for two very different ways to confront the challenges: whereas in the 1980s Britain under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher embraced neo-liberal politics, the FRG, led by a coalition of Liberals and Christian Democrats, stuck to its model of social market economy and thus perpetuated the path taken in 1945. From this point of view, the respective development of the parties of the Centre Right is crucial for an understanding of the political divergence of the countries. Research so far has underlined this model: "Thatcherism" appears to epitomize a distinctive British development, much more in line with US-American Conservatism than with its equivalents in Europe. There, the Christian Democrat tradition, it is claimed, distinguished the Continental brand of Centre Right politics from its North European counterparts. The conflicts between Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl in the 1980s seem to underline this interpretation and lend it a very personal touch. Notably, this contrast extends to the terminology used in political life as well as in research: "Conservatism" is naturally used for the British case, for Germany, though, it is rather contested.

Surprisingly little, however, is actually known about the history of the two countries' 'Conservatisms' in these three decades – about their political culture, their parties, their social milieus and their ideological development. This is of course less true for Britain, where research has invested heavily in understanding the ideological origins of "Thatcherism"; yet, its main focus on economic thought pushed other equally important factors to the background. Recently, research in the UK and in Germany has begun addressing these issues, albeit primarily discussing them in a national framework. The workshop will bring together this new research, working with an analytical understanding of Conservatism. It will put British and West German Conservatism from the 1960s to the 1980s into a comparative perspective in order to sharpen national specifics. At the same time, it also intends to challenge the prevailing, above mentioned interpretation as well as national narratives by asking for entanglements, interactions, and similar patterns of development. The workshop concentrates on political Conservatism in a wide sense, and will address in particular the following questions:

- How did Conservatives perceive the social and cultural change starting in the late 1950s, how did they react and what role did they themselves play in it?
- What political language did they speak and how did they frame their ideas for the present and the future?
- What impact did the Europeanization of politics have on the trajectories of Conservatism in Europe? How did the North American development impact on the European debates?
- What were the traditions, ideas and systems of order which the Conservatives drew from and referred to in order to legitimize their re-formulation of Conservatism? What role did Christianity play?

- How was the Conservative political sphere organized? What networks were important, how did Conservatives communicate with each other, who participated in the debates, how did the change in the political sphere affect Conservative discourse and what part did Conservatives play in this process?

The workshop intends to provide a platform for the discussion of new research. It invites scholars to present their ideas, interpretations and thoughts on the topics they are currently engaged with. It will not set out too strict an agenda, but will organize the papers in four panels, addressing in a comparative manner the history of parties, Conservative reactions to '1968', the political language of Conservatism and its political culture.