

Cultures of Conservatism in the United States and Western Europe between the 1970s and 1990s

Martina Steber (University of Konstanz), Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University, Washington, DC) and Tobias Becker (German Historical Institute London)

In recent research the decades between the 1970s and the 1990s are interpreted as a time of revolutionary change triggered by economic crises, in which the parameters and conditions for our present times were set. Conservatism looms large in this quite influential narrative; after all, the Reagan and Thatcher governments in the United States and in Britain implemented economic and social policies that fundamentally changed the welfare state economies of the boom years. Conservatism is therefore often interpreted as neoliberalism in conservative guise, as the defining political ideology of finance capitalism.

However, conservatism was a much more diverse phenomenon than these interpretations suggest. While economics and politics were certainly crucial in the fashioning of a new conservatism in Western Europe and the United States, conservatism was also a diverse cultural phenomenon, which is not adequately reflected in historical research to date. The conference “Cultures of Conservatism in the United States and Western Europe between the 1970s and 1990s”, which will be held at the German Historical Institute London from 14 to 16 September 2017, seeks to fill this historiographical gap by questioning the primacy of economics and debating alternative interpretations of this age of change.

The conference will examine the cultural history of conservative ideas and movements in Western Europe and the United States between the 1970s and the 1990s. Focusing on cultures of conservatism, the conference will rethink the general contours of conservatism. It will pay close attention to the intersection of culture, politics and economics, in order to broaden our understanding of the processes of change that have unfolded since the 1970s.

Adopting broad definitions of culture and conservatism, the conference will explore the relationship between the two: the influences and repercussions of conservatism in culture as well as cultural actors, artefacts and genres that understood themselves as or were described by others as conservative. Therefore, the conference is on the one hand interested in the contestation and negotiation of the term “conservative” between the 1970s and 1990s, and on the other in the definition of conservatism as an analytical concept. It seeks to compare cultures of conservatism on the two sides of the Atlantic and to study transnational entanglements where they did exist. It will ask whether culture has contributed to a

transnationalisation of conservatism since the 1970s or whether it has actually had the opposite effect, namely a (re-)nationalisation of conservatism.

In both the United States and in Western Europe the 1970s to 1990s were a highly dynamic period in the history of conservative ideas and movements; conservatives redefined their central tenets and concepts, mobilised new actors, and founded numerous new groups and organisations. This dynamic was equally present in the cultural realm: in “high culture”, in media cultures, in everyday cultures, and in lifestyle cultures.

We invite proposals for papers from all relevant disciplines for twenty-minute presentations. We are particularly interested in papers that combine empirical case studies with an interest in theoretical approaches that aim to conceptualise cultures of conservatism. We welcome papers that contribute to an international comparison of cultures of conservatism by examining a national case in depth, but we especially encourage contributions that compare conservatism(s) in different countries and/or that trace the flow of ideas, actors, practices, and concepts across national boundaries.

We are particularly interested in receiving submissions that address the following themes and questions:

1) Conservatism and high / popular culture

Neo-romantic trends, the so-called nostalgia wave, the rediscovery of history, pessimism about the future, a new appreciation of regionalism and small communities, an emphasis on subjectivity and individuality, the distancing of postmodernism from modern functionalities – the decades from the 1970s to the 1990s saw an array of new departures both in high and popular culture – often labelled as “conservative” by contemporary observers. We seek to question these contemporary understandings by probing how closely such cultural trends were connected to conservatism.

2) Conservative lifestyles

Conservatism also played out in daily life. In the US an everyday culture of conservatism developed in the suburbs and in the business districts of major cities, in clubs and religious movements, in corporations and think tanks, in the military, and in the media. This was also

true for Western Europe. The catalysts for the formation of conservative lifestyles were manifold: anticommunism, the civil rights and student movements, second-wave feminism, the questioning of commonly shared religious, moral and social mores, decolonisation, desegregation, and immigration, demands for a fundamental democratisation of society, and growing concerns for the environment. What characterised conservative ways of life? In which spaces and arenas did a conservative way of life take shape? Was there anything particular about conservatives' self-fashioning and everyday practices? How can we distinguish conservative lifestyles from liberal or leftist ones?

3) Conservative temporalities

A particular concept of temporality lays at the heart of conservative self-conceptions: ideally, the three time horizons – past, present and future – are balanced equally, and if this is not the case, the balance has to be redressed. In general, the 1970s witnessed a profound shift in notions of temporality. Pessimism about the future took hold, while a new appreciation of the past emerged. How did this affect conservative notions of time? What influence did this shift have on concepts of temporality and on cultures of conservatism?

4) Intersections of culture and politics

Cultures of conservatism evolved both independently from and in connection with politics. They carried the potential of politicisation and de-politicisation. How political were cultures of conservatism? What notions of the political evolved within them and how were the boundaries between the cultural and the political defined? How do we best describe the relationship between culture and politics? And, last but not least, what impact did economics have on the formation of political cultures of conservatism?

Please submit an abstract of no more than 300 words, along with a short CV, by 5 August 2016 to Tobias Becker [becker@ghil.ac.uk].