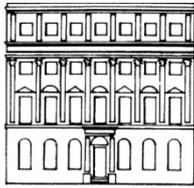


German Historical Institute
London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

Janosch Steuwer:
*Diverging Paths? Conservatism in Britain and West Germany from
the 1960s to the 1980s.*
Conference Report
German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 34, No. 2
(Nov 2012), pp111-117

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CONFERENCE REPORTS

Diverging Paths? Conservatism in Britain and West Germany from the 1960s to the 1980s. Workshop of the German Historical Institute London, held at the GHIL, 26–8 Jan. 2012. Convener: Martina Steber (GHIL).

Conservatism is in crisis, at least if we believe the newspapers. Given the financial and economic situation, the British conservative journalist Charles Moore asked himself in July 2011 whether ‘the Left might actually be right’.¹ Moore hit a nerve, and his comment was repeatedly picked up in Germany as well as Britain, with both left-wing and right-wing commentators diagnosing a crisis of conservatism—once again, it must be said, because this diagnosis is by no means new. In 2001 Paul Nolte, for example, writing in *Die Zeit*, warned that conservatism was disappearing. And if we look even further back into history, we can find numerous crises of conservatism, for example, in the 1970s when, like today, conservatism was confronted with numerous social changes.²

The history of conservatism in Britain and West Germany from the 1960s to the 1980s was the topic of a workshop organized by the German Historical Institute London. In her introduction, convener Martina Steber stressed that processes of social and political change at this time meant that conservatism in both countries was forced to reinterpret conservative ideas and revise political practices. As a result, she suggested, we need to investigate the very different ways

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL’s website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

¹ Charles Moore, ‘I’m starting to think that the Left might actually be right’, *The Telegraph*, 22 Jul. 2011 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8655106/Im-starting-to-think-that-the-Left-might-actually-be-right.html>>, accessed 21 May 2012.

² Paul Nolte, ‘Die Krise des Konservatismus’, *Die Zeit*, 26 Jul. 2001 <http://www.zeit.de/2001/31/Die_Krise_des_Konservatismus>, accessed 21 May 2012.

Conference Reports

in which conservatism met this challenge in the two countries. Steber emphasized that this requires an analytical understanding of the term 'conservatism' as developed in the English-language discipline of political science, one that is pluralistic and variable, and allows processes of transfer to be understood as part of conservatism. This understanding of the term, she went on, also opens up chances for transnational comparison because different national meanings of the term no longer hinder such a comparison. Rather, positions labelled by contemporaries as 'Christian Democratic' in Germany and 'conservative' in Britain can be regarded as part of the same phenomenon, which makes it possible to ask about similarities and differences in the respective national traditions.

The first panel, 'Parties', looked at the political organizations of conservatism. Patrick Deinzer (Berlin) presented conceptual reflections on a comparison between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Germany and the British Conservative Party in the 1970s. He provided an overview of the criteria and concepts of comparative research on political parties. Looking at the historical situation, however, he called for special attention to be paid to the political parties' differing diagnoses of crisis and strategies for overcoming them. Papers by Daniel Schmidt (Gelsenkirchen) and Robert Saunders (Oxford) showed that Germany's Union parties and the British Conservative Party went about this in totally different ways. In his talk on the strategies of the CDU/Christian Social Union (CSU), Schmidt emphasized that their loss of power in 1969 precipitated intense programmatic debates about their own profile. In these discussions, the wing which aspired to modernize the party and had the support of the party leadership competed with a conservative wing which wanted to win back political power by giving the party a clearly right-wing agenda. As Schmidt pointed out, however, in retrospect it is clear that the Union parties were most successful in elections when they achieved a balance between these two wings. Saunders showed that the British Conservative Party, by contrast, was able to overcome an internal crisis by strengthening its conservative profile. In the 1970s Margaret Thatcher, in particular, successfully established a narrative of crisis that depicted a nation under threat from the Labour Party. This narrative provided answers to questions about her own party's profile, he said, and was a central condition for its regaining of political power. In both Britain and

Germany, these self-confidence boosting debates were not only about the value of conservatism within the parties, but equally about what actually constituted conservatism.

Silke Mende (Tübingen) pointed out that a group of people around Herbert Gruhl, at the time still a member of the CDU, was involved in founding the German Green party, Die Grünen. Distancing themselves from the belief in technology and economic progress typical of the Union parties, they regarded themselves as representatives of a 'true conservatism'. But even beyond this group, which later left the Green party, the 'left-wing' Greens challenged the claim of the Union parties to be the sole representatives of political conservatism, pointing out that the Green programme had incorporated both progressive and conservative elements. In Britain, different views of what conservatism is produced competition for the Tories in the form not of a new party but, as Neil Fleming (Worcester) put it, of a 'party within the party', the Monday Club. Founded in the 1960s as a debating club, in the 1970s the Monday Club developed into a movement with a membership of 10,000 within the Conservative Party. It regarded itself as the custodian of 'true conservatism' in the face of a pragmatic party leadership. Fleming placed the Monday Club into the tradition of diehard conservatism which arose after the First World War. This explains the emphases in its programme, he said, as well as its confrontational attitude to the party leadership. Even though the Monday Club lost most of its influence towards the end of the 1970s, Fleming explained, the ideas it put forward had a lasting impact on the Conservative Party.

The second panel looked at the political language of conservatism, with papers focusing on individual terms and concepts, and the mechanisms by which they were popularized. In his paper, Peter Hoeres (Gießen) looked at how the metaphor of the *Wende* developed in Germany. In the mid 1970s this term was used by journalists and intellectuals to describe the political and economic changes taking place. Franz Josef Strauß ('politische und geistige Wende') and later Helmut Kohl ('geistig moralische Wende') expanded the meaning of the term in the early 1980s. Hoeres suggested that left-wing criticism and fears of a conservative restructuring of society were responsible for its success. Achim Saupe (Potsdam) made a similar point in his paper on how the German Union parties and the Tories dealt with the terms *Sicherheit* (security) and 'law and order', which were at the

Conference Reports

heart of political debates in the two countries. Saupe suggested that the Conservative Party's positive use of the slogan 'law and order' and the fact that it appeared to their opponents as a characteristic of conservative politics contributed to the term's popularity in the 1970s. In Germany, by contrast, the term *Sicherheit* was less useful for characterizing conservative policy because it was accepted and used across the whole political spectrum. In her paper Martina Steber (London) focused on industrial relations, an issue that was hotly debated in the 1970s. She was particularly interested in the semantic networks into which the central terms of 'participation' and *Mitbestimmung* were integrated within British and German conservatism. Steber teased out the respective contexts of meaning of these terms, which differ from each other in many respects. She found that the political language of German conservatism was more pluralistic and flexible than its British counterpart. Yet there was a common thread, she said, in the emphasis on the individual, the freedom of the individual, and individual property rights.

In his paper, Matthew Francis (Nottingham) looked at ideas of property, mainly in British conservatism. His investigation focused on the concept of a 'property-owning democracy' which had a long tradition in British conservatism. During the Thatcher years it provided the programmatic basis, enriched with notions of economic liberalism, for the democratization of the housing market and increasing privatization. Taking a comparative view, Francis found similar ideas in Germany, but he stressed the differences more strongly than the similarities. The question which he raised concerning the influence of economic liberalism on British conservatism was taken up by Ben Jackson (Oxford) in his paper on the popularization of the idea of the free market in Britain and its relationship with Thatcherism. He emphasized the central part played by think tanks which had attempted to change public opinion indirectly by influencing elites. They had thus functioned as brokers, bringing together representatives of industry, intellectuals, journalists, and politicians in order to gain their support for the idea of the free market. Their main successes were in the economic field, while their influence on the Thatcher government was limited because of its focus on middle-class interests.

While the first two panels had concentrated mainly on political actors, the third looked at the political cultures of conservatism with-

in which they acted. Thomas Großbölting (Münster) and Peter Itzen (Freiburg) examined the relationship between the conservative parties and the churches and found that in West Germany as in Britain, ties that had still been close in the 1950s were eroding. According to Großbölting a rapid profound change in mentalities was the reason for this in Germany, where the churches lost their influence on everyday life in the 1960s, and ideas of religiosity, like the churches themselves, were becoming pluralized. This process of social change meant that by the 1970s, the churches were just one among many interest groups and no longer had a privileged influence on politics. For Britain, Peter Itzen attributed the growing distance between the Church of England and the Tories to changes that had taken place in the political system during the 1960s. These had weakened the church's direct political influence, while at the same time opening up new opportunities for political activity. The church's attempts to professionalize the political influence which it had previously exercised via informal elite structures, he suggested, had influenced theological concepts and the church's position within the political system, as it distanced itself from the traditional elites such as the Conservative Party. Itzen's remark that this led to conflicts not only with Conservative politicians but also with their own believers was picked up by Matthew Grimley (Oxford) in his paper about opposition to sexual permissiveness in the 1970s. Looking at Mary Whitehouse and her Festival of Light, Grimley focused on a Christian movement that was popular from the late 1960s and opposed the liberalization of British society, especially in the area of sexual freedom. Grimley emphasized that a similar diagnosis of moral disintegration can also be found in Thatcher's statements which set out to reassert (Christian) values in a society threatened by sexual permissiveness.

The Conservative Party, however, was not just tied into a specific culture of conservatism, but also shaped it, as the papers by Lawrence Black (Durham) and Emily Robinson (Nottingham) showed. Black looked at the connections between conservatism and perceptions of the landscape, focusing on Swinton College. This Conservative Party college, which ran from 1948 to 1975 at Castle Swinton in the north of England, was to a large extent responsible for British public perceptions of conservatism being shaped by ideas of the country and associated with a pre-industrial landscape and hunting. This was true of members of the Conservative Party, whose behav-

Conference Reports

ious and cultural ideas (Tories and hunters) were shaped by Swinton College, and of their public image, as Black demonstrated by reference to political cartoons. In her paper on conservative attitudes to history and historical legacy in the 1970s and 1980s, Robinson, by contrast, stressed that the culture of British conservatism included a specific view of history which had reservations about historians, but not the past itself. In their own self-image, the Tories were the 'party of history', whose mission was to preserve the past from the tradition-destroying Labour Party. Consequently, debates about the teaching of history were central to the Thatcher years. In these discussions, the Tories tried to regain control of interpretations of their view of history by laying it down in a national curriculum.

The final panel was entitled 'Conservatism and 1968'. One theme of the papers presented was the relationship between conservatism and the German student movement. In her paper on conservative mobilization at German universities, Anna von der Goltz (Washington) pointed out that along with the dominant left-wing movement, right-wing students were also involved in the student protests of 1968. Left-wing and conservative student groups mounted common campaigns during the early phase of the protests, although increasing polarization from 1970 prevented further cooperation. Among the conservative students, many of whom subsequently occupied important positions within the CDU, quarrels with the Left thereafter became a central component of their political identity. Riccardo Bavaj (St Andrews/Bonn) looked not only at the students, but also at the professors they attacked. Academics such as Ernst Fraenkel and Kurt Sontheimer, who had been members of a critical public in the early years of the Federal Republic and had themselves attacked the state, were now accused of conservatism. From an analytical viewpoint, Bavaj stressed, this was not an adequate description of these people and suggested 'consensus liberalism' instead. Understood as a contemporary category, however, he suggested that the accusation pointed to a shift in political coordinates, especially the distinction between conservatism and liberalism.

The papers in this panel also asked to what extent 1968 was a turning point for conservatism in Britain. Camilla Schofield (Norwich) in her paper looked at Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech, in which the Conservative politician put forward a racist argument warning about the consequences of Commonwealth immigration.

The speech precipitated a heated debate, and although Powell was dismissed from the Tory shadow cabinet, it found wide support in society. Schofield emphasized that in essence, Powell's speech reflected concern about the loss of a moral order which was reminiscent of Thatcher. But in a comparison, he went on, the differences between the two politicians would predominate. Although they used similar means, they had waged different battles against different enemies. Simon Ball (Glasgow) emphasized in his paper that for the Conservative Party, 1968 saw the retirement of many politicians of the pre-war generation which had shaped the party until the end of the 1960s. This generation of politicians which, according to Ball, included Ian Mcleod, Edward Heath, and Reginald Maudling as well as Powell, had been shaped by specific ideas of imperial statesmanship which were centred on the Empire and the personality of the leader. With the generational transition, Ball argued, this view of the state was lost from the Conservative Party in 1968.

Taken together, the contributions to this workshop illustrate the huge range of challenges which conservatism was confronted with between the 1960s and the 1980s, but also the breadth of its response to social change. The plurality of methods and topics underlined the readiness to adapt which characterized the conservatism of the 1970s, and also showed that the similarities which had existed between German and British conservatism were increasingly lost as they reacted differently. The paths taken by conservatism in Britain and Germany only diverged in the 1980s. Against this background, the current crisis can be reassessed. Instead of seeing it as heralding the imminent end of conservatism, we could regard it as a separate and vital phase in the life of conservatism.

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