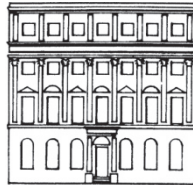


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*Cultures of Conservatism in the United States and Western Europe between the
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CONFERENCE REPORTS

Cultures of Conservatism in the United States and Western Europe between the 1970s and 1990s. Conference organized by Martina Steber (Institute for Contemporary History Munich–Berlin), Anna von der Goltz (Georgetown University, Washington, DC), and Tobias Becker (German Historical Institute London), and held at the GHIL on 14–16 September 2017.

The decades from the 1970s to the 1990s are often seen 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 narrative; after all, the Reagan and Thatcher governments in the United States and in Britain respectively implemented economic and social policies that fundamentally changed the welfare state economies of the boom years. Conservatism is therefore often interpreted as neo-liberalism 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’ addressed this omission by questioning the primacy of economics and debating alternative interpretations of this age of change. Focusing on cultures of conservatism, the conference aimed to re-evaluate the general contours of conservatism. It paid close attention to the intersection between culture, politics, and economics in order to broaden our understanding of the processes of change that have unfolded since the 1970s. The conference was co-funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, the GHIL, the BMW Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown University, and the Institute for Contemporary History Munich.

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

After a conceptual and programmatic introduction by Martina Steber (Munich), Anna von der Goltz (Washington, DC), and Tobias Becker (GHIL), the first panel looked at 'Conservatism on Stage and Screen'. It began with a paper by Amanda Eubanks Winkler (Syracuse, NY) on 'Andrew Lloyd Webber and Thatcherite Arts Policy', in which she viewed the work of the British composer through the lens of Thatcherism and vice versa. Winkler asked whether it is possible to identify a 'Thatcherite aesthetic'. Analysing Webber's *oeuvre* and his identification with the Tories (he composed the theme tune for Thatcher's election campaign in 1987), she came to an ambivalent conclusion. While Lloyd Webber's mega musicals such as *Phantom of the Opera* can, indeed, be understood as 'Thatcherism in action', as Michael Billingham called it, his next project, *Aspects of Love*, which told the story of a bisexual love triangle, went against the conservative grain. It would be wrong, therefore, to see Lloyd Webber merely as a Thatcherite court composer. Winkler's paper was ideally complemented by Nikolai Wehrs's talk (Constance) on '“Yes Minister”: A Popular Sitcom as an Educational Medium for Thatcherism?'. On the surface a comedy about a government minister who is led on a merry chase by the Civil Service, the series reflected many controversial debates of the 1980s, not least about trade union power, and transmitted numerous Thatcherite ideas. Both papers emphasized the decidedly middlebrow appeal of these cultural forms that chimed with the anti-Establishment thrust of Thatcherism.

Television also occupied centre stage in the second half of the panel. In 'Longing for the Past: Conservatism and Changing US Family Values, 1981-1992', Andre Dechert (Augsburg) used popular US television sitcoms to study conservative reactions to changing family values and changing representations of family life at a time when the ideal of the nuclear family was being questioned by the women's movement, the gay movement, and the civil rights movement. It was followed by a look at the representation of Britain on German television screens in Michael Hill's (Heidelberg) paper, 'Old England: Constructions of Britain and Britishness in German Popular Conservatism, 1970- 2000'. Hill traced representations of Britain from the Edgar Wallace films of the 1960s to the Rosamunde Pilcher films of the 1980s and 1990s. He observed a shift from the swinging metropolis to the Cornish countryside complete with stately homes, aristocratic lifestyles, and what he termed crypto-feudal relationships,

which for Germans represented a safe form of conservative longing, because they were foreign and thus untainted by the Nazi past.

The first day of the conference concluded with a round-table discussion on 'Cultures of Conservatism in an Age of Transformation: Interpreting Conservatism between the 1970s and 1990s' with Andy Beckett (London), Frank Bösch (Potsdam), and Bethany Moreton (Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH). Whereas Bösch stressed the necessity and difficulty of defining the key traits of conservative culture—a specific emotional regime, aesthetics, habitus, and a set of spaces where conservatives socialized—Beckett was more concerned with understanding the British version of conservatism in this period, which he placed into a longer historical perspective. He argued that the politics of the Thatcher governments of the 1980s built on a much wider cultural change of the early 1980s that enabled Thatcherism to take root in the mainstream. Teasing out its importance for current politics, he stressed the role of media cultures in the dissemination and implementation of conservative ideas. Far from observing a return to Thatcherism in the present, Beckett underlined the failure of the conservative project and what he called the 'final breakdown of the Thatcherite hegemony in Britain'. Moreton commented on the situation in the United States by reviewing the history of the American culture wars and the overly binary way in which these had conceptualized the relationship between ideas and material interest as well as culture and politics. In keeping with the conference topic, she stressed the importance of culture to understanding conservatism.

The conference continued on the following day with a panel on 'Consumer Cultures' and a paper by Lawrence Black (York) on 'Handbooks of Conservatism'. Black used *The Official Preppy Handbook* and *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook*, both bestsellers in the 1980s, to analyse urban conservative lifestyles and subcultures, presenting them as manifestations of a restored middle-class confidence and simultaneously as an educational tool for the Reaganite and Thatcherite vanguard. At the same time he argued that the rural and pseudo-aristocratic lifestyles conjured up by these handbooks were not entirely at ease with neo-liberalism and therefore in some way at odds with the Thatcherite project. Matthew Francis's (Birmingham) paper '“The Spiritual Ballast which Maintains Responsible Citizenship”: Property, Private Enterprise, and Thatcher's Nation' drew

attention to the importance of home ownership in Thatcherite ideas of conservative culture. Ownership, Thatcherites like John Redwood argued, was the last fulfilment of the promise of full citizenship and therefore the finest expression of democracy. This was also true for immigrants: Thatcherism offered them participation via ownership and individual enterprise. Race did not figure in this framework of British nationhood in conservative guise which was clearly in a relationship of tension with alternative—not culturally, but ethnically informed—notions of the nation in British conservatism. In her paper ‘Conservative Practices: Lifestyles, Consumption, and Urban Protest in 1970s and 1980s West Germany’ Reinhild Kreis (Mannheim) looked at a different manifestation of cultures of conservatism: people who wanted to conserve their material environment but did not necessarily see themselves as conservatives. Using examples such as the campaigns to save local corner shops, the ecological movement, and the squatters’ movement, Kreis studied the intersections between conservation and conservatism in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. This led to a fruitful discussion about the ways in which cultures of conservatism mapped on to party political alignments, and about the problems of definition if cultures of conservatism were constantly in flux in the period under examination.

The following panel on ‘Business Cultures’ probed the intersections between neo-liberalism, the financialization of the economy, related changes in social values, and cultures of conservatism. Moreton’s paper ‘Jesus Saves: Christians in the Age of Debt’ examined how evangelical Christians squared their long-standing condemnation of finance with a financialization of the economy. Bible culture and finance capitalism were not a ‘match made in heaven’, Moreton argued, but Christian financial advisers and faith-based brokers managed to make neo-liberal finance morally acceptable to evangelical Christians while continuing to promote a debt-free life. Marcia Chatelain’s (Washington, DC) paper ‘Ronald McDonald, Richard Nixon, and the Fast Food Future of Black America’ examined programmes that sought to bring marginalized populations into a corporate fold in the USA. Her focus was on the McDonald’s Corporation, which increasingly began to target black consumers in the late 1960s by installing black franchisees at drive-thru windows and front counters. Chatelain analysed how Richard Nixon’s ‘black power conservatism’ facilitated the unprecedented growth of the fast food

industry. Bernhard Dietz's (Washington, DC/Mainz) paper 'Old or New Values? The West German Economy, Conservatism, and "Post-materialism" in the 1980s' took a closer look at the ways in which West German managers and the Christian Democrats incorporated the findings of social science about widespread value change into their business and political strategies. In the 1980s human resources departments and political strategists alike adopted the theories of sociologists such as Ronald Inglehart and Helmut Klages about a turn towards post-material values and integrated their theories into business models and policy outlines.

Friday's final panel, 'Countercultures', discussed conservative responses to and adaptations of some of the major grassroots social movements that emerged in the 1970s, including gay liberation, the 'pro-life' movement, and Christian evangelicalism. It stressed the dynamics which movement cultures unfolded in conservatism. In his paper "'Gay Equals Left?" Conservative Responses to Gay Liberation in West Germany and the United States, 1969-1980' Craig Griffiths (Manchester) departed from the standard narrative on reactionary responses to gay liberation by homing in on conservative voices within the movement for gay liberation. Such actors were small 'c' conservatives, favoured assimilation into rather than a radical transformation of mainstream culture, and preferred to think of themselves as 'homophile' rather than 'homosexual' because it drew less attention to sexual practices as the key mark of distinction. While conservatives in the gay liberation movement remained part of a wider and politically heterogeneous movement, the American Pro-Life movement voiced its concerns vociferously and politically unambiguously, at least since they had declared their allegiance to the Republican Party in 1979. A social movement like its counterpart on the left, it established norms and ideas of a particular conservative lifestyle focused on the family model of the male breadwinner and was steeped in the culture of the Christian Right, as Claudia Roesch (Münster) showed in her talk 'From Right to Life to Operation Rescue: The Re-Shaping of Conservative Cultures through the Anti-Abortion Movement in the 1980s USA'. The claim to individual choice became one of the rallying cries of the American pro-lifers, which provides further proof of the fusion of liberal and social conservative languages in the decades between the 1970s and 1990s. While the US evangelical movement has been intensely studied, not

much is known about its West European manifestations. Gisa Bauer (Bensheim) addressed the West German *Bekennnisbewegung* 'Kein anderes Evangelium' in her paper 'Evangelicalism in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s'. It saw itself as a protest movement inside the Protestant church, and not as a social movement per se. Concentrating on the theological questions rather than social problems, its outreach remained limited, especially by comparison with its US counterpart. Bauer's talk underlined the importance of church structures for the contrary developments of conservative evangelical cultures in Europe and the USA.

While conservatism is often associated with particular national cultures, the fifth panel, 'Cultures of Conservative Internationalism', shifted the perspective to conservative internationalism. Peter Hoeres (Würzburg) shared his insights into the journalistic culture of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in his talk on 'Thatcherism and Reaganomics in Germany: The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the Conservative Revolutions in the Anglosphere'. Despite the generally friendly reception of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations and their economic policies by West Germany's leading conservative newspaper, their course of action was only reluctantly recommended as a model for West Germany. This was mirrored in the *FAZ*'s visual representations of Thatcherism and Reaganomics. Martin Farr (Newcastle) approached Thatcherism as a global brand in his take on 'Thatcherism and the Transnationalization of Conservatism, 1975–1997'. Much more than Ronald Reagan, the British conservative leader managed to sell her type of conservatism as a transnational force, and in so doing took recourse to notions of civilization and ideas about the Anglo-Saxon world. A very different kind of conservative internationalism was at the centre of Sarah Majer's (Potsdam) paper "'Un anarchico conservatore": Giuseppe Prezzolini and the Redefinition of Italian Conservatism in the 1970s'. Taking the Italian intellectual Giuseppe Prezzolini as an example, Majer introduced a transatlantic intellectual biography. Although Prezzolini spent many years of his life in the USA, his blueprint for conservatism, which he developed in the 1970s, clung explicitly to Italian traditions. For him, conservatism could only be conceived as a national creed. Finally, Johannes Grossmann (Tübingen) drew attention to 'Conservatism as a Lifestyle? Cross-Border Mobility, Transnational Sociability, and the Emergence of a Transatlantic Conservative Milieu since the Late

1960s'. Transatlantic networks of conservative politicians and businessmen figured as arenas of political discussion and facilitated the exchange of ideas. In clandestine and almost private settings, friendships and partnerships developed, and holidays were spent together in Franco's Spain or in Liechtenstein. Whether a recognizable conservative lifestyle was created in these settings was open to discussion.

Following a panel that had looked at conservatism in the light more of politics than of culture, the final discussion stressed the importance of bringing the two perspectives together and exploring their interconnections. There was little disagreement about the fact that political, economic, and cultural factors were interconnected, but there was less agreement about the nature of these interconnections and about how they are best grasped conceptually. Political conservatism (voting for a conservative party) could be accompanied by cultural conservatism (an aversion to same-sex marriage or a preference for Andrew Lloyd Webber) or not. Nor did cultural progressivism always go hand in hand with a left-wing party affiliation. However, to study such intersections, and frictions, requires openness both from political historians, who still often tend to ignore cultural factors, and cultural historians, who are often more interested in avant-garde and left-leaning subcultures than in conservative ones. In exploring ways to analyse the relationship between conservatism and culture through different case studies, the conference demonstrated that this approach has a great deal of potential.

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