

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

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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 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. 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 at re-evaluating the general contours of conservatism. It paid 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. The conference was co-funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, the German Historical Institute London (GHIL), the BMW Center for German and European Studies at Georgetown

University, and the Institute for Contemporary History Munich.

After a conceptual and programmatic introduction, the first panel looked at „Conservatism on Stage and Screen“. It began with a paper by AMANDA EUBANKS WINKLER (Syracuse) 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. Her paper was ideally complemented by NIKOLAI WEHR'S (Konstanz) talk 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 and transported 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-ground in the second half of the panel. In „Longing for the Past. Conservatism and Changing American Family Values, 1981-1992“ ANDRE DECHERT (Augsburg) used popular American 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 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 on „Old England. Constructions of Britain and Britishness in German Popular Conservatism, 1970-2000“. Hill traced the representation of Britain from the Edgar Wallace films of the 1960s to the Rosamunde Pilcher films of the 1980s and 1990s.

The first conference day concluded with a roundtable 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). Whereas Bösch stressed the necessity and difficulty to define the key traits of conservative culture, Beckett was more concerned with understanding

the British version of conservatism in this period, which he put it in 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 roots in the mainstream. 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.

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 analyze 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.

MATTHEW FRANCIS' (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. 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.

The following panel on „Business Cultures“ probed the intersections of neoliberalism, the financialization of the economy, related changes in social values and cultures of conservatism. BETHANY ELLEN MORETON's (Dartmouth / Hanover) paper „Jesus Saves. Christians in the Age of Debt“ examined how evangelical Christians squared their long-standing condemnation of finance with the 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 bro-

kers managed to make neoliberal finance morally acceptable to evangelical Christians while continuing to promote a debt-free life.

MARCIA CHATELAIN's (Washington, D.C.) paper „Ronald McDonald, Richard Nixon, and the Fast Food Future of Black America“ examined programs that sought to bring marginalized populations into a corporate fold in the US. Her focus was on the McDonalds Corporation, which increasingly began to target black consumers in the late 1960s by installing black franchisees at drive-thru windows and front counters.

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 social scientific findings about widespread value change into their business and political strategies.

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. 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 counter-part on the left, it established norms and ideas of a particular conservative lifestyle focused on the male-breadwinner family model 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 Cul-

tures through the Anti-Abortion Movement in the 1980s USA". While the American 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 conceived of itself as a protest movement inside the Protestant church, and not as a social movement per se.

While conservatism is often associated with particular national cultures, the fifth panel, „Cultures of Conservative Internationalism", shifted the perspectives to conservative internationalism. In his talk on „Thatcherism and Reaganomics in Germany. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the Conservative Revolutions in the Anglosphere" PETER HOERES (Würzburg) came to the conclusion that, despite an overall friendly reception of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations, West Germany's leading conservative newspaper recommended them only reluctantly as a model.

MARTIN FARR (Newcastle) approached Thatcherism as a global brand in his take on „Thatcherism and the Transnationalisation 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 civilizational notions and ideas of the Anglo-Saxon world.

A very different kind of conservative internationalism was the centre of SARAH MAJER's (Potsdam) paper „Un anarchico conservatore. Giuseppe Prezzolini and the Redefinition of Italian Conservatism in the 1970s". With the example of the Italian intellectual Giuseppe Prezzolini, 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, explicitly clung to Italian traditions.

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 served as arenas of political discussion and facilitated the exchange of ideas.

Following a panel that viewed conservatism more in the light of politics than in that 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 against 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 from both political historians, who still often tend to ignore cultural factors, and from cultural historians, who are often more interested in avant-garde and left-leaning subcultures than in conservative ones. In exploring ways to analyze the relationship between conservatism and culture through different case studies, the conference demonstrated that this approach has a lot of potential.

Conference Overview:

Welcoming Address and Introduction:

Andreas Gestrich (London), Martina Steber (Munich), Anna von der Goltz (Washington, DC), and Tobias Becker (London)

Panel 1: Conservatism on Screen and Stage Chair: Tobias Becker (London)

Amanda Eubanks Winkler (Syracuse): Andrew Lloyd Webber and Thatcherite Arts Policy

Nikolai Wehrs (Konstanz): „Yes Minister". A Popular Sitcom as an Educational Medium for Thatcherism?

Andre Dechert (Augsburg): Longing for the Past. Conservatism and Changing American Family Values, 1981-1992

Michael Hill (Heidelberg): Old England. Con-

structions of Britain and Britishness in German Popular Conservatism, 1970-2000

Roundtable Discussion: Cultures of Conservatism in an Age of Transformation – Interpreting Conservatism between the 1970s and 1990s

Chair: Christina von Hodenberg (London)

Discussants: Andy Beckett (London), Frank Bösch (Potsdam), Bethany Moreton (Dartmouth)

Panel 2: Consumer Cultures

Chair: Alexander Sedlmaier (Bangor)

Lawrence Black (York): Handbooks of Conservatism

Matthew Francis (Birmingham): „The Spiritual Ballast Which Maintains Responsible Citizenship“. Property, Private Enterprise, and Thatcher’s Nation

Reinhild Kreis (Mannheim): Conservative Practices. Lifestyles, Consumption, and Protest in 1970s and 1980s West Germany

Panel 3: Business Cultures

Chair: Jenny Pleinen (Augsburg)

Bethany Ellen Moreton (Dartmouth): Jesus Saves: Christians in the Age of Debt

Marcia Chatelain (Washington, D.C.): Ronald McDonald, Richard Nixon, and the Fast Food Future of Black America

Bernhard Dietz (Washington, D.C.): Old or New Values? The West-German Economy, Conservatism and ‘Postmaterialism’ in the 1980s

Panel 4: Countercultures

Chair: Anna von der Goltz (Washington, D.C.)

Craig Griffiths (Manchester): „Gay Equals Left?“ Conservative Responses to Gay Liberation in West Germany and the United States, 1969-1980

Claudia Roesch (Münster): From Right to Life to Operation Rescue. The Re-shaping of Conservative Cultures through the Anti-Abortion Movement in the 1980s USA

Gisa Bauer (Bensheim): Evangelicalism in Western Europe and the USA in the 1970s and

1980s

Panel 5: Cultures of Conservative Internationalism

Chair: Frank Bösch (Potsdam)

Martin Farr (Newcastle): Thatcherism and the Transnationalisation of Conservatism, 1975-1997

Peter Hoeres (Würzburg): Thatcherism and Reaganomics in Germany. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and the Conservative Revolutions in the Anglosphere

Sarah Majer (Potsdam): „Un anarchico conservatore“. Giuseppe Prezzolini and the Redefinition of Italian Conservatism in the 1970s

Johannes Großmann (Tübingen): Conservatism as a Lifestyle? Cross-Border Mobility, Transnational Sociability, and the Emergence of a Transatlantic Conservative Milieu since the Late 1960s

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