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Editorial: Conservative dispositions in continental thought

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Conservative dispositions in continental thought

In his 1973 essay “The Counter-Enlightenment”, Isaiah Berlin outlines the history of attacks against the universalism of the French Enlightenment and its key idea that nature, society, and individual lives are governed by “one set of universal and unalterable principles” (Berlin, 1998, pp. 245–246). For Berlin, the history of the Counter-Enlightenment is essentially the history of modern cultural relativism and historicism, from the Italian Giambattista Vico, through Germans such as J. G. Hamann, J. G. Herder, and Justus Möser, up to the pessimistic French conservatism of Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald. What these thinkers share is an emphasis on the finitude of human reason—in contrast to divine perfection, but also as opposed to faith and affectivity—and its dependence on local context: community, tradition, and language. While Berlin acknowledges that the Romantic Counter-Enlightenment had its revolutionary left wing in figures like Lord Byron and George Sand, he sees its pessimism regarding human perfectibility and the applicability of rational universal standards as ultimately fostering authoritarian conservatism *à la* Maistre and inspiring nationalism, imperialism, and, later, fascism.

As scholars such as Garrard (2006) have shown, Berlin’s unified narrative is heavily simplified; it makes more sense to speak of multiple Counter-Enlightenments. Still, most accounts, including Garrard’s, retain the focus on German intellectual traditions—certain aspects of German Idealism, proto-Romanticism, and Romanticism, as well as *Lebensphilosophie* and Nietzsche—and their heirs in twentieth-century continental philosophy, such as philosophical hermeneutics and existential philosophy, Frankfurt critical theory, and French poststructuralism. It is the philosophical challenge to Enlightenment universalism that most clearly distinguishes conservative thought on the European continent from its more pragmatically-oriented Anglo-American counterpart, eminently represented by Edmund Burke, who, in spite of his opposition to the abstract utopianism of the French Revolution, supported the constitutional safeguarding of liberties in the American Revolution.

As Garrard shows, the counterrevolutionary political aspects of the Counter-Enlightenment largely faded away in the course of the nineteenth-century. German conservatism, however, reappeared in a new, “revolutionary” guise after the First World War under the antiliberal, antiegalitarian, and anti-individualist banner of the Nietzsche-inspired “conservative revolution” of the Weimar era (see Mohler and Weissmann, 2018). After the Second World War, the critique of the Enlightenment took a marked turn to the left with Max Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) and, since the 1960s, with Michel Foucault’s genealogies of the modern “disciplinary” society. In recent decades, however, a new “postmodern right”, combining critical tools provided by the continental philosophical tradition with the legacy of the conservative revolution, has emerged. Due to the influence it exerts on the alt-right, the international Identitarian movement, and “illiberal” authoritarian states like Russia in their opposition to liberal democracy, this latest form of continental “radical” conservatism and its philosophical and historical foundations call for careful study and analysis.

This Research Topic seeks to tackle that task in the form of discussions of conservative topics and thinkers on the European continent since 1789. It addresses issues such as attitudes toward change, conceptions of time, sovereignty and democracy, the role of conflict, the limits of reason, and the relation between the individual and the crowd, as they have been interpreted and reinterpreted from conservative points of view. Special attention is paid to the links between conservative thought and different strands of continental philosophy and political theory. The contributions mainly draw on the resources of political philosophy, conceptual history, and the history of ideas. They assess the relevance of the continental varieties of conservatism for—and their impact on—contemporary discussions in and beyond Europe. The fundamental aim is to shed new light on the conservative intellectual lineages of certain topical notions in today’s political disputes.

The seven contributions compiled here are mainly focalized on twentieth-century conservative dispositions. Giovanni Damele’s *Crowds, leaders, and epidemic psychosis: The relationship between crowd psychology and elite theory and its contemporary relevance* stretches back to the French Revolution to look at one of its repercussions, the discourses of the nineteenth-century “crowd psychology” and “crowd pathology” and their complex reverberations in conservative, liberal-elitist, and right-wing populist attitudes (Damele). Timo Pankakoski’s *What is conservative and revolutionary about the ‘conservative revolution’? Argument-level evidence from three thinkers* unpacks the seemingly contradictory notion of “conservative revolution” through a textual and argumentative analysis of the work of Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, Ernst Jünger, and Hans Freyer, and questions whether the concept can travel beyond its peculiar context of emergence in interwar Germany (Pankakoski). Ville Suuronen’s *Why are political discussions with fascists impossible? Reflections on the far-right*

politics of silence” draws on Carl Schmitt’s Weimar-era writings to reinterpret fascism as a fundamentally non-communicative political theory that stands at odds with the Aristotelian tradition of Western political thought (Suuronen). Hjalmar Falk’s *The modern Epimetheus: Carl Schmitt’s katechontism as reactionary chronopolitics* looks at another aspect of Schmitt’s political thought—the reactionary, antiutopian, and antiapocalyptic tenor of his political theology, which sees the state as analogous to the New Testament *katechon*, the “restrainer” that fends off the coming of the end times (Falk). Jussi Backman’s *Radical conservatism and the Heideggerian right: Heidegger, de Benoist, Dugin*” takes up the radical-conservative tendencies in another thinker often associated with the conservative revolution, Martin Heidegger, and the important “right-Heideggerian” dimension in prominent contemporary radical conservative thinkers Alain de Benoist and Aleksandr Dugin (Backman). Pedro T. Magalhães’s *Beyond the reactionary sea change: Antimodern thought, American politics, and political science* investigates the migration of reactionary antimodern thought from Europe to the United States by looking at the ambivalent reception of Leo Strauss’s and Eric Voegelin’s main works in conservative political circles and in academic political science (Magalhães). Finally, Tuukka Brunila’s *Depoliticization of politics and power: Mouffe and the conservative disposition in postfoundational political theory* introduces a critical perspective on the “postfoundational” political theory of Chantal Mouffe, detecting in it a conservative Schmitt-inspired normative element that insists on the necessity of police power for upholding a social order, which effectively amounts to a certain depoliticization of social relations (Brunila).

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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