

Contemporary perspectives on conservatism: an interdisciplinary workshop

Day 1 – Wednesday, 2 April

10:00–11:45	Research seminar Emily Jones (University of Manchester) <i>Afterlives: Edmund Burke, Benjamin Disraeli, and the Invention of Modern Conservatism</i>
12:00–13:00	Lunch (at IFFS)
13:00–14:00	Olle Torpman (IFFS) <i>The Ethics of Conservatism</i>
14:00–14:15	Break (15 min)
14:15–15:15	Mathew Hooton (University of Auckland) <i>Groundwork and Principles for Applied Conservatism</i>
15:15–15:30	Break (15 min)
15:30–17:00	Psychology session with roundtable discussion about the prospects and limitations of empirical research in studying conservatism and its correlates: Kirsti Jylhä (IFFS) <i>Conservatism in psychological theories and empirical studies</i> Edward Clarke (University of Marburg) <i>Interrogating a climate policy threat account of conservative resistance to climate action</i> Göran Duus-Otterström (University of Gothenburg), chair
17:00–17:45	Pre-drinks and mingle (at IFFS)
18:00–	Dinner (at restaurant Underbar for invited speakers)

Day 2 – Thursday, 3 April

09:45–10:45	Andy Hamilton (Durham University) <i>Conservative Ideology</i>
10:45–11:00	Break (15 min)
11:00–12:00	Marco Miglino (University of Eastern Piedmont) <i>Can conservatism be a political theory?</i>
12:00–13:00	Lunch (at IFFS)
13:00–14:00	Jasmina Nedevska Törnqvist (Uppsala University) <i>Intergenerational Duties and Natural Law</i>
14:00–14:30	Break (30 min)
14:30–15:30	Eric Sheng (University of Oxford / ENS) <i>The Distinctiveness of Conservatism</i>
15:30–15:45	Break (15 min)
15:45–16:45	Torbjörn Tännsjö (Stockholm University) <i>Political conservatism in a time of system crisis</i>
16:45–17:00	Concluding remarks

Abstracts

Emily Jones (University of Manchester)

Afterlives: Edmund Burke, Benjamin Disraeli, and the Invention of Modern Conservatism

This paper will explore key findings drawn from my first monograph, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830-1914: An Intellectual History* (OUP, 2017) and my forthcoming book, *One Nation: The Disraeli Myth and the Making of a Conservative Tradition* (Princeton). In particular, I will discuss how, by taking a generously conceived ‘reception history’ methodological approach to the history of modern political ideologies, we can locate significant moments in the ‘when’ and ‘how’ in their construction, but gain insights into both the historical contingency and relational nature of political ideologies, as well as the significant role that history and historical reconstruction had in the invention and reinvention of conservatism for much of its history.

Olle Torpman (IFFS)

The Ethics of Conservatism

All political ideologies come with ideas about what is of value, and ideas about how things should be organized in society. In this respect, political ideologies have ethical content. While the ethical contents of liberalism and socialism have been studied quite extensively, less has been said about the ethics of conservatism. Based on the philosophical literature on conservatism, this paper identifies the values and principles that conservatism involves and proposes a coherent conservative moral theory. From a theoretical perspective, it is important to understand the structure and content of conservative morality for the sake of being able to compare it to the moral theories of other ideologies, such as those of liberalism and socialism. From a practical perspective, understanding the ethics of conservatism is crucial for determining its practical recommendations to real-world problems.

Mathew Hooton (University of Auckland)

Groundwork and Principles for Applied Conservatism

This presentation, based on my PhD thesis *Groundwork and Principles for Applied Conservatism* (under examination) identifies ten principles of conservatism to assist action-guidance and decision-making on ethical and political problems, including those stemming from climate change and its mitigation and adaptation.

Novelly, the thesis analysed all four of ontological, epistemic, ethical and political conservatism, so that the identified principles seek to be of conservatism-in-general, denoted by conservatism*. Importantly in the current political environment, the principles aim to be inclusive of as broad a range as possible of self-identifying conservatives across the four domains, albeit with strong emphasis on the conservatism of Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott.

The principles are led by realism (ontological and metaethical, including limited epistemic externalism). This is balanced by very strong epistemic humility (including ontological, axiological,

normative and moral and non-moral inclusivist uncertainty, and epistemic cluelessness) and a strong belief in human ethical imperfection and imperfectability (including a near-universal human propensity, at least sometimes, to think and do things because we know they are wrong).

The principles accept that change, including that initiated by human beings, is inevitable, often desirable and perhaps ontologically necessary, so that conservatism* concerns its prudent management. The principles posit that the very thoroughgoing uncertainty and imperfection of human beings can to some extent be mitigated through a prejudice towards the wisdom of crowds, including that embodied in traditions – especially those that have apparently emerged based on facts about the relevant natural environment – or which emerge from the practice of science and from other collective decisionmaking processes including democratic elections and free markets.

Traditions should thus be maintained wherever possible – if not in conflict with knowledge of the most basic human commonalities, such that pain is unpleasant and that humans wish to survive and reproduce – including by protecting and even enhancing pluralism within a polity. Decisions should be made by those collectives most likely to have the most relevant knowledge of the problem and its possible solutions, supporting the doctrines of subsidiarity and open and contestable public discourse. The state's primary obligations are led by its own survival and maintaining order, including to protect the basic human commonalities, through to maintaining the polity's traditions, including those dependent on environmental stability.

The principles indicate how decisions about climate-change mitigation and adaptation should ideally have been made when the problem was first identified.

However, the principles accept that, in extremis, some decisions can only be made by final decisionmakers in polities, and that the conservative* principle of prudence sometimes demands very radical and urgent action, as now may be required for climate-change mitigation and perhaps even adaptation. The principles thus explore what attributes those appointing final decisionmakers should look for among candidates, and how those appointed to be final decisionmakers might best conduct themselves. As yet unaddressed are questions of the identity of a final decisionmaker for a global problem requiring near-universal action, not least by great powers led by China, the United States and India that do not accept higher sovereignties.

Kirsti Jylhä (IFFS)

Conservatism in psychological theories and empirical studies

Conservatism has become a central concept in social, personality, and political psychology. In this literature, conservatism is often considered as a form of ideology. This term can be defined in many ways, but it usually refers to some form of a cognitive structure that consists of an internally coherent set of values, beliefs and opinions about society. In some cases, ideological variables are discussed as personality dispositions, meaning they entail combinations of traits that influence individuals' behaviors. Conservatism can also be approached as an identity. This means it is considered in the context of group dynamics, whereby a person self-identifies with a meaningful ingroup (e.g., 'conservatives') while taking distance from an outgroup (e.g., 'liberals'). In this talk, I will discuss these different approaches and how they have guided theorization regarding conservatism.

As the second part of the talk, I will introduce some common ways of conceptualizing, defining, and measuring conservatism in psychological research. These include the single liberal-conservative (or left-right) dimension, issue preferences in certain political or social issues, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and system justification. I will also discuss some contemporary phenomena which are often discussed in terms of conservatism, such as the current success of right-wing populism and far-right movements. I will also briefly present some key findings in psychological research, for example how certain ideological structures and contents may match to varying degree the underlying needs and motives (epistemic, existential, and relational) of individuals and groups.

The two talks of this panel will serve as an introduction to empirical research about conservatism and its correlates. A roundtable discussion will follow, allowing more thorough discussion between empirical and theoretical researchers. The purpose of this discussion is to reflect how empirical research can inform theoretical inquiries into the question of “What conservatism is”. While not always directly addressing this question, empirical research about conservatism can nonetheless inform what meaningful identity processes and ideological structures exist among the public, thereby potentially influencing how conservatism could be seen in a theoretical sense. Another purpose of the discussion is to enable critical examinations of how conservatism is currently approached in psychological literature, and to consider ways of improving the existing measurements.

Edward Clarke (University of Marburg)

Interrogating a climate policy threat account of conservative resistance to climate action

Conservatism is conceptualised in a variety of ways in social and political psychology, from symbolic identification to adherence to specific beliefs about how society should be organised. One approach is to define conservative ideology, as it exists in liberal capitalist democracies, as comprising two core aspects – resistance to change and acceptance of inequality. These related but distinct aspects are underpinned by psychological needs to maintain cognitive certainty, to reduce threat, and to enhance relational connections between group members. As such, conservatism is an appealing ideology for those who are motivated by high levels of these psychological needs. These aspects have also proven useful in articulating a nuanced description of what motivates climate change denial and rejection of climate mitigating policies among conservative adherents. Conservatives may minimise the threat of climate change precisely because action on climate change, specifically mitigation policy, threatens the existing unequal social and economic status quo as well as societal norms and traditions. Correlational evidence in the psychological literature points to this possibility. To date however, there is less evidence of a causal link indicative of a threat-driven psychological motivation among conservatives to resist climate policy. This presentation will provide a brief background of the relevant psychological conceptualisations of conservatism, as well as a theoretical overview of the motivated threat account of climate denial among conservatives. Finally, I will present my own research attempting to causally test these theoretical claims in a sample of Australian participants – a nation which exhibits political resistance to climate action at the elite level as well as, albeit to a lesser extent, the citizen level. We exposed participants to one of two texts describing how climate policy threatens the economy or the Australian way of life (arguments which are readily available in the

political discourse), and measured their beliefs about climate change and support for several different mitigation policies. Our findings suggest that messages conveying threats to the social and economic status quo are at most only effective at the conservative margins, and that the extent of the role of threat in conservative resistance to climate action might be overstated

Andy Hamilton (Durham University)

Conservative Ideology and the Nature of Tradition

As Munoz memorably comments, “Traditionalism ... though often confused with tradition, is not really tradition but its ideology” (Munoz (1981), p. 211). That is, all societies have traditional beliefs, but only some societies have a traditionalist attitude to them. I wish to advocate “tradition without traditionalism”. There is a surprising paucity of philosophical analysis of tradition. The received model is Max Weber’s, who treats it as unself-conscious and non-rational; hence David Armstrong’s excellent analysis, according to which “a tradition cannot be adopted nor does it spread. It is handed on.” The opposed view is Alasdair MacIntyre’s rationalist one. However, he offers no analysis of “tradition” as such, and consequently mis-diagnoses liberalism as over-rationalistic, and conservatism as anti-rationalistic. The conservative critique of liberalism rests on a nuanced relation between the rationality and non-rationality; thus a thinker who sees themselves as within a tradition may nonetheless be critical of how it is evolving.

Marco Miglino (University of Eastern Piedmont)

Can conservatism be a political theory?

Despite being an influential political category, conservatism is rarely discussed on a theoretical level. This work aims to fulfil this gap, trying to answer two questions: “can conservatism be a political theory?” and “if so, is conservative political theory justifiable?”. More specifically, I shall argue in favour of an affirmative answer to the former question, and in favour of a negative answer to the latter.

First, I claim that the fundamental premise of conservatism consists in an antimoralist epistemology of political philosophy, according to which normative theorization should not start by the enunciation of universal moral principles from which deducing regulative ideals. Rather, it should be understood as an intellectual enterprise – aimed at evaluating the desirability of different regimes – that is embedded in history. In this perspective, normative prescriptions must stem from the descriptive reconstruction of past political experiences, finalized to determine which orders proved able to win the competition for survival with competing regimes.

This emphasis on the importance of past experiences for normative theorization grounds an attitude of political prudence which is expressed into two principles: first, *anti-perfectionist traditionalism*, according to which traditional institutions (though not perfect) are preferable to potentially more just but unexperimented institutions. Because, insofar as the latter are unexperimented, the discussion of their normative status (and then even their defence) turns out to be epistemically impossible, while for existing institutions – whose risks and potentials are known – the contrary is true. Second, *conservative reformism*, according to which political innovations are desirable only if they are aimed

at restoring existing political institutions, rather than at realizing ideal and unexperimented political models.

I show that conservatism so defined is compatible with liberalism, democracy and human rights if these are not understood as components of a universalist model of justice, but of an historically situated political order which proved able to win competition for survival with competing regimes. Further, I argue that, under specific circumstances, conservatism can support radical reformism in different policy areas – such as environmental justice and international migration – to the extent that it is possible to prove that radical intervention in such areas is required to protect existing institutions from extreme crises.

Nevertheless, I argue that conservatism is not a justifiable political theory. Indeed, the fact that traditional regimes won the competition for survival with competing models is a reliable proof of their desirability only to the extent that all these models had an equal chance to succeed. This condition can only be satisfied if, in ordinary times (namely, times within which no deep crises threaten the tenability of existing institutions), political actors are free to experiment different political models. This freedom, in turn, cannot be given if agents are compelled to systematically prefer the perpetuation of existing regimes over other previously unexperimented alternatives. From this, it follows that past political experiences can be a reliable ground for political theorization only if the conservative presumption in favour of the status quo is removed.

Jasmina Nedevska Törnqvist (Uppsala University)

Intergenerational Duties and Natural Law

Long-term duties to preserve the environment exist in international and constitutional law and may be used to circumscribe majoritarian decision making. Yet, for several scholars, such duties lack in normative foundation. In this talk, I argue that *classical natural law* provides a fruitful approach to “green intergenerational duties” ascribed to states. The work of John Finnis (1980, 2011) is a common starting point and a standard reference for a revival of the natural law tradition in moral, political and legal theory (Hittinger 1989; Westerman 1998: 236; Murphy 2003: 241; Crowe 2011: 293, 2019: 2; Crowe and Lee 2019: ix). I make use of this particular contribution.

The classical natural law tradition can be described as conservative in at least three aspects. One is the significance of authority: it draws heavily on, for instance, pre-modern thinkers such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1275), in a conversation that extends over a long period of time. A second aspect is the structure of the theory: Finnis takes from Aquinas the idea that there are certain indemonstrable (*per se nota*) goods (or values) that are good for their own sake and require no further justification for their pursuit, such as the wellbeing it may bring to individuals, including oneself. In Finnis’ original formulation, he famously identifies seven such goods: life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (“friendship”), practical reasonableness and, within brackets, “religion” (1980: 59). A third aspect is the doctrines that the tradition’s adherents tend to uphold. Finnis’ full account includes conservative views on topics such as extramarital sex and abortion, whereas some contemporary issues, e.g. in environmental or global politics, are notably absent in his works (see Finnis 2011).

To some, the natural law tradition may not appear useful in a quest for green intergenerational duties. On a sceptical view, natural law theory would be inherently conservative, while contemporary environmental issues are inherently unattractive to conservatives (see e.g. Crowe 2019: 4). I argue, however, that natural law provides an approach to green intergenerational duties that circumvents a persistent problem for other theories, the lack of reciprocity between generations. An implication is that conservatives may very well be more, not less, reasonable custodians of the environment. This finding should be welcome, for example if one seeks broad alliances for global agreement on climate policy (see Posner and Weisbach 2010).

Eric Sheng (University of Oxford / ENS)

The Distinctiveness of Conservatism

This talk suggests a way of understanding types of conservatism through a typology based on (a) whether they disagree with salient non-conservative ideologies about what makes a society better or worse and (b) whether they involve reasons for conserving what exists/has existed grounded in their existing/having existed. It considers prudential or sceptical conservatism; conservatism for which there is intrinsic value in avoiding (certain kinds of) change; and, in particular, ‘contingent conservatism’ grounded in independent, not distinctively conservative reasons to support things that in fact exist/have existed. It considers some objections to this typology, the relative importance of different kinds of conservatism in theory and practice, and consequent challenges for developing conservative theories of particular subjects.

Torbjörn Tännsjö (Stockholm University)

Political conservatism in a time of system crisis

All conservatisms of a “pragmatic” sort have something in common, a particular argument, even if there is disagreement about the rationale behind this argument. The conservative argument can be stated thus: Some orders ought to be maintained because they are existing and well established. The reason given by conservatives why orders that are existing and well established ought to be maintained is varied. The reasoning relies on a broad idea of a common good, not on any such moral ideal in particular. Suppose that global heating and the collapse of many ecosystems mean that the global political order as we know it — the Westphalian one, with independent sovereign states — needs to go. Only a world state can save humanity and important ecological values alike. Where does that prospect leave conservatives, who are used to cherish the existing world order. Is it possible to find a place for conservative thinking in a situation where the cherished order is about to perish? One can compare with conservatism in the face of the French and the Russian revolutions. The answer to this question, in its most general form is: The conservative will hold on to surviving parts and aspects of the old regime.