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# German Conservatism and Its Intellectual Challenges

Progressives tend to believe that conservatism has no future. Nevertheless, conservatism already prevailed in the old Roman Republic, whose elite stuck to the *mos maiorum*, the habits and attitudes they attributed to the founders of the republic. A similar pattern can be seen in Confucian cultures, where this was an underlying principle of their success over many centuries. Progressive movements, however, tend to use up what makes them attractive, and before long they disappear. The rise and fall of the communist world movement serves as an impressive example of this.

Against this background, we need not worry about the future of German conservatism. Conservative feelings, even though not labelled as such, will even re-emerge as a result of the war in Ukraine. Indeed, the threatened Ukrainian people are giving an example of how to defend one's own identity. In Germany, too, increasing numbers are becoming aware of the fact that not everyone can—or wants to—belong to the 'citizens of anywhere' group, who enjoy moving freely around the world, with no need to find a home and defend it. Seeing new refugees from a country like their own, ever more Germans will understand that 'anywhereization' has no future. Worldwide, there are good reasons why the 'somewheres' are, and will remain, the vast majority. They should always be able to live safely in their countries, and to enjoy the benefits of the culture that they have built up and are adapted to.

No ideal and no practice can be more conservative than that. The same is true for the values required to maintain and safeguard such communities. They include love for one's country, the disposition to defend it, and the willingness to serve the common good. Therefore, conservatism and patriotism go hand in hand.

Yet patriotism is in a difficult position in Germany due to the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime and its followers. Germans do not want to conceal those past crimes, or to have them forgotten. However, looking back at this crescendo of chauvinism and racism makes pride in one's country, a typical conservative position, quite challenging in Germany. In addition, there is a widespread left-liberal narrative that the Nazis were anti-leftist nationalists, which makes them look like fellow-travellers of patriotic conservatives. It is true that the Nazis were chauvinists and racists, but they were both anti-Bolshevist and anti-conservative at the same time. Conservatives, for their part, were generally anti-Bolshevist, usually patriots, and mostly adversaries of Nazi rule, once it was established.

Unfortunately, these important distinctions are widely missing in the one-dimensional anti-fascist discourse which is now current in Germany. There, the current intellectual fashion is to equate non-leftist attitudes not only with conservatism, but with Nazism as well. Doing so makes both 'politically



German politicians portrayed in *Conservative Right and Socialist Left Taking Snuff Together*. Engraving, New York, 1883

incorrect' positions appear to be two sides of the same coin. To protect oneself against such slander, many Germans avoid calling themselves conservatives. Instead, they prefer the label 'centrist' or, if they are audacious, 'centre-right'. It has essentially been forgotten that many leaders of the German Social Democratic Party, such as Willy Brandt or Herbert Wehner, were fervent German patriots without being conservative at all. As a result of Germany's many traumas during the twentieth century, and of some overcompensation for earlier German deviations from proper attitude and action, all these lines of tradition and self-reflection remain deeply confused to this day.

It was telling that Angela Merkel, who led Germany's allegedly 'conservative' Christian Democratic Union between 2000 and 2018, was never popular as a 'conservative' politician. In particular, she was liked by journalists because she presented herself more as a 'liberal', more 'social', and even more 'Christian' than the rest of her party. Doing so, she was quite close to the origins of the CDU. This 'union' was never a successor to conservative parties going back to Imperial Germany, and the CDU has always remained a blend of conservatives, socially minded Christians, and state-oriented liberals. This was one of the reasons for the CDU becoming the most successful party of post-war Germany.

True, the uneasiness felt by so many members of Angela Merkel's CDU during her last years in office did find expression, along a dividing line between 'conservative' and 'liberal-progressive' party members. But there was no systematic reflection about what it might mean to be a German conservative today, and on why it might be good or bad for Germany to have a stronger conservative current. 'Conservatism' was usually no more than a proxy for missing content. Or simply a political slogan, most notably when used by the AfD, the CDU-contemptuous 'Alternative for Germany'. Under such circumstances, any seminal German conservatism will need to engage in new intellectual debates about what German conservatism could be today and tomorrow, in particular in view of the country's Nazi legacy.

In such debates, referring to the 'conservation of valuable achievements' will be far from sufficient. As proof, only two examples need be cited: more than a few German conservatives were still monarchists one hundred years ago, while now all of them support a republican regime. And less than 200 years ago, German conservatives fought against parliamentary democracy, which all of them now defend. Could one, therefore, say that conservatives are simply intellectual latecomers, needing much more time than others to understand, digest, and adopt new ideas?

To a certain degree this may be true. But such a statement misses the central point. The core characteristic of a conservative is not weakness of imagination, but a particular relationship with reality. In his or her view, a world that is functioning reliably does not require any justification, but the promise of an even better functioning world does. Underneath this position lies the argument that stable structures, or well-working mechanisms, have already passed various checks for viability, so that it would be unsound to no longer rely on them. Yet many conservatives would add that conditions and challenges change over time. As such, modifications of what is existing, or even entering new paths of development, may be repeatedly necessary. Therefore, when looking for unavoidable or worthwhile changes, one

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should engage in stepwise processes of trial and error, while preserving what stands the test of reality. By the same token, one should avoid ideologically driven attempts at creating something fully new from scratch. On balance, being a conservative then means to act as a careful reformer, accepting intellectual and political competition with progressives, and hopefully performing better than these rivals after entering public office.

Due to such an evolutionary approach, conservatives do not merely try to draw inspiration from history. More important is their willingness to think about the unfolding of history in terms of hierarchy, that is, of a layering structure of reality. Then it becomes apparent that some layers are more fundamental, while others are at the surface or just below it. Seeing reality in this way leads to the insight that touching at the lower layers of reality—such as economic structures or religious convictions—will turn out as a particularly risky move, since there may be unforeseen repercussions that should be avoided altogether. Surface structures, however, have many more degrees of freedom for acceptable experimentation. As a result, many conservatives tend to be strict on principles and flexible on details. This may be called the 'liberal conservative' approach Refusing all change on every level of reality might in turn be called 'reactionary conservatism'. The latter turns out to be non-evolutionary, hence ahistorical and unsound. During its long years in power, the CDU has usually sided with liberal conservatism—to the benefit of both party and country.

But is conservatism really not more than a procedurally cautious approach to policy-making? In fact, it is much more. Even the apparently changing contents of what seems

worth preserving are by no means as variable as it may appear at first sight. This becomes evident when we describe the basic values of conservatism on a more abstract level, namely in form of a conceptual triangle. It was within this triangle, without deviation, that the German CDU navigated during those years in which the party was truly successful.

At the top of the triangle we find 'sustainability'. This is indeed the core issue of conservatism. There is no need to narrow this concept down to ecology, although many do so. Yet sustainability is also desirable when it comes to demography. Therefore, conservatives advocate for political measures to stabilize birth rates, and they stand for—and only for—far-sighted immigration policies. Sustainability is also necessary when it comes to energy supply policies, and this guides the attention of conservatives both to renewable energies and to the advantages of safe nuclear power plants. Sustainability is the issue, too, when we think about sound budget policies, or about the legal framework for economic resilience and socially useful growth. In addition, there is cultural sustainability. The issue here is education, both by parents and schools, during which cultural patterns are conveyed—with minor or major alterations—from one generation to the next. This should ensure the transfer of intellectual and technological skills which are vital for society. Of course, this includes—in Europe and in the Americas—ensuring that Christianity will survive and thrive, since Western culture has been fruitfully based on it for many centuries. Apparently, nothing could be more conservative than such a manifold understanding of sustainability.

At the left angle of the triangle, we find 'fair order'. Order based on the rule of law is clearly a central value, and an important political goal, for conservatives. Yet if an established order and the rule of law are meant to be sustainable, then that order must be fair and based on justice. It is true that aiming at justice leads us into thorny intellectual and political discussions on the very meaning of justice, and on the characteristics of social justice in particular, and we will have to deal with the trade-offs between equality and liberty,

and with many more topics. Conservatives often like to avoid such challenging debates, leaving the field to leftists and progressives. This is unfortunate, since striving for a fair order in society is quite simply an imperative of humaneness. In addition, if we—not only as conservatives—want our social or political institutions to have sustainable legitimacy and reliable stability, then there is no alternative to the creation and maintenance of a fair social and political order.

Finally, we find 'enlightened patriotism' at the right angle of the triangle. Such patriotism is much more than nationalism, whatever the attractiveness of that notion may be in different languages. 'Enlightened' means that there is more than the feeling of belonging to a country, or of love for its people and culture. The surplus is a 'reflection loop' which makes sure that affection for one's own nation never turns into contempt for others. At least for German intellectuals, patriotism without such reflexivity is not only unattractive, but also repulsive. Even in other parts of the world, the concept of reflexive or enlightened patriotism should be helpful for bridging the gap between 'right-wing somewheres' and 'left-liberal anywheres'. The German CDU has obviously not been successful in elaborating, or even offering, this important ingredient of conservatism.

So where does this leave conservatism in general? After the end of the Merkel era, and under the shock of the CDU's devastating defeat at the last federal elections, there seems to be a possibility that the present party leadership will adopt a more serious approach to the challenge of finally tooling up intellectually, and of formulating a programme that is more than a compilation of single policy measures and of well-established commonplaces. Undoubtedly, it will require hard work and many compromises to place the CDU's traditional 'practical' approach to politics into a theoretical framework that allows for more successful fights for intellectual and cultural hegemony in Germany. Nevertheless, exactly this needs to be achieved, if German conservatives really want to compete with the spell of leftist and green ideologies.