

# Conservatism

## *From Burke to the New Right*

Dr Matthias Brinkmann

University of Bayreuth, Summer term 2025

Wednesday 14-16 c.t., S45 (RWII)

### Overview

Conservatism has been one of the politically most influential movements over the last century; conservative or right-wing governments are in power in many Western countries, and many major parties self-describe themselves as conservative. Nonetheless, conservatism as a body of thought has gotten much less academic attention than other political ideologies, such as liberalism, libertarianism, socialism, feminism, or even anarchism.

Indeed, it has sometimes been suggested that conservatism has no to very little philosophical substance at all—that it is merely a disposition to keep things as they are, a romantic yearning for a past that never has been, a reactionary backlash against disliked social change, or even just a disguise for xenophobia and other unsavoury instincts.

This seminar looks at conservative arguments concerning various topics in political philosophy, often contrasting them with liberal viewpoints. The aim is not to explain the history, psychology, or political strategies of conservatism, but to evaluate its argumentative force. In particular, we will look at conservative perspectives concerning free markets, utopian political thinking, patriotism, hierarchy, political authority, freedom, and religion. The aim is to understand, analyse, and evaluate those conservative positions.

### Requirements

Regular attendance is expected and will be crucial to your learning success.

#### Requirements for 2 ECTS

To gain 2 ECTS points, you must fulfil the following requirement.

**Reading reflections.** A reading reflection is a short (around 200 words) critical reaction to one of the assigned readings. It should not be a mere summary of the reading, but instead formulate questions, critique, or other insights which you think will help class discussion. Reading reflections are due online two hours before seminar sessions. You need to write a total of eight reading reflections.

You might also contribute by writing a **session summary** (around 2 pages) of class discussion on a day of your choice. The summary should not be a linear protocol of class discussion, but an independent description of the major themes, disagreements, and open questions that arose in class. Session summaries will be made available online to all participants and are due five days after the session. A session summary counts as three reading reflections.

#### Requirements for 5 ECTS

*In addition* to the requirements above, you will have to fulfil *one* of the following two requirements:

**Presentation with short essay.** Presentations will be short (10 minutes) and on an assigned topic. You will have to send in your slides or handout five days before the seminar session to receive feedback from me. In addition to your presentation, you will have to write a short essay (around 2,000 words). You can choose a question relating to any of the topics listed in the syllabus (including topics we do not tackle in class); you might also choose to expand on the topic of your presentation. Your essay should have a clearly framed question which you aim to independently and critically answer yourself using secondary literature. Only your written work will be graded.

**Long essay.** If you do not present, you will have to write a long essay/*Hausarbeit* (around 4,000 words). The same requirements apply as for the short essay.

The deadline for submitting short and long essays is **tbd**.

## Plan

The seminar plan might change during term, sometimes on short notice. If you have suggestions or ideas for topics, we can discuss them in class and modify the seminar plan accordingly.

23.04.	1	Introduction
30.04.	2	Conservatism and libertarianism
07.05.	3	Perversity and futility
14.05.	4	Value conservatism
21.05.	5	Burke's conservatism
28.05.	6	Oakeshott's anti-rationalism
04.06.	7	Patriotism
11.06.	8	Anti-egalitarianism
18.06.	9	Hierarchy, meritocracy, and elitism
25.06.		No course (Wittgenstein lectures)
02.07.	10	Schmitt: friends and enemies
09.07.	11	The contemporary critique of liberalism
16.07.	12	Catholic conservatism
23.07.	13	The contemporary far right

## General literature

This course will not use a textbook. However, for interested students, a variety of overviews and general-purpose introductions to conservatism exist.

I would make three recommendations. Yoram **Hazon**'s *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* provides another useful overview of conservative themes. Tristan **Rogers**' recent book looks like a strong addition to the field and might establish itself as the best philosophical introduction to conservatism. Jerry **Muller** provides a useful and well-organised anthology of conservative texts and is an excellent starting point if one wants to access primary literature.

Alternatively, Roger **Scruton** has written several books outlining conservative ideas (*The Meaning of Conservatism*, 1980; *A Political Philosophy: Arguments for Conservatism*, 2006; *How to be a Conservative*, 2014; *Conservatism: an Invitation to a Great Tradition*, 2017). Scruton's books are accessible (although it is probably enough to pick one of the many offerings), but their presentation of the deeper philosophical issues tends to be a bit quick.

- \*Hazon, Yoram. 2022. *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*. Forum.
- Honderich, Ted. 2005. *Conservatism: Burke to Nozick to Blair?* Pluto Press.
- Kekes, John. 2022. *Moderate Conservatism: Reclaiming the Center*. Oxford University Press.
- \*Muller, Jerry, ed. 1997. *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present*. Princeton University Press.
- Neill, Edmund. 2021. *Conservatism*. Wiley.
- Robin, Corey. 2011. *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. Oxford University Press. (Updated 2017 as ... *from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*.)
- \*Rogers, Tristan. 2025. *Conservatism, Past and Present: A Philosophical Introduction*. Routledge.
- Scruton, Roger. 1984. *The Meaning of Conservatism*. Macmillan.

## Topics

The following list contains more topics than sessions. Around halfway into term time, we will discuss possible changes to the plan together; the additional topics serve as possible alternates. Students writing a research essay should also feel free to tackle one of the listed topics.

Required readings are marked with an asterisk (\*). All other readings are optional.

### 1. Introduction: what is conservatism?

As with all ideologies, there is a large cottage industry of authors, both self-identified conservatives and others, attempting to define it, distinguish different varieties of it, and so forth. But even more so than with other ideologies, there is an intense debate whether conservatism can even be defined at all, or whether it can be defined in a coherent way.

Rogers, Tristan. 2025. *Conservatism, Past and Present: A Philosophical Introduction*. 'Introduction: Philosophical Conservatism'.

Bourke, Richard. 2018. 'What Is Conservatism? History, Ideology and Party'. *European Journal of Political Theory* 17 (4): 449–75.

Freeden, Michael. 1998. 'Theorizing About Conservative Ideology'. In *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. Oxford University Press.

Huntington, Samuel. 1957. 'Conservatism as an Ideology'. *American Political Science Review* 51 (2): 454–73.

Kekes, John. 1997. 'What Is Conservatism?' *Philosophy* 72 (281): 351–74.

Oakeshott, Michael. 1991. *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Essay 'On Being Conservative'.

Scruton, Roger. 1984. *The Meaning of Conservatism*. London: Macmillan.

Smyth, Nicholas. 2025. 'There Is No Such Thing as a Political Conservative'. *European Journal of Political Theory* 24 (1): 111–31.

## 2. Conservatism and libertarianism

The connection between conservatism and libertarianism is contentious. Conservatives have often favoured limited government and free markets; in many countries, conservatives and libertarians have found themselves on the same political side (the 'right'), especially in their opposition to an expansion of the welfare state and the global threats of (Soviet) socialism. But conservatives and libertarians also depart from each in important ways. In particular, conservatives tend to not share the libertarians' unbridled enthusiasm for liberty, especially in the private realm. Indeed, many conservatives see capitalism's 'creative destruction' as a threat to established ways of life, and are thus often sceptical, for example, of free trade. More fundamentally, libertarians tend to have a 'rationalist' philosophical outlook which conservatives tend to distrust (see session 6). This means that conservatives have a more ambivalent relationship to capitalism than is often realised.

Hayek, Friedrich. 2011. *The Constitution of Liberty: The Definitive Edition*. University of Chicago Press. 'Why I Am Not a Conservative', pp. 519–534.

Kirk, Russell. 1981. 'Libertarians: Chirping Sectaries'. *Modern Age* 25 (4): 345–51.

Biebricher, Thomas. 2022. 'Ordoliberalism and Conservatism'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Ordoliberalism*, edited by Thomas Biebricher, Peter Nedergaard, and Werner Bonefeld. Oxford University Press.

Kolozzi, Peter. 2017. *Conservatives Against Capitalism: From the Industrial Revolution to Globalization*. Columbia University Press.

Kristol, Irving. 1978. *Two Cheers for Capitalism*. Basic Books.

Tosi, Justin, and Brandon Warmke. 2022. 'Conservative Critiques'. In *The Routledge Companion to Libertarianism*, edited by Matt Zwolinski and Benjamin Ferguson, 579–92. Routledge.

## 3. Perversity and futility

The title for this session comes from Hirschman's book in which he analyses recurring rhetorical themes and arguments in conservative thought—in particular, the idea that attempts to change social reality is futile, perversely backfires, or jeopardises important goods. As Hirschman himself notes, these rhetorical arguments are not exclusive to conservatism. We will look at the

first two types of rhetorical pattern, and will track them throughout the seminar.

Hirschman, Albert. 1991. *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Belknap Press. Excerpts.

Beaulier, Scott, and Brian Caplan. 2007. 'Behavioral Economics and Perverse Effects of the Welfare State'. *Kyklos* 60 (4): 485–507.

Cowen, Tyler. 2002. 'Does the Welfare State Help the Poor?' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 19 (1): 36–54.

Murray, Charles. 1994. *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*. Basic Books.

#### 4. Value conservatism

Also known as 'metaphysical conservatism' (Scruton), 'existential conservatism' (McPherson), or 'natural conservatism' (Kekes), this view is a more abstracted, general form of conservatism, some distance from its political cousin. The basic idea is that existing things have value, and that we have reason to keep and preserve them even if destroying created greater value. The view is not necessarily connected to being a conservative *in politics*, as one can see in the Marxist G. A. Cohen taking this view. Nonetheless, it provides a useful stepping stone towards understanding conservatism.

Cohen, G. A. 2011. 'Rescuing Conservatism: A Defense of Existing Value'. In *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T.M. Scanlon*, edited by Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman. Oxford University Press.

McPherson, David. 2019. 'Existential Conservatism'. *Philosophy* 94 (3): 383–407.

Nebel, Jacob. 2021. 'Conservatisms About the Valuable'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 100 (1): 180–94.

Scruton, Roger. 2015. *How to Be a Conservative*. Reprint edition. Bloomsbury Continuum.

#### 5. Burke's conservatism

Burke is often held to be the major figure, perhaps even father, of modern conservatism. Burke was a subtle and complex thinker, however, who tends to evade easy classifications; this is what continues to make him an inspiration for a variety of thinkers. We will read excerpts from Burke's most influential work, *Reflections on the Revolutions in France*.

Burke, Edmund. 1790. *Reflections on the Revolutions in France*. Excerpts from Muller (ed.), *Conservatism*.

Bourke, Richard. 2015. *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke*. Princeton University Press.

Kirk, Russell. 2001. *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*. 7th ed. Regnery.

Rogers, Tristan. 2024. 'Change from Within Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*'. *The Philosophy Teaching Library*. [philolibrary.crc.nd.edu/article/change-from-within/](http://philolibrary.crc.nd.edu/article/change-from-within/).

Waldron, Jeremy. 1987. 'Nonsense upon Stilts': *Bentham, Burke, and Marx on the Rights of Man*. Methuen. Chapter 4.

## 6. Anti-rationalism

Another major British figure of conservatism is Michael Oakeshott. We will look at one of the most famous conservative essays ever written, his ‘Rationalism in politics’.

Oakeshott, Michael. 1991. *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Edited by Timothy Fuller. 2nd edition. Liberty Fund. ‘Rationalism in politics’.

Hayek, Friedrich. ‘The Errors of Constructivism’. In Mueller (ed.), *Conservatism*.  
Himmelfarb, Gertrude. 1975. ‘The Conservative Imagination: Michael Oakeshott’. *The American Scholar* 44 (3): 405–20.

Jacobs, Struan, and Ian Tregenza. 2014. ‘Rationalism and Tradition: The Popper–Oakeshott Conversation’. *European Journal of Political Theory* 13 (1): 3–24.

Podoksik, Efraim, ed. 2012. *The Cambridge Companion to Oakeshott*. Cambridge University Press.

Popper, Karl. 1968. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. Harper & Row. Chapter 4, ‘Towards a rational theory of tradition’.

## 7. Patriotism

Patriotism is, on first approach, a strongly felt sense of loyalty to, pride in, and commitment to one’s own country. Almost all conservatives emphasise patriotism as a core virtue. But how far should patriotism go? Can patriotism be rationally defended? We will contrast MacIntyre’s famous defense of patriotism with a brief statement of the cosmopolitan view by Martha Nussbaum.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2002. ‘Is Patriotism a Virtue?’ In *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, edited by Derek Matravers and Jonathan Pike. Routledge.

Nussbaum, Martha. 1994. ‘Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism’. *Boston Review*, 1 October.

Canovan, Margaret. 2000. ‘Patriotism Is Not Enough’. *British Journal of Political Science* 30 (3): 413–32.

Goodin, Robert. 1988. ‘What Is So Special about Our Fellow Countrymen?’ *Ethics* 98 (4): 663–86.

Keller, Simon. 2005. ‘Patriotism as Bad Faith’. *Ethics* 115 (3): 563–92.

Nathanson, Stephen. 1989. ‘In Defense of “Moderate Patriotism.”’ *Ethics* 99 (3): 535–52.

Oldenquist, Andrew. 1982. ‘Loyalties.’ *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (4): 173–93.

## 8. Anti-Egalitarianism

It is a common claim that conservatives see inequality, at least to a degree, as a natural feature of political and social life. Many conservative arguments against egalitarian aims rest on the claim that achieving equality would be futile or infeasible—that it would be a ‘revolt against nature’, as the libertarian Rothbard puts it. Many critiques also rest on the claim that factual inequalities between people stand in the way of achieving equality, or make its pursuit undesirable. Whether these charges hold much water against sophisticated forms of egalitarianism—e.g., Dworkin’s luck egalitarianism—is open to question, however.



### In analytic philosophy

Steinhoff, Uwe. 2014. 'Against Equal Respect and Concern, Equal Rights, and Egalitarian Impartiality'. In *Do All Persons Have Equal Moral Worth?*, edited by Uwe Steinhoff. Oxford University Press.

Husi, Stan. 2017. 'Why We (Almost Certainly) Are Not Moral Equals'. *Journal of Ethics* 21 (4): 375–401.

### Egalitarianism

Dworkin, Ronald. 2002. *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. Harvard University Press.

Williams, Bernard. 1973. *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge University Press. Chapter 14, 'The Idea of Equality'.

### Conservative Critics

Kekes, John. 1997. 'A Question for Egalitarians'. *Ethics* 107 (4): 658–69.

Kekes, John. 2006. 'Against Egalitarianism'. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 58:137–56.

Kekes, John. 2007. *The Illusions of Egalitarianism*. Cornell University Press.

Stephen, James Fitzjames. 1993. *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. Edited by Stuart Warner. Liberty Fund Inc. Chapter 5, 'Equality'.

Lübbe in Muller

### Libertarian Critics

Hayek, Friedrich. 1982. *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy*. Volume 2, 'The Mirage of Social Justice'. Routledge.

Rothbard, Murray. 2000. *Egalitarianism as a Revolt against Nature, and Other Essays*. Ludwig von Mises Institute.

## 9. Hierarchy, Meritocracy, and Elitism

The flipside of conservatism's anti-egalitarianism is a common appreciation of, or at least neutrality towards, social hierarchies. Many conservatives think that organic hierarchies appropriately attuned to a society's needs, far from hindering individual flourishing and social relationships, provide crucial structure. But explicit defences are harder to come by. We will contrast Schumpeter's account with recent critiques of meritocracy.

Sandel, Michael. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Excerpts.

Schumpeter, 'Aptitude and social mobility', in Mueller (ed.), *Conservatism*.

Evola, Julius. 1995. *Revolt Against the Modern World*. Chapter 14, 'The Doctrine of the Castes' and chapter 35, 'The regression of the castes'.

Mosca, Gaetano. 1939. *The Ruling Class*. McGraw-Hill.

Röpke, Wilhelm. 1960. *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market*. Transl. Elizabeth Henderson. 'Nobilitas naturalis', pp. 129–137.

Ortega y Gasset, Jose. 1994. *The Revolt of the Masses*. WW Norton. Chapters 1, 7.

## 10. Schmitt: friends and enemies

We return to an important and highly divisive historical figure, Carl Schmitt.

Schmitt, Carl. 1932. *Der Begriff des Politischen*. Duncker & Humblot. Excerpts

- Ottmann, Henning. 2015. 'Carl Schmitt'. In *Politische Philosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Karl Graf Ballestrem and Henning Ottmann, 61–88. Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag.
- Strauss, Leo. 2001. 'Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, Der Begriff des Politischen'. In *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe*, edited by Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier, 217–42. Metzler.

## 11. The contemporary critique of liberalism

Liberalism—not understood narrowly as the position of a particular political party, but broadly as a philosophical project committed to individualism, liberty, free markets, and constitutional democracy—has been the politically dominant paradigm in the West since 1945.

- Deneen, Patrick. 2018. *Why Liberalism Failed*. Yale University Press. Excerpts.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 2nd ed. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Sandel, Michael. 1998. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press.

## 12. Catholic conservatism

Catholicism expresses itself in a variety of ideological flavours, but some recent authors have suggested to revive it in a more stringently conservative form. Particularly influential in the English-speaking world has been Adrian Vermeule's proposal for a 'common-good constitutionalism', part of a push for 'Catholic integralism'.

- Vallier, Kevin. 2023. *All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism*. Oxford University Press. Excerpts.
- Vermeule, Adrian. 2022. *Common Good Constitutionalism*. Polity. Excerpts.
- Dreher, Rod. 2015. 'Benedict Option FAQ'. *The American Conservative*, 6 October. [www.theamericanconservative.com/benedict-option-faq/](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/benedict-option-faq/).
- Kelly, Martin David. 2024. 'Challenging Common Good Constitutionalism'. *Jurisprudence* 15 (3): 418–40.
- Leiter, Brian. 2023. 'Politics by Other Means: The Jurisprudence of "Common Good Constitutionalism"'. *University of Chicago Law Review* 90 (6).

## 13. The contemporary far right

In the last two sections, we turn to the contemporary right, such as the 'alt-right', 'neoreactionary right (NRx)', and 'traditionalism'. One immediate question to ask is whether these new movements are still recognisably conservative. Indeed, some seem to take more inspiration from Nietzsche or libertarianism than classic conservative thought; the careful traditionalism of Burke and the sceptical anti-rationalism of Oakeshott are hard to find in these movements. We will look, in particular, at Curtis Yarvin neo-reactionary worldview, which has influenced various figures in and behind the Trump administration.

- Beiner, Ronald. 2019. 'The Plague of Bannionism'. *Critical Review* 31 (3–4): 300–314.
- Sedgwick, Mark, ed. 2019. *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*. Oxford University Press.



Sedgwick, Mark. 2023. *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order*. Pelican.

## Alternate topics

There is currently no plan to cover the following topics within the course. Students might still find them interesting as topics for essays or further reading. We might also decide during the term to swap some of these topics for those currently scheduled.

### Nationalism

Nationalism is an ideology that emphasises the importance of the *nation*. What the nation is, and how its importance is to be philosophically derived, however, remains a matter of dispute amongst both liberals and conservatives.

Freeden, Michael. 1998. "Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?" *Political Studies* 46 (4): 748–65.

Garner, Renaud-Philippe. 2022. "Nationalism." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, by Renaud-Philippe Garner. Oxford University Press.

Miller, David. 1995. *On Nationality*. Oxford University Press.

Tamir, Yael. 1993. *Liberal Nationalism*. Princeton University Press.

### The psychology of conservatism

There have been several attempts to provide insight into the social psychology of conservatism and the conservative mindset; and there is also of course a big empirical literature on the electoral success of conservative parties. While speculation about the psychological origins of conservatism is interesting, our focus will be on the philosophical substance of the view. Nonetheless, interested students might wish to have a look at this literature.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2013. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Penguin.

Henrich, Joseph. 2021. *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous*. Penguin.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. The New Press.

Jost, John, Jack Glaser, Arie Kruglanski, and Frank Sulloway. 2003. "Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition." *Psychological Bulletin* 129 (3): 339–75.

Mutz, Diana. 2018. "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 (19): E4330–39.

### Political authority

One might be tempted to ask whether there is a specific conservative theory of political authority. Why should we obey our governments? Why does the state have the right to coerce us?

Corey, David. 2019. 'The Problem of Liberal Political Legitimacy'. In *Michael Oakeshott on Authority, Governance, and the State*, edited by Eric Kos, 45–74. Springer.

Hazon, Yoram. 2022. *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*. Forum.

Oakeshott, Michael. 1991. *On Human Conduct*. Oxford University Press. Essay II, 'On the civil condition'.

## Natural law

One way to arrive at broadly conservative conclusions is via the idea of natural law.

Strauss, Leo. 1953. *Natural Right and History*. University of Chicago Press.

Finnis, John. 1979. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Clarendon Press.

Murphy, Mark. 2006. *Natural Law in Jurisprudence and Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

## Traditional morality

Conservatism is also associated with a defence of 'traditional' values. It is hard to say in the abstract what would characterise traditional morality, but various concrete commitments easily come to mind.

McPherson, David. 2017. 'Traditional Morality and Sacred Values'. *Analyse & Kritik* 39 (1): 41–62.

Taylor, Charles. 2011. 'Recovering the Sacred'. *Inquiry* 54 (2): 113–25.

Primoratz, Igor. 2001. 'Sexual Morality: Is Consent Enough?' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 4: 201–18.