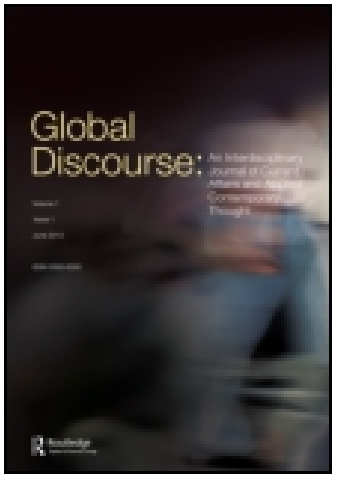

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Conservatism and ideology

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INTRODUCTION

Conservatism and ideology

Michael Oakshott described conservatism as a non-ideological preference for the familiar, tried, actual, limited, near, sufficient, convenient and present. Historically, conservatism, in its traditional, Burkean form, has been associated with attempts to sustain social harmony between classes and groups within an organic, hierarchical order grounded in collective history and cultural values. Yet, in recent decades, conservatism throughout the English-speaking world has been associated with radical social and economic policy, often championing free-market models that substitute the free movement of labour and forms of competition and social mobility for organic hierarchy and noblesse oblige. The radical changes associated with such policies call into question the extent to which contemporary conservatism is conservative, rather than ideological. This issue seeks to explore this tension within contemporary conservative political thought.

In the first paper, Martin Beckstein (2015, 4) dives straight into the heart of this issue, asking 'Is David Cameron an authentic conservative?' Noting that questions of authenticity are not unique to conservatism, Beckstein adheres to an account of the Oakeshottian preference for a status quo, arguing that Cameron, despite his self-identification as a 'conservative' of many conjuncts (compassionate, liberal, etc.) is dependent on 'a non-conservative ideational ideology'. In reply, Joseph Femia (2015) argues that this approach serves to neglect the historical context of conservatism, 'holding that conservatism' may not entertain substantive ideals, they certainly express substantive ideas about the appropriate arrangements of society. Doğancan Özsel (2015) develops this theme further by proposing that the 'conservative minimum' lies in the notion that 'conservative arguments justify their agenda of change with reference to a historical and transcendent subject that is commonly (but not always) labelled "society"'. In this sense, conservatives can advocate change, so long as it is justified in relation to and oriented around society – a particular society, theirs. Stuart McAnulla (2015) replies. In contrast to belief that conservatism is necessarily conformist, Goldstein (2015) explores the psychological relationship between conservative and authoritarian dispositions. Using Indian conservatism for illustration, Goldstein argues that conservatives, in contrast to conformist authoritarians, can embrace diversity and adapt to changing circumstances, refuting the belief that pluralism leaves conservatism moribund. Kieron O'Hara (2015a) provides a reply.

In examining the decline of an approach that consciously sought to orient itself around the interests of a particular society, Britain, Dorey and Garnett (2015) identify 'the main factors – relating to changes within the party and the British electorate as a whole, as well as individual failings and "events" both at home and abroad – behind a development which has played a central role in British politics over recent decades' – not least the dissolution of the post-war consensus. Richard Hayton (2015a) replies. Edward Ashbee (2015) then explores the tension between the neoliberal desire to roll back the state and the conservative desire for civic engagement and voluntary, benevolent action to fill the space left by the receding nanny order, illustrated by the twin drives of austerity and 'Big Society'. With social recapitalization initiatives floundering, the success of attempts to minimize the state permanently seems doomed, with much of the post-war state left 'very

vulnerable to the designs of policymakers and the demands of well-placed constituencies'. Andrew Gamble (2015) replies.

Building on the theme of the attempts by Conservatives to justify radical reforms, Crines (2015) compares the rhetoric of Margaret Thatcher and David Cameron, arguing that, although different historical circumstances influenced differences in strategies, both strove 'to emphasise the "common sense" nature of neoliberalism by comparing it to household economies and a broader sense of economic simplicity', with both presenting neoliberalism as 'the sole solution to economic crises'. Peter Dorey (2015) replies.

Next, Kieron O'Hara (2015b) evaluates the development of open data in governance in relation to Oakeshottian and Rousseauian schemes. Presenting numerous trends in digital government as illiberal, O'Hara argues that open data can, under the correct conditions, promote restrained government, with 'Rationalism … taken out of the political arena' and reappearing in Oakeshott's favoured 'voluntary, unforced enterprises of individuals and associations'. In reply, Mark Garnett (2015a) argues that, whatever the potential merits of open data for Oakeshottians, conservatives of the Burkean variety would view the Internet with suspicion, being 'unlikely to extend a welcome to any initiative whose advantages seem to depend on the ability of government agents and potential profit-seekers to exercise self-denial amid so much temptation'.

The issue concludes with two review symposia examining key monographs on contemporary conservatism. Firstly, Mark Garnett (2015b) and Murray Leith (2015) discuss Hayton's (2015b) *Reconstructing conservatism? The Conservative Party in Opposition, 1997–2010*, with a reply from the author. Secondly, David Walker (2015) and Jim Buller (2015) offer extended, critical analyses of Tim Bale's (2012) *The Conservatives Since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change*, with the author (Bale 2015) offering a rigorous response.

I wish to place on record my sincere thanks to Mark Garnett for his tireless and invaluable work, Richard Hayton for his ever generous and swift assistance, David Walker for his advice, the authors for their distinctive and dynamic contributions and the referees for their extremely constructive reviews.

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