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The Crisis of American Conservatism in Historical–Comparative Perspective

Thomas Biebricher 

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Abstract Starting from the assessment that contemporary American conservatism is in a state of crisis, manifested in a dynamic of growing radicalization, this article seeks to identify the factors and actors that contributed to this trajectory and to thus elucidate its more fundamental drivers, assuming that Donald Trump and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movements are symptoms rather than causes of this radicalization. To this effect, a succinct and pointed history of modern American conservatism from its beginnings in the postwar era is presented, using a periodization into three broad eras. Particular attention is given to the internal heterogeneity and conflicts within the conservative movement on a political and an intellectual level that help explain how conservatism as a whole, or at least its dominant forces, has continued to move to the right over the decades. In order to put this trajectory into perspective, a parallel history of German conservatism is used as contrast. One conclusion that can be drawn from this account is that both German and American conservatism are experiencing a crisis, but for very different reasons and with highly different manifestations. While American conservatism is in a radicalization spiral, German conservatism suffers instead from an identity crisis and a loss of any meaningful ideological–political profile.

Keywords Grand Old Party · Radicalization · United States · Germany · Donald Trump

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Die Krise des amerikanischen Konservatismus in historisch-vergleichender Perspektive

Zusammenfassung Ausgehend von der Einschätzung, dass sich der US-amerikanische Konservatismus derzeit in einer Krise befindet, dich sich in seiner zunehmenden Radikalisierung manifestiert, widmet sich der vorliegende Artikel der Frage nach den tieferliegenden Gründen für diese Entwicklung, wenn man unterstellt, dass Donald Trump und die MAGA („Make America Great Again“-)Bewegung eher das Symptom als die eigentliche Ursache dieser Radikalisierung sind. Zu diesem Zweck entwickelt der Artikel eine pointierte Geschichte des zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Konservatismus seit seinen Anfängen in der Nachkriegszeit, wobei eine Unterteilung in drei Perioden vorgenommen wird. Das Hauptaugenmerk liegt hierbei auf den internen Heterogenitäten und Konflikten innerhalb des Konservatismus, der hier sowohl als intellektuelle Tradition als auch als politisch organisierte Kraft betrachtet wird, um so ein besseres Verständnis davon zu erlangen, wie sich der konservative Rechtsdrift erklären lässt. Um diese Entwicklung besser einordnen zu können, wird ein parallele Geschichte des deutschen Konservatismus als Kontrastfolie benutzt. Als eines der Ergebnisse ist festzuhalten, dass man in beiden Kontexten von einer Krise sprechen kann, die aber unterschiedliche Gründe hat und sich auch auf unterschiedliche Weise manifestiert: Ist es im amerikanischen Kontext die Radikalisierung, so ist es hingegen im deutschen die substanzielle Entkernung und der völlige Profilverlust des intellektuellen wie auch politisch organisierten Konservatismus.

Schlüsselwörter Grand Old Party · Radikalisierung · Vereinigte Staaten · Deutschland · Donald Trump

1 Introduction

Mainstream conservatism is in crisis in many European countries, from France and Italy to Spain and even the United Kingdom. However, it is not only center-right parties across Europe that are in turmoil. In the United States, Republican conservatism is in the midst of a deep and arguably existential identity crisis that has been brought to the fore by the events of January 6, 2021, and the range of attempts to overturn the election results of the preceding November. It is a battle for the heart of the Republican Party, in which—so far—Make America Great Again (MAGA) sympathizers and others in favor of continuing the right turn of the party have prevailed. Here, the crisis of conservatism manifests itself in the radicalization spiral of the Grand Old Party (GOP). This prompts the question of how to account for this radicalization, and while there are voices of Republican “Never Trumpers” who lay all the blame at the feet of the former president and, by the same token, seek to exonerate Republican conservatism summarily, this warrants a deeper inquiry. After all, even if Trump were considered to play a transformative role with regard to the GOP, this is plausible only if it can be shown that his MAGA campaign could latch onto certain traditions in American conservatism, as it is represented by the GOP, even if they were marginalized and tended to be neglected by mainstream

historiography. Therefore, in this contribution I would like to offer a succinct account of the long-term trajectory of American conservatism and thus identify some of the dynamics and contributing factors to what the title of this special issue refers to as a “conservative (r)evolution” in the United States (see also the Introduction to this special issue), which continues to shape and transform the landscape of contemporary U.S. politics. In order to provide some structure for this undertaking, I will use a periodization of three broad eras: 1945–1980, 1981–2000, and 2001 to the recent past. Dividing the history of American conservatism into these three broad periods is warranted by the caesuras that the years 1980 and 2000–2001 each signify. The first marks Ronald Reagan’s election as president and thus symbolizes the triumph of conservatism, which began the postwar era in marginalization and only turned into an intellectual/political force on the ascent through the galvanizing experience of the failed Goldwater candidacy in 1964. The period 2000–2001 marked conservatives’ reclaiming of the presidency, which, in combination with the effect of the attacks of 9/11, had a profound impact on the shape and form of contemporary American conservatism. More fine-grained periodizations are certainly conceivable; I have opted for these broader periods mostly due to limitations of space.¹ The focus will be on the permutations and internal tensions of conservative discourse broadly understood both as an intellectual tradition as well as its political organization(s) (i.e., first and foremost, the Republican Party), and, of course, on those developments that foreshadow the rise of MAGA and its domination of the contemporary GOP. This is to say that my account will move back and forth between the levels of ideology and party politics (and policies) to offer a more encompassing understanding of the dynamics of American conservatism, which cannot be reduced to either ideology or politics/policy. Finally and importantly, in order to better understand how American conservatism might differ from other contexts and traditions and put it thus into comparative perspective, I will provide a parallel but much more succinct account of the same time periods in German conservatism. The paper is not interested in German conservatism *per se*, so this narrative will be even more parsimonious. It serves primarily as a negative foil against which the particularities of American conservatism (but also its correspondences to German conservatism) come to stand out more clearly. German conservatism may also be considered to have experienced a crisis in recent years; however, its manifestations and causes notably differ from the U.S. context. In the concluding section, I will reflect on the findings, avenues of future research, and lessons that can be drawn with regard to the crisis of mainstream conservatism in the United States as well as more generally.

To sum up the aims of this article: If it is correct to describe the state of American political conservatism as that of a crisis that manifests itself not so much in the electoral decline (at least not for the time being) of its main political representative, the GOP, but rather as a radicalization that calls into question its summary designation as genuinely conservative and thus sufficiently distinct from authoritarianism, then I would like to offer an account of the constellations, dynamics, and actors within

¹ I realize that the mid-1960s mark an important realignment in American politics as the “southern strategy” of the Republican Party emerged. Still, while I discuss the significance of this shift in the text, for comparative purposes the periodization I propose here is more suitable.

the right wing that brought about or at least crucially contributed to this current state of affairs. Furthermore, I would like to draw attention to some of the specificities of this trajectory and thus put it into comparative perspective by juxtaposing it with the development of German conservatism in order to highlight the extent to which the American experience is not representative of the international crisis of conservatism in general as it manifests itself in France, Italy, or other contexts.

This is not an essay in political theory but one in political and intellectual history. Therefore, rather than engaging in a discussion of the nature of conservatism as an ideology, which lies beyond the scope of this paper, I will simply posit a working definition drawing on the seminal accounts of Karl Mannheim and Michael Freeden (1996): Conservatism, understood along these lines and at the highest level of abstraction, is the problematic of a traditionalism that has grown reflexive at the sight of visible challenges to the status quo. As such, conservatism contains two core concepts. First is the notion of a normative naturalness that gives an answer, albeit a vague one, to be specified by concrete challenges as to which concrete aspects of the status quo ought to be defended. They are understood as part of a good, natural, or possibly even divine order. Second, if there is to be change and transformation, the second core concept of conservatism, i.e., experience-based incrementalism, stipulates that it ought to be piecemeal and based on experience. Ideally, it would come close to organic processes of growth that can only be supported and cultivated by political and intellectual gardeners but never fully controlled. While I realize that this is a painfully concise account of conservatism, given the focus of the following, I am confident that it will prove to be sufficient for the purposes of this paper.

2 Conservative Traditions in the United States and Germany, 1945–1980

2.1 From Marginalization to Triumph: U.S. Conservatism from the Postwar Years to Reagan

The period from 1945 to 1980 marks the transformation of conservatism from a marginalized political ideology unsure of its own identity to a vibrant intellectual tradition with an entire infrastructure and, consecutively, a potent and resourceful political movement that would carry Ronald Reagan into the White House at the end of this era.

There is a widespread consensus among intellectual historians of American conservatism that it could hardly be said to exist as an intellectual phenomenon in the postwar years (see Allitt 2009; Nash 2014). The New Deal coalition, built by Franklin Roosevelt and the policy agenda associated with it from the New Deal to a robust liberal internationalism, was so entrenched that some of those few thinkers who identified with conservative views even denied its very existence in the U.S. context. “The American conservative has yet to discover conservatism,” wrote Lincoln Rossiter in 1950 (cited in Nash 2014, p. 86), thus expressing a common view in those days. Liberalism in the Rooseveltian sense, i.e., a combination of classical liberal and progressivist ideas bordering on what in the European context would

be called social democracy, had marginalized the ideas of the “Old Right” of the prewar era, and conservative thinkers were deeply unsure about their place in the political–intellectual landscape of the postwar United States. There could be no doubt that there were conservative or even reactionary politics in the United States, but was there a genuinely conservative tradition they could attach themselves to?

Economic historians such as Max Weber and Werner Sombart famously wondered why there was no socialism in the United States, and conservatives were wondering if there was any room at all for anything aside from a broadly liberal tradition shaping the American experience. After all, conventional scholarly wisdom framed this experience in broadly Lockean terms: American settlement by the colonists had been justified through Locke’s theory of property, and its government was arguably set up to protect “life, liberty and estate” as Locke had put it in the *Second Treatise of Government*. Individual rights, property, and steady—at times even rapid—progress thus appeared to be the hallmark of the American experience. Moreover, while conservative traditions in the European context had been associated with and promulgated by aristocratic milieus, at least until the early 20th century, such milieus were conspicuously lacking in the American context. However, all of these concerns and doubts notwithstanding, by the 1950s the major formative forces of modern American conservatism had emerged, notably in reaction to the dangers to the status quo they associated with the rise of Communism and the beginning Cold War. There are three main strands of conservatism that are distinguishable at this point, and as we will see, their legacy would come to shape the conservative tradition for decades to come (see Allitt 2009, pp. 158–183).

First of all, there were anticommunists, who, like Max Eastman, often featured a communist past themselves but had forcefully reneged on their former leftist leanings in their single-minded hostility to an expansionist, if not imperialist, communism. In itself, the ideological profile of this group was rather shallow because it amounted to something like a single-issue conservatism, but during the Cold War, their political impact was significant, tying the conservative tradition to what then Republican President Eisenhower famously referred to as the military–industrial complex. Furthermore, early on this group provided the common denominator and thus acted as ideological mediator between the other two strands considered here. First, there were those who saw in communism, first and foremost, the vision of a planned economy and one variant of collectivism (fascism being the other). The main concern of these *libertarian conservatives* (not to be equated with libertarians more generally, who cannot be summarily subsumed under the ideological rubric of conservatism) was expressed seminally by Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek in *The Road to Serfdom* (2001), published in 1944: The West may have won the war, but the real danger lay in the adoption of ideas about planning, expansionary social policy, and a build-up of state structures generally. Collectivism had lost on the battlefield, or was at least contained in its communist guise, but its ideas had diffused successfully into liberal democracies endangering the free-market societies associated with them. Early on, this strand was exemplified by the works of Austrian émigrés Ludwig von Mises and the aforementioned Hayek, who had moved to Chicago in the early 1950s, as well as the young American economist Murray Rothbard, who would become a standard-bearer for the libertarian movement. As

one might already infer from this transition, the libertarian strand of conservatism was paramount to what in European contexts would be called neoliberalism, focusing on functioning markets, a state that would enable such markets but not encroach unduly upon economic liberties of individuals and enterprises.

On the other hand, there were those who in the scholarship on American conservatism are typically referred to as *traditionalists*, such as Peter Viereck, Lionel Trilling, Kendall Willmore, and, by far not the least, Russell Kirk. Despite the fact that not all of its representatives identified explicitly as religious, the traditionalist strand of conservatism was suffused with the spirit of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Religiosity in general had been on the rebound in postwar America, and for traditionalists, one reason why religion had become more pertinent again was the very experience of World War II, the Shoah, and now the Cold War. All of the latter confirmed to them that, despite all the shallow talk of liberal progress, sheer evil continued to exist—a primordial evil, which believers traced back to the notion of original sin. For traditionalists, communism signified a broader insight, namely the fact that humans could forever become corrupted, and below the slim surface of civilizational restraint lay the abyss of atrocities and chaos (see Hallowell 1950). Consequently, Viereck, in his influential *Conservatism Revisited*, succinctly wrote that conservatism was but “the political secularization of the doctrine of original sin” (Viereck 1949, p. 30). This traditionalist conservatism could also draw on the scholarship of European émigrés, most notably Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, who brought an appreciation of the ancient roots of conservative thought to the table and, by the same token, infused conservative traditionalism with a good measure of cultural pessimism. To them, the problem was not just the New Deal or FDR-liberalism but rather modernity as a whole (see Ott 2022). Still, others tried to establish different lineages, most notably among them Russell Kirk, whose *The Conservative Mind*, published in 1953, signified a real caesura in American conservative thought. It made the case that the American experience was actually less Lockean than Burkean, and with Burke as a theoretical resource, Kirk put forward a vision of American conservatism that was not destitute, forlorn, or world-weary but, rather, fiercely invested in protecting this Burkean America against its detractors (see Nash 2014, pp. 104–111). Kirk even included something like a conservative gospel, which comprised the ideas that a divine intent ultimately ruled the world, political problems were at heart moral problems, society naturally consisted of hierarchical strata and was in need of leadership, and “tradition and sound prejudice provide checks upon man’s anarchic impulse” (Kirk 1953, pp. 7–8).

All of these camps could easily agree on their anticommunism, but beyond this agreement there were great and lasting tensions, if not outright contradictions: The libertarians leaned much more toward the individual and its liberties when it came to their philosophical commitments, whereas traditionalists emphasized community, tradition, morality, and order, which, in their view, philosophically and historically preceded all liberties. More concretely, libertarians were clearly the champions of the capitalist market systems and the liberties it arguably granted to those subject to it. Traditionalists, in contrast, harbored significant skepticism with regard to the materialism and the individualism fostered by capitalism, and the idea of an ever-expanding realm of the economic was anathema to them. The respective debates are

far from trivial, and the crucial role that William Buckley, Jr., played for American conservatism lies not only in his own talents as a writer and thinker but also in the fact that as founder of *National Review* in 1955, he designed the journal to give room to each of these camps and let them hash out their disputes in front of an ever-growing audience of conservative readers (see Syndikus 2021). In the early 1960s, *National Review* was an established journal with a significant number of subscribers. However, the debate between the two major camps, libertarians and traditionalists, had grown somewhat stale, not the least because it mostly took place at a high degree of philosophical abstraction. Beyond conservative core milieus, few were interested in intellectual disputes over the relative merits of market capitalism and how it, in turn, threatened virtue and tradition.

Three factors kept the burgeoning conservative tradition from stalling at that point. First, there was Frank Meyer's highly influential attempt to put the debate between libertarians and traditionalists to rest by developing a "fusionist" framework that sought to do justice to both camps and show that that relation was not mutually exclusive but rather complementary to the point that one presupposed the other (see Meyer 1962). Concretely, the virtue so dear to the traditionalists could only develop on the basis of freedom, which in turn presupposed some basal order and was in need of orientation in order to become virtuous and not fall prey to permissiveness. By the end of the decade, when Meyer, who was an editor at *National Review* and a former communist, published *The Conservative Mainstream* (1969), fusionism had become just that, mainstream—although not for very long.

The second factor was the rise of Milton Friedman as a public intellectual who refined the libertarian conservative case through his sheer eloquence and by applying what Europeans call neoliberal ideas to concrete circumstances. While the Misesians debated the nature of freedom and economic man, Friedman in his bestseller *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) enumerated a list of government functions of the United States that the state could and should simply shed. Here was a libertarian conservative who offered practical knowledge, not the least to political elites who were looking for viable alternatives to postwar liberalism. Consequently, Friedman also was part of the third factor that energized American conservatism, namely Barry Goldwater's campaign for the presidency, in which Friedman acted as economic advisor.

Goldwater's candidly conservative agenda that would cut all kinds of subsidies, lower taxes, and reform Social Security, but which also contained barely veiled racist and white supremacist elements, was roundly rejected at the polls when the electorate gave Johnson a massive victory in 1964. But there was still a detectable Goldwater effect for conservatism (see Perlstein 2001). Although Goldwater had lost in a landslide, at least now conservatives had a champion of their cause, who, in turn, showed a distinct openness for the input of intellectual conservatism (see Nash 2014, p. 282). Goldwater even had *The Conscience of a Conservative* published under his name in 1960, although the book was actually written by traditionalist conservative Brent Bozell, Jr. Pat Buchanan, who would become an important part of the conservative tradition himself, later said, "*The Conscience of a Conservative* was our new testament. [...] For those of us wandering in the arid desert of Eisenhower Republicanism it hit like a rifle shot" (cited in Allitt 2009, p. 188). Thus,

the Goldwater moment proved to have a galvanizing and mobilizing effect, which became fully visible only toward the end of the decade: While conservatism had been an intellectual tradition until then, it now began to become a movement as well, taking root in book clubs, the subscribers of *National Review*, and organizations such as Young Americans for Freedom, which played an important role in the Goldwater campaign (see Schoenwald 2001, pp. 221–250). Moreover, there was the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, founded in the 1950s by Buckley, which became an ever more important factor in college campus politics—which in turn became more and more important over the course of the 1960s, leading to the culmination point of 1968.

The events of 1968 proved to the conservatives that their concerns about the demise of capitalism and the breakdown of civilization were far from unfounded. On the contrary, the student movement in the United States and elsewhere seemed to be taking aim both at market capitalism and traditional forms of morality, family, and community. It also ushered in a new era of conservative theorizing dominated by what would come to be called neoconservatism. Neoconservatives, including Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Bell, had typically been socialized on the left; they were, according to the famous aperçu by William Buckley, Jr., “liberals mugged by reality.” In fact, Bell had been the editor of a volume called *The Radical Right* in 1964, in which many of the contributors went so far as to suggest that conservatism should not be treated as an ideological perspective but rather as a clinical condition. By the end of the decade, when he published his seminal article “The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,” he had settled for a decidedly different view and moved from left-wing liberalism to conservatism (Bell 1976). The move was motivated less by the sheer attractiveness of conservatism than by what Bell viewed as a profound value change within liberalism that triggered its descent into hedonistic permissiveness. Several aspects delineated neoconservatives from their predecessors.

First, many of them held positions in academia, and so neoconservatism could claim academic bona fides, presenting its theses in the vocabulary of sociology and other social sciences. Second, their approach to the problem of modernity was much more practical and concrete, thus following the lead of Friedman’s public intellectualism: They talked about causes and remedies regarding urban decay, the concerns of school politics, and what mass society did to personality structures, thus becoming much more amenable to debates ranging beyond the usual conservative circles. Their outlook was still somewhat fusionist but with a decidedly traditionalist inflection. Theirs was a cultural agenda, and they were keenly aware of the corrosive effects of consumer capitalism: If the hedonism and the weak egos of the young were really the problem, then it might make sense to consider the effects of manipulative market strategies, implanting ever new needs into the minds of consumers indispensable to contemporary capitalism as one of the causes, as Bell famously argued in *The Cultural Contradictions*. Irving Kristol, the spiritus rector of neoconservatism and founding editor (together with Bell) of its major outlet *The Public Interest*, was equally concerned about capitalist corrosiveness and accordingly only extended *Two Cheers for Capitalism*. Its corporate version in the 1970s no longer served as a school of virtue in the view of Kristol, who even singled out Hayek’s

rejection of the notion of “just deserts” as tearing apart the very fabric of capitalist society (see Kristol 1978).

Nevertheless, as has been pointed out by many commentators, conservatives’ position remained riddled with inconsistencies because their reservations about capitalism translated only into feeble pleas for reform and left the fundamental tension they clearly saw ultimately untouched (see Habermas 1985; Lorig 1988). Nor did the ascendancy of neoconservatism overcome the tensions within conservatism more generally. However, although these heterogeneities are important, it is also important to note that, true to its deeply reactive nature, American conservatism was galvanized and consolidated by potent enemies, i.e., communism abroad and liberalism at home, and this opposition plastered over many of the internal rifts. Finally, while early American conservatism often ventured into overtly reactionary territory calling for a rollback of liberal reform, neoconservatives were adamant in defending the New Deal reforms, thus performing a characteristic conservative move in “canonizing of the once heretical,” as English conservative Quintin Hogg once put it. Their targets were the reforms of the Great Society of the Johnson administration² and an overall spiritual crisis that manifested itself in the outbursts of 1968 and beyond, threatening the status quo that had been built in large part by the New Deal coalition.

Meanwhile, the relationship between the conservative (intellectual) movement and its political arm had turned cooler again after the Goldwater moment. Nixon ran on a law-and-order campaign and promised to quell public unrest, but when in power, he managed to alienate almost every strand of conservatism. Anticommunists abhorred his exit from Vietnam and the beginning of ping-pong diplomacy with communist China; the libertarians noted with increasing alarm that Nixon not only introduced the Environmental Protection Agency and at least tried to introduce the Family Assistance Plan but even publicly acknowledged in 1971 that “We are all Keynesians now.” Traditionalist defenders of the public good stood aghast as Nixon’s infractions became public in the Watergate scandal, severely damaging not only Nixon as a person but also the presidency. But even as Nixon left the office disgraced, the stagflation crises of the 1970s had already begun to tarnish Keynesianism as the dominant paradigm in economic theory and policy. Toward the end of the decade, the Carter administration epitomized the exhaustion of New Deal liberalism as the president himself seemed to intone the tune of the neoconservatives when he decried the “crisis of confidence” that had taken hold of the country, thus paving the way for Ronald Reagan’s landslide victory in 1980.

But aside from the aforementioned points, the Nixon campaigns and presidency signify a pivotal moment in the trajectory of American conservatism and the GOP because Nixon’s reelection in 1972 marked the moment when the party could reap the full rewards of its so-called southern strategy, which bears a little more elaboration at this point. The beginnings of the major realignment that took place over the course of the 1960s and was completed in 1972 lay in the so-called Dixiecrat revolt of the postwar era when conservative and segregationist southern Democrats chal-

² The Great Society was the label under which the Johnson administration in particular passed numerous reforms designed to tackle social deprivation, protect civil rights, and bring about racial justice (see Milkis 2005).

lenged northern liberal Democrats. The dispute was ostensibly about states' rights but in fact was all about race relations in the South that were characterized by Jim Crow laws, segregationism, and (Black) voter suppression. This conflict escalated further as the national Democratic Party came to embrace the civil rights movement over the course of the 1960s, thus alienating southern segregationist Democrats such as the Alabama governor George Wallace, who challenged Johnson for the nomination as presidential candidate in 1964 and even ran as a third-party candidate in 1968—winning no less than five southern states. These fissures over the issue of race that became apparent within the Democratic Party provided an opening for conservative Republicans, who saw an opportunity to end a decade-long Democratic supremacy over the South. The key for what came to be called the “southern strategy” was race, as the conservatives within the party of Abraham Lincoln sought to connect to “culturally conservative” Democrats and their base. “In race, there was an easy issue around which to build a coalition and the conservatives in the party were both well-positioned and ideologically disposed to exploit its tactic of abandoning the black vote in favor of, in Goldwater’s words, ‘hunting where the ducks are’” (Lowndes 2008, p. 61). In fact, “race and conservatism had become elements of the same political logic in the Goldwater campaign” (ibid., p. 75). The Arizona governor conspicuously voted against the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and although his campaign ultimately failed, as noted above, he put the GOP on the map in the South. Nixon would build on this in 1968, signaling his sympathies for the discontents of desegregation but casting himself as a more moderate and respectable alternative to the segregationist radicalism of the Wallace campaign. The “southern strategy” then came to full fruition in 1972, when the New Deal coalition as the base of postwar Democratic hegemony had completely fallen apart and, conversely, Nixon, who in the meantime had adopted a strong stance against “busing” as part of desegregation, won the entire South. This laid the groundwork for the victory of Reagan in 1980, who “could now seamlessly combine conservatism, racism and anti-government populism in majoritarian discourse—and with it formed the modern Republican regime” (ibid., 160). Race, thus, inhabits a crucial place in this modern Republican regime and continues to do so in our present day (see Osgood and White 2014).

2.2 Conservatism in Germany from the Postwar Era to the “Wende”: Christian Democratic Beginnings, Technocratic Conservatism, and the Rise of the Neoconservatives

The first thing to note is that there is a vague correspondence between the starting points of postwar conservatism in both contexts. Still, while American conservatism was marginalized by hegemonic liberalism and the sheer lack of an intellectual tradition, German conservatism was discredited by the complicity of some of its strands in the rise of National Socialism. Therefore, the intellectually and politically conservative milieus in postwar Germany hardly dared to refer to themselves as conservatives (on postwar conservatism, see Schildt 1998; Steber 2017; Hochgeschwender 2020). This had a lasting impact as it steered conservatives and their political ambitions

into parties that were constituted as Christian Democratic ones, i.e., the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU).

Christian Democratic ideology was in large part shaped by political practitioners, but especially in the early decades of West Germany, it had a distinguishable identity. It drew on religious notions such as subsidiarity and Catholic social thought more generally, while emphasizing the overcoming of societal cleavages through the integrative powers of religion (Invernizzi Accetti 2019). Christian Democrats were centrists, and this made for a significant degree of moderation in their political outlook. Furthermore, in contrast to the situation of conservatism in the immediate postwar years in the United States, Christian Democrats were in power until the end of the 1960s, which contributed to a stability-oriented and overall affirmative stance that stands in sharp contrast to the oppositional stance of a marginalized minority that American conservatism cultivated well into the Eisenhower years.

Still, in the conservative intellectual circles beyond Christian democracy, German conservatism developed a world-weary elegiac strand that drew on the cultural pessimism of a line of tradition that extended from Oswald Spengler to Martin Heidegger and had much in common with the darker side of American traditionalism and its reservations regarding secularization (see Lenk 1989). Here, some older traditions of German conservatism lived on as modernity, technology, and liberalism were problematized as key ingredients of a history marked by decadence and decay. In the context of U.S. conservatism we noted the antinomy between libertarians and traditionalists pervading the entire tradition, but while analogous tensions exist in the German context, the respective centrifugal tendencies were arrested to a significant degree early on: Key to this containment of a potentially disintegrative dynamic were two factors. First, the equivalent of the libertarian tradition in the United States was represented by ordoliberalism in the German context, which was much more amenable to “traditionalist” conservative sensibilities (see Biebricher 2022). Furthermore, the formula of the “social market economy” pacified the conflict between the various orientations because it offered something to each of them.

Toward the end of the 1950s, the old conservative critique of civilization gave way in an almost dialectical twist to a strand of conservatism that has no equivalent in the U.S. context, referred to as “technocratic conservatism” (see Lenk 1989). Its main representatives were Hans Freyer and his former students Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Schelsky. Gehlen and Schelsky now embraced technological progress wholeheartedly and envisioned a postideological form of expert rule according to the logic inherent to the new technological civilization and its requirements (*Sachzwänge*) (see Seville 2017, pp. 49–88). Still, as Jürgen Habermas pointed out, technological conservatism was willing to accept technological and societal modernity only as long as the subversive potentials of cultural modernity were effectively neutralized and modern man was firmly immersed into a set of stable institutions and systems that kept his hedonistic and destructive potentials in check (see Habermas 1985).

The year 1968 arguably had an even stronger impact on German conservatism than on its U.S. counterpart because in the aftermath, the Christian Democrats for the first time were relegated to the opposition on the federal level. This triggered a process of conservative soul searching that was channeled into a revitalization and modernization of the CDU as well as Christian democratic conservatism by the new

party chairman Helmut Kohl and party manager Kurt Biedenkopf in the 1970s (see Bösch 2016, pp. 33–42, 111–115). Part of this process was an explicit attempt to link to an intellectual conservative milieu, which, at this point, had become dominated by self-described neoconservatives as well. Although the differences between German and American neoconservatives must not be neglected (see *ibid.*; Lorig 1988), they are outweighed by the correspondences: German thinkers such as Herrmann Lübke and Odo Marquard left behind their earlier leftist commitments in their turn toward conservatism, and all of the German neoconservatives, including Günter Rohrmoser and Robert Spaemann, displayed a pronounced hostility toward the “excesses” of 1968 while defending the status quo shaped in the postwar years (see Hacke 2006). In contrast to the technological conservatism that was past its zenith in the 1970s, neoconservatives renewed conservative skepticism regarding progress, including its technological kind (see Lübke 1981). They were also alarmed by the value changes brought about by the Silent Revolution (Inglehart) and concurred with their American counterparts in the concern over the growing “ungovernability” of Western democratic societies articulated pointedly by Samuel Huntington (see Crozier et al. 1975), as expectations and demands attributed to the political system seemed to grow endlessly. Similar to the United States, the social climate changed in favor of conservatism in Germany over the course of the 1970s, ushering in a change of power on the federal level when Kohl claimed the chancellorship in 1982.

3 American and German Conservatism, 1980–2000

3.1 From Reagan to Bush: Between Neoliberalism and Culture Wars

Reagan’s victory was built on neoconservative ideas along the lines of Irving Kristol, the electoral support of the Moral Majority that had been formed by evangelical minister Jerry Falwell in 1979, and the economics of Arthur Laffer, who provided Reagan with a simple albeit scientifically questionable rationale for tax cuts and supply-side policies more generally (see Hayward 2001). When he assumed his office, Reagan, who would later be lauded as “the Great Communicator,” was also the great mediator between the various factions of the conservative movement. Libertarians, evangelicals, and neoconservatives were equally enthralled. In retrospect, Reagan has been thoroughly mythologized by conservatives; however, by the mid-1980s, the Reagan administration was frowned upon by almost every conservative faction (see Hoeveler 1991).

To begin with, Reagan had been elected on the basis of the neoconservative playbook, a playbook that contained considerable concerns about the cultural contradictions of capitalism, to put it in the words of Bell. Still, during the 1980s, the powers of American capitalism were unleashed in an unprecedented manner, and the decade reached new heights of hedonism and materialism. Neoconservative writers such as Michael Novak in his *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (1982) adjusted their skepticism during the 1980s and sought to reaffirm the view of capitalism as a school of virtue that did not exclusively rely on individual greed. However, in the age of hostile takeovers and buyouts, it took a healthy dose of autosuggestion

to believe that. Ultimately, neoconservatives kept their distance from the neoliberal Friedmanite capitalism of the Reagan era and its blatant materialism. Similarly, evangelicals who had placed their hope in Reagan were increasingly disappointed. To be sure, Reagan's rhetoric was that of a social conservative (at times with overtly racist undertones, as in his invectives against "welfare queens"), but there was no significant backlash to the societal liberalization of the 1970s. The legalization of abortion that had prompted many on the religious right to get involved in conservative politics remained in place. Traditionalists, in turn, were dismayed by the overall attitude Reagan seemed to project: There was little talk of preservation or skepticism about the future. To be sure, Reagan could also speak in the terms of an "Evil Empire" and thus cater to both evangelicals and traditionalists. In general, however, his rhetoric was far too upbeat and almost giddy when it came to future progress. Reagan won his reelection on the famous campaign slogan "Morning in America" that epitomized optimism, and in his second inaugural speech he quoted Thomas Paine: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." Conservative intellectual George Will was not the only one who considered this a decidedly unconservative motto (see Rodgers 2011, p. 26). Out of the resentment and disappointment of the Reagan presidency emerged a new faction that came to be referred to as paleoconservatives, which—as the label suggests—had an almost fundamentalist thrust, harking back to the Founding Fathers and their vision of America and also containing a strongly nativist and at times overtly racist dimension (see Wolterman 1993). According to this view, the United States had originally been designed to keep power in check through the separation of powers and a strong federalist element. "Yet America today, with its immense federal government and its activist judiciary, had concentrated power in a small, centralized group, becoming more an oligarchy than a democracy. Only by seizing power back from this oligarchy, reducing the scale of government, reasserting states' rights, and reverting to a regime of low taxation could citizens regain their freedom" (Allitt 2009, pp. 247–248). As one paleoconservative put it, "Again and again, we have seen the self-government of the American people frustrated by the few, the oligarchy [...] the American people, everywhere, have ceased to believe that the government they elect is really theirs or that they will be allowed to make the institutions ostensibly theirs respond to their will" (Wilson 1999, p. 180).

While many currents of conservatism were disappointed by Reagan, at least the libertarian wing was content with the supply-side aspects of Reaganomics. Reagan's tax cuts were highly popular, and respective commitments to lower taxes thus became ever more engrained in the minds of conservative politicians (see Prasad 2006). However, Reagan's rationale behind the massive reduction of state revenue brought about by the tax cuts early on in his administration extended beyond the stimulation of the economy. The strategy came to be referred to as "starving the beast"—and it failed massively (see Frum 1994). The Reagan administration had been making a wager: It was reducing revenue through tax cuts and at the same time oversaw the largest peacetime military buildup in the history of the country. The overall effect could only be an ever-expanding deficit and the accumulation of debt. Reaganites had hoped that the gigantic proportions of the fiscal deficit would produce sufficient pressure on lawmakers to pass far-reaching reforms of welfare programs and other "wasteful" government programs and thus retrench the state and reduce outlays (see

Prasad 2006). However, at the very most, expenditures did not rise as fast as they had during the 1970s. To be sure, welfare state programs were cut and defunded, leading to a rise in poverty, but the big entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare continued to see rising expenditure levels (see Pierson 1991).

By the mid-1980s, the fiscal hawks among (libertarian) conservatives who were less interested in cutting taxes than in balancing the budget (not the least because of the moral dimension of austerity) had become alarmed by the skyrocketing deficits and debt that were left unaddressed by Congress. As we will see momentarily, this part of the Reagan legacy defined conservative politics during the 1990s and beyond to a significant degree. As David Frum noted in 1994, “Conservatives have lost their zeal for advocating minimal government not because they have decided that big government is desirable, but because they have wearily concluded that trying to reduce it is hopeless, and that even the task of preventing its further growth will probably exceed their strength” (Frum 1994, p. 3). To be sure, when former Vice President Bush assumed the nomination as a candidate for the presidency, he needed to assure the party base of his conservative credentials and did so by making the infamous “Read my lips” statement about not raising taxes. Still, although it helped him in the short run, it would ultimately doom his reelection bid in the eyes of conservatives because the administration did indeed raise some taxes in 1990, to the outcry of conservatives within and outside the party.

The twofold conclusion to the failure of Reagan to cut the state down to size and Bush’s ill-advised commitment not to raise taxes was the following: First, only reduced taxes were good taxes in the conservative playbook from now on; raising taxes became utter anathema. Second, as the decade progressed, it became clearer and clearer that the domain of fiscal and financial policy, the promise to reduce the size of government, etc., had turned into a terrain that was less and less attractive for conservatives. There were a number of reasons for this latter assessment: When Clinton assumed the presidency in 1992, it was his administration that had to deal with the towering debt Reagan and Bush had left behind. Clinton’s “New Democrats” pursued a fiscally conservative policy and managed to balance the budget in the second half of the decade, so attacking them on their economic/fiscal record became increasingly unviable. This had already dawned on Newt Gingrich, who became Speaker of the House in 1994, when he got into a standoff with the White House over the budget, which led to the government shutdown of 1995/1996. The public blamed Republicans for the shutdown, and they were reminded once more that economic and financial policy were no longer the ideal terrain on which to contest Democrats, except for the persistent call for tax cuts, of course (see Gould 2014, p. 323). Still, if it became increasingly difficult to paint their political opponents as profligate and irresponsible big spenders, what would be an alternative adversary that could energize and mobilize conservatives? There was added urgency to this question because conservatives also had lost their arch-antagonist, communism, when the Soviet Union collapsed.

The answer was prefigured by the populist tendency inherent in both paleo- and neoconservatism and, furthermore, by what had already begun in the mid-1980s, i.e., the “culture wars.” Conservatives both within and outside the party came to espouse a culturalization of political conflict over the course of the 1990s, shifting

the debates away from socioeconomic bread-and-butter issues, where the distinction between “left” and “right” became exceedingly difficult, and moving them into cultural terrain. The new battleground became questions of family breakup, unintegrated immigrants, the Pledge of Allegiance, sex education, the rights of gay individuals, and—of course—abortion. Under the spiritual and political leadership of Gingrich, this culturalist orientation merged with a decidedly populist zeal, already on display in Gingrich’s famous “Contract with America” revealed ahead of the victorious 1994 midterms (in which, notably, cultural issues were almost entirely absent; see Gould 2014, p. 321). The populist politics of culture that emerged toward the end of the decade had a number of advantages for conservatives: First, they cost much less political capital than trying to reform Social Security and retrench the state. Second, they made for much easier political distinction between conservatives and “liberals” than economic policy. Third, in the medium term, cultural politics opened up socially conservative ethnic minorities as a reservoir of potential Republican voters—those who would not vote for conservatives for the sake of the deficit but would do so for the sake of banning abortion. Finally, and somewhat paradoxically, the politics of culture also enabled conservatives to obliquely pursue a particular politics of race by framing racial politics in terms of cultural politics.

How successful this strategy proved to be for conservatives was analyzed retrospectively by Thomas Frank in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (2004): Voters who did not benefit remotely from Republican economic and fiscal policy still chose to support political conservatives, citing cultural issues and values as the main reason. Still, this shift toward the culturalization of political conflict and the populist tone also entailed a growing radicalization of the party and the conservative landscape in general. In 1991, Pat Buchanan decided to run against Bush in the Republican primaries, citing disappointment over the president’s moderate policies. He campaigned on a platform of anti-internationalism, anti-immigration, economic protectionism and social archconservatism, including positions hostile to gay rights as well as feminism. The campaign slogan was simple and clear: America First. It was paleoconservative in its almost literal sense, harking back to the pre-WW II isolationist era and to the Old Right. Although he failed in this attempt, his support among the party base on the right was sufficiently strong to force the Bush campaign to offer him a prime-time slot at the Republican convention in 1992. And Buchanan used it: “There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself—for this war is for the soul of America. And in that struggle for the soul of America, Clinton and Clinton are on the other side; and George Bush is on our side” (Buchanan 1992). In 1992, this abrasive and populist tone as well as the agenda of a culture war were still frowned upon by the Bush campaign and large parts of the party establishment. By the end of the decade, however, Buchanan’s message of ultrapartisanship and a culture war that had to be waged had become mainstream in the Republican Party and its base (Gould 2014, p. 315). In 1995, Irving Kristol’s son William was one of the co-founding editors of the *Weekly Standard*, which aimed to contribute to the revitalization and popularization of a respectable and moderate intellectual conservatism. However, when it came to the fight over the soul of contemporary conservatism, the *Weekly Standard*, which featured journalists such as future *New*

York Times columnists David Brooks and Bret Stephens, as well as future Fox TV host Tucker Carlson, lost decidedly against the anti-establishment right-wing populism of Buchanan and Gingrich, the flames of which were fanned by conservative talk radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and, of course, Fox News, which began its “fair and balanced” broadcasting in 1996.

At the end of the 1990s, conservatism in its several varieties was firmly entrenched in the political and intellectual landscape of the United States. There was a vast infrastructure of think tanks, journals, and mass media outlets (such as *The American Spectator*), which catered to the various milieus from the libertarians to the evangelical right. Conservatism, thus, was fully established as a political actor that would reclaim the presidency in 2000 and command majorities in both chambers of Congress. It was also an intellectual force that kept producing everything from grand designs to policy briefs, and it was also a grassroots movement with a base that was energized, mobilizable, and—generally—veered to the right. Moreover, while the pugnacious hyperpartisanship of a Buchanan and the resulting polarization were still predominantly a phenomenon among political elites, the radicalization of American conservatism was thus well underway.

3.2 German Conservatism from *Geistig-Moralischer Wende* to Intellectual Burnout

Juxtaposing the trajectory of American and German conservatism during the same period, what is most striking are the dissimilarities that become visible from the very beginning: When Kohl became chancellor in 1983, promising a moral and spiritual renewal (*geistig-moralische Wende*), many assumed, hoped, or feared that Germany would experience something like Thatcherism in the United Kingdom or a Reagan Revolution. But even if the Reagan Revolution in some respects was much less revolutionary than myth has it, in Germany there was nothing comparable. To be sure, there were different accentuations in finance policy and attempts to rein in deficits and debt, but the scope and intensity of the advertised moral and spiritual “turn-around” remained extremely limited, and by the mid-1980s the agenda, if it ever was one, was dead in the water (see Biebricher 2018). Conservative politics consisted mostly of muddling through and dealing—unsuccessfully—with a lackluster labor market. Things were different in the realm of intellectual conservatism, which had been ascending ever since the early 1970s. Over the course of the 1970s, neoconservatives had debated the effects of 1968 and the postmaterialist turn of the New Left. When conservatism was back in power at the federal level, expectations were naturally high—and the disappointment even deeper when the Kohl government did not deliver on their intimations of a grand policy reversal. As noted, American conservatives had their misgivings about the Reagan presidency, but there was a much more intense disdain among German non-Christian Democratic conservative intellectuals for the Kohl government. Günter Rohrmoser, arguably a conservative thinker on the verge of authoritarianism, even published a book about the Kohl government tellingly entitled *Das Debakel. Wo bleibt die Wende?* [*The Debacle*] (Rohrmoser 1985). While the neoconservatives did not hide their disappointment about the government, they continued to engage in public debates with intellectuals representing

the (New) Left—first and foremost, representatives of the Frankfurt School, and Jürgen Habermas in particular. In other words, while political conservatism by the end of the decade had lost much of the momentum it had been building during its opposition years, intellectual conservatism exhibited considerable vitality, with the Ritter School (referring to Münster philosopher Joachim Ritter) being the dominant, albeit not the only, current (see Lenk 1989; Biebricher 2018). What Ritter’s students such as Herrmann Lübke, Robert Spaemann, and Odo Marquard had achieved by the end of the 1980s was to spell out and consolidate the agenda of what came to be called “liberal conservatism” (*Liberalkonservatismus*), which explicitly sought to distance itself from the authoritarianism of the New Right represented by Armin Mohler and others (see Hacke 2006).

The 1990s were a very particular decade for German conservatism because, just like all other conservatisms, it lost a “valuable” adversary and boogeyman in communism; but, of course, in the eyes of most conservatives, this was a price well worth paying for German reunification. During this era, the divergences between American and German conservatism became even more pronounced. In intellectual conservatism, reunification and the regaining of full national sovereignty contributed to the rise of a more nationalist and revisionist discourse on the right intent to leave behind the postwar era and turn Germany into a “normal” country again, unencumbered by “guilt complexes” derived from the past (see Schwilk 1994). This was far from unheard of in former West Germany, but after reunification, such nationalist discourses merged with radical right-wing milieus from the former East Germany and spawned more militant and aggressive positions, corresponding with the (short-lived) ascendance of authoritarian political parties such as *Die Republikaner* and the *Deutsche Volksunion* (Pflüger 1994). Still, while the 1990s saw the rise and consolidation of these milieus and discourses, overall they remained a marginal phenomenon. The hegemonic discourse in the spectrum right of the center remained liberal conservatism, so there was no intensification or radicalization that was comparable to the zeal of American conservatism in the midst of the culture wars of the 1990s. However, this hegemony began to wane for two reasons. First, liberal conservatives were lacking a next generation of scholars and thinkers who would carry on the torch, and second, the debates with Frankfurt School thinkers that had given intellectual conservatism a significant degree of public exposure ceded in the 1990s as Habermas and other critical theorists came to think of neoliberalism as the more pressing challenge.

Politically, conservatism was certainly affected by the fall of the Wall because it lost one of its most reliable unifying bonds; consequently, there was one wing of the party drifting toward a neoliberal orientation while traditional Christian Democrats maintained more centrist positions, slowly but surely losing ground within the party. Still, the story of the CDU in the 1990s is not one of disintegration, and even less so is it one about radicalization, as is the case in conservative politics in the United States. Rather, it is a story of ossification and exhaustion of a party that had been in power for 16 years by 1998—a party that was drawing less and less on the resources of intellectual conservatism and thus was ultimately unable to renew itself and consequently lost to the Social Democrats in 1998.

4 American and German Conservatism Since 2000

4.1 From Bush to Trump: The Radicalization Spiral

George W. Bush had campaigned as a “uniter, not a divider,” promising modesty in foreign relations and brandishing a so-called compassionate conservatism. However, after the slim and highly controversial election victory in 2000, the Bush administration proved to be especially compassionate with regard to those wealthy Americans who benefitted most from the tax cuts passed in the spirit of Reaganomics. The Republican Party gained the majority in the House and the Senate, and the GOP caucuses in both chambers continued to shift toward the right. The GOP politician Grover Norquist was remarkably successful in making Republican incumbents and candidates sign pledges in which they promised never to raise taxes. Those who were defiant had to reckon with the “Club for Growth” and other organisations vowing to finance “more conservative” primary challengers (see Gould 2014, p. 332). The result of the massive tax cuts was a return to Reaganite deficits and debt, which continued to rise in the aftermath of what left a massive imprint on the shape and form of American conservatism during the first decade of the 21st century, namely the attacks of 9/11. The attack and the response to it threw into sharp relief an aggressive nationalism including unwavering (rhetorical) support for the military with the implication that “liberals” were not supportive enough and not sufficiently patriotic (see Robin 2018). The fear of terrorism in general and Islamism in particular became part of the conservative repertoire of anxieties because 9/11 seemed to confirm the old conservative truth that true evil indeed did exist—and it spawned (or rekindled) conservative resentment that fused racist and anti-Muslim elements, thus affirming the crucial role that race plays in the imaginary of American conservatism.

Domestically, little of major substance happened after the tax cuts as the administration became embroiled with security issues at home and war abroad. The focus on the latter, i.e., the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, also contributed to the rise of the “neocons,” which became one of the dominant factions within intellectual conservatism and essentially consisted of a slightly younger cohort of neoconservatives focusing on foreign affairs (see Abrams 2010). The argument at the heart of their agenda contended that it was more important than ever to project American power globally because in a unipolar world, the United States could make a real difference and bring democracy and freedom to former tyrannies. Theirs was a view that stood in contrast to both the realist commitments of more traditional conservatives, who would emphasize a sober assessment of strictly national interests, and the isolationist leanings of paleoconservatives. It was neocons such as Irving Kristol’s son William and Robert Kagan who suggested that American soldiers in Iraq would be greeted as liberators. The neocon creed was Wilsonian in its thrust to make the world safe for democracy, but with a conservative edge that justified the use of military force to that end. Neocons had thought of post-Cold War America as complacent and inward-looking; 9/11 provided the kind of wake-up call that they had been hoping for (see Robin 2018). They were the one conservative faction that thrived during the first half of the decade. The other faction consisted of evangelical Christians who were particularly content with Bush’s appointments to the Supreme Court and other

federal courts and who became one of the most formidable forces in the culture wars of the 2000s, which featured, prominently, same-sex marriage as well as other issues such as intelligent design, gun control, and abortion (see Dombrink 2015; see also Pickel and Pickel 2023 in this special issue). This alliance proved to be potent enough to ensure Bush's reelection, as the militarization of conflict abroad and the culturalization of conflict at home turned out to be a winning formula for Republicans. Still, the star of the neocons was already about to descend; as 2004 marked the beginning of the Iraqi uprising, and as the Bush administration wound toward its end, neocon bravado ceded to a concern about imperial overreach of a nation engaged in two military occupations abroad and, simultaneously, was confronted with a financial crisis that would bring about what came to be called the Great Recession. Importantly, the neocon hubris quietly fueled the resentment of paleoconservatives such as Buchanan and his compatriots. Buchanan had already condemned the first Iraq War as reckless and unnecessary, and as the costly quagmire of the second Iraq War wore on, he became more and more adamant that true conservatives had to refocus their priorities on domestic politics (see Buchanan 2007). Thus, neoconservative overreach swelled the ranks of paleoconservatives who yearned for a return to the splendid isolation espoused by many among the Old Right, a yearning that was to be addressed later by Donald Trump. In any case, at the end of the second Bush administration, the GOP lay in tatters. Bush's domestic agenda had consisted of one single issue during the second term, the privatization of Social Security, thus abandoning the wisdom of the post-Reagan era that big entitlement programs are costly to dismantle, and despite majorities in both chambers, the endeavor came to nothing (see Gould 2014, p. 337). Cultural wars simmered on but were eclipsed by the dire situation in Iraq, the responsibility for which was placed on a deeply unpopular outgoing president and his party (see Dombrink 2015).

The GOP nomination in the presidential contest of 2008 was claimed by Bush's old rival, John McCain. For many commentators, his ultimate pick for vice presidential candidate signified the decline of the party and also a serious, respectable conservatism—although this process had been going on longer, as the preceding account shows. Sarah Palin had just become governor of Alaska and had very little experience in politics but a real knack for showmanship, and as a persona, she foreshadowed what would become a prevalent type of politician in the contemporary GOP: media-savvy political entrepreneurs brazenly defying norms to effect attention and unapologetically showcasing a “folksy” habitus designed to enthrall the Republican base. When McCain lost handily to Barack Obama, with Democrats retaining control of the House and Senate, there were commentators who were ready to write off the GOP and conservatism more generally, at least for the foreseeable future. Still, those obituaries were premature, although the resurrection of GOP conservatism from near death came at the cost of further radicalization (see Kabaservice 2012).

On February 19, 2009, a CNBC reporter named Rick Santelli went on a diatribe against one of the early measures of the Obama administration to deal with the fallout of the financial crisis. The short clip, in which he invited capitalists to a “Chicago Tea Party” (from where he was broadcasting), would come to have an electrifying effect on conservatives everywhere—the grassroots organizers, the bil-

lionaire financiers who would fund the efforts of Tea Partiers, and, not the least, the media corporations and figures, from Fox News's Glenn Beck to Rush Limbaugh, who became revered among Tea Partiers and, in turn, essentially cheered on the activists (see Jutel 2018). For the GOP, the rise of the Tea Party was a mixed blessing. To be sure, it made for a rather soft landing after a serious defeat in the elections that had left behind a demoralized party. Through the boost of the combination of conservative activists, media hype, and the national organisations and donors throwing their weight behind the movement, the Republican Party regained traction in opposing the bailout and stimulus packages of the Obama administration as well as, later on, the Affordable Care Act. All of these were major targets for Tea Partiers who strongly leaned toward the fiscally libertarian pole of the conservative spectrum, emphasizing reducing the size of government, cutting taxes, and, generally, scaling back the interventionist scope of state action. Still, beyond this, there was also the nostalgic, nationalist, and somewhat fundamentalist-reactionary streak to the movement that lamented the disfiguring of the United States, which had strayed from its traditions, morals, and religiosity, thus making the movement amenable to evangelical Christians and social conservatives more generally (see Skocpol and Williamson 2012). So in both the economic as well as the cultural dimension, the Tea Party in all its internal heterogeneity and inconsistency had an overall effect of pushing conservative politics and politicians to the right, as it promoted and supported "conservative" candidates in the primaries—which the party establishment viewed with some concern (see Blum 2020). The 2010 midterms gave the Republican Party a huge win, which was in part attributable to the momentum that the Tea Party movement as a whole had provided, and it ushered in a new Congressional caucus with a much more right-wing profile. "Republicans who stayed in office from the 111th to 112th Congress are all more conservative, mostly much more conservative, than the Democrats. Yet the Republicans newly elected in 2010 are even further to the right than their GOP predecessors. An amazing 77% of the newly arriving Republicans, including dozens of Tea Party-backed Republicans, are to the right of the typical Republican in the previous Congress—and many are to the right of almost all continuing Republicans" (Skocpol and Williamson 2012, p. 170). This had far-reaching consequences, as it especially committed incoming members of the Republican caucus to an uncompromising stance vis-à-vis Democrats and the president and, increasingly, pitted Tea Party-backed Republicans against the leadership of the new Speaker of the House, John Boehner (see *ibid.*). Boehner originally welcomed the endeavors of the Tea Party, but now he became embroiled with the spirits that he had summoned as budget deals were derailed by dissenters in the caucus and House Republicans (and senators under the leadership of Mitch McConnell) reverted to a politics of unrelenting opposition and obstruction. As McConnell put it in an interview with the *National Journal*, "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president" (McConnell 2010). This escalation of both economic as well as cultural issues driven by Tea Party-backed campaigning ultimately did not prove to be a winning formula for the GOP, as Obama won reelection against Mitt Romney in 2012. And if 2008 had been a reckoning for the Republican Party and the conservative movement, 2012 was even more so: The election had been considered thoroughly winnable

but was still lost summarily. While some pointed to the ideological gap between the candidate and the conservative base, others identified the drift to the right in cultural as well as economic matters as the core problem. Even more so than in 2008, the election showed that for young age cohorts, former wedge issues such as gay marriage simply were no longer wedge issues; many aspects of the culture wars seemed to have lost their veracity (see Dombrink 2015). Thus, 2012 left the party and the movement at a crossroads: Had the party become entangled too deeply in the right-wing radicalism of the Tea Party type, or, on the contrary, had it projected a centrist image embodied by Mitt Romney that was incapable of mobilizing the Republican base?³ Furthermore, should the GOP proceed to highlight cultural issues or economic issues, or a combination of the two? Finally, how could libertarian support for the free market and globalization be reconciled with traditionalist social conservatism, the perennial question at the heart of modern conservatism that had only ever been solved through temporary arrangements such as the fusionism of Meyer? American conservatism after 2012 and in the throes of Tea Party activism became more and more fragmented, a visible manifestation being the ousting of John Boehner as Speaker, who could no longer rein in the radical edges of his caucus in 2015. It was this state of affairs of a party and a movement experiencing massive centrifugal dynamics in the wake of two lost presidential elections, the Tea Party's call for a purer form of conservatism, and a concern among some of the functionaries and elected officials about the political costs this would incur that created the vacuum into which Donald Trump could step with his candidacy. Trump could win the nomination against all odds due to a multiply divided party and a movement with a formula that was mostly reminiscent of the Buchananite brand of paleo-conservatism: combining economic protectionist, antiglobalizing rhetoric with the themes of cultural anxiety over immigration (see Hacker and Pierson 2020). Thus, it is important to note that Trump did not come out of the blue to push the GOP in this direction. There were traditions in place he could latch onto, with paleoconservatism being channeled into his orbit not the least by Steve Bannon (see Drolet and Williams 2019). What was remarkable about Trump as a figure was that he could incorporate all the tensions that pervaded the intellectual territory of conservatism. He could evocate the plight of the victims of globalization and rail against global capitalist elites and do it from the speaker position of a billionaire whose main asset for his political career was the fact that he was a billionaire who had perfected "the art of the deal" (see Robin 2018). Trump defied the laws of political gravity by taking every side of an argument and constantly oscillating between them with impunity. Whereas others would have been accused of flip-flopping, Trump did not leave his critics enough time to make the claim because he had already moved on to making the next outrageous statement. In power, Trump pursued an economic nationalism that seldom bore fruit and did little to protect American workers; instead, he lowered taxes in the spirit of Ronald Reagan, even calling on Arthur Laffer as a consultant. Trump kept pursuing an anti-immigration agenda, including a wall at

³ See on these issues the Growth and Opportunity Project, commonly referred to as the GOP autopsy, initiated by the Republican Leadership Council under Reince Priebus. Available online at <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/624581-rnc-autopsy>.

the Mexican–American border, and pushed the party into an even more nativist if not overtly racist position, consecutively blurring the boundary between right-wing conservatism and right-wing extremist groups, as became evident in the events of January 6, 2021 (see Beiner 2019). He placated social conservatives and evangelical Christians in particular with his nominations for the Supreme Court, with the eventual result of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. The effect of the Trump administration for the Republican Party has been an even further radicalization because it was the pro-Trump faction that prevailed in the internal struggles over how to position the GOP vis-à-vis the controversial heritage of his presidency. For those who represent the tradition of moderate conservatism, the Republican Party less and less appears to be a viable political vehicle for their interests. It has turned into something else (see Brooks and Stephens 2023).

4.2 German Conservatism as Ultrapragmatism: The Politics of Perpetual Crisis Management and the Deprofiling of the CDU

For German conservatism, the first decade of the 21st century signified its further weakening as an intellectual force (see Nolte 2001) as the cohort of the classic exemplars of liberal conservatism grew old and new recruits to intellectual conservatism of whatever stripe proved difficult to find. Those who at least engaged in the quest for contemporary conservatism opted for a decidedly (neo)liberal agenda, which turned out to be in tune with the overall direction of organized conservatism, i.e., the CDU/CSU. The CDU in particular had witnessed a growing divergence between neoliberal currents and a waning Christian Democratic faction, and this process reached its culmination point with the Leipzig Program of 2003, which marked the victory of the neoliberal wing of the CDU/CSU over its rivals. Still, when this edgy neoliberalism that recommended massive reforms in health care, fiscal policy, and public finance almost cost the Christian Democrats the election of 2005, which it hardly could have lost, the momentum for reforms evaporated, and in the absence of intellectual conservatism as a viable resource, the reservoirs from which to replenish political conservatism dried up (see Biebricher 2018). The latter reinvented itself only with the onset of the financial crisis as a world view attuned to managing crises, which required careful and incremental action and abstained from entertaining any far-reaching agendas beyond calming the waters day after day. It was conservative politics out of the spirit of perpetual crisis, and the CDU/CSU emerged as a champion of these kinds of politics.

To be sure, the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) emerged as a competitor from the right in 2013 in response to the Eurozone crisis management of the Grand Coalition, but only months after it was formed, the Christian Democrats narrowly missed an absolute majority in the general election. From then on, conservative politics meant “asymmetric demobilization,” a resolutely centrist course, and the promise to the electorate that with conservatives in power, whatever crises were to emerge, their worst effects would be mitigated, if not entirely averted (see Jung 2019). Electorally, this was a remarkably successful strategy, but it was not sustainable forever, as the (conservative) profile of the CDU in particular became less and less distinguishable. In 2015, due to the so-called migration crisis, immigration

acquired a new salience as a wedge issue that would eventually propel an already moribund AfD into the federal parliament and sow discord between the CDU and CSU that would erupt into regular confrontations. Weakened through fluctuations at the leadership level at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and by quarrels over who would be the candidate for the chancellorship, the CDU/CSU entered the election campaign with no discernible programmatic agenda whatsoever and, consequently, was relegated to the opposition after 16 years in power at the federal level. Typically, it is during periods in opposition when parties regenerate and aim at renewal with regard to personnel as well as their substantive profile. The CDU/CSU is confronting this task without recourse to an intellectual conservative milieu, which has become marginalized, if it has not disappeared entirely (Grieswelle 2021, pp. 99–104). Although intellectual production on the authoritarian right has been constantly high throughout recent years, mainstream political conservatism largely lacks such an intellectual infrastructure of persons, organizations, networks, and think tanks—the recently founded R21 being one of the few exceptions.

5 Conclusion

At the end of this transatlantic tour de force through the decades, let us take stock of the findings and draw some conclusions. The juxtaposition has revealed some broad similarities and correspondences between American and German conservative traditions as well as some phenomena and developments that are specific to the respective contexts. Chronologically, conservative beginnings in the postwar era were similar in that they were difficult, but for quite different reasons: In Germany, conservatism was discredited because of its complicity with Nazism; in the United States, the question was whether there ever was or could be a genuinely American conservatism given the country's historical experience.

Beyond these initial similarities, there are obviously some broad correspondences when it comes to some basic aspects of conservative politics: On both sides of the Atlantic, piecemeal transformation was initially favored over abrupt transformation; experience-based politics and building on what was considered to be “*tried and true*” was considered a valuable political maxim in both contexts. These correspondences also extend to the fundamental tension, if not contradiction, at the heart of modern conservatism, i.e., how to reconcile the commitment to markets and capitalism—highly disruptive drivers of transformation—with the espousal of morality, community, and tradition. Although there have been many attempts throughout the decades to “*fuse*” these two poles that are represented by “*libertarian*” and “*traditionalist*” conservatives in the United States, in general these fusions proved to be much more tenuous and preliminary than in the German context. Here, the conciliatory power of “*Christian Democracy*” early on and the formation of a “*liberal conservatism*” later on contributed to forging more durable arrangements. Despite these broad similarities, there are indeed, as the scholarship on conservatism suggests, somewhat specific phenomena and dynamics that do not have any meaningful correspondences in the respective contexts.

In Germany, there is the current of technocratic conservatism that has no equivalent in the conservative discourse of the United States. In the American context, there is, first, the outsized influence of religious conservatives, especially evangelical Christians, on conservative discourse and politics, which is unparalleled in Germany (see Pickel and Pickel 2023 in this special issue). In the United States, evangelical Christianity had been constituted as a recognizable current of its own within American conservative discourse by the end of the 1980s, and ever since then it has come to wield considerable influence on conservative politics (although rarely enough to meet the aspirations of religious organizations and activists; see Heinemann 1998).

Second, there is the paleoconservative discourse that finds no real equivalent within the orbit of German conservatism. Or, to be more precise, such a discourse existed at the fringes of conservative thought and would ultimately come to fuel the AfD. What is noteworthy about the U.S. context is that paleoconservatism, emerging toward the end of the 1980s as a response to the disappointments of the Reagan era and neoconservative hegemony, continues to exist within the fold of American conservatism. It is not ostracized, although the historiography of conservatism used to allege that under the Reagan presidency the GOP was purged of the “lunatic fringe” and radical streaks more generally (see Perlstein 2017). The right-wing populism of a Buchanan never lost its footing among the conservative base, which first became evident as early as 1991/1992, when he ran for the candidacy of the Republican Party with some success.

In the 1990s, when Buchanan’s star began to rise in earnest, the conservative intellectual infrastructure developed over the preceding 20 years was at maximum capacity in the United States, while intellectual conservatism ceased to be a force to be reckoned with in Germany. Thus, while German conservatism has all but disappeared in the 21st century as an intellectual tradition, and political conservatism has grown increasingly stale and depleted through an ultrapragmatic course, U.S. conservatism has exhibited a much different trajectory that must be described as a process of radicalization, up to the point of the Trump presidency and its repercussions, which continue to shape political conservatism on that side of the Atlantic. At this point, using the German context as a contrast foil to put the American trajectory into perspective turns out to be instructive. Mainstream/moderate conservatism is indeed in crisis in both contexts, but for very different reasons and with very different manifestations. While German conservatism has grown sclerotic and shallow because it is bereft of most of its intellectual infrastructure, almost the opposite is true of American conservatism with its vibrant intellectual infrastructure and a political conservatism that has been gravitating toward authoritarianism for a decade now. Whereas the sign of the crisis of German conservatism is its ultrapragmatism verging on the opportunistic, in the U.S. context it is its hyperideological rigidity.

Accounting for the causes for this divergence and exhaustively explaining, in particular, the radicalization of U.S. conservatism exceed the scope of this paper. Potential factors, some of which are also mentioned in the preceding, include the fact that American conservatism ever since the early 1970s has been not only an intellectual and political phenomenon but also a grassroots movement with a populist bent, most recently on display in the Tea Party phenomenon and the MAGA movement, including its inclination toward conspiracy theories such as QAnon (see

Simon 2023 in this special issue). Furthermore, there is the influence of the religious right and the prominence of culture wars that may figure in the radicalization process. On the level of political structures, there is the primary system, which has come to incentivize fringe candidates who cater to the conservative base rather than the median voter (see Manow 2018). With regard to the party system, there is the impact of a two-party system, in which the GOP continued to accommodate more radical currents such as paleoconservatism and representatives of these currents, which, in turn, kept vying for influence, while in Germany, radical(ized) currents would ultimately find a new political home outside the CD/CSU, namely in the AfD. One of the effects of this institutional separation was a better ability to cordon off Christian Democracy and mainstream conservatism from right-wing authoritarianism—at least for the time being.

Finally, there are even those who attribute the radicalization as well as the fissuring of American conservatism, paradoxically, to its success in achieving its aims over the last 50 years (see Robin 2018).

With regard to future research, putting the trajectory into historical and comparative perspective can only be the first step of an attempt to get a better grasp of the specifics of this conservative tradition and its (r)evolution through a broader comparative contextualization. In such a larger setting, the American trajectory might turn out to be much more common than the German one, considering developments in France and the United Kingdom, but, for the time being, this remains a hypothesis that still needs to be borne out in future studies.

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