

**Matthijs Lok, Friedemann Pestel, Juliette Reboul (eds.): *Cosmopolitan Conservatism: Countering Revolution in Transnational Networks, Ideas and Movements (c. 1700–1930)*, Leiden: Brill, 2021, 434 pp.**

Reviewed by  
Matthias Middell, Leipzig

Since the rise of right-wing populism, which is often dated to 2015, even if it goes back much further in some countries, for example in France, interest in its intellectual roots and the history of conservatism has grown rapidly. However, the assumption that there is a continuity from classical conservatism or fascism to the “new right” is no more confirmed than the binary juxtaposition of cosmopolitan leftism and populism where the latter would be absent from transnational networks and learning processes simply because it expresses itself in an exclusionist, nationalist, racist way and is particularly hostile to immigration.

Against this backdrop, the 20 authors of this volume, who came together for the first time at a conference in Ravenstein in the eastern part of the Netherlands in 2018, undertake a comparative look at the relationship between cosmopolitanisms and conservatisms from a historical perspective. The three editors set themselves four goals. First, they want to examine the transformation of conservative ideas and rhetoric over a very long stretched

nineteenth century (from what is called the counter-enlightenment to the 1930s) in its transnational quality and free themselves from reconstructing solely national strands of ideas. Second, they want to counter a binary notion of conservative and progressist or liberal and understand the various conservatisms as part of the transformations of political thought in the nineteenth century (of which nationalism was only one current). This necessarily goes hand in hand with historicizing conservatism, counter-revolution, and the “right” or the “reaction” while avoiding the temptation to regard them as unchanging phenomena. Finally, Matthijs Lok, Friedemann Pestel, and Juliette Reboul also want to reconstruct (contrary to the constraints of the book series dedicated to political thought alone) the institutions and networks that connected these thinkers, who often turned themselves very aggressively against abstract philosophical ideas.

It is no coincidence that the introduction focuses on the experiences of the French Revolution, as the dynamics of the field of words surrounding the “conservateur”, celebrated in Thermidor as the saviour from disorder and anarchy, were already very much in evidence here. Even if the opponents of the revolution had always been accused of not having learned anything, the counter-revolutionaries proved to be extremely flexible and adapted to a liberalism into whose wounds they repeatedly put their fingers: those who wanted to defend property could not interfere with the property of the church or the old feudal elite, and those who preferred order over chaos would have to vigorously oppose the rebellion of the populace, as had already been heard from the right side of

the ranks of the *Assemblée nationale* in 1790. With a keen sense of the anti-revolutionary resentment of sections of the peasantry and small craftsmen, the right wing appealed that tradition, religion, and authority should not be sacrificed on the altar of a blind desire for advancement on the part of bourgeois elites or petty-bourgeois radicals. However, the conservatives proved to be innovative not only in terms of their arguments but also in their cultural repertoire: in many respects, they followed the discovery of new media, new forms of expression, and new ways of addressing the public in order to secure their influence on political discourse.

But the revolution was not the zero hour of conservative thinkers' engagement with the awakening that the eighteenth century brought with it. Part I of the volume demonstrates this with numerous examples that observe the relationship between the Enlightenment and the Revolution from a quasi-right-wing perspective: how the preservation of nature was positioned against technological progress or how an anti-progressive counter-public had been the goal of authors such as Mallet du Pan or Barruel since the 1770s. The volume gains in this part its appeal by thoroughly examining the Dutch case in particular and placing the Brabant revolution alongside the French situation, which has already been dealt with many times. In Part II, which deals with conservative networks, this is also extended to England, Russia, and Spain. In Part III, which is titled conservative modernisms, the case studies even extend to China and otherwise ask about the relationship between feminism and conservatism as well as the semantics of "right" and "left" and the rhetoric used

to characterize conservatism and revolution in the *London Times* 1789–2010.

Even if the ribbon that holds the volume together sometimes only shimmers vaguely, the high quality of the individual contributions guarantees that each individual case study will find its readers. Neither a lack of editorial care nor insufficient intellectual discipline is the reason for the divergent contributions – the disparity lies rather in the subject matter itself. Conservatives have been and still are intensively searching for what holds them together at their core, which is to a certain extent a brand essence independent of the situation. And this search becomes even more clearly recognizable if one observes transnationally, as the initiators of this volume rightly focus on. But the conservative forces have always felt compelled to react to new developments for the sake of success and to put the search for the brand essence on the back burner. Interestingly, this constant flexibility also characterizes today's right-wing populism, which at first glance has nothing to do with aristocratic resistance to the revolution that broke out in 1789. In a very short space of time, it has adapted to the challenges of the European or US-Mexican migration regime as well as to the Covid-19 pandemic and the wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Beneath this surface, however, it remains the use of contradictions that liberalism itself produces and that limit its attractiveness (not to go so far as to question its cultural hegemony) that gives the many conservatisms food for permanent revival.