In a television address in November 1969, President Richard Nixon appealed to the “silent majority” of Americans to show their support for him and to register their opposition to the “loud minority” of left-wing radicals who were demanding the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. Shortly thereafter, opinion polls did in fact show a substantial increase in public support for the president. Nixon thus succeeded in mobilizing those who saw their interests overshadowed by the publicity-attracting actions of the counterculture and had previously kept their views to themselves. The idea of the silent majority soon found powerful resonance on the other side of the Atlantic as well. Why did this concept have such a strong international impact? What integrative force did it have? These questions and the general subject of the development of conservatism in the United States and Western Europe stood at the center of this conference. To be sure, historians have given considerable attention to conservatism over the past two decades. But, as conference organizers Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson and Anna von der Goltz noted in
their introductory remarks, scholars have yet to combine comparative and interdisciplinary approaches with a transnational perspective in exploring modern conservatism. The papers presented at the conference were as diverse as the participants, who came from the United States, Canada, and several European countries.

The first panel considered the development and substance of the idea of conservatism. Michael Kimmage examined “Western Civilization” as a key concept in American neoconservatism, arguing that this concept has been neglected by historians due to its instability and breadth. At the same time, he suggested, the uncertain and shifting meanings of “the West” could help historians illuminate developments and changes in conservatism over an extended time period and from a transnational perspective. Focusing on the 1960s, Donald Critchlow grappled with the question of how far disagreement within the Democratic Party, the African American civil rights movement, student protests, and other “anti-patriotic expressions and calls for revolution” contributed to a broad turn to the Republican Party. In the eyes of voters, Critchlow argued, the Republicans succeeded in taming the uncertainties of the times with the idea of “law and order.” Martin Geyer brought up the similarities between the American notion of the “silent majority” and the idea of the “spiral of silence” advanced in the 1970s by the German pollster Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Though there is no evidence that Noelle-Neumann had been directly influenced by Nixon, her theory that many people are unwilling to state their views openly depending on what they perceive to be the majority view comes remarkably close to Nixon’s conception of the silent majority. Geyer’s paper focused in particular on the largely unsuccessful attempt by West German conservatives to regain the control over language and public opinion they believed they had lost to the left and to break the media’s silence about the overshadowed majority. The papers were followed by a discussion, led by Jerry Muller, on the use of public opinion research and the social and political effectiveness of the integration of cultural narratives in self-descriptions and descriptions of others.

The first day of the conference concluded with a public keynote lecture by Julian Zelizer on how historians have addressed the history of conservatism in the United States. His lecture compared the origins and development of liberalism and conservatism in the United States, focusing in particular on techniques of mobilization. Building on this historical and historiographical review, Zelizer suggested an agenda
for future research. It is important, he argued, that the dominance of liberal historians in the debate on conservatism be challenged in order to bring broader perspectives to the subject.

The second panel, which addressed political parties and mobilization, began with a paper by Martina Steber on conservative parties in Europe and their attempts at cooperation. Steber explained that the difficulties European conservative parties encountered in their attempts to ally themselves during the 1960s and 1970s resulted from differences in terminology rather than substance. Furthermore, she pointed to the negotiations over the meaning of politically influential concepts as a reason for paying closer attention to intellectual history. Bernard Lachaise noted that historical work on this time period in France is still dominated by the impressive mobilization of forces on the left in May 1968. He attributed the various attempts to mobilize the majorité silencieuse in the early 1970s to increasing media attention to the "progressive threat." Adding another European perspective, John Davis offered an analysis of his interviews with onetime conservative student activists in Britain. In contrast to Margaret Thatcher, who moved steadily toward the euroskeptic camp during her tenure as prime minister, the young Tories of the 1960s eagerly sought to make common cause with their counterparts in West Germany and Scandinavia through shared opposition to the left. During the following discussion, led by Jeffrey Herf, several participants noted the importance of pinpointing differences between the language used by conservative organizations and that of the rank-and-file members of those groups. Particular attention was given to the differences between European and American conservatism and to the ways scholars have approached those differences.

The third panel, chaired by Richard Wetzell, focused on the divergence of European and American conservatism and the rise of Christian conservatism. Mark Rozell began his presentation by describing the "awakening" of "a sleeping giant" in the 1970s. The conservative movement in the United States, he explained, received a powerful boost from Evangelical Christian leaders and groups who were responding to the counterculture and to the legalization of abortion. The counterculture’s perceived indulgence of sexual promiscuity and rejection of traditional values brought Christian and secular conservatives together in an alliance dedicated to combating the moral decay they saw afflicting American society. They took up arms against feminism, the gay rights movement, and other causes
they deemed unpatriotic and unchristian. The success of the Moral Majority in mobilizing conservative voters was a decisive factor in Ronald Reagan’s victory at the polls. In West Germany, by contrast, the Christian conservative movement remained small. According to Thomas Großbölting, the two major churches in West Germany played a part in public debate and exercised a certain influence, but German fundamentalist and conservative Christian groups were unable to mobilize broad support. Groups such as Kirche muss Kirche bleiben (The Church Must Remain the Church) had little success in challenging the anti-church counterculture. As Marjet Derks explained in her paper, conservative Christians in the Netherlands found themselves in a similarly difficult position. Focusing on Catholic groups who saw themselves as the defenders of “the true ideas of the family, order, and the mass” in the wake of Vatican II, she argued that gender and age need to be given more attention in examining the history of conservatism. She attributed the Christian right’s lack of success in spurring a mass movement in large measure to the print and broadcast press’ focus on comparatively young and media-savvy male representatives of progressive Catholicism who explicitly set themselves apart from the conservative “grannies.”

The fourth panel, chaired by Michael Kazin, opened with a paper by Joshua Farrington on the Nixon administration’s cooperation with the Black Power movement. Although Nixon is well-known for his “Southern strategy,” his opposition to busing, and his sympathy with white opponents of integration, his administration supported affirmative action and government programs to aid businesses owned by African Americans. Nixon’s policies toward the black minority, Farrington concluded, were less one-sided than generally depicted.

Turning to Britain, Bill Schwarz considered the public response to Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech and Mary Whitehouse’s campaigns against sexual permissiveness in television programing and in British society more generally. Schwarz’s analysis rested on a sample of the more than 100,000 letters that Powell and Whitehouse received from members of the public. The letters often convey a sense of a lost past and dwell on the writers’ own experiences. Affirming the writers’ agreement with the views of Powell and Whitehouse, the letters were a powerful instrument for the “silent majority,” and they have received too little attention from researchers. One question prompted by these two papers was how far the impact of decolonization on British society and the influence of the civil rights movement in the United States can be compared. The wide-ranging discussion
also touched upon conservative visions of the future in the 1970s and conservative views of the media.

The impact of media stood at the center of the fifth panel, “Conservative Media Strategies,” chaired by Brita Waldschmidt-Nelson. Heather Hendershot presented a paper tracing the history of the pioneering conservative talk show “Firing Line.” From 1966 to 1999, “Firing Line” was a major media vehicle of the American conservative movement. It thus offers a unique view into the development of conservative perspectives in the U.S. over a comparatively long period. Bernhard Fulda explored the complex interaction of the mass media, public opinion, and the agents of the “knowledge industry.” Taking the career of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and her close collaboration with West Germany’s Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union as an example, Fulda argued for the utility of the concept of the “scientification of the social” (Verwissenschaftlichung des Sozialen). This concept, he went on to suggest, needs to be supplemented by a theory of the “politicization of the (social) sciences.” Frank Bösch traced the transformation of conservative views of television as a mass medium in West Germany. Long convinced that the country’s public broadcasters sought to manipulate public opinion, conservatives took the lead in championing the introduction of private commercial broadcasting. Whereas conservatives drew on traditionally liberal themes, such as the promotion of plurality and diversity, in promoting private broadcasting, the Social Democrats used arguments more commonly associated with the right to defend the public broadcasters’ monopoly, notably that unregulated broadcasting posed a threat to families and children.

The third day of the conference opened with a panel on conservative gender constructions, chaired by Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson. Michelle Nickerson traced back the prehistory of the successful popular movement to limit property taxes in California in the late 1970s, associated with anti-tax activist Howard Jarvis, to the grassroots activism of conservative housewives in California (and elsewhere) in the 1950s and 1960s. Nickerson’s paper and the following discussion underscored the tremendous difference in the views of American and European conservatives on taxation and social welfare policy. Although Till van Rahden was unable to attend the conference, his paper, “Visions of Gender Equality and Child Rearing among German Catholics in an Age of Revolution,” was read by John Davis. Left-leaning lay Catholics in West Germany used lay organizations to counter patriarchal conceptions of
family life, though they did not go as far as the counterculture in calling for the complete dissolution of traditional family structures. Their goal, according to van Rahden, was to promote more liberal child rearing practices, a conception of marriage that underscored partnership, and a transformation of parental roles.

The final panel of the conference, chaired by Konrad Jarausch, explored “Cultures and Legacies of Conservatism.” Whitney Strub’s paper “Envisioning the New Right Sexual Citizen in the 1960s–1970s United States” traced conservative discourse on pornography and obscenity from the 1960s into the early twenty-first century. That discourse, he argued, testifies to the continuity of heteronormativity in conservative sexual politics. Lawrence Black examined the culture of British conservatism in the late 1960s and its transformation in the 1970s by focusing on activist Mary Whitehouse, the Young Conservatives, and the Tory party training center at Swinton College. In the final paper of the conference, Anna von der Goltz considered what it meant to be a “liberal conservative” in West Germany in the late 1960s. Conservatives differed little from their counterparts on the left in what they identified as the political, economic, and social problems of the day; the solutions they proposed, however, rested on a fundamentally different vision of the Federal Republic’s future. Setting her findings in the broader historical context of the 1960s, von der Goltz cast the interdependencies and continuities of conservatism into sharper relief.

The concluding discussion began with the question of the historian’s perspective and the different approaches taken by conservative and liberal scholars. Much of the discussion centered on the radical incongruity between American conservatives’ advocacy of deregulation and their stance on issues of sexuality, particularly their efforts to control the most intimate aspect of private life through legislation on sexual practices and birth control. The conference sought to place conservatism during the second half of the twentieth century in a global context, taking measure of the complex array of actors, agents, and movements involved and underscoring both the differences between the United States and Western Europe as well as the mutual connections and influences. The range of topics addressed, the lively and fruitful discussions, and the diverse backgrounds of the participants contributed to the success of the conference, bringing a transnational perspective to the history of conservatism.

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