

Hermann Lübke on Neoconservatism (1983)

Abstract

Responding to an attack by Jürgen Habermas, philosopher Hermann Lübke seeks to rehabilitate democratic conservatism as an acceptable alternative to the political Left, rejecting the agenda of the 68ers as excessive.

Source

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It is plausible, for historical reasons, that in postwar German political language the word “conservative” was used relatively rarely for purposes of self-identification, and all the more frequently with the intention of pinning an epithet of dubious appeal onto a political opponent. The New Left especially has made ample use of it and has tried to further amplify the pigeonholing effect by ascribing certain intentions to conservatives so as to disqualify them politically, morally, and intellectually. For example, it could be read that the primary purpose of conservative intellectual and political practice was to defend illegitimate privileges. Others proclaimed conservatives the *Wachkompanie* (guard squad) of supposedly obsolete virtues such as “diligence” and “loyalty,” and these critics did not fail to mention that Adolf Eichmann, too, had been a very diligent executor of ideology and that the motto of the SS was “Our honor is loyalty.” Still others revived the tradition-rich bias that intelligence stands on the left; conversely, they determined that conservatives are characterized by a “troubled relationship” to literary and artistic modernity.

However, underestimating the opponent always backfires. Anyone who abuses a word with a dismissive intent by pinning it on people who think independently, people who, within the political and cultural public sphere, have earned a reputation different from what the dismissive critics had wished it were, valorizes that word. This is the semantic dialectic that turns something shameful into a badge, and, by now, a little of that dialectic has also benefitted the word “conservative.” For the language of politics this is a win, and for German politics even a process of normalization. For it facilitates political discussion, also here at home, if the word “conservative” is available again without any hint of defamation for the purpose of mutual communication about positions and intentions. In particular, it contributes to the linguistic equalization of German and Anglo-American political culture, and by now even the social-democratic left no longer feels inhibited about claiming conservatism for itself under this kind of label—as Erhard Eppler has done with his “value conservatism.”

Most recently, [philosopher] Jürgen Habermas has rendered an effective contribution—in keeping with the semantic dialectic sketched out above—to the intellectual and political valorization of the conservative orientation, namely, with his critique of so-called “West German neoconservatism,” which he published repeatedly during the time the left-liberal coalition was coming to an end.^[1] In this case, too, the intent was to strike at “neoconservatism” by demonstrating that its attachment to the past rendered it incapable of meeting the challenges of our present social and cultural situation. Neoconservatives were accused of opinions and intentions that, given the evident improbability of serious people possessing such opinions and intentions, eventually began to work in their favor. We can illustrate this by contrasting some insinuations with the views that one actually can find among neoconservatives.

1. Neoconservatives, we are told, are trying to revive traditions. The reply: “You don’t bring traditions

back to life by showing the good they could achieve.” [...]

2. Neoconservatives, we are further told by Habermas, are “calling for” “a scaling back of democracy.” This accusation gives rise to the notion that neoconservatives would rather have, in place of democracy, just a little bit of democracy, and that, for example, they would like “to minimize the moral burden of justifying the system of government” as a way of giving parliaments, governments, and administrations more opportunity to make decisions and take action without the need for justification. [...]

3. Among the constant refrains in the critique by so-called “progressives” of the so-called “neoconservatives” is the assertion that they are renegades of Enlightenment who are opposing the manifestations of a renewed “tradition of Enlightenment that has taken hold across the board.” [...]

4. It is true: recently conservatives have come forward once again to criticize intellectuals—Helmut Schelsky has done so most prominently, as one of the most recent in a long tradition of this type of critique from Julian Benda to Raymond Aaron. Why is it that leftist intellectuals are always so sensitive to intellectual criticism of intellectuals? [...]

One should not let this go unchallenged. And here the following argument seems to me the most important one: Anyone today who believes that clashing with conservatives will give him an advantage by allowing him to proclaim his opposition to right-wing chauvinism, and even to intellectual racism, trivializes these phenomena. That still holds even if some of the older “neoconservatives” do in fact have brown elements in their biographies—as millions of other Germans also do. —Incidentally, the ongoing attempt to prove that German conservatives depend on Carl Schmitt for some of their ideas serves a similar purpose: it is intended to compromise them. [...]

The caricature of so-called “neoconservatives” that I have laid out cannot be dismissed as an inconsequential inner-academic intellectual quarrel. By now, even prominent SPD representatives, for example, are being guided by this caricature. This enables them, no doubt, to converse on the intellectual wavelength of young academics when speaking among members of their party. But those in the economy who are employed either in manufacturing or services, not to mention skilled workers, can no longer be reached through the ideological means of criticizing conservatism. For, in keeping with their actual social status, they themselves have long since become conservatives, having made a nice place for themselves within liberal democracy, so that they mistrust anyone who tries to rally them once again to engage in long marches. And by now, the same social strata are, on the other hand, very receptive to arguments that the political and social systems in which they live are viable and thus in need of preservation.

It is apparent: the so-called “neoconservatives” are in no way advocating a new political program; nor do they by any means follow in the footsteps of the previously mentioned, bygone conservatism of the more recent German past. To say it once again: they were not the first to call themselves “conservatives”; rather, this is what they are called in the language of their leftist critics. If this is indeed the case, then in order to be consistent, in determining the current meaning of the political label “conservative,” one must take one’s cues from the characteristics that are in fact conspicuous among those who are today called “neoconservatives.” What are these characteristics? In conclusion, I summarize them in eight brief paragraphs:

1. In terms of their political background and membership, neoconservatives in the Federal Republic are noticeably often Liberals and Social Democrats.

2. As a rule, their so-called “conservative” profile became visible only in reaction to the cultural revolution—which first appeared in academic circles—of the late sixties. That is to say: they were not fellow travelers of this movement of young people and intellectuals, but from the outset their critics.

3. Neoconservatives have reminded us that liberal political democracy turns into a totalitarian system if one wants to “democratize” all of society beyond political institutions. In opposition to this, they assert that civil rights secure precisely those spheres of life whose freedom would be abolished if it were placed at the disposal of democratic majority decisions.

4. Neoconservatives have reminded us that the liberal political system lives by preconditions that the system itself cannot guarantee. These include civic virtue and public morality. They thus contradict those who believe that the freedom of a society is best assured if the number of possible ways of making oneself impossible is reduced to zero.

5. Neoconservatives hold that the efficacy of civil liberties is not indifferent with respect to the difference between the free market, on the one hand, and a politically controlled administrative economy, on the other; rather, if the freedom of the market were to decay, so too would civic liberties—from free choice in schooling and career, to the freedom to choose where to live, all the way to the freedom to establish corporations and to unionize.

6. Neoconservatives therefore have no sympathy for intellectual sympathy with Marxism. They also do not regard anti-communism driven by the desire to secure civil and human rights as primitive, but instead as a condition for the self-preservation of liberal systems.

7. The accusation that the so-called neoconservatives are, as anti-Marxists and anti-communists, enemies of détente, misses the mark. In fact, the opposite is true: a policy of détente on the basis of the compelling, pragmatic goal of avoiding war is all the more promising, the less it is burdened with the effusive activities of ideological bridge builders.

8. It is, in fact, an old trope that conservatives have no theories. Here is an example of what this means today: neoconservatives supposedly dismiss the ideologies’ belief that there is insight into the laws of history, insight that allows us already today to organize future humanity into the shape of a vanguard, and, in keeping with this erroneous belief, to organize it already politically into a privileged party. In fact, neoconservatives cling to the tradition of the Enlightenment, which suggests that we base our political intentions and purposes at all times only on those assumptions about reality that can be affirmed by common sense and expertise as constrained by methodology. This is the context that explains the pragmatic and—as the critics erroneously say—the “neo-positivist” elements within neoconservatism.

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NOTES

[1] First in *Merkur*, no. 413, November 1982.

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