

Chapter 15

The International of Conservative Intellectuals: Transnational networks, illiberal inputs and ideological flexibility

In

The Routledge Handbook of Ideological Analysis

Edited By Juliette Faure, Mathew Humphrey, David Laycock

Copyright 2026

<https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Ideology-Analysis/Faure-Humphrey-Laycock/p/book/9781032534350>

Valentin Behr and Anemona Constantin

Abstract: Based on a sociology of ideas approach, this chapter emphasises the relevance of the transnational level for the analysis of conservative intellectuals and ideologies. This approach allows us to understand their simultaneous successes in various countries and environments as a collective rather than an individual endeavour. It permits us to break with a history of ideas focused on the “great intellectual figures” and national case studies and to study contemporary conservative elites as a transnational group of “petty” and multi-positioned intellectuals, whose political interventions take various forms. Under specific circumstances, their ideology appears as a tool to legitimate illiberal parties and their policies. After reviewing the scholarship on conservatism and conservative intellectuals and the methods to study them, this chapter provides an account of the

formation of the “International of Conservative Intellectuals”, before discussing relevant topics for a future research agenda.

Keywords: intellectuals; conservatism; illiberalism; sociology of ideas; transnational circulation of ideas; conservative international.

Introduction

Conservatism and conservative intellectuals have long been under-studied topics but have recently been brought into the limelight by the growing interest in the “illiberal turn”. The rise of regimes challenging the “liberal consensus” in Central Eastern Europe a decade ago led to a shift in scholarship from themes such as populism, public discontent and democratic backsliding (Scheppelle 2013; Bermeo 2016; Bogaards 2018; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Berman 2021) to an inquiry into illiberalism and conservative mobilisations (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Laruelle 2022; Sajó, Uitz and Holmes 2022). Although “ideas do not make revolutions” (Chartier 2000), a wide range of research began addressing the ideological background of these regimes (Bluhm and Varga 2019; Buzogány and Varga 2023; Coman, Behr and Beyer 2023).

If we were to omit its postwar renewal, conservatism, an “old philosophy” that has met uneven political echoes through different times and spaces and is rather anchored in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of thought (Mannheim 1986; Epstein 1966), could hardly be regarded as the source of these transformations in postcommunist Europe. More of a way of “looking at life and things” than actively engaging in politics, conservatism could be contemplated as the wisdom of quiet disagreement and resistance to change by the privileged classes and other dominant social actors, rather than the spark of revolutions (Tate 2019; Fawcett 2020). However, conservatism is a patchwork of ideas, with a belief in the key role of “natural” norms derived from God, tradition,

the community or biology at its core (Freeden 1996; Robin 2017). Although its political translations have been diverse, its strong inequalitarian undertone could lead to radical or even revolutionary manifestations, as in the case of Germany's interwar "conservative revolution" or, more recently, the overtly anti-liberal and nationalist ideas espoused by certain political and corporate leaders.

Recent developments have made the contribution of intellectuals to the rise of illiberalism a relevant research question. These include the pervasive debates around "woke-ism" and "political correctness"; the unfinished "culture wars" (Hunter 1991; Trencsényi 2014; Barša, Hesová and Slačálek 2022) pitting Liberals and progressivists against traditionalists, Christian Democrats and anti-communists; and the support given by self-defined conservative figures to illiberal political entrepreneurs. Several scholars have already pointed at the ongoing ideological reconfiguration of the right along anti-liberal lines (Plattner 2019; Behr 2021).

A "fuzzy and inconsistent classification" (Laruelle 2022), illiberalism can designate a political regime organisation or practice, a policy or a "set of social (...) phenomena" (Sajó, Uitz and Holmes 2022). Most of the time however, illiberalism is understood as "a modern ideological or ideational family that perceives itself in opposition to and reaction to liberalism" (Waller 2024), in "all its varied scripts – political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational – often in the name of democratic principles and by winning popular support" (Laruelle 2022).

Based on this definition, most studies on conservatism and its cross-fertilisations with illiberalism emphasise their shared ideas and political worldviews and the ways they shape public policies and political decisions. We argue, however, that the interactions between conservatism and illiberalism should be studied not only from an ideational perspective, but also from a sociological one. This implies investigating the conditions under which contemporary

conservatism is produced to match or to compete with illiberalism by intellectuals caught in specific professional, social and political configurations or fields (Bourdieu 1991; Geroulanos and Sapiro 2023). It also means taking an interest in how these actors engage in politics and interact with illiberal leaders and parties or mobilise through public interventions, journals organisations, to impact society and politics. Among these strategies, the intellectual societies and think tanks (Medvetz 2012; Lok, Pestel and Reboul 2021; Behr 2021), based on transnational networks play a significant role in the legitimisation and even in the realisation of illiberalism.

To tackle this question, we begin by exploring the scholarship on conservatism and conservative intellectuals and the methods to empirically study their political ties and influence. We then consider the “International of Conservative Intellectuals” (ICI) as a relevant case study. Finally, we suggest several guidelines for a future research agenda.

Conservative intellectuals: An elusive research object?

The very phrase “conservative intellectual” may sound like an oxymoron, given numerous publications highlighting the historical attachment of intellectuals to the contestation of authorities, whether political, social or religious (Charle 1996; Trebitsch and Granjon 1998). Under the influence of French sociology, the scholarship on intellectuals generally emphasises their left-wing inclinations and traditions of activism originating in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution (Suny and Kennedy 1999; Charle and Jeanpierre 2019) and opposition to the political establishment (Ory and Sirinelli 1986; Charle 1990). Linked to deep socio-political transformations (the struggle for national determination, mass education, urbanisation), the emergence of intellectuals as a social group is generally associated with change, modernisation and democratisation, which explains why most historical accounts celebrate their contributions to

progressive movements. However, in other national settings, intellectuals remained closely aligned with ruling powers (Konrád and Szelényi 1979). They maintained ties to the Church and aristocracy in England, to public universities in Germany and to national state bureaucracies in Central Eastern Europe, Russia and in the colonies (Gellner 1983; Hroch and Fowkes 1985; Thiesse 2001; Anderson 2016; Falola and Agbo 2018). More influential in the UK and later in the US, conservatism remained, if not peripheral, at least dominant on the continent, as well as in Latin America (Charle, 1990; Castañeda 1993).

It is, in part, due to these historical and geographical variations that scholarship tends to neglect conservative intellectuals as a collective subject and focuses on the “great conservative figures” (Kirk 1953; Allitt 1993, 2009; Robin 2017), often detached from social structures. Only a few historical and sociological accounts (Allitt 1993; Serry 2004; Faure 2022; Matonti 2022; Swartz 2023) have pointed out the weight of professional, institutional or economic factors bearing on the political behaviour of conservative intellectuals as complex actors belonging to disparate social arenas. Conservative intellectuals remain at present an under-rated research topic, several authors recalling even their persistent anti-intellectualism (Chomsky 1969; Sowell 2009; Scruton 2014).

Grasping conservatism beyond disciplinary boundaries

Disciplinary boundaries divide the study of conservatism into the history of ideas on one side and the sociology of its actors on the other (Gross, Medvetz and Russell 2011). This division has major implications for the study of conservatism, starting with its definition.

While some authors have opted for a substantialist and sometimes ahistorical perspective on conservatism, understanding it as a political philosophy or ideology attached to “things as they

are” (traditional values and institutions) and associating it with “reactionism” (a return to a past state), “revanchism,” and “counterrevolution” (Pierson and Skocpol 2007; Robin 2017), others have approached it through constructivist lenses, as a social and political identity in the making, continuously built by “creative” actors through struggles and adapted to changing contexts and local traditions (Conover and Feldman 1981; Peele 1984; Swartz 2023).

Deviating from its most established versions and regarded more as an ideological nebula than as a coherent and stabilised system, conservatism is therefore understood by recent scholarship as a “field of debate” encompassing various strains, not always coherent, ranging from “classical” conservatism, libertarianism and Christian democracy, to national conservatism, Catholicism, right-wing feminism and anti-communism (Varga and Buzogány 2022; Della Sudda 2022; Lok 2023). Highly heterogeneous, yet vivid and connected to current affairs, contemporary conservative circles maintain a strategic flexibility, even an ambiguity that allows intellectuals to build bridges with political parties and counter-movements from both the mainstream right and the fringes of the parliamentary space. Among these connections, those with illiberalism, an ideological trend appropriated most of the time by political leaders and almost never by intellectuals, is currently one of the increasing points of inquiry (Fawcett 2024; Tait 2024; Varga and Buzogány 2024).

Breaking with a history of political thought focused on identifying continuities and establishing a firm canon based on long genealogies (Kirk 1953), new research orientations have emerged. These studies show how alliances within the conservative realm are made and unmade over time and how ideological filiations once taken for granted are “invented”. The complicated history of new conservatism and fusionism in the US (Nash 1996; Ansell 1998), as well as the

radicalisation of early 1990s liberals in Central Eastern Europe following their countries' accession to the EU, demonstrate these dynamics (Kopeček 2022).

These orientations have proven highly fruitful for studying both “great” and “petty” conservative intellectuals (Sternhell, 2010; Matonti 2022), showing that their recent popularity is due to the provision of valuable resources rather than to the intrinsic strength of their “common-sense” proposals (Lepistö 2021).

By breaking with the idea of “frustrated” (Chartier 1982) or “dominated” intellectuals who engage with conservatism to overcome marginalisation or a lack of public audience, this scholarship has established, on the contrary, that conservative authors often occupy dominant positions as respected academics, community leaders or public writers (Swartz 2023). Faithful to a relational perspective, this literature explores the social ties on which conservatism relies as a collective and negotiated identity and highlights the importance of sociability networks in holding together the ideological divisions that cut across this nebula.

Going beyond the split between the sociology of elites and the study of social movements, another body of literature advocates for the methodological “normalisation” of the study of conservative mobilisations (Agrikoliansky and Collovald 2014). In this perspective, although dominant actors are usually more difficult to grasp because they have a looser command of traditional protest tools, are more socially integrated and are less inclined to overtly protest, conservative mobilisations should be examined in the same manner as left-wing activism. This approach opens a new field of investigation and invites scholars to explore the “quiet” yet exclusivist arenas where the fabrication of conservatism takes place, despite the obvious obstacles linked to the scarcity of sources, the difficulty of conducting fieldwork and the ethical problems the study of anti-liberal movements poses to researchers (Sibgatullina 2024).

Approach and methods

Less committed to institutional roles than “organic intellectuals,” conservative intellectuals intervene in politics often from above and collectively. The role of think tanks, foundations and epistemic communities that bypass official institutions as well as the use of social networks that shortcut traditional channels of communication and maintain an ambivalent relationship with political organisations is thus crucial to evaluate contemporary conservatism’s ideological and political ties with illiberalism.¹

To grasp these organisations, we rely on a theoretical and methodological framework deriving from the sociology of ideas. Considering intellectuals as participants in a relational sphere (or field), we seek to study both their ideological production and the social context in which it takes place (Geroulanos and Sapiro 2023). We thus assume that their stances are informed by their positions in the social and professional space and the positions of their competitors, in a struggle for the definition of the legitimate worldview (Bourdieu 1984). This implies that we focus on intellectuals’ interventions in the public sphere (Eyal and Buchholz 2010) and study collective groups of intellectuals rather than isolated individuals.

To do so, we rely on both qualitative and quantitative methods. Prosopography allows us to determine which are the most common professional and social categories among conservative circles and to identify correlations between their resources and trajectories, on one hand and their ideology, on the other. Interviews allow us to complement biographical data, but also to get a better understanding of their values and worldviews and to reconstruct the history of the organisations in which they participate(d). Participant observation during their meetings and conferences have permitted us to capture the ideas in the making, not as finished products but as imperfect outcomes

of a negotiation process between actors struggling to define common or dominant views. It is also a useful method for observing the relationships within and outside these communities, which are not only based on ideological proximity but rely on social affinities. Documentary analysis is needed to study the content of various interventions, such as public statements, writings, speeches and social networks' discussions. We seek here to consider a variety of ideological productions and to study them in their broader context of production/reception, which is both intellectual and political since intellectuals' interventions are often aimed, directly or indirectly, at political parties (Skinner 2002).

The International of Conservative Intellectuals

What we call the ICI has been formed in the last 20 years. This thought collective reunites scholars, think tankers and pundits, who rally around transnational organisations such as conferences, publications, research institutes, think tanks and clubs. Far right and (liberal) conservative politicians are also taking part in this transnational nebula, which has become more institutionalised in recent years. The so-called “NatCon” (National Conservatism) conferences organised since 2019 provide a good illustration of this phenomenon: the 2024 edition took place in Brussels with the participation of political leaders such as Nigel Farage, Mateusz Morawiecki and Viktor Orbán. J. D. Vance, the American Vice-President, has also been a regular attendee.

The ICI has contributed to the elaboration and dissemination of a common though simplified ideology. Neither homogenous nor coherent, the ICI is functioning as a pressure group, able to advocate for more conservative stances on a set of political and cultural issues, hence contributing to the reconfiguration of the global right (or, rather, in the case of this chapter, the Western right) along anti-liberal lines.

Hungary and Poland (in 2023) seem to be inspiring laboratories for many actors of this International, as the central European “illiberal democracies” have become new hubs for the ICI. This is illustrated by the hosting of the American Conservative Political Action Conference in Budapest in 2022 and the visits paid to Budapest and Warsaw by conservative scholars and intellectuals, through fellowships and participation in conferences. Hence, there is much to learn from extending the study of intellectual conservatism beyond Western Europe by including Eastern Europe. We thus retrace the history of the ICI from the point of view of both Western and Central European intellectuals who have been involved in all the steps of its creation since the Cold War. This is not to say that Central Eastern intellectuals have played the major role in that story. Rather, it is a methodological means to make the study of the formation and circulation of conservative political ideas more complex by going beyond the East/West divide.

Methodologically, we reconstruct the socio-historical configurations in which these processes took place by articulating the development of the ICI and the social properties of its key actors. This sociological approach allows us to show how a transnational group of like-minded intellectuals has been shaped, as the result of the combination of both the work of ideological entrepreneurs on one hand and of a political context marked by the electoral victories of illiberal political entrepreneurs on the other. We also examine the ICI’s ideological consistency.

Origins of the International of Conservative Intellectuals

The Vanenburg Society and the Centre for European Renewal (CER) can be considered the first and major step in the establishment of the ICI. Since 2006, intellectuals from across Europe have gathered during yearly meetings – the Vanenburg conferences. In 2007, they established the CER, a pan-European club initiated by Dutch conservative intellectuals gathered within the Edmund

Burke Stichting, headed by Andreas Kinneging. A professor of philosophy of law at Leiden University, Kinneging has been associated with the conservative think tank of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). In the late 1990s, he separated from the organisation to embrace an academic career.²

Quickly, the CER meetings brought together members of conservative civil society, mainly scholars, think tankers and columnists, who reflected on ways to spread their ideas in European countries, sharing their concerns about morality issues (such as abortion and LGBTIQ rights) but also the domains of education and culture, sometimes the economy, which they saw as heavily dominated by left-wing ideology.

Among the first participants in the CER was the late British philosopher Roger Scruton. As the founder and editor (from 1982 to 2001) of *The Salisbury Review*, a conservative political journal, and the author of books such as *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980) and *How to Be a Conservative* (2014), Scruton was a major figure of the ICI until his death in January 2020. Living mainly as a writer and a columnist, he held several academic positions in the UK and the US. In the early years of Thatcherism that he considered to be too focused on economic concerns, Scruton sought to provide a more intellectual basis for conservatism, critical of egalitarianism, multicultural education and feminism (Scruton and Dooley 2016).

Regular participants in CER meetings included Chantal Delsol, a French philosopher, and Central European scholars such as Polish philosopher Ryszard Legutko and Hungarian philosopher András Láncki, both close to conservative political parties such as Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary.

Interpersonal relations between members of the CER from both Western and Central-Eastern European countries existed before the mid-2000s, cemented around anticommunism and

Euroscepticism, which have longer historical roots (Behr 2023a). These Cold War bonds were reactivated to establish the CER.

After the fall of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, Eurosceptic political networks, established already in the 1990s, constituted another space for the circulation of conservative ideas between East and West (Slobodian and Plehwe 2020). A closer cooperation between British conservatives and their Central European counterparts emerged, as the 2004 EU enlargement to the East was taken as an opportunity to consolidate a Eurosceptic right wing in favour of a less federalist EU. This ultimately led to the creation of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

Next to the British Tories, the Polish PiS party has become the largest delegation in this parliamentary group following the 2014 European election. Legutko (as president of the PiS delegation in the European Parliament and vice-president of the ECR group between 2017 and 2024) and Polish sociologist Zdzisław Krasnodębski (as vice-president of the EP between 2018 and 2019) became prominent actors of the European Right. The ECR's foundation New Direction, founded in 2010, organises conferences and summer schools that have served as another platform attracting conservative intellectuals in Europe. Participants to New Direction's initiatives include Yoram Hazony and Ofir Haivry, who have contributed to the ideological reconfiguration of the US right following the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 (Hazony and Haivry 2017).

The CER thus marks a genuine step towards the shaping of the ICI. It publishes the quarterly *The European Conservative*, a transnational publication for right-wing intellectuals with 5 000 print copies, professionally organised with an editor-in-chief trained in the US, Alvino-Mario Fantini. While the CER is formally hosted by the Edmund Burke Stichting in the

Netherlands, the editorial team of *The European Conservative* has recently moved to Budapest, where it found more favourable grounds to develop its activities, including public funding.³

The illiberal impulse

The relocation of *The European Conservative* from Amsterdam to Budapest illustrates the illiberal impulse that has benefited the ICI following the electoral victories of Fidesz in Hungary and of PiS in Poland.

From 2011 onwards, Polish conservative intellectuals launched the annual “Poland’s Great Project” congresses (*Polska Wielki Projekt* (PWP)). Among the main organisers of this event is the Centre for Political Thought (*Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej*), a bedrock of Polish conservatism headed by Legutko until 2005. PWP congresses sought to design a strategy to regain “cultural hegemony” while PiS was in opposition (Behr 2023b). Under the PiS government (2015–2023), PWP congresses extended their scope to host many European intellectuals, entrepreneurs and politicians, invited to reflect on conservative reforms to be carried out in areas from European and foreign policy to education, culture and economy. Regular attendees include Scruton and David Engels.

As a historian and a specialist on ancient Rome, Engels held a professorship at the Université libre de Bruxelles. In 2013, the publication of his first essay, *Le Déclin*, in which he compares the crisis of the EU to the fall of the Roman Republic, gained him the status of a public intellectual not only in Belgium but also in France and Germany. In 2018 he joined the *Instytut Zachodni* (Western Institute) linked to the Polish government and published the manifesto for a “hesperialist” (i.e. conservative) renewal of Europe, together with the volume *Renovatio Europae* (2019), which includes contributions by prominent members of the CER. Since 2024 Engels has

been a lecturer at the Institut Catholique de Vendée (France) and senior research fellow at the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) in Brussels.

But it is Viktor Orbán's government which has been the greatest supporter of the ICI. The MCC, Hungary's main private university, has been closely associated with Fidesz since its foundation in the late 1990s and financially supported by the Hungarian government (Pető 2022). Together with the Danube Institute, it offers attractive fellowships to scholars and pundits from all over Europe and the US. The Danube Institute aims to promote Hungary's "illiberal democracy" as a model for a remaking of the European right. It is indirectly funded by the Hungarian state and led by a former advisor to Margaret Thatcher, John O'Sullivan.

O'Sullivan was editor of the conservative magazine the *National Review* from 1988 to 1997. He also co-chaired the New Atlantic Initiative, an international organisation dedicated to accompanying the post-communist transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, especially by supporting the adhesion processes to NATO and the EU of the countries from this region.

MCC and the Danube Institute have hosted dozens of fellows praising Hungary's illiberal democracy, including Rod Dreher and Francesco Giubilei. Dreher even settled in Budapest. He has been an editor for the *National Review*, a senior editor at *The American Conservative* and a regular contributor to *The European Conservative*. A Christian writer, Dreher has been associated with the national-conservative movement in the US and praised for his book *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (2017).

Giubilei embodies a new generation of Italian conservatives who support *Fratelli d'Italia*. He founded several magazines and online newspapers, as well as *Nazione Futura*, a think tank and a publishing house. He also briefly served as a special advisor for the Italian Minister of Culture, Gennaro Sangiuliano, from December 2022 to June 2023.

The MCC has recently opened its own think tank in Brussels, where it seeks to challenge the “progressive” and “politically correct” establishment. MCC Brussels is chaired by Frank Füreidi, a British sociologist born in communist Hungary and a conservative public intellectual, yet once a leftist. Author of *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU* (Füreidi 2018), his political views are nuanced as he calls himself today a “conservative” in family matters, a “liberal” in economics and a “social democrat” when it comes to education, health and social problems.⁴

The ideological reconfiguration behind Trumpism

US protagonists appear as late comers in the ICI. Since 2019, the NatCon conferences have been organised by the Washington-based Edmund Burke Foundation. Chaired by Israeli political philosopher Yoram Hazony, the foundation seeks to redefine the global right along illiberal lines and presents conservatism as opposed to liberalism. A Bible scholar, Hazony identifies as a Modern Orthodox Jew and a Judeo-nationalist. He has become a vocal advocate of a distinctly anti-liberal national conservatism, in writings such as *The Virtue of Nationalism* (2018) and *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (2022).

US “post-liberal” scholars such as Gladden Pappin, Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule have also made their way to Hungary. Pappin, a political theorist, now serves as president of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, a state institution. Political theorist Deneen joined the chorus of critics of liberalism and advocates of Catholic communitarianism with his *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018) and *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (2023), in which he promotes a form of postliberal conservatism that strives for the “common good”. Vermeule is professor of Constitutional Law at Harvard Law School. He too has voiced support for Catholic integralism and sought to articulate it into a theory of common-good constitutionalism. Both

Hazony and Vermeule have praised Legutko's *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (2016). The book, prefaced by O'Sullivan, describes liberal democracy as a totalitarian ideology with ominous similarities to Soviet-style communism (Behr 2023a).

Our account of the ICI is only a partial view, since it is just one part of a broader global right which has been studied from other angles, including transnational advocacy networks (Clifford 2012; Williams and Drolet, this volume) and anti-gender campaigns (Kuhar et Paternotte 2017; Datta 2021). While we have been focusing on arenas involving intellectuals, often closely linked to politicians, other transnational conservative actors include the Vatican, the World Congress of Families and numerous business and religious lobby organisations (Stoeckl and Uzlaner, 2022). Many of the intellectuals mentioned above participate in meetings held by such organisations: however, they did not play a key role in establishing them. Russia has also been a key actor supporting transnational conservative movements and far-right political parties (Shekhovtsov 2018; Datta 2021), though not the ICI. While Russian and Central European conservatives share common topics, there seem to be few connections and little circulation of ideas between them (Bluhm and Varga 2019).

What is a conservative intellectual today?

In previous sections we introduced a few protagonists evolving in the ICI, chosen for their multiple participations in a nebula of organisations (see Table A15.1). Hence, they form a transnational elite comprising scholars, think tankers and pundits.

Table A15.1: Here

Many of them are involved in several organisation(s) within this nebula. Table A15.1 shows protagonists' participation in the activities (conferences and publications) of the CER and New Direction; participation in transnational conferences (NatCon and *Polska Wielki Projekt*); fellowships and/or conferences at MCC and the Danube Institute (merged in the table since protagonists typically participated in both); participation in teaching and conference activities of *Collegium Intermarium*, a Polish private university established by Ordo Iuris (a legal think tank of conservative lawyers closely associated with the PiS) (Curanović 2021); and contributions to *The European Conservative*.

We can thus draw a general picture of the ICI's main protagonists. We have consciously chosen a sample of multi-positioned individuals rather intensely involved in the ICI. Our sample is thus by no means comprehensive, nor representative of the hundreds of participants in those organisations and events. It comprises the most visible players in the group.

While they are characterised by a genuine degree of inter-personal relations and inter-textual citations, the organisations we have chosen to consider as key to the ICI are distinct in their aims and scopes. For instance, the CER has a more scholarly and semi-closed character, while NatCon is more political, bringing together top politicians and intellectuals and open to larger audiences. The ICI is thus far from being a unified network. Instead it consists of several overlapping groups and networks, with this chapter's protagonists as a rather tiny group of recurrent figures, which testify to the consolidation of the intellectual exchange institutionalised in recent years.

Next to politicians who are regular participants in events such as NatCon, *Polska Wielki Projekt* and New Direction's conferences, four different categories of protagonists of the ICI can be distinguished to better characterise their profiles.

- scholars, who are also often public intellectuals and think tankers (Engels, Hazony)
- think tankers, often with a foot in academia as PhD holders and/or university lecturers (Blond, Puppinck)
- columnists/pundits, who may also be active as think tankers (Murray)
- scholars-politicians, who form a category that may be specific to Central European countries, where a significant number of political personnel are recruited from university staff (Legutko, Krasnodębski, Joch) (Zarycki, Smoczyński and Warczok 2017)

These are profiles of petty intellectuals, characterised by a high degree of multi-positionality between various social spaces (Boltanski 1973). At the crossroads between academia, politics, the media and think tanks, they possess various resources (social, symbolic but also political and economic) that favour their influence on both the public and the political debate. Their academic legitimacy is rather weak, but they enjoy great access to media and close ties with political leaders. These “fast thinkers” spread illiberal discourse in a diffuse way, not elaborating master theories of conservatism but legitimising the political agenda and sometimes seeking to achieve an academic credibility for politically charged ideas. Addressing the mainstream media, party or NGO activists, these intellectuals do not seek to play a direct role in politics but to shape, endorse and legitimate conservative ideas and illiberal policies.

A research agenda

In this final section we discuss two presently under-studied avenues for future inquiry: the ideological coherence of contemporary conservatism and its connections with illiberalism; and the social factors of (transnational) intellectual engagement on the right.

The ICI actors examined above come from different intellectual and political tendencies of the right (Varga and Buzogány 2022). In both their writings and the interviews we have conducted with them, contentious lines of argument are noticeable when it comes to religion, national sovereignty, economics, gender and international relations.

Despite this ideological inconsistency, the need for transnational exchange and coordination seems to be widely shared among protagonists of the ICI, who contribute to forms of rapprochement between political leaders and parties (at the EP for instance) and to the shaping of a common political platform. This platform is opposed to liberalism in its political, economic and cultural declinations, with an emphasis on the latter. Liberalism appears as conservatives' new common enemy, which contributes to their rapprochement with illiberals. Manifestos such as *The Paris Statement: A Europe We Can Believe In*⁵ and *National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles* (June 2022),⁶ written and signed by members of both the CER and the NatCon movement, are good illustrations of their shared values and differences (see the reply *An Open Letter Responding to the NatCon Statement of Principles*⁷).

First, the critique of economic liberalism and neoliberalism: this dimension goes rather unnoticed in the scholarship, though an emerging literature discusses the extent to which “New Right” and “National conservative” actors question neoliberalism, for instance by looking for inspiration in Chinese and South-East Asian developmentalism (Naczyk 2022; Varga and Buzogány 2022).

Second, the need for education system reform and alternative institutions (private colleges, home schooling), which primarily target universities considered to be tools of leftist propaganda and ideologised.

Third, both statements emphasise the importance of identity in its national, family and religious declinations. “National independence” is the first of the ten principles listed in the NatCon Statement, while the Paris Statement, though it praises Western civilization and international cooperation, defines Europe as “a community of nations”. Family constitutes the basic unit of community, in an explicitly nativist perspective: both statements support natalist policies.

Religion and especially the Judeo-Christian tradition is a third and crucial marker of identity. Unsurprisingly, the Paris Statement emphasises the Christian roots of Europe, while the NatCon Statement identifies the Bible as “the first among the sources of a shared Western civilization”.

Fourth and finally, the rejection of non-European (or non-white) immigration comes as a logical consequence of such a definition of Western identity. In both manifestos, immigration is equated with a threat to the community or even with “colonisation”.

Altogether, these statements endorse an inegalitarian and elitist worldview, accompanied by a euphemised form of racism. A sense of hierarchy and authority, characteristic of conservative ideology, is to be found explicitly in the Paris Statement.

The social factors of intellectual engagement on the right offer another promising avenue for future research on the topic. Is it possible to identify common patterns of socialisation which may drive our protagonists’ political engagement?

The critique of the establishment and especially of academia, whose political autonomy is questioned, definitely constitutes a common trope (Paternotte and Verloo 2021). Such a critique should be linked to these intellectuals’ own position vis-à-vis academia, where they sometimes hold peripheral positions, feeling or being marginalised due to their political views (Swartz 2023).

In this respect, political engagement may offer a certain public recognition but also some professional upward mobility, i.e., symbolic and material profits. This invites us to expand our research in two complementary dimensions.

The first is a cross-country comparison of intellectual and academic fields. This permits us to understand their differentiated permeability to the circulation of ideas and, ultimately, to understand how an ideological *Zeitgeist* is shaped.

Second, a deeper investigation of the ICI should look at the intensity of protagonists' involvement in transnational organisations. This would allow us to identify more precisely the social resources that may favour this involvement, but also the symbolic and material retributions such as access to transnational and foreign intellectual markets.

Conclusion

Based on a sociology of ideas that draws on Bourdieu's theory of fields and the Cambridge School of intellectual history, this chapter has emphasised the relevance of the transnational level for the analysis of conservative intellectuals and ideologies in a context characterised by the electoral successes of "illiberal" political entrepreneurs. Such an approach permits us to characterise the protagonists of the ICI as a petty, transnational and multi-positioned elite whose interventions take various forms, ranging from intellectual exchange and ideological education to political engagement. While we should take these intellectuals' ideas seriously, they seldom form a consistently constructed, coherent ideology. Rather, we are dealing with a kind of ideological bricolage that combines references to grand theories with a veneer of academic legitimacy, together with a loose commentary on the current political situation. Ideology thus appears as a

ready tool to legitimate political entrepreneurs and their illiberal policies, particularly in the broadly understood cultural realm.

While we firmly believe that the approach we have presented in this chapter can provide new insights into the use and circulation of intellectuals and ideas, both transnationally and between social spheres, other methods will certainly be useful in exploring the research agenda presented in the last section of this chapter. For instance, the analysis of online media and social media, both in terms of content – through discourse or narrative analysis (Squire et al. 2014) and in terms of social networks through a directed multilayer network approach (Logan, LaCasse and Lunday 2023) – is certainly key to understanding the diffusion of conservative and illiberal ideas.

Another complementary approach is to study the reception of these ideas, the diversity of their audiences (social media users, youth, political activists) and their appropriation and interpretation. Scholarship on the reception of ideologies (Hall 1973; Darnton 2003) and more recently on fake news, post-truth and conspiracy theories (Fassin 2021) provides us with valuable insights into their uneven success. It could be fruitfully combined with scholarship on “ordinary” far-right voters and activists, who rarely read the intellectuals considered in this chapter and whose worldviews are nevertheless similar in some respects (Challier 2021; Fauray 2024).

References

- Agrikoliansky, É. and Collovald, A. (2014) “Mobilisations conservatrices: comment les dominants contestent?”, *Politix*, vol. 106, no. 2, 7–29.
- Allitt, P. (1993) *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America: 1950–1985*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.

- Allitt, P. (2009) *The conservatives: Ideas and Personalities throughout American History*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press.
- Anderson, B. (2016) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, New York: Verso.
- Ansell, A. E. (1998) *Unravelling the right: the new conservatism in American thought and politics*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Barša, P., Hesová, Z. and Slačálek, O. (ed.) (2022) *Central European Culture Wars. Beyond Post-Communism And Populism*, Prague: Filozofická fakulta UK.
- Behr, V. (2021) “From anticommunism to antiliberalism. Polish conservative intellectuals’ involvement in the transnational circulation of ideas”, in Hałas, E. and Maslowski, N. (ed.) *Politics of Symbolization Across Central and Eastern Europe. Strategies, Conflicts, Solutions*, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Warszawa, Wien: Peter Lang: 241–259.
- Behr, V. (2023a) “Towards a transnational and social history of anti-liberalism. Insights from the trajectory of Ryszard Legutko”, *European Politics and Society*, vol. 24, no. 1, 22–39.
- Behr, V. (2023b) “The illiberalism(s) of Polish conservative intellectuals”, in Laruelle, M. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berman, S. (2021) “The causes of populism in the West”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 24, no. 1, 71–88.
- Bermeo, N. (2016) “On democratic backsliding”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1, 5–19.
- Bluhm, K. and Varga, M. (ed.) (2019) *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe*, New York NY: Routledge.

- Bogaards, M. (2018) “De-democratization in Hungary: Diffusely defective democracy”, *Democratization*, vol. 25, no. 8, 1481–1499.
- Boltanski, L. (1973) “L’espace positionnel: multiplicité des positions institutionnelles et habitus de classe”, *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 14, no. 1, 3–26.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Homo Academicus*, Paris: Minuit.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991) *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Buzogány, A. and Varga, M. (2023) “Illiberal thought collectives and policy networks in Hungary and Poland”, *European Politics and Society*, vol. 24, no. 1, 40–58.
- Castañeda, J. G. (1993) ‘The intellectual and the state in Latin America’, *World Policy Journal*, vol. 10, no. 3, 89–95.
- Challier, R. (2021), *Simple militants : comment les partis démobilisent les classes populaires*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Charle, C. (1990) *Naissance des « intellectuels »: 1880–1900*, Paris: les Éditions de Minuit.
- Charle, C. (1996) *Les intellectuels en Europe au XIXe siècle: essai d’histoire comparée*, Paris: Seuil.
- Charle, C. and Jeanpierre, L. (ed.) (2019) *La vie intellectuelle en France*, Paris: Éditions Points.
- Chartier, R. (1982) “Espace social et imaginaire social: les intellectuels frustrés au XVIIIe siècle”, *Annales*, vol. 37, no. 2, 389–400.
- Chartier, R. (2000) *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution française*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Chomsky, N. (1969) *American Power and the New Mandarins*, New York NY: Vintage Books.
- Clifford, B. (2012) *The Global Right Wing and the clash of World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Coman, R., Behr, V. and Beyer, J. (2023) “The shaping power of anti-liberal ideas”, *European Politics and Society*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1–4.
- Conover, P. J. and Feldman, S. (1981) “The origins and meaning of liberal/conservative self-identifications”, *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 25, no. 4, 617–645.
- Curanović, A. (2021) “The international activity of Ordo Iuris. The Central European actor and the global Christian right”, *Religions*, vol. 12, no. 12, 1038, [Online], Available: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121038>
- Darnton, R. (2003) *Pour les lumières: défense, illustration, méthode*, Bordeaux : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux.
- Datta, N. (2021) *Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality & Reproductive Health in Europe*, Brussels: European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights.
- Della Sudda, M. (2022) *Les nouvelles femmes de droite*, Marseille: Hors d’atteinte.
- Eatwell, R. and Goodwin, M. J. (2018) *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy*, London: Pelican.
- Epstein, K. (1966) *The Genesis of German conservatism*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Eyal, G. and Buchholz, L. (2010) “From the sociology of intellectuals to the sociology of interventions”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 36, August, 117–137.
- Falola, T. and Agbo, C. (2018) “Nationalism and African intellectuals”, in Shanguhya, M. S. and Falola, T. (ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan US: 621–641.

- Fassin, D. (2021) “Of Plots and Men. The Heuristics of Conspiracy Theories”, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 62, no. 2, 128-137. <https://doi-org./10.1086/713829>.
- Faure, J. (2022) *Russian Modernist Conservatism (1960–2022): The Intellectual and Social Reconstitution of Russia’s alternative to Western Liberal Modernity*, Thèse de doctorat, Paris: Sciences Po Paris.
- Fauray, F. (2024), *Des électeurs ordinaires : enquête sur la normalisation de l’extrême droite*, Paris: Seuil.
- Fawcett, E. (2020) *Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fawcett, E. (2024) “Illiberalism and conservatism”, in Laruelle, M. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freedman, M. (1996) *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, London: Clarendon Press.
- Füredi, F. (2018) *Populism And The European Culture Wars: The Conflict Of Values between Hungary and the EU*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Gellner, E. (1983) *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- Geroulanos, S. and Sapiro, G. (ed.) (2023) *The Routledge Handbook of the History and Sociology of Ideas*, London: Routledge.
- Gross, N., Medvetz, T. and Russell, R. (2011) “The contemporary American conservative movement”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 37, no. 1, 325–354.
- Hall, S. (1973) *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.
- Hazon, Y. and Haivry, O. (2017) “What is conservatism?”, *American Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2.

- Hroch, M. and Fowkes, B. (1985) *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the smaller European Nations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hunter, J. D. (1991) *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, New York NY: Basic Books.
- Kirk, R. (1953) *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, Washington DC: H. Regnery & Company.
- Konrád, G. and Szelényi, I. (1979) *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, Brighton UK: Harvester Press.
- Kopeček, M. (2022) “From narrating dissidence to post-dissident narratives of democracy: Antitotalitarianism, politics of memory and culture wars in East-Central Europe 1970s–2000s”, in Barša, P., Hesová, Z. and Slačálek, O. (ed.) *Central European, Culture Wars. Beyond Post-Communism and Populism*, Prague: Filozofická fakulta UK, 28–83.
- Kuhar, R. and Paternotte, D. (ed.) (2017) *Anti-gender Campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against Equality*, Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Laruelle, M. (2022) “Illiberalism: A conceptual introduction”, *East European Politics*, vol. 38, no. 2, 303–327.
- Lepistö, A. (2021) *The rise of Common-Sense Conservatism: The American Right and the Reinvention of the Scottish Enlightenment*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lok, M. (2023) *Europe against Revolution: conservatism, enlightenment, and the making of the past*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lok, M., Pestel, F. and Reboul, J. (eds.) (2021) *Cosmopolitan conservatisms: countering revolution in transnational networks, ideas and movements (c. 1700-1930)*, Leiden: Brill.

- Mannheim, K. (1986) *Conservatism: A Contribution to the Sociology of knowledge*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Matonti, F. (2022) *Comment sommes-nous devenus réacs?*, Paris: Fayard.
- Medvetz, T. (2012) *Think tanks in America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Naczyk M. (2022), Taking back control: comprador bankers and managerial developmentalism in Poland”, *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 29, no. 5, 1650-1674.
- Nash, G. H. (1996) *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, Wilmington DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute.
- Ory, P. and Sirinelli, J.-F. (1986) *Les Intellectuels en France, de l'affaire Dreyfus à nos jours*, Paris: Armand Colin.
- Paternotte, D. and Verloo, M. (2021) “De-democratization and the politics of knowledge: unpacking the cultural Marxism narrative”, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 556–578.
- Peele, G. (1984) *Revival and Reaction: The Right in Contemporary America*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pető, A. (2022) “The illiberal polypore state and its science policy”, in Mörner, N. (ed.) *The Many Faces of the Far Right in the Post-Communist Space*, Stockholm: Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, CBEES, Södertörn University: 33–41.
- Pierson, P. and Skocpol, T. (ed.) (2007) *The Transformation of American politics: Activist Government and the rise of conservatism*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Plattner, M. F. (2019) “Illiberal democracy and the struggle on the right”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 30, no. 1, 5–19.

- Robin, C. (2017) *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sajó, A., Uitz, R. and Holmes, S. (ed.) (2022) *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, New York NY: Routledge.
- Scheppele, K. (2013) “The rule of law and the Frankenstate: Why governance checklists do not work”, *Governance*, vol. 26, no. 4, 559–562.
- Scruton, R. (2014) *How to be a Conservative*, London: Bloomsbury Continuum.
- Scruton, R. and Dooley, M. (2016) *Conversations with Roger Scruton*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Serry, H. (2004) *Naissance de l'intellectuel catholique*, Paris: La Découverte.
- Shekhovtsov, A. (2018) *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, Abingdon UK: Routledge.
- Sibgatullina, G. (2024) “Ethics of studying illiberalism in a hyperconnected, polycrisis-defined era: An introduction to the special issue”, *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*, vol. 4, 1–7.
- Skinner, Q. (2002) *Visions of Politics: Volume 1: Regarding Method*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slobodian, Q. and Plehwe, D. (2020) “Neoliberals against Europe”, in Callison, W. and Manfredi, Z. (ed.) *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*, New York NY: Fordham University Press: 89–111.
- Sowell, T. (2009) *Intellectuals and Society*, New York NY: Basic Books.
- Squire, C., Molly A., Mark D. (2014) *What is Narrative Research?*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Suny, R. G. and Kennedy, M. D. (1999) *Intellectuals and the articulation of the nation*, Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press.

- Swartz, D. L. (2023) “Trump divide among American conservative professors”, *Theory and Society*, vol. 52, no. 5, 739–769.
- Tait, J. (2024) “American illiberal thinkers”, in Laruelle M. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tate, J. W. (2019) “Liberalism, conservatism and contested boundaries”, *Newcastle Business School Discussion Paper Series: Research on the Frontiers of Knowledge*.
- Thiesse, A.-M. (2001) *La création des identités nationales: Europe, XVIIIe-XXe siècle*, Paris: Seuil.
- Trebitsch, M. and Granjon, M.-C. (1998) *Pour une histoire comparée des intellectuels*, Bruxelles: Complexe.
- Trencsényi, B. (2014) “Beyond liminality? The Kulturkampf of the early 2000s in East Central Europe”, *Boundary2*, vol. 41, no. 1, 135–152.
- Varga, M. and Buzogány, A. (2022) “The two faces of the ‘global right’: Revolutionary conservatives and national-conservatives”, *Critical Sociology*, vol. 48, no. 6, 1089–1107.
- Varga, M. and Buzogány, A. (2024) “Genealogies of illiberalism”, in Laruelle M. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, New York NY: Oxford University Press.
- Waller, J. (2024) “Distinctions with a Difference: Illiberalism and Authoritarianism in Scholarly Study”, *Political Studies Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, 365–386.
- Zarycki, T., Smoczyński, R. and Warczok, T. (2017) “The roots of Polish culture-centered politics: Toward a non-purely cultural model of cultural domination in Central and Eastern Europe”, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 31, no. 2, 360–381.

Table A15.1: Conservative intellectuals’ involvement in transnational organisations

Name	CER	NatCon	New Direction	MCC/Danube Institute	Polska Wielki Projekt	Collegium Intermarium	The European Conservative
Blond		X		X	X		
Delsol	X			X		X	X
Deneen		X		X	X	X	X
Dreher		X		X	X	X	X
Engels		X	X	X	X	X	X
Fantini		X	X	X			X
Furedi		X	X	X			X
Giubilei		X	X	X		X	X
Haivry		X	X	X			
Hazony		X	X	X			
Joch	X		X	X			
Kinneking	X			X		X	
Krasnodebski			X	X	X		
Lánczi	X	X		X		X	
Legutko	X	X	X	X	X		X
Murray	X	X	X	X			
O’Sullivan		X	X	X		X	X
Pappin		X		X		X	X
Pesey	X	X					X
Puppinck		X		X		X	
Scruton	X	X	X		X		X
Vermeule		X		X	X	X	

¹ On think tanks, see chapter by Landry and Lamy in this volume.

² Biographical information has been gathered from double-checked online sources (*Wikipedia*, official websites and media material) and, in some cases, from interviews conducted by the authors.

³ See David Engels, “‘Don’t just criticise, create! #1’ – Interview with Alvino-Mario Fantini, *delibeRatio*, 23 February 2023: <https://deliberatio.eu/en/opinions/dont-just-criticise-create-1-interview-with-alvino-mario-fantini>

⁴ Interview with Frank Furedi conducted by Anemona Constantin, Brussels, 11 January 2024.

⁵<https://thetrueeurope.eu/a-europe-we-can-believe-in/> Summer 2017.

⁶<https://nationalconservatism.org/national-conservatism-a-statement-of-principles/>

⁷<https://europeanconservative.com/articles/commentary/an-open-letter-to-natcon/>