The conservative political logic: A discourse-theoretical perspective

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Abstract

In contrast to other core constituents of modern politics, conservatism has not been the object of much discursive-constructivist rethinking. Inspired by Laclau’s work and by Glynos and Howarth’s discourse-theoretical development of the notion of logics, this article sets out to identify the conservative political logic. Conservative politics, it argues, articulate demands as conservation, envisaged as a process of ensuring the desirable continuity of the social order between past, present, and future, in opposition to a (demand for) change that is argued to constitute a dislocatory threat to the continuity of the social order. The conservative political logic interpellates citizens as members of that threatened social order, and presents conservative politics as the way to protect this threatened social order. Building on a critical discussion of dominant approaches to conservatism, the article proposes to identify the more formal logic that structures conservative rhetoric as an alternative for a substance-based ideological definition of conservatism. The distinctiveness of the discourse-theoretical perspective on conservative politics becomes more pronounced as the article moves on to argue that conservatism discursively constructs changes as threats to the social order, and, finally, shows how conservative politics discursively construct and reproduce the social order they (cl)aim to conserve.

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Introduction: a discourse-theoretical perspective on conservatism

In contrast to other core constituents of modern politics, conservatism has not been the object of much discursive-constructivist rethinking. This is part of a more general scarcity of academic inquiry into conservatism as a concept. The discussion on conservatism pales in comparison to the intense debates on for example liberalism, nationalism, and populism. All too often, politicians and academics alike either equate conservatism with the conservative party family or use it as a shorthand term for the defence of the status quo. The use of the term beyond politics to describe resistance to change and sticking to traditions in anything from child rearing to fashion has only added to its imprecision. Furthermore, work on conservatism have often been inspired by sympathy for or, less frequently, resistance against conservative politics. The common conservative self-definition as a non- or anti-ideological political position has not furthered our understanding of how conservative rhetoric works and how it discursively constructs social reality. But neither has the critical view of conservatism as the mere defence of self-interest by the powerful. Moreover, conservative politics are less obviously involved in the construction of political identities than for example nationalism and populism; and it is exactly the deconstruction of political identities such as ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’ that has concerned discursive and other constructivist approaches to politics.

The scarcity of academic accounts of conservatism is obviously only relative. Focus has mainly been on particular conservative movements, thinkers, and parties. But there is considerable work on the concept of conservatism as well – including a number of contributions in this journal. Vincent distinguishes between five types of definitions of conservatism. These are closely related and overlapping, and much usage of the term conservatism combines elements of several definitions. Conservatism has, firstly, been treated as the aristocratic ideology: a historically specific reaction to the decline of aristocratic society after the French Revolution. A second approach treats conservatism as a distinct ideology – a body of ideas, values, demands, or principles – defended by a conservative political family that has its roots in the reaction against the French Revolution but that lives on until this day. Often, however, conservatism is defined in opposition to ideology. Indeed, a third approach
sees conservatism as a pragmatic political position opposed to ‘ideological’ politics. A fourth, closely related, approach is more psychological and treats conservatism as a disposition of habit or mind characterised by resistance to change. The more complex and more explicitly political version of this attitudinal view distinguishes conservatism’s practical or experience-based reasoning from what it considers theoretical or ideological reasoning. Conservatism, in this third and fourth definition, has no particular substance or doctrine. This also holds true for a fifth perspective on conservatism as a situational or positional – rather than substantive – ideology. Conservatism, according to this view, is an ideology that arises in certain situations where a (any) established institution needs to be defended against (political demands for) abrupt changes.4

This article asks what a discourse-theoretical perspective could add to our understanding of conservative politics. The theoretical backbone for this is the poststructuralist and post-Marxist discourse theory formulated by Laclau and Mouffe.5 It is particularly inspired by Laclau’s conceptualisations of capitalism, fascism, and populism in Politics and ideology in Marxist theory6 and, more recently, On Populist Reason.7 And it also draws on Glynos and Howarth’s discourse-theoretical development of the notion of logics.8

This discourse-theoretical strategy to identify the logic of particular forms of politics has been especially successful in understanding populism. Laclau has argued that:

‘a movement is not populist because in its ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are.’9

Laclau and others have shown that populist politics, across the left-right spectrum, revolve around the claim to represent ‘the people’, envisaged as an underdog and constructed through a down/up opposition to ‘the elite’ that fails to represent ‘the people’10. This definition is both precise and broadly applicable, and it highlights how populist politics discursively construct ‘the people’ and formulate demands as representing the needs of ‘the people’ (rather than merely representing a particular pre-existing ‘people’ and its existing demands).
Conservatism, so far, has not been subjected to such a discourse-theoretical re-assessment. The question becomes: What is the particular conservative way of articulating ‘contents – whatever those contents are’? What logic structures conservative politics, across the broad diversity of conservative politics? What is the particular conservative way of formulating political demands (whatever those demands might be) and of interpellating citizens and of claiming to speak in their name (whoever those citizens might be)?

Such an endeavour shifts our attention away from the more common focus on the ideology and psychology of conservatism and towards dimensions of conservative politics that have thus far received little consideration. The article does not focus on the psychology of conservatism. Nor does it attempt to identify a conservative party family or a set of conservative values or principles. Instead, it argues that different political actors can use the conservative logic to interpellate citizens and formulate demands, to promote or oppose very different political projects. The discourse-theoretical perspective shares with the positional approach the aim to uncouple the concept of conservatism from particular ideological substances. But it significantly diverges from the positional approach as well. Due to its constructivism, it does not take the notions of ‘change’, ‘conservation’, ‘the social order’ or the ‘status quo’ as given, but rather examines how these signifiers acquire a particular meaning in conservative rhetoric.

The aim here is not to supplant current conceptualisations of conservatism, but rather to use the notion of a conservative political logic to shed a different light on conservative politics and to develop a discourse-theoretical conceptual tool for the empirical analysis of conservative politics. For this reason, the article engages mainly with conservative political rhetoric, rather than with the intricacies of conservative philosophy.

The conceptualisation put forward in this article has a number of benefits. The article starts with a critical discussion of the principal conceptualisations of conservatism. Laclau has identified two main barriers to the development of concepts that allow us to understand, in a discourse-theoretical fashion, the specificity of particular forms of politics: ‘the connotative articulation of concepts at the level of common sense discourse and their rationalist articulation into essential paradigms’. In other words:
a lack of abstraction and a lack of constructivism. These two ‘barriers’ are very present in the literature on conservatism. To identify and overcome them, the article follows what Howarth calls a ‘logic of formalisation’. This consists of four related strategies. A first section ‘deconstructs’ and ‘reactivates’ existing conceptualisations of conservatism to make the notion of conservatism compatible with discourse theory’s constructivist ontology. It suggests that a focus on the formulation of political demands and on the discursive construction of political identities allows a more complete recognition of conservatism’s political nature. A second section argues that formalising the concept of conservatism through ‘abstraction’ and ‘commensuration’ provides a solution to problems with covering the variety of conservatisms and with clearly distinguishing conservatism from other concepts (such as nationalism or economic liberalism). The article then moves on to the identification of the conservative political logic. It shows how conservative rhetoric revolves around ‘conservation’, ‘change’ and ‘the social order’; how these signifiers acquire a particular meaning in conservative rhetoric; and how conservative politics formulates demands and interpellates citizens using these signifiers.

**Deconstructing and reactivating the concept of conservatism**

Starting from a constructivist discourse-theoretical position, this section ‘deconstructs’ and ‘reactivates’ some of the most prominent conceptualisations of conservatism. To start with, a discourse-theoretical approach diverges from the conceptualisation of conservatism as a reluctant attitude towards change. This conceptualisation underlies much of the lay use of the term conservatism. It is found more explicitly in social-psychological models that treat attitude towards change as a conservative personality trait – as well as in sociological and political science (survey) research that uses such social-psychological categories. Whilst such psychological insights are important, they do not suffice to understand conservative politics or explain their appeal. Approaching conservative politics as a matter of conservative attitudes of conservative politicians and/or voters has the effect of ‘emptying out’ the political character of conservatism. It cannot explain how conservative politics have promoted certain changes. And it disregards how conservative politics actively interpellate citizens – who could potentially identify with a range of political projects and subject positions – with a conservative project,
rather than merely capitalise on or result from conservative attitudes that exist within society.

The attitudinal perspective on conservatism also informs some of the (self-) definitions of conservatism as a ‘political position opposed to ideological politics’\textsuperscript{15}. Conservatives have often contrasted their ‘realism’ or ‘pragmatism’ to so-called ‘ideological’ or ‘utopian’ ideologies. This argument was central to the conservative reaction to the French Revolution's and to Enlightenment ideologies of progress and rationality. And it underpinned conservatives’ rejection of liberalism in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and of socialism in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{16} The fact that much conservatism presents itself as political realism, pragmatism or modesty and opposes this to utopian, ideological politics is indeed fundamental to understanding conservative rhetoric. But it is crucial in a profoundly political way, because it is an attempt to achieve hegemony by placing certain values, traditions and institutions outside of political debate. We should, therefore, not take certain conservatives’ self-definition as a realistic aim to conserve the social order against ideologically inspired changes at face value. Instead, 'anti-utopian', 'anti-ideology', 'realism', ‘conservation’, ‘change’ and ‘the social order’ need to be considered as fundamentally political notions and as central signifiers in conservative rhetoric.

Ideological approaches to conservatism – including those formulated by conservatives – go a long way in recognising conservatism’s political character; be it by identifying a substantive conservative ideology (a set of values and principles), or by treating conservatism as a positional ideology that appears in response to (demands for) radical changes. They acknowledge that conservative politics are not a mere matter of realism opposed to ideology, and that conserving the status quo is as much a political choice as changing it. The discourse-theoretical endeavour to analyse how conservative rhetoric discursively gives meaning to ‘change’, ‘conservation’, and ‘the social order’ goes further than this. It stresses how the political struggle between conservative politics and other politics is not merely or simply a struggle between two options – conserving the social order or (radically) changing it – or a struggle between political projects for the future. It is equally a discursive struggle over what the current social order looks like (and who belongs to it and who does not, and which
behaviours belong to it and which do not), and how demands for change and conservation relate to that social order.

In this fashion, a discourse-theoretical approach to conservatism also differs rather profoundly from the critical (often Marxist) approach to conservatism as the ideology of the powerful defending their self-interest by holding on to the status quo. First of all, there is no necessary relationship between conservatism and positions of power: movements aiming to capture power can equally use the conservative logic, and power positions are not necessarily defended using the conservative logic. Because of its social constructivism a discourse-theoretical perspective also takes issue with the economic determinism and with the epistemology underlying the false consciousness approach to conservative ideology. Moreover, whilst it holds obvious political potential, treating conservatism as the ideology of the powerful defending the status quo also takes at face value the status quo. It thus fails to recognise how conservative rhetoric discursively constructs and reproduces the social order it claims to (merely) conserve, and how it constructs certain changes as dislocatory threats to the social order.

Before turning to how the conservative political logic functions, let us look at how a logics approach to conservatism is better able than prevailing approaches to capture what is specific about conservative politics across the variety of conservative politics.

**Abstracting and commensurating the concept of conservatism**

*Abstraction* and *commensuration* are strategies intended to develop more formal concepts that clearly distinguish a concept from related concepts and that are applicable to a variety of commensurate phenomena. These strategies allow responding to two limitations of the concept of conservatism. As others have remarked, theorists of conservatism have had a hard time covering the complexity of individual conservatisms and the diversity of conservatisms across space and time. Simultaneously, many approaches to conservatism do not manage (or attempt) to distinguish conservatism from concepts that have been associated with conservative politics (such as nationalism, authoritarianism or neoliberalism).

*The variety of conservative politics*
The ability for the concept of conservatism to cover the variety of conservative politics depends on what kind of thing we consider conservatism to be, as well on the level of abstraction we locate the concept on.

The existence of a ‘family’ of parties donning the name ‘Conservative’ fits well with political science's focus on the categorisation of parties. But such a party family approach is much less interesting from a discursive perspective (or an ideological perspective for that matter). It blocks from view how the politics of political parties and movements outside of this family might also revolve around a conservative political logic (or ideology).

It has also proven challenging to cover the variation between what are in fact commonly considered members of the conservative party family. Ideological definitions have usually been based on key philosophers who are considered to represent conservatism in its purest form – with Edmund Burke as the most prominent name – and/or on ‘typical’ forms of conservative politics – with the conservative reaction against the French Revolution as the most common definitional basis. Freedon has convincingly argued that a ‘fixed list’ approach that attempts to identify the principles and demands of conservative politics does not work because ‘[i]t is a simple task to demonstrate that for the past two centuries conservatives have compiled very different lists’. Fixed-list definitions remain too close to the particularities of the instance(s) of conservative politics they are based on. They include references to substantive demands that are central to particular conservative politics but are not shared by others.

Others have attempted to identify the broader principle or principles of conservative ideology, underlying the diverse, more concrete demands of particular conservative politics. Recurring principles are authority (an ordered society with clear power relations), freedom (usually from the state), property, inequality between people (including hierarchical relations between individuals), and nationalism. But problems with covering the variety of conservatisms across space and time remain.

Moreover, definitions based on broader principles cannot cover the diversity within particular conservatisms. For these principles hold true for conservatives’ positions regarding certain societal spheres (e.g. the economy and education) and institutions (e.g. the church, the school, the family, the state), but not for others. For example,
Conservatives have defended the authority of some institutions whilst rejecting the authority of others, and have defended authority in certain spheres (for example sexual morality, the family) whilst rejecting authority over other spheres. Similarly, conservatives have defended economic freedom whilst rejecting freedom and defending authority in the realm of sexual behaviour and religion.\(^\text{30}\)

These difficulties with covering the variety of conservatisms across space and time have led some to argue for what Müller (critically) calls ‘conceptual changism’: the argument that because conservative politics are changing, the concept needs to change as well.\(^\text{31}\) Others have argued that it would be better to speak of different types of conservatism, with different characteristics.\(^\text{32}\) Yet another strategy has been ‘addition’\(^\text{33}\): the development of definitions that include a list of characteristics\(^\text{34}\) whereby each concrete phenomenon that exhibits one or several (depending on the definition) of those characteristics is treated as an instance of conservatism.\(^\text{35}\)

Whilst changes in and differences between conservative politics need to be dealt with in the empirical analysis of concrete conservative politics, the prime function of the concept of conservatism is to make clear why we consider conservative politics conservative, and it needs to hold true, in its entirety, for all conservative politics.

**The distinctive character of conservative politics**

Simultaneously, a concept of conservatism needs to clearly identify what is specific about conservative politics. It needs to distinguish conservatism from concepts that have often been associated with conservative politics, such as nationalism, authority / authoritarianism,\(^\text{36}\) economic liberalism,\(^\text{37}\) or the support of private property.\(^\text{38}\) There are indeed many examples of conservative politics that are nationalist, cherish authority, and support private property and the free market. However, nationalism, authoritarianism, or the support of private property are not exclusive to conservatism. They can therefore not constitute the basis for identifying the specificity of conservative politics.\(^\text{39}\)

Definitions of conservatism as a particular combination of principles – which, individually, are not exclusive to conservatism – are certainly better able to characterise certain instances of conservative politics. But these additive concepts are (even more) limited in their ability to cover the diversity of conservatism than those based on one principle.\(^\text{40}\)
Moreover, even when concepts of conservatism as an ideology built around one or a set of central principles would manage to distinguish conservative politics from other politics, they define conservatism by proxy. A list of features does not answer the question why a particular combination of elements is conservative or why we would want to label it conservative. To borrow Laclau’s words (speaking of analyses of fascism): such list-style definitions ‘remain lost in a taxonomical labyrinth’ and do not show what ‘comprises the unity of an ideological discourse’.41

If we want to identify the specificity of conservative politics, we need to look elsewhere than to the substance of their demands. However, the solution lies not in conservatives’ position towards change per se. One reason is that conservative politics do not aim to conserve all but only certain institutional or social arrangements, and have indeed promoted certain changes as well. Second, such an approach would imply that any effort to conserve any institutional or social order is conservative. Effectively, political debates have seen the label conservatism be used to delegitimise opponents as unwilling to adapt to ‘the times’ (and therefore as ‘unrealistic’). For example, labour unions’ defence of the welfare state and resistance against privatisations has been criticised as conservative (for example by Giddens).43 To label all attempts to maintain a certain institutional or social order conservative severely limits the analytical value of conservatism. It is conceptually not very fruitful to label the defence of the welfare state conservative because it aims to conserve rights acquired by long-term progressive struggle against conservative politics.44 This does not imply that the defence of progressively acquired rights cannot be voiced in a conservative manner (we will see below how this does happen). Rather, it means that if the concept of conservatism is to retain a distinct and useful meaning, reluctance towards certain changes and the aim to conserve certain institutional arrangements as such should not suffice for such an effort to be labelled conservative.

**Conservatism as a political logic**

As an alternative to substantive-ideological, attitudinal, as well as positional views on conservatism, this article proposes to identify a particular conservative way of formulating political demands. Building on the deconstruction and reactivation, and abstraction and commensuration of existing accounts of conservatism, this section
moves on to the formulation of a thoroughly constructivist and more formal concept of conservatism as a political logic.

In their *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory*, Glynos and Howarth theorize the notion of logics as a tool for discourse-theoretical analyses. Logics, they argue, are ‘constructed and named by the analyst’ in order to identify and understand the ‘rules or grammar of [a] practice’ under study. The identification of political logics, more specifically, aims to grasp how political projects formulate demands, interpellate and mobilize subjects, construct political identities, and in so doing claim power. It is aimed at understanding how regimes of social practices come into existence and are institutionalised; how they are transformed and contested; as well as how their political nature is made invisible, and their contestation preempted.

I will argue that the conservative political logic revolves around the *articulation of demands as conservation*, envisaged as a process of ensuring the desirable continuity of the social order between past, present, and future in the face of a (demand for) change that is argued to constitute a dislocatory threat to that social order. In this manner, conservative politics interpellate citizens as members of a threatened social order, and presents themselves as defenders of this threatened social order.

The distinctiveness of the discourse-theoretical conceptualisation becomes more pronounced as the argument shifts across from the proposal for a more formal concept structured around conservation *per se*, to the argument that change and conservation are discursive constructs, and finally to the argument that conservatism discursively constructs and reproduces the social order it (cl)aims to conserve.

**Conservation**

The logical starting point for identifying the conservative political logic is the notion of conservation. The conservative political logic consists of the articulation of demands as being a matter of conservation, an effort to ensure the continuity of the social order between past, present, and future. It is this way of articulating demands that makes conservative politics conservative, whatever their precise demands might be. Defining conservatism as a political logic uncouples the concept of conservatism from the substance (which social order is being conserved) and social context (who is
articulating those contents and supporting them and why) of particular conservative politics. This is contrary to most other approaches to conservatism where the focus tends to be exactly on the substance and social context of certain conservative politics, rather than on the more formal political logic underlying the formulation of demands.

Hirschman’s *The Rhetoric of Reaction* is a major exception here. Hirschman identifies three ‘major polemical postures and maneuvers likely to be engaged in by those who set out to debunk and overturn “progressive” policies and movements of ideas’.\(^\text{47}\) His lucid work shows that reactionary rhetoric has been structured around the arguments that progressive attempts at improving society a) risk having the opposite effect of what they aim to achieve (what Hirschman calls the perversity thesis), b) are ultimately in vain and will not manage to transform the deep structures of society (the futility thesis), and c) risks having unintended negative consequences and endangering present accomplishments (the jeopardy thesis). Hirschman’s analysis, however, is limited to major episodes of conservative reaction to progressive changes, which makes his work less suitable for the study of how the conservative political logic is used to further change. Moreover, his focus on the highly significant arguments used to undermine and counter progressive politics is not paralleled by a thorough analysis of how the continuity of the social order functions as an underlying element of conservative rhetoric, and of how conservative rhetoric discursively constructs the social order it claims to conserve.

In decoupling the notion of conservatism from particular values or demands, the discourse-theoretical perspective also bears resemblance to the positional approach. The latter, as we have seen, holds that conservatism is an ‘institutional ideology’ that appears when some radical ideology aims to subvert the (any) current institutional arrangement. As Huntington has argued: ‘the nature of conservatism as an institutional ideology precludes any permanent and inherent affiliation or opposition between it and any particular ideational ideology’.\(^\text{48}\) Freeden’s morphological approach to conservative ideology, which is focused on ‘the structural characteristics that order the highly diffuse manners in which [conservatism’s] variants employ value-sustaining political concepts’\(^\text{49}\) also focuses on conservation *per se*. The structural characteristics of conservatism, to Freeden, consist in ‘a diachronic interpretation of the present, in which the structure of rather than the contents of the
diachrony requires protection. To put it very simply: what characterises conservatism is the wish to conserve the social order per se. This is a crucial move in identifying the conservative political logic. As the following sections will show, a discourse-theoretical perspective does differ from the positional approach and from Freeden’s work because of its stronger focus on how conservatism discursively constructs the social order and on how it constructs certain changes as dislocatory.

Defining conservatism without reference to the substance of the demands voiced by conservative actors is evidently not without its criticisms. In the absence of much discursive-constructivist reflections on conservatism, such criticism has mainly been aimed at the positional approach to conservatism. Vincent covers the most common criticisms when he argues that with a positional approach:

*it becomes virtually impossible to differentiate between groups,*  
*apart from the criteria of institutionalized or transcendent ideas [...]  
Every ideological scheme becomes reduced to two simplistic categories [the present structure and future possibilities] and every ideology is potentially conservative when pressured.  

We can start from these criticisms to shed some light on what it means to define the conservative political logic on the basis of conservation per se, rather than around the substance of what is being conserved.

As for the argument that every ideology is potentially conservative, the discourse-theoretical approach does indeed hold that very different demands based on very different views on what society should look like can potentially be articulated using a conservative logic. However, this does not imply that any attempt to conserve is automatically conservative. Scruton has written that ‘conservatism arises directly from the sense that one belongs to some continuing, and pre-existing social order, and that this fact is all important in determining what to do’. This definition of conservatism illustrates the two conditions necessary to speak of conservative rhetoric.

In order for rhetoric to be labelled conservative, it needs, first, to be structured around a plea for conservation. The time dimension – the continuity between past, present and future – needs to be essential to how a politics formulates its demands for that
politics to be labelled conservative. It needs to interpellate citizens as part of an existing social order that is under threat from dislocatory change, and it needs to present itself as the force that will ensure the conservation of that existing social order. This means that a one-off demand to conserve some situation or a passing use of the signifier conservation does not suffice to call a politics conservative.

Second, in conservative rhetoric the continuity between past, present and future is valued in itself (and the disruption of that continuity, as I will discuss below, is considered problematic in itself). The conservative political logic hinges on a view of society as what Burke called ‘a partnership not only between those who are living but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born’53. This view is sometimes made explicit, but can also be present in conservative rhetoric as an underlying assumption. That is, the view of society as extending across time and the desirability of the continuity between past, present and future serves as an underlying idea without which the conservative rhetoric would not function. People who do not share this assumption will not be successfully interpellated by conservative rhetoric. Conservative rhetoric can, and usually does, also give other, more substantive, arguments for why a particular social order needs to be conserved (arguments that depend on the social order in question), but these are formulated in support of a plea for conservation that structures its rhetoric.

We can clarify the role of ‘conservation’ in the conservative political logic by contrasting it with the use of the signifier conservation in progressive rhetoric. Progressive rhetoric is structured not around conservation, but around the nodal point progress and/or around one or several values towards which this progress should evolve (e.g. equality). For example, when labour unions demand that, say, paid pension at age 65 or the 38-hour workweek, be conserved they base this demand not on the desirability of the continuity of the social order per se. Rather, their demand to conserve is based on the claim that paid pension at age 65 and the 38-hour workweek are rights acquired through progressive struggle, and that increasing the pension age or the length of the workweek would constitute an undesirable step back on the hard-fought road of progress towards a more desirable society.

The specific role and importance of ‘conservation’ in conservative rhetoric also counters Vincent’s second criticism that decoupling conservatism from particular
contents reduces ideological schemes to their stance regarding change and therefore does not allow to ‘differentiate between groups’. This criticism does point to the fundamental issue of what we want to use the concept of conservatism for. The identification of the conservative logic aims to grasp a certain way of articulating demands. It does not have the ambition to cover the entire political programme of actors that use this conservative logic. A conservative politics is never exhausted by the conservative logic alone. This move allows treating a certain way of articulating demands as conservative, without treating these substantive demands as conservative in themselves. Decoupling the definition of conservatism from particular substantive demands, does not question the fact that ‘typically’ conservative demands for the centrality of the nation, strong authority or so-called family values have recurrently been voiced using a conservative logic. But it does imply that it is the particular conservative way of articulating such demands that makes them conservative; not the wish to conserve per se, not their nationalism or authoritarianism or focus on family values per se, and not the fact that the actors articulating them are called or call themselves conservatives. To grasp what it means for demands to be articulated as the conservation of the social order, we need to analyse how the conservative logic revolves around resistance to changes that threaten the continuity of the social order.

**Change**

Just like a mere demand to conserve some arrangement is insufficient to speak of conservatism, a mere rejection of some kind of change is insufficient to label a politics conservative. The conservative formulation of demands revolves around resistance to change. Freeden calls conservatism ‘an ideology predominantly concerned with the problem of change’. And Huntington argues that ‘conservatism is not just the absence of change. It is the articulate, systematic, theoretical resistance to change’. Indeed, the resistance to change is usually more visible in conservative rhetoric than explicit arguments in favour of the continuity of the social order.

The notion of change is implied in the concept of conservation. Without change that threatens the continuity of the social order, the notion of conservation is meaningless, and there would be no need for a conservative politics. Let me illustrate the interdependence of change and conservation with an excerpt from a speech delivered
in Berlin on 2 October 2010 by the populist radical right politician Geert Wilders of the Dutch Party for Freedom.

It is not up to me to define what Germany’s national identity consists of. That is entirely up to you. I do know, however, that German culture, like that of neighboring countries, such as my own, is rooted in judeo-christian and humanist values. Every responsible politician has a political obligation to preserve these values against ideologies which threaten them. A Germany full of mosques and veiled women is no longer the Germany of Goethe, Schiller and Heine, Bach and Mendelssohn. It will be a loss to us all. It is important that you cherish and preserve your roots as a nation. Otherwise you will not be able to safeguard your identity; you will be abolished as a people, and you will lose your freedom. And the rest of Europe will lose its freedom with you.  

Wilders uses the conservative logic to formulate his nationalist demands: the desirable continuity of German (and other European nations’) national identity and culture between past, present and future needs to be protected in the face of Islam that threatens to destroy this identity and culture. The above excerpt is heavy with conservative vocabulary. The desirable continuity between past, present and future becomes visible in words such as ‘roots’ and ‘identity’ that link past to present and future, as well as in the reference to ‘Goethe, Heine, Bach and Mendelssohn’. The threats to that continuity come alive through words such as ‘threat’, ‘abolished’, ‘loss’, and ‘no longer’. And the need for a conservative politics in the face of those ‘threats’ is stated using terms such as ‘cherish’, ‘political obligation to preserve’, and ‘safeguard’; verbs that, like the verb ‘conserve’, simultaneously invoke the continuity between past, present, and future and the threats to that continuity.

The conservative logic, then, is not structured around opposition to change per se but to changes that are argued to endanger the desirable continuity of the social order across past, present and future. This particular manner of resisting change sets conservative politics apart from how other kinds of politics resist certain changes. Indeed, resistance to change can be found in all kinds of politics, even the most progressive ones.
Moreover, the conservative political logic can also be used to further change – in a conservative manner. Whilst the conservative political logic discursively constructs some changes as threats to the continuity of the social order, it can formulate demands for changes, sometimes even profound changes, as a means to ensure the continuity of the social order. Freeden writes that conservatism does not necessarily propos[e] to eliminate [change], but to render it safe. The difference is important, because most types of modern conservatism encourage one kind of change, only in order to delegitimate the others.58

This becomes visible in the conservative rejection of ‘radical’ changes, proposed by ‘abstract’, ‘utopian’ ideologies, whose legitimation lies in progress, a better future and an ideal society. To these, conservatives have opposed ‘incremental’, ‘piecemeal’ ‘reform’.59 Conservatives have even applauded changes that allow adapting institutions to historical developments and conserving the present social order into the future. About this Burke famously wrote that: ‘A State without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation’.60 And Scruton argues that ‘the desire to conserve is compatible with all manner of change, provided only that change is also continuity’.61

Whether the conservative logic is used to resist or to advocate certain political or institutional changes depends on the relation between the institutional order and the preferred social order. When conservatives plead for the institutional status quo, they do so with the argument that conserving institutions will guarantee the continuity of the social order and that changing them will threaten that order (sometimes in contradictory combination with the argument that such ‘superficial changes’ will not change the social order anyway (Hirschman’s ‘futility thesis’62)). And when they demand institutional changes, they do so with the argument that the current institutions do not reflect and threaten the ‘deeper’ order of society and that changes are necessary to ensure continuity.

Let us look at this in some more detail. The conservative logic has often been used to defend the institutional status quo and reject changes to laws and regulations. In these cases, conservatives argue for the defence of a present institutional order against individual political demands or against a broader political project that they consider to
threaten to dislocate society on one or a number of levels (e.g. identities, institutions, ways of life). The following is an excerpt from a 2013 speech by Ludovine de La Rochère, president of the French ‘La Manif pour Tous’, a collective of organisations that organised large-scale protests against the ‘Marriage pour tous’ (Marriage for all) law, the right for gay couples to adopt, and resists the education of so-called ‘gender theory’ in education.

Because, whatever happens, the flame of French resistance should not go out and will not go out: it is called to reinforce itself and to spread even further. It will continue to erect this dyke that, on its own, will stop the wave of projects that undermine the common good, the future of society, the values of France, the respect for Man and true democracy. We are ready. Future generations depend on us. We will not give in to anything, never.63

La Manif pour Tous uses the conservative political logic to reject the legalisation of gay marriage and adoption as constituting threats to ‘the future of society’, ‘the values of France’. The movement interpellates citizens as members of a France that needs to be protected from those that are undermining it. Resistance to change is presented as necessary to ensure the social order for ‘future generations’.

The conservative logic has also been used to propose changes. These changes are then presented as necessary to ensure the continuity of the social order. Such changes have been argued to be needed in response to ‘new’ or ‘growing’ threats to the social order. The introduction of laws banning the headscarf to protect national and European identity against so-called ‘Islamisation’ is an example here. Demands that a present institutional arrangement be changed have also been supported with the argument that this present arrangement itself constitutes a threat to the continuity of the social order – often in combination with the argument that the current institutional order is based on an abstract (progressive) ideology rather than on actually existing society. Conservatives in those cases demand that the institutional arrangement change to reflect the society as it (still) ‘really’ is and respect the continuity of the social order (which is considered more profound than the present institutional arrangement).64 The conservative logic can be used to formulate reactionary demands to change the institutional order back to how it was before progressive forces took power. But the institutional order that is rejected by conservatives does not have to be new. Nor does
the institutional order they consider necessary for conserving the social order have to have any actual historical precedent. An example would be the conservative and nationalist argument, voiced for example by Flemish nationalists in the Dutch-speaking North of Belgium, that an independent Flemish nation-state (which has never existed) is needed in order to ‘protect’ the ‘identity’ of ‘the Flemish people’ against the Belgian state.

‘Change’ and ‘conservation’, then, are not simply positions vis-à-vis a current political and institutional constellation and the direction it is taking. Rather, conservative rhetoric discursively constructs certain changes and certain existing institutional arrangements as dislocatory to the social order, and other existing institutional arrangements and demands for changes as necessary for the conservation of the social order. In so doing, conservative rhetoric also discursively constructs and reproduces the social order it claims to merely conserve.

The social order

Conservatives have often (but certainly not always) obfuscated the contingency of the social order they aim to conserve. They have tended to not recognise that any institutional arrangement as well as any social order is necessarily contingent and therefore inherently political. The conservative logic has in many cases been combined with essentialist ways of thinking that have helped to depoliticise a certain social order and to legitimate the demands for its conservation. Bourdieu writes that conservatism has been connected to ‘all forms of thought that tend to reduce the social to the natural, the historical to the biological’\(^{65}\). And Freeden sees a belief in ‘extra-human origins’ that guide human behaviour as a core characteristic of conservatism. ‘God, history, biology, and science’ and even economic laws\(^{66}\) have been used to depoliticise the nation-state, gender roles, the heterosexual family, class relations, and so on.

Such essentialism, however, I would like to argue, is not a necessary characteristic of conservative politics. The conservative political logic hinges on the view of society extending from the past, over the present and into the future and articulates demands as a matter of upholding the desirable continuity of the social order between past, present and future. From there it is not a big step to the essentialisation of that social order. But this is a matter of articulating conservatism with some essentialist
discourse rather than a necessary element of the conservative logic itself. Conservatism does not need to rely on biological or religious or other determinisms and essentialisms, does not have to appeal to religious or natural ‘truth’ to make its claims. Indeed, as discussed above, the conservative logic has often revolved around resistance to metaphysical, abstract, universal truths as posited by ‘utopian’ ideologies. Some forms of neo-conservatism are even post-foundational. They accept the contingency of particular values and institutions and defend the conservation of those contingent values and institutions as desirable for reasons of stability and the continuity of the social order per se.67

This conservative logic is even used to argue for the conservation of rights that have been acquired through progressive struggle against conservative politics. Contemporary (radical) right-wing politics, for example, uses the conservative logic to demand that democratic institutions and liberal Enlightenment values such as the equality between men and women be protected against the threats posed by Islam. The democratic system and liberal rights that were acquired through progressive politics – against conservative politics that presented that democracy and these liberal rights as dislocatory threats to the social order – become an element of a European civilisation that needs to be conserved. A history of progressive political politics is ‘decontest[ed] […] as organic growth’, as Freeden calls it. 68

This kind of rhetoric revolves around a historical narrative of the development of Europe, where moments of progressive struggle become integrated in a view of European society that extends continuously from the past to the present, and is in need of conservative politics to be protected against dislocation for it to survive into the future. The conservative logic thus allows conservative politics a high degree of flexibility over time in terms of substantive demands.

Sometimes, this flexibility even becomes visible at one moment in time. For example, there are strong similarities between the radical right’s traditional conservative anti-feminist rhetoric about women and its contemporary rhetoric about protecting the liberal values of freedom and equality for women against Islam. Both revolve around a conservative logic. There are obvious contradictions between on the one hand the radical right’s historical and on-going anti-feminist views, and on the other hand its positioning (itself) as the defender of liberal values of freedom and equality and as protectors of the Enlightenment against Islam. But in both cases the radical right
positions itself as the defender of what is and has come to us from the past against threats to the continuity of society. In both cases, it interpellates citizens as members of a social order that is under threat. Both these rhetorics revolve around a ‘crisis’, ‘downfall’, ‘loss’, ‘demise’, ‘decline’, ‘disintegration’ of a historical civilisation due to ‘threats’ against which society needs to be ‘defended’ and ‘protected’.

A focus on the conservative way of formulating demands also implies not taking conservatives’ claim that they aim to conserve ‘society’, ‘our values’, ‘our identity’, or ‘our way of life’ at face value. Looking at conservatism as a political logic, it becomes clear that the conservative aim to conserve a certain social order is simultaneously a claim that this certain social order has come to us from the past, that is currently exists, and that conservatives are merely conserving what is into the future. To argue that conservative politics discursively constructs the social order goes further than the argument that to conserve is as political as to change and that any social order is always necessarily contingent and political – and therefore also any effort to conserve it. For these more common criticisms of conservatism’s self-definition as non-political do continue to take at face value change and conservation as positions vis-à-vis a social order, and do not problematize that social order.

Approaching conservatism as a logic deconstructs the claim – implied by the notions of conservation and conservatism – that conservatism defends the continuity of a social order that has come to us from the past and that currently is from dislocatory threats to that order and its continuity. To start with, the conservative character of a certain politics does not depend on whether the social order it claims to conserve actually exists or has ever existed. What makes a political project conservative is the fact that it articulates its demands as conservation, even if the social order it claims to conserve is very far removed from actually existing society or even the history of that society. For example, the conservative political logic can be used to ‘defend’ the Catholic character of a society that is thoroughly secularised or has never been deeply Catholic.

Moreover, discursive approaches to politics have shown that a significant aspect of the struggle between competing political projects, beyond their different visions of what society should look like, is their struggle for the definition of what society looks like now. Conservative politics are no exception to this. When conservatives claim
to conserve ‘our values’, ‘our identity’, ‘our way of life’ they promote particular values, a particular identity, a particular way of life – which are nearly never shared by all members of the population or not even by the majority of the population. This also means that conservative politics discursively construct certain developments as dislocatory changes to the social order, rather than merely react to changes that objectively threaten an objective social order.

Conservatives have prided themselves for not striving for abstract ideals but instead defending the continuity of what actually exists, in many cases from utopian ideologies that threaten it. The fact that conservatives defend what is rather than strives for what could be serves as the main argument here. Huntington wrote that ‘no political philosopher has ever described a conservative utopia’. This self-definition of conservatism at first sight seems to point to modesty, in contrast to utopian ideologies with their aims of changing society to fit their ideas. And there is indeed a modesty to the scepticism of certain forms of conservative thought. However, this claim to conserve also obfuscates the profoundly political nature of that which conservatism (cl)aims to conserve. By positioning itself in opposition to ideologies that are based on abstract ideas about how to improve society, conservatism presents itself as rooted in actual, real, historically developed society. This is a far less modest claim, and a far less apolitical claim as well. Dismissing opposing views as based in abstract ideals about the future and presenting one’s own demands as the mere continuation of the present (and therefore realistic) order could even be labelled the hegemonic move par excellence.

Deconstructing the function of change and conservation in conservative rhetoric shows that, rather than simply threatening an objectively existing social order, the dislocatory changes conservatism resists in the name of an existing social order play a profoundly productive role in conservative politics. Dislocatory changes such as growing crime, the increase in homosexual ‘lifestyles’, or the rise of communism, allow the conservative logic to function. Most obviously, dislocatory changes allow formulating the demand to conserve. The raison d’être of conservative politics is to protect the social order against such dislocatory changes (see the previous section).

But dislocatory changes also serve as ‘constitutive outsides’ that allow conservatives to discursively construct and reproduce the social order they claim to conserve – a
society safe from crime, the heterosexual family as the cornerstone of society, a free society, a Western civilisation with Western values, and so on. The notion of the constitutive outside in Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory points to how, in a context of radical contingency, identities, political projects, and indeed ‘society’ can only acquire meaning discursively through differentiation from what they are not. A discourse is dependent for its coherence on that which it is outside of it, or rather: what it discursively constructs as being outside of it. Any discourse needs forces against which it can define itself, so that that against which it is defined is in fact constitutive of (and therefore in a way also part of) a discourse. Indeed, if a certain conservative politics would succeed in eradicating what it sees as the threats to the continuity of a present social order, if its constitutive outsides would disappear, it would dissemble. It would have to look for other dislocatory threats. The way conservative parties and thinkers in the West moved from communism to identify Islam as the main foe after the collapse of the Soviet Union is a case in point here.

All political projects depend on constitutive outsides for their coherence – it is the outside that provides coherence to the diverse demands and identities they bring together. Compared to other forms of politics, these outsides are highly visible in conservative rhetoric, which is explicitly built around opposition to certain changes. Freeden has pointed out that, because conservation is structured around a resistance to (demands for) change, conservative rhetoric tends to ‘mirror-image’ central signifiers of the politics it opposes. Which signifiers depends on who uses the conservative political logic and in what social order is furthered or reproduced in this manner. For example, the conservative logic has been used to posit ‘the family’ against demands for same-sex marriage, ‘private property’ against the welfare state, and ‘the nation’ against multiculturalism. This goes some way in explaining why conservatism has so often been defined on the basis of particular signifiers opposed to particular (progressive demands for) dislocatory change that are in fact specific to certain conservative politics. What is structural to conservative politics, as Freeden has argued, is not the particular mirror-images in some conservative rhetoric at some point in time, but the mirror-imaging process itself. A discourse-theoretical perspective on this phenomenon stresses just how profoundly the conservative logic hinges on the discursive construction of dislocatory changes as constitutive outsides in its efforts to construct, reproduce, and strengthen a certain social order.
Conclusion: the analytical and critical potential of identifying the conservative political logic

Following a discourse-theoretical strategy that Howarth has labelled the logic of formalisation, this article has identified the conservative political logic. It has deconstructed existing definitions of conservatism and reactivated them by stressing how conservatism discursively gives meaning to conservation, change, and the social order. And it has abstracted existing definitions and identified the particularity of a conservative logic so as to grasp the specificity of conservatism as well as cover what makes conservative politics conservative across their wide variety.

The conservative political logic is geared to the analysis of conservative political practice and rhetoric. Whilst recognising the value of existing approaches to conservatism, the article has shown a number of limitations of psychological, ideological and positional approaches as a basis for the study of conservative politics. Through its focus on how conservative politics formulate demands and how conservative rhetoric gives meaning to its central signifiers, the conservative political logic complements the conceptual toolbox for the analysis of conservative politics.

But the conservative political logic is always only one of the tools to be deployed in the empirical analysis of conservative politics. Whilst substantive demands are best kept out of the concept of conservatism, an analysis of a concrete conservative politics needs to ask what substantial demands are articulated in a conservative fashion, what other (for example nationalist or religious) discourses and political logics are at play, and how these are combined with the conservative political logic to form a more or less coherent whole. And it needs to consider the psychology of conservative political actors and people attracted to conservative politics. Whilst the conservative logic is not concerned with psychology, the identification of how conservative politics interpellate people as members of a threatened social order does highlight how conservative politics appeal to the fear for dislocatory change and to the desire for continuity and protection of what is.

The identification of the conservative political logic can also support the critique of conservative politics. As Glynos and Howarth argue, ‘all logics carve out a space for a critical conception of explanation because they all presuppose the non-necessary character of social relations’. Critique as well as the democratic quality of political
debate, in the discourse-theoretical tradition, starts from the recognition of the ultimately contingent nature of any societal arrangement and from the political nature of any political project. This acknowledgement is the starting point for a democratic debate about the desirability of these models and about which models benefit whom. To look at conservative political practices through the prism of the conservative logic can help to undermine conservative efforts to obfuscate the profoundly political character of conservative politics as merely conserving into the future of a social order that has come to us from the past. Independently of one’s stance vis-à-vis the demands or values that are defended in a conservative fashion, a better understanding of the conservative logic might help recognise the political nature of conservatives’ efforts and the models of society they strive for, allow questioning of conservatives’ particular discursive construction of society, and urge conservatives to formulate arguments in defence of those models beyond the desirability of the continuity of the social order per se.77

Whilst the conservative political logic can aid in deconstructing conservative rhetoric, it also goes against the derogatory use of the notion of conservatism in political rhetoric (by both the Left and the Right). Using the conceptualisation of the conservative logic set forward in this article, efforts to conserve (anything, from workers’ rights to patriarchal family relations) are not conservative in themselves. Such demands are only articulated in a conservative way when they are presented as constituting a defence of the desirable continuity from the past, over the present, and into the future of a social order against a dislocatory threat.

Moreover, the derogatory use of the term conservatism in political rhetoric is itself a way to close down the space for actual democratic political debate, as it treats conservation as inherently problematic and change as inherently desirable. To argue that the defence of workers’ rights or of the patriarchal family is conservative, however, does not constitute a convincing critique of workers’ rights or of the patriarchal family. Nor does it constitute a convincing argument in favour of a deregulation of the labour market or in favour of measures towards a more gender-equal family. Such usage of the notion of conservatism serves strategic ends, and should itself be critically deconstructed. It has little to offer to our understanding of conservative politics. If we want to understand and critique conservative politics, we need to study how ‘change’, ‘conservation’ and ‘the social order’ acquire meaning in
conservative rhetoric, and are used to formulate substantive demands. And we need to expose conservatives’ definition of society-as-it-is as a particular political perspective on what society should look like, and critically engage with that societal project if necessary.

Notes and references

11 Laclau, Politics and ideology, op. cit., Ref. 6, p. 10.


19 E.g. Freeden, Ideologies, op. cit., Ref. 1 ; Mendilow, op .cit., Ref. 2.

20 See Mendilow, ibid., pp. 221-223.


24 see Mendilow, op. cit., Ref. 2, p. 222.


26 Nisbet, op. cit., Ref. 21.


28 Ball and Dagger, op. cit., Ref. 25, p. 103; several works of Eccleshall, see Ref. 17; H. McClosky, ‘Conservatism and personality’, The American political science review, 52-1 (1958), pp. 27-45; Nisbet, op. cit., Ref. 21.


31 See Müller, op. cit., Ref. 2, p. 359.


These can be of the same nature (for example different elements of conservative ideology) or a different nature (for example ideology, electorate, sociological profile of conservatives).

E.g. Müller, op. cit., Ref. 2.


See Mendilow, op. cit., Ref. 2.


Laclau, Politics and Ideology, op. cit., Ref. 6, p. 100.

See Kekes, ‘Conservative theories’, op. cit., Ref. 23.


See Ball and Dagger, op. cit., Ref. 25, p. 87; Eatwell, ‘Nature’, op. cit., Ref. 36, p. 49; Mendilow, op. cit., Ref. 2, pp. 221-223.

Glynos and Howarth, op. cit., Ref. 8, p. 136


Huntington, op. cit., Ref. 3, p. 460.


Freeden, Ideologies, op. cit, Ref. 1, p. 333.


Edmund Burke cited in Nisbet, op. cit., Ref. 21, p. 23

Freeden, Ideologies, op. cit., Ref. 1, p. 332.

Huntington, op. cit., Ref. 3, p. 461.

See Freeden, Ideologies, op. cit., Ref. 1, p. 343.


Freeden, Ideologies, op. cit., Ref. 1, p. 332

60 Burke, op. cit., Ref. 25.
61 Scruton, op. cit., Ref. 25, p. 11.
62 Hirschman, op. cit., Ref. 47.
63 de La Rochère, Ludovine, Discours de Ludovine de La Rochère au podium des Invalides, 23 mai 2013. Downloaded from http://www.lamanifpourtous.fr/actualites/discours-de-ludovine-de-la-rochere-presidente-de-lmpt (my translation and emphasis).
64 See Freeden, Ideologies, op. cit., Ref. 1, p. 344; Kendall and Carey, op. cit., Ref. 4, p. 410.
66 Freeden, Ideologies, op. cit., Ref. 1, p. 333.
68 Freeden, Ideologies, op. cit., Ref. 1, p. 333.
69 Laclau and Mouffé, op. cit., Ref. 5; See also R.L. Faith, ‘Can We Know the Status Quo?’, Constitutional Political Economy 15 (2004), pp. 145-151.
70 Huntington, op. cit., Ref. 3, p. 458.
71 See M. Festenstein and M. Kenny, Political ideologies: a reader and guide (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 120.
74 Freeden, Ideologies, op. cit., Ref. 1, p. 343.
76 Glynos and Howarth, op. cit., Ref. 8, p. 153.
77 See Hirschman, op. cit., Ref. 61.