



Book Review: Enno Freiherr von Fircks. (2024). *Conservatism: A Cultural-Psychological Exploration*. Cham: Springer Nature. xx+124pp. ISBN 978-3-031-51205-6 (eBook)

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In the last few years, scholars have continued to refine the understanding of conservatism through cultural psychology. The application of Symbolic Action Theory, particularly Ernst Boesch's framework, remains central to discussions, illustrating how conservatism is not merely a political stance but a dynamic system of behaviors that reinforces societal values through symbolic actions (Kölbl, 2020). Additionally, recent studies have highlighted the interaction between cultural conservatism and collective identity, with particular focus on how conservatism can manifest in diverse cultural settings (Yilmaz & Alper, 2019). Research also underscores the relevance of symbolic politics in shaping both individual attitudes and broader political actions, contributing to the understanding of how symbolic meanings sustain social conservatism in different cultural contexts (Chin & Levey, 2022).

Exploring conservatism from a cultural psychology perspective, the monograph *Conservatism: A Cultural-Psychological Exploration* examines the cultural and psychological foundations of conservatism, redefining it not merely as a political ideology but as a concept rooted in cultural psychology. This broader interpretation enhances its relevance in contemporary psychological research. The author advocates for a cultural individualist perspective to understand how individuals construct and sustain conservative action strategies within their everyday environments. Criticizing mainstream psychology's quantitative approach to assessing conservatism, the book draws on Boesch's Symbolic Action Theory. It investigates how conservatism upholds personal and social value systems through everyday behaviors and symbols. By demonstrating that conservatism is more than just an idea or a political label, the author illustrates it as a dynamic and integrated system of behaviors and symbols.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I redefines conservatism beyond its conventional political labels, presenting it as a dynamic, culturally ingrained attitude through the lens of cultural psychology. The author argues that conservatism is a natural human response designed to preserve values and ensure cultural stability. To understand its complexities, the author recommends a qualitative approach, focusing on the interaction between individuals and their environments. The discussion begins with the author's personal experiences as a young conservative in college, offering insights into how conservatism shaped his identity and social relationships through reflection and self-clarification. The author then critiques traditional

social science definitions of conservatism, arguing that they are too narrow, often emphasizing negative traits like militarism and dogmatism, which fail to capture the full range of conservatism's diversity and complexity. Referring to the Weimar Conservative Manifesto, von Fircks contends that conservatism upholds individual reason, autonomy, and family values, extending far beyond mere adherence to tradition. This section also explores the cultural dimension of conservatism, presenting it as a cultural stance rooted in historical contexts. The author defines conservative culture as one that preserves traditions, family values, and social order, which play a crucial role in societal stability and individual psychological security. Using concepts from cultural psychology, dynamic analysis, and Historically Structured Invitation (HSI) theory, the author portrays conservatism as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by cultural contexts and psychological needs. This new perspective offers a fresh understanding of how individuals enact and transmit cultural values in their everyday lives.

In Part II, the author applies Boesch's Symbolic Action Theory to argue that conservatism functions as a strategy for preserving essential values through everyday actions. By analyzing behaviors in contexts such as tennis matches and family dinners, the author reveals how conservatives express their core values and maintain cultural significance through symbolic actions. The author further probes into how individuals balance personal and social needs through symbolic behaviors that reflect conservatism. From this perspective, conservatism is viewed as a positive process in which individuals symbolically navigate their personal needs alongside social expectations. Key concepts such as "myths" (socially shared values) and "fantasms" (individual motivations) are introduced, showing how these elements interact within an "action field" that shapes conservative behavior. This interpretation presents conservatism as a flexible and adaptive cultural attitude, not merely a static traditionalism. Practical examples, like activities in a tennis club, illustrate how individual actions align with collective values to reinforce conservative identity. These symbolic behaviors allow individuals to satisfy their personal needs while aligning with group values, without the imposition of coercive constraints. This perspective unveils the complex psychological and behavioral patterns of conservatives, giving a more nuanced understanding of conservatism as a dynamic attitude, rather than a rigid ideology.



This book is both intellectually rich and thought-provoking, with several notable strengths. First, it offers a fresh perspective on conservatism, moving beyond conventional political definitions to delve into its complex human dimensions. Second, it represents the first attempt to examine conservatism through the lens of cultural psychology, presenting it as a dynamic and adaptive mechanism for navigating change, rather than a rigid or static value system. Third, the book innovatively applies Symbolic Action Theory to the study of conservatism, proposing that conservative behavior is not just an individual choice, but one imbued with symbolic meaning. By studying the interaction between “myths” and “fantasms”, the author showcases how conservatism seeks stability, order, and cultural identity through everyday actions. This theoretical framework offers a valuable tool for understanding the behaviors of conservatives.

However, the book does have certain limitations. While the author’s analysis of myths and fantasies is insightful, it lacks a systematic, categorical approach, which could have strengthened the theoretical framework. Additionally, the empirical section of the book, though grounded in real-life cultural contexts through case studies, relies on a limited sample size, which may hinder the generalizability of the findings, especially when considering the broader socio-cultural context of conservatism. Furthermore, the focus on the positive aspects of these symbolic interactions tends to overlook potential negative outcomes, which could provide a more balanced view.

Overall, this book makes a significant contribution to the study of conservatism by combining methodological innovation with theoretical depth. It paves the way for future research in this area and provides valuable insights for scholars and researchers in cultural psychology, sociology, and political science. It is also a useful resource for anyone interested in understanding the multifaceted nature of conservatism.

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