

Jörg Neuheiser. *Krone, Kirche und Verfassung: Konservatismus in den englischen Unterschichten 1815-1867.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010. 349 S. \$82.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-525-37009-4.



Reviewed by Klaus Nathaus

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2011)

J. Neuheiser: *Krone, Kirche und Verfassung*

The role of the 'working class' in England (or Britain) relatively continuous social and political history has preoccupied contemporaries as well as historians to a huge extent and has become a 'leitmotif' of British historiography at least since the ascent of social history. Beginning with the question why the members of the English 'lower orders' have not caused a political and social revolution even though they came closest to what Karl Marx had termed 'Klasse an sich', Jörg Neuheiser places his study on working class conservatism in this familiar context. His approach to answer this very 'English' question, however, derives from a 'German' methodological discussion, and this leads him to findings which should be challenging first and foremost for our British colleagues. Fortunately, this audience will soon be able to read the book, as it has recently been awarded a prize by the German Publishers and Booksellers Association to fund its translation (Congratulations!), and this is also the reason why the present review is written in English.

Neuheiser proposes three questions to guide his study: Firstly, he looks at political debates and campaigns

as well as political festivals and proto-political voluntary associations in which working class people were involved to detect conservative ideas and assess their diffusion as well as their influence on people's behaviour. Secondly, he asks how and why the Conservative Party managed to gain considerable support among the lower orders. Thirdly, he analyses the relationship between conservative concepts on one side and liberal and radical positions and the emerging working class movement on the other. Taking a critical stance against social history and its preoccupation with 'class' as a social entity primarily shaped by socio-economic structures, Neuheiser sympathises with 'revisionist' positions that highlight the importance of language and ideas for human behaviour and stress the heterogeneity of social 'identities'. This leads him to study Popular Politics as a manifestation of what has been termed by political scientist Karl Rohe and others 'political culture', a set of basic ideas about politics that structure and motivate the political behaviour of those who share them as unquestioned convictions. This line of research has found many followers among German historians, but is less common in British historiography.

The ideas and attitudes Neuheiser identifies as the core of a 'Popular Conservatism' are patriotism and loyalty to the monarchy, Protestantism, and a particular understanding of social justice. These three basic elements also make up thematic sections which contain two chapters each. In these chapters, Neuheiser traces conservative ideas in a broad spectrum of cases, ranging from rituals like the royal festivals and Guy Fawkes Day to political debates like the fight against the emancipation of Catholics, the reaction to the 'Papal Aggression' of 1850, election campaigns and finally to voluntary associations such as the Operative Conservative Associations, the Volunteer Force and the Orange Order. He concentrates his study on the West Riding of Yorkshire with Leeds as its centre, the Bolton area in Lancashire and Greater London and chooses local newspapers as his main source.

Carefully arguing against influential, if not dominant research positions, Neuheiser collects evidence for the influence of what he defines as conservative concepts on the behaviour of working class people. This way he not only manages to shed new light onto a number of research discussions on more particular aspects, but also to qualify older interpretations that portray working class involvement in conservative politics as involuntary, tactical or, at best, marginal. This is the main point of his study: Whereas popular conservatism tended to be explained away to maintain the working class as a unity, Neuheiser's aim is to prove that it was often genuine in order to complicate the 'political identity' of the 'common people'. Overall, his argument is convincing, particularly when he is able to point out that working class people acted independently and occasionally took the initiative, so that Tory leaders found themselves struggling to contain a manifestation of conservatism rather than orchestrating it. The anti-Catholic unrests on Guy Fawkes Day are one example for this 'conservatism from below' (p. 182). At times, however, Neuheiser seems to force his point a bit, for instance when he calls the popular attitude towards the Volunteer Force, a militia that had working class men among its rank and file members, enthusiastic (p. 127), while not mentioning that Volunteers quite often met with far less favourable reactions.

How then does the study under review explain England's remarkable social and political stability? In his conclusion, Neuheiser confirms that he does not want to propose that conservative ideas, even though they were more widespread than often acknowledged, pervaded English political culture to an extent that they would have made a revolution unthinkable. On the contrary,

he concedes that working class Tories were opposed by a clear majority of Radicals, reformers, Chartists and trade unionists. Noting that concepts alone cannot account for the political development, Neuheiser then moves his argument away from particular ideas to the communicative space of politics and identifies the early existence of a pluralistic political arena which prevented the formation of durable cleavages between intransigent camps as a primary explanation for England's stability.

While convincing, this shift of focus from political concepts as such to their diffusion and availability has repercussions for Neuheiser's approach, the point I found most problematic in his study. The common political culture approach Neuheiser chooses to follow ascribes ideas an overwhelming influence on people's behaviour, in its most extreme cases turning actors into some kind of automatons that are programmed with cultural scripts. To subsume political ideas under the term 'identity' confirms this tendency, as it makes world views appear so forceful that they can only be overcome after an 'identity crisis'. Even though Neuheiser in a footnote asserts that he understands 'identities' as situational and changeable (fn. 89, p. 39), which seems in breach with the common understanding of the term, his primary focus on the formative effect of ideas leaves little room for interests or pragmatism as alternative motives for action. But to account for the inconsistency of human behaviour, such alternative motives would have had to be taken into consideration. The closest the study gets to this is in the chapter on conservative protest against child labour and the Poor Law (pp. 219-261), which illustrates that concepts were actually used by historic actors, rather than demonstrating that the latter were immersed in them. This implies that ideas are not so much the building blocks of an identity, but make up a repertoire of tools that are applied to situational needs. For further discussion see the influential study by sociologist Ann Swidler, *Talk of love: how culture matters*, Chicago 2001. A 'tool kit' understanding of culture seems to suit much better the complexity of the English political sphere which Neuheiser in fact describes than the static concept of political culture that he explicitly chooses as his method.

Thankfully, due to its rich analysis and careful argumentation, Neuheiser's work does not stick to the political culture method too firmly. And so, while the study introduces British historiography to a 'German' perspective, the peculiarities of the English case challenge the plausibility of this approach and may stimulate our discussion on the link between ideas and action.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Klaus Nathaus. Review of Neuheiser, Jörg, *Krone, Kirche und Verfassung: Konservatismus in den englischen Unterschichten 1815-1867*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34408>

Copyright © 2011 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.