Fighting against the "left-wing mainstream" and for "true Toryism". British anti-liberal intellectuals and their networks at the margin of the Conservative party in the 1930s.

The English journalist and editor, Douglas Jerrold, gave in June 1933 an insight into his vision for the political future of Great Britain: „Finally, the Conservative party must turn its back on the present Parliamentary system in favour of a system which will restore the reality of self-government in the appropriate spheres, and enable a strong central government to speak for the nation, and not merely for a class, on national issues."[1] For Jerrold, influenced by the rise of authoritarian regimes in all parts of Europe, the notion of England as the "mother of parliaments" had neither historical importance nor any significant political implications for the future. In fact, he devoted a large part of his historical and political writing to providing proof that the establishment of a "Corporate State" would be in accordance with British history and traditions. He was, however, too elitist to see a populist mass movement as a way of seizing state power and rejected the combination of legality and violence, which was characteristic for the continental fascist movements. In his autobiography of 1937 he summarised the political strategy of his circle: „We were not, of course, proposing to appeal primarily to the people. We decided that neither through the House of Commons nor through the electorate could salvation come, but through the party."[2] The fundamental challenge of the liberal principle of the public sphere on the one hand and the rejection of the populism

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[1] Douglas Jerrold, Current Comments, English Review, June 1933, p. 600.
[2] Douglas Jerrold, Georgian Adventure. The Autobiography of Douglas Jerrold, London 1938, p. 342.

of the fascist movements on the other was an identifying feature of the right-wing networks at the margin of the Conservative Party in the 1930s. Anti-liberal intellectuals such as Douglas Jerrold saw the best strategy for their fight against "left-wing mainstream" and for "true Toryism" in an "informal cooptation"[3] with the establishment of the Conservative Party.

While the term "British intellectual" as such might no longer be seen as an oxymoron[4], the image of the radical conservative intellectual writing against the political enemy is still very much associated with the German Weimar period. However, anti-liberal radical conservative thinking was not restricted to the "mortified" loser of war; even in victorious Great Britain, during and after the world economic crisis, a new form of right-wing intellectual discourse developed whose advocates denied that parliamentarism and democracy were original British concepts. Providing new evidence, two recent publications have already shown how indefensible the older image of an immunisation of British political culture against foreign and native fascisms actually is.[5] Over and above these books, however, my research aims to prove that the analysed group of anti-liberal intellectuals can neither be described simply as „friends of Hitler" nor should they be reduced to mere supporters of British Fascism as "Fellow Travellers of the Right"[6].

Although organised in circles and around journals rather than any formal membership of a group or strict adherence to a clearly defined political programme, these 'New Conservatives' have to be regarded as a distinguishable intellectual movement and can be described as a genuine British phenomenon.[7] Unlike the traditional right wing of the Conservative party this younger generation of right-wing rebels of the late 1920s and 1930s were not simply interested in defending the status quo of the Empire or a return to the old franchise, but in a far more comprehensive

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[3] Hans Mommsen uses the term to describe the new forms of political organisations of the "Conservative Revolution" in the Weimar Republic. See Hans Mommsen, Das Trugbild der "nationalen Revolution". Betrachtungen zur nationalistischen Gegenkultur der Weimarer Republik, in: Walter Schmitz / Clemens Vollnhals, Völkische Bewegung. Konservative Revolution. Nationalsozialismus. Aspekte einer politisierten Kultur, Dresden 2005, p. 23.
[4] Stefan Collini, Absent Minds. Intellectuals in Britain, Oxford 2006.
[5] Ian Kershaw, Making friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry, the Nazis and the road to World War II, New York 2004; Martin Pugh: 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'. Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars, London 2005.
[6] Richard Griffiths, Fellow Travellers of the Right. British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-9, London 1980.
[7] Bernhard Dietz, Gab es eine Konservative Revolution in Großbritannien? Rechtsintellektuelle am Rande der Konservativen Partei 1929-1933, in: Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, 54 (2006), 607-638.

political counter attack. The term "New Conservatives" can be applied to this group of around thirty to fifty influential writers, journalists and allied politicians, who projected themselves as the young generation of Conservatism. Operating at the borderline of the literary world and the political realm they produced a flood of radical writings in the form of political journalism, manifestos, and theoretical tracts, and tried to influence the Conservative party through political discussion clubs, pressure groups, book clubs and think tanks.

Most of them were born in the 1890s, often meeting for the first time in the universities of Oxford or Cambridge, and volunteered for the First World War. What later became known as the "lost generation" meant for them the partial destruction of an elite to which they belonged and which was supposed to lead an Empire. Their longings for national regeneration, based on corporative utopias after the First World War, corresponded with actual socio-political challenges to their status – by the extension of the franchise, the rise of the Labour party, feminism and new death duties. The journalist and "back-to-the-land" activist Rolf Gardiner gave a revealing portrayal of his generation after attending an Old Boys' dinner in 1932: "Meeting these men trained in the pre-war world, I could not escape the feeling that they still spiritually dwelt in its atmosphere. The harsh reality of the present puzzled them, they had no zest to battle with its difficulties; they clung to the vestiges of the 1913 world, underneath terrified and non-plussed by the world of 1932. They appeared to me a little pathetic. They didn't count any longer. They were posthumous England, the ghost of the England which was slain in the fields of Flanders in 1914-18."[8]

It is not a surprise that Gardiner admired the mastermind of the German "Conservative Revolution" Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and was influenced by the German Youth Movement.[9] Impressed by the actionist and voluntarist impetus of the German "Conservative Revolutionaries" Gardiner saw the elitist German "Bund" as an organisational role model for the 'New Conservatives' in Britain. Before changing England's society, however, it was essential for men like Gardiner to accept the fact

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[8] Rolf Gardiner, World without end. British politics and the younger Generation, London 1932, p. 31.
[9] Malcolm Chase, "North Sea and Baltic: historical conceptions of the youth movement and the transfer of ideas from Germany to England in the 1920s and 1930s", in: Stefan Berger / Peter Lambert / Peter Schumann (ed.), Historikerdialoge: Geschichte, Mythos und Gedachtnis im deutsch-britischen kulturellen Austausch, 1750-2000, Göttingen 2003, p. 309-330.

that "the old England, the England of our country mansions, is, alas! being swept away.[10]

Old England was swept away – however, not with the outcome the "New Conservatives" were hoping for. Despite the disintegration of the British Empire as well as huge economical and social problems, Great Britain overcame the interwar period without a serious challenge to its parliamentarian democracy. The authoritarian alternatives of the 'New Conservatives' never became reality. Nevertheless, a study of this phenomenon is a worthwhile and fruitful endeavour, particularly for three reasons. Firstly, the failure of right-wing authoritarian alternatives to liberal democracy cannot merely be explained with the failure of organised British Fascism. Especially the history of ideas approach shows that British political culture was much less 'immune' against authoritarian alternatives than the hostile reactions of the British establishment and public towards black uniforms, marches and street violence might suggest. Secondly, an analysis of the intellectual traditions of the 'New Conservatives', a study of their interpretation of history and an examination of their political writings sheds some light onto what one scholar described as the „grey area between Fascism and Conservatism"[11]. And finally, the presentation of this neglected aspect of intellectual history as part of British political history demonstrates that the radical conservative intellectual opposed to the political system should not only be associated with the German Weimar period. At the same time it should be self-evident that a European perspective on this strand of intellectual history implies not a relativisation of the responsibility of the Weimar "Conservative Revolution" for the rise of National Socialism.

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[10] Gardiner, World without end, p. 31.
[11] Gerald C. Webber, The Ideology of the British Right 1918-1939, London 1986, p. 98.