Conservatism is a notoriously contentious term, so any attempt to analyze it will necessarily involve a struggle over naming-rights. A movement calling itself conservative has been gaining prominence on the world stage. With the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the rise of right-wing populism evident everywhere in Europe, we seem to be in the midst of a revolution. There is a specter haunting Europe, the United States, perhaps the world. Is it the specter of conservatism?

Commentators speak of the international rise of nationalism, right-wing populism, illiberalism, authoritarianism, perhaps even fascism, sometimes interchangeably, sometimes to distinguish particular demographics or ideologies (Albright; Frum; Nagle; Kazin, Populism; Müller; Mounk; Fukayama; “Nations in Transition 2018”). The terminological confusion reflects a certain helplessness among those of us who regard current developments with trepidation. How conservative are these movements on the Right? Is there a link between traditional conservatism—if such a thing ever existed—and the alt-right? It is not the intent of this special issue to offer conservatism as an umbrella-term under which to gather these nationalistic, authoritarian, and populist trends. On the contrary, our gambit in studying conservatism is that it may reveal potential coalition partners in the struggle against illiberalism. Today many self-proclaimed conservatives, such as David Frum, a former speechwriter for George W. Bush, are calling on moderates of different backgrounds and party affiliations to come together to conserve democracy, international cooperation, and the rule of law (Frum 216–18). If the specter haunting the political stage poses a threat to democracy, it behooves those who identify with causes on the Left to reach out to libertarians who oppose discrimination not for reasons of social justice but for those of personal freedom; to value conservatives who oppose corporate malfeasance for what it does to working families; to foreign policy hawks who recognize the importance of international alliances; to advocates of law and order who oppose mixing private business with public affairs; to religious communities whose charity extends to prisoners, immigrants, and the poor; to strict defenders of the Constitution who believe in bolstering not only the Second Amendment but the First; to federalists who believe in the separation of powers; to States-righters who feel unjustly disadvantaged by the weakening of local pollution standards; to family advocates who abhor separating children from their parents at the border; to traditionalists who believe in the dignity of office. Reaching out to these potential allies might also involve looking beyond the ivory tower to think tanks, media outlets, and even to neighbors who find themselves on the other side of the town-gown divide. Cultural studies has always attempted to make sense of symbolic relations and oppositions. Perhaps one way to begin studying the cultures of conservatism is by questioning the ‘us vs. them’ opposition that separates researchers in the social sciences and humanities from those who support democracy from different institutional and ideological locations. Do we know what conservatism is? This is the question Alan Brinkley
called “The Problem of American Conservatism” in a 1994 article by that name. Conservatism, according to Brinkley, has been an “orphan within American historical scholarship” (410). It has been an orphan in literary scholarship as well, at least since 1950 when Lionel Trilling claimed that “In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition” (Trilling 5; also Kimmage). Scholars, according to Brinkley, have been unable or unwilling to define conservatism’s “intellectual traditions and its social and political movements”; they have, in short, had trouble “finding a suitable place for the Right” within scholarly concerns (410). Much has changed in the twenty-and-more years since Brinkley wrote his article. Some of our contributors, such as Elizabeth Shermer, have taken important steps in making the Right a topic of scholarship. Brinkley called conservatism “a cluster of related (and sometimes unrelated) ideas from which those who consider themselves conservatives draw different elements at different times” (414). According to its sympathetic chronicler George Nash, “the conservative intellectual movement in America” got started in 1945, when libertarians like F. A. Hayek insisted that attempts to regulate the economy, through, for instance the New Deal, were heading down the “road to serfdom,” ultimately leading to fascism or communism (Nash 5). Free trade, in other words, was supposed to be the guarantor of political freedom; property the most fundamental right; and the state little more than an umpire making sure everyone played by the rules. Under the pressures of the Cold War, this anti-statism combined with other ideologies to create a volatile mix of what one scholar has called the “three critical themes of modern conservatism: fealty to [...] property [...], contempt for [...] intellectual elites, and a reverence for the 'Anglo-Saxon race,'” a “racially loaded phrase” that “over time would be replaced with the more inclusive ‘Western civilization’ or the religiously uplifting ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’” (Farber 16–17). These ideologies combine to form the great conservative monomyth: the struggle of the individual against the encroachments of the bureaucratic state. These ideologies have been challenged, and rightly so, by scholars of a more progressive bent. Individualism, as a principle, is full of internal contradictions; and individuality is often not a right but a privilege, conferred unequally, by law and custom, on the basis of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. The conservative coalition, busy defending a concept of freedom perhaps meant to mask white supremacy, or perhaps just too idealistic to exist, often proclaimed its open hostility to the ‘eggheads,’ i.e., intellectuals advocating government solutions to social problems like discrimination. In extreme cases, conservatives have shown themselves receptive to the importunities of a violent fringe: gay bashing to preserve the sanctity of marriage, killing to prevent abortion, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, the gun-lobby, the belief that the federal income tax is unconstitutional, the belief that the Constitution justifies armed opposition to itself. Groups supporting these questionable causes certainly backed Trump’s candidacy. His advisors, some of them with close ties to the alt-right, encouraged him in his natural inclination to play to the pit (Frum; Nagle). However, we should be careful about lumping together the entire Right with the extreme Right and the alt-right. Not all conservatives exhibit an “authoritarian personality” or succumb to the “paranoid style,” and sometimes these famous scholarly categories (Adorno et al.; Hofstadter) have been used to dismiss rather than to assess. There is considerable dissent within conservative communities, and many reasoned and reasonable positions. Influential voices from right-of-center are calling for “a new politics of commonality” to resist illiberal and reactionary tendencies (Frum 218). The clashes between those who see government as a solution and those who see it as the problem—to
paraphrase Reagan—are real and ongoing (Reagan 18). However, they have taken on a ritualistic character that obscures the common ground of debate. Intellectuals identifying as liberals and progressives have tended to defend the role of government in solving social problems (Brinkley 415). They also tend to work as public servants, for instance as teachers in a university system that expanded exponentially after World War II (Graff, Gitlin). Those thinkers more skeptical of government have often worked outside the university; George Nash, whose authoritative history of the conservative movement we have already mentioned, can serve as an example. The conflict between liberals and conservatives is perennial; the battle cries predictable: Social equality vs. personal freedom; freedom to vs. freedom from; opportunity vs. property; security from want vs. security from attack. The ideas are important, and the arguments are real, but they also serve to confirm membership in distinct social groups whose identities are based on pre-defined roles. Behind the ritualized conflicts there are nevertheless a number of commonalities. One of those commonalities is liberalism itself. The conservative tradition in the United States is a liberal tradition—evident, for instance, in Robert Taft’s arguments with Roosevelt over the meaning of the term (Farber 17). In his recent book *Founding Conservatives*, David Lefer argues that “Modern conservatism […] was born at the moment of independence”; its antagonist, Lefer continues, was not liberalism but the political extremes of radicalism and aristocracy (6–7). Key conservatives argued that liberal ideals—such as general prosperity—could better be realized through “the opposition of competing self-interests, not by the frozen hierarchy of inherited social orders, as in Europe” (Lefer 284). Liberalism can mean different things to different constituencies. Taken as a political model, however, it is committed to a procedural conception of truth: parliamentary debate, agreeing to disagree, working through the inefficient and often frustrating hurdles imposed by the institutional separation of powers, finding a balance between change and tradition. It is hard to see the commonalities because liberalism, as a political system, has come under fire since the 1960s—from both the Left and the Right. The immediate postwar years were governed by a consensus that Arthur Schlesinger dubbed “the vital center.” By 1969, however, Garry Wills could argue that “[t]he New Left and the New Right had some points of agreement in their criticism of official liberalism” (359). Barry Goldwater and Carl Hayden, in their mutual hostility towards the establishment, were closer than either would have admitted. The anxiety of the suburbs mirrored and fed off the activism of the students, and the word liberal became an epithet on both sides of the political spectrum. The Right saw institutional efforts to create equality as the road towards communism; the Left saw institutionalized racism and the Vietnam War as evidence of crypto-fascism; and both agreed that democracy had to be protected from the totalitarianism lurking behind the liberal facade. The infamous lines in Goldwater’s 1964 nomination acceptance speech could have served as a motto for either side: “I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!” (“Goldwater’s”). Not only was moderation suspect but the entire Washington establishment. It became paramount in politics to establish one’s identity as a rebel and an outsider. Since the 1960s this suspicion of the liberal establishment has produced two different, but in some ways complementary versions of institutionalized rebellion. As Todd Gitlin puts it, the Left “marched on the English department and the Right took the White House” (Gitlin). This is, of course, a deliberate simplification, but important voices in the Left have certainly aligned themselves with universities, avant-garde art, the
culture industry, and the press; and the Right has concentrated on forming think tanks, PACs, and alternate media outlets such as call-in radio talk shows. Both political orientations are mainstream, but both have positioned themselves as beltway outsiders. The Left strongly identifies with the causes of groups more likely to be represented in novels and poems than in the Halls of Congress, and the Right opposes the ‘politically correct’ language that has evolved to reflect the sensitivities of such groups. The Left has concentrated much of its energy on influencing politics through culture, and the Right has mobilized new voters—who are increasingly white, working-class men without college degrees—on religious and domestic agendas and against the dictates of an alleged cultural elite (Frum xv; Khazan). It makes sense to see this conflict between two rebellious postures as a cultural one. The performance of specific kinds of rebellion has become integral to two forms of cultural identity. The familiarity of the antagonisms has prompted many to see contemporary attacks against the media (“fake news”) and the Washington establishment (“drain the swamp”) as the latest incarnations of “America’s Never-Ending Culture War.” This is the title, and the argument, of a recent op-ed piece by Michael Kazin, who “outs” himself as an aging member of the New Left and sees Trump as the latest champion of the constituencies that opposed the Civil Rights Movement (Kazin). Others, like David Frum and Angela Nagle, coming from different ends of the political spectrum, place particular opprobrium on the former protestors who embraced the “cultural turn” once they became professors, endorsing counterculture as politics by other means and supporting “identity movements along race, gender and sexuality lines” (Nagle 61–62). As Frum puts it,

When the phrase “post-truth” began to circulate in the 1980s, it originated as something close to a compliment. The idea that things were “true” or “false” was outmoded, even reactionary! Michel Foucault and other advanced thinkers had shown that liberation would follow only once we accepted that “truth” served merely as a euphemism for self-serving ideologies devised by holders of power. All we can know for certain, insisted this glamorous new system of thought, are “narratives”: yours, mine—and no way of judging between them, except on the basis of race/class/gender. (222–23)

Frum, like Kazin, blames the current crisis on the old culture wars, but his perspective is inverted. Both agree on the pertinence of the old struggle between protestors and counter-protestors, but the issue has come down to a disagreement over whether to call Trump a postmodern president or the political heir to McCarthy, Goldwater, Wallace, and Nixon. Most post-structuralists would probably challenge Frum’s characterization of Foucault as a theorist of liberation. There is also a difference between ideology critique and the Foucauldian analysis of the knowledge/power nexus. Nevertheless, there is some truth in Frum’s account of the role identity has come to play in political debate. It is common for the Left to claim that the Right only pretends to endorse liberal values like individualism when what it is really promoting are restrictive models of gender or race. This ritualized struggle between Left and Right, now fought over the issue of identity politics, should not distract us from what is really at stake. Whatever their cultural lineage, both sides agree that the basic structures of liberal democracy are under threat, and both appeal to something very much like the “vital center” (Schlesinger) to hold its ground.

In other words, the debate over whether to blame Trump on the racists or the post-structuralists betrays a fear, common amongst traditional political antagonists, of what
Trump represents. Leftists and conservatives, whether inside the academy or out, both recognize the need to reaffirm establishment norms. The sides do not have to subscribe to the same terms of analysis to form a strategic alliance against a much greater threat to American political values. That alliance could help confirm those liberal structures that have been obscured by ritualized debate. Though Western democracy has all too often served to mask institutionalized racism, it is nevertheless impossible to square racism with any political system paying more than lip service to equality. Even those who doubt the efficacy of identity politics, like Frum and Nagle, agree on this point. Whatever their conflicting opinions about the role identity should play in cultural analysis and political agenda-setting, those to the right and left of center hold up the possibility of finding common cause against racist and sexist demagoguery. The current threat to democracy might call itself conservative, but it is actually a new form of illiberalism trying to drape itself in the costume of tradition. We can challenge it by showing that conservatism is actually part of the liberal tradition. We do not pretend that redefining conservatism will have an immediate impact at the ballot box. Nor are we calling on colleagues to change scholarly research agendas. Ideology critique and theories of identity-formation will remain central concerns in the humanities. However, we do believe that it is time to look more closely at some conservative principles in order to highlight their roots in the liberal tradition. We also advocate looking at contemporary conservatism as a cultural movement that developed in tandem with cold-war liberalism and the New Left. We know the arguments by heart—identity vs. individuality, equality vs. liberty, freedom to vs. freedom from—but perhaps the divisions are not that clear. We need to look at the different styles of debate, their audiences, their institutional locations, and at the ritual nature of their antagonisms. Conservatism is not only a set of ideas but a collection of postures, beliefs, attitudes, tastes, and career trajectories. The same can be said about cultures of the Left. Many forms of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences have defined themselves in opposition to conservatism. It is now time to explore how even this antagonism may reveal a common political—and cultural—tradition. In an effort to excavate one common but forgotten figure, we now turn briefly to the poet and historian Peter Viereck, who played a dual role in the development of postwar conservatism and the humanities. Viereck made his first bid for public attention as a 23-year-old Harvard graduate student when he published his personal manifesto, “But—I’m a Conservative!” in a 1940 issue of Atlantic Monthly. The moniker was a protest against the Popular Front; Viereck thought that mainstream liberals had no business teaming up with communists in the fight against fascism. Indeed, his target—like that of the cold war intellectuals who would gain prominence a few years later—was totalitarianism conceived as a problem of the extreme right and left. Viereck lumped together radicals at both ends of the political spectrum as “communazis,” proclaimed himself in “revolt against revolt,” and demanded that Americans commit themselves to preserving democratic traditions. After World War II, Viereck continued to make this political argument in a number of influential monographs and essays (including a short piece in the nascent American Quarterly). He also staked out a conservative cultural position, arguing that cultural revolt, in the form of avant-garde aesthetics, led to political extremism. His example here was Ezra Pound, the modernist poet who faced treason charges for supporting Mussolini during the war. Viereck’s own poetry, beginning with the war poems collected in Terror and Decorum (1949), was self-
consciously anti-modernist in its embrace of more traditional rhyme, meter, and subject-matter (Gross 127–63). Viereck had personal reasons for aligning himself with conservative politics and poetics. His father, George Sylvester Viereck, dubbed ‘Swastika’ by his detractors, was a writer and journalist who early on identified with progressive causes (he backed Robert La Follette) but came to support Hitler in the years leading up to the war. Soon after the publication of his son’s conservative manifesto, George Viereck was arrested as an undeclared foreign agent and spent five years in a federal prison for promoting the Nazi cause in America. His other son, Peter Viereck’s brother, was killed fighting the Nazis in Italy. Peter joined the army after receiving his PhD from Harvard for a dissertation published under the title Meta-politics, which traces Nazi ideology back to German romanticism (the book has gone through several editions and is still in print). In 1949 he won a Pulitzer Prize for Terror and Decorum, which includes several war poems and elegies for his brother. The title is programmatic for the way Viereck’s poetry, like his politics, holds up decorum as safeguard against terror (Gross 127–68). Decorum, for Viereck, meant tradition and restraint. He was a value conservative who was skeptical of modernity and who viewed education as a moderating force. Thus, while he opposed radicalism in politics and avant-gardism in poetics, he thought that universities could provide forums where these issues could be productively debated. This put him at odds with key figures of the postwar conservative movement like William F. Buckley, who argued in God and Man at Yale that the curriculum at a private university should reflect the values of its donors. Viereck, in his negative review of the book, quipped that if Buckley pretended to support laissez-faire economics, he should grant academic opinions the same freedom in the marketplace of ideas (Viereck, Shame and Glory 294–95, 299–300). This inaugurated a long feud between the two that was exacerbated by Buckley’s support of McCarthy and then Goldwater. Eventually, Viereck was excommunicated from the conservative movement as it coalesced around Buckley’s National Review (Gross 152). In some ways Viereck seemed impatient to declare his allegiance to liberals and the growing anti-conservative consensus in the academic community. His ideas about how mainstream conservatism was going wrong are outlined in the two essays “Revolt against the Elite” (1955) and “Philosophical New Conservatism” (1962), which were published in the two versions of Daniel Bell’s seminal collection New American Right (1955) and the re-published version Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated in 1963. Alarmed by the rise of McCarthyism after WWII, Viereck crafted a defense of civil liberties and non-violent dissent in which he emphasized the virtues of a free mind, moral law, and the common ground of liberalism and conservatism as manifested in the American Constitution. What he essentially proposes is a “prosperous moderation” of the “extremes of right and left” that reverses the intellectual and political trajectories of Pound, his father, and, he argued, McCarthyism (“Revolt” 178). Viereck was one of the first to point out that McCarthy was elected by the same Wisconsin constituency once stood behind La Follette (“Revolt” 163). His father’s biography taught him the fickle nature of populism, which is much more likely to endorse any form of political extremism than it is to support the centrists. Viereck’s conception of centrist conservatism stems from his fierce critique of any form of populism, left or right-wing radicalism, and anti-establishment resentment. He perceives such tendencies in American politics as anti-conservative and as a threat to civil liberties. He laments the fact that populism and anti-elitism are often defined as “conservative” by public discourse, but in fact have nothing in common with “true American conservatism”
("Revolt" 164) in the tradition of Burke and the Federalist Papers. McCarthy supporters are, he says, “the same old isolationist, [...] radical Populist lunatic-fringers against the eastern, educated, Anglicized elite” (164). His objections underline the tenor of Bell’s publication to dismiss conservatism as a radical, non-intellectual movement, rooted in the status anxiety of lower classes and a regressive resistance to modern times. Unlike most of Bell’s contributors, however, Viereck also seeks to recover a viable conservative tradition rooted in the Constitution. According to Viereck, the increase in ideological intolerance in the fifties—the notion of anti-establishment and opposition to an intellectual elite—threatens “liberty of opinion” (169). For him, “a world-minded, responsible American conservatism” and government would ensure “a return to established ways, relaxation of tension and calm confidence, reverence for the Constitution and every single one of its time-hallowed amendments and liberties, orderly gradualism, protection of the Executive Branch from outside mob pressure. The conservative kind of government would bring an increased respect [...] for time-honored authority” (“Revolt” 176). Viereck despairs that those following Buckley et al. would ever sign onto this program. Therefore, he ultimately pursues what he called a “non-political ‘cultural conservatism’” (190) in his follow-up article “Philosophical New Conservatism” (1963) in which he attempts to recover an intellectual and cultural tradition that goes back to Burke and celebrates the “classical humanistic values” (190) of Herman Melville, Irving Babbitt, the Federalist Papers, and John Adams. He recognizes the literary value of Southern Agrarianism, an anti-industrialism that meshed with a left-wing skepticism of capitalism. The Agrarians’ political racism and “utopian dream of an aristocratic agrarian restoration,” however, could not be tolerated by Viereck in his defense of civil liberties (188). Viereck’s project was to steer new conservatism away from the “(at best) Manchester-liberal economic materialism or (at worst) right-wing nationalist thought control” (191). Only then could America “humanize and canalize its technological prowess creatively, instead of being dehumanized and mechanized by it in the sense of Thoreau’s ‘We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us’” (193). We do not advocate elevating Viereck’s cultural conservatism into a political platform. His anglophile elitism betrays a potentially racist suspicion of other cultures. His rhymed and metered verse demonstrates the deep compatibility of traditionalism with sexism (Gross 157–59). His elevation of the executive branch as a counterweight to what he calls the “mob” is not only aristocratic but hopelessly inadequate as a model for dealing with contemporary populist threats. Nevertheless, Viereck presents an interesting case study, not because of his influence on politics or poetry—which was negligible—but because of the circumstances of his oblivion. The once-celebrated Viereck was not forgotten for violating any specific political or cultural credos. Rather, his traditionalism fell between the cracks of two divergent cultures of rebellion. His politics were not populist enough for the conservative mainstream, his poetics not modernist enough for the institutionalized avant-garde. He never identified as an outsider—though paradoxically this excluded him from dominant postwar trends—so he fell between the fault lines of the emergent cultural landscape. Clearly, we would want to expand Viereck’s canon and move away from his elitist arguments, but perhaps we should also think about what his fate tells us about the culture of US-American conservatism. The specter haunting the contemporary political landscape is not the specter of illiberalism—that is a concrete threat—but the specter of traditional liberal principles. At least some of those principles were exemplified by Viereck, who was consigned to oblivion for his revolt against revolt. Perhaps we should question
the kinds of rebellion that have become automatic on both sides of the political spectrum. Perhaps we should look for common ground. As Viereck concludes in “Philosophical New Conservatism”: “So we come full circle in America’s political paradox; our conservatism, in the absence of medieval feudal relics, must grudgingly admit it has little real tradition to conserve except that of liberalism—which then turns out to be a relatively conservative liberalism” (199).

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