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Conservatism and the Politics of Emotion

Conservatism claims to be a philosophy of common sense and everyday experience, in which feeling takes priority over reason. Yet, it is also underpinned by appeals to reverence, majesty, and awe. In this paper, I show how these two emotional registers run through both political texts and grassroots publications in mid-twentieth-century England, and argue that the tension between them is what gives Conservatism its distinctive character. I conceptualise this in Burkean terms as the beautiful and the sublime. The latter guarantees order, hierarchy, and allegiance, while the former works to soften and socialize power – making it seem a matter of custom and common sense. The article suggests that this combination enabled Conservatism to adapt to the challenges of mass democracy, but became ever harder to sustain in the emotional culture of post-war England. Over the latter decades of the twentieth century, feelings came to be regarded as a privileged form of political authority, but one rooted in personal authenticity, rather than cultural authority.