Robert Mason: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism

Hi I’m Robert Mason I’m a historian of the United States and at the moment I’m developing a course for the Online MSc which is about The Rise of Modern American Conservatism.

What inspired my own interest in this topic, partly connects with what I could see in the contemporary world. The dominance, the influence of the Conservatives in the United States and also in the wider world. And when I started studying American history in more detail I started to appreciate the way in which it hadn’t always been that way and how not so long before that time American Conservatives had been in a marginal position, they had been the losers rather than the winners so it was that juxtaposition between the history of what I could see in the world today. And so I was interested in the transition from how Conservatives went from being on the margins to how they achieved that position of dominance. That first of all inspired my research agenda that I have developed as a historian, and that’s also connected with the teaching that I’m doing.

A key goal for me in offering this course is to try to connect students with this very lively historiography, this very rich historiography about American Conservatism. There’s really an opportunity here to engage with some very active debates that historians have been having over the past 20 years. These debates are still going on now. So this is a subject that I think is important for any understanding of the United States during the 20th Century, but it is a particularly good topic just because of the urgency of the debates that surround the topic.

One of the issue that I think is especially important to reflect on when thinking about the history of American Conservatism during this period is just how important Conservatives were in achieving this breakthrough to a position of political dominance. To what extent was the mistakes of liberals that gave them the opportunity to achieve that position? To what extent was it the strength of their own ideas? That’s one of the areas that historians have disagreed about. Some give more responsibility to Conservatives for this achievement and some say it’s actually the mistakes of democrats, the mistakes of liberals. What we are looking at really is the failure of liberalism, rather than the success of conservatism. So that’s one of the issues to reflect on in the course.

While I’ve been doing my own research on these issues, it has become a subject that has become a very lively one in historiographical terms there’s a lot of new history that’s been written. A lot of the history that’s very interesting, that’s quite innovative in its approaches to the subject matter. So what we have here is I think a fascinating and important topic around which there is a very lively scholarship, a very lively literature which gives us lots to think about and lots to talk about when we are thinking about these issues.