From critique to reaction: The new right, critical theory and international relations

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Abstract
Across the globe, radical conservative political forces and ideas are influencing and even transforming the landscape of international politics. Yet IR is remarkably ill-equipped to understand and engage these new challenges. Unlike political theory or domestic political analyses, conservatism has no distinctive place in the fields’ defining alternatives of realism, liberalism, Marxism, and constructivism. This paper seeks to provide a point of entry for such engagement by bringing together what may seem the most unlikely of partners: critical theory and the New Right. Important parts of today’s New Right represent self-conscious appropriations of Critical themes and thinkers—turning them to self-declared “reactionary” ends. Developing outside the confines of the academy, these forms of thought have woven insights from across Critical theory into new and mobilizing forms of conservative ideology, seeking to link that ideology to social forces that play increasingly active roles in global politics. Our intention here is not to somehow blame Critical perspectives for the ideas of the New Right, either directly or by association. Rather, we seek to show how an engagement with Critical theory helps us understand the New Right, while also demonstrating some of the direct challenges the New Right poses for critical perspectives.

Keywords
Critical theory, globalization, international relations, new right, populism, radical right

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Across the globe, radical conservative political parties, transnational movements, and ideas are influencing and even transforming the landscape of international politics. From the United States to the European Union and beyond, “populist” and nationalist forces have come together in “international-nationalist” movements to challenge prevailing norms, practices, and institutions—leading some to proclaim the emergence of an unpredictable and troubling “right-wing international” (Dervis and Conroy, 2018; Encarnacion, 2018). These ideas and movements have attracted increasing attention in international political theory. Some have asked why there is no reactionary theory in IR at a time when awareness of these ideas is essential (Drolet and Williams, 2021; McKay and LaRoche, 2018). Others have begun to excavate the marginalized or forgotten lineages of radical conservative international theory, tracing their contemporary expressions, impacts, and implications (Abrahamsen et al., 2020; Drolet and Williams, 2018, 2020; de Orellana and Michelsen, 2019). In light of contemporary events, such engagements are vital, and they need to be widened and deepened if international political theory is to understand and address the challenges presented by the New Right.

This paper seeks to contribute to such an engagement by bringing together what may seem the most unlikely of partners: Critical theory and the New Right. At first glance, this pairing may seem at best quixotic, and at worst perverse. From its inception, Critical international theory has almost by definition taken up the mantle of progressive politics. Inspired by Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, early “critical” thinking distinguished itself from conservative realist approaches that failed to countenance the possibility of progressive change. Similarly, Habermasian-inspired theory attempts to conceive political community beyond the boundaries of territorial or national states, and critiques of neoliberal economics and global governmentality seek to reveal global power structures and inequalities, and potential sources of resistance to them.

Yet the intellectual resources and lineages that Critical theory draws on are by no means the exclusive purview of progressive thinkers and movements. In this paper, we venture a different and rather discomfiting possibility: that some of the most potent contemporary appropriations of many Critical ideas are found in neither the liberal universities of the Atlantic world, nor in the “progressive” movements of the political Left with which they are usually aligned. They lie instead in today’s radical conservatism. In fact, as we will attempt to show, many of the insights and themes that have long been building blocks of critical social and international theory—from Gramscian ideas about hegemony, to Frankfurt School analyses of capitalist societies and mass consumerism, to postmodernism—have been appropriated and mobilized by the New Right, which has turned them to distinctly non-progressive and often reactionary purposes. Developing outside the confines of the academy, these forms of thought have woven insights from across Critical theory into new and mobilizing forms of conservative ideology, seeking to link that ideology to social forces that play increasingly active roles in global politics.

Our intention here is not to attribute responsibility to Critical perspectives for the ideas of the New Right, either directly or by association. Rather, we seek to show how an engagement with Critical theory helps us better understand the nature and character of the New Right’s revolt against liberal orders in contemporary politics and international relations. It also reveals an important theoretical and political challenge. “Critical” international theory today often seems marked by a sense of self-doubt about its theoretical foundations and practical
relevance. The New Right exhibits few such doubts. It has actively mobilized Critical themes to reactionary ends, posing a direct challenge to the idea that Critical theory is intrinsically tied to progressive political purposes. Coming to terms with this theoretical and political gambit is essential if Critical theory, and international political theory more broadly, is to engage effectively with the intellectual-political challenges posed by today’s New Right.

**Gramsci for the right?**

What we call the New Right in this short study designates the intellectual vanguard that has provided much of the ideological impetus for the resurgence of the radical Right in Europe, the United States and beyond since the end of the Cold War. This New Right takes many forms and expressions in different countries. In Europe, its historical origins are generally traced to the French *Nouvelle Droite* established in 1968 by Alain de Benoist, Dominique Venner, Guillaume Faye, and other militant right-wing intellectuals associated with the *Groupement de recherché et d’études pour la civilisation européenne* (GRECE), whose agenda took shape on the back of the multiple ideological re-alignments spawned by the cultural revolutions and economic crises that shook many Western societies at the time.

One of the key moves defining the emergence of the French New Right was a strategic engagement with Antonio Gramsci’s critical legacy, with the aim of developing what Dominique Venner at the time called a “Gramscianism of the Right” (GRECE Collective, 1977). This marked a major change of tactics within the French radical Right, which until then had been guided by the “integral nationalism” of *Action Française* philosopher Charles Maurras. Whereas Maurras insisted on the importance of decisive and confrontational political engagement, many of the young people who founded the New Right in the late 1960s were former activists convinced that a wide range of intellectual and cultural activities were preconditions for successful political action. Organized around the GRECE networks, they abandoned the extra-parliamentary militancy of the extreme Right to pursue a long-term strategy premised on the notion that all great political revolutions in modern European history were the actualization of an evolution that had already taken place in the realms of thought and culture, a strategy De Benoist often refers to as “metapolitics” (De Benoist, 2011a, 2011b).

Although culture and its relationship to political power always played a major role in the philosophy of the counter-Enlightenment, De Benoist and his GRECE colleagues believed that the post-war Right had seriously neglected this relationship. In its obsession with fighting communism, it had embraced the free market catechism of the United States, along with its consumerist culture of cheap entertainment and technological fetishism. By contrast, the *Nouvelle Droite* undertook a wide-ranging re-evaluation and critique of modernity, including a modulated scepticism toward capitalism. The appropriation of Gramscian themes provided the New Right with novel strategic insights, and facilitated its attempts to blur the traditional distinctions between Left and Right in ways that could neutralize the polemical force of left-wing usages of Gramscian tropes while simultaneously adorning radical right-wing positions with a certain revolutionary appeal and post-fascist intellectual credibility.
The New Right is diverse, and different theorists channeled this appropriation in different ways. Collectively, however, the move expressed a shared conviction that the cultural revolutions of the 1960s had succeeded in politicizing all spheres of human activity; that parliamentary debates and government policies would from now on merely confirm the results of the culture wars; and that the egalitarian principles of the Left had become hegemonic in practically all civil society, state, and international institutions. Under these conditions, New Rightists concluded that the only viable strategy to challenge the “cultural power” of its adversaries was to turn the ideology critique of the Left against its own universalist categories and egalitarian common sense. The aim was to re-shape public debates on a theoretical meta-level by re-articulating the ideas, concepts, and meanings that people use to comprehend and define the world around them, and to provide the foundations for political movements that could challenge the Left and the dominant liberal order.4

By the early 1980s, the Italian Nuova Destra, the German Neue Rechte, and other Nouvelle Droite counterparts across Europe had adopted similar approaches, generating a significant transnational network of publications, publishing companies, study groups, conferences, front organizations, and online platforms that make up what participants and observers today call the European New Right.5 In addition to GRECE, these include Arktos Media, Élements, Krisis, Nouvelle École, Black House Publishing, Junge Freiheit, TeKos, New European Conservative, Metapedia, Terre et Peuple, Thule Seminar, Europe-Action, Club de l’Horloge, Institut für Staatspolitik, Geopolitika, and the Journal of Eurasian Affairs, to mention but a few. During the 1990s, De Benoist and many of his colleagues also became key contributors to the journal Telos, an influential—if always unorthodox—flagship of Frankfurt School Critical Theory in the United States. In the eyes of its founding editor Paul Piccone, this transatlantic post-Cold War alliance demonstrated the obsolescence of conventional categories of Left and Right in the face of increasingly predatory neoliberal regimes of global governance. Reflecting and perhaps even promoting the success of the New Right’s ideological re-positioning, Piccone contended that: “The French New Right, if it is still possible to place them anywhere on the Right – have re-defined themselves by incorporating 95 percent of standard New Left ideas, but on the whole, there is no longer anything that can be defined as ‘Right’” (Piccone, 1993/1994: 19).

This characterization of the New Right’s intellectualization strategy as a bridge beyond Left and Right is naïve and profoundly misleading (see also Bar-On, 2013; Griffin, 2000). For at the heart of this left-inspired objective lies a systematic effort to disseminate the quintessentially right-wing ideas and visions of some of the most unambiguously conservative figures in the history of Western political thought. This is not just a question of producing new studies, editions, translations, and commentaries in order to expose new generations of readers to well-known, forgotten or previously unpublished texts. It is also a conscious strategy of cultural hegemony seeking to shape the identity, collective self-understanding, and agenda of the European New Right by constructing its own intellectual history and lineages. The New Right looks back to the counter-revolutionary tradition of writers like Joseph de Maistre, Juan Donoso Cortes, and Louis Gabriel Ambroise de Bonald. But more than anything, it seeks to carry forward the 20th century legacy of “conservative revolutionary” thinkers such as Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, Oswald Spengler, Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, and Julius Evola.6 As we will see in
a moment, the aim is not to recover a golden age destroyed by the advent of the Industrial Revolution and mass democracy, but rather to articulate novel, anti-liberal ideological alternatives that can accommodate traditional communitarian and spiritual “values” with a radicalization of some of modernity’s most powerful dynamics.

In the United States, these efforts to connect renovated conservative ideas with specific social forces are closely linked to the historical development of the paleoconservative movement. The intellectual historian and Schmitt-scholar Paul Gottfried coined the term paleoconservatism with the historian Thomas Fleming during the mid-1980s in an effort to revitalize the agency of the Old Right. The aim was to counter the growing influence of the neocconservative and neoliberal strains of conservatism that were also often rather confusingly designated as the “New Right” in the United States and the United Kingdom at the time. In the paleoconservative view, this mainstream conservatism was in fact a “neoliberal” version of conservatism that re-enforced the power of the liberal order rather than providing the basis for a true conservative resurgence (Gottfried and Spencer, 2015). For assistance in developing an “alternative Right,” they too turned to Gramsci.

Few thinkers probed as deeply into these questions as the influential author and columnist Sam Francis. Like the European New Right, Francis stressed the importance of adopting a cultural struggle against the prevailing liberal order. As he saw it, the problem for conservatives was that “while we will find much in the conservative tradition to teach us about the nature of what we want to conserve and why we should want to conserve it, we will find little in conservative theory to instruct us in the strategy and tactics of challenging dominant authorities. Instead, we need to look to the left to understand how a politically subordinated and culturally dispossessed majority of Americans can recover its rightful position as the dominant and creative core of American society.” At about the same time that Gramscian ideas were gaining traction in international political theory, Francis (1991: 1) suggested that if “the cultural right in the United States is to take back its culture from those who have usurped it, it will find a study of Gramsci’s ideas rewarding.”

Francis held that conservatives had ceded control of cultural institutions, products, and power to liberal elites. As a result, even when they achieved electoral success, conservatives failed to exercise real political power. Channeling Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, Francis insisted that genuine political power rests ultimately on the recognition that dominated classes obey because they share the values, perceptions, beliefs, and prejudices of those who determine the existing distribution of goods, along with the institutions that decide how this distribution occurs and the permissible range of disagreement about those processes. A class interpretation of history in this framework is therefore not necessarily fixated on overt struggles between oppressors and oppressed; it may instead reveal a process by which a ruling class successfully avoids such confrontations by cultivating a complex mixture of support, apathy, and resignation among the oppressed—what Gramsci called “consent” or a “contradictory consciousness.” It follows that “in order to challenge the dominance of any established authority, it is necessary to construct a countervailing cultural establishment, a ‘counter-hegemony’ (or, as the New Left called it, a ‘counterculture’) that is independent of the dominant cultural apparatus and is able to generate its own system of beliefs” (Francis, 1991: 2).
Despite his focus on cultural struggle, Francis was also convinced that socio-economic classes remained a crucial part of political transformation. In fact, he believed that the experience and failure of the more radical parts of the New Left exposed the limits of a purely “cultural” strategy severed from the social forces that could carry it forward successfully—particularly the working class. In this view, a key weakness of the New Left lay in the fact that its counter-cultural politics placed it at odds with much of the working class, which the New Left dismissed as conformist or complacent.10 Francis and his paleoconservative colleagues did not share this dismissal. On the contrary, they saw working class mobilization, spurred by economic insecurity and cultural resentment within the white, industrial working class, as a potential catalyst for a radical conservative challenge to the liberal order (Drolet and Williams, 2019). The goal thus became to provide an analysis of liberal cultural power and its weaknesses, and to construct a cultural strategy—a political identity and ideology—capable of mobilizing those groups into a counter-hegemonic force.

Over the past decade or so, this agenda has been taken up by a range of “Alt-Right” ideological entrepreneurs gravitating around publishing and media platforms such as Counter-Current Publishing, North American New Right, American Renaissance, and other agents of white nationalism who have also linked up with European interlocutors. In the white nationalist version advocated by Greg Johnson, what the European New Right calls metapolitics translates in the American context into two main activities. The first is education: “articulating and communicating forms of white nationalism tailored to the interests and outlooks of the full array of white constituencies. This includes not just ivory tower theorizing but also artistic expression, topical cultural and political commentary, and the whole range of media by which they are communicated.” The second targets the organization and development “of real-world communities that live according to our vision in the present and may serve as the seeds of a New Order to come” (Johnson, 2012). Political organization, allied to the goal of training a new cadre of youth to undertake what the Charlemagne Institute,11 with a nod to the New Left, calls “the long march through the institutions” of culture, commerce, and government, is now a systematic goal of important parts of the New Right.

**Conservatism and the new class: A critique of neoliberalism—with a twist**

The New Right’s engagement with Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is, of course, highly selective.12 Despite his attack on the “economism” of the Second International, Gramsci still assumed that the social bonds of class were ultimately more genuine than those of family, community, and religion. His interpretation of “consent” and “contradictory consciousness” was hobbled by a rationalist psychology and a revolutionary teleology that could not envisage workers’ dissatisfaction as anything else than an embryonic class consciousness against the impersonal system of exploitation theorized by Marx. The New Right takes class seriously, but it eschews this account of class consciousness. Instead, it proposes that we understand late-modern capitalism as part of a new “managerial society” in which the enemy is not an abstract extractive logic driven by the profit motive of the market and the bourgeoisie, but a mechanism of wilful exploitation associated with the concrete agency of the so-called “New Class.”
The roots of this New Class thesis go back to late 19th century critiques of Marxism and Soviet-style communism,13 assaults renewed more systematically at mid-century by Rizzi (1939/1985) and, most notably, Burnham (1941).14 Burnham argued that the emergence of a New Class of technically skilled administrators who had succeeded in gaining power in government, industry, and the media by exploiting redistributionist ideologies was not exclusive to Soviet Russia, but was also a key feature of fascist powers and welfare state democracies across Europe and North America. The new, managerial state that grew out of these experiments was “built on neither a market economy nor socialist equality.” Rather, it elevated a managerial class that had already captured the corporate economy into one that would now design and provide state-authorized social services and dominate technological developments (Gottfried, 2002a: 51). Progressive elites came to dominate the technocratic state and turned their expansive new powers toward fighting prejudices, providing social services and welfare benefits, and punishing infringements on expressive and lifestyle liberties (Francis, 2000).

The New Right uses the term New Class in a similar way to designate the growing social stratum of experts, ranging from corporate executives to university lecturers, lawyers, computer programmers, and bureaucrats, who occupy positions of economic and political power in the post-industrial “information” society. Controlling the centralizing mechanisms of mass organization, these elites possess a vested interest in the application of contingent but nonetheless “expert” and “therapeutic” knowledge to address social issues. The “war on poverty” and progressive reform enacted through bureaucratic regulation, as well a “rights culture” in which rights are increasingly determined by liberal experts and judges rather than through popular will, exemplify this agenda and the ways it empowers and rewards the new elite and the client groups associated with it. In this account, the move from New Deal/social democratic liberalism to neoliberalism in the West since the mid-1970s should not be interpreted as a market-driven withdrawal of state institutions from society, but as an administrative move away from expanded material entitlements toward behavioral control. Cuts in expensive welfare entitlements are supplanted by cheaper, but nonetheless lavish, governmental commitments to therapeutic and disciplinary projects that sustain the rule and foster the interests and expansion of the “managerial regime” and the “administrative state” (Gottfried, 2002b: 1–2).

As many of the New Right’s most influential theorists acknowledge, their critique of neoliberal managerialism in important ways overlaps with, and even takes inspiration from, some of the Frankfurt School’s most influential theses on the oppressive contradictions of ostensibly liberal capitalist societies in the 20th century (O’Meara, 2013: 30, 48). Between the early 1940s and the late-1960s, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse all wrote extensively about how capitalism had narrowly averted a fatal systemic crisis of legitimacy by co-opting the modernist counter-culture and turning it into a commodity. Analyzing the ways that the emerging “culture industry” turned expressive individuality into a tool for the administrative creation of consumerism, they sought to explain how the mass media had transformed socialization processes previously carried out within the family and the community to produce individuals susceptible to manipulation by advertising and bureaucratic agencies.15 In this “one-dimensional,” “totally administered society” (Marcuse, 1964), there seemed vanishingly little room for critical agency, and the proletariat’s historical mission of bringing modernity to its emancipatory conclusion.
seemed increasingly implausible. In these forms, Critical Theory retained its commitment to the power of negation and its hostility to liberal capitalism, but it lacked a compelling historical process and agent.\textsuperscript{16}

Many conservatives and Cold War liberals at the time broadly agreed with the sociological analysis underpinning this gloomy diagnostic.\textsuperscript{17} Although these thinkers did not reject the continued reign of capitalism in principle, they worried that consumerism and the successful commodification of the counter-culture led to the internalization of subversive tendencies into the normative fabric of the liberal capitalist system. This “hedonistic” or “decadent” culture was undermining traditional values and solidarities, as well as the bourgeois worldview that had historically allowed liberal democratic societies to make the distinction between liberty and license and provided them with a sense of stoic resignation to face the inevitable existence of racial and economic inequality. Few captured these misgivings better than the Bell. In his neoclassical assessment of the “cultural contradictions of capitalism,” Bell (1976: 35) argued that the trajectory of contemporary societies has

been dominated by a principle of modernism that has been subversive of bourgeois life, and the middle-class life-styles by a hedonism that has undercut the Protestant ethic which provided the moral foundation for the society. The interplay of modernism as a mode developed by serious artists, the institutionalization of those played-out forms by the “cultural mass”, and the hedonism as a way of life promoted by the marketing system of business, constitutes the cultural contradiction of capitalism. The modernism is exhausted, and no longer threatening. The hedonism apes its sterile japes. But the social order lacks either a culture that is a symbolic expression of any vitality or a moral impulse that is a motivational or binding force. What, then, can hold the society together?

For neoconservatives and other mainstream conservative forces in the West, this predicament called for a mobilization of state institutions to introduce proactive and often punitive public policies and welfare reforms designed to regenerate the normative consensus and individual “discipline” deemed necessary to the stability of liberal capitalist democracy. New Right intellectuals, by contrast, have consistently rejected such tactics as deceptive ploys designed to legitimate the managerial state to those of a conservative disposition. In their view, the strategy is deeply hypocritical: it laments the erosion of national traditions and culture, while simultaneously eliding the deracinating role of economic neoliberal globalization in this process (De Benoist, 1996; Gottfried and Fleming, 1988). As Gottfried (2001, 2019: 72–73) (who studied with Marcuse in the 1960s) argues, neoconservatism intensifies the “one-dimensionality” of late capitalist societies insofar as it envisages values and identity as malleable market-like commodities that can be purchased and exchanged at will to suit the needs of the regime: “This furnishes a model of social control, in which subjects can be manipulated in return for being given access to certain comforts and services.” At best, Francis (1992: 19) concurs, neoconservative appeals to erstwhile “virtues” of republican or bourgeois liberal citizenship are deeply naïve, radically underestimating the power of the managerial regime to fuse culture, commodification, and social control: “Not only do technology and its organizational applications entice us with ‘luxury’ – and what we today complacently call a ‘high
standard of living,” he argued, “but they offer to those who understand how to manipulate them a degree of power unknown to the most imperious despots of the past.”

The challenge for the New Right thus became to chart a path outside that of the neo-conservative Right (which was little more than liberal managerialism in disguise) and the failures of the New Left. The “critical” theory of the New Left was in their eyes analytically perceptive but hopelessly abstract, elitist, and ineffective. Moreover, it had actually contributed to the power of the managerial state rather than challenging it. Having failed to gain the support of trade unions and the formal organizations of the Old Left, the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s were incapable of generating their own discipline or sustaining themselves independently of the society they rejected. In response, the new transnational social movements emerging out of the defeated democratic surges in the 1970s largely rejected party politics and formal organized representation, re-orienting their activity toward a “global arena” and favoring postmodern, multicultural discourses of individual emancipation driven by a deep distrust of all party and state institutions. This new, multicultural politics of recognition asked for public affirmation of individual and group differences—not as pathological deviations to be accepted reluctantly by the majority, but as worthy ways of leading individual and collective life.

In the eyes of its advocates, this turn to identity politics represented a fight for self-determination and human dignity against the false universalisms of the establishment and the hegemony of the heterosexual, White Anglo-Saxon majority culture. For the New Right, it was a self-defeating plunge into what Gottfried describes as “theocratic politics in a new key,” ironically intensifying liberal managerialism rather than resisting it. “Identity as recognition” Gottfried (2002a: 112–113) argues, “is something to be granted, which means (and the multiculturalists are politically right here) by those in power or by those who intend to seize it. . .(identity) has a relational and confrontational content and is contingent for its own validation on those who bestow political acknowledgement.” Since identity is something to be accorded or withheld depending on needs and aspirations of existing political institutions, it became yet another instrument used selectively by the managerial elites to empower minorities at the expense of established majority cultures: “Multiculturalists speak incessantly about tolerance, but not everyone is to be assigned the same expressive and cultural rights. Those who are awarded victim status by virtue of a group affiliation have preferential rights to self-identity, whereas those identified with oppression, such as Southern whites in America, are accorded no right to a sense of pride in a shared past” (Gottfried, 2002b: 149).

The New Right sees the deliberative democratic theories of second-generation critical theorists, who reformulated Critical theory away from the perceived dead ends of agential negativity toward universal communicative rationality, as key expressions of these forms of liberal power. Consider, for instance, Habermas’ (2000: 110) paradigmatic claim that: “[at the level of global governance] the democratic procedure no longer draws its legitimizing force only, indeed not even predominantly, from political participation and the expression of collective political will, but rather from the general accessibility of deliberative processes whose structure grounds an expectation of rationally accepted results.” For New Right critics, there is little doubt what kind of people—which class—and which values will dominate what count as “rationally accepted results,” and how this will be determined. They see in such formulations not simply a philosophical argument,
but a process in which the post-68 generation of Critical intellectuals were co-opted within the liberal-capitalist system, becoming accomplices (or pampered critics) of the system they once proposed to overturn (Gottfried, 2001, 2005). Ultimately, these theorists end up supplying ineffectual critiques that provide the appearance of opposition without having the remotest chance of fundamentally challenging liberal institutions at either a philosophic or a practical level, a function Piccone (1976, 2008) called “artificial negativity.” Critique becomes little more than ineffectual criticism that legitimates structures of power by providing a simulacrum of adversity, or is reduced to an individualistic, moralistic, and ephemeral politics of outrage. As de Benoist and Champetier (2000: §13) argue in their millennial Manifesto for the French Nouvelle Droite:

Incapable of renewing itself, powerless and disillusioned by the failure of its objectives, critical thought has slowly turned itself into a form of thought police whose purpose is to excommunicate all those who diverge in any way from the currently dominant ideological dogmas. Former revolutionaries have rallied around the status quo while carrying over from their former lives a taste for purges and anathemas. This new form of treachery relies upon the tyranny of public opinion, as fashioned by the media, and takes the form of cleansing hysteria, enerating mawkishness or selective indignation. . . The reduction of politics to the sound management of increasingly problematic growth excludes the possibility of radically changing society or even the possibility of an open discussion of the ultimate goals of collective action. Democratic debate thus finds itself reduced to nothing. One no longer discusses, one denounces. . .

In this account, critique has not “run out of steam,” as Latour (2004) suggested. In the eyes of the New Right, the dissipation of critical energies has been accompanied by the co-optation of critical theorists, who have gained a small degree of power and a high degree of comfort (both psychological and material) in the process. As ideal theorists, supposedly adversarial artists, or irrelevant “radical” academic philosophers espousing the merits of pure negativity or the virtues of “failure” (Michelsen, 2020: 14), these self-proclaimed “critics” have in fact become integral parts of New Class hegemony increasingly distant from actual political power and (despite their declarations) estranged from large parts of the non-elite population.²⁰ As Faye (1998/2010: 144) declares: “The critical Left is neither reformist, nor revolutionary or conservative: it is a means to reinforcing the system. . .. It passes itself off as being against the system, when it is the system. It passes itself off as being oppressed, when it oppresses.”

In sum, the New Right shares a number of the defining features of the Frankfurt School’s critique of late-modern liberalism, casting the latter as an insidious form of power politics fostering compliance and dependency by means of relentless abstractions and socio-cultural integration. But in the conceptual frameworks that Adorno, Marcuse, and their colleagues deployed to apprehend these developments, New Rightists also see the paradoxical but characteristic inability of the intellectual Left to appreciate the diversity of working class culture, along with the resources it provides for common decency, solidarity, and resistance. It charges that over the past five decades Critical theory has slowly moved from being an ally of large parts of the proletariat and non-elite sectors of societies to being its most condescending critics. Despite its radical self-representation, Critical theory has evolved into a small but valuable vehicle for the globalizing imperatives and desires of liberal managerialism and its proponents. The New Right deploys
both aspects of this polemical diagnosis to bolster its intellectual and strategic positions in the wider counter-hegemonic struggle against contemporary liberal domination.

**Postmodern possibilities/postmodern populism**

Like Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, postmodernism seems on the surface deeply resistant to conservative appropriation—and it is certainly not hard to find an array of mainstream conservatives decrying its purported evils. However, the New Right is not unremittingly hostile to postmodern positions. Instead, it combines critique with appropriation, seeking a paradoxical revaluation and reorientation of postmodern insights toward reactionary ends.21

On the one hand, the New Right is in accord with critics on the Left like Jameson (1991) who argue that parts of postmodernism are best understood as part of the “cultural logic of late capitalism.” Far from providing a critique of capitalist society, the New Right contends, postmodernism simply celebrates and supports the demands of global capital, the culture industry, and their associated political elites (De Benoist, 2011a; Sunic, 2007). Yet the New Right also finds much of value in postmodern views. As one of their leading theorists explains, influential postmodern positions like that of Jean-François Lyotard are characterized by an ironic, fatalistic, and pluralist incredulity toward metanarratives and scepticism toward liberal morality and “Enlightenment Reason” that the New Right shares. In this account, what makes our era “post” modern is precisely the fact that the Enlightenment narrative remains central to the reproduction of contemporary liberal orders, despite having lost all metaphysical credibility: “It persists by dint of force and propaganda. But in the sphere of thought, poetry, music, art or letters, this metanarrative says and inspires nothing. It has not moved a great mind for 100 or 150 years” (Steuckers, 2012: 250; see also Corbulo, 2017).

For the New Right this incredulity toward the Enlightenment does not open up a vast new vista of political tolerance and the proliferation and play of difference. Instead, “Provincializing” (Chakrabarti, 2000) Europe’s false Enlightenment universalism provides an opportunity to unapologetically revive the West’s essential and unique historical identity, which lies not in liberal Reason but in “a return of the Dionysian, the irrational, the carnal, the turbid, and disconcerting areas of the human soul revealed by Bataille or Caillois, opening up the possibility for a revival of myth and the tragic, agonistic worldview laying at the origins of Western civilisation and its best cultural achievements – what Spengler called the ‘Faustian spirit’” (Steuckers, 2012: 248–249). As De Benoist and Champetier (2000: §2) emphasize, this affirmation of mysticism and the transgressive, emotional aspects of Western culture is not a question of overcoming the crisis of modernity by returning to the past, but of recovering “certain premodern values in a decisively postmodern dimension.” In their view, “it is only at the price of such a radical restructuring that anomie and contemporary nihilism will be exorcised.”

In this context, the end of the Enlightenment project heralded by postmodernism is transformed by New Right intellectuals into an opportunity for the re-constitution of an organic populism. This reconstitution seeks to rehabilitate an ethno-politics disgraced by its association with eugenics and historical fascism by re-articulating this politics in the somewhat less offensive language of cultural relativism. The move is fashioned conceptually through an
“identitarian” theory of individual and collective self-determination that frames identity as a process of constant becoming within the limitations of historical experiences and material conditions. In this framework, identity “is not what never changes, but on the contrary, it is what allows one to constantly change without giving up who one is”—that is, without losing the sense of ontological security afforded by our existence as member of a distinct community of fate (De Benoist, 2004: 41).

Identitarianism thus affirms the value and importance of recognizing differences between cultures, ethnic groups, races, and civilizations, along with the political processes and ideological mechanisms that maintain a healthy degree of segregation and estrangement between them: “The group and the individual,” De Benoist (2004: 39) argues, “both need to be confronted by ‘significant others.’” This is what New Rightists call “differentialism,” or the “right to difference.” While asserting the absence of objective criteria for determining a hierarchy of cultures, races, or ethnic groups, differentialism casts itself as an ethico-political response to the perceived threat posed by liberal multiculturalism and ethnic and racial miscegenation. As Tudor (2014: 88–89; see also Sunic, 2011; Willinger, 2013) emphasizes in a sympathetic survey: “When total openness and mixing occur, peoples do not merely change in the normal sense, but lose who they are or merge with another people entirely, thus resulting in the elimination of their identity.”

It is safe to say that this mashup of Schmitt and Gobineau with poststructuralist tropes on the disenfranchisement of alternative subjectivities will not satisfy many sociologists within professional academic circles. But identitarians have their own para-academic outlets and alternative epistemic communities through which they can challenge New Class “regimes of truth” and disseminate their own. As O’Meara (2013: 261–262) cheerfully acknowledges, the revolutionary conservatism of the New Right, in this sense, does indeed unfold within the cultural horizon of postmodernism:

Accepting the world’s intrinsic lack of coherence and the relativity of its different orders of value need not trivialize or discredit the European heritage. From the identitarian’s perspective, postmodernism’s broadsides constitute an emphatic justification of tradition’s particularity and the fact that we are who we are only because we make certain decisions to identify with and defend our particular system of truth. The constructed (that is, the human or cultural) character of the historical narrative, the multiplicity of these narratives, and their absence of closure are cause for commitment, not despair, for the culturally relative ‘truths’ born of one’s own identity are necessarily more meaningful than those that are not. The art of historical survival... consequently dictates that a people jealously, intolerantly if need be, defend its myths, beliefs, lifestyles, language, institutions, and, above all, its genetic heritage, for these alone enable it to be what it is and what it might be.

According to New Right thinkers, the disorientating temporalities and disastrous demographic and environmental consequences of globalization have made the renewal of traditions and revitalization of local communities imperative. As De Benoist and Champetier (2000: §10; see also De Benoist, 1992) argue: “Fostering social interaction and a sense of celebration, traditions inculcate a sense of life’s cycles and provide temporal landmarks. Emphasizing rhythmic passing of the ages and of the seasons, great moments in life, and the stages of the passing year, they nourish symbolic imagination and they
create a social bond. These traditions must never been frozen in time, but must always be in a state of renewal.” Appropriating the Left’s environmentalist language of “Indigenous Sovereignty,” New Rightists insist on the close link between historical heritage, collective memory, and spiritual rootedness in ancestral lands against the utopian vision of a cosmopolitan elite that has no concrete ties to the earth. In their eyes, the protection of the ecosystem is inseparable from territorial sovereignty and the defence of “indigenous” white populations. For the theorists of the French Nouvelle Droite, as for Dugin (2012) in Russia and Johnson (2018) and his acolytes in American Renaissance (Santoro, 2017; Taylor, 1998), the challenges of the 21st century call for a new synthesis of tradition and technology that will effect a decisive break with modern egalitarianism to restructure the relationship between the local and the global. Faye calls his own influential version of this synthesis *Archeofuturism*:

To envisage a future society that combines techno-scientific progress with a return to the traditional answers that stretch back into the mists of time. This is perhaps the true face of postmodernity [...] Could we not imagine and foresee a scenario where most of humanity reverts to living in traditional societies that consume little energy, and are socially more stable and happy, while – in the context of globalisation – a minority continues to live according to the techno-industrial model? Might there be two parallel worlds in the future, the worlds of a new Middle Ages and of Hyperscience? Who would be living in each of these worlds, and in what numbers? All daring and creative thought must think the unthinkable. I believe that *Archeofuturism*, an explosive meeting of opposites, is the key to the future, simply because the paradigm of modernity is no longer viable on a global scale (Faye, 1998/2010: 45–46).

The New Right locates the possibilities for realising its alternative visions of world order in the postmodern, globalizing logic of liberal managerialism itself. Managerial liberalism’s hedonistic ethics, relativist values, and therapeutic social practices tend to fragment societies into ever more diverse groups, each advocating their own programs, identity, and interests, inhibiting collective action and weakening the progressive state’s ability to enact its promises through appeals to collective solidarity and national identity and unity. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, liberal managerialism relentlessly undermines and attacks the economic and social positions of those who cannot or will not adopt or adapt to globalist imperatives. These are the “left behinds,” those still tied to locality, who experience migration or cultural cosmopolitanism as a threat, as well as the “basket of deplorables” who hold onto tradition, to their inherited communities and prejudices even as they are being eroded by globalization, and who are disparaged as backward and bigoted, dependent, and (if they are lucky) in need of “re-skilling” by a liberal elite which is the condescending agent of their increasingly dire economic plight and that dismisses and disparages their feelings of social and cultural dislocation or alienation.

Drawing historical lessons from a Frankfurt School tradition that searched in vain for an historical agent once it had given up on the working class, the New Right holds (and hopes) that the combination of economic dislocation, cultural resentment, and mythic mobilization provides an opportunity to reverse this situation. For its protagonists, the present conjuncture is particularly ripe for such mobilization. Economic sectors now affected by globalization and population movement go beyond declining industries to
include once protected “New Class” professions threatened by off-shoring and automation, and generational inequities provide opportunities for attracting a youth cadre. At the same time, the United States’ geopolitical decline has weakened managerial globalism while strengthening “pluralizing” forces and particularist identities.24

In this setting, New Right thinking seeks to create class, race, or group self-consciousness on the part of the objects of its analysis—to help mobilize the “marginalized” groups it identifies into self-conscious agency. By associating the material and cultural contradictions of capitalism with the history and concrete agency of New Class managerial elites in this manner, New Right discourses provide a focus for opposition (a Schmittian identifiable enemy), working to create the agents capable of overthrowing the system. Here, admonitions to recapture pre-modern insights into the power of myth play important roles, and New Right theorists view themselves as part of the vanguard of these national and transnational movements.25 For those following in Francis’s (1991: 11) footsteps, the main ideological goal is to destroy the old “myth” of America as an abstract universalist proposition (the “rights of man”) and replace it with “a new myth of the nation as a historically and culturally unique order that commands loyalty, solidarity, and discipline and excludes those who do not or cannot assimilate to its norms and interests.”

This strategy seeks to break the dependency of Middle America on the cultural power of the incumbent elite, and thus enable it to formulate goals and adopt tactics that do not simply mimic and help reproduce those of the managerial regime. As Francis explained in 1991, in this ideological framework “America First” is not a mere rallying cry against the deracinating follies of liberal internationalism: it represents a counter-hegemonic mythology through which opposition to the regime can be fomented and transmuted into a new cultural hegemony: “It ought to inform the total cultural life of the nation and be the foundation of our cultural and social identity no less than our politics and national policies. . . If it fails to do so America will be no more secure, no more prosperous, and no more first than it is today in the custody of its self-serving and self-appointed globalist masters” (Francis, 1991: 11; see also Gottfried, 1995).

Conclusion

The New Right is often cast as an anti-intellectual movement—a populist, nativist throw-back to the “know-nothing” days of a darker, less enlightened time. Although this view is accurate in some ways, it significantly under-estimates the intellectual resources of the New Right and the challenges it poses. As we have tried to show, important parts of these movements are not just spasmodic reactions to passing economic or social dislocations, or the product of ephemeral, charismatic leaders. The New Right has a long and in many ways sophisticated theoretical lineage that demands critical interrogation. Somewhat ironically perhaps, one place to begin such an examination is with its use of key themes commonly associated with Critical international political theory to reconfigure parts of conservative ideology. Drawing strategic insights from Gramsci and lessons from the successes and failures of the Frankfurt School, as well as select themes from postmodernism, New Rightists seek to provide a thorough-going critique of the contemporary global order, and the intellectual and ideological bases for building counter-hegemonic movements to resist and oppose it.
The New Right’s promise to move beyond conservative nostalgia or neoliberal globalism through a postmodern synthesis of aesthetic myth-making, hyper-scientific futurism, and regenerated ethno-homogenious polities is in many ways fanciful. However, we should resist the temptation to see the expressions of the New Right surveyed here as mere extensions of historical fascism. The first wave of fascist movements that swept across Europe in the 1920s and 1930s were avowedly committed to militarism, imperial conquest, and violent extra- and anti-parliamentary activism in ways that the contemporary New Right simply is not. The metapolitical focus of New Right ideologues also distinguishes its visions and activities from the delusional conspiracy theories of QAnon and other like-minded groups who stormed the U.S. Capitol in January 2021. Yet by identifying the cultural and material contradictions of late-modern capitalism with the concrete agency of the New Class and its client groups, New Right critiques of globalization do lend themselves perfectly well to this sort of violent conspiratorial politics. Although managerialism is not a conspiratorial theory, it can easily shade toward views that are.

Also clearly connected to the fascist playbook is the revolutionary rhetoric of exceptional circumstances through which those critiques are articulated to mobilize their supporters. Whereas Marxian revolutionary thought locates the motives for collective action in reasoned class consciousness positively connected to universalist claims about the direction of historical developments, the New Right promotes a disengagement with universalist norms that can easily give rise to (and strategically cultivate) violent emotions and strategies of social division. The aim is to render centrist political parties and reformist positions irrelevant by radicalising the terms of public debates and polarizing the electorate around binary oppositions: those who embrace globalization versus those who want to destroy it; “ordinary” voters who want to leave the EU versus arrogant metropolitan elites who want to remain; those who wish to preserve traditional communities and their sources of authority versus those who wish to abolish these arrangements. The strategy is simple, but it has proven incredibly effective over the past decade. So much so that some influential academic studies of contemporary right-wing populism have internalized and reproduced those reductive binaries in their own analytical framework.

In a 1967 address to Viennese students, Theodor Adorno reflected upon the recent electoral success of the National Democratic Party of Germany, warning against the resurgence of right-wing radicalism only two decades after the end of the Second World War. Adorno attributed these developments to young people’s growing disappointment with the unredeemed emancipatory ideals and democratic deficit of ever-more technocratic mechanisms of government. Against those who hoped that the European Economic Community and other forms of trans-national integration would expose the obsolescence of nationalism once and for all, Adorno (1967/2020: 6) reiterated Nietzsche’s warning that nationalist politics become particularly aggressive when the nation state is faced with its own impotence: “it is very often the case that convictions and ideologies take on their demonic, their genuinely destructive character, precisely when the objective situation has deprived them of substance.” Adorno was under no illusion that the leaders of this resurgent far-right could be given a stake in the management of Europe’s changing political orders. All that could be done was to relentlessly expose the deceptive character and destructive consequences of right-wing radicalism in the hope that people would turn away from these groups and movements.
In retrospect, Adorno’s strategy worked quite well at the time (Weiss, 2020)—and as we hope to have shown in this analysis, it remains important. But the radical Right today has changed. It has sharpened its “critical” theoretical and rhetorical arsenal and adapted its modus operandi to take full advantage of the unprecedented range of new communication technologies to disseminate its message, and foster alternate realities within which that message can appeal to significant segments of populations across Europe, North America, and beyond. Reading the New Right through its appropriation of key themes of Critical theory reveals that, contrary to what is often suggested in the media and mainstream foreign policy literature, the aspiration of this anti-globalization politics is not simply to revert to an idealized account of 19th century nationalism. What the radical right wants more than anything is to take control of globalization and build an alternative order in which capitalism thrives but is rooted in notions of shared civilizational heritage, myths of inherited communities and their traditional sources of authority, and in which the West is redefined against the cultural and demographic “threats” from Global Islam and the Global South.

This situation cries out for “critical” engagement in all senses of the word. Yet at precisely the moment that reactionary theorists are mobilizing its core themes to considerable effect, critical international theory often seems increasingly paralyzed by self-doubt and its apparent inability to make itself relevant to the wider political conjunctures of the 21st century. As one IR scholar has recently pointed out, what is being lamented in this literature is the growing disconnect between the “explanatory-diagnostic” and the “anticipatory-utopian” aspects of Critical Theory (Schmid, 2018: 200). It is increasingly wondered today whether the negative dialectic—the great legacy of the Frankfurt School—has revealed its own negation; whether its still-recognizable Marxian roots leave Gramscian politics out of touch with an increasingly postmodern world; or whether post-modernism itself is an exhausted, dispersed, and increasingly empty position, hanging on more from the lack of any obviously more compelling “critical” options than from its own virtues.

Theoretically, each of these views have a degree of plausibility, and they are matched by a sociological sense that Critical international theory, a vision historically always in search of an agent, is ever more unlikely to find one. The intellectual avant-garde, the working classes, social movements, not to mention more speculative hopes for a rising progressive global “multitude” all seem to have failed to take up their transformative mission, despite decades of effort by their would-be theoretical conjurers. At best, we might say, Critical theories of various kinds may have played roles in particular political struggles—gender, race, and environment being perhaps the most vibrant, and often drawing on theoretical inspirations outside the bounds of this article. But there also seems in much of contemporary “critical” international theory a sense of self-doubt, a worry about whether it can in fact have a “worlding” effect. To return again to Latour’s oft-quoted phrase, it is hard to avoid the impression that critique has “run out of steam.”

By contrast, the New Right’s appropriation of critical-theoretic themes has not led to doubt, paralysis, or exhaustion. Quite this opposite: putatively “critical” theory has been appropriated and turned to radical conservative and even reactionary ends. This situation poses serious questions and challenges for Critical international theory. It shows, as Michelsen (2020: 5) recently argued, that contrary to what is often assumed, “critical”
theoretical tools are by no means necessarily tied to “emancipatory” or normatively superior stances and objectives. Moreover, if critique has “run out of steam,” how is it to engage with theoretical perspectives and movements that not only refuse such doubts, but see them as a sign of weakness and decadence—a target to be attacked rather than a scepticism to be embraced? We are in no position to provide substantive answers to these complex questions in the space available here. But they are questions that critical international theorists and others can no longer avoid, and we hope that the reconstructive exegesis presented in this study can help to better understand the nature of the challenges ahead.

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Notes

1. The literatures are, of course, extensive and we make no effort to survey them here; an excellent assessment is Devetak (2018).
2. Early analytical overviews include Carofiglio and Ferrandes (1986), Duranton-Grabol (1988), and Taguieff (1984). For later studies in the English language see Bar-On (2013), Griffin (2000), and Spektorowski (2003).
3. See the statements by De Benoist (1979a) and Vial (1979a) in Le Monde.
4. See, for instance, De Benoist (1979b), GRECE Collective (1977), Tarchi (1980), and Vial (1979b).
5. On the Europeanization of the New Right see Capra Casadio (2014), O’Meara (2013), Sacchi (1993), Salzborn (2016), Wegierski (1993), Weiss (2017), and Teitelbaum (2017).
6. On the idea of a conservative revolution see De Herte (1977) and Mohler (1950/2018).
7. Ashbee (2000), Drolet and Williams (2019), Scotchie (1999), and Woltermann (1993). To get a sense of the ideological affinities and disagreements between paleoconservatism and the European New Right see Francis (2004) and Gottfried (1993).
8. Richard Spencer, one of the most radical and controversial figures of the “Alt-Right,” presents Lenin and Gramsci as “the Left we can learn from” because their “strategic and tactical insights are useful, due, in part, to the fact that they existed in similar social positions as rightists find themselves in today.” Quoted in Main (2018: 246).
9. For influential early treatments, see Cox (1983), Gill (1993); and the discussion in Germain and Kenney (1998).
10. See Levy (1994: 111).
11. https://www.charlemagninstitute.org/. In France, similar ambitions animate Marion Maréchal’s attempts to establish the Institute of Social, Economic, and Political Sciences in Lyon.
12. On this point see Faye (1998/2010: 28–30).
13. Especially in the writings of Polish revolutionary Jan Waclaw Machajski. See Shatz (1989).
14. Other important right- and left-wing Cold War re-articulations include Djilas (1957), Evola (1951/2012), Gouldner (1979), and Konràd and Szélényi (1974/1979).
15. For the classic statement see Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1997: 120–167).
16. As De Benoist (1977/2019: 126–127) argues in an early assessment, Frankfurt School Critical Theory “represents a much more efficient type of criticism of the modern world than orthodox Marxism.” Its protagonists grasped the subtle, insidious, and powerful forms of domination exercised by liberal institutions in ways that even some of the most perceptive right-wing critics of liberalism as a de-politicising ideology often fail to recognize. However, its unwillingness to venture positive theoretical positions by fear that the liberating force of these positions might get corrupted in practice condemned it to political impotence, “demonstrating the sterilising power that pervades an intellect which is only driven towards criticism and gradually reaches a point where it targets everything with denial and dissolution.” For more recent New Right engagement with the Frankfurt School and its legacy see Bolton (2019), Bowden (2016), Francis (2016: 524–545), Frieberg (2015: 2–26), Gottfried (2005, 2009: 45–62), and Leimann (2020).
17. These were taken up in various guises in Europe and North America during the 1950s and early 1960s in the context of the intellectual debates and controversies over the so-called “end of ideology” thesis. See Waxman (1968).
18. Francis (2016: 674–675) also draws freely on Marcuse to emphasize the totalizing character of these developments.
19. On this wider shift, see Moyn (2018).
20. For a striking account of this process, see Eribon (2013).
21. For a recent example see Dyal (2017), and for a rare and insightful link in to debates in IR theory, Michelsen (2020: 15–17).
22. For a rare treatment of some of these questions outside the North, see Abrahamsen (2020: 67–73).
23. A number of authors have noted this fusion of environmentalism and various nationalist and post-nationalist strains of conservatism. See, for instance, Chatterjee (2019), Forchtner (2020), Hamilton (2002), and Olsen (1999).
24. Although anxious over the perceived incursion of Islam into the Christian civilization of the West, New Rightists admire Islamic radicals for their conservatism and their spectacular refusal to be absorbed into the networks of liberal managerialism.
25. On the New Right and myth see De Benoist (2021), Lochi (1979), and O’Meara (2013: 133–136).
26. This is not, of course, to say that overtly neo-fascist movements or groups do not exist, but analytic distinctions between different aspects of the New Right are vital for both theoretical understanding and practical engagement.
27. A partial exception here is Georges Sorel, who for this reason has long been a figure of interest on the Right.
28. See especially Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), a work that Johnson (2018: 181–189) recommends to his white nationalist readers.
29. For attempts to encourage a similar dialog between Critical theory and classical realism see Behr and Williams (2017), and the accompanying Special Issue of the Journal of International Political Theory.
30. See, for instance, Azmanova (2014), Barguez-Pedreny (2019), Kompridis (2006), Kurki (2011), Latour (2004), and Schmid (2018).
31. Ironically, it is in areas such as military strategy and tactics that critical-theoretic ideas have successfully entered the policy world, though not always in ways their originators might approve; see Beaulieu-Brossard and Dufort (2017).
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