Alain de Benoist, ethnopluralism and the cultural turn in racism

DANIEL RUEDA

ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to analyse critically the idea of ethnopluralism (also known as ethno-differentialism and droit à la difference) as formulated by Alain de Benoist, one of the founding fathers of the Nouvelle Droite and one of the most important far-right intellectuals of the last decades. Rueda locates this ideal as part of what will be called ‘the cultural turn in racism’, that is, the passage from biological and pseudo-scientific racism to alterophobic discourses based on culture and ethnicity among European far-right intellectuals. Moreover, the article will explore the impact of ethnopluralism on both increasingly mainstream radical-right parties and fringe extremist organizations since the 1980s.

KEYWORDS Alain de Benoist, ethnopluralism, far right, France, history of ideas, New Right, Nouvelle Droite, racism

Ceux qui détestent les idées d’Alain de Benoist doivent les combattre par des idées, non par des bâtons ou du vitriol.

— Raymond Aron

The rise of the European far right in the last few decades has caused growing concern among both media commentators and researchers regarding the intellectual currents that are shaping their ideas. Unfortunately, this has often resulted in an overestimation of the importance of flamboyant figures such as Steve Bannon or Aleksandr Dugin, whose influence on European far-right parties is limited to say the least. As a consequence, other intellectuals whose thought is key to understanding the contemporary far right but tend to keep a low and ambiguous profile have been overshadowed. Such is the case of Alain de Benoist.

Born in Tours in 1943, de Benoist has been a far-right activist since he was a teenager. He started his political career as a journalist for the magazine Lectures Françaises (edited by Henry Coston, an antisemitic conspiracy theorist and former collaborateur), defending the maintenance and legacy of the French colonial empire and the actions of the paramilitary organization...
Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS, Secret Armed Organization).² Like many of his comrades, he decided to move to a more ‘intellectualist’ strategy after witnessing both the defeat of the OAS and the persistent marginality of the French extreme right. This led him to become one of the founding members of the think tank Groupement de Recherche et d’Études pour la Civilisation Européenne (GRECE, Research and Study Group for European Civilization) in 1968, when he was only twenty-five.³ Ever since, and despite the fact that some of his ideas (such as his neo-paganism or his anti-Americanism) can be problematic for his audience, he has become a prominent member of the so-called Nouvelle Droite (ND, New Right) and one of the most influential thinkers of the contemporary far right, both for mainstream parties and for fringe, extremist organizations. He has published more than 100 books and thousands of articles, some of the most important of them in journals associated with the ND, such as Nouvelle École (founded in 1969), Éléments (1973) and Krisis (1988).

This article will not explore the vast theoretical work that de Benoist has published in the last decades, which goes well beyond political philosophy. Neither will not examine the advent and characteristics of the ND, as such work has already been done by other scholars. Instead, it will focus on one of his key ideas: ethnopluralism, the notion that different cultures should not coexist in as much as each of them has a unique character that should be preserved and respected. The article will locate de Benoist’s ideas in their particular context, analysing them as part of what shall be called ‘the cultural turn in racism’, a moment in the history of the far right in which a series of intellectuals began to reject biological racism overtly while retaining nativist and ethnic-based preferences, focusing on preserving cultural rather than racial identities. It will not only treat the French thinker as a far-right intellectual, but also as an interlocutor (and one who has won the prestigious Prix de l’essai) who has repeatedly defended himself against accusations of racism and xenophobia coming from academics.⁴ The main research objective is to explore ethnopluralism as a renewal of xenophobia that emerged in the late twentieth century, and to do so through the writings of Alain de Benoist.

Analysing subjects like ethnopluralism, the far right and racism is one of those tasks in which the researcher can easily be tempted to speak from his or her ideological point of view, which can lead to normative biases that can mitigate the analytical value of the research. In order to limit the

² Jean-Yves Camus, ‘Alain de Benoist and the New Right’, in Mark Sedgwick (ed.), Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy (New York: Oxford University Press 2019), 73–90.
³ Before founding GRECE, de Benoist also joined other neo-fascist and ultranationalist organizations, such as Jeune Nation, Fédération d’Étudiants Nationalistes, and Europe-Action.
⁴ See, for example, Alain de Benoist, ‘Alain de Benoist answers Tamir Bar-On’, Journal for the Study of Radicalism, vol. 8, no. 1, 2014, 141–68.
effects of such biases, this article engages in what George L. Mosse, one of the major historians of fascism, called ‘methodological empathy’,⁵ that is, the idea that researchers should try to understand the goals, values and reasoning of the intellectuals in question, something that requires studying their thought directly and ‘from the inside’, without intermediaries.⁶ Since we naturally apply this approach when we analyse other ideas or ideologies there is no justified analytical reason to avoid it in the case of the far right.

It is essential to provide some conceptual clarifications before starting the analysis of de Benoist’s ethnopluralist ideas and their impact. First of all, we need to distinguish between forms of right-wing radicalism in order to both locate de Benoist and understand his relationship with different political actors. This conceptual issue has caused many headaches among political scientists,⁷ but today there seems to be a certain consensus on differentiating between the extreme right (which opposes democracy, tends to be revolutionary and self-marginalizing and sometimes supports violence) and the radical right (which accepts democracy but is illiberal and reformist and tends to opt for institutional means to attain power), which are both part of the broader family of the far right.⁸ Thus, the Front National (recently renamed Rassemblement National), Trumpism, Lega Nord (often known as Lega) and Fidesz would be part of the radical right, whereas neo-fascist organizations such as Golden Dawn, the National Radical Camp, the Alt-Right and CasaPound would be part of the extreme right.

Moreover, the concept of ‘racism’ needs to be carefully defined, since it will be crucial for the subject of this article. Drawing from the works of George Fredrickson, who dedicated his academic career to the analysis of racism, it will be defined as discriminatory and essentializing persuasive and structured mindsets and discourses based on difference (between racialized groups) and power (between the dominant and the dominated group).⁹ This definition allows the integration of some manifestations of the so-called ‘cultural racism’ (based on ethnicity) as a form of discrimination similar to biological racism (based on physical characteristics solely), and therefore to understand phenomena such as some forms of antisemitism or Islamophobia as part of racist world-views. It also allows us to apply it to different regions and eras, which undermines what Giovanni Sartori called ‘the travelling

⁵ George L. Mosse, Confronting History: A Memoir (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2000), x–xi.
⁶ One of the major contemporary proponents of this ‘method’ is Roger Griffin. See Roger Griffin, Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), 351; and Roger Griffin, Fascism (Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press 2018), 23.
⁷ Cas Mudde, ‘The war of words defining the extreme right party family’, West European Politics, vol. 19, no. 2, 1996, 225–48.
⁸ A generic version of this taxonomy can be found in Cas Mudde, The Far-Right Today (Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press 2019), 12.
⁹ George M. Fredrickson, Racism: A Short History (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2002), 8–11.
problemp in conceptual formation while at the same time being concrete enough to avoid conceptual stretching. Similar ‘expanded’ conceptualizations have been propounded in the last few decades, especially due to the rise of new forms of prejudice after the dismissal of ‘scientific’ racism after the Second World War and the subsequent ‘adaptation’ of the far right.

How to be racist after 1945: the cultural turn

There are few, if any, examples of ideological defeat that can be compared to what happened to the European far right in 1945. After a catastrophic military defeat and the dissemination of documents regarding the extermination of the European Jews and other minorities, it became virtually impossible to publicly defend ultranationalist and racist ideals. Divided between a liberal and democratic West and a socialist and authoritarian East, post-war Europe emerged as a no-go area for right-wing extremists. Both extreme-right politicians and intellectuals, including eugenicist scientists who had posited the existence of natural hierarchies between human ‘races’, were soon marginalized. As Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg note, this was a time of revisionism in which ‘both the facts of history and past doctrine had to be revised to ensure a future for neo-fascism’.

The task of reinventing right-wing extremism represented a great challenge for former fascists, who had to face serious obstacles at the beginning.

10 Giovanni Sartori, ‘Concept misformation in comparative politics’, American Political Science Review, vol. 64, no. 4, 1970, 1033–53 (1033).
11 See, for some notable examples, John Solomos and Les Back, ‘Conceptualising racisms: social theory, politics and research’, Sociology, vol. 28, no. 1, 1994, 143–61; Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘The new cultural racism in France’, Telos, no. 83, 1990, 109–22; Rohit Barot and John Bird, ‘Racialization: the genealogy and critique of a concept’, Ethnic and Racial Studies, vol. 24, no. 4, 2001, 601–18; Étienne Balibar, ‘Is there a neo-racism?’, in Andrew Pendakis, Jeff Diamanti, Nicholas Brown, Josh Robinson and Imre Szeman (eds), Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing 2014), 129–40.
12 The notable exceptions to this are both António de Oliveira Salazar’s Portugal and Francisco Franco’s Spain, which were highly influenced by the doctrines of the interwar European extreme right.
13 Although ideological transformation did not suffice to erase these approaches, and the work of both rigorous and egalitarian anthropologists such as Franz Boas was the determining factor. See Robert Wald Sussman, The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 2014), 146–65.
14 Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg, Far-Right Politics in Europe, trans. from the French by Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2017), 53. As Roger Griffin shows, many neo-fascists began to perceive post-war Europe as the beginning of an interregnum between death and rebirth, sometimes flirting with mystical and eschatological ideals. See Roger Griffin, ‘Interregnum or endgame? The radical right in the “post-fascist” era’, Journal of Political Ideologies, vol. 5, no. 2, 2000, 163–78.
Although, in countries such as Italy and Germany, there was a certain resurgence (with parties such as the Movimento Sociale Italiano and the soon-to-be-banned Sozialistische Reichspartei Deutschlands), western countries established party systems in which the main competition took place between social democrats and conservatives, and there was a strong consensus around democracy and liberalism. Some pre-war fascists such as Otto Strasser, Julius Evola and Oswald Mosley tried to articulate European nationalist movements (such as the European Social Movement and the National Party of Europe), but Europeanism soon became a liberal and post-nationalist ideal constructed as a bulwark against both fascism and communism with the help and sponsorship of the United States.

As racism was one of the most problematic elements for the new political zeitgeist after 1945 (with both the Holocaust and decolonization as the main driving forces behind this trend), right-wing extremists tended to focus their discussions on the racial question. Outside Europe, intellectuals from both the American South (where segregation was still in place) and South Africa (where apartheid was not dismantled until the early 1990s) were able to formulate racist discourses at least for a certain period of time. But in countries such as Italy, Germany, France or the United Kingdom, recent events made things more difficult.

One of the major developments was the crucial passage from pan-Aryanism to white supremacy, which opened the possibility for broader alliances among Westerners. According to Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg, for post-war neo-fascists ‘Germanic people no longer had a specific role, and Aryanism was confined to the proclamation of the supremacy of the white race, which therefore included the Slavs’, a shift that also led to the emergence of sympathy for the ‘anti-Zionism of the USSR’. In France, key neo-fascist intellectuals such as Dominique Venner and Gaston-Armand Amaudruz reaffirmed their compromise with racist ideals. Réné Binet (a former member of the Waffen-SS) created the concept of ‘biological

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15 This allowed neo-fascists to present an alternative against the binary logic of the Cold War and to assert Europe’s particularism against both Russian and American cultural and ideological trends. For an overview of European nationalism as a key ideological element of post-war fascism, see Tamir Bar-On, ‘From fascism to the Nouvelle Droite: the dream of pan-European empire’, Journal of Contemporary European Studies, vol. 16, no. 3, 2008, 327–45. In France, pan-European nationalism was strongly defended by intellectuals like Maurice Bardèche, even though he was pessimistic about the resurgence of fascism after 1945. See Maurice Bardèche, Qu’est-ce que le fascisme? (Paris: Les Sept Couleurs 1961).

16 For an analysis of the ideological foundations (sometimes posited by white liberals) of apartheid and their evolution at a discourse level, see Saul Dubow, Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919–36 (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan 1989), esp, 21–50 and 91–127. For an overview of the moral justifications of segregation after 1945, see Ibram X. Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America (New York: Nation Books 2016), 349–81.

17 Camus and Lebourg, Far-Right Politics in Europe, 67.
realism', and claimed that immigrants coming from the colonies should leave the country in as much as they threatened Europe’s ‘genetic capital’. Francis Parker Yockey, an American attorney and philosopher (famous among extreme rightists for his 1948 book Imperium: The Philosophy of History and Politics) also had an important role in mixing white supremacy and pan-European nationalism (in 1949 he founded the short-lived European Liberation Front after some disputes with Oswald Mosley) which included Russia as part of the white race. It then became possible to imagine ethnic alliances stretching from California to Siberia and involving the whole European continent.

However, in the late 1950s, it was already possible to appreciate some discursive shifts. Neo-fascist organizations such as Nouvel Ordre Européen (founded in 1951) began to propound the repatriation of immigrants as a form of benevolent and pluralist decolonization: ‘It is our responsibility . . . to substitute, for the current colonialist regime, a regime of association that shows respect for the traditions proper to each race, accompanied by a strict racial segregation in the interest of each of the contracting parties’ and ‘to call for and realize the return of the nonnative groups to their traditional space’. Other French neo-fascists such as Dominique Venner started advocating the idea of a strong and united Europe based on ethnic (rather than racial) common traits, which was already popular in the late 1940s. As Pierre-André Taguieff noted, there were already signs in the 1960s that ethnopluralism (as a response against the cultural influence of the USSR and the United States, and the alleged global standardization bolstered by capitalism) was gradually replacing biological racism among these activists.

This meant the slow but steady passage from biological racism to ethnic particularism among extremists, even if there is no doubt that the degree of intolerance and alterophobia (understood as intolerance towards those perceived as foreign, which can and has taken many shapes during human history) was barely revised, and that this was often a purely strategic move. What is important to note is that the possibility for European culture to

18 A concept that is today brandished by the Alt-Right under the name of ‘race realism’. See Thomas J. Main, The Rise of the Alt-Right (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press 2018), 176–81.
19 Dominique Venner, quoted in Éric Dupin, La France identitaire: Enquête sur la réaction qui vient (Paris: La Découverte 2017), 87. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are by the author.
20 Keith Coogan, ‘Lost Imperium: the European Liberation Front (1949–54)’, Patterns of Prejudice, vol. 36, no. 3, 2002, 9–23.
21 Déclarations du Nouvel Ordre européen (1958), translation quoted in Camus and Lebourg, Far-Right Politics in Europe, 73.
22 Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘L’héritage nazi: des Nouvelles Droites européennes à la littérature niant le génocide’, Les Nouveaux Cahiers, no. 64, 1981, 3–22.
23 Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Le néo-racisme différentialiste. Sur l’ambiguïté d’une évidence commune et ses effets pervers: l’éloge de la différence’, Langage & Société, vol. 34, no. 1, 1985, 69–98.
displace the white race as the key identity aggregator among some neo-fascists and the growing salience of immigration gained momentum against pre-war antisemitic conspiracy theories and justifications of colonialism. Instead, Europe itself would be portrayed as another victim of both American and Soviet colonization. This is a key moment in the history of the European extreme right that is here referred to as the ‘cultural turn’ in racism, when ethnies replaced races as the key political unit of analysis, even though the difference between the two is sometimes blurred, since culture is often attached to geography. This tendency took time to take root and was challenged by some militants, but its victory over biological racism is now evident. It is here argued that some forms of ‘differentialism’ are indeed a form of racism, since they conflate ethnic and racial traits in an essentializing, hierarchical and discriminatory way. That being said, other forms of it are not necessarily racist, although, as it will be argued, they can trigger the same degree of violence and intolerance as racial discrimination.

This is the context in which GRECE was born in 1968, just a few months before the protests of May erupted in Paris. Its founders (among whom were both Dominique Venner and Alain de Benoist) envisioned it as a think tank that would employ a metapolitical approach, that is, instead of planning a coup or an electoral victory, it would slowly but steadily try to undermine the foundations of the post-war liberal and increasingly multicultural democracy. The rationale behind this is simple: the conquest of power only comes after the conquest of ‘culture’. This idea of focusing on ‘culture wars’ against liberalism and the left after articulating a consistent doctrine rather than directly pursuing political power, a tactic that de Benoist calls ‘right-wing Gramscianism’, was preconceived by Dominique Venner in

24 Which is why, contrary to what some commentators think, GRECE cannot be considered a reaction to May ’68. In fact, the ideological bases of the movement were already outlined at the end of 1967 and most of them were already present among the members of Europe-Action. See Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Origines et métamorphoses de la Nouvelle Droite’, Vingtième Siècle, no. 40, 1993, 3–22 (4). That being said, the ND can indeed be seen at least to some extent as a reaction against the New Left that emerged during the 1960s, being part of a conservative backlash (which also includes some prominent French writers such as Michel Houellebecq or Jean-Pierre Le Dantec) that sees the soixante-huitards at the origin of a world in which hedonistic capitalism has ravaged the fabric of society and undermined national and ethnic identities (a situation that partly justifies the ethnopluralist alternative in de Benoist’s discourse). It is also interesting to note that, for the French far right, there was a common thread between the loss of Algeria in 1962 and the May events, both being regarded as symptoms of the decay of the nation and virility. See Todd Shepard, ‘L’extrême droite et “Mai 68”: une obsession d’Algérie et de virilité’, Clio: Femmes, Genre, Histoire, no. 29, 2009, 37–57.

25 See Griffin, ‘Interregnum or endgame?’, 170; and Griffin, Fascism, 56. The idea of applying some insights from Gramsci’s works to extreme-right strategies was first pronounced in the mid-1950s by the Centro Studi Ordine Nuovo, directed by Giuseppe Umberto ‘Pino’ Rauti, a prominent member and future leader of the Movimento Sociale Italiano. De Benoist refers to the importance of Gramsci from an strategic
the early 1960s after witnessing the strategic limitations of the French extreme right. The ‘movement’ was qualified as Nouvelle Droite—even though it always saw itself as being beyond the left–right dichotomy during a major controversy concerning its infiltration of conservative mass media such as Le Figaro.

What is the ideological identity of the ND? The question itself is problematic, since this is a loose (and ultimately transnational) school of thought that has gone through many transformations, rather than a homogeneous, static movement. That being said, it is possible to identify some essential characteristics, all of them linked to far-right thought.

First of all, it is a renewal of both French and European right-wing nationalism and extreme-right ethnic prejudices at a moment of political impasse, using already existing ideals to articulate new sets of idées-forces. Second, although de Benoist and other prominent members of the ND persuasively claim to be against fascism and point to the intellectuals of the Konservative Revolution as their ideological forebears, it is difficult not to see that they share many ideas with European neo-fascism. As Tamir Bar-On notes:

point of view in Alain de Benoist, ‘Les causes culturelles du changement politique’, Eléments, no. 16, 1982 (a special issue, ‘Pour un gramscisme de droite’), 14–27; and in Alain de Benoist, View from the Right: A Critical Anthology of Contemporary Ideas, vol. 3, trans. from the French by Roger Adwan (London: Arktos 2019), 47–50.

26 Taguieff, ‘Origines et métamorphoses de la Nouvelle Droite’, 5–6. These limitations were later confirmed by the extremely poor electoral performance in 1965 of the far-right party Comités Tixier-Vignancourt, whose campaign director was a young Jean-Marie Le Pen.

27 Tamir Bar-On, Rethinking the French New Right: Alternatives to Modernity (London and New York: Routledge 2013), 33–66.

28 The origin of the name (which has different meanings in other countries) comes from Louis Pauwels, although analysts of the ND tend to associate it with Thierry Pfister, a journalist from Le Monde who denounced the group and its aspirations. In any case, the ND ended up ‘appropriating’ the name. See Thierry Pfister, ‘La nouvelle droite s’installe’, Le Monde, 22 June 1979.

29 This is the main ideological role of the ND according to Anne-Marie Duranton-Crabol, Visages de la Nouvelle Droite: Le GRECE et son histoire (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques 1988).

30 The Konservative Revolution was an extreme-right German intellectual movement that reacted (in different ways) against the alleged moral decay of the Weimar Republic (1918–33) and advocated the need to revitalize German völkisch nationalism. Some of its most prominent members include Oswald Spengler, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and Ernst Niekisch. For an overview of the movement, see Roger Woods, The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 1996). For its relationship with the French ND and the importance of Armin Mohler as a link between the two traditions, see Tamir Bar-On, ‘Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite’, Patterns of Prejudice, vol. 45, no. 3, 2011, 199–223; and Roger Griffin, ‘Between metapolitics and apoliteia: the Nouvelle Droite’s strategy for conserving the fascist vision in the “interregnum”’, Modern & Contemporary France, vol. 8, no. 1, 2000, 35–53. It seems clear that rescuing these elements is a way to preserve the European far-right tradition while avoiding any reference to stigmatized
exaltation of a warrior ethic; praise of a voluntarist creed as the key to historical change; a Romantic, anti-materialist worldview; the ideal of an organic ethni-
cally based homogeneous community; and the goal of a revolutionary political
system superseding traditional conservatism, liberalism, and socialism.

are traits shared by both neo-fascism and the members of the ND. Roger
Griffin shares such a view, noting that ‘at the height of its fame the ND
had indeed retained much of fascism’s mythic foundations and ground-
plan despite the extensive structural alterations and redecoration it had
carried out to the visible ideological edifice’. And, third, the ND challenges
many of the elements that are generally defended by the European mainstream
right, such as globalization, the model of homo economicus, Judaeo-Christian
ethics, some forms of nationalism, multiculturalism and Atlanticism, thereby
distinguishing itself from conservative and liberal-conservative ideological
competitors and paving the way for situational sympathy with anti-imperialist,
New Left, indigenous or anti-capitalist groups.

As mentioned, this school of thought went through several changes in the
last decades. Pierre-André Taguieff, an expert on both the history of racism
and the Nouvelle Droite, distinguishes two main phases when it comes to
thinking about race and ethnicity. The first would stretch from the foun-
dation of GRECE to the late 1970s and be a mere continuation of neo-
fascist biological and anti-revisionist racism. During this decade, the racial
superiority of ‘Whites’ or ‘Europeans’ was opposed to egalitarian and
liberal ideals. The second phase (starting in the early 1980s) consists of a
shift towards ethnic differentialism that emphasizes ethnic differences and
the need to preserve ethnoregional spheres, which could imply both oppos-
ing multiculturalism and supporting anti-colonial and anti-western pro-
jects. The next section critically explores Alain de Benoist’s version of this
idea and its impact on both radical-right and extreme-right organizations.

31 Bar-On, Rethinking the French New Right, 2. That being said, despite these similarities it
would be problematic to define either the ND or de Benoist as neo-fascists.
32 Roger Griffin, ‘Plus ça change! The Fascist pedigree of the Nouvelle Droite’, in Edward
J. Arnold (ed.), The Development of the Radical Right in France: From Boulanger to Le Pen
(Basingstoke: Macmillan 2000), 217–53 (217).
33 Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘From race to culture: the New Right’s view of European identity’,
Telos, vol. 98–9, 1993–4, 99–125. See also Bar-On, Rethinking the French New Right, 148–56.
34 This shift would develop into a schism between two different attitudes towards immi-
grants: one that demands their expulsion (represented by Guillaume Faye, who left
the ND in the early 1980s) and another that tends to be more communitarian (re-
presented by de Benoist and others). See Niklas Bernsand, ‘Friend or foe? Contempo-
ary debates on Islam and Muslim immigrants among Swedish Identitarians’, in
Thomas Hoffman and Göran Larsson (eds), Muslims and the New Information and Com-
munication Technologies: Notes from an Emerging and Infinite Field (Dordrecht: Springer
Netherlands 2013), 163–89 (168–73).
Understanding Alain de Benoist’s ethnopluralist ideal and its impact

The notion of ethnopluralism as it is being analysed here was not coined by de Benoist, but by Dominique Venner, a veritable intellectual pioneer among those who postulated a replacement of biology by ethnie as the fundamental identity marker of Europeans. Yet it was the former who developed it and made it available for political praxis. As Pierre-André Taguieff explains, de Benoist started as a ‘biological realist’ in the 1950s and turned towards a focus on ethnic identity and a critique of cultural standardization in the late 1970s, coinciding with the advent of mass migration towards Europe and the rise of the New Left. His 1974 interview with the journal Éléments, entitled ‘Contre le racisme’, can work as an interesting summary of this shift. In answer to a question, de Benoist explains that he opposes the idea of racial superiority (he rather thinks that every race has its own ‘genius’), but also left-wing ‘anti-racism’, which for him acts as a homogenizing force that imposes western values on non-white peoples. He proposes, instead of cultural interbreeding, to guarantee the autonomy of every ethnie and build harmonious societies that avoid hate and prejudice through a respect for diversity. Finally, he denounces both the United States and the Soviet Union as the two major threats against the cultural sovereignty of both Europe and the developing world and he claims that fighting against discrimination means offering self-rule to every ethnic group (not only African Americans and immigrants, but also Whites from different backgrounds).

Those are the key elements of de Benoist’s ethnopluralist project. In order to examine them thoroughly it is necessary to provide an overview of the foundations of his thought. As mentioned earlier, he was part of neo-fascist and pro-violence groups when he was young but, after the late 1970, he turned to less anti-democratic positions and to a form of differentialism based on ethnic rather than racial identities. His political thought ever since has been based on three pillars: identitarianism, anti-liberalism and pan-Europeanism. He is first and foremost a great advocate of basing political praxis on an emphasis on the centrality of identity for human beings:

35 Camus and Lebourg, Far-Right Politics in Europe, 130.
36 Danilo Zolo, ‘Prefazione’, in Pierre-André Taguieff, Sulla Nuova Destra. Itinerario di un intellettuale atipico, trans. from the French by Guiseppe Giaccio (Florence: Vallechi 2004), 8–20 (8).
37 Alain de Benoist, ‘Contre le racisme’ [1974], in Alain de Benoist, Les Idées à l’endroit (Paris: Éditions Libres-Hallier 1979), 145–56.
38 Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Prefazione’, in Taguieff, Sulla Nuova Destra, 36–53 (43). See also Taguieff, ‘L’héritage nazi’. That said, de Benoist remained critical of liberal democracy: see Alain de Benoist, The Problem of Democracy, trans. from the French (London: Arktos 2011).
according to de Benoist, we live in a disenchanted, globalized and materialistic world in which abstract reason, technological change and universalism have wiped out the spiritual and ethnic roots of human identity, thereby producing atomized and replaceable individuals. The culprits of such transformation are not only the Enlightenment, financial and political elites or the United States, but also the Judaeo-Christian heritage (alien to Europe), with its universalist and egalitarian principles. According to him, we live in ‘a society of individuals’ in which ‘individualism has led to a hedonistic endorsement of the private sphere, and therefore a disinterest, maybe even a hostility, towards public affairs’, including ethnic identities.

Second, there is stark opposition to liberalism in all of its forms and manifestations. In economic terms, de Benoist sees liberalism as a system capable of uprooting individuals and homogenizing them as mere consumers, since its laws know no frontiers or boundaries. In political and juridical terms de Benoist sees liberalism as an ideology that paves the way for the emergence of an atomized type of individual who is separated from the social and political body, leading to the conquest of society by market forces. Both economic and political liberalism are thus different sides of the same coin. According to de Benoist, the idea of human rights (which he also criticizes) is likewise a result of liberalism, in as much as it starts from the premise of ‘proclaiming the equal right of each individual to pursue the ends that he has independently chosen’. These ideals can lead to what he pejoratively calls ‘the ideology of sameness’, ‘the universalist ideology, which under a religious or a profane veneer aims at reducing the diversity of the world,

39 See Alain de Benoist, ‘Présentation’, Krisis, no. 1, 1988, 1–4; and Alain de Benoist, Nous et les autres: problématique de l’identité (Paris: Éditions Krisis 2007). The importance of Romanticism, a great component of far-right European politics, is here evident.
40 See Alain de Benoist, Comment peut-on être païen? (Paris: Albin Michel 1981). Like other extreme-right thinkers who reject ‘the Judaeo-Christian tradition’ (most of them inspired by the works of Friedrich Nietzsche), de Benoist considers it to be the seed of the egalitarian and universalist foundations of the Enlightenment. He also criticizes monotheism as a source of both egalitarianism and totalitarianism, which would in their turn be related as forms of submission to a strong leader or ideal.
41 Alain de Benoist, ‘La société n’existe pas’, 9 January 2021, available on the Les Amis d’Alain de Benoist website at www.alaindebenoist.com/2021/01/09/la-societe-nexiste-pas (viewed 12 October 2021).
42 See Alain de Benoist, ‘Hayek: la loi de la jungle’, Éléments, no. 68, June 1990 (a special issue on ‘Le libéralisme contre les peuples’), 5–14. Here de Benoist’s ideas are in stark contrast to those of the Club de l’Horloge, a think tank that was also originally linked to the ND but wanted to amalgamate economic liberalism and French nationalism, propounding a form of ‘popular capitalism’.
43 Alain de Benoist, Contre le libéralisme: La société n’est pas un marché (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher 2019).
44 Alain de Benoist, Beyond Human Rights: Defending Freedoms, trans. from the French by Alexander Jacob (London: Arktos 2011), 75.
such as the diversity of cultures, value systems, and rooted ways of life, to one uniform model’.45

Third, de Benoist is an enthusiastic proponent of pan-European nationalism. As mentioned earlier, this stance is embraced by many post-1945 European extreme-right organizations (and by many other pre-war fascists who supported Germany’s imperialism). De Benoist himself was part of Europe-Action, an overtly white supremacist and Europeanist movement founded in the early 1960s. This was closely interconnected to the perception that after 1945 Europe needed to be united in order to preserve its independence against other great powers such as the Soviet Union.46 For de Benoist, this position can also be defended after the Cold War since, today, a federal and strong Europe would mean an alternative sovereign power to the alleged American domination of the continent, an equivalent of the Monroe Doctrine (‘Europe for the Europeans’).47 This position also allows him to criticize nationalism, once again distinguishing himself from other far-right theorists.48 According to him, Europe should be an independent power and become politically united so ‘that it can liberate itself from the domination of financial markets and, more generally, from the money system’ and be part of ‘a multipolar [and ethnopluralist] world, where large continental blocs of culture and civilization could play a role of regulatory poles’.49 Recently he claimed that in a multipolar world civilizations will replace nations and a unified (yet ethnically diverse) Europe should be one of them.50

45 Alain de Benoist, ‘The New Right: Forty years after’, preface to (and translated from the French by) Tomislav Sunić, Against Democracy and Equality: The European New Right, 3rd edn (London: Arktos 2011), 15–29 (19). This idea of interchangeability was anticipated by Charles Péguy and later also defended by Alain Finkielkraut, another right-wing intellectual. See Charles Péguy, ‘Note conjointe sur M. Descartes et la philosophie cartésienne’, in Œuvres en prose complètes, vol. 3, ed. Robert Burac (Paris: Gallimard 1992), 1273–1477 (1431); and Alain Finkielkraut, La Seule Exactitude (Paris: Stock 2015), 120.

46 In France the idea of pan-European nationalism as protection against the new world order was defended in theoretical terms by Maurice Bardèche. A new Europe independent from both the United States and Russia was also seen as a neo-fascist third position between capitalism and communism. This would, on the other hand, help to justify the collaboration of European nationalist elites with the Germans during the war. See Bardèche, Qu’est-ce que le fascisme?, 112–15.

47 ‘Entretien avec Alain de Benoist sur la politique française’, transcript of de Benoist’s (unpublished) responses to an interviewer, May 1992, [6], available on the archive.wikiwix website at http://archive.wikiwix.com/cache/index2.php?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.alaindebenoist.com%2Fpdf%2Fentretien_sur_la_politique_francaise.pdf (viewed 13 October 2021). An Italian translation of this transcript is quoted in Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Origini e metamorfosi della Nuova Destra’, in Taguieff, Sulla Nuova Destra, 55–119 (107).

48 Alain de Benoist, Critiques—Théoriques (Lausanne: Éditions l’Âge de l’Homme 2002), 85–90.

49 Arthur Versluis, ‘A conversation with Alain de Benoist’, Journal for the Study of Radicalism, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, 79–106 (92).

50 This is why de Benoist rejects the sovereigntist approach of far-right Eurosceptic parties. See Alain de Benoist, ‘Une Europe unifiée est nécessaire’, 5 August 2020,
All these elements are present in the doctrine of ethnopluralism. For de Benoist, the *droit à la différence* is an alternative to the homogenizing forces of globalization and liberalism. Ethnopluralism is portrayed as an anti-totalitarian and liberating ideal, since it contests the oppression caused by global capitalism and American cultural imperialism against both European and ethnicities of the developing world.\(^5\) It is allegedly also against any form of racism, in as much as it considers that there are no superior races (even though there are differences between them at an ethnic level) and that every race has the right to self-determination.\(^5\) On the other hand, xenophobic discourses such as the one articulated by Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National are condemned as a form of cruelty, not because they oppose immigration but because they use immigrants as scapegoats for deeper problems.\(^5\) Moreover, by opposing mass immigration, it goes against the interests of large corporations and posits that cultural interests are above material ones.\(^5\) Finally, it is a form of Europeanism, since it provides a way to protect, celebrate and bolster the relative ethnocultural homogeneity of European peoples (who would organize federally), thereby producing a ‘re-enchantment’ of the world against the dynamics of capitalist acculturation and a ‘third position’ against egalitarian ideologies such as socialism and liberalism.\(^5\)

The fact that de Benoist’s approach is only one possible form of differentialism raises the question of whether there are other forms of right-wing ethnopluralism. Apart from the abovementioned differences between Faye and de Benoist it is possible to distinguish some of them. Lega Nord

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51 Alain de Benoist, ‘Le totalitarisme raciste’, *Éléments*, no. 33, 1980 (special issue on ‘Le droit à la différence’), 10–19. Here de Benoist syncretically borrows some ideas from Third-Worldist and anti-imperialist left-wing movements of the 1970s.

52 De Benoist, ‘Contre le racisme’, 147–9. This is followed by a critique of sociobiological accounts of human morality, especially those propounded by Edward O. Wilson. See Alain de Benoist, ‘Minima moralia’, *Krisis*, no. 7, 1991, 2–34; and Alain de Benoist, ‘Minima moralia (2)’, *Krisis*, no. 8, 1991, 2–35.

53 ‘Entretien avec Alain de Benoist sur la politique française’, [1]. An Italian translation is quoted in Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Origini e metamorfosi della Nuova Destra’, in Taguieff, *Sulla Nuova Destra*, 55–119 (109).

54 De Benoist, ‘Contre le racisme’, 154–5.

55 Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Sous l’éloge de la différence, la phobie du mélange’, part 3 of Taguieff’s article, ‘Les métamorphoses du racisme’, *Hommes et Migrations*, no. 1114, 1988 (special issue on ‘L’immigration dans l’histoire nationale’), 114–29 (125–8). De Benoist’s Europeanist ideal is often presented in metaphysical and vague terms, so one cannot judge exactly what would be the consequences of its implementation as a political project. As might be expected, de Benoist opposes the European Union and considers it to be yet another technocratic project to suppress ethnic pluralism. See Alain de Benoist, ‘La France est aujourd’hui gouvernée par la pire des droites: la droite libérale’, 26 September 2018, available on the *Les Amis d’Alain de Benoist* website at www.alaindebenoist.com/2018/09/26/la-france-est-aujourd'hui-gouvernee-par-la-pire-des-droites-la-droite-liberale (viewed 13 October 2021).
(now turned into a national party) and Vlaams Belang could be described as ‘ethnoregionalist’, as they posit the existence of particular regions (which could integrate different ethnies) that should be independent. On the other hand, pan-white nationalism (whereby the ‘white race’ should be reunited within the same nation-state) and pan-European nationalism (whereby all Europeans should be united within the same nation-state) contrast with more localist approaches (such as de Benoist’s, which is compatible with broader civilizational alliances), but they can share the ‘pluralistic’ rhetoric and present themselves as forms of tolerant separatism (the ‘separate but equal’ approach). Even though these differ on some points, they all start from the premise that different ethnies should be, if possible, separated, and they all reject universalist humanitarianism (here we see how the Counter-Enlightenment still lies at the core of the far right) and cultural miscegenation.56

It is also important to explore whether ethnopluralism is actually a pluralist ideal against racism and intolerance, as de Benoist claims. It suffices to scrutinize his works closely to contest this assertion. First of all, the celebration of différence is also necessarily a repudiation of miscegenation. Of course, this is far from being a new idea among the far right: there is no shortage of intellectuals who have offered this ‘separate but equal’ doctrine as an alternative to more radical or eliminationist views. It is undoubtedly problematic to assert both that one feels admiration and professes extreme tolerance towards different cultures but only as long as they remain far away. In addition, only an ethnic-based vision of identities could support the reductionist view that different cultures are incommensurable,57 as a more

56 On the other hand, it is interesting to wonder whether there is such a thing as ‘left-wing ethnopluralism’. In general, progressive activists in the West tend to prioritize an approach whereby different cultures can be integrated within the same society, and they are divided on the degree of adaptability that these communities can require (creating a dichotomy between the so-called ‘melting pot’ and ‘salad bowl’ models, and generally trying to find a balance between the two), normally focusing on values rather than on ethnicity. See Arun Kundnani, ‘Multiculturalism and its discontents: left, right and liberal’, European Journal of Cultural Studies, vol. 15, no. 2, 2012, 155–66. This clearly contrasts with far-right ethnopluralism. That being said, there are some particular examples of left-wing activists advocating the separation of ethnies or races, such as black separatism (the Nation of Islam movement being the best known example) or some forms of Latin American indigenism (in countries like Mexico, Chile or Bolivia). Paradoxically, some forms of left-wing identity politics (no doubt sometimes influenced by Orientalist views) lead to the same solutions that right-wing ethnonationalists propose. It is worth noting, as a symptom of this unexpected association, how the film Black Panther, which became popular among many American left-wingers, was celebrated by Alt-Right activists on social media as a depiction of a successful example of ethnic nationalism (Wakanda being a model for an eventual white ethno-state).

57 Recently de Benoist wrote an article against the idea of ‘cultural assimilation’, basing his arguments on the premise that cultural communities are essentially different and thinking otherwise is totalitarian. See Alain de Benoist, ‘L’assimilation n’est ni bonne,
individual methodological approach shows us exactly the opposite. Unless
culture is also understood as a series of ethnic, ancient traits it is difficult
not to see that history is nothing but cultural hybridization among peoples
from different races and backgrounds. In fact, what de Benoist calls ‘accul-
turation’ is actually the triumph of liberal, democratic and pluralist cultural
trends, which sometimes intersect with previous cultural realities thereby
creating ‘hybrids’ (which do not seem to play an important role for the
French thinker who is fixated on pure and generally hypothetical ethnies).
By downplaying the possibility of building cultural bridges, de Benoist
cannot but become a critic of fraternity, as was made clear in his recent dia-
tribe against Pope Francis.58

Moreover, de Benoist’s ethnopluralist theorizations do include some
overly racialist and racist remarks, even after the ‘cultural turn’ that crystal-
lized in the late 1970s. It is in ‘Contre le racisme’, paradoxically, that he first
displays these views. During that interview, he essentializes ethnic behaviour
as part of race, pointing to how African Americans could never be assimili-
cated in to the American culture, as, according to him, the Black Power move-
ment shows.59 A few pages later he acknowledges biological differences of
intelligence between races (as measured by IQ tests) and the link between
biological race and ethnie.60 Two decades later, in the Manifeste pour une
renaisance europiéenne, co-written with Charles Champetier, he emphasizes
that ‘Man is first and foremost an animal’ and that ‘every single individual
already bears the general characteristics of the species, to which are added
specific [racial?] hereditary predispositions to certain particular aptitudes
and modes of behavior’.61 Later the authors claim that ‘Man is rooted by
nature in his culture... he is a singular being: he always locates himself at
the interface of the universal (his species) and the particular (each
culture, each epoch)’,62 which seems like a difficult attempt to insinuate
essential differences while trying to avoid biological racism. By

ni mauvaise: elle est impossible’, 15 March 2021, available on the Les Amis d’Alain de
Benoist website at www.alaindebenoist.com/2021/03/15/lassimilation-nest-ni-bonne-
ni-mauvaise-elle-est-impossible (viewed 14 October 2021).

58 Alain de Benoist, ‘Catholicisme: le probléme de la fraternité universelle’, 26 November
2020, available on the Les Amis d’Alain de Benoist website at www.alaindebenoist.com/
2020/11/26/catholicisme-le-probleme-de-la-fraternite-universelle (viewed 14 October
2021).

59 De Benoist, ‘Contre le racisme’, 148. Although that movement was inspired mainly by
western ideals such as Marxism or liberal tolerance, de Benoist sees it as a way of
African Americans reconnecting with Africa and ‘their ethnic roots’.

60 Ibid., 149, 153. More recently, he reaffirmed the importance for him of IQ biological
differences among races, although he also insisted on how one should always avoid
scientific reductionism. See Versluis, ‘A conversation with Alain de Benoist’.

61 Alain de Benoist and Charles Champetier, Manifesto for a European Renaissance, trans.
from the French (London: Arktos 2012), 17. Unsurprisingly this emphasis on the bio-
logical allows the authors to criticize contemporary feminism as well (18).

62 Ibid., 19.
reductively defining racism as a form of extreme and violent biologism, de Benoist shrinks the concept in a way that historians of the idea would not accept, which is problematic in epistemological terms but certainly advantageous for him, since it allows him to draw a clear line between ethnopluralism and racism.

But even if there can be no doubt that both de Benoist and the ND sometimes ‘flirt’ with racist and racialist positions, it is clear that they defend a different form of discrimination, based on ethnic elements and often opposed to biological racism. The droit à la différence is based on cultural, not biological, distinctions, and it can lead to communitarianism rather than to exclusion. Although sometimes the dissimilarity is not clear-cut, it is fundamentally different from both pre-1945 scientific racism and post-war attempts to articulate new forms of pan-European, white supremacist identities (which de Benoist embraced but then rejected). It also allows for the formulation of discourses that oppose racism and defend the rights of both immigrants and developing countries, paving the way for less polemical positions among post-war far-rightists. But even if, in de Benoist’s hands, ethnopluralism can appear as an abstract and even benevolent ideal, its impact on the far right is impossible to deny, despite his reluctance to be associated with those movements.

Indeed, de Benoist has repeatedly claimed that neither he nor the ND are right-wing but rather ‘both right and left’, given that they borrow from many intellectual traditions and the left–right distinction would in any case be questionable today. Since his activism is mostly intellectual, he sometimes can avoid being concrete in relation to some issues, thereby presenting himself as an author moved only by his libido cognoscendi, beyond particular ideologies and concrete policies. Yet, if that is the case, one might wonder why his model of ethnopluralism has only been embraced by far-right groups. The main example is of course the Front National (recently renamed Rassemblement National), created by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972 and today headed by his daughter, Marine Le Pen. It is important to note that de Benoist does not support the party and that many of his ideas (such as paganism, anti-capitalism, anti-nationalism and a stark criticism of Atlanticism) are actually opposed to its doctrines, although this should not blind us to the way that ethnopluralism has had a crucial impact on the French far right, facilitating its normalization.

Like the ND, the FN was created as a way to overcome the post-1945 stigma by rejecting violence and embracing democracy, thereby trying to mirror the electoral progresses of the Movimento Sociale Italiano. The

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63 Alain de Benoist, ‘Alain de Benoist answers Tamir Bar-On’, translated from the French by Christine Rhone, *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2014, 141–68 (146).
64 James G. Shields, ‘Jean-Marie Le Pen and the new radical right in France’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1986, 3–10.
influence of the ND was there for all to see: during the 1980s key *nouvelle droi-
tistes* such as Bruno Mégret, Jean-Claude Bardet, Pierre Vial, Jean Mabire, Jean-Jacques Mourreau, Jean Varenne, Christiane Pigacé and Jean-Yves Le Gallou and Yvan Blot joined the party.65 Of course, not all of them were sym-
pathetic to de Benoist’s ethnopluralism, but the connection between the ND and the FN seems clear. In addition to that, Jean-Marie Le Pen soon started to defend the idea of *droit à la différence* in reference to Muslims and other immi-
grants while at the same time denouncing liberal globalization and trying to avoid racist and antisemitic discourses.66

His daughter (leader of the party since 2011) is even more explicit in her sympa-
thies for de Benoist’s ethnopluralism. Soon after removing any pos-
tions that could make the party susceptible to accusations of antisemitism and rejecting the left–right divide, she denounced globalism (*mondialisme*) as a form of totalitarianism ‘whose monstrous project is one of a planet in thrall to consumption and production for the benefit of a few big businesses or banks which alone stand to profit’.67 Globalism is for her an invention of the elites, ‘an ideology that far exceeds mere globalization and which aims to standardize cultures, to encourage nomadism, the permanent movement of uprooted people from one continent to another, to make them interchangeable and, in essence, to render them anonymous’.68 One of the trends that intensifies this ‘interchangeability’ is of course mass immigration (presented as a weapon in the hands of big corporations),69 and yet this is not accompanied by xenophobic remarks but rather, following de Benoist’s approach, by a cult of ethnic diversity, celebrating ‘the diversity and, indeed, the radiance of the world, free from the flavourless mush of one-
dimensional globalism which is the opposite of the universal’.70 During the campaign for the 2017 French presidential election, she declared that Islamism and ‘ultraliberalism’ were the two major totalitarianisms that the French were facing, once again echoing the discourse of the founder of the ND.71

65 Tom McCulloch, ‘The Nouvelle Droite in the 1980s and 1990s: ideology and entryism, the relationship with the Front National’, *French Politics*, no. 4, 2006, 158–78. For an overview of the links between de Benoist and the FN, see also James G. Shields, *The Extreme Right in France: From Pétain to Le Pen* (London and New York: Routledge 2007), 143–70; and Caroline Monnot and Abel Mestre, *Le Système Le Pen: enquête sur les réseaux du Front National* (Paris: Denoël 2011).
66 Sara Wallace Goodman, *Immigration and Membership Politics in Western Europe* (Cam-
bridge: Cambridge University Press 2014), 190.
67 Quoted in Michel Eltchaninoff, *Inside the Mind of Marine Le Pen*, trans. from the French by James Ferguson (London: Hurst & Co. 2018), 66.
68 Ibid. Here we also see echoes of conspiracy theories around the idea of ‘the great replacement’, disseminated by authors such as Renaud Camus.
69 Maël de Calan, *La vérité sur le programme du Front National* (Paris: Plon 2016), 174.
70 Quoted in Eltchaninoff, *Inside the Mind of Marine Le Pen*, 72.
71 Thierry Richard, ‘Marine Le Pen, une “patriote” contre les “mondialistes”’, *Ouest-
France*, 5 February 2017, available online at www.ouest-france.fr/politique/marine-
In France, this ideal has also influenced extreme-right groupuscules such as Les Identitaires and the recently banned for inciting hatred and violence Génération Identitaire (GI).\(^\text{72}\) As José Pedro Zúquete (the author of the most important study on these groups to date) explains:

Irrespective of the ND’s excoriation of the excesses of Identitarianism . . . the reality is that the ND has laid the theoretical ground for Identitarians, exercising a great influence on their preference for cultural combat, rejection of universalism, embrace of differentialism, and overall critique of a system captured by a disintegrating liberal capitalism.\(^\text{73}\)

Indeed, GI is part of what Zúquete calls ‘the Identitarian turn’,\(^\text{74}\) which can be seen as a by-product of ethnopluralism and which has become popular among young European extremists in recent decades. The approach is based on de Benoist’s main idea: identity (particularly ethnic identity) is essential for the well-being of individuals, and therefore it should be protected from the cultural dynamics that pose a threat to it (mainly, capitalist globalization and mass immigration from non-western countries). In theory, this can be defended in a purely speculative and rhetorical way (as de Benoist does), but in practice (as the example of GI and other movements shows) it can only lead to xenophobia and discrimination, as it is based on a ‘rejection of the Other’.\(^\text{75}\)

Ethnopluralism has also had an impact beyond France. As this article shows, since 1945 the European far right has favoured the creation of links between nations that are deemed part of the continent, from Portugal to Russia. Therefore one can find supporters of de Benoist’s droit à la différence in Italy (such is the case of some intellectuals associated with Lega Nord, a party that has now shifted from regionalism to nationalism),\(^\text{76}\) the United Kingdom (where both Michael Walker and Troy Southgate have propounded

le-pen/marine-le-pen-une-patriote-contre-les-mondialistes-4782660 (viewed 14 October 2021).

\(^{72}\) Jean-Yves Camus, ‘Le mouvement identitaire ou la construction d’un mythe des origines européennes’, Fondation Jean Jaurès, 1 May 2018, available at www.jean-jaures.org/publication/le-mouvement-identitaire-ou-la-construction-dun-mythe-des-origines-europeennes/. See also Kim Willsher, ‘France bans far-right “paramilitary” group Génération Identitaire’, The Guardian, 3 March 2021, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/03/france-bans-far-right-paramilitary-group-generation-identitaire (viewed 17 March 2021).

\(^{73}\) José Pedro Zúquete, The Identitarians: The Movement against Globalism and Islam in Europe (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2018), 11.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{75}\) Stéphane François, ‘Raus! L’ideologie identitaire face aux “migrants musulmans”’, December 2018, available on the SciencesPo website at www.sciencespo.fr/kerif/or/raus-l-ideologie-identitaire-face-aux-migrants-musulmans (viewed 14 October 2021).

\(^{76}\) Alberto Spektorowski, ‘Ethnoregionalism: the intellectual new right and the Lega Nord’, Global Review of Ethnopolitics, vol. 2, no. 3–4, 2003, 55–70
ethno-differentialist and allegedly anti-racist views), and Belgium (with the journal Nieuw Recht and intellectuals such as Luc Pauwels and Robert Steuckers), and, in a lesser way, in Holland, Spain, Croatia, Romania, Poland and other European countries, as Tamir Bar-On notes. In Germany, Götz Kubitschek (the most prominent figure of the Neue Rechte) is explicit about this influence and its importance as a substitute for biological racism: “I agree with Benoist,” and his defense of a “differential anti-racism . . . [w]hen you look at the term ’ethnopluralism,’ you find distinctness by the side of equality, and you do not have to use the word ‘racism,’ which is scorched beyond repair.” It is important to insist, against de Benoist’s alleged ideological agnosticism, that every single one of these groups is part of the extreme right and they all tend to promote in one way or another forms of discrimination against ethnic minorities.

The case of Russia deserves separate treatment. There the intellectual in charge of translating the ideas of the ND was Aleksandr Dugin. A former member of the Yuzhinsky Circle (an outlandish group of anti-Soviet dissidents who embraced all kinds of esoteric and mystical neo-fascist ideas), Dugin later moved to more ultranationalist and militaristic positions in order to influence the Russian establishment, even though, as Marlene Laruelle notes and contrary to what some western media commentators tend to think, he ’has been unable to secure himself a position within the Kremlin’s institutions’. Dugin has used the notion of ethnopluralism to fantasize about a united and spiritually regenerated Eurasia in which Russia would be an essential part and which would also make an alliance with Shia Islam against western liberalism, the United States, Jews and ‘the cosmopolitan financial elites’. The Russian thinker praises the droit à la difference, from which he draws the natural conclusion that some ‘ethnic hygiene’ will need to be preserved somehow in an ethnopluralist world.

77 Craig Fowlie, ‘Britain’s far right since 1967: a bibliographic survey’, in Nigel Copsey and Matthew Worley (eds), Tomorrow Belongs to Us: The British Far Right since 1967 (London and New York: Routledge 2018), 224–67. See also Graham D. Macklin, ‘Co-opting the counterculture: Troy Southgate and the National Revolutionary Faction’, Patterns of Prejudice, vol. 39, no. 3, 2005, 301–26.
78 Bar-On, Rethinking the French New Right, 19. This led to the notion of a ‘European New Right’, used to refer to this loose yet consistent network of metapolitical groupuscules.
79 Zúquete, The Identitarians, 268. Zúquete is here quoting from his 2016 interview with Götz Kubitschek.
80 Anton Shekhovtsov, ‘Aleksandr Dugin’s neo-Eurasianism: the New Right à la Russe’, Religion Compass, vol. 3, no. 4, 2009, 697–716.
81 Marlene Laruelle, ‘Alexander Dugin and Eurasianism’, in Sedgwick (ed.), Key Thinkers of the Radical Right, 155–69 (158).
82 Alexander Dugin, ‘On “White Nationalism” and other potential allies in the global revolution’, 26 March 2014, on The Fourth Political Theory website at www.4pt.su/en/content/white-nationalism-and-other-potential-allies-global-revolution (viewed 14 October 2021).
83 Aleksandr Dugin, Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe buduschee Rossii. Myslit’ Pros- transtvom (Moscow: Arktogeya-tsentr 2000), 251.
views are clearly xenophobic and discriminatory yet, according to de Benoist, Dugin ‘stress[es] that Empire is always a multicultural space, and thus he takes a firm stand against all forms of racism and xenophobia’. This description of Dugin’s thought is yet another proof of how de Benoist can use the cultural turn and the idea of ethnopluralism to do away with any accusation of alterophobia, even when its presence is all too evident. Indeed, the fact that he can present Aleksandr Dugin as a tolerant anti-racist activist tells us more about him than about the Russian thinker (who is less cautious when it comes to exhibiting his intolerance).

The idea of ethnopluralism has also reached the native far right on the other side of the Atlantic, in the United States. Indeed, Richard Spencer and other key intellectuals of the Alt-Right, a loose association of neofascist and white nationalist activists formed in the early 2010s, have overtly adopted many concepts coming from de Benoist (who visited Spencer in Washington D.C. in 2014) and the ND, starting with the idea of metapolitics. Spencer has repeatedly advocated the creation of white ‘ethno-states’ in North America and Europe, but he has also defended the existence of other ethno-states for minorities whose culture needs to be respected. His manifesto states: ‘Globalization threatens not just Europeans but every unique identity on Earth.’ This is a great example of how ethnopluralism, despite focusing on culture, can perfectly fit racialist approaches, a fact that is also evident when one examines the discourse of extreme-right groups such as Génération Identitaire (which has an American equivalent, Generation Identity) and its recurrent merging of the ethnic, the cultural and the racial.

The impact of de Benoist among right-wing extremists is obvious, although this should not imply that the ND is at the heart of the rise of the contemporary far right. Indeed, since the 1980s, both the ND and the European far right have gained popularity simultaneously after a few decades of marginality, but this is not because they are necessarily interconnected. In fact, and as already mentioned, many ideas of the ND are incommensurable with the ideology of the contemporary far right. The reality is rather that, as this article intends to show, both are part of a renewal of the western far right after the fatal blow of 1945. Ethnopluralism should therefore be understood

84 Versluis, ‘A conversation with Alain de Benoist’, 85.
85 Main, The Rise of the Alt-Right, 12–13. In 2018, de Benoist even wrote an article for Radix, one of the Alt-Right’s online journals: Alain de Benoist, ‘America—A view from the French New Right’, Radix, 14 January 2018, available at https://radixjournal.com/2018/01/america-a-view-from-the-french-new-right/ (viewed 14 October 2021).
86 Richard B. Spencer, ‘What it means to be Alt-Right’, altright.com, 11 August 2017, archived version available at https://web.archive.org/web/20210320012103/https://altright.com/2017/08/11/what-it-means-to-be-alt-right (viewed 14 October 2021).
87 Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall and Simon Murdoch, The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century? (London and New York: Routledge 2020), 8–34.
as a new form of ethnic identity-building that can be used to condemn liberalism, individualism, multiculturalism and mass immigration while at the same time rejecting biological racism. It is important to note in any case that there has been a genuine shift within the far right, which, as shown, was pre-formulated around the 1950s. In other words, a non-negligible part of the contemporary far right (and this is also the case of other political groups) has changed its ideas and has adapted to the world that emerged after the Second World War. This is the only conclusion that a non-biased researcher can draw from an analysis of the evolution of the far right since 1945. Insisting on how these forces remain somehow as racist and fascist as their ‘predecessors’ is simply misleading, even if the frontiers between ethno-pluralism and racism remain porous.

The plasticity of prejudice

Biological racism and similar forms of ethnic essentialism have not always existed. Their expansion and popularization in Europe and later in the United States can be traced to both the persistent Spanish stigmatization against conversos even after they accepted the Catholic faith and naturalist explanations of geographical inequalities by thinkers such as Montesquieu, John Locke and Carl Linnaeus.88 Ever since, the idea that there are essential differences between races, religions and cultures has taken many different shapes, and it has shown an astonishing capacity to intersect with historical particularities. This idea has sometimes been formulated in an aggressive and hierarchical way, but generally the historian of racism will find benevolent and ‘differentialist’ views, most of them presented as a way to protect or improve the conditions of the Other.

After 1945, these ideals soon became marginal among the western public, including those who sympathized with right-wing positions. Being racist or defending the incommensurability of cultures almost inevitably reminds one of the anti-egalitarian and brutal policies of interwar fascist regimes. Even though extremist groups tried to revitalize their ethnic-based approach to politics, decolonization and the fall of segregation in the American South made things even more difficult for them. Neo-fascist groupuscules remained active across the West, but they did not represent a threat to liberal democracy and multicultural coexistence.

In the 1970s, Alain de Benoist and other far-right intellectuals began to craft an alternative to biological racism that could still provide a more or less acceptable defence of cultural separatism and civilizational chauvinism, a sort of xenophobia with a human face. As an ideological bricoleur, de Benoist managed to merge far-right ideas with the postcolonial cult of difference professed by some activists of the New Left. As shown, this has had an

88 Wald Sussman, The Myth of Race, 11–43.
impact on many radical-right and extreme-right activists, coinciding with an era of mass migration and demographic anxieties among a not inconsiderable section of the public. The resulting ideal, ethnopluralism, is not a priori a variant of racism, but it can provide new ways to rationalize ethnic stigmatization and discriminatory policies against non-European immigrants. One cannot doubt that de Benoist does not agree with many of the activists who use his ideas, but neither can we deny that ethnopluralism was always conceived as a renewal of far-right alterophobia towards other groups and autophilia towards one’s own ethnie.

What is important to understand is that the idea of ethnopluralism poses a threat to multicultural societies, in as much as it challenges the possibility of peaceful coexistence between different cultures (and it conveniently does so in an era of mass migration towards the West), even if their proponents would never admit that openly. As mentioned, it is not necessarily racist, but it connects with ‘classic’ far-right anxieties and it is embraced by movements that promote stigmatization and discrimination. In fact, religion, nationalism or class have also historically played this role for extremists, who do not necessarily need to put race in the centre of their discourse in order to be discriminatory (or violent) towards minorities. What matters is that ethnopluralism is essentializing, and its dogmatic rejection of methodological individualism downplays the possibility of cultural encounters, and similar ideals have been used to justify ethnic separatism, stigmatization and colonial arrangements. Suffice it to note, as a historical example, how cultural differentialism became the fundamental sociodicy coming from apartheid South African authorities at a certain point. As George Fredrickson observes: ‘No better example can be found of how a “cultural essentialism” based on nationality can do the work of a racism based squarely on skin color or other physical characteristics.’

Roger Griffin is right to employ the metaphor of the rhizome to explain the possibilities of the contemporary extreme right, which ‘behaves like the tangled root-system of some species of grass or tuber, displaying “multiple starts and beginnings which intertwine and connect with each other”, constantly producing new shoots as others die off in an unpredictable, asymmetrical pattern of growth and decay’. It is important to note, though, that this apparent chaotic marginality is perfectly compatible with influencing the more mainstream radical right and even the conservatives. Indeed, even though biological racism suffered a deadly wound during the second half of the 1940s, it is now evident that other forms of ethnic discrimination (some of them difficult to separate from pre-war racism) can develop in our societies, and that metapolitical extreme rightists can supply mainstream

89 Fredrickson, Racism, 3–4.
90 Roger Griffin, ‘From slime mould to rhizome: an introduction to the groupuscular right’, Patterns of Prejudice, vol. 37, no. 1, 2003, 27–50 (34).
parties with new ideas, even though those will probably be filtered and adapted before reaching the public.

Alain de Benoist and his notion of ethnopluralism are proof of the many shapes that these new offshoots can take, even to the point of looking like the opposite of what they actually represent. Indeed, this thinker has shown an ability to articulate an approach that provides discursive grounds for the defence of anti-miscegenation stances in a context in which ethnic pluralism is part of the political mainstream. Even though his views are only embraced by a part of the political spectrum (the far right, both in the form of radical-right parties and extreme-right fringe organizations), the possibility of articulating them in a way that allows us to take a great distance from its interwar predecessors (presenting them as a defence of freedom and pluralism) is remarkable and should be considered by both researchers and activists.

Daniel Rueda is a Teaching Assistant and a PhD candidate in the Department of European and International Studies at King’s College London. His research focuses on analysing the role of nationalism among four European right-wing populist parties from four different countries (France, Italy, Portugal and Spain). His chief research interests are populism, nationalism, the far right, European history, intellectual history and international relations. He also works as a managing editor at Studies in Ethnicities and Nationalism (SEN), a journal based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Email: daniel.rueda@kcl.ac.uk. ORCID © http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5169-2631