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World of the Right: Radical Conservatism and Global Order
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After Liberalism?

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The energetic expansion of the far right over the past decade has shaped a fast-growing literature, spanning from liberal to far left and scholarly to activist, which has sought to comprehend this complex, fear-inducing force.¹ Understanding what is taking place is difficult—not only because of what Ernst Bloch called the inevitable ‘Darkness’ of the present moment, but also because the far right appears to be constantly mutating and in-transition.² At the time of writing—amidst the Trump administration’s assault on the ‘administrative state’ and dramatic pronouncements on tariffs, Ukraine, Gaza, and Greenland, as well as sweeping public sector cuts and culture wars rhetoric here in Aotearoa New Zealand—it is not unreasonable to wonder whether a book on the far right composed in 2024 is already out of date.

The literature on the far right gives us an array of possible compound adjectives that can be used to characterise this

1 See Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics in Europe* (Belknap Press, 2017); Geoff Eley, ‘What is Fascism and Where Does it Come From?’ *History Workshop* 91 (2021), 1-28; Ugo Palheta, ‘Fascism, Fascisation, Antifascism,’ *Historical Materialism* (blog), 2021; Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (Verso, 2023).

2 Ernst Bloch *The Principle of Hope, Volume One* (MIT Press, 1986). See also Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism* (Verso, 2019).

phenomenon—extreme-right, new-right, populist-right, neo-fascist, post-fascist, national-populist, new-authoritarian—and asks to consider whether this is a single, unified thing at all. Can we extract an ideological core from the multitude of far-right sub-currents: alt-Righters, traditionalists, white nationalists, post-liberals, neo-reactionaries, kinists, national conservatives, integralists, groypers, and more? What ties together the variety of people and organisations that make an appearance in literature on the far right such as Sam Francis, Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Javier Milei, Steve Bannon, Aleksandr Dugin, Guillaume Faye, Christopher Rufo, Yoram Hazony, Giorgia Meloni, Frank Furedi, Pat Buchanan, Alain de Benoist, Narendra Modi, Matthew Goodwin, Marine Le Pen, the Law and Justice Party, National Rally, the Heritage Foundation, the Conservative Political Action Conference, Brothers of Italy, and the Edmund Burke Foundation?

The authors of *World of the Right*, a group of political science and international relations scholars from the United Kingdom and Canada, acknowledge such difficulties in defining the far right, emphasising that what they call the ‘global right’ is ‘a work in progress’.³ They note that there is no identifiable central command or anything like a ‘Right-wing international’, and that major differences separate the groups and intellectuals composing this global right—for example, over support for, or opposition to, certain sexual freedoms. Nevertheless, the authors boldly attempt a totalising encapsulation of the contemporary far right, attempting to articulate its ideological core, central strategic vision and practices, and political sociology in a manner that is an advance on any competing efforts I have encountered in the English language. At the same time, while the result is deeply impressive, the focus and length (under 200 pages) of the work means that certain issues and crucial questions that are strategically vital for the left go untreated.

The authors set up their core contentions in an expansive first chapter, which sets out to better understand the contemporary far right—which they view as ‘a relatively novel and revolutionary ideological orientation’—as

3 Rita Abrahamsen et al., *World of the Right: Radical Conservatism and Global Order* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 182.

globally interconnected, encompassing a set of forces that are transforming domestic politics and threatening the liberal international order (LIO).⁴ Briskly and sharply outlining the book's central theses, this chapter is also dedicated to considering the difficulties facing scholars of the contemporary far right. Here, the authors put to the side conventional uses of populism as 'thin ideology', drawing instead on Ernesto Laclau's reading of populism as a performance that makes the emergence of the people possible, emphasising the usefulness of his concept of 'chains of equivalence'.⁵ The authors also gesture towards Michael Freeden's morphological treatment of conservatism, underscoring the traditionalist and anti-Enlightenment dimensions of the contemporary far right.⁶ Throughout the book, the authors are careful to note the diversity in play within the contemporary far right—for example, the mix of free-marketeers and protectionists, revolutionaries and reformists, culture warriors and pragmatists that they encounter at the May 2023 NatCon UK Conference—but their investigative object, which they variously name as 'radical right', 'global right', and 'radical conservatism', has a very distinctive cast. The deep story, leading edge, or 'intellectual vanguard' disclosed in *World of the Right* is one that has its most crucial origins in the French New Right.⁷ This new intellectual movement assembles the ideas of a number of key authors gathered by the anti-globalism publishers Arktos Media, ideas that accord closely with Anglo-American post-liberalism, even though the authors of *World of the Right* pay no real attention to this current.

A first core feature of today's radical right is its Gramscian quality. The French New Right, whose leading figure is Alain de Benoist, faced with the crushing defeat of fascism and appeals to biological racism, amidst the rise of the New Left and counter-culture, were pioneers of the contemporary radical right. Often framed as 'metapolitics', the French New Right turned its focus away from political power to battle around ideas, concepts, and

4 Abrahamsen et al., *World of the Right*, 3.

5 See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005).

6 Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

7 Abrahamsen et al., *World of the Right*, 67.

meanings, and to struggles for moral and intellectual reform. Gestures to Gramsci and to the priority of patient cultural trench warfare are now everywhere on the radical right, from Guillaume Faye to Andrew Breitbart, from Argentina to Greece. The radical right's Gramscianism extends as well to the embrace of Gramsci's emphasis on the importance of organic intellectuals, the necessity of alliance politics, and the generation of 'transnational equivalences and effects' in an effort to form a new collective will centred on various essentialisms such as tradition, people, nation, and civilisation.⁸ Such a cultural struggle is inseparable from Gramsci's insistence on the need for a new total conception of the world. In the book's third chapter, the authors point to the importance of the radical right's creation of a coherent sociological critique of globalisation. The suggestion is that 'managerialism' functions as a core concept for the radical right and that globalisation is framed as 'the expansion of liberal managerial society, the administrative state, and the New Class'.⁹ This political sociology offers a powerful cognitive map of the world and the workings of power. It provides a model of antagonism—us against them—a sharp focus for discontent and mobilisation, and a sense of possibility, or, as I would frame it, a utopian dimension or salvational narrative. Originating with James Burnham's 1941 book on the managerial revolution, the radical right's development of this sociology links managerialism, the administrative state, and the new class to a whole slew of bad things: technocracy, cosmopolitanism, abstraction, hedonism, secularism, arrogant expertise, progressive values, universalism, standardisation, and the erasure of freedom, tradition, identity, and particularity.¹⁰ Often, as the authors note, this political sociology appropriates the language and affects of anti-colonialism, and it frequently expresses opposition to at least certain kinds of capital, meliorative state intervention, neoliberal globalisation, elites, and those marginalised groups protected by the elites. The authors propose that this sociological approach of the radical

8 Abrahamsen et al., *World of the Right*, 63.

9 Abrahamsen et al., *World of the Right*, 68.

10 See James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World* (John Day, 1941).

right provides a ‘powerful rhetoric of enmity’, which can appeal to diverse constituencies, drawing together, for instance, those on the European far right, who resist the oncoming ‘Great Replacement’, with a pan-Africanist thinker such as Kémi Séba.¹¹ The radical right has also been able to draw energy from the class hatred—encapsulated in Hilary Clinton’s description of Trump voters as a ‘basket of deplorables’—directed towards poorer and less-educated constituents by centrist media and politicians, bringing together economic interests and class resentments.

This powerful cognitive map composed by the intellectuals of the contemporary radical right is directed not just at ideational transformation. It also shapes the organisational and institutional practices of the radical Right, the most obvious and well-researched of which is the use of social media. In chapter four, the focus is instead on radical right publishing initiatives and educational organisations. In publishing ventures, such as Arktos, Counter-Currents (both of which have published works by New Zealand author Kerry Bolton), and Encounter Books, and in journals such as the *Claremont Review of Books* and *Eléments*, the radical right has sought to achieve intellectual respectability and to construct a useable lineage or counter-canon. The radical right has also sought to create a new stratum of organic intellectuals and elites capable of replacing liberal globalists through culture wars against universities that are framed as propaganda machines for ‘cultural Marxism’ and ‘woke ideology’, and in the establishment of new universities, foundations, and think-tanks.¹²

The final chapter deals with the global dimensions of the radical right, and especially the ways in which the rise of the right has been widely viewed as both symptom and cause of the current crisis of the LIO. Here, the authors draw attention to the truly global resonances of radical-right critique,

11 Abrahamsen et al., *World of the Right*, 106.

12 These new insitutions and think-tanks include: Hillside College in Michigan; New College of Florida; University of Austin, Texas; Danube Institute; Mathias Corvinas Collegium; Policy Exchange; Institute of Social Sciences, Economics, and Politics; Peterson Academy; organisations linked with figures and forces such as Viktor Orbán, Christopher Rufo, Frank Furedi, Jordan Peterson, Matthew Goodwin, Marion Maréchal, the Law and Justice Party of Poland, Vox in Spain, and National Rally in France.

especially in its disavowals of cultural supremacy, emphases on the right to difference and the integrity of cultures, and appeals to multipolarity against imperialism. One instance of the surprising alliances here are campaigns to defend the ‘natural family’, which can draw together disparate groups such as Western integralists, traditionalists attached to Russian Orthodoxy, and conservative NGOs based in the Global South. Such globality is intertwined as well with the rise of powerful illiberal states, such as Russia and China, which also appeal to multipolarity, and, in the case of Russia, offer support to the radical right. For the authors, in its efforts to erode the LIO, the radical right’s powerful sovereignist vision of the future can appeal, variously, to more localist, regionalist, nationalist, and civilisational projects in ways that allow the formation of ‘transversal global coalitions’.¹³

The strengths of the book’s wide-ranging, bold, and lucid account of the radical right are clear. The authors have composed a convincing portrait of the unifying core of a diverse and evolving phenomenon. This portrait can help illuminate, for instance, the combination of a baffling array of demands and identities on display in the anti-mandates and anti-lockdown protest in Wellington in 2022. Importantly, it also insists on taking the far right seriously as an intellectual and moral project, which, to borrow Bloch’s words from his analysis of fascism, is a ‘powerful cultural synthesis’.¹⁴ While drawing on theory lightly and pragmatically, the book evinces a serious-minded reflection on ideology, hegemony, and political strategy. And by producing such a unified yet subtle account of the far right, the authors also provide important cues for the left in its strategic efforts to disassemble the far-right’s collective will.

Inevitably, though, in a book of such ambitious scope and limited space, certain claims or suggestions are undeveloped: for instance, the idea that perhaps all ideologies today are merely thin ideologies, or the postmodern qualities of the right. The reader might also question the apparent bracketing of ‘extreme right’ organisations, such as CasaPound,

13 Abrahamsen et al., *World of the Right*, 157.

14 Bloch quoted in Anson Rabinbach, ‘Unclaimed Heritage: Ernst Bloch’s Heritage of Our Times and the Theory of Fascism’, *New German Critique* 11 (1977), 5.

Golden Dawn, and the Proud Boys, when arguably equally extreme figures such as Greg Johnson, Richard Spencer, and Guillaume Faye are positioned on the conservative right. With respect to the major currents included in the radical right, I was surprised that no mention was made of post-liberalism. This absence is certainly no major failing, given the limited space, aims, and achievements of the book, but attention to this current does help illuminate a number of potential contradictions, blockages, and tensions facing the contemporary far right, which, at the same time, are open discussion points for left strategy today.

It is, I think, plausible to suggest that there has been a sense of a gathering ‘post-liberal atmosphere’ in the West and beyond, expressed in a widespread, profound sense of doubt among liberal intellectuals about the health and future prospects of liberalism.¹⁵ This atmosphere has been shaped, above all, by two dates: 2007–2008, the Global Financial Crisis, and 2016, the year of the Brexit and Trump votes. These concerned liberals have tended to register a major shift from what Edward Luce describes as the ‘unshakeable self-confidence’ of liberalism after the collapse of ‘really existing socialism’ to today’s loss of ‘faith in the future’, in which ‘Western liberalism . . . [is] under siege’.¹⁶ The symptoms of liberalism’s retreat include growing inequality and precarity, the diminishment of political and civil rights, economic stagnation, financial volatility, the rising power of aggressive illiberal regimes, and expanding popular anger, irrationality, polarisation, and extremism.

The other significant aspect of this post-liberal atmosphere is the emergence of an explicitly post-liberal current of thought, which contends that liberalism can no longer lay exclusive claim to political authority, and which seeks to lay the intellectual foundations for an alternative, post-liberal modernity. Post-liberalism is predominantly an Anglo-American

15 See Bill Emmott, *The Fate of the West: The Battle to Save the World’s Most Successful Political Idea* (Public Affairs, 2017); Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents* (Profile Books, 2022); Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017); Martin Wolf, *The Shifts and the Shocks: What We Have Learned – and Are Still to Learn – from the Financial Crisis* (Penguin, 2015).

16 Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, 71, 36, 11.

political current of thought, which has emerged over the past decade or so, including thinkers such as Patrick Deneen, Sohrab Amari, R. R. Reno, Adrian Vermeule, Rod Dreher, Julius Krein, Gladden Pappin, and outlets such as *First Things*, *Compact*, *American Affairs*, and *UnHerd*. It converges in a number of important respects with the radical conservatism discussed in *World of the Right*, even if their sources are often different.

For post-liberals, the liberal project has failed, often because it has succeeded. Liberalism's success, they claim, has not only issued in major social problems such as rising inequality, elite detachment, and corrosive identity politics but it has also undermined liberal institutions and values of democracy, freedom, and tolerance. Post-liberals understand liberalism as encompassing both progressivist social liberalism and neoliberalism, which have converged, increasing the power of both the bureaucratic state and the global free market. Both liberalisms share a commitment to the limitless expansion of individualism, which rests upon an overwhelmingly negative conception of liberty, a pessimistic anthropology, and a flawed voluntarism. These individualist foundations, post-liberal thinkers suggest, have undermined social connectedness, encouraged hedonism and materialism, and produced fragmentation and meaninglessness. Together with liberal commitments to universalism, abstraction, and progress, these thinkers see liberalism as having the effect of diminishing the experience of place and time, destroying cultures, and eventually destroying the moral foundations that it inherited, and upon which it had relied.

Against this decaying liberalism, post-liberals insist on the necessity of a politics of the common good. Such a politics entails an alternative anthropology, an insistence that human beings are, above all, social and relational beings. Post-liberals champion an alternative conception of freedom that is linked to self-discipline, obligation, reciprocity, and virtue, and which is bound up with a focus on forms of human flourishing in the context of living, concrete practices, and traditions. In terms of the aim of establishing a new social order embodying the common good, post-liberals respond in divergent ways, but we can make a number of generalisations about their responses. For one, post-liberals contend that

economies should serve the common good. Extremes of wealth and poverty can be controlled through measures such as stronger welfare safety nets, guaranteed work, protectionism, the expansion of manufacturing, action against monopolies, and control over financial movements. Here, post-liberals typically place a significant emphasis on, and appeal to, the working classes against elites. Such re-embedding of the economy in social orders implies an elevation of politics, but post-liberals also oppose bureaucracy and technocracy, appealing to subsidiarity. The establishment of a robust politics of the common good necessitates the formation of a new elite who will express, as well as elevate and guide, the demands of the many. And culture plays a very significant role in post-liberal contentions. Culture, as an authentic product of time and place, is the source of the common good, and protecting and allowing certain cultures to flourish is the goal of politics. Particular attention here is given to religious faith and the family.

Like the radical right treated in *World of the Right*, the sources of post-liberalism's critique of liberalism are various—conservative, romantic, socialist, fascist, theological—and, on the face of it, the political location of post-liberalism on a left–right scale is hard to determine. An important part of this intellectual diversity is the significant attention both post-liberalism and the radical right have given towards inequality and class. In the terms of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's treatment of the 'new spirit of capitalism', both can be viewed as part of a more widespread return to the 'social critique' of capitalism, to issues of inequality, misery, and exploitation, which have followed the Global Financial Crisis.¹⁷ In contrast to the global left, though, both currents have sought to diminish the values of the 'artistic critique'—such as libertarian freedom, mobility, self-reinvention, and novelty—which are values enshrined as supreme and sacred by neoliberalism.

Will Davies has characterised neoliberalism, in distinctly Weberian language, as 'the disenchantment of politics by economics'.¹⁸ I would offer a

17 Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot (Verso, 2005).

18 Will Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (Sage, 2014).

play on this phrasing in summarising an important core of both the radical right and post-liberalism: they represent *the attempted re-enchantment of politics by culture*. This re-enchantment should be seen, in part, as Abrahamsen and co-authors note, as expressing a critique of neoliberalism's post-political tendencies, and as a reassertion of the role of politics. Increasingly, though, it would seem that we see are witnessing something like what Weber called the 'routinisation of charisma' on the far right. As the National Rally and the Brothers of Italy have drawn close to power, for instance, both organisations appear to have stepped back from or softened their opposition towards neoliberal globalisation. A similar dynamic is striking in the shift in the work of post-liberalism's most fluent and influential thinker, Patrick Deneen, between his *Why Liberalism Failed* and his follow-up book, *Regime Change*, as the strong focus on class, inequality, and neoliberalism of the former book is transformed into a fixation on woke corporations, culture wars, and the formation of honourable elites in the latter.¹⁹

This hypertrophy of the cultural in the intensely superstructural politics increasingly on display on the far right perhaps indicates a major blockage that echoes the failure of interwar fascism to substantially transform economic power relations, beyond shaping a more statist and political form of capitalism.²⁰ Post-liberals and thinkers of the radical right, such as de Benoist, have pointed to some of the important contradictions besetting contemporary liberalism, but the far right is equally vulnerable to tensions and reality problems of its own. Its class and plebian rhetoric, its opposition to materialism and unequal power, and its appeals to more direct and organic forms of democracy sits uneasily alongside a thoroughgoing elitism and a defence of its own preferred hierarchies, the prominent role of elites in its ranks, and multiple intertwinements with a range of economically powerful organisations. Will the dismantling of the 'administrative state' in the US satisfy a good part of the constituency that brought Trump back to power,

19 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018); *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (Penguin, 2023).

20 Toscano, *Late Fascism*.

or is this likely a readjustment of the allocation of wealth among existing elites, along the lines of a more political form of capitalism?²¹ Similarly, does the Trump administration's expansionist belligerence not look likely to antagonise other far-right forces? Here, surely, the forces and dynamics of a competitive world economy and interstate system provide hard limits to the plausibility of discourses of multipolarity and 'differentialist anti-racism' that the authors of *World of the Right* view as ideational vehicles of the global attraction of the radical right.

None of the above is, of course, to deny that the radical right is a serious force that is forging a new collective will in the ways in which Abrahamsen et al. describe. The radical right has undoubtedly reshaped ideational, emotional, and moral climates by breaking taboos, undermining norms of civility, coarsening political rhetoric, and casting a harsh light on cosmopolitan liberal values, aspirations, and hypocrisies.²² This success, though, is beset by tensions. It is also risky. Here, it is worth drawing attention to some of the authentic utopian content in far-right ideology as outlined in *World of the Right*: its critique of materialism, egoism, consumerism, individualism, inequality, its appeal to more thoroughgoing forms of democracy, its desire to protect communities, traditions, and values, and its anti-imperialism. Some of these appeals might be read—as August Bebel characterised anti-Semitism—as the 'socialism of fools', but there are piercing critical dimensions and utopian desires here that are available to and resonate with the left. In short, another post-liberalism is possible. We might look here for inspiration from a figure like Alasdair MacIntyre, who has been a tremendously influential figure for post-liberals, but who was also unrelenting in his critique of both the bureaucratic state and the destructiveness of market forces in liberal modernity.²³ MacIntyre

21 Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner, 'Seven Theses on American Politics', *New Left Review* 138 (2022), 5-27.

22 Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2017).

23 We might also consider other thinkers whose post-liberal theological concerns draw them to the Left. Most notable here, perhaps, is John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

was a thinker not unfairly glossed by Fredric Jameson as representing an Aristotelian Marxism.²⁴

With respect to acknowledging and competing for those utopian dimensions visible on the far right, the left also has a distinct advantage: the beauty of the socialist dream, which stands in striking contrast to the ugliness of so much that appears on the radical right. In his reading of fascist propaganda, Theodor Adorno noted the tendency of fascist agitators to ‘dwell upon the immanence of catastrophes of some kind’, in which ‘they and their listeners get a thrill out of the idea of inevitable doom’.²⁵ Consumers of the thinkers assembled by Arktos may be won to the critique of the moral thinness of hegemonic liberalism and initially enchanted by the stylish cultural pessimism, but even the most indulgent reader has to feel a shadow creeping over their soul, page after page, as the fear, hatred, and ugly tedium accumulate. Of course, such fear and hatred are paired with salvational, utopian imaginings of rebirth, but, as Adorno said of fascism, these frequently read more like ‘a delirium of annihilation masked as salvation’, with the heightened and volatile sentiments a ‘pretence, a fictitious, shabby imitation of real feeling’.²⁶ It is plausible to suggest that we read far-right thought as a complex rupture from the consensual neoliberalism of the 1990s and early 2000s, and as a contrast to and contestation of post-political, neoliberal affective culture—individualist, non-conflictive, depoliticised, technocratic, and centred overwhelmingly on the accumulation of wealth and personal success.²⁷ However, the mobilising passions of fear, rage, unease, and suspicion are never matched by anything beautiful, beyond a highly abstract jumble of ‘cliches and vapid

24 Fredric Jameson, ‘Morality Versus Ethical Substance’, *Social Text* 8 (1983), 151-154.

25 Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 170.

26 Adorno, *Stars Down to Earth*, 170, 167.

27 Diana Carolina Pelaez Rodriguez, ‘Emotional Communities: An Understanding of Collective Situated Knowledge and Action’, *Emotions: History, Culture, Society* 5 (2021), 303-330.

tokens of belonging', and the 'worship of a gloriously hollow past'.²⁸ Amidst this post-liberal atmosphere, a core challenge for those on the left is to provide those beautiful possibilities and concrete enactments of other ways of being, along with the stories and images that summon very different collective wills and other, better peoples.

28 Toscana, *Late Fascism*, 113, 122; Marco Revelli, *The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss* (Verso, 2019).