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THE FAMILY TREE OF ILLIBERALISM: LINEAGES AND ALIGNMENTS



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There is a widespread assumption that democracy is threatened by a Global Right that builds on a common set of ideas.¹ These ideas feature a core that is interchangeably termed “nativist,” “sovereigntist,” “nationalist,” or “populist” and is recognizable across a wide range of political actors, from the two Americas (Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro) to Europe’s Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, and Vladimir Putin. As similar as these actors might seem at first sight, there are only limited commonalities and little compatibility across the Global Right in terms of the intellectual currents underpinning or accompanying their rise to power.

To be sure, these actors of the Global Right share certain common and compatible discourses. These include the need to roll back what is perceived the “1968 agenda,” including gender-related emancipation and the power of international organizations and treaties. But closer scrutiny of the intellectual currents of the Global Right shows a dividing line between these currents, despite their often-voiced mutual sympathy. This dividing line has much to do with the different historical and theoretical lineages that characterize them.

On the one hand, we can identify the lineage of political forces associated with the New Right (Drolet & Williams, 2018). This is an intellectual current mainly interested in the re-establishment of a right wing with a lineage rooted in intellectual tradition(s) close to those of the interwar extreme right. Stopping short of fascism and national-socialism, it includes the “revolutionary conservatism” of Arthur Moeller van den Bruck and Armin Mohler (and earlier also Ernst Jünger and Friedrich Nietzsche) and the traditionalism of René Guénon or Julius Evola. This lineage of revolutionary conservatism—resurrected after World War II by Mohler in Germany and especially by Alain de Benoist in France—finds its reflection in the political forces and intellectual currents supporting Le Pen, Salvini, Germany’s AfD, Austria’s FPÖ, and the U.S. Alt-Right. Only rarely does this lead to open cooperation between intellectuals and parties, as Alain de Benoist’s enduring distancing from the Front National (now Rassemblement National—National Rally) shows. Rather, use of these ideas is selective: while embracing de Benoist’s ideas of “ethnopluralism” and the “right to difference,” political currents sidestep his more controversial positions such as paganism or criticism of the nation-state.

On the other hand, there is a second lineage that provides the intellectual background for Orbán and Kaczyński as well as certain U.S. conservative currents, including in particular Catholic conservatives, whose more prominent representatives have repeatedly expressed admiration for Orbán.² This includes “post-fusionist” conservatism around Sohrab Ahmari³ that is opposed to the “fusion” between social conservatives and economic free-marketers that defined the Reagan era and the “red Toryism” of Philipp Blond in the UK.⁴ Further in the background, we find a complex lineage reaching back to 19th-century Catholic conservatism, combined with outspoken support for conservative thinkers such as Leo Strauss, Thomas Molnar, and Eric Voegelin. Voegelin and Strauss infused U.S. conservatism in the 1950s (and Eastern European conservatism in the 1980s-1990s) with the idea of the “crisis of the West” (McAllister, 1996), which, rather than chastise or abandon “the West” altogether, attempts to formulate a positive notion of a true “Western” heritage that is rooted in a rejection of Enlightenment and modernity.

There are further important differences between *revolutionary conservatives* (the first lineage) and *national conservatives* (the second). Revolutionary conservatives pursue a fundamental break with liberalism and socialism and refuse to interpret history along the same events and developments as liberals or socialists, with a preference for pre-modern myths about thousand-years old European identity and propose a cyclical perspective on history in which a new revolutionary era will reconnect Europe (Bar-On, 2012). National conservatives, the second lineage, have also developed their discourse in opposition to liberalism and socialism, but the line of argumentation is one of fundamental disagreement over the interpretation of key historical developments (Enlightenment, modernization, emancipation) and political events, such as 1789, 1968 or 1989, while agreeing with these intellectual traditions on what the key events and developments are (Mannheim, 1954).

Furthermore, whereas revolutionary conservatism is ambivalent about the extreme right and the fascist currents of the interwar years, the national conservative lineage clearly distances itself from fascism. Along the argumentative lines supplied by Voegelin (Voegelin, 2003 [1964]) and Leo Strauss, who argued that all modern ideologies disconnect human designs from normative order (McAllister, 1996), national-conservatives equate liberalism and socialism with fascism. Thus, revolutionary conservatives have an affinity for revolution and identity, while national conservatives are inclined toward restauration and order. The first lineage perceives the survival of European nations and Europe as a whole to be existentially threatened by supra-national institutions and trends that are erasing all “cultural differences”; the second problematizes the perceived loss of normative bearing in modern societies more generally. Where they agree is on blaming liberalism for these problems.

There are other lines of agreement and intellectual references that cut across the two camps. One is the work of Carl Schmitt, who is arguably one of the few intellectuals that both currents hold in high esteem. Another is their reliance on the core concept of “conservatism.” At the same time, both currents seek to appropriate the intellectual tradition that they regard as legitimately “conservative.” Thus, national-conservatives are increasingly silent on the influence of classic conservatives such as Michael Oakeshott or Edmund Burke. In the case of the New Right, this has manifested itself as a rejection of classic conservatism in favor of a mix of references⁵ to revolutionary conservatives such as Armin Mohler or Oswald Spengler or even left-wing thinkers, including Antonio Gramsci, Noam Chomsky, and Herbert Marcuse (for a rare exchange of opinions between the intellectual representatives of these two “conservative” currents, see the 1978 debate between Thomas Molnar and Armin Mohler in Molnar and Mohler, 1978).

Given their different lineages, the political alignments that national-conservative and New Right intellectuals have entered tend to differ, as we will show below by focusing on political alignments

within Europe. Many of them remain skeptical of parties and choose to stay outside of party politics and concentrate on “metapolitics.” Others support parties on the far-right fringes, while still others have become accepted ideologues of governing parties. These differences are further modified by their situational reactions to ongoing events.

Revolutionary Conservatives

Among the best-known examples of revolutionary conservatism in Western Europe is the cooperation, in France, between the *Front National*, founded in the 1970s, and the right-wing intellectual networks that emerged in reaction to the 1968 student protests around the organizations GRECE (*Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne*) and *Club de l'horloge*. These have coined numerous concepts and ideas that have been employed through the international far-right, including the term “New Right,” as well as Great Replacement, ethno-differentialism, and ethno-pluralism (Keucheyan, 2017). Nouvelle Droite thinkers (for instance, de Benoist and Robert Steuckers) have also cooperated with Armin Mohler, the unrepentantly fascist author of the “conservative revolution” in the German-speaking countries. While these networks and associated political parties have rarely expressed open sympathy for interwar fascism, they have nevertheless condemned and promised to resist the “victimization” of fascist regimes or countries associated with them. For example, far-right politician and *Club de l'horloge* member Jean-Yves Le Gallou argued that the European “migrant crisis” in 2015 was an effect of the post-war victimization of Germany, which was compelled to prove its “repentance” by allowing an influx of refugees (Keucheyan, 2017).

It would be misleading, however, to present the alignment of these intellectual circles and political parties as bereft of tensions and conflicts. While some concepts and ideas have indeed acquired hegemonic status within the far right (the slogan “Europe of Nations,” for instance), others continue to divide the scene between more “realist” politicians and “idealist” intellectuals (see, for instance, GRECE’s ideas of “anti-sovereignism” or “deep ecology”—(François & Nonjon, 2021). Similar alignments of far-right political actors and intellectual circles are also present in Germany and Italy, although they cannot claim the status of the French Nouvelle Droite on the European far-right scene. As in the French case, the recent successes of the far right AfD in Germany have been accompanied by intellectual preparation in far-right networks and think tanks, such as *Institut für Staatspolitik*’s which helped de-coupling the AfD from its more moderate wing (Laskowski, 2018).

National-Conservatives

Poland’s PiS and Hungary’s Fidesz are the most prominent political representatives of the second lineage in present-day Europe; both parties seek alliances with Western European conservatives rather than with the far right. This happens even though Western European conservatives trace their positions to a more liberal lineage, one that accepts economic liberalism and a liberal reading of history and only objects to the speed of (liberal, and especially socialist) change. In contrast, national-conservatives challenge the notion that markets are natural and replace Western conservatives’ concern for protecting markets with a concern for protecting nations, understood holistically as cultural entities united by language, confession, and historical legacy, and constituted in and replicated through traditional families (Varga & Buzogány, 2020). Discourses of the “crisis of the West” often drive a further wedge between national-conservatives in Poland and Hungary and

Western conservatives, visible, for instance, in the conflicts between Nordic conservatives and Hungarian Fidesz MEPs (the latter often blame the crisis of liberalism on Western conservatism's adoption of liberalism). Behind these positions is a lineage maintained by a network of Hungarian and Polish conservative intellectuals that builds on references to Voegelin, Strauss, and Schmitt and has adopted a complex critique of modernity that encompasses all "progress-oriented ideologies," from fascism to socialism and liberalism (Bluhm & Varga, 2019). The "Paris Statement," a manifesto issued in 2017 by ten European intellectuals, presents a good summary of these ideas, opposing "progress" and "multiculturalism" while defending national solidarities as a basic "human need."⁶

While Poland's PiS and Hungary's Fidesz refrain from adopting such a virulent critique of "progress," their alignment in search of conservative political alliances largely corresponds to the preferences outlined in this national-conservative intellectual network (Buzogány & Varga, 2018). Its most prominent member, Polish philosophy professor Ryszard Legutko, also serves as an MEP for Law and Justice and Co-Chairman of the Conservative and Reformists Faction in the European Parliament. PiS' and Fidesz' avoidance of ties to far-right formations close to the New Right is further amplified by the latter's support for Vladimir Putin, which it shares with Germany's AfD, Italy's *Lega Salvini*, and France's *Rassemblement Nationale*. Yet since Polish national-conservatives firmly believe the 2010 Smolensk air crash to have been a Russian plot to assassinate their political elite, they remain particularly suspicious of political forces that seek close relationships to Russia.

In sum, as our focus on Europe shows, the perceived similarity of the actors populating the Global Right often masks the different lineages of these forces. Rather than conjuring up the specter of a common and stable front of illiberal and like-minded actors, it would be more advisable to approach the "Global Right" as a temporary formation, researching why such actors come together and the extent to which they really do.

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² Zack Beauchamp, "The American right's favorite strongman," *VOX*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/21/21256324/viktor-orban-hungary-american-conservatives>, accessed April 7, 2021.

³ Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "David French, Sohrab Ahmari, and the Battle for the Future of Conservatism," *The New Yorker*, September 12, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-political-scene/david-french-sohrab-ahmari-and-the-battle-for-the-future-of-conservatism>, accessed April 7, 2021.

⁴ John Gray, "Red Tory, By Phillip Blond," *Independent*, October 23, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/red-tory-phillip-blond-1933475.html>, accessed April 7, 2021.

⁵ Bryan Sylvain, "European son: an interview with Alain de Benoist," *The Occidental Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2005): 27.

⁶ "The Paris Statement," *Current Concerns*, October 7, 2017, <https://www.zeit-fragen.ch/en/archives/2017/no-2930-1-december-2017/the-paris-statement.html>, accessed April 7, 2021.