Radical conservatism and global order: international theory and the new right

JEAN-FRANÇOIS DROLET and MICHAEL C WILLIAMS
School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London, UK and Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Ottawa, Canada

E-mail: j.drolet@qmul.ac.uk

The rise of the radical ‘New Right’ (NR) across much of the global political landscape is one of the most striking political developments of recent years. This article seeks to foster international theory’s critical engagement with the NR by providing an overview of its thinking about world politics and the challenges it presents. We argue that in many ways international theory is in fact uniquely positioned to provide such an engagement, and that it is essential that international theory comes to terms more fully with its political vision and theoretical claims if it is to engage effectively with this increasingly potent and often deeply troubling intellectual and political movement.

Keywords: New Right; global liberal order; radical conservatism; paleoconservatism; conservative revolution

The rise of the radical ‘New Right’ (NR) across much of the global political landscape is one of the most striking political developments of recent years. Long moribund, and in many cases given up for dead, the radical Right has emerged from the shadows to play a disruptive and often disconcerting role in the ‘populist’ political movements that have challenged previously entrenched political and economic orthodoxies. Rising in electoral support and public visibility in many countries, it has exercised significant influence on the domestic politics of international issues and on foreign policy discourse.¹

Explanations of this resurgence tend to focus on the dislocations caused by economic globalization and international migration (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Muiz and Immerzeel 2017), and the attendant rise of a widespread if often inchoate populism (Müller 2017; Mudde 2016). Few, however, have taken it seriously as a theoretical perspective and an

¹ Surveys of this trend include Economist (2018), Greven (2016), Lazaridis, Campani, and Benveniste (2016); for electoral dynamics, see Norris (2005), Hale-Williams (2006), Mudde (2007).
ideological project. This is a mistake. Because today’s radical conservatism is also the product of a decades-long attempt to craft a philosophical position capable of mounting an intellectual challenge to the contemporary liberal order, fostering political movements dedicated to its destruction, and supporting alternative political projects at the national, regional, and global levels. As one of its key theoreticians explains, many of the young people who founded the NR in the late 1960s were former activists sharing a conviction that intellectual activities must precede political action:

In an effort to lay the foundations for a political philosophy and in order to develop a concept for a new world, they wanted to somehow start from scratch and were ready to give up illusions about any immediate action. By that time, however, they had become aware of the simplistic and obsolete cleavage between Left and Right... They were ready to critically examine the tradition in order to identify its operating and living principle, while also tackling the major problems of their time from a truly revolutionary perspective (Benoist 2011, 21–22).

The political vision of the NR is neither reactionary in the sense of trying simply to reinstate an old, pre-modern order, nor purely nostalgic – it is a call to action, to a combination of theoretical, cultural, and political struggle often described by its proponents as a ‘Gramscianism of the Right’.2

The movements and actors captured by the NR label are diverse, both historically and geographically. As an intellectual project, its historical origins are often traced to the French Nouvelle Droite established in 1968 by Alain de Benoist, Dominique Venner and other militant right-wing intellectuals associated with the Groupement de recherche et d’études pour la civilisation européenne (GRECE), whose agenda reflected the multiple ideological re-alignments spawned by the cultural revolutions and economic crises shaking many Western societies at the time.

The Nouvelle Droite developed strong counterparts in Italy (Nuova Destra) and Germany (Neue Rechte) in the 1970s, and subsequently in several other countries across Western and Central Europe. It also has intellectual allies and interlocutors in contemporary Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union.3 In the US, the NR is closely related to the development of the American ‘paleoconservative’ movement led by intellectuals such as Paul Gottfried, Sam Francis, and Mel Bradford. Gottfried coined the term paleoconservatism during the early 1980s in an effort to

2 Dominique Venner (quoted in Spektorowski 2003, 113). See also Sunic (2011) [1990], 69–74).

3 Russia’s support for far-Right actors in Europe is traced in Shekhovtsov (2017).
revitalize the ‘Old Right’ and counter the growing influence of the neo-conservative and neoliberal strains of conservatism that were often conventionally designated as the ‘New Right’ in the US and the UK at the time. More recently, the anti-establishment politics of the NR has been promoted actively by Jared Taylor, Greg Johnson, Michael O’Meara and the ideological entrepreneurs gravitating around busy online platforms such as alt-right.com, www.counter-currents.com, www.theoccidentalobserver.net, and www.amerika.org.\textsuperscript{4} Like De Benoist and his European colleagues, paleoconservatives and other American New Rightists see this ‘mainstream’ conservatism as the work of dangerous doctrinaires who have infected the Right with ideas that have more to do with the early Bolsheviks and the Jacobins of the French Revolution than with conservatism.\textsuperscript{5} Their alternatives are frequently cited in the alt-right movement and strands of populist nationalism associated with ‘Trumpism’ in recent years (see Francis 2016; Gottfried 2016; Shenk 2016; Siegel 2016).

This article seeks to foster international theory’s critical engagement with the NR by providing an outline of its thinking about world politics and the challenges it presents. Although the ideas of the NR may at first glance seem far distant from contemporary international theory, its rise is too important to ignore. Indeed, we argue that in many ways international theory is in fact uniquely positioned to provide such an engagement, with important parts of its intellectual lineage and its contemporary concerns providing important points of intersection with the arguments of the NR. To make this case, we first provide an overview of the primary intellectual lineages of the NR, focussing in particular on its connections to the conservative revolution of the inter-war period. This lineage parallels themes influential in the construction of the field of international relations (IR) by realist thinkers in the inter-war and immediately post-war periods, although taking these arguments in different and more radical directions.

In the second section, we examine how NR thinkers apply this understanding in a specific analysis and critique of the contemporary liberal world order – a position that challenges the vision of global governance put forward by liberal internationalists in IR today in direct and highly politicized terms. Finally, we look briefly at the NR’s vision of an alternative international order based on assertively anti-liberal principles and structures that self-consciously echoes older traditions of geopolitics. For the NR, these alternatives are not simply ideals to be worked towards; they are

\textsuperscript{4} For a mission statement, see Johnson (2012).

\textsuperscript{5} See Gottfried (2007) and Scotchie (1999) for overviews.
possibilities made more likely by the cultural and political logics of liberal states, the economic and social dislocations created by globalization, and by the resentment and instabilities created by ‘liberal’ wars.

Discussing the NR is controversial. In this article, we do not seek to provide a sustained evaluation or critique of its positions; nor do we enter into the question of its political strength, or likely trajectories. Our goal is more foundational but, we think, equally essential. The international theory of the NR is not simply descriptive or explanatory: it is a form of political action, and for those parts of the Right interested in ideology, a systematic and historically resonant set of ideas is available. It is thus essential that international theory comes to terms more fully with the NR’s political vision, theoretical claims, and mobilizing strategies if it is to engage effectively with this increasingly potent and often deeply troubling intellectual and political movement.

The conservative revolution

The intellectual lineages claimed and mobilized by the NR are wide-ranging and often eclectic. However, almost all give a central place to the inter-war ‘conservative revolution’ associated with figures such as Carl Schmitt, Friedrich Meinecke, Oswald Spengler and others. In this, it has significant connections to the evolution of IR theory. Indeed, over the past decade, the significance of this period for many of the (particularly émigré) thinkers who sought to ‘invent’ (Guilhot 2011) IR theory in the post-war period has become widely recognized (Enemark-Petersen 1999; Scheuerman 2009; Behr and Roesch 2012; Williams 2013; Greenberg 2014; Guilhot 2017); even if figures such as John Herz and Hans Morgenthau attempted to take the nascent discipline in directions almost diametrically opposed to those advocated by the NR.

The conservative revolution does not refer to a well-defined collective project, but to a coalescing series of philosophical explorations and political experimentations articulated within a radically anti-liberal nationalism infused with the aesthetic voluntarism of modernity.6 In very broad terms, it comprised both a critique of liberal modernity, and an attempt to build a

---

6 As intellectual historians remind us, the concept of the conservative revolution is above all an academic construct that only really gained currency during the Cold War following the publication of Armin Mohler’s (1950) seminal study. According to Fritz Stern (1961, 27), the Austrian poet Hugo von Hoffmannstahl (1927) first used the term in print in his Das Schriftum als gestiger Raum der Nation. See also Rauschning (1941), Von Klemperer (1957), Gerstenberger (1969), Herf (2002) [1984], Breuer (1993), Travers (2001), Woods (1996).
non-liberal alternative by radicalizing rather than rejecting some of modernity’s most powerful dynamics.

Few figures inspired this vision more powerfully than Nietzsche. Whereas progressives of all varieties had envisaged reason as the tendency in all human thought towards greater unity, system, and necessity, Nietzsche viewed reason as a source of fragmentation and pluralism that was rendering the rule of law and state institutions highly problematic. In contrast with Marxist theories of ideology as ‘false consciousness’ prevalent at the time, Nietzsche insisted that all knowledge is necessarily embroiled in relations of power and is never the result of a dispassionate search for truth. In consequence, no classes or social forces had access to the ‘truth’ of the social situation, and all claims to truth ultimately revealed their self-interested nature and existence in a priori social rationality. Thus, although Nietzsche welcomed the Enlightenment for having exposed the bankruptcy of the Christian worldview and allowing an unprecedented degree of individual freedom, he argued that such emancipation could be maintained only by instituting a new social and political hierarchy. Moreover, he warned that unravelling the communal bond through which God acted as the mediating agent of security between individual political subjects meant that modern politics were dominated by atomizing mechanisms of control where the ‘nation-state’ asserted itself as the unmediated source of security.7 The Enlightenment’s quest for universal security and equality thus fostered an unprecedented expansion of state power by democratizing the economic and the cultural spheres, and allowing the state to administer both according to its own self-serving logic of raison d’État.

Although Nietzsche was deeply critical of modern conservatism, the character of his Kulturkritik, along with the warrior rhetoric through which it was often articulated, rendered his ideas attractive to many conservative nationalists who shared his revulsion against the effete liberalism of the bourgeoisie and his hopes that the crisis of European nihilism could be a source of affirmative regeneration.8 By far the most influential study to come out of this movement was Spengler’s (1922) [1918] controversial, The Decline of the West.9 There, Spengler appropriated Nietzsche’s Birth of

---

7 Nietzsche’s remarks on politics and IRs are scattered in fragments and aphorisms across a huge corpus, published and unpublished, but see especially 1996 [1878–1880] (161–178) and 2002 [1886], (131–150). Engagements in IR that overlap with some of the themes include Elbe (2003), Drolet (2014), and Beiner (2018).

8 On the reception of Nietzsche in Weimar, see Aschheim (1994, 128–200).

9 Despite the opacity of the work, 100,000 copies had sold in Germany by 1926; for general assessments, see Joll (1985), Farrenkopf (1991), and Herman (1997).
Tragedy (1872) to argue against Eurocentric narratives of progress, and to present human history as a meaningless but aesthetically sublime spectacle generated by the ceaseless struggle for political and cultural supremacy within naturally limited time-spans.

Against the Enlightenment, Spengler insisted that there existed no universal human culture but only a pluralism of cultures, each going through the same cycle of growth and decay autonomously (Spengler 1918, 106–107). By the nineteenth century, he argued, Western culture had entered into the final stage of a long period of decline and had degenerated into mere ‘civilization’ in which elites in Western societies had lost their ability to inspire and organize the masses in relation to cultural goals of lasting significance. Well-read in the Marxist literature of the time, Spengler (1922, 497–507) was also convinced that the world capitalist economy was past its prime, and about to collapse under the pressure of its own sins – a ‘cultural catastrophe’ he attributed in large part to processes of industrial ‘off-shoring’, the importation of foreign workers, and indiscriminate immigration that undermined white, Western supremacy. As he wrote in Man and Technics, at this point:

The famous “dissemination of industry” set in, motivated by the idea of getting bigger profits by bringing production into the marketing area. And so, in place of the export of finished products exclusively, they began an export of secrets, processes, methods, engineers, and managers... The unassailable privileges of the white peoples have been thrown away, squandered, betrayed... Here begins the exploited world’s revenge on its masters. The innumerable hands of the coloured races – at least as clever, and far less exigent – will shatter the economic organization of the whites and its foundations (Spengler 2015 [1931], 76).

A different though in many ways parallel critique was found in Carl Schmitt’s assaults on liberalism. Schmitt held that liberalism’s valorization of individualistic calculation and purely subjective values had reduced politics to a process of technical computation and competition lacking in any larger meaning, any capacity to decide authoritatively upon substantive values, and lacking any broader commitment to the political order or the state itself. Under liberalism, the state was subordinate to the interests and values of individual citizens who would support it only so long as it furthered their private ends. Governments thus tended to become paralyzed by entropic competition between factional interests, or captured by powerful agents or coalitions who used public power solely for their private benefit. As a result, the idea of a public or national interest became discredited, and the citizenry increasingly disillusioned and disaffected from a government that was either ineffective or mendacious. This erosion of political
commitment left the state an empty shell-prey to internal or external anti-liberal forces seeking to gain control of the political order.10

These issues were most pressing in the case of war, where the pathologies of liberal individualism undercut the state’s capacity to engage in armed conflict. For Schmitt, the ability of the sovereign to decide definitively on questions of war, and the individual’s willingness and obligation to obey those decisions, is fundamental. All functioning sovereignties are founded on this principle and capacity; those that do not possess it are unlikely to survive. Yet liberal individualism’s subjective foundations fatally undermined this capacity, leaving the liberal state incapable of defending itself: ‘In case of need’ Schmitt (1996, 71) argued, ‘the political entity must demand the sacrifice of life. Such a demand is in no way justifiable by the individualism of liberal thought. No consistent individualism can entrust to someone other than to the individual himself the right to dispose of the physical life of the individual’.

As a consequence, liberal states were intrinsically unstable. Unable to rely consistently on sacrifice by their citizens, liberal states were either weak or prone to ever more destructive modes of ideological universalism and fear-mongering that could mobilize their citizens and offset this fragility. The destructively paradoxical result was that states were both more fragile internally and more destructive internationally, as universalizing forms of nationalism provided social solidarity at the cost of making states ever less able to exercise policies of restrained calculation, coercion, and compromise characteristic of traditional realpolitik (Schmitt 2007 [1927]; see also Freyer 1925).11

Spengler and Schmitt were two of the doyens among the small but influential groups of militant middle-class intellectuals who sought to organize the conservative opposition to the humiliation of Versailles and the newly instituted parliamentary democracy of Weimar. What made their thinking strikingly novel, however, was the ways in which they reconfigured their bleak diagnoses into a stance of revolutionary potential rather than reactionary despair (see Kondylis 1986). Canonical conservative thinkers, such as Burke, de Maistre, Cortés, or Bonald, often drew on the ideal of an essentially medieval hierarchical society defended by landed aristocrats and their intellectual supporters. In contrast, the intellectuals of the conservative revolution were convinced that Germany’s ability to influence the future of the global distribution of power depended upon its

10 The contrast between Schmitt (2008) and Ikenberry (2012) is instructive in this regard.

11 The classic analysis is Meinecke (1957); its influence is clearly discernible in Morgenthau (1946), and discussed in Frei (2001).
ability to accommodate traditional communitarian values with mass democracy and the technological imperatives of modern industry. As Moeller explained in *Germany’s Third Empire*:

The conservative counter-movement does not seek to re-create, but to link up with, the past. This is the ideal which it sets above all others, even above the monarchical ideal. We do not seek reaction; we do not want a restoration which – apart from all other considerations – would have most disastrous foreign political repercussions [...] The Conservative has no ambition to see the world as a museum; he prefers it as a workshop (2012 [1923], 162, 188).

It is this synthetic, forward-looking dimension that attracts many NR intellectuals to the political theory of the conservative revolution (see, for instance, Mohler 1950; Gottfried 1990; Minkenberg 1997; Lenk, Meuter and Otten 1997; De Benoist 2014; Sunic 1990 [2011], 75–82; O’Meara 2004 [2013], 46–50). While acknowledging the Right’s historic association with the defence of privilege and economic interests against the forces of democracy, the conservative revolutionaries called for a new nationalism that would break with the divisive nationalism forged by the National Liberals under Bismarck by affirming the unity of the *Volksgemeinschaft* against the rigidified class antagonisms of contemporary reality. As Freyer explained in his programmatic treatise, the notion of a ‘revolution from the Right’ rested on the conviction that the working-class movement of the nineteenth century had been irreversibly absorbed into industrial society by the advent of the welfare state. Under these conditions, the only genuine political adversary of industrial society was the *Volk*, precisely because its constituents did not define themselves primarily by their social interests and therefore could not be co-opted by the structural forces of industrialism. Although the class struggle was inevitable in the economic realm, politics and culture had their own dynamics irreducible to economic grievances and aspirations:

The revolution from the right will clear away with the remnants of the nineteenth century where they persist and free the way for the history of the twentieth [...] Those who think in the day-before-yesterday terms of bourgeoisie and proletariat, of class struggle and economic peace, of progress and reaction, who see nothing in the world but problems of distribution and insurance premiums for the have-nots, nothing but opposing interests and a state that mediates among them – they naturally fail to see that since yesterday there has been a regrouping of goals and forces underway (Freyer 1984 [1931], 347).12

---

12 An excellent study of Freyer is Mueller (1988).
For the conservative revolution, the deeper significance of the First World War as a world historical event was that it allowed the release and actualization of energies accumulated for centuries, obliterating existing norms, social orders, empires, and religious institutions to expedite a re-evaluation of all existing values in the name of struggle, force, and strength (Jünger 1993 [1930]). In the face of the machine gun and aerial bombing, all existing barriers between peasants, workers, nobility, bourgeoisie, civilians, and combatants disappeared, along with their respective orders of values. It was also during the Great War that non-white colonial troops appeared for the first time on the European killing fields: ‘for the sake of military efficacy, they were not only allowed to kill white soldiers but were ordered to do so. By participating in the carnage, they achieved an equality that, although precarious, nevertheless contrasted with their usual colonial subjugation’ (Pick 1996, 32). Whereas Lenin, Wilson, and their respective followers sought to recuperate these energies into competing narratives of universalism and progress, the conservative revolutionaries believed they had opened up the possibility for a new, terrifying understanding of history and the human condition in which individuals had become both the primary producers and managers of resources, as well as the prime resource required to carry out a purposeless will to power.

Thus, in the often apparently senseless wastage of these homogenizing forces of war and production, many saw the possibility of developing a new, more stable, and totalizing authoritarian order. The technological revolution was creating the conditions for a new cultural aristocracy that would take control of the decisive intellectual and technical means of production and organization. Signs of these emerging hierarchies could be discerned in the generation of frontline combatants, in the youth, and in the proliferation of social and political movements. These individuals, they argued, had already come to terms with the naivety of subjective individuality, and many in these circles thus called for an intensification rather than a halt to technological development. In this view, it was not because of technics as such that individuals had become instruments of technology, but because moderates had failed to assimilate and master the predatory standpoint of technics. As Schmitt summarily put it: ‘How ultimately this century should be understood will be revealed only when it is known which type of politics is strong enough to master the new technology and which type of new friend-enemy groupings can develop on this new ground’ (Freyer 1930 [1929]; Schmitt 1996, 94–95; Schmitt 2007 [1929]; see also Spengler 2015 [1931], 69; Jünger 2008 [1932], 207).

13 See also Patocka (1975/1999), Bartov (1989), and Ellis (1975) on this theme.
As both intellectual historians and NR intellectuals have pointed out, although the ideological trajectory of the conservative revolution intersected with that of fascism, its attitude towards the state, law, bureaucracy, nationalism, and race differed significantly from Nazi orthodoxy. Yet when Hitler took power in 1933, many of its leading protagonists had little difficulty bridging the gap between the two. This was not just out of career opportunism. For many, National Socialism seemed the only way to salvage communitarian practices and to secure the nation-state as a responsible agent of international stability against the destructive tyranny of a one-world administrative structure in the making. As Heidegger (1993) explained at a rally organized by German university professors in support of Hitler’s plebiscite on merging the posts of Chancellor and President:

It is not ambition, not desire for glory, not blind obstinacy, and not hunger for power that demands from the *Führer* that Germany withdraws from the League of Nations. It is only the clear will to unconditional self-responsibility in suffering and mastering the fate of our people. That is not a turning away from the community of peoples. On the contrary: with this step, our people is submitting to that essential law of human Being to which every people must first give allegiance if it is still to be a people. It is only out of the parallel observance by all peoples of this unconditional demand of self-responsibility that there emerges the possibility of taking each other seriously so that a community can also be affirmed. The will to a true national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] is equally far removed both from an unrestrained, vague desire for world brotherhood and from blind tyranny. Existing beyond this opposition, this will allows peoples and states to stand by one another in an open and manly fashion as self-reliant entities.

Of course, far from extracting Europe from the wasteland of technological nihilism, industrial anomie, or crusading liberalism, Nazi Germany was about to replay the carnage of 1914 with even greater acts of violence and more unimaginable acts of hatred, vengeance, and *ressentiment*, reducing the diplomatic tradition of sovereign statehood nostalgically idealized by Heidegger, Schmitt, and their colleagues to the status of dispensable superstition. The revolution had failed, and by the time the war broke out in 1939, most of the conservative revolutionaries had already abandoned hope that National Socialism might show a path out of the technological nihilism of the age. Although many of them withdrew from public life altogether, others turned their attention to the regional orders and post-national constellations that were already beginning to emerge out of this ‘global civil war’ between fascism, Bolshevism, and liberal internationalism over the normative substance of globalization.
The liberal world order

The NR takes on the mantle of the conservative revolution, while disavowing its fascist associations and developing it in novel contemporary directions. As we will see in the following section, the themes of technological mastery and ‘grounded’ political orders combined into geopolitical blocs remain important aspects of this legacy. Like Heidegger (1959), Schmitt (1962), and other intellectuals of the conservative revolution, those who established the NR as a school of thought in Europe in the late 1960s saw the Cold War as a division of the world between two variants of the same techno-economic and organizational mindset.

Ultimately, however, European New Rightists believed that the American incarnation of this nihilistic civilizational project posed a much greater threat to European sovereignties than the Soviet Union did, if only because it relied on much more insidious and complex mechanisms of control (De Benoist 1979; Faye 1980; Herte 1980; Krebs 1994; O’Meara 2013, 210–220). Although this assessment echoes many aspects of the revolutionary conservative critique of liberalism, it also departs from it in ways that are crucial to understanding much of the NR today. Among the most significant of these is its critique of contemporary liberalism as the triumph of the ‘managerial’ or ‘administrative’ state. This particular line of criticism, in fact, was already anticipated in the political theory of the ‘Old’ American Right, especially in the work of James Burnham (1972) [1941] and Francis Parker Yockey (1962). It has been rearticulated and developed in various guises by Gottfried and Francis in the US since the 1980s, in ways that resonate strongly with the political theory and aims of the European NR.

As we have just discussed, conservatives in the Burkean tradition have long assailed liberalism’s corrosive impact. Liberalism, in this view, has damagingly undermined the substantive values of grounded communities, values that underpinned the meaningful lives of their members, sustained social solidarity, and provided a basis for decisions on accepted legal and moral principles. More radically, critics such as Schmitt argued that the relativism and pluralism of modern liberalism reduced the state to nothing more than a pluralistic arena for competition between diverse individual and social interests, thus undermining any idea of a public or national interest, and leaving the liberal state struggling to establish and defend a stable social order.

The NR endorses many of these views, yet much as it might respect Burke’s conservative philosophy and admire Schmitt’s insights, it argues that previous conservative visions seriously misunderstood the power of the liberal state and the international structures it created. To the NR, this state bears scant resemblance to the weak and embattled governmental power
bemoaned by conservatives (and some liberals). On the contrary, the liberal state exercises subtle, insidious, and even more powerful forms of domination as the result of what Burnham (1972) [1941] influentially characterized as the ‘managerial revolution’ and the rule of a ‘new class’ of expert liberal elites. As Paul Gottfried (1999, xi) puts the case: ‘Unlike the national monarchs in early modern Europe, today’s Western rulers hide rather than flaunt the power they exercise. This, however, does not render their power any less real, though it is not individuals but a class of ‘experts’ who speak out against inequality and monopolize this rule’.

Important parts of today’s NR thus argue that the challenge to conservatism goes beyond the loss of traditional values, solidarity, and authority; and in their eyes, Schmitt was wrong to believe that relativist/pluralist liberalism led inevitably to state entropy or weakness. On the contrary, they argue, having been emptied of positive content embedded in local traditions, concrete institutions, and social values, rights and values in modern liberal democracies are abstract, empty vessels. The meaning of equality and the content of rights is therefore determined by those groups dominating the social and institutional structures empowered to give those rights content. Despite their apparent pluralism, these structures are in fact dominated by a liberal elite that uses the supposed weakness of the state and the competition of value-positions as ideological cover for its power. As Gottfried (1999, xi) puts it, the liberal state ‘is becoming the instrument of a political class marked by a common access to power and a shared vision of change. Seizing opportunities to transform society, this class has used entitlements to gain leverage over citizens. But it also conceals its power and designs by presenting itself as perpetually caught between interest groups’.

For critics like Gottfried, the oft-proclaimed ‘relativism’ or ‘emptiness’ of modern rights (or their ‘pre-political’ nature advanced by figures like Dworkin, or the pragmatism of Dewey and his followers) is not just a deviation from traditional conservative positions that assert the importance of tradition and substantive values. Instead, liberal relativism constitutes a subtle yet pervasive form of power, and intellectuals who promote such an apparently open and pluralistic philosophic systems actually constitute an elite performing an ideological role.

14 This analysis echoes Burnham (1943) and draws explicitly on Lasch (1996).

15 For Gottfried (1988, 73), liberal intellectuals constitute what Mannheim called a ‘utopian’ elite group, espousing a set of beliefs beyond their narrow class interests alone (‘the mass democratic identification of government with social planning and material benefits, and the prevalence of a pluralist worldview’) that in fact reinforces the power of the liberal elite of which they are part.
In this view, a key source of liberal power lies in its control of the dominant cultural and educational institutions of society, a control that reinforces the relativistic values underpinning liberal power while restricting access to (and holding in its own hands) the ‘non-political’ power of the courts, bureaucracies, and elite universities that influence value determinations, shape subjectivities, and decide policy. For the NR, liberal democracy is substantially undemocratic: it exercises power against conservative expressions of popular will that oppose it, blocking the ‘sovereign’ will of the people if it takes non-liberal directions. Seeking relentlessly to undermine such a will by advocating a relativistic pluralism in education and culture that is compatible with its underlying values, the liberal elite all the while masks its power by misleadingly bemoaning the supposed ‘weakness’ of the liberal pluralist state. Yet for those who do not conform to its values, the liberal state has wide-ranging educational and therapeutic experts and institutions tasked with modifying behaviour and modulating dissent, as well as extensive coercive capacities should these strategies fail.

NR thinkers generally concede that this domination is not simply oppressive. The managerial state has succeeded historically in providing degrees of economic performance and prosperity, delivered various forms of ‘entitlements’, and generated forms of liberty and (popular) cultural life that have earned it the acquiescence, if not the love, of the majority of its citizens. In light of these factors, the NR tends to have relatively little faith in traditional conservative strategies of reaction, such as appeals to the erstwhile ‘virtues’ of republican (or nineteenth-century liberal) citizens. As Sam Francis (1992, 19) argues: ‘no one save a few romantic reactionaries’ realistically considers a return to the virtuous individualism of American republicanism:

Not only do technology and its organizational applications entice us with ‘luxury’ – and what we today complacently call a ‘high standard of living’ – but they offer to those who understand how to manipulate them a degree of power unknown to the most imperious despots of the past. The elites that manage modern mass organizations and master the technical skills that allow these organizations to function cannot permit the decentralization and autonomy that characterize republican civic culture simply because their own power would vanish, and these elites are lodged not only in the state but also in the dominant organizations of the economy and culture so that our incomes and our very thoughts, values, tastes, and emotions are conditioned and manipulated by them and their apologists.

The power of this liberal order is not restricted to domestic politics: for the NR it is intrinsically international. Globalization is not simply an economic process – it is the product of the logic of liberal rule and power, of the
interests and the ‘utopia’ underpinning liberal modernity as an epoch. Here, the combination of the rootless cosmopolitanism of liberal elites, the hidden values beneath their pluralist ideology, and the affinities of both with Weberian bureaucratic and legal power, transnational capital, and borderless cultural flows are intrinsic elements of globalization. As Gottfried (1999, 75, 95–96) explains, the phenomenon is inexorably linked to the rise of American power and the consolidation of American hegemony during the course of the twentieth century:

Through much of the second half of this century the United States did not enjoy the widespread approval of intellectuals, nor was it seen as the most promising representative of social planning. Its recent success as a model comes from surviving the downfall of managerial rivals and from using its political and cultural presence to advance its version of popular government [...] A critical moment in the association of pluralism with a global society was reached in the United States in the 1960s. At that time, American politicians and journalists emphatically came to identify their country as a universal nation. They presented the civil rights revolution as a crucible for reforming American identity. A connection emerged between establishing equal political rights for American blacks and breaking down national barriers. The first was thought to mandate the second... The drive toward extending equal citizenship at home and the opening of America’s borders to larger and larger numbers of Third World immigrants became related tendencies....

At this point, again, the analysis of the NR intersects with contemporary international theory at a series of important points. This is clearest in relation to liberal internationalism. As we have just seen, unlike Schmittian conservatives, or Leftist critic who follow his lead, the NR does not see liberalism as weakening the state. Indeed, when it comes to globalization, they would almost undoubtedly agree with those liberals who, responding to charges that they underestimate the power of the state, argue that ‘In fact, national–states are going global and networking with counterparts around the world. These networks of government agencies – financial regulators, even legislators and judges – are creating a web of global governance that is based not in a supranational entity but rather in nation-states themselves’ (Hale and Slaughter 2005).16 The difference is that where Slaughter and her internationalist counterparts see this as a progressive, dialogical process of an expanding, pluralistic, liberal pragmatism, from the perspective of the NR it as a description (as well as an ideology) of the spread of liberal power through New Class networks and ever more subtle mechanisms.

16 The quote expresses the wider analysis in Slaughter (2004).
Indeed, for the NR, the very idea of international human rights developing towards and around purportedly universal principles represents yet another liberal strategy that, under the guise of pluralism and tolerance, effectively forecloses the legitimacy of ‘native’ definitions of values or rights and opposes the right of national publics to effectively and democratically support particularist values. Liberal structures of intellectual and institutional power place such decisions in the hands of elites (Slaughter’s tellingly identified ‘financial regulators, judges, and legislators’) who claim the right, and incessantly seek the ideological and institutional power, to adjudicate such rights and enforce their decisions.

From this perspective, liberal international institutions are the global expression of the managerial state and the interests and values (universalism, egalitarianism) of the New Class, carried out through undemocratic institutions. The processes of international ‘institutionalization’ and ‘juridicalization’ applauded by IR liberals are for the NR illustrations of the power and pathologies of the liberal state and its elites. Such an order seeks to transform the world in exactly the same way as it has liberal states – through elite educational and managerial networks, and by severing the normative basis of international legitimacy from the political principle of national democratic consent. Consider, for instance, Jürgen Habermas’ (2000: 110) claim that: ‘[at the global level] the democratic procedure no longer draws its legitimizing force only, indeed not even predominantly, from political participation and the expression of political will, but rather from the general accessibility of deliberative processes whose structure grounds an expectation of rationally accepted results’. For the NR, there is little doubt what kind of people – which class – and which values will dominate what count as ‘rationally accepted results’, and how this will be determined. They see in such formulations not simply a philosophical argument, but a political power-play.

NR polemics here also converge with a growing body of ‘sovereigntist’ literature in IR and international law, which campaigns against the transformation of international law from a mechanism designed to regulate inter-state relations (a customary law of nations) into a mechanism designed to regulate the relationship between states and their citizens – and between the majority culture and different cultural and ethnic minorities within the states. According to the NR, the economic and social losers in this constitutionalization of world order are those who cannot or will not adopt or adapt to globalist imperatives. These are the economically ‘left

behinds’, those still tied to locality, who experience migration or cultural cosmopolitanism as a threat, as well as the ‘deplorables’ who hold on to tradition, to their inherited communities and prejudices even as they are being eroded by globalization, and who are disparaged as backward and bigoted, dependent and (if they are lucky) in need of ‘re-skilling’ by a liberal elite which is the condescending agent of their increasingly dire economic plight and that dismisses and disparages their feelings of social and cultural dislocation or alienation. This view of globalization’s consequences was powerfully expressed in the American context by Sam Francis (1992, 19), in a passage worth quoting at some length:

These ‘Middle Americans’, largely white and middle class, derive their income from their dependence on the mass structures of the managerial economy, and, because many of them have long since lost their habits of self-reliance, they also are dependent on the services of the government (at least indirectly) and the dominant culture. Yet despite their dependency, the regime does little for them and much to them. They find that their jobs are insecure, their savings stripped of value, their neighborhoods and schools and homes unsafe, their elected leaders indifferent and often crooked, their moral beliefs and religious professions and social codes under perpetual attack even from their own government, their children taught to despise what they believe, their very identity and heritage as a people threatened, and their future – political, economic, cultural, racial, national, and personal – uncertain.

As this statement suggests, for NR intellectuals one of the main consequences of globalizing mechanisms is that older, decentralized identities of particular social classes, communities, and religious and ethnic groups can no longer effectively mobilize populations for collective political action. Echoing familiar Spenglerian themes, they contend that even what was once called ‘the West’ has become a mere ideological abstraction sustained by a conglomerate of Atlanticist managerial interests. This conglomerate is not ‘led’ by inspiring political and cultural figures but only ‘administered’ according to its own expansionist regulatory imperatives (Faye 1981; Sorel 1999; Gottfried 1999; Francis 2016).

NR intellectuals in Europe and North America also assail global military interventions and commitments that threaten to drag their respective political communities into unnecessary wars and ‘policing operations’ in the name of ‘liberal’ values. They have been particularly critical of the Western interventions in the Balkans during the 1990s against Serbian and Croatian nationalism, as well as the subsequent war on terror fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, and beyond (see, e.g., Champetier 1999; Sorel 1999; Sunic 2007; Faye 2011; Gottfried 2012; De Benoist 2013). This is one of the main reasons...
why Donald Trump’s electoral campaign, including his conciliatory attitude towards Russia and its leader, Vladimir Putin, received so much support from the ‘anti-neoconservative’ alt-right in the US (Gottfried 2016).

For Gottfried, Benoist and their NR colleagues and interlocutors, the recent electoral successes of the anti-establishment Right in America and Europe are signs that liberal globalization contains the seeds of its own destruction by creating crises in the social and economic conditions, as well as political legitimacy, of modern states. Liberal governments culturally marginalize or economically disadvantage significant parts of their societies; encourage immigration that intensifies the social dislocation experienced by those groups; and through an elite culture disdainfully alienates the very groups whose traditional patriotism is necessary for fighting ‘the wars its leaders devise’.

The goal of the NR’s analysis of liberal political power and its links to globalization is not just explanatory. Its objective is not simply to provide a political sociology of ‘Middle America’, or European ‘nations’. It seeks to create class, race, or group self-consciousness on the part of the objects of its analysis – to help mobilize the ‘marginalized’ groups it identifies. Narrating the global history of liberal elitism is an essential component of this strategy, as is identifying the transnational ‘New Class’ as a focus for opposition: a Schmittian ‘identifiable enemy’. Here, conservative revolutionary admonitions to reconfigure pre-modern insights into the power of myth play important roles,18 with figures like Francis (1992, 22) arguing that a counter-myth of an essentialized nation is needed to overcome its liberal adversary:

The myth of the managerial regime that America is merely a philosophical proposition about the equality of mankind (and therefore includes all mankind) must be replaced by a new myth of the nation as a historically and culturally unique order that commands loyalty, solidarity, and discipline and excludes those who do not or cannot assimilate to its norms and interests. This is the real meaning of America First.

The future

The NR alternative to conservative nostalgia or liberal domination is a domestic and international order centred around a return to the ‘ethnos’, to what Roger Griffin (2000, 48, quoted in Bassin 2015, 842) has evocatively captured as a ‘basic unit of homogenous cultural energy’ distinct from the

modern nation (and state). As the previous section has shown, for at least parts of the NR opposition to the liberal universalizing/national/managerial state and efforts toward its ‘deconstruction’ are certainly difficult, but they are by no means impossible. The historical dynamics of liberalism may even be opening avenues for success, as the economic and cultural dislocations caused by globalization and resentment against the proliferation of ‘liberal wars’ provide propitious conditions for a conservative counter-movement. But change involves more than simply waiting for the wheel of history to turn; it requires a positive alternative as well. Reactionary fatalism or a traditional conservative narrative of loss and decline are neither necessary nor sufficient. What is required is a new political theory, a vision and narrative beyond the outmoded categories of Left and Right, and a sustained campaign of cultural and political mobilization based upon it.19

In geopolitical terms, this narrative takes a number of novel turns. American paleoconservatives have argued for a decentralized nationalism based on the social power and cultural hegemony of Middle America. This would be achieved through an aggressive process of de-bureaucratization and power devolution, as well as a sharp reversal of the immigration policies associated with the liberalism of East Coast elites and the interests of global capital (Francis 1992, 2016; Gottfried 1995). European New Rightists seek a similar return to literally ‘grounded’ political communities of substantive culture and history (and in some cases – De Benoist – subsidiarist local democracy) as an alternative to liberal modernity and globalism. Here, the legacy of the conservative revolution emerges again, with old ideas of technological elitism and communal solidarity fused in a revolutionary embrace requiring both restraining capitalism and intensively exploiting (and yet controlling) technology20 without rejecting either. Both the myth of an ethnos-based polity, and a technologically liberated elite are at work.

The goal is not to replace the state with some more comprehensive form of the same universal logic but to move beyond it. To remain within a statist logic is to be trapped by outdated ideas and institutions that need to be transcended. That these ideas may sound suspiciously like some advocated on the anti-globalization Left is to NR thinkers like De Benoist another

19 See De Benoist, and particularly his support of Alexander Dugin’s (2012) call for a new ‘fourth political theory’ for the twenty-first century that can supplant the liberal, socialist, and nationalist theories that successively dominated the previous three.

20 As De Benoist puts it, ‘European civilization is not in danger because of technical progress, but because of the egalitarian utopia which seems to be gaining ground nowadays and is proving to be in contradiction with the needs of society – born of, amongst other things, precisely this technological progress’ (1979, 316; quoted in Spektorowski (2003, 120). This position is echoed in the techno-elitism of popular online figures such as Curtis Yarvin (aka Mencius Moldbug), a computer scientist and “neo-reactionary” political theorist; see Gray (2017) for a critical account.
illustration of the need to transcend outdated political dichotomies, accepting environmental and economic positions antithetical to free-market conservatives, while rejecting the Left’s cultural cosmopolitanism.

This reconfigured order would restrict membership in the political community by excluding or even expelling those who do not or will not adopt its way of life. The NR is quick to argue, in some eyes disingenuously, that this does not mean that these Others should be hated or despised; they, too, should have their own polities, that should be equally valued in their own ways. The NR thus claims to be identitarian, but not necessarily racist (the NR’s position on race in fact varies a great deal depending on authors and factions). Nor, they assert, is it a return to the fascist glorification of the state. Identity, Benoist claims to follow Martin Buber, is ‘dialogical’. The NR should therefore oppose cultural and economic globalization nationally as well as locally, supporting counter-globalization efforts globally while rejecting Leftist attempts to do so in the name of some abstract ‘humanity’.

These themes are frequently connected to yet another idea that the NR seeks to redeem historically – that of empire. In this view, smaller ‘ethno’-political units could form a wider regional order that is not simply an extension or enlargement of the modern state or an interest-maximizing structure, which the NR equates with the quintessentially managerial-liberal EU. Instead, they suggest it would be possible to construct neo-regional orders among ‘grounded’ ethno-polities sharing broadly similar cultural foundations. Empire in this narrative is not oppression and domination: it is a form of autonomy and subsidiarity – a possibility for intra-order pluralism impossible within the universalizing logic of the modern state but capable of sustaining itself on different principles. De Benoist’s (1994 [1993], 84) version of these arguments draws specifically on Julius Evola’s (1934) Revolt Against the Modern World: ‘What distinguishes the empire from the nation? First of all, the fact that the empire is not primarily a territory but essentially an idea or a principle. The political order is determined by it — not by material factors or by possession of a geographical area. It is determined by a spiritual or juridical idea’.

Despite some affinities with his views, this is not necessarily ‘the West’ as portrayed by Samuel Huntington. As we have seen, for many NR thinkers ‘the West’ as a civilizational entity now scarcely exists. Moreover, some European NR thinkers even insist that contemporary America should not be seen as part of the natural order of ‘Eurasia’, and that Russia quite

21 As Spektorowski (2003, 2003) puts it, ‘the concept of differentialist ethno-pluralism…sets the basis for a right-wing theory of multiculturalism pitted against liberal multiculturalism’.
possibly should be. This is a key element in the ‘Eurasianist’ view of the future advocated by Russian conservatives like Alexander Dugin, and provides another bridge between NR thinkers IR scholarship via geopolitics. DeBenoist, for instance, argues that: ‘It seems to me that we have to take very seriously the notion of “Eurasia” which, far from being only Dugin’s property, links up directly to the theories of the main geopoliticians since the time of Rudolph Kjellen, Alfred Mahan, Nicholas Spykman, and Halford Mackinder’. Commenting on Dugin, he continues: ‘What is interesting is that he adds to this general perception the idea of the Empire as opposed to the Western idea of the nation-states. This has prompted him to stress that Empire is always a multicultural space, and thus he takes a firm stand against all forms of racism and xenophobia’ (quoted in Versluis 2014, 84, 85).

For Dugin, this conservative traditionalism (as opposed to traditional conservatism) can provide a binding force, a shared commitment linking Europe, Russia, and stretching variably even to the Middle East, particularly Iran. Indeed, in Dugin’s view, the diversity of the NR is the source of its potential strength, providing the basis for multiple conservative forces to make common cause against their defining liberal adversary. As he puts it in a statement worth extended attention:

Another question is the structure of a possible anti-globalist and anti-imperialist front and its participants. I think we should include in it all forces that struggle against the West, the United States, against liberal democracy, and against modernity and post-modernity. The common enemy is the necessary instance for all kinds of political alliances. This means Muslims and Christians, Russians and Chinese, both Leftists and Rightists, the Hindus and Jews who challenge the present state of affairs, globalization and American imperialism. They are thus all virtually friends and allies...That is the basis for a new alliance. All who share a negative analysis of globalization, Westernization and postmodernization should coordinate their effort in the creation of a new strategy of resistance to the omnipresent evil. And we can find common allies even within the United States as well, among those who choose the path of Tradition over the present decadence (Dugin 2012, 194; quoted in Hawley 2016, 237).

In this mixture of geopolitical narratives, old ideas of Eurasia, Russian imperial space, European mitteleuropa, and wider affinities between

---

22 Dugin’s ideas derive in part from the influence of the Soviet historian Lev Gumilev, though Gumilev would have been unlikely to share his protégé’s enthusiasm for Europe; for Gumilev’s connections to and divergence from today’s NR, see Bassin 2016, and for claims about the influence of Gumilev’s ideas on Putin, see Clover (2016).

23 For an analysis of traditionalism, see Sedgwick (2009).
‘Traditional’ groups and states of many different kinds, are reconfigured within a new global narrative in opposition to and often excluding (though, they are careful to stress, not necessarily in conflict with) America (see also Sunic 2007; O’Meara 2013 [2004], 176–209). The terms and premises of these debates in the US are different; yet here too, nativist and biological visions of nation, race, and culture exist in the context of shared criticisms of global liberalism. The NR’s decision to rally behind a ruthless capitalist entrepreneur like Donald Trump during the 2016 electoral campaign, for instance, can be understood against a similar set of dilemmas and considerations over immigration, global capitalism and America’s European heritage (Gottfried 2017, 267).

Conclusion

The NR is often presented as the resurgence of an ill-defined populism, or as evidence that today the Right has ‘lost its mind’. There is ample evidence to support both views, and the splenetic outbursts of NR advocates across multimedia networks often recall the ‘know nothing’ politics of decades past – or worse. Yet such assessments risk underestimating the depth of the challenge represented by the NR. The NR is also marked by a self-conscious intellectual vanguard with roots in some of the most sophisticated trajectories in modern political thought. These ideas are part of a cultural and political project that, while diverse, has significant transnational linkages and affinities, and has questions of international politics at the heart of many of its most important elements.

Arguably, the NR’s most significant challenge to our thinking in contemporary IR does not lie in the specifics of its policy positions, but rather in the ways in which it seeks to reconfigure political life as an all-consuming conflict between those who wish to deepen the infrastructures that grew out of the geopolitical transformations of the twentieth century, and those who wish to dismantle these infrastructures to the profit of nativist and neotraditionalist alternatives. For what is at stake in this politics is not only the substantive gains achieved since the 1950s on questions of race, gender, human rights, and welfare, but also the discursive field within which conventional conceptions of Left and Right are being disarticulated and rear-ticulated into new relationships of friendship and enmity over the meaning and future of the nation-state, globalization and ‘the West’. As former Trump-advisor Steve Bannon (2018) explained to his Italian audience during a recent tour of Europe:

There will always be ideas, parties and politicians of the Left and the Right, but these categories are beginning to lose their meaning. “Left
against Right” is simply a means to divide communities within themselves. The real struggle in the future will be one between the privileged and the dispossessed; between peoples and political classes; between nationalists and globalists; between those who hold traditional values and those who dismiss those values as garbage [...] Our system of global government was instituted after the Second World War on the basis of certain rules, and imposed through a mixture of central planning, political apathy and lack of trust in the working class. Their rights were progressively wiped away because technocrats believed that there were no other options – alternative possibilities were not seriously considered. Now, this is all changing.

The NR’s agenda is a direct challenge to the post-political, ‘beyond left and right’ narrative adorning the Clinton–Blair globalization discourses of the 1990s. Politically, this campaign is channelled through various efforts to shift the terrain upon which discursive processes of threat definition and securitization take place by extricating domains of insecurity from expert knowledge and complex linkages between policy issues and competition between professional bureaucratic agencies. As with the conservative revolution and many other reactions against globalization since the nineteenth century, the strategy hinges on an essentialist interpretation of culture as being either ‘lost’ or ‘under threat’, and which ultimately sustains the conclusion that the eradication of another ‘incompatible’ or ‘hostile’ culture from a given territory is imperative for the survival of one’s own. By stirring anxiety and mobilizing stigmas over foreign competition, unemployment, welfare, and immigration, the NR seeks to force mainstream political parties to revise their traditional positions to prevent an exodus of voters from the centre-right. As one observer puts it: ‘While political parties have generally been viewed as a vehicle for the organized representation of popular interests, the radical right has reversed this relationship. To some extent the radical right attempts to create popular interests that provide a basis for party organization’ (Hale Williams 2006, 4).

As we stated in the introduction, our aim in this article has not been to offer a comprehensive critique of these processes, but to prepare the ground for a more effective encounter with the theory and practice of the radical conservative tradition in politics and IR. However, no overview would be sufficient without pointing to a number of clear evasions and weaknesses in the NR’s ideas. Most obviously, one cannot help but be sceptical about the supposedly pacific ‘differentalist multiculturalism’ advocated figures like de Benoist. In both domestic and international terms, the rosy picture of the creation and consequences of a world of ethno-homogenous polities seems fanciful at best, and a recipe for conflict and domination at worst.
This was, in fact, precisely how the prognoses of the conservative revolution struck early ‘classical realists’ such as John Herz and Hans Morgenthau, who sought to construct post-war liberal realism as a viable alternative to the mytho-theological politics of enmity advocated by Schmitt, Spengler and their fellow travellers during the 1920s and 1930s.

Even more telling are difficulties in the transformative political practices the NR seeks to underwrite. As we have seen, NR thinkers do not believe that a revival of traditional conservative values and politics represents a viable political strategy, at least in advanced industrial societies such as the US and western Europe where the corrosive effects of modernity have gone beyond a point of redemption. In response, some put their faith in the persistence of regional identities and solidarity, others in less-modernized countries where tradition remains a more viable alternative. But for those who deny the viability or the desirability of these options, the prognosis is bleak – and the implications much more radical, and troubling.

Few figures capture this trajectory more clearly than the influential American ‘paleoconservative’ Sam Francis. As we saw previously, Francis’ description of the ‘left behinds’ of ‘middle America’ provides a powerful rendition of the NR’s view of the dislocations generated by global liberal managerialism. And he sees in this social strata a latent potential to be tapped by NR political movements. However, Francis (1992, 20) refuses to be romantic about this class of ‘Middle American radicals’. On the contrary, he provides a scathing account of Americans’ loss of social virtue and political agency with few equals:

Today, virtually everyone in the United States is habituated to a style of living that is wrapped up in dependency on mass organizations of one kind or another—supermarkets, hospitals, insurance companies, the bureaucratized police, local government, the mass media, the factories and office buildings where we work, the apartment complexes and suburban communities where we live, and the massive, remote, and mysterious national state that supervises almost every detail of our lives. Most Americans cannot even imagine life without such dependencies and would not want to live without them if they could imagine it. The classical republicans were right. Having become dependent on others for our livelihoods, our protection, our entertainment, and even our thoughts and tastes, we are corrupted. We neither want a republic nor could we keep it if we had one. We do not deserve to have one, and like the barbarians conquered and enslaved by the Greeks and Romans, we are suited only for servitude.24

24 Gottfried appears less willing to ascribe to such an alternative, claiming instead that the best the NR can hope for in America is to ‘throw a monkey wrench into the system’ – a view that resonates with Bannon’s desire to ‘tear down’ the liberal system whatever may follow.
How, then, is the NR to move from degradation to revolution? For Francis, the only viable route may well lie in a form of ‘hard managerialism’ – an ethno-culturally and even racially defined strong state reminiscent of some members of the conservative revolution. Here, despite their protestations to the contrary, the spectre of fascism again rears its head, and the ‘new’ Right begins to look troublingly like the worst of the old.

Criticisms like these could surely be multiplied at length. But weakness in prognosis by no means damns the NR’s ideological project to political irrelevance. It is thus vital that its claims are fully understood, and its strategies accurately recognized, if it is to be countered. Refusing to do so on the grounds that the NR is morally or politically reprehensible reflects an optimism that it will somehow fade away. Neither history nor a number of worrying trends in contemporary politics provide much assurance that such hopes are justified.

The NR is strikingly at odds with the views that dominate the conventional political and intellectual landscape, including the field of IR and international legal theory. For many years, advocates of historical community and ethnic ties against the supporters of globalization, human rights regimes and cosmopolitan identity discourses have been effectively pushed to the margins of political and intellectual debates in Europe and North America. But this isolation can no longer be taken for granted. Whatever we make of the dissident politics of the NR, the ideas of its leading intellectuals now require sustained critical engagement. It is an engagement likely to become ever more urgent in years to come.

Acknowledgements

Jean-François Drolet would like to thank the Danish Institute for International Studies and the Velux Foundation for helping to fund part of this research. Michael Williams would like to thank the Social Sciences Research Council of Canada (grant number 147311) and the United States Studies Center at the University of Sydney for support for this research. For insightful comments on the argument, we are grateful to Rita Abrahamsen, James Dunkerley, Andrew Hurrell, Kim Hutchings, John Ikenberry, Ray Kiely, Rick Saull, Karoline Postel Vinay, and David Williams.

References


