

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The European Intellectual Origins of the Alt-Right\*

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### Abstract

This article places the intellectual inspirations behind the white nationalism of the Alt-Right in a Transatlantic context. It does so by first focusing on the late 1960s and the rise of New Right Movements throughout Europe that sprang up as a response to the New Left, which involved a hatred of liberal internationalism and multiculturalism, a thorough critique of global capitalism, and, in one way or another, promoted an identitarian form of race-based politics. The pivotal New Right figure here is Alain de Benoist whose key ideas this paper will summarize. The paper then shows how Benoist's thought made its way into United States by the 1990s. I will conclude by unpacking a strange argument that it was in fact cultural Marxists, and specifically European émigré thinkers fleeing the Nazis, who provided a model for how the alt-Right could pursue a cultural revolution that would overthrow liberal understandings of race and identity

### Keywords

European • Intellectual origins • Alt-right • Radical thought • Civilization

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## Introduction

On September 27, 2018, Robert Bowers, a 46-year-old man, opened fire on a Pittsburgh synagogue and killed 11 people. In the runup to the shooting Bowers regularly posted anti-Semitic remarks on Gab, a social media website of the Far Right (Amend, 2018). Before he went on his murder spree, Bowers last post stated, “HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered” (Amend, 2018). Reports on Bowers’s Gab account have found that his attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, which supported HIAS, an institution that welcomes the poor and the homeless, and provides aid to immigrants and refugees, was motivated by an anti-Semitic conspiracy called “white genocide.” According to one recent report conducted after the killings,

White genocide holds that forces — principally Jewish, often coded as “globalist” — are pursuing policies seeking to destroy the “white race” in their “traditional homelands” like Europe and the United States through the deliberate importation of non-white people. This is what the torch-bearing white supremacists who marched on the campus of the University of Virginia meant when they chanted “Jews will not replace us (Amend, 2018).

The idea that Jews are trying to destroy the “white race” through immigration is the very same idea that was shouted from the mouths of neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 as they chanted, “Jews will not replace us” (Williams, 2017). As blatantly racist as all this is, there is one thing that stands out about the last line of Robert Bowers final post on Gab: “Screw your optics, I’m going in”. The meaning of “optics” here, according to the same report cited above, involves a strategy within the Alt-Right community as to how to best pursue their mission to save white civilization given the blunders of the Neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville. As the same report cited above explains:

[Bowers] reference to optics — meaning how best to market the white nationalist message to gain recruits and ultimately political power — reflects a familiarity with the current debate within the movement, which is accessible to anyone on Gab. “The optics debate” was a defining argument within alt-right circles, both online and off, as leaders and groups cracked under the pressure of public scrutiny and legal trouble following the deadly Unite the Right riot in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 (Amend, 2018).

One way the Alt-Right has gone about this is to instead promote the notion that western civilization is experiencing a crisis of cultural and political identity, a claim which they believe can bypass charges of racism or anti-Semitism, even though these two things are, in fact, the essential concern. Bowers disagreed with this “optics” strategy, since his fear of the migrant caravan convinced him that the country was on the verge of being invaded, and, as such, action had to be taken immediately (Sommerlad, 2018). But what are the origins of how the Alt-Right came to the realization that they could effectively use the discourse of civilization as a code word for white identarian politics, and, as such, slip their racism in through the back door?

The best place to look for answers is at the thought leaders of the Alt-Right who are most responsible for promoting the idea that their civilization is under attack. A growing number of rightwing intellectuals, from Richard Spencer in the United States, to Alexander Dugin in Russia, have acknowledged the significant influence the so-called, French Nouvelle Droite, has played in influencing their thinking about collective identities and cultural hegemony (Buet & Feder, 2017; Dugin, 2012). The French New Right emerged in the late 1960s, and is often seen as a “rightwing”, “fascist” or “racist” reaction to the student and workers protest movement of May 1968 (Bar-On, 2011). It reached its pinnacle of influence during the late 1970s in France, at the very moment Marxism intellectually waned there and the world stood on the precipice of a neoliberal revolution.

Although the French New Right’s status diminished in France during the 1980s, some of the movements key ideas made inroads outside of the country through various academic journals and think tanks starting in the 1990s. Those today claiming to be influenced by it, such as Spencer, Dugin, etc., were exposed to French New Right thinking about collective identity, cultural hegemony, etc., in this specific context. Scholars and journalists, in search for the intellectual origins of Trumpism, Bannonism, the so called, “dark web”, and more generally the alt-Right, are just beginning to turn their attention to the influence the French New Right has had on the other side of the Atlantic and beyond (Williams, 2017).

A major aim of this article is to place the intellectual inspirations behind the white nationalism of the Alt-Right in a Transatlantic context. By making this move the article does not at all deny the deep homegrown roots of American racist thought. Nor will the article make arguments like the historians Timothy Snyder or Richard Steigmann-Gall which traces Trumpism back to European fascist movements of the 1930s (Steigmann-Gall, 2017; Snyder, 2017). Instead the paper takes a different tack by first focusing on the late 1960s and the rise of New Right Movements throughout Europe that sprang up as a response to the New Left, which involved a hatred of liberal internationalism and multiculturalism, a thorough critique of global capitalism, and, in one way or another, promoted an identitarian form of race-based politics. There is no doubt that the New Right movement that I will describe has been influenced by a reactionary canon of thinkers associated with interwar thought, such as with the writings of Carl Schmitt, Ernst Junger, Julius Evola and others (Gilbert, 2018; Müller, 2003; Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2014). But this paper will focus less on these thinkers, and more on one from France who is still alive, and whose thought has provided major ideological inspiration for the so-called Alt-Right, namely: Alain de Benoist.

It then discusses why so called Russian traditionalism has proven to be such an influential model for certain nationalist thinkers like Steve Bannon. Here I will

discuss the so called Eurasian traditionalism of Dugin, who fits squarely into the trajectory of the New Right movements of 1960s and is specifically influenced by Benoist. I then will show how some of these ideas made their way into the United States in the 1990s. I will conclude by unpacking a strange argument that it was in fact cultural Marxists, and specifically European émigré thinkers fleeing the Nazis, who provided a model for how the alt-Right could pursue a cultural revolution that would overthrow liberal understandings of race and identity.

### French New Right

A significant argument can be made that a major source of intellectual inspiration for the Alt-Right comes from France. At the *Counter-Current* publishing website, which describes itself as the home of the North American New Right, Greg Johnson, one of the leading Alt-Right thinkers, has proclaimed: “We do not have any thinkers of the caliber of Alain de Benoist, Guillaume Faye, and many others. We are deeply indebted to the decades of work they have done” (Johnson 2012). A similar sentiment can be found at the publishing house Arktos, which since it was founded in 2009, has become by far biggest publisher of traditionalist, nationalist, identitarian and, overall, alt-right literature in the world. According to its founder, Daniel Friberg, Arktos first task “was to acquire the rights to the most important books by Guillaume Faye and Alain de Benoist right from the start, effectively monopolizing the most important New Right works shortly after founding the company” (Friberg, 2017).

Who is Alain de Benoist and why is his work viewed as crucial to American Alt-Right thought?<sup>1</sup> To begin with, scholars are most familiar with seeing May 1968 in France through the prism of a student protest and workers movement, and more generally the emergence of the New Left. But one can also view it as giving birth to a reactionary New Right. As a consequence of the May Events, a group of young extreme right-wing journalists, philosophers and intellectuals, marked by lingering sympathies for pro-Nazi Vichy and French Algeria, came together to establish a research group called, the Research and Study Group for European Civilization (Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne, also known as G.R.E.C.E), which, in effect, became the think tank of the French New Right.

Its leader was 25-year-old Alain de Benoit, a public commentator and philosopher, who had a talent for social networking. Benoit believed that May 68 revealed something fundamental about how the Right could regain power in a country now dominated by the liberal-Left (hence the reason for why some on the Left today claim that the Right the Right is using and corrupting its political tactics). What the May events for him revealed is that the Right should pursue a plan of action

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1 For the purposes of this article I have limited this section to an explanation only of de Benoist thought. For that of Guillaume Faye see the excellent essay by Williams (2017).

neither through a political party nor through terrorism. Instead May 1968 was a success, he argued, because liberal and leftist elites were able to capture the levers of cultural power in civil society. Tamir Bar-On, one of the few scholars who has written considerably about the French New Right in English, says about Benoit's views: "‘cultural hegemony’, in civil society, namely control of dominant values, attitudes, and ways of seeing and being, promised long-term, durable power. Capture the hearts and minds of the masses, as well as of key elites, and liberal democracy would fall, reasoned Benoit" (Bar-On, 2011, p. 204).

This constitutes the supposed Gramscian bases of Benoit's thought, which has proven to be so influential for the Alt-Right, specifically in its attempt to challenge the mainstream by establishing an alternative form of cultural and political hegemony (Williams 2017). And what made the *Nouvelle Droite* "new", in this regard, concerned its attempt to jettison the obsolete language associated with 1930s fascist movements in the hope of making right-wing politics respectable again. To avoid charges of racism or fascism, Benoit by the 1980s started to argue that no culture or civilization was superior to any other. In other words, as Bar-On observes,

Benoit reinterpreted the 'right to difference' in a transnational or pan-national European framework in order to promote a 'multiculturalism of the right', aimed at publicly recognizing differences in order to preserve the 'authentic' regions of Europe against the onslaught of non-European immigrants (Bar-On, 2011, p. 208).

Notice the move away from a race-based nation-state approach to a European civilizational model justified by appealing to the uniqueness of European culture. It is very easy to go from here to something like Renaud Camus's 2012 book *La Grande remplacement*, which sees Europe on the verge of becoming Euro-Arabia. "The idea", Camus, who is admired around the world by the global Alt-Right, says "is very simple":

You have one people, and in the space of a generation you have a different people. Individuals, yes, can join a people, integrate with it, assimilate to it. . . . But peoples, civilizations, religions—and especially when these religions are themselves civilizations, types of society, almost States—cannot and cannot even want to . . . blend into other peoples, other civilizations (as cited in Williams, 2017).

And this is exactly the move that the Front Nationale under Marine Le Pen regularly makes when justifying its anti-immigration policies. We are not racist, so the argument goes, but want to preserve our French cultural values (Ravid, 2017). It is the same type of argument Richard Spencer and Greg Johnson make when marching to defend the white race against immigrants and the homogenizing liberal values they say threaten it (Johnson, 2017; McEvers & Spencer, 2016).

As an intellectual movement, the French New Right reached its peak in the late 1970s as a consequence of Benoit being invited to write columns for *Le Figaro Magazine* and

also due to the publication of his major tome in 1978, *Vu de Droite*, which won France's highest literary prize from the Académie française. That Benoit was awarded such a prize led to public outcry and specifically charges that fascist thought was experiencing a revival in France (Bar-On, 2015). Roughly a decade later the Nouvelle Droite had been entirely discredited as a fascist outfit in France, although there are signs that some of its main thinkers are returning to the spotlight there.<sup>2</sup>

Leaving this aside, at the very time that Benoit's influence was declining in France it was achieving success outside of it. His ideas began to be circulated in the United States in the 1990s via *Telos*, a journal founded in the late 1960s, which during its early run touted a social democratic bent.<sup>3</sup> After the demise of the Soviet Union, the journal allowed a new group of writers to publish in its pages that shared *Telos*'s antipathy towards liberalism. In doing so the journal opened the door to New Right thinking, which provided Benoit with a platform for disseminating his ideas in the United States (Benoist, 1992, 1998, 2004) It was at this same time that *Telos* went out of its way to promote the writing of Carl Schmitt in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in a recent article titled, "From New Class Critique to White Nationalism: *Telos*, the Alt Right, and the Origins of Trumpism" Joseph Lowndes, a political scientist at the University of Oregon, has made the argument that *Telos* brought the French New Right and the fledging Alt-right in contact, for shaping the latter's regionalism, anti-immigration, and, most of all, ethnonationalistic viewpoints (Lowndes, 2017). And as Dana Kennedy's recent *Daily Beast* article has pointed out: "references to Benoit pop up regularly in the alt-right and pro-Donald Trump forums on *Reddit* and *Achan*" (Kennedy, 2016) and Richard Spencer regularly acknowledges the influence Benoit has had on his thought. In this sense Benoit's work has come to act as a medium between 'two rights' and thus embodies what Andrea Mammone has described as a transnational cross-fertilization of ideological and political transfer and networks between different neo-fascist groups: "neo-fascism acts as a transnational phenomenon with a commonality of behavior and an analogous political philosophy and discourse" (Mammone, 2008, p. 2014).

### **Russian Traditionalism**

Evan despite Steve Bannon being removed from the Trump administration, there remains a curiosity for many concerning the rather strange ideas informing

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2 Some of the intellectual descendants of Raymond Aron appear to have recently entered into a conversation with Benoit. See, for instance: Hamburger, J., & Steinmetz-Jenkins, D. (2018). 1968-2018: Vie et mort du néoconservatisme. *Libération*. Retrieved from [http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/04/26/1968-2018-vie-et-mortdu-neoconservatisme\\_1646114](http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/04/26/1968-2018-vie-et-mortdu-neoconservatisme_1646114)

3 The website of the journal can be found here: <http://journal.telospress.com>

4 See in particular, the special issue of *Telos* entirely devoted to him: Carl Schmitt: "Enemy or Foe," *Telos* No. 22 (Summer 1987).

his political outlook. Perhaps he is nothing more than an eclectic reader versed in various schools of reactionary thought. But one talk that he gave before a group at the Vatican in 2014 does show him to be very much up to speed on the intellectual trends of Alt-Right thought (Bannon, 2016). There are good reasons to think that this talk is connected to French New Right thought. Bannon in his Vatican talk suggests that in some sense Russia, and specifically what he describes as the Russian traditionalism of Putin, provides a model for how to oppose the secular, liberal culture of the decadent West. In his telling, the greatest mistake the baby boomers made was to reject the traditional “Judeo-Christian” values of their parents. He considers this a historical crime, because it was Judeo-Christian values that enabled Western Europe and the United States to defeat European fascism, and, subsequently, to create an “enlightened capitalism” that made America great for decades after World War II (Bannon, 2016).

Bannon insists that without Judeo-Christianity, the culture war cannot be won, enlightened capitalism cannot function, and “Islamic fascism” cannot be defeated. Here is where Bannon invokes the “Russian traditionalism” of Putin. But it is important to recognize the reasons for why he does so. Bannon’s Vatican talk makes it clear that Putin is “playing very strongly to US social conservatives concerning his message about more traditional values” (Bannon, 2016). As a recent *Atlantic* essay convincingly argues, upon his return to office in 2012, Putin realized that “large patches of the West despised feminism and the gay-rights movement” (Foer, 2017). Seizing the opportunity, he transformed himself into the “New World Leader of Conservatism” whose traditionalism would offer an alternative to the libertine and decadent West that had long shunned him.

Bannon seems to underestimate the complexity of Putin’s engagement with the West and yet at the same time he is aware of the significant incommensurability between Judeo-Christian traditionalism and Russian traditionalism. Bannon’s Vatican talk, for instance, points out the differences between Judeo-Christian traditionalism and the traditionalism of Alexander Dugin, who he credits as being the intellectual mastermind of the traditionalist movement in Russia (Bannon, 2016). Dugin is often viewed as one of the most important proponents of Russian expansionism, ultra-nationalism and Eurasianism: a European-Asian alliance against the neoliberal United States. Dugin is close to the National Bolshevik Party and Eurasia Movement, which is said to have inspired the traditionalism of Putin (Clover, 2016). Interestingly, Alain de Benoist and Dugin entered contact in the early 1990s, which led Dugin to create a Russian New Right journal modeled on that of the French New Right’s publications (Umland, 2010). Here we see one major difference between someone like Bannon and elements of the European New Right. Christianity and capitalism are seen positively by him, whereas many French New Right thinkers have proved hostile to Christianity in favor of paganism.

### Cultural Marxism and Revolution

If the Alt-Right believes that its political agenda demands capturing the levers of cultural power in civil society, how do they go about explaining how American liberals managed to do the same thing for so long? Strangely Anders Breivik, the mastermind behind the atrocious 2011 terrorist attacks in Oslo, offers an answer that is now supported by several Alt-Right thinkers. In his massive 1500-page English language track, Breivik oddly provides a review of the historian Martin Jay's famous book, "The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School." He makes the following judgement about the book:

Just what is "Political Correctness?" Political Correctness is in fact cultural Marxism (Cultural Communism) – Marxism translated from economic into cultural terms. The effort to translate Marxism from economics into culture did not begin with the student rebellion of the 1960s. It goes back at least to the 1920s and the writings of the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci. In 1923, in Germany, a group of Marxists founded an institute devoted to making the transition, the Institute of Social Research (later known as the Frankfurt School). One of its founders, Georg Lukács, stated its purpose as answering the question, "Who shall save us from Western Civilization?" The Frankfurt School gained profound influence in European and American universities after many of its leading lights fled and spread all over Europe and even to the United States in the 1930s to escape National Socialism in Germany. In Western Europe, it gained influence in universities from 1945 (Breivik, 2011).

Breivik is drawing on a line of thought that seems very similar to the Gramscianism of the French New Right. Since Marxists failed to win either through the ballot box or through revolution, they must take their fight to the level of cultural to influence the latter two. Breivik is seemingly relying on the arguments of Lyndon Larouche and William Lind who have done more than anyone else to promote the idea of "cultural Marxism," a conspiracy theory concerning the origins of political correctness, which Lind alleges was launched, nearly a century ago by Jewish Marxist intellectuals from the "Frankfurt School" (Lind, 2004).

According to a recent *Vice* article by Scott Oliver titled, "Unwrapping the 'Cultural Marxism' Nonsense the Alt-Right Loves" this conspiracy theory has been warmly received by the Alt-Right, and quite naturally dovetails with it project of a cultural revolution. "It has been rolled out everywhere from the *Daily Mail* (whose editor accuses the BBC of cultural Marxism) to the neo-Nazi Daily Stormer, from Milo fans to meninists, becoming a staple of permanently livid YouTube ranters" (Oliver, 2017). For his part Martin Jay has had to constantly defend his book from conspiracy theorists and alt-right enthusiasts who see it as a manual for the intellectual origins of PC culture (Jay, 2010). There is a new book by Robert Zwarg, which makes clear that the idea of cultural Marxism was indeed promoted by Frankfurt School devotees in the 1970's (Zwarg, 2017). But whether they had any real influence on the dissemination of political correctness would be difficult to determine, and moreover



what they advocated was very different from the mishmash of offenses imagined by the purveyors of the new scapegoating ideology.

The bottom line is that the whole affair speaks to the Alt-Right's willingness to draw from Leftist thought for the purpose of a cultural right-wing revolution. Their goal is to seize the cultural apparatus of society and to proclaim liberalism, feminism, etc., to be nothing more than fake news produced by Davos elites who do not represent real Americans. In turn, they hope to form a new civilization by way of establishing a form of cultural and social hegemony, whatever this might entail.

### **Conclusion: Trump and the Discourse of Western Civilization: Is it Alt-Right?**

On July 6, 2017, Donald Trump delivered a speech in Warsaw in which he proclaimed that Western Civilization was under attack. "The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive... Do we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost? Do we have enough respect for our citizens to protect our borders? Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it? (Trump, 2017) In his talk Trump referred 10 times to "the West" and five times to "our civilization". Many commentators, such as Sarah Wildman of *Vox* and Peter Beinart of *The Atlantic*, believed that this was a dog-whistle speech for the Far Right, especially since it was given in Poland, a country whose government is being accused by certain UN rights experts of disseminating the "myth" of a "homogenous" Polish culture (Beinart, 2018; Wildman, 2018; UN News).

Some commentators resisted this accusation. *Washington Post* columnist Marc A. Thiessen suggested that the speech had nothing to do with the Alt-Right and that many US presidents, such as Henry Truman, John F Kennedy and Bill Clinton also appealed to Western Civilization in a manner like Trump (Thiessen, 2017). What was this manner? The form of "Western civilization" Trump referenced, argued Thiessen, "is founded on ideas that transcend race and religion... "Western" values are universal values" (Thiessen, 2017). By this, Thiessen claims, Trump means human rights, democracy, and the values of the Enlightenment.

Even if we grant that a version of Western civilization can be appealed to that promotes these ideas, Thiessen's argument not only ignores the myriad examples to the contrary, but also the glaring facts about the person who wrote Trump's speech. Its author is Trump's senior advisor Stephen Miller who is the architect of the travel ban and the controversial policy of separating migrant families. Miller has ties to the Alt-Right (Hildreth, 2018). He and Richard Spencer were both students at Duke University in the mid-2000s, and according to Spencer he became a mentor to Miller (Cohen, 2017). As Spencer put it in an interview,

I knew [Miller] very well when I was at Duke. But I am kind of glad no one's talked about this, because I don't want to harm Trump, But I do think that Stephen probably would've ended up exactly more or less where he is today whether he had met me or not. He is his own man . . . He is a strong American nationalist, you could say. Certainly not a white nationalist, but he is an American nationalist and a civic nationalist or a public nationalist . . . He was going on Fox News even as an undergraduate—really remarkable (as cited in Cohen, 2017).

During Trump's Presidential campaign Miller was forced to deal with his relationship with Spencer, which he quickly disavowed despite significant evidence to the contrary (Harkinson, 2016). All of this is to say that the Alt-Right racial origins of today's crisis of civilization discourse has potentially influenced a leading senior advisor of the Trump administration, who is promoting a hardline form of nationalism. For some this nationalism signifies mere American or civic nationalism, but for others it is code or "optics" for western civilization being under attack by non-white invaders. When this latter group hears the discourse of civilization, they very well be influenced by a strain of reactionary thought that has deep intellectual origins in France.

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