

The Extreme Right (still) Lacks the Education for Using Critical Theory

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We are here in a Masters program called Critical Studies, which is in an obvious lineage of Critical Theory. The word “critical theory” was coined by Max Horkheimer in 1937 during the Frankfurt School’s American exile as a code word for Marxism - but at the same time, as a new form of Marxism that broke with dogmatic historical materialism. In other words: a “cultural marxism”, in the sense of a revision of classical notions of base and superstructure.

- Horkheimer’s analysis from 1937 seems surprisingly up-to-date, btw.:

Der Begriff der Abhängigkeit des Kulturellen vom Ökonomischen hat sich daher verändert. Er ist mit der Vernichtung des typischen Individuums gleichsam vulgärmaterialistischer zu verstehen als früher. Die Erklärungen sozialer Phänomene werden einfacher und zugleich komplizierter. Einfacher, weil das Ökonomische unmittelbarer und bewusster die Menschen bestimmt und die relative Widerstandskraft und Substantialität der Kultursphären im Schwinden begriffen ist, komplizierter, weil die entfesselte ökonomische Dynamik, zu deren bloßen Medien die meisten Individuen erniedrigt sind, in raschem Tempo immer neue Gestalten und Verhängnisse zeitigt. Selbst fortgeschrittene Teile der Gesellschaft werden entmutigt, von der allgemeinen Ratlosigkeit ergriffen.

And so we are in the center of contemporary extreme right discourse and the war against “cultural marxism” or “postmodern neo-marxism” waged by the likes of Jordan Peterson and Thierry Baudet.

The Frankfurt School and Adorno are the particular target of Baudet. He sees them as part of a modernist conspiracy against classical European heritage, including classical music, figurative painting and pre-modern architecture.

Jordan Peterson, however, mainly targets Foucault and Derrida in his polemics against ‘post-modern neomarxism’ (never mind the fact that neither of them ever used the term postmodern for their theory, nor can be easily aligned with Marxism.) Vice versa, in his supposed debate with Slavoj Zizek, one could see that Peterson’s and Zizek’s positions were much less different from each other than many had expected, since both of them argued against a culturalist left and saw themselves as victims of political correctness.

To complicate things further: Cultural Marxism *does* exist, but not where Peterson, Baudet and

Cliteur spot it - for example, in British cultural materialism and Marxist cultural studies: Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and in the American counterparts of cultural materialism, such as the New Historicism of Steven Greenblatt, the Marxism of Fredric Jameson that happens to argue (like Habermas and the late Frankfurt School) *against* postmodernism as a phenomenon of late capitalism, or postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak whose thinking combines Marxism and deconstruction. (So Peterson should rather target Spivak than Derrida, and Baudet should rather target Stuart Hall than Adorno. I also think that both of them actually refer to the discourse of Hall, Spivak and other more clearly politically positioned thinkers when they complain about political correctness and campus anti-discrimination policies, but wrongly attribute that to Adorno, Foucault and Derrida. Let me come back to this in a few minutes.)

The extreme right, in other words, has not done its research very well, with the exception of a few thinkers: Richard Spencer, the neofascist and inventor of the term “Alt-Right”, who studied in the humanities departments of University of Virginia, University of Chicago and Duke University on both undergraduate and graduate level. Although Spencer is a crude fascist, he’s rather clever in appropriating campus-left concepts such as “safe spaces” for his own cause.

But more significantly, the whole concept of the New Right (or, in French: Nouvelle Droite), is based on cultural marxism, namely the appropriation of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony for the cause of a renewed extreme right. This appropriation was pioneered in the early 1970s by the French Nouvelle Droite, particularly Alain de Benoist, and subsequently adopted by the extreme right in other countries (such as Germany). From here, it is not a far stretch to imagine that extreme-right thinkers could adopt the more contemporary concepts of political hegemony and radical democracy of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe for their own causes, last not least because Mouffe herself partly adopted them from the preeminent fascist thinker Carl Schmitt.

When I studied in Germany in the late 1980s and early 1990s, poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida and Foucault were under suspicion from the Frankfurt School (Habermas even called them “neoconservatives”) last not least because of their reuse of ideas from right-wing thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Schmitt. In Germany, a number of former left-wing and postmodern intellectuals indeed have recently turned to the populist right, such as the media theorist Norbert Bolz (a former close collaborator of Friedrich Kittler) and the former Situationist and postmodern sociologist Frank Böckelmann. It wouldn’t be hard to imagine an intellectual extreme right that, instead of waging a knee-jerk war against postmodern neomarxism, would try to establish its own readings of critical theory, poststructuralism and even Post-Marxism that would bring those theories back to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Schmitt.

Let’s try to do this as a thought experiment.

Foucault’s theory of power, and his analysis of disciplinary institutions and systems of punishment could be rather easily appropriated for right-wing authoritarian politics (since Foucault himself complicates the issue of authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism). After all, Foucault himself had a weak spot for authoritarian regimes when he sided with Khomeini and the Iranian revolution.

If we turn to the Alt-Right meme wars and the Alt-Right tactics of irony, transgression and use of the grotesque (Pepe the Frog): Can be perfectly analyzed with Bakhtin’s theory of carnival. Conversely,

Bakhtin's theory lends itself to being interpreted as a theory - and even apology - of populism (since in carnival, the good people rebel against the corrupt elite). Antisemitism as a token of medieval European carnival culture is a blind spot of Bakhtin's theory anyway.

Secondly, George Bataille's theories of transgression and excess, particularly in his late work *Tears of Eros* and the link between sexuality and death. It fits btw., that Bataille's essay *The Psychological Structure of Fascism* is now being shared on Alt-Right blogs. It could be argued that his analysis that identifies fascism with the homogenous versus the heterogeneous (non-aligned groups/culture) is precisely subverted by the "Alt-Right".

Thirdly, if the new Right had properly read the Frankfurt School, it would discover that Adorno and Horkheimer, in particular, combine Marxist and conservative elements in their critique of culture and society. Adorno was an enthusiastic reader of Spengler's "Decline of the West" just as the contemporary Right, and the cultural pessimism in the "Dialectics of Enlightenment" has Spenglerian undertones. Adorno's infamous papers on jazz music (with, among others, their critique of jazz as "emasculatation" music and his endorsement of the jazz bann on German radio in 1934 could be adopted 1:1 into contemporary Alt-Right discourse. In fact, Baudet grotesquely misreads Adorno if he sees in him a conspirator against classical music and the classical European cultural canon. The critique of the "culture industry" in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* is certainly a point in which both the left and the right agreed, and which also explains why so many of Germany's 1960s left-wing student movement activists (who saw Adorno as their teacher) later turned to the populist and extreme right. (Böckelmann, Rabehl, Mahler, Roehl, Maschke, Oberlercher.)

This history repeated itself when postmodern media theory (of Baudrillard, Virilio - the latter being a conservative catholic btw.) got appropriated, with Heidegger and Bataille in the mix, in Nick Land's 'hyperstition' and Land's later transformation in to a "neo-reactionary" theorist within the larger network of the Alt-Right.

Land currently is the only cultural studies/critical theory intellectual that the extreme right has, much in contrast to the early 20th century when fascism had intellectuals like Marinetti, Pound, Schmitt, Heidegger, Blanchot, de Man.

Even the term "Critical Theory" and "Critical Studies" could be appropriated, just as the term "alternative" got appropriated, since it is unspecific to what is being criticized and how.

The extreme right is quite likely to further educate itself, smarten up and eventually develop its own version of critical theory. Aside from intervening into existing disciplines and institutions, it could develop its own partisan and activist institutions, such as identity studies departments that would function as antitheses to gender and postcolonial studies.