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National Populism and Anti-Globalism: Conspiracy Theories and the Reactionary International

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Many disciplines of the social sciences have come to grapple with the growth of far-right political movements which self-consciously pit themselves against neo-liberal, business as usual, governance (Mudde 2007; Akkerman et al 2016; Greven 2016). International Relations is no exception, as scholars have begun to focus their attention on how the relationship between states is being challenged and remoulded by the actions of right-wing political figures such as Marine Le Penn, Viktor Orban, and Donald Trump (Öniş and Kutlay 2020; Lacatus and Meibauer 2022; Löffmann 2022). Perhaps one of the most insightful contributions to this emerging body of literature is Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen's (2019) work, which has examined what they designated "reactionary internationalism". The authors argue that reactionary right-wing leaders and intellectuals do not reject internationalism as some commentators claim, but instead present an alternative theory of the international. Movements embracing this loose form of reactionary internationalism call for an international order characterised by competition between distinctive national groups asserting native cultural differences, combined with a rejection of universal human rights and a renewed support for inequality and national sovereignty (ibid: 751-752). This reactionary international is further characterised by a populist approach to politics – both at the domestic and international level – and a rhetorical style that seeks to contrast a pure group of common people that are oppressed and put upon by a corrupt elite seeking to exploit and denigrate them (Michelsen et al 2023). In this way, we can already observe how the international is implicated in the growth of reactionary movements, and, as other scholars have already pointed out, populism plays an important role in this relationship (Berlet 2012, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, Sanahuja and López Burian 2020).

However, I argue that there is a further instrument in the rhetorical toolkit of the reactionary international which is integral to both their political ideology and to their wider political project; their use of conspiracy theories. It is very easy to dismiss the conspiratorial pronouncements of the reactionary populist right as further evidence of their irrational politics. However, I argue that the affinity of the reactionary international to conspiracism runs much deeper than this and represents a fundamental part of their ideological project. In this essay I intend to do just that. By primarily drawing on the work of Moishe Postone and his theory regarding the link between conspiracism and reactionary ideology, I argue that conspiracy theories have an incredibly important function within the worldview of the reactionary international, one that allows them to justify and explain their somewhat fraught relationship with the liberal international order that they work both within and against.

Populism and Conspiracism

Before I begin, it is worth taking a moment to properly define what we mean when we talk about conspiracy theories. Joseph E. Uscinski and Adam M. Enders (2023: 151) argue that "conspiracies, in the political context, involve the machinations of a small group of powerful people, working in secret, against the common good". Whilst this is a good starting definition, it presents us with further issues. As both authors point out, this definition would very much include a variety of real conspiracies that are documented to have occurred throughout history (ibid: 152). The question then arises, how to separate these historic and plausible conspiracy plots from the more elaborate and fanciful conspiracy theories? To answer this question, we can turn to the work of Jeffrey Bale (2007). Bale argues that conspiracy theories are very different from accusations of real political conspiracies (what he calls conspiratorial politics). He

National Populism and Anti-Globalism: Conspiracy Theories and the Reactionary International

Written by Joseph Patrick McAulay

then suggests that the core essence of the conspiracy theory “is a belief in the existence of a ‘vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character’, acts that aim to ‘undermine and destroy a way of life’” (Bale 2007: 50). Bale (2007: 51-52) thus goes on to argue that conspiracy theories of this type function analogously to religious or spiritual beliefs, as a way to make sense of and find meaning in a chaotic universe that works to create a sense of order and explain away the existence of evil. In this sense, I argue that rather than talking about conspiracy theories per se, we may more fruitfully use Frank Mintz’ (1985) concept of conspiracism; that is, an ideology or worldview which posits that conspiracies are the motive and driving force in society and history. With this set out, we can now turn to look at the ways in which conspiracism has been found to intersect with both populism in general, and reactionary populism in particular.

Indeed, I am not alone in drawing a connection between populism and conspiracy theories. The affinity of right-wing populism for conspiracy theories has been documented for many years by numerous authors (see e.g., Askanius et al 2024; Parker and Barreto 2017). For example, Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons (2000) in their historical overview of right-wing populist movements in the United States – which stretches from the nation’s founding to the modern day – identify conspiracism as a recurrent rhetorical and ideational motif that appears in almost every instantiation of such movements. Whilst we can thus point to these clear affinities, we still yet do not know what their source is, what it is about conspiracism and populism that make them work so well together. One potential explanation comes from the cultural theorist and conspiracy researcher Michael Butter (2020), who argues that conspiracism and populism are both, in some fashion, anti-elite discourses which exist to de-legitimise existing holders of authority. Political and cultural authority for populism, epistemic and scientific authority for conspiracists. Moreover, conspiracy theories provide a useful function within populist rhetoric by explaining why the elites of a society are corrupt, out of touch, and need to be removed from power by the populist movement (Butter 2020: 117). Rather than just being incompetent, lazy, or politically negligent, conspiracism allows populists to paint “elites” as actively malicious and hostile, conspiring with a hidden cabal to bring down society and, to borrow the words of Jeffrey Bale (2007: 50), destroy the common people’s “way of life”. However, what if the relationship was deeper, what if conspiracism performed a core and indispensable function for both the reactionary international and indeed for reactionaries in general. To understand why this is the case, I wish to turn to the work of Jewish Canadian historian and sociologist Moishe Postone.

National Socialism and Antisemitism

Postone (1980) sought to explain why conspiracy theories played such a prominent role in the ideologies of reactionary movements, and more specifically, why conspiratorial antisemitism became such a foundational part of National Socialist ideology. Postone, a Marxist thinker, grounded his analysis of these reactionary social movements in the economic changes unleashed by the advent of capitalist modernity. For Postone, these reactionary movements sought a way to critique the destabilising social effects of capitalism whilst simultaneously denying the larger structural critiques of the left. In effect, they wished to harness the productive and industrial forces of capitalism whilst symbolically criticising its more abstract and financialised aspects (ibid: 105). Postone argued that this conflict was resolved through the deployment of elaborate conspiratorial antisemitism, where the Jews were collectively held to be responsible for all the pernicious and harmful impacts of the structural economic system of capitalism (ibid: 106-107). This conspiracy theory allowed reactionaries to blame the impacts and outcomes of capitalism not on the system itself, but on a shadowy and malevolent outside force that had secretly infiltrated society and was working to corrupt and destroy it. The flipside to this argument, however, is that it not only provides a simplified explanation, but also a simplified solution. If the flaws of the system are solely or ultimately caused by a malignant conspiratorial agent, then all that is needed for the capitalist system to revert to normal is for this conspiratorial cabal to be identified, rooted out, and destroyed. Indeed, we can see that this form of conspiracism existed from the very start of the history of reactionary movement, with the founding fathers of modern conspiracism, John Robinson and August Baurell blaming the French Revolution on the machinations of a cabal of conspiratorial freemasons working to undermine Christianity (Byford 2011).

For Postone (1980) then, conspiratorial antisemitism as embodied by reactionaries like the Nazis, allowed these groups to attack what they saw as the abstract liberal side of capitalism whilst exalting its “productive” side, as embodied in industry and manufacturing. Furthermore, it allowed them to argue that movements which existed to

National Populism and Anti-Globalism: Conspiracy Theories and the Reactionary International

Written by Joseph Patrick McAulay

fight against capitalism and reactionary forces alike were in fact secretly agents of the grand conspiracy. This is why within Nazi propaganda, Jews were often depicted as controlling both the rapacious Atlantic bankers of New York and London, and the barbaric Judeo-Bolshevists of the Soviet Union (Postone 1980: 106). The Nazis, and other reactionaries, could thus claim that the productive aspects of capitalism could be saved from both the impacts of finance capital and from left-wing demands for equality, if only the conspiratorial cabal was purged from society. It was this urge, this quest to defeat the conspiratorial other, that Postone argued was a key ingredient in the road to the holocaust.

In effect, Postone argued that conspiracism as a mode of ideological thought allowed the structural problems of capitalism, both the harm the system causes and the responses it generates, to be externalised onto a singular demonic conspiratorial other. With this demon identified, reactionary political movements could critique certain harms caused by the capitalist system whilst never actually challenging its underlying structures. In this way, the Nazis could instead channel the popular discontent against the system towards their end of “palingenetic ultranationalism” (Griffin 1996). This term, originally derived from the theorist of fascism, Roger Griffin, highlights that fascists seek to create a national community that is symbolically reborn as a new, vigorous, and strong political entity, ready to combat and conquer its rivals in the international scene, and simultaneously purge internal dissenting traitors from the body politic.

Postone’s theory is deep, nuanced, and at times very theoretically dense, and thus my own enumeration of his ideas is unlikely to capture the full span of his thought. With that said, I argue that the core of Postone’s theory accords with much later social psychological research into the study of conspiracy theories. Researchers have found that conspiracy theories are correlated with a kind of cognitive narcissism that blames outgroups for the existence of problems and thus strengthens both in-group solidarity and increases their positive self-conception and the ideas they hold (Cichocka et al 2016a, 2016b; Marchlewska et al 2019).

The next question to therefore ask is, how does Postone’s theory fit into our study of the reactionary international? Indeed, I argue that his work allows us to understand the ways in which conspiracist rhetoric is integral to the worldview of the modern reactionary political movement. Postone’s argument that conspiracies allow right-wing movements to attack the abstract forces of finance capital whilst exalting the supposedly solid and productive forces of industrial capital accords with much of both the policy and rhetoric of many of the core figures of reactionary internationalism. Famously, one of former President Trump’s flagship proposals was an attack on the NAFTA agreement and a promise to re-industrialise large swaths of the American heartland (Alberta 2019; Green 2017). It also helps us explain the veiled anti-capitalism that some members of the international have been known to dabble in, particularly when facing more traditionally neo-liberal opponents. Marine Le Penn, for example, derided international financiers and promised to protect the welfare rights of struggling French workers during her latest election standoff with the doctrinaire neo-liberal Emmanuel Macron (Orr 2020). Furthermore, Postone’s theories allow us to understand how and why reactionary groups link their various enemies, both at home and abroad, into a singular vast international conspiracy hell bent on bringing ruin to their home nation. A paradigmatic example we will continuously return to is the liberal Jewish financier George Soros, who has become a powerful symbolic bogeyman for the far-right across the world due to his support for causes such as multiculturalism, open democracy, and migration (Langer 2021). During the 2020 George Floyd protests, various reactionary forces surrounding former President Trump, and within the wider international reactionary milieu, spread elaborate conspiracy theories that Soros, a multi-billionaire who made his money through financial speculation, was secretly funding left-wing anarchist and other anti-capitalist groups in a bid to destabilise the United States and even bring about a global New World Order (Hart 2020).

Here we see a near pitch perfect rendition of the old National Socialist narratives which alleged an international Jewish conspiracy uniting both communist and capitalist against the pure Aryan people, and further evidence of the centrality of a particular type of conspiracist reasoning to the operation of reactionary political figures on the international scene. However, whilst we may wish to grant Postone’s theory some degree of explanatory value in the modern day, I argue that it is necessary to update and adjust the theory, considering the significant changes in the international order both from the time of the original fascist movements Postone’s studied and from the time of the article’s original publication. Principally, I argue that these modifications involve adjustments to both the antisemitic

National Populism and Anti-Globalism: Conspiracy Theories and the Reactionary International

Written by Joseph Patrick McAulay

nature of the conspiracy theories in question, and the fascist nature of the movements which spread them.

The Expansion of Antisemitism

The national socialist conspiracy theories that Postone studied were inherently antisemitic, deeply and irrevocably tied up with centuries of European hatred towards the Jewish people, and heavily influenced by eugenic and pseudo-Darwinist views of race and racial competition in which Jews were seen as a racial parasite that was a fundamental threat to the German people's survival (Cohn 1996). In the aftermath of the Second World War and the horrors of the holocaust, direct and blatant antisemitism became politically unacceptable in most respectable circles, and the kind of anti-Jewish blood and soil conspiracism retreated to the fringes of political life in an elaborate national socialist underground (Griffin 2003). This by no means suggests that modern reactionary conspiracism does not involve antisemitism as a core component; it is a clear part of the reactionary coalition that exists as a consistent ideological current present in numerous contexts (Subotic 2022). From Jean-Marie Le Pen's dismissal of the holocaust as a mere fact of history (Chrisafis 2016), to the outright antisemitic white nationalism of the American Alt-Right (Hawley 2017), antisemitism remains entrenched in the reactionary international. However, this antisemitism can no longer sustain the movement as a core motivating ideological force for all members of the reactionary international, particularly when open discussions of antisemitism are all but prohibited in more mainstream political circles. As such, the figure of the international Jew has been replaced within the reactionary imaginary with a much more open and flexible central figure, the globalist. This figure is vaguer and more elastic than the characters of early reactionary conspiracism, and whilst it can certainly include Jews, it is not reducible to them. Instead, the globalist functions as a symbol for all the forces that sit outside the nation-state and which seeks to subvert, corrupt, and destroy it. In Postone's framework, the globalist is therefore the demonic figure which comes to stand in for the structural failings of international capitalism. All problems can be attributed to this figure, and thus their political defeat will purify and return the nation to a state of natural harmony. The vagueness of the globalist, shorn of any ethnic, religious, or even political affiliations, allows it to function as a perfect demonic outsider for the reactionary international to rally against. Its elasticity allows for it to be used in different national contexts for different reasons, and for different, often contradictory groups, to be fitted under its label. It is important to remember here that antisemitism has not disappeared within the reactionary international. Instead, it is often hidden or veiled under dog-whistles, such as international bankers or financial elites. Conspiracy theories around Geroge Soros provide a good example of this type of conspiracist code switching, where Soros can function both as a generic liberal internationalist in one breath, and then as the embodiment of supposed international Jewish control of finance in another (Langer 2021).

National Socialism to National Populism

The second modification we can make to Postone's original argument lies in the ways in which reactionary forces have altered their positions regarding state intervention into the economy and indeed against capitalism itself. A core part of Postone's argument is that conspiratorial antisemitism allowed nationalist movements to construct pseudo-alternatives to laissez-faire liberal capitalism through hyper productive and often autarchic economies (Postone 1980). However, since the end of the Cold War, we have witnessed the ascendancy of a hegemonic neo-liberal international order which has entrenched a global marketisation of the economy and increasing pressure on countries to accept free-trade, austerity, and political neo-liberalism (Harvey 2005). Within this environment, a return to the kind of economic state intervention that characterised fascist economies seems like a remote possibility. Indeed, though strains of the far right have retained pseudo-socialist economic positions or advocated for nativist protections such as tariffs, welfare spending, and even nationalisations of industry, other currents in the international have instead embraced ardently neo-liberal or even libertarian positions that advocate for the unfettered marketisation of the economy (Saul et al 2015; Renton 2019). Such positions can be observed in the American Tea Party movement of the early 2010s who resisted Democratic party attempts to intervene in private provisions of healthcare (Parker and Barreto 2017). This abandonment of nominally anti-liberal economic positions might lead us to argue that the modern reactionary international has essentially capitulated to the market. This is a position shared by other scholars, such as Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen (2021: 6), who has argued that the current bearers of the reactionary political tradition have now, under the banner of leaders like Trump, moderated their economic position to essentially accept the market economy and defend neo-liberal economics in total. The modern reactionary is thus, in Rasmussen's words more "National-liberal rather than National-Socialist" (ibid: 6).

National Populism and Anti-Globalism: Conspiracy Theories and the Reactionary International

Written by Joseph Patrick McAulay

I am sympathetic to the position of authors like Rasmussen; however, I think he and others like him place too much emphasis on the strains of economic liberalism which exist within the far-right international whilst in effect dismissing the extant and at times quite powerful protectionist strains that also circulate. Let it be remembered that Trump, who Rasmussen principally studies, gained mass appeal in the GOP through advocating for an economically nationalist policy favouring tariffs and re-industrialisation. Moreover, a focus on economic issues ignores the ways in which reactionaries work to attack the political and cultural aspects of the liberal international order which were so important to de Orellana and Michelsen's (2019) original conceptualisation of reactionary internationalism. We can see this in the international sphere through the disdain held by reactionary figure for concepts such as international governance and multilateralism in organisations such as the UN and the EU, and in the domestic sphere by their attacks on liberal constitutional forms of governance, human rights, and notions of cultural and political pluralism (Michelsen et al 2023; Slobodian 2018).

Thus, instead of embodying either a national socialism or a national liberalism, I argue that the political position of modern conspiracist reactionaries can be more accurately conceptualised as a national populism; that is, as a political ideology that emphasises a conflict between a pure national group attacked by a corrupt elite and, as other scholars of populism have argued, one which often demonstrates a scepticism towards liberal institutions of governance in favour of a mono-cultural understanding of democracy that eschews minority rights, pluralism, and constitutional governance (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). This populist narrative embodies the dominant strain of reactionary conspiracism, claiming that the ills facing the current social order are the product of an external conspiratorial cabal who, through deception and trickery, are attempting to destroy the national community. In turn, this threat functions as the mobilising passion for the political movement.

From this, I argue that, with some modification, we can see that Postone's conceptualisation of conspiracism still has explanatory power in understanding the centrality of conspiracist rhetoric for the modern reactionary international. Conspiracy theories allow reactionary actors to externalise the problems and failures of structural economic systems, namely capitalist ones, to an external demonic figure which can then be used as fuel for political mobilisation. Therefore, far from being a mere irrational product of maladjustment or political paranoia, conspiracy theories and conspiracism more generally are a core ideological component of reactionary reasoning, a component which allow these political actors to construct understandings of both domestic and international political orders that support their broader cultural and ideological goals. Given the growing proliferation of conspiracy theories at the international level and the continued power of reactionary political blocs, it is safe to say that this tendency is not going anywhere. Indeed, it now behoofs scholars of international politics to take conspiracism seriously as a mode of international political thought. Whilst thankfully some scholars, such as Allen (2023: 777-778), have already begun to undertake such an effort, much more work remains to be done to map the contours of the relationship between reactionary internationalism and conspiracism. Even if we vehemently disagree with the ideas of the conspiracy theorist, we must take them seriously as objects of study, lest we find ourselves overwhelmed with the actions of those motivated by a pernicious but powerful form of political demonology.

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National Populism and Anti-Globalism: Conspiracy Theories and the Reactionary International

Written by Joseph Patrick McAulay

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National Populism and Anti-Globalism: Conspiracy Theories and the Reactionary International

Written by Joseph Patrick McAulay

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National Populism and Anti-Globalism: Conspiracy Theories and the Reactionary International

Written by Joseph Patrick McAulay

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