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‘War of position’: liberal interregnum and the emergent ideologies

*Adrian Pabst**

Beyond binaries

What are the leading forces and ideas that are shaping our age? In the West, a decade of financial disruption, austerity, and stagnant wages has produced a popular rejection of market fundamentalism that prevailed for over forty years. Mass immigration and multiculturalism have contributed to rapid changes in both family and community life that leave many people feeling dispossessed or even humiliated. Unresponsive government is exacerbating people’s sense of powerlessness and anger. The revolt against the status quo is fuelling a political insurgency against the establishment that replaces the old opposition of left versus right with a similarly simplistic dichotomy pitting the people against the elites. We are witnessing the failure of dualistic thinking and this will not be resolved by substituting one binary for another.

The populism of the far left and the radical right thrives on economic and cultural insecurity as both the working classes and the lower middle class experience permanently lower living standards and the loss of their ways of life. Populist politics is an emotional expression of identities under threat that trumps rational concerns for material progress. While the motivating energy of populists is the need to redeem a sense of inherited popular culture against the elite culture of the professional class, it is also the case that contemporary populism invents identity: it equates the people as they are in their families and communities with Rousseau’s *volonté générale* – the monolithic will of ‘The People’ embodied by a self-proclaimed leader who promises simple solutions. Populists are just as guilty of manipulation and demagoguery as the establishment. Both polarize politics just when democracy needs a transcendent conversation about the pre-political ‘we’ – the social, civic ties binding us together as citizens who jointly inhabit neighbourhoods and nations. Beyond economic or cultural tribes, there are also bonds of shared belonging. What is missing in our age is a public philosophy that can address deep divisions around dispossession and explore questions about meaning.

The first task in crafting such a public philosophy is to conceptualize the times we are living in. Antonio Gramsci calls this an analysis of the ‘conjuncture,’ which he defines as the events, social factors, and economic interests that shape society at any given moment in its history.¹ A political settlement emerges when these forces broadly align. Since the conjuncture is in flux, each political settlement is not fixed and it is only dominant if it converges with what Gramsci calls the ‘situation,’ which he defines as deeper organic trends and historical forces that structure the foundations of society – moral, cultural and social issues as well as class interests.² Gramsci calls such a convergence between conjuncture and situation ‘hegemony’: political domination beyond the state and the market into the realm of culture and society. At any moment rival political forces contest the meaning of the dominant settlement in what Gramsci calls a ‘war of movement.’ Once a settlement is no longer hegemonic and in crisis, politics enters an ‘interregnum’ when the political contest shifts to a ‘war of position’ that is a battle over ideas, common sense, organization, and leadership.

Our contemporary conjuncture is such a period of interregnum and a war of position between the hitherto hegemonic ideology of liberalism and its populist rivals. The popular revolt against liberalism, which is driving the political insurgency across the West, highlights the collapse of the authority of the professional political class dominated by liberals.³ In Gramsci’s words, “If the ruling class has lost consensus, that is, if it no longer "leads" but only "rules" – it possesses sheer coercive power – this actually means that the great masses have become detached from traditional ideologies.”⁴ The breakdown of people’s trust in mainstream politics points to a deeper crisis that reveals a divergence between the current conjuncture and the wider situation: “The crisis consists

* I am indebted to conversations with Jon Cruddas, Maurice Glasman, Ron Ivy, John Milbank, James Noyes, and Jonathan Rutherford.

¹ Antonio Gramsci, ‘The Third Notebook (1930)’, in *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia Press, 1996), Vol. 2. Here I draw on Jonathan Rutherford’s several unpublished essays on Gramsci.

² Gramsci subscribes to the Marxist idea that the ‘situation’ (or base) determines the ‘conjuncture’ (or superstructure), but he accords much greater power and autonomy to ideas and culture than Marxist materialism.

³ Peter Osborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

⁴ Gramsci, ‘The Third Notebook (1930)’, §34, p. 32.

precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass.”⁵ These morbid phenomena encompass the failure of liberalism and the limits of populism because, as I shall argue, both rest on an anti-humanist logic.

The anti-liberal insurgency has shaken liberals or even dislodged them from power, but it has not and likely will not defeat liberalism altogether. Gramsci suggests that the previously hegemonic forces try to resolve conjunctural contradictions within the limits defined by the political settlement:

A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and that despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them.⁶

Faced with the loss of its hegemonic status, the professional political class led by liberals is desperately trying to contain the populist insurgency. But in a deliberate inversion of Gramsci’s argument, it is in reality the new that is dead and the old that is yet to be revitalized. The failure of liberalism means that we are witnessing the demise of the New Left, the New Right, and their convergence around the liberalisms that shaped the dominant political settlements in recent history: the ‘embedded liberalism’ of the post-war consensus, the social liberalism since the 1960s and the economic liberalism since the 1980s.⁷ The death of the new marks the end of the liberal hegemony because the assumptions of liberalism defy the common sense of the people and liberals struggle to assemble a coalition of estranged groups through which it can lead rather than simply rule.

In our times when the old consensus of the new is dead and a renewal of older traditions is yet to occur, the democratic contest is over which ideology can offer a ‘national popular politics.’ Gramsci describes this rather vaguely as an alignment of popular aspirations with national culture.

⁵ Gramsci, ‘The Third Notebook (1930)’, §34, pp. 32-33.

⁶ Gramsci, ‘Fourth Notebook (1930-1932)’, §38, p. 177.

⁷ John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), pp. 1-10 and 13-67.

Intellectuals – including politicians, party members and all those active in politics – play an important role of mediating guidance in bringing together people and the nation into a unified political form, something that he calls the ‘people-nation.’ The task is to combine feeling with knowledge in ways that generate mutual understanding and avoid extremes: “The popular element “feels” but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element “knows”, but does not always understand and, above all, does not feel. The two extremes, therefore, are pedantry and philistinism on the one hand and blind passion and sectarianism on the other.”⁸

To command majority support for a national popular politics requires a cultural change by the political class that reflects the common sense of the people rather than the opinions of elites. But the opposite is currently happening. The established traditions of liberalism, conservatism, and socialism, which were dominant for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are at odds with popular beliefs and values. The conservatives’ reputation for being a competent reliable force in power lies in tatters and their model of free-market capitalism leads to a concentration of wealth for the few that violates a sense of justice. Social democrats and socialists have abandoned their traditional working-class supporters in favor of a largely urban, progressively minded electorate and their model of state-administered egalitarianism divides society. And everywhere the liberal obsession with the individualized identity of minority groups excludes a majority from mainstream politics. In their contemporary form, none of these traditions has much to say about what people share as members of national, cultural communities or even what binds them together as humans.

In what follows I shall argue that the emergent ideologies which are vying for hegemony are hyper-liberalism, nationalist traditionalism, and tech utopianism. All of them are variously anti-humanist, to which one can oppose updated versions of one-nation conservatism and ethical socialism. Before setting out the unfolding ‘war of position,’ I will first explore the new anti-humanism that underpins the main ideological movements.

⁸ Gramsci, ‘Fourth Notebook (1930-1932),’ §33, p. 173.

The surrender of the human

As the British MP and political thinker Jon Cruddas has argued, the character of politics has shifted from a sense of sacrificial contribution to the common life based on the struggles of representative democracy and collective agency to a culture of victimhood, a movement politics of protest, and narcissistic online echo chambers of what we do and do not like.⁹ At the hands of the revolutionary left and the radical right, identity politics is now joining forces with technological determinism and anti-humanism that rest on the same logic of rejecting natural law, fetishizing transgression and embracing the nihilism of ‘dark enlightenment’ disguised as a liberating tech utopia.¹⁰ This marks the surrender of universal human nature, the dignity of the person, and with it the pursuit of the common good based on mutual flourishing and the building of a just society.

Hating the liberal model of capitalist globalization, the resurgent extremes seek to institute an alternative modernity that is anti-liberal but in reality an intensification of certain modern liberal ideas: the cult of the individual, an invocation of the ‘will of the people,’ the unmediated power of techno-science, and a non-teleological cosmos in which both nature and humanity will be replaced – or, to use the ‘accelerationist’ language of deception, ‘enhanced’ – by a new Promethean spirit.¹¹ Prometheanism combines a naturalist philosophy in which reality has no purpose with a materialist politics driven by economic and technological forces – a belief it shares with accelerationist Marxism.¹² In the words of Ray Brassier, “existence is worthless [...] and nihilism is [...] the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality which [...] is

⁹ Jon Cruddas, ‘The humanist left must challenge the rise of cyborg socialism,’ *The New Statesman*, 20-26 April 2018, online at <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/04/humanist-left-must-challenge-rise-cyborg-socialism>

¹⁰ Nick Land, the father of ‘accelerationism’ that informs both left- and right-wing libertarians, set up the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at Warwick University that incubated the cyber philosophy underpinning accelerationist ideas. See his book *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992) and his 2013 essay ‘The Dark Enlightenment,’ at <http://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land>

¹¹ Ray Brassier, ‘Prometheanism and its Critics,’ in Robin Mackaey and Armen Avenessian (eds.), *#Accelerate: the Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), pp. 467-88.

¹² Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015); Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism. A Guide to our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015); Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2018), *forthcoming*.

indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable.”¹³

Just like Prometheus’ theft of fire sought to subvert the power of the gods in an attempt to elevate humans from their supposed humiliation, so too the new Prometheanism seeks to remake humanity through the unmediated power of technology. The convergence of nanotech, biotech, infotech, and cognitive science serves to create a ‘plane of immanence’ (building on the immanentist ontology from Duns Scotus via Spinoza to Deleuze) that transcends our human condition in the direction of a new ‘singularity,’ which is grounded in a flat ontology of equivalence between all subjects that make up the ‘multitude.’¹⁴ The aim is to liberate the individual and the masses not simply from the trap of contemporary capitalism but above all from any limits of nature or history. Both the natural order and inherited traditions are seen as arbitrary, irrational boundaries on our free mind that artificially creates reality from nothing. In this manner, technologically enhanced humanity replaces the Creator God as the supernatural source of being. Instead of coming into existence *ex nihilo*, humans are now revealed to have a ‘will to nothingness,’ which paradoxically is the ultimate ground of everything. Transhumanism is a nihilism.

By positing that human nature is in total flux, modern transhumanists from Julian Huxley (brother of Aldous) to Max More view the possibilities of science and technology as more fundamental than the actuality of life – to the point where everything from anti-ageing genetic research, robotics, AI, cybernetics, life extension, ‘mind-uploading,’ and cryonics ends up producing new forms of existence that engender ever-more advanced versions of themselves.¹⁵ This ‘singularity moment’ is portrayed as the new frontier of reason and science when in fact it constitutes the meeting point

¹³ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave, 2007), p. ix.

¹⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2005).

¹⁵ Julian Huxley coined the term ‘transhuman’ in his 1951 essay that was subsequently published in a book of essays *Knowledge, Morality and Destiny* (New York: New American Library, 1960); Max More, ‘Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy’ (1990) and ‘The Philosophy of Transhumanism,’ in Max More and Natasha Vita-More (eds.), *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future* (Oxford: Wiley, 2013), pp. 3-17.

between ‘new age’ fanaticism and science fiction. ‘If you love life, extend it into the vanishing ether of cyber-reality’ seems to be the transhumanists’ oddly life-denying motto.

The Promethean spirit promises to release us from our affections and attachments to relationships and institutions that make us more fully human as social, political beings. That is what Brassier means by ‘nihil unbound.’ Such a release is not the same as liberation from oppression and exploitation combined with a promotion of human self-government. Rather, Brassier and his fellow accelerationists have in mind what they call in their manifesto “a Promethean politics of maximal mastery over society” (§21) that fuses “the command of The Plan” with “the improvised order of The Network” (§14).¹⁶ Here libertarian freedom meets totalitarian control.

This means not resisting or transforming capitalism but instead realizing the capitalist utopia of infinite possibility based on an ontology of immanence: “expansion beyond the limitations of the earth and our immediate bodily forms” (§22) “[...] towards the universal possibilities of the Outside” (§24). Only accelerationism can fulfill the promise of the Enlightenment to “shift beyond the world of minimal technical upgrades towards all encompassing change” (§22) because humanity and the universe are by nature deficient and therefore require technological completion. The individual, released from all constraints, can be whatever she wants.

Based on a similarly Promethean anti-humanism, liberals have passed laws permitting euthanasia and sex changes for minors without parental agreement – as in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Norway. To allow people to die as they wish or to change their gender is to subordinate the intrinsic value of human life in its givenness to individual freedom of choice and the pursuit of happiness, itself construed in utilitarian terms as maximizing pleasure and avoiding pain – not a richer sense of happiness that combines personal fulfilment with mutual flourishing. Such a conception would include the acceptance that life involves suffering and dying. Liberals who claim we have a right to

¹⁶ Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, ‘#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,’ in Mackaey and Avenessian, *#Accelerate: the Accelerationist Reader*, pp. 347-62, quotes at §21, §14 and §22.

happiness abhor the thought of human frailty because it gets in the way of feeling good about yourself. This violates a universal ethical principle that has governed most cultures and societies in history – nature and human life have almost always been recognized as having a sacred dimension beyond the power of human volition. No person enjoys full sovereign jurisdiction over her own possession of life and her body.

The dominant strands of liberalism redefine life as something that belongs to individuals as their own property. But even self-ownership requires protection by the state. Therefore liberalism effectively grants government power over life itself. That is why liberals have not hesitated to liberalise euthanasia. This hands over life to the forces of the state and the market, treating it as a commodity that can be traded or dispensed with without regard to its intrinsic worth. If this were true, then we would have to conclude that we really are isolated individuals, disembodied from relationships with other embodied beings and reducible to biological-chemical processes. To adopt this perspective is to abandon the entire basis of humanism. It is to replace the idea of dignity with private liberty and comfort, which are now the only constraints on individual choice. Paradoxically, liberalism promises liberation from any constraint not chosen by consenting individuals who have no obligation to anyone while at the same time being subordinate to the liberal world order based on an overweening state and the expanding global market.¹⁷ Yet behind the negatively self-choosing individual stands the state, which can either permit anti-humanism or, on the contrary, uphold principles in line with natural law that grant human existence a unique status and promote life over death.

Liberal man is the freest man ever to have lived and at the same time the most domesticated – the richest and at the same time the most dispossessed. *Really existing* liberalism unleashes the forces of domestication and dispossession that include capitalism, statism, and globalization.¹⁸ They

¹⁷ Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

¹⁸ Maurice Glasman, 'A home in the world: Brexit and the future of British politics,' lecture at the University of Kent, 31 January 2018.

involve the administration of people and nature as commodities circulating in an unmediated space and the oscillation between the individual – disembedded from history, institutions, and relationships – and the collective based upon a positivist legal system. This liberal order is inherently unstable and prone to periodic crises because liberalism erodes the very foundations on which it rests. It brings about economic injustice and divisions in society that are threatening the social contract between the people and their representatives, which is the bedrock of the liberal tradition since Hobbes and Locke. The elites fail to understand that the anti-establishment insurgents are a consequence, not the cause, of the failure of liberalism.

Hyper-liberalism

Faced with the political insurgency, liberals have so far not learned their lesson. Instead of drawing on older liberal traditions anchored in notions of social virtue, they have doubled down and embraced what John Gray calls hyper-liberalism.¹⁹ Far from defending toleration and a richer conception of freedom, hyper-liberal politics seeks to overcome any attachment to national and group identity in favor of a borderless world without restrictions on personal choice. Gone is a commitment to critical debate about rival values and beliefs, combined with a concern for truth. By contrast, hyper-liberals are at best indifferent to facts and at worst engage in sophistry with virtue-signaling self-righteousness, condemning patriotism as reactionary and national identity as a repressive construction while promoting a cosmopolitan vision that is remote from the everyday existence of most people.

As Gray argues, hyper-liberalism is less a departure from the main liberal tradition as an intensification of liberalism as a secular religion. With a blind faith in progress and individual emancipation from all forms of shared belonging, liberalism at the hands of J.S. Mill, who was

¹⁹ John Gray, 'Un-liberty. Some problems with the new cult of hyper-liberalism,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, 30 March 2018, online at <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/john-gray-hyper-liberalism-liberty/>

deeply influenced by the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte,²⁰ became a new religion of humanity that worships the human species as ‘the new Supreme Being’ – a notion at the heart of Robespierre’s politics of terror. By reducing freedom to the absence of constraints on individuals except for the law and private conscience, Mill and his followers in politics have replaced toleration with oppression: a notion of liberty synonymous with personal choice implies that identity is constructed by individual volition and can be undone in the name of the self without any regard for the relational constraints and opportunities of the family, community, nation and beyond.²¹

Moreover, Mill’s secular religion of humanity ignores people’s deep yearning for belonging and security rather than pure personal emancipation. The hyper-liberalism that has emerged in our times cannot comprehend that popular attachment and affections for relationships embedded in institutions of culture provide meaning. It equates such sentiments with atavistic prejudice that must be swept away in the name of progress embodied in transnational state power and the expanding global market. The rise of impersonal power promoted by hyper-liberals is a key driver for the political insurgency. Crucially, ‘the new religion of humanity’ flips over into an anti-humanist politics that enforces large-scale social engineering to refashion society in the image of hyper-liberalism, combining free-market fundamentalism with social egalitarianism and liberal identity politics.

As an ideology and a system of government, modern liberalism turns the market economy into a capitalist engine of commodification that turns human beings and nature into things that are subject to fluctuating prices as part of commodity exchange, which strips people and the natural habitat of all intrinsic worth, symbolic significance, and sacred character. Connected with the commodifying pressures of liberal capitalism is the slide into oligarchy. Far from defending open and competitive markets, liberalism maintains old monopolies and creates new cartels. This concerns the economy where the lack of democratic accountability is inversely related to the growing concentration of

²⁰ Maurice Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

²¹ See again Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, pp. 1-10 and 13-67.

wealth and power. In 2017, two-thirds of the total number of sectors across developed economies were characterized by a greater concentration of ownership and control than in 1997, including old monopolistic industries such as tobacco, food, construction, retail, the car industry, and Wall Street.²²

The new cartels include the tech giants of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and the Chinese conglomerate Alibaba, which are modern-day plutocracies with such dominant market positions that they can take over their online competitors and eat the traditional retail world. Oligarchic power undermines both economic competition and democracy. By managing access to information and knowledge, Facebook and Google exercise control over public debate in ways that threaten not just open markets but free speech and democratic argument. There is an online feedback loop optimized for manipulation: make money on Google, and then spend the proceeds on paid ads propaganda via Facebook.

The liberal oligarchy, which can be found in different liberal democracies across the globe, takes the form of ‘old elites’ and ‘new classes,’ as Paul Piccone and Christopher Lasch argued. The old elites include long-standing political dynasties and captains of industry, while the new classes encompass networks such as the Tech oligarchy in Silicon Valley,²³ the advocates of ‘capitalist philanthropy,’ and an array of technocrats in governments. They all use the procedures of liberal democracy to increase their power, wealth, and social status while at the same disregarding the more informal manifestations of citizens’ interests.

This drift towards oligarchy also reveals how liberalism can be a catalyst for demagoguery. Liberal indifference to substantive values of truth and goodness involves a tendency to exploit fear and manipulate opinion. Liberalism claims to offer security by guarding us against alien elements – the bigot, the racist, the welfare-scronger and those deemed deficient in ‘entrepreneurship.’ For

²² Barry C. Lynn, *Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction* (Hoboken: John Wiley, 2010).

²³ Joel Kotkin, *The New Class Conflict* (New York: Telos, 2014).

liberals, human beings are rational, self-owning individuals who owe nothing to society – a form of possessive individualism first developed by Hobbes and Locke.²⁴

The liberal practice of oligarchy and demagoguery ends up undermining the principles of liberality on which liberalism rests, including free inquiry, free speech, and tolerance. Liberal politics thereby produces the threats that it supposedly protects us from – ideological tyranny and the closing-down of argument. University ‘safe spaces’ and echo chambers on social media leave people unprepared to deal with views other than their own. The result is a political culture that is increasingly narcissistic and unable to build broad alliances. Paradoxically, liberalism brings about the kind of intolerant illiberalism that it ascribes to all non-liberal positions.

The other element of hyper-liberalism is social egalitarianism and individualized identity politics embraced by both left and right. First the New Left from the mid-1960s onwards took socialism in a doctrinaire direction that was either rationalist-scientific or culturally liberationist but either way abstract and soulless. It preferred progress to tradition, identity to class, and free choice to inheritance or common purpose. Then the New Right combined a libertarian economics with a corporate capture of the state – aligning conservatism with borderless capitalism, fundamentalist faith, and individual freedom without mutual obligation. The political contest descended into the culture wars, fuelling the flames of tribalism and polarization on which the hyper-liberal elites and the anti-liberal insurgents are now thriving. The concern of the political with forming character was lost through a slide into moralism and a politics of the unencumbered self. Thus liberals on left and right have celebrated the diversity of difference at the expense of civic ties that bind people together beyond the divides of class, color, creed, age, wealth, or gender. The loss of a shared national identity and mutual obligations undermined social cohesion and civic patriotism. As Mark Lilla has argued, “in recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial,

²⁴ C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism's message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing."²⁵

Already in the 1970s, Christopher Lasch argued that liberalism was becoming increasingly associated with a move away from the family and mutual obligation towards a culture of narcissistic self-absorption and political retreat into the private sphere of subjective self-expression.²⁶ The 1980s, far from witnessing a revival of civic spirit, saw the rise of yuppie greed and self-gratification whose economic excesses were mirrored in their social transgressions. A bunch of weed-smoking hippies morphed progressively into a generation of middle-aged, cocaine-fuelled financial speculators. The rise of global finance, driven by legislative and regulatory incentives to greed, has divided society and subordinated national interest to multinationals.

Today liberals patronize or simply ignore those who neither support economic-cultural liberalism nor benefit from its effects – remember Hillary Clinton's jibe about half of Trump's supporters as a 'basket of deplorables.' For them as for other voters, free trade, mass immigration, and cosmopolitan multiculturalism have meant greater economic hardship and unnerving cultural compromises. Identity liberalism entrenches a sectarian, minority politics at a time of polarization. The commentator Ross Douthat goes further than Lilla to suggest that

people have a desire for solidarity that cosmopolitanism does not satisfy, immaterial interests that redistribution cannot meet, a yearning for the sacred that secularism cannot answer [...]. A deeper vision than mere liberalism is still required – something like "for God and home and country," as reactionary as that phrase may sound. It *is* reactionary, but then it is precisely older, foundational things that today's liberalism has lost. Until it finds them again, it will face tribalism within its coalition and Trumpism from without, and it will struggle to tame either.²⁷

²⁵ Mark Lilla, 'The End of Identity Liberalism,' *New York Times*, 18 November 2016, available online at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html?_r=0, expanded as *The Once and Future Liberal. After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

²⁶ See Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 1969); *Haven in a Heartless World. The Family Besieged* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977); *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979).

²⁷ Ross Douthat, 'The Crisis for Liberalism,' *New York Times*, 19 November 2016, online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-crisis-for-liberalism.html> (original italics).

Liberalism is no longer hegemonic but it remains the default position of (former) mainstream politics, which no longer commands majority support because the adoption of social-cultural and economic liberalism has undone post-war coalitions between working-class and middle-class people. The ruling elites have lost or are on the back foot but they don't get it. For economic liberals, the non-metropolitan areas are uncompetitive, inefficient, and in need of 'market correction.' Meanwhile for social liberals, working-class cultures cling to a past long gone and backward values that will be swept away by a bright new cosmopolitan future. Neither on the ground of economic interest nor of social identity could left and right liberals find any reason to defend the working class and lower middle class people who are rejecting the status quo.²⁸ The popular revolt against liberal elites opens up a space in which a 'war of position' is fought between the ideology of hyper-liberalism that is ruling but no longer leading and its rivals – starting with the radical right that has disrupted the liberal consensus.

Nationalist traditionalism

Across Western countries and beyond, a new movement of nationalist traditionalism is challenging rightwing liberalism whose origins go back to the New Right of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and their joint intellectual mentor Friedrich von Hayek. Part of the contemporary conjuncture is a surge in support for the radical right that opposes the New Right's global market fundamentalism. Tory arch-Brexiteers, Trump, Europe's far right, and strongmen from Vladimir Putin via Recep Erdogan, Narendra Modi to Xi Jinping are the political expression of nationalist traditionalism, and figures such as Steve Bannon and Alexander Dugin its theorists.

This movement combines economic nationalism ('America First') with an appeal to traditionalist values, which is diametrically opposed to the New Right's fusion of economic globalism with social conservatism. But neither is conservative because both rest on certain libertarian ideas and deploy

²⁸ Edward Alden, *Failure to Adjust: How Americans Got Left Behind in the Global Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class. Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017).

revolutionary means to achieve their ambition of hegemony. The New Right's embrace of the unfettered global free-market as the main mode of social organization undermined community cohesion and the family that it professed to uphold. Nationalist traditionalism's state capture to smash the establishment has strengthened the 'big government' that it promised to abolish. Neither ideology is conservative because both have entrenched the power of corporate money in politics and consolidated the oligarchic hold over democracy.

Nationalist traditionalism is a more accurate characterization of the rightwing insurgency than 'authoritarianism' or 'populism' because the latter two denote a set of methods and tactics that are deployed just as much by movements on the hard left – including Syriza, Podemos, the militant group Momentum around the UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, as well as the late Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. Nationalism is not limited to the right either, but the difference with the revolutionary left is the radical right's intellectual debt to the Traditionalist Movement.²⁹ Its main pioneer was René Guénon (1886-1951), a French philosopher who was raised a Roman Catholic, joined the Freemasons, and in later life converted to Sufi Islam. His legacy has influenced both Bannon and Dugin, in particular the idea that certain ancient faiths – such as medieval Catholicism, eastern Orthodoxy, Sufism, and the Hindu Vedanta – are repositories of shared spiritual truths, revealed to humankind at the dawn of civilization, which are being destroyed by the secular modern West.³⁰ For Guénon, the path to liberation passes through the conversion of small elite groups who act as the vanguard of a spiritual revolution that is necessary for the success of a political revolt against liberal modernity.

Guénon's followers include Julius Evola, an Italian intellectual whose racial theories influenced interwar Fascism. Like Guénon, Evola denounced the spiritual emptiness of liberal modernity but unlike Guénon who emphasized the importance of proper spiritual conversion, Evola promoted a

²⁹ Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁰ René Guénon, *La crise du monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), trans. *The Crisis of the Modern World*, tr. Marco Pallis et al. (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001).

form of religious racism aimed at inciting popular uprisings wherever possible.³¹ Guénon and Evola were also cited by Donald Trump's former strategist Steve Bannon in a widely referenced talk at a 2014 Vatican-based conference hosted by the Human Dignity Institute on 'Poverty and the Common Good: Putting the 'Preferential Option for the Poor' at the Service of Human Dignity.' While distancing himself from the white supremacism of Richard Spencer and other 'alt-right' figures inspired by Evola, Bannon nonetheless shares Evola's belief in political change without waiting for a spiritual transformation. This outlook underpins Bannon's praise for what he called "a global tea-party movement [...] a center-right populist movement of the middle class, the working men and women in the world who are just tired of being dictated to by what we [Breitbart] call the party of Davos."³²

Both before and since being sacked by Trump and then *Breitbart*, Bannon has been dismissed as an apologist of nationalism and nativism. Derided as a self-styled kingmaker who claims to have single-handedly injected the 'alt-right' into the American political mainstream, Bannon is blamed for using Trump, whom he viewed as a "blunt instrument," to inflame cultural and racial tensions – as in the case of the President's defense of far-right counter-protesters against the 'alt-left' attack on Confederate statues in Virginia and Trump's endorsement of the Alabama senate candidate Roy Moore. But while Bannon advocates a politics that is unashamedly anti-globalist and nationalist, the intellectual foundations of his version of traditionalism go much further to include a critique of secularization, Islamic fascism, and capitalism. Binding them together is Bannon's argument that the West has abandoned and even destroyed its "underlying spiritual and moral foundations of Christianity and, really, Judeo-Christian belief."³³

What is striking is that, for the first time since the Republicans' embrace of market fundamentalism under Nixon and Reagan, the capitalist system based on globalization and free trade is seen by the

³¹ Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, tr. Guido Stucco (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1995).

³² Steve Bannon, 'Should Christians impose limits on wealth creation?', at https://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/this-is-how-steve-bannon-sees-the-entire-world?utm_term=.mjEWvYdNK#.jpLXQZKEN

³³ Bannon, 'Should Christians impose limits on wealth creation?'

US President and his (now former) chief counsel as a threat to prosperity. Whatever his intellectual deficiencies and flawed character, Trump grasped a truth that American and wider Western political class ignored for so long – a broken economy that produces America’s ‘forgotten men and women’ and an establishment that despises their ways of life. And whatever his apocalyptic outlook, Bannon has a coherent critique of contemporary capitalism as a force of dispossession. He rejects not just the crony capitalism of statist systems such as China or Russia where the kleptocratic elite enriches itself but also what he terms “the Ayn Rand or the Objectivist School of libertarian capitalism. [...] that form of capitalism is quite different to what I call the "enlightened capitalism" of the Judeo-Christian West. It is a capitalism that really looks to make people commodities, and to objectify people [...].”³⁴

If nationalist traditionalism resonates with voters, it is because the liberal mainstream has failed to recognize the fundamental grievances that are shared by both working-class and lower middle-class voters: liberal-cosmopolitan globalization; the loss of manufacturing and industry; corrupt and incompetent elites; rising inequality of wealth, power, and social status; uncontrolled mass immigration; and the erosion of national sovereignty and identity. Unlike the Republican establishment and his Democrats opponents, Trump understood that many millions of Americans rejected the continuation of the liberal status quo.

But far from offering the leadership required to usher in a new hegemonic settlement, the Trump Administration is an exercise in confused ambiguity. It promised the biggest infrastructure investment since the New Deal and an end to job-exporting trade deals, but in reality enacts protectionist borders to have more ‘neoliberalism in one country’ that serves the interests of the financial oligarchy on Wall Street and the billionaires in Silicon Valley and Hollywood. It professed to help ‘America’s forgotten men and women,’ but in fact has pitted the white working-class against

³⁴ Bannon, ‘Should Christians impose limits on wealth creation?’

fellow workers in the public sector and service as well as against socially conservative immigrants of color.

Holding together a divided and chaotic White House is the one constant in Trump's (very New Left) 'personal politics' – a penchant for plutocratic power. The dismissal of Bannon from the White House and then *Breitbart News* was at the instigation of the Mercer family who co-owns Breitbart and belongs to the US oligarchy. It is the main beneficiary of the tax cuts and controls Trump's economic policy. Both his Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and his former chief economic adviser Gary Cohn are ex-Goldman Sachs who never stopped working for investment banks, and they tempered Bannon's economic nationalism, preventing so far a large-scale trade war with China that would hurt business more than workers. Under Trump, America's oligarchical democracy looks set to continue on an increasingly anti-liberal trajectory – fusing economic libertarianism that dismantles social and environmental protections with militarism and manipulative propaganda that purports to reflect the 'will of the many' while handing the levers to the plutocratic few.

Elsewhere in the West, the new radical right combines nationalist traditionalism with elements of social progressivism in ways that are intellectually incoherent but electorally appealing. Movements such as Pegida in Germany, the Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary, and Bloc/Úsvit in the Czech Republic purport to represent the downtrodden people against corrupt elites that have lost touch with their citizens. Such movements favor economic intervention to shield populations from the worst effects of globalization, free trade, and transnational capitalism on workers' rights, wages, and living standards. They also claim to defend free speech and progressive policies such as support for feminism and gay rights. Much of this is driven by their desire to protect national and European culture from the impact of mass immigration and what they view as the creeping Islamization of the West. While some leaders of these groups try to draw a distinction between the supposedly fascist ideology of Islam and ordinary Muslims, the claim that Islam is incompatible with the West goes

against the anti-fascist principle of religious liberty, freedom of conscience and the commitment to free speech regardless of class, color or creed.

Compared with neo-Nazi and neo-fascist movements of the past, the new radical right has been more influential by injecting ideas into the mainstream and thereby shifting the political discourse to the point where some of their values have become the new norm. Part of the problem in confronting such movements is the liberal establishment tendency to vilify their supporters. As Jamie Bartlett remarks, “it’s lazy and simplistic to call Pegida supporters racist ill-informed bigots. The people who do so not only misunderstand them; they risk making the problem worse, because it provides them with the ammunition that the liberal elites are trying to silence them.”³⁵ Crucially, Bartlett notes that new movements and their ability to mobilize people offer some form of common purpose and even belonging absent from mainstream professional politics – replacing “the empty consumerism, the crap precarious jobs, the fragmented communities. In a strange way, they are a form of the ‘identity politics’ they claim to dislike to much.”³⁶ Hyper-liberalism is exacerbating the worst aspects of nationalist traditionalism – including a mix of libertarians, ‘alt-righters,’ and far-right white supremacists – because it reinforces popular distrust in mainstream media and politicians who are widely perceived to ignore concerns about the levels of immigration and the loss of settled ways of life.

One-nation conservatism

The other ideology that is challenging the liberal right is one-nation conservatism. Originally developed by Edmund Burke and Benjamin Disraeli, it is being renewed by figures such as Roger Scruton, Jesse Norman MP, and Nick Timothy who is the former chief of staff to the British Prime Minister Theresa May. She has distanced herself from Margaret Thatcher’s economic liberalism and David Cameron’s social liberalism in an attempt to restore a more traditional Toryism that

³⁵ Jamie Bartlett, *Radicals: Outsiders Changing the World* (London: Windmill Books, 2018), p. 76.

³⁶ Bartlett, *Radicals*, p. 85.

combines greater economic justice with more social solidarity. Inspired by Timothy and other one-nation conservatives such as George Freeman MP, May's speeches proclaim that "we [the Conservatives] don't just believe in markets, but in communities. We don't just believe in individualism, but in society," while also emphasizing the importance of "the bonds of family, community, citizenship" and the crucial role of government to "nurture those relationships, networks and institutions" that make a "shared society" work.³⁷

May's words have not translated into any transformative action that is even less likely after losing her parliamentary majority in the June 2017 election and failing to formulate a clear position on Brexit. However, contemporary one-nation conservatism reflects a renewed Burkean vision that seeks "to reject the ideological templates provided by the socialist left and the libertarian right and to embrace a new centre-ground in which government steps up – and not back – to act on behalf of us all."³⁸

What is perhaps most striking is the critique of economic liberalism. May's attack on financial elites and tax-dodging multinationals, her promise to tackle the pay gap between managers and employees, her embrace of industrial policy, and her championing of some workers' representation on company boards represents potentially a decisive break with four decades of market fundamentalism. Against the seemingly inevitable forward march of globalization and the triumph of market selfishness over shared prosperity, she wants to deploy an active state and legal system to help shape an economy at the service of society: "We don't hate the state, we value the role that only the state can play," and "it's time to [...] employ the power of government for the good of the people."³⁹ In a renewal of the Conservative commitment to subsidiarity, she favors stronger local

³⁷ Theresa May, 2016 speech to launch leadership campaign, Birmingham, 11 July 2016, full text available online at <http://www.ukpol.co.uk/2016/07/11/theresa-may-2016-speech-to-launch-leadership-campaign/>; 'The new centre ground', speech to the Conservative Party, Birmingham 5 October 2016, full text available online at <http://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2016/10/change-has-got-to-come-mays-conference-speech-full-text.html>; 'The shared society', London, 9 January 2017, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-shared-society-prime-ministers-speech-at-the-charity-commission-annual-meeting>

³⁸ May, 'The centre ground.'

³⁹ May, 'The centre ground.'

and regional self-government (here echoing the radical Tory legacy of Joseph Chamberlain's 'municipal socialism' promoted by Timothy) and also a strategic role for central government to invest in housing, research and development, and high-tech manufacturing.

Until she lost her majority and authority, May's aim was to replace Thatcher's and Osborne's trickle-down economics with a form of distributism by raising wages and sharing assets – not old-style top-down redistribution through tax-and-spend. With proper organization and leadership, she could have been the first Conservative leader in nearly forty years to reject Gladstone's 'Whig conservatism' with its emphasis on the unfettered market and self-help in favor of an updated version of 'High Toryism' with its focus on national unity, mutual assistance, unconditional support of the truly needy and a measure of protectionism.

However, one-nation conservatism is in an impasse over championing global free trade while also trying to build a more social market at home. Unrestricted free trade on the global market without regional tariff agreements is likely to hurt the very workers that one-nation conservatives claim to defend when, like May, they speak of an 'economy for the many, not the privileged few.' Workers may be appeased by promised restrictions on immigration, but may become less so when these restrictions fail to materialize (more free trade with the rest of the world will lead to more economic migrants from abroad) and living standards continue to stagnate. Moreover, a likely desperate recourse to the most uninhibited global exponents of financial and business practice could prove incompatible with the forging of a domestic social market. Nor, given the nature of globalization, is it easy to achieve this in one country acting alone.

And on the other hand, while there is a role for selective and temporary state protection for certain sectors, it is worth remembering that protectionism, in understandable reaction to the unequal predations of 'free trade,' has almost always reinforced inter-state conflict. It also fails to match the operation of capital at the global level where more targeted political cooperation is needed to

encourage a model of globalization which works for all. Regional organizations, such as ASEAN, Mercosur, or the EU – which establish privileged trade access under agreed rules between a group of nations – offer precisely the ‘third way’ between free-trade and protection that tends to promote international pacification.

Meanwhile, one-nation conservative ideas for domestic renewal are not consistent. Although rightly motivated by a desire to give better opportunities to children from low-income families, the commitment to ever-more social mobility is too limited an ideal. It needs to be supplemented by a recognition that most people will not prove clear ‘winners.’ A problem with mere meritocracy, as the Brexit vote and the election of Trump suggest, is that it breeds a dangerous resentment amongst the many who carry out necessary but unglamorous tasks, and remain valuably rooted in one place. These people also deserve adequate, comfortable provision and a sense of dignity and respect consequent upon appreciation for their service.

A more genuinely Burkean perspective beyond liberalism would involve a search for a restored sense of belonging for all, for more holistic fulfillment in work (in resistance to the creeping proletarianization of labor) and for the combining of work with the needs of family and community. This idea of a balance of interests at the service of the common good also points the way to a more ethical economy. Instead of offering mere compensation for the side-effects of globalization, a true one-nation conservative approach has to focus on injecting social purpose into economic profit.

The point is to provide fundamental reforms, which would begin to change the nature of the market itself by aligning the executive with the long-term interests of the company, its shareholders, employers, consumers, and communities where businesses operate. This would go beyond mere representation of workers on company boards, which is nevertheless important and welcome. Virtuous entrepreneurship, if undertaken with integrity and not *just* for instrumental purpose, can help increase profit and remuneration because it promotes innovation and productivity through

employee retention, job satisfaction, and participation in the workplace.

One-nation conservatism can only hope to defeat the liberal New Right and nationalist traditionalism if it fights a ‘war of position’ in which it reflects the common sense of the people who are far more Burkean in their practice of social virtues – such as generosity, loyalty, trust, and honor – than much of the political class. The Conservative MP Jesse Norman has articulated what such a Burkean revival of contemporary conservative thinking could look like.⁴⁰ He draws on Burke’s “deep philosophical critique of political rationalism and revolutionary ideology” in order to develop a conservative politics that is committed to conserving a country’s main institutions and traditions, including liberty and the common good. For Norman, one-nation conservatism has to reject both the liberal idea of the atomized self and the collectivist ‘will of the masses’ so beloved of ideological vanguards like nationalist traditionalism.

In accordance with Burke’s search for a radical yet traditional middle path, Norman’s conservative politics is about instilling virtue and leading by example. That would involve upholding social order and parliamentary democracy in the national interest, balancing rights with obligations, renewing trust and cooperation, rebuilding institutional character, replacing crony capitalism with a socially embedded market economy, as well as devolving central state power to localities and communities. The test of one-nation conservatism will be whether it can truly avoid either liberal economism or liberal statism by forging such a social market. As with nationalist traditionalism, either a purely buccaneering approach to globalization or a xenophobic soft-fascism at home would be likely to ensure a backsliding in either respective direction.

Tech utopianism (and retro leftism)

A very different challenge to the domination of hyper-liberalism comes from the far left side of the political spectrum in the form of tech utopianism, which builds partly on accelerationist ideas and

⁴⁰ Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet* (London: William Collins, 2013).

partly on a retro leftist vision associated with 1970s statism. This is true of the Labour leadership around Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Spain's Podemos, and Greece's Syriza, and in a different sense Bernie Sanders in the USA. Tech utopian politics has its roots in the second phase of the New Left with a focus on a rationalist-scientific Marxism pioneered by Louis Althusser and Perry Anderson.⁴¹ At the hands of post-capitalists such as Paul Mason, real Marxism – contained in a two-page section of Marx' *Grundrisse*, entitled 'The Fragment on Machines' – turns out to be all about technological innovation, not market laws modeled on laws of nature. Economic cycles are not primarily governed by boom and bust linked to the iron law of unstable but ultimately balancing supply and demand. Rather, the economy evolves according to waves of innovation in finance and technology that incubate revolutionary change.

Driving this process is social knowledge, which replaces the social relations of labor production as the main dynamic of capitalism and with it the worker as the revolutionary subject. The Blue Labour thinker Jonathan Rutherford summarizes the position of the revolutionary left well:

The future of society belongs to a higher educated caste of information workers. Their taxes will pay for a universal basic income to support a redundant, workless working class. History will move rapidly toward human perfection by computer power and the mastery of the new historical subject. The totalitarian implications can be overlooked.⁴²

The other roots of tech utopianism go back to a further shift in the Marxist tradition to the *operaismo* movement in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, which combined a critique of centralized Marxism-Leninism with an alternative focused on direct worker action rather than the battles of representative democracy and the collective action of parties or trade unions. Like the New Left's shift away from work and workers, *operaismo* has morphed into the *post-operaismo* of Hardt and Negri's multitude – a global network of militant movements spanning anti-globalization groups,

⁴¹ Jon Cruddas, *A Renewed Public Philosophy for the Left*, unpublished manuscript, ch. 1

⁴² Jonathan Rutherford, 'In Common,' unpublished manuscript.

anti-war mobilization, Occupy, on-campus agitation, and now the protest politics of Syriza, Podemos, and Momentum.⁴³

Common to *post-operaismo* and accelerationist post-capitalism is the belief in a future economy without work or workers driven by a process of technological de-materialization that replaces the physical world of manufacturing and industry with the virtual reality of knowledge, information, and other intangible assets. It also replaces the political economy of land, labor, and capital with a new knowledge economy of networks, leisure, and transferable skills. As the old workers become the new self-employed entrepreneurs (or, alternatively, the lazy leisure class), the wage-labor conflict at the heart of capitalism withers away and with it the class system.

If this sounds eerily like the social-democratic liberalism of Clinton and Blair, it is because – as both Cruddas and Rutherford point out – tech utopians agree with social-democrat liberals that the future of the left lies in a shift away from the working-class and the labor interest towards the middle-class urban salariat and the globalized, networked youth. They also share a retreat behind variants of neo-classical economics, which is a simplified version of Hayek and Keynes respectively. Whereas ‘third-way’ liberals in the 1990s privatized, deregulated, liberalized, and re-distributed some small proceeds from corporate capitalism, the tech utopians harken back to the 1970s in their desire to tax the tech giants, borrow billions for centralized bureaucracy, and nationalize vast swaths of industry. Underpinning their shared neo-classical economics is a utilitarian and deontological model of justice. Both view just social relations in terms of utility-maximization and rights-based welfare. Concretely, they combine GDP growth, which is seen as the best means to achieve ‘the greatest happiness of the great numbers,’ with the provision of individual entitlements that are disconnected from contribution and increasingly rationalized by the managerial state. Social-democratic liberalism is a model of Kantian ethics of context-less duties with Millian liberty and Weberian rationalist statecraft. For its part, tech utopianism fuses Benthamite calculus

⁴³ Frederick Harry Pitts, ‘Beyond the Fragment: postoperaismo, postcapitalism and Marx’s ‘Notes on machines’, 45 years on’, *Economy and Society*, 46:3-4 (2017), pp. 324-45.

with a heavy dose of Fabian centralism and a Trotskyist embrace of ‘permanent revolution’ against the working-class.

Crucially, neither social-democratic liberalism nor tech utopianism offer the left any prospect of intellectual renewal in the hope of replacing the hegemony of the liberal right or the nationalist-traditionalist insurgency. The reason is that both fail to challenge the fundamental logic of contemporary capitalism – the cultural conditions as well as the economic workings that involve destruction and dispossession through the concentration of wealth and power as well as the commodification of everyday life. The capitalist economy destroys human attachment to, and affections for, relationships and institutions by re-embedding them in impersonal transactions. Such an economy abstracts people and production from value and treats everyone and everything as a commodity with a market price.

The reason for this blindness about capitalism is that both ideologies are grounded in a philosophy of abstraction from our embodied humanity and from our embedding in nature. As Cruddas argues, social-democratic liberalism and tech utopianism rest on statism, rationalized welfare, technological determinism, hyper-individualism, abstract cosmopolitanism, a libertarian conception of freedom to opt out from work and citizenship, passive consumerism, a denial of agency, and an anti-humanism dressed up as techno-scientific enhancement.⁴⁴ The organizational energy of new movement-parties and the charisma of their leaders cannot mask the unthinking orthodoxy that prevents an intellectual renaissance, which is necessary for a leftwing counter-hegemony.

Here the lessons from Bernie Sanders’ politics provide some building blocks for a renewal of the left. First of all, he struck a chord with the disaffected working class precisely because he connected the fate of the Rust Belt factory workers to that of people in the public sector and the services industry, speaking of shared interests and values in ways that bound them to the struggling middle-

⁴⁴ Cruddas, ‘The humanist left must challenge the rise of cyborg socialism.’

class. Second, Sanders led a political insurgency that was positive, offering hope and transformative action to a broad coalition of working families:⁴⁵ pro-worker and pro-small business, promising criminal justice reform plus Medicare for all; better social care plus free college tuition. Third, his critique of America's 'rigged system' was informed by a conception of justice that transcends individual freedoms-as-rights and collective utility in the direction of the common good.

But much of this was under-developed and got lost in an acrimonious contest for the Democratic nomination, in which the Sanders campaign was arguably guilty of virtue-signaling its moral superiority and accusing the Clinton campaign of underhand tactics. In turn, the Clinton machine was guilty of virtue-signaling her experience and dismissing the Sanders candidacy as protest rather than a serious attempt to gain power and govern the country. So far Sanders and the Democrats have failed to articulate an alternative to Clinton's hyper-liberalism that not only replaces the global free-market with a moral economy but can also build a common good politics based on a balance between individual rights and mutual obligations.

Ethical socialism

With its roots in the traditions of Romantic philosophy, the guild and cooperative movement, as well as Christian social teaching, ethical socialism has the conceptual resources to develop a renewed public philosophy based on a moral critique of capitalism and the re-imagining of a just social order. Romanticism is central to such a project because it sought to chart an alternative modernity around nature, human creativity, and the imagination, which outflanks the binary divide between the rationalist and empiricist strands of the Enlightenment by binding reason to habit, feeling, and faith. Connected with this is a wider divide in philosophy since the seventeenth century between humanism and the modern scientific revolution and the concomitant separation of economics from moral philosophy – whose intellectual origins go back to the thirteenth and

⁴⁵ Nancy Fraser, 'From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond,' *American Affairs*, 1:4 (Winter 2017), pp. 46-64.

fourteenth centuries, in particular the split between a metaphysics of participation and an ontology of immanence that ultimately underpins accelerationist anti-humanism.⁴⁶ This fundamental division between an ethical and an economistic outlook runs through the history of socialism both before and after Marx. Culture and society, not state and market, are the main foundations on which ethical socialism builds a politics of the common good.

One reason why Romantic philosophy is so important to the history of socialism is its traditional and radical character. English Romantics like Blake, Shelley and Coleridge, with their German contemporaries Novalis, Hölderlin, and Friedrich Schlegel, or their French counterparts Joseph Joubert, Chateaubriand, Maine de Biran, and the young Victor Hugo – for all their diverse modes of political radicalism – actually refused the impersonal ontology of immanence just as much as they refused the voluntarist politics of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Instead, they combined a commitment to radical reform with a deep respect for tradition, notably the fusion of Greco-Roman philosophy with Christianity that bequeathed to us the dignity of the person, the ancient liberties, virtue, the common good, and citizenship.⁴⁷

Romanticism – especially in Germany with Novalis and Schlegel and in England with William Morris and John Ruskin – transmitted and developed the legacy of Burke. He rejected the despotism of the *ancien régime* and the tyranny of the French Revolution in favor of a politics based on embodied covenantal relations, not abstract contractual ties, human association rather than individualism or collectivism, affection for the ‘little platoons’ and attachment to institutions instead of human being as carriers of historical laws or soulless economic agents.

Far from being confined to the conservative tradition, Burkean thematics shape ethical socialism: the idea of local government that educates the citizenry to participate in the public realm; the idea of

⁴⁶ Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: the creation of hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Intellectual Traditions and Responsible Knowledge* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

⁴⁷ Adrian Pabst, ‘Fall and Redemption: the Romantic alternative to liberal pessimism,’ *Telos*, 178 (Spring 2017), pp. 33-53.

parliamentary scrutiny of the government; the proportional participation of all classes of working people – not just property owners – in the affairs of the state; the right of the people to resistance as a last resort against unjustified tyranny; the idea of blending both authority and freedom by conceptualizing the latter not as a rational right of the individual but rather as a system of both duties and privileges; the need for a renewable aristocracy that admits to its rank outstanding citizens and can thus assume the responsible leadership of the state with a view to the common good; the political primacy of land ownership over the ownership of mobile goods (in particular paper money).

Burke's conception on virtue as 'principled practice' is of particular significance to ethical socialism because it charts a radical yet traditional middle ground beyond extremes. This middle ground not only echoes Aristotelian and Thomist virtue ethics but also extends it in a more democratic direction. Virtue is democratic because its practice is open to all, especially the supreme virtues of love, trust, hope, mercy, kindness, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It is also benignly non-democratic because the practice of virtue requires guidance through time by the already virtuous, skilled, generous, and wise at every level of society from the plumber to the wing-commander. The transmission of virtue from generation to generation involves a legitimate place for hierarchy in terms of educative guidance, gradual initiation, and the conveying of tradition. Besides formal modes of representation, democracy in the Burkean sense requires more hierarchical leadership by honorable elites *and* greater popular participation.⁴⁸

Crucially, virtue as a 'principled practice' is not found in the innermost recesses of the human mind nor can it be inductively known from experience but rather is embedded in social relationships – the 'customs, manners, and habits of life' that shape our everyday existence, which encompasses work, family, community, and country. These Burkean themes run through the ethical socialist politics of the common good, starting with Morris who redefines virtue: it ceases to be Machiavelli's military

⁴⁸ This draws on Milbank and Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue*, pp. 1-10, esp. p. 7.

proress or the a-political moral virtue of Rousseau and Smith and instead becomes the principle by which we translate the ethics of love into practice. The virtue of charity, when applied to labor, elevates work into art: “the aim of art [is] to destroy the curse of labour by making work the pleasurable satisfaction of our impulse towards energy, and giving to that energy hope of producing something worth its exercise.”⁴⁹

Morris’ defense of the dignity of work was sparked by his moral outrage over the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the commodification of society, which he shared with Ruskin. The other major figure in the development of ethical socialism in the English-speaking world was R.H. Tawney and his distinction between two approaches: first, an economic approach based on utility-maximization and the central administration of things, which are compatible with both state-sponsored and market-driven capitalism; second, an ethical approach anchored in the practice of solidarity and self-government as a resistance against the commodification of life and dispossession of inheritance, as well as a pursuit to realize one’s vocation and talents – how to live a good life.⁵⁰ Such an outlook is diametrically opposed to accelerationist transhumanism that tries to transcend our embodied existence in a quest for alien immortality in outer space.

Ethical socialism was until recently part of the social-democratic left and the labor movement. In the USA, it inspired both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy who were arguably the most visionary voices of the civil rights movement and the Democrats in the post-war era. Their politics sought to build a new coalition between the more liberal urban middle class and the more socially conservative small-town and rural working class⁵¹ – a coalition most recently mobilized by Bill Clinton and much less so by Barack Obama but in each case for predominantly electoral purposes. In Britain, a number of Labour Party leaders – including Keir Hardie, Ramsey MacDonald, and

⁴⁹ William Morris, ‘Signs of Change,’ in *Useful Work v. Useless Toil* (London: Penguin, 2008 [1896]), p. 34.

⁵⁰ R.H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (London: Bell, 1921); idem., *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), pp. 79-132.

⁵¹ Adrian Pabst, ‘Fellowship of Love: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s legacy and the renewal of the Labor tradition,’ *Telos*, 182 (Spring 2018), pp. 139-60.

George Lansbury – “were all driven by a profound sense of human fellowship forged alongside Morris in the 1880s.”⁵² Others, like Labour’s first post-war Prime Minister Clement Attlee, adopted some principles of ethical socialist politics, including ‘parliamentary socialism’ and a popular patriotism based on a sense of obligations and duties.⁵³ The ‘conservative socialism’ of Tawney, Morris, and Ruskin was also taken up by leading intellectuals such as E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, who developed left philosophy in a very different direction compared with the second phase of the New Left whose scientific Marxism laid the foundations for the materialist politics of social-democratic liberalism and the new tech utopianism. The same applies to both the non-statist guild socialism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon who rejected scientific Marxist statism and the Catholic personalism of Emmanuel Mounier who resisted any accommodation with fascism.⁵⁴

Thus the question for the moderate left today is whether it has the intellectual hart-headedness and the political courage to renew the legacy of ethical socialism in the ‘war of position’ with the nationalist traditionalists and tech utopians. Earlier moments of left revisionism have yielded little more than reheated orthodoxy combined with a tactical repositioning in order to appeal to different sections of the electorate. Faced with deeply divided societies and a polarized politics, the task for the moderate left is to develop what Jonathan Rutherford, echoing Gramsci, calls a patriotic socialism that is ‘national popular.’

The unfolding ‘war of position’ over humanism

Today, the main political resistance to hyper-liberalism comes not from one-nation conservatism or ethical socialism but rather from nationalist traditionalism and tech utopianism. Both are in secret collusion. The Tory arch-Brexiteers and the Trump administration have turned to the state as the instrument of still faster and more complete deregulation. At the same time, a greater executive

⁵² Cruddas, *A Renewed Public Philosophy for the Left*, ch. 1.

⁵³ John Bew, *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee* (London: Riverrun, 2016).

⁵⁴ Jean-Claude Michéa, *Les Mystères de la Gauche : De l’idéal des Lumières au triomphe du capitalisme absolu* (Paris: Flammarion, 2013).

capture of the state may permit a greater overriding of welfare and work protections which democratic opinion tends to resist. The marginalized masses can be bought off with militarism and protectionism, besides more extensive if more permanently degrading welfare provisions where absolutely necessary. Moreover, the state bailing out of the banks since 2008 means that a market-state entirely subordinate to the interests of capital has now evolved into being also a state-market, for which government monopoly of both force and currency provision has become essential to the management of an economy permanently dependent on a negative cycle of debt. In this fashion, it could be that the Chinese hybrid of brutal market competition and tight state control is becoming normative rather than aberrant.

Such an ‘ultra-neoliberal’ fusion already speaks competing anti-humanist languages. On the left, we are seeing a celebration of the further blurring of the boundaries between genders, between childhood and youth, between casual and committed, and between human, animal, and machine. All these blurrings will increase human *danger* and erode the civic institutions and relationships of affection and attachment on which we all daily rely. The current outcry over sexual harassment is surely a symptom of this, as is the popularity of Jordan Peterson. In response, the double hydra of state and market will assume ever-more control over processes of reproduction, production, leisure and an education whose humanist basis is being abandoned in favor of transhumanism. As Jamie Bartlett reports, transhumanists in politics pursue total morphological freedom, which they views an extension of the sexual freedom that we owe to the 1960s libertarian revolution.⁵⁵ In this manner they confirm the thesis by the French novelist Michel Houellebecq that this revolution has left people atomized and increasingly incapable of forming lasting relationships, which fuels a desire for self-gratification that perpetuates this condition – a downward spiral of unfulfilled desire.

On the right, we are witnessing a creeping integration of ‘alt-right’ themes. There is a pseudo-scientific return of ‘race’ as a supposedly objective category, with an accompanying legitimization of

⁵⁵ Bartlett, *Radicals*, pp. 9-50.

racial stereotyping and racial preference. An unabashed social Darwinism favoring neo-eugenics is also resurgent, as is a post-humanist accelerationism less constrained than that of the left, and happy to countenance the abandonment of humanity as we know it and any notions of ecological balance in favor of a fantasized cosmic reconstitution.

Thus a double convergence has been at work in Western politics. For the past half-century, the liberal left and right converged around variants of individualism. Now the extremes are converging around variants of statism. Neither can be mapped onto the old opposition of left *versus* right because both view politics as oscillating between two other binary poles: the isolated individual with her rights and liberties, and the collective power of the state either to secure or override them. Jean Rohou has shown that, ever since Bodin and Hobbes, absolute state sovereignty and contracting between isolated individuals have been two halves of a modern politics seeking a purely formal, legal control over supposedly anarchic ‘natural’ human forces.⁵⁶ This ‘biopolitics’ is a despairing refusal of the possibility of ancient and medieval civic self-government, which at its best involved a dispersal of rule throughout the social and economic order.

For common to both statism and individualism is a denial of the paradoxically reciprocal hierarchies of social division that characterize Europe and other civilizations – intellectual/manual, aristocratic/popular, high culture/folk culture. This pattern of vertical reciprocity is precisely what the purely horizontal axis of hyper-liberalism and its main ideological challengers exclude. It collapses the hierarchical and mediatory axis of political culture into the horizontal false binary of (social-democratic or revolutionary) ‘left’ as the ‘rule of the many’ *versus* (conservative or radical) ‘right’ as the rule of a single strong power – state or market or both at once.

Therefore the genuine alternative is a combination of virtuous and wise elites with greater popular participation in the polity and the economy, as well as a greater sense of mutual obligation and

⁵⁶ Jean Rohou, *Le XVII^e Siècle: Une révolution de la condition humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

hierarchy of honor, alongside much more real justice and creative freedom. The necessary involvement of all the people and of an integrating central force must be supplemented by the role of the intermediate ‘few,’ both in the sense of virtuous, wise elites at every level and of multiple associations operating between the level of state diktat and privately contracted choice.

Such a paradoxical combination can be conceptualized as a public philosophy of the common good. In the economy, the common good signals a shift from market capitalism to economic justice and reciprocity. In society, it signals a shift from individualism to social solidarity and fraternal relations. And politically, it signals a shift from the minority politics of vested interests and balkanized group identity to a majority politics anchored in a balance of interests and a shared sense of belonging. Linking together common good economics and politics is an emphasis on the embedding of state and market in the intermediary institutions of civil society, which give people agency – professional associations, profit-sharing businesses, trade unions, universities, ecological groups, and devolved government.

Therefore the alternative to tech utopianism and nationalist traditionalism is not social democracy or liberal conservatism, which history has now overtaken. It would rather be ethical socialism and one-nation conservatism, or even a fusion of both in a kind of ‘conservative socialism’ – combining a more just and socially purposed market with more allowance for attachments to religion, custom and place than the left has been happy with since the 1960s. Such a mode of common good politics would remain committed to a traditional humanism, whose metaphysical undergirding now, it would seem, only religion and spiritually sensitive secular traditions provide.

By contrast, an extended Trumpism would only transcend hyper-liberalism in a newly fascistic, anti-humanist and anti-traditional religion sense. Here it makes sense to invoke Michel Houellebecq’s novel *Soumission*, which is less about the dangers of creeping Islamization and much more about the idea that no society, even post-Christian Europe, can survive without religion. As

one of the novel's characters remarks, without Christianity, the European nations are no more than bodies without souls – zombies. Tellingly, the novel ends by predicting that French society will get what it deserves, a state run by those who believe in something bigger than mere material wealth and cultural narcissism.

The task is to build a new cross-class, cross-cultural and cross-national alliance that can appeal to people of all faiths and none around a politics based on work, family, place and cultural belonging. Common good politics can offer a radical middle with paradoxical combinations: a desire for fiscal discipline *and* greater economic justice; for further devolution of power to people *and* a more active role of government; for more global trade *and* a strategy for national renewal; for greater patriotism *and* a stronger international outlook. These paradoxical combinations are an indication that a politics of virtue and the common good can be popular and have majority support just because it reconciles the estranged interests – capital *vs.* labor, young *vs.* old, north *vs.* south, urban *vs.* rural, religious *vs.* secular – which hyper-liberals and their rivals view as diametrically opposed.

The new pivot in politics

We live in troubled times. A sense of anger and abandonment is spreading among people who feel humiliated, unable to live the lives they hope for, and powerless to shape the forces that dominate them and those they care about most. Among those forces are liberal and libertarian ideas of liberty as free choice and the pursuit of individual happiness. This is understood as including the right to terminate the lives of the older or the suffering. What is legitimated here is not a genuinely desirable democratic right but instead the will to power of some over others and essentially the strong over the weak. If the unique value of each human person is not upheld, then nothing prevents ending the lives of children and adults deemed to be too ill or too weak. This is social Darwinism under a new guise. Ironically, the science-based enlightened liberalism ends up on the same side as the Nietzschean will-to-power that liberals like Steven Pinker in his new book *Enlightenment Now*

associate with all the evils of modernity.⁵⁷ Thus the humanist foundations of equality and dignity are once again under attack.

Both libertarian and liberal thinking points towards a new form of biological totalitarianism based on a refusal of all value except the will of the individual. Neither the liberal centre nor the resurgent extremes have learned the lessons of Aldous Huxley's warnings about totalitarian temptations in *Brave New World*. A control over reproduction is now more easily attained through self-release and promiscuity than self-discipline and fidelity. This allows the state to deal with the individual directly, rather than through the mediation of couples and families, which can offer more resistance to central intervention. Much of liberal feminism and minority rights activism too readily colludes with this underlying reality. These movements also embrace the commodification of human reproduction, which becomes a matter of contractual exchange – as with surrogacy. Precisely because such matters raise complex ethical questions, economic-social liberalism with its cult of pure individual rights or an outright denial of human dignity altogether is insufficient. Moreover, it is too rarely noticed that sexual permissiveness has today, as Huxley already noted in his dystopian novel, become a kind of opiate that covertly reconciles people to the loss of other freedoms – at the workplace, in the locality and beyond.

This is not to overlook real social progress. Women and minorities are freer and have more rights and opportunities than before. All the discrimination that persists is a denial of human equality on which humanism rests. At the same time, greater personal autonomy coincides with a growing sense of people's powerlessness. Liberalism and libertarianism have liberated us from bonds of family, community and nation but the impersonal mechanisms of state and market that have replaced those interpersonal ties leave most of us at once free yet lacking in agency. The vision of humanity shared by liberals and libertarians offers freedom of choice, yet subordinates people to forces that cannot be governed democratically and that disregard dignity and human flourishing. Yet behind the isolated

⁵⁷ Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: the case for reason, science, humanism, and progress* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

individual stands the state. It can either give in to totalitarian temptations or, on the contrary, uphold principles that grant human existence a unique status. It can either promote death or choose life. The defence of humanism is the new pivot in politics.

A common good politics is about nurturing a sense of fraternity, which in the West we inherited from the fusion of Greco-Roman philosophy with biblical revelation and which secular modernity has marginalized by unleashing the forces of dispossession that are capitalism, statism, liberalism, and globalization. Europe and the wider West will not survive and influence global affairs unless they renew their unique legacy and can find ways of instilling the practice of virtue in pursuit of the common good.