A Return to the New and a Journey to the Old: Looking Backwards, Sideways, and Forwards at the Right from the Left in a World of Mirrors

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Abstract: An analysis of what constitutes the new far right today involves reflecting on the drifting of what was once the left, via collectivist, culturalist, and communitarian thinking, towards what we might now call a postleft; and on the movement of politics to the right, such that an earlier centre-right formation might look like a very leftist one by today's standards. We need to look a little more closely at the mutual leakages of ideas between what was formerly left and right. The right, historically, has been good at piggybacking on the language of the left; but now, the new far right has been able to return to an old language of fascism and a *völkisch* imagination, in part enabled by a postleft's adoption of antirational politics and a victimhood claim as the basis of legitimation. A reprise of the concerns of fascisms in their 'core' period, when their central had not yet been discredited after the defeats suffered by the iconic fascist powers in 1945, is now possible; 'neo'-fascisms had had to hide this connection, but could return to their older language as the counter-language of the left vanished.

Keywords: new right, far right, postleft; shibbolethics; voluntary Gleichschaltung; fascism; völkisch nationalism, Bonapartism, populism

Introduction, c. 2024: Where are We?

At moments of defeat, the Old Left, or the remnants of it that keeps its own company over doleful glasses of cheap beer and acidic wine in greasy bars, return to the iconic moments of defeat that dominate our lives; and inevitably, to the dramatic opening passages of Karl Marx's 18th Brumaire:[1] first as tragedy, then as farce; and then, in descending order, slapstick and limerick, epigram, epithet, and pun. But the keystone of the archway of these strange discussions without external support is of course repetition. And this is part of a series of questions before us: how new is the New Right? Does the New Right see itself as, call itself, or identify with, that term? Is Far Right a better one, and does it matter that neither this, nor 'neo-fascist', are actor-centric categories? Are we, the pretend-remnants of an Old Left that hasn't the language to speak to a new-new 'left' that has abandoned both the old and the new left, the best-placed to make any of these judgements? How many of us actually exist, outside of the six people in a bar? If we are to be denied the smug satisfaction of self-pity, and rise above it to see why we are sitting here today thinking about the New Right, what is to be done, and who is to do it, we might need a few historical reflections to orient ourselves.

How does the new far right relate to older far rights? Does the collapse of all plausible left positions and alternatives after the end of the Cold War owe anything to the attacks of an older right, or bear some responsibility in the growth of a new right? (To the latter part of this question, we can emphatically answer 'yes'; and this essay is largely

concerned with the 'how' part of that question.) Can we use the 'f' word to describe these new rights: are we in a new age of neo-fascism, or do we see a return to old fascism, admittedly with variations and disguises? How internationalist, or national, are these new rights? Do they collaborate? To what extent does this have to do with democracy, or with populism? Is any of this facilitated by new media in a new age? Do they have new mythologies of history, or mythologies that they call history, and do they have a vision of the future? All these questions seem a bit slippery when we're told that left and right make no sense in a post-ideological age, where alliances are affective and allusive, and in a moral world where vegan extremists in Europe see affinities in the allegedly superior culturally-vegetarian population of India, unable to read the upper-caste exclusionary markers of the claim to purity contained in Brahmanical dietetics.

How would we place our theoretical vegan on a spectrum of left to right? What this essay attempts to do is to look at manifestations of far-right or new far-right politics from the perspective of left attempts to understand far-right formations; the confusions and crossovers this entails; and contemporary manifestations of far-right formations. Simultaneously, of course, we are looking at a series of self-definitions or subjectivities of and from the left, some more and some less self-conscious. This is a clumsy approximation in both its aspects: Pierre Bourdieu once reminded us that the field of cultural production is both 'a series of positions' and 'a series of position-takings' at one and the same time, in a reciprocal and mutual acknowledgement;[2] and Werner Heisenberg pointed out that it was impossible to track the velocity of a particle and to ascertain its position at the same time (his 'uncertainty principle').[3] Both point to a situation in which a left analysis of the right involves a good deal of self-reflection on the shifting meanings of what it is to be on the left; and so it shall be with this essay.

Drifting Parameters

This much we know, and we wouldn't have had to leave our barstools to find out: 'right' makes more sense terminologically at the moment than 'left'. Instead of a left, we are witnessing instead a drift away from what was once the left, via collectivist, culturalist, and communitarian thinking, through identitarianism, to 'woke', all of which bears little resemblance to anything we'd recognize as 'left'; let us call them, for the purposes of this set of arguments, the postleft.[4] And increasingly, it is easy to make fun of or discredit what passes as the left, and still, to some extent, calls itself that name: every ridiculous act of a group of people without a movement but with increasingly radical and impossible emotive slogans can be equated by their detractors with 'the evils of communism' and used to demonstrate that at the very least, it is now conservatives who are on the side of reason.

The 'right', or at least those starting from the conservative end of the spectrum (the left of the right) identifies itself as opposing the left, which

in turn is identified as those with affective, irrational, and 'woke' positions. It is a claim of a centre-right that it has more sensible and practicable political positions than anyone on the left, and for the first time in my lifetime, this doesn't look as far-fetched. And they claim this even as the entire political spectrum moves to the right: The United States' Democratic Party, the most diluted version of anything that has, relatively speaking, been called 'left' (of an admittedly right-wing system: Gore Vidal called it a system of one party with two right wings)[5] has not had a plausible candidate for the Presidency in living memory who has looked even mildly progressive since Michael Dukakis in 1988. That's a matter of political preferences, for sure: Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro's campaign for 1984 might count as progressive because of Ferraro's gender, and Mondale's centrism might look in retrospect to be quite left of the current Democratic consensus on who can be a plausible candidate, but even the arch-Republican Ronald Reagan would now be to the left of the Democratic Party's self-proclaimed mainstream. And the fact that those of us who (once upon a time?) identified as Left are rummaging in the dustbin of history for these examples demonstrates the extent of the problem.

But that's not what we mean by 'the new right'. This has meant more or less everything from economic neoliberalism of a Ronald Reagan-Margaret Thatcher-Milton Friedman variety, post-Cold War conservatism, late anticommunism, political anti-liberalism, anti-immigrant xenophobia, or various other populist positions, with or without popular movements to go with them. It is the latter part of this spectrum, from political anti-liberalism onwards, that has recently become a concern, more accurately now referred to as the far right, and whose existence is of concern to this essay in particular. Here there is a problem of populism and the muddling of political registers. Especially with the somersaults and affective antics of the artistes once known as the left, one does not quite know how to place political tendencies. In a particular case like Israel/Palestine, it's hard to know whether support for a frankly murderous organization, opposition to the collective punishment and massacres of an entire population, two-state solutions of various description, or the ethnic cleansing of Jews, is the aim of the multitude; and which of these, based on their forms of reasoning, should be considered a left or right position. In the absence of such clarity, it is also hard to know how to classify those demonstrating (as a movement? a coalition of tendencies?). This confusing scenario provides a welcome gift both to conservatives and neo-fascists, in allowing them to depict the activists involved as 'left' or 'communist', with the additional claim, sometimes true, that (sections of the) left have historically had anti-Semitic tendencies. The corollary drawn by conservatives is from the famous 'horseshoe theory' of politics: an extreme right and an extreme left end up reasonably close to each other.

The corollary drawn by a far right is more interesting: in Germany, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) can channel a not-entirely-

unfounded fear of radical Islamist mobilization, various frankly anti-Muslim sentiments, a defence of *Leitkultur*, the dominant culture of the true nation (though the term is borrowed from the perfectly legitimate conservatives, the Christian Democrats and the Christian Socialists), the usual demographic panics of a majority with a fear of becoming a minority, and diminishing material prosperity, and combine it with a German language of legitimacy that centres on the protection of its Jewish minority, its responsibility to the state of Israel, and the allegedly 'Judaeo-Christian roots' of German culture.[6] Sooner or later, its opponents argue, or its instrumental and provisional supporters fear, the AfD and its associated demos will turn on the Judaeo parts; but for now, its primary generic enemy being Muslims can provide temporary relief. Its relationship to formal democracy is complicated: supposedly rooted in the demos (*'wir sind das Volk'*, as the East German demonstrations running up to 1989 proclaimed), its exclusionary logic vis-à-vis 'outsiders' (*'wir sind ein Volk'*, shortly afterwards) becomes quickly clear, even if its commitment to formal elections is maintained. A populist right uses democratic means to attempt to come to power; whether it is always attempting to use democracy to destroy democracy, or needs formal democracy to establish strength of numbers, might vary from case to case. Whether the new right is a movement, or whether it relies on picking up support from disaffected people feeling abandoned by more traditional political party-positions is an additional question. This became evident in the closeness of the 'Querdenker' to one another, mobilised during the Covid pandemic: comprising a strange conglomerate of environmentalists, vegans with bodily purity fears, vaccine conspiracy theorists, right-wingers, and former Antifa hippies, and loosely organised by right-wing and frankly neo-Nazi groups whose claims to being anti-statist have not been tested yet. The conglomerate was symptomatically embodied in the celebrity chef who became jocularly known as 'Attila the Vegan', who was more of a decoy than a figure actually symbolizing leadership of a 'movement'.[7]

Trying to work out a clear genealogy of these formations, whether we call them fascist, or neo-fascist, or not, is complicated. The trouble with fascism as a term is that it's no longer a self-description, just like 'the new right' or 'the far right': but those we call fascist or the new right or the far right are quite likely to call their *opponents* 'fascist' in return, or as a pre-emptive strike: they *know* it is a discreditable term for a discredited movement. In an age of self-identifiers as legitimation, that's not very useful. In what follows, I'd like to examine the dynamics of drawing upon past and future that enable neo-fascism to journey to the old, and return, renewed, to the new. But in order to do so, we shall need to look at drifting lefts and rights from the core period of fascism to the present day, and from an old and new left to a postleft that has fallen off the edge of the world, or has dropped off one end of the Mercator Projection, and begins to show its face on the other side.

If left and right are to be seen as meaningful relational categories, we need to look a little more closely at the mutual leakages: after all, victimhood claims, to take one theme associated with the postleft, have been made on behalf of the Germans as a whole by National Socialists, of the 'white working classes' by Trumpists, and of people of colour, indigenous peoples, all the states of the 'Global South', women, or various non-normative sexual preferences or self-identifications, by the postleft; and of course this does not begin to exhaust the possibilities of plausible victimhood narratives. One would be hard-pressed to make practical alliances that work across all these victimhood categories, even with the invocation of now-ubiquitous 'intersectionality' claims.[8] And so many post-left positions are merely reactive: we didn't, for instance, know what 'Critical Race Theory' really was, but because 'the right' was against it, the postleft had to endorse it, write university syllabi for it, and now we have a new beast.[9] For the postleft, 'we' are what 'they' are not, but it is more than possible that there are shared languages at play. But now for something completely different. Or not.

(Neo-)Fascisms Historical and Contemporary

Does the far right of today's world merit the use of the 'f' word? Does it claim that genealogy, or does it have that genealogy thrust upon it? The study of individual (neo)-fascisms within their own self-proclaimed territories has its limitations because of their propensity to work well with 'outsiders', and of the propensity of outsiders to work well with them.[10] We need a quick, if preliminary, definitional digression here: what are we willing to call fascism, and is a new right inclined towards fascism? We can see a continuum from an ethnocentric or *völkisch* nationalism to fascism(s), and a tendency to draw upon ideas (sometimes in disguise) from fascism's 'core period', from after the First to the end of the Second World War; but the ideas, as individual particles, had existed since the late nineteenth century at least, finding a conjunctural moment after the Great War in which to realise themselves collectively as fascism: these ideas formed the abstract bundle that made up the remodelled Roman fasces.

Two sets of distinctions thereby become important: First, that between fascism *in search of* state power, at the stage of mobilization, ideological proselytization, and the building of a movement; and fascism *in possession of* state power,[11] at which point it is important not to confuse state capacity with fascism. This, in the second iteration (and in all subsequent iterations), is often missed, given that we have so long studied fascism's most destructive phases, in possession of state power, and its most successful points of history: Auschwitz, not a beer-hall putsch. The second set of distinctions concerns fascisms observed in their 'core' period, at which point their central tenets were in the process of being created and stabilised, and had not yet been as widely discredited as they had been after the defeats suffered by the iconic fascist powers in 1945;

and fascisms after their core period, which made them 'neo'-fascisms.

Here, the Indian example can be instructive, because its fascism had never been properly discredited as fascism, though its politics has been seen as sectarian, occasionally violent (its most successful moment was the murder of Mohandas Gandhi in 1948), and 'communal', which in Indian-English usage is a divisive and not a mutually binding category: it cleaves people from people, rather than cleaving people to people. The Hindu fascist paramilitary, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), now runs a government, a huge network of schools, and is in control of extra-statist violence. Founded in 1924, the RSS has had a nearly-uninterrupted existence for a hundred years.[12] Its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has been in power first from 1998 to 2004, and then again from 2014 to the present. It has only recently become relatively common for journalists, activists, and academics to refer to the cluster of organisations around the RSS, the *Sangh Parivar* (literally, the 'family' of the Sangh), as 'fascist', though it was common enough to refer to them by that name before 1945, or for the RSS or its political affiliates to affiliate themselves to fascism or National Socialism before 1939, and in some cases even between 1939 and 1945.[13] India had also had other fascist ideologies or movements that cannot merely be assimilated to an early history of the *Sangh Parivar*: among 'communities' of Muslims, or Zoroastrians, or in secular manifestations, at home in India, and across the world in alliance with specific fascist states or an implicit international fascist order.[14] But fascisms, like capital, tend towards forming monopolies, with the mutually assimilable fascisms or proto-fascisms being subsumed in the larger whole.

This is a logic that works well in a movement that relies at least implicitly on numbers and intimidation: the majority fascism wipes out minority fascisms. The RSS and its *'parivar'* are now without any fascist or near-fascist competitor. Other neo-fascisms, in other countries, had to follow a longer road, before their older vocabulary, previously discredited, had made the necessary detours and their languages of legitimacy remodelled; and perhaps it eventually became politically legitimate to revive the old vocabulary in order to use it again; or for the modified vocabulary to do the work of the old. India, with its overlap of a fascist and 'spiritual' imaginary, could become a hideout and recovery resort for the regrouping of fascists (the international side of which was represented by the Greek fascist who took the name Savitri Devi and her young fascist followers into the 1960s).[15]

Proto- or quasi-fascist regimes, or hybrid state formations that took advantage of the fascist and wartime expansion of the state's interventionist role in far more things than before the Depression and did not push back to a pre-war position, also complicate the picture of what constitutes a fascist regime, with Portugal and Spain managing to hide in the Cold War as benign fascist dictatorships to be tolerated by

the Western Bloc in their own interests, like Greece; and with Peron and Peronists able to be adopted, in their own times and after, as fascist-influenced, but with progressive or 'left' components.

We often lack the analytic tools to study these trajectories, perhaps due to the tension among legalistic, historical (and therefore often retrospective), and activist antifascist approaches to defining fascism. Legalistic delimitations of fascism emerged in the context of the end of the Second World War, where a central concern was to find grounds to prosecute members of fascist regimes. But a narrowly legal set of definitions tends to be in conflict with contemporary antifascists' understandings of and debates about the nature of fascism, which sought to understand the appeal of fascist ideas and their ability to generate mass movements.[16] Antifascists were therefore interested in a *continuum* rather than a crucial *dividing line* separating fascists from non-fascists. Professional historians have also tended to restrict their definitions of fascism because of fears of 'concept inflation'.[17] This often accompanies the trend towards pinning fascism down as a phenomenon 'in its own times',[18] which then requires the prefix 'neo-' for later versions.[19] Given that public debates were internationally connected, and every great power was watched by other great powers and lesser powers, and Europe's colonies, dependences, or areas of informal imperialism watched their own and rival or aspiring metropoles in the age of competing empires and imperialisms, fascism 'outside Europe'*20* and inside it is a distinction that cannot make sense. This view produces a lazy relativism or moral comparison of colonialism and fascism that produces what we might call a 'concept deflation'.

Fascists themselves sought to communicate and work with each other,*21* through active proselytization by fascists or their sympathizers, or through particular contacts –The family of ideas that coalesced into fascism at the conjunctural moment of the 1920s had been around for some time, at least since the latter part of the nineteenth century,*22* and contemporary observers in the heyday of fascism had already been able to point out that the division of human beings into *Herrenvolk* and *Untermenschen* (or equivalent hierarchical ideas) had not needed the Italian Fascists or the German National Socialists: in India, for instance, ideas of caste, moral duty, and destiny had been adequate to this task,*23* mapped onto ideas of a hierarchy and evolution of races provided by the Theosophists, who were as much a late imperial Russian or an Austrian as a North American or Indian phenomenon.*24*

Fascism was a family of ideas, with common (though often disavowed) roots, intellectual underpinnings, styles and organisations of movements, and sometimes even a strong overlap of personnel. Fascists and pre-or proto-fascists (the latter terms being less useful or necessary if we think in terms of a continuum) shared world-views and ideas in communication that took place across regional and national boundaries,

somewhat awkwardly, given that fascists claimed the unique genius of their particular nation. They shared much common ground in terms of romantic irrationalism, the concept of the intrinsic inequality of human beings of different types, or the transcendental nature of violence.

A *fascist repertoire* of ideas does not make its appearance all at once, or together (as appears to be implied in the renowned but often static formulation of a 'fascist minimum').[25] Different elements of that repertoire can be mobilized at different junctures, in response to a specific political situation. This repertoire tends to include a claim to an organic and primordial nationalism – the idea that the nation is in blood and soil, and everyone who belongs has to share that origin, or at least to defer to those who do, and to submit to being the tolerated outsiders; and it aspires to a controlling statism that disciplines the members of the organic nation to act as, for and in the organic nation (they are a nation, but they had forgotten and need to be carefully taught that lesson). Then again, that nation must be purified and preserved by cleansing it of its impurities (which has implications for those who had expected to be tolerated in exchange for quietism), which presupposes the identification of a generic enemy within. In the service of purifying and preserving this organic nation, a paramilitarist tendency towards national discipline is invoked, simultaneous to inciting a sense of continuous crisis and alarm about the potential decay of the organic nation if discipline and purity is not preserved. The use of political violence is supposed to be purificatory.

As fascist movements develop across the world, lesser movements take on the forms of their more successful cousins, in a 'voluntary *Gleichschaltung*'[26] – *Gleichschaltung* was of course the 'synchronisation' or forcible coordination of organisations and institutions in Germany to conform to Nazi ideology, and I use the qualifier 'voluntary' in a deliberate oxymoron. Each fascist movement, however, simultaneously maintains that it is unique and represents the authentic genius of its *Volk*. This disavowed affinity allows for inter-fascist collaboration (a phenomenon that is often more visible in the era of 'neo'-fascism, but is older and more widespread than we think). This phenomenon can distract from the fact that various fascist movements across the world have their own autonomous origins and existence, in some cases with prior and separate worlds that did not require the movement that gave us the generic name to already have come into existence.[27] Some of this prior existence, in the form of mobilization or ideas, can be brought to bear on the new situation; and the Indian case, for instance, of looking to the Italian Fascists to learn how to train their paramilitary gangs,[28] or the instances of Indians working within institutions that served Nazi ideology,[29] might be two contrasting institutional cases that show how mutual borrowings worked, beyond the better-known examples of Nazi borrowings from supposedly Indo-'Aryan' mysticism or symbolism, the best-known being the *Hakenkreuz* or Swastika.[30]

Völkisch Imaginations

This is an outcome of the common origins of romantic nationalisms in *völkisch* thinking. *Völkisch* is an adjective that indicates a community of blood, soil and race, and is a product of a nineteenth century romantic nationalism, which is implicit and remains embedded in the apparently new positions taken and invoked – a compulsory collective community of organic belonging. The idea of a *Volk* originated in German romanticist imaginings of the German nation. It was anti-rationalist, ethnic, racialised, anti-Semitic, and organicist, and it glorified all things it could claim as Germanic: this, at least, was the notion of Volk that prevailed, as the statist, egalitarian, and assimilationist aspirations that also informed some notions of the Volk that were not racialized or organicist died out. The extent of *völkisch* commitment to paganism, or to religion at all, is a matter of variations and emphases among its followers.[31] *'Volk'* and '*völkisch*' translate back into English, both as noun and adjective, rather harmlessly, as 'folk'; but they have racial connotations in German that they do not necessarily have in English. *Volk* is also a reasonable and literal translation of the English qualifier 'folk' as in 'folk music', which also has populist potential, and a practical history of populist usage. But *völkisch* is not a concept that is often encountered in the English-speaking world, which has been remarkably resistant to using the categories of romantic nationalist and later National Socialist self-ascriptions to other contexts. This has perpetuated at least a residual German(ic) exceptionalism that has survived critical interventions refuting the *Sonderweg* arguments that claimed a special (and distorted) German national path of political-historical development that inexorably led to Nazism.[32] Not all adherents of *völkisch* ideas made their way over to fascism(s); and not all *völkisch* nationalists could articulate the difference between a nationalism of civic belonging and of ethnic chauvinism in a coherent manner.

Here, issues begin to get a little more muddy, as time goes by. Perhaps as a result of the primarily English-language (and US and North American) origins of many of their political issues, the postleft's acceptance of what we'd now call decolonial and postcolonial assertions of the special rights of their particular peoples' subjectivities are not seen as sharing an intellectual genealogy with European romantic nationalisms' celebrations of the particular genius of each individual *Volksgeist*, the spirit of a people.[33] (For those unfamiliar with these sometimes threatening concepts, it might be worth a quick definitional digression again: 'Postcolonialism' indicates a state usually after the end of formal colonial empires, in which certain intangible effects of the colonial condition persist – the fused prefix 'post' in postcolonial, as in postmodern, and in our provisional neologism in this discussion, postleft, is not a chronological marker.[34] 'Decoloniality' is a slightly later term, which refers to the need to undo the effects of colonization that persist into the present, and in particular to see the world from beyond the confines of

'the West', undoing (at least in writing) the Eurocentrism that, it is alleged, still characterizes dominant forms of knowledge, knowledge-production, and social control mechanisms.) But the worlds of romantic nationalism and its latter-day supporters were far from sealed to one another, each interacting in a public domain that freely borrowed ideas from one another, across spaces, and across times.[35] Most romantic nationalists read Herder, directly or indirectly through his popularisers and translators, and reproduced his ideas.[36] Today's postleftists could be conscious Herderians, or be of his party without knowing it.

The legacies and afterlives of these origins can be seen in latter-day postleftists' implicit acceptance of the distinctness of 'cultures', and the legitimacy of arguing from these differences. The early origins of ideas or debates can be forgotten and then later rediscovered in a way as to suggest a newness that misleads their own protagonists. If the postleft and the far-right share tendencies to make exceptionalist arguments under the label of 'culture', crossovers are easier, as acts of misrecognition as well as acts of ideological affiliation; and the uncommitted can be forgiven for not recognizing the difference.

Shibbolethics

One way to understand how this works, is to understand what we shall call *shibbolethics.* (A shibboleth, for those whose Old Testament knowledge isn't up to scratch, is, according to Judges 12:5-6, a life-and-death password, a word that has to be pronounced, and pronounced correctly, in order to demonstrate that you're not an outsider. The consequences of failing to do so can be fatal: biblically, it appears to have led to the death of 42,000 Ephraimites).[37] The contemporary art of shibbolethics is one in which you demonstrate the ability to use the right shibboleths when required to do so: you say the right thing to the right people at the right time (invoking a number of formulaic socio-political positions) in order to demonstrate to them that you are morally and ethically on their side. The shibboleths you use have the purpose of implying an entire set of assumptions, beliefs, and arguments that can be inferred from the words, phrases, or passages that you use. (This, perhaps, is what retrospective aficionados of the late French philosopher Michel Foucault might also refer to as a 'discourse', only a discourse is *not* supposed to be voiced, as its power depends on its ability to remain an *implicit* structure, if we still wish to distinguish Foucault from the Foucauldians).[38] And the point of the use of shibboleths is that they are necessary signals, in order to establish the users' moral and ethical credentials within a community of believers ('meat is murder'; 'from the river to the sea'; 'black lives matter'; 'critical whiteness'; 'virtue signalling', 'Israeli apartheid'). It goes without saying that these shibboleths can actually represent sincerely held positions, with shades and subtleties; but no external observer can read intention, only proclaimed intention, and there's often no room in a shibboleth for

more than a few words. They tell the listener precisely nothing about the beliefs of the pronouncer of the shibboleths. They ease the way for those who will use them. And they can be used by people who don't believe a word of them. But that hardly matters: we cannot, for the most part, have access to the intentions of particular persons, and perhaps in some cases they cannot either; we only have their publicly avowed positions to deal with. And here's where the problem of conforming to a language of legitimacy comes in. We would often find out only in retrospect whether the proclaimed principle, expressed in correct shibbolethical language, is a cover (free speech claims for hate speech) or is actually adhered to, on the basis of particular acts of usage; that is, only in retrospect.

While we all agree that the conflation of the 'woke' with the left, in particular by an increasingly polemical and confident right, has been unfortunately inadequately refuted by those who consider themselves on the left, it might be worth noting how the journey from left to woke was accomplished. Because there is a left route to what we're here provisionally agreeing to call postleft: it's the legacy of a Stalinist shibbolethics: how to say the right thing to make sure you're saving your neck. This has various versions: self-silencing, in advance of being denounced; and afterwards, self-denunciation, though that was no guarantee of survival. There's a Chinese set of variations: In the Maoist version, 'revolutionary self-criticism' (Mao Zedong wasn't particularly happy with Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation speech, since he had been the inheritor of Stalinism) was a duty; in the Cultural Revolution, old scores could be settled by placing a person outside of a mob-induced consensus, which had little to do with Marxist theory or any political principle, but was supported and policed by a mob ever-ready to intimidate and ritually humiliate those who stepped outside that consensus. The need of a self-identified 'left' to perpetually police its internal purity, owes a little to survival tactics developed in these times: let someone else be denounced, by Party, movement, or General Secretary; or, in less organized times, by social media, hashtag, and decolonial academic.

A shibbolethicised language becomes opaque to questions of political position, because they are meant to prevent debate, to fix a moral position rather than a political one in terms of loyalty to a cause; and intellectual life becomes a matter of partisanship. It is in this context that one recognizes how the dividing lines between postleft and neoright are blurred: both use affective categories rather than reasoned arguments; loyalty to a position excludes even an engagement with inconvenient points of view that are pre-categorized as not on our side; if the wrong message is delivered, the messenger gets shot.

Psychohistory, Bonapartism, Fascism

But this formulation recalls, or anticipates, two sets of reflections on history and its trajectories that belong together. The first of these

formulations is a remark in Isaac Deutscher's biography of Stalin, in which he describes the Great Purges and its aftermath as the outcome of a perceived threat from without: the authoritarianism of the Stalinized Soviet Union owing much to a threat-perception from the world outside it, with the rise of Fascism and Nazism and the course of the Spanish Civil War, which greatly enabled the establishment of an authoritarian system, and with it, the cult of personality of Stalin.[39] This remark should probably be read alongside Sigmund Freud's wry remark from 1930, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, that the Soviet Union would run out of bourgeoisie to use as internal enemies, and then would be faced with the necessity of finding new enemies.[40] The second formulation, perhaps more relevant to worlds of loyalty, is the dilution of a radical movement as it establishes itself as legitimate authority, restoring itself to authority. The anointing of a radical teacher or movement or ideology as a god, the killing and deification of the father, and the consequent taming of a revolution is the theme of *Eros and Civilisation41* and a New Left position on the creation of figures of authority and the surrender of freedom out of a fear of freedom became the concern of a number of Frankfurt School and later Frankfurt School thinkers, from the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* and into their American exile.[42]

Psychoanalytic Marxism,[43] as it came to be known in the 1960s, was 'psychohistory' for short. The term is borrowed from, or shared with, a movement described in an iconic work of science fiction, which, if it hasn't a great deal in common with its historiographical namesake, contains an inconvenient message on the telos of history that the Old Left, still steeped in some forms of Marxism, could have understood. In Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, written between 1942 and 1949,[44] Hari Seldon, the founder of psychohistory, a predictive science of history for the future, charts out the paths of human history for the generations to come.[45] But his science does not work if people know what is in store for the world beforehand. Seldon therefore decides that his findings for the future be hidden from its subjects, to be revealed by himself, as he posthumously appears before his public in the form of a hologram, at opportune moments at which it is relevant to explain to humanity where it now is, and where it is likely to go.

Told at the wrong moment, in too much detail, and over too large a time-frame, Seldon's predictions could disrupt themselves by affecting their own variables (a version, more sophisticated, of the time-traveller's experience of going back in time and killing one's own father). As it is also a statistical science, psychohistory isn't very comfortable with large-scale exceptions to the rule either. And this is where a mutant appears, to change the laws and trajectories of psychohistory: the Mule, able to feel and control the emotions of others, whose life and abilities are not predicted by Seldon in his scheme, whose evil ambitions to empire interrupt the progressive scheme of Seldon and his Foundation so much that Seldon's holographic communications begin to make no sense in

the time of the Mule: he is wrong about present conditions, and it can be inferred that the plausibility of his predictions are wrong. To cut a long series of short stories short, the Galaxy panics; and therefore, society has to rise up and stop the bastard,[46] without the help of the helpful predictions of the psychohistorians. But when the Mule is indeed stopped, and Seldon's next broadcast is awaited with scepticism, when it does appear, it seems, to everyone's surprise, that psychohistorical equilibrium has been re-established. The trajectories of history have returned to where they ought to be, humanity is where Seldon predicted it should be, and could begin to take his predictions seriously again.

When it was written, the allegory of the *Foundation* trilogy was too close to recent history for anyone to miss, soon after the Second World War and the defeat of Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler; and the books were written originally as interconnected short stories between 1942 and 1949. With the Mule being a mutant and an aberration, the restoration of the trajectories of psychohistory was to be expected thereafter. The trilogy's similarities to a Stalinised Marxist telos, where fascism and Nazism were aberrations, soon to be lost from historical significance, but preserved as an abstract threat in the background that could be used to reiterate the continued relevance of really existing socialism, and the progressive path of a soon-to-be-Soviet Man in the socialist fatherland, whence Progress would migrate to the rest of the world, could easily be read into it. The uncomfortable question that remained, and remains for the few people who have concerned themselves with Asimov and Marx(ism), was whether Asimov believed that there were laws of history that could have predictive purposes, or whether Marx did, or Marxists did. At least Hari Seldon's optimism about the predictability of mankind's future is constantly called into question by Asimov's narrative itself. But this is an uncomfortable allegorical reminder that the Old Left, whether its Marxist side, or even during its late, post-bolted-horse Popular Front manifestation, didn't have an adequate answer to the question of why Fascism existed at all.[47]

Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy and Karl Marx's *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* can be read together in terms of their political visions. The Karl Marx who allegedly provides a teleological history of progress certainly cannot be found in the *18th Brumaire.* Marx has much to say about how not to compare historical phenomena across times and spaces.[48] The *18th Brumaire* is not an optimistic text, and as with many texts of the left or of Marxism drawn from the experiences of defeat, might have more to say to us today than the texts of optimism. It is a tale of the defeat of ordinary working people, their exhaustion, and their subordination to the authority of the state. But was Louis Napoleon Marx's Mule? Human beings make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing, not from free-floating pieces of history; and Marx was clear that Louis Bonaparte was not exceptional, and not a man of talent. On the contrary, 'the class struggle in France created the circumstances and

relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part'.[49] The Mule's power derives from his capacity to manipulate opinion; Louis Bonaparte, in manipulating the memory of his famous uncle, might be seen to be doing something similar. Marx's own disclaimer about future relevance notwithstanding, if we should like to postulate the history of something we might now call 'populism' from his observations in the *18th Brumaire*, they would not be completely misplaced; the tendency of people to act against their own interests.

The 18th Brumaire gives us the term 'Bonapartism', and is, I suspect, an influential background presence in various debates among Marxian-educated leftists on the nature of fascism, it also presents the conditions of failure of class consciousness and a case study of a class acting against itself (a class in itself not for itself but against itself?). Perhaps at least it is a predecessor to some of Antonio Gramsci's writings on 'the southern question' in Italy and the role of its peasantry in sustaining Fascist power.[50] Bonapartism is not Fascism, we know already, though perhaps we need to return to the *18th Brumaire* and ask whether there is more to be learned from this text than we thought, and why exactly it is not. The nineteenth century is also not the twentieth century; and the debates within Marxism on the nature of fascism were truncated and distorted by Stalinism and the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1938, and we cannot in all honesty glean the theoretical or methodological foundations of the 1935 Dimitrov Line on fascism from anything other than a late realisation of 'facts on the ground', given the mysteriously self-censored nature of Comintern discussions at the time, in a context in which Stalin's great purges were around the corner, and expulsions, assassinations and (self-) denunciations were on the rise.

It was perhaps Leon Trotsky who made most use of the concept of Bonapartism in the twentieth century. Writing in 1934, he saw Bonapartism as an 'intermediary' stage on the way to fascism. For Trotsky, the basis of fascist power, and Bonapartist power, was the mobilization of the petty bourgeoisie in the interest of the ruling class, and imbued with a hatred of the proletariat: 'Just as Bonapartism begins by combining the parliamentary regime with fascism, so triumphant fascism finds itself forced not only to enter into a bloc with the Bonapartists, but what is more, to draw closer internally to the Bonapartist system'. There was a preventive aspect to Bonapartism, to return to 'order' in a situation of intense class conflict, creating a 'military-police dictatorship' that is 'barely concealed with the decorations of parliamentarianism'. But it has no programme of its own. The bourgeoisie's resort to Bonapartism was to discipline the extreme wings of the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie: they needed the threat of fascism, but in the last analysis, the disorder created by the fascists was more than they wanted. Once fascism came to power, however, it had itself to discipline its followers, and would (Trotsky believed) revert to Bonapartism. Thus, Bonapartism and fascism

were related and not incompatible forms: 'Having arrived in power, the fascist chiefs are forced to muzzle the masses who follow them by means of the state apparatus. .... But while losing its social mass base, by resting upon the bureaucratic apparatus and oscillating between the classes, fascism is regenerated into Bonapartism'. There is thus a pre-fascist and a fascist Bonapartism; fascism, once it captures state power, must become the party of order against itself, and against its own movement.*51*

Whether this is an accurate understanding of fascism after seizing state power and fascism as a movement is doubtful; it may echo a bourgeois self-understanding of a strengthening of anti-democratic forces to dampen or defeat a socialist or communist upsurge, only to be controlled again. Perhaps this view shares too much of an economic-driven politics that isn't able to take political mobilization sufficiently seriously: it is the economic interests of a ruling class that produce fascism as an effect of the former's crisis, which means that the crisis-ridden capitalist's interests lead the fascists. That the fascists might instead recruit capitalists from a position of strength as a mass movement, supported by an ethnicised, völkisch, national, 'socialism', is less appealing;*52* it also very reluctantly allows for the choices of ordinary people, pre-ordered as workers and peasants, to act or vote against their own interests.

Trotsky also saw Stalinism as a form of Bonapartism, drawing on the first Napoleon, his original coup of 18th Brumaire 1799, and the post-'Thermidorian' consolidation of bourgeois power from 1794 rather than on the third Napoleon's reprise in Marx's tersely phrased historical palimpsest of tragedy and farce: the turn of events that led to the French Revolution's consolidation of authority and of the gains of the bourgeoisie after 1794. The question of Bonapartism, Trotsky wrote in 1935, was one 'not of historical identity but of historical analogy, which always has as its limits the different social structures and epochs'. And: 'The present-day Kremlin Bonapartism we juxtapose, of course, to the Bonapartism of bourgeois rise and not decay: with the Consulate and the First Empire and not with Napoleon III'. By his calculations, Soviet Bonapartism was based on protecting the state and its regime not only from 'feudal-bourgeois counterrevolution' but also, crucially, from the working masses themselves. It followed for him that if its overthrow did not come from the masses themselves, 'as the conscious act of the proletarian vanguard', then 'in place of Stalinism there could only come the fascist-capitalist counterrevolution'. And while Trotsky takes 'forces of production' seriously in analyzing what sort of regime could be supported in given conditions, he didn't reproduce the mechanistic understanding of a 'capitalism in crisis' and capitalists using fascism to get itself out of its mess; Trotsky took political forms too seriously to do this. Stalinism, then, was a pre-fascist Bonapartism.*53* The question of the family resemblances of opposing ideologies can be raised from these

discussions, in the manner that Deutscher had,*54* and in a subtler manner than any theory of 'totalitarianism' can provide.*55*

The insight from Marx's *18th Brumaire* for a history from below worth returning to, in a number of contexts, is this: the desire of a group, a class or a 'nation', 'to return from the perils of revolution to the flesh-pots of Egypt' – the renunciation of the possibilities of freedom and liberation, and to return to the safety of unfreedoms. The repeated message of the *18th Brumaire* is that of the bourgeoisie's fear of the freedoms it has given *itself*, lest they be used by others – or by themselves. This might indeed foreshadow the psychoanalytic Marxism of Wilhelm Reich, or of Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse later on, or the insistence, earlier on, by Alexandra Kollontai, that modes of production do not in any automatic sense change social relations.[56] As human society develops to a stage where new freedoms are possible, it is the dead hand of previous generations whose weight on the shoulders of the new stops them in their tracks, afraid of the freedoms they can exercise, sending them scurrying for the shelter of forms of unfreedom that they feel safer in. Kollontai in the Soviet 1920s was less than sanguine that the changes experienced by the young Soviet Union would automatically remove old prejudices about the role of women in society; Reich in the Weimar 1930s would merge psychoanalytic insights about self-repression with Marxian concerns about alienation.[57] By the time Fromm wrote in 1941 about the escape from freedom, and Marcuse in the 1950s and 60s about the Revolution restoring the father figure and thereby destroying itself, a mechanistic view of the revolutionary proletariat was only the official window-dressing of Stalinised communist parties.

The Marx of the *18th Brumaire* did not, unlike Lenin after him, imagine a vanguard who could see better and quicker than most: he could only see clearly in retrospect. The two Foundations postulated by Isaac Asimov or Hari Seldon, comprising two separate vanguards of intellectuals who are expected to preserve and guide human civilization into the future, are fallible entities that fail to do what they are set up to do, eventually coming into conflict with one another. The two Foundations, in finding out about one another, in fact, damage the Seldon Plan, which has to be restored by the Second Foundation allowing the first Foundation to imagine the destruction of the Second: two vanguards are one too many. But the first vanguard suspects the continued existence of the other because the Seldon Plan, which is postulated upon both Foundations, appears to continue to hold: the telos of psychohistory continues, in the vanguards' readings, and they must decide whether this is because of or despite them.

In his later years, as he continued his imaginary journey with the Foundation, Asimov turned to the myth of Gaia, a planet named after a collective consciousness, which unites the First and Second Foundations, imagines an entire galaxy with a single consciousness, and merges the separate strands into a united collective consciousness.

That idea of human life as an organic and coordinated whole is either an environmentalist's fantasy or a fascist's dream.[58]

Conclusions: The New Far Right and the Sharing of Languages

It is still possible to recognize a far-right movement when one sees it: there is a mobilization against the foreign and alien elements within the body politic; intimidation, aggression, and violence characterize the clearing of neighbourhoods, the implicit exclusion of a generic enemy from public space. These, in countries of the self-defined 'global north', get noticed when they are led by the usual suspects: white, mostly male and aggressive. We can draw upon a recognizable völkisch-fascist genealogy to understand such a movement, even when the more explicit ideological pronouncements that make a movement readily assimilable to fascism are absent. Movements of a kind that don't explicitly appear to be right, or that appear broadly speaking to be based on good intentions and morally upright premises, of inclusion, speaking for the weak, are less easily identified with a 'left', which used to be characterized by a willing suspension of particular characteristics in the interests of secular solidarity. Though you might still find a self-declared left bloc at a demonstration or two that refuses identitarian affiliations, it's more than likely that these postleft conglomerates are ideologically more amorphous.

Religiously-motivated mobilization, even when of a radical nature, are misrecognised by well-meaning people of the postleft as 'cultural' self-determination. At least since the anti-Iraq War demonstrations of 2002-2004, what was at first a cynical left-Islamist alliance or understanding has moved on to a misreading of Islamic radicalism as a potential ally, and the distinction between 'Islamophobia' and opposition to radical Islamism is in danger of being erased. This is a distinction which is more important to Muslims, people of colour, and minorities, than it is for a 'majority community' in the 'global North'; because it is the former's lives that it primarily affects. In the 'global south', of course, these good-and-evil binaries that are superimposed on to religious or ethnic belonging make much less sense, and can only be sustained in the face of 'white guilt'; if these themes are mobilized in the global South it is because the necessity to place an entire society, civilization or nation on the moral high ground is being mobilized by states in the interest of its right to repress its own people without interference from without. Because radical Islamism, radical Hinduism, murderous Buddhism in Sri Lanka or Myanmar, is a framework of experience that doesn't suggest to inhabitants of really existing countries, rather than their shorthand representation in 'the West' or 'the 'global North', that religiously-motivated groups are benign. Secular non-white people, as individuals, or organised in groups, in the 'West' are often assailed by white postleftists who abhor their hostility to 'their own culture' or their 'Islamophobia'. And it goes without saying that it is above all white postleftists or second- and third-generation diaspora PoCs who insist that

those who don't believe, on the strength of their empirical knowledge, that all Jews in Israel are white and therefore settler colonialists in the authentically 'Arab' Middle East are disrupting the narrative.

I offer no references for the above; anyone who has left the safety of their computer screen to engage in any political activity in the twenty-first century will know what these observations are based on, although there might be some differences of observation or emphasis; the point to be made here is that one can recognise an explicitly far-right movement in its period of action. It's less easy to recognize anything that comes from any recognizable left tradition: the postleft has different genealogies, less of thought and more of affect. The post-Cold War world did a good job of erasing the received wisdom of left movements. Vestigial issues that were once traditional leftist ones are picked up by populist right-wingers:[59] The right, historically, has been good at piggybacking on the language of the left: rights for ordinary people, trade union issues (jobs, standards of living, but for the authentic *Volk*). The left and the language of the right is a more complicated question: a long-standing 'moderation' question has been that of a non-radical left chasing the far right rightwards in order to make themselves electorally palatable (and sometimes in the process leaving the centre-right standing to the left of them or appearing to be to the left of them – think of the Labour Party in Blairite Britain, and David Cameron defeating Gordon Brown by appearing to be to his left).

Drawing a clear line between postleft and far-right languages is more difficult. Take a central issue of our times such as The Environment, and you will find that left and right positions are inexorably mixed up: a romantic urge to return to a pristine idea of 'nature' is intermingled with pragmatic and principled positions, reminding us of earlier connections of green themes and Nazism.[60] If evangelical zeal and the moral politics of the ethical consumer dominates political self-positioning, it is easier for that self-positioning to move to the right or to any other position. Collaborating right and far right groups and parties are now a regular phenomenon in the European Parliament, often among parties without a commitment to the European Union at all. Competing far rights often provide a complementarity for one another – in a reciprocal cycle that perpetuates one radical positioning as it legitimates another.

1 Marx 1852.
2 Bourdieu 1983
3 Heisenberg 1927
4 Neiman 2024
5 Vidal 1975
6 AfD 2017
7 Wachter 2022
8 Crenshaw 1989 is responsible for this term, but it has been projected backwards and forwards in time.
9 Sawchuk 2021; Reveland 2021
10 Wagenhofer 2010
11 Bach and Breuer 2010.
12 Anderson and Damle 1987; Anderson and Damle 2018; Sarkar 1993; Casolari 2000; Casolari 2020; Banaji 2013; Zachariah 2005; Zachariah 2014; Zachariah 2015a, Zachariah 2015b.
13 Zachariah 2013.
14 Nicholson 2015
15 Goodrick-Clarke 1998
16 Rosenberg 1934.
17 Kershaw 2004
18 Nolte 1963.
19 Zachariah 2019
20 Larsen 2001
21 Zachariah 2014
22 Sternhell 2008
23 Roy 1938
24 Goodrick-Clarke 1994; Kurlander 2013
25 Griffin 1991; Eatwell 1996.
26 Zachariah 2014; Ledeen 1975
27 Finchelstein 2010
28 Casolari 2000
29 Zachariah 2013
30 Goodrick-Clarke 1994; Kurlander 2013
31 Puschner 2001; Breuer 2008
32 Blackbourn and Eley 1984
33 Zachariah 2019
34 Young, 2001; Young 2003; Zachariah 2019
35 *Goodrick-Clarke 1994.*
36 Zachariah 2015b
37 Judges 12:5-6
38 Foucault 1972 [1969]
39 Deutscher 1949
40 Freud 1930
41 Marcuse 1955
42 Makavejev 1971
43 Marcuse 1955; Reich 1933; Fromm 1941
44 Asimov 1951; Asimov 1952; Asimov 1953
45 The following paragraphs are a revision and reconsideration of Zachariah 2022
46 Brecht 1941
47 Dimitrov 1935
48 Marx 1869
49 Marx 1869
50 Gramsci 1971
51 Trotsky 1934
52 Arthur Rosenberg 1934; Banaji 2013
53 Trotsky 1935
54 Deutscher 1949
55 Arendt 1951
56 Kollontai 1909; Kollontai 1920
57 Reich 1932; Reich 1933.
58 Asimov 1982
59 On the distinction between a populist left taking short-cuts to mobilization and a populist right using democratic numbers to weaken or abolish democracy, see Finchelstein 2017. But can we recognize this in advance, or do we see it post-ex facto?
60 Uekoetter 2006; Brüggemeier 2007.

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