

**“From New Class Critique to White Nationalism:
Telos, the Alt Right, and the Origins of Trumpism”**

Joseph Lowndes
University of Oregon

Joseph Lowndes is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Oregon. He is the author of From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism (Yale University Press, 2008). He has published widely in academic and popular venues on race, populism, and right-wing politics. He is currently completing a co-authored book with Daniel Martinez HoSang titled The Labor of Race in the Age of Inequality (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), and writing another tentatively titled The Rise and Fall of White Populism. He lives in Eugene, Oregon.

Last spring I attended the big, statewide Trump rally here at the Lane Events Center in Eugene. It looked like what you might expect in Oregon; a largely working-class white audience who responded to Trump when he talked about free trade battering Oregon’s economy, about job losses in the mills. They also cheered his anti-Clinton tirades, and joined the chant “Build the wall!”

Then last summer, I went to Cleveland for the Republican National Convention where I spoke to dozens of attendees. The longtime GOP members I interviewed would have been pleased to support any of the establishment conservatives on offer during the primaries. But when I asked questions about the party’s presumptive nominee, most of my respondents looked queasy. And then there were Trump loyalists –pugilistic, conspiratorial, often unabashedly racist outsiders exhilarated by their candidate.¹

It is a common refrain that Trump drew on alienated white voters, many of them from outside of the GOP. And it is of course true that Trump’s margin of victory in the Electoral College came from those states along the lower rim of the Great Lakes where globalization has hammered industrial jobs the hardest.

The conditions wrought by 40 years of neoliberalism are central to the story. They have caused extraordinary economic and social dislocation across US society in what many scholars have called the second Gilded Age. But

politics don't emerge directly from conditions. How people understand their interests is a product of politics, not the other way around.

So where did Trumpism come from? One clear story here is the legacy of white racial populism. We can trace this lineage from George Wallace's campaigns in 1964 and 1968 – which was absorbed into Nixon's Silent Majority, and then emerged again in the figure of the Reagan Democrat in 1980 and 1984.

But as the Republican Party became more identified with the establishment, with financialization, corporate rule, and American imperial hegemony, the old white populist insurrection re-ignited. The central figure here is Pat Buchanan, who ran in the GOP primaries in 1992 and 1996 on a self-consciously populist anti-free trade, anti-Wall Street, anti-immigrant, anti-affirmative action, and anti-abortion platform.

"Pitchfork Pat" drew both cultural traditionalists and angry white workers (many Democrats and union members) into his "Buchanan Brigades" and opened up a divide in the Republican Party, garnering nearly 3 million votes in 1992 and was thus offered a primetime spot at the convention for his now famous Culture War speech.

One of Buchanan's closest advisors was a man named Samuel Francis. Francis was, as he described himself, "a man of the right, perhaps the far right". He was a diehard racist, a nativist, and a nostalgic for the southern lost cause. Once an editor at the conservative *Washington Times*, Francis was fired for suggesting in a column that neither slavery nor racism were in any way immoral. He left there to edit the newsletter of the Council of Conservative Citizens, to work for the League of the South, and write for increasingly obscure publications of the far and racist right.

Francis, who died in relative obscurity in 2005 after spending the last years of his life writing a sprawling opus on the second floor of Robert E. Lee's historic home, became an important figure for white nationalists in the alt-right when it emerged in the last few years, and you can see how his racist theorizing would galvanize Trumpism.

But Francis's story is more complicated. I saw him deliver a keynote address at a gathering back in 1994. This was not a Citizens Council meeting, nor even an event sponsored by a far right magazine like *American Renaissance*. It was at a conference on populism put on by the critical theory journal, *Telos*, at Cooper Union in New York City.

More on what he said there in a minute, but this, I think, gets to the heart of what is one of the left's biggest challenges in regard to Trumpism. Francis, you see, was not simply a racist crackpot. He was a complex thinker who was able to put his finger on something true about neoliberalism and its ravages. He had been a mentee of James Burnham, the former Marxist radical and confidante of Trotsky who went on to become a leading figure in the American conservative movement in the 1950s and 60s, after writing a book called *The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World in 1941*.²

Francis, like Burnham, saw a managerial "new class" as having become the dominant class in the 20th century, the central functionaries of both modern capitalism and the bureaucratic state, oppressing a broad working class. As he wrote in a 1990 essay called, "From Household to Nation: The Middle American Populism of Pat Buchanan," "If the post-bourgeois middle class seriously wishes to avoid its own extinction, it will have to evolve a new group consciousness and a new identity independent of both the moribund bourgeois elite and the techno-bureaucracy of the global managerial order.... and it must aspire to form the core of a new political and cultural order in which it can assert its own hegemony."³

Francis saw promise in what sociologist Donald Warren called Middle American Radicals (or MARs) as holding the populist possibility of breaking out of this elite stranglehold on American society.⁴

Francis was strongly influenced by Machiavelli and Nietzsche, and also by the Gramscian theory of hegemony. He was a close reader of the critical theory *Telos*, and particularly the writings of editor Paul Piccone, who was increasingly focused on what he called the "artificial negativity thesis." Building

on Adorno's notion of the totally administered society and Marcuse's one-dimensionality thesis, Piccone argued that capitalist rationality required forms of negation to recalibrate itself bureaucratically.

In the absence of any real negation, Piccone argued, capitalism produces it systemically through social movements, protests, etc. which never threaten the system, but rather make it more powerful, more efficient. In a society and state where genuine democratic sovereignty was increasingly eclipsed and market relations paramount, editors and writers at *Telos* looked to the eco-anarchism of Murray Bookchin, the western Marxism of Agnes Heller, communalism, traditionalism, Schmittian anti-liberalism, and perhaps most of all, populism as possible forms of political and cultural practice that could resist political domination and social alienation.⁵ Distinctions of left versus right fell away in the quest to find genuine, organic forms of practice and expression outside of capitalism and state power.

I think there are many serious problems with this analysis, but it reflected a moment of the emergence of George H.W. Bush's "New World Order" and followed by that the free-trade promoting Clinton regime. Where and how to even think about enacting political freedom was not at all clear for these veterans of the New Left's promise of participatory democracy.

As it drifted toward notions of organicity, *Telos* also became the major translator for English-speaking audiences of the European new right, the white French Algerian Alain de Benoist in particular. The ideas of the European new right: regionalism, anti-immigration, and most of all ethnonationalism (either cultural or biological) – have been profoundly influential on the contemporary Alt Right.⁶ Indeed another strand of connection runs from regular *Telos* contributor and one-time Marcuse student, Paul Gottfried, to white nationalist, Richard Spencer, who claims him as a mentor.⁷

Telos foundered, lurched rightward and made itself available for racist purposes in great part because while the journals writers and editors were able to generate powerful analyses of capitalism and state formation, they did not theorize them in relation to either slavery and colonialism, or heteropatriarchy.

These could not be made legible as forms of resistance to systemic domination and hierarchy because they were not fundamental to an analysis of state and capital formation in the first place.

It was as if in the absence of these terms, opposition to neoliberalism would almost inevitably look toward some imagined forms of particularity. In a modern world that is founded on not only capitalism and the state, but white supremacy and bourgeois family as its supports, this almost inevitably meant a drift toward ethnonationalism and traditionalism. Thus Piccone's romance of the northern Italian Lombard League, for example.

Back to Francis, what I remember most about his address at Cooper Union was his insistence that if his audience there wanted to embrace populism as an authentic, organic form of resistance, they had to embrace it all – including, he said by way of example – the anti-austerity riots aimed at Jews that broke out all over England in 1947. The assembled *Telos* editors, writers, and readers shifted uncomfortably in their seats and chuckled in embarrassment, but none had an answer for Francis.

Just as left and right responses to neoliberalism became blurry at *Telos*, they did so in the Buchanan campaigns of that era as well. Future Socialist Party USA presidential candidate, Brian Moore, supported him in 1992. As Tom Carson of the left-leaning *Village Voice* told the candidate in 1996, "I've been waiting my whole life for someone running for president to talk about the Fortune 500 as the enemy, and when I finally get my wish, it turns out to be you."⁸

I relate this odd history because I think it is instructive for the very precarious moment in which we now find ourselves. Globally, there are two major responses to this era of vast inequality, or two off ramps from neoliberalism: one left, one right.

On the left there has been Die Linke in Germany, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and various populisms in Bolivia, Ecuador, and other parts of Latin America, and Sandersism in the US. Most of these express some vision of social democracy, oppose many trade agreements, and financialized economies.

On the right there is Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, Austria's Freedom Party, the Jobbik Party in Hungary, Golden Dawn in Greece, the Brexit campaign in the UK, Trumpism here. These all also oppose free trade, financialization and bureaucrats making decisions about their lives in distant centers of power, but in doing so, they also express some admixture of racism, nativism, traditionalism, patriarchy, and authoritarianism. The current dominant right responses to the neoliberal order are unquestionably on the rise and are developing in complex symbiosis with forms of accelerationist, and extractivist capitalism that eschews the neoliberal international order and embraces instead a kind of Schmittian nationalism.

In this context, the current dominant responses on the left risk being entirely swamped, or short of that absorbing a politics that consciously resists what some on the left call "identitarianism." This is the tentative direction taken by, for instance, the social democratic Jacobin Magazine in the US, or Sahra Wagenknecht's campaign in Germany's Die Linke party to move it in a more anti-refugee direction.

The gamble, for these parties and movements, is that by avoiding issues that divide the working class, or appealing to people on the basis of white racial or national identity - they have a fighting chance of building a left. This path leads not toward socialism (or even a more tentative defeat of Trumpism) but toward a politics that will be played out entirely on the landscape that the fascists are trying to create.

Buchanan was recently asked why Trump had fared so much better than he had in the 1990s. He replied: "What's different today is that the returns are in, the results are known. Everyone sees clearly now the de-industrialization of America, the cost in blood and treasure from decade-long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the pervasive presence of illegal immigrants. What I saw at the San Diego border 25 years ago, everyone sees now on cable TV. And not just a few communities but almost every community is experiencing the social impact." This equivalential chain that Buchanan strove to forge a quarter-century ago from the

margins of the GOP is now is the common sense logic of the movement that won the 2016 presidential election.

We need a counterhegemonic, populist struggle that delinks those elements. We won't defeat Trumpism unless we can connect war abroad to the ongoing, increasingly militarized war on people of color here. We must connect financialization to its costs not just on a failing Middle America, but on the way all communities have been failed, particularly the most vulnerable. The struggle against Trumpism must simultaneously take up on the neoliberal order that gave impetus for the Trumpian revolt, but also - finally – it must put the fight against masculinized white supremacy at the center of our work.

¹ See Lowndes, Joseph. "From Silent Majority to White-Hot Rage: Observations from Cleveland." *Counterpunch*, July 22, 2016.

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/07/22/from-silent-majority-to-white-hot-rage-observations-from-cleveland/>

² Burnham, James. *The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World*. 1941. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1972.

³ Francis, From Household to Nation: The Middle American Populism of Pat Buchanan." *Chronicles*, April 1996, pp12-16.

⁴ Warren, Donald I. *The Radical Center: Middle Americans and the Politics of Alienation*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976.

⁵ Luke, Timothy. "The 'Americanization' of Critical Theory: The Legacy of Paul Piccone and Telos." *Fast Capitalism* 5.1, 2009

⁶ See Lyons, Matthew. Ctrl-Alt-Delete: The origins and ideology of the Alternative Right - See more at: <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/01/20/ctrl-alt-delete-report-on-the-alternative-right/#sthash.pSVPwKcU.dpuf>

⁷ See Siegel, Jacob. "The Alt-Right's Jewish Godfather. How Paul Gottfried—willing or reluctant—became the mentor of Richard Spencer and a philosophical lodestone for white nationalists." *Tablet Magazine*. November 29, 2016.

⁸ Stanley, Timothy. *Crusader: The Life and Tumultuous Times of Pat Buchanan*. New York, St. Martin's Press. 2012. P 236.