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12. “Understanding and Resisting Left-Right Convergence in the Internet Age”

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In: *Exposing the Right and Fighting for Democracy: Celebrating Chip Berlet as Journalist and Scholar*

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In the 1980s, as the internet was built, the far right was quick to establish a presence there. As Chip Berlet, and more recently Aaron Winter,¹ have documented, the far right in the United States and elsewhere was pushed underground in the post-Civil Rights era by a combination of law enforcement and black-led, anti-racist social movement organising—but being forced underground also later helped propel it to go online. And as it went online it developed new and unfamiliar forms that constituted a challenge to traditional anti-fascism.

By the 1990s, there were online eco-systems where syncretic and intellectual fascist ideas were articulated, where Holocaust denial’s alternative facts were archived, where global or translocal forms of whiteness were imagined, and where the dispersed cells of the insurgent far right’s “leaderless resistance” were networked.

But at the same time, anti-fascists were developing a digital presence. Some sought to counter Holocaust revisionist myths (as with Ken McVay’s *Nizkor Project*, which started out on electronic bulletin boards before becoming a website), others to co-ordinate monitoring of the new far right internet presence (as with the *Public Eye* bulletin board Chip started) or to network those involved in militant responses to the far right.

¹ Aaron Winter, “Online Hate: From the Far-Right to the ‘Alt-Right’, and from the Margins to the Mainstream,” in Karen Lumsden and Emily Harmer, eds, *Online Othering: Exploring violence and discrimination on the web* (London: Palgrave, 2019).

I first encountered Chip Berlet's writings at more or less the moment I first encountered the internet. By the time I got online in the 1990s, I had been active in street anti-fascism for some time, and had been focused primarily on the traditional forms of Nazi-influenced British nationalism that constituted the main physical far right presence in the UK then, exemplified by the British National Party. But the syncretic forms of fascism then emerging represented a new challenge.

One problem in particular was the growth of fascisms that used apparently radical language and imagery. As Chip put it in the 1990s,

there are other strains of fascism active today, and the siren calls of those movements may mesmerize progressives whose anti-government fervor blinds them to historical lesson. As the far right made overtures to the left in the early 1980's, some of the classic scapegoating conspiracy theories of the far right began to seep into progressive, and even mainstream, analyses of foreign policy and domestic repression.²

Berlet's "Right Woos Left," first published in 1990 and revised and expanded in 1994 and 1999, remains a key text for analysing these "other strains of fascism," but also holds key lessons for understanding how radical movements can get derailed by reactionary ideas, including antisemitism and conspiracy theories. This piece will outline some of Berlet's key concepts, developed in that text and in other work, which are even more relevant in the 2020s, and concludes by thinking about how these concepts can help us build a more robust anti-fascist culture and healthier radical praxis.

Fascist Parasitism and Narrative Coherence

The first key concept I want to touch on is fascism's *parasitism*. Chip writes that, "Fascism parasitizes other ideologies, juggles many internal tensions and contradictions, and produces chameleon-like adaptations based on the specific historic symbols, icons, slogans, traditions, myths, and heroes of the society it wishes to mobilize." Fascism's endurance, especially in the post-Holocaust period, has been due to its ability to ingest ideas and imageries from dynamic movements, including anti-fascist ones. Perhaps the most striking example of this is what Czech antifa have named "the big Neo-Nazi crib," whereby at the turn of the 20th and 21st century, far right

² Chip Berlet, "Right Woos Left," *Political Research Associates*, February 27, 1999, www.politicalresearch.org/1999/02/27/right-woos-left.

subcultural activists in Europe began to abandon the style and symbolism of the Nazi boneheads and take up those of the antifa scene, plagiarising and détourning anti-fascist logos and wearing the black hoodies associated with militant anti-fascism.

If fascism is inherently parasitic on other ideas, its coherence cannot be found in its ideas or ideology. Rather, as Berlet shows, fascism operates through *narrative*: narratives organised around heroes and villains, victors and victims, can craft disparate and even contradictory ideas into a political message that makes sense and mobilises people. Shared narratives enable fascist groups with sharply differing ideas to work together in ways the Left is often unable to.

Conspiracism

Centring narrative in this way enables us to see the key role of conspiracy theories for fascist movements and to understand how fascist movements can appeal beyond their core constituencies. While conspiracy theories have received media attention in recent years—as commentators have noted we have entered a “post-truth world”—their significance in mobilizing social movements (and in drawing potentially radical people towards the far right) has often been missed by mainstream commentators who equate conspiracism with ignorance and credulity.

In contrast, Berlet looks at conspiracism from a materialist or sociological perspective, rather than a psychological or cognitive one: “Conspiracism is the idea that history is primarily shaped by secret conspiracies. Conspiracy theories circulating in a society serve a social function and are generated through a social process.”³

This materialist perspective shows how conspiracism might be an arrested form of critical theory:

Conspiracy theories are one way alienated people try to understand how power is exercised in a way that creates the oppression they are actually experiencing.... They are half correct in their formulation. They have accurately sensed (and perhaps even accurately analyzed) the particulars of their oppression, but they have not based their interpretation of causation on structural, systemic, or institutional

³ Chip Berlet, “When Alienation Turns Right: Populist Conspiracism, the Apocalyptic Style, and Neofascist Movements,” in Lauren Langman and Devorah Kalekin-Fishman, eds, *The Evolution of Alienation: Trauma, Promise and the Millenium* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2006), 122.

forms of analysis. They are blaming demonized scapegoats. Conspiracism is a narrative form of scapegoating.⁴

Centrist, liberal, and conservative commentators often evoke images of angry rednecks easily taken in by fake news; they frame conspiracy theory as a cognitive failure among ignorant people with insufficient respect for expertise and received wisdom. Chip's materialist framing, in contrast, allows us to see that conspiracism appeals to those seeking understanding of the lived contradictions of the increasingly complex capitalist world: "false consciousness is constructed in a way that intelligent, educated, skillful people can get swept away" by conspiracist thought.⁵

That is why Chip's account of conspiracism is so relevant in the current moment. The crisis in authoritative truth, the excess of information and disinformation available on our screens, and the opacity of globalisation's mechanics all open up space for conspiracist thought to flourish.

Because conspiracism can be an arrested form of critical theory, it has purchase not just in right-wing populist milieus, but also in social movements of the Left. Already by the 1990s, conspiracism had deeply penetrated them. A large audience" had been created, Berlet wrote in "Right Woos Left," which

gullibly accepts undocumented anti-government assertions alongside scrupulous documented research, with little ability to tell the two apart.... Elevated to leadership roles were those persons who were willing to make the boldest and most critical (albeit unsubstantiated) pronouncements about the U.S. government and U.S. society. This phenomenon has undermined serious institutional and economic analysis, replacing it with a diverting soap opera of individual conspiracies, and inadvertently creating an audience ripe for harvesting by fascist demagoguery.⁶

At that point, these ideas were distributed via public speaking, independent radio, audiotapes and videotapes, and photocopied newsletters. Since then, the web and subsequently social media have massively opened up the space for these ideas to circulate.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 131.

⁶ Berlet, "Right Woos Left."

The Protocols

On the Left, conspiracy theories often take a vulgar materialist form—the idea that U.S. intervention in Syria was because of a planned oil pipeline, or that the West backed a coup in Bolivia to steal its lithium—but just as often fix on figures (George Soros, the Bilderberg group, Rothschild bankers) who personify finance capital. As Chip has written, the ur-form for such conspiracy theories is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Not all conspiracy theories are antisemitic, but antisemitism provides a template for conspiracy theories, and that means conspiracy thinking almost inevitably finds antisemitic forms.

Protocols-style conspiracy theories have found their way into the UK Labour Party, for instance. Former Labour MP Chris Williamson enthusiastically promoted the work of a right-wing Spanish colonel called Pedro Baños, who claimed to reveal “the 22 secret strategies of global power,” identifying secret global power with the Rothschilds and other Jewish financiers.⁷ Among other examples from the 2015–2019 period include: a Labour Prospective Parliamentary Candidate who shared a far right meme about Rothschild control of Israel and the world;⁸ a councillor in Lancashire who justified sharing a meme about the Rothschilds controlling Trump by saying “we must remember that Rothschilds are a powerful financial family (like the Medicis) and represent capitalism and big business”;⁹ another in Tyneside shared an image of Jacob Rothschild with the text “these people...invisibly control the world”;¹⁰ and a Constituency Labour Party chair in Merseyside said the “Rothschild family are behind a lot of the neo-liberal influence in the UK and the US.”¹¹

⁷ Lee Harpin, “Suspended Labour MP Chris Williamson Intervened to Defend Author Now Accused of Antisemitism,” *Jewish Chronicle*, June 12, 2019, www.thejc.com/news/uk/suspended-labour-mp-chris-williamson-intervened-to-defend-author-now-accused-of-antisemitism-1.485285.

⁸ Daniel Sugarman, “Former Labour Candidate's Antisemitic Tweets,” *Jewish Chronicle*, February 7, 2017, www.thejc.com/news/uk/labour-2015-parliamentary-candidate-shares-antisemitic-trope-1.432268.

⁹ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Investigation into Antisemitism in the Labour Party — Report* (London: EHRC, October 2020), 108.

¹⁰ Dan O'Donoghue, “North Tyneside Councillor Slammed for Sharing 'Anti-Semitic' Post on Social Media,” *ChronicleLive*, August 26, 2016, www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/north-tyneside-councillor-slammed-sharing-11803945.

¹¹ Lee Harpin, “University Distances Itself from Academic Who Promoted Rothschild Conspiracies on David Icke Show,” *Jewish Chronicle*, February 12, 2019, www.thejc.com/news/uk/university-insists-academic-who-promoted-rothschild-conspiracies-on-david-icke-1.479941.

Producerism

Producerism, which was developed in the book Chip co-wrote with Matthew Lyons, became another important concept in Chip's analysis of the far right. He emphasises producerism as the key conspiracy theory for contemporary fascism: the sense of the productive middle and working class squeezed by elites above and by the idle and useless below and outside. Producerism, like conspiracism, often short-circuits to antisemitism because the reservoir¹² of antisemitic tropes is brimming with representations of antisemites as essentially non-productive, parasitical, and usurious. The *Protocols* stands in a long line of antisemitic narratives which imagine themselves as punching up at vampiric Jewish power. Simultaneously, late 19th and early 20th century xenophobic movements also punched down at Jewish migrants, who were also represented (including by trade unionists and socialists) as leechlike for their willingness to work for less than "native" workers.

In recent years, we have had plenty of opportunities to see right-wing governments tap into producerist narratives. For example, the UK Conservative Party has tried to bind working- and middle-class people to their elite project by talking about "strivers" versus "skivers." The Brexit movement in the UK and Trump's supporters in the United States identify rootless cosmopolitan "globalists" as attacking healthy native workers by plotting to import migrants.

What's less remarked upon is how producerism has been a theme for the center-Left. For example, Britain's last Labour government promised "British jobs for British workers," a slogan also used by the fascist British National Party which conjures up images of foreigners stealing jobs. And this has also been a theme for the radical Left.

In the 2011 Occupy protests, which articulated a populist rhetoric against "the 1%," a major presence, at least in London, was the Zeitgeist movement—which Chip describes as "driven by a replication of longstanding right-wing antisemitic conspiracy theories about the so-called 'International Bankers'."¹³ The Occupy protests targeted the City of London, the financial district, and Zeitgeist movement slogans about defending "the

¹² Ben Gidley, Brendan McGeever and David Feldman, "Labour and Antisemitism: a Crisis Misunderstood," *The Political Quarterly* 91: 413-421 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12854>.

¹³ Chip Berlet, "Loughner, 'Zeitgeist - The Movie,' and Right-Wing Antisemitic Conspiracism." *talk2action.Org*, January 14, 2011, www.talk2action.org/story/2011/1/14/92946/9451.

real economy” (a classic producerist trope) were ubiquitous.¹⁴ Occupy received some support from the Church of England, with the then-Archbishop of Canterbury making a supportive speech which echoed the Zeitgeist demands: attacking the City’s “usury,” he said, “Routine banking business should be clearly separated from speculative transactions.” He also called for banks to be recapitalised with public money only if they are “obliged in return to help reinvigorate the real economy.”¹⁵

Key conduits between the Church and the protestors were the Anglican priest and pundit Giles Fraser (who helped the protestors camp outside St Paul’s Cathedral) and the former academic Baron Maurice Glasman (who visited the camp, publicly endorsed it, and tried to persuade it to focus its enmity on the City of London rather than capitalism in general).¹⁶ Glasman was the founder of the centrist pressure group Blue Labour, which called for a syncretic combination of leftist economics with social conservatism; in the same year as Occupy he called for less migration and a dialogue with supporters of the proto-fascist English Defence League. Blue Labour’s motto is “Work, Family, Community,” which disturbingly echoes the Vichy regime’s “*Travail, famille, patrie*.”¹⁷

Since then, Fraser, Glasman, and Blue Labour have moved to the right, becoming key players in the nationalist coalition driving Brexit—British exit from the European Union. Left-wing Brexiteers in this milieu have been quick to accuse left anti-Brexit campaigners of operating with “pockets full of Soros money,” to quote one trade unionist.¹⁸ Another left-wing pro-Brexit trade unionist tweeted about “the divide in our society—between a rootless, cosmopolitan, bohemian middle-class...and a rooted,

¹⁴ BobFromBrockley, “More Notes on #Occupy,” *brockley.blogspot.com*, September 3, 2015, brockley.blogspot.com/2011/11/more-notes-on-occupy.html; Neil Transpontine, “Occupy London: First Thoughts,” *History Is Made at Night*, October 16, 2011, history-is-made-at-night.blogspot.com/2011/10/occupy-london-first-thoughts.html.

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, “Time for us to challenge the idols of high finance,” *Financial Times*, November 1, 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/a561a4f6-0485-11e1-ac2a-00144feabdc0>.

¹⁶ Lisa Ansel, “The Occupation Will Not Be Astrourfed,” *New Internationalist*, July 5, 2017, newint.org/blog/2011/11/07/occupy-london-protest-astroturfing-grassroots-movement/.

¹⁷ Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts, “Liberalism and critical Marxism: A Reply to Glasman and Rutherford,” *British Politics* 15, 120–133 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-019-00108-5>;

¹⁸ Mathilde Frot, “Trade Unionist 'Sorry' for 'Pockets Full of Soros Money' Tweet,” *Jewish News*, March 27, 2019, jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/trade-unionist-sorry-for-pockets-full-of-soros-money-tweet/.

communitarian, patriotic working-class,” quoting (knowingly or not) a key phrase of the antisemitic lexicon of Stalin’s final purges.¹⁹

A recent Marxist analysis by Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts of the Jeremy Corbyn’s 2015–2020 left-wing leadership of the British Labour Party also identifies what we might call a producerist narrative in the Corbyn project. Bolton and Pitts point out that one of Corbyn’s key slogans was against “the rigged economy,” a term Trump has also used.²⁰ As the late Moishe Postone noted, this kind of truncated anti-capitalism—identifying the problem as a greedy elite rather than capitalist system—can be vulnerable to an antisemitic articulation.²¹

Anti-fascist Culture

Conservative, liberal, and centrist commentators have occasionally noted some of the phenomena described here. In the UK, for example, the mainstream media was understandably fixated on the antisemitism that bubbled around the pro-Corbyn sections of the Labour Party. With their simplistic notion of politics as a “horseshoe” in which the “far Left” resembles the “Far Right,” the mainstream commentators’ diagnosis is that “both sides” are as bad as each other and all dissident movements and radical critiques are dangerous. Any departure from this superficial analysis would require a reckoning with capitalism. If we don’t meaningfully address the alienation and the need to understand capitalism’s lived contradictions driving the so-called “left-behind” and “squeezed middle” towards conspiracist explanations of the world, then parasitical fascism will continue to feed on democratic cultures.

What we need instead is an anti-fascist culture. As Chip puts it, “In an age of globalized alienation, we should strive to help people recognize which roads lead to actual liberation, freedom, and equality.”²² Anti-fascist knowledge is one key to anti-fascist culture. In the introduction to “Right Woos Left,” he wrote that “the fascist right has been able to forge ties to the left due to a serious lack of knowledge on the left regarding the complex

¹⁹ Stephen Ashe and James Renton, “Antisemitism at Work in the UK: Ignorance and Denial,” *Monitor: Global Intelligence on Racism*, June 2019, monitorracism.eu/antisemitism-at-work-in-the-uk-ignorance-and-denial/.

²⁰ Matt Bolton and Frederick Harry Pitts, *Corbynism: A Critical Approach* (London: Emerald Publishing, 2018).

²¹ Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to ‘Holocaust,’” *New German Critique*, 19 (1980), 97–115. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487974>

²² Berlet, “When Alienation Turns Right,” 133.

history, different forms, and multiple tactics of fascism”: if that was true in the 1990s, it is sadly even more true now.

In the 1990s, Anti-Fascist Action, then the main militant anti-fascist network in the UK, argued that the far right was growing because the Left had evacuate working-class communities, leaving a vacuum the right was sometimes able to fill. Where the labour movement had once been a meaningful presence in industrial communities—through radical municipal politics, trade unions, tenant organisations, institutions of working class self-education—this was no longer true in the post-industrial moment. The rise of producerism (which often speaks to a nostalgia for the industrial era) and conspiracism on the Left is a symptom of this same vacuum.

Although Marxism was never hegemonic in the labour movement in the English-speaking world, Marxist ideas circulated in the movement, providing a framework for understanding the capitalist world. The collapse of cultures of learning in working-class spaces in the wake of de-industrialization, as well as the perceived obsolescence of Marxism as an explanatory model as a result of decades of new right backlash, have created an intellectual vacuum that conspiracism and producerist populism fill. Rebuilding the critical capacity of our movements is synonymous with building anti-fascist knowledge.

Understanding that fascism is parasitical—and how it feeds off other political traditions and breeds new syncretic forms—is essential to this anti-fascist literacy. So is understanding how narrative forms bind the emerging syncretic movements of the far right: once we recognise conspiracism’s appeal and identify producerist and *Protocols*-style narratives, we can start to unpick the stories that propagate memetically and enable far right movements. And only then can we find the space to start to provide alternative and genuinely emancipatory narratives and repair our broken world.