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Cultural Marxism

Marc Tuters

A central concept in the contemporary genre of right-wing manifestos, Cultural Marxism is a term of art used to disparage the canon of Western Marxist thought as propagating a conspiracy to undermine presumably traditional Western values. Initially coined by political commentators in the US in the early 1990s, the concept was popularized by the American paleo-conservative figure Pat Buchanan – famous for having promoted the notion of a “culture war” for “the soul of America” at the Republican National Convention in 1992 – and has experienced a resurgence in popularity in the late-2010s with the emergence of the so-called “alt-right” around the election of Donald Trump. The concept of Cultural Marxism seeks to introduce readers unfamiliar with – and presumably completely uninterested in – Western Marxist thought to its key thinkers, as well as some of their ideas, as part of an insidious story of secret operations of mind-control whose nuances may differ but whose basic premise is remarkably similar whether told by Anders Breivik (2011) or Andrew Breitbart (2011).

The story, repeated again and again, tells of how a bunch of Jewish intellectuals infiltrated America through the minds of its youth, culminating in the sixties counterculture, which is framed as a low point in the culture war for preserving traditional American values. (In its traditionalism, and preoccupation with

contamination, the concept can be seen to have a certain structural similarity to the charge of “cultural Bolshevism” which Weimar-era conservatives directed towards aesthetic modernists of their day.) This conspiratorial and often anti-Semitic concept imagines the corrupting and feminizing influences of European decadence as having spread octopus-like throughout the American body politic in particular via its infiltration of the academy (Walsh 2015).

In the words of Andrew Breitbart, the founder of Breitbart News, a new right-wing media outlet that supported Donald Trump and exploded in popularity coincident with his insurgent candidacy: “When the Soviet Union disintegrated, the battle took a different form. Instead of missiles the new weapon was language and education, and the international Left had successfully constructed a global infrastructure to get its message out. Schools. Newspapers. Network news. Art. Music. Film. Television” (2011, 3). Breitbart is referring here, without accreditation, to Buchanan’s idea (2002) – which was in turn inspired by an obscure retired American naval officer by the name of Gerald Atkinson (1999) – that while the West was busy winning the Cold War abroad it had in fact unknowingly ceded ground to Cultural Marxism at home, particularly through higher education. Based on this template then, the typical account sees Marxism as responsible for having seeded all the important social movements that came out of the 1960s, from environmentalism to equal rights, as well as for a variety of schools of critical thought such as postmodernism and deconstructionism (see Peterson 2018, 285-334) – even if the latter may have little truck with Marxist economism.

The Cultural Marxist narrative attributes incredible influence to the power of the ideas of the Frankfurt School to the extent that it may even be read as a kind of “perverse tribute” to the latter (Jay 2011). In one account, for example (Estulin 2005), Theodor Adorno is thought to have helped pioneer new and insidious techniques for mind control that are now used by the “mainstream media” to promote its “liberal agenda” – this as part of Adorno’s work, upon first emigrating to the United States, with Paul Lazarsfeld on the famous Princeton Radio Research Project, which helped popularize the contagion theory of media effects with its study of Orson Welles’ 1938 broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*. In an ironical sense this

literature can perhaps be understood as popularizing simplified or otherwise distorted versions of certain concepts initially developed by the Frankfurt School, as well as those of Western Marxism more generally. One such example might be the concept of “the Cathedral” (Yarvin 2008), developed by figures in the so-called neo-reactionary movement on the far right as a kind of critique of the hegemonic, unconscious consensus between powerful figures within academia and the media who use the concept of “political correctness” as a tool of oppression developed by those who (falsely) imagine themselves as being oppressed. Although the narrative of Cultural Marxism’s ineluctable triumph, which one encounters in all of these texts, seems patently false, defenders argue that seemingly unbiased research supports the claim that academics have moved markedly to left of the rest of Americans in recent decades (Abrams 2016). The polarization of these contested findings have in turn helped to breathe new life into the Cultural Marxist conspiracy theory, turning university campuses into sites of far-right activism in recent years.

While the critique of Cultural Marxism may have initially developed out of the culture wars of the American new right, in recent years it has also been taken up by the European new right who often cite Gramsci as inspiration in championing a counter-hegemonic movement of “identitarianism” (de Benoist 2015), which stands in opposition to the sanctimonious cant of liberalism, thought to be destroying Europe from within. And though the analysis of Marxism proffered by this literature would certainly not stand up to scrutiny by any serious historian of the subject, we can nevertheless understand Cultural Marxism as a prime example of how the ideas of conservatism grow above all in reaction to those of the left (Robin 2011).

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