A Radical and Elitist Imagination? Political Paternities and Alternatives in the History of Ideas

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Abstract

This short essay responds to the question of whether there are affinities between a radical imagination and other ideas of social organization, including ideas associated with the radical right. The answer to this question involves understanding the history of political ideas as situated in specific contexts rather than as manifestations of dehistoricized doctrines of the left or right—an answer which is relevant to understanding discussions of a radical imagination today.

What do Stanley Aronowitz, Irving Howe, Robin D.G. Kelley, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo and the Handbook of Public Administration all have in common? They have each invoked, at one time or another, the radical imagination. Clearly these are not the same radical imagination! As with terms like freedom or justice, the radical imagination does not have any essential component to its meaning, but serves as shorthand for what are sometimes mutually-exclusive concepts, experiences and programs. In short, its meaning is situated in the specific social and historical context in which it has been invoked.

Today, there is an appreciable urgency to intellectuals’ calls for a radical imagination to meet the contemporary crises. However, such appeals by anarchist and socialist intellectuals have a history which is more complicated than might seem at first glance, and is thus worth some reflection. A century ago, male European intellectuals who at one time professed to have radical political positions, like Georges Sorel, Maurice Barrès, and F. T. Marinetti, called for an unleashing of creative and imaginative powers against what they saw as a decadent or degenerate modern society. Yet their visions of a radical imagination were in fact points-of-reference in the rise of another distinctive political phenomenon: that of the radical right.

This is not to say, as some historians of ideas do, that the radical right and radical left were easily conflated in their programs—at least any more than they were with liberal or conservative ones—only that, on the other hand, history offers no guarantees of abstract political purity. Knowledge, including that of a radical Christopher Churchill, “A Radical and Elitist Imagination? Political Paternities and Alternatives in the History of Ideas,” Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action, Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 2010, pp. 39-47.
imagination, is situated knowledge. This brief historical essay will look to a few instances in the past in which a radical imagination was called upon, to hopefully better situate some important questions relevant to discussions of a radical imagination today. These include not only the necessary questions of what these ideas are or could be, but also crucially questions of who frames these ideas, and how these ideas are produced and disseminated. These are questions which in many instances suggest interrogating the role of canonical European intellectuals in the production, and more often appropriation, of these ideas.

In textbooks, political ideas are typically taught as genealogy: political currents and practices such as anarchism, conservatism, fascism, liberalism, or socialism are taught as possessing discrete points-of-origin—often ascribed to a founding thinker—which then unfold as relatively isolated traditions in conflict with each other. This can be a useful means of understanding these ideas in the abstract; but this approach also risks reducing politics to paternity—usually with individual European men (for instance: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Edmund Burke, Maurice Barrès, John Locke or Karl Marx) inaccurately presented as ‘fathers’ of these ideas, with each tradition sealed from the contagion of rival political ideas. A canon is thus established. These genealogical divisions allow for an artificial and abstract segmentation of ideas which historically had originated in a variety of different contexts. These divisions also tend to expropriate political thought, if not thought itself, into a male, elitist, and European fantasy of how ideas were and are disseminated. This is, among other things, a logic which is still amenable to some academic production—academic production which can mistake abstract ideal-types for the historical complexities of ideas as they were actually elaborated in specific contexts. But a more rigorous study of the history of these ideas contradicts these attempts to unproblematically isolate them as part of a singular and European-centered radical tradition.

Intellectuals who principally identify according to each political tradition often establish their credentials by collapsing other traditions into a set of ideas and practices defined in opposition to their own credo. For instance, Cold War liberals presented their approach as a golden mean between the totalitarianism of the radical left and the radical right. Fascists, however, typically defined and define themselves against Marxism, the left, and liberalism, all supposedly partnered in decadent materialism. Socialists and anarchists sometimes argue that fascism is immanent within a liberal and conservative bourgeoisie. Some Marxists will distort anarchism as a variant of bourgeois individualism while some anarchists will distort Marxism as essentially statist. This process of politically

quarantining other doctrines into a conflated opposition, and thus purifying one’s own doctrine, operates across ideological boundaries. The gesture is situated in a long history of Western intellectuals profitably distinguishing themselves from one another: a weapon in the arsenal of modern propaganda that can be wielded under many flags. But this model for political definition and purification also risks distorting the confluences of ideas between specific groups of liberals, conservatives, socialists, anarchists and even fascists, who in their individual experiences, sometimes shared much more than any of them may have wished to admit, including their ideas for reorganizing or reshaping society.

The confluences between elite European intellectuals of various political allegiances, in other words the commonly-situated contexts of their ideas, could and did even sometimes include those circulating among fascists. Historically, fascism was a dynamic and mercurial set of principles and practices. Aside from historians focused on the history of ideas, most social and political historians see fascism as coherent (if coherent at all) in its distinctions from and oppositions to socialism and anarchism, as well as liberalism and conservatism—as many fascists had themselves formulated in their propagandistic programs.\textsuperscript{v} Historians of ideas, however, like A. James Gregor (himself a one-time contributor to English fascist leader Oswald Mosley’s post-war journal \textit{The European}), Zeev Sternhell and Roger Griffin continue to argue that fascism’s origins can be traced to the European left around the beginning of the twentieth century—whether as a distinct ingredient of a revolutionary cauldron including left and right ideas, or as an idealist revision of socialism, or as part of a mythic structure of regenerative and redemptive ideas circulating in the modern period. Some of this might be dismissed as propaganda itself—a lasting legacy of Cold War-saturated scholarship. However, some of these historians, like Sternhell, are quite insightful in specific points of analysis (see for instance, Sternhell’s examination of syndicalist Georges Sorel’s collaborations with the royalist Charles Maurras in France) even if their overarching framework reductively conflates left and right.\textsuperscript{vi}

These analyses by historians of ideas shy away from a more profound historical point which is more relevant to discussions of a radical imagination. Many political ideas that we see as distinct, even diametrically opposed today, shared considerable overlap as they were elaborated by specific groups of individuals in particular contexts. A crucial component to understanding radical ideas and imaginaries is that forms of knowledge are not eternal or immutable, but \textit{situated} in historical context. Ideas were related to people’s lived experiences, were developed in particular circumstances, and then later adapted, recognized, re-titled, or appropriated by others, recombining these ideas in a

way appropriate to their own circumstances. So depending on the group of people you study, a history of anarchist or socialist ideas can and should be understood in conjunction with the histories of religious non-conformists, Onkwehonwe traditions, in the context of rebellions by enslaved or colonized people, women’s struggles against subordination and subjugation, Africana philosophies, working-class social life and/or peasant folklore, to name just a few examples. But these are not the experiences of one mass. These are distinct and complex histories of specific people’s experiences, sometimes united in the intersections of people’s lives, sometimes opposed. An inattentive history of the radical imagination of any movement is at risk of papering over these differences, similar to the ways many political activists paper over the differences between opposing political doctrines. Indeed, Eurocentric and patriarchal socialist and anarchist intellectuals are no less guilty and have often homogenized these diverse struggles under their own banner, or isolated them onto an individual intellectual. In the modern era of mass communication, many of the ideas and traditions of anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and feminist struggles were expropriated by European male intellectuals as their own, in a manner akin to how, in the art world, Picasso drew inspiration from and homogenized different African societies’ icons, technologies, and art for his own brand of so-called ‘primitivism’.vii

Intellectual historians who argue that radical right ideas originate from the left most often fix this point-of-origin to the context of French avant-garde artists and scholars in the late nineteenth century. This context however reveals something more important to current attempts to study or summon a ‘radical imagination’ by drawing on a canon of European philosophers, artists and intellectuals: namely, that among this group of European cultural elites in the nineteenth century there was remarkable overlap in world-views, whether liberal, conservative, socialist, anarchist, or indeed ‘proto-fascist’. Many European scholars and avant-garde intellectuals in the fin-de-siècle saw themselves as members of a new social category with a newly coined term to herald their arrival: the intellectual. In their writings they detailed imagined alternatives for ‘the people’ while at the same time, as Venita Datta observes, they maintained a fear of the popular classes, one which transcended professed political doctrines.viii The avant-garde had members who pronounced themselves to be socialists, anarchists, conservatives and liberals, and some, such as Maurice Barrès, have since been labelled proto-fascists. Yet they shared a great deal. Datta has effectively demonstrated that fin-de-siècle intellectuals engaged in the Dreyfus Affairix, from whatever position, shared classist, racist, and sexist lines of reasoning which they used against their ideological opponents.x Christophe

Charle has demonstrated this cultural elite’s relative exclusivity in regards to other social groups. Unlike prior political writers who gave voice to, or wrote in the interests of a particular group to which they belonged (religious or political groups for instance), the avant-garde tended to live together, go to school together, to publish in journals together, and to argue with one another in salons, universities, and their homes (the avant-garde often married into each others’ families). Members of the avant-garde also tended to shift their political doctrines as often as their aesthetic sensibilities, which for T.J. Clark suggests that “what really mattered was the ease of transition from attitude to attitude, style to style, posture to imposture.” Clark’s assessment applies at least as much to their political views as their aesthetic ones, which almost all agreed were intertwined. For instance, avant-garde writer André Gide was close to a number of neo-classicist traditionalists in the 1890s, was a supporter of the far-right Action Française around the time of the First World War, but then in the inter-war period was briefly a communist and also something of a left-leaning liberal republican. Maurice Barrès on the other hand is typically (and not wholly inaccurately) presented by intellectual historians as a proto-fascist avant-garde intellectual; however, he identified as both a socialist and liberal republican at other points in his life while maintaining friendships with his anarchist, socialist, conservative, and liberal avant-garde contemporaries. Clark writes that “...being avant-garde was just an institutionalized variant of everyone’s gambit. It was a kind of initiation rite—a trek out into the bush for a while, then a return to privileged status within the world you had left. It was a finishing-school, an unabashed form of social climbing.” This is not to say that these political ideas are the same. However, restricting one’s gaze to this particular group of elites for examples of the radical imagination instead reveals surprising points-in-common across doctrinal thresholds—ones which reveal the situated nature of their knowledge.

Of course there is overlap between the imagination of a radical left and radical right—in this very specific context, among a group of elites for whom it became something of a fashion to conflate and exchange all political doctrines. Their utopian ideas did resemble each other—the most utopian, underappreciated and widely-held was that these vanguardist elites would shape the masses to fit a new future, be it a reformist or radical one. Because these intellectuals were such prolific writers (and because those with entrepreneurial acumen went on to found so many journals) historians have often privileged their writings as sources for understanding many different political conflicts in twentieth-century Europe: world wars, revolutions, and the hopes and dreams (radical or otherwise) of people in popular classes. This is because the remnants of so many people’s lived experiences and struggles exist outside of archives, libraries, or the
internet. Given the paucity of sources, there is an assumption that the history of ideas and the imagination operates in some sort of under-theorized cultural version of trickle-down economic theory: scholars are biased in believing that cultural elites shape radical thought and it is to these elites whom they turn in order to understand these ideas. Indeed, fin-de-siècle intellectuals like Gabriel Tarde engaged in this approach at the time. Of course one can nonetheless find in the writings of these intellectuals the struggles of people in the societies around them. Political writers were, by necessity, attentive to and inspired by the social movements and injustices that defined their societies, but whose historical record is much more difficult to recover. Yet the writings of these particular intellectuals often overwrote and continue to occult the struggles of other people in Europe and people struggling against Western imperialism, whose historical traces are more subtle or have been intentionally or unintentionally forgotten.

For example, a self-professed anarchist avant-garde intellectual like Paul Adam had infinitely more in common with fellow avant-garde intellectual Maurice Barrès than he did with other European-born anarchists like Emma Goldman or Errico Malatesta. Goldman and Malatesta, unlike Adam, spent much of their lives struggling alongside working class, migrant, and incarcerated people. Barrès, the avant-garde theorist of rootedness, and Gide, the avant-garde theorist of nomadism, are often paired as ideological opposites in studies of fin-de-siècle France. And while they certainly quarrelled about the nature of nationalism in a number of journals, they also shared a great deal, including a social milieu, their identification as neo-classicists, and their privileged role as tourists able to cross colonial thresholds forbidden to colonized people. Barrès after the French had conquered and occupied his country, but whose imagination resonates only faintly, if at all, in English-language studies of the history of ideas.

Perhaps any idea can be diverted from its origins to serve other purposes. Perhaps this is the fate of all ideas. But then what ideas are proper to a radical imagination and what are not? In current efforts to better define a radical imagination, something can be lost: the historical context out of which these ideas emerged in their specificities. Who claims these ideas and how will they be
disseminated? Will they merely be invoked again in journals, disputed among academic colleagues and avant-garde intellectuals today like they were by the avant-garde a century ago? Will they be written and disputed by a relatively homogenous group of elites in settler societies? A radical imagination worth its name would not be one that is homogenized in academic writing. Rather, it would seek to transform these very levers of power and exclusivity that make up the apparatuses of oppression and exploitation, a project articulated over the last decades by scholars like Gayatri Spivak.\textsuperscript{xiv} It is by moving beyond a restricted canon of intellectuals and elites as arbiters of human thought and imagination, as Robin Kelley and Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo have done in their historical studies, that something like-or more profound than-a radical imagination could even be enunciated and recognized.

Endnotes

\textsuperscript{i} Christopher Churchill is an historian currently teaching at Ryerson University. His dissertation, defended in 2010 at Queen’s University, was on the cultural and political intersections between colonial, fascist, and avant-garde intellectuals in French Mediterranean provinces and colonies. He is presently developing a study of far-right organizations across the colonial Mediterranean, and their underappreciated role in shaping the development of fascism in metropolitan France.


\textsuperscript{iii} The notion of situated knowledge has been notably developed by feminist theorists, particularly feminists interested in the intersections of different forms of oppression and experience. See for instance Patricia Hill Collins on intersectionality in (2000). \textit{Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment}. New York and London: Routledge.

For instance, Karl Radek, a communist revolutionary who was purged, imprisoned and executed under Stalin, had argued, somewhat like Leon Trotsky, that fascism was a petty-bourgeois political reaction spurred by “Big Capital”, which for Radek appealed to its constituents as a “middle-class socialism”. Radek’s analysis was true in many specific instances, but local studies have since shown considerable variety in the social and political groups that were drawn into fascist movements or that allied with them, and how these supporting factions of fascist movements, and the movements’ political programs, changed over time. Nuanced, and neglected, radical studies of fascism from before and during the Second World War include Franz Neumann’s (1944) *Behemoth*, and Daniel Guérin’s (1936) *Fascisme et Grand Capital*.

Robert Owen Paxton’s *Anatomy of Fascism* currently offers the most careful and (among academics) widely-accepted definition of fascism: “Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victim-hood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.” Paxton, Robert Owen (2005) *The Anatomy of Fascism*. Vintage (p. 218). See also Kevin Passmore’s (2002) *Fascism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, which underscores the importance of patriarchy to fascist movements and Enzo Traverso’s unorthodox analysis in (2003) *The Origins of Nazi Violence*. New Press.


The Dreyfus Affair was a key conflict in French and European society in the 1890s. Alfred Dreyfus, a French military officer, who was also Alsatian-Jewish, was wrongly convicted for selling secrets to the Germans. Artists, scholars and
other cultural elites entered into public debates about Dreyfus's innocence in particular, and issues of anti-Semitism, justice and national belonging more broadly.

x  Ibid, Datta.


xiii  Ibid, Clark (p. 14).


References


