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Restoring the Past or the Future?
Post-liberalism between Nostalgia and Hauntology

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Abstract

*Drawing on the traditions and concepts of post-Marxism and post-structuralism, in this paper I investigate whether, for the intellectuals behind post-liberalism, post- implies merely a chronological procession and rejection (*post-*liberalism) or whether the fundamentals of liberalism are questioned, reformulated, or otherwise dallied with more seriously (post-*liberalism*). Moreover, I take the question of imagination seriously and ask whether, for these thinkers, liberalism is being "post-ed" in order to rejuvenate liberalism, restore a mythical past (the nostalgic operation), or to restore a future that was promised and then lost (the hauntological operation). I trace the contours of these claims with reference to three thinkers, Eric Kaufmann, Patrick Deneen, and Nick Land, who are emblematic of the three modes of post-ing, respectively. In the course of the article, I therefore refine a conceptual differentiation between post-liberalism and post-liberalism, and present a typology of three post-liberal potentialities.*

Keywords: post-liberalism, political imagination, nostalgia, hauntology, Eric Kaufmann, Patrick Deneen, Nick Land

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The crisis of contemporary liberalism has been an act of creative destruction: the act of tearing down the institutions, norms, and political philosophies that dominated the post-Cold War era has simultaneously created the conditions for new political imaginaries to flourish. "Post-liberalism," as a term that "contains fairly different and distinct elements that all hold a general ideological family resemblance," has increasingly been seen by scholars as a useful category for thinking our moment.[1] Under this umbrella, one can find countless subtypes, from religious and secular communitarianism to Catholic integralism to national conservatism and paleoconservatism to tech-accelerationism.[2] In all these cases, and to think the contemporary moment properly, one needs to first take the question of temporality seriously and ask what exactly the "post-" in post-liberalism implies and what it means for the future.

Drawing on the traditions and concepts of post-Marxism and post-structuralism, this article investigates whether, for the intellectuals behind post-liberalism, post- implies merely a chronological progression and rejection (*post*-liberalism) or whether the fundamentals of liberalism are questioned, reformulated, or otherwise grappled with more seriously (post-*liberalism*). Moreover, the article takes the question of imagination seriously and ask whether, for these thinkers, liberalism is being "post-ed" in order to rejuvenate liberalism, to restore a mythical past (the nostalgic operation), or to restore a future that was promised and then lost (the hauntological operation). The article thus forwards a typology centered around three potentialities: a liberal post-liberalism, a nostalgic post-liberalism, and a hauntological post-liberalism.

Here, post-liberalism is not treated as a thick ideological orientation, and barely a "family," but rather as something thinner and more spectral. The article argues that it is a series of motifs, instincts, and gestures related to a phenomenological perception of crisis, the renegotiation of relations with liberalism, an insistence on rescuing time itself from the End of History, and an openness to ghostly subversion. In short, it suggests that post-liberals are discontented with "the eventless horizon of the end of history, in which nothing happens forever."[3] It is argued that, while these commonalities constitute a distinct "thing" called post-liberalism, the greatest variances within post-liberalism concern precisely the nature of the past, present, and future, and the nature of the ghosts insisting that a different, post-liberal, world is possible. As such, the article does two, equally important things. First, it develops a novel way of theorizing post-liberalism, which brings to bear on post-liberalism traditions different from those typically drawn on. In doing so, it emphasizes different dimensions of post-liberalism—namely, its relationship to time—which are in desperate need of interrogation and which are largely left unaddressed by

1 Julian G. Waller, "Postliberalism and the 2024 Election," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 5, no. 2 (2025): 1-19, https://doi.org/10.53483/ZCQS3599.

2 In treating post-liberalism as something of an umbrella category, this article is more closely aligned with Paul Kelly and his definition than others who stress post-liberalism's specificity within a different umbrella category, like the New Right, etc. While it falls closer to Kelly on this point than to others, this article's analysis nonetheless departs quite strikingly from his, beginning from different traditions and assumptions as it does, and interested as it is in different aspects of post-liberalism than he is. See Paul Kelly, "The post-liberal movement," in Duncan Ivison (ed.), *Research Handbook on Liberalism* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), 276-292, 276-277.

3 Mark Fisher, "No Future 2012 (for Nick Kilroy)," in Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)* (Repeater Books, 2018), 713-718, 714.

the existing literature.[4] Second, to demonstrate its validity, it applies this novel framework to three thinkers—Eric Kaufmann, Patrick Deneen and Nick Land—who are emblematic of liberal, nostalgic, and hauntological post-liberalism, respectively.

On post-ing

What does it mean to "post-" a tradition like liberalism? By way of answering this, it is useful to think of how this operation has been undertaken in relation to other traditions like Marxism and structuralism. Two of post-Marxism's primary exponents, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, attributed the necessity of post-ing Marxism to the latter's alleged crisis, to the fact that it had "clearly reached an impasse," and was therefore incapable of thinking the present.[5] The move to post-Marxism, then, was "much more than a theoretical choice" and in fact a *necessity*.[6] Post-Marxism thus had both an ontic and ontological dimension. Ontic insofar as a new field of objects was observed, and ontological insofar as that field was unthinkable within the strictures of the Marxist paradigm.[7]

Laclau and Mouffe have a clever way of talking about their project, labelling it both *post*-Marxist and post-*Marxist* in order to register a chronological element and a substantive one that grapples with and expands upon the content of Marxism itself. Stuart Sim has argued that *post*-Marxism implies turning one's back on Marxism entirely ("losing faith"), while post-*Marxism* implies an "attempt to graft recent theoretical developments…on to Marxism, such that Marxism can be made relevant to a new cultural climate…"[8] Even if they claim to be both, Laclau and Mouffe originally saw themselves as closer to Sim's post-*Marxism*, stating that their project works from "the development of certain intuitions and discursive forms constituted within Marxism, and the inhibition and elimination of certain others."[9] Laclau always

4 The emphasis on time in this article is justified by several things. The first is simply an observation: the "post" in post-liberalism, as a prefix which is undeniably a *temporal marker*, itself necessitates that temporality and the philosophy of time be considered when investigating post-liberalism. In the existing literature, "post" is superficially read as merely indicating that post-liberals are thinking about a world "after liberalism" to take the phrase which graces Matthew Rose's *A World After Liberalism*. And surely, they are, but there has yet to be a robust engagement with temporality *as such* vis-à-vis post-liberalism. Which, again, is strange given that temporality is crucial to one half of what linguistics calls the "complex word" named post-liberalism, adorned with this prefix as it is. And it is doubly strange given that post-liberals themselves sometimes, and helpfully, make these philosophical temporal arguments explicit (although in fairness, in many other cases they do not). But there is something else here, too, concerning the hidden genealogy of post-liberalism. It is not just that post-liberalism linguistically implies a certain sense of temporality and therefore necessitates an investigation from the perspective of the philosophy of time. It is also the case that post-liberalism, especially as it emerged out of the right wing, was birthed by a dissatisfaction with received notions of temporality, by a dissatisfaction with a certain philosophy of time. As Matt McManus has shown, some elements of the right wing were always hostile to the "phenomenological time consciousness" of both modernity and post-modernity, favoring instead (to various degrees) a "historical time consciousness." McManus goes so far as to claim that some of these figures can be described as right Hegelians on this basis. The yearning for historical time consciousness was first and secondly, though inadequately, made manifest in neoconservatism and then in what McManus dubs "post-modern conservatism." Post-liberalism makes this drive even more manifest. The degree to which it does so is an open question, and it is precisely that question that animates this article. See the penultimate chapter, "The Time Consciousness of Secular Post-modernity and the Argument for Liberal Socialism," in Matthew McManus, *The Emergence of Post-modernity at the Intersection of Liberalism, Capitalism, and Secularism: The Center Cannot Hold* (Palgrave MacMillan 2022), especially 253-268.

5 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Second Edition) (Verso, 2014), viii, x. See also Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," *New Left Review* 166 (1987): 79-106, https://newleftreview.org/issues/i166/articles/ernesto-laclau-chantal-mouffe-post-marxism-without-apologies.

6 Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (Verso, 1990), xii.

7 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, x.

8 Stuart Sim, "Spectres and Nostalgia: *Post*-Marxism/Post-*Marxism*," in Stuart Sim (ed.), *Post-Marxism: A Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 2, 6.

9 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xxiv

maintained that his moving beyond Marxism was not "a 'rejection' or 'abandonment,' if you simply mean discarding things,"[10] but rather a "thinking from" Marxism.[11]

Post-structuralism was similar in this regard. Even while some, like Michel Foucault, claimed that neither it nor the structuralism that preceded it were coherent concepts or traditions,[12] others attempted to define both. Claude Lévi-Strauss helpfully identified structuralism with four key prioritizations.[13] And later, a more ambiguous account was given by Gilles Deleuze in his seminal "How Do We Recognize Structuralism," which was both an explicit attempt to answer the titular question and an implicit example of the move into post-structuralist thinking.[14] But it's Jacques Derrida's 1966 lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play…" that laid out the program for what a proper post-*structuralism* would look like, internalizing certain features of the structuralist orientation while departing from it in a number of crucial ways.[15]

If one plays the same game with post-structuralism that was played above with post-Marxism, one sees that many of the former's leading lights were both *post*-structuralists, insofar as they came out of or were adjacent to the structuralist tradition,[16] but more pointedly post-*structuralist*, insofar as the key assumptions and claims of structuralism were at once deconstructed and problematized and also built upon and reactivated. The exact dynamics of this phenomenon are not of primary

10 *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time,* 203.

11 This reveals the influence of Derrida on Laclau and Mouffe, as Laclau acknowledges: "Derrida very cogently maintains that one *thinks only from within a tradition*, and shows that this thinking is possible only if one conceives one's relation with the past as a critical reception." Ernesto Laclau, "The Time is out of Joint," in *Emancipation(s)* (Verso, 1996), 66-84, 80. For Laclau and Mouffe, this thinking from Marxism was undertaken in order to construct a new social ontology that was contingent and discursive, rather than deterministic and economistic, and a new politics that was radically reformist and not revolutionary. However, as time went on, Laclau and Mouffe increasingly came closer to rejection and abandonment, seeing Marxism as a dead-end both theoretically and politically, and Marx*ists* as worthy of scorn. On these dynamics see e.g., *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time,* xii, 203-205, 212. See also Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2018), 250. See also Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (Verso, 2018), 80.

12 Gérard Raulet, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault," *Telos* 55 (Spring 1983): 195-211, http://journal.telospress.com/content/1983/55/195.abstract. Despite Foucault's own reservations, some like Bernard Harcourt see in Foucault's work the origin of post-structuralism (though many others trace the origin to Jacques Derrida). See Bernard Harcourt, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Poststructuralism?'" University of Chicago Public Law Working Paper no. 156 (2007), https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/1466/.

13 These priorities centered unconscious infrastructure over conscious phenomena, relations between terms rather than their positive value, systematicity, and the discovery of general laws. See chapter two, "Structural Analysis in Linguistics and Anthropology," of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology*. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (Basic Books, 1963): 31-54.

14 Deleuze centers the role of the symbolic, systematicity and relationality, the singular and the differential, seriality, the "empty place," the structural subject, and the dimensions of praxis, among other things. Gilles Deleuze, "How Do We Recognize Structuralism," in Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974* (Semiotext(e), 2004). For how the move to post-structuralism is implicit in this text, see James Williams, "Poststructuralism as philosophy of difference: Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*," In James Williams, *Understanding Poststructuralism* (Routledge, 2014). See also Étienne Balibar, "Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject?" *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2003): 1-21, 2; and Réda Bensmaïa, "Poststructuralism," in Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Columbia University Press, 2006): 92-95.

15 Derrida was intent on settling the score between "play and history," "play and presence," definitively in favor of *play*. While structuralism, in its predilection for scientificity, "dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign," Derrida insists on "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation." Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (The University of Chicago Press, 2017): 278-293.

16 Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Michel Serres, for instance, were students of the structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser. Gilles Deleuze was not, but, along with Jacques Lacan, was instrumental in organizing lectures and conferences with Althusser at the École Normale Supérieure and elsewhere.

concern here, so they have been relegated to a footnote.[17] The point is that post-structuralism was still "thinking from" the structuralist problematic, and certain elements were retained.[18] Bernard Harcourt has claimed that of Lévi-Strauss' four tenets of structuralism, the first three were built upon and partially retained—only the last was abandoned altogether.[19] Thus, just as post-*Marxism* was an attempt to "graft recent theoretical developments onto Marxism," post-*structuralism* was an attempt to do so the same vis-à-vis structuralism. In Étienne Balibar's words, "Structuralism, or poststructuralism if you prefer, is in the course of emigrating elsewhere, where it demonstrates its vitality by combining with other problematics."[20]

But there is always a tension here or, maximally, a danger. How far can one go beyond an intellectual tradition before ties are severed altogether? In the case of post-Marxism, even sympathetic readers acknowledged that the diversity of figures associated with the movement complicated an analysis of it.[21] Partisans of Marxism were quick to suggest that these "post-Marxist" thinkers were not post- anything, but rather *anti-* at a minimum *ex*-Marxists.[22] But what is the basis for such an accusation? It may be useful to consider the question on Fredric Jameson's dialectical terms, through his employment of the quality/quantity distinction wherein a "certain threshold of excess" pushes the same force into something else entirely.[23] In other words, it is possible to push a problematic off a cliff and into the radical unknown, into something actually *new*. But this is only one potential. One can also exploit the crises of a problematic to fundamentally negate its premises, not push them further along—this amounts to a restoration of something *old*. Finally, there is a third possibility which suggests that the prefix post- holds very little explanatory power. Here, we can think of Balibar's suggestion that "there is, in fact, no such thing as poststructuralism, or rather poststructuralism… is always still structuralism."[24] So we

17 The impersonal subject of structuralism gave way to the "hero" of post-structuralism, structuralism's claim to scientificity and objectivity gave way to a more radical perspectivism, structuralism's epistemological intentions were countered by post-structuralism's insistence on the limits of knowledge, structuralism's emphasis on totality replaced by a virulent critique thereof, and many more things besides. See again Deleuze, "How Do We Recognize Structuralism"; Réda Bensmaïa, "Poststructuralism," 95; the introduction to James Williams' *Understanding Poststructuralism*. More broadly, Fredric Jameson helpfully sketches out the French scene that structuralism and post-structuralism inhabited and their contours throughout Fredric Jameson, *The Years of Theory: Postwar French Thought to the Present* (Verso, 2024). See also the first chapter, "The Crisis of Marxism, or, a History of the Poststructuralist Challenge to the Traditional Left," of Beverly Best's unpublished master's thesis titled "'Post-ing Marxism: A Totalizing Critique of Fredric Jameson and Ernesto Laclau," Simon Fraser University (1997).

18 Retained were a certain emphasis on language, system, and philosophical anti-humanism, for instance.

19 In his words, "Poststructuralism resists, then, the fourth tenet: structures of meanings are not universal, and do not reflect ontological truths about humans or society. Poststructuralists focus on those gaps and ambiguities in the system of meaning and *find meaning there*." Bernard Harcourt, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Poststructuralism?,'" 17.

20 Étienne Balibar, "Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject?," 8.

21 This is because "Post-Marxists can variously want to reject, revitalise, or renegotiate the terms of their intellectual contract with Marxism." Stuart Sim, "Spectres and Nostalgia: *Post*-Marxism/Post-*Marxism*," 1.

22 "People have, in their various ways, moved on, in directions that have very little to do with Marxism, or even socialism, except to repudiate it. It seems clear that post-Marxism was just a short pit-stop on the way to *anti*-Marxism." Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (Verso, 1998), xii. See also Norman Geras, "Post-Marxism?" *New Left Review* 163, no. 1 (1987): 40-83, https://newleftreview.org/issues/i163/articles/norman-geras-post-marxism, 43 and Norman Geras, "Ex-Marxism without Substance: Being a Reply to Laclau and Mouffe," *New Left Review* 169, no. 1 (1988): 34-61, https://newleftreview-org.us1.proxy.openathens.net/issues/i169/articles/norman-geras-ex-marxism-without-substance-being-a-real-reply-to-laclau-and-mouffe.

23 The full quote is instructive: "This new moment is a radical break…but it is important to grasp it as dialectical, that is, as a passage from quantity to quality in which the same force, reaching a certain threshold of excess, in its prolongation now produces qualitatively distinct effects and seems to generate a whole new system." Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," in Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory* (Verso, 2008): 483-516, 505. Jameson's statement has Marxist and Hegelian roots, obviously. See e.g., this quote from Marx: "Here, as in natural science, is shown the correctness of the law discovered by Hegel, in his Logic, that at a certain point merely quantitative differences pass over by a dialectical inversion into qualitative distinctions." Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1* (Penguin Classics, 1990), 423.

24 Étienne Balibar, "Structuralism: A Destitution of the Subject?," 11.

have three post-liberal potentialities: post-liberalism as something *new*, something *old*, or something *still liberal*.

Is post-liberalism characterized by potential one, two, or three? What is to be maintained from liberalism and what is to be abandoned? What is it that makes the move from liberalism not only desirable, but *necessary*? The article now has some themes to track—concerning crisis, temporality, transformation. It will be shown shortly how exactly this relates to the figure of the ghost, and different conceptions of the future. One will see how, following Derrida, "as in *Hamlet*, the Prince of a rotten State, everything begins by the apparition of a specter."[25] So, liberalism's perceived *rottenness* must be assessed, alongside the vision of the future that it is attempting to construct. To begin to assess this latter element, in the following section the article introduces two kinds of future: a nostalgic future and a hauntological one. From there, it analyzes in reverse order the potentialities just named above, beginning with liberal post-liberalism, moving to nostalgic post-liberalism, and concluding with hauntological post-liberalism.

On Haunting and Nostalgia

For hauntology, the ghosts haunting the present are not necessarily from the past, are not always merely phantoms of the now dead: they can also be specters of a future yet to come and hangers-on of a future once imagined and now lost. Mark Fisher provisionally distinguished these from one another by labelling the first the *no longer* and the latter the *not yet*.[26] On this latter category, Mattie Colquhoun explains that "We are not haunted by the dead but by apparitions and hallucinations, by our hopes and dreams of what could still happen but no less struggles to materialize itself."[27] When Marx and Engels declared in the *Manifesto*, for instance, that "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism," they were not implying that communism was a ghost from the past haunting our present—they were not engaging in a nostalgic politics of restoration.[28] Rather, they were describing a specter, a ghost, that was not *of* the present but which nonetheless exercised a certain effectivity there. The specter of communism was, "a virtuality whose threatened coming was already playing a part in undermining the present state of things,"[29] insofar as, in announcing itself, it was already *there* in some way, even if immaterially.[30] This is why "All the Powers of old Europe" had to band together to "exorcize" this virtuality, this specter.[31] The hauntological specter "is the future itself, it comes from there. The future is its memory."[32]

As a cultural theorist, Mark Fisher was interested in popular modernism, and the basis for his hauntology was the robust social democracy of the post-war years, as

25 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Routledge Classics, 2006), 2.

26 Mark Fisher, "The Slow Cancellation of the Future," in Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, (Zero Books, 2014): 2-29, 18-19. The source of this distinction, as far as I can tell (Fisher does not say) is a line from Derrida: "presence (*Anwesen*) is enjoined (*verfugt*), ordered, distributed in the two directions of absence, at the articulation of what is no longer and what is not yet." Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 29-30. Derrida, it seems to me, likely adapted it from Heidegger.

27 Mattie Colquhoun, "Key Words: Hauntology," *Red Pepper*, May 18, 2025, https://www.redpepper.org.uk/key-words/key-words-hauntology/.

28 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin Classics, 1985), 78.

29 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, 19.

30 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 44.

31 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 78.

32 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 45.

well as the expectations that were suffocated by the onset of neoliberalism.[33] The hauntological art that emerged from these latter conditions was longing not for "a particular period, but the resumption of the processes of democratisation and pluralism…"[34] In Fisher's view, "What should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised."[35] These futures that never came to pass are what Fisher calls *lost futures* and it is here that the distinction with nostalgia is most evident: what is mourned is not a concrete object or a past, but the very possibility of the future.[36] It is no wonder, then, that Fisher talks of neoliberalism's "slow cancellation of the future."[37] These *lost futures* are not positive objects in themselves. One can proclaim with Derrida that they can "only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger," in the form of a "monstrosity" that "breaks absolutely with constituted normality."[38] To orient oneself to the future is to radically embrace the new and the unknown, and with it, the Other and the possibility of justice to come.

In all of this, one finds an undercurrent related to one of this article's motifs: crisis. As announced above by the necessity of "post-ing," hauntology, spectrality, exist because, in Derrida's words, "time is off its hinges, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted."[39] There is, as was said above, something *rotten* about the present. Whether they be Hamlet or Marx (or as will be shown, some post-liberals), those who fraternize with ghosts are interested in restoring time to its proper hinges, its course, reuniting it with itself, and in so doing restoring a certain idea of justice to the world.[40] Every problematic is riddled with its contradictions, and it is the multitude of specters that confront them at every turn; in other words, "Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony."[41]

The article can now ask the following: What is the character of the post-liberal future? To what extent is it a liberal future, or a nostalgic future and to what extent is it hauntological?

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33 While popular modernism was about innovation and constructing the future, discovering the truly novel, its successors under neoliberalism could only produce repetitions, shallow sequels and remakes, etc.

34 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, 27.

35 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, 27. See also Mark Fisher, "No Future 2012 (for Nick Kilroy)," 717.

36 It is on this basis that Fisher talks about "the spectres of lost possibilities, the ghosts of things that never happened" and "the traces of forgotten events photoshopped out of the end of history." Mark Fisher, "No Future 2012 (for Nick Kilroy)" 714.

37 This is also deeply related to Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism," or the idea that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." In other words, the future has been foreclosed and relegated to being merely the continuation of the present. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), passim.

38 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology: Corrected Edition* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 5.

39 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 20.

40 While this article is here quoting Derrida, it is important to stress that Hamlet and Marx's task is not his own, he (Derrida) found the "being out of time" of the present to be constitutive of justice and of the "good." See, most pointedly, the chapter entitled "Apparition of the Inapparent" in Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 156-221, but also see the discussion on 34-35 and 40-42. On exactly this point, Ernesto Laclau juxtaposes Derrida and Marx's respective views; for Derrida, there is a "constitutive dislocation that inhabits all hauntology – and that ontology tries to conceal." Without this constitutive dislocation, "there would be no politics, just a programmed, predetermined reduction of the other to the same." Laclau goes on to say that Marx, on the other hand, "attempted the critique of the hauntological from the perspective of an ontology," looking forward to a "society fully reconciled with itself," i.e., a communist society, which would "look to hauntology as its past." Ernesto Laclau, "The Time is out of Joint." See especially pages 67-69.

41 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 46.

Liberal Post-liberalism

Post-liberalism, understandably, is typically portrayed as an intellectual movement that views liberalism as its enemy. However, there is a set of thinkers who explicitly call for a *liberal* post-liberalism. Given the analysis conducted above concerning the nature of post-ing, this is not, at least theoretically speaking, as surprising or outright oxymoronic as it may initially seem. So it is now time to investigate liberal post-liberalism with reference to the watchwords laid out above: crisis, temporality, and transformation. Then, to consider the kind of future that liberal post-liberalism entails.

Kaufmannite Post-liberalism

As an entry point, Eric Kaufmann's "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism" is instructive.[42] Here, Kaufmann undoubtedly agrees with the most basic post-liberal premise: the present is crisis-ridden and, to use the language employed above, rotten. Kaufmann takes it as obvious that the present is characterized by a "fraying social fabric and cultural malaise."[43] "The fabric of Western societies" has been "eaten away at," the "detraditionalizing egalitarian ratchet" has been "cranked far beyond its happiness-maximizing optimum," and inalienable rights, community, religion, and conservative social values have all been relentlessly attacked and neutered.[44] Or, as Kaufmann puts it elsewhere, the malignant logics of our present have "eroded freedom, truth, and excellence while vandalizing cherished national identities and undermining social cohesion."[45]

But what is the *cause* of this crisis, according to Kaufmann? Unlike many post-liberals, Kaufmann does not identify the roots of this crisis in liberalism itself, at least not without complication or reservation. His view is rather that there is nothing *inherent* in the logic of liberalism that binds it teleologically to the crises of today. In fact, when he speaks most sharply about the cause of today's crisis, he very often speaks of "left-modernism" and its constitutive parts.[46] This has given rise to successive waves of culture wars and finally to the emergence of wokeness.[47] The hegemony of left-modernism is causally related to the rottenness of the present and may yet mean nothing less than a kind of civilizational change (if not collapse).[48] As

42 Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," in Daniel Pitt and Phillip Blond (eds.), *The Post-Liberal Turn and the Future of Conservatism* (Ludovika University Press, 2024): 177-205.

43 Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," 177.

44 Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," 177, 182, 185.

45 Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution* (Forum, 2024), introduction.

46 The "left" component of this compound word concerns itself with inequalities based on identity, while the "modernism" component is concerned with expressive individualism, novelty and difference, rather than tradition and community. In Kaufmann's telling, since the 1960s in the West, the left component (what he also calls "moralistic cultural socialism") has come to predominate over the modernist component and is now "running unchecked" (though the modernist element has not entirely disappeared).

47 He defines wokeness very narrowly: It is the "*sacralisation of historically marginalised race, gender and sexual identity groups*. Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," 182-184.

48 To take one specific example among many, Kaufmann has written that the features of left modernism that we have already encountered (feverish expressive individualism, most notably), products again of the "social upheaval of the 1960s," have had an "enormous impact on fertility," pushing native European birthrates below replacement level when combined with other factors like immigration. This may well usher in what he calls a "Plurope." That is, a European continent that will be shared between those considered traditionally European (in ethnic and religious terms) and those from without. Kaufmann's vision here is explicitly opposed to more reactionary predictions of a coming "Eurabia," but when read within the context of his other writings, it is clear that Kaufmann sees "Plurope" as a kind of catastrophe and not a neutral outcome. At a minimum, he sees these demographic changes as the cause of populism and the chaotic politics of the present. See Eric Kaufmann, "Sacralization by Stealth? The Religious Consequences of Low Fertility in Europe," in Eric P. Kaufmann and W. Bradford Wilcox (eds.), *Whither the Child? Causes and Consequences of Low Fertility* (Routledge, 2013): 140-161. See also, Eric Kaufmann, *Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration, and the Future of White Majorities* (Abrams Books, 2018), *passim*.

he bluntly puts it: "People must understand that the future of our civilization is at stake."[49]

Despite the focus on left modernism, liberalism is far from innocent. As destructive of an ideology as "cultural socialism and transgressive modernism" have proven to be, they are still "offshoots of liberalism"—but only in a soft sense. That is, "only in the same way that nationalism, Marxism or religious fundamentalism are—that is, they draw on some aspects of liberalism while rejecting others."[50] This is evidently in line with the theory of post-ing articulated above. But more forthrightly, Kaufmann has traced the genealogy of today's crisis not to malicious outside forces, but to well-meaning left liberals. "Woke," acting here as a kind of catchall for the rottenness of the present, has "deep roots," and is "continuous with an older left-liberalism which fears majorities and cherishes minorities." It is in fact the "anti-racism taboo" that emerged in the 1960s, itself the outgrowth of dynamics from the early twentieth century, that was imbibed by liberalism and so became a "cosmic event," "defining our social universe" ever since.[51] In case there was any room for doubt, Kaufmann explicitly rejects the claim that "cultural Marxism" or post-modernism "corrupted" liberalism from the outside. Contra this view, he maintains that "modern liberals, not radicals, are largely responsible for our cultural malaise."[52]

This view places Kaufmann safely within the boundaries of the post-liberal problematic. Even so, the promise of Kaufmann's diagnosis, so to speak, is that those "other aspects" of liberalism can be recovered and bolstered.[53] What this diagnosis amounts to is this: if post-liberalism arrives as a necessity, it is not because it was an inevitability (as other post-liberals believe), but rather because liberalism contingently excised its better angels in favor of its worst.[54] For Kaufmann, it could have been, and may again be, otherwise. For this reason, "the future of post-liberalism is liberal."[55]

Kaufmannite Futures

This invocation of the future allows one to ask the following: what kind of specters inhabit Kaufmann's vision of a post-liberal future? In what way is his theory haunted by ghosts of the *no longer* or the *not yet*, or else not haunted at all? For reasons that will become evident, it is clear that, at bottom, Kaufmann's post-liberalism can be thought of as *still liberal* within this article's typology. This has an epistemological and substantive dimension. Regarding the first, Kaufmann's post-liberalism is still liberal insofar as the key epistemological presuppositions of liberalism are retained. Most importantly, anthropological individualism and social contractualism.[56] As

49 Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*, introduction.

50 Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," 182-184.

51 Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*, introduction.

52 He continues: "Incremental guilt and compassion, much more than envy or the desire to overthrow the existing order, have led us down this path." "Left-liberals, not revolutionary radicals, were also responsible for a number of woke innovations." Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*, introduction.

53 It is worth noting that this is basically in line with the efforts of other thinkers who are inclined toward liberal post-liberalism and who, marking a deformation of liberalism which nonetheless does not spoil liberalism *as such*, have set about coining terms adorned with prefixes of their own: It is not liberalism that has failed, but *hyper*-liberalism, or *ultra*-liberalism. John Gray theorizes the concept of hyper-liberalism in his *The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023). Nick Timothy has theorized ultra-liberalism in his *Remaking One Nation: Conservatism in an Age of Crisis* (Polity, 2020).

54 On this point, Kaufmann explicitly, in several different works, differentiates himself from his post-liberal compatriots. In *Taboo*, he notes that, while "other postliberals believe that the entire philosophy of liberalism is to blame, I believe liberal ideas can be salvaged if today's left-liberals come to understand, question, and control their 'minorities good, majorities threatening' emotional reflex." Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*, introduction.

55 Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," 201.

56 Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," *passim* but especially 196-201.

such, Kaufmann is still thinking from *within* the liberal problematic and not from without.[57]

Regarding the second, Kaufmann's post-liberalism is largely, substantively speaking, still liberal, especially in its *ends*. This can be juxtaposed with other post-liberals who imagine a future that is radically different from liberalism (even if the character of this difference varies, as will be seen). But on *means*, Kaufmann's liberal post-liberalism seems to align closely with other strains. His endorsement of state interventionism is a case in point. Kaufmann variously advocates for using legislative and executive actions at the federal and state levels to intervene in public bodies and K-12 schools, for "penetrating and reforming" universities and museums, for wielding government regulation against certain private corporations, and much else. Government intervention is, for him, "imperative" and he proclaims the need to "engage in a concerted legislative, regulatory and entryist effort to recapture elite institutions.[58] This certainly aligns with the program advocated for by self-identified post-liberals, and with the secondary literature's conclusions.[59] The invocation here of "elite" signals another affinity: Kaufmann's, like other post-liberals', theory of change runs through elite institutions and necessitates new forms of elite formation. If the future can be recovered, this recovery will occur at the hands of a new, virtuous elite. Like Patrick Deneen (as will be demonstrated below), Kaufmann does not suggest that post-liberalism should advocate for the overturning of existing institutions. Rather, it should advocate for a "revolution in ethos" so that tomorrow's elites will be better stewards of those institutions.[60]

On ends, despite some superficial ambiguity, Kaufmann's liberal post-liberalism is clear-cut. To the extent that there is ambiguity, it is because Kaufmann professes that the aim of his project is promoting human flourishing. As he says, human flourishing can go by other names: "the common good, cultural utilitarianism, [or] cultural holism."[61] This invocation of the common good no doubt flirts with the post-liberal problematic, the common good being *the* core concept of post-liberalism according to many scholars (this article, obviously, defines post-liberalism a little differently).[62] But when one looks closer, this superficial similarity largely fades away, as the common good is conceptualized differently by Kaufmann than by other post-liberals. Gone is the thickly defined, religiously inflected, and *objective* notion of the common good.[63] In its place is a thinner notion of the common good, which is more amalgamating and pluralistic. But beyond this ambiguity, Kaufmann's desired future is characterized by neutrality, depoliticization, and balance. In his heart of hearts, he may want a national conservative future (as he readily admits), but he does not believe that national conservative hegemony is plausible or desirable. What he wants instead from a post-liberal future is a polity where national conservative

57 Incidentally, this epistemological dimension is what Balibar was concerned with in the quote invoked in a previous section, when he noted that "poststructuralism…is always still structuralism." In Kaufmann's case, speaking strictly epistemologically, his "post-liberalism is always still liberalism" even if it manifests itself differently in a political sense from what we have come to expect from liberalism.

58 Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*, introduction, chapter 11; Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," *passim* but especially 196-199.

59 Though personally, I question whether state intervention, something commonplace in all modern political ideologies, can be so neatly branded as distinctly post-liberal.

60 Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*, introduction.

61 Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*, chapter 1.

62 For this emphasis on the common good, see Stefan Borg, *The Return of the Common Good: The Postliberal Project Left and Right* (Routledge, 2026), 6-7 and *passim*. Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right* (Princeton University Press, 2025), 5. Paul Kelly, "The post-liberal movement," in Duncan Ivison (ed.), *Research Handbook on Liberalism* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024): 276-292. Matt Sleat, *Post-Liberalism* (Polity, 2026), 10, 178 and *passim*.

63 This notion of the common good is crucial according to Stefan Borg: "There is something very important to be said here: for many of these figures, there is an objective component to what flourishing means. It is not just what you or I think, it is not simply what we love to do or what we believe is in our interest. There is, in other words, a capitalized, objective Common Good." Stefan Borg, "On Post-liberalism and the Return of the Common Good," *Post-Liberalism*. January 29, 2026, https://post-liberalism.org/p/on-post-liberalism-and-the-return.

politics are *possible*, where they are given a fair shake, a "more level playing field." Today, because of the "progressive indoctrination apparatus" spanning the public and private realms, a discriminatory, "anti-conservative political prejudice" makes this impossible.[64] To counter this, post-liberals need to occupy key institutions and wield them. But rather than using these institutions to implement a positive vision of the Good, rather than using them excessively coercively as other post-liberals are willing to do, Kaufmann wants post-liberals to wield them in order to restore a level playing field.[65] On level ground, with equal opportunity, "Substantive conservatism can then be built from below."[66] Kaufmann's desired end—a society characterized by institutional neutrality, tolerance, and balance—is quintessentially liberal, even if it requires post-liberal means and a post-liberal coalition to achieve, and even if what it supplants is also, in no small part, liberal, too.

But if Kaufmann's ideal future is "fully in accord with liberalism,"[67] how then can his political theory be meaningfully called post-liberal at all? Clunky as the phrase is, his theory is, in reality, post-*a certain kind of liberalism*. Kaufmann's post-liberalism is, self-avowedly, a "rebalanced new liberalism," which is also a recovery of an older Hobbesian liberalism concerned with "defending the liberty of citizens from institutions and private threats more than from executive government."[68] This explains why his project is pragmatically attached to post-liberalism. As can be seen, post-liberalism, for Kaufmann, is a kind of *political coalition*; it is not a robust, coherent, and radical *political philosophy*. As will be seen shortly, the same is not true for others…

Nostalgic Post-liberalism

The title of Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* is suggestive of some of the motifs this article has been tracing. A failure often inspires an attempt at avoiding its repetition, or maximally, inspires one to move beyond what has been tried and which has been shown to fail. Thus, in Deneen's title one is confronted with a crisis manifesting in failure, and implicitly with the necessity of moving beyond, of post-ing, liberalism.

Deneenian Post-liberalism

Deneen is clever in the way he insists on the necessity of overcoming liberalism. For him, if liberalism is coming to an end—that is, a finale—it is only because we are already at liberalism's *end*, insofar as its core ends, its goals, its drives, have been entirely realized and shown to be destructive and antithetical to human dignity. Liberalism, over time, has become "more perfectly 'itself'" and cast away any lingering inheritances.[69] This suggestion is common among self-described post-

64 Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," 199.

65 "Utopian dreams of installing conservative values in courts and institutions" must be rejected on Kaufmann's view. Rather, the goal should be to "politically neutralise institutions or, where content is required, as with history instruction and civics, aim for balance – with a slight preference for positive conceptions of the country, justified on public interest grounds." He concludes, "Thus, instead of aiming to restore public religion and change the valence of activism and indoctrination in institutions, as some post-liberals advocate, we should be seeking to find broad majority consensus around the neutral nation-state." Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," 196.

66 Eric Kaufmann, "Toward a Liberal Post-Liberalism," 196.

67 Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*, introduction.

68 Eric Kaufmann, *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*, chapter 1, introduction.

69 Patrick Deneen, "After Liberalism: Can we Imagine a Humane, Post-Liberal Future?" *ABC Religion & Ethics* (2014), https://www.abc.net.au/religion/after-liberalism-can-we-imagine-a-humane-post-liberal-future/10098770. See also Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, (Yale University Press, 2018), 3 and Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (Sentinel, 2023), 3-5, 47, 237.

liberals, of the British and American varieties.[70] For Deneen, then, liberalism's ends, of liberating individuals from arbitrary, non-chosen relationships, of facilitating self-actualization, of rejecting self-limitation of any kind, of promoting technological innovation and "progress," have the effect of rationalizing, universalizing, and justifying the separation and inequality of the "rational and industrious" in society from the "querulous and contentious." This effect is in fact welcomed by liberals.[71] The technological element is especially pernicious and dark, allowing both for the extension of life for "worthy" individuals and the elimination of life for the unworthy or unwanted: through abortion and medically assisted dying, for example.[72]

Deneen sees the trajectory of contemporary technology as fundamentally duplicitous. Where it had previously been believed that "technology will usher in a new age of freedom, we discover in various ways that we are subjects to those very technologies."[73] In fact, "Far from controlling our technology for our own betterment, we find that the technology ends up either ruling or destroying us."[74] As will become clearer in the sections below, Deneen's perspective on technology (and the capitalism undergirding it) is fundamentally humanist, and will be antithetical to the "virulent anti-humanism" of other post-liberals like Nick Land.[75] This is a key node in the meta-discussion this article has been tracing about what to keep from liberalism and what to leave behind as it is moved beyond. As will become clearer below, Land is actually keen to lean into the fact that humanity has become subject to technology, even if he sees contemporary liberalism as an impediment to this process, whereas Deneen more forthrightly and thoroughly sees liberalism as its catalyst.[76]

What all this amounts to is this: if post-ing liberalism arrives as a necessity, it is because of liberalism's successes, which are simultaneously its failures.[77] This insight operates as something of a "mantra" for Deneen, one that is "repeated ad nauseam" throughout his work.[78] And Deneen is not alone here—this insight is shared by most post-liberal thinkers, as Stefan Borg has articulated.[79] At base, what Deneen *means* by liberalism, and what must be overcome is this: anthropological individualism, voluntarist conceptions of unlimited choice, and an insistence on the human separation from and opposition to nature.[80] In short, radical autonomy

70 Adrian Pabst, for instance, puts it this way: "Liberalism's worst excesses will continue to destroy the cultural and religious roots on which it depends, the trust, cooperation, and participation of people in decision-making that are vital for the functioning of liberal institutions." Adrian Pabst, *Postliberal Politics: The Coming Era of Renewal* (Polity Press, 2021), 18.

71 Patrick Deneen, "After Liberalism: Can we Imagine a Humane, Post-Liberal Future?"

72 Patrick Deneen, "After Liberalism: Can we Imagine a Humane, Post-Liberal Future?"

73 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 93.

74 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 93.

75 This characterization of Land comes courtesy of Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier in their introduction to his collected writings. See Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, "Editors' Introduction," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007* (Urbanomic, 2025): 1-54, 3

76 Deneen says, "It is less a matter of our technology 'making us' than of our deeper political commitments shaping our technology." Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*., 103.

77 Deneen says, "Liberalism is failing not because it fell short but because it was true to itself. Liberalism is failing because liberalism succeeded. As liberalism has "become more fully itself," as its inner logic has become more evident and its self-contradictions manifest, it has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims and realizations of liberal ideology." Later in the same article, he reiterates this point. "The ship of liberalism is in dangerous waters not because it hasn't yet realized its potential but because it overwhelmingly has." Patrick Deneen, "The Tragedy of Liberalism," *The Hedgehog Review* (Fall 2017): 38-51, 41, 50. See also Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 179. In the secondary literature, this is well-documented as well. Stefan Borg claims that "Deneen's central argument is that liberalism…has failed not because it has been realized incompletely or captured by special interests of big business, but rather because its inner logic tends to undermine its core aims." Stefan Borg, *The Return of the Common Good: The Postliberal Project Left and Right*, 49.

78 Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right*, 86.

79 "Thus, postliberals characteristically argue, liberalism tends to lead to its own undoing," and "for the postliberals, the problems they identify lie in the internal dynamics of liberalism itself." Stefan Borg, *The Return of the Common Good: The Postliberal Project Left and Right*, 6, 8. See also pages 11 and 48.

80 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 37.

and hedonism. Or, hitting a slightly different note as he does in his follow-up to *Why Liberalism Failed*, 2023's *Regime Change*, liberalism in a word means the "*dis*integration of most forms of relationality," or the "keeping separate what rather needs to be joined."[81] This is all packaged as liberty, but according to Deneen this view is, in the grand sweep of history, a radical outlier in terms of what the word "liberty" means. Ancient liberty was not something humans were born with, but something cultivated through virtuous practices, entailing an ethic of restraint. This can be counterposed to the "tyranny of internal appetite and desire" characteristic of liberalism, which can only separate one from, and inflict harm on, the social worlds into which they are born.[82] In short, what is lost in liberal liberty is "gratitude to the past and obligations to the future."[83] And indeed, obligations to one's fellow citizens in the present.

Deneenian Futures

This invocation of the past and the future prompts a question related to that other motif this article has been tracing: when Deneen looks at the world, is he confronted by specters? If so, are they ghosts of the *no longer* or the *not yet*? Interestingly, Deneen rhetorically refuses nostalgia, stating that "Envisioning a condition after liberalism calls us not to restore something that once was but to consider something that might yet be; it is a project not of nostalgia but of vision, imagination, and construction."[84] Deneen stresses that "the desire to 'return' to a preliberal age must be eschewed… There can be no going back, only forward."[85] But, substantively, these claims are undercut in several respects. In the first instance, Deneen is insistent that many of the features we attribute to liberalism "are to be found in medieval thought."[86] They were in fact "developed especially throughout the period of Christendom that we moderns are often prone to label 'the Dark Ages.'"[87] When Deneen comes nearest to putting forward a positive vision of post-liberal future, one that would be just and dignified, he first insists that "the outlines of such a theory are already discernible, guided by liberalism's own retention of essential concepts from a preliberal age…"[88] Thus, one can be confident, "given the perpetual appeal of certain basic political ideals that have been present in the Western tradition since antiquity," that post-liberalism is not only possible, but desirable.[89]

In other words, to the extent that elements of "liberalism" might be retained in a post-liberal society, it is only those elements that predate liberalism. What is *left behind* in the transition to post-liberalism is precisely liberalism's novel contributions; what is "innovated" and injected into post-liberalism is precisely the heritage that liberalism inherited and "drew down" over time, as Deneen says. The imagery of "drawing down" the pre-liberal inheritance is, in Fisherian terms, clearly representative of a *no longer* and therefore of a nostalgia for an object of the past. As Deneen says, the post-liberal

81 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 188, 192.

82 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 113-115. See also Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 3-4, 125-133, 139. These claims about liberty and virtue are, once again, central for most post-liberals, and certainly for those on the right. See Stefan Borg, *The Return of the Common Good: The Postliberal Project Left and Right*, 7.

83 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 39.

84 Patrick Deneen, "Unsustainable Liberalism," *First Things*, August 1, 2012, https://firstthings.com/unsustainable-liberalism/.

85 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 182.

86 These are things like constitutionalism, separation of powers, the rights of citizens, the rule of law, federalism, and more. Patrick Deneen, "Unsustainable Liberalism." See also Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 19.

87 Patrick Deneen, "After Liberalism: Can we Imagine a Humane, Post-Liberal Future?" See also Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 184.

88 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 183. On exactly this point, Laura K. Field has observed that "According to Deneen (and many other conservatives), liberal democracy has survived as long as it has only by leaning hard on older forms of social cohesion—old religious beliefs, cultural norms and traditions, and forms of education." Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right*, 82.

89 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 183.

project is about "beginning to put together what liberalism has put asunder."[90] If one takes "asunder" literally, then one is confronted with the image of an object broken up into pieces. Thus, Deneen could have, more accurately, spoken about putting *back* together what liberalism has broken. In that case, one is obviously dealing with a project of restoration that rests upon a lost object, a *no longer*, a nostalgia. What that means is that the ghosts that haunt Deneen are of a very traditional type—merely the already dead risen from the grave, speaking through us in the present only to justify themselves and insist that *they did not deserve their fate*.

In short, for a certain version of Deneen, the post-liberal future is largely a pre-liberal past that has come to terms with the fact that it cannot turn back the clock. The contemporary world, mixed as it is with a certain experience of liberalism, must be accepted on its own terms even as it is moved beyond. But where is this beyond? What are the bodies that these ghosts are meant to inhabit in the post-liberal future—how are they to "become-flesh"?[91] For the Deneen of the *Why Liberalism Failed* era, the answers are fairly modest. The embrace of intentional communities, those who have chosen the "Benedict option" and exited global liberalism in favor of small, virtuous alternatives is the place to start. These largely exist as "remnants of orthodox religious traditions" (the past makes itself felt once again) but can be built out to entice even secularists who have come to reject liberalism.[92] These virtuous communities will reject liberalism's radical anthropological individualism and rather be built upon "human relationality, sociability, and the learned ability to sacrifice one's narrow personal interest not to abstract humanity, but for the sake of other humans."[93] In a word, built upon the principles of ancient Western virtues and liberty. Over time, little by little, they "will come to be seen not as 'options' but as necessities."[94]

This is the prescriptive vision offered by the final chapters of *Why Liberalism Failed*, one that seems out of step with the radical diagnosis unfurled in the book's preceding pages. In one scholar's words, this vision had "a prudent and even quaint quality," that was "cautious and hedging."[95] It was, in fact, critiqued on this basis by Deneen's post-liberal compatriots such as Adrian Vermeule, who dubbed the prescriptive portions of the book "a crooked turn at the end of… [a] near-masterpiece," and a "relapse into liberalism." At a minimum, according to Vermeule, because he largely leaves liberalism intact, Deneen's localist communities can "exist only at the sufferance of the aggressive liberal state."[96] From the point of view of the framework outlined above, it is clear that Vermeule is charging Deneen with not being post-liberal enough, with not crossing the threshold of excess that would constitute a true post-*liberalism*.[97] Vermeule challenges Deneen to charge ahead rather than retreat, to go further in his prescriptions and consider ways to "undo the liberalism of the state from within" and thereby inaugurate a post-liberal era.

90 Patrick Deneen, "After Liberalism: Can we Imagine a Humane, Post-Liberal Future?" Deneen returns to this language in *Regime Change*: "What modern liberalism—in both its right- and left-wing forms—tore asunder, a renewal of this older conservatism would put back together." Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 96.

91 The "becoming-flesh," with its clearly Christian overtones, is the "privileged moment of the spectral incarnation or incorporation." Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 180.

92 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 191-192.

93 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 196

94 Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 196

95 Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right*, 92, 94.

96 Adrian Vermeule, "Integration from Within," *American Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2018): 202-213, 202.

97 Other right-wing critics came to similar conclusions. Peter J. Leithart, for example, suggested in his review of *Why Liberalism Failed* that Deneen "retain[s] a fundamentally liberal stance." He closes his review with a, perhaps rhetorical, question (given that he seems to have already made his mind): "We must ask: Is Deneen also among the liberals?" Peter J. Leithart, "Deneen Among the Liberals," *First Things*, November 16, 2018, https://firstthings.com/deneen-among-the-liberals/.

Deneen took these criticisms to heart, as is reflected in his follow-up work, *Regime Change*, the title of which connotes a more robust prescriptive vision and which, in some sense, offers it.[98] This new offer was certainly built upon the foundations of the old.[99] But the prescriptive elements have seemingly been radicalized: in *Regime Change*, Deneen largely (though not entirely) abandons his localist vision in favor of a more ambitious and statist one.[100] One thus read in its pages much more about the "power elite," the formation of a counter-elite, and central governance than fostering localism and Benedictine-like communities. Deneen's goal is now the creation of a "mixed constitutional regime" that, while "blending" social classes together, nonetheless necessitates a new "aristopopulist" elite who (having been trained in the proper virtues) will govern society to the benefit of a common good.[101] At his most bombastic, Deneen suggests that what we need is the "application of Machiavellian means to achieve Aristotelian ends."[102] While much of this sounds rhetorically radical, some of the cautiousness of *Why Liberalism Failed* remains, which is why some leading scholars have spoken about Deneen's "two voices" in *Regime Change*.[103]

Deneen's vision changed in important ways in the period between *Why Liberalism Failed* and *Regime Change*, but it did not change from the perspective taken in this article. Nostalgia remains the operative mode in *Regime Change*. Deneen's self-conceived project here is one of both "recovery" and "reinvention" or "updating" and so it (as in previous works) avoids falling into pure, unadulterated nostalgia or reaction.[104] The desire for a *re*invention is only, even theoretically, mildly hauntological and ambiguously connected to desiring a *lost future*. But even so, the thrust of Deneen's effort leans towards stasis or recovery and not reinvention at all. The static element is most visible when Deneen aligns himself with those who think that "long-standing institutions and practices be given the benefit of the doubt."[105] What one can conclude from this is that the institutions and customs that have, miraculously, been spared from liberalism's logic should be maintained *as is*. But where they have been lost, a true recovery is necessary, even a revolutionary recovery.[106] At the macro level, this recovery takes the form of recovering an entire regime type that has gone by the wayside—the "mixed regime" or "mixed constitution." This new regime will be stewarded by a "'new' conservatism," a "common-good conservatism," that is "in fact, quite old: It is a new manifestation of 'original' conservatism" whose "origins lie

98 On the continuities and discontinuities between *Why Liberalism Failed* and *Regime Change*, see Julian Waller's critical review of *Regime Change*. Julian G. Waller, "Political Actors," *The Lamp*, no. 19 (2023): 48-51. The connection between Vermeule's critique and Deneen's follow-up is also discussed in Matt Sleat, *Post-Liberalism* (Polity Press, 2026), 68-70.

99 The diagnosis remains static: the account of liberalism and its failure provided by *Why Liberalism Failed* is retained in *Regime Change*.

100 Even in *Regime Change*, Deneen remains committed to a form of localism, but one that is embedded within very different conditions of possibility. If in *Why Liberalism Failed* the creation of tightly bound local communities is the product of individual initiative, in *Regime Change* it is the product of state intervention. The following quote summarizes this nicely. "'Localism' is easily destroyed in a globalized system but can flourish if protected *under an umbrella of public policy* devoted to breaking up concentrations of economic power." Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 182, emphasis my own.

101 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*. See in particular chapters two and six, "The Power Elite" and "Aristopopulism."

102 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 167.

103 Stefan Borg, "Stefan Borg on Post-liberalism and the Return of the Common Good," *Illiberalism Studies Program*, February 12, 2026, https://www.illiberalism.org/stefan-borg-on-post-liberalism-and-the-return-of-the-common-good/. Matt Sleat has his own way of talking about this: "Despite his penchant for overstatement, Deneen's post-liberalism, though flawed and incoherent in parts, is not the repressive, intolerant and violent politics typically associated with full-blown illiberalism." He goes on to say that "Ethos Change" would have made for a more accurate title. See Matt Sleat, *Post-Liberalism*, 13, 67, 72-74.

104 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, xiii, xv.

105 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 7.

106 "To constitute a political and social order worth conserving, something revolutionary must first take place…" Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 147.

in the classical and Christian tradition of the West…"[107] A while later, Deneen is once again clear that "There is no deeper American corrective to the disintegrating form of [liberal] liberty that exacerbates our divisions than the predecessor understanding of liberty."[108] In these examples and many more one sees that, while differing from *Why Liberalism Failed* in myriad ways, Deneen's later work is similarly haunted by the specter of something old, of a *no longer*.

In perhaps the clearest articulation of this nostalgic impulse to date, Deneen, while still insisting that one cannot "roll the waves backward," proclaimed in 2025 that what must be developed is a "fourth wave of modernity, made not of the salty waters of modernity but refreshed, and perhaps even replaced, with the purer waters of premodernity, our classical and Christian heritage."[109] For this reason, though overstating the case and being a bit polemical, Laura K. Field nonetheless gets at something crucial when she argues that Deneen's work is "soaked in nostalgia for bygone eras."[110]

It is worth noting that Deneen explicitly, and helpfully, takes up these questions concerning time. He lends credence to the validity of the approach taken in this article by expressing his displeasure with the temporal regime imposed by liberalism and the End of History. He has his own sense of time being "off its hinges" or "out of joint" in the manner explicated by Derrida. Deneen's constant railing against progress and "progressivist ideology" and the like[111] (when read superficially) could be seen as a refusal of the future and therefore a refusal to recover a sense of time. But what Deneen, in fact, refuses is the specifically liberal construction of time which, while all the while insisting on its status as a guarantor of the future, of the new, in fact forecloses it. This is clear, for instance, when one hears Deneen proclaim that liberalism has midwifed a civilization that only "lives for the moment"—that is, a civilization that lives outside of history, or else at history's End.[112] Thus, while things may progress, they may, in a deeper sense, never *change*. This is why Deneen claims that liberalism sees itself as a "*permanent* ideological order."[113] If something is permanent and unable to be dislodged, then any superficial advance can only ever mask a deeper reproduction and repetition that eschews genuine futurity. Here, one hear echoes of Fisher's "eventless horizon of the end of history, in which nothing happens forever."[114]

Contra this "fragmented" and disintegrated conception of time,[115] Deneen desires to restore time to its hinges by reintegrating past, present, and future. As he says, "a politics of *continuity* weaves together past, present, and future in a relationship of mutual influence and correction."[116] Through this reintegration of time, we will recover a sense of "hope and memory," but only a "*hope without optimism*" and a "*memory without nostalgia*." If Deneen's desire to restore time to its hinges and usher in an end to the End of History places him squarely within the post-liberal problematic as defined above, his post-liberalism (in spite of his rhetorical denials)

107 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 95.

108 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 197-198.

109 Patrick Deneen, "Inaugural Neuhaus Lecture: We Are All Postliberals Now (Presented by: Patrick Deneen)," First Things, Streamed live on February 13, 2025, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOOnn04XE10&list=PL3bg2uSGoVsoKzyLaM72izmQYXe9V1kxK&index=4. I thank Laura Field for directing me to this resource.

110 Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right*, 83.

111 See e.g., Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 58 and many places elsewhere in the book and in *Why Liberalism Failed*.

112 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 114.

113 Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 237.

114 Mark Fisher, "No Future 2012 (for Nick Kilroy)." In Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)*, 713-718, 714.

115 On fragmented time, see Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 211.

116 On fragmented time, see Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, 212.

nonetheless remains a deeply nostalgic kind, haunted only by the ghosts of the past and never by the *lost futures* that modernity made possible but which were foreclosed. His conception of a quaint and harmonious continuity of time is only ever a vehicle for a philosophy that sees only the past when it imagines the future. Thus, with reference to the three potentialities outlined above, the analysis above clearly demonstrates that Deneen's post-liberalism best fits into category two; his post-liberal future takes the shape of something *old*, i.e., pre-liberal. For other post-liberals, as will be evident in the next section, a very different kind of future can be imagined.

Hauntological Post-liberalism

In the first pages of Nick Land's *The Dark Enlightenment*, savvy readers are immediately confronted with all the motifs discussed here. Land proclaims that, to conflate his project with "an indiscriminate repudiation of the Enlightenment (or even Modernity) in general" would be a mistake.[117] One is not, then, in the realm of "rejection or abandonment"; that is, of a *post*-Enlightenment. Rather, this is a kind of post-*Enlightenment*. This is confirmed by Land, sounding like Balibar, when he makes a meta-point about post-ing. "From a cladistic point of view, nothing arising as a schism from X ever becomes 'post-X.'"[118] Land proclaims that the background of his intervention is "an environment of incandescent political tension—and even collapse."[119] Land is clear that the emergence of the Dark Enlightenment, of so-called Neoreaction, is a contingent phenomenon based only on the fact that "Liberal failure has been succeeded by that of the left," inducing a feedback loop wherein "Fall-back to a genuinely liberal position is almost certainly inobtainable (*sic*)."[120] It is almost too fitting that Land invokes the word that Derrida insists on in his treatment of Hamlet: *rotten*. For Land, the Alt-Right "inherited the rotten remains" of contemporary liberalism.[121] A post-liberalism of *necessity* then. In a final word, Land believes that "If classical liberalism had been able to secure itself against mass politics—including mass race politics—Neoreaction would not have arisen from its grave."[122]

This invocation of rising from the grave means that one is also confronted by that other motif this article has been tracing—that of haunting, specters, ghosts. And thus, Land forwards a hauntology grounded in the idea of an Enlightenment "that was—if not missed—at least crucially eclipsed, and thus driven into the shadows," by what he deems later the "progressive Enlightenment."[123] But this shadowy Enlightenment has lingered on hauntingly. In his final chapter one is told that, "When things are squashed they rarely disappear. Instead, they are displaced, fleeing into sheltering shadows, and sometimes turning into monsters" (or perhaps, ghosts).[124] The Dark Enlightenment, then, is "the resilient attachment to the ineluctable, and thus to fate, or providence."[125] It is, to put it in the terms used above, haunted by a *lost future*, and intent on restoring time to its hinges. When Land speaks of the *Dark* Enlightenment, he is conjuring ghosts, invoking spectrality in order make it real, to give it a body, to assist in its becoming-flesh. Land is keen to play with this notion of disjointed time—he proclaims that his vision of Neoreaction is an "occult pact between the future and the past, setting both against the present," and "its bond with time as

117 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment* (Imperium Press, 2023), vii.

118 Nick Land, "Cladistic Meditations." In Nick Land, *Xenosystems* (Passage Publishing, 2024), 25.

119 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, x.

120 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, x.

121 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, x. Land says elsewhere that Neoreaction is primarily a *symptom* and elsewhere still that the status quo is "radically morbid, and is leading inexorably to utter ruin." See Nick Land, "Cathedral Decay" and "Down-Slopes," respectively. Both in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, on pages 22 and 216.

122 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, x.

123 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, vii, 5.

124 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 91.

125 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, vii.

outsideness carries it ever further beyond the moment and its decay… It is a Shadow Out of Time."[126]

The absence of a promised future has long been a motif in Land's work, dating back to the early nineties when he proclaimed that "Modernity invented the future, but that's all over [now]."[127] What is Land's own vision of a providential future? One will shortly see. One thing that can be definitively said is that this is *not* a nostalgic post-liberalism, even if Land acknowledges that "progress isn't what it used to be,"[128] that what is called progress today is "in fact bound to a primary association with *worsening*. The model is that of a progressive disease."[129] Still, he maintains that "unlike a renaissance, there is no need for an enlightenment to recall what was *lost*, or to emphasize the attractions of *return*."[130] This can be starkly juxtaposed to the nostalgic post-liberalism analyzed above, with its explicit invocation of pre-liberalism, to the heritage that liberalism inherited but outgrew over time. Land rejects "everything that shackles the future to the past," including those concepts that are watchwords for the post-liberal future envisioned by Deneen and others: tradition, inhibition, and the like.[131]

Landian Post-liberalism

Land's criticism of contemporary liberalism is two-fold. First, it has allied itself too closely to universality and democracy, which is but a degenerated form of religiosity.[132] Democracy is a roadblock on the way to the radical future that Land cries out for, as the former "accentuates time-preference to the point of convulsive feeding frenzy."[133] Thus, "democracy *consumes* progress" and must be analyzed as a parasite.[134] In other words, it skews incentives to the present and away from the future, inhibiting "the long-range techno-economic improvements and associated accumulation of cultural capital" needed to make *genuine* progress,[135] while softening the "tight-feedback, cybernetically intense" circuits that would otherwise do the same by punishing anti-productive behavior and rewarding its opposite.[136] Universality is "poison" insofar as it tries to flatten or dialecticize differences that should be made to compete and

126 Nick Land, "Reaction, Repetition, and Time," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 189.

127 Nick Land, "No Future," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 392.

128 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 3.

129 Nick Land, "The Idea of Neoreaction," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 3.

130 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 3. Emphasis my own.

131 Nick Land, "Circuitries," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 299.

132 Land largely takes this line from Curtis Yarvin (writing under his pseudonym Mencius Moldbug). Yarvin claims that universalism (which is an umbrella category housing democracy, progressivism, etc.) is a "nontheistic Christian sect." More specifically, it is the "the dominant modern branch of Christianity on the Calvinist line, evolving from the English Dissenter or Puritan tradition through the Unitarian, Transcendentalist, and Progressive movements." On this basis, it is considered a "*mystery cult of power*" that "displaces theistic traditions by replacing metaphysical superstitions with philosophical *mysteries*, such as *humanity*, *progress*, *equality*, *democracy*, *justice*, *environment*, *community*, *peace*, etc." The continual production of these mysteries is meant to confuse us and reproduce the Cathedral. This all amounts to a very inefficient and misguided government, and perhaps even one that can be considered "evil" using the metrics Yarvin outlines. See Mencius Moldbug, "How Dawkins got PWND, Chapter 3: A Mystery Cult of Power," in Mencius Moldbug, *Unqualified Reservations Vol. 1* (Passage Publishing, 2023): 421-443.

133 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 7.

134 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 17.

135 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 7.

136 "Social solidarity…is the parasite's friend. By cropping out all high-frequency feedback mechanisms (such as market signals), and replacing them with sluggish, infra-red loops that pass through a centralized forum of 'general will,' a radically democratized society insulates parasitism from what it does, transforming local, painfully dysfunctional, intolerable, and thus urgently corrected behavior patterns into global, numbed, and chronic socio-political pathologies. *Gnaw off other people's body parts and it might be hard to get a job*—that's the kind of lesson a tight-feedback, cybernetically intense, laissez faire order would allow to be learned. It's also exactly the kind of insensitive zombiephobic discrimination that any compassionate democracy would denounce as thought crime…" Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 17-18.

progress according to the logic of creative destruction. The maxim must never be integration, but disintegration and fragmentation.[137]

The other problem with liberalism, certainly related to the first, is that it has inhibited the drives and tendencies of capital, of market intelligence, which is the vehicle to the future. This latter phenomenon is targeted in the opening salvos of *The Dark Enlightenment*, where readers are told that "commercial processes interpret ethico-political interventions as damage, and route around them. Progressive domestication of the economy is illusory."[138] He returns to this theme in *Xenosystems*: "The techno-commercial *thing*—catallaxy—is comparably invulnerable. There is no chance that anyone, ever, will successfully prohibit the market…"[139] To the extent that "capitalism" exists today alongside progressive, contemporary liberalism, it is a "pseudo-capitalism" captured entirely by what he calls, following Curtis Yarvin (aka Mencius Moldbug), the Cathedral.[140]

Successfully prohibiting or domesticating capital's true drives is an impossible task, but one persistently attempted—and this is a problem. This persistent attempt to shackle capital is chalked up to human folly, tied all too intimately to sentimentality about humanness as such, and therefore to the present and not the future. Capital's "machinic" drive is ambivalent about, if not hostile to, this sentimentality.[141] In Land's words, "Capital only retains anthropological characteristics as a symptom of under-development… Man is something for it to overcome: a problem, [a] drag."[142] Land, for his part, would rather unleash capital and leap headfirst across the "bionic horizon," which would be "not merely an evolutionary event, but the threshold of a new *evolutionary phase*," that is, a new phase for what was once the human species."[143] More on that below.

What is Land's relationship to liberalism? It is clear that Land's philosophy is a kind of post-*liberalism*, insofar as he is "thinking from" liberalism, developing certain intuitions and eliminating others. In fact, he has said in interviews that he actually

137 Nick Land, "Disintegration," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 206-208.

138 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, viii.

139 Nick Land, "Dark Techno-commercialism," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 40.

140 Nick Land, "Crypto-capitalism," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 173. The Cathedral is probably Yarvin's most influential idea and was coined in 2008. For the term's first usage, see Mencius Moldbug, "An Open Letter to Open-Minded Progressives, Chapter 4: Dr. Johnson's Hypothesis," in Mencius Moldbug, *Unqualified Reservations Vol. 1*, 89-105. The idea was elaborated on by Yarvin in "An Open Letter to Open-Minded Progressives, Chapter 7: The Ugly Truth about Government," in Mencius Moldbug, *Unqualified Reservations Vol. 1*, 167-201, and many other places besides. Yarvin more recently reiterated that the Cathedral is a means of "managing the mind" of the public. It is at once a commercial business, a state agency, a religious church and a political party, according to Yarvin. In short, "a profitable one-party ministry of truth" made up of branches in universities and the media. See Curtis Yarvin, "The Consensus of History," in Curtis Yarvin, *Gray Mirror, Fascicle I: Disturbance* (Passage Publishing, 2024): 36-39. See also, Curtis Yarvin, "A Brief Explanation of the Cathedral," *Gray Mirror,* January 21, 2021, https://graymirror.substack.com/p/a-brief-explanation-of-the-cathedral.

141 On what is meant by machinic here, see Nick Land, "Machinic Desire," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 319-344, and more generally the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

142 Nick Land, "Meltdown," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 445-446.

143 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 91-97. This article has not spoken about Land's assessment and endorsement of race science, though of course it is troubling. But in the end, Land does not see racialist thinking as a horizon for politics but rather as a "triviality," for reasons altogether to do with his commitment to the bionic horizon. In Land's words (p. 96), "*Think face tentacles.*" In the face of that, what we think of as race likely melts away. But in general, Land's commitment to passing through the bionic horizon is all about his commitment to abstract intelligence. This has been a throughline in his work since the beginning, as evidenced by this quote from 1992: "It might still be a few decades before artificial intelligences surpass the horizon of biological ones, but it is utterly superstitious to imagine that the human dominion of terrestrial culture is still marked out in centuries, let alone in some metaphysical perpetuity. The high road to thinking no longer passes through a deepening of human cognition, but rather through a becoming inhuman of cognition, a migration of cognition out into the emerging planetary technosentience reservoir…where human culture will be dissolved…Human brains are to thinking what mediaeval villages were to engineering: antechambers to experimentation, cramped and parochial places to be." Land would prefer we lean into becoming techno sapiens. See Nick Land, "Circuitries," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 293-294.

"likes liberalism" within certain limits.[144] In his later writings, Land more often dallies with the prefix neo- and the conjunction Neoreaction, but his justifications for doing so are more or less in line with what we have dubbed post-*liberalism*.[145] But Land's conception of liberalism is in fact a radical departure, it is "counter-political," and opposed to democracy and consensus in any guise. But this critique of (liberal) democracy is launched "*from the perspective of* (the old) *liberalism*."[146] In general, Land sees himself as retaining the critical economic core of liberal, capitalist modernity, noting that classical liberalism's stewarding of techno-commercial modernization is "far more baby than bath water."[147] Not to be thrown out then, even if one must dispense with the architecture of modern liberalism's political institutions. But how?

Here, Land is indeed indebted to Curtis Yarvin, from whom he takes an insistence on Exit over Voice, proclaiming that problems and difficulties should never be handled temporally, but only spatially. In other words, what are today considered the principles of liberal democracy must be succeeded by a system wherein citizens are offered no opportunity for input, but every opportunity to leave and to form or participate in new and different communities elsewhere. This is what is meant by the Yarvinite maxim, "all exit, no voice." When Land imagines a new political system for the West, he certainly sees potential in Yarvin's "patchwork" and "sovcorp" formulations, the details of which cannot be elaborated on here.[148] Inspired by these Yarvinite innovations, he has put forth a "trichotomocratic" schema for a post-Cathedral government that sees the three main branches of Neoreaction (ethno-nationalists, theonomists, and techno-commercialists) engaged in power sharing operations, creating a government with "complete immunity from populist pressure" that is "answerable only to itself, with a self that is irreducibly plural, and this intrinsically self-critical."[149]

144 Monica Sobchak, "In conversation with Nick Land, 'the father of accelerationism,'" *The Spectator World*, October 21, 2025, https://thespectator.com/technology/conversation-nick-land-father-accelerationism.

145 "'Neo-' at its most frivolous is merely a mark of fashion. When employed more seriously, it notes an element of innovation. Its most significant sense includes not only novelty, but also abstraction. Something is carried forwards in such a way that its conceptual core is distilled through extraction from a specific context, achieving a higher generality, and more exact formality." Nick Land, "Malthusian Horror," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 320.

146 Nick Land, "NRx and Liberalism," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 89.

147 Nick Land, *Outsideness, 2013-2023* (Noumena Institute, 2025), 40.

148 Yarvin's "formalist" hypothesis suggests that the US government is nothing but a corporation, but a poorly managed, inefficient, and directionless one. "It is just a big old company that holds a huge pile of assets, [and] has no clear idea of what it's trying to do with them…" He therefore suggests that government must be "reformalized" by discovering "who has real power in the US" and assigning "shares in such a way as to reproduce this distribution as closely as possible." Yarvin is therefore interested in creating a highly efficient (which means in large part, profitable) and undemocratic "sovereign corporation" (*sovcorp*) and dispensing with all demotic mystifications. In short, "A sovcorp is a corporation that owns a populated territory, and is not dependent on any other power to enforce its claim of property." Whereas today those who objectively *own* the government are tempered in the degree of *control* they can exercise over it, the "formalist is only happy when ownership and control are one and the same" and this does not involve mass participation in the slightest. What Yarvin sees in democracy is this: "A modern democracy is nothing more or less than a very malstructured sovcorp. Its basic problems are that its power base—its voters, who are at least in theory the owners of this collective enterprise—is completely deformalized. Voters cannot sell their shares, nor does a share guarantee an equal percentage of government revenue. New shares are constantly being issued…The confusion of customers and shareholders is complete." The "patchwork" element of all this simply suggests a proliferation of efficient sovcorps, where "customers" (citizens) can browse the market, so to speak, and exit their sovcorp for another if they desire. As Yarvin says, "The basic idea of Patchwork is that, as the crappy governments we inherited from history are smashed, they should be replaced by a global spiderweb of tens, even hundreds, of thousands of sovereign and independent mini-countries, each governed by its own joint-stock corporation without regard to the residents' opinions. If residents don't like their government, they can and should move. The design is all 'exit,' no 'voice.' On all of this, see variously "A Formalist Manifesto" and all seven chapters (but especially the last three) of "How Dawkins got PWND." All contained in Mencius Moldbug, *Unqualified Reservations Vol. 1*. And see also, Mencius Moldbug, "Patchwork: A Political System for the 21st Century, Chapter 1: A Positive Vision," *Unqualified Reservations*, November 13, 2008, https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2008/11/patchwork-positive-vision-part-1/.

149 Nick Land, "Trichotomocracy," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 32-34.

One again sees here the persistence of certain liberal-ish sounding axioms—concerning the separation of powers, pluralism, market economism—but all are stripped of their democratic baggage. Much of this musing on Land's part is essentially *hyperstitious* (or desires to be so), but this does not mean one should not take it seriously.[150] The bottom line is that, according to Land, the governance structures outlined above would foster a culture of genuine freedom—*true* liberty would be preserved. This kind of liberty is in fact the only kind conducive to the positive feedback cybernetics that preoccupy Land, which he insists are the gateway to continual progress, to intelligence maximization—in a word, *to the future*. So, it is towards Land's vision of the future that this article must now turn.

Landian Futures

If for Marx the revolution of the nineteenth century could not "draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future,"[151] then in the twenty-first century Land agrees—there truly is nothing nostalgic operative here.[152] In *The Dark Enlightenment*, Land lays out three potential futures, what he calls Modernity 2.0, Postmodernity, and Western Renaissance.[153] Working backwards, it can quickly be explained what these scenarios are. Western Renaissance depends upon the West "reversing pretty much everything it has been doing for over a century, excepting only scientific, technological, and business innovation," and implies replacing current institutional structures with something far less democratic, a massive downsizing of government functions, the restoration of hard money, and the "dismantling of state monetary and fiscal discretion."[154] This last measure would "liberate" the "autonomous (or 'catallactic') economy" and is thus "the real prize."[155] The Postmodern scenario sees the continuation of everything Land despises, and he is sure that it will not only usher in a "new dark age," but also see the "entire future of the world collapse" around it.[156] Modernity 2.0 is clearly Land's preference, as it is the "the world's principal highway to the future," a highway being built day in and day out, he says, by contemporary China.[157] China today is, for Land, 'the greatest political engine of social and economic development the world has ever known.'[158]

This affinity for China is longstanding in Land's work; asking why gets one back to the motifs being traced throughout this article. As far back as the nineties one hears from

150 *Hyperstition* is a concept coined by Land and adopted by other members of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (Ccru) at Warwick University throughout the 1990s. Morphologically, the word is a compound of *hyper-* and *superstitious*, and "describes ideas that bring themselves into actuality in the future through the forces unleashed via their expression in the past or present." See Macon Holt, "Hyperstitional Theory-Fiction." *Full Stop Quarterly*, October 21, 2020, https://www.full-stop.net/2020/10/21/features/essays/macon-holt/hyperstitional-theory-fiction/. Definitionally, in brief, "the coinage refers to 'fictions that make themselves real.'" This of course has significant overlap with hauntology and the specters we have been tracing here, because "The hyperstitional process of entities 'making themselves real' is precisely a passage, a transformation, in which potentials—already-active virtualities—realize themselves." See Ccru, "Lemurian Time War," In *CCRU: 1997-2003* (Urbanomic, 2023): 33-53, 35-36. On the function of hyperstition and how it marked a distinct shift in Land's early work, see Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, "Editors' Introduction." In Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, especially pages 6-27 and 31-39. On developments in hyperstitional thinking, see Simon O'Sullivan, "Accelerationism, Hyperstition, and Myth-Science," *Cyclops Journal* (2017): 12-44.

151 Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (International Publishers, 2020), 18.

152 As an aside, despite Marxism and communism's futurity, which have been referenced repeatedly here, Land finds socialism utterly nostalgic. "Socialism has typically been a nostalgic diatribe against underdeveloped capitalism, finding its eschatological soap-boxes amongst the relics of precapitalist territorialities." On our theme of hauntology, Land praises the fact that the "long senile spectre" of communism is fading from the horizon. See Nick Land, "Machinic Desire," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 340-341.

153 Modernity 1.0 is our present, dominated as it is in Land's view by degenerate, decaying liberal hegemony.

154 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 86-87.

155 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 87.

156 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 86.

157 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 86.

158 Monica Sobchak, "In conversation with Nick Land, 'the father of accelerationism.'"

Land that "Neo-China *arrives from the future*."[159] So, one is firmly in the presence of specters and they are not merely illusory; Land reminds readers around the same time, like Derrida, that "Nothing is arriving unless it's already there."[160] This *there* is spectral but is becoming-flesh in the body of contemporary China. The latter must be defended "precisely because it is alien to the Cathedral," insofar as it is "free of all demotic corrosion."[161] But more than this shallowly Manichean point, contemporary China must be defended as a highway to (and from) the future; it is on this basis that Land talks about "Neoreaction with Chinese characteristics."

It is therefore not a stretch to suggest that Land's fascination with China is not only providential (he sees Modernity 2.0 as "the most encouraging and plausible scenario")[162] but strictly speaking hauntological.[163] He tells readers, for instance, that "The End can reach back to us, but when it does, it hides."[164] The ghost cloaks itself in camouflage, it evades visibility, as all ghosts tend to do.[165] Land tells readers that "Capitalism tends to the realization of an end entirely innovated within itself, inherently nonlinear in nature, and roughly designated as *Technological Singularity*… What it is *in itself* is only tactically connected to what it does *for us*—that is (in part), what it trades us for its self-escalation. Our phenomenology is its camouflage."[166] This latter quote helps make sense of what is meant by "The End" in the former quote: It is the Technological Singularity; it is capital's telos projected forward and backward. As he was already prophesizing in 1993, "something is climbing out of the machinic unconscious and onto the screen, as if *the end* itself were awakening."[167] For Land, then, "It is no longer just society, but time itself, that has taken the 'capitalist road.'"[168]

Humanity is thus, according to Land, haunted by the specter of capitalism, a capitalism entirely unshackled and freed from all "monkey business," i.e., petty humanistic sentiment.[169] Humans are faced with a choice: double-down on monkey business or on anti-humanist accelerationism that can "convert the human species into auto-intelligenic robotized capital as fast as possible."[170] If humanity cannot embrace this specter, the *speed machine*,[171] then Land proclaims, "extinction might

159 Nick Land, "Meltdown," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 442. Emphasis my own.

160 Nick Land, "No Future," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 398.

161 Nick Land, "NRx with Chinese Characteristics," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 28.

162 Nick Land, *The Dark Enlightenment*, 86.

163 On providence, Geoff Shullenberger puts it nicely; while Land prefers to speak of 'directed historical processes,' "The old term for a 'directed historical process' is providence." Geoff Shullenberger, "The Faith of Nick Land," *Compact*, October 15, 2025, https://www.compactmag.com/article/the-faith-of-nick-land/.

164 Nick Land, "Teleology and Camouflage," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 165.

165 This disguising is roughly what Derrida means when he talks about the "visor effect." See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, passim.

166 Nick Land, "Romantic Delusion," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 167-168. This is in line with Land's longstanding fascination with, and particular reading of, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophy, particularly in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, as can be gleaned from this 1993 quote from Land: "…the desiring-production of Deleuze-Guattari is not qualified by humanity (it is not a matter of what things are like for us). Within this framework of social history the empirical subject of production is man, but its transcendental subject is the machinic unconscious, and the empirical subject is produced at the edge of production, as an element in the reproduction of production, a machine part, and 'a part made up of parts.'" Nick Land, "Machinic Desire," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 321-322.

167 Nick Land, "Machinic Desire," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 344. Italics my own.

168 Nick Land, "Critique of Transcendental Miserablism," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 626.

169 Monkey business, as Land calls it, is narrowly "the subordination of the economy/technology to discernible human purposes." Nick Land, "Monkey Business," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 92.

170 Nick Land, "IQ Shredders," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 232.

171 Nick Land, "Re-accelerationism," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 42.

then be the best thing that could happen to our stubbornly idiotic species."[172] In other words, China is merely the camouflage that this specter wears in the present, to hide the truth of its "runaway processes," but it is not an end in and of itself.[173] The object called China is not *the future*, because the future can never be an object, never be a place. Rather, one might reappropriate a line from Deleuze and Guattari, who are so influential for Land, and say that the future is "not a promised and a pre-existing land, but a world created in the process of its tendency, its coming undone, its deterritorialization…not at all a hope, but a simple 'finding'…"[174] For Land, contemporary China is exacerbating this tendency rather than resisting it. It is thus consciously attuned to the processes constructing the future and must be supported on that basis.

To conclude, a few questions are in order. Which of the three potentialities outlined above is one in the midst of in Land's writings? Land's post-liberal future is clearly the first—something which, despite its debts to hyper-liberal capitalism, is radically *new*. Nick Land's vision of the future is simply capital teleology. But what does liberalism have to do with all this? Well, in its Cathedralized form, liberalism is an impediment, it is a "decelerator," a "breaking mechanism" whose "emergent function [is] the cancellation of capitalism."[175] To this, Land counterposes his perspective: "For re-accelerationist Neoreaction, escape into uncompensated cybernetic runaway is the guiding objective."[176] The choice for Land is clear: *ultra-capitalism or a return to monkey business*.[177] Thus, Capital's ghost beckons humanity into the future, to the radical Outside. Even in the rottenness of the present, with its attendant loss of future, "the Shadow [still] mutters to us."[178] He has said that "We don't control the current. The only agency that remains is alignment—listening to what's happening and cooperating with it rather than resisting it. You can't command the process, but you can move with it."[179] In other words, Land suggests we humans listen to and oblige the ghost…as it guides us into the unknown.

Conclusion

"To announce oneself…is that not already to be there in some way?"[180] This is one of the many ways that Derrida makes sense of the figure of the specter in philosophy and politics. Today, without a doubt and even if it has not yet consolidated itself in material reality, post-liberalism is announcing itself. The specter of post-liberalism has emerged to haunt contemporary liberalism, to strive towards the latter's abandonment or else a thorough rethinking. This article has demonstrated that the

172 Nick Land, "Romantic Delusion," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 168. As early as 1992, Land was already suggesting that this was not only desirable, but inevitable, and we would therefore be stupid to oppose it. "Life is being phased-out into something new, and if we think this can be stopped we are even more stupid than we seem." Nick Land, "Circuitries." In Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 317.

173 It is interesting that this concept of camouflage has been retained for so long in Land's work, even as much else has been abandoned or transformed. The quote referenced here is from 1993, while the earlier examples are from almost two decades later. Here is the quote invoked here in full, with a relevant line added afterwards: "The future of runaway processes derides all precedent, even when deploying it as *camouflage*, and seeming to unfold within its parameters…Thanatos mimics the anthropomorphic desiring-cycle – anticipating, enveloping, and simulating it – but it is on its way somewhere else." Nick Land, "Machinic Desire," in Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 330-331.

174 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Penguin Classics, 2009), 322.

175 Nick Land, "Re-accelerationism," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 44.

176 Nick Land, "Re-accelerationism," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 45.

177 Nick Land, "Monkey Business," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 93.

178 Nick Land, "Abstract Horror (Note 1)," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 300.

179 Monica Sobchak, "In conversation with Nick Land, 'the father of accelerationism.'"

180 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, 44. Land says that by the time something is a political question, "it is already historical fact. It is too late, then, for simple denial. The thing is in motion. It cannot be asked not to have begun." See Nick Land, "Which Falls First?," in Nick Land, *Xenosystems*, 220.

post-liberal field is varied, and that fundamentally oppositional projects blossom there, rooted in very different conceptions and desires about the past and the future. But what unites the field is a fundamental commitment to a radical renegotiation with liberalism, crisis ridden as it is perceived to be, and a commitment to restoring a sense of time itself.

The broadest contours of this renegotiation are what this article has tried to map. While some scholars have begun fruitful work analyzing post-liberalism politically or ideologically or semiotically, it is my view that it is yet a little too early for such analyses. Post-liberalism is not yet, or not entirely, *here*, not yet corporeal. It is, more accurately, both *here* and *not here*—it is ghostly and spectral and anticipatory, but it is not yet entirely become-flesh. For this reason, this article has chosen to traffic less in stark claims than in gestures, motifs, impulses, and drives. To reiterate what those are, I find it necessary to talk: about *moving beyond* a problematic and all the messiness that entails, about phenomenologically perceived *crises* and *contradictions*, about *no longers* and *not yets* (i.e., *lost futures*) and their effectivity in the present. These latter phenomena, of lost futures, are in my view the most interesting and compelling vectors of post-liberalism because they indict all of us with a simple charge: "*You had forgotten having been in the future*."[181] After three decades of insisting on an End of History, after coming face to face with a technocratic liberalism that is observably and viscerally static and sclerotic and out of ideas…who is in a place to refute this simple charge?

181 Nick Land, "No Future." In Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena, Collected Writings 1987-2007*, 399. Italics my own.