

OPEN QUESTIONS

# DOES MAGA HAVE IDEAS?

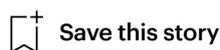
*A new book traces the intellectual origins of Trumpism—straight into the void.*

By Joshua Rothman

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Illustration by Josie Norton



In 2018, at a rally in Houston, Donald Trump articulated a distinction that was becoming central to the American right. “A globalist is a person that wants the globe to do well,” Trump said. This involved “not caring about the country so much.” By contrast, he was “a nationalist.” “Really, we’re not supposed to use that word,” Trump went on. “You know what I am? I’m a nationalist, O.K.? I’m a nationalist. Nationalist! Nothing wrong. Use that word. Use that word!” The delighted crowd began chanting, “U.S.A.! U.S.A.!”

Trump’s use of “nationalist” was perplexing to many people. CNN, in its coverage of the speech, connected it to “the protectionist trade policies he has implemented in an effort to boost domestic manufacturing.” This was reasonable—much of Trump’s speech had centered on his “America First” economic agenda—and yet the idea of being a nationalist was clearly bigger than that. Trump’s nationalism was partly about pride: “For years, you watched as your leaders apologized for America,” he told the audience, and “now you have a President who is standing up for America.” It also involved a generally pugilistic attitude. He wanted to throw America’s weight around. Possibly, he was associating himself with the ambitious, violent nationalisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

We seemed to be hearing only part of the conversation; we didn’t know exactly what he was talking about. And it was strange to consider how Trump, whose mind doesn’t work in isms, had come to be thinking about nationalism in the first place. It was

difficult to picture him on Air Force One, gazing out at the passing clouds, then scribbling the word “nationalism” on a notepad and underlining it. What appeared more likely was that some aide or speechwriter had nudged the term up the chain of command until it could be presented to him as a spell to be cast on his audience. (“Use that word!” the adviser might have suggested.) Still, even this scenario was a little hard to credit. “Nationalist” is a nerdy term, associated with history and political science. As a rallying cry, it’s a long way from “Lock her up!” The word “nationalism” had emerged from somewhere—but where?

Broadly speaking, two discourses lurk behind MAGA’s pomp and circumstance. One roars unimpeded through blogs, memes, forums, group texts, Substacks, and chatrooms, while another unfolds at a more stately pace, by means of policy papers, revisionist histories, and conservative political-philosophical manifestos. Often these streams overlap, producing the recognizable MAGA vibe—provocative, emotional, and yet oddly specific. When J. D. Vance told Tucker Carlson that America was run, via the Democrats, by “a bunch of childless cat ladies” who “want to make the rest of the country miserable, too,” it was easy to hear the bro-centric laugh line. What was less obvious was that it was a slur with an intellectual origin, descending from arguments in theology, history, and conservative social theory, and from the very real phenomenon of declining birth rates. Viewed from the right, it was academically respectable.

What should we make of the intellectual aspect of MAGA? Beginning in 2016, Laura K. Field writes, in “Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right,” a group of “PhDs and intellectuals”—“almost all men”—began coalescing around ideas that they attributed to, associated with, or smuggled inside Trump’s nascent movement. To some extent, they liked that he seemingly held the same “old-school conservative views” as they did. But they also saw, in his ideological malleability, a chance to go further. Many “wanted to turn back the clock on pluralistic liberal democracy, and even on modernity itself”; others hoped to advance “visions for the future”—“new laws, schemas for education, modes of constitutionalism, traditionalist communities, and technological utopias.” The result of this fusion was a new brand of conservative futurism.

Having emerged chaotically and opportunistically, the New Right now appears to be

at the center of the most dynamic political movement in modern American history. But the role of ideas in politics is complicated. From one perspective, ideas shape political possibilities. (We might hold that, without the Enlightenment, there'd be no French Revolution.) But it's also true that intellectuals conjure ideas to make sense of what's already happening. Trump's unprecedented ascendance was the result of innumerable factors—among them changes in the media, the economy, and American culture—that had little to do with the arguments being made by conservative intellectuals, who were as surprised by Trump as everyone else. By interpreting and justifying his rise, many of those thinkers accessed power; some now work for the federal government, and are putting their ideas into practice. And yet their thinking didn't create Trump. People didn't necessarily vote for it. They might not know what it is.

Meanwhile, Trump, now seventy-nine, seems already to be fading; the MAGA movement, at the height of its power, faces the increasingly urgent question of what comes next. If MAGA has good ideas, they might undergird its future. Alternatively, if it has bad or irrelevant ones, it may struggle to maintain its energy. Do the ideas associated with Trumpism lead somewhere, or are they a dead end? Can they stand on their own, without a reality star to animate them?

**F**ield, an academic based in Washington, D.C., was once a conservative, and has a lot of sympathy for various conservative viewpoints. She received an education in the “Great Books,” reading Plato and Rousseau; earned a Ph.D. in government from the University of Texas at Austin; and has spent plenty of time among the conservative intelligentsia. In the preface to “Furious Minds,” she recounts the beginning of her disillusionment. She was in her fifth year of graduate school, and was attending a prestigious summer program for young scholars at the University of Virginia. At the opening dinner, hosted by a conservative educational organization, she was seated next to one of the program's senior staffers, a well-liked man she calls Todd, who had recently attended an event where he'd met Michelle Obama, then the First Lady. “She was truly statuesque,” Todd said. “Very tall, very impressive. I'd really like to fuck her.”

Shocked, Field excused herself from the table, went to the restroom, regarded herself in the mirror, and thought, “What on earth am I doing here?” She describes the moment as “the beginning of the long, slow process” of extricating herself from the right. Unnerved by what she perceived as a newly supercharged misogyny among

conservative intellectuals—in her view, they are “obsessed with masculinity” in a way their predecessors were not—Field watched as they grew suddenly more radical. In the nineteen-eighties, Ronald Reagan had seen conservatism as a three-legged stool. The basic idea was freedom from government; the legs, Field writes, were social conservatism, free-market economics, and anti-Communism. But now even Reagan was seen as “a great capitulator” in a much larger war. The new conservative thinkers said they wanted a bigger, more assertive government—perhaps even a “Red Caesar”—to overturn atheistic, scientific, multicultural modernity, ushering in a “postliberal” age.

Did this new attitude make sense? There are contradictions involved in using expansive government power to liberate people from the social and political structures they themselves have built. And yet it’s not clear “how much the incoherence of the New Right movement matters in the rough and tumble of real politics,” she writes, in “Furious Minds.” Incoherence could even be part of the point: making an ostentatiously contradictory argument can be a way of demonstrating power and devotion. She quotes the political theorist Matthew McManus, who believes that the New Right counts “a willingness to sublimate and affirm contradiction” as a kind of membership card.

Political life is inevitably disappointing, because all political movements contain contradictions. Democrats consider themselves advocates of the working class, yet their party skews toward the highly educated; old-school Republicans talk up freedom from big government while tolerating the predations of big corporations. Whenever anyone makes an argument about how society should run, they risk being hypocritical, because reality is knotty. So perhaps the contradictions of the New Right are just ordinary.

Field shows how this isn’t the case. The contradictions of the New Right reflect a unique disconnect between thinking and reality. The word “nationalist,” for example, may have snuck into Trump’s lexicon through the wide influence of “The Virtue of Nationalism,” a book published the month before the Houston rally, by the philosopher and political theorist Yoram Hazony, to conservative acclaim. Its central contention is that the world is a better place when it’s composed of distinct nation-states, each with its own individual culture and history; such societies are more stable, and achieve more, and make unique contributions to humanity as a whole. That’s not unreasonable. But Hazony takes this idea very far. He argues, in abstract terms, that

multiculturalism is actually a form of globalist imperialism, aimed at undermining the structure of those nation-states. In his account, there is a black-and-white choice to be made between this so-called imperialism and national sovereignty. Hazony proposes that the concept of national sovereignty, in turn, can be traced back to the struggles of “biblical Israel” to preserve its political independence and religious freedom. So a successful nation-state is actually a theocratic ethnostate, with, as Hazony puts it, “a majority . . . whose cultural dominance is plain and unquestioned, and against which resistance appears to be futile.”

Hazony’s conception of nationalism turns out to have been influential within Trumpism; National Conservatism, the movement Hazony helped found, counts Vance, Marco Rubio, and Josh Hawley among its adherents. There are all sorts of problems with basing one’s idea of nationhood, even loosely, on the case of Israel. But the biggest issue with Hazony’s theory, Field writes, is simply that it is “untethered from the history of the real world.” In fact, many nations have prospered without being so monolithic, and there are shades of nationalism, multiculturalism, and liberalism, which allow countries to thrive without making black-and-white choices. Moreover, it’s simply a fact that the United States contains people from many places, with different cultures and views. There is really no sense in which Hazony-style nationalism can be put into practice here. The signal intellectual error of the New Right, Field says, is that it lets “abstractions smother straightforward real-world truths.” You can’t deport half of America.

**T**he New Right has a lot of very abstract ideas—not just about nationhood but about human nature, God, virtue, gender, technology, “the Common Good,” and more. One way to understand this addiction to abstraction, Field writes, is to look at a book like *“Ideas Have Consequences,”* an “ur-text” of American conservatism published in 1948 by Richard Weaver, an intellectual historian at the University of Chicago. Weaver’s view, Field argues, was that “without a transcendental metaphysics . . . there is nothing to limit political turpitude, and no reason for people to be good and true.” We might doubt this; we might point out that being uncertain about what’s right and wrong definitely doesn’t make you a nihilist. (In fact, the opposite is probably true.) Still, ever since, many conservative intellectuals have been convinced that “moral relativism” is a grave danger to civilization.

If you presume, for whatever reason, that moral uncertainty is nihilism, then you must urgently acquire a transcendent metaphysics. This might mean turning to the Greeks,

or the Romans, or the Bible, or to some other source of authority, and asserting that whatever you find there is capital-T Transcendently True. Unfortunately, since we're stuck in modernity, it's always possible to disagree about what's transcendent; it's also easy to welcome new transcendent abstractions into your pantheon. And so someone like the influential hard-right provocateur Costin Alamariu—known pseudonymously as Bronze Age Pervert, or BAP—can propose an alternative version of ancient history in which men once lived free, during the Bronze Age, but have now become trapped within the cage of “gynocracy.” This view, outlined in the widely read book “Bronze Age Mindset,” is hardly metaphysical. But it can easily be added to a storehouse of abstract ideas that seem, to some people, to be somehow capital-T Transcendently True. (Vance follows Bronze Age Pervert on X.)

It's small-T true that, today, men face many challenges, among them shifts in the job market and in cultural norms around masculinity. It should be possible to talk about those challenges in straightforward, concrete, real-world terms. But if your head is full of abstractions, it's tempting to use them. The path from Bronze-Age “gynocracy” to “childless cat ladies” can be quite short, and the presence of the abstract idea can turn concrete questions into what look to be catastrophic crises of value. Reality doesn't matter; abstractions do. And yet how many Trump voters care about the same abstractions as the New Right intellectuals? How many just want cheaper groceries, vacant apartments, and decent jobs?

A common thread throughout “Furious Minds” is the frequency with which the New Right simply asserts truths in eternal terms, without justification or argument, and the satisfaction it takes in doing so. These supposed truths, once asserted, serve as justification for more assertions, creating a performance of certainty about what's True. And yet this performance quickly outpaces what's actually self-evident. The legal scholar, political theorist, and Nazi Party member Carl Schmitt held that there's a “state of exception” during which a leader can, and perhaps must, circumvent the constitutional order so that he can save the nation; some on the New Right have merged this idea with the notion of “Caesarism,” arguing that the country needs a “Red Caesar.” (“If we *must* have Caesar, who do you want him to be?” Michael Anton—who would go on to help author Project 2025—asked, in 2016.) But is a “state of exception” a real thing? Even if it is—are we in one? Do voters believe in this stuff—or even know about it? The New Right acts as though it's all perfectly obvious. (“Sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” Schmitt wrote, in 1922. “He who

saves his Country does not violate any Law,” Trump posted on social media this year.)

It’s no surprise to find that the intellectual fabric of Trumpism is thin. What is possibly surprising is the degree to which the New Right has, through its arguments and behavior, refuted its own premises. In 2019, in a celebrated joint essay called “Against the Dead Consensus,” a group of conservative thinkers argued that liberalism and “consensus conservatism”—the old-school kind—had “long ago ceased to inquire into the first things”; it had taken for granted erroneous conclusions about “the nature and purpose of our common life.” They promised to turn America into the kind of place where values were taken seriously—where we might ask, for example, whether “the soulless society of individual affluence” was one we wanted. But it turns out that it’s liberalism that forces you to inquire into ideas, precisely because they’re uncertain, changeable, and contested. In the illiberal world created by Trumpism, you don’t have to ask—you can just proclaim. You can change on a dime, saying or thinking anything at all. ♦



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