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Radical Right Dystopias in the Global Culture Wars

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Despite the pervasive description of our times as dystopian, the disciplines of political theory and international relations seldom consider the political power of dystopian imaginaries. This article seeks to remedy this neglect by focusing on the radical Right's invocation of dystopias. These dystopian narratives go beyond mere scaremongering and constitute instead "critical dystopias" that follow a distinct grammar rooted in the radical Right's ideological critique of managerialism and liberal globalization. They express the radical Right's fear of liberalism, exploiting the latent dystopian possibilities in the liberal present. Promoted by right-wing influencers and media pundits, critical dystopias translate theoretical and ideological interpretations of social and political life into globally mobile, everyday infotainment readily accessible to broader, global audiences. As such, radical Right dystopias are affective strategies in a global culture war that may help (re)produce and reinforce political subjectivities, identities, and geopolitical imaginaries. They provide a window on the global appeal and interconnectedness of the radical Right and serve as a reminder of the importance of emotions and affect in international politics.

A pesar de que, con frecuencia, se describen los tiempos actuales como distópicos, las disciplinas de la Teoría Política y de las Relaciones Internacionales rara vez tienen en cuenta el poder político que emana de los imaginarios distópicos. Este artículo trata de remediar esta falta de atención centrándose en la invocación de las distopías que lleva a cabo la extrema derecha. Estas narrativas distópicas van más allá del mero alarmismo y constituyen, en cambio, ≪distopías críticas≫ que siguen una gramática distinta, la cual se encuentra arraigada en la crítica ideológica de la extrema derecha al gerencialismo y la globalización liberal. Estas narrativas también representan el miedo que tiene la extrema derecha al liberalismo, explotando las posibilidades distópicas latentes en el presente liberal. Los influencers y los expertos en infoentretenimiento de la extrema derecha promueven las distopías críticas, las cuales, además traducen las interpretaciones teóricas e ideológicas de la vida social y política en infoentretenimiento cotidiano, globalmente móvil y fácilmente accesible a audiencias globales más amplias. Como tales, las distopías de la derecha radical son estrategias afectivas que, en el contexto de una guerra cultural global, pueden ayudar a (re)producir y reforzar subjetividades políticas, identidades e imaginarios geopolíticos. Estas distopías proporcionan una ventana al llamamiento global y a la interconexión de la derecha radical y sirven como un recordatorio de la importancia que tienen las emociones y el afecto sobre la política internacional.

Bien que l'on décrive souvent notre époque comme dystopique, les disciplines de la théorie politique et des relations internationales envisagent rarement le pouvoir politique des imaginaires dystopiques. Cet article vise à remédier à cette omission en se concentrant sur l'invocation des dystopies par la droite radicale. Ces récits dystopiques dépassent le simple alarmisme pour plutôt constituer des ≪ dystopies critiques ≫ qui suivent une grammaire distincte, ancrée dans la critique idéologique du managérialisme et de la mondialisation libérale par la droite radicale. Ils expriment sa peur du libéralisme, en exploitant les possibilités dystopiques latentes dans le présent libéral. Promues par les influenceurs de droite et spécialistes de l'infodivertissement, les dystopies critiques traduisent des interprétations théoriques et idéologiques de la vie sociale et politique en infodivertissement quotidien, mobile dans le monde entier et facilement accessible pour des publics plus larges et mondiaux. Ainsi, les dystopies de la droite radicale constituent des stratégies affectives dans la guerre culturelle mondiale qui pourraient permettre de (re)produire et de renforcer les subjectivités politiques, les identités et les imaginaires géopolitiques. Elles offrent un aperçu de l'attrait mondial et du caractère interconnecté de la droite radicale, tout en rappelant l'importance des émotions et de l'affect en politique internationale.

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We live in an epoch frequently described in dystopian tones. Climate change is destroying the Earth's ability to sustain life. Political fundamentalism is causing pervasive violence. New forms of authoritarianism are eroding freedom and creativity. Emerging technologies, especially artificial intelligence, threaten the possibility of a future where humans are surplus to requirements and where warfare is more inhumane than ever. The widening gap between rich and poor manifests in walls and barbed wire, migration camps, and ever harsher border regimes. Popular culture too is saturated with dystopian themes; *The Hunger Games* and *Squid Game* both depict abject, atomized individuals fighting for survival to entertain the rich, while the Hollywood film *Civil War* describes a not-too-distant future where America has descended into a brutal, sectarian conflict.

For many, the near worldwide rise of the radical Right deepens the dystopian despair of the present and the fear of an apocalyptic future. But dystopia cuts both ways and

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the radical Right is a prolific promoter of its own, distinctive dystopian narratives. The Right's transgressive political discourse and penchant for exaggerated, dystopian, and even apocalyptic statements are of course well known, although frequently dismissed in academic circles as mere scaremongering and flawed fantasies (Finlayson et al. 2022; Krugman 2024). We suggest a different approach. While the radical Right's flexible relationship to the truth is beyond dispute, there is much to be gained from taking their political use of dystopia seriously. Rather than simply scaremongering, these are "critical dystopias" that follow a specific grammar grounded in the radical Right's ideological critique of global liberalism and managerialism. Radical Right dystopias, we argue, are best understood as expressing a fear of liberalism, exploiting the latent dystopian possibility of the liberal present. They are a crucial part of the global culture wars, fought largely online by transnational activists and political entrepreneurs operating in a global infotainment mediasphere.

Importantly, while we do not make any claims regarding the direct political effects or electoral impact of dystopian imaginaries, we argue that their affective force and possible impact on international politics should not be ignored. As numerous studies of popular culture and International Relations (IR) have shown, political subjectivities, identities, and geopolitical imaginaries are (re) produced at the everyday level through novels, films, and other forms of ostensibly non-political entertainment (Caso and Hamilton 2015; Dittmer and Bos 2019; Hozić and Davies 2024). This is especially true when seeking to understand the "Very Online Right," which has perfected the art of transgressive communication. IR is only now beginning to grasp the existence of a globally interconnected radical Right and its forms of networks and power (Dervis and Conroy 2018; de Orellana and Michelsen 2019; Ashutosh 2022; Michelsen, de Orellana, and Buranelli 2023; Abrahamsen et al. 2024). In doing so, we need to recall Cynthia Enloe's insight that despite its focus on power, IR radically underestimates the amounts and types of power needed for "world politics" to function as "it" does (Enloe 1996). If, as recent analyses have argued, the radical Right is in important ways constituted in relation to the global (Abrahamsen et al. 2024), then any understanding of its appeal and impact requires more than a focus on national elections, party manifestos and voter preferences. Radical Right dystopias, we argue, constitute a small, yet revealing, front in the global culture wars, and as such they provide a surprising, if somewhat sideways, look at the affective power and global interconnectedness of today's radical Right.

We begin by outlining the distinctiveness of dystopian narratives, before exploring a recent mobilization of dystopia by Sohrab Ahmari, a prominent Iranian–American conservative author and public intellectual. We then situate Ahmari's intervention within influential currents in the intellectual tradition and political thinking of the contemporary radical Right, focusing on their critique of global liberalism, the managerial state, and the pathologies of liberal individualism. Ahmari's dystopia, we show, is not merely an undesirable future: it carries the distinct imprint of the radical Right's critique of the global liberal present. In the final section of the article, we show how these dystopian themes are deployed not just as fictional futures, but in more direct political discourse that is part infotainment, part fiction and conspiracy, where truth is a flexible category. These infotainment entrepreneurs evoke a dystopia already in the making, one potentially coming soon to a place near you. Their paradigmatic dystopia is Canada—a country whose self-identity is profoundly bound up with liberal progressivism and "good international citizenship" (Kymlicka 2003). For the radical Right, however, Canada is already a dystopia, literally an "unhappy place," a country increasingly dominated by the managerial state and its progressive experts, and as such a warning to those around the globe who fear the excesses of liberalism.

Critical Dystopias

While dystopias flourish in political fiction and popular culture, the disciplines of political theory and IR have preferred a focus on utopias.[1] From Thomas More to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, political philosophers have produced powerful visions of the ideal society to come. More recent discussions have centered on the political principles and institutions required to create "real utopias" (Chrostowska and Ingram 2017).[2] In IR, utopia has long structured canonical debates in the field, with charges of "utopianism" a mainstay of realist attacks on plans for universal peace and disarmament.

But one philosopher's utopia is (or may become) another's dystopia—and dystopia is, in this sense, "utopia's twentieth-century's doppelgänger" (Gordon, Tilley, and Prakash 2010, 1). It is at this intersection that much political theory has engaged with dystopian visions and critiques. During the Cold War, for example, political theory took on a strongly anti-utopian flavor, concerned with how utopian schemes were implicated in creating dystopian realities and less with speculating about dystopian futures. Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, and numerous other postwar thinkers warned of the dangers of utopia, while Judith Shklar's classic *After Utopia* (1957/2020) began her life-long exploration of "dystopic liberalism" or the "liberalism of fear." Such important contributions aside, both political theory and IR are strangely lacking in serious considerations of the political and affective power of dystopias, especially in the present. Yet, as Adam Stock notes, the frequent recourse to the term dystopia by politicians, pundits, and even comedians "suggests an unusually strong and productive relationship between a cultural genre and political life" (Stock 2018, 2). This article follows this lead, suggesting that the political use of dystopia by the radical Right provides important insight into its popular appeal and global interconnectedness.

Like any genre, dystopian narratives exhibit distinctive structures and ways of telling a story. Unlike a utopia, which can be sketched pedagogically for a reader as an abstract ideal to be constructed, dystopia depends on the reader making connections between the dystopia described and the potential within their own situation or society (McManus 2022). In this way, dystopias are frequently "critical dystopias" (Moylan 2000), where the imagined future is also a critique of the present. As Patricia McManus puts it, critical dystopias describe a "future inhabited by people who are to the text's readers spectres of a world which is narrated as legible, as a possibility germinating in the present, and which therefore takes on the guise if not of a warning, then of a rebuke of some kind to the reader's present" (McManus 2022). The active role of the reader or viewer is part of the dystopian mode of presentation. It places us "directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future

[1] Noteworthy exceptions include Ioannis D. Evigenis (2021), who suggests that Hobbes' state of nature represents a powerful attempt to deploy dystopia as part of a political argument in which the Leviathan provides safety, not bliss. See also Jones and Paris (2018).

[2] For surveys of what (in contrast to dystopia) is a very large field of enquiries into utopia, see Papastephanou (2009) and Thaler (2018); and more broadly still, Cherniss (2022) and Bell and Mao (forthcoming 2025).

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if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms here and now" (Gordon, Tilley, and Prakash 2010, 2). Imagine, this could be coming here—and maybe, if we think about it, it is already happening... .

Critical dystopias have long a lineage. As a genre, dystopian political fiction dates back to at least the early twentieth century, when famous authors such as Jack London 1908 penned warnings about the possibility of an authoritarian *Iron Heel* and Yevgeni Zamyatin's pathbreaking novel *We* (2021 [1924]) reflected suspicions that the Soviet utopia risked a dystopian, totalitarian future.[3] In the mid-1930s, lesser known works such as Margaret Storm Jameson's *In the Second Year* (1936), Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), and Rex Warner's *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937) painted dystopian pictures of Europe's future.[4] Through the 1940s and 1950s, literature was awash in works that found the roots of totalitarian dystopias in the failure or unforeseen consequences of utopian dreams, giving rise to the century's defining works of fictional dystopia: pre-eminently Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.[5] The literary attractions of dystopia continue. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* enjoyed widespread popularity in the late 1980s and has gained renewed attention in recent years.[6] The winning streak of dystopian fiction continued with the 2023 Booker Prize, awarded to Paul Lynch's *Prophet's Song*, a dire warning against the rise of new forms of totalitarianism arising from populist nationalism.

Critical dystopias are not simply about a speculative future. They are "historically aware, responding to present conditions and informed by knowledge of historical events and traumas" (Stock 2018, 1–2). This does not mean that the audiences need to share the same values, ideology or understanding of the present in order to fear the dystopian future painted.[7] Recognizing the dire possibilities of the present suffices. The political dystopias of the mid-twentieth century that resonated so powerfully with Cold War liberals, for example, did not demand a uniform commitment to an ideological alternative. Nor was their impact limited to these groups. Many leftists found them equally shaking. Utopia came in for criticism not because visions of a better world were denied, but because people came to fear the dystopian consequences of engaging the future through totalizing utopian "ideologies."[8]

Utopia is a natural target of conservatism, and anti-utopianism has long been part of its history.[9] Dystopia, however, fits uncomfortably with many forms of conservative thought characterized by hostility to abstract speculation, emphasis on the importance of inherited habits, the stability of tried institutions, and the virtues of pragmatic evolution. Traditional conservative dystopias are thus hard to find.[10] Radical conservatives, however, are more comfortable with dystopian themes.[11] Indeed, the increasing prevalence of dystopian themes on today's Right may well stand as evidence of the radicalization of conservatism more broadly.

Below we show how contemporary radical conservative dystopias are "historically aware" (though by no means historically accurate) and function as "critical" dystopias. They, too, construct narratives of historical events and traumas for their audiences. And although these dystopias and the traumas they evoke are likely to appear unfamiliar (or uncomfortable) for many outside their confines, they have become recognizable and significant narratives in the wider cultural politics of the radical Right. Like all critical dystopias, these narratives are cast as existing partly in the space of the author's present, but as further developed elsewhere. They are not fictions, but rhetorical extrapolations from purported presents. They claim to show the direction that things are going *there* and will soon go (or have already started to go) *here*, if awareness is not raised and action taken. The latent dystopian possibility of the global liberal present is their central theme.

The Radical Conservative Dystopia

A good starting point is Sohrab Ahmari's essay "The Political Economy of Dystopia" (2021). A prominent Iranian–American conservative author and public intellectual, Ahmari defies easy categorization. He is a former columnist for the Wall Street Journal and a proponent of Catholic integralism and "common good" conservatism, a position that is also associated with figures such as Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule. He is a pointed conservative critique of neoliberal capitalism and corporate domination, seeking to build post-liberal alliances across the political spectrum, particularly through *Compact*, the online magazine he co-founded in 2022.[12]

Ahmari's essay on dystopia begins by observing that "Those of us who inhabit the Very Online Right like to point out how this or that new social phenomenon resembles this or that dystopian fiction. ... these resemblances to fictional dystopias should arrest us" (Ahmari 2021). Then he asks, "What if dystopia is already here? What if our territory already conforms to maps drawn long ago by science-fiction authors? Could it be that we have crossed the invisible fron-

[3]Zamyatin's novel was published in English in 1924 in New York but did not appear in the Soviet Union until 1988. Orwell reviewed *We* in 1946, and it is widely cited as an influence on both him and Huxley. On dystopian literature in this period, see Hoyles (1991) and Stock 2022.

[4]For a comparison of Orwell and Burdekin on gender, see Patai (1984).

[5]A discussion of whether these works are best seen as dystopian or anti-utopian is Seeger and Davison-Vecchione (2019) and Kumar (1987).

[6]Atwood's critical dystopianism is discussed in Canavan (2012). See also Atwood (2022).

[7]Mark Bould (2018) holds that "in the most harrowing of dystopias, there are always utopias" but these do not need to be unified or universal. To believe that they need to do so is to misunderstand the politics of dystopia, including on the Right.

[8]Utopia often became a code word for the fearful plans and rationalist dreams of fanatics (or cold-blooded bureaucrats) who would destroy whatever stood in the way of its achievement. Responsible political thought and action required restraint and realism—and tended toward conservatism, including of a liberal kind. Dystopian cautions easily shade into anti-utopian closures. For a thoughtful discussion, see Bell (forthcoming).

[9]Consider, for example, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* first published in 1790 and one of the foundational texts of conservativism.

[10]By contrast, some conservatives, such as Russell Kirk (1962), argue that the Gothic, and particularly ghost tales, are the natural genre for conservative fiction. Kirk wrote a series of such tales, and his 1961 novel *The Old House of Fear* sold widely. See also Panero (2019). Probably the most wellknown and controversial extreme Right dystopian novel is *The Turner Diaries* by William Luther Pierce, published under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald in 1978.

[11]Controversies over the definition of conservatism and the Right are legion. Briefly, we use the terms radical Right and radical conservative to refer to groups that broadly speaking accept democracy but are illiberal and reformist and tend to opt for institutional means to attain power. This is in contrast to the extreme Right, which opposes democracy, is more revolutionary, and sometimes supports and advocates violence. Both are part of the broader family of the far Right, which excludes more conventional conservatives that advocate gradual change. Importantly, this is a sliding scale and the definition of what counts as the Right is itself a space to be struggled over—and that space is global as much as it is local. On definitions, see Mudde (1996).

[12]See particularly his *Tyranny, Inc.: How Private Power Crushed American Liberty—and What to Do About It* (2023). Slavoj Zˇizˇek praised the book as "a masterpiece of clarity"(https://www.randomhousebooks.com/books/708,057/). For a critical review from a free-market conservative, see Pino (2023). A good, brief overview of Ahmari's position in the post-liberal movement in the United States is Gurman (2024) and more broadly Lilla (2024).

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tier that divides an ordinary place, an ordinary *topos*, from a dystopian realm?" Indeed, Ahmari is effusive in lauding the ability of dystopian fiction to place issues of the day (such as "cancel culture, woke-ism and gender ideology") within wider frameworks that "uncover the deeper currents shaping our age." He sees these contemporary phenomena as "merely the acceleration of older and deeper processes of ideological transformation" that dystopian fiction can help expose.

The text Ahmari takes as his template is JG Ballard's novel *Super-Cannes,* published in 2000.[13] In doing so, he joins a long line of writers praising the novelist's prescience, while adding his own radical conservative spin on the Ballardian lessons for the future.[14] In Ahmari's interpretation, Ballard's diagnosis is correct but his politics is wrong as it seems to blame the Right for the dystopian conditions of the novel.

Super-Cannes is set in a business park, Eden-Olympia, "a sort of playground for workaholics, not unlike real-world counterparts in Silicon Valley or the leafy suburbs of Seattle" (Ahmari 2021). Ahmari stresses three core characteristics of this dystopia. The first is an "obsession with bodily health" where centralized data and surveillance systems monitor all vital functions, social relations and their "distancing" (Ballard was writing pre-COVID, but Ahmari is not) are controlled, and life is a "bio-politically'" governed mixture of corporate productivity and individualistic hedonism within a carefully administered natural environment. Second, there is no civil society in Eden-Olympia, and there are no children. The population is racially diverse but attitudinally homogenous. People in the elite look different but think the same—and therefore there is no conflict. It is, Ahmari claims, the "apolitical," "meritocratic" state perfected. Elite prosperity, social order, and political passivity go seamlessly together—and this order is produced and maintained through technological manipulation: "Things no longer get debated, but algorithms ensure that we are steered away from 'extremist' ideas, the definition of which is ever-shifting, according to the needs of the system."[15] These first two characteristics capture the ideals, and to some degree the reality, of the what radical conservatives call (as we will discuss in a moment) the managerial or administrative state. Biopolitical governance and the manipulation and enforcement of "correct" views and knowledge by elites (and particularly by techno-elites such as pre-Musk Twitter) are signs of the social forces that seek and may yield a world like that Ballard imagined.[16]

The final element of *Super-Cannes* that inspires Ahmari concerns class relations, specifically the relationships between those he calls the "laptop elites" of Eden-Olympia and the working classes or "tangibles" that provide the labor still required for it to function. In relations between the lower classes and "their messy, competing claims, not least the claims of the poor, the small property-holder, etc.," politics, history, community, and conflict still exist. The response of Ballard's elite is to subject them to symbolic oppression, waging a

> war against historical memory. The bringing about of Eden-Olympia demands ahistoricity. People who have historical memory have heroes, they have romantic ideals, they have authorities that guide their individual consciences, they have national pride. Family and community are the warp and weft of their characters. People who don't have such things make the perfect corporate subjects, be they the ones who occupy the commanding heights or the ones who toil on the periphery. (Ahmari 2021)

The laptop class also occasionally resorts to physical violence through organized programs of elite *ratissage* (literally, raking) in which the elites vent their repressed violent urges in "vicious human-hunting parties" that both enforce order and allow them to shake off the entropic "ailments of antipolitical man."

All this is underpinned, Ahmari claims, by a *material* structure and political economy of a hyper-capitalist class that dominates and benefits from society at the cost of its history and culture, as well as the social position and economic interests of the "tangibles." COVID-19, he argues, "was a real crisis, but also a tremendous opportunity to squeeze the tangibles class, to discipline it, to transfer as much of its livelihood as possible to virtual realms controlled by the laptop class—an incredible opportunity for an upward transfer of wealth."

Dystopia's Origins

Ahmari's interpretation of *Super-Cannes* is neither idiosyncratic nor innocent. Instead, his dystopia reflects the influence of a long, once nearly forgotten, but recently revived tradition of right-wing thinking about international politics (Krein 2017; Lind 2020, 2021). Drawing particularly on ideas developed by James Burnham in the 1950s and extended by paleoconservatives such as Sam Francis in the 1980s, today's radical Right has developed a wide-ranging critique of global liberal managerialism and what they regard as the rule by a "New Class" of experts.[17] Below, we explore these ideas in more depth in order to show how Ahmari's analysis of *Super-Cannes* is a critical dystopia playing with possibilities that the Right sees as germinating in the present.

In *The Managerial Revolution*, published in 1941, Burnham analyzed the emergence of new mass societies and the ever-increasing concentration of industrial and financial power. Identifying similarities between the political-economic formations of Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, and the United States under Roosevelt's New Deal liberalism, he argued that since 1914 an emerging social group or New Class of technically skilled managers, administrators, engineers, and bureaucrats of all sorts were engaged in a "drive for social dominance, for power and privilege, for the position of ruling class" (Burnham 1941, 71).

In Burnham's view, this New Class was usurping the power of the traditional bourgeois elites that lacked the technical expertise required to direct the large organizations and enterprises of twentieth century societies. In this emerging order, the distinction between the ruling elite and the masses no longer hinged on the actual *ownership* of the means of production, but rather on the control—the management—of the means of production and communication, and the

[13]The Canadian director Brandon Cronenberg is reportedly adapting the novel into a limited television series.

[14]Duncan Bell (2021) suggests that although Ballard is profoundly elusive and has been claimed for all manner of political visions, his writings are best understood as a version of the liberalism of fear. For other assessments, see Pattison (2017), Wilson (2017), and O'Connell (2020).

[15]Unlike Huxley's dystopia, which it in some ways resembles, Eden-Olympia has neither a central Controller nor the need for drugs (Soma) to sustain order.

[16]Ahmari illustrates this point by invoking actions against his previous employer, the *New York Post* when it published allegations about the business dealings of the (then Vice-) President's son, Hunter Biden—a *cause celebre* on the American Right.

[17]For an in-depth treatment of these ideas, see Abrahamsen et al. (2024) and Drolet and Williams (2019). In another essay, Ahmari (2022) is critical of "crude" Burnhamite views but acknowledges their pervasiveness. His own critique is often specifically focused on corporate elites.

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ability of the elites to influence and direct state-authorized mechanisms of mass organization and economic distribution. Generally, the interests of these new managerial elites consisted of maintaining and extending the institutions they controlled, and ensuring that the demand—and the rewards—for the technical skills of managers were steadily increased.

Burnham held that in contrast to the "hard" authoritarian strands of managerialism prevailing in communist and fascist regimes, elites in liberal democratic societies tended to rely on the manipulation of cultural symbols, desires, and material incentives rather than on direct coercion. The new liberalism that dominated the twentieth century abandoned the bourgeois view of the state as an impediment to individual self-realization, and instead emphasized the collective nature of human improvement and responsibilities under conditions of large-scale industrialization and growing interdependence.

Today's radical conservatives, including writers such as Ahmari, have rediscovered and revitalized these themes, expanding them into an all-encompassing critique of modern liberal rule and globalization. In this view, managerialism has become the dominant institutional form not only in the West but around the globe, spanning commerce and culture, politics and leisure. The New Class includes corporate elites, civil servants, journalists, lawyers, information technologists, engineers, therapists, academics, consultants, and bureaucrats of all sorts who occupy positions of economic, political, and social power in the post-industrial "information" society. Although they often hold conflicting political opinions on the matters of the day, these professionals constitute a New Class insofar as their livelihoods do not rest on the ownership of property, but on knowledge, expertise, and the reproduction of a globalized capitalist economy in which the progressive values of education, cultural capital, mobility, technical sophistication, and connections to cosmopolitan networks have become the primary determinants of salary, status, and social advancement. The radical Right associates this constellation of power with liberalism insofar as its continuous expansion hinges on a series of declared commitments to the interests and wellbeing of others, to universal justice, equality, and human rights, but without significant economic or social reform that would threaten the interests of the incumbent managerial elites.

This new elite is increasingly global and disconnected from locality, tradition, and nation. They see themselves as the antidote to the bigoted, parochial, and repressive worldviews and mindless flag-waving patriotism that they ascribe to the "heartland" and to the working and lower middle-classes in suburbs and rural locations. They seek to re-educate and reform those still steeped in tradition and place through a range of corrective interventions into all aspects of individual, social, and family life, be it intrusive taxation, anti-racist "empowerment campaigns," "sensitivity training," or "decolonized curricula." In the name of pluralism, this analysis argues that the New Class reduces all values to subjective "lifestyles" and then subjects those lifestyles to manipulation by the market and regulation by bureaucratic, therapeutic, and cultural experts who prescribe acceptable forms of subjectivity and "diversity" and proscribe those they find offensive or politically incorrect.

In both domestic and international politics, the primary methods for dealing with resistance to liberalism's expansion are the "soft" powers of liberal governance—claims of expert knowledge, therapeutic social and education policies, development assistance, cultural stigmatization, and legal activism—though recourse to violent coercion is also frequent, when required.[18] For the radical Right, the power of liberal-dominated elites and the global expansion of the modern language of rights—disability rights, LGBTQ+ rights, the right to choose, the right to die, the right to health care, the right to work, the right to live free from discrimination—are not just a deviation from conservative positions that assert the importance of tradition and substantive values or natural law. It is yet another avenue of managerial power and domination that targets and destroys "traditional" social orders, states, ideas, and identities that oppose its expansion, eroding non-liberal societies, and refashioning them in its image.

According to the radical Right, "woke" capitalism has made this attack on culture and tradition even worse. In Vivek Ramaswamy's analysis, "wokism" has invaded the business world and empowered a small group of corporate elites to decide what is morally right for society at large (Ramaswamy 2020; Edgecliff-Johnson 2022). The result is not an increase in cosmopolitan pluralism and diversity, but the creeping "standardization of lifestyles, reduction of differences and particularities, conformity of attitudes and behaviours" (De Benoist 1996, 133). Politically, these homogenizing trends make it almost impossible to construct durable identities that cohere over time and space, and that can effectively mobilize particular populations for collective action—in no small part because such identities are ruled out by liberalism as an unacceptable (even fascist) kind of "essentialism" or reaction. It is in this sense that radical Right polemics often speak of the "soft totalitarianism" of late-modern managerial liberalism (Kaalep and Meister 2020, 33–4).

The connections between these ideas and Ahmari's reading of *Super-Cannes* are not hard to see. Managerial theory claims to uncover what Ahmari (2021) calls "the deeper currents shaping our age." The dystopia he invokes is a template cast by the theory of the managerial state and the domination of the New Class—the liberal dream of a future of rights is a looming dystopia already germinating in the present. As he puts it:

> It seems to me that we are living in a kind of Eden-Olympia writ large. Or rather, we are in a stage of transition—a shift between, on one hand, a vestigial world of still-embodied communities inhabited by political animals with historical memories…The paroxysms that so worry us—woke-ism, cancel culture, gender ideology, etc.—are symptoms of this historical passage. The neoliberal class, the globalization class, the managerial class—whatever you wish to call it—is subjecting us to a kind of *ratissage*, raking us over to create a world that will serve its material interests even better than the semi-normality that prevailed just a few years ago. Hence, for example, the bodily obsession and social distancing: the dream of a world without grime, without the scent and sweat and germs of other human beings—an aspiration as much for Eden-Olympia's executives as for our ruling class. (Ahmari 2021)

In Ahmari's *Super-Cannes,* the relationship between the elites and the "tangibles" holds a mirror to today's social gap between the liberal elite and the real people, the honest working class, all those who are necessary to society but not acceptable to the elites, as well as the "deplorables" and the

[18]In contrast to the "hard" managerialism of Stalinism (and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), this is the rule of "soft" managerialism, which radical conservatives view as no less dystopian. See Gottfried (2002), De Benoist (2003), O'Meara (2004), and Francis (2016).

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"left behinds" who require therapeutic re-education, the exercise of cultural soft discipline or—failing that—the hard managerialism of state coercion.

Critical dystopias seek to spur awareness and action. Ahmari's repurposing of Ballard seeks to generate specific forms of social perception in opposition to the increasingly dystopian present. For today's radical Right, liberal power is pervasive but not omnipotent. The very forms of domination underpinning it also create numerous opportunities for a fundamentally revised post-liberal, conservative projects based on the revitalization of ethnicity, class, gender, race, and nation triggered by the relentless *rattisage* of the elites. These alternatives are not necessarily utopian in the sense of a planned, or a single, fully agreed alternative, but arise instead from multiple critiques of the liberal present. The alternatives are "populist" in their articulation and seek to rally the cultural resentment and further the economic interests of those portrayed as the primary victims of the dominant global liberal regime. Because liberal managerialism is global and the New Class feeds on the globalization of its power, the radical Right's dystopias seek to mobilize affective resonances and alliance across national boundaries, drawing attention to the possibility of similar dystopian experiences in different countries and different parts of the world.

Dispatches from Dystopia

Dystopian accounts such as Ahmari's, which began as an address to university students, may seem of limited relevance—marginal literary fictions (or fictions about fictions) with little practical purchase. But it is a mistake to disregard their role as affective strategies and forms of critique, as well as their possible contribution to the formation of shared political identities and geopolitical imaginaries. Similar dystopian visions distilled from the radical Right's fear of liberalism find frequent expression outside futuristic novels, especially on various online social media platforms where influencers and cultural entrepreneurs trade in transgressive politics.[19] Here, dystopias are rhetorically conjured within today's global culture wars as already existing places, or as immanent possibilities germinating in the liberal present.

In Thomas More's Latin usage, utopia translates as "no-place" and it is also a play on the Greek word *eutopia*, meaning the good place (Tower Sargent 1982, 565). As Gregory Claeys (2018, 4) explains, the word dystopia is derived from two Greek words, *dus* and *topos*, and denotes a diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavorable place—or, in a usage from 1748, an "unhappy country." The idea of an "unhappy country" is particularly appropriate to the radical Right's invocation of "real world" contemporary dystopias, which involves acts of imagination where the dystopian future can already be seen as developing, and potentially coming soon to your country as part of the inevitable spread of liberal globalization.

Perhaps surprisingly, Canada is one of the radical Right's favorite dystopias. By conventional liberal measurements, Canada would seem an unlikely illustration of dystopia. It consistently ranks among the top twenty countries on the Human Development Index and is a stable middle power known for its contributions to international peacekeeping, democracy promotion, human rights, and gender equality. Apart from a brief period in the international limelight in 2022, when the so-called Trucker Protest or Freedom Convoy paralyzed the nation's capital in protest against various pandemic restrictions and became something of a right-wing *cause célèbre* around the world, Canada is generally perceived to have escaped the wave of right-wing populism.[20] Indeed, Canada's self-identity is intrinsically bound up with being a multicultural society and a "good international citizen." A slogan once promoted by a nationwide chain of bookshops captured this image in a rather self-congratulatory way, declaring "The World Needs More Canada."

Radical conservative commentators do not agree. They see a different Canada—an unhappy country of managerial over-reach and pervasive wokeness representing much of what is wrong in the world. "So glad I'm not Canadian ...", the right-wing commentator Piers Morgan tweeted in response to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's photo of himself and his son dressed in pink for the Barbie movie (Morgan 2023).[21] This messaging is common not only amongst foreign right-wing pundits. Despite the country's liberal reputation, Canadians are strikingly prominent in what Ahmari calls the "Very Online Right." In the words of one observer, "Canadians are vastly overrepresented in the North American far right, unequivocally... . It's sort of insane. It's almost like one out of every four" (Vanderklippe 2022).[22] While "one out of four" is undoubtedly an exaggeration given the scale of the right-wing mediasphere in North America, there is no denying that Canadians have an outsized presence on the radical Right, and especially on various social media platforms.

The cast of characters on the "Very Online Canadian Right" runs something like this: The main actor is undoubtedly Jordan Peterson, the ex-University of Toronto psychology professor who has parlayed his conservative profile into worldwide influence and considerable riches. With 5.6 million followers on X and his own online Academy, Peterson is a radical Right megastar. Next up is Steven Crowder, the host of *Louder Than Crowder*, a highly popular online show. Crowder was born in Canada and holds a Canadian passport (Lombroso 2020). He started his podcast in 2014, after a stint working with Fox News. His show became daily in 2017 and is ranked among the most popular in its category. As of April 2023, Crowder's YouTube channel had nearly 6 million subscribers, and he had over 2 million X followers and 1.2 million on Rumble. Crowder's YouTube channel was demonetized twice (in 2019 and 2021) and was suspended for a short period in 2022. At the beginning of 2023, he moved exclusively to Rumble.

Another internet sensation, Lauren Southern, deemed "the alt-right's most famous woman" by *The Atlantic*, was born and lives just outside Vancouver (Vanderklippe 2022). Although she has an ambivalent relationship with many of the radical Right's ideas and members, she has a large following. In recent years, she has focused on producing documentaries on various social and political issues, including the murder of white farmers in South Africa, the migrant

[19] Interestingly, Ballard also attached great importance to the impact of media, see Bell (2021).

[20] The current popularity of Pierre Poilievre, the leader of the Conservative Party that has moved significantly to the right, may mark a change in this consensus. Poilievre has also invoked dystopian themes to describe today's Canada, suggesting that if Trudeau "had read Nineteen Eighty-Four, he would have thought it was an instruction manual" (Lévesque 2024).

[21] Morgan has 8.7 million followers on X. Prime Minister Trudeau's reference to "people-kind" instead of mankind has been similarly mocked and held up as an example of a dystopian society where men can no longer be men, and women no longer women.

[22] The quote is from documentary film-maker Daniel Lombroso, who directed *White Noise*, a documentary about white nationalism. See also Lombroso (2020) and Perry and Scrivens (2018).

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crisis in Europe, the politics of firearms, as well as Canadian and US politics. As of April 2023, Southern had 717,000 YouTube subscribers, and her videos had been viewed over 62 million times. She had 510,250 X, 152,244 Instagram, and 292,000 Facebook followers.

Lauren Chen is another Canadian right-wing social media star, albeit a waning one in the wake of the US Justice Department's indictment of Tenet Media, the Tennessee-based company she co-founded with her husband. Barely a month before the 2024 US elections, the indictment alleged that a company widely reported to be Tenet Media was paid by Russia's state broadcaster RT to "create and distribute content to US audiences with hidden Russian government messaging" (US Justice Department 2024). In its brief 2-year existence, Tenet Media produced over 2000 videos with more than 16 million views on YouTube alone. It closed its doors shortly after the indictment in September 2024, when YouTube removed its channel from its platform. Chen's personal YouTube channels were also suspended, leaving her 570,000 followers looking elsewhere for radical Right content.

One alternative source is Gavin McInnes, the founder of the infamous Proud Boys group, and yet another Canadian. Described by *Vanity Fair* as "one of our era's most troubling extremists" (Gollner 2021), McInnes now hosts the weekly podcast Get Off My Lawn. While he resigned from Proud Boys, his show has featured Proud Boys members who have been convicted of conspiracy to commit treason for their involvement in the January 6th riots (Nestruck 2024). And finally, to complete the roll call of Canadian internet personalities, Stefan Molyneux, whose racial views led to him being dropped by YouTube. He now brands himself a "Canadian philosopher" and runs the podcast Freedomain, which has hosted fellow Canadians such as Jordan Peterson and Steven Crowder, as well as numerous other radical-right influencers and activists.

In sum, while Canada is rarely seen as a site of radical Right politics, it seems to have a remarkable record of giving rise to its pundits and popularizers. As Nathan Vanderklippe (2022) observes:

> Ms. Southern particularly likes one internet meme that shows an image of eight far-right figures with Canadian roots, beneath a headline: "Conservative America, behold these are your masters." Many are interlinked: Ms. Southern grew up watching Mr. Crowder, a dual citizen who has played host to her on his show as well as Mr. Peterson, Mr. McInnes and Stefan Molyneux. [23]

[23]Clockwise from top left: Jordan Peterson, Steven Crowder, Gavin McInnes, Ted Cruz, Rod Dreher, Tim Gionet (aka 'Baked Alaska), Stefan Molyneux, and Lauren Southern. The meme contains several errors or distortions: US Senator Cruz was born in Canada but relinquished his citizenship; neither Dreher nor Gionet are Canadian or, to the best of our knowledge, have strong Canadian connections. Truth, as always on the Right, is flexible and in the service of the desired effect (https://ifunny.co/picture/conservative-america-behold-these-are-your-as-cKP6bzBy9?s = cl). Despite our best efforts, we are unable to determine a copyright holder, if any, for this image.

How can we account for the presence and impact of these and many other Canadian online personalities? The answer is not that Canada or Canadians are more right-wing that other countries and peoples—perhaps it is just the opposite. Under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canada has consciously branded itself as a liberal and virtuous government. After Donald Trump first came to power in 2016, "the contrast between Canada's saintly government and the nativist, jingoistic politics to its south was stark" (*Economist* 2024). Part of the answer thus lies in the power of dystopia, for it is not just Canadians that figure so prominently in the right-wing mediasphere—it is Canada itself. As a liberal, virtuous, even "woke" country, Canada becomes the radical Right's dystopia, a dire warning to the rest of the world, and particularly to its American neighbors. In the global culture wars, Canada is an artifact traded for power and influence in the struggle over morality and social values.

The members of the "Very Online Canadian Right" use their positions as "insiders" or "natives" to perform as Canadian Cassandras, bringing prophecies of impending perils and dire warnings of a terrifying future from the "unhappy country." They are transnational cultural entrepreneurs who draw on dystopian imaginaries to further their political and commercial projects and interests. These transnational provocateurs draw power and credibility as narrators from their positions as natives of dystopia—reporters who have experienced dystopia first-hand and who have escaped its clutches (intellectually, culturally, and even physically, via emigration) and who can warn from personal experience of the coming future and how to prevent it. Unlike Greek mythology's Cassandra, whose prophecies were true but fated never to be believed, the Canadian Cassandras have a flexible relationship to truth, but their warnings reach millions around the world.

The central political narratives of these Canadian Cassandras reflect and replay wider radical Right critiques of the New Class. In their telling, Canada is a country where liberal managerialism has gone almost unchecked, where the New Class inhabits not only the highest political offices but dominates almost all social spaces. Canada thus becomes a warning of things to come; the audience is invited to see the connections between the dystopia described and the potential dangers lurking within their own societies, particularly in the United States. Unlike Ahmari's dystopia, these narratives are not fictional in form, but they are often infotainment—

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the "news" as entertainment genre found across contemporary media from *The Daily Show* to *Louder With Crowder*, but particularly powerful on the Right where it is conveyed through a provocative and performative rhetoric of transgression and excess designed to subvert liberal norms of appropriate conduct and leadership (see, e.g., Sienkiewicz and Marx 2022; Finlayson 2023). They play on two affective sides of dystopia: unease and amusement, horror and ridicule. They may rely on ill-defined utopias or golden ages (such as the 1950s), or darker intimations of gender or racial hierarchy, but they do not need to evoke them directly and their audiences do not necessarily need to share them. What they need to show is the power and repressive goals of their liberal adversaries. It is the combination of fear, outrage, and ridicule that is crucial. While these narratives have political-economic touchpoints, they predominantly seek to mobilize cultural themes—a unifying struggle against not just an ill-defined elite, but also a specific opposition to the managerial New Class and its allies. Dystopia's emotive side is vital.

The Canadian Cassandras revel in cataloguing the political correctness of liberal Canada—gender neutral pronouns, LGBTQ+ rights, multiculturalism, and of course, COVID-19 pandemic authoritarianism. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, mask mandates, and mandatory vaccinations testify to the perceived abuse of power by liberal managerial elites and experts. One theme in particular captures the manner in which the Cassandras' dystopian warnings echo the radical Right's fear of liberalism. This is Medical Assistance in Dying; MAID in the government's terminology, or, as some conservatives prefer, "euthanasia." The federal law allowing eligible adults with a "grievous and irremediable medical condition" to request medical assistance to end their life came into effect in June 2016. In 2021, an amendment was proposed to allow people suffering solely with mental illness to seek death with the assistance of a physician. Originally due to come into effect in March 2023, the amendment was postponed until 2024 and then again until March 2027, following widespread concerns from health professionals, politicians, and civil society alike. It is currently pending further consultation. Since MAID for people suffering with "grievous and irremediable medical conditions" came into effect in 2016, a total of 44,958 people have chosen to end their lives this way, with their average age being 77 years (Government of Canada 2023).[24]

For the radical Right, the Canadian government's legalization of the right to end one's own life with medical assistance epitomizes the dangers of rule by a managerial elite and is yet another indication—or perhaps the most dire warning—of the unfolding Canadian dystopia. Leading the charge is Lauren Southern. She describes MAID as a moral atrocity and a sign that Canada is a blatant dystopia. In a YouTube video released in November 2022, shortly after the proposed MAID amendment to include people who suffered mental illness, Southern bemoans the decline of her home country. "We used to have a culture of life in Canada and now we have a culture of death," she says mournfully, looking directly into the camera (Southern 2022). Later in the video, she admits to being "terrified but also morbidly curious about what we're going to find out next in this wonderful story that is unfolding. This wonderful story that is also the decline of my home, life, family, friends, and loved ones' nation."

In a video released after the government's latest postponement of MAID for those suffering solely with mental illness, Southern dwells on the theme of "the right to choose," referring to the "pro-death" people and giving them "top marks for freedom." Echoing the Right's pervasive theme that individualism has resulted in nihilistic anomie, she then mocks the view of the bill's defenders, who maintain that it is "paternalistic" to prohibit people with mental disorders from making decisions about their medical care. "Totally guys," she says, "we all know that the dude on the Golden Gate Bridge is in his best state of mind, and it is totally condescending to talk him down." She continues, "Do we really want to live in a country where instead of picking people up and setting them on the right course of treatment, we discard them off to the reaper himself?" (Southern 2024).

These videos are characterized by a mix of outrage and humor, interspersed with a hint of conspiracy theory. They also pretend to historical accuracy. Thus, Southern (2024) claims that "While the government has the guidelines on how to kill someone with mental illness prepared, or alternatively, how to send people with the CIA beaming instructions into their heads 24/7 for an internal nap," the decision has been postponed due to a lack of time to prepare. Truth is a flexible category in Southern's hands, and her attacks on MAID are classic infotainment, mixing news with fiction, jokes, and outrage. The narrative is also a classic critical dystopia, giving voice to the outrage at the liberal state and its experts who prioritize subjective choice above all else. It is cast as a caution about dystopian trends in the present and as a warning to audiences in other countries—especially what she calls "our friends in the South" (i.e., Americans) about the emerging Canadian dystopia.

One of the "friends" who picked up the issue was Rod Dreher, a radical conservative journalist and writer who now directs the Network Project at the Danube Institute, a Budapest-based think tank supported by the Orbán government. Writing in the *American Conservative*, Dreher (2022) deployed Burnhamite themes observing that:

> What's happening in Canada now is, in a way, even worse [than Nazism]. In Hitler's Germany, the state euthanized you. In Trudeau's Canada, the state helps you euthanize yourself… The hard totalitarian government euthanizes "life unworthy of life" for unsentimental reasons. The soft totalitarian government urges its own people to choose death, for totally sentimental reasons. And also for "practical" ones (such as keeping down social care costs).

The same gestures towards comparison with Nazi Germany appeared in Tucker Carlson's coverage of the topic on Fox News. In Carlson's infotainment masquerading as news, the headline reads "Canada expanding state-sanctioned murder to "mature minors" regardless of parental objections." Featuring an interview with an American professor of medicine, the key question is said to be "how can we stop this from coming to the US?" (Carlson 2022). The segment has been watched over 1 million times on YouTube alone.

The dispersion of the dystopian-themed Canada is not limited to North America. An exchange between two UK right-wing media pundits, Kellie Jay Keen and Carl Benjamin, went along the following lines in 2022:

> Benjamin: "So now 30 000 people have been murdered by the Canadian government."
>
> Keen: "It's so… it's so bad, it's unbelievable, but it does really go hand in hand with all the other things going on in that country…"

[24]The statistics are from 2022 when there were 13,241 MAID provisions in Canada. From 2021 to 2022, the total number of MAID provisions increased by 31.2 percent, compared to 32.6 percent from 2020 to 2021. The annual growth rate in MAID provisions has been steady over the past 6 years, with an average growth rate of 31.1 percent from 2019 to 2022 (Government of Canada 2023).

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Benjamin: "This is what Hannah Arendt called the banality of evil. A lot of the time in the modern world, these sort of like, with the Holocaust, you know, a lot of people are just stamping papers, you know, but what you're doing is facilitating the murder of millions of people and in this, I mean it's not millions yet, but I mean, just give it, it's only been a few years, like…"

Keen: "It's just so depressing, because it's also Canada so it's done with this sort of love and kindness and compassion and it's really anything but, it's just so bad." (Lotus Eaters.com 2022)

The mere fact that these dystopian narratives are taken up and reproduced internationally does not mean that they are effective in producing political change or influencing voting behavior, but it does show their ability to travel. The Canadian Cassandras are not speaking only, and not even primarily, to their fellow Canadians. Indeed, many of them no longer live in Canada. Their main audiences are global, and above all American. As native informants who have escaped the "unhappy country," they seek to mobilize not only fear and outrage, but also emotional recognition and cross-border alliances of right-wing sympathizers—'we are all potential victims of liberal globalization, wherever we are'.

Conclusion

In an age ripe with dystopian anxieties, the rise of the radical Right is often seen as adding to the looming darkness of the future. We do not in any way dispute this interpretation. Quite the opposite. The threats posed by right-wing movements to democracy, rights, and inclusion merit urgent attention, and our analysis suggests that the radical Right's use of dystopian narratives can yield important insights into its worldwide appeal and global interconnectedness.

Support for the radical Right is often explained with reference to economic factors, pointing to the disaffection of those "left behind" and excluded from the benefits of globalization (Rodrik 2021; Protzer and Summerville 2022). While economic dislocation and marginalization cannot be ignored, such explanations disregard the fact that social and political life is mediated and experienced, and that how people understand and interpret "a given situation is neither arbitrary nor purely personal, but shaped by societal, intragroup, and political norms" (Freistein, Gadinger, and Unrau 2022, 6). In her interviews with Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, Arlie Russell Hochschild 2016 captured how emotions and the rejection of certain liberal "feeling rules" perceived as hegemonic and oppressive can lead people to support the Right. They seek "release from liberal notions of what they 'should feel'—happy for the gay newlywed, sad at the plight of the Syrian refugee, unresentful about paying taxes" (Hochschild 2016, 15–6). The radical Right's critical dystopias give voice to similar rejections of what are perceived as hegemonic "feeling rules," using fear, ridicule, and humor to resist global liberal managerialism and expert rule. As Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison (2008), 123) explain, "emotions help us make sense of ourselves, and situate us in relation to others and the world that surrounds us." Taking dystopias seriously as a form of political discourse serves as a reminder of the importance of emotions and affect in international politics. Radical Right dystopias are affective strategies in a global culture war that may help (re)produce and reinforce political subjectivities, identities, and geopolitical imaginaries. As such, while dystopias alone cannot explain the appeal of the radical Right, they provide important insights into the capillary and affective power of its political strategies.

Taking dystopian narratives seriously also provide a window on the global interconnectedness of the radical Right. While the radical Right is almost always nationalist and sometimes nativist, it is also in important ways constituted in relation to the global and transnationally networked through personal and institutional connections. The activists and entrepreneurs of the "Very Online Right" play a crucial role in these networks and operate in a mediasphere that is a main battlefield of the global culture wars. Their dystopian narratives translate the radical Right's theoretical and ideological interpretations of social and political life into globally mobile, everyday infotainment readily accessible to broader audiences. These critical dystopias seek to mobilize not only fear, but also recognition among people in diverse geographical locations who might feel, or be made to feel, similarly dissatisfied by the current liberal order. As such, critical dystopias are attempts at what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) called "social magic"—the creation of groups as self-conscious groups through a combination of discursive strategies and social (media) positions. Such efforts at social magic escape the limitations of concepts such as "national populism" and theories determined by methodological nationalism. For these reasons alone, it may be time to take the radical Right's critical dystopias more seriously as modes of power and identity formation in global politics.

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