

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Raphael Schlembach**, *Against Old Europe: Critical Theory and Alter-Globalization Movements*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. ISBN: 9781409453338 (cloth); ISBN: 9781409453345 (ebook)

With pending membership referendums, continuing post-crash bitterness between the north and the south, and the steady rise of right-wing parties that have taken the continent as their central concern (such as UKIP), the question of European identity has never been more crucial in understanding contemporary antagonisms. Raphael Schlembach's *Against Old Europe* arrives as an extremely timely and pertinent addition to our understanding, seeking to critically understand European identity as it is utilised by alter-globalization movements (of the Left *and* Right) in order to construct an "Old Europe [that] is regarded as the 'authentic' one, a Europe that has rid itself from the artificial values and constructed needs of neoliberal globalization" (p.35).

The book includes discussions of (unfortunately, all male) key thinkers—including Jürgen Habermas, Antonio Negri, John Holloway, Moishe Postone, and Alain de Benoist. Schlembach begins each chapter by expertly outlining a position on Europe before asking what basing resistance upon a particular 'old' European identity actually *means* for anti-capitalist resistance. Taking Habermas' and Negri's work, Schlembach aims to refute their positions that have been shared with post-'68 alter-globalization movements: conceptualizing Europe as a 'lifeworld' that needs to be protected from (American) colonization, and defending European unity in order to resist neoliberalism and assert democratic values that are 'deeper' and 'more real' than the USA. Such a binary scenario, in which identity constructions of an (old) 'authentic' Europe are situated against the American (inauthentic) other, means that alter-globalization movements have identified their enemy as distinctly American (and see 'new Europe' as distinctly Americanized) and have therefore retreated into a common identity of 'old' Europe. Yet, as the book argues, such a conceptualization not only entails a romanticising of European history as a place of high culture, peace,

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understanding and social justice (p.90), but there are also “inherent dangers of tying a progressive alter-globalization politics to the values of Old Europe” (p.114).

Specifically, Schlembach argues, such recourse to this imagined identity entails a loss of distinction between left- and right-wing ideologies because “elements of the critiques of free market capitalism...leave the door open to old and new forms of far-right scapegoating” (p.78). Following the ideas of Holloway, Postone and also Werner Bonefeld, he goes on to argue that the othering of America is only a short step away from the anti-Semitic conspiracy discourse of right-wing resistance where “the Jew [is] seen as being at the heart of conspiracies, often as finance elites against ordinary, honest and hard-working citizens” (p.72). In other words, in order to establish their ‘authentic’ European identity via othering, otherwise progressive movements are vulnerable to being inadvertently drawn into a personification and personalization that misses the *structural* critique of capitalism and therefore plays straight into right-wing narratives.

I particularly enjoyed Schlembach’s discussion of conspiracy theory as I found it relevant to my own research with Occupy London. There is certainly a tendency within such movements to utilize conspiracy theories in their resistance in order to position one’s own identity, but, as is pointed out in the book, the problem is that such a “treatment of globalization processes as manufactured, promoted, and controlled by a global elite of politicians, economists, and bankers disregards the structural elements of the relations of domination that are derived from its modes of production” (p.79).

On the other hand, however, I found it difficult to agree with Schlembach’s attributing of anti-Semitism to such conspiracies. I understand that what he is referring to is a ‘post-Jewish’ anti-Semitism that “does not ‘need’ Jews...the category of ‘Jew’ has powers attributed to it that cannot be defined correctly...it is an abstraction that excludes nobody...anyone can be considered a Jew” (Bonefeld 2005:158). Furthermore, I can see how this generalization of anti-Semitism is being utilized rhetorically in the text in order to provocatively emphasize the links between

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left-wing conspiracy othering and regressive right-wing racism. But I also fear that such an attribution muddies the waters of conspiracy theory and risks tarring progressive politics. This is not to say that anti-Jewish racism isn't present in left-wing discourse (sadly, it is), or that there isn't a link between conspiracy theories and neo-Nazism, but only that generalizing anti-Semitism appears to achieve little in terms of critical thinking. What's more, I find this over-stretching particularly problematic and trivialising in a context where charges of 'anti-Semitism' are being used by the state of Israel (and the USA) to legitimize ongoing Palestinian genocide.

Having said that, I nevertheless found *Against Old Europe* to be a fascinating, informative and highly original read, taking a unique angle on European identity and resistance, as well as demonstrating a rare willingness to fully engage with right-wing movements and theory so often neglected in social movement theory (such as de Benoist's). Perhaps further work could build upon Schlembach's argument even more by demonstrating other processes of European othering. In particular, I am thinking about that neglected history of European modernity that *defines* 'Old Europe': namely, colonialism. Indeed, as Gurinder Bhambra (2009) has argued, a potential way to challenge the kind of European identity that Schlembach recognizes as being problematically used by governments and movements alike is precisely through an assertion of its 'forgotten' history of slavery, exploitation and destruction. Indeed, in order to build upon the argument against identifying with old Europe, an effective maneuver might be to avoid equating it with the enlightenment of the French revolution and traditions of counter-enlightenment altogether and instead seek to highlight neglected events (for example, the Haitian revolution). Furthermore, this radical undermining could also be achieved by recognizing that neoliberalism is *not* simply an American phenomenon that has come to colonize the European 'lifeworld' (as Habermas would have it), but rather an essentially European ideology that has stemmed from continental traditions in political, economic and social thought (see Foucault 2010; Gane 2014).

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