

9 Books to Understand the Collectivist Right

The fast and furious rise of the alt-right in Europe, the UK, and the US has caught many people intellectually off-guard. I can speak for myself in this respect. My education and reading prepared me well to understand the statism of the left. My instincts became finely tuned. The threat to liberty from the right was always an abstraction: something that happened in history but had no present relevance.

Herein lies the danger of ever having considered yourself a completed intellectual. There is always more to know.

At some point in the last few years, something changed. It became impossible to ignore the rise of the collectivist right wing, one that rejects liberty and individualism in favor of statism and tribalism, that also claims to be the only viable alternative to the left. The war is on, and you see it everywhere: on campus, on social media, and even on the streets.

In retrospect, it's clear that the roots of this new movement are much deeper than, for example, the Trump campaign. There are sightings of the movement as far back as the early 1990s, and it is going to take some serious historical examination to trace all the forces and influences that led to it.

That's for later. For now, the most important step is to gain an understanding of this strange ideology and what it means for the free society. We need more than images of screaming marchers waving Nazi flags. We need to understand the ideas behind it all (and this is true also for those who find themselves tempted by alt-right ideology). These ideas need to become real in our minds and thereby recognizable even when its adherents aren't giving Nazi salutes. We need a crash

course in what I think is most accurately called right-Hegelianism. We need a conception of its roots, history, and meaning.

1. 'Omnipotent Government'

The most important single work on right-collectivism is [Omnipotent Government](#) (1944) by Ludwig von Mises. The author himself, a lifetime opponent of socialism, was forced to flee his home in Vienna when the Nazi threat arrived. He left for Geneva in 1934 and came to the United States in 1940, where he went to work almost immediately, reconstructing the intellectual history and meaning of what was called fascism and Nazism.

The book appeared just as the war was ending. Here Mises reveals the economics, politics, and cultural appeal, as well as the conditions, that led to the Nazi rise. He deals very frankly with issues like trade, race, market integration, Jewry, discrimination, class resentment, imperialism, demographic control, trade, and the core illiberalism of rightist collectivism.

What you get out of this book: Mises will train your intellectual instincts to make sense out of what might seem like chaos around you. You will see patterns. You will see connections. You will see trajectories of thought and where they end up. In a strange way, then, the result of the book is to create a calming effect. It makes sense of the whole complicated mess. The book is also infused with an amazing and powerful passion that could only come from someone with his brilliance and direct and personal experience with the problem at hand.

2. 'The Road to Serfdom'

My next choice is the most famous book that nobody today has

read. It came out the same year as Mises's book. It is [The Road to Serfdom](#) by F.A. Hayek.

The usual interpretation of this book's core message—that the welfare state brings about socialism—is completely wrong. What Hayek actually argues is that socialism takes many forms, styles, and shades (red and brown, or left and right) and every variation results in the loss of freedom. You can believe you are fighting fascism with socialism and end up with a fascistic state, or you can fight socialism with fascism and end up with an authoritarian socialist state. He demonstrates that these really are false alternatives, and the only real and sustainable alternative to dictatorship is the free society.

Here again, Hayek had a profound personal interest in the outcome of the great ideological struggles of his time and understood them very well. He too was driven out of his home by the Nazi threat and landed in London where the academic scene was dominated by Fabian-style socialists who imagined themselves to be great fighters of fascism. Hayek shocked them all by calling them out: the system you want to manage society will actually bring about the very thing you claim to oppose. In other words, the book is not as much about the reds as it is about the browns and the threat that this way of thinking poses even to England and America.

In the course of his argument, he offers a basic tutorial in the functioning of freedom itself, which can never mean “rule by intellectuals” or “rule by intelligent social managers” but rather defers to the knowledge discovery process that characterizes the choices of individuals in society.

3. 'As We Go Marching'

The year 1944 also saw the publication of one of the greatest but least remembered attacks on fascism ever written: John T. Flynn's [As We Go Marching](#).

Flynn was an amazing writer and thinker who came out of the anti-New Deal movement of the 1930s. This is his best and most scholarly work, with a full biography of Mussolini and a rich examination of fascist ideology. He provides the best list of traits of fascist politics I've seen. The message, in the end, is about how every warring state adopts fascist forms, with a specific accusation directed against Washington, D.C.. In some ways, his message is similar to Hayek's but more tactile and focused.

4. 'Planned Chaos'

Three years after the above books appeared, FEE founder Leonard Read came to Mises and asked him to write up a large essay that provides a one-stop shop for all things political that Mises had learned during his life. The manuscript grew and grew until it became a book that appeared in 1947: [*Planned Chaos*](#). It's a masterpiece, one that bears reading and re-reading throughout your life.

I've looked far and wide for another essay from the period that directly connects Nazi experiments with American eugenics and failed to find one. Mises saw that relationship and called it out in several amazing passages. Directly relevant here are the sections on fascism and Nazism in particular. In brief form, he explains the roots of the terror in intellectual error.

5. 'Illiberal Reformers'

And this takes us directly to the hidden history of demographic planning in America. No understanding of right-Hegelianism and its implications can take shape without grappling with this weirdly hidden history.

Why is it so hidden and why has it taken 100 years to finally deal with the scandal that nearly the entire American ruling

intellectual class was consumed by eugenic ideology for many decades before World War II? I suspect the reason is embarrassment about what happened. In particular, Progressives do not want to talk about this.

Eugenics is an inevitable outcome of any form of identitarianism that focuses on race and geography, as the alt-right does (the alt-left is the same!). If you can't control the "anarchy of human reproduction," all bets are off. In some ways, controlling birth is the first order of business for any form of rightist totalitarianism. That means: racism as an ideology and a statist tactic for managing the social order.

I'm always intrigued about the young boys on the streets shouting racist slogans and wearing MAGA hats, imagining that they are so politically incorrect. They have no idea that they are actually adopting the views of the entire American ruling class from a century ago that built the state they claim to hate. Indeed, most Americans know absolutely nothing about this history and how it was absolutely central to the building of the invasive and ubiquitous state that emerged out of the Progressive Era.

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The most important tutorial is Thomas Leonard's explosively brilliant [*Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era*](#) (2016). This book (packed with footnotes that will keep you busy for weeks) documents how eugenic ideology corrupted the entire social science profession in the first two decades of the 20th century. Across the board, in the books and articles of the profession, you find all the concerns about race suicide, the poisoning of the national bloodstream by inferiors, and the desperate need for state planning to breed people the way ranchers breed

animals. Talk about hidden history!

Now, you might say: these are Progressives, not rightists! It's true and that speaks to Hayek's point about red and brown being the inevitable expressions of factionalism with any single movement. The core point is that the word "progressive" here is ridiculously wrong. They were all reactionaries against the right of laissez-faire in the 19th century that drove such explosive demographic changes. It's one of the great ironies of intellectual/political history how the left and right blend into a single oppositional force to the free society.

This next book deals directly with this problem. It was a formative book for me personally because it answered a question I had long entertained but never answered. The question is this. Why was the free society overthrown so quickly and with such decisiveness and in such a short time, even though we were then surrounded by the evidence of the success of the free society? It's long been a mystery to me.

6. 'The Intellectuals and the Masses'

The answer is provided by John Carey's [*The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939*](#) (2005) reveals a side to upper-class intellectuals in the UK that you didn't know existed. They despised the free market, not because it didn't work but because it did work. It was displacing the old aristocracy, transforming the cities, bringing the masses new consumer products, and transforming class relations. And they hated it. In other words, the revolt against laissez faire was fed by snobbery, and that led to the most extreme solution justified in the name of eugenics: the extermination of inferiors.

7. 'War Against the Weak'

To see how this played out in the US, have a look at the

harrowing and horrible evidence marshaled in Edwin Black's [*War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*](#) (2003, 2012). It shows how eugenics was central to Progressive Era politics. Laws requiring sterilization claimed 60,000 victims, but that was just the beginning. The entire nature and purpose of the regime changed in the direction of comprehensive social planning, a movement that is simply impossible to comprehend without realizing that eugenic and racist (and, inevitably, misogynistic) concerns were the driving force.

8. 'Liberal Fascism'

Jonah Goldberg's [*Liberal Fascism*](#) (2009) covers much of the same territory. It is an outstanding book that will continue to pay high returns for decades. The book is flawed, however, by the author's incessant desire to blame everything that went wrong on the "left" and the "liberals" (talk about a misnomer!). His refusal to acknowledge the broadness of the eugenic movement and its diverse ideological expressions – which were fundamentally conservative in motivation – makes the whole book come across like some partisan attack. If only he had admitted that the revolt against laissez faire took on many colorings, the book would have made a much more powerful statement for freedom and against statism in all its forms.

9. 'Against the Modern World'

Right-Hegelianism also takes religious forms. It begins with a small sect that believes its religion has been unbearably corrupted by modernity and seeks out ancient texts as guides to reconstructing it in a purer if forgotten form. The results depart from the organic development of the faith in question to embrace a rationalist reconstruction.

It has great leaders that builds a movement focused on some great restorative act that involves coercion and the invention

of a rationale for every manner of immortality. Such movements have popped up in the 20th century within varieties of religious expression, including Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, Magic, and Occultism. The strange guide here is Mark Sedgwick's [*Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*](#).

That's the main list, the books that open up a new world of intellectual exploration and shine so much light on where we are today. More valuable, still, is reading the original works of these thinkers, from Johann Fichte to Friedrich List to John Ruskin to Madison Grant to Carl Schmitt and beyond. The loathing of liberalism is never more obvious than when experienced from the author's own hand. This is the best way to get into their heads and understand (and thereby combat) their worldview.

Champions of freedom need to have a broad view of the threats we face and that requires some serious study. Then the next step is just as important: develop a new vision of the kind of person you want to become so you can make the largest possible contribution to the society we want to see around us.

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Jeffrey Tucker is Director of Content for the [Foundation for Economic Education](#). He is also Chief Liberty Officer and founder of [Liberty.me](#), Distinguished Honorary Member of [Mises Brazil](#), research fellow at the [Acton Institute](#), policy adviser of the [Heartland Institute](#), founder of the CryptoCurrency Conference, member of the editorial board of the [Molinari Review](#), an advisor to the blockchain application builder [Factom](#), and author of five books. He has written 150 introductions to books and many thousands of articles appearing in the scholarly and popular press.

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