

# Book Review: Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream by Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter

*In Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream, Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter challenge the assumption that democracy is necessarily progressive through introducing the notion of 'reactionary democracy', showing how narratives that claim that the resurgence of racism, populism and the far right are the result of popular demands obscure the manipulation of the idea of 'the people' for reactionary ends by those in power. This is an indispensable book, writes [Rahel Süß](#), and is a must-read for those seeking to contest prevailing ideas about the relationship between racism and liberal democracy.*

**Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream. Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter. Verso. 2020.**

[Reactionary Democracy](#) is destined to be one of the indispensable books of our time, a work drawing upon the enduring debate about the causes of systemic racism. Introducing readers to the entanglement of racism and liberal democracy, this co-authored book seeks to shed new light on how these forms of power interact and the possibilities emerging in the wake of this.

In western societies, authors Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter observe, the liberal narrative celebrates the abolishment of slavery and the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act in the US as a defeat of racism. The problem with such a framework is that it constructs racism as something of the past, and therefore fails to account for systemic racism today.

Starting from the assumption that democracy is not necessarily progressive, the book introduces the idea of 'reactionary democracy'. The central claim holds that the resurgence of racism, populism and the far right is not the result of popular demands but instead the consequence of 'a more or less conscious manipulation of the concept of "the people" to push reactionary ideas in the service of power' (17). Such an argument emerges out of the authors' critique, which shows that the rise of the 'alt-right' and the far right is not only a reaction to the limitations of liberal democracy and its failure to address them, but also is the product of liberal institutions.

There are several instructive arguments animating the book. In Chapters One and Two, the authors introduce what they call 'illiberal' and 'liberal racism'. The former describes articulations of racism associated with biological racism, genocide, racist violence and segregation, which are claimed to have been defeated by the forces of egalitarian liberal societies (79). Liberal racism instead refers to the 'denial of the forms of racism which persist and have deep roots in liberalism' (94). While they admit that the borders between the two are 'fuzzy', they insist on the importance of this conceptual distinction to allow for nuanced analyses of how 'the existence of illiberal racism in opposition to liberal racism is essential to the perpetuation of a system built on discrimination and privilege, ensuring its mainstream acceptability' (19).

Drawing on case studies from the UK, the US and France, Chapter Three subsequently discloses how the mainstreaming of the far right and the radicalising of the mainstream function as intertwined processes. Holding the view that the mainstreaming process originates not only from popular politics of far-right parties and movements but also from discursive elites (such as the media, politicians and academics), the authors explore this dual dynamic. Finally, the task of Chapter Four is to outline in detail how the processes of legitimising and mainstreaming reactionary understandings of equal rights and liberty operate.

Populism serves as an explanatory example for Mondon and Winter's argument. By drawing on the common usage of the term, they disclose how the discursive link between 'the people' and the far right has been created through the term 'populist'. For them, it is vital to understand how the term 'populism' euphemises ideas around racism by falsely assuming an 'ideological evolution away from racism' towards more 'blurry forms of politics' (162-63).

For Mondon and Winter, there are at least two problems with this discursive link between 'the people' and the far right: firstly, 'it legitimises the far right and its ideas'; and secondly, 'it delegitimises the people as central to the democratic process' (279) because of 'the almost exclusive association of the term "populism" with the far right' (280). In their view, the far right has largely benefitted from the skewed interpretation of the rise of the populist right, in particular by a) constructing racist and exclusionary ideas as representing the will of 'the people'; b) positioning them as an example of popular revolt; and c) discussing its potential as an alternative to the current system (211).

Drawing on the current political discourse about the working class, Mondon and Winter show how the link between the working class and racism was constructed especially in the context of both the UK Brexit referendum and the 2016 US election campaign (325). In disclosing how most of the political commentary assumed that the working class was white, they also highlight how the 'enemy' of working-class struggles became 'defined only by race, ethnicity or foreign nationality, rather than by class' (332). Their argument, however, is not that the working class should be seen uncritically as a vessel for emancipatory politics. More interested in tracing back the particular narrative which equates the working class with the rise of the far right, Mondon and Winter seek to develop an understanding of the 'ideological underpinnings of this manoeuvre, which places the blame squarely on the voiceless, [...] deflecting attention from those responsible for the current sociopolitical situation' (333).

Yet there is another important aspect of the relationship between populism and the mainstreaming of the far right. As liberalism has created a new political dichotomy between populists on one side, whether of the left or the right, and anti-populists on the other, Mondon and Winter show that liberalism positions itself as the defender against 'all forms of authoritarianism and irrational politics' (283). In doing so, however, liberal institutions not only ignore their 'share of responsibility for the rise of authoritarian politics', but also 'create a diversion away from their own failures' (283).

Conclusively, the misuse of the category of populism as the only alternative to the establishment has allowed the systemic failures of liberalism to go unremarked within public discourse. It is this absence of antagonism in contemporary politics that marks, according to the authors, a central source for the mainstreaming of the far right. But how does this mainstreaming operate? With the help of powerful actors, Mondon and Winter argue, that legitimise the far right's ideas as a credible alternative. As carefully described by them, 'the mainstreaming of the far right is not simply or even predominantly the result of popular demand or the savviness of the far right itself' (290). It is also the result of sensationalist media coverage as well as the short-term and opportunistic strategies of politicians and academics.

Turning to the question of a more radical democratic imagination at the end of their book, Mondon and Winter convincingly emphasise the importance of understanding racism as power relations that evolve and adapt. Consequently, racism is not exhausted by its illiberal articulations. Liberalism itself has ‘failed to live up to its own supposed ideals’ (392). Ultimately, it is essential to recognise that ‘the far right is not the (only or inevitable) alternative’ (296).

While the overall argument of *Reactionary Democracy* convincingly illuminates current debates about systemic racism, it fails to fully account for the role [white privilege](#) plays. Part of the problem is the absence of a conceptual discussion of the term ‘democracy’. Although Mondon and Winter shift attention from democracy as an institutional process or electoral politics to more ‘discursive forms’ (210), they say little about the underlying assumption. In the absence of such systematisation, the book is unable to fully grasp how contemporary inclusive and participatory politics stabilise what the political theorist [Joel Olson](#) refers to as ‘white democracy’. This term is used to describe how attempts of democratic repair fail because they misconstrue racial oppression as a problem of exclusion (for which the solution is inclusion), rather than a problem of white privilege.

Finally, the book offers little guidance on the question of strategy and increasing democracy. Besides a few references to grassroots and social movements, it does not discuss the potential – or danger – of current experiments with new democratic institutions and practices, such as the inclusive politics of civic lotteries or participatory citizens’ assemblies. Because of the absence of such a discussion, Mondon and Winter do not address whether emancipatory or participatory politics can play a role in mainstreaming the far right. More inclined to develop a framework for understanding liberal and illiberal racism, the book focuses instead on how the idea of progress has falsely left a lasting mark on the liberal democratic imagination.

Overall, however, it can be said that *Reactionary Democracy* is an important contribution to the continuing debate on the causes of systemic racism. With its call for a thorough analysis of the relation between the far right and liberal democracy, the book provokes the right question at the right time. For scholars and students of politics, philosophy and history seeking to challenge prevailing ideas about racism and liberal democracy, this is a must-read.

- This review originally appeared at the [LSE Review of Books](#).
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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the reviewer

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