

## Article

# “One Knows the Tree by the Fruit That It Bears:” Mircea Eliade’s Influence on Current Far-Right Ideology

Mark Weitzman

Simon Wiesenthal Center, Los Angeles, CA 90035, USA; mweitzman@wiesenthal.com

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**Abstract:** Since the notorious Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017, the alt-right has surged into prominence as the most visible expression of right-wing extremism. While most analysts have focused on the political aspect of the movement, my article will explore the spiritual and religious roots and connections of the movement. In particular, I will focus on how Mircea Eliade, one of the most prominent figures in the academic study of the history of religion in the late 20th century, is viewed by many current extreme right thinkers. Drawing on the writings of some of the leading theoreticians and inspirations of the alt-right such as Julius Evola, Alain de Benoist, Aleksandr Dugin and Richard Spencer, as well as the prominent extreme right publishing houses, Arktos and Counter-Currents, I will show how Eliade’s extremely controversial and problematic past is seen as an intellectual and even spiritual source for these leading figures.

**Keywords:** antisemitism; Eliade; history of religions; traditionalism; alt-right

Mircea Eliade probably needs no introduction to the readers of this journal. Described as “the father of the history of religions” (Berger 1994, p. 51) in the United States, his prominence reached beyond the academic world and into mainstream culture, and at his death in 1986 the New York Times hailed him in an obituary as “one of the world’s foremost interpreters of spiritual myths and symbolism” (McDowell 1986). Yet since his death, Eliade has perhaps become even more well known for his connection with the violently antisemitic Iron Guard movement in pre-war Romania and during World War II. Eliade had been a prolific propagandist for the Iron Guard and its leader Corneliu Codreanu and his post-war journals continued to give evidence of his sympathies<sup>12</sup>.

The controversy over Eliade’s past exploded when the Romanian émigré writer Norman Manea (1991) published a piece in *The New Republic* that laid out the basic contours of Eliade’s complicity, although some questions had actually surfaced almost two decades earlier.

In 1972, an Israeli journal published a denunciation of Eliade and his activities by a Romanian historian and Holocaust survivor. These accusations led directly to a break between Eliade and the towering scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem. Eliade had met Scholem in 1950 when he first participated in the famous Eranos conference in Switzerland, and a friendship had developed

<sup>1</sup> In 1937, Eliade asserted “The significance of the revolution to which d. Corneliu Codreanu aspires . . . its success would mean at the same time a victory for the Christian spirit in Europe” (Eliade 1937).

<sup>2</sup> In *Exile’s Odyssey*, vol. II (pp. 65–66) of his autobiography, which covered the years 1937–1960, Eliade described the Iron Guard or Legionary movement as “The only Romanian political movement which took seriously Christianity”. He added that for Codreanu, “the Legionary movement did not constitute a political phenomenon but was in its essence, ethical and religious” and, finally, in regard to his own position “I could not conceive of disassociating myself from my generation (the Iron Guard–MW) in the midst of its oppression, when people were being prosecuted and persecuted unjustly.” (Eliade 1988).

between the two scholars that would end when Eliade could only respond in “an evasive nature” to Scholem’s request for a specific and detailed refutation of the charges<sup>3</sup>.

Since then, much ink has been spilled and many words have been typed on all aspects of Eliade’s career by both defenders and detractors, and there is no need to repeat them all here. Despite the efforts of apologists such as Bryan S. Rennie, David Cave and Mac Linscott Ricketts, the charges made by critics such as Daniel Dubuisson, Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine Robert Ellwood, Adriana Berger, Leon Volovici, Steven Wasserstrom and others have indelibly stained Eliade’s reputation. Yet, up to now, the thrust of both critics and defenders has been to examine Eliade’s immense oeuvre for explicit or implicit fascist or antisemitic tropes. This includes either his personal and professional writings, or what the Romanian born Israeli scholar Moshe Idel (2014) describes as Eliade’s *academica, literaria* and *personalia*<sup>4</sup>. As Elaine Fisher (2010, p. 262) writes

“A recent, well-publicized trend in the critical literature traces the formative influences of Eliade’s ‘eccentric’ scholarship directly to his checkered political history. Already infamous for his alleged associations with the Romanian Iron Guard, Eliade has come under renewed scrutiny not only on account of his methodology or his politics as discrete but objectionable matters. Rather, a veritable cottage industry has emerged, uncovering evidence that Eliade’s academic work in the history of religions is not only methodologically problematical but fundamentally ‘tainted’ by his political associations.”

Fisher then notes that “In their strongest forms, these critiques have tended toward outright polemics at the expense of any pretense to academic objectivity” (pp. 262–63) and targets, among others, Adrianna Berger’s 1994 claim that Eliade’s “dangerously reactionary and conservative ideas . . . resurface not only in the post-Ceausescu Romania but also in the United States today” (p. 71). Thus, Berger and others who wrote in the same vein had extended the critique of Eliade from his professional writings to his perceived influence on extremist discourse.

Twenty-five years later, the question of Eliade’s influence and connection to the extreme right remains open and merits reconsideration. The changes in right-wing extremism have been vast and the discontinuities between past and present manifestations raise significant questions about whether Eliade’s writings resonate in today’s extremist world. In order to answer that question, I surveyed over one hundred extremist sites, articles, interviews and studies for overt acknowledgement of Eliade’s influences. I extracted those that contained substantive references, not just brief citations. Here, I will attempt to show, through a survey of some of the most prominent intellectual figures in the New Right, alt-right and similar movements, that these leaders of the movement have claimed inspiration and support from Eliade’s writings. I not only used postings by individual leaders, but also searched through the two most prominent alt-right publishing houses, Arktos and Counter-Currents. Interestingly, Eliade’s writings that are referenced include not only those from his compromised Romanian past, but also his post-World War II works, including those written in America that brought him high academic and public acclaim. It is important to note that we recognize that a mention does not by itself connote influence; it can mean nothing more than a name being dropped in an attempt to gain some intellectual credibility for a fringe extremist enterprise. Nonetheless, just knowing what name to drop, especially when we consider that Eliade died over thirty years ago, does in itself have a measure of significance and might indicate some lingering influence of Eliade’s thought today.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Lavi (1972), *Tik Mircea Eliade* (Heb), *Toladot*, 1:13–18. When Scholem read the charges, he wrote to Eliade directly in an effort to allow Eliade to present a defense of the charges. Eliade’s response was evasive, causing Scholem to write in return that “since you had not been specific about the Jewish point which interested me the most”, your response “left me with a feeling of perplexity” (Scholem 1973). Scholem expressed his disappointment in Eliade’s response in a comment to another scholar, Burton Feldman, who was friendly with both Eliade and Scholem. Feldman wrote to Eliade that “I gather however that Scholem is still puzzled on that especially agonizing charge of antisemitism . . . He seemed to be puzzled by what he feels is a certain “reticence” in your letter about the antisemitism charge” (Feldman 1973).

<sup>4</sup> In this analysis, I have greatly relied on Idel’s perspective on Eliade. I am grateful to my friend, Prof. Felicia Waldman, who drew my attention to Idel’s book.

Our findings show Eliade's presence in two broad categories. The largest number of references were on sites that reflected some attempt at a theoretical or intellectual validation of the extremist position that they articulated. The other category, which I will not discuss here, includes more generic blogs and social media postings that reflect cruder and less intellectually pretentious comments. Generally, on the sites that I reference, Eliade was never really the only or central focus, but usually was cited as an influence or source along with others, although there were some significant exceptions. Perhaps the simplest example of the general importance attached to Eliade in these circles is his inclusion on reading lists for the far right, such as the Essential Rightist Reading List<sup>5</sup>.

One of the most significant connections is that of Eliade and the French theorist Alain de Benoist, often considered the father of the Nouvelle Droite (ND), the French New Right. While the peak of their prominence came decades ago, the legacy of the Nouvelle Droite is strong in today's world. Within the European far right, de Benoist's preeminence is generally acknowledged, as shown by a major publishing house of the movement describing him as "the leading thinker of the European 'New Right' movement, a school of political thought founded in France in 1968" (de Benoist, A n.d.). Further, while the ND flourished decades ago, its influence is still felt. As Tamir Bar-On has written, "Despite the ND's fall from the media and intellectual spotlight in France, ND ideas on immigration, national identity, and the loss of national sovereignty are increasingly accepted by many Europeans" (Bar-On 2016), an assessment that has been borne out by recent surveys and votes. Thus, in his role as the intellectual leader of the ND and following that as Europe's leading right-wing theorist, de Benoist has had and still continues to have a major impact, making Eliade's influence even more relevant.

Bar-On, who has extensively studied the ND and Benoist, and even engaged in a public debate with de Benoist, describes him as "something close to" a fascist, who is trying "to give a very respectable face to the right as a prelude to eventually capturing power" (Political Capital 2018).

De Benoist began editing the journal *Nouvelle Ecole* in 1968 and recruited Eliade as a member of the journal's board of patrons, along with other figures associated with far-right tendencies, including Hans Eysenck, Konrad Lorenz and Armin Moehler (Winston et al. 2001). According to de Benoist, the two even met personally a number of times in Paris (Hakl 2014). In a 2010 article celebrating what would have been the right-wing German writer Ernst Jünger's 110th birthday, de Benoist included Eliade in a short list of thinkers such as Jünger, Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger that he viewed as important and positive figures but whose general reputations were tainted by their associations with Nazism (de Benoist 2010).

It is worth noting that Jünger, Eliade and Schmitt all knew each other personally and had high regard for one another. Eliade visited Schmitt in Berlin in July 1942, and they met again when Schmitt visited Portugal in May 1944 (Eliade 1988)<sup>6</sup>. Jünger, in turn, discussed Eliade with Schmitt during their meeting in Berlin in November 1942. After the war, Jünger and Eliade were coeditors of the journal *Antaios* (1959–1971)<sup>7</sup>. During this period, they published five articles by Evola in the journal. (Junginger 2008).

According to Jünger's (2019) testimony, Schmitt described Rene Guénon, the founder of the traditionalist movement, as Eliade's "mentor,"<sup>8</sup> while Eliade himself acknowledged that he sometimes thought that Guénon was "the most interesting person of our time" (Eliade 2012).

Eliade's connection with Guénon surfaces in many places, but especially important in our context is another article by de de Benoist (2008) that cites "the historical studies of religion by Mircea

<sup>5</sup> <https://thearetosite.wordpress.com/2017/08/16/essential-reading-list/>. This list appears on multiple postings online.

<sup>6</sup> This account is amplified in Eliade's *Portugal Journey*, pp. 108–9.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Eliade's journal entry of 7 June 1959, where he records a working lunch with Jünger (and another member of the editorial team) regarding the journal. The account appears in Eliade, *No Souvenirs, Journal, 1957–1969*, pp. 42–43. Recently an attempt has been made to restart the journal: <https://gwendolyn-taunton.com/2013/10/22/the-new-antaio-journal-call-for-papers/>.

<sup>8</sup> For the best introduction to traditionalism, see Sedgwick (2004). Sedgwick reviewed Eliade's connection with Guénon on pp. 111–13 as part of his larger discussion on Eliade, fascism and traditionalism, pp. 109–17.

Eliade". This piece by de Benoist is devoted to the thought and influences of Guénon. For de Benoist, traditionalism "is defined as a coherent body of intangible and sacred principles imposed on all which delineates the essential rules of conduct". Thus, traditionalism is important because it teaches that "Clearly stated: the ideology of progress is crumbling ... The modern world is thus perceived first and foremost as distraction: literally, it diverts man away from the essential." This theme is one that permeates de Benoist's (2013) writings; as he describes it, "Modernity is intrinsically antagonistic to collective identities", and thus it is the past that holds the key to happiness, not the future. Moshe Idel has described Eliade's affinity for this type of thought by writing that Eliade has "a clear propensity to the archaic", in which "the good times are not anticipated in the future but have already flowered in the distant past, and true religion is to be sought in the role of the cyclical return to primordial times" (2013, p. 243). Mark Lilla (2016) has devoted his recent book, *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction*, to a discussion of how a number of thinkers have articulated this "'political nostalgia' which reflects the belief that a discrete Golden Age existed and that (the believer) possesses esoteric knowledge of why it ended". This combination of esoteric knowledge and reactionary political thought has resurfaced with a powerful impact in today's world and is also reflected in Eliade's influence on current right-wing extremism. While de Benoist is an example of a thinker who provided an erudite framework for extremist theory, Eliade's academic output and scholarly reputation offered strong historical support and the possibility of academic respectability to those who drew upon it.

De Benoist also cited Eliade a number of times in his book, *On Being a Pagan*. He relies on Eliade for the support of his dismissal of Christianity because of its Jewish roots, quoting Eliade who wrote "The characteristic intolerance and fanaticism of the prophets and missionaries of the three monotheist religions have their model and justification in the example set by Yahweh" (de Benoist 2018, p. 112). While de Benoist (2018) feels that Catholicism had once "protected Europe", Eliade saw Christianity, particularly the Western version described as the Judeo-Christian heritage, as having "emptied the cosmos of the sacred" and having "thus neutralized and banalized it" (Eliade 1977, p. 71). Eliade did draw a distinction between Romanian Orthodox Christianity and the Western versions of Christianity, seeing "the simple Romanian peasant as the standard for an authentic form of belief" (Idel 2014, p. 233). Although de Benoist drew on Eliade, it is clear that Eliade, particularly after World War II, was extremely reticent about his personal religious and political thought and preferred to speak as a scholar and researcher. However, it seems apparent from his writings that he retained an affinity for what he described as "cosmic Christianity" and, shortly before his death, he described himself as having a "simple faith" like a "Romanian peasant" (Idel 2014).

An early colleague of de Benoist, Guillaume Faye (who died in March 2019), also showed evidence of Eliade's influence. Faye was one of the founders of the *Nouvelle Droite*, alongside de Benoist, and was an important member of the group associated with de Benoist until he split with them in 1987. After a period away from the movement, he returned with an aggressive anti-Muslim platform in the late 1990s, and then he broke with de Benoist and others in the movement a decade later by taking a positive position regarding Jews and Israel (Faye 2007)<sup>9</sup>. Still, Faye was recognized, in the words of Jared Taylor (2019), the influential US editor of the white nationalist publication *American Renaissance*, as "one of the most important intellectual leaders of the Identitarian movement."

In the conclusion to his 2012 book, *Convergence of Catastrophes*, Faye relies on Eliade's reflections that "Deluge or flood puts an end to an exhausted and sinful humanity, but the disappearance of an entire humanity ... is never total, for a new humanity is born from a pair of survivors" (Eliade, quoted in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*). Faye is prophesizing that we are at the end of a historical era, a "dead end" that will lead to chaos, and from that destruction will arise a new "race" (in a metaphysical sense not biological) that will create a "new civilization" that is "more stable and ethically higher" (Faye, Guillaume 2012). For Faye, Eliade's work is fundamental to this picture.

<sup>9</sup> For an example of the criticism that Faye received for this stance, see O'Meara (2011).

Perhaps even more so than de Benoist or Faye, the Russian thinker, Aleksandr Dugin, has expressed overt appreciation of Eliade's work. Dugin is considered the "leader of the Russian New Right and a theoretician of fascism and Eurasianism" (Laruelle 2015, p. 1), the geopolitical theory that Russia must "unlearn the West and reject the imperialism of European unity" (Laruelle 2008, p. 1). Dugin is the most prominent current theorist of this ideology, propagating a version that has been described as "fascistic" (Ibid., p. 2)<sup>10</sup>. Dugin's influence reached, for a time, into the top of Russia's political elite to the extent that he was once even labeled "Putin's Brain" (Barbashin and Thoburn 2014). More recently, he has lost some of the access to the highest levels of policy, but he has remained a prolific and influential voice. His inflammatory rhetoric and extremist positions in regard to Ukraine resulted in his being named to the list of Russians sanctioned by the United States Treasury Department in March, 2015 (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2015). The Canadian government followed suit in June 2015 (Brean 2018).

Dugin, who evinces much more of a religious/spiritual interest than the French thinkers discussed above is explicit about his debt to Eliade. As the Russian scholar Victor Shnirelman (2016) has written, part of Dugin's project can be described as "Building a Bridge between Eschatology, Esotericism and Conspiracy Theory." According to Shnirelman, Dugin shared Eliade's appreciation of Guénon (Dugin's "favorite thinker") and called de Benoist one of his two favorite authors (Ibid., pp. 444–45). In his 2017 book, *Noomakhia: Wars of the Mind—Geosophy: Horizons and Civilizations*, Dugin devoted an entire chapter to Eliade (2017). There, he discusses Eliade as one of the authorities who created the "Large-scale reconstructions of ancient cultures" that Dugin relies upon as the basis of the new society that he is proposing (ibid.). For Dugin, this process is an examination of the "existential category of Dasein (Heidegger) and the multiplicity of cultures and their logoi . . . clarifying the identity of each society we examine and the correspondence between this deep identity and the layers presented by each civilization's logos" (Dugin 2017). The similarities between Eliade's work and Dugin's project are clear here. Marlene Laruelle Marlène (2006) notes that Dugin "regularly translates extracts from the works of the great traditionalist theoreticians, René Guénon and Julius Evola, but also from so-called 'soft' traditionalist authors such as Mircea Eliade" (p. 11)<sup>11</sup>. In a talk he gave in 2017 on Russia and Romania, Dugin was even more specific, stating "The entire circle of Romanian intellectuals gathered around the magazine *Zalmoxis* . . . the grandeur and depth of intellectualism that Set (sic) themselves a late Eliade and Couliano, they produce such a grand impression that nothing like this is not found in any of the Eastern European countries" (Dugin 2017). A website devoted to Dugin sums it up by pointing out that Dugin "places even more importance on Right-wing thinkers, who clearly form the greater influence on him... the traditionalist School (Evola, Guénon, Schuon, etc.), the New Right (Benoist, Freund, Steuckers, etc.), and the conservative religious scholars (Eliade, Durand, etc.)" (Tudor 2015). As Victor Shnirelman put it (Shnirelman 2016, p. 453) "It is no accident that Dugin highly respects Julius Evola, one of the fathers of European neo-fascism, and is fascinated with another Italian neo-fascist, Claudio Mutti."

Julius Evola (1898–1974), mentioned above, was a friend of Eliade who also features in this conversation. Evola was an idiosyncratic Italian philosopher, fascist and traditionalist thinker who worked for the SS during World War II and became known as the "leading intellectual of neofascism and/or the radical right in all of Europe" (Payne 1996, p. 502)<sup>12</sup>. Eliade and Evola began corresponding

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent and informed journalistic account of this movement, with a great deal of detail on Dugin, see Clover (2016). For a biography of one of the seminal thinkers of Eurasianism in Russia, see Bassin (2016). Both of Laruelle's books as well as Bassin contain a great deal of material on Dugin, while Sedgwick's *Against the Modern World*, pp. 221–37 describes Dugin's traditionalism. However, Anton Shekhovtsov and Andreas Umland question the identification of Dugin with traditionalism in their article (2009), pp. 662–78.

<sup>11</sup> However, according to Shekhovtsov and Umland (2009, pp. 671–72), Dugin is not consistent on whether he views Eliade as a traditionalist. Sedgwick (2004, p. 11) defines "soft" traditionalism as "works in which Traditionalism is not overt".

<sup>12</sup> On Evola's thought, see Hansen (2002, pp. 1–104), in Evola (2002), *Men Amongst the Ruins: Post-War Reflections of a Radical Traditionalist*. In a 1935 review of the book, originally published in Romanian but now available in English at <https://www.gornahoor.net/?p=4303>, Eliade described Evola as having "one of the most interesting minds of the..



in the late 1920s and met for the first time when Eliade introduced Evola to Cornelius Codreanu, the leader of Romania's antisemitic fascist Iron Guard<sup>13</sup>. Their relationship continued after the war, with exchanges of letters and two meetings in Rome (1955 and 1964) before they broke apart<sup>14</sup>.

Evola's influence did not end with his death; indeed, it had possibly become even more important in far-right circles. Together with Dugin, Evola was actually referenced by Steve Bannon, who led Donald Trump's presidential election campaign and served as a former White House chief strategist, in his notorious Vatican talk of 2014. Bannon, in discussing Vladimir Putin, linked Putin to Eurasianism and said "he's got an adviser who harkens back to Julius Evola and different writers of the early 20th century who are really the supporters of what's called the traditionalist movement, which really eventually metastasized into Italian fascism" (Feder 2016). The advisor Bannon referred to was clearly Dugin.

As is well known, after World War II, Eliade was very circumspect about his pre-war (and wartime) activities and connections. By 1964, Eliade had cut direct communication with Evola and stopped citing Evola's work in his own writings (Bordas 2011, p. 141). One of the possible reasons for this was that Evola, who was unrepentant in his beliefs (describing himself after the war not as a fascist, but as a "superfascist" although he differentiated his beliefs from the cruder Nazi racial theories), did not hesitate to discomfit the Romanian scholar by actually publishing accounts of Eliade's embarrassing past (Ibid., pp. 135, 139–40)<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, in Eliade (1955), Eliade was already working on his first American trip to deliver the Haskel Lectures at the University of Chicago and did not need any revelations that might jeopardize the invitation to the US.

Evola was not the only Italian fascist with a positive relationship with Eliade. Claudio Mutti, described as Evola's "direct intellectual heir" (Laruelle 2015, p. 13), devoted a whole interview to Eliade, which began with whitewashing Eliade's Legionary past in Romania (Claudio Mutti homepage n.d.). Mutti, who later converted to Islam, took the name Omar Amin to honor the Nazi fugitive Johann von Leers who fled to Egypt after World War II (von Leers' Muslim name was also Omar Amin)<sup>16</sup>. Mutti, who runs his own publishing house even published a volume in Italian of the correspondence of Evola and Eliade and also edited a volume for the German far-right Antaios publishing house on the pre-war Romanian right-wing intellectuals including Eliade<sup>17</sup>. Mutti's relationship with Dugin can be traced back at least to 1990, again showing the web of far-right connections that reflected Eliade's influence (Laruelle 2015, p. 38)<sup>18</sup>.

One hallmark of the new radical right includes the international networks that have tied together European and American extremists, with the Americans often turning to Europe for intellectual nourishment and validation. A prominent source for this is the Arktos publishing house, which was founded in 2010 by Daniel Friberg, a Swedish-born activist, originally edited by the American John Morgan, and which has become "the world's largest distributor of far- and alt-right books" (Williams 2017). Richard Spencer has identified himself as an "identitarian", linking himself to the movement that grew up in Europe. (ibid.). Spencer "credited Arktos with having increased intellectually inclined white nationalist Americans access to the French New Right and identitarianism."

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generation." The quote can now be found as the lead blurb in the English edition of the book, published by the far-right Arktos publishing house.

<sup>13</sup> For Eliade's perspective on the early correspondence, see Mircea Eliade, *Journal III*, 1970–78, (Eliade 1989, p. 161). Evola's account of the meeting with Codreanu can be found in his *Legionary Asceticism: Colloquium with the Head of the Iron Guard*, in Evola (2015), *A Traditionalist Confronts Fascism*, pp. 71–76.

<sup>14</sup> On their post-war relationship, see Liviu Bordas, *Inedited Letters of Julius Evola to Mircea Eliade: The Difficult Encounter in Rome*, Mircea Eliade's Post-War Relationship with Julius Evola, *International Journal on Humanistic Ideology*, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> It should also be mentioned that Evola was also annoyed at what he perceived to be Eliade's refusal to publicly acknowledge his debt to hard-core traditionalist writers such as Guenon.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of Mutti's career, see Giovanni Savino (2015, pp. 104–17). On Von Leers Nazi past, see Robert Wistrich (2013, pp. 152–53) and Jeffrey Herf (2009, pp. 180–81).

<sup>17</sup> The English announcement of the publication of the volume can be found at <https://www.gornahoor.net/?tag=claudio-mutti>.

<sup>18</sup> Mutti's German volume is listed on the Antaios site at <https://antaios.de/antaios-liefert-jedes-buch/3130/mircea-eliade-und-die-eiserne-garde>.

(Teitlebaum 2019, p. 272). Eliade's presence can be found on Arktos in a number of essays that cite him, along with works by Evola, Dugin and de Benoist<sup>19</sup>. For the Americans who look to Eliade's work for validation, his value lies in his excavating and elevating the white European heritage that they feel is the source of Western civilization and culture and is being now devalued and derided by liberal thought.

Arktos' rival publishing house, Counter-Currents, is run by the American white nationalist and antisemite Greg Johnson (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.). While Arktos included references to Eliade in essays that focused on other topics, Counter-Currents featured Eliade prominently in essays devoted to his work, such as *Mircea Eliade & the Rediscovery of the Sacred* by the French far-right writer Guillaume Durocher (Mircea Eliade 2016). Durocher concludes his appreciation of Eliade by offering the encomium "We salute you Mircea Eliade, Aryan mystic, loyal in a dark age to the faith of your forefathers" (Ibid.). Johnson himself published a short piece "Mircea Eliade, Carl Schmitt, & René Guénon" that explored the connections between the three thinkers as detailed in Eliade's *The Portugal Journal*.

Counter-Currents not only published the extracts described above from Eliade's *Portugal Journal*, but they also published a full English translation of Eliade's preface to his untranslated 1942 book *Salazar and the Revolution in Portugal* (*Salazar și Revoluția în Portugalia*) (Mircea Eliade 2016). Overall, it can be estimated that Eliade is mentioned over one hundred times on the site.

Johnson is not the only US extremist to acknowledge Eliade's influence. Arktos has also published an anthology of essays by the American intellectual historian Paul Gottfried, who has been called the "Godfather" of the alt-right and might even be responsible for the name of the movement. While Richard Spencer is popularly viewed as its founder, the term actually originated as the title (which Spencer claims credit for) of a 2008 lecture written by Paul Gottfried entitled "Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right" (Gottfried 2008). Spencer and Gottfried were working together at the time at Taki's Magazine and, while Gottfried did not use the term in his speech, when it came to publishing the talk on the magazine's website, the headline included the term<sup>20</sup>.

In the Preface to his 2012 anthology (published by Arktos), *War and Democracy*, Gottfried (2012) describes how Eliade and Nietzsche were his primary influences in trying to understand the "apocalyptic temptation" that is the vision of human progress that underlies Western liberal thought today (2013, p. 7). Gottfried's career has been defined in opposition to this tendency, and thus Eliade's thought has provided one of the major inspirations for Gottfried. While not well known outside of extreme conservative circles (much to his own displeasure, Gottfried spent his career far outside of the academic mainstream at a small and little-known college in rural Pennsylvania), his influence in far-right intellectual circles has been great; outside of the contested attribution of the term alt-right, Gottfried has been described by Jared Taylor's white nationalist publication, *American Renaissance*, as "one of the most brilliant intellectuals in America today ... an intellectual godfather to the so-called Alt-Right ... (whose) works have certainly proved deeply influential" (Collins 2018). In other words, Gottfried has been successful in putting his own stamp, which is deeply indebted to Eliade's thought, onto a wide swath of the current extremist movement.

Another extremist thinker, the Croatian-American Thomas Sunic, has also drawn on Eliade. Sunic, a former academic, diplomat and translator and an overt antisemite who has hobnobbed with Holocaust deniers cites Eliade (along with many of the thinkers mentioned above) as being among "pagan thinkers [who] usually appeared under the mask of those who styled themselves as "revolutionary conservatives." For Sunic, "All these individuals had in common the will to surpass the legacy of Christian Europe, and all of them yearned to include in their spiritual baggage the world of

<sup>19</sup> See for example, Kerry Bolton (2018) and Monika Hamilton (2018).

<sup>20</sup> The lecture was given at the annual meeting of the H. L. Mencken Club, 21–23 November 2008 and can be found at <http://www.unz.com/pgottfried/the-decline-and-rise-of-the-alternative-right/>. For a detailed account, see Andrew Marantz (2017). The journalist Jacob Siegel (2016) presents a good portrait of Gottfried.

pre-Christian Celts, Slavs, and Germans.” Their success would lead to recognizing that “Christians could never quite reconcile themselves to the fact that they also had to worship the deity of those whom they abhorred in the first place as a deicide people.” As a result, Sunic wonders “Might it be that the definite disappearance of anti-Semitism, as well as virulent inter-ethnic hatred, presupposes first the recantation of the Christian belief in universalism?” (Sunic 2012)<sup>21</sup>.

This short survey demonstrates that, almost thirty-five years after his death, Mircea Eliade is unquestionably a figure of some influence in extremist intellectual circles today, perhaps even more so than in respectable academic circles. Thus, his legacy remains contested, with answers to many questions tantalizingly still out of reach. Even if we agree, as I believe, that Eliade was compromised by antisemitism and demonstrated ugly sympathies for the Romanian fascist movement, we still cannot be certain exactly how deeply Eliade was “tainted” in Nancy Harrowitz’s (1994) phrase, whether those attitudes persisted after World War II and also after his immigration to the US, or how much they intentionally or unconsciously infiltrated and influenced his writings<sup>22</sup>. Although he was a voluminous writer, much still remains shrouded in mystery. New texts by Eliade, falling into the three categories described by Idel above (*academica*, *literaria* and *personalia*) are still being discovered. Further, even the old ones are open to different interpretations and readings, making it extremely difficult to penetrate the fog that lies around Eliade’s writings and intent.

In one attempt to evaluate Eliade’s work, Moshe Idel has described Eliade’s methodology as constructing “stark polarities and . . . a historical development of religion that has very little to do with the facts.” Further, specifically in reference to Judaism, Idel wrote that Eliade made “no attempt to update his understanding of Judaism as an evolving religion.” As a result, “Judaism remained antithetic to the type of religion he [Eliade] forged and disseminated” (Idel 2014, p. 151). Again, we have to judge whether this traditional perspective on Judaism, which often reflected a supersessionist view of Judaism as a “dead” religion, was intentional, based on antisemitism, or incidental, based on methodological weakness<sup>23</sup>.

So, while acknowledging that no author can be held totally responsible for how their words are understood or used after they are published, it is still remarkable how many current extremist intellectuals find some form of inspiration in Eliade’s writings. Clearly, there is something in Eliade that resonates with these thinkers and that in turn raises more questions. Are they reading Eliade accurately? Or are they piling their own biases onto the foundation that he laid down? Can those aspects of his work be isolated? Did his students unwittingly absorb some of those aspects of his work? Further, where does that leave the study of the history of religions that he is credited with founding? Is that also tainted? We can isolate some elements of Eliade’s thought that the figures surveyed find sympathetic and impactful. For example, Eliade’s charge to historians of religions that they work “to advance the understanding of man by recovering, and reestablishing meanings that have been forgotten, discredited, or abolished” (Eliade 1969) can easily be coopted by those who want to restore an archaic world that embraces traditional forms of human inequality and who reject modernity and its associated vices and failings. Further, Eliade’s Iron Guard propaganda writings, with their antisemitic and fascist cruxes, also add to his luster in these circles.

Clarity might be difficult to obtain, but that might also be as result of Eliade’s own intent. There is one cryptic and tantalizing hint in the correspondence of Eliade and Evola. In a famous letter dated 31 December 1951, Evola, who had challenged Eliade regarding Eliade’s refusal to cite by name his traditionalist friends in his academic work as well as Eliade’s expunging any public memory of

<sup>21</sup> For more on Sunic, see <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/tomislav-sunic>.

<sup>22</sup> There is a large body of literature that examines and critiques Eliade’s work from a variety of perspectives. To give but two examples, on the methodological problems, see Alles (2017); on the methodological issues, and for the political influences in Eliade’s scholarly work, see Ellwood (1999).

<sup>23</sup> There are many examples of Judaism being described as a “dead religion” not only linked to theological discourse. It also became a common theme among German philosophers. For Kant, see Robert S. Wistrich (2012, p. 102), n. 15; for Hegel, see David Nirenberg (2013, p. 404); for Schleiermacher, see Leora Batnitzky (2011, p. 26).



his right-wing activities, responded to a letter of Eliade's that presumably contained some defense or explanation.

Evola wrote "As regards your clarifications regarding your relations with academic 'masonry,' I find them somewhat satisfactory. It would therefore be less a question about methodology than pure tactic, and there would be nothing to say against the attempt to introduce any Trojan horse into the university citadel"<sup>24</sup>.

It is entirely unclear what the "Trojan horse" above referred to. Was it traditionalism? Was it antisemitism? Was it Romanian fascism? Was it any combination of the above or something else entirely? Did Eliade actually write to Evola that he was attempting to infiltrate certain controversial ideas into scholarly discourse through his own work, using a method he described as a "Trojan horse"? Was the term even Eliade's or did it originate (in this context) with Evola?

Since we do not possess Eliade's original letter, we remain in the dark about what exactly Evola was reacting to with his "Trojan horse" comment. Yet it might be instructive to point out that Eliade's work has consistently enjoyed a positive reception in far-right circles. As Idel (2014) notes, "Some of the positive reviews (of Eliade's writings) came from people of quite right-wing political positions" (p. 258). Further, it is not only the pre-war Eliade who is cited as an influence, but as one far-right intellectual wrote recently, "But he was nonetheless able to reinvent himself at the University of Chicago and one is left with an unmistakable impression: this man dedicated the rest of his life promoting the history of religions as an apology for spirituality, in effect a crypto-Right traditionalism" (Durocher 2016).

So, while we are left with many unanswered questions, one fact stands out. Today, in certain antisemitic and racist intellectual circles, Mircea Eliade is considered an intellectual mentor and highly important thinker whose writings influence and provide a basis for at least some of their positions. Mark Lilla (2016) has articulated the danger inherent in such a "theological-political approach", writing that "Such myths do nothing but feed a more insidious dream: that political action might help us find our way back to the Road Not Taken" (p. 85). Ultimately, then, we are forced to conclude that if Eliade's work has resonated so strongly with these current antisemitic and far-right thinkers, then it just might be because, as Paul Gottfried remarked about another intellectual "One Knows the Tree by the Fruit that it Bears" (Siegel 2016)<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> An English version of the letter can be found at <https://www.gornahoor.net/?p=4949>.

<sup>25</sup> There, Gottfried was referring to Leo Strauss.

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