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Title	How counter-critique problematises power: on the 'tyranny' of ideas
Authors	Boland, T.
Publication date	2026-04-21
Original Citation	Boland, T 2026, 'How counter-critique problematises power: on the 'tyranny' of ideas', Journal of Political Power, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 366-382. https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2026.2656877
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://www.scopus.com/pages/publications/105036149323 - 10.1080/2158379X.2026.2656877
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Download date	2026-11-06 03:11:37
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18700



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Journal of Political Power

ISSN: 2158-379X (Print) 2158-3803 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rpow21

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To cite this article: Tom Boland (21 Apr 2026): How counter-critique problematises power: on the 'tyranny' of ideas, Journal of Political Power, DOI: 10.1080/2158379X.2026.2656877

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2026.2656877

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JOURNAL OF POLITICAL POWER
https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2026.2656877

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How counter-critique problematises power: on the 'tyranny' of ideas

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a corpus of books by conservative, right-wing or reactionary authors – together termed 'counter-critics' – this article examines how they represent their opponents' ideas as 'tyranny', as 'authoritarian' or even 'totalitarian'. Rather than offering a theoretical account of 'power', the approach here follows a Foucauldian approach to 'problematisation', examining how 'power' is represented in discourse. Beyond tracing how counter-critics denounce their opponents as 'tyrannical', what emerges here is how a special power is attributed to words and ideas, both to enchant people with ideology and to dispel such delusions. Finally, this article offers reflexive considerations concerning the practice of critique.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 10 April 2025
Accepted 2 April 2026

KEYWORDS
Critique; discourse; power; Foucault; ideology

Ideas matter. In politics, ideas can be powerful. Yet, beyond such truisms, how other people's ideas are 'problematised' or framed within discourse warrants sustained analysis. Herein, I examine how a series of 'counter-critics' represent the ideas of their opponents – variously styled as the 'woke', the left, liberals, progressives or even 'Cultural Marxists'. Drawing on the sociology of critique in an analysis of fourteen books by thinkers from conservative, radical and reactionary right-wing positions – herein styled as 'counter-critics' – I suggest that these authors ascribe a peculiar power to the words and ideas of their opponents, positioning them as tyrannical, authoritarian, oppressive, even totalitarian. Perhaps this is unsurprising; in 2014 *Agenda Europe* advised reactionaries to 'Use the weapons of our opponents and turn them against them . . . ' and that ' . . . cultural wars are about who can impose his use of terminology'. (2014: 130, 138). Yet this is not a straightforward co-option of critique, but a distinctive problematisation of opponents' ideas.

This critique of 'ideas' is politically consequential. Authored by conservatives within The Heritage Foundation, *Project 2025* is a sprawling treatise on how a conservative president might reform government in the early stages of taking office. It recommended:

> . . . deleting the terms sexual orientation and gender identity ("SOGI"), diversity, equity, and inclusion ("DEI"), gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitive, abortion, reproductive health, reproductive rights, and any other term used to deprive

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> Americans of their First Amendment rights out of every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation, and piece of legislation that exists. (2023: 4–5)

Implicit here is the conviction that words and ideas have power, that they shape and twist thought and prevent people from speaking freely. On taking office, Trump's Executive Order 14,151 attempted to give legislative force to this demand, explicitly countering Biden's Executive Order 13,985, which Trump declared to have 'forced illegal and immoral discrimination programs [...] into virtually all aspects of the Federal Government'. While the implementation of this agenda is fraught with legal and practical complications, the underlying accusation is clear: the opponents' ideas are both false and powerful and have turned government into tyranny.

Occasionally, this focus on ideas seems overwrought, for instance, renaming the Department of Defence as the Department of War, yet simultaneously a variety of institutional changes are underway to uproot the supposedly pernicious influence of 'woke' social justice ideas within the military. More broadly, the allegation that ideas are tyrannical animates reactionaries within the 'culture wars' (Hartman 2019), and the analysis below draws on fourteen books which address the general reader, tracing both the metaphor of tyranny and the focus on ideas as powerful. Herein, the authors of these books are described as 'counter-critics', a term situated among other categories in the following section before outlining the corpus. The article then moves onto the sociology of critique – taking a Foucauldian approach to discourse, which is put to work in an in-depth analysis of the corpus. The reflexive implications for practices of critique are addressed in the conclusion.

1.1. Situating counter-critique

The selection of 'counter-critics' here does not neatly reflect conventional political categories, spanning right-wing, populist, reactionary and conservative thought. The focus is less on the content of these works, what they affirm or assert, but how the criticise their opponents, their words, and the power they supposedly wield. As such, the focus is less on the claims or values expressed by these counter-critics, than how they deploy terms like 'ideology' or equivalents to describe others. Most prominently, a wide range of populist and radical right-wing thinkers tend to critique the nefarious influence of 'elites' on society (Schroeder 2020), articulate an 'us and them' dichotomy (Kustán Magyari and Arataki 2025) and claim to speak truth on behalf of the people (Mudde 2019). These tendencies have a longer history within the radical right-wing, which does not simply seek to preserve or conserve, but to restore or re-imagine order which has been disrupted by political forces ' ... they perceive as tyrannical' (Parker 2019, p. 630). Whether such right-wing commentators are speaking genuinely or strategically cannot be resolved here – rather the focus is how to understand how others' 'powerful ideas' are represented as tyrannical.

A very wide range of scholarship tends to describe those it agrees with as critics, and those it disagrees with as ideologues, often on a political basis (Baehr 2019). Such dichotomies are often informed by Marxist or post-Marxist thinking, wherein ideology appears as an smokescreen for power or a justification of either the status quo or a political project, pursued by oppositional actors, rather than a broader conception of

ideology as an inescapable aspect of political positioning (Laclau 2014). While this version of 'ideology' is eschewed by Foucault (1984) whose approach to discourse underpins this article, and many scholars employ different, more subtle approaches – for instance, non-normative critique (Hansen 2016), nonetheless the idea of 'ideology' persists in political debate and positioning. Obviously, the authors analysed herein could simply be interpreted as expounding a radical right-wing ideology, but this gives insufficient attention to how they use the term 'ideology' or equivalents to criticise the ideas of their opponents.

This poses a challenge – how to understand and analyse political positions that we may disagree with on the basis of fact and value which nevertheless ostensibly take the form of critique. A frequent reaction is to simply declare that they are 'mere rhetoric' or 'not real critique', or to suggest that the right 'co-opts' or imitates critique from the left (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, Klein 2023). Perhaps, sometimes. Yet the assumption that 'critique' somehow belongs to the left belies a complex history, ignores the ways in which the left may draw upon the right, reduces complexity to 'two sides' and is frankly naïve about 'critique'. Rather than assuming 'critique' is an untrammelled good or an inherent mental capacity, I turn to the 'sociology of critique' to understand the discursive play of criticism.

An interesting precursor to the sociology of critique is Hirschman's *The Rhetoric of Reaction* (1995) which outlines three key styles of response to progressive politics; suggesting that attempts at reform will be *futile*, put existing social goods in *jeopardy* or have a *perverse* effect. In the corpus, and our opening example, the accusation is made that the pursuit of equality through EDI/DEI policies perversely generates discrimination and unfair treatment. As Hirschman suggests, ' . . . heavy use is made of such metaphors as "mask", "veil" and "disguise" and the radical social analysts, like their conservative counterparts, obligingly provide the service of tearing off the mask, of lifting the veil, of making us see through the disguise' (1995, p. 80). Rather than being the preserve of one side, the critical unmasking of the other as an 'ideologue' with a hidden agenda is pursued by 'both sides'.

Whether the authors in the corpus should be categorised as populist, conservative or radical right-wing is not easily resolved. There are many who could be considered as 'alt-right' (Hermansson *et al.* 2020), some could be considered part of the 'manosphere' (Simmons 2025), and others who even combine populism and conspiracy theory, making ' . . . unprovable counter-cultural claims that contradict conventional accounts' (Bergmann 2018: 50). Another promising category is Finchelstein's *Wannabe Fascists*, which highlights how contemporary and historical populists tend to reverse any critique made against them to criticise their opponents in turn: 'Big lies always include the accusation that it is the enemy who is lying (2024, p. 63). Yet, terms like fascist also provokes counter-critique, where those 'ostracised as fascists' (Hermansson *et al.* 2020, p. 28), tend to 'dig in' rather than 'see the light' (Baehr 2019).

Perhaps the simplest term is 'reactionary', in that each of these authors reacts to recent gains made by their political opponents. Robin (2018) notes how reactionary thought since Edmund Burke has tended towards the 'absorption of the ideas and tactics of the very reform or revolution it opposes' (Robin 2018, p. 40). Given that the preceding political drift is produced by critics – of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy and so forth – we might expect that reactionaries become critical in turn. Occasionally, some of these authors are quite explicit in their tactics: In an

interview with the *New Yorker* Chris Rufo said: ' . . . we should use the linguistic techniques of the critical theorists and apply them against their own intellectual movement, turning the language of subversion back on itself' (Conway 2024). This explicit reversal of tactics by reactionaries is also extensively detailed in the reactionary *Agenda Europe* (2014). To capture how critique is adopted, adapted and redirected by these thinkers, they are termed 'counter-critics' herein. Indeed, in this interchange of critical discourse, one might well understand all participants in politics not as 'fools fooled' but as 'critics critiqued' (Boltanksi 2011), because there is practically no position today which someone has not already been denounced as 'ideological'.

Furthermore, this approach to 'ideas' – criticising them as 'tyrannical – might well emerge from this exchange of critique and counter-critique. Reactionaries can be understood as having encountered and repurposed critical perspectives on symbolic language and how it institutionalises certain power-relations from the left – for instance in Steve Bannon's reading of Gramsci (Klein 2023). Within the broad 'reactionary right' this focus on transforming culture before altering politics and ideas is termed 'metapolitics' (Hermansson *et al.* 2020). The 'Breitbart Doctrine' that 'politics is downstream from culture' has been translated beyond the invention of new slogans and movements to the development of subversive, transgressive and critical culture – with the mainstream figured as sanctimonious 'political correctness' and 'woke tyranny'. Herein 'critique' is plural and hybridised discourse, both cultural and creative (Ryan 2024), inventing new insults to characterise opponents, for instance, 'Cultural Marxism' or 'the Cultural Revolution' – invoking a parallel to Maoist totalitarianism.

Before entering into the question of the sociology of critique, a list of 'counter-critics' from 2018 to 2024, drawn from the US and UK, written by academics, journalists and politicians. These authors variously claim professional expertise – having a privileged grasp of 'objective truth' – or claim to write from the perspective of 'common sense'. However, what characterises them more clearly is how they position themselves as critics, a discursive move which largely depends on 'unmasking' their opponents as 'ideologues'. Beyond debating with opponents, these books are largely pitched at a wider audience, seeking to combat the 'power' of their opponents' ideas.

These authors all react to recent contestations of hegemony through forms of critique which are effective within the attention economy of media, especially social media, podcasts and so forth (Tegelberg *et al.* 2024). However, books are preferred here as the most elaborate and extensive statements, carefully phrased and revised during the publication process, giving due recognition that these authors are critics. The selection could certainly be extended or contracted, but the point here is less a comprehensive overview of the field than a detailed discourse analysis of a certain style of critique.

How power is represented, how ideas are posed as 'tyrannical' is my central concern. There are other metaphors at play: Many counter-critics dismiss 'the left', 'social justice' or the 'woke' as being a 'new religion' (McWhorter 2021), with a credulous faith in irrational ideas, following gurus, repeating mantras, enacting rituals and defending sacred idols (Kaufman 2024), and effectively the zealous inheritors of the Puritans (Doyle 2022). This is a classic critique of ideology involving an iconoclastic gesture (Adorno 2022). Here, the beliefs of opponents seem both irrational and veering towards totalitarianism, with the pursuit of 'social justice' presented as a modern form of the inquisition.

Another variant is to describe opponents as crazy, afflicted by the 'woke mind virus'. This perspective is given pseudo-psychological grounding by authors such as Haidt and Lukianoff (2018), who declare that college students are mentally 'coddled', unable to deal with ideas they don't agree with, even equating the left or social justice with depression. The critical voices of opponents are considered addled, but also power-hungry; ' . . . part of a dysfunctional way members of our society have learned to argue and battle for power, status and dominance' (Lukianoff and Schlott 2023, p. 7). Some counter-critics are less nuanced, for instance, Tucker Carlson describes his opponents as a 'ship of fools', and Ted Cruz declares that 'Today, ideas that were once (rightly) considered insane are mainstream' (2023, p. 21). For Douglas Murray, opponents suffer from derangement, following a crowd mindlessly, and their ideas are ' . . . make-believe, masquerading as science' (Murray 2019, p. 60). This metaphor of insanity is used to explain why others' ideas are influential whilst absurd. However, the metaphor of tyrannical ideological power opposed by the critical rebel is more prevalent and influential.

Making sense of these particular critical problematisations requires more than just categorising these texts as conservative, reactionary or right-wing; those political positions are certainly present, the focus here is on how 'critique' represents 'power' – so I turn here to the sociology of critique.

1.2. Theorising critique and counter-critique

The 'sociology of critique' reflects Boltanski and Thevenot's theoretical argument that 'The main problem of critical sociology is its inability to understand the critical operations undertaken by the actors' (1999, p. 364). Mainly this references the Bourdieusian tendency to treat ordinary individuals as 'cultural dopes' but could equally apply to the widespread tendency to describe political opponents as not just non-critical, but ideological in the sense of being blinkered or delusional. Pluralising critique, Boltanski and Thevenot argue actors appeal to different 'orders of worth' or 'regimes of justification' when legitimising or criticising situations. Arguably, the counter-critics analysed herein draw on the 'domestic world' of values, emphasising trust and tradition (1999, pp. 370–1). However, my sociology of critique draws on Foucault, less for his reflections on critique itself or his critical practice but adopting his post-structuralist approach to discourse to rethink both 'power' and 'critique' (Hansen and Triantifiliou 2022). Hence, the focus here is not political power as variously conceived by a wide range of theorists (Haugaard 2021), but how 'power' is represented by a particular version of 'critique'.

Foucault eschews the concept of ideology, more concerned with historicising contemporary categories rather than denouncing them as false (Koopman 2019). Since the aim here is to analyse 'counter-critique', from a 'critical' perspective Foucault's approach can ' . . . make visible the complicated difficulties of an assembly of practices in which we find ourselves uncomfortably enmeshed' (Koopman 2019, p. 481). Unsurprisingly, the term 'ideology' features frequently in the corpus, but this can remain an empirical question without incorporating 'ideology' into the theoretical language herein. In the corpus, 'ideology' is roughly equivalent to propaganda, but also delusion, both a deliberate and self-deceiving perspective, and always attributed to the opponent rather than the critic. Of course, academic accounts position ideology not simply as a smokescreen to be dispelled, but as an institutionalised social practice (Bourdieu 1991), a practice which

constitutes subjects (Ben-Shai 2023), or a political articulation of antagonism (Laclau 2014). Nonetheless, such theoretical debates are often ignored in public critiques, especially among reactionaries (Butler 2024).

Critique – like any other practice of thought – has a complex genealogy (Boland 2019, Stypinska 2020), addressed in Foucault's late historical work on the genealogy of modes of 'truth-telling', with the figure of the 'parrhesiast' often speaking out critically and courageously against tyranny in historical scenes (Harcourt 2024). However, rather than trace the redeployment of complex conceptual inheritances, the current focus is on the present, how counter-critique problematises 'power', that is, how 'power' is represented in discourse – a post-structuralist application of Foucault's thought developed by Bacchi in particular (2015). Of course, there are multiple modalities of 'critique' beyond the corpus – my focus is particularly on the 'unmasking style' (Baehr 2019). Following Foucault's post-structuralist approach to discourse, these texts are read interpretatively to trace how they represent 'problematise' or 'pose the problem' of power (Bacchi 2015).

Focusing on counter-critique as an empirical instance of 'critique', a key question emerges: How does 'critique' depict and describe 'power'? Following Foucault (Koopman 2019), this suspension of the given character of concepts entails positioning critique as a discourse, a culturally specific but also plural repertoire of ideas, techniques and subject positions, with a complex genealogy, which is adopted and adapted by numerous actors for various purposes and yet nonetheless creates ' . . . regular effects of power' (Foucault 1984, p. 73). Rather than simply reacting to situations of inequality, oppression or violence (Ben-Shai 2023) – though it often does so – critique is a discourse, which allows for situations to be (re)described in particular terms. So, rather than offering a critique or a perspective on power, this article traces how particular critical discourses represent 'power', making an empirical question from the theoretical problem that 'power' is itself plural rather than self-evidently coherent (Saar 2010).

Influentially, Foucault argued that 'power' should not be understood as mere violence, or a capacity held within individuals or a judicial power to decide, but in terms of 'power-relations' (Haugaard 2021). In 'The subject and power' (Foucault 1982) invites us to consider 'power' as something variously conceptualised, and 'What is Critique?' (Foucault 1997) positions critique in relation to power – a 'refusal to be governed thus', but also implicitly as an account of 'power'. While normative approaches (Hansen 2016) or frameworks that insist on a strong conception of 'ideology' (Laclau 2014), would require a more elaborate account of both 'power' and 'critique', perhaps making distinctions between various versions of these, for our purpose of understanding how 'power' is problematised by 'critique', the first step is to suspend any assumptions about either, in order to examine how the discourse at hand represents them.

Half a century ago, Foucault noted the ' . . . immense and proliferating criticizability of things, institutions, practices and discourses' (2003: 6). Since then, critique has arguably diversified and spread, being deployed variously in different contexts for diverse purposes – there is perhaps even 'too much critique' (Brady 2023). This is reflected both in the emergence of the sociology of critique and post-critique (Anker and Felski 2017). 'Post-Critique', like post-modernism, does not reflect the end or a turn away from critique, but rather that critique already suffuses society, it is part of culture, even institutionalised or routine (Felski 2015). Drawing on Foucault, Felski (2011) suggests that critique emerges historically like other disciplines or human sciences. Thus, rather

than simply being a response to injustice (Ben-Shai 2023) or a reaction to power which threatens subjects with abjection (Butler 2004), critique is taken here as a discourse which variously frames situations as 'unjust' or 'oppressive' and institutions or rules as 'tyrannical' or 'totalitarian' – or uses other metaphors. Indeed, for the sociology of critique, in 'critical moments' where disputes arise, all actors are subject to the 'imperative for justification' (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999), incited to engage in discourse. Yet, while critiques may sometimes lead to new norms or justifications, often the crisis persists, with entrenched critical oppositionality.

Within academia, critique is often celebrated as a crucial academic practice, central to thought itself, and this article is inescapably critical. However, many contemporary problems of critique have been identified: Latour (2004) suggests that critique is sometimes almost indistinguishable from conspiracy theory and often relies on two contradictory discursive tricks. Baehr (2019) argues that critique suffers from 'diminishing returns' and tends to backfire, leading less to 'enlightenment' than oppositional counter-critique. The spread of critical discourse among right-wing, alt-right, far-right, anti-migrant, ethno-nationalist, anti-feminist, gender-critical and beyond has been widely observed (Nash and Browne 2020, Hermansson *et al.* 2020). Others suggest critique is co-opted and commercialised (Heath 2001).

For many, these problems represent the dilution of critique by pseudo-critique: 'Critique often functions as a risk-free, permitted transgression which sustains, rather than shatters a given state of affairs' (Diken 2009, p. 584). This routinisation of critique into a ceremony of toothless indignation is certainly problematic (Stypinska 2020), yet there is little warrant to distinguish between 'genuine' and 'pseudo-critique' without recursively criticising certain political positions – thus becoming entangled in further levels of critique and counter-critique. This does not warrant 'anything goes' relativism, simply the empirical observation that many different actors make critical claims, which appear to them and their followers as critical unmasking, for instance, denouncing the 'woke' as tyrannical.

Beyond theoretical works, problematic tendencies within critique are now chronicled in empirical work, for instance, the shallowness of some of anti-racism (Michaels and Reed 2023), or the dominance of narrow conceptions of 'white privilege' (Pierce 2024), or the tension between anti-colonial and queer critiques (Atshan 2020). Without interrogating these complex and controversial claims here, it is clear that critique suffuses contemporary culture to the extent that it is empirically significant. A great many political, popular, activist and social media-based contributors use forms of unmasking critique (Postill 2024). Both academic studies of the contemporary 'culture wars' (Sahar 2023, Samuels 2024), and more popularly oriented studies (Klein 2023, Sarkar 2025) suggest problems with common-place versions of critique: that it provokes opposition rather than emancipation, that it is easily co-opted, that it is individualising or politically short-circuiting, and so forth. These effects or 'unintended consequences' of critique cannot be assessed here, but the broad characteristics of this form of critical discourse can be outlined here – bearing in mind that this critical discourse is adopted and adapted across the political spectrum.

Although Foucault is widely considered as a critical thinker (Harcourt 2024), his work also reflects ambivalence about critique, for instance, in his discussion of the cynics, whose philosophical militancy he diagnoses in contemporary political avant-gardism

(Foucault 2013), or in his discussion of ordo and neo-liberalism as critique of the state (Hansen 2016). Thus, Foucault's approach to discourse can underpin an analysis of critical discourse in general and reactionary counter-critique in particular. Herein ambivalence about critique is necessary, both in order to recognise the critical tendencies of those we disagree with, and the potential pitfalls of critique as an academic and political practice. Such reflexive considerations are reserved for our conclusion, and we turn now to empirical analysis.

1.3. How counter-critics imagine power

Even while denouncing them, counter-critics represent their opponents and their ideas as 'powerful', as authoritarian, tyrannical, even totalitarian, evoking the critique of domination (Saar 2010). Occasionally, tyranny is metaphorical: Kaufman rails against ' . . . being forced to genuflect in front of sanctimonious moralisers' (2024, p. 3). Yet in the main, the 'woke', left, liberals and so on are considered as genuinely tyrannical, restricting freedom, creating oppressive rules and spreading dogma.

Across the corpus, authors make similar claims: Firstly, that free speech and proper debate are stymied by false accusations, public shaming and cancel culture, so that 'politically correct' or 'woke' ideas go unchallenged: 'Cancel culture allows people to dismiss their ideological opponents without refuting their arguments' (Lukianoff and Schlott 2023, p. 23). Secondly, that they spread false yet seductive ideas, marshalling emotive opposition to sexism, racism and any kind of suffering, which serves to gather mass support or at least acquiescence, partly through youthful enthusiasm, partly through guilt trips. Thirdly, organisations from states to universities to corporations become captured, through laws or DEI 'overreach' wherein these ideas become institutionalised, creating perverse results – instituting discrimination in the name of combatting it – as per Hirschman (1995).

Overall, a grim vista is presented, a new era of thoughtless adherence to absurd ideas seems to be universally established, yet counter-critics also insist that 'ordinary people' – or the 'silent majority' among them – are largely dissatisfied with these ideas and that a book-length counter-critique might go some way to dispel the problem. Broadly, these counter-critics present themselves as moderates, even classical liberals, yet curiously part of the supposedly suppressed 'intellectual dark-web' (Finlayson 2021). This rather dubious claim by these widely popular and platformed figures to be somehow censored by political power reflects the pervasive and persuasive metaphor of rebels facing tyrants.

Speculatively, this image might invoke older legal concepts, wherein a sovereign who does not govern in accordance with the 'natural law' is a tyrant (Kantorowicz 1997, pp. 150–7). Indeed, political philosophy enables us to decipher the paradoxical relationship between sovereign judges and the critic who decry tyranny (Sahlins and Graeber 2017) – recalling that critique is etymologically connected to judgement (Koselleck and Richter 2006). Consider for instance, Vivek Ramaswamy, who both stood for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024 and wrote *Woke, Inc* (Ramaswamy 2021), critiquing how the 'social justice agenda' was infiltrating board rooms of American businesses, distorting company policies and dividing people against each other on lines of race and gender through the supposed petty tyranny of DEI policies. If elected, he planned upon using executive orders to impose his critical vision – as it happened, another similarly

critical sovereign was elected. Here, the critic of tyranny would be sovereign, an explicit articulation of the counter-critical 'will-to-power' perhaps (Nietzsche 2001).

More concretely, an elaborate conceptualisation and critique of 'power' is offered by Jordan Peterson, psychologist turned best-selling author and central opponent of 'woke', 'leftist' and 'politically correct' ideas, which he often describes as not just foolish and erroneous, but oppressive and totalitarian. This is spelled out in a chapter entitled 'Abandon Ideology' in *Beyond Order* (Peterson 2022). This book combines practical life advice and criticism of society, and this chapter also reflects his extensive experiences of being subjected to critique by opponents who he 'unmasks' as tyrannical in turn.

Initially, Peterson situates the contemporary tendency towards ideology within historical context, suggesting that the modern world confronts people with the ' . . . doubt that undermines and the certainty that crushes' (2022, p. 162). While meaning and social values persist, by the twentieth century, the uncertainty of modernity – the feeling that 'God is Dead' – led to the emergence of vast totalitarian movements, socialism and fascism, considered ideological answers to the problem of doubt. He suggests that contemporary 'isms' – conservatism, feminism, socialism, postmodernism, environmentalism and other 'isms', are roughly equivalent ideologies.

Peterson breaks down ideology into constituent parts: Firstly, he suggests that it exaggerates and simplifies one element of reality, 'the patriarchy', for instance. Secondly, he notes how ideologists divide the world in two: ' . . . reduce the problem to something simple and accompany it with an evildoer, who can then be morally opposed' (ibid: 170). Peterson describes how the 'faux theorist' seizes on a limited number of explanatory factors and inflates these to account for everything – usually choosing negative, resentful or destructive explanations. This quickly becomes 'cultish', offering a 'false idol', dividing people into enthusiastic adherents of the new ideology and tacitly or explicitly demonised critics.

Partially, Peterson offers a peculiar 'sociology of critique', but one in which his opponent's ideas are pseudo-critiques: Peterson denounces opponents' ideas as 'ideology', dividing the world into superficial cynics and genuine thinkers. That his own pronouncements are not an 'ideology' is implicitly self-evident – he asserts his deep understanding of both 'the facts' and deeper existential and psychological realities. Peterson leans heavily on tendentious 'evolutionary psychology' to buttress his truth-claims: For critics this 'knowledge' rather too conveniently legitimises a patriarchal and Judeo-Christian order. But to call Peterson ideological is to miss how he deploys critical discourses to combat the claims of his opponents and redescribe them as ideological. His description of others' ideology is not conducted from a great distance; rather, Peterson is a critic critiqued, who has been confronted by unmasking critics. To him, the earnest and emancipatory criticisms of feminism or socialism are experienced as false accusations, attempts to undermine his Western Christian liberal values. He dismisses such critique but warns that they have a grievous impact on the unwary, exerting an authoritarian power over free thought.

Scholars have noted the populist, right-wing and reactionary critique of 'elites' for decades (Mudde 2019). In recent years, this critique of elites has been redeployed as a critique of journalists – traditionally important critics – as stooges of the establishment in the MSM (mainstream media) (Phelan and Maeseele 2023). More recently, left-wing critics have suggested that identity politics has suffered from 'elite capture' (Táíwò 2022).

Anti-elite critique pervades this corpus; an interesting example is Deneen (2023), who criticises both economic elites on the right and social elites on the left as having disturbed the 'social order'. Unlike most counter-critics, he recognises the problem of critique: 'The genre relies mainly on denouncing an enemy rather than elevating the virtuous' – a problem he imputes to 'both sides': 'As a result of these respective oppositional stances, each "team" is actually worse than it believes itself to be' (Deneen 2023, pp. 23, 28). Nevertheless, he drifts towards critique of 'leftists' as tyrannical. For Deneen, the right-wing is finally becoming populist and supports ordinary people via a return to conservativism, but the left are hyper-critical hypocrites; ' . . . the powerless are denounced as oppressors . . . and the powerful . . . commend themselves as victims' (ibid: 37). He goes on to describe the 'new elites' as a form of 'collective oligopoly', implicitly referencing Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, evoking totalitarianism.

Counter-critics are evidently creative, inventing phrases like 'Cultural Marxism', 'Post-modern social justice', 'New Elite' or 'liberal socialism' to describe what they deplore. The range of issues and individuals that the critic seeks to address are evidently diverse and complicated, but by coining a new term these disparate elements are yoked together, so that it seems that the central, hidden, misunderstood problem has been revealed. Those who are addressed by such counter-critiques rarely if ever accept these new terms – instead they seem like accusations. These are *exonyms*; names for others, outsiders, opponents. Yet, for those who coin these terms, these words supposedly 'reveal' or 'expose' the reality, implicitly attributing a considerable power to words and ideas. Rather than nominal labels or opinions, words appear to possess a 'performative power', often ignoring the materiality of language, that is, the social situation, power-relations and institutional framing of discourse (Pennycook 2024).

Beyond name-calling, an important element here is how opponents' ideas are traduced or repurposed into distorted or crude versions. This is not simply the use of 'strawman' arguments – much decried by counter-critic advocates of free-speech – because a 'strawman' will not suffice to explain the power of the opponent. For instance, in *The Identity Trap*, Yascha Mounk describes ideas he disagrees with as ' . . . so alluring, especially to the young and idealistic' (Mounk 2023, p. 13). For counter-critics to appear audacious, their opponents must seem powerful and persuasive. The lure of the 'identity trap' is that it renders identity as destiny, so that political position can be read from race or gender, with the world neatly divided into goodies and baddies; the powerful, the status quo, against the rebels, the critics, the resistance. Ironically, this tendency towards dichotomous thinking which demonises opponents is sometimes criticised by these counter-critics but always attributed to opponents.

Having renamed their opponents in a denunciatory fashion, counter-critics tend to argue that their power is primarily derived from insidious ideas; for example, 'woke' ideas are derived from 'Marxism' or 'Relativism' or 'critical theory' or 'post-modernism' – all considered as politicised departures from truth. 'The one overwhelming problem with this attitude is that it sacrifices truth in the pursuit of a political goal' (Murray 2019, p. 120). Very often, counter-critics position themselves as revealing a well-kept secret, almost a conspiracy to be exposed (Bergmann 2018, Latour 2004). Desultory and derogatory accounts of Marx, Marcuse, Sartre, Foucault, Butler, Bell are frequently offered – quite repetitively, as though the original texts were overlooked in favour of reading 'counter-critical' commentaries. These accounts do give some accurate details,

for instance, that Foucault wrote about prisons and punishment or that Butler contests the naturalness of gender roles. They then offer distorted accounts of complex theoretical positions; for instance, that 'there is no truth, only power', or that everything is merely a matter of opinion, totally subjective, or whatever. These inaccurate glosses are offered as diagnoses of dangerous ideas, the 'Relativism' which undermines science or even 'Western Values'

Perhaps these seem like wild accusations which might seem better off ignored or simply corrected, but the point here is to understand how counter-critical thinkers disfigure critical theories for political ends: While much debate concerns particular issues and politics, the root cause is the 'tyranny of ideas'. For instance, Lindsay and Pluckrose's *Cynical Theories* pays closer attention to academic sources, from Critical Theory to Critical Race Theory. Proponents of these perspectives will find *Cynical Theories* inaccurate and disfiguring, offering cartoonish parodies of anything from post-modernism to stand-point theory, yet, Lindsay and Pluckrose write within a recognisably critical repertoire.

Cynical Theories offers an intellectual history of the diffusion of ideas from 'high-theory' to 'applied' registers, for instance, from post-colonial theory through to DiAngelo's 'white fragility' which is not just widely read but informs in-person workshops. They accuse Social Justice theorists of 'reification', ventriloquising them as claiming; 'Theory can never be denied. Theory is real' (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020, p. 183). A cascade of accusations follows; Social Justice re-inscribes the categories it should contest, demands new forms of discrimination, is not open to debate, is a guilt trip and so forth. Along the way, Lindsay and Pluckrose develop their own category, calling their opponents' ideas 'Applied Post-Modernism' – a nonsensical combination. Strikingly, their creative calumny emerges from a very partial but nevertheless critical style of analysis, whereby other theorists' truth-claims are suspended and presented as ideologies, persuasive and powerful perhaps, but erroneous and vulnerable to swift refutation. The counter-critics adapt critical discourse to render their opponents' critiques as both ideological and idiotic, perhaps incoherently, but for their readers and followers, quite persuasively.

Beyond 'exposing' the secret cabals of unscrupulous and irresponsible intellectuals, counter-critique alleges that bad ideas and ideologies have infected and corroded contemporary society. For instance, Chris Rufo has counter-critiqued Critical Race Theory for years, culminating in a plea to have it banned in education, which was taken up by Donald Trump in 2020, repealed by Biden in 2021, and expanded by Trump in 2025 in a general executive order against DEI policies. For Rufo, CRT is not just an incorrect opinion but has a more sinister character and capacity 'The revolution is not a path to liberation; it is an iron cage. [. . .] a work of counter revolution' (Rufo 2023, p. 7). The supposed 'new authoritarianism' of the left goes beyond normal politics to the pervasive allure of ideas which turn out to be totalitarian. Describing the process of this 'take-over', Deneen (2023), Cruz (2023), Kaufman (2024) and others describe 'the left' as slowly gathering power through the 'long march through the institutions', that is, the insidious effect certain ideas have within universities, government and corporations. Such institutions are supposedly corrupted, overly obsessed with 'identity politics', infringing on personal freedom, inadvertently stoking inter-group tensions, thwarting individual ambition and headed towards a dismal future.

What matters here is how counter-critique imagines the relationship of power and ideas. While many will dispute the accuracy, relevance and political implications of the texts under examination here, they certainly constitute critical discourse. Their authors present themselves as dauntless and daring truth-tellers, speaking truth to power. Crucially, power is imagined in metaphorical ways, both as a form of control, through governmental or institutional intervention and as influence, the 'guilt-trip' or seductive pseudo-revolution. Perhaps reflecting liberal traditions of critique, these texts appear as a brave resistance to government 'refusing to be governed thus' (Foucault 1997). Yet, in depicting how they are 'governed' the texts have recourse to long-standing tropes; the unmasking of malevolent power beneath the guise of benevolence (Baehr 2019), so that new regulations and norms appear as tyranny (Foucault 2008).

Variously, these texts present extensive and highly dubious accounts of the authoritarian reach of 'leftist' or 'woke' or 'social justice' ideas, alleging that there are oppressive new forms of social control within organisations, public debate and the state in general. Thus, the root of tyranny is located within ideas, stemming perhaps from the supposedly totalitarian tendencies within Marxism. By presenting the problem of modern politics as error, ideology and idiocy, critique appears as the remedy, because it unmasks 'power', but less 'power' as force, resources, institutional capacity or suchlike, but the 'powerful' tyranny of ideas, the authoritarian language-police and totalitarian theories which are the problem. Uncannily, this goes beyond critique to resemble constructionism or performativity, where words shape reality – an idea with deep cultural roots (Coleman 1996). Idiosyncratically, Norman Vincent Peale, author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, was a mentor for Donald Trump (Conway 2024), and the basic idea here is simply that difficult situations can be reframed and solved, simply by thinking about them differently or using different words to define them.

Unsurprisingly, no text in the corpus even approaches the complexity of social constructionism (Berger and Luckman 1966) or performativity theory (Butler 1990). Rather something more metaphorical is invoked, words are used to weave a narrative – a fantasy – which political actors attempt to impose on reality (Finchelstein 2024). Moreover, reactionaries accuse their opponents of constructing supposedly imaginary things; patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy and so forth, guilt trips which exert authoritarian sway over individuals. Yet, because of the centrality of ideas here, counter-critique also might have the power to 'dispel' the compelling but perverse ideas of opponents – as though they were not opinions but enchantments cast like spells upon the polity. Of course, serious theorists recognise that such 'social magic' does not occur without institutional power (Bourdieu 1991, pp. 106–119). Nonetheless, the appeal of rebellious critics against tyrannical power clearly attracts attention and followers. Furthermore, this critique of 'tyrannical ideas' both imagines and legitimises particular policies.

To return again to *Project 2025*, the accusation that others' ideas are tyrannical is forthright: 'Contemporary elites have even repurposed the worst ingredients of 1970 s 'radical chic' to build the totalitarian cult known today as "The Great Awokening' (2023: 1), a denunciation that leads to policy prescriptions: 'The noxious tenets of "critical race theory" and "gender ideology" should be excised from curricula in every public school in the country'. (2023: 5). While this is evidently a form of 'counter-critique' it not only co-opts critical theory but redeploys it, and accords special power to words, which appear as both the source and the remedy to tyranny.

Here, the focus of these counter-critics is less power in general than the power of words and ideas to change people's perceptions, spreading delusions and pernicious ideology. Changes to institutions and laws are considered as 'downstream' from transformations of discourse. Problematised thus, 'power' is less a matter of political mobilisation or force, than an attribute of discourse: thus, critique is the remedy to the problems it identifies. Of course, for opponents of these counter-critics, their accusations and allegations may appear 'ideological' in turn, motivating movements such as MAGA or Reform UK. Yet, something of the same problematisation is widely shared – the focus on words, ideas and ideology. Of course, there may well be differences – the metaphors of 'tyranny', 'authoritarianism' or 'totalitarianism' are less widely used, yet nevertheless, the idea of critique as the remedy to ideology persists.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in a public sphere of instantaneous communications, critics and counter-critics may tend to imitate or adapt each other's strategies (Postill 2024). Thus, recognising these figures as counter-critics is both an important step in understanding their reach and appeal, but also poses important reflexive considerations: Is it worthwhile to describe our opponents as 'ideologues' anymore? Surely, recognising them as critics in some aspect will help us understand them better. And if reactionaries have adopted and adapted the tactics of those they oppose, is a strategic re-think of critique overdue?

2. Conclusion

Behind this empirical study is the conviction that it is worthwhile to 'know your enemy' – though not in the sense of *The Art of War*: 'Know thy enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles, you will never be defeated'. Indeed, part of the problem is the extent to which politics has been reconceived as war, following the dichotomous friend/enemy distinction emphasised by Carl Schmidt, a Nazi political theorist popular with some contemporary counter-critics (Dean 2023). Instead: know your opponents to understand why they appeal to their many followers. Moreover, consider Nietzsche's warning: 'He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster'. Presumably, the vast majority of readers of this article will disagree with the arguments of the 'counter-critics' and challenge the critical problematisation of 'ideas as tyranny'. Yet disagreeing with 'ideology' is less the point than recognising 'critique'. One last famous quote; 'love your enemy' – which is probably too much to ask, but at the very least, we might try to respect our opponents.

Of course, those who are politically engaged – anyone on the left or concerned with social justice – will find the accusations of the 'counter-critics' about 'tyranny' and 'totalitarianism not just inaccurate but insulting. Rather than respectful dialogue, these texts seem more like " . . . arguments that are in effect contraptions specifically designed to make dialogue and deliberation impossible" (Hirschman 1995, p. 170). By representing others' words as not opinions or persuasion but powerful forms of tyranny, debate gives way to debunking. Yet, this tendency is not limited to right-wing reactionaries: Their focus on words, symbols and discourse is largely prefigured on the left or the academy in general, from figures ranging from Gramsci to Laclau and Mouffe, to the 'cultural turn' in sociology. While some 'counter-critics' may be beyond reasonable argument, others on the same political spectrum may feel their political perspectives

are similarly misrepresented and slandered. Such moderate positions are also drowned out by the invective of extreme critics; meaningful debate is displaced by repetitive denunciation.

Why attend to this endless parade of counter-critical excoriations of ideas? To understand the appeal of reactionaries, conservatives or radicals we may need to go beyond examining their ideology with our critical perspectives to recognising their critical edge. Furthermore, recognising our own problematic tendencies within these counter-critics is important: Reflective thinkers on the left are increasingly recognising how modes of critique are adopted and adapted across political fault-lines (Klein 2023, Sarkar 2025). Beyond decrying how critique is being co-opted for other purposes, as though critique was somehow invented and owned by one side of the political spectrum, we need to recognise the complex ways that critique is adopted, adapted and redeployed within politics today.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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