

# Aliens, Antisemitism, and Academia

BY

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Alt-right conspiracy theorists have embraced postmodern philosophy. The Left should return to the Enlightenment to oppose their irrational and hateful politics.

A scandal is brewing in academia. The photo accompanying a recent *Atlantic* article depicts Jason Reza Jorjani, who received a PhD in philosophy from Stony Brook University, embracing Richard Spencer, the white nationalist who coined the term alt-right back in 2010.

Jorjani, the article details, has become a prominent leader in the movement. He now works as cultural editor for [altright.com](http://altright.com) and serves as editor-in-chief of the New Right publishing company Arktos Media. Last November, he spoke alongside notorious white nationalists Spencer, Jared Taylor, and Kevin MacDonald at the National Policy Institute (NPI) conference in Washington, DC. While Spencer leading the crowd in a “hail Trump” chant may have captured the most headlines, Jorjani’s speech most clearly revealed the alt-right’s perverse philosophical logic.

Jorjani’s writings, political activities, speeches, and media appearances have drawn charges of antisemitism and Islamophobia. In one instance, he suggested that Yahweh and Allah were actually space aliens who enslaved their believers and tricked them into committing genocide. He has openly characterized certain high-ranking Nazi officials as akin to supermen with psychic powers. While Jorjani has vehemently denied the charges of bigotry leveled against him, his public statements do make you wonder.

All of this has drawn uncomfortable and occasionally hostile attention toward his alma mater.

Stony Brook's philosophy department, famous for its pluralism and progressive politics, seems like an unlikely context for this scandal. Many of the department's students and professors identify themselves as leftists and liberals. Their focus on Continental philosophy includes research on critical theory, feminism, post-colonialism, and queer and critical-race theories. It came as a great shock, then, that one of Stony Brook's newest alums had become the self-appointed spokesperson for "Aryan Imperium."

Jorjani wrote an open letter to the department after he discovered that an attendee at a faculty meeting suggested reviewing his dissertation research. Although there's no evidence that the department is conducting such an investigation, it has nevertheless elicited a flurry of articles from *Inside Higher Ed* and industry blogs like *Leiter Reports* and *Daily Nous*, which highlight questions of censorship, the revocability of degrees, academic freedom, and the role of dissertation committees.

The institutional embarrassment certainly stems from Jorjani's reactionary views on culture, which he outlines in *Prometheus and Atlas*, the book based on his dissertation. But the parade of oddities that appear in the book — including, but not limited to, sorcerers, precogs, ancient aliens, telepathy, and the sunken city of Atlantis — are equally disconcerting.

To defend against charges of antisemitism, Jorjani cites his occasional references to Jewish philosophers like Leo Strauss, brags that there were Jewish attendees at the NPI conference, and reminds readers how even Mussolini enjoyed the support of some Italian Jews, however briefly. His book is even dedicated to Jeffrey Mishlove, a Jewish parapsychologist and media personality.

This evidence doesn't suffice to overturn the charges, however. After all, the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger dedicated his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, to his slighted Jewish mentor Edmund Husserl.

We also attended Stony Brook's philosophy department, where we were contemporaries of Jorjani. We know that some in academia would prefer that we not give this story any more attention. Jorjani, they say, is a morbid curiosity not worthy of earnest critique. This

mirrors those liberal pundits who warn against “normalizing Trump” by taking his inflammatory rhetoric and oddball proposals too seriously.

Comforting as this dismissive stance may be, it fails to recognize the place Trump’s and Jorjani’s ideas have in contemporary culture. Calls to ignore these figures are based on the faulty premise that they are lone cranks, aberrant blips on the radar with no real connection to broader trends in politics or philosophy. If only this were true.

Although the alt-right remains on the fringes in the United States, it has come within proximity to real power and is trying to position itself as court philosopher. Figures like Richard Spencer see themselves as the Trump movement’s organic intellectuals, guiding the president’s followers, whom they characterize as a directionless “body without a head.”

These would-be-Rasputins have a plethora of modern antecedents to follow, including interwar intellectuals like Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger in the Third Reich, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in fascist Italy, and the Anti-Dreyfusard Charles Maurras in France. Ideas, even incoherent ones, often amass significant political followings.

Second, Jorjani’s work participates in a significant philosophical tradition that combines antisemitism with occult beliefs. The long historical association between irrationalism and anti-Judaism suggests that they emanate from a common worldview. After all, the mystical, neo-pagan writings of Dietrich Eckart inspired much of the Third Reich’s racial policy. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Hitler’s friend and mentor, proclaimed that “every Mystic is, whether he will or not, a born Anti-Semite.”

The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, perhaps the first instance of popular conspiracy theory literature, is riddled with images of demonic manifestation alongside Jewish treachery. And as far back as the eighteenth century, Counter-Enlightenment ideologues sought to denigrate reason itself as “Jewish” and political emancipation as a subversive Hebraic plot. Figures like Joseph de Maistre praised the Spanish Inquisition for rooting out the political and spiritual “cancer” of Jewry, and the conservative Edmund Burke compared the French Revolution to a cabal of Jewish bankers.

Criticizing Enlightenment thought has become fashionable across the political spectrum. For the past several decades, more and more academics have called reason into question,

especially the sort of rationalist worldview that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This is especially true among left-leaning, postmodern, and post-structuralist thinkers. While it seems surprising that someone like Jorjani would come out of a self-consciously progressive department, suspicion of Enlightenment rationalism has become endemic to liberal philosophy programs like the one at Stony Brook.

This coincides with one of the Alt-Right's primary tactics: adopting leftist rhetoric as cover for its racist, nativist, and often misogynistic agendas.

Its appropriation of identity politics for its own chauvinist brand of *white* identity politics attests to this strategy's success. If the Left wants to resist the alt-right's growing power, it needs to return to the roots of Enlightenment rationality, which insists on the equality of all people and provides a strong theoretical basis for social transformation and universal emancipation.

## Antisemitism and the Counter-Enlightenment

The alt-right descends directly from the Counter-Enlightenment. When the Enlightenment-era *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789), explicitly based on the principles of universal reason and equality, emancipated European Jewry, traditionalists from France to Prussia and beyond saw it as a violent overturning of the hierarchical worldview that had long ordered European political consciousness.

From its very inception, the Counter-Enlightenment belonged to the Right, quite often of the romantic, *völkisch*, and antisemitic Right.

At its most consistent, Enlightenment rationalism replaced pluralism with monism. It did away with the medieval conception of a stratified and enchanted cosmos, wherein each part of nature (planets, living things, inanimate objects) obeyed their own local laws. The probabilistic view of the world, which made room for all sorts of miracles and divine interventions, began to disappear. A properly universal conception of nature, subject to one intelligible and determining natural law, displaced the mystery and spirituality that defined the medieval period.

This new worldview elicited an updated view of humanity as well. The qualitative plurality of peoples gave way to a belief in one intelligible human nature, common to all, and commonly governed by our natural faculty of reason. Enlightenment principles thus opposed the subjugation of minority communities based on some supposedly innate difference from the majority.

Baruch Spinoza, a member of the émigré Sephardic Jewish community that fled the Portuguese Inquisition for Amsterdam, became the leading exponent of this “Radical Enlightenment” view. His community of *ex-Marranos* secretly held onto their Jewish identity after being forced to convert to Catholicism.

Spinoza’s universalism entailed that governments exercise tolerance toward minority communities and grant them political emancipation as citizens without requiring them to shed their particular religious and cultural identities. It also held that members of those communities should be able to freely assimilate, should they desire, into the broader European culture (as Spinoza himself did following his excommunication). Meanwhile, his rationalism empowered minorities to become critics of the dominant culture now open to them.

The alt-right, particularly Kevin MacDonald, has seized on this dynamic as proof of the “destructive Jewish intellect.” The Jew hides behind a mask of cosmopolitanism while trying to subvert and destroy Christian, Western culture. This belief also comes straight from the Counter-Enlightenment.

Late eighteenth century thinkers like Jacobi and Hamann found something suspiciously Jewish about European rationalism. In fact, for decades during this period, being called a

Spinozist carried the same weight as being called a communist during the Red Scare of the 1950s.

Among the interwar right of the twentieth century, we find Martin Heidegger linking modernity to Judaism in his *Black Notebooks*. The Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt agreed, arguing that Spinoza's Jewish intellect exploited the magnanimity of European liberties to destroy the Christian foundations of Western civilization. Hitler himself asserts in *Mein Kampf* that the belief that we can know and control nature is essentially a Jewish idea.

One may distill the elements of a right-wing epistemology from these ideas. First, the universe is fundamentally unknowable and mysterious; second, there is no universal human nature, but rather unbridgeable differences between distinct peoples; third, reason itself represents totalitarianism because it blots out essential differences.

From Hamann to Wagner to Heidegger, the idea that the rationalist Jew is the “murderer of common sense” persists.

Opposed to abstract reason, right epistemology instead aligns itself with a subjective, phenomenological approach — the earthy wisdom of ordinary folk. Heidegger calls the mathematical homogeneity of Cartesian space the “forgetfulness of being” because it ignores our lived experiences of the world. Hitler, in a political application of this same idea, characterizes Jewish consciousness as obsessed with “the mass of numbers and their dead weight.”

For this reason, the Jew “denies the value of personality in man, and contests the significance of nationality and race.”

## Strange Bedfellows

Feminism, antiracism, socialism, and anticolonialism rank among the most radical fruits of Enlightenment thought, but these ideals could not guarantee human emancipation on

their own. By mid-century, an impatient and demoralized Left increasingly threw the Enlightenment baby out with the bourgeois bathwater.

Thinkers blamed universalism, determinism, and what appeared as a deadening mechanical worldview for the mass slaughter of two world wars, the atrocities of the Holocaust, the horror of the atomic bomb, and the misery of industrial capitalism.

Thus began what Georg Lukàcs called the marrying of “Left ethics with Right Epistemology,” a project that tried to derive progressive politics and notions like freedom, equality, and solidarity from a more traditional view of existence akin to the Counter-Enlightenment. Understanding trends in today’s academic Left requires recognizing this crucial shift.

Much of this contemporary thought reinstates an enchanted view of the world that is inherently pluralistic. Drawing on figures like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Left thinkers learned to be suspicious of the rationality that once belonged to them.

This rejection of the Enlightenment was not always consistent or total. Some (Adorno, Horkheimer) retained a tension between the Enlightenment ideas of emancipation, on the one hand, and the Nietzschean critique of reason on the other. Others (Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault) resolved this tension more straightforwardly by moving unreservedly toward Nietzsche.

Outside of Continental thought, 19th century pragmatists such as William James, the exemplary American liberal, placed “the will to believe” over objective reality. That, in turn, gave him license to indulge in the then popular fads of spiritualism and séances.

Perhaps the most striking example of this marriage of Left ethics and Right epistemology appears in certain currents of postcolonial thought. These, as documented by Vivek Chibber, criticize reason itself as not truly universal to all of humanity, but rather as complicit in a Eurocentric project of domination.

# The Fool and the Madman

The alt-right will always outflank the postmodern left because, in the words of Mike Pence, the former are “coming home,” while the latter are attempting to camp on alien territory. Jorjani’s book epitomizes this fact. Repeatedly, he uses leftist and progressive thinkers to make his own reactionary points. He can do so precisely because these thinkers have themselves imbibed Counter-Enlightenment thinking.

Jorjani’s case is worth our attention precisely because it is not unique, but typical. His work is the predictable, nearly mechanical consequence of a longstanding intellectual retreat from the legacy of the Enlightenment.

What he lacks in originality, however, he makes up for with consistency. John Locke’s maxim about the “fool and the madman” is helpful here: The fool cannot draw conclusions from even true premises, whereas the madman dutifully draws his conclusions from faulty premises.

Jorjani may be no fool, but we cannot vouch for his sanity. He derides postmodern thinkers like Derrida and Foucault not for their faulty premises — that is, not for their criticism of the Enlightenment — but instead for not allowing their deductions to lead them to disturbing conclusions. Jorjani has no such hesitation, celebrating his conclusions that openly conflict with democracy and egalitarianism.

Jorjani frequently draws on Heidegger and William James. The reliance on Heidegger is not particularly surprising, as he had explicit commitments to National Socialism and never completely managed to distance himself from Nazism. But William James may come as a shock, as his pragmatism is widely considered the paragon of American liberal philosophy.

From James, Jorjani takes the idea of radical empiricism, which rejects any rational standard for what counts as evidence apart from experience itself. James defines experience extremely broadly, as not just bare sense data but also the complex products of

culture and spirituality. The latter specifically includes parapsychological phenomena such as Extrasensory Perception and Psychokinesis.

Against Enlightenment rationality, James's radical empiricism validates these supernatural abilities as well as a plethora of religious experiences. When it came to revealed religion, however, he humbly maintained that the authors of the Bible were primarily grappling with their own "inner experiences."

True to form, Jorjani insists on going further. He uses James's empiricism to identify revelatory and miraculous experiences as real and historical, rather than as symbolic or allegorical. As a result, his reading of Exodus, Joshua, and Ezekiel treats the Hebrew God not as a hazy vision of some transcendent being but as a finite creature. Yahweh does not appear in the manner of an infinite God, but simply as "unknown," in the sense of an UFO that hovers directly within our line of sight. Jorjani's hyper-literalism transforms the Jewish God into an extraterrestrial intelligence that telepathically communicates with Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and Ezekiel.

Jorjani believes that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was an aerial attack and that Lot's subsequent abandonment of the area indicates nuclear fallout. He thinks "some kind of anti-gravitational beam from out of the cylindrical object hovering over the [Red] Sea" destroyed the Egyptian chariots during the exodus.

The Arc of the Covenant "apparently acts as a pathfinder or guidance system" as well as a "sonic weapon" since it "interacts with vibrations of sound, possibly amplifying and concentrating the sonic waves before directing them at the walls of Jericho." The descriptions of UFOs in Ezekiel line up comfortably with the worst daytime programming on the History Channel.

From Heidegger, Jorjani takes the idea that one's historical culture matters more than objective reality. As opposed to the Enlightenment belief that time and space are uniform and measurable in some objective way, Heidegger claims that each group of people subjectively wills and shapes its own world and destiny. No common universe belongs to all; there is only a pluriverse of conflicting worldviews and forces. As Jorjani paraphrases Heidegger, each historical community struggles "to become more essentially what it is, or to perish in enslavement to another people and *its* world."

Jorjani accepts this Heideggerian “war of worlds” and also embraces the philosopher’s belief that National Socialism possessed an inner greatness. Even here, Jorjani finds a way to push Heidegger still further, arguing that National Socialism represents the confrontation of modern man with the “spectral” essence of technology.

In Jorjani’s telling, technology is not simply mechanical or instrumental, but rather supernatural and world-forming. He recasts the essence of Nazism as an esoteric spectral revolution that started with the occult *Thule* (Atlantis) Society and ended with Himmler’s *Ahnenerbe* (ancestral research) institute, organizations obsessed with lost cities, ESP, and clairvoyance that deemed Hitler an actual superman with occult powers.

From these premises, Jorjani concludes that a liberal society based on privacy and equality is impossible. James’s radical empiricism allows him to posit the existence of a “psychic elite” that would require the sort of organic-corporate state that Hitler advocates, and Jorjani cites this approvingly in his Stockholm speech.

He synthesizes this insight with Heidegger’s world pluralism to imply that such a state must not only be internally homogenous but externally world-conquering. This echoes Hitler’s statement at the end of *Mein Kampf* that the purity of the Aryan race entails its potential to master the world.

Jorjani consistently subordinates theory to practice, science to *techne*, and evidence to will. As such, his bizarre views on ESP and aliens actually align with and support his racism. Jorjani can believe in ESP without evidence because he believes that the presence of skeptical minds suppresses its manifestation. Similarly, while Tom Davies correctly pointed out all the ways that Jorjani gets his Indo-European scholarship wrong, totally undermining his views on Aryan supremacy, Jorjani wouldn’t care. After all, it is not skepticism or objective evidence, but the sheer “will to believe” that can conquer the world.

## The Other Continental Tradition

Nearly everyone seems to miss the point of this story. For the alt-right, the actual scandal of their worldview is often obscured by a fake scandal of their own making: their imagined persecution by liberal or Marxist elites.

Here again, Jason Jorjani's case is wholly typical. The *Inside Higher Ed* story, which first set philosophy faculties on edge, discussed whether or not it was fair to revoke Jorjani's doctorate in light of his recent political activities. Of course, only Jorjani himself suggested such an action was underway.

Likewise, the *Leiter Reports* misses the point by ham-fistedly criticizing Continental philosophy departments such as Stony Brook, as if the only Continental philosophies were Heideggerian or irrationalist. Other commenters wrongly laid the blame on a philosophical canon unjustly restricted to Western authors.

In truth, Jorjani does away with much of the traditional Western canon and draws heavily, if eccentrically, on Eastern thought, from Japanese Zen Buddhism and Taoism to contemporary anime. Jorjani's idea of "Europe" is, in fact, decentered: he traces its cultural roots back to the Persian empire, which he emphatically insists was a white civilization before forced miscegenation by Muslim Arab and Mongol invaders. For Jorjani, the fate of "Aryan" Persia constituted what he, with much of the Alt-Right, refers to as a "white genocide."

His book, *Prometheus and Atlas*, emphatically refutes the claim that intolerance can be remedied by greater eclecticism, pluralism, and interdisciplinarity, all of which have become academic buzzwords. His work is extremely interdisciplinary, incorporating historiography, Biblical hermeneutics, techno-science, parapsychology, cultural studies, mythology, and deconstruction. All of this suggests that pluralism of method and worldview do not necessarily produce progressive thought.

We can avoid Jorjani's madness, but we must start with the right premises. Jorjani's utility lies in how, by attacking his philosophical enemies, he identifies the lineage of Continental philosophy best suited to establish a humane and antiracist politics.

From Descartes, Spinoza, and the French materialists to the French and Haitian revolutions to Hegel and Marx, we have a strain of thought that proceeds from an

intelligible world to the full emancipation of humanity. We should return to this canon, if we want to effectively resist the rise of an irrational right.

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