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Review by Aaron T. Bell, American University

Kyle Burke’s article contributes to the growing field of study on the transnational right, which recognizes that the nationalist tendencies associated with right-wing politics has not precluded its proponents from reaching out to and working with foreign sympathizers. Burke uses the mid-century radio program Manion Forum of Public Opinion as a window into the transnational connections that linked state and non-state actors from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Southern Africa to conservatives in the United States who formed the early foundation of the New Right. Burke’s article is a reminder that foreign policy is not strictly the purview of the state, as the groups and individuals examined here specifically embraced private activism to spread the free enterprise system and defend Christianity against the machinations of world communism. The Manion Forum served as a platform for advertising these activities to potential supporters in the United States and for interpreting world events in the domestic context, particularly as the struggle for African American civil rights and the anti-war movement gained steam in the 1960s. In tracing the transnational linkages centered on the Manion Forum, Burke seeks to demonstrate that, alongside the familiar story of the U.S. right’s development in opposition to federal power, liberalism, and the expansion of civil rights for minorities at home, “postwar American conservatism was simultaneously forged on an international terrain” (113).

The story of the Manion Forum begins with Clarence Manion, a conservative Catholic intellectual, former dean of the Notre Dame law school, and member of the John Birch Society who was deeply opposed to federal government power at home and abroad. He briefly served in the Eisenhower Administration before being ousted over his support for a proposed constitutional amendment that would have strictly limited the executive’s ability to negotiate and implement international treaties. Manion began his radio program shortly afterward, and by 1965 it had an audience of four million spread across much of the United States. The program initially focused on domestic concerns, but by the late 1950s it had turned its attention to foreign policy matters as well. Manion and his guests rejected an active U.S. government presence abroad, denouncing both foreign aid and global institutions like the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as “‘internationalist’ schemes” (116) to subordinate U.S. interests. Instead, Manion called for
private actors to take a more active role in supporting anti-communist governments and ‘captive nations’ abroad.

By the early 1960s, the Forum’s programming began to incorporate the voices of foreign state and non-state actors and their domestic supporters to describe the global communist threat and raise support for a variety of private activities intended to counter it. Manion’s corporate sponsors connected him with Spruille Braden, former diplomat and businessman, who in turn helped Manion gain access to the military regimes of Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes in Guatemala and Luis Somoza Debayle in Nicaragua. Manion ran interviews with both leaders on his program, in which they called for private loans to support development and for the overthrow of the Fidel Castro regime in Cuba. He hosted Cuban exiles and Bay of Pigs veterans on his program as well, which raised the profile of Cuban exile groups like the Truth About Cuba Committee and lent support to his accusations that U.S. liberals had abandoned the island to communism.

As the war in Vietnam escalated, the Manion Forum’s focus shifted accordingly. Manion and his guests opposed a negotiated solution to the conflict and lamented the prolonged nature of the war, which in their view distracted the U.S. from the global anti-communist struggle, but they also rejected escalation that would only bog down U.S. forces further. Instead they proposed bolstering domestic support for anti-Communist regimes in Asia, to which they developed ties through several organizations and individuals. These included the Asian People’s Anti-Communist League (APACL), made up of officials and activists from Taiwan, South Korea, South Vietnam, and the Philippines who sought the overthrow of the Communist government in China; Daniel Lyons, a Jesuit priest and economics professor; and the Belgian-born Catholic missionary Raymond J. de Jaegher, who, along with Lyons, formed the National Committee for the Liberation of China, which produced anti-Communist literature, and the Asian Speakers Bureau, which sent domestic and foreign speakers to college campuses, fundraising events, and Bircher meetings. The college campus-based Young Americans for Freedom appeared on Manion’s program as well to raise funds and tout its trips to Asia.

Burke demonstrates the multi-directional influence of these transnational ties by showing how U.S. conservatives interpreted domestic events through the experiences of their foreign peers. Manion and others, for example, linked the left-wing activism of students in Central America, as described by Ydígoras and Somoza, to the radicalism of U.S. students; in their view, all were communist front groups manipulated by Moscow and Havana, inherently subversive and indistinct. Foreign officials and businessmen from Rhodesia and South Africa also appeared on Manion’s program and defended the apartheid system by “cloaking racial politics in the language of anticommunism and free enterprise” (136). White-rule, in their view, was the only way to defend the region from African nationalist revolutionaries and preserve capitalist development, which would ultimately benefit the black majority. The rise of revolutionary movements in Africa offered further evidence to Manion and others that those groups fighting for African American civil rights at home were, as they had long claimed, just another set of communist front groups rather than movements rooted in legitimate grievances.

Burke capably maps a wide-ranging network of conservative activists and their activities, and largely does so without overstating their influence abroad. This speaks well to Burke’s discretion as a historian, but it does leave the question of influence hanging over this article. When he writes that the Manion Forum’s narrative of communist subversion near and far “influenc[ed] debates about campus protest, the Vietnam War, and civil rights,” it is not clear to what extent this is the case. Did it influence debate at a bipartisan level, or only within the conservative movement itself? How much cache did claims of a nationwide communist conspiracy in the civil rights movement and campus protests carry among U.S. conservatives, particularly given the
complex relationship between the Republican Party and the Birchers in the 1960s? A reference to literature on this would be helpful for gauging if these claims truly shaped U.S. conservative politics or merely fired up those who inhabited the radical fringes. At the end of his article, Burke describes neoliberals in Latin America, businessmen who continued to push for private investment in South Africa despite the anti-apartheid movement, and Vietnam veterans who fought as mercenaries in Rhodesia and Angola as legacies of the early 1960s movement, but to what extent were these actions the direct outcome of those earlier ties rather than mere inspiration? Burke aptly demonstrates the extent of heretofore-overlooked connections between right-wing actors at home and abroad in the opening decades of the Cold War. Further research might address to what extent these early connections were cemented and carried through over the decades, to what extent they instead replicated themselves with new actors, and to what extent these transnational conversations and interactions shaped domestic and foreign policy debates and policies for mainstream conservatives.

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1 For a broad view of the field, see Martin Durham and Margaret Power, eds., New Perspectives on the Transnational Right (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).