

“TRUMP”—WHAT DOES the NAME SIGNIFY? or, PROTOFASCISM and the ALT-RIGHT

Three Contradictions of the Present Conjuncture

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Abstract This article examines the rise of the alt-right and Donald Trump’s successful campaign for president of the United States in the context of three overlapping contradictions: that of subversion in postmodern culture and politics, that between the democratic and commercial logics of the media, and that of the failure of the Left in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The article looks at the rise of “Trumpism” and the new brand of white nationalist and misogynistic culture of the so-called alt-right in its historical context to show how it is consistent with but also distinguished from previous right-wing ideologies. More generally, the three contradictions presented here are proposed as explanations for understanding the mainstreaming of the alt-right in contemporary politics and culture.

Keywords alt-right, mass media, postmodernism, social media, Donald Trump

No one seriously concerned with political strategies in the current situation can now afford to ignore the “swing to the Right.” We may not yet understand its extent and its limits, its specific character, its causes and effects. . . . But the tendency is hard to deny. It no longer looks like a temporary swing in the political fortunes, a short-term shift in the balance of forces.

—Stuart Hall, “The Great Moving Right Show”

Fascism Ascendant?

These lines, written by Stuart Hall, were a response to the rise of Thatcherism in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s, where the conservative New Right was mobilized in the birthing days of neoliberalism as a kind of cultural logic to hegemonize the masses away from the failing welfare state in its period of crisis. Today, after nearly a decade dealing with the crisis of neoliberalism and its new regime of hyperausterity, we are again witnessing the rise of a rightist movement mobilizing around President Donald Trump. Although it is often commonplace today to connect Trump to previous figures of conservatism, like Margaret Thatcher, the neoconservative movement that galvanized around George W. Bush, the Moral Majority movement of the 1980s, or the culture wars of the 1990s, or even the fascism of the mid-twentieth century, I want to propose that the rise of “Trumpism” has its own distinct historical logic. It is a protofascist movement (see Jameson 1979: 15), but one that is particular to its own historical conditions of existence.

In what follows, I propose three historical and contextual contradictions that help explain the rise of Trumpism and the new brand of white nationalist and misogynistic discourse and violence—whose perpetrators often frame their positions in terms of a backlash against progressive and resistant politics—collectively referred to, using its own politically correct term, as the *alt-right*. This term, according to Angela Nagle, was initially used by members of its various groups to define “a new wave of overtly white segregationist and white nationalist movements and subcultures, typified by spokespeople like Richard Spencer [president of the white nationalist think tank the National Policy Institute],

who has called for a US white ethno-state and a pan-national white empire” (2017: 12). The alt-right is characterized by its preoccupation with “IQ, European demographic and civilizational decline, cultural decadence, cultural Marxism, anti-egalitarianism and Islamification” (12). As expressed by the alt-right darling himself, Milo Yiannopoulos, the movement is distinguished from “old-school racist skinheads” by its obsession with intelligence. He writes (with fellow Breitbart blogger Allum Bokhari) that those in the alt-right “are a much smarter group of people—which perhaps suggests why the Left hates them so much. They’re dangerously bright” (Bokhari and Yiannopoulos 2016).

Perhaps it is its penchant for a kind of pseudo-intellectualism that makes the alt-right somewhat more palatable than its more apparently extremist predecessors. It is dangerous because it comes off in some circles and spaces (particularly online spaces in the Chan culture) as being intellectual and cultured, rather than drawing influence from the religious moralism of the New Christian Right, for instance. Spencer himself lists Friedrich Nietzsche and Carl Schmitt among his influences (Wood 2017). But the alt-right’s appeal to intellect, more than a reference to specific thinkers and texts, has more to do with what it perceives as its legitimate claim to power: in the struggle for supremacy, “nothing matters, not inheritance, social connections, or economic resources, but one’s native intelligence and innate strength” (Robin 2011: 29). The alt-right therefore seeks to distance itself in this way from both an older group of neo-Nazi skinheads and the Ku Klux Klan, but also, as Nagle notes, from traditional conservatism and the conservative establishment, which is often dismissed as “cuckser-vatives” (2017: 12). Yet how odd that

Friedrich Hayek and Ayn Rand—as one news headline put it, “Ayn Rand is dead. Liberals are going to miss her” (Burns 2017)—have been replaced by Trump, a man who reeks of imbecility and ineptitude. Something more must be going on.

Indeed, as Corey Robin notes, conservatism “is the theoretical voice of [the] animus against the agency of the subordinate classes. It provides the most consistent and profound argument as to why the lower orders should not be allowed to exercise their independent will, why they should not be allowed to govern themselves or the polity” (2011: 7). For the conservative, hierarchy is order. But what drives the “reactionary mind” of the conservative, as Robin puts it, is the experience of power besieged—that feeling of having (once) had power and now seeing it threatened. This is why, according to him, white men, regardless of class status, are particularly interpellated by conservative ideology. Feminism and antiracism, for instance, challenge the existing power of phallocentrism/patriarchy and Eurocentrism. Robin explains that, although the claim is often that the Left demands more equality while the Right decries more freedom, the disagreement between the two has in fact more to do with the *extension* of freedom. Historically, he claims, “the conservative has favored liberty for the higher orders and constraint for the lower orders. What the conservative dislikes in equality, in other words, is not a threat to freedom but its extension. For in that extension, he sees a loss of his own freedom” (8).

Given the extension of freedom to women and racialized minorities, it is easy to understand the populist appeal of conservatism to the average Joe. Despite the fact that conservatism is an ideology that preserves the power of the elite, the

average Joe, in railing against emergent forces on the Left demanding extensions of freedoms for the oppressed, seeks to preserve his own relative power vis-à-vis gendered and racialized minorities. In this sense, too, “radicalism is the *raison d’être* of conservatism” (21)—the radical demand for social and political change is what drives the conservative reaction toward preserving the relations of power. However, this is not to suggest that the conservative Right lacks a desire for change and transformation in favor of traditionalism. In fact, to preserve existing forms of power, the conservative Right constantly requires incorporating the rhetoric of change as part of its interpellative practices. It must posit the Left as the reigning ideology and must assume some of the characteristics of the radical to restore vigor to the movement (24). By doing so, the conservative Right incorporates the lower orders, allowing them “to locate themselves symbolically in the ruling class.” As Robin puts it, “Ordinary people get to see themselves in the ruling class by virtue of belonging to a great nation among nations, and they also get to govern lesser beings through the exercise of imperial rule” (35). This is the essence of right-wing populism: “to appeal to the mass without disrupting the power of elites or, more precisely, to harness the energy of the mass in order to reinforce or restore the power of elites” (55).

The new alt-right, however, should be distinguished from the brand of American neoconservatism tied to support for the George W. Bush regime. As Wendy Brown notes, American neoconservatism as a political force emerged from a convergence of interests, including evangelical Christianity, Jewish Straussians, secular Cold Warriors, and conservative feminists and family moralists (2006: 696). What binds these seemingly disparate groups

under the rubric of neoconservatism is their affirmation for a moralist state power both domestically and internationally. Thus the neoconservative Moral Majority movement abandoned “classic conservative commitments to a modest libertarianism, isolationism, frugality and fiscal tightness, belief in limits and moderation, and affinity with aristocratic virtues of refinement, rectitude, civility, education, and discipline” for an avowed drive to power, paranoid about the crumbling morality of the West (697). Neoconservatism therefore imputes to the state the authority to set the moral-religious compass of society (697). The alt-right is distinguished by its chiding of moral-religious rightness. In fact, its blatant crassness is one of its most identifiable features.

Much of the popularity of the alt-right, and the attention it has received in the mainstream mass media, prior to Trump’s election, was due partly to its combination of crude humor and youthfulness, and because of its image-based culture of online meme production in forums like 4Chan and 8Chan (Nagle 2017: 13). Traditional conservatives took notice of the alt-right and began to incorporate some of its nihilistic and ironic tones, developed in the Chan culture, because of its vocal opposition to such Left forces as political correctness, feminism, and multiculturalism (16). The alt-right and traditional conservatives have thus found an alliance in challenging the apparent Left penchant for oppressing “free speech,” which the alt-right and conservatives see as a product of feminism and (so-called) cultural Marxism’s push for political correctness, and collectively refer to its proponents as social justice warriors or SJWs.

What makes the alt-right such an oddly fascinating (yet no less concerning) movement is that it seems to use cynicism

and irony in staging and borrowing language and tactics from the New Left of the 1960s. At a very formal level, it seems to promote itself as a radical alternative movement against what it positions as the dominant ruling ideology. It is a reactionary movement against the liberal center; however, it is a *pseudo*-emancipatory movement that targets culture and different cultural identities, instead of the political economy of capitalism, and its class relations, as the source of today’s problems. Culture, rather than the political economy of capitalism, is for the alt-right the real problem.

Both the rise of Trump and the alt-right share populist and chauvinistic dimensions in common with an older European fascism, which, to paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, is in a sense a “conservative revolution”: it is capable of organizing dissent by recognizing people’s authentic frustration with the status quo; but rather than address the core problem, that is, the relations of exploitation in capitalism, for instance, it displaces this problem onto a *false* problem (2008: 304). Usually, for right-wing populism, this means blaming some kind of false image of an enemy or intruder who disrupted the system from within: the anti-Semitic representation of Jews and Jewish people, for instance, as in Nazi Germany; or as in a more traditional conservatism, those who identify as queer, who are supposedly responsible for the disintegration of the institution of marriage; or even the Muslim other whom we are told we must fear as the “terrorist” threat. And so forth and so on. As the logic goes—from the perspective of the Right, of course—the problem is not the system itself but the (image of) the false enemy. The figure of the enemy is surfaced as a fetish figure to evade or disavow the existing problems and inherent contradictions in the capitalist

mode of production and its increasing tendency toward mass proletarianization (see Jameson 2010).

Today, for the alt-right, this false enemy has multiple identities. On the one hand, it is formed through standard practices of racism and sexism, thus extending the post-9/11 violence against the Muslim other. On the other hand, the alt-right has targeted particularly politicized groups, the vaguely defined “Islamicists,” for instance, as opposed to Muslims. However, one primary target of the alt-right has been feminism. The alt-right is largely masculinist and antifeminist, concerned with the decline of Western masculinity, and therefore feminism has been one of its chief targets. It is not simply that the alt-right is misogynist (which it certainly is); it specifically targets *political* feminism, aided in part by selective female voices, such as the self-dubbed “factual feminist,” Christina Hoff Sommers (1995), who denounces contemporary third-wave and postmodern feminism. We saw this, for instance, in the #GamerGate fiasco in the summer of 2014, where female games critics, such as Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn, were harassed online by swarm attacks, threatening violence and rape. This was all because Sarkeesian and Quinn sought to introduce feminist critique and themes into gamer culture, which male gamers saw as an affront to their free speech. They believed largely that feminist critiques of gamer culture were just more SJW “nonsense” and that from their perspective, the critics were being oversensitive, seeking to censor male gamers. The extremely violent and sexist backlash was, then, as Nagle notes, a masculinist response to political correctness, paradoxically to prove that gamer culture was *definitely not* sexist (2017: 20). This movement targets politicized groups rather

than individuals based simply on race or gender, since this creates the appearance that Left political movements, like feminism, are figures of dominant authority—it makes it look like feminism is a dominant ideology—despite the continued existence of systemic (and physical) violence against women, which reproduces existing forms of inequality. Going after feminism in this way reinforces patriarchal domination as a social, cultural, and political institution. But still, because it is posited as transgressive and subversive, the alt-right is tactical in displacing blame for existing economic problems and cultural conflicts onto liberal and Left agents.

My goal is to contextualize and historicize the mainstreaming of the new alt-right with reference to three overlapping contradictions. These three contradictions help explain Trump’s successful campaign in the United States and his election as president in November 2016 as symptomatic and not as a cause of the rise of the alt-right. It is already popular to make connections between Trump and the new legitimacy given to the alt-right. But I want to investigate some of the possible explanations for this relationship to better assess how it could have been otherwise. In this regard, the name “Trump,” I claim, signifies a new historical moment that is symptomatic of these overlapping contradictions. The first contradiction concerns the political and cultural context of postmodern practices of transgression and subversion, drawing on aesthetic practices that grew out of modernism. The second concerns the contradiction between the democratic and commercial logics of the mainstream mass media; and the third deals with the failure of the Left to make powerful gains in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. These three overlapping contradictions are by no means

extensive, but they do provide some points of reflection for understanding the present conjuncture.

Contradictions of Subversion and Transgression in Postmodern Culture

The rise of Milo, Trump, and the alt-right are not evidence of the return of conservatism, but instead of the absolute hegemony of the culture of non-conformism, self-expression, transgression, and irreverence for its own sake—an aesthetic that suits those who believe in nothing but the liberation of the individual and the id, whether they're on the left or the right. The principle-free idea of counterculture did not go away; it just became the style of the new right.

—Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies:*

The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4Chan to the Alt-Right and Trump

It has been claimed that Trump is the first “postmodern” president or that his presidency is ultimately “postmodern” (see, for instance, Ernst 2017; McKnight 2017; Smart 2017). This seemingly astute claim rests on the simple idea that Trump is somehow “post-Truth,” a notion that came out in full force in particular when his campaign manager and now counselor, Kellyanne Conway, used the much-mocked phrase “alternative facts” to support Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s claim that Trump’s inauguration was the most highly attended ever in American history (which it was not) (Bradner 2017). For much of this popular criticism, postmodernism amounts to little more than a certain brand of relativism and the rebuking of the real. While I disagree with how this claim has been deployed, I think that it is right, but for the wrong reasons. Trump and the alt-right are definitively products of postmodernism, but not necessarily in the way it has so far been claimed. Although some of the

more positive features of postmodernism as a political and cultural philosophy have been its propensity to bring to light the underlying Eurocentric and phallogocentric elements of modern liberal culture, it is its “incredulity towards metanarratives” (to use the phrase popularized by Jean-François Lyotard) that I find most problematic, and its reduction in importance of the commodity-class dynamics of late capitalism (see Flisfeder 2017). Trump and the alt-right, I claim, are in this way symptoms of postmodernism—a reaction that can be understood only at a formal level in the emergence of the postmodern. To return, then, to a metanarrative of sorts, the rise of Trump and the alt-right must be contextualized within the emergence of the existing postmodern culture.

The alt-right is, on the one hand, a by-product of ideological postmodernism and, on the other, the result of the contradictions of subversion and transgression within postmodern culture. To understand this, it is necessary to first recall in what sense subversion itself became part of the dominant ideology of postmodern late capitalism. In this regard, Fredric Jameson’s (1984) cogent application of the Lacanian logic of the psychotic’s discourse still provides an illuminating aesthetic description of the historical, political, cultural, and ideological dynamics of contemporary postmodern society. What he describes, borrowing equally from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983), as the “breakdown of the signifying chain”—or what Žižek (1999) refers to as the demise of symbolic efficiency—operates as a kind of shorthand to describe some of the various tenets of postmodernity and postmodern culture, including, on both the Left and the Right, an incredulity of sorts toward metanarratives (Lyotard 1984), otherwise

encapsulated by Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) thesis about the “end of history” or Daniel Bell’s (1960) about the “end of ideology.” The “breakdown” metaphor highlights what Perry Anderson means when he says, “Modernism, from its earliest in Baudelaire or Flaubert onwards, virtually defined itself as ‘anti-bourgeois.’ Post-modernism is what occurs when, without any victory, that adversary is gone” (1998: 86). Postmodernism is equally, according to Terry Eagleton (1996), defined not by a victory on the part of the antibourgeois but by an imagined defeat—that is, by a cynical resignation that, in Thatcher’s words, “there is no alternative,” a feature that the late Mark Fisher (2009) referred to as “capitalist realism.”

This sentiment, of the loss of the adversarial relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—whether in the form of the perceived triumph of either side—is not at all disconnected from the logic of capital. It is tied to the very persistence of capital to break down all barriers to accumulation. This includes, in some cases, the breaking down of political and cultural barriers, which is partly what the “breakdown” metaphor describes; or in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, the constant pursuit of accumulation and the breaking down of barriers force a deterritorialization of capital, unleashing it in different modalities, or “lines of flight” (1987: 510). Politically, this has resulted in the *sublation* of existing antagonisms into the very logic of capital, save (of course) for that antagonism that is its absolute point of negation: the class struggle, which instead of being eliminated is simply displaced onto other, cultural antagonisms, that is, class war turns into “culture war.” This last point helps, in part, to explain the rising influence of the Moral Majority and neoconservatism among the working

classes in the United States from the late 1970s up to and including George W. Bush’s two terms as president. With the sublation of class war into culture war, it often appeared as though the Right more than the (liberal) Left spoke the language of the working class (see Frank 2004). It is also in this sense that, as Anderson puts it, modernity “comes to an end . . . when it loses any antonym” (1998: 92), that is, when the terms of antagonism get so confused that the image of the actual enemy gets blurred. The driving force of the existing postmodern culture therefore differs from the propulsion of the modern culture, fueled by antagonism and contradiction.

As a logic of production, capital is driven by its dialectic of development, constantly in need of destroying the old to produce the new (Berman 1982) or, in a sense, what David Harvey (2004) means by the phrase *accumulation by dispossession*. As such, it consistently requires breaking down those older ideological—as well as material—barriers that prevent exponential expansion. Modernity was therefore culturally contradictory in the sense that, for instance, it relied on traditional culture—say, the culture of the conjugal, patriarchal family—as part of its own processes of social reproduction while working to break down the structures of traditional culture to produce new subjectivities that could act as agents of consumption, the latter of which is required to ensure that a crisis of effective demand in the market does not ensue. This logic of antagonism and contradiction operated similarly in art and culture.

The significance of the political formation of the bourgeoisie as a class is matched by the emergence of the market as the material and ideological space of shared individual equivalence. Regardless of one’s identity outside the

market, inside we are all supposedly free and equal individuals engaged in acts of (fair and equitable) exchange. The market logic applied as well to art and culture, as the rise of capitalism broke down the older relationships between the artist and his patron. The commodification of art and culture is a contributing factor for the emergence of modernism. No longer producing for the patron, the artist—now, too, “liberated” as “entrepreneurial” labor—produced art for the market. But modern art was able to carve out for itself its own separate sphere, a field of cultural production, the latter defined by two points of negation, first, by its vocation to not become mere commodity. In this sense, modern art sought to distance itself from what was later termed *mass* or *popular culture*—or the “culture industry.” Second is the negating influence of new media, beginning with the daguerreotype. What the technological reproducibility of the image instituted in modernism was a formal criterion to “make it new!” From impressionism onward, through cubism, surrealism, and abstract expressionism, visual art sought to distance itself formally from the production of verisimilitude found in popular culture.

On the other hand, the modern avant-garde found definition by distancing itself, again, from the culture of the bourgeoisie. Culturally, modern artists carved out a space for themselves by setting up a concept of the bourgeoisie to demonstrate precisely what they were *not*. At the same time, modern artists sought to distance their work from the political sphere, completely—hence the tautology “art for art’s sake.” So it is in these two ways that modernism found definition: by railing against what it was *not*—a process of negation—both in terms of its object (the work of art itself as

noncommodity) and in the identity of the artists (antibourgeois).

However, capital, being what it is, did not take very long to saturate this antagonism. While modernism may be understood by its vocation to not become commodity, postmodernism, we could say, is what emerges at the point of *total* commodification in the postwar consumer society, where art and commodity begin to fold into each other, as in the case of pop art, like Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans*, and later with works of pastiche, like Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*. But postmodernism is also what emerges when the rebellious art of modernism, which constantly sought to negate the existing world, formally, *becomes* the official art of the canon, the gallery, and the university. Put differently—and this is one of my central claims—if modernism defined itself as a process of subversion and negation, postmodernism, culturally, is what emerges *when subversion itself becomes the dominant ideology*. It is in this sense that we should take seriously Žižek’s (2002: 169) warning that we should not confuse the ruling ideology with the ideology that *seems* to rule. If subversion is now part of the ruling ideology, how might we imagine the subversion of subversion?

Alongside these developments in the cultural sphere, a parallel conundrum emerged in the political spheres of Western Europe and North America in the 1960s, in the moment of the postwar welfare state and Cold War—era class *compromise* between capital and labor, which saw the emergence of new subjects of history, in place of the apparently nonexistent proletariat. In place of the class struggle between capital and labor, new social movements (NSMs)—from the civil rights movement and postcolonial movements to second-wave feminism, the

gay liberation movement, and the student and antiwar movements—arrived on the scene. But just as modern art and culture were absorbed into the mainstream, first by the logic of commodification and then by way of institutionalization, so were the NSMs similarly diffused.

A positive feature of the NSMs was the kind of criticism that they launched against the phallocentrism, heterosexism, and Eurocentrism of both the dominant culture and the labor movement. However, in the campus protest culture of the 1960s and 1970s, there was a concerted effort to ensure that fights against sexism, racism, and homophobia were still conducted in the context of a class awareness: hence the cultural studies mantra “race-class-gender.” With their gaining political influence, NSMs had a profound impact on the curriculum of humanities departments in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, with more attention being paid to nonwhite and female scholars, writers, and artists, launching a kind of academic “culture war.” Again, positively, the culture war in the university drew attention to issues of cultural representation in the media and the stereotypical representation of racialized and gendered minorities, which by the 1990s came to include the representation of gays and lesbians, with the addition of queer theory to the literature.

Not surprisingly, and not unproblematically, the rising attention to cultural representation and questions of diversity in the media was picked up by the consumer culture. Dick Hebdige’s (1979) now-classic study of subculture is useful here. Just as the threat of subculture is diffused by and incorporated through commodification, so have the identity politics of the NSMs and the institutionalization of the culture wars been incorporated into the branding logic of the consumer society, which is

interested less in multiculturalism and diversity, or intersectionality, than with maintaining a steady base of diverse consumers—the interpellation of new subjectivities—still, in order to avoid crises of market demand (see Klein 2000). Unlike the mass audience culture of the early entertainment industries, the contemporary consumer culture is “demassified” in the sense that it makes diversity a marketing tactic to broaden its reach. But what this context also reveals is that here, too, rebelliousness, difference, and subversion have become part of the reigning ideology when it comes to questions of identity. Demassification and branding are both tied to the commercial diffusion of subversion. Rather than ideology interpellating individuals as compliant subjects, the ruling ideology today is grounded on the inherent transgression (Žižek 1997) of the ideology that seems to rule. Here we face one of the central cultural and political contradictions of our time: if, as I have shown, in both art and culture, and in the identity politics of the NSMs, subversion, far from being antagonistic to the existing system, has actually become part of its interpellative call—that is, if subversion has itself become the dominant ideology (in the case of art and culture, the ethic of innovation reigns over tradition; in the case of identity politics, diversity subverts conformity)—if all of this is the case, what does the subversion of subversion look like?

This is how the situation must be approached from the perspective of the new alt-right. What the Left sees as the subversion of bourgeois/elitist, phallocentric, and Eurocentric ideology, the alt-right sees as the formation of a new culturally dominant ideology, best encapsulated in the much-disdained call for political correctness. The alt-right, too, is antibourgeois, but perceives and constructs the

Left as just such a bourgeoisie, trapped in its own libertine elitist bubble. What the alt-right, particularly in its white nationalist and masculinist bent, finds most objectionable in the politically correct postmodern identity politics is what its members perceive as a double standard on questions of diversity and identity. From their perspective, all identities are permissible, save for white and conservative, or even “normative,” identities. In this scenario, when political correctness and postmodern identity politics are posited as the ideology that seems to rule, for the alt-right, its politics cannot but appear subversive. The alt-right, in fact, is caught up in the postmodern interpellative call to subversion. What makes this formation additionally troubling is that it also, at times, seems to rail against the consumer culture of postmodern capitalism, making it both ironically populist and at times seemingly anticapitalist, not unlike the depiction of Project Mayhem in David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999), an iconic film for members of the alt-right. Although the film appears radical in its anticonsumerist posturing, the film is outrageously misogynistic in its equating of consumerism with femininity. In the fight club, a prototypical men’s rights association (MRA) if ever there was one, the men literally beat each other up, metaphorically beating the consumerism and femininity out of themselves.

**“Fake News” and “Post-truth”:
Contradictions of the Media Spectacle**

No wonder your President has to be an actor, he’s got to look good on television!

—Doc Brown, *Back to the Future*

Prepare to meet Donald Trump, possibly the first “social media” and “reality TV” president.

—Van Jones, “Trump: The Social Media President?”

Postmodernism is thus contradictory for, on the one hand, instituting and commodifying subversion and transgression as an apparent ideology and, on the other, for interpellating the proponents of the ruling ideology as somehow subversive. The second contradiction concerns that between the democratic and commercial logics of the media. One of the other by-products of commodification has been a democratization of sorts. Again, in art and culture this has meant widening access to those spaces previously open only to the elite—spaces of cultural consumption, like the gallery. Oddly, though, commodification has the effect of veiling the class antagonism when it now comes to accessing art, culture, and information. No one is barred from access, so long as one can pay the price of admission. For conservative cultural critics, like Matthew Arnold (1993) and F. R. Leavis (1930), and especially for Left cultural critics, like Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2000), the commodification of culture, however democratizing to a certain extent, still played a role in removing what was uniquely valuable about works of art—that is, their aura, or their uniqueness in time and space, and their ability to speak to the sublime essence of the human condition. For Adorno, more so, modern art had the ability to truly challenge the reigning order, in contrast to the products of the culture industry, which simply help reproduce capitalism.

The technological reproducibility of art, too, according to Walter Benjamin (1968), is a factor in the democratization of art and culture. Just as paying the price of admission grants access to the unique work, so too does new media make possible the widespread dissemination of the work so that it can be accessed far and wide, beyond the gallery’s limited reach. In

fact, this aspect of new media, its ability to share information widely, is part and parcel of democratization in a political sense. The term *media* has become synonymous with the practice of journalism. As journalism, the media serve an important function in democracy by providing the people with the information that they need to make critical rational decisions about how to *participate* democratically. However, this democratic (fourth estate/public sphere) function of the media is contradicted by the commercial (i.e., commodified) logic of the media.

As media scholars have long demonstrated, private media companies are principally driven, as businesses, by the profit motive. This includes contemporary new media and social media websites, such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) demonstrated thirty years ago, the commercial logic of the media, particularly influenced by the role of owners and advertisers, works toward filtering *out* information that is either detrimental to the political status quo or at the very least to its bottom line. This includes sifting out content that potentially offends advertisers or special interest groups. Nevertheless, at the same time, the media interpellates viewers through the spectacularization and sensationalization of news and information (see Postman 1985). Since media revenues are still drawn by maximizing viewer attention, and the “work” of the so-called audience commodity (Smythe 1977), or online as the “prosumer commodity” (Fuchs 2014a), building a sizable audience is still one of the primary motivating factors of media production. In this regard, we can also see to some degree the “liberalization” of the media in the same sense, as has been already discussed in terms of the diffusion and branding of diversity.

This gives some credence to criticisms of the mainstream mass media from both the Left and the Right.

On the Left, the political economic critique of the media demonstrates the existence of a right-wing, procapitalist bias. On the Right, however, the mainstream mass media is believed to contain an underlying liberal bias, which has become a favorite target for right-wing radio talk-show hosts, like Rush Limbaugh (2015), who see the push for political correctness and the positive representation of women and racialized minorities so much as a threat sparked by the “cultural Marxism” of the liberal university campuses of the 1960s and their culture wars. The rise of the right-wing website Breitbart News is also indicative of this trend, as the site was initially conceived as a locus for uncovering liberal falsehoods, cover-ups, and conspiracies (Solov 2015). Regardless of which side is more correct—the Left critique is based more in terms of an organizational analysis, while the Right critique is based more on selective content analysis of the supposedly “liberal” media—both the Left and the Right apparently have cause for not trusting the mainstream media, which also makes pop protest songs, like Green Day’s “American Idiot” (2004) and Katy Perry’s “Chained to the Rhythm” (2017), both of which take media as their political targets, politically ambiguous. Evidently, everyone—whether on the Left or Right—is critical of “fake news.” This is one reason for understanding the technoutopianism about the digital public sphere of the Internet, first in the 1990s, with the development of the World Wide Web, and then again in recent times with the rise of the so-called social media revolutions. As Nagle notes, “Just a few years ago the Left-cyberutopians claimed that ‘the disgust had become a network’ and that

establishment old media no longer control politics, that the new public sphere was going to be based on leaderless, user-generated social media.” This network, she says, “has indeed arrived, but it has helped to take the Right, not the Left, to power” (2017: 27).

If the protest movements that arose in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, themselves organized in part by using social media sites like Facebook and Twitter (Fuchs 2014b; Herrera 2014; Lenzo 2013; Tufekci 2013), energizing the technopians on the liberal Left, this positive image of the new Internet and social media culture was crushed by the election of Trump in November 2016. Not surprisingly, the enthusiasm for the social media revolutions that we saw in the mainstream media quickly dissipated in the election’s aftermath. How could we have all been so blindsided? Social media became vilified with ensuing reports about online information “bubbles” or silos and the problem of “fake news” (Lee 2016; Solon 2016).

The “bubble” problem is exacerbated by for-profit social media websites, and if the prosumer commodity model is accurate—where social media sites are capable of monetizing user-generated content and data—then there is an incentive to maximize user participation as much as possible. This is partly what Jodi Dean (2002, 2009, 2010) means when she writes about “communicative capitalism.” Instead of serving democratic interests, as profit-generating platforms, social media turn participation and communication into means of monetization and revenue building. Maximizing participation is key, and part of the algorithmic logic of sites like Facebook includes individuating user experience in the sense that the feedback loop becomes part of the normalized regimen of

site activity (see Bucher 2012; Finn 2017; Langlois 2014; Mager 2014; Srnicek 2016). Unlike an older conception of ideological passivity, social media use is paradoxical in that the more we participate, the more we are plugged into the feedback loop of the ideological choir club, so to speak, however lacking in any real encounter with the ideological other. In ideal terms, the liberal bourgeois conception of the democratic public sphere (Habermas 1974) has meant more or less—and not without significant flaws (Fraser 1990; Mouffe 2000; Spivak 1988)—an *encounter* with the other. The notion of critical rational public discourse is premised on the idea that people in civil society must come together to politely and openly debate opposing views. Not only do the feedback loops and information silos on social media prevent such an encounter; the new digital society of the spectacle is contrarily driven by maximizing the number of hits, clicks, likes, and shares that a post receives. The digital attention economy is very much an effect of the neoliberal entrepreneurial ethic of reputation management (see Flisfeder 2015). In the cluttered spaces of the digital sea of abundance, attention is valuable currency, and getting noticed sometimes means being loud and obnoxious.

For the neoliberal ideology, it is primarily the entrepreneur as identity curator who is most publicly valorized by the reigning sensibility. However, it is the figure of the troll—an agent who builds a reputation by tarnishing the reputation of others—who has become one of the primary antagonists of the present, championed heroically by the racists and misogynistic meme culture of the alt-right. For a culture that privileges the troll as its antihero, Trump, then, appears as a godsend. Trolls, as Richard Seymour (2016) puts it, “are the self-styled pranksters of the internet. A subculture of

wind-up merchants who will say anything they can to provoke unwary victims, then delight in the outrage that follows.” What drives the troll is the pursuit of “lulz”—a cynical form of enjoyment “that derives from someone else’s anguish.” And as agents of the alt-right, the troll delights particularly in the harassment of feminists, cultural Marxists, and PC liberals or SJWs. With this use being made of the most advanced communications system and technology ever to exist, it is worth asking if the concerns of conservative elitist critics like Arnold and Leavis, or Left critics like Horkheimer and Adorno, were in fact correct about the commodification of culture, especially if digital democracy has been reduced to the anything goes, free speech fundamentalism of the masculinist alt-right troll. My own inclination is that social media can and do still fulfill a democratic function, but as with all forces of production, must be contextualized within the existing relations of production, exploitation, and the class struggle.

Finally, what also makes the emergence of the alt-right troll—and Trump as a figurehead—so hard to bear for the traditional liberal Left is that the regular appeals to truth seem to have flown out the window entirely. Even the kind of political economic criticism of the mainstream media’s propaganda model, expounded by Herman and Chomsky, still relies on an older notion of ideology as false consciousness. Part of the problem that they see with the mass media is that its system of filtration creates a barrier of access for people to the truth. They—and Chomsky in much of his political commentary in particular—seem to rely on the idea that “if only the people knew the truth,” then they would revolt and demand back their democracy. The problem is that followers of the alt-right, and Trump in particular, already seem to

know the truth, but continue to act as if this were not the case. In their cynical enjoyment of lulz, truth simply does not factor in. As Seymour points out, “This is what the critique of ‘post-truth politics’ misses. Even when he lies egregiously, Trump’s fans think he is demonstrating an important truth in exposing media fakery.”

The Rise of the Alt-Right out of the Failures of the Left

Every rise of Fascism bears witness to a failed revolution.

—Walter Benjamin, “Theories of German Fascism” (as quoted by Žižek)

So now we are faced with a culture that champions subversion and transgression itself being transgressed by the so-called alt-right; we are faced with the possibility that not even the truth portrayed by the media (or truth itself) is enough to bring about an enlightened counterpublic. The problem today is less the nonknowledge of the public than a collective cynical resignation in the form of what Fisher (2009) calls “capitalist realism.” Such an identification is built around, first, Thatcher’s well-known TINA statement, “there is no alternative,” and second, by Jameson’s (1994) thesis that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This kind of cynical resignation has been reinforced somewhat by the visible failures of the Left ever since the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis.

Recall, again, that we did see a wave of Left protest movements and resistance after the 2008 crisis, from the so-called Arab Spring to the Occupy Wall Street movement. What was significant about the former is that it showed how the strength of the people could be a force of change. The Occupy movement, in addition, drew

significance for directing attention to the capital-class dynamic—pointing the finger at (or giving “the finger” to) Wall Street, using the language of “we are the 99%”—and of existing global power and the cause behind the 2008 crisis (i.e., the dangers of deregulated capital and the growth of fictitious capital in the form of collateralized debt obligations, such as mortgage-backed securities, and derivatives, such as credit default swaps). However, these movements failed to produce any kind of lasting alternative to the existing system (OWS was famously mocked for being leaderless and for lacking concrete “demands”—the imagery alone seems to equate OWS with some kind of hostage-taking situation), and therefore reflected the impotence of the Left. Once again, the Left was incapable of producing change. There have been different material dimensions to each new rise of the Right in recent years, whether it is Trumpism, the Brexit vote, or the new alt-right. But in many ways, they are all reactionary responses to the failure of the Left in the wake of the crisis.

Phenomena like the rise of the alt-right demonstrate quite clearly that “every rise of Fascism bears witness to a failed revolution.” This phrase, which Žižek (2006: 363; 2009: 73; 2010: 152; 2014: 101) often attributes to Walter Benjamin, signals what is perhaps the most depressing aspect of the rise of the alt-right as a protofascist movement. It highlights the fact that “there was a revolutionary potential, a dissatisfaction, which the Left was not able to mobilize” (Žižek 2010: 152), or in fact, that the revolutionary potential of the Left failed by being beaten out by the predominant liberal status quo. There are, then, two ways to understand the failure of the Left in the wake of the 2008 crisis of capitalism: (1) a failure of mobilization; (2) a failure to break

through and defeat the liberal ruling class. The first problem is one of building up the Left as a hegemonic force. In some ways, the Arab Spring and OWS did demonstrate a wave of postcrisis leftist enlightenment, which saw rising popularity of left-wing political parties, such as Syriza in Greece, as well as avowed socialist figures like Bernie Sanders in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom. But Syriza’s inability to defeat the European “Troika” (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) in its austerity talks, the pro-Brexit vote in the UK, and Sanders’s failure to secure the nomination to become the Democratic Party’s candidate for president all showed signs of defeat for a Left that rose up only to be beaten back down, not by the alt-right but in fact primarily by the liberal status quo. Therefore, according to Žižek, the liberal ruling class and the fascistic reaction are two sides of the same coin.

Žižek distinguishes liberal agency from that of the fascist by comparing two different modes of fetishism: the permissive-cynical form and the populist-fascistic form (2009: 66). The first form is tied to a false universality: “The subject advocates freedom or equality, while being unaware of implicit qualifications which, in their very form, constrain its scope (the privileging of certain social strata: being rich, or male, or belonging to a certain culture, etc.).” The second form, in contrast, “involves a false identification of both the nature of the antagonism and the enemy: class struggle is displaced, for instance, onto the struggle with the Jews, so that popular rage at being exploited is redirected away from capitalist relations as such and onto the ‘Jewish plot’” (66). Both forms, then, operate through the odd pairing of the fetish and the symptom: the formal fetishism of

the liberal permissive cynic, both in the form of the commodity and in the form of the law (i.e., equality before the eyes of the law), produces as its symptom the proletarianized subject as its excess; in the case of the populist-fascist, the figure of the other or the enemy (“Jew” in the case of Nazi anti-Semitism, for instance; feminists and cultural Marxists in the case of the alt-right) is fetishized, displacing the centrality of the class struggle (67). The paradox is that, although demystification is easier with the permissive enlightened liberal—identification of class struggle as the real problem or threat—such a liberal is in terms of the class struggle the real class enemy, while those who would be the apparent proletarianized class ally are more difficult to enlighten, preferring instead to blame the racialized and gendered other as a scapegoat. For Žižek, this does not mean that we should simply “understand” the racism and the sexism of the proletariat; rather, what it suggests is that, instead of simply preaching liberal tolerance and permissiveness, it is necessary to articulate the underlying class dimensions of the class struggle directly in nonmystified terms. This is why, as he puts it, although “one should have no qualms about concluding short-term alliances with egalitarian liberals as part of the anti-sexist and anti-racist struggle,” in the long term, “the success of the radical emancipatory struggle depends on mobilizing the lower classes who are today often in the thrall to fundamentalist populism” (73).

Herein lies the difficulty with the alt-right: they are fetishist in both the cynical and the fascistic sense. In their cynical form, they distance themselves from their position via rational discourse and critical interpretation—when one listens to speeches given by Richard Spencer, as deplorable as his arguments sound,

these are not the ravings of a mad man but the carefully thought out and charismatic pseudo-intellectual statements of a “leader”—the movement, in other words, produces organic intellectuals. But in its fascist populist form, the movement clings to the other as fetish, disavowing the centrality of the class struggle, using the other—feminists and cultural Marxists, SJWs, and so forth—to displace this centrality. Therefore, rather than try to convince members of the alt-right, through rational critical interpretation, that their rage is simply displaced, they should be seen more so as a reactionary formation, the symptomatic product of the *defeat* of the Left by the liberal ruling class. It is for this reason that, if the alt-right is to be defeated, the challenge is to defeat the liberal ruling class. As Žižek puts it, for the Left, “the only true alternative is the one between itself and the liberal mainstream, the populist ‘radical’ Right being nothing but the *symptom* of liberalism’s inability to deal with the Leftist threat” (75).

**“Bernie Would Have Won!”:
A Provisional Conclusion**

Against the postmodernist suspicion of grand narratives, we need to reassert that, far from being isolated, contingent problems, these are all the effects of a single systemic cause: Capital.

—Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*

As I noted above, subversion and transgression have been embraced and diffused as virtues into the culture of postmodern capitalism. Formally and aesthetically, the alt-right follows a tradition that has a lineage going back to the modernist ethics of transgression and subversion. At the same time, their public demonstrations, and alarms about the anti-free speech

SJWs, particularly on university campuses, appear to have adopted the tactics of the radical New Left from the 1960s. While the ideological content of the alt-right is determinatively conservative, at a formal level, their tactics start to mimic the traditional and New Left, especially when one of their chief characteristics is a hypervigilance toward breaking taboos. The alt-right, in this way, has more in common with the counterculture of May '68 than it does with anything resembling the traditional Right (Nagle 2017: 28). As well, the alt-right demonstrates that a formal transgression of the existing order is not necessarily one that moves in the direction of emancipatory and progressive change. As Nagle puts it, "disrespect for its own sake" mirrors the modern avant-garde's ethic of "art for art's sake." The ethic of the alt-right has taken on a Nietzschean "cult of moral transgression," that even informed much of early (and in some cases, contemporary) poststructuralism (31). For the Marquis de Sade, the surrealists, R. D. Laing, and even in some sense in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, madness and insanity are signs of nonconformity. The alt-right's celebration of the carnivalesque and the grotesque in practices such as "RIP Trolling" (trolling Facebook and Twitter pages of the recently deceased) demonstrates why, I claim, even anarchist practices of the carnivalesque, such as those described by Simon Critchley—advocating for "a new language of civil disobedience that combines street-theatre, festival, performance art and what might be described as forms of non-violent warfare," and including things like "carnavalesque humour" (2007: 123)—are easily co-optable by the alt-right Chan and meme culture. There is, in fact, nothing inherently radical or emancipatory about empty formal tactics such as these. As well, through websites like Breitbart

News, which even the mainstream mass media now seem to cite as a legitimate source of news, the alt-right also manages to incorporate public sphere and liberal critiques of elitism into its arsenal, allowing it to appear sympathetic to the concerns of the average Joe. What, then, is the solution?

Perhaps, rather than focus on a politics of subversion and transgression, it is time to build toward a new "common sense." If there is anything positive to say about the past decade of protest and Left politics, it is that a new language and narrative of understanding—a new form of cognitive mapping—seem capable of interpellating a new Left sensibility. Although OWS ultimately dissipated, its lasting effect has been a renewed discourse about the class struggle—the 99% versus the 1%, language that even mathematically makes visible the disparity between the two class positions, so that it does not appear as though we are talking about two antagonistic groups on a level playing field. What it emphasizes is the deep disparity in size and reach of the population, to show that the majority is proletarianized. Furthermore, another particularly youthful group of people is coalescing around figures like Sanders and Corbyn. One of Sanders's greatest achievements during his campaign for the Democratic nomination was to help destigmatize the word *socialism*. Many young people now openly identify as "socialists" (see Ehrenfreund 2016 and Meyerson 2016). The term is beginning to lose the ideological baggage that it carried during the Cold War.

Out of the actual contradictions of capitalism, people are beginning to imagine real alternatives, and a new common sense is in fact forming, whose main antagonist has been less the alt-right and megalomaniacal figures like Trump than

figures at the center who, to maintain power, have slowly shifted over the period of neoliberalism increasingly to the right. They court the Right and the center in economic terms to defeat the Left. However, their apparent social liberalism is finally being undermined by their staunch economic conservatism. Paradoxically, it is the populist rhetoric of a socialist economic narrative, mixed with a right-wing racist and sexist social identity, that brought the masses toward Trump. Recall that much of Trump’s economic rhetoric included discussion of policies normally addressed by the Left (withdrawing from the TPP, for instance; criticisms of the mainstream mass media), but couched in inflammatory racist rhetoric about illegal immigrants and terrorists. Perhaps, then, if the socialist Left is so much of a threat to that liberal center—so much so that it sees a rightward shift as its only solution—and if apparent supporters of the alt-right are themselves courted by economic socialism, then maybe (just maybe) socialism (and dare we say “communism”) really is our new common sense.

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