

The alt-right: reactionary rehabilitation for white masculinity

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US alt-right extremism is a logical consequence of
mainstream neo-conservatism

After the 2016 presidential election, as the US media scrambled for ways to understand the sources of Trump's support, there was a dramatic proliferation on news sites of profiles of figures from the alt-right such as Milo Yiannopolous and Richard Spencer - many of them alarmingly deferential in tone. Almost immediately, however, there was an understandable backlash from liberal commentators and activists, urging journalists to stop using the euphemistic 'alt-right' moniker and to instead refer to the loosely-defined digital subculture to which the label was attached as 'neo-Nazi'.

As someone who spends the best part of my days reading and collecting data from alt-right hubs for my research, it was hard not to notice the instant impact of this strategy. Figures who had previously embraced the alt-right label as a way to distinguish themselves from traditional Republicans quickly began to discard the term. But I am not certain that forcing well-known commentators with a large established platform of anti-progressive resentment to hastily rebrand themselves is the solution to the problems represented by the alt-right as an ideological

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communication network. The media was right to focus on alt-right networks as a way of understanding the wellsprings of Trump support, but to brand the whole field as neo-Nazi, or to narrow the critical field of vision to the network's deliberately outrageous Nazi acolytes, is to risk losing sight of its roots in socially acceptable discourse.

There is at present a lively and important debate on how to defy the 'normalisation' of the alt-right, but it is important here to tackle not simply the way it is branded but also the ideological and material underpinnings of this process. It is a relatively useless tactic to point out that the alt-right's way of positioning the world is in fact the work of a delusional fringe. It would be more helpful, instead, to pinpoint the accountability of mainstream post-9/11 neo-conservatism in laying the groundwork that would go on to underpin and encourage the burgeoning alt-right digital scene.

This article will make the case that the alt-right is both inspired and defined by a discourse of anxiety about traditional white masculinity, which is seen as being artificially but powerfully 'degenerated', with catastrophic consequences for the nation. It also argues that this discourse is dominant in much of the political and cultural mainstream.

The alt-right is not really a social or political movement in the traditional sense: it is, rather, a network of smallish digital social hubs whose ideological position can be understood as the natural conclusion of neo-conservative logics surrounding liberalism, manhood and national security. While branches of this network may take different forms and styles, they can all be broadly characterised as firmly supporting the counter-cultural rehabilitation of the white male individual through a hostile rejection of liberal-left discourse. The material discussed in this article - entirely produced and distributed online - represents an attempt to discursively reconstruct an idealised model of white masculinity, based on nostalgia for a time that has never existed, and defined largely on the basis of the absence of modern, 'degenerate' influences. The collection of digital groups and forums gathered under the alt-right label may role-play as sites of political activism and advocacy for white Americans, but their rhetoric is very different from traditional political discourse in that it is based on fantasising: and their fundamentally reactionary fantasy is of the reversal, or undoing, of modernity. In these circles, modernity is conceived of as a corrupting ideological force constructed by the nation-state's internal enemies,

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which have severely damaged the superior lifestyles of the past. That such language is fantastical should not, however, undermine its potential as a threat. Indeed, as shown by the power of Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again', it can have global consequences.

When self-proclaimed alt-right spokesmen such as Jared Swift claim that 'we've pushed the Overton window. People have adopted our rhetoric, sometimes without even realizing it', an initial response may well be to take them at their word.¹ But this would be to overlook the symbiotic transference of language and ideas between the more mainstream right-wing media and the alt-right - something that neither side would be happy to admit.

Crises of national masculinity are a dominant and recurring feature of mainstream political discourse in the United States, but their political utility for jingoistic and authoritarian campaigns bears particular relevance in the modern day. 9/11, and the subsequent war on terror, enshrined a very particular version of masculine crisis into a narrative that had been centred on the supposed safety of strictly delineated borders of both gender and nation. The reason the pentagon and twin towers were vulnerable to an attack of such scale and horror, opined right-wing radio commentator Michael Savage, was that liberal women in positions of power had 'feminized and homosexualized much of America, to the point where the nation has become passive, receptive, and masochistic'.² The dire need to once more bolster the nation's old-school sense of masculinity made itself felt in post-9/11 revivals of 1980s action films, as Sarah Godfrey and Hannah Hamad have noted. Heroes such as Indiana Jones and *Die Hard's* John McClane have recently returned to the screen after a period of more sensitive male protagonists during the 1990s.³

More or less concurrently with these compelling calls for re-masculinisation, anxieties about the latest generation of young adulthood, the newly coined 'millennials', were being expressed in a bestselling commercial platform. Dr Jean Twenge's 2006 book, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled - and More Miserable than Ever Before*, set a blueprint for a whole series of common-sense 'truths' about the nation's youth, and, by extension, its future. A supposed cultural gulf between modern youth and previous generations was discovered, as evidenced by statistics regarding the millennial generation's unprecedented ease of access to digital spaces, as well as their unique vulnerability at the hands of corporate employers. What could, and should, have been identified

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as a failure of free market capitalism instead became a tool with which to reassert conservative principles under the guise of good old-fashioned common sense. Millennials became conceived of as spoiled and undisciplined characters, whose strong sense of social justice was in fact a childish desire for heavy-handed paternalist protection in their conflict with 'the real world'. And millennial political engagement, both stronger and more left-wing than that of their parents' generation, thus became rhetorically rechannelled by both conservative and centrist voices as representing a symptom of fundamental weakness, and, by extension, femininity.

This is sometimes laughably overt, as with David French's article for *The National Review*, inspired by a comparative study on the grip-strength of college men, 'Men Are Getting Weaker - because We're Not Raising Men'. In a rhetoric that went beyond the knowing 1990s language regarding metrosexuals and 'new men', millennials were now being referred to in the diminutive terms usually reserved for little girls - such as 'snowflake' - explicitly *because of* their left-leaning sympathies.

The war on terror and the millennial panic were not unconnected. The prospect of a generation of weak and girlish millennial men became a particular threat when it was contrasted to the figure of the Muslim invader that haunted the American news cycle after 2001. Both al Qaeda and ISIS appealed explicitly to hyper-masculine ideals in their recruitment propaganda, and their shots of young bearded men brandishing guns and machetes in the desert were breathlessly consumed by Western media. American conservatives seemed at once repulsed by and in awe of these displays of foreign machismo, and the latent hankering for conservative traditionalism that underlay the millennial panic was ramped up to the point of hysteria.

One particularly striking example was the reaction in 2013 to 'Pajama Boy', as seen in a photo posted by the group Organizing for Action as a means of encouraging young people to spread the word to their older relatives about the benefits of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The image - of a young man wearing thick-framed glasses and red pyjamas, nursing a hot drink and sitting on a sofa, alongside the words 'Wear pajamas. Drink hot chocolate. Talk about getting health insurance. #GetTalking' - swiftly gained notoriety as a meme after being posted by Barack Obama's twitter account.⁴ In conservative responses to the image, the young man's supposed symbolic infantilisation and feminisation were apparently interchangeable. Tweeted responses to Obama included one from a man who, unlike

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Pajama Boy, would 'spend [his holidays] standing up when I pee';⁵ others wondered if the character needed healthcare coverage 'to pay for gender reassignment surgery'.⁶ And perhaps the most succinct expression of the authoritarian belief structures that were operating in the construction of Pajama Boy's twinned youth and emasculation came from Fox News presenter Katie Pavlich: 'We are doomed'.⁷

Pajama boy, in his fetching red onesie, seemed to represent the exact opposite of the rugged masculine future that the nation desperately needed. And the overreaction to the character was not based solely on the way he looked. Obamacare, as the ACA was nicknamed, undoubtedly belonged to the maternal 'socially oriented left hand' of the state that Pierre Bourdieu describes in *Masculine Domination*.⁸ Pajama boy's comfort in his parental surroundings, matching his seeming comfort with having the state 'look after' his healthcare insurance, was seen as foreshadowing the nationwide emasculation that had been explicitly spelled out in the wake of 9/11.

Responses to Obama himself also bear consideration in this context. The gender-based anxiety about how the United States would measure up to its enemies under Obama's administration is palpable in former Breitbart columnist Ben Shapiro's withering description of the president's attitude towards ISIS - 'we should all get together to fight terrorism, and we should all be bestest friends, and we should all put aside our differences to weave flower-chains'.⁹ That the Obama administration, alarmingly, oversaw more drone strikes than any previous government had little relevance for Shapiro or other right-wing commentators: they were more interested in the optics of aggression. Obama's (at least rhetorical) embrace of progressivism, as well as his race, which positioned him in the right-wing imagination as naturally more sympathetic to Islam, rendered him an emasculated and servile character in the masculinist fantasy of the war on terror. 'We were doomed' indeed.

At the core of this understanding - which sees the vital role of traditional patriarchal masculinity as having been subverted, not just demeaned, thereby seriously weakening the nation-state - is the far right concept of degeneracy. This is a term that outlets such as Breitbart are usually careful to avoid, but a glance at their comment sections shows that their readers are more than capable of picking up the thread. Originally a nineteenth-century eugenicist term to demarcate a lack of supposed white racial purity, degeneracy as a tool of social and cultural critique gained traction under the Nazi regime in Germany to deride art and

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media perceived as either immoral or unpatriotic. In alt-right spheres, degeneracy fuses both of these threads to signal progressivism and modernity as an assault on a supposed white past - created through an assemblage of elements from fantasy literature, 1950s advertisements and classical art. These elements conjoin to create a mythic era in which white men and women formed a prosperous, content and, above all, homogenous community. The vagueness of this relatively commonplace white nostalgia helps boost, rather than hinder, its power as an artefact of propaganda. Without ever needing to confront the messiness of history, a demagogic figurehead can simply state that life was *once* better and that society has *somehow* lost its way, thereby naturalising an anachronistic gender and racial hierarchy as history's default setting.

Nostalgia for a mythic past of fixed gender dynamics and racial homogeneity is an important underlying tenet of popular social conservatism, but alt-right discourse brings this imagery to the unmissable foreground, while fusing such nostalgia with an explicit rhetoric of victimhood and betrayal. This fusion frequently involves an appropriation and distortion of the language of the activist and academic left, a technique most overtly utilised by Richard Spencer, creator of the alt-right label and self-described spokesman of 'identity politics for white people'.¹⁰ When Spencer invokes 'our lived experience ... being a young white person in twenty-first century America, seeing your identity being demeaned', he is adapting a familiar far-right tactic: a reversal of left-wing progress is cloaked in a narrative of white victimisation.¹¹ This strategy is also seen in the far-reaching meme campaign by white supremacist website Stormfront, which seeks to define the ethnic demographic shifts of the United States as 'white genocide'. The white genocide conspiracy theory veils a support for eugenics and nativism in dramatic declarations of victimhood, but it also points a finger at a shadowy perpetrator. White genocide is seen as a deliberately engineered phenomenon, evidence for which can be found in television advertisements which show mixed-race couples or children, articles which might discourage women from having children early in life, and, of course, site visitors' anecdotes from their previous relationships.

In order to reconcile the supposedly innate nature of traditional gender roles with the existence of degenerate, feminised modern man, it has to be asserted that, rather than simply 'losing its way', society has been actively and deliberately derailed. Given the purported strength of the white past when dealing with external

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enemies, this derailment has to be attributed to enemies that are internal - and practically invisible. The most obvious and frequently utilised candidate for this role in far right narratives is the Jewish people, whose proximity to whiteness yet designated Other status distinguishes them from other ethnic minorities. And this is still a popular choice for the alt-right, given the historical blueprints left by countless anti-Semitic writers throughout history. But it is not the only one. Feminists, communists and supporters of left-wing politics are also often framed in much the same terms of deceitful hunger for power, betrayal of the nation-state and support for societal subversion. A 2015 article in manosphere alt-right hub Return of Kings, 'Why Is There A Prolific Jewish Presence In The American Feminist Movement? An undeniable truth to the objective researcher', makes it clear from the title onwards that identifying one internal enemy does not necessarily preclude finding another. In many pro-Trump enclaves, the language that would usually concern itself with the Jewish people as a whole is instead concentrated in a single focus on business magnate George Soros, who has reached supervillain status as the architect of all leftist and liberal dissidence against Trump.

Whatever their exact identity, internal enemies are always presumed to possess an all-encompassing dominion over the mainstream media. Here, yet again, the alt-right converges with more mainstream conservative news pundits, whose frequent derogatory invocations of the 'liberal media' have in themselves created a media trope. This is not to suggest that such pundits are wholly incorrect - most analysis of American news media reveals that journalists tend to position themselves further to the left than the average voter. However, whereas more mainstream right-wing voices would only slyly imply such a proposition, the alt-right asserts unequivocally that the most well-known sources of culture are unusable, if not downright dangerous, for the reactionary reader. The importance of this stance is underscored by the litany of terms within the ideology to describe the process of rejecting these corrupting influences. Terms such as 'unplug', 'redpill' and 'uncuck' consistently pepper the arenas of the alt-right network. 'Red pill', initially a reference to the science-fiction movie *The Matrix*, references the film's central process as the protagonist is made aware that the world as they see it is an illusion. This is mirrored in both film and the alt-right by 'blue pill', a term for those who have chosen to remain in the fantasy. Interestingly, in the alt-right sphere 'blue pill' is a term that is usually attached only to men portrayed as spineless, desperate and sexually unappealing to women - all traits antithetical to most understandings of hegemonic masculinity. 'Cuck' is a term

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derived from a genre of pornography in which a man watches his onscreen wife or girlfriend have sex with another man, who usually but not always is black. This resonates with the coded language in Shapiro's comments on Obama's foreign policy, which suggests that to espouse belief in multiculturalism is to be submissive to the racialised foreign 'Other'. As one subscriber to the alt-right reddit forum says to another: 'Uncuck yourself by realizing that race is a vital part (though not the whole) of our ideology, and that "racism" is the last snare of political correctness. Until you do that, you remain a cuck.'¹²

Becoming uncucked or red-pilled, then, is recognised as a process through which one must 'unlearn' liberal beliefs in order to fully re-masculinise the self, and resist the sinister social engineering of internal enemies. Different factions of the alt-right network will place different emphases on what these liberal beliefs are: for instance, r/theredpill and Return of Kings will primarily understand such a process as involving the rejection of feminist principles and a commitment to the subjugation of women through sexual strategy. Social alt-right hubs such as r/altright, 4chan's/pol/ and blogs like American Renaissance, whilst not diametrically opposed to this ideology, focus more strongly on the re-assertion of racist doctrine and fascist governance.

'Alt-light' sites and forums confine themselves to a denunciation of political correctness and leftist politics, and promote a secular 'classic liberalism' which roughly equates to a militantly anti-progressive strain of neoliberalism. Many alt-right hubs, though critical of what they perceive as alt-light avoidance of 'JQ' (shorthand for 'the Jewish Question'), recognise them as an important first step in the individual process of red-pill enlightenment. A commenter on Return of Kings, who was following the progress of one such alt-light movement, GamerGate (a harassment campaign against feminist video game critics and developers), described how he had been red-pilled by the campaign: 'Suddenly life events which previously had no explanation (the illogical actions of women, for example) were VERY clear, and I was pissed off'; others agreed about 'the opportunity we have here, as our own community, to evangelize gamers with [the red pill]'.¹³

Given the high crossover of rhetoric and membership between these sites and networks, there is no reason to disbelieve this narrative. Just as with published conservative media, an alt-light site may stop short of overtly white supremacist symbols, but nevertheless lend legitimacy to the alt-right's central understanding

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that the white male identity has been culturally diminished and requires reasserting. And because of its claims to centrism and careful avoidance of outright hate speech, such a site also has a much further-reaching platform, which can extend beyond the digital arena. Thus Milo Yiannopolous, Breitbart columnist and open defender of the alt-right (he has described them as mischievous ‘rebels’¹⁴), at one time received frequent invitations to campus events, commentator spots on televised news programmes and even a lucrative book deal from Simon & Schuster - before he finally strayed into a line of discourse mainstream conservatives were unwilling to associate with - a defence of pederasty on a long-forgotten YouTube stream.

It is important not to overstate the numbers of the alt-right, nor their power as a voting bloc. But, then again, the alt-right is not particularly concerned with numbers. Their success is primarily measured not by levels of recruitment to their ranks but in terms of their ever-increasing dissemination of extreme right-wing ideals and their ability to project an updated rhetoric of anti-left antagonism into the Overton window of acceptable political discourse.

Since the 2016 election, and the objective proximity to power of hard right figures like Steve Bannon, questions of how to tackle the alt-right’s growing success on this front are more relevant - and more difficult to answer - than ever. I welcome calls for a de-normalisation of alt-right premises, but they must be twinned with a similar call to recognise and hold accountable the conservative and pro-capitalist underpinnings of mainstream American political discourse that have normalised such premises. This is a much more difficult task, but not an impossible one. The alt-right’s fundamental weakness is that it is bound to a narrative of the past, and therefore can only advocate change in the form of a reversal of history - however divorced from reality their version of ‘history’ may seem. The left has a broader spectrum of tools and ideas at its disposal, and has the ability to use these to construct solutions that are as powerful and engaging as the current wave of reactionary thought - as evidenced by the impressive movements behind self-described socialist figures such as Bernie Sanders. Whilst this may seem like a small and theoretical comfort in times of far-reaching political adversity, it is a useful starting point for an effective resistance.

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Notes

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