



Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web

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Abstract

Drawing on research from digital media studies, political theory and rhetoric, this article explores online radical conservative and reactionary ‘ideological entrepreneurs’. It argues that online media are uniting an ‘ideological family’ around concepts of natural inequality and hostility to those who deny them. Placing this phenomenon in context, the article shows how online culture reinvestigates well-established discourses of opposition to bureaucrats, intellectuals and experts of all kinds, rejecting one version of the neoliberal state and of its personnel, a ‘new class’ understood to dominate through discursive, cultural power and imagined through the figures of the ‘Social Justice Warrior’ and the ‘Cultural Marxist’. In competing for a share of the marketplace of ideas, these ideological entrepreneurs promise insights – the revelations of the ‘red pill’ – critiquing ‘actually-existing’ neoliberalism yet insisting on the ‘rationality’ of governance through markets and promising adherents techniques for achieving success as liberated entrepreneurial selves.

Keywords

alt-right, conservatism, digital culture, ideologies, neoliberalism, online politics, rhetoric

Introduction

In *The New Way of the World*, Dardot and Laval explain the rise of neoliberalism, partly with reference to ‘ideological entrepreneurs’, the writers, academics and intellectuals who used their position, particularly their media platform, to ‘struggle head-on against all forms of progressivism and social reform’ (2013: 132–3). Today, ‘ideological entrepreneurship’ has been profoundly affected by the spread of digital, participatory and shareable forms of media. Barriers to entry into the ‘marketplace of ideas’ have lifted. Subscription and peer-to-peer payment systems enable those lacking institutionalised political or journalistic

platforms to earn a living as a grassroots political ‘digital evangelist’ (Schradie, 2019). The most successful within this new ‘marketplace of ideas’ are ideological entrepreneurs disseminating (and reshaping) ‘populist’ political ideologies hostile to ‘globalism’, multiculturalism, the cultural and economic integration of minorities, feminism and gender politics.

This article brings together and applies approaches from digital media studies, political theory and rhetoric in order to understand this phenomenon better. In the first section I review extant research into ‘radical conservative’ (Dahl, 1999) and ‘reactionary’ (Robin, 2018) politics online, considering a range of examples from the extremes of white nationalism to more mainstream opinion about the failures of liberal politics. In a second section, drawing on the theory of political ideologies, I argue that online media erode distinctions between these kinds of politics, which converge around hostility to a particular conceptualisation of ‘liberalism’ understood as the constitutive inability to recognise natural limits to equality and to social justice. In the third section I show that central to the articulation of this hostility is a concept of the ‘new class’, which I place within a longstanding political and critical literature. In a fourth section I discuss common online rhetorical tropes which organise and articulate this hostility today: the ‘Social Justice Warrior’, ‘Cultural Marxist’ and ‘red pill’. In the fifth and final section I argue that this critique of ‘actually-existing’ neoliberalism nevertheless insists on the ‘rationality’ of neoliberal governance through markets. It interpellates adherents as entrepreneurial selves, holding their valuable attention by promising them techniques for fully inhabiting a neoliberal ‘system of norms and functions’ (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 13).

Overall, the article aims to make a number of contributions. It synthesises findings from a large and diverse literature, presents an overview and explanation of a wide range of online political ideas and arguments, and develops an original interpretation of the relationship between neoliberalism and reactionary politics online.

Right Online

The volume of online communication, the speed of turnover and the difficulties of interpreting political ideas communicated in various combinations and styles of words and images makes for a bewildering, overgrown, ecology. Creating a comprehensive taxonomy of species is no easy task when the analyst of conservative, right and far-right politics is confronted by such a range of potential categories as ‘nationalists, identitarians, libertarians, neoconservatives, paleoconservatives, counter-jihadists, and neoreactionaries’ (Sedgwick, 2019: xiii, xiv). Consequently, inductive, data-driven, studies of the political right online often identify ‘communities’ rather than ideologies, giving them

names which have emerged from within this political subculture: the ‘Intellectual Dark Web’, the ‘Alt-lite’ and the ‘Alt-right’ (e.g. Ribeiro et al., 2019). Lewis’s study of political connectivity on YouTube identified an ‘Alternative Influence Network’, ‘an interlocking series of videos, references, and guest appearances’ involving self-defined conservatives, libertarians and white nationalists united in ‘general opposition to feminism, social justice, or left-wing politics’ and collaborating ‘to the point that ideological differences become impossible to take at face value’ (Lewis, 2018: 8). Building on Lewis, Munger and Philips (2019) propose a five-part classification: ‘liberals’, such as podcaster Joe Rogan, who interviews celebrities alongside a range of political writers; ‘sceptics’, unconvinced by ‘identity politics’ centred on gender or race; ‘conservatives’, commentators who combine opposition to identity politics with pro-market traditionalism and also contribute to ‘old’ media; ‘alt-lite’ provocateurs; and those most committed to far-right racial politics – the ‘alt-right’.

These descriptions of how things appear within digital media help organise a large field and distinguish some of its parts. But such analyses paint only a part of the picture and can be complemented by research drawing on the history and development of political ideas and ideologies. Here, studies find that white nationalism is the ‘centre of gravity’ of the alt-right (Lyons, 2017; see also Hawley, 2017; Nagle, 2017; Neiwert, 2017). This includes ‘traditional’ forms of neo-Nazism (as found on anti-Semitic and conspiracist podcast and website *The Right Stuff*) and those presenting what Hawley calls a more ‘highbrow’ appearance. For example, through the original *alternativeright.com* which he founded, and latterly through the anti-Semitic *Radix Journal*, Richard Spencer has attempted to develop in America the kind of cultural ‘metapolitics’ associated with the European New Right.¹

Less Europhilic expressions are found on sites with their roots in American paleoconservatism (Lyons, 2017; Nagle, 2017: 54–67; Hawley, 2017: 9–33; also Woltermann, 1993; Drolet and Williams, 2020). Here, economically as well as politically nationalist ideas blend with Christianity, defence of ‘traditional’ sex-roles and opposition to immigration. An example is the ethnonationalist website *American Renaissance* (formerly a print publication), founded by racial segregationist Jared Taylor (see Taylor, 2011; Nieli, 2019). The core of his argument is that racial differences are a feature of natural reality, ‘an important aspect of individual and group identity and the most important of all societal fault lines’. Taylor draws in particular on the thinking of Samuel T. Francis, the paleoconservative thinker fired from *The Washington Post* for speaking (at an *American Renaissance* conference) against ‘the anti-white racialist movement’, the ‘fraudulent’ liberalism of Martin Luther King and Mandela, and in favour of the political unity of the white race (Francis, 2014).

Where *American Renaissance* foregrounds the ‘white’ in ‘white nationalism’, other anti-immigration sites such as *VDare* foreground the nationalism. Founded by former *National Review* columnist Peter Brimelow, *VDare* claims an educational mission, asking ‘the national question’ and committed to informing ‘the fight to keep America American’. Here the core political propositions are that nation-states must be culturally unified, America’s is an identity ‘unique to history’, and that human differences – ‘philosophical, cultural or biological’ – are grounded in race and ethnicity. Diversity therefore weakens polities.²

Both sites draw on claims about the heritability of traits and their incidence by race and gender, so-called ‘sex-realism’ and ‘race-realism’, sometimes ‘Human Bio-Diversity’ (HBD) (Hawley, 2017: 67–8), the name of an online discussion forum created by another former *National Review* journalist (and *VDare* contributor), Steve Sailer. Here, political arguments are presented as scientific truths which others are too weak or scared to articulate. HBD-focused twitter feed ‘Uncensored Science’ describes itself as ‘Bringing you the latest in censored politically incorrect truth’, and the website <http://humanbiologicaldiversity.com> quotes Orwell on its masthead: ‘In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act’. *VDare* claims it embodies ‘a bold idea’ held to ‘in the face of unwavering hostility from the Main Stream Media’.

Emphasis on race differences is not confined to conservatives and nationalists. Canadian libertarian ‘anarcho-capitalist’ YouTuber Stefan Molyneux promoted such ‘realism’ to 900,000 subscribers to his channel (hosting Brimelow and Taylor, self-help author Jordan Peterson, Noam Chomsky and a range of right-of-centre ideological entrepreneurs). He presents himself as a philosopher, blending Randian style ‘objectivism’ with libertarian anti-statism and intense belief in the significance and evolutionary basis of race and sex differences. The latter is prominent in the so-called ‘manosphere’ and the writings of, for example, far-right, neopagan advocate of ‘male tribalism’ Jack Donovan (see Lyons, 2019) and anti-feminist conspiracy theorist Mike Cernovich. The last of these rose to online prominence in large part because of ‘Gamergate’ in 2014, the semi-organised, voluble and aggressive online contestation of the role of women in the computer gaming industry. This bewilderingly significant phenomenon catalysed the crystallisation of a variety of hitherto inchoate online political trends, demonstrating the commercial viability of a new kind of ideological entrepreneurship and the capacity of contributions to discussion forums and ‘chans’ to crossover onto mainstream platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Reddit, reshaping public discourse about gender politics and feminism (Nagel, 2017: 19–24; Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Massanari, 2017; Salter, 2018). Through Gamergate, themes from ‘sex-realism’ were circulated across platforms, giving them a wider audience (bringing with them themes from ‘race-realism’, paleoconservatism and nationalism).

Elsewhere, ideological entrepreneurs have appealed to tech entrepreneurs in the form of the ‘neoreactionary’ movement or ‘Dark Enlightenment’, a baroque, techno-futurist, political philosophy (Burrows, 2018; Tait, 2019). Here belief in natural hierarchy is not restricted to the categories of race and gender but part of an argument for empowering the few capable of resisting the dominance of liberal humanism, figuratively represented as ‘the cathedral’ of academia, politics and journalism. Neoreaction advocates the dissolution of these monasteries so that a new elite can accelerate technological innovation and institute the order of artificial intelligences which it sees as our destiny and salvation.

A different strand of online political ideology – the so-called ‘alt-lite’ – is distinguishable by its style of ‘irreverent assault on political correctness’ (Hawley, 2017: 141). Polemical, vulgar and ironic, it wages provocative discursive and aesthetic warfare on liberalism, exulting in the reaction. For example, the UK-based Paul Joseph Watson tells 1.8 million subscribers to his YouTube channel that liberalism is a ‘mental disorder’ (Watson, 2015b) and feminists are ‘fat and ugly’ (Watson, 2015a). Such ‘bad manners’ exemplify the ‘populist style’ identified by Moffit (2016). Disseminated through online posting boards and chans with a common verbal and visual vocabulary, this style shapes subcultural identities through which individuals learn about political ideas and promote them by creating and sharing jokes, memes and ‘shitposts’ (Topinka, 2018; Fielitz and Thurston, 2019). Such gestural ‘transgression’ and demonstrative non-conformity is characteristic of online subcultures across the internet (Phillips, 2016). Nagel is correct that this is a response to ‘callout culture’ (2017: 68–85), but it is a *political* response intended to unsettle, uproot and expose liberal consensus as mere convention. That is a well-established rhetorical tactic (Chambers and Finlayson, 2008). An indicative example is mockery of ‘the argument from the current year’. Declarations such as ‘It’s 2021! How can you say that?’, in response to expressions contrary to liberal social values, imply belief in the inevitable and harmonious flow of progress. Shitposters provoke so as to ‘reveal’ that liberalism rests on this unacknowledged metaphysical conviction about the necessary destiny of humanity, represented as a quasi-religious faith recited by, in internet slang, ‘NPCs’, people like the Non-Playable Characters in video games who can say and do only what they are programmed to.

A different sort of self-conscious and self-declared transgression characterises the so-called ‘Intellectual Dark Web’ or ‘IDW’ (Weiss, 2018), a label used by supporters to refer to a range of political writers, including psychologist Jordan Peterson and Douglas Murray, associate editor at *The Spectator*. Articulating a (familiar) critique of ‘tenured radicals’, they are described as ‘iconoclastic’, ‘academic renegades’ with views ‘that sound unlike anything else happening, at least publicly, in the culture

right now' (Weiss, 2018). The academy is identified with conformist liberalism, accused of putting ideology above science, distanced from the culture and values of the nation, corrupted by its embrace of the principle of campus diversity yet too cowardly to stand up to students' identity politics and complaints of microaggression. These writers speak from traditional, pre-digital, bases of authority (commercial media and university professorships) but have found significant audiences and counter-cultural cache through podcasts, YouTube and other social media (especially *The Rubin Report*, *The Daily Wire* and the Rogan podcast). Their public lectures and TV appearances are widely recirculated, re-edited and commented on, forming supplementary content produced by ideological entrepreneurs with smaller markets.

We find, then, a range of 'ideological entrepreneurs' opposed to 'progressivism and social reform'. Digital communication has increased their reach and potential prominence, creating a 'marketplace of ideas' within which an increasing range of conservative and reactionary ideologies may compete for a share of success. For these, inequality is a core concept, understood as a natural phenomenon, scientifically verified, and the necessary basis of civil order, essential to the maintenance of individual freedom, economic stability and cultural coherence; liberalism's failure to recognise the reality of inequality is leading to civilisational decline and illegitimate domination, and must be exposed as ungrounded, irrational and against nature. These entrepreneurs differ in style and content, drawing on different parts of the reactionary ideological tradition. However, as we shall see, their internal coherence and their relations with each other are fundamentally changed by the online platforms that now bring them to market.

Ideologies Online

Political ideologies (the 'isms' organising politics) may be understood, following Freedman (1998), as distinct combinations of political concepts through which the contested ideas of politics are temporarily 'decontested' and shared politics made possible. Certain concepts are fixed as 'core', anchoring the whole, with other 'adjacent' concepts, supplementing or modifying that core while those at the 'periphery' are linked to applications of the ideology and responses to events. Over time, in response to social change, political events, ideological contestation and innovation, concepts change their places. Some increase in importance while others fade from significance. Theoretical and historical analysis of political ideologies is concerned with identifying, mapping and explaining that process.

Political ideologies are not fixed categories but fields of relatively contained contestation. Digital communication dramatically changes how such contestation happens, disrupting the boundaries of ideological

intellectual traditions, making them parts of broader, looser ‘fields’, fluid ‘ideological families’ (Freeden, 2013: 127–8). Three things are most important here. Firstly, as we have seen, digital media increase the volume of participants in ideological production and circulation. This flooding of the marketplace of ideas also changes its shape. Constituencies ‘constrained by the scope of the ideology of extant media’ may now ‘switch into consuming media more consistent with their ideal points’ (Munger and Philips, 2019: 12). That facilitates (or forces) new kinds of consolidation and differentiation of political positions in ways driven by that market as well as by conceptual logics internal to ideological traditions.

Secondly, digital media further erode the authority and effectiveness of traditional gatekeepers of ideological purity. The covers of a book, copyright claims of an author and rules of political party meetings set clear, albeit porous, boundaries to constellations of political ideas and policy proposals, giving them identifiable origins and specifiable destinations while policing their limits. Ideological traditions and their canons have not survived the onslaught of fluid media which disorganise such lineages, overflowing the boundaries of national political cultures, increasing the range of resources from which political ideas and arguments are made. The inherently intertextual nature of online communication, the speed of its decontextualisation and recontextualisation, the ease with which consumers move between sources and resources, unsettles classifications of political genre. Memes, ‘spreadable’ media (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017), move ideas, themes, the argot and discursive style of trolling subculture from the ‘fringe’ into the ‘mainstream’ in a way which blurs that very distinction (Phillips, 2016). Key sites or individuals are condensation points for an eclectic range of ideas while phrases and slogans, fragments of propositions broken free of the arguments within which they first appeared, flow across forms and forums, picked up by individuals plotting their own path through them. For example, Lewis shows how Jordan Peterson, a mainstream figure from the ‘Intellectual Dark Web’, is connected with fringe participants like Richard Spencer through the appearances each made, discussing IQ, on the YouTube channel run by ‘Sargon of Akkad’, a Swindon-based UKIP member (Lewis, 2018: 9). Peterson and Spencer are not politically indistinguishable, but the medium brings them into the same discursive universe from the perspective of viewers, literally putting them on the same page of algorithmically generated viewing recommendations; fragments of claims about psychology, nature and genetics flow online between and around them. In such ideological assemblages ‘diverse elements infiltrate into the others, metabolizing into a moving complex’ (Connolly, 2005: 870).

In the cauldrons of the internet, the heat of emotions, reactions and disputations, the speed of experimentation, testing and adaptation, force ideas to cohere in new ways. What might have seemed historically,

culturally and rationally distinct is bound by the force and fire of algorithmic, affective and aesthetic congruence. The arrangement of concepts comprising white nationalist and mainstream conservative politics is different, even contradictory (Hawley, 2017: 91–114), but alt-right rhetoric builds stylistic bridges between them (Hartzell, 2018). Contradictory and conflicting positions have converged around ‘radical conservatism’ (Dahl, 1999), united by dramatic performances and expressions of hostility to ‘liberalism’. At one end is the ‘alt-right’ critique of what paleoconservative intellectual Samuel T. Francis called ‘the universalist world-view’ for which ‘there is neither history nor race nor even species, neither specific cultures nor particular peoples nor meaningful boundaries’ and which, he says, ‘has assumed several different names: Marxism, liberalism, globalism, egalitarianism’ (2014: 48). At another end is Douglas Murray’s charges against ‘liberal dogmatism’ and ‘metaphysics’, which he associates with the continued influence of Marxists (Murray, 2019: 467–8; 104–23). In between are all kinds of ‘alt-lite’ mockery of ‘woke’ culture. Though placing different emphases on concepts such as tradition, order and religion, all advance arguments about natural and scientifically identifiable inequalities which put them in a polemical relationship with a liberalism they understand to be based on denial of nature, at variance with reality, hostile to science and successful only because forcefully imposed by institutions of education, and systems of communication controlled by cynical and elitist ‘universal’ intellectuals, ready to deploy the weapons of censure and censorship. From far-right racist ideologies to mainstream conservatism, that analysis is articulated and performed as an unpalatable truth revealed by brave, honest, subversive, thinkers unafraid to challenge established power. We turn next to how that power is conceptualised, its errors and corrupting influence named and ‘revealed’.

The ‘New Class’

The idea of the ‘new class’ has a long and varied history (Barbrook, 2006). Understanding and explaining the significance of white-collar managerial, knowledge and cultural workers has been such a preoccupation of post-war social science that, as one observed, ‘an entire history of political sociology could be written on the theme of the “new middle classes”’ (Ross, 1978: 163). That ‘new class’ has been thought definitive of post-industrial knowledge societies (e.g. Bell, 1973), identified as a secular and technical intelligentsia inevitably conflicting with existing traditions and authorities (Gouldner, 1979), considered a new source of anti-capitalist resistance (Touraine, 1971) and as central to new modes of workplace domination, control and surveillance (Carchedi, 1987). More recently it has been given various names (and invested with various hopes) in mainstream political discourse. In the 1990s

'third way' political economy, future growth and development were believed to require development of a global knowledge and information economy within which skilled and adaptable individuals could flourish through expressing their creativity and employing their cognitive capacity. Across Europe social democrats came to think that knowledge was a form of capital owned by the worker and that intensifying it was therefore egalitarian and liberatory (Andersson, 2010). It followed that social justice could best be achieved not by limiting the domination of the labour market but by equipping individuals with the social, cultural and other capitals needed to compete fully within it. Discrimination (on the basis of race, gender, disability) was a breach of rights but also, because it limited the movement of knowledge-capital, economically damaging. The future depended on supporting and empowering 'the Symbolic Analysts, the Virtual Class, the Digerati, the Digital Citizen, the Swarm Capitalists, the New Barbarians, the Bobos, the Netocracy and the Creative Class' (Barbrook, 2006: 23).

If such figurations of the 'new class' have been central to technocratic liberalism, they have been just as important for its opponents. In the 20th century, left-wing critics of communism developed a critique of bureaucratic 'state capitalism' which has become central to 21st-century conservatism. For example, the American James Burnham, having identified the new class with industrial managers, went on to abandon Trotskyism in favour of conservatism, helping to found *The National Review*. His 1964 *The Suicide of the West*, influential across the conservative spectrum, especially for paleoconservatives, rhetorically re-describes liberalism as the ideology of 'opinion-makers, molders and transmitters', university and school teachers, journalists, people in the arts and 'verbalists in all branches of government' (Burnham, 1964: 32). Because they believe that nothing in mutable human nature hinders the establishment of peace, freedom, justice and wellbeing (1964: 50), liberals, Burnham argues, conceive of social problems as outcomes of ignorance and badly designed institutions. Consequently, politics becomes 'education generalised' (1964: 72) and liberalism, elevating justice over freedom, increases state power over individuals while failing to defend the nation from enemies without and criminals within. It is blinded to reality by its egalitarianism, the 'quantitative reduction of human beings to Common Man' and the rejection of 'qualitative distinctions' (1964: 288).

For later writers such as Irving Kristol, also once committed to Trotskyism (Kristol, 1977), the new class consisted of a very wide range of occupations: 'scientists, teachers and educational administrators, journalists and others in the communications industries' and 'psychologists, social workers, those lawyers and doctors who make their careers in the expanding public sector, city planners, the staffs of large foundations, the upper level of the government bureaucracy' (Kristol, 1978: 27) – a wide range of roles, aligned and linked with the welfare

state, and targets for neoliberal critiques of state inefficiency. Paul Gottfried, an academic, former student of Marcuse (and mentor to Richard Spencer), has effectively updated Burnham by drawing on Hayek, von Mises and Ruggiero (Gottfried, 1999: 9–11), although here, instead of suicide, liberals have committed ‘patricide’ (1999: xi), abandoning their 19th-century progenitors for social planning in the name of ‘humanitarian and “scientific” goals’ achieved through managerial and judicial intervention (1999: 5). Welfare ‘entitlements’ are symptoms of the new class capture of the state, creating permanent clients to keep it in power, supplanting Republican ideals of simplicity and frugality with self-indulgence and luxury, turning aristocratic vices into virtues (1999: 34–5). Socialism has been replaced by ‘a more enduring form of collectivism’ and administration converted into ‘an instrument of equity’ (1999: 55); ideals of pluralism and cultural inclusion disguise ‘behavioural coercion’ of those who ‘think differently’ (1999: 88). Of particular harm, says Gottfried, are the ‘antisocial postmodernist values of New Class verbalists’ (1999: 72) who have subverted education by turning it into a means for shaping ‘social personality’. That position is echoed online by Jordan Peterson when he claims that ‘Departments like Women’s Studies have trained between three-hundred thousand and three-million radical left-wing activists’ (Palkin, 2016) and that ‘the post-modernist types have infiltrated bureaucratic organizations at the mid to upper level and that’s actually what they’re trained to do by their activist professors in university’ (*Epoch Times*, 2017).

The political potential of a movement defined by opposition to this new class has been identified by a variety of observers. For example, Paul Piccone, founder and editor for 30 years of the journal *Telos*, long argued that the left/right division obscured struggles ‘not between capital and labour, but between those with cultural and political capital and those without’ (quoted in Raventos, 2002: 138; also Lowndes, 2017). He used the journal to develop the influential argument that new-class cultural power is the fundamental source of domination in consumer capitalist democracies, publishing Marxian critiques alongside those of paleoconservatives and the European New Right, proposing that populist opposition to it is the centre of radical resistance today. In the UK former members of the Revolutionary Communist Party, grouped around online magazine *Spiked*, have implemented such a strategy becoming influential within the British Conservative government (Beckett, 2020). In America, conservative libertarian Murray Rothbard advocated a strategy of ‘right-wing populism’ shaped by antagonism to ‘politicians and bureaucrats allied with ... powerful corporate and Old Money financial elites ... Ivy League academics and media elites, who constitute the opinion-moulding class in society’ (Rothbard, 1992). For F.H. Buckley, law professor, senior editor at the *American Spectator* and speechwriter for Trump, his candidate stood opposed to the ‘new class’ (Buckley, 2016)

and won because people wanted to destroy the administrative state it had created, bringing down the aristocracy of ‘well-credentialed’ elites ‘atop the greasy pole’ (Buckley, 2018). Steve Bannon, speaking at CPAC in 2017 while still working for the Trump administration, stated that the three goals of the presidency would be national security, economic nationalism and ‘deconstruction of the administrative state’.

A range of ideological currents – conservatism, nationalism, ethnonationalism, libertarianism – share a critique of the liberal state which gives to it a cultural and intellectual rather than economic class character. That critique emphasises the linguistic and discursive power of ‘new class’ intellectuals, exercised through institutions of culture, communication and legal regulation, oppressing or victimising those with contrary cultural, political and ethical orientations. Today this analysis is the basis of a broad-based systematic challenge to the technocratic politics of third-way neoliberalism and globalisation. The new class is the common enemy, under a variety of names: ‘the establishment’, ‘the swamp’, ‘the blob’, ‘the cathedral’. Because followers can characterise members of these groups variously as bureaucrats, intellectuals, civil servants, climate scientists, gender theorists, feminists, public sector workers, journalists, screenwriters, specific ethnic groups and so on, this antagonism sustains an otherwise unlikely alliance of Trump supporters, online ‘Men Going Their Own Way’, Christian Identity militias, radical libertarians, ethnonationalists, anti-feminists, American paleoconservatives, ‘race realists’, anti-Muslims, anti-communists. Online and offline that equivalence is intensified through common rhetorical repertoires, shared reference points, forms and styles of argumentation which make up a distinct ‘community of discourse’ (Salazar, 2018), a counter-cultural rhetoric of enmity against the ‘verbalists’.

Figures of Anti-Liberalism

Critical sociological analysis of the new class sees it as an outcome of high-level features of modernity – secularisation, bureaucratisation, de-traditionalisation – and also of specific changes to family structure and labour markets, the blurring of national-cultural boundaries, the extension of governmental pastoral power. But contemporary reactionary politics finds these things to be effects, not causes, manifestations of the political predilections and interests of the new class. Similarly, claims to equality made on behalf of various groups, because they lack a basis in natural reality, must be mystifications of new class ideology. Thus ‘identity politics’ can be explained not with reference to histories of economic or juridical organisation but to strategic political intervention. Peterson, in a lecture criticising the concept of ‘white privilege’, says he ‘can’t quite figure out why the postmodernists have made the canonical distinctions they’ve made – race, ethnicity, sexual proclivity, sexual

gender identity'. His answer is that 'you privilege some of those dimensions over the other' because 'it sustains your bloody Marxist interpretation, that's why'.

For any ideological formation 'naming the enemy', revealing its hand and enumerating its guises is important political work. In this case that work is focused on awakening people to the presence of the 'new class', the varied guises it may take, showing how we are dominated by it and dispelling its mythology. Online culture has generated a variety of new figures and tropes for achieving this goal. In the past the new class has been metaphorised as the 'bureaucrat', 'civil servant', 'academic' and 'journalist'. Anonymous posting boards such as 4chan – in its day an incredibly influential part of a 'deep vernacular web' (Zeeuw and Tuters, 2020), a source of 'memetic antagonism' (Tuters and Hagen, 2020) and of munitions for semiotic warfare against rules of all kinds (Hine et al., 2017; Tuters et al., 2018) – have helped create and propagate other mythical, metaphorical, 'archetypes' such as the 'Social Justice Warrior' (Massanari and Chess, 2018). Amplified through Gamergate, the mytheme of the 'SJW' connotes a 'monstrous feminine' figure (Massanari and Chess, 2018), a student, a millennial, a young woman aggressively sanctioning others, irrational yet powerful, superficially motivated by political commitment but in truth by a desire for social approval and advance in the corrupt world of the new class. That class is figured as the 'Cultural Marxist'. This label for a range of perspectives in social and political theory predates the internet. Its origins lie in paleo-conservative writing from where it has developed into a conspiracy theory, holding that acolytes of the Frankfurt School are enacting a plan to undermine America by promoting feminism and anti-racism (Jamin, 2014). Online the idea has taken on new life (Richardson, 2015; Manavis, 2019), becoming shorthand for the argument that claims to racial or gender equality are a spurious invention of those with a sinister hidden 'agenda' (Peterson, 2017; Murray, 2019). The Cultural Marxist is a jargonising guru mesmerising impressionable students, exploiting them financially while covertly and calculatedly destroying Western culture by encouraging immigration. The idea has been taken up by Members of Parliament and circulated in magazines such as *The Spectator* (Walker, 2019). Along with the 'SJW', the figure is central to a political rhetoric which has emerged from the fusion of offline and online reactionary spaces, the inhabitants of which see themselves as involved in a war for hearts and minds, teaching others to see the invisible left-hand behind events, and to learn how to protect themselves by becoming part of the cultural, intellectual and moral resistance. Jordan Peterson, for instance, advises school students to leave their classes if teachers begin discussing diversity, inclusivity or equity, to video it and post it to YouTube (Peterson, 2018). Such awareness and resistance are most powerfully conveyed through the rhetoric of 'the red pill'.

In a 1976 interview French New Right theorist Alain de Benoist advocated an ‘awakening’, a metaphysical, metapolitical, cultural struggle against the ideology of egalitarianism which convinces people by appealing to universal reason. Its opponents had to speak to ‘the heart and soul’, using ‘images rather than concepts’ in order to ‘bring to the surface a sensibility which has been repressed in the unconscious of our peoples by two-thousand years of egalitarianism’ (quoted in Taguieff, 1993: 111). Such an affective politics of the image, structured by the trope of awakening, and of ‘revelation’, is captured by the ‘red pill’, a reference to the film *The Matrix*, in which the hero is invited to take a red pill which will enable him to see beyond illusion, the reality that humanity is trapped in a computer simulation (Ging, 2017; Aikin, 2019). Online, ‘taking the red pill’ or being ‘red pillled’ names an experience of political-cultural awakening, the revelation that the new class (in media, government and education) is propagating falsehoods in which they do not themselves believe: the universality of humanity, natural equality, progress. Shared stories of taking the red pill are conversion narratives about the struggle to open the mind, of finding the courage to go beyond the boundaries of conventional thought and discourse, accepting that the natural facts of inequality are the basis for true political reasoning. As Lewis notes, these narratives often manifest as personal ‘ideological testimonials’, a common form of online ‘influencer’ marketing (2018: 25–8).

Red-pilling, then, is a familiar trope about political consciousness, here connected with powerful tropes of secrecy and revelation. YouTuber Paul Joseph Watson is typical in regularly titling videos ‘The Truth About...’ and ‘What they’re NOT telling you’ (Finlayson, 2020), as is men’s rights podcaster Mike Cernovich when he documents ‘fake news’ in his book *Hoaxed: Everything They Told You is a Lie*. These themes have a lineage in liberal conceptions of publicity and transparency where they are a means for the regulation of government. But stories of the red pill, rather than emphasise transparency, scrutiny and deliberation, focus on the subject of revelation who learns to recognise the hidden meaning of words and how to give things their true name. The red pill inoculates individuals from infection by liberalism. It’s taking is part of a hero’s journey across the gap separating conventional thinking from ideas which, because they are ‘edgy’, beyond the boundaries, are proof of the free, independent, spirit articulating them. Thus the red pill trope sanctions unconventional, profane speech, objections to which are to be expected from the NPCs, and proof of true insight. Tactics of demonstrative disruption and rejection of norms follow: calls to boycott classes, ‘politically incorrect’ discourse, performed rejections of the precepts of egalitarianism, circulating unreadable or seemingly meaningless memes and ‘copypasta’ (Topinka, forthcoming). The space of digital media is, then, a theatre of ‘culture war’, a proving ground for those

demonstrating their skill at semiotic combat, their individualism and freedom. It is also a marketplace.

Neoliberal Salvation

The unifying ‘essence’ of contemporary radical conservatism (online and offline) is hostility to ‘the new class’ and to its works: cultural and economic globalisation, the erosion of national cultures, gender equality, racial diversity, the deregulation of labour markets and other goals of ‘knowledge economy’ social democrats, third-way progressives, New Democrats. In this respect we might see such reactionary politics as a formation largely opposed to neoliberalism. However, hostility to technocrats is also part of a Hayekian objection to the extension of state power in the name of social justice (Hawley, 2017: 34–5; Slobodian, 2018). That connection in theory is affirmed in style.

Neoliberalism is not only a political and economic philosophy. It is also a means of governing through practices of the self, shaped by an ideal of the ‘entrepreneurial subject’ (Foucault, 2008) immersed in competition, seeking always to ‘maximize his results by exposing himself to risks and taking full responsibility for possible failures’ (Dardot and Laval, 2013). That subject – imbued with the ‘new spirit’ of capitalism – is an expression of what McNay describes as the ‘wide-ranging application of the idea of human capital to decipher all kinds of social relations, from education, genetics, social mobility and migration to the most intimate of interactions’ (2009: 59), interpellating us, as Wendy Brown argues, as ‘entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life’ (Brown, 2005: 42). To take the red pill is to accept such an interpellation without reservation; to see that behind the mystifications of the SJWs and Cultural Marxists, reality is a power struggle between unequals. Thus, on the men’s rights red pill forum on Reddit, the central revelation is that sexual and marriage relations, which men are said to be naturally inclined to think of ‘idealistically’, are really domains of economic and genetic competition: women seek to exploit their partners, financially and biologically, marrying and living off the compliant, hard-working ‘beta’ male while seeking evolutionarily better impregnation by the dominant, aggressive ‘alpha’ (Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019). Feminism is thus construed as a kind of anti-competitive behaviour, disrupting sexual and marriage markets through collective action (Ging, 2017). As one poster to Reddit explained: ‘Feminism is a sexual strategy. It puts women into the best position they can find, to select mates, to determine when they want to switch mates, to locate the best DNA possible, and to garner the most resources they can individually achieve’ (quoted in Van Valkenburgh, 2018: 6). The appeal of the red pill is that it frees those who take it from the false-consciousness of egalitarianism, enabling them to improve their strategic action in market situations. Participants in

men's rights forums seek education in how to project 'alpha-male' qualities, using 'pick-up' techniques to become profitable entrepreneurs of the sexual marketplace. Van Valkenburgh highlights red pill forum members' interest in rational-actor theories, their application of authors such as Becker and Baumeister to sexual relationships as a praxeology, increasing 'Sexual Market Value' (2018: 14–15).

This orientation is reaffirmed – and naturalised – by the competitive and acquisitive format of online communication platforms and by online cultures of 'debate'. In its theory of human action neoliberalism 'prioritizes an agonistic dimension: competition and rivalry' (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 103). For Schumpeter the entrepreneurial motivation wasn't merely hedonistic or dynastic but marked by a 'will to conquer', to 'prove oneself superior to others'. Economic action was 'akin to sport', featuring 'financial races, or rather boxing-matches' in which financial outcome is secondary to the display of one's victory. In online political culture such competition is celebrated and has economic value. The heroic individual, freed from convention, can enact opposition to the SJWs and Cultural Marxists, in a competition through which he proves himself. Structured as reward-based systems for the creation and distribution of communicative content, social media platforms, where value and success are measured in upvotes, karma and subscribers, induce and naturalise behaviours oriented to the achievement and celebration of remunerative success in the 'marketplace of ideas'. Free speech and debate are understood not primarily as means for verifying constative utterances but as domains for the demonstration of transgressive discursive skill. Thus, for example, the phenomena of 'internet blood-sports', 'no-holds barred' debate about 'prohibited' topics, of video compilations of clips titled 'X destroys SJW', 'X's savage comebacks', posted as proof of success in virtuous combat. Similarly, discourses of 'resilience' often associated with neoliberal modes of governmentality are reworked and repurposed within forums filled with advice on fitness, gym culture, the use of nootropics as well as reading lists and other guides on self-development. One has to learn to protect oneself from the intrusions and depredations of liberal modernity, to see when one is being fooled and live outside of society. YouTuber Paul Joseph Watson writes that 'The battle begins at home', against feelings of depression and self-loathing, and one must learn self-respect so as to be able to escape false reality. Cernovich's *Gorilla Mindset*, subtitled 'how to control your thoughts and emotions to live life on your own terms', offers techniques to help readers become confident, maintain focus, be physically fit and financially secure by branding themselves (what he calls 'You Inc.').

For all that it appears as a restorationist critique of third-way neoliberalism, this contemporary configuration of reactionary politics is very much in tune – affectively and aesthetically – with the rhythms and styles

of what Byun-Hul Chan calls the 'achievement society'. It celebrates heroic individualism, expressed as manly and victorious conduct in marketplaces of all kinds. It does not question the commodification of the self but reveals selves to have been priced incorrectly, the market rigged by SJWs, Cultural Marxists and administrative-state bureaucrats who let the wrong people win the competition. The subjects to whom it appeals are told that they can and should be the very best kind of human capital, honed by natural and cultural evolution. They are advised to prove this by waging a culture war which begins as a battle to free the self from the illusions of liberalism and acquire the confidence and self-reliance needed to be truly autonomised and responsabilised. We might say that such a politics invokes class consciousness but that, lacking a concept of class, it adverts to consciousness of the self. Online, collective political identifications are formed not out of geographic coincidence or 'objective' interests but as 'affective publics', agglomerations of selves, 'mobilized and connected, identified and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment' (Papacharissi, 2016). Thus, as Ging finds of men's rights forums, the discourse is more cultural than political, marked by 'preoccupation with men's personal relationships and psychological and emotional pain rather than with collective political action' (2017: 648). Online political celebrities interpret the world for their followers, showing them what has been hidden. They cultivate 'charismatic authority', offering not so much a programme for a political movement as the promise, in Weber's words, 'to effect a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm' (Weber, 1978: 245), a personal rather than political salvation. Weber also observed that charismatic authority rejects 'rational economic conduct' (1978: 244), generating income through 'honorific gifts, dues and other voluntary contributions' (1978: 1113) from which followers might obtain special access to the charismatic and a share in their esteem (1978: 1119).

The structures of social media celebrity reproduce this kind of relationship. Subscription to a channel is a basic form of membership of a community. But here rational accumulation of wealth affirms rather than undermines the charismatic's authority, proving competitive fitness. When Jordan Peterson jokes to podcast host Joe Rogan that he has found a way 'to monetise SJW's' it is a joke but also evidence of his virtuous entrepreneurship, and of the rewards that will flow to those who come to share his truth by clicking like and subscribe. Here, form and content are as one. Online one can inhabit ideological conflict anywhere and all the time. Its very ubiquity is evidence of a political-economic ontology which demands that one participate in that online conflict, intensify it and win it. Success as an ideological entrepreneur is its own reward and its own proof.

Conclusion

To make sense of politics online we cannot look only online. We have also to attend to the histories of ideas and ideologies on which people draw when making sense of politics for themselves. But we cannot only look offline. The economic and technological organisation of platforms changes who has a chance to communicate political ideas, the verbal and visual languages in which they can do so and the relationships these establish with and between audiences. Digital, participatory and shareable media hugely increase the number of people who can act as ideological entrepreneurs endlessly revising, reusing and recirculating political ideas and arguments, moving them in and out of all sorts of contexts. This has eroded the boundaries between and within ideologies (and, indeed, between ideologies and entertainment, fan-culture, self-help and other genres of public communication). Reviewing studies and examples of online ‘reactionary’ and ‘radical conservative’ politics, we found an expanded and fluid ideological family, internally differentiated but united and organised around a concept of natural inequality and hostility to those who deny it, the ‘new class’ apprehended figuratively as the ‘SJW’ and ‘Cultural Marxist’. Its politics is articulated in part as a critique of a kind of ‘false-consciousness’, and it advocates ideological class conflict in the name of restoring natural order.

The people exercising it may not share a unified identity or interests in any simple sense, but ‘new-class’ discursive power is a real power, exercised over the public sphere, taking shape as rules about communicative behaviour, setting boundaries to the narratives of the culture industries, establishing criteria for judging between knowledge and ignorance. It is also powerful in workplaces where an increasingly important axis of conflict is between those with embedded practical skills and those in management and personnel working with abstract, discursive forms of knowledge (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014). It is no surprise that this is contested. Digital participatory and shareable media make available new ways to challenge and to exercise interpersonal communicative and discursive power, training one’s verbal force on the verbalists, transgressing their rules and experiencing the power of the speech-act. What first manifested as ‘below-the-line’ polemics against the communicative authority of journalists has turned into brute contestation of discursive power and rejection of all kinds of technical and scientific authority (of virologists, climatologists and economists, for example). That has given shape to – and been shaped by – the revival and renewal of a familiar ideological discourse of opposition to bureaucrats, academics and intellectuals now central to rejection of third-way neoliberalism and of governments which refuse intervention into economic production while increasing oversight of cultural consumption.

Aspects of this backlash have been welcomed as a ‘return of the repressed’, an upsurge of popular hostility to the neoliberal consensus on globalisation and the suppression of working people’s rights (e.g. Streeck, 2017). However, online reactionary ideologies connect such hostility with a critique of ‘social justice’ derived from and fully congruent with Hayekian and related forms of neoliberalism (Phelan, 2019). It is, as Slobodian (2018, 2019) puts it, a critique of neoliberalism formed within rather than against it. Furthermore, the bearers of this critique are participants in a marketplace, an attention economy which requires ‘content creators’ to adapt to the communicative affordances of platforms which incentivise the cultivation of parasocial relationships with and between ‘subscribers’ and ‘followers’. In that marketplace, charismatic ideological entrepreneurs compete to reveal the follies and the ‘agenda’ of the ‘new class’, offering techniques for resisting its mystifications, ‘doing your own research’ and coming to self-consciousness. Latterly, QAnon has seized market share with a yet more stark political dramatisation, including the ‘revelation’ that the new class is literally demonic, predating on our children, with no limits to its depravity. Here resistance requires refusal to believe anything the journalists, scientists or politicians say; the SJWs, Cultural Marxists and universalist intellectuals will do anything, rig any election and tell any lie, to stay in power. In January of 2021 fidelity to the truth demanded that people protest, take up arms and storm the cathedral on Capitol Hill, but also that they film it, broadcast it live online and post about it on various messaging apps. In so doing, commenting, sharing/recirculating, re-editing/reposting, they became content creators en route to successful ideological entrepreneurship. This is not a post-neoliberal politics but one which demands the yet greater marketisation of ideas and ideologies, culture and consciousness. It seeks an end to a monopoly of communication it thinks is held by the new class, as an act not of political ‘liberation’ but of ‘creative destruction’, clearing the space on which new monopolies may be built. It is, we might say, a critique of new class verbalism formed within that class and not against it.

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Notes

1. On Spencer see Bar-On (2019); for ‘metapolitics’ see Benoist and Champetier (2000) and for a critique see Mondon (2015). European sources for the online right include the mystical traditionalism of Evola (Sedgwick, 2004), the Identitarian movement (Willinger, 2013) and Russian traditionalist Aleksander Dugin (2012; see also Lyons, 2017; Orellana and Michelsen, 2019).
2. See: <https://vdare.com/about>

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