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The Public Eye



In this issue:

Religious Freedom is a Progressive Value • Birth of the Alt Right • Mobilizing Misogyny • Right Moves: Interview with Jason Stahl

After the November election, the growing concern among progressives about the “Alt Right”—an ideology that draws together White supremacy, misogyny, antisemitism, and authoritarianism in an irony- and meme-fueled movement—became a sense of emergency. Followers of the movement were Sieg Heiling in Washington D.C. hotels, and a spate of attacks against minority groups and people of color were reported across the country. It seemed as though the worst elements of President Trump’s base had emerged *en masse* to mark their victory with virulent displays of intolerance. But as with confronting any threat, effective response first requires understanding it.

In this issue, as well as in a rapidly-expanding list of online-exclusive reports, stories, and profiles, PRA is doing what it does best: digging into the fraught subject of the White nationalist Alt Right with meticulous research and broad historical context. This edition of *The Public Eye* includes two full-length features concerning the Alt Right. The first of these is David Neiwert’s “**Birth of the Alt Right**” (pg. 4). Neiwert, who with journalist Sarah Posner investigated the movement over the course of the presidential race, delves into the deep backstory of how the Alt Right came to be. Much of its origin story is found in the bowels of the internet, where “Gamergaters” rose from a band of noxious online trolls to form a politicized mob that saw in candidate Trump a champion for their cause. A uniquely internet-age mass movement, Neiwert explains, the Alt Right has “effectively become a massive mechanism for the online radicalization of mostly young White Americans.”

While many media outlets are rushing to catch up on coverage of the Alt Right, most are overlooking a crucial component of the movement: its grounding in sexism, gender politics, and deep antipathy to feminism. In “**Mobilizing Misogyny**” (pg. 9), Alex DiBranco examines how this profoundly important aspect of the movement has been overlooked as part of a larger failure to recognize misogyny as a primary organizing principle of the Right. Some of the Alt Right’s most fervent support has come from corners of the “men’s rights” movement and the associated online “manosphere,” which for well over a decade have dedicated themselves to fighting the “scourge” of feminism. For years, this movement was aided by a number of conservative “equity feminist” groups that sought to provide a right-wing counterpoint to the women’s rights community; in a sad irony, the mass mobilization of anti-feminists under the banner of the Alt Right has left even equity feminists concerned about a new and far bolder “War on Women.”

Please also look online at politicalresearch.org for our continuing coverage of the Alt Right, which includes a new full-length report by Matthew Lyons, “Ctrl-Alt-Delete”; Adele Stan’s dispatch on what happened when Richard Spencer’s followers digitally descended on a Montana town; as well as a growing list of profiles of key Alt Right figures.

The Alt Right isn’t the only right-wing movement emboldened by Trump’s win. Every January the country celebrates Religious Freedom Day. For years, the concept of religious freedom has been overwhelmingly associated with the Christian Right, which has used it as justification for the violation of others’ civil rights. But just because the Right would like to coopt the concept of religious freedom doesn’t mean that progressives should let them. As PRA Senior Fellow Frederick Clarkson writes in “**Religious Freedom Is a Progressive Value**” (pg. 3), the concept is “one of the most powerfully democratic ideas in the history of the world” as well as “the stuff from which revolutions are sometimes made.”

In an **author Q&A** (pg. 17), PRA Fellow Rachel Tabachnick speaks with historian Jason Stahl about his recent book *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture Since 1945*. The first full-length historical study of conservative think tanks, Stahl’s investigation into the machinery of right-wing ideology leads him to believe that the rise of Donald Trump is “the logical endpoint of a decades-long reorientation of what constitutes valid policy debate.”

Finally, in **Reports in Review** (pg. 21), we look at United for a Fair Economy’s new assessment of economic inequality in *State of the Dream 2017: Mourning in America*.

The coming months and years will require diligence and courage from us all. PRA is proud to work in solidarity with frontline social justice partners and our friends most targeted under the new administration.

-Kathryn Joyce

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QUARTERLY

PUBLISHER
Tarso Luís Ramos

EDITOR
Kathryn Joyce

COVER ART
Nansi Guevara

LAYOUT
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EDITORIAL BOARD
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.....
1310 Broadway, Suite 201
Somerville, MA 02144-1837
Tel: 617.666.5300
publiceye@politicalresearch.org
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All rights reserved. ISSN 0275-9322
ISSUE 89

www.politicalresearch.org

BY FREDERICK CLARKSON

Religious Freedom is a Progressive Value



Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. Photo: DaKohlmeyer via Flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0.

To read press coverage about it, one might think that religious freedom is a concern only for religious and political conservatives, and not one of the most liberatory ideas in history. One would also think religious freedom and civil rights are at odds with one another.¹ Indeed, U.S. history is filled with examples of such competing claims, as resistance to everything from African American Civil Rights to marriage equality have been cast as matters of religious freedom. But stepping back from the heat of our political moment, there is a different, more fully accurate, story to be told, one I think that as progressives we need to know and be able to tell.

Religious freedom is a powerful idea—the stuff from which revolutions are sometimes made. It includes the right of individual conscience—to believe or not believe as we choose, without undue influence from government or powerful re-

ligious institutions, and to practice our beliefs free from the same constraints. It's no surprise that the first part of the First Amendment guarantees freedom of belief. The right to believe differently from the rich and powerful is a prerequisite for free speech and a free press.² Grounding our politics, journalism, and scholarship in a clear understanding of what it means and where it came from could serve as both an inoculation and an answer to the distorted, self-serving claims of the Christian Right.

It was religious freedom that allowed for Quakers, evangelicals, and Unitarians to lead the way in opposition to slavery in the 19th Century. Religious freedom also allowed Catholics and mainline Protestants to guide society in creating child labor laws early in the 20th Century, and later made it possible for religious groups and leaders to help forge wide and evolving coalitions to advance African American Civil Rights

and women's equality, to oppose the Vietnam War, and eventually fight for LGBTQ civil and religious rights.

Such coalitions aren't always easy. When North Carolina Disciples of Christ minister Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, a leader in the progressive Moral Mondays movement, was asked about squaring religious freedom and marriage equality, he looked to the lessons of history and the wisdom of his own religious tradition. Working within a coalition that had long included LGBTQ advocates, Barber noted that the Christian Right was trying to “divide our ranks by casting doubt either among the LGBTQ community or among the African American community about whether our moral movement truly represented them.”

In the last century the NAACP had faced a similar challenge over the question of restrictions on interracial marriage. They ultimately opposed the bans, he wrote, as a matter of uphold-

Commentary, continued on page 20

Birth of the Alt Right

Never believe that anti-Semites are completely unaware of the absurdity of their replies. They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play...They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert. —Jean-Paul Sartre, “Anti-Semite and Jew,” 1944¹

S ometime on October 10, 2014, feminist computer-game developer Brianna Wu began receiving a series of tweets on her Twitter account from someone named “DeathToBrianna”:

You just made a shitty game no one liked. That’s it. No one will care when you die. [sic]

I hope you enjoy your last moments alive on this earth. You did nothing worthwhile with your life.

If you have any kids, they’re going to die too. I don’t give a fuck. They’ll grow up to be feminists anyway.

Your mutilated corpse will be on the front page of Jezebel tomorrow and there isn’t jack shit you can do about it.

I’ve got a K-Bar and I’m coming to your house so I can shove it up your ugly feminist cunt.

Guess what bitch? I now know where you live. You and Frank live at [her real address].²

Wu, the development chief at game-maker Giant Spacekat, and her husband called the police and moved out of their home that evening for several days, eventually hiring a bodyguard. Within days, she was accused by her tormentors

of having “manufactured” the threats; they advised their readers in memes to “incite as much butthurt as possible, so don’t engage in civil reasoned debate. Flame anyone who disagrees...” Two years later, she continued to receive threats at such a volume that she hired a staff member to track them all.³

The threats directed at Wu arose from her involvement in the so-called “Gamergate” controversy, a bitter online dispute that revolved around the internal politics of the video-gaming community. On one side were feminists and other liberals who argued for greater inclusion of games appealing to women. On the other side were men who found such talk not merely threatening but a declaration of a “culture war,” wherein “social justice warriors” used the cudgel of political correctness to impose the values of multiculturalism.

The predominantly White men making these arguments, however, were not content merely to debate their positions online. Instead, a whole army of them swung into action on social media and Internet chat rooms, harassing and threatening feminists and liberals like Wu.

One of the feminists’ chief online assailants was Milo Yiannopoulos, a young gay man living in London who wrote a widely read column for *Breitbart News*. In a September 2014 piece he described the anti-Gamergate faction as “an army of sociopathic feminist programmers and campaigners, abetted by achingly

politically correct American tech bloggers, [who] are terrorising the entire community—lying, bullying and manipulating their way around the internet for profit and attention.”⁴

Yiannopoulos, who would parlay his Gamergate activism into a job as *Breitbart*’s tech editor and later as a leader of the emerging “Alt Right” phenomenon, responded to the threats against Wu in a typically “not-my-fault-she-deserved-it” tweet: “Whoever sent those tweets deserves to be charged and punished,” he wrote. “It was vile. But I cannot be alone in finding the response distasteful.”

The controversy heralded the rise of the Alt Right: a world dominated by digital trolls, insanely unbridled conspiracism, angry White-male-identity victimization culture, and ultimately, open racism, antisemitism, ethnic hatred, misogyny, and sexual/gender paranoia. A place where human decency and ethics are considered antiquarian jokes, and empathy is only an invitation to assault.

TROLL LOGIC

The most influential aspect of the rise of the Internet in the 1990s was the liberation of information from the constraints of the mainstream media—something expected to further democratize the globalized economy. After all, the more information people had at their fingertips, the thinking went, the more they could be liberated by the truth.

Within a few years, however, it be-

came evident that there was a serious downside to all this liberation: while the constraints on information imposed by a top-down mass media had seemingly been lifted, one of the press's important by-functions was vanishing as well: namely, the ability to filter out bad information, false or badly distorted "facts," and outrageous claims designed not just to titillate but to smear whole groups of people and to radicalize an audience against them. The Internet, with its easy anonymity and wanton disregard of the rules of evidence and factuality, by the early 2000s had already become host to a swamp of conspiracy theories, false smears, and wild speculation. As Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons have observed, the 1990s Patriot/militia movement was the first right-wing movement widely organized and promoted online.⁵

And the same "anything goes" ethos applied doubly to people's behavior online. No entity embodied this anarchical and deliberately destructive sensibility quite like the digital troll: the usually anonymous creatures who lurk under the bridges of our discourse, lobbing insults, nonsequiturs, off-topic remarks, and racial or religious incendiary grenades. Their chief tactic is called "flaming," in which they mercilessly abuse their target, substituting aggressive abuse for debate.

"Trolling" which takes its name from the fishing technique of dropping a lure on a long line and waiting for fish to take the bait, was initially considered a relatively benign, if juvenile, pastime. There was even a kind of "positive" trolling in which the "troll" used fact-based questions to lead a target to a logical conclusion. However, as "flaming" behaviors matured and spread, the resulting ethos created a "troll" whose deportment came closely to resemble the dreaded creatures who dwelt under bridges and snagged unwary travelers of legend. Trolls are ultimately engendered by a third kind of consequence of the rise of the Internet: namely, the ability of people in modern society to construct their entire social lives online, with only a nominal interaction with the reality of the physical

world. Increasingly, some people's social lives began increasingly to revolve around chat rooms, email listservs, political and special-interest forums. As social-media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter took off, this phenomenon became not only widespread but profoundly consequential.

As media theorist Judith Donath explained in her groundbreaking 1999 study of trolling behavior: "In the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self, for the body provides a compelling and convenient definition of identity. The norm is: one body, one identity ... The virtual world is different. It is composed of information rather than matter."⁶

This helps explain why the introduction of bad information—false or distorted "facts" that creates an alternative "reality" for people largely detached from the real world—so profoundly toxifies people's worldviews, their understanding of news and current events, as well as their interactions with others. The culture of trolling, by its very nature, quickly attracted some of society's

False or distorted "facts" create an alternative "reality" for people largely detached from the real world—profoundly toxifying people's worldviews, their understanding of news and current events, as well as their interactions with others.

most toxic elements: sociopaths, psychopaths, and sadists. And that, in turn, had a profound political effect.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TROLLING

A disturbing study released in 2014 by a team of psychologists led by Erin E. Buckels of the University of Manitoba sketched out a personality profile of trolls, focusing particularly on people attracted to "antisocial" uses of the Web. Buckels' results found that many trolls share what psychologists call the "Dark Tetrad" of psychological traits: Machiavellianism (willing deception and manipulation), narcissism (self-obsession and egotism), psychopathy (an utter absence of empathy or remorse), and sadism (enjoyment of the suffering of oth-

ers). The correlation of trolls with the last of these—sadism—was particularly powerful.⁷

"Both trolls and sadists feel sadistic glee at the distress of others," Buckels wrote. "Sadists just want to have fun ... and the Internet is their playground!"

And the more time a person spends exclusively online (as opposed to in the material world) the stronger the connection becomes, Buckels found.

Buckels' study also found that even though trolls have an outsized influence on Internet discourse, they comprise only a small percentage of Web users—just 5.6 percent of the survey's respondents said they enjoyed trolling, while some 41 percent reported they don't engage with other people online at all. Some trolled merely for fun, while others were driven by personal motivations, including politics.

As it happens, Buckels explained by email, there is, in general, a high correlation of these "Dark Tetrad" traits with another important mass-psychological phenomenon known as "social dominance orientation," or SDO. It's based on

the recognition that people orient themselves socially based on a kind of fundamental view: do they believe people are inherently equal, or unequal? Psychologists have tested people accordingly, devising an "SDO scale" that measures a person's level of preference for hierarchy based on inherent inequalities within any social system, as well as the concurring desire for domination over lower-status groups.

The original 1994 study that designed the SDO scale asked participants whether they favored ideas such as "increased social equality," "increased economic equality," or simply "equality" itself. Conversely, subjects were asked whether they agreed that "some people are just more deserving than others" and that

“This country would be better off if we cared less about how equal all people were.”⁸ SDO trolls, by dint of their personalities, were often inclined not only to share but to act out right-wing political views, often of the extremist variety.

“In short,” writes Robert Altemeyer, a psychologist who’s studied authoritarianism, “in social dominators’ way of thinking, equality should not be a cen-

turalists.¹⁰

White nationalism quickly devolved from its original claim—to be simply promoting the interests of ethnic Whites—to, by the late ‘90s, demonizing non-Whites and LGBTQ people, as well as embracing far-right undercurrents of antisemitism and conspiracism. And indeed, many of the movement’s leaders displayed the kind of personal-

the decade wore on, the far-right conspiracists fixated on the idea of “political correctness” as a form of what they called “Cultural Marxism.” This idea grew from a fundamentally antisemitic White nationalist theory: that a small group of Jewish philosophers at Columbia University in the 1930s had devised an unorthodox form of Marxism that aimed to destroy American culture by convincing mainstream Americans that White ethnic pride is bad, sexual liberation is good, and traditional American “family values” and Christianity are bigoted and reactionary. (Among the subscribers to this theory, circulating in far-right circles since the ‘90s, was the right-wing Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, who in 2011 slaughtered 69 children at a Norway youth camp after detonating a series of bombs in Oslo that killed eight.¹¹)

The audience for conspiracy theories, as Altemeyer observes, is often comprised of right-wing authoritarians: people who are inclined to insist on a world in which strong authorities produce order and peace, often through iron imposition of “law and order.”¹² Highly ethnocentric, fearful of a dangerous world, aggressive, dogmatic, and inclined to extreme self-righteousness and poor reasoning, they are, as Altemeyer explains, “very dependent on social reinforcement of their beliefs. They think they are right because almost everyone they know, almost every news broadcast they see, almost every radio commentator they listen to, tells them they are. That is, they screen out the sources that will suggest that they are wrong.”¹³

A LETHAL UNION

To understand the growth of the Alt Right, one must explore the relationship between social dominators and right-wing authoritarian followers. Altemeyer, who conducted groundbreaking work on the psychological makeup of right-wing authoritarian (RWA) personalities, explains that people with high SDO scores—“dominators”—correlate poorly with people who score highly on the RWA scale. The two groups are distinct. Authoritarian followers lack dominators’ lust for power and they are generally much more religious; their hostility is rooted in fear and self-righteousness



A sign at the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, D.C. Photo: Mark Dixon via Flickr (CC BY 2.0).

tral value of our society or a goal toward which we should strive. To high SDOs, ‘equality’ is a sucker-word in which only fools believe.”⁹

In contrast to the trolls who played the trolling game for its own sake, right-wing political trolls saw their activities as direct reflections of their politics. If trolling was often rude and openly transgressive, so were their politics.

If any movement could be said to describe the manifestation of Social Dominance Orientation in the political realm, it’s White nationalism. A far-right movement that took hold among “academic racists” in the 1990s, who contended that racial genetics imparted inherent characteristics such as intelligence, White nationalists followed these arguments with a call for distinct ethnostates that could enable racial separation. Moreover, the movement’s ideologues claimed, traditional White European culture faced an onslaught from non-White immigration and liberal multicul-

ity characteristics—lack of empathy, manipulativeness and aggression, and hostility to femininity and equality—associated with people who score highly on the SDO scale.

During the Bush administration years, White nationalists focused less on attacking liberalism than on attacking Republicans who they believed were failing to “stand up for White interests.” The antagonism created a gulf in which the movement, rife with contentious would-be leaders, struggled to reach new followers.

The White nationalists’ predilection for conspiracism, however, soon brought them the audience they sought. The conspiracy theorists who’d first become mobilized through the 1990s antigovernment Patriot movement found new inspiration in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which they portrayed as an “inside job” perpetrated with assistance from the Bush administration and its “New World Order.” As

in the name of authority, while dominators use hostility as a means of intimidation and control.

Though they are dissimilar in many ways, dominators and right-wing authoritarian followers share an overpowering tendency towards prejudice against racial and ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ people, and religious minorities as well as deeply conservative politics.

Altemeyer's 2006 book warning about the rise of authoritarianism focused on the special kind of chemistry that happens when right-wing authoritarian followers and social dominators come together. He called it the "lethal union":

When social dominators are in the driver's seat, and right-wing authoritarians stand at their beck and call, unethical things appear much more likely to happen. True, sufficiently skilled social dominators served by dedicated followers can make the trains run on time. But you have to worry about what the trains may be hauling when dominators call the shots and high RWAs do the shooting.¹⁴

It was during the Obama administration years, following the election of the first Black president, that the gradual coalescence of the alternative-universe worldviews of conspiracists, Patriots, White supremacists, Tea Partiers and nativists occurred. Fueled in no small part by racial animus toward Obama, the Internet and social media became the ground on which this "lethal union" could finally occur, after decades of internecine bickering among and marginalization of far-right factions. Those same chat rooms and Facebook threads where trolls gathered and harassed became the places where far-right social dominators—many of them espousing openly transgressive worldviews such as neonazism and misogyny—could come together with the right-wing authoritarian followers whose ranks grew with every conspiracy-theory convert and wannabe Oath Keeper militiaman.

That "lethal union" ultimately gave birth to a new baby created for the 21st century: the Alt Right.

THE ROAD TO GAMERGATE

It all began with people talking online about Japanese anime—the animated

cartoons featuring everything from ultra-cute kittens to horrifying monsters, and everything in between.

The website's owner, a then-15-year-old New York City student named Christopher Poole, called it 4chan when he launched it out of his bedroom in 2003. His idea was to create an open forum where anyone could post images and chat about anime and associated manga comic-book culture. And it was an immediate success, drawing a million hits in his first six days of operation. Soon it had expanded into a massive operation, one of the Internet's most influential referral sites.¹⁵

Much of its original success was built on memes like "LOLcats," featuring photos of cats over-scripted with funny phrases (the most famous of which, "I Can Haz Cheezburger," went on to spawn a million-dollar company hosted at 4chan). 4chan also became known for its trolling, with resident trolls creating, among other things, the long-lived Internet prank known as "RickRolling."

But 4chan was also the ultimate open forum. People could register without entering an email address, so most commenters posted anonymously. 4chan's boards became host not just to gamers and hobbyists but also neonazis, White supremacists, gay-bashers, and a flood of pornographic material. Trolling—of the nasty kind—soon became not just the ruling ethos but a competition among peers at 4Chan.

The "manosphere," too, was a major presence at 4chan. An online community comprised of blogs, chat forums, and Reddit sub-communities, the manosphere was generally dedicated to the "men's rights" movement, ostensibly to defend men against feminism. In reality, the movement had quickly become an open sewer of rampant misogyny and rape culture, particularly at the "Men's Rights Activists" (or MRA) discussion boards at 4chan. Within this world, MRAs called feminism "a social cancer," and asserted that, "Feminism is a hate movement designed to disenfranchise and dehumanize men." They complained that women "cry rape" too easily, and, using Holocaust denialism as a metaphor, claimed that feminists had "created" the concept of patriarchy to justify abortion and "the destruction

of men and masculinity."¹⁶

Given the various communities gathering at 4chan, it was unsurprising when, in early 2013, all these forces converged to create the "Gamergate" controversy—an initially online phenomenon that crept over into the real world.

"Gamergate" began when a feminist game designer named Zoe Quinn was lauded for her woman-friendly online game "Depression Quest," which guided users through the trials and tribulations of a person suffering from clinical depression.¹⁷ Quinn's creation, reviewer Adam Smith wrote at *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, transformed computer gaming from a mere exercise in conflict to "game' as communication, comfort and tool of understanding."¹⁸

The positive coverage of Quinn's creation, however, attracted the ire of anti-feminist gamers, livid at the success of a feminized game that was a stark departure from "male" battle games. She soon found herself inundated with hate mail and threatening social-media messages. Someone mailed a detailed rape threat to her home address. Then, in August 2014, a year after "Depression Quest" was released to the general public, a former boyfriend of Quinn's published a nasty tell-all post about their relationship, complaining that her new boyfriend was video game journalist Nathan Grayson. At 4chan's boards, this story quickly took on a life of its own, as Quinn's critics began claiming that Grayson had written a positive review of "Depression Quest" as a result of their relationship, even though, in reality, no such review existed.¹⁹

In a glimpse of trends to come, though, that fact did not matter. The 4chan trolls were off and running, claiming they had uncovered an ethical scandal within the world of gaming journalism. Grayson's supposed breach of standards reflected what they claimed was a pro-feminist, pro-liberal, anti-White-male bias growing within the computer-game industry. Soon anyone who questioned their interpretation of events was part of the conspiracy. Actor Adam Baldwin, highly active in right-wing circles, dubbed the controversy "Gamergate" in a Twitter hashtag, and it spread like wildfire.

Quinn's previous flood of hate mail was dwarfed by the incoming tide of vit-

riol that now descended upon her. She was “doxxed”—her home address and personal contact information published online—and forced to flee her home.²⁰

Nor did the harassment end with Quinn. Anita Sarkeesian, a well-regarded feminist cultural critic, endured death and rape threats, as well as a phoned-in bomb threat that canceled a speaking appearance, after she became a public critic of the Gamergaters. That was followed shortly by the online threats against Brianna Wu.²¹

Appalled by the wave of harassment emanating from their boards, the owners of 4chan announced in September 2014 that they would ban any further

and the threats that were flooding out to women, LGBTQ folk, and people of color in the industry. It was a language of dismissal and belittlement. They called their targets “special snowflakes” and “cry bullies,” derided their websites as “safe spaces” and their hope for civil discourse as “unicorns.” The targets of the abuse, they claimed, were lying or exaggerating; and even when the abuse was factually substantiated, Gamergaters’ usual response was that people on their side were being abused too.

The Gamergaters shared a predilection for conspiracism as well. Feminists, for example, were portrayed as a subset within the larger “Cultural Marx-

ism” conspiracy to destroy Western civilization. But what was once an idea with limited popular appeal was gaining widespread circulation through popular conspiracists like Alex Jones, creator of the massively popular conspiracy mill InfoWars. At 4chan and 8chan, the threat of “Cultural Marxism” became the focal point of many discussions, first about Gamergate, then, increasingly, politics. A common theme began to emerge: that White men were being systematically oppressed by dangerous left-wing forces, and that mainstream conser-

vatives, through their “weak” response to multiculturalism, had “sold them out.”

Eventually Gamergate passed out of the news cycle, and the controversy subsided, to no one’s real satisfaction. What had transpired in the process, though, was far more important. Aggrieved MRAs from the “manosphere,” White nationalists who shared their virulent hatred of feminists and adora-

tion for “traditional values,” as well as gamers and online trolls, had coalesced as a movement. And they continued on as a community, talking now more about politics and conspiracies than gaming, and how much they hated “sell-out” mainstream conservatives. They reserved their most bilious outbursts for liberals, multiculturalism, gays and lesbians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Jews—especially Jews.

Their growing community of like-minded defenders of the White race and “traditional values” had to have a name, and so they gave it one: the “Alt Right.”

THE MOB IS THE MOVEMENT

In 2009, a young White nationalist named Richard Spencer coined the term “Alternative Right” while writing a headline for the paleoconservative *Taki’s Magazine*, where he was an editor at the time.²² The headline was for an article by White nationalist Kevin DeAnna, describing the rise of a new kind of conservatism— one hostile to neoconservatism and open to “racialist” politics. Less than a year later, in early 2010, Spencer founded his own webzine and named it *The Alternative Right*. In short order, the name of the movement it promoted was shortened to “Alt Right,” and it stuck.

The name was developed with public relations well in mind; after all, it permitted White nationalists to soften their image while drawing in recruits from mainstream conservatism. When the movement rose to national prominence in 2016 in conjunction with the Trump campaign, a controversy erupted over whether to use the movement’s preferred name or simply call its members what many took them to be: “neonazis” or “White supremacists.” (This mirrored a similar discussion in the 1990s over whether to call the Patriot movement by its chosen name or other descriptors such as “antigovernment” and “antidemocratic.”)

However, as researcher Matthew Lyons explains, the movement is much more complex than any of those simple terms.²³ It incorporates elements not only from White nationalists and supremacists of various stripes, but also misogynist anti-feminists, certain “neo-reactionary” activists who regard democratic rule as a threat to civilization, as



White nationalist Richard Spencer is credited with coining the term “Alternative Right” in 2009. Photo: V@s via Flickr (CC BY 2.0).

Gamergate discussions. However, a longtime 4chan user named Fredrick Brennan had, that previous October, already created a similar, competing website called 8chan, because he believed 4Chan had become too censorious.

The Gamergaters at 8chan, on Twitter and Reddit and other forums created a lingo of their own: mainly a range of pernicious rhetorical devices designed to create a buffer between themselves

well as some right-wing anarchist elements. Identifying it as only one of those elements is not only inaccurate, but obscures the Alt Right's peculiarly culture-savvy orientation and the strength of its appeal.

Take Pepe the Frog, for example. Pepe did not begin life, as it were, as the mascot of the Alt Right. His cartoonist creator, Matt Furie, a liberal Democrat, drew the smiling character in 2005 as part of an absurdist comic book; Pepe's panel featured the frog peeing with his pants down around his ankles, saying, "Feels good man."

Pepe's catchphrase and image—big-eyed, large-lipped, cheerful—proliferated and became a common part of memes. By 2014, he had become one of the most popular memes on social media.

And then he was hijacked by the Alt Right. Already wildly popular among the far-right trolls at 4chan, Pepe's image came increasingly to be featured in Alt Right memes as the trolls spread to other forums. Andrew Anglin, a former skinhead who was one of the leading trolls at 4chan, featured Pepe's visage prominently at his neonazi blog *The Daily Stormer*; other Alt Right activists followed. Soon regular users stopped using Pepe in memes out of fear that they would be presumed to be racist White nationalists.²⁴

It was only a dumb cartoon, but what Pepe really represented to the Alt Right was something much more powerful: irony. Unlike their historical forebears in the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations, the leaders and followers of the Alt Right see themselves as smarter and more sophisticated, their rhetoric of racism, violence, and open eliminationism wrapped in more wit and humor, at least of a sort.

As Anglin explained, "A movement which meets all of the [Southern Poverty Law Center's] definitions of Neo-Nazi White Supremacism using a cartoon frog to represent itself takes on a subversive power to bypass historical stereotypes of such movements, and thus present the ideas themselves in a fun way without the baggage of *Schindler's List* and *American History X*."²⁵

Pepe is hardly the only cartoon figure deployed by the Alt Right. The move-

ment's roots in 4chan are evident in its many anime-fueled memes, most of them showing cute cartoon girls wearing various kinds of Nazi regalia, or sporting openly misogynistic, racist, and antisemitic texts. Comic characters of various kinds are deployed to ironically promote White nationalist ideas.

The Alt Right established itself primarily through its cultural agility—its ability to stay at the forefront of current events, themes, and ideas by adapting them to its own uses and then running wild with them. Spencer explains that these memes have "power" and are "a way of communicating immediately." The movement takes pride in the inscrutability of its memes and other cultural markers—from the "echo" of placing parenthesis around the names of Jews (a tactic since reclaimed by some Jews), to the use of "Shitlord" as an honorific to describe Alt Right true believers—and revel in using them as a kind of secret handshake. The most pernicious of these is the #WhiteGenocide hashtag that handily reduces the White nationalist "mantra" that "Diversity is a Code Word for White Genocide."

Many Alt Right memes tap into popular culture: Taylor Swift's image pops up to promote "Aryan" beauty standards; the new Star Wars films are mocked for including central Black and female characters. Masculinity is a fixation for Alt Rightists, reflected in lingo such as "cuck" or "cuckservative," which characterize mainstream conservatives as spineless cuckolds. They revel in naked racism for its transgressive value, reflected in their term "dindu nuffin" (caricatured dialect for "I didn't do nothing," used to describe African Americans, especially Black Lives Matters protesters). The terms spawned social-media hashtags (#Cuckservative, #Dindu) that spread the ideas behind them to a mostly young and impressionable audience.

Frequently, Alt Right activists describe the conversion to their point of

view as getting "red pillled," after the red pill in the 1999 science-fiction film *The Matrix* that enables Keanu Reeves to see reality. Alt Righters see it as a metaphor for what they consider to be the revelatory power of their ideology, which cuts through the lies of "social justice warriors," "Cultural Marxists," and the mainstream media they insist is actively suppressing their views.

Pepe the Frog was one of the most popular memes on social media by 2014 before being hijacked by the Alt Right.



Image via clipartsgram.com.

"The Alt-Right is a 'mass movement' in the truest possible sense of the term, a type of mass-movement that could only exist on the Internet, where everyone's voice is as loud as they are able to make it," explained Anglin. "In the world of the internet, top-down hierarchy can only be based on the value, or perceived value, of someone's ideas. The Alt-Right is an online mob of disenfranchised and mostly anonymous, mostly young White men. ... The mob is the movement."²⁶

And yet, by virtue of its spreading online presence, and the genuinely extremist nature of the ideology it promoted, the Alt Right was much more. It had become a massive mechanism for the online radicalization of mostly young White Americans.

INTERNET RADICALS

In the wake of domestic terrorism attacks in the fall of 2015 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and San Bernardino, California, committed by non-Whites ostensibly motivated by Muslim extremism, various media pundits, experts on terrorism, and government officials began raising concerns about the role of “online radicalization” in fueling such violence. The massacre of 49 people at an Orlando gay nightclub in June 2016 by a Muslim man who espoused beliefs from radical Islam, seemingly picked up online, only intensified the conversation.

The massive media attention paid to these incidents, however, underscored how acts of terrorist violence related to the influence of White supremacy or other far-right ideologies rarely received

be fueling terrorist acts by Muslim “radicals” was occurring simultaneously in a completely separate dimension of the Internet: among the gathering White male nationalists of the Alt Right.

How does online radicalization happen? A number of different models have been developed for understanding the phenomenon. Most of them, unsurprisingly, have been geared toward examining Islamist radicals, but their findings fit remarkably well in explaining how the same process works with White nationalism.

One of these theories is called “identity demarginalization,” articulated by psychologists Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh in a 1998 study. It attempts to explain why some social groups are more drawn to the Internet than others.

Dylann Roof, for example, spent most of his days reading Alt Right websites. It was clear, but little noted, that the same phenomenon believed to be fueling terrorist acts by Muslim “radicals” was occurring simultaneously in a completely separate dimension of the Internet: among the gathering White male nationalists of the Alt Right.

the same treatment.²⁷ When 20-year-old Dylann Roof murdered nine people in a Charleston church in a June 2015, both media accounts and law-enforcement officials were reluctant to identify the act as domestic terrorism, despite the fact that it more than adequately fit the FBI definition of such crimes.²⁸ Similarly, when an anti-abortion extremist shot up a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs in November 2015, killing three people, the crime was again not identified as terrorism.²⁹ And when a (White) militia gang was arrested for plotting to bomb a Kansas Muslim community in October 2016, even though the plotters were ultimately charged with domestic terrorism, there was relatively little media coverage of the case.³⁰

But all of these incidents had one thing in common: their perpetrators were all motivated in large part by Internet communities. Roof, for example, spent most of his days reading Alt Right websites. It was clear, but little noted, that the same phenomenon believed to

People with “concealable and culturally devalued identities” were found to be more likely than people with mainstream identities to participate in and value online communities. McKenna’s and Bargh’s study found that people who posted in online forums dedicated to concealable identities, such as being LG-BTQ or a neonazi, valued the feedback and opinions of other group members much more strongly than people who belonged to forums focusing on easily perceivable marginalized identities, such as obesity and stuttering.³¹

“For the first time,” McKenna and Bargh wrote, an individual exploring his or her marginalized identity in an online environment “can reap the benefits of joining a group of similar others: feeling less isolated and different, disclosing a long secret part of oneself, sharing one’s own experiences and learning from those of others, and gaining emotional and motivational support.”

The process of radicalization occurs in steps. Journalist Abi Wilkinson, not-

ing that concern about Islamist radicalization had produced such government efforts to combat the problem as the U.K.’s “Prevent” program, examined the course of various Alt Right adherents as they became increasingly vitriolic and even violent in their views. “Reading through the posting history of individual aliases,” she wrote, “it’s possible to chart their progress from vague dissatisfaction, and desire for social status and sexual success, to full-blown adherence to a cohesive ideology of white supremacy and misogyny. Neofascists treat these websites as recruitment grounds. They find angry, frustrated young men and groom them in their own image. Yet there’s no prevent equivalent to try to stamp this out.”³²

Southern Poverty Law Center analyst Keegan Hanks, who devotes much of his time to monitoring the activities and growth of the Alt Right, explained that the very shape of the movement’s discourse plays an important role in its recruitment: People are first exposed to their ideas by going wildly over the top with jokes that celebrate Nazis or other kinds of ugly behavior designed to attract attention by its craziness.

“You know, people will laugh at these things, just because they’re so transgressive. And who is most susceptible to that? Young minds,” continued Hanks. “The idea is to attract young minds, and of course, they are targeting the people who spend the most time in these environments. This movement is very immersive, and people wind up building their whole lives around it.”

David Neiwert is an investigative journalist based in Seattle and the Pacific Northwest correspondent for the Southern Poverty Law Center, as well as the author of numerous books, including the forthcoming Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump (Verso Press, June 2017).

Mobilizing Misogyny

Unquestionably, President Donald Trump's demonstrated enthusiasm for catering to the Christian Right on abortion—and obliterating their memory of his pro-choice past—spells trouble for reproductive rights. But that's not the only threat to women under Trump's new order. Trump's campaign distinguished itself from those of other Republican candidates by its attacks on women: regularly insulting women's appearances or behavior and defending physical and sexual harassment and violence against them. Sometimes, Trump's threatening and offensive rhetoric directly targeted his Democratic opponent, Hillary Rodham Clinton, the first woman major party nominee for president, from calling her a "nasty woman" to suggesting there might be a Second Amendment "remedy" in case of her election.¹

This rhetoric energized members of a secular misogynist Right—such as the men's rights movement and, more recently, the "Alt Right"—that has flourished online since the 1990s. And it found no pushback from a brand of conservative, libertarian "feminism"—another '90s development—that provides a dangerously legitimizing female face for misogynist ideology centered on overt hostility to women and the promulgation of rape culture.

Effectively fighting mobilizations like those emboldened by Trump's election requires accurately understanding their composition—one in which misogyny thrives alongside, and intertwined with, racism.

PATRIARCHAL TRADITIONALISM FROM WHITE SUPREMACY TO THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

Male supremacism, enshrined in the nation's founding documents, is as fun-

damental to U.S. history as White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) nativism.² The same patriarchal stance—combining race, religion, and nativism—fuels conservative Christian ideology on appropriate gender roles. (Transgender women and men and genderqueer individuals also violate these designated roles.) Especially in the last 100 years, as some women have succeeded in pushing back against the sexist world they inherited, social and political movements have emerged to defend traditional gender structures.

Amid Second Wave feminism, the antifeminists Phyllis Schlafly (a Roman Catholic) and Beverly LaHaye (an evangelical) followed in this tradition when they organized a "pro-family" movement to stop the ratification of the 1972 Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Though themselves prominent activists, LaHaye and the late Schlafly promoted submission to husbands and attacked women seeking careers.³

Abortion, contraception, and sexuality education all threaten the enforcement of traditional gender roles. After the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion in 1973, conservative evangelicals joined with the existing Catholic "pro-life" movement in the creation of the Christian Right, and abortion became "a vital component of [the Right's] fight to protect the bottom line of traditional family values—the dominance of white, male power and control," as PRA's Jean Hardisty and Pam Chamberlain observed. The anti-abortion movement drew together members of the Religious Right and White supremacists and neonazis, who contributed to the rising violence against clinic providers in the 1990s perpetrated primarily by White men.⁴ (The legacy of White supremacy, Hardisty and Chamberlain continue,

can be seen in how "the Right applies race and class criteria that distinguish between the rights of white, middle-class women and low-income women of color." This dynamic led to the 1990s stereotype of the "welfare queen," and welfare reform under Bill Clinton designed to discourage women of color and immigrant women from having "too many" children.⁵)

But attacks on women's reproductive rights have often come wrapped in the guise of chivalry, framed as "moral issues" and "family values" rather than misogyny. To gain wider acceptance, the anti-abortion movement has adopted a framework of "protecting women," vilifying abortion providers as preying on weak women threatened by the physical and mental health consequences of abortion.⁶ That effort has made significant legislative progress in recent years, with a slew of state anti-abortion bills in 2011. Despite this official strategy, clinic protesters on the ground expose their misogyny in calling women "murderers" and "whores," and sometimes resorting to physical intimidation.⁷

In 2012, contraception came under increased attack as immoral in the debate over healthcare reform. Anti-abortion groups have long denounced the "morning after pill" as an abortifacient, yet had otherwise tended to avoid pushing an unpopular position against contraception, largely considered a settled issue. When law student Sandra Fluke testified in favor of contraceptive coverage, Rush Limbaugh infamously ranted about her being a "slut" and a "prostitute" who should be required to post sex videos online.⁸

Set on proving that his "pro-choice" days were behind him, during the 2016 campaign Trump denounced Planned Parenthood as an "abortion factory" and

selected hardline reproductive and LG-BTQ rights opponent Indiana governor Mike Pence as his running mate. In his eagerness, Trump unknowingly violated the Christian Right's strategic deployment of a "kinder, gentler" image⁹ when he announced that women who obtained an illegal abortion should face "punishment." Although Trump backpedaled to mollify anti-abortion groups

therefore opposes equal pay legislation.¹² In such respects, Christian Right ideology aligns with that of equity feminism and men's rights.

EQUITY FEMINISM AND MEN'S RIGHTS

In 1991, "Women for Judge Thomas" formed to defend conservative Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas against Anita Hill's sexual harassment allegations. The following year this group institutionalized itself as the Independent Women's Forum (IWF), under the premise that, as co-founder Anita Blair declared, feminism should have "declared victory and gone home" by 1978.¹³ The idea that, at least in the U.S., women have achieved equality underlies the secular libertarian philosophy of "equity feminism" (also "individualist feminism").¹⁴ In 2009, IWF's then-president Michelle Bernard explained, "we have a philosophical belief that women are not victims... we believe that free markets are really the great equalizer, and will allow women to become truly equal with men in areas where we still may be unequal."¹⁵ This ideology diverges from patriarchal traditionalism in applauding successful career women (and holding varied views on abortion), replacing it with a sexism that blames women's continuing under-

developing a male victimhood ideology to complement equity feminism's rejection of female victims. In 1988, Warren Farrell, who had once been involved with feminist organizing of men's consciousness group, published the book *Why Men Are the Way They Are*, "depicting a world where women—particularly female executives—wield vast influence. Even those women who are less successful have 'enormous sexual leverage over men.'"¹⁹

When men think about women's gains, Caryl Rivers and Rosalind C. Barnett write in *The New Soft War on Women: How the Myth of Female Ascendance Is Hurting Women, Men—and Our Economy*, "There's a tendency to circle the wagons, to exaggerate how far women have come and how far men have fallen."²⁰ Alarm over women's advancement emerges repeatedly in U.S. history: as Danielle Paquette points out in the *Washington Post*, 30 years prior to Farrell's book, Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. worried over the trickle of wives into the 1950s workforce: "Women seem an expanding, aggressive force, seizing new domains like a conquering army, while men, more and more on the defensive, are hardly able to hold their own and gratefully accept assignments from their new rulers."²¹

Farrell, dubbed the "father of the men's rights movement," followed up in 1993 with *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex*, where he suggested that American (White) men were the new "nigger," threatened by women's ability to cry sexual harassment and "date rape." According to sociologist Michael Kimmel, this became the movement's "bible," awakening men to their status as victims of women's ascendancy.²² Like White supremacist movements, men's rights ideology warns White men that they are losing their place in society. Where equity feminism thrives among elite women with access to major communications platforms, the men's rights movement is a decentralized "netroots" movement that draws men who feel less privileged, especially those with employment troubles and failures in romantic relationships.

Claiming rampant false accusations



Jack Donovan has advocated a system of patriarchy based on "tribal" comradeship among male warriors. (photo: Zachary O. Ray via Wiki Commons).

that claim to protect women, his original statement was characteristic of the anti-woman vitriol of his campaign and may have appealed to the existing hatred demonstrated by clinic protesters.¹⁰

The Christian Right's attack on women isn't limited to reproductive issues. Schlafly frequently argued that women make false accusations of sexual assault and domestic violence—her grounds for opposing the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and suggesting that there exists a "war on men."¹¹ Concerned Women for America (CWA), a major Christian Right group founded by Beverly LaHaye, claims that the "wage gap" results from women's own choices and

representation in positions of influence on personal choices and intrinsic differences, and to protect this worldview, frequently dismisses contradictory evidence.¹⁶

By offering a provocative dissident women's voice, presenting "the other side," equity feminists can forego the grassroots organizing of Schlafly and LaHaye¹⁷ while benefiting from extensive media dissemination of its ideas. As former IWF Executive Director Barbara Ledeen put it, "You can't have white guys saying you don't need affirmative action."¹⁸

Of course, plenty of White guys have spoken out against affirmative action,

of rape and violence is one of the most prevalent men's rights and equity feminist talking points.²³ *Who Stole Feminism?*, a classic among conservative "feminists" published the following year by Christina Hoff Sommers, similarly argues that "gender" or "radical" feminists lie about rates of rape and domestic violence. Speaking on campus sexual assault in 2014, Sommers, a scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, repeated the same themes of "false accusations" and "[i]nflated statistics," declaring, "I believe that the rape culture movement is fueled by exaggerated claims of intimacy and a lot of paranoia about men."²⁴ A spokesperson for A Voice for Men (AVFM), one of the most prominent men's rights organizations, rejected rape "hysteria...as a scam" and baselessly claimed that sexual assault affects only about two percent of women—far from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's one-in-five statistic.²⁵

Although equity feminists reject the existence of structural constraints on women, like Men's Rights Activist (MRA) they suggest that American boys and men suffer at the hands of gender feminists. In 2000, Sommers wrote *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*, and a flurry of concern over boys' educational achievements in 2013 landed her in major outlets including *The New York Times*, *TIME Magazine*, and *The Atlantic*. Psychologist Helen Smith, one of IWF's "Modern Feminists," suggested in 2012 that "the deck is so stacked against men that they are 'going Galt,'" a reference to Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*, an MRA favorite.²⁶

Equity feminism's depiction of women as liars with "victim mentalities" dovetails alarmingly with (and legitimizes) the online manifestation of the men's rights movement, which uses more virulent and hateful rhetoric to convey the same argument.

MALE SUPREMACIST HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE

Paul Elam has made attempts at a respectable mainstream image, organizing the movement's first in-person conference. But he also has a history

of advocating violence, writing that women who go clubbing are "begging" to be raped, and that "there are a lot of women who get pummeled and pumped because they are stupid (and often arrogant) enough to walk [through] life with the equivalent of a I'M A STUPID, CONNIVING BITCH—PLEASE RAPE ME neon sign glowing above their empty little narcissistic heads."²⁷

Another site Elam launched, Registerher.com, allowed men to post personal information for women they claim made false accusations (or otherwise outraged the movement) in order to target them for harassment. In 2011, feminist writer Jessica Valenti fled her house under a barrage of threats after her information



Daryush Valizadeh writes at the PUA site *Return of Kings*.

appeared on this site.

Other strains of online male supremacy include pick-up artists (PUAs), who advocate male sexual entitlement and give sexist advice on seducing women; the Red Pill, a community named for a *Matrix* reference that seeks to awaken men to the "reality" of dominant "feminist culture";²⁸ Men Going Their Own Way, which advocates cutting ties with women; and Jack Donovan's "gang masculinity," which calls on men to form warrior gangs to escape domestication by women.²⁹ Deviating from the online movement's predominantly secular nature are Christian masculinists, who, as Dianna Anderson writes at *Rewire*, "have fused manosphere rhetoric with what they see as 'biblical' gender roles to envision a hierarchical, patriarchal ideal world."³⁰ These varied communi-

ties share adherents, though there is also conflict among their competing perspectives.

The virulent misogyny promoted by male supremacists, often couched as anti-feminism and accompanied by racism and nativism, has serious repercussions that play out on a global stage. In 1989, Marc Lépine killed 14 women at an engineering school in Montreal under the guise of "fighting feminism."³¹ In 2009, George Sodini killed three women and then himself at a fitness class in Pennsylvania, leaving behind a website that complained about being rejected by women (and leading PUAs to coin the term "going Sodini").³² Anders Breivik murdered 77 adults and children in Norway in 2011, leaving behind a manifesto attacking "the radical feminist agenda," Islam, political correctness, and "Cultural Marxism" (see David Neiwart's article in this issue).³³ And in May 2014, Elliot Rodger set out to "slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up blonde slut" at the "hottest" sorority at the University of California, Santa Barbara, writing, "I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you for it."³⁴ He ultimately killed six people and himself, though he failed to make it inside the sorority.

The Southern Poverty Law Center's *Intelligence Report* editor-in-chief, Mark Potok, wrote, "Men's rights activists did not tell Rodger to kill—but in their writings, it seems like many of them wouldn't mind doing some killing of their own. Rodger said as much in his manifesto, writing that PUAHate 'confirmed many of the theories I had about how wicked and degenerate women really are' and showed him 'how bleak and cruel the world is due to the evilness of women.'"³⁵

Elliot Rodger's story has parallels with that of White supremacist terrorist Dylann Roof, convicted in 2016 of murdering nine Black congregants at a Charleston church.³⁶ Though the media typically portrays such acts of right-wing violence as perpetrated by mentally disturbed individuals³⁷—so-called "Lone Wolves"—as PRA contributor Naomi Braine writes, "a decision to act alone does not mean acting outside of social movement frameworks, phi-

losophies, and networks.”³⁸ Both young men encountered inaccurate and hateful rhetoric online that inflamed existing dissatisfactions by depicting them as victims.³⁹ Thus, Lone Wolf violence emerges from a right-wing context “systematically erased” by media misrepresentation of these as isolated and irrational actors.

Some members of the male supremacist online movement hailed Rodger as a hero on PUAHate.com messaging boards or Facebook fan pages.⁴⁰ Others distanced themselves while defending their own misogynist content, much as the Council of Conservative Citizens, the White nationalist group Roof cited in his manifesto, claimed to condemn Roof’s violence while blaming society for ignoring White people’s “legitimate grievances.”⁴¹ Daryush Valizadeh (“Roosh V”), a professional PUA and founder of the site *Return of Kings*, argued, “Until you give men like Rodger a way to have sex, either by encouraging them to learn game, seek out a Thai wife, or engage in legalized prostitution...it’s inevitable for another massacre to occur.”⁴²

Meanwhile, equity feminists stepped up to whitewash a clearly misogynist attack. IWF senior editor Charlotte Hays wrote that calling Rodger’s violence a “product of sexism” was a “bizarre response” by feminists.⁴³

VIDEO GAMES, MISOGYNY, AND THE ALT RIGHT

Video games might not seem like a vital social justice battleground. However, as sociologist and gaming critic Katherine Cross has pointed out, the virulence of online White male reactions to increasing gender and racial diversity in game players and creators, and to critiques of the industry’s sexism, indicates a problem with dismissing this as a trivial issue.⁴⁴ Only a few months after Rodger’s fatal 2014 attack, an incident dubbed “Gamergate,” ostensibly about gaming industry ethics and media corruption, resulted in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) looking into the barrage of violent rape and death threats against women who criticized video games’ sexist portrayals of women and lack of diversity.⁴⁵ Anita Sarkeesian, one of the primary targets, canceled

a talk at Utah State University after the school received a threat to repeat Marc Lépine’s massacre and demonstrate “what feminist lies and poison have done to the men of America.”⁴⁶ While circles of progressive female journalists took the movement behind Gamergate seriously, their voices were largely ignored by the mainstream media.⁴⁷

Through Gamergate, vocal misogynist personalities such as Mike Cernovich, associated with the pick-up artist community, and Milo Yiannopoulos, a *Briertbart* writer, expanded their online following, to be leveraged in future attacks on feminism and women. Yiannopoulos had over 300,000 Twitter followers at the time the social media platform finally banned him for offensive content in 2016; at the time of this writing he has more than 1.9 million Facebook likes and 568,000 subscribers on YouTube, in addition to his platform at *Briertbart*, where he has bragged about writing headlines such as “Would You Rather Your Child Had Feminism or Cancer?”⁴⁸ In “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” Yiannopoulos and co-author Allum Bokhari write, “The so-called online ‘manosphere,’ the nemeses of left-wing feminism, quickly became one of the alt-right’s most distinctive constituencies.”

The New Yorker’s Andrew Marantz writes that Cernovich “developed a theory of white-male identity politics: men were oppressed by feminism, and political correctness prevented the discussion of obvious truths, such as the criminal proclivities of certain ethnic groups.”⁴⁹ In 2016, in tweets that received more than 100 million views, Cernovich focused on supporting “unapologetically masculine” Trump and attacking Hillary Clinton with conspiracy theories regarding her failing health and emails.

Following Trump’s election, mainstream and progressive media outlets worried that using the movement’s chosen name, the Alt Right, helped euphemize and normalize old-fashioned bigotry. As *Think Progress’* editors wrote, “[Alt Right Leader Richard] Spencer and his ilk are essentially standard-issue white supremacists who discovered a clever way to make themselves appear more innocuous—even a little

hip”; their publication, they declared, wouldn’t do “racists’ public relations work for them.”⁵⁰

But nowhere in this statement from a major progressive news outlet exists a single reference to sexism or misogyny—a glaring omission given its significance to the Alt Right’s mobilization to defeat the first woman to receive a major party nomination for president.⁵¹ Some respected outlets and organizations, including the *Associated Press* and SPLC, described the movement’s misogyny, but their recommended definitions referenced White nationalism, neglecting to acknowledge male supremacy as a core component.⁵² While some Alt Right leaders, such as former *Briertbart News* executive (now Trump administration chief strategist) Stephen Bannon, hail from more racist corners of the umbrella movement, others, like Yiannopoulos and Cernovich, rose to prominence primarily on their misogynist rhetoric.

These omissions aren’t surprising. In a 2008 study, “The Absence of a Gender Justice Framework in Social Justice Organizing,” activist and consultant Linda Burnham wrote, “All too many organizers and activists affirm a commitment to women’s human rights or gender justice while having no clear idea of sexism as a systemic phenomenon with tangled historical, social, economic and cultural roots and multiple manifestations.” In her interviews of activists, Burnham found “the subordination of sexism as a legitimate concern among ‘competing isms’”; antipathy to the feminist movement (which is perceived as White); a feeling that “there’s already a level of equity and there’s no need to struggle over it anymore”; and a lack of tools for structural analysis.⁵³ (Groups with a better intersectional approach, Burnham footnoted, included reproductive justice organizations like SisterSong.⁵⁴)

Matthew N. Lyons, co-author of *Right-Wing Populism in America*, further argues that this heightened misogyny distinguishes the Alt Right from other White supremacist and neonazi mobilizations, which have practiced a “quasi-feminism” that viewed women as holding distinct but complementary gender roles important to the movement. Especially since the 1980s, Lyons writes,

neonazi groups have increasingly lauded White women as “race warriors.”⁵⁵

Some early Alt Right writers did encourage their compatriots to do more to attract women and root out sexual harassment.⁵⁶ Now even that has disappeared. Today the movement is better characterized by dismissive ideology like that of White male supremacist Matt Forney, who asserts in a 2012 “anti-feminist classic” post on *Alternative Right* that women are “herd creatures” who are “unimportant” to the men who will make history. “Attempting to convince such flighty creatures to join the alt-right with logical arguments is like begging escaped inmates to please pretty please come back to the insane asylum.”⁵⁷ Forney also argues that, “Every feminist, deep down, wants nothing more than a rapist’s baby in her belly.”⁵⁸ Lyons writes:

Alt-rightists tell us that it’s natural for men to rule over women and that women want and need this, that “giving women freedom [was] one of mankind’s greatest mistakes,” that women should “never be allowed to make foreign policy [because] their vindictiveness knows no bounds,” that feminism is defined by mental illness and has turned women into “caricatures of irrationality and hysteria.”⁵⁹

Richard Spencer, the now-infamous White nationalist leader credited with coining the term “Alt Right,” promotes male supremacist rhetoric that includes yet goes beyond traditional arguments for women belonging in the home. Along with his position on women’s “vindictiveness” (quoted by Lyons above), Spencer defended Trump against sexual assault accusations with the argument, “At some part of every woman’s soul, they want to be taken by a strong man.”⁶⁰

Cas Mudde, a Dutch political scientist who studies right-wing movements, describes the Alt Right’s assertion of women’s inferiority as “a sexist interpretation of xenophobia. It’s the same view they have of immigrants and minorities, that they’re threatening their way of life. A life where men are dominant. A life where they have privilege in virtually every domain.”⁶¹

Vox writer Aja Romano argues that misogyny is not only a significant part

of the Alt Right, it’s the “gateway drug” for the recruitment of disaffected White men into racist communities. David Futrelle, a journalist who watches the men’s rights and other online misogynist movements, told *Vox* that it’s “close to impossible to overstate the role of Gamergate in the process of [alt-right] radicalization...Gamergate was based on the same sense of aggrieved entitlement that drives the alt-right—and many Trump voters.” Within this narrative, Futrelle said, they saw their harassment of women as defending “an imperiled culture,” moving into other online enclaves populated by neonazis and White supremacists that recruited them for “fighting against ‘white genocide.’”⁶²

2016 ELECTION: WHERE HAS THIS MISOGYNY LED US?

In 2006, IWF Managing Director Carrie L. Lukas wrote, “In the past, victims of rape were made to feel that the crime was their fault. Many women around the world still suffer this bias. Today in the United States, the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. A man accused of rape often is convicted in the court of public opinion without evidence.”⁶³ Yet in Trump’s campaign, that was far from the case. Multiple accusations of sexual assault and harassment against the Republican candidate were ignored throughout the campaign; when audio recordings exposing him admitting to sexual assault finally brought widespread attention to his treatment of women, he defended his comments as “locker-room talk.” And those comments did not ultimately cost him the election.

While IWF and equity feminism, like other libertarian ideologies, tend toward the conservative side of the political spectrum, there is more diversity there than among women in anti-feminist movements and the Christian Right. This allows the ideological tent to include Democrats like Christina Hoff Sommers, independents like former IWF president Michelle Bernard, and Republican women who might criticize aspects of their party’s gender dynamics. After applauding Sarah Palin for breaking free of sexist attempts to control her image as the 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee, in 2009, Bernard

spoke of bright prospects ahead for Hillary Clinton: “She is incredibly smart, brilliant, an excellent campaigner, and I think her time will come.”⁶⁴

However, misogynist and anti-feminist Rightist ideologies have taken a toll beyond leaders’ control. Though during the primaries IWF gave favorable attention to Carly Fiorina, the only female Republican candidate, a poll showed Trump leading the Republican pack among female voters. Historian Catherine Rymph explained that the exodus of feminism and women’s rights advocacy from the GOP means that, among those left, “voters, including women, who don’t like Democratic feminism or so-called ‘political correctness’ in general may very well find refreshing Trump’s delight in using language about women that many find offensive.”⁶⁵ When then-*Fox News* anchor Megyn Kelly criticized Trump’s misogyny while moderating a 2015 primary debate, Trump responded, to audience cheers, that “the big problem this country has is being politically correct”—code for resistance to misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia. Trump went on to call Kelly a “bimbo” and imply she was menstruating. After Trump’s continued attacks on Twitter rallied online misogynists to further harassment, Kelly received death threats.⁶⁶

For some equity feminists, it’s gone too far. IWF senior editor Charlotte Hays argues that Trump’s history of misogynist statements goes beyond “bucking political correctness.” In March 2016, Hays worried, “If Trump is the nominee, the [Leftist claims of a] ‘war on women’ will be back with a vengeance. And this time there will be a degree of fairness in the charge.”⁶⁷ Sommers referred to Trump as an example of “amoral masculinity” that “preys on women.”⁶⁸ She joined conservative female media pundits in calling for Trump to fire his original campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, after *Brietbart News* reporter Michelle Fields charged him with physically assaulting her.⁶⁹ Trump denied Lewandowski’s culpability, only firing him three months later after apparently unrelated problems.⁷⁰ And when former *Fox News* anchor Gretchen Carlson filed suit against CEO Roger Ailes for sexual harassment—which Kelly also reported

experiencing—Trump asserted that Carlson’s accusations against his informal advisor were “Totally unfounded.”⁷¹

Fields resigned from *Briertbart*, which former executive and Trump senior strategist Stephen Bannon proudly called “the platform for the alt-right,”⁷² over the outlet’s inadequate response.⁷³ Commenting on the successive Alt Right online harassment of Fields, Kelly said, “This woman hasn’t done anything wrong, anything, other than find herself on the wrong end of these folks, for whom she used to work.”⁷⁴

Some equity feminists, like Sommers, may have expected their own elite conservative colleagues to be taken seriously, not realizing that the damage done in disparaging other women would find its way back to them. In response to Sommers’ criticism of Trump, Mike Cernovich disdainfully pointed out that she had previously “mocked women who played the damsel in distress.”⁷⁵

On the other hand, the appreciation for Hillary Clinton’s political merits seems to have disappeared under IWF’s new leadership, which got on board with Trump after his nomination. Trump hired IWF board member Kellyanne Conway to replace Lewandowski as his new campaign manager, which followed the organization’s efforts to peddle palatable sexism under a female face. IWF’s campaign affiliate, Independent Women’s Voice (IWV), supported Trump’s campaign, with CEO Heather Higgins coming around to offer her full-throated support in the general election.⁷⁶

The men’s rights movement lacked these internal divisions over Trump’s outright misogyny. Early in the primary season, members of online male supremacist communities touted Trump as an example of an “alpha” male given how “he insults and dominates women, preys on their insecurities and refuses to ever apologize for it.”⁷⁷ And as though he was directly channeling men’s rights talking points, at a campaign rally in May 2016 Trump declared, “All of the men, we’re petrified to speak to women anymore. ... You know what? The women get it better than we do, folks. They get it better than we do. If [Hillary Clinton] didn’t play [the woman] card, she has nothing.”⁷⁸

While Trump’s rhetoric reflects MRA vitriol, it is the long fight against feminism by groups embraced in the mainstream, like equity feminists and Republican women, that legitimized the candidacy—and election—of an overt misogynist who has bragged about sexual assault.

DEFENDING GENDER JUSTICE POST-ELECTION

Trump’s rhetoric shares more in common with equity feminist and men’s rights ideologies than with “family values” framing—and with the reality of Christian Right misogyny, such as the vitriol of clinic protestors and the anti-feminism of the late Phyllis Schlafly, a staunch Trump supporter.

It will be important to track the growing connections between these secular and religious movements, bridged by an underlying misogyny, racism, and nativism, especially as individuals aligned with the Alt Right, like Bannon, and equity feminism, like Conway, gain influence. The seeds are already there. The libertarian Koch brothers, infamous major donors to libertarian and conservative causes, fund both IWF and CWA. Alt Right figures like blogger Matt Forney oppose reproductive rights, writing that pro-choice women have “evil” in their souls and that “Girls who kill their own children despise life itself and will do their best to destroy yours.”⁷⁹ Pickup artist communities advise members to seek submissive wives who can easily be controlled, and oppose abortion and contraception as a means of weighing them down with children.⁸⁰ And, extending “father’s rights” arguments within the men’s rights movement, a Missouri lawmaker proposed in 2014 a bill requiring paternal consent to an abortion.⁸¹

The influence of ideology on the broader population, outside of active movement participants, bears particular importance with a president who uses his platform to broadcast virulent misogyny, racism, nativism, and Islamophobia.⁸² In tracking reported bias-related incidents since Election Day, the Southern Poverty Law Center found that perpetrators were most likely to explicitly reference Trump in anti-woman attacks—82 percent of the 45 reported

incidents, more than double the next-highest rate.⁸³ In multiple incidents of harassment of women, assailants from middle school boys to groups of adult men parroted Trump’s boast that he can “Grab [women] by the pussy.”⁸⁴

Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL) originally claimed it was a “stretch” to “characterize [Trump’s comment] as sexual assault” (later backpedalling under questioning during his confirmation hearing for U.S. attorney general).⁸⁵ Before Trump was even sworn in as president, his administration’s threat to reproductive rights, protections addressing violence against women and campus rape, and other women’s equality programs had already been made alarmingly clear.⁸⁶ Under the Trump-Pence administration, threats will come from the Christian Right, conservative secular and libertarian groups, empowered White supremacist figures, and, of course, a President who’s shown his comfort with overt displays of racism, nativism, and misogyny. This disturbing combination may now jeopardize a wider expanse of policies reducing structural oppression that had seemed settled.

But the fact of this combined threat may also bring more dissenters into a more holistic response. Loretta Ross, a longtime reproductive justice and women’s human rights leader, is optimistic about the power vested in intersectional feminist organizing. “Now with the Women’s March on Washington using the ‘Women’s Rights Are Human Rights’ call for mobilizations in 616 simultaneous marches worldwide,” she wrote at *Rewire*, “I believe feminists in the United States have finally caught up to the rest of the global women’s movement. I feel like celebrating our inevitable progress toward victory for equality, dignity, and justice, despite the reasons we are marching in the first place: to unite to challenge the immoral and probably illegitimate presidency of Donald Trump.”⁸⁷ ☪

Alex DiBranco is a PhD Student in Sociology at Yale, studying social movements and the U.S. Christian Right. She was formerly PRA’s Communications Director and has written for outlets such as Alternet, The Nation, and Change.org.

BY RACHEL TABACHNICK

Right Moves

Historian Jason Stahl Opens a New Era of Scholarship on Conservative Think Tanks

The role of conservative think tanks in the modern resurgence of the Political Right has been a topic of interest to progressive activists for decades. However, academia had failed to produce a full-length historical study of conservative think tanks, according to author Jason Stahl. Stahl, a historian in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development at the University of Minnesota, corrected this oversight with his new book, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture Since 1945*.

Stahl argues that there were three stages since 1945 in the “development of the think tank as a site of conservative political and cultural power.” First was the stretch between the end of World War I to the 1960s, when the American Enterprise Institute, founded in 1938, struggled to be relevant in a liberal-leaning technocratic environment. Second was the late ‘60s through the ‘70s, when AEI and newly emerging think tanks like the Heritage Foundation sought funding from wealthy conservative and libertarian donors for the purpose of countering what they viewed as a monopoly on public policy ideas by “liberal academia” and the Brookings Institution. Stahl describes the result as a “marketplace of ideas” in which public policy was promoted to legislators and the public on the grounds of ideological appeal as opposed to its academic rigor. The third stage began in the ‘80s with the success of conservative think tanks in effecting ideology and policy making on a wide scale.

Although *Right Moves* was written prior to Donald Trump’s emergence as a presidential contender, Stahl views the president’s rise as the logical endpoint of a decades-long reorientation of what



Jason Stahl is an author and historian in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development at the University of Minnesota. Photo: Pamela Butler.

constitutes valid policy debate.

Notably, Stahl also pays attention to how historically liberal-leaning think tanks have also reacted to the success of conservative institutions like the Heritage Foundation by moving rightward. The chief example of this is the book’s examination of the Democratic Leadership Council’s think tank, Progressive Policy Institute, and its role in helping to “shift the parameters of the debate even more to the right in the 1990s.”

This November, on the eve of the election, Stahl spoke with PRA.

What led you to this particular topic?

This was first a dissertation and then a book, so it was roughly a decade-long project. As any historian will tell you, we are often influenced by the events around us and trying to historicize the present. For me that meant the Iraq war and certain foreign policy decisions that

I did not agree with, but I was struggling to understand.

I would see names mentioned, different monikers of these different institutions that were supporting the war. For example, George W. Bush spoke at the American Enterprise Institute in early 2003, giving this very high profile speech covered by all the major networks. I could find no coherent histories of these think tanks so that was the genesis of my efforts to learn more about them and to understand why they seem to wield so much pull in policy debates.

There has been previous research and writing on the impact of conservative think tanks, including in this publication, but very little published in academia.¹ Why is that, and what are the challenges of doing this research?

Number one, I think at the time when I started writing my dissertation, to

the extent that historians were writing about conservatives and the Right Wing, they were writing about grassroots conservative movements. These were historians who had come out of the '60s and '70s social history orientation, trained to study and trained by people who studied social movements. Elite conservative organizing was not really the center of what historians were looking at. That's really changed since in the past five or six years, and now you could argue that my book is part of a reorientation of the field.

The second reason I wasn't finding much in academia is that there is an archive problem. Historians are trained to go to the archives and dig through them as a sort of font of truth. And when you think about the type of people and organizations I'm studying, the archives just aren't there as they are for social movements, for instance. Social movements would be much more interested in celebrating what they did and wanting to have open accessible archives. This is not the case with think tanks. I can't go to the archive of the American Enterprise Institute because there is not one. I can't go to the archive of the Heritage Foundation because there is not one.

Historians are immediately suspicious if your work does not include the traditional route of accessing archives and this was challenging, but there are ways to study these think tanks and other sources that can be used.²

Your thesis is centered on the idea that the 1980s and '90s growth of conservative think tanks changed the way that policy, domestic and foreign, is developed—from a more technocratic approach to the marketing of policy to both politicians and the public.

If there is a singular guiding argument of the book, it's that. Without hearkening back to some golden age of think tanks, I posit that there was a time not too long ago, when there was a certain kind of rigorousness in policy making and policy debate, and that is no lon-

ger the case. That's not to say that this rigorousness—which I and other historians talk about as a liberal technocratic ideal—didn't have problems. It did. But what I argue in the book is that conservatives, and particularly conservative think tanks, were integral in creating this shift in focus from technocratic analysis to a focus on having an open "marketplace of ideas." As I try to say in the conclusion of the book, this market-



Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture Since 1945 was published by The University of North Carolina Press in 2016.

place could have been a good thing. A range of voices could have allowed for a more fruitful policy debate, but I argue that's not what happened. The marketplace became about balancing existing liberal ideas with conservative ideas, regardless of analytical rigor. I focus on supply side economics as a key early example of this: an idea that had little research foundation but was nevertheless enormously influential in changing tax policy.

You warn readers at the opening of Chapter Four that you are about to make an abrupt shift. And you do. You shift away from your focus on self-described conservative and libertarian think tanks like Heritage Foundation, AEI, and Cato Institute to the response of some of the think tanks on the other side of the political spectrum.

So what I try to do in this chapter is focus on institutions that were affiliated more with what we would think of as American liberalism: those like the Brookings Institution and the Democratic Leadership Council's (DLC) Progressive Policy Institute (PPI). One might have expected them to take the liberal pole and debate these growing right-wing institutions in this new marketplace of ideas. I argue that they did not do that. Instead, they said, You're right and now what we need to do is to make sure we are internally balancing our own institutions. We need to be policing ourselves against being overly liberal.

So this helps to explain the historical convergence that moved the parameters of policy rightward, as you describe it?

Yes. The DLC and the PPI, in their role of making this dynamic happen within the Democratic Party, effectively used a think tank structure to move the Democratic Party rightward, both rhetorically and on matters of policy. I think that this is in direct response to the formation and growth of powerful conservative institutions. It's part and parcel of the key important dynamic in the late '80s and 1990s.

PPI repeatedly used the phrase "liberal fundamentalists" in their media to marginalize and disassociate themselves from both "new" social movements and "old" labor-based social movements.

The corrosive part of DLC and PPI was a denigration of movement-based politics, a suspicion of grassroots, movement-based politics. They accepted the pernicious framing of liberal/Left so-

cial movements that the Right had been forwarding for years, that these rabble-rousing movements were out of touch and un-American. PPI used this moniker—liberal fundamentalism—suggesting that liberalism is more akin to a kind of unthinking religious orientation and that this is the real problem of the Democratic Party. When you go down that road of denigrating movement politics, you are going down a disastrous electoral path, in my mind, regardless of your politics.

I think the Democratic Party is largely still torn about this very central question. How do people actualize politics? Not just policies, but what does it mean to be a political being in the world, in a nation state? Is politics a secluded realm in which you cast your vote and then go back home and live your private life? The Democratic Party is still struggling with this. It's what we saw in the primary. I think Hillary Clinton moved in a much more liberal policy direction than her husband, for sure, but she did not move away from the suspicion of social movements that the DLC and PPI bred within the Democratic Party.³

Of course, Bernie Sanders was the counter pole to that, obviously saying we need movement politics and here's what movements can do. I thought that this was the big missed point in the primary: the debate wasn't all about policy, it was also about the nature of what it means to be a politically-engaged citizen. Are mass movements necessary to a vibrant political life, and vibrant Democratic Party, or not? That's a question that is going to continue for Democrats regardless of what happens in the presidential election.

You quote a scholar from the Economic Policy Institute as saying, "For years the so-called New Democrats have been skewering the left for alienating Bubba by taking up elitist social positions. Now when push comes to shove they are willing to trade Bubba for elitist economic positions." How did the "Mainstream Democrats" become the "New Democrats"?

In the beginning there was the pretense, obviously with Bill Clinton's run

in 1992 and even before that in the 1980s, that the DLC was going to somehow speak for a forgotten White working class—to speak for Bubba. At that time you still have this core constituency of White Southern Democrats. Figures like Sam Nunn, Chuck Robb, and others at the time latched onto DLC as representing the mainstream of American life, one that is equated with whiteness and counterposed to Jesse Jackson and his movement politics of the time.

Later there was a change in moniker from Mainstream Democrats to the New Democrats. That is where you have the shift to the anti-social movement writ large. The New Democrats are to be a future-oriented party that is going to focus on professionals—a new economy and the new actors in this economy. The New Democrats are not just against new social movements, but embrace policies like NAFTA that are against the old labor-based social movements and working class interests.

One of the reactions to your book has been a reexamination of the role of Jesse Jackson and his political marginalization by DLC/PPI. Was this unexpected?⁴

People forget how important Jesse Jackson was—that post-1968 and all the way through the 1990s he is a central figure in American politics. For some reason, unless you lived through it and remember, people largely don't get that.

Jesse Jackson figures prominently in Chapter Four and I think that throws people a bit. At least the first half of the whole chapter is about race and the centrality of race in American politics and the centrality of debates over race in the Democratic Party. Jackson, as a Black political figure of a certain sort, is part of what the DLC wants to chop off of the Democratic Party in order to create this vision of the New Democrat. And so Jesse Jackson is this person who is always held out by them as the personification of the old Democrat, as the personification of the movement politics that they want to be done with, this whole Rainbow Coalition.

What is one thing that reviewers or readers are getting wrong about your

book?

Some have argued that the book is about a Republican Party and conservatism that no longer exists, or even that the book is now moot because of Donald Trump. I would say exactly the opposite.

The marketplace of ideas, as I describe it, is the belief that what you need in the debate is a conservative view, regardless of the rigor of that view. How can we not see Donald Trump as the logical endpoint to that? If you say policy and policy details, policy rigor don't matter, you are going to get a figure like Donald Trump, who says, okay, they don't matter. I can get up on stage and just babble and not even be forced to confront details. It's just accepted that he's not going to do it. That doesn't mean that if he was elected president, he wouldn't find people to write his policies. But in terms of actually being forced to debate and confront the details, or supposed details of his policies, it's taken as a given that it's not going to happen. And I think that is because of where the institutions that I write about have taken the policy debates in this country.

Trump is the natural endpoint of what I talk about in my book, the reorientation in thinking about and debating politics. ☺

Rachel Tabachnick (PRA associate fellow) researches, writes, and speaks about the impact of the Religious Right on policy and politics including civil rights, education, economics, environment, foreign policy, and labor. She produces presentations and speaks on conservative infrastructure and the intersection of the Religious Right and other sectors of the Right, including "free market" think tanks. Rachel has been interviewed on NPR and other radio and print media across the nation on topics including the New Apostolic Reformation, Christian Zionism, and education privatization. Follow her on Twitter at @RTabachnick.

Commentary, continued from page 3

ing “the moral and constitutional principle of equal protection under the law.” Faced with yet another fear-based tactic today, Barber wrote, “our movement’s position had to be the same.” He found his response in the First Amendment, which guarantees the right of churches, synagogues, and mosques to discern for themselves “what God says about marriage,” free from governmental attempts to enforce its preferred religious doctrines.³

The Revolutionary War-era Virginians who created our approach to religious freedom understood religious freedom to be synonymous with the idea of the right of individual conscience. James Madison wrote that when the Virginia Convention of 1776 issued the Virginia Declaration of Rights (three weeks before the Declaration of Independence), the delegates removed any language about religious “toleration” and declared instead “the freedom of conscience to be a *natural and absolute right*.”⁴ Madison was joined in supporting the rights of conscience by evangelical Presbyterians and Baptists who also insisted on a separation of church and state for fear that mixing would corrupt both.

Invoking the words of the Founders may seem hokey or sound archaic to some. But they knew that the freedom they were seeking to establish was fragile, and likely to be opposed in the future. Understanding the through line that connects the struggles for religious freedom at the founding of the country to today’s helps us fight to defend the principle from redefinition and cooptation.

Such an understanding helped the United States Commission on Civil Rights in 2016 when it issued a major report on issues involving religious exemptions from the law. “Religious liberty was never intended to give one religion dominion over other religions or a veto power over the civil rights and civil liberties of others,” said Commission Chair Martin R. Castro, who also further denounced the use of religious liberty as a “code word” for “Christian supremacy.”⁵

The Commission found that overly broad religious exemptions from federal labor and civil rights laws undermine the purposes of these laws and urged

that courts, legislatures, or executive agencies narrowly tailor any exemptions to address the need without diminishing the efficacy of the law.⁶

Religious freedom advocates of the colonial era faced powerful entrenched interests who actively suppressed religious deviance and dissent that might upset their privileges. In the Virginia colony attendance was required at the Sunday services of the Church of England, and failure to attend was the most prosecuted crime in the colony for many years. Members of these Anglican church vestries were also empowered to report religious crimes like heresy and blasphemy to local grand juries. Unsurprisingly, the wealthy planters and business owners who comprised the Anglican vestries were able to limit access to this pipeline to political power. Dissenters from these theocratic dictates were dealt with harshly.⁷ In the years running up to the Revolution, Baptists and other religious dissidents in Virginia were victims of vigilante violence. “Men on horseback would often ride through crowds gathered to witness a baptism,” historian John Ragosta reports. “Preachers were horsewhipped and dunked in rivers and ponds in a rude parody of their baptism ritual... Black attendees at meetings—whether free or slave—were subject to particularly savage beatings.”⁸

This was the context in which Jefferson drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1777, which took nearly a decade to become law. The statute effectively disestablished the Anglican Church as the state church of Virginia, curtailing its extraordinary powers and privileges. It also decreed that citizens are free to believe as they will and that this “shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.” The statute was the first in history to self-impose complete religious freedom and equality, and historians as well as Supreme Court justices widely regard it as the root of how the framers of the Constitution (and later the First Amendment) approached matters of religion and government.⁹

The principle of religious equality under the law was a profoundly progressive stance against the advantages enjoyed and enforced by the ruling political and economic elites of the 18th Century.

Then, for example, as John Ragosta writes in *Religious Freedom: Jefferson’s Legacy, America’s Creed*, “Marriages had to be consecrated by an Anglican minister, making children of dissenters who failed to marry within the Church of England (or pay the local Anglican priest for his cooperation) subject to claims of bastardy, with potentially serious legal consequences.”¹⁰

Such abuses may seem like a relic of the past, but in recent years some Christians have tried to outlaw the religious marriages of others. In 2012 Christian Right advocates in North Carolina sought to build on existing laws limiting marriages to heterosexual couples by amending the state constitution, using language that would effectively criminalize the performance of marriage ceremonies without a license. This meant that clergy from varied religious traditions, from Judaism to Christianity to Buddhism, would be breaking the law if they solemnized religious marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples. And the motive was explicitly religious. State Senator Wesley Meredith, for example, cited the Bible in explaining, “We need to regulate marriage because I believe that marriage is between a man and woman.”¹¹

This issue was part of the 2014 case *General Synod of the United Church of Christ vs. Resinger*, wherein a federal judge declared that laws that deny same-sex couples the right to marry in the state, prohibit recognition of legal same-sex marriages from elsewhere in the United States, “or threatens clergy or other officiants who solemnize the union of same-sex couples with civil or criminal penalties” were unconstitutional.¹² It was an historic victory for a progressive version of religious liberty but one soundly rooted in the history of religious freedom. Clergy could now perform same-sex marriage ceremonies “without fear of prosecution,” said Heather Kimmel, an attorney for the UCC.¹³

Jefferson and his contemporaries saw religious freedom as the key to disentangling ancient, mutually reinforcing relationships between the economic and political interests of aristocrats and the institutional imperatives of the church: what Jefferson called an unholy alliance

of “kings, nobles, and priests”—meaning clergy of any religion—that divided people in order to rule them. He later wrote that his Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom was “intended to put down the aristocracy of the clergy and restored to the citizens the freedom of the mind.”¹⁴

A quarter-millennium later, we are still struggling to defend religious freedom against erosion and assaults by powerful religious institutions and their agents inside and outside of government. Aspiring clerical aristocrats debase the idea of religious freedom when they use it as tool to seek exemptions from the generally applicable laws of the United States—particularly those that prohibit discrimination.

Religious freedom and civil rights are complementary values and legal principles necessary to sustain and advance equality for all. Like Rev. Barber, we must not fall for the ancient tactic of allowing the kings, nobles, and priests of our time to divide and set us against one another.

We have come a long way since the revolutionaries who founded our country introduced one of the most powerfully democratic ideas in the history of the world. The struggle for religious freedom may never be complete, but it remains among our highest aspirations. And yet the kinds of forces that struggled both for and against religious freedom in the 18th Century are similar to those camps today. We are the rightful heirs of the constitutional legacy of religious freedom; the way is clear for us to find our voices and reclaim our role. 🗣️

Frederick Clarkson is a senior fellow at Political Research Associates. He co-founded the group blog Talk To Action and authored Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy. Follow him on Twitter at @FredClarkson.

State of the Dream 2017: Mourning in America

United for a Fair Economy, January 2017



White economic anxiety has been cited by the media as a prime reason for Donald Trump’s presidential win. With wealth inequality at its highest rates in decades, some fear about the future of personal wealth is understandable. But financial instability and economic anxiety are not exclusively White problems and should be contextualized within the broader and more diverse scope of the U.S. population—especially given the fact that when looked at through a racial lens, the wealth gap is even greater, with the average family of color having less than a dime in wealth for every average White family’s dollar.

United for a Fair Economy’s January 2017 report, *State of the Dream in 2017: Mourning in America*, breaks down the ways that race and sexuality

impact an individual’s ability to amass wealth in the current U.S. economy. The vast majority of private wealth held in the U.S. is inherited. Historically, minorities have not had access to the capital necessary to build familial wealth, and the White power structure created laws to keep it that way. The theft of land and resources from Native Americans, Jim Crow laws, restrictions on non-European immigration, redlining, and the rise of neoliberal economic policies have all been successful institutional and systemic policies to keep wealth out of the hands of minorities. The author’s argue that President Trump’s proposed economic policies would maintain this status quo—and keep wealth in the hands of the already wealthy.

The report identifies six areas that are important for economic success: assets, housing, immigration, wages, education, and inclusion. In all of these areas, minorities are currently struggling to catch up to their White counterparts. For example:

- **Education:** Barriers to economic success start young with inequity in the classroom. Black children make up 38.8 percent of the children who are suspended from school as opposed to 15.6 percent for White children, setting Black children on the school-to-prison pipeline.
- **Housing:** Homeownership is a factor in American wealth accumulation and people of color are far less likely to own their home than White people. Thus, people of color are disproportionately impacted by rents rising much faster than stagnant wages.
- **Immigration:** There are 7.9 million undocumented immigrants working in the United States. Mass deportations would be a human rights violation, injurious to many specific industries, and would hurt the overall economy.

Also, LGBTQ individuals are less likely to have jobs and stable housing than straight or cisgender people, and the inequality grows even larger when race is taken in account. The news is not all bad, though. Organizations such as Jobs With Justice have successfully campaigned in some cities to raise the minimum wage and kept wage inequality in the public conversation. Other grassroots and community organizations are addressing these issues as well and working to continue the national dialogue. In these early days of the Trump presidency no one is quite certain what the future holds, but what is known is that in order to promote economic equality and social justice, an intersectional and authentic coalition is needed. Identifying the problems is just the beginning. Coming together, creating solutions, and influencing lawmakers to enact policy with economic justice in mind needs to happen in order to see real change and progress enacted.

-Jessica Conger-Henry

Religious Freedom is a Progressive Value, p. 3

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Author Q&A, p. 17

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Art of Activism

Nansi Guevara, a visual artist and activist based in South Texas, has been creating art for as long as she can remember. “The circumstances in my household, a crafty and *costurera* mother and a father that left construction materials all over the house, pushed me to utilize these discarded materials for new objects that nurtured my imagination.” She points out that what is now called “DIY” has always been a marker of creativity, and a form of art, rooted in indigeneity, that goes back centuries. It is *rasquachismo* for border communities—a term coined by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto referring to the celebration of resourcefulness, ingenuity, and “the underdog” in Chicano/a arts. As a self-described Xicana, Mexicana, first generation U.S. American, artist, and muxerista, Nansi uses art to make sense of her and her community’s experiences and evoke emotion and empathy through imagery.

Growing up on the border in Laredo, Texas, exposed her to complex, often contradictory realities. “Since I was a child I couldn’t understand why some people were allowed to cross the [US.-Mexico International] bridge and some were not.” Nansi evokes Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of *nepantla*, or “the in-betweenness that we experience as border people,” as the foundation for the sacred knowledge of *fronterizas*.

Inspired by the queer/women leadership of Black Lives Matter, the dignity and humanity of the Zapatista communities, the indigenous-led movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock, North Dakota, and other bottom-up, community driven movements for change, Nansi says, “For me it is critical to center the often untold stories, histories, and experiences of people of color and women in this country.” Her art frequently incorporates bright colors, resisting Eurocentric design traditions, and weaves together multiple languages, as in her installation, “Our Tierra Livri.” She says she uses language in her art to “elevate multilingualism and push back against purism and nationalism in language,” which delegitimizes folks for “not speaking in a certain way or not using the ‘right’ language.”

Nansi describes the process of drawing as a medicine to her body and sees the creation of new worlds through art as something that’s also essential to activism. Socially conscious artists are at the forefront of movements and change, pushing boundaries and bringing the seemingly invisible to light. They “are the pulse of the community and art has the power to help us imagine a better world. It is essential in our fight for justice because we need to be able to first imagine change in our minds in order to create it.”

-Gabriel Joffe



Nansi Guevara, *Muxeres lideres de Brownsville, Texas*, 2016, print, 24" x 18". See more of Nansi's work at: nansiguevara.com.

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