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

Three Contradictions of the Present Conjuncture

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

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

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

1 ### *Fascism Ascendant?*
2
3 These lines, written by Stuart Hall,
4 were a response to the rise of
5 Thatcherism in the United Kingdom in the
6 late 1970s, where the conservative New
7 Right was mobilized in the birthing days
8 of neoliberalism as a kind of cultural logic
9 to hegemonize the masses away from the
10 failing welfare state in its period of crisis.
11 Today, after nearly a decade dealing with
12 the crisis of neoliberalism and its new
13 regime of hyperausterity, we are again
14 witnessing the rise of a rightist movement
15 mobilizing around President Donald Trump.
16 Although it is often commonplace today
17 to connect Trump to previous figures of
18 conservatism, like Margaret Thatcher, the
19 neoconservative movement that galva-
20 nized around George W. Bush, the Moral
21 Majority movement of the 1980s, or the
22 culture wars of the 1990s, or even the
23 fascism of the mid-twentieth century, I
24 want to propose that the rise of "Trump-
25 ism" has its own distinct historical logic. It
26 is a protofascist movement (see Jameson
27 1979: 15), but one that is particular to its
28 own historical conditions of existence.
29 In what follows, I propose three histor-
30 ical and contextual contradictions that help
31 explain the rise of Trumpism and the new
32 brand of white nationalist and misogynistic
33 discourse and violence—whose perpetra-
34 tors often frame their positions in terms
35 of a backlash against progressive and
36 resistant politics—collectively referred to,
37 using its own politically correct term, as
38 the *alt-right*. This term, according to Angela
39 Nagle, was initially used by members of
40 its various groups to define "a new wave
41 of overtly white segregationist and white
42 nationalist movements and subcultures,
43 typified by spokespeople like Richard
44 Spencer [president of the white nationalist
45 think tank the National Policy Institute],

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What makes the alt-right such an oddly fascinating (yet no less concerning) movement is that it seems to use cynicism and irony in staging and borrowing language and tactics from the New Left of the 1960s. At a very formal level, it seems to promote itself as a radical alternative movement against what it positions as the dominant ruling ideology. It is a reactionary movement against the liberal center; however, it is a *pseudo*-emancipatory movement that targets culture and different cultural identities, instead of the political economy of capitalism, and its class relations, as the source of today's problems. Culture, rather than the political economy of capitalism, is for the alt-right the real problem.

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

tendency toward mass proletarianization (see Jameson 2010).

Today, for the alt-right, this false enemy has multiple identities. On the one hand, it is formed through standard practices of racism and sexism, thus extending the post-9/11 violence against the Muslim other. On the other hand, the alt-right has targeted particularly politicized groups, the vaguely defined "Islamicists," for instance, as opposed to Muslims. However, one primary target of the alt-right has been feminism. The alt-right is largely masculinist and antifeminist, concerned with the decline of Western masculinity, and therefore feminism has been one of its chief targets. It is not simply that the alt-right is misogynist (which it certainly is); it specifically targets *political* feminism, aided in part by selective female voices, such as the self-dubbed "factual feminist," Christina Hoff Sommers (1995), who denounces contemporary third-wave and postmodern feminism. We saw this, for instance, in the #GamerGate fiasco in the summer of 2014, where female games critics, such as Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn, were harassed online by swarm attacks, threatening violence and rape. This was all because Sarkeesian and Quinn sought to introduce feminist critique and themes into gamer culture, which male gamers saw as an affront to their free speech. They believed largely that feminist critiques of gamer culture were just more SJW "nonsense" and that from their perspective, the critics were being oversensitive, seeking to censor male gamers. The extremely violent and sexist backlash was, then, as Nagle notes, a masculinist response to political correctness, paradoxically to prove that gamer culture was *definitely not* sexist (2017: 20). This movement targets politicized groups rather than individuals based simply on race or gender, since this creates the appearance that Left political movements, like feminism, are figures of dominant authority—it makes it look like feminism is a dominant ideology—despite the continued existence of systemic (and physical) violence against women, which reproduces existing forms of inequality. Going after feminism in this way reinforces patriarchal domination as a social, cultural, and political institution. But still, because it is posited as transgressive and subversive, the alt-right is tactical in displacing blame for existing economic problems and cultural conflicts onto liberal and Left agents.

My goal is to contextualize and historicize the mainstreaming of the new alt-right with reference to three overlapping contradictions. These three contradictions help explain Trump's successful campaign in the United States and his election as president in November 2016 as symptomatic and not as a cause of the rise of the alt-right. It is already popular to make connections between Trump and the new legitimacy given to the alt-right. But I want to investigate some of the possible explanations for this relationship to better assess how it could have been otherwise. In this regard, the name "Trump," I claim, signifies a new historical moment that is symptomatic of these overlapping contradictions. The first contradiction concerns the political and cultural context of postmodern practices of transgression and subversion, drawing on aesthetic practices that grew out of modernism. The second concerns the contradiction between the democratic and commercial logics of the mainstream mass media; and the third deals with the failure of the Left to make powerful gains in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. These three overlapping

1 contradictions are by no means exten-
2 sive, but they do provide some points of
3 reflection for understanding the present
4 conjuncture.
5
6 ### *Contradictions of Subversion and*
7 ### *Transgression in Postmodern Culture*
8
9 The rise of Milo, Trump and the alt-right are not
10 evidence of the return of conservatism, but instead
11 of the absolute hegemony of the culture of non-
12 conformism, self-expression, transgression and
13 irreverence for its own sake—an aesthetic that
14 suits those who believe in nothing but the liberation
15 of the individual and the id, whether they're on
16 the left or the right. The principle-free idea of
17 counterculture did not go away; it just became the
18 style of the new right.
19 —Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies:*
20 *The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4Chan*
21 *to the Alt-Right and Trump*
22
23 It has been claimed that Trump is the
24 first "postmodern" president or that his
25 presidency is ultimately "postmodern"
26 (see, for instance, Ernst 2017; McKnight
27 2017; Smart 2017). This seemingly astute
28 claim rests on the simple idea that Trump
29 is somehow "post-Truth," a notion that
30 came out in full force in particular when
31 his campaign manager and now counselor,
32 Kellyanne Conway, used the much-mocked
33 phrase "alternative facts" to support Press
34 Secretary Sean Spicer's claim that Trump's
35 inauguration was the most highly attended
36 ever in American history (which it was
37 not) (Bradner 2017). For much of this
38 popular criticism, postmodernism amounts
39 to little more than a certain brand of rela-
40 tivism and the rebuking of the real. While
41 I disagree with how this claim has been
42 deployed, I think that it is right, but for the
43 wrong reasons. Trump and the alt-right are
44 definitively products of postmodernism,
45 but not necessarily in the way it has so

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

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

1 encapsulated by Francis Fukuyama's
2 (1992) thesis about the "end of history" or
3 Daniel Bell's (1960) about the "end of ide-
4 ology." The "breakdown" metaphor high-
5 lights what Perry Anderson means when
6 he says, "Modernism, from its earliest in
7 Baudelaire or Flaubert onwards, virtually
8 defined itself as 'anti-bourgeois.' Post-
9 modernism is what occurs when, without
10 any victory, that adversary is gone" (1998:
11 86). Postmodernism is equally, according
12 to Terry Eagleton (1996), defined not by
13 a victory on the part of the antibourgeois
14 but by an imagined defeat—that is, by
15 a cynical resignation that, in Thatcher's
16 words, "there is no alternative," a feature
17 that the late Mark Fisher (2009) referred to
18 as "capitalist realism."
19   This sentiment, of the loss of the
20 adversarial relationship between the
21 bourgeoisie and the proletariat—whether
22 in the form of the perceived triumph of
23 either side—is not at all disconnected from
24 the logic of capital. It is tied to the very
25 persistence of capital to break down all
26 barriers to accumulation. This includes, in
27 some cases, the breaking down of political
28 and cultural barriers, which is partly what
29 the "breakdown" metaphor describes;
30 or in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the
31 constant pursuit of accumulation and the
32 breaking down of barriers force a deterrito-
33 rialization of capital, unleashing it in differ-
34 ent modalities, or "lines of flight" (Deleuze
35 and Guattari 1987: 510). Politically, this
36 has resulted in the *sublation* of existing
37 antagonisms into the very logic of capital,
38 save (of course) for that antagonism that
39 is its absolute point of negation: the class
40 struggle, which instead of being eliminated
41 is simply displaced onto other, cultural
42 antagonisms, that is, class war turns into
43 "culture war." This last point helps, in part,
44 to explain the rising influence of the Moral
45 Majority and neoconservatism among the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not surprisingly, and not unproblematically, the rising attention to cultural representation and questions of diversity in the media was picked up by the consumer culture. Dick Hebdige's (1979) now-classic study of subculture is useful here. Just as the threat of subculture is diffused by and incorporated through commodification, so have the identity politics of the NSMs and the institutionalization of the culture wars been incorporated into the branding logic of the consumer society, which is interested less in multiculturalism and diversity, or intersectionality, than with maintaining a steady base of diverse consumers—the interpellation of new subjectivities—still, in order to avoid crises of market demand (see Klein 2000). Unlike the mass audience culture of the early entertainment industries, the contemporary consumer culture is "demassified" in the sense that it makes diversity a marketing tactic to broaden its reach. But what this context also reveals is that here, too, rebelliousness, difference, and subversion have become part of the reigning ideology when it comes to questions of identity. Demassification and branding are both tied to the commercial diffusion of subversion. Rather than ideology interpellating individuals as compliant subjects, the ruling ideology today is grounded on the inherent transgression (Žižek 1997) of the ideology that seems to rule. Here we face one of the central cultural and political contradictions of our time: if, as I have shown, in both art and culture, and in the identity politics of the NSMs, subversion, far from being antagonistic to the existing system, has actually become part of its interpellative call—that is, if subversion has itself become the dominant ideology (in the case of art and culture, the ethic of innovation reigns over tradition; in the case of identity politics, diversity subverts conformity)—if all of this is the case, what does the subversion of subversion look like?

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

1 Left as just such a bourgeoisie, trapped in
2 its own libertine elitist bubble. What the
3 alt-right, particularly in its white nationalist
4 and masculinist bent, finds most objec-
5 tionable in the politically correct postmod-
6 ern identity politics is what its members
7 perceive as a double standard on ques-
8 tions of diversity and identity. From their
9 perspective, all identities are permissible,
10 save for white and conservative, or even
11 "normative," identities. In this scenario,
12 when political correctness and postmod-
13 ern identity politics are posited as the ide-
14 ology that seems to rule, for the alt-right,
15 its politics cannot but appear subversive.
16 The alt-right, in fact, is caught up in the
17 postmodern interpellative call to subver-
18 sion. What makes this formation addi-
19 tionally troubling is that it also, at times,
20 seems to rail against the consumer culture
21 of postmodern capitalism, making it both
22 ironically populist and at times seemingly
23 anticapitalist, not unlike the depiction of
24 Project Mayhem in David Fincher's *Fight*
25 *Club* (1999), an iconic film for members
26 of the alt-right. Although the film appears
27 radical in its anticonsumerist posturing,
28 the film is outrageously misogynistic in its
29 equating of consumerism with feminin-
30 ity. In the fight club, a prototypical men's
31 rights association (MRA) if ever there was
32 one, the men literally beat each other up,
33 metaphorically beating the consumerism
34 and femininity out of themselves.
35
36 **"Fake News" and "Post-truth":**
37 **Contradictions of the Media Spectacle**
38 No wonder your President has to be an actor, he's
39 got to look good on television!
40 —Doc Brown, *Back to the Future*
41
42 Prepare to meet Donald Trump, possibly the first
43 "social media" and "reality TV" president.
44 —Van Jones, "Trump: The Social Media
45 President?"

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

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

1 fact, this aspect of new media, its ability to
2 share information widely, is part and parcel
3 of democratization in a political sense. The
4 term *media* has become synonymous with
5 the practice of journalism. As journalism,
6 the media serve an important function in
7 democracy by providing the people with
8 the information that they need to make
9 critical rational decisions about how to
10 *participate* democratically. However, this
11 democratic (fourth estate / public sphere)
12 function of the media is contradicted by
13 the commercial (i.e., commodified) logic of
14 the media.
15 As media scholars have long demon-
16 strated, private media companies are
17 principally driven, as businesses, by the
18 profit motive. This includes contemporary
19 new media and social media websites,
20 such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter.
21 As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky
22 (1988) demonstrated thirty years ago, the
23 commercial logic of the media, particu-
24 larly influenced by the role of owners and
25 advertisers, works toward filtering *out*
26 information that is either detrimental to
27 the political status quo or at the very least
28 to its bottom line. This includes sifting out
29 content that potentially offends advertisers
30 or special interest groups. Nevertheless,
31 at the same time, the media interpellates
32 viewers through the spectacularization and
33 sensationalization of news and information
34 (see Postman 1985). Since media reve-
35 nues are still drawn by maximizing viewer
36 attention, and the "work" of the so-called
37 audience commodity (Smythe 1977), or
38 online as the "prosumer commodity"
39 (Fuchs 2014a), building a sizable audience
40 is still one of the primary motivating factors
41 of media production. In this regard, we
42 can also see to some degree the "liberal-
43 ization" of the media in the same sense,
44 as has been already discussed in terms
45 of the diffusion and branding of diversity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 wind-up merchants who will say anything
2 they can to provoke unwary victims, then
3 delight in the outrage that follows." What
4 drives the troll is the pursuit of "lulz"—a
5 cynical form of enjoyment "that derives
6 from someone else's anguish." And as
7 agents of the alt-right, the troll delights
8 particularly in the harassment of femi-
9 nists, cultural Marxists, and PC liberals or
10 SJWs. With this use being made of the
11 most advanced communications system
12 and technology ever to exist, it is worth
13 asking if the concerns of conservative
14 elitist critics like Arnold and Leavis, or Left
15 critics like Horkheimer and Adorno, were in
16 fact correct about the commodification of
17 culture, especially if digital democracy has
18 been reduced to the anything goes, free
19 speech fundamentalism of the mascu-
20 linist alt-right troll. My own inclination is
21 that social media can and do still fulfill a
22 democratic function, but as with all forces
23 of production, must be contextualized
24 within the existing relations of production,
25 exploitation, and the class struggle.
26 Finally, what also makes the emer-
27 gence of the alt-right troll—and Trump as
28 a figurehead—so hard to bear for the tradi-
29 tional liberal Left is that the regular appeals
30 to truth seem to have flown out the win-
31 dow entirely. Even the kind of political eco-
32 nomic criticism of the mainstream media's
33 propaganda model, expounded by Herman
34 and Chomsky, still relies on an older notion
35 of ideology as false consciousness. Part of
36 the problem that they see with the mass
37 media is that its system of filtration cre-
38 ates a barrier of access for people to the
39 truth. They—and Chomsky in much of his
40 political commentary in particular—seem
41 to rely on the idea that "if only the people
42 knew the truth," then they would revolt
43 and demand back their democracy. The
44 problem is that followers of the alt-right,
45 and Trump in particular, already seem to

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

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

Every rise of Fascism bears witness to a failed
revolution.
—Walter Benjamin, "Theories of German Fascism"
(as quoted by Žižek)

So now we are faced with a culture that
champions subversion and transgression
itself being transgressed by the so-called
alt-right; we are faced with the possibility
that not even the truth portrayed by the
media (or truth itself) is enough to bring
about an enlightened counterpublic. The
problem today is less the nonknowledge of
the public than a collective cynical resigna-
tion in the form of what Fisher (2009) calls
"capitalist realism." Such an identification
is built around, first, Thatcher's well-known
TINA statement, "there is no alternative,"
and second, by Jameson's (1994) thesis
that it is easier to imagine the end of the
world than the end of capitalism. This kind
of cynical resignation has been reinforced
somewhat by the visible failures of the
Left ever since the beginning of the 2008
financial crisis.
Recall, again, that we did see a wave
of Left protest movements and resistance
after the 2008 crisis, from the so-called
Arab Spring to the Occupy Wall Street
movement. What was significant about the
former is that it showed how the strength
of the people could be a force of change.
The Occupy movement, in addition, drew

1 significance for directing attention to
2 the capital-class dynamic—pointing the
3 finger at (or giving "the finger" to) Wall
4 Street, using the language of "we are
5 the 99%"—and of existing global power
6 and the cause behind the 2008 crisis
7 (i.e., the dangers of deregulated capital
8 and the growth of fictitious capital in the
9 form of collateralized debt obligations,
10 such as mortgage-backed securities, and
11 derivatives, such as credit default swaps).
12 However, these movements failed to
13 produce any kind of lasting alternative to
14 the existing system (OWS was famously
15 mocked for being leaderless and for
16 lacking concrete "demands"—the imagery
17 alone seems to equate OWS with some
18 kind of hostage-taking situation), and
19 therefore reflected the impotence of the
20 Left. Once again, the Left was incapable
21 of producing change. There have been
22 different material dimensions to each new
23 rise of the Right in recent years, whether
24 it is Trumpism, the Brexit vote, or the new
25 alt-right. But in many ways, they are all
26 reactionary responses to the failure of the
27 Left in the wake of the crisis.
28 Phenomena like the rise of the alt-right
29 demonstrate quite clearly that "every rise
30 of Fascism bears witness to a failed revolu-
31 tion." This phrase, which Žižek (2006: 363;
32 2009: 73; 2010: 152; 2014: 101) often attri-
33 butes to Walter Benjamin, signals what is
34 perhaps the most depressing aspect of the
35 rise of the alt-right as a protofascist move-
36 ment. It highlights the fact that "there was
37 a revolutionary potential, a dissatisfaction,
38 which the Left was not able to mobilize"
39 (Žižek 2010: 152), or in fact, that the revolu-
40 tionary potential of the Left failed by being
41 beaten out by the predominant liberal
42 status quo. There are, then, two ways to
43 understand the failure of the Left in the
44 wake of the 2008 crisis of capitalism: (1) a
45 failure of mobilization; (2) a failure to break

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

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

1 the liberal permissive cynic, both in the
2 form of the commodity and in the form
3 of the law (i.e., equality before the eyes
4 of the law), produces as its symptom the
5 proletarianized subject as its excess; in
6 the case of the populist-fascist, the figure
7 of the other or the enemy ("Jew" in the
8 case of Nazi anti-Semitism, for instance;
9 feminists and cultural Marxists in the case
10 of the alt-right) is fetishized, displacing the
11 centrality of the class struggle (67). The
12 paradox is that, although demystification
13 is easier with the permissive enlightened
14 liberal—identification of class struggle as
15 the real problem or threat—such a liberal is
16 in terms of the class struggle the real class
17 enemy, while those who would be the
18 apparent proletarianized class ally are more
19 difficult to enlighten, preferring instead to
20 blame the racialized and gendered other as
21 a scapegoat. For Žižek, this does not mean
22 that we should simply "understand" the
23 racism and the sexism of the proletariat;
24 rather, what it suggests is that, instead
25 of simply preaching liberal tolerance and
26 permissiveness, it is necessary to artic-
27 ulate the underlying class dimensions
28 of the class struggle directly in nonmys-
29 tified terms. This is why, as he puts it,
30 although "one should have no qualms
31 about concluding short-term alliances with
32 egalitarian liberals as part of the anti-sexist
33 and anti-racist struggle," in the long term,
34 "the success of the radical emancipatory
35 struggle depends on mobilizing the lower
36 classes who are today often in the thrall to
37 fundamentalist populism" (73).
38   Herein lies the difficulty with the alt-
39 right: they are fetishist in both the cynical
40 and the fascistic sense. In their cynical
41 form, they distance themselves from
42 their position via rational discourse and
43 critical interpretation—when one listens
44 to speeches given by Richard Spencer,
45 as deplorable as his arguments sound,

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

"Bernie Would Have Won!": A Provisional Conclusion

"Against the postmodernist suspicion of grand narratives, we need to reassert that, far from being isolated, contingent problems, these are all the effects of a single systemic cause: Capital." —Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*

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

1   SJWs, particularly on university campuses,
2   appear to have adopted the tactics of the
3   radical New Left from the 1960s. While
4   the ideological content of the alt-right is
5   determinatively conservative, at a formal
6   level, their tactics start to mimic the tradi-
7   tional and New Left, especially when one
8   of their chief characteristics is a hypervigi-
9   lance toward breaking taboos. The alt-right,
10 in this way, has more in common with the
11 counterculture of May '68 than it does with
12 anything resembling the traditional Right
13 (Nagle 2017: 28). As well, the alt-right
14 demonstrates that a formal transgression
15 of the existing order is not necessarily one
16 that moves in the direction of emancipa-
17 tory and progressive change. As Nagle
18 puts it, "disrespect for its own sake" mir-
19 rors the modern avant-garde's ethic of "art
20 for art's sake." The ethic of the alt-right
21 has taken on a Nietzschean "cult of moral
22 transgression," that even informed much
23 of early (and in some cases, contemporary)
24 post-structuralism (31). For the Marquis de
25 Sade, the surrealists, R. D. Laing, and even
26 in some sense in the writings of Deleuze
27 and Guattari, madness and insanity are
28 signs of nonconformity. The alt-right's
29 celebration of the carnivalesque and the
30 grotesque in practices such as "RIP Troll-
31 ing" (trolling Facebook and Twitter pages
32 of the recently deceased) demonstrates
33 why, I claim, even anarchist practices of
34 the carnivalesque, such as those described
35 by Simon Critchley—advocating for "a new
36 language of civil disobedience that com-
37 bines street-theatre, festival, performance
38 art and what might be descried as forms
39 of non-violent warfare," and including
40 things like "carnivalesque humour" (2007:
41 123)—are easily co-optable by the alt-right
42 Chan and meme culture. There is, in fact,
43 nothing inherently radical or emancipatory
44 about empty formal tactics such as these.
45 As well, through websites like Breitbart

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

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

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

1 figures at the center who, to maintain
2 power, have slowly shifted over the
3 period of neoliberalism increasingly to the
4 right. They court the Right and the center
5 in economic terms to defeat the Left.
6 However, their apparent social liberalism
7 is finally being undermined by their
8 staunch economic conservatism. Paradoxi-
9 cally, it is the populist rhetoric of a socialist
10 economic narrative, mixed with a right-
11 wing racist and sexist social identity, that
12 brought the masses toward Trump. Recall
13 that much of Trump's economic rhetoric
14 included discussion of policies normally
15 addressed by the Left (withdrawing from
16 the TPP, for instance; criticisms of the
17 mainstream mass media), but couched in
18 inflammatory racist rhetoric about illegal
19 immigrants and terrorists. Perhaps, then,
20 if the socialist Left is so much of a threat
21 to that liberal center—so much so that it
22 sees a rightward shift as its only solution—
23 and if apparent supporters of the alt-right
24 are themselves courted by economic
25 socialism, then maybe (just maybe) social-
26 ism (and dare we say "communism") really
27 *is* our new common sense.
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