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# The “Great Meme War:” the Alt-Right and its Multifarious Enemies

Maxime Dafaure

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## Memes and the metapolitics of the alt-right

- 1 The alt-right has been a major actor of the online culture wars of the past few years. Since it came to prominence during the 2014 Gamergate controversy,<sup>1</sup> this loosely-defined, puzzling movement has achieved mainstream recognition and has been the subject of discussion by journalists and scholars alike. Although the movement is notoriously difficult to define, a few overarching themes can be delineated: unequivocal rejections of immigration and multiculturalism among most, if not all, alt-right subgroups; an intense criticism of feminism, in particular within the manosphere community, which itself is divided into several clans with different goals and subcultures (men’s rights activists, Men Going Their Own Way, pick-up artists, incels).<sup>2</sup> Demographically speaking, an overwhelming majority of alt-righters are white heterosexual males, one of the major social categories who feel dispossessed and resentful, as pointed out as early as in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by Daniel Bell, and more recently by Michael Kimmel (*Angry White Men* 2013) and Dick Howard (*Les Ombres de l’Amérique* 2017). But one of the defining features of the larger alt-right<sup>3</sup> is its overall self-appointment as defender of a declining western civilization.
- 2 As argued by Niko Heikkilä, “through the Trump campaign, there was an opportunity to inject alt-right ideas into mainstream U.S. politics by means of visual and rhetorical provocations.” Such visual and rhetorical provocations overwhelmingly consisted of memes, a concept which needs some clarification before being used for my analysis of the correlations and resonances between the discourses of the 45<sup>th</sup> American president, some of his most extreme supporters, and mainstream conservative media. The meme, as coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 in *The Selfish Gene*, was defined as “a unit of cultural transmission,” and one of its prominent features is that it is viral, almost in an organic sense: like a virus, it spreads from host to host (here, human minds), but also

conveys an idea which is designed to alter the host's worldview. Such a notion can be traced back to William Burrough's concept of "language as a virus" which infects their hosts and consequently creates their realities. It is in this sense that we can understand Milner and Phillips' assertion that 2016 was the meme election:

Trump tapped into prejudices bigger and older than the internet: hateful racial stereotypes, oppressive gender norms, sweeping anti-elitism, and good old fashioned fear of the other. By tugging at these strings, Trump ran a campaign whose platform consisted not of policy proposals or thoughtful argumentation, but almost entirely of memes [...] Online or off, memes emerge when resonant ideas spread within and across social collectives. Factual, objective truth isn't a requisite if underlying idea connects and compels sharing. (Milner & Phillips 2016)

- 3 The second use of 'meme', sometimes referred to as internet memes, consists in "an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media." (Merriam-Webster) Internet memes, also framed as "postmodern folklore," (Shifman 2013: 15) thus refer to the actual pictures or words used to express a concept. In *The World Made Meme*, Ryan Milner notably explained how this new, digital *lingua franca* has influenced and shaped public conversation and discourse, and will most likely continue to do so in the years to come.
- 4 The significance and influence of memes (and more broadly internet culture) on the 2016 presidential campaign, dubbed "The Great Meme War" by online pro-Trump supporters on alt-right hubs such as 4chan's /pol/ or Reddit's r/The\_Donald, is also to be linked to the notion of metapolitics, notably used by key alt-right figure Richard Spencer. Heavily inspired by Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, and borrowed from the French *Nouvelle Droite*, the concept of metapolitics aims at spreading certain themes and ideas among the general public by focusing on cultural and ideological issues rather than on actual politics. It has been mentioned several times by Spencer as a fundamental notion for the movement he contributed to create. This goal is also explicitly expressed as "shifting the Overton window." Another favorite notion of the movement, the Overton window conceptualizes the opinions which are socially acceptable to hold, and how this acceptability can shift according to the dominant discourses within the public sphere. This essay thus not only examines the creation and reappropriation of enemy images by the alt-right, in parallel with more conventional media and public figures, but it also intends to deconstruct the metapolitics behind the movement's cunning use of memes, and the ways in which the creation of enemy images fits into this strategy.

## The foreign civilizational enemy

- 5 In her 2017 work *No Is Not Enough*, author and activist Naomi Klein describes one of the major pillars of Donald Trump's policies as "a civilizational war against immigrants and 'radical Islamic terrorism.'" (Klein 2017: 6) Such sentiments were explicitly expressed by the Republican candidate during his 2016 campaign, notably when he promised he would enforce his now infamous travel ban, which also came to be known as the Muslim ban. Similarly, in his 2017 speech in Warsaw, the American president presented his vision of "the West," a civilization under the threat of, and engaged in a war against, Islamic terrorism. As mentioned earlier, the alt-right often presents itself similarly as a defender of a threatened western civilization and culture, and Donald

Trump's Warsaw speech was soon identified as dog-whistles to his more extreme supporters (Caperhart 2017). In this section, I will discuss how the alt-right uses existing historical stereotypes and recurring myths on immigration, which David Neiwert explains (2017: 78-9), are widespread in conservative circles, and have been so for decades. Through semantic and critical analysis, I will analyze how such myths are used to create images of a civilizational outsider enemy.

- 6 The first meme I want to examine here is that of the "rapefugee." This easy portmanteau word, which straightforwardly creates an association between refugees (believed to be almost exclusively Muslim) and sexual violence, became widely used online from 2016 on, when the European refugee crisis began to unfold. Although it gained fame on the Anglophone internet, the meme seems to have first appeared in Germany, following the infamous New Year's Eve sexual assaults which took place in several German towns. At its inception was a subversion of the phrase "Refugees Welcome," which was both a popular slogan among progressive, pro-refugee demonstrators, and the name of a project launched in 2014 in Germany and which became international in the following years. During protests against the arrival of new refugees, members of the anti-Islam movement PEGIDA, and in particular its founder, Lutz Bachmann, were seen wearing shirts or carrying placards with the words "Rapefugees Not Welcome, Stay Away!" The visual elements were a subversion of the original picture associated with the slogan 'Refugees Welcome'. Here, the fleeing family is replaced by threatening and armed men running after a woman, a scene which appeals to the historical stereotype of the foreigner's ferocious lust (Illustration 1). Such historical stereotypes were spread through racially discriminatory discourses in the media coverage of those stories, as demonstrated by Monica Ibrahim (2017: 29), who showed that the process of othering is here twofold, racial but also cultural. Furthermore, she analyzed the way the media articulated "the sex attacks in Cologne with the mass assaults that took place in Egypt years ago to convey an ideological bias, branding 'culture of mass sexual harassment' as a Middle Eastern phenomenon that would spread into Europe through migration." (Ibrahim 2017: 30)

Figure 1. Rapefugees Not Welcome



Source: [https://encyclopiadramatica.rs/File:Rapefugees\\_Not\\_Welcome.png](https://encyclopiadramatica.rs/File:Rapefugees_Not_Welcome.png)

- 7 A similar type of articulation is at work with the claim that Sweden is the “rape capital” of Europe due to the arrival of Muslim refugees. This claim, now common among many anti-immigration right-wingers, was originally made by conservative filmmaker Ami Horowitz, on Tucker Carlson’s show on Fox News. However, more remarkable than this myth was its evocation, although indirect and rather awkward, in a speech by President Trump on the day after the interview aired.<sup>4</sup> Days later, UKIP leader Nigel Farage jumped on the bandwagon and tweeted about Malmö, “the rape capital of Europe due to EU migrant policies.” Such unfounded claims kindle historical sexual fears and fantasies about the other. Muslim men are thus seen as “overly masculine” and are “associated with a sexuality that goes unchecked,” creating a threatening stereotype and a justification for stricter immigration laws (Døving 2010).
- 8 A second meme which demands attention is the crusade-themed meme. In addition to the racist and bellicose implications of the historical crusades, this meme is tied to and influenced by gaming culture, another important influence on the metapolitics of the alt-right (the movement’s emergence was tightly linked to the Gamergate controversy which I will discuss in the next section). Recurring motives such as the trebuchet, or the exclamation “Deus Vult” (“God wills it” in Latin), are typical of videogames set in medieval times. However, “Deus Vult” was readily co-opted by online far-right movements, and by some Trump supporters during the 2016 election on websites such as Reddit or 4chan where the borders between irony and earnestness are precarious. Several journalistic outlets defined the phrase as an alt-right or white nationalist dog-whistle, and went on to accuse certain videogames using the term for promotion of playing into the hands of neo-crusaders (Allegra 2017; Murdock 2018). It is however important to note that a number of users most likely employed crusade-themed memes

such as “Time for new crusade” or “Deus Vult” ironically, in the same way that ironic Nazism has become a trend in recent years, often less as a plea in favor of the Third Reich than as a gratuitous and deliberately bad taste provocation. The phrase “Urban II [the pope who launched the First Crusade] did nothing wrong” is thus an alteration of the more common “Hitler did nothing wrong,” and relies on the same ironic detachment, typical of internet-based humor (Philips 2015). Nonetheless, even if one accepts the premise that not all users of those memes are sincere, given the multiple layers of irony that have become part of many internet cultures, the real-life references to those themes or phrases make the underlying motivations clear: in 2016, several mosques were vandalized and sprayed with “Deus Vult,” along with other anti-Muslim slogans. But the most troubling real-life occurrence of an islamophobic internet meme happened in March 2019, when terrorist and self-proclaimed “kebab removalist” Brenton Tarrant murdered more than fifty Muslims in two New Zealand mosques in Christchurch. The “Remove Kebab” meme had appeared several years earlier than the aforementioned memes. Its origins can be found in an obscure music video designed as a tribute to Radovan Karadžić, a war criminal of the Bosnian War found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity because of his role in ordering the systematic extermination of Bosnian Muslims.<sup>5</sup> Due to such origins, which reinforce the already obvious anti-Muslim subtext, and to the humorously odd phrasing of the meme, it turned into an ironic way of mentioning ethnic cleansing, until any hint of irony disappeared when Tarrant wrote the words on his weapons, and had the original tribute song playing in the background during the macabre livestream of his atrocities.

- 9 “Orcposting” is yet another type of meme attacking immigration, and is a noteworthy example of the metapolitics advocated by the alt-right in that it successfully blends ideology (in this instance, racist anti-immigrant sentiment), humor (typically in a caustic or sarcastic tone), and pop culture references.<sup>6</sup> Originally a Twitter hashtag, orcposting consists in assimilating Muslim refugees with Orcs, the race created and used as cannon fodder by Sauron, the archenemy of the free people in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. It is important to note that in the lore of both the books and their movie adaptations, Orcs are a race for which there is no redemption possible, as they are intrinsically barbaric and evil. Therefore, not only does this assimilation explicitly dehumanize Muslim immigrants or refugees by essentializing them as inherently unable to adapt, or to become “civilized,” but it also raises the theme of invasion, as displayed in this tweet by evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller, in which Uruk-Hais (a different type of Orcs but which embody the same antagonistic figure) are climbing the walls of a citadel in order to conquer and most likely sack it (Illustration 2). The practice of orcposting thus seems to epitomize the process of othering which Edward Saïd describes in *Orientalism* as “disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people or geographical region.” (Saïd 1978: 108)



Figure 2. Tweet by Geoffrey Miller (May 29, 2017)



Source: <https://twitter.com/primalpoly/status/869315252495712257>

- 10 Another favorite target of the alt-right and of Donald Trump are people from South and Central America. In addition to traditional stereotypes such as that of the lazy Mexican, the American president famously connected immigration coming from south of the US border to crime, drugs, and again, sexual violence. His comments about “bad hombres” during the third presidential debate raised many eyebrows but were consistent with his major campaign promise to build a wall at the border between the United States and Mexico. “Build the wall” has become a slogan and rallying cry for Trump supporters. Again, as Milner and Philips explain, the American president successfully exploited a meme which resonated among his followers, in a very similar fashion to how slogans were built and used in former presidential campaigns as “persuasive, short, compelling tools,” in the words of political scientist Lynn Vavreck (qtd in Chmielewski 2016).
- 11 Along the same lines, in the weeks leading to the 2018 midterm elections, conservative media and personalities focused heavily on a migrant caravan coming from Central American countries. The claims made about this caravan, and the words used to describe it were explicitly designed to provoke fear and to encourage voting for representatives supporting Trump’s anti-immigration policies. On October 22, the president notably posted a tweet which claimed that “criminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in.” A similar story could be heard on alt-right outlets, with references to “alleged Hondurans,” “invasion auxiliary forces,” or a “coordinated invasion force overwhelmingly comprised of fighting-age young men.” (Stelter 2018; Rupar 2018) Likewise, conservative media and pundits raised the threat of an organized invasion, some of them even flirting with the conspiracy theories which inspired Robert Bowers, the terrorist who murdered 11 Jewish people in a Pittsburgh synagogue on October 27, 2018. As pointed out by Aaron Rupar (2018), “the gunman, Robert

Bowers, repeatedly referred to people traveling with the caravan as ‘invaders’ on Gab, a social media website that serves as a den for white supremacists.” The recurrence among mainstream conservative politicians and media, in particular on Fox News, of similar wording about invasion or invaders in reference to the Central American caravan did not go unnoticed, nor did the “interesting coincidence” that the use of such terminology and rhetoric dramatically dropped on the most important conservative channel of the country immediately after the midterm elections (Rupar 2018). Here is another clear point of convergence and resonance between obscure racist talking points inherited from traditional white supremacist movements and mainstream contemporary conservatism.

- 12 By claiming that the religion of Islam is a civilizational threat to the West, this brand of alt-right memes allows supporters to deny that race is a crucial aspect of their islamophobia, instead arguing that their opposition to Islam has philosophical or political motives. However, the racial aspects of this first enemy image become explicit when one considers alt-right treatment of Latin American people. Contrary to Arab-speaking Muslims, a large majority of people in Latin American countries speak a European language and are overwhelmingly Christians; yet, they are still presented as a civilizational threat. The paradox can be explained if their perceived threat simply results from the color of their skin, rather than from cultural or civilizational concerns.
- 13 At this point, and to strengthen my argument, it is important to keep in mind the ideological mindset behind the creation and spread of those memes, which becomes clearer when one looks at the philosophical and ideological foundations of the “highbrow” alt-right, as George Hawley has put it: politically speaking, the most direct ancestor of the alt-right is the 1990s paleoconservative movement formed in opposition to the dominant neoconservatism. Neoconservatives were mostly criticized for their interventionism and laissez-faire economic policies, whereas paleoconservatives were deeply isolationist and protectionist, with a strong focus on economic nationalism and cultural traditionalism. Paul Gottfried, an influential thinker of paleoconservatism, was also instrumental in the early development of the alt-right, as he was the mentor of Richard Spencer, and he is rumored to have coined the “alternative right” label, although Spencer disputes this claim (Hawley 2017: 32). Gottfried and Spencer have taken their distances following political and strategic divergences in the wake of the Trump campaign, notably after Gottfried’s disdain for white nationalism. Interestingly, the first signs of disagreement between the alt-right and the Trump administration appeared in April 2017, when the American president ordered airstrikes against Syria despite having adopted a non-interventionist stance during his campaign; such tensions, sometimes expressed by vehement rejections of former alt-right champion Trump, highlights the isolationist legacy of paleoconservatism on the alt-right, as does both movements’ contempt for traditional conservatism.
- 14 Another major influence of the alt-right is the neo-reactionary movement known as the Dark Enlightenment spearheaded by Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin. As its nickname suggests, this school of thought which emerged in the late 2000s rejects the values inherited from the Enlightenment and is thus at heart anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic, with strong authoritarian instincts, and is often considered as a radical extension of American libertarianism. Neo-reaction however remains a little-known ideology, consisting more in a philosophical movement than a political one, contrary to the inherently political alt-right, which strives to present itself as a populist and anti-



elitist mass movement, in addition to a cultural phenomenon — although, as argued by Hawley (2018), and as demonstrated by the failure of almost all their offline happenings, the alt-right found it almost impossible to present itself in real life as the fun counterculture it appeared to be online. Neo-reaction is also noted for its misanthropy, a common feature among several internet subcultural spaces, as well as for its civilizational pessimism and occasional focus on the same pseudoscientific theories exploited by the alt-right: this “scientific racism” is notably expressed through an abundant use of euphemistic catchphrases such as race realism or HBD (human biodiversity, a racialist exaggeration of the importance of genetic differences between human populations), and serves as a justification for the Dark Enlightenment’s extremely elitist worldview as much as for the alt-right’s equally extreme racist ethos. Given such anti-egalitarian, anti-democratic and often racialist ideological origins, it does not come as a surprise that the contemporary promoters of progressive and liberal values inherited from the Enlightenment are treated as formal enemies of the alt-right, as will be examined in the following section.

## Online culture wars and ideological antagonists

- 15 Racial subtexts transpire in some of the vocabulary alt-righters use to deride their ideological opponents. One of the most significant examples is the slur “cuckservative.” It is another portmanteau buzzword between the words cuckold and conservative, used to mock usually moderate conservative who support some liberal policies, in particular those who are not in favor of strong immigration laws. It is also one of the earliest alt-right memes to reach a mainstream audience, as demonstrated by the significant number of newspapers and websites which mentioned it through the summer of 2015, during the campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Although it is similar to “RINO” (Republican In Name Only) or other slurs for “fake conservatives,” the “cuckservative” meme’s origins shed light on the meanings intended by its creators. As noted by Joseph Bernstein (2015a), the term first appeared on alt-right forums and blogs and refers to a pornographic genre “in which passive white husbands watch their wives have sex with black men.” Although it could be argued that the term “cuckold” is sufficiently insulting to add any racial connotation, users on websites affiliated to the alt-right tend to be knowledgeable about pornographic categories. It seems more than likely that the reference was deliberate, and in the vein of more explicit terms such as “race traitor.” Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017) further explains the motivations behind the slur, analyzing that “the target is so weak that he would submit to the humiliation of having his white wife lie with black men.” Victims of these slurs include conservatives who opposed Donald Trump, as documented by David French (2016), a writer for the conservative magazine *National Review* who has an adopted African-American daughter, and who faced a campaign of online abuse and harassment.
- 16 Niko Keikkilä rightly notes that the “‘cuckservative’ narrative represented the anti-establishment mood embodied by the alt-right,” in that it “intertwined subcultural jargon and ideas of masculinity and race.” Maybe more significantly, he adds that “besides being an example of popularization of alt-right ideas, [the ‘cuckservative’ meme] served as a reminder of increasing online and social media antagonism in the election.” Such antagonism, although far from novel neither in form nor substance, has indeed become particularly prevalent on social media over the course of the last

decade. In this section, I want to give particular attention to some of the memes employed in what Angela Nagle describes as

the online culture wars that formed the political sensibilities of a generation, [...] the online battles that may otherwise be forgotten but have nevertheless shaped culture and ideas in a profound way from tiny obscure subcultural beginnings to mainstream public and political life in recent years. (Nagle 2017: 9)

- 17 These online culture wars, the repercussion of the 1980s and 1990s culture wars dissected by Andrew Hartman in *A War for the Soul of America* (2015), were marked by the emergence of new categorizations of antagonistic figures, the most notable of them probably being that of the Social Justice Warrior (commonly abbreviated to SJW).<sup>7</sup> The Social Justice Warrior label, highly sarcastic, refers to an activist defined by their support for progressive politics, typically feminism, political correctness, or environmentalism, but also by the supposedly aggressive and emotional rhetoric used to defend these opinions. The SJW qualification can however be very malleable: George Hawley (2017: 43-4) mentions how Ben Shapiro, although a staunchly conservative pundit famous on the internet for his attacks against progressive politics and his catchphrase “facts don’t care about your feelings,” was labeled a SJW by people more right-wing than Shapiro himself. The images and preconceptions used to create the SJW stereotype led SJWs (or at least their representation) to be largely loathed among several online subcultures, even among those not necessarily adhering to the extremist views of the manosphere or of white nationalists.<sup>8</sup>
- 18 The 2014 Gamergate controversy mentioned earlier, described as “the galvanizing issue that drew up the battle lines of the culture wars for a younger online generation” (Nagle 2017: 24), is a pertinent example of how anti-SJW sentiment created a backlash against attempts, however small in scale, to bring progressive themes into broader culture, in this instance into gaming culture. In contrast to the Gamergate proponents’ claim that the controversy was about “ethics in gaming journalism,” Mike Wendling (2018: 65) offers a more convincing approach: “[Gamergate] amplified the lament that feminism had gone too far, that a normally male-dominated space was becoming feminized, and that ‘social justice warriors’ were taking over.” Indeed, one of the recurring aspects found in pro-Gamergate (and anti-SJW as a whole) arguments is the perception that diversity, tolerance and more generally speaking PC (politically correct) politics are being force-fed to the general public. For the anti-SJW crowd, PC culture has become the embodiment of all the perceived evils of contemporary leftist thought: authoritarianism, anti-free speech positions (exemplified by online or real-life policies of deplatforming), and extreme sensitivity to diverging opinions. Nicole Hemmer (2016) argues that political correctness is “the alt-right’s most cherished concept,” precisely because it allows them to mask their racism, misogyny and anti-Semitism. In this light, it is interesting to note that one of the online communities primarily associated with the emergence of the alt-right is 4chan’s /pol/, the “politically incorrect” section of the website.
- 19 Opposition to PC culture also provides an example of one of the favorite strategies of the alt-right: the co-optation of rhetorical and conceptual tools from the opposite side of the political and ideological spectrum. Political scientist Zeynep Gambetti (2018) explains that the strategy is “to appropriate the terms of the liberal politics of identity and to push identitarian arguments to their logical conclusion.” As a result here, a key concept of PC culture, namely trigger warnings, was reappropriated and rearranged in order to both deride it and spread the idea that SJW are overly sensitive.<sup>9</sup> This idea

works along the lines of the “special snowflake” designation, sometimes used interchangeably with SJW, and another occurrence of popular culture in internet vernacular (the phrase “You are not a special. You are not a beautiful or unique snowflake” comes from the 1999 movie *Fight Club*, which has become cult among many young people from radically different ideological backgrounds). The “snowflake” epithet is meant to sarcastically highlight both the sensitivity and the self-centeredness of the target. In order to further prove the point that progressives are overly sensitive (and by extension overemotional), alt-righters do not hesitate to push the envelope and to try to make the most polemical statements imaginable. This strategy was epitomized in 2016 with an online campaign coined #TheTriggering launched by Canadian alt-right pundit Lauren Southern (one of the rare high-profile women of the movement, although she has repeatedly rejected the alt-right label, and officially retired from political activism in June 2019). It consisted in tweeting deliberately provocative statements made to “trigger” angry responses from progressives. This is similar to trolling tactics explored by Whitney Phillips in *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*, and echoes Douglas Rushkoff’s words (1994: 186) about the tactics used by underground activists to achieve a form of visibility: “Alternative distributors depend on others, even the enemy, to spread their memes.” Indeed, as previously demonstrated with various memes, the alt-right manages to reach mainstream audiences through intentionally outrageous claims, via media either circulating similar ideas or, contrariwise, vehemently attacking them, which nonetheless helps spread and contribute to the “infection” (to use Rushkoff’s terminology) of unsuspecting minds by reactionary, racist and supremacist memes. The potency of memes as propaganda tools is also directly linked to the issue of amplification: such collective storytelling is indeed ineluctably reinforced and perpetuated even when it is denounced, and thus, “content spreads memetically whether participants share something to signal support, disgust, or anything on the spectrum in between.” (Phillips & Milner 2017: 54)

- 20 I would like to explore here another successful strategy of the alt-right described by Zeynep Gambetti (2018), who explains that “the Alt-Right obscures power differentials by putting Whiteness or European descent at the same level as minority identities.” Power differentials are similarly obscured by recent alt-right adversarial rhetoric, notably through the use of false equivalences, in particular in their attempt at reversing the perceptions of their movement and of their ideological enemies by the public opinion. Thereby, Antifa, the equally vague antifascist movement actively and sometimes physically opposing far-right demonstrations, is recurrently presented as an actual fascist movement, in opposition to the free speech extremism of the alt-right. Likewise, “feminazi” is a beloved anti-feminist portmanteau buzzword promoting the idea that feminists are authoritarian, angry and man-hating women, a stereotype that taps into thousands of years of misogyny, as demonstrated by Zuckerberg (2017). Once again, the popularization of the “feminazi” term came from a mainstream conservative pundit, Rush Limbaugh, host of the most popular radio talk-show in the United States. Similarly, when Donald Trump notoriously called Hillary Clinton a “nasty woman” in October 2016, the phrase became a meme of its own among both Trump and Clinton supporters. Online, in order to convey the themes carried by the “feminazi” meme, anti-feminists have recourse to visual means: by cherry-picking images of feminist women arguing with political opponents, and by capturing through a screenshot the moment when they appear the most irrational and angry, anonymous internet users at the inception of those internet memes create powerful enemy images (Illustrations 3

and 4). These images are then captioned, sometimes doctored or integrated within other popular internet memes, and spread via various social media to disseminate the idea that anger, irrationality, hatred of men, and feminism are all linked. Such images may thus come to mind when Nagle mentions "sour-faced identitarians who undoubtedly drove so many young people to the right during these vicious culture wars" (Nagle 2017: 117). Of course, one must however remain careful, and question the existence of genuinely authoritarian feminists behind the numerous "radical feminists" personae on social media which often turn out to be sockpuppet accounts (Hampton 2019), or to the sometimes surprisingly effective false flag campaigns (Fernando Alfonso 2014/7), both of which are common warfare and propaganda strategies, in this case designed to undermine the credibility of feminism as a whole. The alt-right's strategical use of memes can therefore be considered as a form of manipulative ideological cyberwarfare.

Figure 3. "Big Red; The Assumption I Hate Men Is Correct." *Know Your Meme*, 2014



Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/people/big-red>

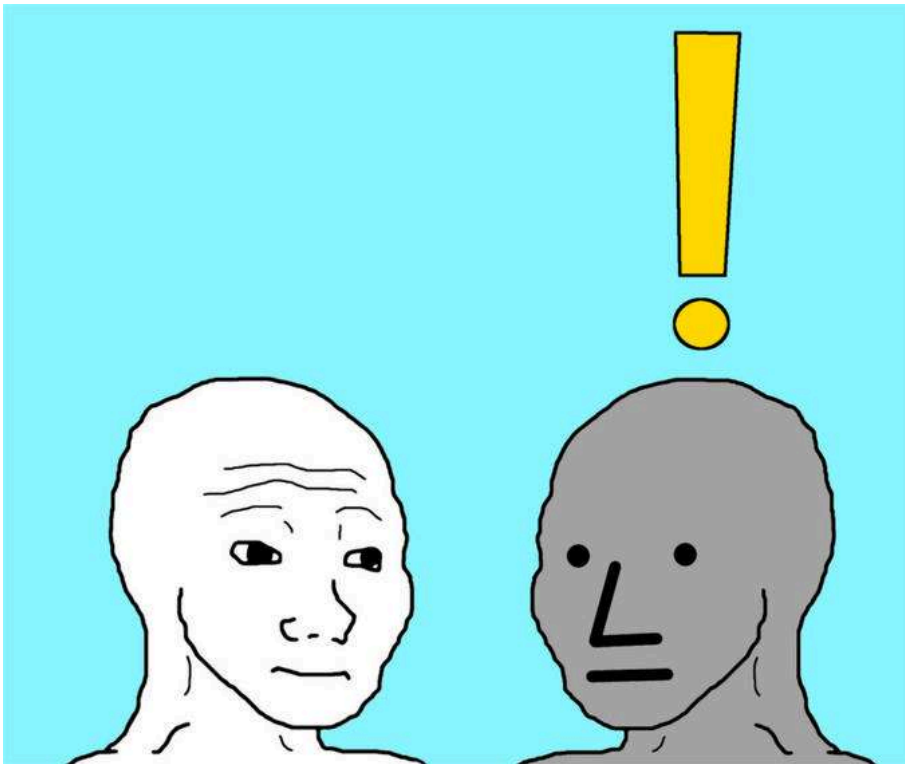
Figure 4. “Triggered Feminist/Ficki Fiona; MFW [My Face When] Someone Tells Me There Are Only Two Genders.” *Know Your Meme*, 2016



Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1470831-triggered-feminist-2>

- 21 The last internet meme I want to discuss in this section is the NPC, an acronym standing for Non-Player Character.<sup>10</sup> Originating from 4chan, it also draws on gaming culture: an NPC is a character present in almost all types of videogames, its behavior and dialogues being usually predictable since they are determined by a script. In 2018, NPC began being used by alt-right channers (the users on sites such as 4chan) as a derogatory and dehumanizing term for liberals, progressives or moderates, and more broadly for anybody not in line with alt-right talking points. NPCs are characterized as unable to have ideas and thoughts of their own, readily compared to previous pejorative qualifications such as “sheeple” or the more recent and internet-savvy “normie,” mentioned in the title of Angela Nagle’s 2017 *Kill All Normies*. The NPC, devoid of any feelings or critical thinking, is often opposed to the Feels Guy meme, also known as Wojack, which commonly expresses the sadness or feeling of loneliness of the user posting it (Illustration 5).<sup>11</sup> When employed by alt-righters, the NPC tends to be presented as frowning, usually ticked off by some far-right slogan; one of the most frequent captions associated with the NPC is “Orange Man Bad,” a dismissive parody of anti-Trump arguments (Illustration 6).



Figure 5. "Wojack and NPC." *Know Your Meme*, 2018

The exclamation point refers to videogames, in which it is meant to alert the player that an interaction with the NPC can for example lead to a quest.

Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1411366-npc-wojak>

Figure 6. "Orange Man Bad – NPC Rage." *Know Your Meme*, 2018

Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1419757-orange-man-bad>

- 22 The reappropriation of the NPC meme by the alt-right echoes that of another popular internet meme, Pepe the Frog, the cartoonish green amphibian which has come to represent the movement to many observers. I would argue, following from Philips' concept of "oxygen of amplification" (2017) and danah boyd's "hacking of the attention economy" (2017), that such reappropriations were made possible by mainstream media,



even, and in this case, to refine Rushkoff’s idea, in particular by those considered to be the enemy. Indeed, for alt-righters at the origin of such internet memes, the fact that their “work” is mentioned beyond the websites where they emerged is a major success in itself. Not only does their evocation boost the ego and sometimes the online reputation of the original posters, but they often sow confusion among conventional commentators, rarely versed in internet and meme culture. More importantly, such exposure subtly contributes to the spread of the worldviews behind those memes. Indeed, similarly to the foreigner threatening to invade the country or the SJW trying to subvert traditional values, the impersonal NPC embodies an archetypical character within a broader narrative.

## Cultural Marxism and paranoid narratives

- 23 All the concepts and notions I have evoked so far are articulated within a large-scale narrative, widespread among far-right circles under the name of Cultural Marxism. Its proponents believe that there has been a conspiracy at work against the capitalist West, originating from the Frankfurt School, a group of (mostly) Marxist social researchers comprising major figures of the field such as Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, or more recently Jürgen Habermas, famous for developing the concept of critical theory. It is a well-documented conspiracy theory, notably discussed by political scientist Jérôme Janin (2018) and intellectual historian Martin Jay (2010). Janin discovered that the Cultural Marxism/Frankfurt School conspiracy theory emerged in the context of the 1990s culture wars and of the paleoconservative movement, in particular through the writings of Pat Buchanan, Paul Gottfried, and William Lind (one of the first critics to make the claim that “political correctness is Cultural Marxism” [Lind 2000]), before spreading among various Western far-right groups. Such origins underline the crucial influence of paleoconservatism on the emergence and construction of the alt-right and of its worldview. Janin also explains how Cultural Marxism “offers a variable scope,” insofar as it “gives a large range of possible uses by multiple actors from right-wing conservative intellectuals to criticize Marxism in the United States to radical and violent groups to denounce the ‘death of the West.’” (Janin 2018) Martin Jay presents a list of 11 points allegedly established by the Frankfurt School to promote Cultural Marxism, among which “the creation of racism offences,” “the teaching of sex and homosexuality to children,” “huge immigration to destroy identity,” “the promotion of excessive drinking,” “emptying of churches,” “an unreliable legal system with bias against victims of crime,” or “encouraging the breakdown of the family” (Jay 2010). He also explains that verbatim copies of this list can be found on almost every right-wing outlet taking this conspiracy theory seriously, and it is not rare to see this list used as propaganda in discussions on Cultural Marxism on websites such as 4chan or Reddit today. Cultural Marxism thus provides its believers with a one-size-fits-all narrative about all the perceived evils threatening the West, whether it is immigration, feminism, political correctness, and more broadly any challenge to traditional social, gender, or racial norms. This conspiracy theory even reached the White House through a 2017 National Security Council memo written by Rich Higgins, then a NSC employee, which presented Donald Trump as “an existential threat to cultural Marxist memes that dominate the prevailing cultural narrative.” (Winter & Groll 2017)

- 24 This alleged domination of Cultural Marxist memes on the cultural narrative echoes another widespread theme of contemporary conservatism, namely the liberal bias in academia and mainstream media. One can find a thorough history of the manipulation by conservatives of this alleged liberal bias in the academy, and of one of its most symbolic aspects, political correctness, in John Wilson’s 1995 work, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education*. Similar accusations have been made against mainstream media, which have become synonymous of liberal media to many right-wingers and Republicans, who incidentally ignore the fact that the most popular media in the United States are conservative (Umstead 2019). Once more, it is in large part because of such long-held assumptions among large swathes of the public that Donald Trump and his supporters successfully spread the “fake news” meme, a powerful tool used and abused during the 2016 campaign and later throughout the Trump presidency (the American president tweeted 114 times about fake news between January 1, 2019 and July 1, 2019, not to mention in his speeches).<sup>12</sup>
- 25 The theme of conspiracy theories is far from novel in American political life, as shown by Richard Hofstadter’s 1964 seminal essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” and followed by numerous works, including Timothy Melley’s *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2000). There also appears to be a long-lasting American tradition of othering intertwined with such paranoid mentalities. Historical examples include racial dimensions (as in the previously discussed stereotypes and suspicions about Hispanics, but also about African Americans, recently revived by the “birther” conspiracy theory targeting Barack Obama), religious ones (with the Know Nothing movement of the 1850s, which accused Catholic immigrants of plots and evils very similar to those attributed by contemporary far-right groups to Muslims or Jews today), as well as ideological ones (with for example the notorious John Birch Society, whose alarming and antagonistic views on “commies” and socialists have again come in the spotlight in the last decades, in particular during the Trump campaign and presidency). However, the advent of the Internet seems to have given a dramatic new momentum to paranoid mindsets. Indeed, conspiracy theories are thriving online, and many on the alt-right are binging on “alternative facts” about society, politics, or history. An example of a recurring conspiracy theory among alt-right communities can be found in French writer and politician Renaud Camus’ “*Grand Remplacement*,” which claims that there is a deliberate replacement of native European populations by non-Europeans, a very similar theory to Bat Ye’or’s “Eurabia.” Both conspiracy theories fall under the concept of demographic threat, an obsession of white nationalists which also expresses itself through the analogous “Kalergi Plan,” or the more recent and widespread “white genocide” theory. Encompassing most previous theories, it was notably popularized through the slogan “diversity is codeword for white genocide,” a variation of “anti-racist is code word for anti-white,” a portion of the Mantra, a short text famous among online white supremacists (Lenz 2017). Although these theories have blatantly shallow foundations, they spread in a fashion similar to memes; however, in addition to discretely infecting unsuspecting minds, they also tend to rely on confirmation bias, and work as gateways to further conspiratorial beliefs. Indeed, these recurring and often interwoven conspiracy theories obviously and inevitably lead to the question of their perpetrator(s): since all these conspiracies are deliberately orchestrated, a powerful and secret force must necessarily be pulling the strings, whether from within as a fifth column, or from above as a secretive global influence.

- 26 Unsurprisingly, many among the alt-right believe they are fighting the old nemesis of many historical far-right movements, the Jew, the usual suspect of a large proportion of conspiracy theories. The Cultural Marxism narrative has particularly telling ancestors, since it is a mere contemporary update of Nazi Germany’s concept of “Cultural Bolshevism” used to foster anti-Soviet fears (not unlike the American anti-communist hysterias of the Red Scares). Maybe even more telling is its direct association with the like-minded “Jewish Bolshevism” concept, which professes the whimsical claim that a Jewish cabal is responsible for the creation and spread of communism, and more broadly for the “degeneracy” of traditional Western values, an infamous term which also surfaces in recent far-right arguments. The outright and pervading antisemitism of the alt-right is exemplified by another of their memes which garnered considerable media coverage, the use of triple brackets, or (((echo))), to signal the Jewish faith of the target (Anthony & Fleishman 2016). But the conspiratorial antisemitism of the online far-right movements comprising the alt-right is epitomized by its almost pathological obsession with George Soros, the Hungarian-American billionaire and long-time supporter of progressive causes. A symbolic bogeyman for the extreme right, he is regularly accused of organizing and/or funding anti-Trump activism (notably the 2017 Women’s March following the inauguration of the new president), gun-control protests, but also of having orchestrated the violence which took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 during the major real-life happening of the alt-right (Sankin 2017). He was even accused of being behind the Central American migrant caravan discussed in the first section, which led him to be targeted by Cesar Sayoc’s mail bombing campaign in October 2018, among other prominent Democratic or liberal American figures. Yet again, it has been noted that the demonization of Soros, at first restricted to obscure far-right outlets, turned mainstream in large part through Republican politicians and conservative pundits (Vogel et al. 2018).
- 27 Richard Hofstadter was already emphasizing the effects of mass media on paranoid and conspiratorial minds in 1964: “the villains of the modern right are much more vivid than those of their paranoid predecessors, much better known to the public.” More than fifty years later, and despite, or maybe because of the Internet revolution, this claim holds true. And furthermore, those villains have retained the same superior and almost supernatural attributes described by Hofstadter:
- This enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman-sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving. Unlike the rest of us, the enemy is not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, himself a victim of his past, his desires, his limitations. (Hofstadter 1964)
- 28 This presentation of an evil mastermind towering above and detached from the rest of the population seems to perfectly fit the figure embodied by George Soros, and by extension by Jews and Cultural Marxists in the alt-right mythology. To further establish the link, Soros is often assimilated to historical evils (he is recurrently accused of having collaborated with the Nazis and of having betrayed fellow Jews despite all factual evidence) or to fictional archfiends, such as Star Wars’ Darth Sidious (Illustration 7), whose storyline resonates with the accusations against Soros (by pulling the strings in the shadows, Darth Sidious is the actual ruler of the universe).

Figure 7. "George Soros/Darth Sidious." SOTT.net.



Source: [https://www.sott.net/image/s19/390237/large/george\\_soros\\_darth\\_sidious.jpg](https://www.sott.net/image/s19/390237/large/george_soros_darth_sidious.jpg)

- 29 As argued throughout this essay, the epitome of the alt-right's metapolitics is the combination of long-lasting prejudices, humorously detached sarcasm and irony typical of the internet atmosphere, and sly use of popular references understandable by most. By framing their targets as stereotypical villains, the representations of which speak for themselves (the lustful and invading foreigner, the fragile, irrational, and subversive SJW, or the lurking puppetmaster secretly coordinating civilizational attacks on the West), the metapolitical strategy of the alt-right remaps the understanding of the world for a sizeable part of the population and creates a unifying narrative which helps its followers to make sense of a complicated reality. However, the more or less abstract yet irredeemably evil enemy used as a threatening rhetorical tool can easily turn into a tangible, real-life enemy.

## When the fantasized enemy becomes real

- 30 The possible dangers raised by such paranoid and adversarial worldviews are already hinted at in Hofstadter's essay: "since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated — if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention." (Hofstadter 1964) Although the primary "theatre of operations" of the enemy images under scrutiny in this study seems to be the very minds and mental representations of the general public — a symbolic elimination through processes of othering, the elimination imperative of such rhetoric has also produced tragic consequences beyond the world of ideas. Right-wing terrorism is not a new trend in American history; the last decade has known a resurgence of ideologically-motivated killings<sup>13</sup>. In May 2014,

Elliot Rodger murdered six people in California in one of the first “incel” attacks, thus bringing the misogynistic movement in the public eye. The 2015 Charleston Church shooting is also an early example of the potency of online radicalization, as the terrorist, Dylann Roof, stated in his manifesto that a simple Google search changed his entire worldview and made him “racially aware,”<sup>14</sup> a change which resulted in the slaughter of nine African-American parishioners. In late 2016, shots were fired in a Washington D.C. pizzeria targeted by the notorious and bizarre conspiracy theory known as “Pizzagate”, which tied links between the Democratic establishment and the Clinton family, a child sex ring, and the small local restaurant (Fisher et al. 2016). The August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville must also be mentioned as a car attack committed by a white supremacist killed a counter-protester and injured several more. As mentioned earlier, the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooter was also heavily involved in alt-right communities, and was named in the manifesto of the April 2019 Poway synagogue shooter, alongside Brenton Tarrant, who himself quoted Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik in his own manifesto, packed with in-jokes and references to internet and alt-right themes (in addition to the “Remove Kebab” meme, Tarrant’s manifesto, called “The Great Replacement,” notably alludes to Cultural Marxism, as did Breivik’s manifesto in 2011). Finally, a compelling consequence of the alarming and antagonistic discourses about invading immigrants analyzed in the first section came in August 2019, when Patrick Crusius murdered 22 people and injured 24 others in an El Paso supermarket, specifically targeting Hispanics whom he believed were invading Texas in order to bring “cultural and ethnic replacement.” Like his predecessors, the El Paso shooter also expressed admiration for the Christchurch shooter in his own manifesto, once again published online on 8chan shortly before the shooting.

- 31 As observed, a large majority of these terror attacks involved a manifesto, written and published online by the terrorists before they committed their heinous crimes. Those manifestos almost systematically display a sense of urgency, coupled with a perceived duty to act (Roof notably wrote “no one doing anything but talking on the internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me,” a sentiment echoed in several subsequent manifestos), glorifications of previous terrorists, as well as, more often than not, an explicit call to arms to like-minded individuals. These elements shed light on another consequence of the use of enemy images within broader paranoid and Manichean narratives: if western civilization (or the USA, or the “white race”) is under threat and on the brink of ruin, it calls for brave and heroic soldiers willing to fight and possibly to die for a greater purpose, and offers them an opportunity to become martyrs for their cause, an obvious yet striking similarity with other extremist movements and narratives, in particular Islamist ones<sup>15</sup>. Enemy images also create a form of intersectionality between the fringe groups that find themselves gathered against common foes under the umbrella term alt-right: misogynistic “incels” often blame feminism, interracial relationships, and other “symptoms of Cultural Marxism” for their lack of social and sexual success; conversely, white supremacists co-opted some of the manosphere’s ideas and lexicon, most notably the concept of “red pill,” another reference to popular culture, here the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist taking the red pill gets to see the world as it really is (in the manosphere, being red-pilled basically means realizing that feminism is the cause of most ills of modern society; with the alt-right, it similarly means becoming “racially aware”). This union and cooperation among the different online communities of the alt-right is however far from steady, and as George Hawley



underlines, the context of the 2016 presidential election provided a clear set of goals and obvious common enemies to this movement, which found it very complicated to reach that level of organization and coordination without such context. The upcoming 2020 presidential election in the United States will therefore require close scrutiny, as will the relation between the incumbent president and his most extreme supporters. Indeed, and in opposition to the self-congratulatory reactions of the alt-right following the election of “their” candidate, I tend to agree with Nicole Hemmer when she says that “more than the alt-right made Donald Trump, Donald Trump made the alt-right. He validated many of their points of view, as well as their stylistic approach.” (Jervis 2016) I would, however, nuance that assertion by noting that reactionary and ultraconservative ideologies have prospered in the United States both on and offline for a long time, and that Trump’s fiery and outrageous rhetoric tapped into what his advisors felt was the pre-existing dominant mood of anxiety among white Americans feeling disregarded and dispossessed.

- 32 In all three cases of this study, the alt-right has been exploiting historical prejudices, with a slight update to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital environment. Their enemy images consist in “culturally influenced, very negative and stereotypical evaluation[s] of the ‘other.’” (Fiebig-von Hase 1997) The online and viral context of their spread is conducive to even greater alienation, however, as explained by Whitney Philips: “because content is so easily severed from creator, and because information spreads so fast online, [...] it is inevitable that real people would be reduced to fictionalized things.” (Philips 2015: 119) As we have seen, such reduction to a fictionalized entity can lead to very real threats for the people (mis)represented and caricatured in those memes. This examination also illustrates the potential clout of memes, which was implicitly acknowledged by the Trump administration on July 11, 2019, during a social media summit at the White House, in which prominent online supporters of the president were invited to discuss the alleged bias against conservatives on major social media such as Twitter or Facebook, but also — perhaps even more so, to prepare the president’s campaign for the 2020 election (Rupar 2019). As demonstrated in this essay, the force and reach of online enemy images can be used to appeal to tech-savvy teenagers or young adults, but also to middle-aged blue collar workers, who now also get some, if not most, of their news from social media such as Facebook, news which can turn into far-fetched conspiracy theories in just one or two clicks on the wrong sensationalist clickbait. The examples of Cesar Sayoc, 56, and Robert Bowers, 46, respectively suspect of the mail bombing attempts and perpetrator of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, are eloquent: they both self-radicalized online, despite not corresponding to the intended alt-right audience. They also reveal two different sides of the movement, polarized by their stances on Donald Trump (Sayoc is a fervent supporter of the American president, while Bowers rejects him for being too soft).
- 33 Eventually, perhaps even more significant is the relationship between subcultural aggregators such as 4chan and Reddit, and mass media, a relationship which echoes the “cybernetic feedback loop” in which early trolls and sensationalist corporate media coexisted (Philips 2015). The alt-right’s successful memes invariably follow the same pattern: they are carefully designed on underground social media, using the codes and standards in force, before being approved and/or altered by like-minded users, after which they are disseminated on more conventional social media, typically Twitter or Facebook. This dissemination is almost always coordinated, which means it is felt as a great achievement when major mainstream media evoke a particular meme, the same



feeling of pride which was displayed following Trump’s election (“we actually elected a meme as president!” was one of the most publicized reactions [Ohlheiser 2016]) and which resonates with the alt-right’s adoption of the codes of early trolling subculture. It is however crucial to keep in mind the primordial difference between the trolling culture analyzed by Whitney Phillips and the trolls of the alt-right: Phillips’ participant trolls are not only wary of political or ideological motivations, they are “agents of cultural digestion” in that they reveal implicit tropes of mainstream culture, whereas ideologically-motivated far-right trolls merely exploit trolling culture, memes, and strategies, and function as agents of cultural dissemination, attempting to act as trendsetters while at the same time running parallel to dominant conservative media and discourses.

- 34 The unique success of the alt-right, compared to previous iterations of far-right or white supremacist thought, raises the question of what is really distinct about its mechanisms. Elements of response can be found in Phillips and Milner’s *The Ambivalent Internet*, which stresses the fact that most phenomena perceived as original because of their online context are only the extensions of already existing traditions: “the affordances of digital media” thus simply add “new dynamics to long-established practices.” (Phillips & Milner 2017: 46) What is worrying is therefore not that such supremacist, racist, or antisemitic ideas still exist, but rather the ease with which they spread and the number of people reached. This leads to the question of the responsibility of mainstream media and major tech firms, the algorithms of which create numerous possibilities for self-radicalization, whether by functioning as echo-chambers or by pushing users to go further “down the rabbit hole,” video after video, meme after meme.<sup>16</sup>
- 35 The successful use of memes and of broader internet culture also provides opportunities to reflect on the state of contemporary public discourse in the US, notably on the apparently irreconcilable paradox consisting in a sizeable public distrust for traditional journalistic outlets and mass media<sup>17</sup> coupled to an increasing number of people taking on blind faith dubious alternative sources such as the notoriously conspiratorial website Infowars (for all its rejections of the evils of postmodernism, the alt-right displays a very postmodern contempt for notions such as objectivity or even truth), or the deeply and explicitly sensationalist and biased Breitbart and Fox News. However, the same kind of sensationalist treatment of news, in particular on topics related to the alt-right, can also be deplored on moderate or left-leaning media, and may sometimes be equally damaging. Indeed, it has been suggested that the success of the alt-right was in large part due to the mainstream media conjuring it as a sort of ideological monster (Phillips 2016), through a vicious circle consisting on the one hand of provocative trolls making the most outrageous statements, and on the other of corporate media publishing those statements either because it will appeal to their radically conservative audiences, or to elicit the indignation of progressives, in both cases garnering profitable attention and clicks, all the parties involved thus exploiting the cultural tensions of contemporary America for their own benefit. Once again, such issues are ones of amplification, and are all the more relevant when considering the recent wave of domestic far-right terrorism in the US, and the influential role of the terrorists’ manifestos successfully incentivizing potential successors. This essay thus attempted to shed new light on the possibilities but also dangers of a strategic and targeted use of memes and internet culture, while also opening new perspectives which demand attention, notably reflections on the

deeper structural roots of white supremacy in the American past and present, of which the alt-right might only be the most conspicuous symptom.

- 36 One might also wish to be cautious with one particular frame of reference used to describe and analyze the alt-right which has indeed been repeatedly presented as a counterculture by both news media (Bernstein 2015b) and scholars (Nagle's *Kill All Normies*; Khan 2019), implying that the subversive and humorous style used by the movement, and its attacks against taboos of the contemporary United States, are enough to qualify it as a counterculture in the vein of that of the 1960s. I believe such framing is misguided for two major reasons. First, because of the fact that alt-right ideology stems directly from centuries of traditional Western supremacist thought, in particular on race and gender, as shown in this essay. The alt-right does not strive for a new world and society; on the contrary: it yearns for a return to former norms and hierarchies. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the alt-right can hardly be considered a cultural phenomenon per se, because it merely co-opts and weaponizes elements of existing subcultures into political tools and tactics suited to their fundamentally ideological motivations, whereas the Beats and hippies of the mid-century, or arguably even the punk movement, were characterized by their original and abundant artistic production. Only when one focuses strictly on aesthetics and form, can one interpret the alt-right's adoption of transgressive humor as displaying countercultural features, which results in Nagle's suggestion "to lay the very recent and very modern aesthetic values of counterculture and the entire paradigm to rest and create something new." (Nagle 2017: 116) Although I agree that transgression for transgression's sake can be counter-productive, I would be equally cautious with such a prescriptive argument: the use of an ironic, subversive, and/or humorous style should not be renounced by progressive and radical dissidents solely because it was successfully exploited by white nationalists. The unique success and popularity of the alt-right is largely rooted precisely in its appeal as a rebellious, defiant and contrarian movement, a representation manufactured once again both by the movement's proponents and by mainstream media. To give up the tradition and the field of humor and transgression, in addition to large parts of internet culture and "postmodern folklore" to the alt-right and other reactionary groups might only provide a self-fulfilling quality to the recurring memetic mantra of the larger radical right, that "the Left can't meme," and drive more angry and confused youths into dangerously antagonistic mindsets.

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## Movies

*Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999)

*Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977-2019)

*The Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001-3)

*The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999)

## NOTES

1. Named after a female game developer was harassed for having developed a game designed to fight against depression, a ‘liberal’-minded topic in a milieu usually dominated by games glorifying physical violence. See also below, section ‘Online culture wars and ideological antagonists.’
2. For more on anti-feminism, misogyny and the manosphere, see Donna Zuckerberg’s *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2018). For the links between the manosphere and the alt-right, see Romano (2016/8).
3. Some groups or individuals are sometimes referred to as alt-lite, which is said to reject the white nationalist designation and focus on culture rather than on racial questions, but for the sake of clarity I will only use the alt-right designation in this essay, although I am aware that its use is controversial in itself.
4. This myth has been debunked on several occasions, with one exhaustive example to be found here: <https://twosixteenhouse.wordpress.com/2017/03/04/the-myth-of-the-swedish-rapefugee/>



5. “Serbia Strong/Remove Kebab.” *Know Your Meme*, June 21, 2010 (updated March 28, 2019). <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/serbia-strong-remove-kebab>
  6. “Orcposting.” *Know Your Meme*, May 31, 2017. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/orcposting>
  7. “Social Justice Warrior.” *Know Your Meme*, February 19, 2015 (updated April 9, 2018). <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/social-justice-warrior>
  8. See the various definitions of Social Justice Warrior, in large part hostile, on “Social Justice Warrior,” *Urban Dictionary*. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Social%20Justice%20Warrior>
  9. It is hardly coincidental that most SJW internet memes present female subjects almost systematically as overly emotional and by extension irrational. Philips (2015) and Zuckerberg (2017) both underline how the prevalence of reason over emotion is a logical extension of the androcentrism of the Western tradition of philosophy.
  10. “NPC Wojack.” *Know Your Meme*, September 17, 2018 (updated April 4, 2019). <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/npc-wojak>
  11. “Wojack/Feels Guy.” *Know Your Meme*, July 9, 2015 (updated January 7, 2018). <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wojak-feels-guy>
  12. Source: [http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/archive/fake%20news%20%7C%7C%20fakenews%20%7C%7C%20fake%20media/ttff/1-19-2017\\_](http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/archive/fake%20news%20%7C%7C%20fakenews%20%7C%7C%20fake%20media/ttff/1-19-2017_)
  13. According to the Anti-Defamation League, “Right-wing extremists collectively have been responsible for more than 70 percent of the 427 extremist-related killings over the past 10 years.” (Greenblatt 2019)
  14. Following the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, Roof explains that he searched for “black on white crime” and picked the website of the Council of Conservative Citizens, a white supremacist group created in 1985.
  15. David Neiwert for example makes this connection (Neiwert 2017: 258), while J.M. Berger (2016) provides an interesting comparative study between alt-right and ISIS online social media networks, with a focus on their respective (and similar) uses of Twitter.
  16. For a recent large-scale quantitative study of radicalization on YouTube from “alt-lite” or “Intellectual Dark Web” channels to more radical alt-right ones, see Ribeiro et al. (2019).
  17. According to Gallup, in 2019 only 41% of Americans expressed some trust in mass media, a proportion which sinks at 15% among Republicans. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/267047/americans-trust-mass-media-edges-down.aspx>
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## ABSTRACTS

In this essay, I discuss how the alt-right has brought back into fashion traditional tenets of the reactionary, xenophobic, and often racist far-right, as demonstrated by George Hawley, and how it has managed to make these tenets appear as novel, provocative, and updated to the 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. society and digital environment. I argue that to do so, alt-righters relied heavily on the creation, and sometimes reappropriation, of enemy images, with the ultimate goals of provoking outrage, instilling fear and/or hatred towards specific groups, reinforcing a sense of belonging within their own community, or more broadly manipulating collective perceptions and representations, first online then in real life. Indeed, the election of Donald Trump was hailed by the online alt-right as one of their major successes. With the help of irony, subversion,

and often carefully engineered propaganda-like messages and images, the alt-right, it boasts, "meme'd into office" the Republican candidate. This paper consequently leads to an analysis of real-life repercussions of such adversarial rhetoric, notably through examples of recent far-right domestic terrorism in the US, and to a reflection on their place in an age of post-truth, fake news, and alternative facts. This contribution focuses on several enemy images. The first is that of the civilizational enemy from the outside, which uses the traditional process of othering. This theme is linked to Trump's campaign and to his attacks against two major "enemies" of the U.S., namely Hispanics and Muslims. With the alt-right, refugees for example become "rapefugees," which easily appeals to rampant islamophobia. The second enemy image created by the alt-right consists in its ideological opponents. Here, the function of the enemy image is to discredit opponents and their views ("cuckservative," "feminazi," or the sarcastic "Social Justice Warrior"). The third enemy image establishes a link between the first two. It depicts what I would call the "enemy within," a common thread (or threat) in far-right ideologies. Indeed, cultural Marxism, a widespread conspiracy theory among the alt-right, is what its proponents believe to be the hidden reason for the perceived decline of the Western civilization. According to this worldview, the ideological opponents push a conspiracy against the West and its values. The recurring claims of a liberal bias among the media and academia also belong to this conspiracy theory. It also embraces elements of anti-Semitism, as well as traditional aspects of anti-communism, reminiscent of the historical Red Scares. Such a theory thus provides its believers with a broader narrative, as well as with a common enemy to rally against, and therefore builds a form of intersectionality among various online fringe groups.

Dans cet article, je traite de la façon dont l'alt-right a su remettre au goût du jour des doctrines traditionnelles de l'extrême-droite réactionnaire, xénophobe, et bien souvent raciste, comme a pu le démontrer George Hawley, ainsi que la manière dont ces principes ont été présentés comme nouveaux, provocateurs, et réactualisés à l'aune de la société américaine et de l'environnement digital contemporains. Pour ce faire, j'affirme que les membres de l'alt-right ont largement compté sur la création, et parfois la réappropriation d'images ennemies, avec pour objectifs ultimes de provoquer l'indignation, d'instiller peur et/ou haine de certains groupes spécifiques, de renforcer le sentiment d'appartenance dans leur propre communauté, ou plus largement de manipuler les perceptions et représentations collectives, d'abord en ligne, puis dans la réalité. L'élection de Donald Trump a été saluée par l'alt-right comme l'un de ses principaux succès. A l'aide d'ironie, de subversion, et d'images et messages souvent méticuleusement construits, l'alt-right se vante d'avoir fait élire le candidat républicain grâce aux mêmes, l'arme de prédilection dans les guerres culturelles en ligne. Cet article analyse les répercussions dans le monde réel de telles pratiques rhétoriques antagonistes, notamment à travers des exemples récents de terrorisme domestique d'extrême-droite aux Etats-Unis, et à une réflexion sur leur place dans une ère souvent qualifiée de post-vérité, faite de « fake news » et de faits alternatifs. Cet article s'intéresse alors plusieurs images ennemies. La première est celle de l'ennemi civilisationnel venu de l'extérieur, qui repose sur l'usage de processus traditionnels d'altérité. Ce thème est lié à la campagne de Trump et à ses attaques contre deux ennemis majeurs des Etats-Unis, les hispaniques et les musulmans. Avec l'alt-right, les réfugiés deviennent ainsi des « rapefugees » (i.e. des violeurs déguisés en réfugiés), une formulation destinée à attiser une islamophobie grandissante en Amérique et en Europe. La deuxième image ennemie créée par l'alt-right est constituée de ses ennemis idéologiques. La fonction de cette image ennemie est de discréditer les opposants idéologiques et leurs vues (avec des mots-valises tels que « cuckservative », « feminazi », ou le sarcastique « Social Justice Warrior ».) La troisième image ennemie établit un lien entre les deux premières. Elle dépeint ce que j'appellerais l'ennemi de l'intérieur, une menace récurrente aux idéologies d'extrême-droite. En effet, le marxisme culturel, une théorie du complot répandue dans les cercles de l'alt-right, serait la force se cachant derrière le

« déclin » de la civilisation occidentale. D'après cette vision du monde, les antagonistes idéologiques participant à un complot délibéré contre l'Ouest et ses valeurs. Les attaques récurrentes contre un supposé biais « gauchiste » des médias et du monde universitaire font partie de cette théorie conspirationniste, et ont contribué à sa diffusion. Elle épouse également des éléments d'antisémitisme, ainsi que des vues anti-communistes traditionnelles, qui ne sont pas sans rappeler les Peurs rouges historiques. Une telle théorie fournit donc à ses partisans un récit bien établi censé démystifier la complexité du monde, ainsi que des ennemis communs contre lesquels se rallier, et construit ainsi une forme d'intersectionnalité entre différents groupes marginaux présents en ligne.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** alt-right, internet memes, social media, white nationalism, metapolitics, radical right, alternative right, online movements, enemy image, antagonism, othering, stereotypes, Trump Donald, U.S. presidential election, mainstream media, narrative, Cultural Marxism, conspiracy theories, trolling, right-wing terrorism

**Mots-clés:** alt-right, mèmes internet, réseaux sociaux, nationalisme blanc, métapolitique, droite radicale, droite alternative, mouvements en ligne, image ennemie, antagonisme, altérité, stéréotypes, Trump Donald, élection présidentielle américaine, médias de masse, récit, marxisme culturel, théories du complot, trolling, terrorisme d'extrême-droite

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