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Understanding the Alt-Right

Ideologues, 'Lulz' and Hiding in Plain Sight

Rob May and Matthew Feldman

The Alt-Right has perhaps performed the most successful rebranding of fascist ideology since the Axis dénouement of 1945. Fascist ideology has been a vexatious term for almost as long as fascism has existed, resistant to definition and typically used as either an insult or political hyperbole. Yet the utility of the term as a definitional starting point for understanding fascists past and present has changed markedly over the last generation. There has come to be a notable confluence of scholarly views on this forward-looking, revolutionary and even cultic form of (usually ethnically-based) integral nationalism:

“Since it first emerged in the wake of World War One, fascism can be profitably conceptualised as a specifically modern form of secular ‘millenarianism’ constructed culturally and politically, not religiously, as a revolutionary movement centring upon the ‘renaissance’ of a given people (whether perceived nationally, ethnically, culturally, or religiously) through the total reordering of all perceivedly ‘pure’ collective energies towards a realisable utopia; an ideological core implacably hostile to democratic representation and socialist materialism, equality and individualism, in addition to any specific enemies viewed as alien or oppositional to such a program” (Feldman 2008: xviii).

Not all groups falling under the umbrella term ‘Alt-Right’, fit this view; for instance, the arch-reactionary racists of the League of the South take their inspiration from the Civil War-era Confederate States of America. Yet most of the ideologues who self-identify with the Alt-Right movement do fit this understanding, like hand in glove.

The Alt-Right's 'hand', in the analogy above, is its explicit ideological extremism. In keeping with historic fascism, despite savvy use of social media, this is a movement that seeks ethno-national 'purity' through revolution. Such revolutionary change is directed against social and political 'sickness'; like a patient dying in the emergency room, fascists believe that only a defibrillating shock can return the race (and often synonymously, nation) to mythic glory and dominance. While this zap would undoubtedly be violent – and, as in the past, target leftists, ethnic and religious minorities – the emergent society is invariably cast in utopian terms. For the Alt-Right, this means reactionary gender roles; a militant state focussed on dynamic expansion, even colonization; and above all, a top-down policing of ethics and politics putting the collective above any and all individuals, save a charismatic leader. The latter also helps to explain the importance of Alt-Right ideologues today, in both charting this 'regenerative' course, and in embodying the 'healthy' nation, giving it a renewed sense of self belief and, in a Nietzschean sense, a racist will to power capable of eradicating weakness and opposition from all quarters – internally and externally.

To pursue this simile a bit further, far from the jackbooted paramilitaries who marched across the 'fascist epoch' between 1919 and the end of World War Two, the Alt-Right's 'glove' – that is, its identifying feature and way of displaying its beliefs – has typically been the defence of mere 'lulz'. A distortion of 'LOL', or 'Laugh out Loud', lulz are a sharper form of offensive humour directed by online activists. Exemplified by Pepe the Frog avatars and targeted 'humour' about ethnic and religious minorities in Europe and North America, lulz provide ironic distance where necessary. In this way, the public response of 'just joking' is used as a 'frontstage' mechanism; or better, a shield to protect against charges of racism and their potential consequences, like falling foul in Europe of anti-racist legislation, including Holocaust denial. This characteristic feature is candidly described in Andrew Anglin's *Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right* for the neo-Nazi Daily Stormer online site, which has swiftly become one of the most popular Alt-Right websites today:

"While racial slurs are allowed/recommended, not every reference to non-white should not be a slur and their use should be based on the tone of the article. Generally, when using racial slurs, it should come across as half-joking – like a racist joke that everyone laughs at because it's true. This follows the generally light tone

of the site. It should not come across as genuine raging vitriol. That is a turnoff to the overwhelming majority of people” (Anglin 2016).

A subsequent section of this *Normie’s Guide* is still more explicit:

“Lulz

The tone of the site should be light. Most people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging, non- ironic hatred. The unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not. There should also be a conscious awareness of mocking stereotypes of hateful racists. I usually think of this as self-deprecating humor – I am a racist making fun of stereotype of racists, because I don’t take myself super-seriously. This is obviously a ploy and I actually do want to gas kikes. But that’s neither here nor there” (Anglin 2016).

Speaking in forked tongues to a wider public while signalling a fealty to committed activists has long been a tactic for the postwar far right, eager to counter the stigma of wartime totalitarianism and genocide committed by the Axis. Fully a generation earlier, Roger Eatwell (1996: 100) raised a distinction between the neo-fascist British National Party’s ‘esoteric’ nods-and-winks to hardcore members and their more populist ‘exoteric’ appeal intended for the general public. In a book examining this phenomenon across a range of different countries and groups, Chip Berlet termed this persistent feature “coded rhetoric” (Berlet 2014), while Graham Macklin described this frontstage-backstage dynamic as ‘ideological bifurcation’:

“ideological bifurcation functions as an innate component of the operating system of post-war fascist ideology. It serves as a mode of communication and as a ‘coping strategy’ enabling far right groups to organize themselves around certain forms of ‘rejected knowledge’ which, since the Second World War, have been profoundly out of step with the values of the societies in which they organize. This duality co-exists without contradiction, resulting in an ‘exoteric’ articulation of its ideology for public consumption and an ‘esoteric’ truth understood by an initiated hardcore of political activists” (Macklin 2014: 123–124).

To take just one Alt-Right example – chosen simply by reading the comments on the Daily Stormer about a mainstream news story current at the time of writing – in response to a child who was bullied for being gay and then committed suicide, Andrew Anglin’s (2018) headline is *LOL: 9-Year-*

Old Mulatto Niglet Commits Suicide After Bullying! God Bless the USA! The opening of this account then proclaims: “It’s a proud day for all Americans. Things like this don’t happen in Europe, you know – because they love sucking cock and actually encourage little boys to do it, instead of bullying them into suicide for saying they like doing it. This heart-warming tale reminds me of my favorite patriotic song...” Further racist and homophobic content is then cossetted in just enough lulz to provide a semblance of ironic distance, just as the Daily Stormer’s *Normie’s Guide* advocates.

Put simply, leopards do not change their spots. ‘Ironic misdirection’ is vital for understanding the mainstream push by Alt-Right ideologues and online activists. It is but one of the key techniques deployed in the Alt-Right’s rise to prominence over the last five years. The panoramic glimpse provided by this chapter, emphasizing recurrent themes and leading figures in this still-nascent movement, also serves as a salutary reminder that the revolutionary goals of fascist socio-cultural ‘purity’ – especially in the previously hostile terrain of mainstream politics in Europe and North America, the most familiar stamping grounds for the Alt-Right to date – has many paths toward this goal. ‘Joking’ about the Holocaust is but one of them.

Although not all far-right trolls are as gratuitously offensive as the Daily Stormer and its stable of online neo-Nazis, normalizing fascism, and above all Hitler’s Third Reich and its Axis partners’ genocidal crimes, remains the principal tollbooth through which every Alt-Right group and ideologue must pass. As this chapter underscores, it is Alt-Right ideologues that frame, justify and often direct the growing online army of so-called ‘shitposters’. The ideologues are the self-appointed ringmasters of this racist circus, even if they often disagree and sometimes directly clash with one another. Richard Spencer, perhaps their most influential and sophisticated ambassador, demonstrated this shockingly when speaking to a roomful of Nazi saluters shortly after Donald Trump’s shock election to the presidency: “For us, it is either conquer or die ... Let’s party like its 1933 ... Hail Trump! Hail our people! Hail victory!, accompanied by an English version of Nazism’s *Sieg Heil!*”¹

1 | See a video recording of this speech, alongside commentary with cited quotations, in NZ Herald (2016): “The Big Read: Insight the Alt-Right world of Richard

KEY ALT-RIGHT IDEOLOGUES

It was Richard Spencer who first popularized the term ‘Alternative-Right’ in 2008. Son of an heiress to cotton farms in Louisiana, Spencer is educated to MA level – having read English Literature and Music as an undergraduate and Humanities as a postgraduate – before dropping out of a Ph.D. in History “to pursue a life of thought-crime” (Burghart 2014). Perhaps tellingly, Spencer’s entrance essay for the Ph.D. examined the German judicial theorist and onetime Nazi, Carl Schmitt. Thereafter, Spencer became an Assistant Editor at *The American Conservative*, a magazine led by the noted paleoconservative Pat Buchanan who was White House Director of Communications under the Reagan administration. Spencer was dismissed for his extremist views (Lyons 2017: 2; Wood 2017). After a two-year period as Executive Editor at the fringe publication *Taki’s Magazine*, Spencer founded the now-defunct www.AlternativeRight.com in 2010, which he defined as “an online magazine of radical traditionalism [which] marks an attempt to forge an intellectual right wing that is independent of and outside the American conservative establishment” (quoted in Hartzell 2018: 19). As far back as 2010, the Southern Poverty Law Centre described the website as extreme right and “loaded with contributors who, like Spencer, have long lamented the white man’s decline” (Keller 2010).

The success of *AlternativeRight.com* opened up various new avenues for Spencer. He accepted the role of President and Director at the National Policy Institute (NPI), a racist organization dedicated to the “heritage, identity, and future of people of European descent in the United States and around the world.”² On its website, the NPI continues to describe itself as “a central and indispensable component of the international Alt-Right” while boasting that “Richard Spencer and NPI are at the forefront of Alt-Right activism.”³ Spencer is also the Executive Director at *Washington Summit Publishers*, a white nationalist publisher specializing in eugenics, anthropology, and human biodiversity. As an offshoot of *Washington Summit Publishers*, Spencer also launched the online *Radix* journal

Spencer”, 23 November 2016 (https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=11753791).

2 | National Policy Institut: “About”, (<https://www.nationalpolicy.institute/whoarewe>).

3 | *Ibid.*

which, according to its website, produces “original work on culture, race, tradition, meta-politics, and critical theory.”⁴

Most recently, Spencer launched www.Alt-Right.com, an ‘academic’ think-tank seeking “to give a platform to dissident opinions within the right.” Its thinly-veiled racist aim is to “promote information and discourse in support of Western civilization and draw attention to the imminent demographic threat of mass immigration which is on course to completely erase the unique cultures and peoples of the Occident.”⁵ Notwithstanding the sanitized language above, a legal complaint by civil rights groups claimed that the white supremacist site was actively promoting violence and hatred against racial and ethnic minorities. In response, the internet domain registrar GoDaddy.com, which hosted [Alt-Right.com](http://www.Alt-Right.com), shut down the website in May 2018 (see Murdock 2018; Sharwood 2018). In recent weeks, however, www.Alt-Right.com has re-emerged online.

As a self-identified white nationalist, Spencer’s vision for a utopian United States is a place for whites only. He claims that “European America is being demographically dispossessed [and therefore] we are losing our culture [and] our sense of being.” Spencer’s aim is to influence politics and culture by “raising consciousness and influencing people”, which he claims to be engaged in daily. Spencer insists that he has an “amazing” opportunity to achieve this with Donald Trump in the Oval Office. Although conceding that Trump is not Alt-Right himself, he sees Trump’s presidency the first step towards white nationalist policies in the US.⁶ For his part, though one of many Alt-Right ideologues, Spencer can rightly claim the mantle of *primus inter pares* given his editorial undertakings, media savvy engagements and long-standing activism for an ‘Alternative Right’.

However, the most repulsive and (at least publicly) extreme devotee to the Alt-Right is Andrew Anglin. In 2006, Anglin launched the conspiratorial website, *Outlaw Journalism*, which was modelled on the works of Infowars founder Alex Jones and gonzo journalism (journalism without objectivity) originator Hunter Thompson, who he greatly admired. Before forming his first neo-Nazi website *Total Fascism* in 2012, Anglin went

4 | Radix: “About”, (www.radixjournal.com/about/).

5 | Alt-Right.com: “Who We Are”, (www.Alt-Right.com/who-we-are/).

6 | *Los Angeles Times*: “Richard Spencer, Chairman of the National Policy Institute”, 18 November 2016 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jm4DNMNEZM0&t=29s).

on a spiritual and psychological journey resulting in his conversion to 'full Nazi'. He worked as an English teacher in Asia where, according to Anglin, "all the White people you meet are outcast sorts who you can usually connect with easily" (Anglin 2015). In comments that must again be treated with large helpings of salt, Anglin claims that "having been raised mostly without exposure to non-Whites, this was when I first started thinking seriously about race as a biological concept. Eventually, I got fed up and realized that I couldn't live in a jungle with a bunch of 80 IQ jungle people" (ibid.). Combined with his continental experience was his obsession with the uncensored imageboard, 4chan, where anyone can post anonymously. Anglin explains how he had latched on to the less overtly fascist 'brand' of the Alt-Right, helping to give his patch a more explicitly neo-Nazi inflection:

"I had always been into 4chan, as I am at heart a troll. This is about the time [I] knew [I] was going full-Nazi, and so I got into Hitler, and realized that through this type of nationalist system, alienation could be replaced with community in a real sense while the authoritarianism would allow for technology to develop in a direction that was beneficial rather than destructive to the people" (Anglin 2015).

Due to its lengthy articles, Anglin replaced Total Fascism a year later with Daily Stormer, named after the infamous antisemitic weekly newspaper *Der Stürmer* run by a Nazi called Julius Streicher, which vehemently attacked Jews. With shorter and more provocative pieces, Anglin hoped his new platform would appeal to a broader audience. Central to Anglin's website is extreme racism, misogyny, homophobia, Holocaust Denial and, above all, antisemitism. According to traffic statistics website Alexa, Daily Stormer is ranked 5,722 most viewed in the US and 17,558 globally, making it one of the most popular Alt-Right websites.⁷ The success of Daily Stormer has established Anglin to one of the most influential ideologues in the Alt-Right, resulting in his inclusion (along with Spencer) in a leaders' pact to unite the Alt-Right in December 2016.⁸

7 | Alexa: "dailystormer.name Traffic Statistics", (www.alexa.com/siteinfo/dailystormer.name).

8 | SPLC: "Andrew Anglin", (www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/andrew-anglin).

Anglin's mission is to create a Nazi world (2015). As a proud Hitler-worshipper, he admits to philosophizing over "what [would] Hitler do if he'd been born in 1984 [the year of Anglin's birth]?" Unsurprisingly, given his adoration of Hitler, Anglin harbours an innate hatred of Jews. In his vital 78-page primer, *A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right*, Anglin defines the Alt-Right thus: "The core concept of the movement, upon which all else is based, is that Whites are undergoing an extermination, via mass immigration into White countries which was enabled by a corrosive liberal ideology of White self-hatred, and that the Jews are at the center of this agenda" (Anglin 2016: 2).

Through the *Daily Stormer*, Anglin has created an ad hoc group of followers called 'The Stormer Troll Army' who perpetrate harassment on his behalf, mostly directed towards Jews. In December 2016, Anglin targeted Tanya Gersh, a Jewish woman who had a disagreement with Richard Spencer's mother. Anglin uploaded photographs of Gersh and her contact details along with a rally cry to his readers: "Are y'all ready for an old-fashioned Troll Storm?" (quoted in Stevens 2017). Subsequently, Gersh received "more than 700 threatening, hateful, harassing, antisemitic communications from Anglin's followers at all hours of the day and night". This included harassing telephone calls, asserting that she should have been murdered in the Holocaust "with the rest of your people" (Beckett 2017). As the SPLC has stated: "Anglin is infamous for the crudity of his language and his thinking, a contrast to his sophistication as a prolific Internet troll and serial harasser."⁹

While there is no doubt that the Alt-Right was originally, and remains predominantly, an American phenomenon, there is more to it than that. Needless to say, the internet connects across national borders, and Alt-Right's white supremacism is similarly transnational (if heavily weighted toward Anglophone countries like the US and Britain, together responsible for more than half of the global site visitors to *The Daily Stormer*).¹⁰ Notwithstanding this English-as-first-language propensity, Daniel Friberg is the most prominent Alt-Right figure in Europe. The Swede has a background in neo-Nazism and convictions for criminality, including possession of illegal arms. He has also been involved with several fascist

9 | Ibid.

10 | Alexa: "dailystormer.name Traffic Statistics", (www.alexa.com/siteinfo/dailystormer.name).

parties in Sweden, including Sweden's National Alliance and the violently extreme Swedish Resistance.¹¹ In 2009, Friberg formed the publishing company Arktos in Sweden, which has evolved into "the most important purveyor of European New Right and Alt-Right material, publishing works by the likes of de Benoist and Dugin."¹² With over 150 titles translated into 14 different languages, Arktos publishes "literature that dares to challenge the current paradigm of liberal democracy."¹³ In January 2017, in an attempt to unite the Alt-Right, Spencer's NPI, the Alt-Right's Scandinavian Independent media company, Red Ice Creations, and Friberg's Arktos merged to form the AltRight Corporation, with Friberg sitting on the Board of Directors as its European Editor.¹⁴ Relatedly, Friberg is the organizer of a prominent Alt-Right conference series in Europe, known as 'Identitarian Ideas', where he and his fellow Alt-Rightists deliver lectures.¹⁵

Friberg is a vocal supporter of Spencer and shares many of his perspectives. He describes Spencer as "a great guy [and] a great advocate of our viewpoints", further revealing that "I share a lot of viewpoints with Richard Spencer [...] we come from the same ideological background". Like Spencer, with the phrases 'White guilt' and 'White dispossession', Friberg similarly claims that European civilization is under threat of extinction (Kovacs 2017). The latter differentiates between the 'real right [the Alt-Right]', to which he claims allegiance, and the 'false right', which some call the 'Alt-Lite' and is fronted by such non-fascist radical right figures as Milo Yiannopolous and even onetime special advisor and chief strategist to President Donald Trump, Stephen K. Bannon. According to Friberg, unlike the more reform-minded reactionaries of the 'Alt-Lite', the 'real right' adheres to traditional values, ethnic consciousness and the preservation of European civilization, while the 'false right' believes in civic nationalism and liberal economics, bringing together old-style American

11 | AltRight.com: "Daniel Friberg Annihilates BBC Journalists in Interview", 4 February 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OetLTAfu1Po&bpctr=1537382158>).

12 | Hope Not Hate: "Daniel Friberg", (<https://alternativeright.hopenothate.com>).

13 | Arktos: "About Arktos", (www.arktos.com/about/).

14 | Hope Not Hate: "Daniel Friberg", (<https://alternativeright.hopenothate.com>).

15 | *Ibid.*

Republicans and even fringe figures like the provocateurs from Breitbart. In separating the Alt-Right from even far-right groups like UKIP or the Tea Party, Friberg argues that a strong meta-political basis and theory is crucial for the Alt-Right to triumph. In sum, he claims that controlling culture is pivotal to political success. It is only a matter of time, according to Friberg, before the ‘false right’ are replaced by the ‘real right’ – that is, proud fascists – in all western European countries.¹⁶

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

It is no coincidence that all the key ideologues cited above are male. The sociologist Hannah Bergman (2018) conducted an extensive analysis of rank-and-file supporters of the Alt-Right to explore the preponderance of white men in the movement. Bergman argues that the Alt-Right promotes a sense of “male entitlement” which, in turn, is “easily radicalized and connected to white nationalism and white supremacy” (2018). By attacking feminism and liberal notions of gender equality, the Alt-Right has “created a culture of vitriolic defensiveness among young white males, which aims to establish a common belief in white male victimhood”. Importantly, Bergman points out that the Alt-Right’s existence, in part, relies upon a “rejection of the accomplishments of feminism”. This negation raises the spectre of the ‘f’ word for uniting revolutionary-minded white men around a core of misogynistic disgruntlement, which licences the Alt-Right to “view the subordination of women as both part of a functional society and a stepping stone to a larger movement: one steeped in fascist ideology and willing to openly champion a politics of hate and violence” (ibid.).

This misogyny is but one of the indelible features of the Alt-Right’s fascism. Given the commitment of chief ideologues of the movement, like Anglin and Spencer in the US, and Friberg in Europe, it is a phenomenon which shows little sign of abating. This is despite the washout of the second Unite the Right rally in Washington D.C. in August 2018 – a year after the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally in 2017, which saw one protester killed by and many more injured, some severely – underscoring the

16 | AltRight.com: “Daniel Friberg Annihilates BBC Journalists in Interview”, 4 February 2018 (<https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1240745/>).

fact that this is a movement much more at home in the eddies of online extremism. This is in no small part due to the way digital networks allow them, on one hand, to mobilize fluid groups of activists, especially for online trolling and ‘pile-ons’; but on the other, to hide behind the ‘lulz’ of alleged irony and defence of hateful incitement as free speech. More than anything, it is these strategies that allow the fascists of the Alt-Right to hide in plain sight, ever like leopards ready to pounce on their prey.

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