The Radical Roots of the Alt-Right

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The radical political movement known as the Alt-Right is, without question, a twenty-first century phenomenon. As the hipster-esque ‘alt’ prefix suggests, the movement aspires to offer a youthful alternative to conservatism or the Establishment Right, a clean break and a fresh start for the new century and the Millennial and ‘Z’ generations.

Unlike earlier radical right movements, the Alt-Right operates natively within the political medium of late modernity – cyberspace – because it emerged within that medium and has been continuously shaped by its ongoing development. This operational innovation will continue to have far-reaching and unpredictable effects, but researchers should take care to precisely delineate the Alt-Right’s broader uniqueness. Investigating the Alt-Right’s incipient ideology – the ferment of political discourses, images, and ideas with which it seeks to define itself – one finds numerous links between it and twentieth century radical right movements, like those seen in the present collection.

The Alt-Right described here is the hard core of the movement. Ideologically, the Alt-Right fuses together three previously distinct political and social phenomena:

1. A ‘reboot’ or revision of earlier forms of American white nationalism, sometimes designated ‘white nationalism 1.0.’
2. A theoretical and discursive programme centered on appropriating and adapting European right thought – especially that of the French New Right, the German Conservative Revolution, and Evolian Traditionalism – for an American audience.
3. A refined and intensified gender politics, a form of ‘ultra-masculinism.’

While the first has long been a feature of American political life (albeit a highly marginal one), and the second has been paralleled elsewhere on the transnational right, together the three make for an unusual fusion.

Seminal Alt-Right figures, such as Andrew Anglin, Richard Spencer, and Greg Johnson, have been active for less than a decade. While none has continuously designated the movement as ‘Alt-Right’ (including Spencer, who coined the term), each has consistently returned to it as demarcating the ideological territory they share. No attention is here given to the less ideologically radical and less organisationally cohesive ‘Alt-Lite.’ Nor is attention given to the distinct and much broader phenomena of populism and nationalism.

Mainstream media in the United States often refers to populism and nationalism as ‘alt-right.’ Analytically, such conflations are unhelpful. They were exacerbated by an August 2016 presidential campaign speech by Hillary Clinton in which she expansively asserted that many of her opponent Donald Trump’s supporters were ‘Alt-Right,’ which she defined as an ‘emerging racist ideology’ comprised of ‘race-baiting ideas, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant ideas, anti-woman.’ While Clinton’s characterisation of the Alt-Right – if understood as the
movement’s hard core – rings true in some ways, it is a serious error to confuse the movement’s hard core with far larger and electorally significant, but also far less radical, populist and nationalist phenomena. The Alt-Right’s overt and pervasive fixation on race, ‘the politics of white identity,’ and a homogenous future ‘ethnostate’ clearly demarcate it from other political forces. Yet, while it is crucial to recognise that the Alt-Right is a radical movement and, as such, will likely never enjoy widespread appeal in anything like its current form, the small size of a radical movement or ‘groupuscule’ should by no means preclude sober scholarly investigation and analysis. In the most revealing overview of the Alt-Right’s genesis yet produced within the movement, Anglin identifies twentieth-century American white nationalism as a key precursor of the Alt-Right.

How does the Alt-Right attempt to ‘reboot’ earlier forms of white nationalism? In terms of significant departures and differences, seven can be noted here. Comparative analysis gives us a clearer picture of how the Alt-Right innovates (or fails to). Such analysis can also support hypotheses and forward-looking research agendas mapping potential routes the Alt-Right will take in the future. Each of these seven departures may yet be revisited and reversed as the movement develops. First, the Alt-Right is not a party and lacks, in particular, any hierarchical organisational structure. In this respect it breaks from the kind of neo-fascism seen in George Lincoln Rockwell’s American Nazi Party of the 1960s and its lesser-known successors and imitators. In addition to having no hierarchical apparatus, the Alt-Right features no well-trained paramilitary cadres, no mass rallies of besotted supporters, no cult following of a charismatic leader – all crucial features of the archetypal fascism of Benito Mussolini’s Italy and Adolf Hitler’s Germany aped by many neo-fascists, including Rockwell. Nor do we find a flag or symbol used consistently across the movement, as were the fasces and the swastika. (The issues of political violence and aesthetics are addressed more fully below as distinct matters separable from hierarchical party organisation.)

Second, the Alt-Right abandons the emphasis on religion seen in earlier forms of white nationalism, like Christian Identity, William Luther Pierce’s Cosmotheism, or Ben Klassen’s Church of the Creator (COTC) and its successor, Matthew Hale’s World Church of the Creator (WCOTC). Spencer frequently invokes Nietzschean critiques of Christianity, and Johnson publishes similar critiques along with explorations of alternative religious forms. But the Alt-Right has little in the way of a robust neo-paganism, for example, nothing akin to the Odinism of Robert Jay Mathews and David Lane.

Third, and as one would expect of a cyber-spatial movement which has denigrated ‘IRL’ (‘In Real Life’) activities, the Alt-Right has abandoned physical place, including public spaces and streets. The Alt-Right’s one major street-level foray – the August 2017 ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, Virginia – was catastrophic. Save for tightly controlled, situationist appearances designed solely to produce video and images for distribution online, open IRL practices have been abandoned. Gone too are the isolated communal compounds in Western mountain retreats and Southern
The Alt-Right has nothing akin to Richard Butler’s Aryan Nations in northern Idaho or James Ellison’s Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord compound in southern Missouri.  

Fourth, the Alt-Right features no prominent female leaders akin to the WCOTC’s Lisa Turner, founder of the Women’s Frontier in the late 1990s and editor of a publication of the same name.  

Most Alt-Right leaders are unmarried men. Female leaders are rare and, when they do emerge, are consistently subjected to shaming within the Alt-Right for not being married, not bearing children, and the like.

Fifth, the Alt-Right largely avoids hints of organised violence in its public discourse. It publishes no texts akin to Pierce’s *The Turner Diaries* and *Hunter.* The Alt-Right eschews extremist models and has formed nothing like Tom Metzger’s White Aryan Resistance, Mathews’ Brüder Schweigen (Silent Brotherhood), an armed cadre better known as The Order, or Joseph Tommasi’s National Socialist Liberation Front.

Sixth, the Alt-Right cultivates a public-facing political aesthetic or ‘optic’ that largely avoids imagery, symbols, and uniforms that could be construed as deriving from Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, the Ku Klux Klan, or a subculture like that of skinheads. Indeed, Anglin and Johnson are increasingly converging in their aesthetic and discursive strategies, each urging their followers to coopt and colonise the accoutrement of mainstream American patriotism (the flag, the Founding Fathers, etc.) as well as its attendant discourses. From the classical world, the European Generation Identity and the American Identity Evropa movements have appropriated symbols like the Greek lambda and images of muscular male sculptural figures like the youthful Hercules housed at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Seventh, while twentieth-century white nationalists were fantastically fractious, constantly riven by leadership rivalries and mutual anathemisations (often accusing one another of being predatory homosexuals, covert Jews, or undercover Federal agents, and sometimes all three), the Alt-Right manages a fair degree of coordination or, at a minimum, benign indifference among its component parts. Spencer’s platforms and Johnson’s *Counter-Currents* have both worked closely with Arktos Media, the other major publishing enterprise that has driven the Alt-Right’s highbrow discursive output. Headed by Daniel Friberg, a Swedish national, *Arktos* primarily publishes translations of European right thinkers; these have been excerpted on Spencer’s platforms, and Friberg is European editor of AltRight.com. Arktos books have been sold and reviewed by *Counter-Currents,* and the former editor of *Arktos,* John Morgan, is now a prominent editor there. For years, Anglin’s *Daily Stormer* has helped define the Alt-Right (as opposed to starting a separate movement), and while Anglin’s métier is now consistently lowbrow, in earlier years he would praise and cite the more intellectual Alt-Right platforms.
Having considered seven ways in which the Alt-Right differs or departs from twentieth century white nationalism, in what ways does the Alt-Right more straightforwardly reprise earlier movements? Three significant similarities can be highlighted here. First, and most obviously, the Alt-Right maintains the fixation on race, on whiteness as a perceived biological and cultural marker uniting all Americans of European descent. Like Pierce’s National Alliance, it even entertains strands of Nordicism, openly invoking public intellectuals like Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard, early twentieth-century advocates for a restrictive immigration policy along Nordicist lines. Second, the Alt-Right is pervaded by similarly apocalyptic discourses: the white race, white nations, and white civilisation are under dire threat – especially from non-white mass immigration – and may well be beyond saving. The heroic few must stand fast in the face of doom. Third, the Alt-Right reprises a virulent anti-Semitism. One anti-Semitic discourse, long-standing in white nationalism, attributes national and world domination to ‘ZOG,’ the ‘Zionist Occupation Government,’ which controls foreign and domestic policy, finance, media, academia, Hollywood, and seemingly everything else. The Alt-Right also relies heavily on Professor Kevin MacDonald’s *Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements*. And the Alt-Right is developing other anti-Semitic discourses through its appropriation of recently-translated writings by Martin Heidegger and Julius Evola, an example of how white nationalism is being supplemented – even, to a degree, supplanted – by European influences.

Beyond anti-Semitism, the Alt-Right looks to the European right in other ways. We do not find the Alt-Right republishing and extensively commenting upon texts like Rockwell’s *White Power* or Klassen’s *White Man’s Bible*. These are ignored by white nationalism ‘2.0.’ Instead, Alt-Right platforms have translated, edited, and published dozens of European thinkers aligned with the French New Right, the German Conservative Revolution, and the Traditionalism of Julius Evola. Furthermore, these platforms publish work by contemporary Alt-Right figures – several with advanced graduate academic training – who seek to interpret and adapt the European thinkers to suit the needs of the American movement. White nationalism 1.0 generated no transnational theoretical and discursive enterprises on the scale of those presently seen on the Alt-Right.

Indeed, with the partial exception of fascism, European right thought had little influence on earlier forms of American white nationalism. One of the rare outliers in this respect, a man who sought to bridge the two spheres, was Francis Parker Yockey. A graduate of Notre Dame Law School, Yockey was a WWII Army officer who vehemently disagreed with the Allies’ conduct of the war crimes trials in Germany, left military service, and then undertook decades of shadowy effort towards a transnational renaissance of the radical Right. Yockey’s *Imperium*, a massive work influenced by Oswald Spengler and Carl Schmitt, was certainly totemic among twentieth-century white nationalists, if not widely read or understood.
The Alt-Right seeks to build a transnational radical right intellectual and discursive sphere. Of French New Right thought, the Alt-Right publishes translations of work by Alain de Benoist and Guillaume Faye. From the German Conservative Revolution, the Alt-Right publishes translations of, or commentaries upon, Carl Schmitt, Oswald Spengler, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, and Ludwig Klages. Spencer’s Radix/Washington Summit imprint produces an edition of Eurasianist Alexander Dugin’s book on Heidegger, translated by Spencer’s wife. Counter-Currents publishes on most of the above and on right literary figures like Ernst Jünger, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, and H. P. Lovecraft. Other trends, less influential but noteworthy, include Counter-Currents’ publication of esoteric Hitlers like Savitri Devi and Miguel Serrano and Arktos’ publication of the radical right ecologist Pentti Linkola. Finally, the Alt-Right looks to Traditionalism, especially that of Julius Evola. Arktos has committed to publishing all of Evola’s hitherto untranslated major writings; it has also published selections of Evola’s work under titles like The Metaphysics of War and A Handbook for Rightwing Youth.

The third and final element of the Alt-Right’s emerging ideology is ultra-masculinism. American white nationalists displayed and codified numerous forms of masculinity. Consider, for example, the virile posturing of Rockwell or the patriarchal family structures of the Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord community. But masculinity itself, a normative conceptualisation and social formation of gender (intersecting but distinct from sex and sexuality), was rarely discussed or even understood as in need of discussion. Anglin thinks the ‘Manosphere’ and gendered events like ‘#GamerGate,’ understood as reactions to the perceived triumph of feminist and LGBTQ politics, were crucial to the formation of the Alt-Right. The Alt-Right is unique, and a product of its time, in making masculinity an overt discursive subject and a core (if contested) concept in its ideology, a type of masculinism.

Across the Alt-Right, one finds hundreds of webpages, posts, and podcasts in which masculinity is openly named and its relation to politics, culture, society, sex, and sexuality debated. Spencer featured the ‘androophile’ thinker Jack Donovan at his NPI annual conference and on his Radix podcast. Counter-Currents has distributed and reviewed Donovan’s books and published related works that depart from the typical conflation of gender and sexuality found elsewhere on the right. And several Alt-Right platforms have revived the concept of the Männerbund, the intensive grouping of male warriors and initiates understood to have dominated pre-Christian Indo-European societies, especially Germanic ones.

Alt-Right ultra-masculinism, as part of a threefold fusion with American white nationalism and European right thought, will continue to take the movement into unusual and uncharted territory. One of the most popular Alt-Right figures on Twitter, ‘Bronze Age Pervert’ (BAP), describes himself as a ‘Steppe barbarian, Nationalist, Fascist, Nudist Bodybuilder!’ and calls for the ‘Return of spirit of the Bronze Age – revolt of vitalism, destruction of the cities in fire!’ BAP frequently posts images of youthful, muscular men, always white and usually positioned in front of grandiose natural backdrops. Followers of BAP’s
aestheticised masculinism post images of their own physiques, sometimes under the hashtag ‘#frogtwitter,’ seeking BAP’s approval and coveted retweet. BAP’s cult following appears global: after the summer 2018 release of his [self-published] first book, *Bronze Age Mindset*, images appeared on social media of readers holding the book aloft before beaches and mountains across the world. When accused of being ‘ghey,’ his preferred spelling of ‘gay’ – one of many insider code words, partly necessitated by social media censors – BAP accuses his accusers of being themselves hopelessly effete, often by way of comparison to imagined forefathers from a more virile, ‘bronze’ age. If a religion emerges out of the Alt-Right, BAP may prove, in retrospect, to have been one of its founders.

**ENDNOTES**

1 For a general overview of the focused on the 2015–16 period in which the movement came to public awareness, see George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

2 For a good introduction to contemporary research on radical right youth movements, albeit with an emphasis on Europe, see Anna Krastva, *Re/De/Constructing Far-Right Youth: Between the Lost Generation and Contestatory Citizenship*, in *Understanding the Populist Shift*, ed. Gabriella Lazaridis and Giovanna Campani (London: Routledge, 2016).

3 In order to maintain an analytical distinction between the loose media and partisan usage of ‘alt-right’ and a more precise designator for the movement’s hard core, the latter will here be consistently capitalised ‘Alt-Right’—save in the case of quotations, as in Clinton’s speech below, which are unaltered.

4 After having first created and operated a now-defunct web publication called *Total Fascism*, for the past five years Anglin has led the lowbrow *Daily Stormer*, a crudely racist and anti-Semitic web publication named after the Nazi-era *Der Stürmer*; on the latter, see Dennis E. Showalter, *Little Man, What Now?: Der Stürmer in the Weimar Republic* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1982). It has been estimated that the *Daily Stormer* was responsible for a third of all web traffic associated with the alt-right before the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017; Thomas J. Main, ‘What’s the Alt-Right, and How Large Is Its Audience?’, *Los Angeles Times* [Online], 26 August 2017. For the most prominent journalistic portrayal of Anglin to date, see Luke O’Brien, ‘The Making of an American Nazi’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2017.

5 Infamously described by the leftwing *Mother Jones* as ‘dapper,’ Spencer – fond of tailored suits for himself and polo shirts for his men – strives to reach middle America through various college speaking tours, his annual National Policy Institute conference, his journal *Radix*, and the website AltRight.com. On the sartorial designation, see Josh Harkinson, ‘Meet the Dapper White Nationalist Who Wins Even If Trump Loses’, *Mother Jones*, 27 October 2016 (the title was subsequently changed). While Anglin and (until recently) Johnson are very reclusive, Spencer actively courts the limelight, so popular media interviews and portrayals of Spencer are legion.

6 Editor of *Counter-Currents*, Johnson, who claims to hold a PhD in philosophy, publishes extensively online and in print on topics ranging from Martin Heidegger’s conception of ‘Jewry’ in his Black Notebooks, to Julius Evola’s conception of ‘spiritual’ racism, to the
perceived theoretical and philosophical foundations of white nationalism.

1 The term ‘Alt-Lite’ is used in a denigratory sense within the Alt-Right to designate its most proximate political rivals, a loose and ever-shifting collection of ‘civic’ nationalists who shun the Alt-Right’s overt ethno-nationalism, racialism, and anti-Semitism. On the Alt-Lite, see Hawley, Making Sense of the Alt-Right, ch. 6.


2 A cogent case for studying small and seemingly unimportant groupuscules is made by Roger Griffin, ‘From Slime Mould to Rhizome: An Introduction to the Groupuscular Right’, Patterns of Prejudice 37, no. 1 (2003).


10 Arthur Versluis, ‘A Conversation with John Morgan’, Journal for the Study of Radicalism 8, no. 1 (2014), is very useful but occurred before Morgan’s split with Arktos. Morgan’s departure was acrimonious (he accused Friberg of embezzlement). And Friberg and Spencer have at times attacked Johnson in homophobic terms.

11 Madison Grant, The Passing of the Great Race, or, the Racial Basis of European History (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916); Lothrop Stoddard, The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920). For a scholarly biography of Grant, see Jonathan Peter Spiro, Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant (Burlington:
University of Vermont Press, 2009). Whitsel, ‘Aryan Visions’, 19, reports that Pierce placed Grant and Stoddard together with Francis Parker Yockey as writers who shaped his views on race. Spencer wrote the forward to a recent edition of Madison Grant, Conquest of a Continent, or, the Expansion of Races in America (1933; Abergele: Wermod and Wermod Publishing, 2013).

* For an overview of representative white nationalist literary works sustaining such discourses, see Jeffrey Kaplan, ‘America’s Apocalyptic Literature of the Radical Right’, International Sociology 33, no. 4 (2018).


* Kevin B. MacDonald, The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements (Westport: Praeger, 1998); MacDonald is a California State University, Long Beach, emeritus professor of psychology. On MacDonald, see George Michael, ‘Professor Kevin MacDonald’s Critique of Judaism: Legitimate Scholarship or the Intellectualization of Anti-Semitism?’, Journal of Church and State 48 (2006).


* Roger Woods, The Conservative Revolution in the Weimar Republic [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996], remains the standard source in English despite being by no means comprehensive. The term was created and developed by Armin Mohler in his Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918–1932, first completed as a doctoral thesis in 1949 and subsequently published in several revised and updated forms. Roger Griffin, ‘Between Metapolitics and Apotheosis: The Nouvelle Droite’s Strategy for Conserving the Fascist Vision in the “Interregnum”’, Modern & Contemporary France 8, no. 1 (2000), 39, emphasizes that Mohler’s book is conceived as a survivalist manual for those who do not wish to lose their spiritual bearings in the present age. Spencer has announced plans to publish the first English translation of Mohler’s work.


