Alt-Right

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From 4chan to the White House

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Introduction: Is it OK to Punch a Nazi?

Richard Spencer had reason to crow. As one of Donald Trump's most fervent "alt-right" supporters, walking through the streets of Washington on Inauguration Day in January 2017, he was celebrating not only the victory of one of his favorite politicians, but the start of what he thought would be a cleansing revolution. It was the beginning of the end, he thought, for globalism, liberalism, political correctness and multicultural democracy.

In the middle of the crowds, Spencer enjoyed the attention of Trump supporters, protesters and the media in his role as the leader of this new, slightly mysterious fringe movement in American politics. It was a contrast with the recent past. He had spent the years of the Obama administration writing for esoteric websites, bickering with his neighbors in a tiny Montana town,[1] and working out how to spin his twenty-first-century version of white nationalism—and a new nationalist ethno-state world order—into something fashionable, edgy and cool. But now, in Donald Trump, he had found a leader he could follow.

"I think we were in love with him," Spencer told me later.

> He was the man, he was changing everything, he was doing things for us, he couldn't be stopped. I was definitely excited. The alt-right felt unified with average Trump supporters. I could walk around with a Trump hat on … and get a slap on the back and a pat on the back from an average person. For what I'm doing, which is quote "far-right" politics, that's not something that normally happens.

Suddenly, Spencer felt like he was no longer on the fringes, but in the middle of the slipstream of history. "I never got into any of this to become a marginal figure," he said. "I think we're going to win. Our biggest problem is that we haven't dreamed big enough." And President Trump was the alt-right's first big dream that came true.

But it wasn't just the president that alt-righters counted as being on their side. The inaugural stage would also be graced that day by Stephen Bannon, former executive chairman of the online tabloid Breitbart. Breitbart was a site with a distinct mission, even in America's increasingly partisan media environment. Its staple news diet consisted of stories about immigrants spreading crime and disease, mendacious Democrats, and outrage-inducing examples of political correctness. Breitbart was the new media outlet of choice for the Trumpian right and had become—though perhaps not through deliberate design—the chief popular media amplifier of alt-right ideas.[2] It had previously described Spencer, in laudatory terms, as one of the intellectual founders of the movement,[3] and Bannon himself once bragged to a reporter: "We're the platform for the alt-right."[4] He was about to become the president's chief strategist.

Wandering among the Inauguration Day crowds, Spencer found himself giving an interview amid a small throng at the corner of 14th and K Streets in downtown Washington.[5] Video posted online shows him shrugging off the opponents surrounding him.[6] "I've given conferences for ages, and we usually expect some protesters," he said to the reporter.

But the conversation soon deteriorated into a free-for-all. In the video, people behind Spencer held signs which read "White lives matter too much" and "Fight for socialism over barbarism." Protesters began interjecting with questions. *Do you like black people? Are you a neo-Nazi?*

"Neo-Nazis don't love me, they kind of hate me," he responded.

The reporter asked him about a cartoon frog pinned to his lapel—the now-infamous green amphibian Pepe that had become the mascot of the alt-right movement.

Just as he started to answer—"Pepe's become kind of a symbol…" he began—a man rushed at Spencer and punched him in the face.

* * *

Spencer was perhaps the most recognizable leader of a movement that is in some ways unlike any other political force of modern times. The alt-right is an incredibly loose set of ideologies held together by what they oppose: feminism, Islam, the Black Lives Matter movement, political correctness, a fuzzy idea they call "globalism," and establishment politics of both the left and the right.

It's a movement that for most of its relatively short history has existed almost entirely online and one which, despite its lack of organization, formal political channels, official candidates or party membership, burst into mainstream consciousness in 2016, in tandem with the Trump candidacy. With amazing speed after his election victory, the term "alt-right" transformed from an obscure idea into a commonly used—if sometimes ill-defined—label.

As the movement gained attention, it presented a unique set of challenges to journalists, to progressives, and to conservatives who found themselves in the alt-right firing line. What was the best way to deal with this phenomenon, and its outpouring of a mixture of authentic and ironic hate? Where did it come from? What did it stand for? Who were these people, and what did they want?

This book is an attempt to answer some of those questions. It's also an attempt to move beyond exhausted "call out" tactics. These suggest that simply labelling the alt-right racist (or sexist, or homophobic or xenophobic, etc.), or reducing their

movement to white supremacism or a rebranded version of the Ku Klux Klan will scare people off.

Let's be clear. These epithets are certainly accurate—many of the alt-right's self-declared members are indeed, by any standard definition of the terms, racist or sexist. Many of them won't even quibble with being labeled as such. They believe in a racial pecking order, and strictly prescribed gender roles. Taken collectively, race is the movement's top obsession—only just nudging out topics such as gender, anti-feminism, free speech, Western civilization and video gaming.[7]

But for those concerned about the alt-right's growing influence, casual label-tossing plays directly into the movement's hands. Some activists are actually proud of being called "racist." Others brush the word off as meaningless, correctly if misleadingly pointing out that, online, such insults are routinely lobbed at people who are nothing of the sort. And, in one of the favorite pastimes of alt-righters, insults are hurled back at their enemies, for almost nothing pleases them more than pointing out hypocrisy, and appealing to the classic logical fallacy, "You do it too!"[8] And so if an alt-righter is accused of being racist or sexist, they're likely to fight back by pointing out some egregious example of similar behavior by someone on the left. It's not really that they care about equality—their movement is profoundly anti-egalitarian. They care about winning arguments, pointing out logical inconsistencies and verbally bludgeoning their opponents into submission, which they routinely do online.

Imprecision allows even the most extreme alt-righters—and many of them hold views far out of step with any recognizable mainstream political party or movement—to avoid being pinned down, and to accuse their accusers of misrepresenting them.[9] Thus to call the alt-right "racist" or an offshoot of the KKK and leave it at that is to step into their trap, where activists can either refute the claim with selective facts or embrace it—but either way claim victim status—and tweet out a few Pepe memes in triumph. The internal logic of the alt-right quickly breaks down

under scrutiny—and the fissures that have already started to kill it off become glaringly obvious—but in order for this to happen, it must be properly examined and exposed.

* * *

Getting a handle on the alt-right is difficult. It is, as mentioned, an oppositional force with no real organizational structure. It's a creature of the internet, where many of its members, even some of the most prominent, are anonymous or tweet under pseudonyms because they are afraid of the impact of their political activities on their jobs and relationships. It's a movement with several factions which shrink or swell according to the political breeze and the task at hand.

It's hard to get an overall sense of its size and scope. Numerical estimates are useless and perhaps a bit beside the point. The alt-right is not like the KKK—hate-tracking groups can't provide reasonable estimates of the number of people who belong to local or national organizations, because there are virtually none. Website membership, readership figures and Twitter follower counts are inexact measures, regularly inflated by those running the sites, and swelled by the curious, clictavists, pranksters and the relatively uncommitted, as well as a huge cohort of committed opponents keeping tabs on the movement.

But even if metrics were available, they would probably be misleading in the opposite direction. Some of the movement's ideas are shared by a host of people, including mainstream politicians who wouldn't identify themselves with the alt-right tag, and some who only have a dim idea of what the alt-right actually is. Meanwhile others with alt-right sympathies and whose agendas overlap with the movement are outraged at the term, and even threaten legal action to extract apologies from news outlets who use it to describe them.[10]

In fact, some of the people most identified with the movement shun the label, a trend which accelerated after the election of

Trump, as the alt-right garnered attention and was given a bad name in much of the mainstream press. And the alt-right as a widespread phenomenon is new—so new that as late as August 2016, in the home stretch of the US Presidential campaign, I wrote a much-clicked-on story for the BBC News website with the simple headline: "Trump's shock troops: Who are the 'alt-right'?"[11]

But while the term "alt-right" and the movement's coalescence as a result of the current political climate is a relatively recent phenomenon, there are definitive identifiable strands of alt-right thought, some of which reach far back into history (or which alt-righters grandiosely *imagine* reach far back into history). There are some broad observations and useful conclusions to be drawn about the overall nature and philosophy of the alt-right, and some specific conclusions that can be made about the various wings of the movement.

To begin with, there are what might be called the alt-right's forefathers. The movement's most identifiable leaders have for years been active in the white ethno-nationalist scene, working towards an elusive goal: to make their brand of far-right politics palatable to a mainstream audience. It's a hard sell in the United States, a country mostly populated by the descendants of immigrants from around the world, where pluralism is a broadly accepted concept across both major political parties and the phrase "E Pluribus Unum"—*out of many, one*—is printed on every coin.

And yet they found traction as their online efforts melded with the current fever pitch of anti-elitism, and found a willing audience in a concentrated generational backlash of young men. These foot soldiers feel aggrieved by the successes of feminism and the progress made by ethnic minorities, and have also felt rising anxiety as former certainties about race, sexuality and gender crumble. At the same time, some are puzzled and scared—as are many people from the more traditional right as well as the left—by the censorious atmosphere of many university

campuses today, a confusing, sometimes barely comprehensible minefield of trigger warnings, privilege checking, safe spaces, and complicated sexual politics. For the alt-right, all of these fall under the umbrella of one of the ideas they loathe the most: political correctness.

They are also opposed to feminism. While some begrudgingly give credit to second-wave feminists and concede that legal equality between the sexes is a valid goal, others argue against any such notions. Some even say that giving women the franchise was a terrible mistake. Many embrace the old conservative lament that "these days" things have "gone too far" and call for a reaffirmation of traditional values. At the same time, other alt-righters are obsessed with porn and the promise of sexual freedom offered by "pick-up artists."[12]

When it comes to religion there are equally baffling contradictions. The alt-right counts many committed atheists in its ranks and many in the movement scorn monotheistic religious thought. Some embrace a purely cultural notion of Christianity—they prefer cathedrals and incense to church communities and prayer—or even adhere to a pre-Christian paganism. You will also find a few churchgoers and many others who, like Steve Bannon, are fond of talking about the "Judeo-Christian West."[13]

Most importantly, alt-righters see no unity in the Abrahamic religions. Anti-Semitism is rife and goes well beyond sketchy reports of Bannon's comments about Jews.[14] Nazi imagery and "jokes" about gas chambers are one of the alt-right's defining tropes, and debate revolves not around the question of what should or shouldn't be said, but rather about what most irritates its opponents.

As for Islam—as a whole, and not just in its radical extremist form—it is viewed as an existential threat to Western civilization. Some of the less worldly alt-righters in America view Europe as already lost to the invading hoards from the East, despite Muslims making up only 6 percent of the continent's population.[15]

Tied to their opposition to Islam is the alt-right's sharp rebuke of immigration and their belief that, despite centuries of American history to the contrary, gradual assimilation is nothing but a pipe dream. Given these main tenets, you can see how the candidacy and then presidency of Donald Trump prompted cheers and swooning among the alt-right faithful.

* * *

So who exactly are the people who make up the alt-right? Here again the nature of the movement and its life online make it extremely hard to pin down the characteristics of the individuals involved. It's safe to assume that many are men, and most are white, but there are notable exceptions. The conventional wisdom, created in part by alt-right sympathizers, has established that this is a youthful movement, and while there may be an element of truth in that description, the movement probably doesn't skew as young as it thinks it does.[16] I've encountered a number of middle-aged alt-righters, people established in professions or completely alienated from the world of work, who have come together in their resentment of what they consider the establishment elite.

Alt-righters are scattered throughout the United States, with significant concentrations in other English-speaking countries, particularly Britain, Canada and Australia, and adherents throughout Europe. Despite their anti-immigrant stance, more than a few alt-righters are immigrants, or children of immigrants. It does seem that a significant cohort are university students or recent students, who bear a particular grudge against the forces of political correctness. It's unclear if any particular socioeconomic backgrounds are particularly over- or under-represented.[17]

Central to the alt-right's conception of itself is that it represents something fundamentally countercultural—activists have compared their movement to punk rock or the hippies of the 1960s. The comparison stems not from shared political values but from the alt-right's claim to "outsider" status. Like the

hippies and the punks, alt-righters rail against what they see as an oppressive establishment. The difference is that their establishment is made up of academia, the Washington "swamp," and influential leftists in the media, rather than the corporate world and free-market politicians. In the words of one alt-righter, the movement "is basically political punk rock: loud, abrasive, hostile, white, back to basics, and fun."[18]

But the argument that the alt-right represents a "counter-culture" comes almost entirely from the movement itself and rings hollow when properly examined. It has received little scrutiny in the media—the anonymity of most activists being a key barrier to testing the proposition. In actual fact, the alt-right is quite a culturally sterile space—producing a bunch of Photoshopped images ("memes"), tweets, propaganda videos and in-jokes, sure, but very few original songs, bands, films, or other cultural artefacts of the type that flourish in real counter-cultural communities. This is a movement with no soft power, and which immediately found it hard to keep up oppositional pretenses after their hero was elected president.

There are a few other things crucial to understanding the movement. As a creature born and raised on the internet, it values trolling and internet pranks not just as sideshows or light diversions, but as key forms of political action. Pranking takes a variety of forms, from memes to campaigns of tweeted nastiness or disinformation, often loosely coordinated, but designed to knock liberals and mainstream conservatives off balance. Activists exaggerated their own role in Trump's victory, hyping up chat on 4chan—a freewheeling, confusing-to-outsiders message board which played a key role in the movement's development—and social media skirmishes into "The Great Meme War," which they hoped would be only the first campaign in an online wave of populism spreading across the Western world.[19]

The alt-right does have a few proto-institutions, like Spencer's National Policy Institute, and some media: most notably Breitbart, the /pol/ section of 4chan, numerous accounts on

Twitter, popular Reddit forums and YouTube accounts, and niche websites and message boards devoted to conservative news or topics such as men's rights.[20] While each of these has a particular role to play in the movement, building institutions hasn't been the main focus of most of the people involved—a strategy that, as we'll see, can be both a strength and a weakness.

If it's tough to tell who's involved in the alt-right, pinpointing exactly what these individuals believe in is more difficult still. Because if you move just a step or two away from the handful of core values described above, you find that even self-described and enthusiastic alt-righters have widely different views. Take the issue of white nationalism. Some key alt-right figures run a mile from the concept.[21] Others don't necessarily dismiss the idea out of hand. And some alt-righters are positively proud of the label. One prominent fringe member described his life goal as: "Reestablishing global white supremacy … blacks have supremacy in Lagos and Asians in Shanghai and whites are uniquely being deprived of their homelands in a global plot to exterminate them from the Earth."[22]

The policy fuzziness can be seen again and again, even when looking at issues that fall squarely within the movement's key obsessions: race, sexuality, and gender relations. Some on the alt-right are intensely anti-Jewish, others—to paraphrase a Breitbart headline about Stephen Bannon—are friends of the Jewish people. Some call gay people "degenerate," others are themselves gay, and many couldn't care less about the sexual orientation of their fellow activists. And, as noted, their views on feminism, and on particular women, vary wildly. Several young women could credibly be called leaders of the alt-right, while some (male) supporters have views on the role of women in society that are more or less indistinguishable from the fundamentalist Muslims they hate.

Economic concerns are secondary, and amongst the alt-right you can find every viewpoint from Russia-worshiping statists to techno-utopian libertarians.