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THE HIGH/LOW TOGGLE

Alt-Right Code Switching on 8chan

BY LUKE MUNN

ABSTRACT

The alt-right has recently achieved a kind of intellectual legitimacy, with best-selling books, lecture tours, and academics who splice racist ideals into sophisticated new ideologies with pseudoscientific rhetoric. Yet the alt-right also contains a strong anti-intellectual tradition, a populist demagoguery that rails against the doctored version of reality handed down by official institutions like the university. This paper thus argues that the alt-right derives much of its power from an ability to rapidly code switch between the *high* culture of scientific rationalisation, academic theories and institutional legitimacy, and the *low* culture of populist tropes, crude humour and pragmatic action. To explore this phenomenon, I analyze 24 hours of postings from the /pol board of 8chan, regarded as *ground zero* of alt-right discourse. In scrolling through these pages, 8chan users move back and forth between logical arguments and low-brow jokes, between scholarly literature recommendations and simple lifestyle suggestions. Though these twin modes are logically opposed, they are functionally complementary, slowly nudging users towards a more far-right position.

Mit Bestsellern, Vortragsreisen und Wissenschaftler*innen, die rassistische Ideale mit pseudowissenschaftlicher Rhetorik in ausgefeilte neue Ideologien verwandeln, hat die Alt-Right vor kurzem eine Art intellektuelle Legitimation erreicht. Gleichzeitig enthält die Alt-Right eine starke anti-intellektuelle Tradition, die sich gegen eine vermeintlich manipulierte Version der Realität richtet, welche von offiziellen Institutionen wie der Universität weitergegeben werde. Dieser Beitrag argumentiert, dass die Alt-Right einen großen Teil ihrer Macht aus der Fähigkeit ableitet, schnell zwischen der *hohen* Kultur wissenschaftlicher Rationalität, akademischer Theorien und deren institutioneller Legitimität und der *niedrigen* Kultur populistischer Tropen, rohen Humors und pragmatischen Handelns zu wechseln. Um dieses Phänomen zu untersuchen, analysiert der Beitrag Einträge des /pol-Kanals von 8chan, dem *Ground Zero* des Alt-Right-Diskurses. Beim Scrollen durch diese Seiten bewegen sich Nutzer*innen hin und her zwischen logischen Argumenten und einfachen Witzen, zwischen wissenschaftlichen Literaturempfehlungen und Lebensstilvorschlägen. Obwohl diese Modi eigentlich gegensätzlichen Logiken folgen, ergänzen sie sich funktionell und führen dazu, dass Nutzer*innen sich langsam für eine rechtsextreme Position öffnen.

LUKE MUNN

DISCLAIMER

This article contains original language used in *8chan* posts, quoted verbatim. Although I've intentionally avoided citing many of the worst slurs, several highly offensive terms occur. These are reproduced here as a way to gain much-needed insight into the alt-right ideology, and such homophobic and xenophobic hate speech in no way represents the views of myself or the journal. To avoid driving traffic to the site, quotes from anonymous users of *8chan* are intentionally not linked.

GLOSSARY

SJW: Social Justice Warrior, a pejorative term for an individual who promotes socially progressive views, including feminism, civil rights, multiculturalism, or identity politics.

Pepe the Frog: an anthropomorphic frog that has moved from popular internet meme to hate symbol.

Red pill: a term taken from the film *The Matrix*; after taking the pill one awakens from the comfortable dream to the true reality. In an alt-right context this can mean *waking up* to see the supposed agendas of feminists or cultural Marxists, the *racial realism* of reality, or the Jewish conspiracy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The alt-right has recently achieved a kind of intellectual legitimacy. Racial realism is debated; antifeminism is discussed. University professors such as Jordan Peterson provide racial ideologies with an air of intellectual sophistication, while Marc Jongen acts as the *party philosopher* of Germany's far-right AfD party. Pseudo-science proliferates, dredged up by conservative think-tanks in order to validate claims of racial disparity. At the same time, publishing houses are mining historical fascist literature, which is translated, annotated and distributed, expanding an ideologically sophisticated alt-right canon.

Yet the alt-right also contains a strong anti-intellectual tradition, a populist demagoguery that frames itself as the common sense of the average Joe and ordinary Jane. The mainstream media are lying. The government is corrupt. The swamp must be drained. Rather than accepting the political correctness of the university or the official version of reality handed down from the *powers that be*, those in the alt-right have chosen to swallow the *red pill*, opening their eyes to the supposedly true state of the world. Instead of engaging in logical arguments, alt-right activists hurl abuse or gleefully craft the next juvenile image meme. In online environments, rhetoric becomes overwhelmed by spamming and shitposting, trolling behaviours designed to disrupt.

In fact, the alt-right encompasses both strands simultaneously. But more than simple coexistence, the ability to smoothly pivot from an intellectual to an anti-intellectual mode is highly beneficial. This paper thus argues that the alt-right derives much of its power from an ability to rapidly code switch between the *high* culture of scientific rationalisation, academic theories and institutional legitimacy, and the *low* culture of populist tropes, crude humour and pragmatic action.

I explore this phenomenon through community postings from the popular imageboard website *8chan*. As a sibling of *4chan*, which creators felt had become too monitored, *8chan* is championed by its users as the last bastion of free speech and uncensored thought. More typically, *8chan* is derided as the dark underbelly of the web, a cesspit inhabited by sick people and their sick ideas. Closely associated with the GamerGate controversies of 2014, *8chan* is a crucial breeding ground for an anti-feminist, anti-SJW (social justice warrior) community and a potent catalyst of the alt-right's recent rise.

Methodologically, I examine 24 hours of postings from *8chan*'s ›/pol‹ (politically incorrect) board, collected on April 12th, 2019. Referred to as »ground zero of the Alt-Right« by one activist, /pol is by far the most popular board on *8chan*, with 13.109.487 posts at the time of writing, roughly double its closest competitor of /videogames. For this reason, 24 hours of material encompasses about 10 pages, with dozens of posts per page. As an indication of what an average user would experience, these top-level pages are not the full text of each post, but rather excerpted summaries a few hundred words in length. All are posted by the same pseudonym of *Anonymous* for obvious privacy reasons. Because of this, and in order not to direct traffic to the site, authors will not be cited as per a standard forum.

While the posts have been somewhat clustered into themes, I also want to retain some sense of the rapid switching that occurs when scrolling through each page. In the following three sections, one mode will be juxtaposed against the other, demonstrating this oscillation. While these modes are diametrically opposed in some sense, on *8chan* they appear to work synergistically. Whether intellectual or anti-intellectual, rhetoric or joke, each post is designed to nudge a red piller further along an alt-right trajectory.

2. INTELLECTUAL / ANTI-INTELLECTUAL

Intellectual arguments occur throughout *8chan*, and resonate with a broader attraction to intellectualism in the alt-right. Whether or not these arguments are agreeable or ethical, or even grounded in any empirical, demonstrable evidence is besides the point here. It is the rhetoric of academic language, of scientific proof, of logical statistical analysis, that is key. As Stephanie Hartzell notes, »purposeful construction of an intellectually grounded ›alt-right‹ provides an air of legitimacy

to the ideological assumptions of white superiority.«¹ This rhetoric not only rationalizes ideologies, but does so typically through a detached presentation of the *facts* as they are. The all-too-obvious nastiness of former racial tropes is obfuscated, repackaged for a contemporary audience with »a shiny veneer of intellectual sophistication.«²

The first page of posts examined on *8chan* lists a *solutions megathread*. For this poster, solving the racial problems in society will require intelligent foresight and the implementation of a strategic response. The post explains that

We discuss and brainstorm solutions to the many obvious problems that plague us today. Rather than being simple (»just, like, fix things«), or retarded (»hurr durr gas the kikes race war now«), write as much as fucking possible – outline the specific problem, then detail what exact solution you believe should be put forth. Other anons should point out potential flaws, and we aim to constructively build up each other's ideas in order to create better and more effective designs.

Here the Enlightenment ideals of science and engineering converge in full force. According to the post's author, a problem should be stated and a hypothetical solution introduced using precise language. These are then to be analysed by peers, with various flaws being corrected and more optimal methods proposed. Although not exactly erudite in its formulation, this vision of cool analysis and empirical investigation corresponds closely to broader alt-right terms like *racial science*. Indeed, one key marker of racial difference in this science is the intellect itself, a pseudo-scientific data point leveraged to justify ideologies. In the speech that coined the term alt-right, so-called paleoconservative Professor Emeritus Paul Gottfried posited that »human cognitive disparities« were »stark fact.«³ In its academic language and calls to reason, Gottfried's speech anticipated the strain of alt-right discourse evidenced in this *8chan* post.

Another *8chan* post draws upon the theoretical framework of intersectionality. Intersectionality was originally coined by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, and was aimed at exploring how interlocking systems of power impact marginalized groups.⁴ However in this *8chan* post, intersectionality is reworked for an altogether different purpose. »The time has come to develop what I call right-wing intersectionality against the Judeo-egalitarian tyranny« the poster asserts. This theoretical model would assist alt-right activists in »triggering or exacerbating racial, ethnic, religious, sexual and religious tensions everywhere and all the time.« While the post's author remains vague on how this

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- 1 Hartzell: »Alt-White: Conceptualizing the Alt-Right«, p. 23.
 - 2 Shafak: »To Understand the Far Right«.
 - 3 Gottfried: »The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right«.
 - 4 Cf. Crenshaw: »Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex«, p. 139.

framework would be harnessed, the notion of co-opting intellectual weapons of the left shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. As Phillip Gray observes: »Within both the alt-right and the intersectional Left, their notions of identity depend upon an ideational structure of ›category-based epistemology.«⁵ The repurposing of theories like intersectionality suggests an alt-right movement that understands intellectual theory can be both valuable and influential. The university is not only the source of such theories, but the very bastion of political correctness, and consequently a key site of cultural contestation.

Yet this *8chan* post is closely followed by others that might be labeled populist or anti-elitist. One poster responded to a news link with the simple: »no one trusts journos, they're just useful idiots.« Such rhetoric reflects a broader right-wing disillusionment and distrust. Mainstream media cannot be counted on to report the facts fairly. Information from official sources like government bureaus and scientific institutes has been manipulated to suit a certain agenda. »We live in two universes,« quipped right-wing radio host Rush Limbaugh: »One universe is an entire lie...The other universe is where we are.«⁶ Indeed the rise of the alt-right has coincided with a whole Trump era lexicon aimed at undermining these official narratives, from alternative facts to fake-news, post-truth and even truthiness. After all, as Nesta Divine notes, the alt-right occupies »a world that is neither entirely modern, nor entirely post-modern: a world in which education, science, economics and religion have all failed to deliver on their promised truths.«⁷ Trust has been thoroughly exhausted, and the result is a deep-seated cynicism.

A similar post on *8chan* asserts self-education over that provided by the ivory tower of the institution: »wrong, shit for brains. You musta got your ›knowledge‹ from a university. LOL.« Implicit in these replies is the idea that the official instruction provided by the university is carefully censored, inferior to the unfiltered knowledge obtained by those who are self-taught. As one poster complained

- >Since middle school I identify myself with authoritarian and traditional systems
- >In university I started to sympathize with fascism
- >Have the great fucking idea of study psychology
- >Only can go to a public school
- >It's full of marxist/liberal bullshit

5 Gray: »The Fire Rises«, p. 142.

6 Limbaugh: »ClimateGate Hoax«.

7 Devine: »Beyond Truth and Non-Truth«, p. 161.

Putting these two opposed tendencies together, the alt-right draws upon the objective reason of scientific rationalism until this reason starts to sour, contradicting their already established views. At this point, the rhetoric rapidly toggles to anti-intellectualism. Corrupted by *cultural Marxists*, the university is a dangerous place where the harsh, race-based reality of existence is shrouded in political correctness and »liberal bullshit.« For alt-right activists, such teaching leads students away from the *natural* superiority of the white race, for instance, or the *natural* role of women in reproduction. Given these conditions, being uneducated is better than being miseducated. A return to healthy living, family values, common sense and innate instincts is the best path to rediscovering the real truth.

3. TEXT / NON-TEXT

Alt-right groups display a penchant for literature, extracting nuggets of racist ideology from a wide range of texts, whether historical, classical, or philosophical. Donna Zuckerberg notes that, along with a fascination with classicists like Homer and Marcus Aurelius, alt-right advocates are »particularly interested in the histories of Great Britain, Germany, and Russia, especially the medieval period, and they also compose and cite articles about evolutionary psychology, philosophy, biology, and economics.«⁸ In their erudition and their ability to precisely formulate a racial-national vision, such texts form a conceptual corpus that is woven into speeches and strategies. White supremacist icon Richard Spencer, for instance, draws arguments from the writings of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche as well as those of Nazi-era political theorist Carl Schmitt.⁹ Respected or even revered, such texts contribute a historical and moral authority to the ideas of the alt-right.

Interest in wide-ranging and often difficult texts is also evidenced in the *8chan* posts. One post of recommended reading for *ecofascism/deep ecology* listed a number of academic and philosophical books such as *The Question Concerning Technology* by Martin Heidegger, *The Impeachment of Man* by Savitri Devi, and *Can Life Prevail* by Pentti Linkola. Like the theory of intersectionality described above, this literature was conceived for different purposes in another context, but might still be repurposed as a literary weapon in the alt-right canon. Another post dismisses recently books by alt-right blogger Laura Southern as »trash«, distracting readers from »giants like Evola«, the Italian philosopher and fascist intellectual. In a final example, a group calling themselves the *Sicherheitsdienst* states that we are »alive and well« in Germany and references the Masons, the SS, and bloodlines. However, the first reply is not an encouragement but a critique of their textual sources. »The trouble with Masonic history books, is that most are written by Masons, and they're terrible historians«, the user opines, »The best ones are probably Tobias Churton's book on Masonry, and Nevile Barker-Cryer's

8 Zuckerberg: »How the Alt-Right Is Weaponizing the Classics«.

9 Cf. Wood: »His Kampf«.

history of early Masonry, York Mysteries Revealed.« Carefully selected, excerpted, and shared, such texts draw from the past and the present to form a fascist library, assembling a theoretical scaffold for the contemporary alt-right.

However, while the /pol board on *8chan* displays the broader literary bent characteristic of the alt-right, it also demonstrates an ability to switch effortlessly between text and non-text, between intelligent discourse and crude derision. For example, one page lists a news item about the recently announced Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2019. Rather than a simple link, the original poster has delved into the details of the political text and extracted a key phrase from SEC. 2. FINDINGS. »Congress finds the following: (I) White supremacists and other far-right-wing extremists are the most significant domestic terrorism threat facing the United States.« The reply to this Congressional finding is deliberately swift and stupid. An image of Clown Pepe wearing his typical rainbow wig is slapped underneath, accompanied by his two-word catch-phrase: «HONK HONK«. ¹⁰ While Clown Pepe is certainly racist, the key point here is that he is absurdist, an anti-intellectual, anti-political jester who responds to the ostensible collapse of the Western world the only way possible – with laughter.

As Jean-Paul Sartre once said of an older xenophobic generation, they »are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play.« ¹¹ On *8chan*, play takes the form of meme generation. Images are cut and spliced together. Illustrations are hastily redrawn. The results are uploaded to the board, throwing them back out to the community, where they can be remade once more. The aim of all this visual production is to land—partially by careful refinement, partially by chance and crowdsourcing—on the next viral phenomenon. Memes *win* through repetition, not argumentation. Their end game is not to construct a logical argument, but rather to saturate an environment like a message board or even the wider web. Stamped across 4Chan, Reddit, YouTube and Facebook, successful memes follow the user, appearing again and again in different contexts. Such images are not texts, which can be semantically deconstructed to discover meaning, but rather webs of references only understood by insiders. Rather than writing, they should be understood as a performative play that daily reinforces the boundaries of the *red pill*ed community.

In a second reply directly below this, another poster further undercuts the perceived authority of Congress with a three line take-down

gaaaay

neet life autistic lone wolves (don't) unite!

just shoot more people lmao

10 Holt: »White Nationalists Adopt Clowns as Their Next Racist Symbol«.

11 Sartre: »Anti-Semite and Jew«, p. 13.

The language here is aggressive and colloquial, a perfect inversion of the formal proclamations of Congress. »Gay« in this post joins other racial, sexual and political slurs on 8chan, like *fag*, *shitskin*, *cuck* (from cuckold), and *libtard* (liberal retard). These words are designed to stop the flow of words, to shut down language. As ad hominem attacks, they seek to close down argumentation by annihilating the reputation of the speaker.

In the second line, the designation of »neet« (not in Education, Employment or Training), embraces the loser-in-his-parents-basement cliché, framing it as a pushback against structures of authority and order. The »autistic lone wolf« is a dropout, a recluse who has withdrawn as much as possible from society and thus from the strictures of the state. For this user and others on 8chan, this withdrawal provides the conditions of anonymity and freedom conducive to trolling. The troll is performative, not rhetorical. He seeks not to win an argument, but to simply evoke outrage. He is not making a point so much as poking and prodding, mocking and deriding. If the troll has an imperative, it is disruption not discourse.

Toggling to this pragmatic perspective, the Congressional Act becomes an empty text, a pompous decree exerting only nominal force on the everyday. The author's use of »lmao« (laughing my ass off) points to the role of callous humour mentioned above. But directly prior to it, the phrase of »just shoot more people« posits violence as a practical and brutal performance that overpowers the feeble dictates of language and legislation. Before walking into two mosques and opening fire on those he regarded as inferior, the Christchurch shooter signed off by saying: »Well lads, it's time to stop shitposting and time to make a real life effort post.« Faced with a textual affront, individuals within the alt-right smoothly pivot to the *non-text* of image-based memes, everyday slurs and pragmatic action.

4. COGNITIVE LABOR / MINDLESS PLEASURE

One final juxtaposition is that between cognitive labor and mindless pleasure. Through their diverse writing, publishing, and distribution projects, the alt-right affirms the importance of forming and disseminating ideas. In the wake of the Charlottesville events, Richard Spencer, prominent white nationalist figurehead, penned a *meta-political manifesto* for the alt-right; the treatise takes complex ideologies and compresses them into a highly shareable set of keywords with aphoristic definitions, from »Education« and the »Ethno-State« to »Firearms« and »Foreign Affairs«.¹² Spencer has gone on to form the *AltRight* magazine as a publishing platform, as well as taking over the leadership of the National Policy Institute. Modelling itself on other conservative think tanks, the institute's website explains that we »publish original research« and »host regular events, including major conferences«.¹³ Alt-right ideas, whether contemporary or ancient, must be

12 Spencer: »The Charlottesville Statement«.

13 Cf. National Policy Institute: »»About« National Policy Institute«.

distributed widely, and so publishing houses have also sprung up. Launched in 2009, Arktos Media has now relocated to Europe, where it is described as the »biggest publisher of traditionalist, conservative, nationalist, Identitarian and overall alt-right literature in the World.«¹⁴ The work of Arktos also includes translation, resulting in English language versions of French (Alain de Benoist) and Russian (Alexander Dugin) fascist literature.

These strands are evidenced on *8chan* as well. One recent post discusses the Christchurch shooter's manifesto, titled *The Great Replacement*. As other commentators have noted, the title itself is directly lifted from a 2012 book by French anti-immigration writer Renaud Camus, *Le grand remplacement*. The *8chan* post announces that translations of the manifesto in »FRENCH, BULGARIAN, AND RUSSIAN!« have now been completed: »And we have German and Dutch translations on the way. Please, spread these everywhere you can. The entire world needs the fire of [Christchurch shooter] ignited inside of them.« The post calls for translations in additional languages, providing instructions for contributors and an upload address for the resulting PDF. While this particular text is certainly not the most complex, the post nevertheless foregrounds a willingness to engage in »a genre of laborious text work effected at the nanoscale of a word-for-word textual world.«¹⁵ In translating, alt-right contributors must perform the basic intellectual labor of analysing a text, choosing the appropriate linguistic terms, and rewriting it.

However once again, when scrolling through *8chan*, we see how users often pivot away from such intellectual work, even if only temporarily. One user, sounding somewhat stressed, asks for advice on dealing with all the problems in the world. In the context of the /pol board, such problems are typically pinned on immigrants, minorities, and other marginal groups, and so present a rich opportunity to draw on the carefully formulated and widely published ideas discussed above. Yet instead of rationalising such issues or discussing their root causes, the posted reply lists five recommended activities

- go for a drive
- have a smoke
- go to traditional mass (this is huge for me, it helps me put my worries in perspective)
- read something apolitical, older books are generally better
- get a dog

14 Valencia-García: »The Rise of the European Far-Right in the Internet Age«.

15 Apter: »Taskography: Translation as Genre of Literary Labor«.

Rather than the intellectual labor of theorization, this user suggests relaxation. Whether joy riding, recreational drugs, or attending a religious event, all these activities are in the category of non-work. Reading is included, but must be reading for pleasure, *apolitical* books without an agenda that presumably provide a means of escape or enjoyment. More to the point, however, such activities are not just non-work, but non-thought. Their goal is to reduce the ceaseless churn of the cognitive, to quiet the mind. To drive or to smoke is to engage in a habitual, routine activity that allows the mind to wander and drift. Similarly, to care for a dog or to worship your God is to halt self-reflexivity by placing one's focus temporarily on something else. This post mirrors others on *8chan* that foreground the non-thought of practical daily living: routines of sleeping, exercise, and healthy eating. If these micro-routines stress a wholesome lifestyle without overthinking things, they slot into a broader macro-role: a healthy family, headed by a male leader, with strong values and high reproduction rates. For the white supremacist, such a role applies no matter what you think—it is not about intellectual assent but about a racial duty.

To conclude, the ability to seamlessly pivot back and forth between *high* intellectualism and *low* populism is one of the strengths of the contemporary alt-right. In a post for the *Daily Stormer*, Andrew Anglin explained that the »heads-space of those in the movement« is a place »where irony and vulgarity meet conscious idealism, futurism and a deep reverence for objective, scientific data.«¹⁶ Yet, as one post from *8chan* itself pointed out, such smooth switching between cultural codes was evident in earlier far-right regimes as well. Hitler could »indulge the elite« by supporting chastity, the user asserted, yet could rapidly toggle into a more populist mode and »indulge the crowd« with speech that was »emotional, hysterical«.

Novelist and academic Elif Shafak also notes this duality, stating that: »A new breed of populist demagogue has arisen, with no care for facts, reason or data. Yet alongside this has been a silent shift: the emergence of a radical right wing intelligentsia.«¹⁷ One can certainly imagine figures that seem to perfectly epitomize these twinned tendencies: Donald Trump vs Jordan Peterson, for example. But Shafak's framing implies a set of two groups and a clean delineation between logics which are fundamentally opposed. The high/low toggle proposed here and witnessed in the rapid juxtaposition of *8chan* posts suggests instead that, if these modes are logically opposed, they are functionally complementary, propping each other up when one fails to achieve the desired result. Intellectualism engenders a certain legitimacy: academic language provides a dispassionate presentation to racist theories and scientific *logic* lends them an empirical foundation. Yet as soon as this begins to falter, the alt-right can shift over to anti-intellectualism, can claim

16 Anglin: »A Normies Guide to the Alt-Right«.

17 Shafak: »To Understand the Far Right«.

the truth has been censored or covered up, can stress action over theory, or can simply retreat to the *luls* of memes and mockery. As one post summed up neatly

Is this just a load of schizoposting or have I tapped into some other dimension of knowledge?

Bit of both I guess

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