This is Not a Critique:
Reactionary Digital Politics in the
Age of Ideological Entrepreneurship[1]

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Abstract

On digital platforms a distinct form of reactionary politics has gathered, intensifying and focusing its political arguments. Composed of diverse strands of political ideology it is unified by opposition to any and all forms of politics concerned with claims for equality. Key avatars of this politics are 'ideological entrepreneurs', individuals untethered from modern political institutions and engaged in the business of manufacturing criticism not only of this or that form of politics but of modern politics as such. While highly politically consequential these political forms are peculiar insofar as their goal is not primarily political consciousness raising and organising but the growth of an audience and the intensification of its parasocial attachment. Because they are not seeking to attain political legitimacy or win office, standard forms of counter-critique, which measure the distance of reactionary political claims from what is imagined to be universal and legitimate, are misdirected. In addition to such normative critique those who would defend politics must learn how to do it better, in ways which understand the digital political conjuncture and the opportunities it contains. The force and meaning of political critique is found only in its effects.

Keywords

ideology, digital politics, reactionary politics, alt-right, far-right, criticism, critique

Introduction[2]

In February of 2005 YouTube was launched. It was followed, in June of that year, by Reddit. In March 2006 Twitter went online and that September Facebook was made available to anyone with a valid email address. These are now major venues for the crystallisation of novel arrangements of political ideas and arguments, and for their

putatively persuasive communication. Societal political education (about the meanings of fundamental political concepts, how to identify friends and enemies, what should be done) now takes place in and through YouTube channels, Reddit communities, Twitter threads and Facebook Groups, and in ways neither contained nor controlled by traditional political parties or mass media outlets.

Regis Debray (2007) characterised political movements as arrangements of people, institutions, and "tools of transmission", mutually interacting and conditioning each other. The transformation of just such "tools of transmission", engendered by digital platforms and interfaces, is in turn transforming how people come together to interact and think politically, and to position themselves in relation to political institutions (see also Finlayson, 2019). As is, I think, widely sensed, these changing relationships between people, institutions and tools of transmission have exposed once dominant modes of political critique and deliberation as inadequate. This is not only to do with the adoption of "constructivist" forms of critique by "the dense and moralist cigar-smoking reactionary bourgeois" (Latour, 2004: 231) or with the ways in which certain critical gestures have become reflex, institutionalised and banalised (see Felski, 2015). It is also to do with the ways in which Liberalism, as a political practice, because of its tendency to reduce politics to the exchange of opinions, encourages us to believe that the public critique of the expression of opinions – their measurement against what are imagined to be common standards of propriety, evidence and authority – is one of the highest and most significant forms of political action. Finding their critical voices to be just a drop in the vast oceans of online discourse, such "critics" focus their efforts on the "tools of transmission", construing the issue primarily in terms of "disinformation", convinced that reform and regulation can resolve political problems by ensuring the prominence of opinions expressed "properly". Meanwhile, however, what I call "Reactionary Digital Politics" has taken shape online. It brings older forms of political thought together with participatory, shareable and digital means of communication, giving rise to particular forms and styles of argument and expression which are deployed not in the service of better deliberating liberal political procedures but, rather, for waging polemical warfare on socially liberal ideals of communicative deliberation, and which flout propriety for that very reason (while strategically laying claim to a different (neo)liberal ideal of commodified communication in the "marketplace of ideas").

This essay is about such Reactionary Digital Politics. It is not, however, a "critique" insofar as it does not especially focus on exposing the internal incoherence of such a politics, or its lack of an evidentiary basis, nor on assessing it against a more fundamental normative principle or some other political "rule" it may be accused of breaking. Such critical gestures belong not to politics as such but to a specific form of political Liberalism – one that is primarily legalistic and deliberative, and which is precisely rejected by Reactionary Digital Politics (which ruthlessly exploits its weaknesses). Instead, what this essay is, I hope, is a concrete *analysis*, a good explanation of what is going on. That can be a useful prelude to the formation of political strategies which can make possible, *concrete*, social criticism which is to say, informed and tactical action with the potential to outmanoeuvre political opponents. The import of this distinction will be returned to later. As an introduction I begin by characterising a particular kind of reactionary political criticism which pre-figured forms dominant today. I then turn to a general explication of the ideological underpinnings of what I call "Reactionary Digital Politics" before considering how communication on digital platforms has reshaped its manifestations and given rise to new styles of political rhetoric. In the conclusion I return to the question of critique and of what that might be in contemporary politics.

The "Coulterist" critique

The writer Anne Coulter first came to public prominence through working as legal counsel to Paula Jones when the latter sued President Bill Clinton for sexual harassment. After publishing the book, *High Crimes and Misdemeanours: The Case Against Bill Clinton*, in 1998, Coulter began writing more general political commentary and publishing books with titles such as *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right* (2002). She became a regular on the talk-show and speaker circuits, and had a syndicated news column. As of 2023 she has published twelve books including, in 2017, one called *In Trump We Trust: E Pluribus Awesome!* Since 2013 she has also been a contributor to VDare: an anti-immigration, so-called "race realist" online magazine (one that believes in the natural reality, hierarchy and foundational political significance of race) named after Virginia Dare, the first English (i.e., white) person born in the US colonies. Coulter is an exemplar of a certain sort of political ideological style and rhetoric which

took shape before the launch of the major social media platforms but which has since been amplified and energised by them.

The historian of political thought Quentin Skinner has argued that one of the most important rhetorical strategies of political thought is *paradiastole* or "redescription" – the attempt to represent something in such a way that it moves from the category of virtue to that of vice (Skinner, 1996). Obvious examples are the redescription of an act of virtuous bravery so that it is understood as the vice of recklessness, or of prudence as miserliness. Coulter perfected just such a polemical, redescription of Liberalism's self-proclaimed virtues – tolerance, pluralism and rationality – representing it as an exclusionary ideology, intolerant of those who dissent from its promise of secular salvation, and ruthless in its ideological propagandising. In making that case Coulter employed epithets, satire, mockery, hyperbole and stretching of the truth, decontextualising statements and then recontextualising them as parts of her own political-critical discourse (see Chambers and Finlayson, 2008). The substance of that critique is not intellectual but practical, not normative but rhetorical and best assessed not in terms of its formal coherence or procedural legitimacy but with an eye on its intended tactical effects.

Samuel A. Chambers and I, in a 2008 article we published on this phenomenon, called "Coulterism" "one of the most important political developments of our time". We did so because we wanted to highlight the ways in which Coulter's discourse was inassimilable to standard debates, in liberal political theory, about deliberation, pluralism and the regulation of political discourse. We showed how Coulter's practice wasn't to justify her own thinking, nor to criticise liberal thinkers in ways they might recognise, but to destabilise their claims performatively. We argued that her gratuitously extremist or offensive remarks were not only red meat for her fans but also a kind of calculated provocation. So enraged were Coulter's liberal critics that they resorted to the same kinds of *ad hominem* they condemned when she made them, reducing her claims to manifestations of personal pathology, an act, or simple stupidity sold to readers described as duped hicks and "rubes" (Chambers and Finlayson, 2008: para 22). Thus did they prove her charges that they were intolerant, elitist and incapable of rationally justifying their claims. Outrage and anger at her remarks, and normative responses to the effect that "you can't say that", we wrote, "provides evidence not of

the failure but of the success of the Coulterist polemic. [It] has exposed a particular framework of political thought and action as just that: particular and a framework rather than the natural and rational order it claimed to be". We suggested that this was a kind of performative political critique which often left Liberalism "squealing that the world had refused to conform to the liberal description of it" (2008: para 22). In short, Coulterist discourse forced liberals into showing their claims as merely habitual reflexes, a kind of unwitting self-criticism.

Coulterism adapted counter-revolutionary, anti-liberal politics (redirected by post-civil rights and "Goldwater Republicanism") to a celebrity media culture itself intensified by radio talk shows, cable news entertainment (and liberal comedy programmes such as Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*). It flourished as the counterpart to the triumphalism of Clintonite and Blairite Liberalism in the post-cold war West, and to the latter's confidence in its harmony with the natural progressive forces of history (which were believed to legitimise military, financial and political expansionism). As liberal political theory seemed to redefine its purpose as mopping up the stragglers, forcing them to "modernise" while establishing ever tighter rules for discourse and justice, Coulterism seemed to us to be a significant counter. Our view, in 2008, was that the force of Coulter's style of attack, and the constitutive incapacity of Liberalism to realise what was happening and thus to respond, were key forces in contemporary politics.

There was another dimension to all this, one which became apparent to us only after publication of that article. Reaction from within political theory (in which, at that time, Rawlsian and Habermasian liberalism were hegemonic), was unsurprisingly muted. But the article was briefly mentioned on a blog run by *The Atlantic* magazine. Consequently, we received angry emails and were attacked online sometimes unpleasantly but also amusingly; one person wrote "These guys have read too much Karl Marx while tripping on acid". Our correspondents vigorously defended Coulter, questioned our right even to look at her let alone criticise her, and attributed to us various dark motives – not only our "Marxist agenda" but also our barely repressed polymorphous sexual desires for Coulter and each other. This was helpful. It demonstrated to us that Coulterism was also part of a kind of commercial fan culture – a key source of energy for early internet take-up in which groups were bound not just by perceptions of common interest but by shared affections (see Papacharissi, 2016) and enjoyment of

opportunities to participate, be it by creating forms of fan art or by attacking opponents online using uncivil forms of discourse (see also Martin, 2020).

I have been studying this formation ever since. Today, the online journal in which we published our analysis of Coulter is no longer available online. Coulter is still writing, though a more marginal figure. But the Coulterist performative critique dominates American politics, and versions of it are prominent across Europe: polemicising against liberalism, while expanding the term to encompass a range of positions and exploiting its polysemy to blur important distinctions (see Finlayson 2021), provoking it into reactions which justify the provocation and destabilise its hegemonic claims. It is the style of Tucker Carlson who – until his firing by Fox News in April of 2023 – was the most watched news anchor in the US. The default mode of online reaction picked up and employed by many individuals enabled by digital platforms is to have a go at becoming an Anne Coulter and at cultivating a remunerative form of her political-influencer celebrity. They do not merely disseminate "hot takes" on issues of the day but propagate a potent political analysis which viewers can themselves apply in their own online content creation. The core of that analysis, in 2023, is of course the argument that "woke politics" is a cultic form of liberalism, organised and encroaching on individuals' rights to speech, property and privacy; weakening their bodies through regulating food supply and forcing the take up of vaccines and, through the subversion of gender norms, corrupting children and promoting paedophilia; destroying cultural heritage from museums to video games and superhero films. The terms and tropes of that analysis have moved from the bottom of the internet and below-the-line comments into mainstream news commentary and the speeches of, for example, British cabinet ministers (see Little, 2022).

I have, therefore, needed to repeat arguments from fifteen years past only partly so as to demonstrate mine and my colleague's extraordinary perspicacity and prescience. The point is that forms of online far-right, right-wing and reactionary populist politics did not come from nowhere but have developed out of, and in the wake of, tactics of rhetorical and ideological communication with a much longer history. They are not a mistake, an unfortunate by-product of a means of communication so easily used by people not yet "educated" in how to do political critique properly. Critiquing such online political discourse by measuring it against pre-defined standards for "serious"

and "appropriate" journalism or a healthy "public sphere" is both pointless and a misunderstanding of the phenomenon. Coulterism is not intended as a contribution to a rational public discussion about the common good. It is performative, illocutionary, part of a political-ideological strategy, a war-of-position against liberal hegemony. Already adapted to televisual and tabloid forms of expression it has in turn shaped and been reshaped by the affordances of social media platforms.

Consider, for example, "current year" memes.[3] These make fun of arguments which rely on claims of the form "But it's 2023, how can you…." used to express critical disdain of an attitude or outlook implied to be out of date and out of line with an idea of progress. Reactionary online actors make fun of "the argument from the current year" as empty and reflexive and, in so doing, expose reliance on unthought concepts of historical development. But it is not an attempt to show arguments wanting when measured against standards for good grounds for a claim, in search of revised and better grounds. The strategy is to provoke people into making the argument from the current year, to collate these as evidence that there are no grounds for liberal progressivism at all, just empty attachment, faith in a vague idea – and to destabilise it while winding everybody up. In turn we might decide to wait for the philosophers and ethicists to publish their own critiques and to tell us what is "problematic" about it all. Alternatively, we might undertake analyses of this political formation, of where it comes from and of how it works, and make tactical assessments which can contribute to concrete political strategies to counter it.

Reactionary politics

I call this formation Reactionary Digital Politics, a term intended to draw attention to the fact that it is not a single unified ideology but a broad field of political thought and expression within which ideas, arguments and slogans flow. It includes very far-right, white nationalist forms of politics but also mainstream aspects of conservatism. These are not the same. But one of the significant effects of digital communication on politics is the breaking down of barriers between political tendencies. In pre-digital political culture, radical politics (of the left or the right) were fragmented, built around face-to face meetings and movements' own magazines and newspapers. For politically curious

people it was not easy to survey the whole spectrum and access all the information. For the organisations themselves there was an incentive to intensify attachment to a particular group against the others. Digital political culture is very different. In place of groupuscules and organisations there are individual "influencers", and incentives (both economic and political) for them to collaborate (see Lewis, 2018). Meanwhile, for casually curious outsiders there is no difficulty in accessing content from across the spectrum while incurious outsiders can also find it in their various social media feeds and recommendations. Consequently, concepts, terms and mythemes formed in one part of the political spectrum are not held on to as the exclusive property of this or that faction but easily picked up, adapted and recirculated. Political cultural analysis has to adapt to that, recognising distinctions but also larger and looser ideological groups with a shared vocabulary.

Central to that vocabulary is a language of anti-politics (part of but not reducible to Populism).[4] Aristotle in the *Ethics* described Politics as "the most authoritative art", and "truly the master art" because it is concerned not with a particular end or specific good but with the chief good (Ethics, 1, 2). A narrower, influential, twentieth-century conception, from American political science, is that politics involves "the authoritative allocation of values" (Easton, 1952), the distribution of power, status and resources. For both of these approaches – one primarily concerned with the Good, the other with goods – politics is at the centre of social organisation yet also apart from it, intervening into and deciding on social and economic disputes about how things should be organised, who gets what and when. However, the most dynamic and consequential forms of contemporary politics, driven by online technologies but also driving their use, reject all of this. They are not interested in a contest of values, and do not think that politics should allocate values or decide anything for anyone. For them, to talk about a politics of the Good or Justice is intrinsically wrong. Theirs is an anti-politics politics.

One of these kinds of politics comes from within Liberalism. For libertarian neoliberalism, the allocation of values properly takes place through the market. It is not a matter for politics at all. For it, the very idea of social justice – as Sean Phelan (2019) has shown – is illegitimate. Its governing principle is that governing should be limited (Foucault, 2008) so that there is space for self-creating entrepreneurs investing

in their personal, bodily and human capital, and whose true value can be revealed only by the market. Attempts to achieve "social justice" will lead only to illegitimate interference from government that will bring everything crashing down. At the core of Reactionary Digital Politics is, then, a fairly familiar opposition to the political principles of equality and collective freedom which began to organise European politics in the 18th Century and which were at the heart of 20th Century Social Democracy and Socialism. Calling themselves "Classical Liberals" they ruthlessly critique everything to do with what they see as the political pursuit of a fictious equality and the interference of the state in natural hierarchies, imposed on once free people by a "new class" of state and industrial bureaucrats.[5]

The second form of anti-politics comes from outside of Liberalism. It objects to the idea that politics is the authoritative allocation of values because it thinks that value doesn't have to be allocated, having already been assigned by nature or God. From this perspective, the Good is disclosed by religion and the state must subordinate itself to Natural Law. It's a position somewhat in the ascendant in US Conservatism under the name of Integralism – the idea that the spiritual power of the Christian (Catholic) church should be integrated within constitutional practice not distinguished from it – (but see Joyce, 2022) and in Europe as varied forms of "post-liberal" opposition to multiculturalism and religious tolerance.[6] From this perspective any form of politics is a kind of idolatry, an attempt to put a man-made principle at the heart of social order in the place where God and the church should be (see Vermeule, 2017). Equality is one such principle, not least because it must oppose belief in a divinely ordained natural order which gives some people authority over others, and which in the US manifests as Christian, providentialist nationalism, and as evangelical and Traditionalist Catholic critiques of government over-reach.

That seems about as far as you could get from advocacy of the neoliberal market state. Yet the best way of explaining politics today is that these two forms of anti-politics have joined forces, united by their principled objection to equality and total opposition to the contemporary liberal state. The neoliberal and the theological are united in opposition to political means of resolving disputes about value, and to the principle of equality. They have been able to consolidate around them varied factions united in opposition to equality even as they differ over which axis of equality is the worst: racial,

gender, religious, economic etc. And they are thus also united in opposition to those they see as imposing equality, enemies whose names reactionary ideologues work hard to create, recreate and disseminate: "social justice warriors"; "the woke"; "Critical Race Theorists"; "Cultural Marxists"; the entire white collar "new class" and "administrative state" deriving power and income from the public sector – especially lawyers, doctors, journalists. For adherents to this sort of politics theirs is not a political struggle at all. They do not believe in politics. Law and the allocation of values comes from God and nature moving, in unmysterious ways, the invisible hand of the market. And they certainly don't care about your or my textual or ethical critique.

Ideological entrepreneurs

The affordances of digital communication, and the culture with which it is enmeshed, have turned out to be broadly hospitable to Reactionary Digital Politics. One aspect of this is the way in which it facilitates and encourages the "outsourcing" of ideological production. With the barriers to entry into the paying-public square lifted, the avatars of ideology are individuals rather than parties or movements. This has tended to fragment liberal politics yet further. But for reactionary politics it has created a large army of what I call "Ideological Entrepreneurs" who, like Anne Coulter, manufacture and sell tendentious political ideas, analyses, images and slogans.

These kinds of political actors are not unprecedented. They perform a kind of political-intellectual function that has previously been carried out by: various kinds of "official" public intellectuals and academics, writing and speaking in venues officially sanctioned for that purpose; newspaper columnists cultivating a political archetype as a brand identity; a few professional political "mavericks", acting as outsiders for political positions that can't be articulated by the mainstream. Digital ideological entrepreneurs do not need – and make a virtue of lacking – the imprimatur of the academic, journalistic or political professions; their route to influence is not directly mediated by these institutions and they are not constrained by institutional or ethical rules or interests. Instead, they are governed by the economic and celebrity logics that drive social media: to produce regular content keeping up the outrage that attracts fickle audiences; to cultivate a consistent seeming brand image; conforming to the need to

imply authenticity and intimacy (characteristic of much YouTube content); cultivating a parasocial relationship with audiences; promoting subsidiary activity from the selling of merchandise to a Patreon account accompanied by promises to let people "Ask Me Anything". As Lewis shows, such entrepreneurs often present "the way they live their politics as an aspirational brand" providing a sort of "ideological testimonial" (Lewis, 2018: 28). A single post is just one part of an ongoing stream of content which derives meaning from the character of the poster or channel and from its place in the creation of an ongoing relationship with subscribers. In return, content creators can receive a share of advertising or subscription revenue, sell merchandise and attract donations using platforms such as Patreon. For instance, political Substack newsletters can bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars a year from subscriptions, with more in sponsorship (Mayer, 2023).[7] It has been estimated that Patreon has raised as much as $80,000 a month for Jordan Peterson (Hern, 2018). YouTube revenue derived from advertising is harder to be certain of. At the time of writing, Social Blade estimates that the British right-wing and conspiracy-oriented YouTuber Paul Joseph Watson brings in between £599.00 and £9600 a month.[8]

However, it is not just content creators for whom barriers are reduced. The personalisation of political content is matched by the individualisation of its consumption, as part of a flow unique to particular users. In offline life, obtaining and reading the newspapers, books and pamphlets of various ideological factions is time-consuming and potentially costly. On digital media, as Munger and Philips have suggested, people drawn to minority and fringe political positions not previously represented in mainstream political coverage can now "switch into consuming media more consistent with their ideal points" (Munger and Philips, 2019: 12). In the pre-digital context, a small faction needed, if it was to survive, to cultivate and sustain a small but dedicated support base because that was all it could reach. In the digital context, political-ideological entrepreneurs do not need to respect such party lines and neither do users. Ideas, terms, slogans and argumentative forms become common properties which can easily flow across and between positions picked up and adapted by various actors.

In combination, this changes how people encounter and experience politics as such. Consumers of political content online are doing so through the same interface that

affords access to other forms of public communication such as comedy, entertainment, education, gaming, music, sports, finance and so on. Pre-digital politics cultivated distinctions between genres of public communication in part as a means of governance but also as a means of facilitating public life, and of organising the kinds of discourse that happened in certain places and at certain times. The British law that prevents footage of Parliaments being used in comedy programmes – often treated with derision – has its roots in the (not wholly bad) idea that how we speak, discuss and decide on our political affairs involves a particular and special speech genre which must necessarily be kept distinct from how we speak when we are mocking things. Similarly, newspapers evolved divisions between politics, sport, business, entertainment and so on. Of course, the boundary between the discourses of entertainment, commerce and politics has been eroding for decades not least because, as Street (2004) has shown, celebrities have used their platform to become political actors and politicians have become celebrities. Advertising techniques have been fully incorporated into political communication and, before the internet was widely available, most forms of public talk had been forced to accept their subordination to the codes of televisual communication.

Online all of that has been exploded. On your Twitter, YouTube or Facebook page all these genres are jumbled up. You may be watching them at any time and in any place: on the train, in class, at a restaurant. Hegel remarked that "Reading the morning newspaper is the realist's morning prayer." Now that prayer happens at any time of day, perhaps all day, but with no more reverence than paid to any other moment of media consumption. In short, digital communication has blurred the boundaries of generic social practices, dissipating the distinctiveness of politics as a specific dimension of action. It reduces and individualises political experience to the exchange of texts, images, claims and counter-claims making it easier to represent politics as an intrusion into personal life (rather than a means of collectively addressing conflicts of interest). It also makes it easy to claim that any sort of discourse trying to maintain these distinctions – either by adhering to older codes or by policing expressions – is elitist, dishonest or in some way at odds with free speech. This is fertile ground for forms of anti-political politics, which – like Coulterism before them – hide their own politicality and claim authority through their generic difference from the official or mainstream politics they critique.

The confluence of ideology with the affordances of the technology, and the demands of its economic organisation creates opportunities for new kinds of political relationship. At the core of Reactionary Digital Politics is a political micro-celebrity-culture in which users feel a bond or affinity with an ideological entrepreneur (or a network of them), whose work they consume and with whom they participate by liking, subscribing, commenting, re-posting, discussing and debating in ancillary forums, defending from others (for instance by sending abusive emails to academics like myself) or promoting it through their own online activity, and perhaps becoming content creators – ideological entrepreneurs – in their own right.

Reactionary digital rhetorics

For "Reactionary" political arguments, by definition, the burden of argumentative proof does not fall on positive propositions for change but on efforts to forestall, undermine or destabilise the actions of others. It thus tends not to be concerned with endlessly proving first principles (as are both liberal and socialist forms of progressive politics) but is rather, as Corey Robin (2018) puts it: a "contingent mode of thought"; a reading of "situations and circumstances, not texts and tomes" in the mode of "adaptation and intimation rather than assertion and declamation". One way of apprehending the fundamental rhetorical appeals to which this gives rise has been offered by Hirschman (1991) who famously characterised them as futility, jeopardy and perversity: that some proposed course of action won't work (it's futile), will risk (jeopardise) what has been achieved, or have unexpected negative (perverse) outcomes. The claims of Reactionary Digital Politics can be understood in just this way. The argument is that liberal, egalitarian policies are futile because divine or evolved nature (gender, race, competence) is immutable, jeopardises natural and traditional rights and freedoms (such as free speech, free labour market competition) and, if fully pursued, will lead not to freedom or equality but, perversely, only to elite totalitarianism (or "serfdom" as Hayek called it). These, then, are general containers of arguments which a reactionary rhetorician or ideologue can fill with different details and specificities, adapting to who or what they want to oppose.

Richard Shorten (2015) has supplemented Hirschman showing that reactionary rhetoric is also characterised by emotional appeals which seek to rouse "indignation" at the plight of victims of the ideology against which reaction opposes itself and to highlight decadence, decline, decay and loss. They also, Shorten argues, make claims centred on what rhetoricians call "ethos" (the authority, character and insight of a speaker) which emphasise insight into, perhaps privileged knowledge of, "conspiracy". Here too we can see key aspects of contemporary Reactionary Digital Politics. Ideological entrepreneurs will indignantly highlight examples of victims of "woke madness", and list phenomena such as modern art, drag shows, or declining testosterone as signs of encroaching decadence. Central, however, are claims that "cultural Marxists" or "critical race theorists" (etc.) are at work behind the scenes of public politics, producing not only unintended consequences but deliberately promoting destruction of rights, culture and liberty. What makes all of this into clickable emotional and shareable content, however, is one of the most significant structural features of digital communication: context collapse.

Because of the costs of originality, a lot of content online is parasitic on other content. On Reddit threads, YouTube videos and other platforms, users present and interpret ideas and events through the discussion of other texts, extracting from and re-presenting news stories, clips of speeches, footage of events and so on. This lends itself to "paranoid reading", the seemingly methodical exposure of what this or that "really" means, revealing evidence of decadence and conspiracy whilst intensifying indignation. An exemplary form of this, adapted to the rhetoric of Reactionary Digital Politics, is the compiled collage of extracts of videos, social media posts and so on – Feminist students protesting loudly, a candidate misspeaking, a gay teacher – decontextualising their statements so that we do not know when or where they were protesting or posting. These can then be recontextualised within another argument or narrative transforming a specific instance of expression into an exemplar, a representative type, standing for all of Feminism, or all liberal politicians or all teachers. This lends itself to the integration of tropes of indignation, decadence and conspiracy. For example, Libs of TikTok – initially a Twitter Feed and now also a Substack site – reposts images and edited clips of content mostly from LGBT users of TikTok, especially teachers, adding commentary to create indignation, a moral panic about gender identity, children and teachers, evidence not only of decadence but of imminent threat. The compilation

of examples on a single feed creates the impression that they are connected, and evidence of a wider conspiracy. More significantly, though, it shows the ideological entrepreneur as one with the capacity to reveal what is "really going on" behind such examples. Indeed, videos and posts often have titles such as "The Truth About…" or "…what's really going on" (see Finlayson 2022a).

This is only one aspect of context collapse, however. In a lecture theatre, the layout of the room, my dress and appearance, my formal and stylised mode of address, fit together to affirm conventional expectations which also sustain my authority while inviting criticism of particular, managed and manageable kinds. In digital spaces the social cues and markers of such genres are absent and the authority they sustain is weakened. The platform "flattens" the appearance of forms of knowledge. A tweet from an astrophysicist looks the same as one from a flat earther. Consequently, authority is disembedded from social and institutional contexts and passes, at first, to those able to master the forms and styles of the platform (to do Twitter well, to conform to the conventions of YouTube and so on). That is to say, it tends to increase the extent to which judgements of what claims are right or best or beneficial rest on the rhetorical ethos of those making them (already emphasised as part of ideological entrepreneurial activity) and so, ultimately, on their charismatic authority. This further resonates with the imperatives of ideological entrepreneurship where brand-building requires consistency of online identity and the construction of an appearance of authenticity.

Platforms provide creators with data on the responses of users to content (for instance, when they watched a video, how far they watched, when they skipped and so on) and this, in combination with the functionality to obtain comments from viewers, enables and induces the cultivation of content as a kind of ongoing "conversation" between creator and consumer, binding them more tightly together. In some cases, this can lead to the growth of subsidiary communities – in the comments, on Reddit forums and so on – and the development of a parasocial relationship between users and content creators extending into forms of direct financial support through, for example, Patreon subscription. This parasocial relationship deepens "charismatic authority", born out of the performance of indignation, the cultivation of a personal relationship with "followers" – the language itself is cultic.

Here, it's worth dwelling on the much-discussed, central trope of online reactionary discourse – the red pill (see, for example, Aikin, 2019; Dignam and Rohlinger, 2019; Van Valkenburgh, 2021). Taking the red pill reveals the hidden reality: that liberal claims about equality are a lie; that the world has an order and a hierarchy which has been hidden from you; that those hiding it are trying to work against nature; that they are doing so in order to accrue power for themselves. That can be applied to Feminism, anti-racist politics, to immigration politics, climate change, covid policy or economics. But less important than the political analysis is the subject position taken up by consumption of the red pill. Weber finds that it is characteristic of charismatic authority that it promises to "effect a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts, or enthusiasm" (1978: 245). The red pill promises and is promoted as just such a curative reorientation. The ultimate promise of reactionary digital rhetorics is that once you see the truth, the conspiracy, the lie of equality, you will feel better. You won't feel shame about your beliefs or think that failings in life are your fault. Thus, often, at the point where you might expect online ideological entrepreneurs to deliver a recognisable politics, you find instead advice on fitness, reading lists on self-help, pitches for cryptocurrency and so on: "techniques of the self" for winning the market competition of life.

Conclusion: What of critique?

I have – very briefly – outlined a certain political style, formed at the confluence of an ideological orientation, a strategy for undermining opponents and a means of communication. It is an anti-equality politics, encompassing different forms and intensities which are united in opposition to those who are said to propagate defiance of nature by proclaiming equality. It has a cult-like aspect and its most successful advocates cultivate a charismatic appeal to individuals, promising to make them feel better about themselves by helping them to assert and so demonstrate their superiority while fostering disdain for the outgroup and generating paying subscribers. It has a secure and strong if not wholly dominant grip on online spaces where it offers analyses, explanatory frameworks and a vocabulary that people can use to make sense of political events, to resolve contradictions in their experience, and which they can propagate themselves. It connects with real social constituencies and it points at real

forms of cultural and social power in late-modern societies yet it doesn't want to reform politics or economics. It wants, rather, to abolish politics and assure inequality through the fusion of theology and political economy.

A standard form of academic critique of all this would proceed by marking the distance between it and some idea of "proper" political thought and expression: the "appropriateness" of its aggressive discourse in civil politics, appeals to emotions, use of "alternative facts" and so on. It might also suggest that the pecuniary interest of ideological entrepreneurs, to use Habermas' terminology, systematically distorts their communication by making it instrumental. It might dwell on how the very argument – for more inequality, in defence of racism and misogyny – is in contradiction with the standards of just politics. But what is the use – the force – of such critiques which appeal to principles and values Reactionary Digital Politics refuses to recognise? It is certainly true that Reactionary Digital Politics offers a fantasy resolution to real contradictions (and it does it for money) but it is not a discourse like that of liberal politics. It is not an expression of opinion about politics meant to be part of a common public sphere. Its discourse – as with Coulterism – is itself a political intervention, a performative move in an ongoing political conflict, cultivating adherents over the longer-term and seeking out opportunities not for productive dialogue with opponents but for demonstrating that they are merely conventional, "mainstream", and for widening the gulf between "them and us".

Responding to this with critiques which show that it breaks the rules is, if not exactly like bringing a knife to a gun fight, then like bringing a rule book rather than gloves to a boxing match (and being surprised when your opponent chooses to fight you with Mixed Martial Arts). Liberal politics, and its analogues in academia, pursues its own kind of anti-politics, in the form of an effort to contain disputes between contradictory interests (indicative of real, historical, material and ideational situations) within a particular discursive procedure taking shape as the reasonable exchange of opinions and their critical assessment by criteria always already agreed in advance, and acceptance of which is the price for entry into the game. At the root of the contemporary legitimation crisis of actually-existing capitalist liberal societies is the failure of that game to keep its players satisfied and their inability to respond to the Coulterist challenge to it. Something that can be learned from Coulterism is the

potential effectiveness of a discourse and a rhetoric which eschews the pretence that it is a kind of referee of reasonableness and instead seeks to win. In this respect, "critique" need not only be "about" politics but also a way of doing it, part of a concrete political intervention. If it is to succeed that sort of critical action must be based on an analysis of the situation, the truth of which is demonstrated not by its fidelity to rules of discourse but by its political success.

This, then, has not been a critique. It has been (part of) an analysis. And counter-Coulterist political interventions can – one hopes – learn something from such analyses: that digital spaces are the primary terrain of ideological contestation today, that at stake is the foundational political principle of equality; that there is a need to defend politics as such which goes beyond moralistic insistence by rival theologies and requires the organised articulation of common demands. That will require political organisation and tactical action. And it will require a political rhetoric which does more than highlight what is egregious about its opponents but which provides – tactically calibrated – counter-explanations, a method of analysis and a vocabulary through which people can think their situation. There will be no return to an imagined idyll of pre-digital domination by liberal pure reason, nor by critique reliant on norms from that imaginary. What there could be is new forms of political intervention which adapt to and reinvent technologies of communication and which are linked to new forms of collective political organisation. To put this another way: there is – at least in the UK – a fair amount of discussion about "culture war" which mostly focuses on whether or not it exists, and which tends to emphasise the "culture" bit of the formulation. The focus should be on the "war".

Althusser once claimed that "in political, ideological and philosophical struggle, the words are also weapons, explosives or tranquillizers and poisons. Occasionally, the whole class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word" (1971: 13-26). I'm disappointed that I can't tell you all what that word is or what that rhetoric and political organisation looks like. But I do think it can be constructed only when we have analyses which make clear what the argument is really about, what is at stake and where it has to be directed. Then one can form a strategy, success of which is the only critique that matters.

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Notes

[1] This is a revised version of a keynote address delivered on May 25th 2022 at the 'pre-conference' Critique, PostCritique and the Present Conjuncture at University Paris Nanterre, part of the 2022 International Communication Association conference. In clarifying and updating references I have sought not to erase all traces of its origin as a spoken address.

[2] In the following I draw on research undertaken as part of the project 'Political Ideology, Rhetoric and Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century: The Case of the 'Alt-Right', funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/R001197/1). I am grateful to the council for funding and to my colleagues on the project Dr. Rob Gallagher, Dr. Cassian Osborne-Carey and Dr. Robert Topinka.

[3] See https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/come-on-its-2015-current-year

[4] For general theorisations of populism today see Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013; Laclau, 2005. On the interactions between populist style/strategy and mediatisation see Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014. On the links between media, celebritisation and populist anti-politics see Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016; Finlayson, 2022a. On anti-politics more broadly see Clarke, Jennings, Moss and Stoker, 2018.

[5] See, for example, Burnham, 1964; Kristol, 1978; Gottfried, 1999. For a more recent example see Buckley, 2016. For analysis of the connection to far-right race politics see Lowndes, 2017 and Slobodian, 2019. For an overview see Finlayson, 2021.

[6] I am thinking here of the position of someone such as Alain de Benoist (e.g., Benoist and Champetier, 2000) and of groups such as *Generation Identitaire* (e.g. Willinger, 2013). Centrist neoliberal politics can also take up a position hostile to multiculturalism, sometimes under electoral pressure from the Right, and sometimes in search of a 'communitarian' nationalism which it is imagined can make up for the affective void at the heart of neoliberal globalisation. It is thus all too ready to respond to the performative critique of Reactionary Digital Politics by succumbing to it.

[7] Of course, ideologues of all kinds can benefit from this situation as do people selling advice on haircare, fashion, pet care and exam technique. However, the extant 'rules' of political discourse cannot easily be enforced online and Coulterist breaches of 'decorum' – mocking consensus-liberal styles of political discourse – may in exposing the artificiality of the former, tend to affirm 'traditional' or 'common sense' styles of discourse while also taking up sort of affective discourse that generates user engagement in ways which tend to the reactionary style (see Finlayson, 2022b). In contrast many liberal or left ideological entrepreneurs tend to employ styles congruent with the mainstream and are often more embedded in legacy media and political organisations.

[8] See https://socialblade.com/youtube/channel/UCittVh8imKanO_5KohzDbpg (accessed 9th May 2023).

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