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ALT-RIGHT OF THE_DONALD AND AUTHORITARIAN COMMUNISTS ON REDDIT: INTERNET MEMES TO BUILD COMMUNITY

Joshua Hendricks

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ALT-RIGHT OF THE_DONALD AND AUTHORITARIAN COMMUNISTS ON
REDDIT: INTERNET MEMES TO BUILD COMMUNITY

by

Joshua Hill Hendricks

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Communication
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

This project infuses Lacanian psychoanalysis further into the rhetorical study by exploring authoritarian discourses on Reddit. I analyze the alt-right community that found a home on the subreddit r/The_Donald and chart their discourse as it shaped from the quarantine to the establishment of an independent forum called TheDonald.win. I selected memes and the comments around them to build the analysis. The second aspect of this thesis examines authoritarian communist discourse on Reddit. The leftist community splintered when r/socialism banned a community member because the person made catgirl art. The ban sent shockwaves through the leftist community on Reddit and generated old faction lines between the authoritarians and anarchists on the left. I include, alongside the memes and discourse of authoritarian communists, an analysis of how authoritarianist communists define authoritarianism. I selected these communities and events to observe the workings of 21st-century authoritarianism to understand how fringe ideologies reflect the structure of authority in the current socio-economic sphere. I engage in my analysis through a deep psychoanalytic reading of the memes of the selected subreddits to chart the structure of their discourse. I contend there is better opposition to authoritarianism within psychoanalysis, a dramatic linguistic turn, and the development of a politics of desire.

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DEDICATION

For those who believe in me when I cannot believe in myself as I stumble through
life.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>r/CA</i>	r/COMPLETEANARCHY
<i>r/FC</i>	r/FULLCOMMUNISM
<i>r/soc</i>	r/socialism
<i>ML</i>	Marxist-Leninist

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND METHODOLOGY

Around the world, democracy is faltering, and the spirit of world cooperation is sliding back to nationalism. Extreme political polarization is directly linked to the decline in democracies worldwide (McCoy et al., 2018). Neoliberal capitalism has faced several crises of legitimacy, and such crises spur authoritarianism (Langman & Schatz, 2021). The neoliberal political system has given way to deadlock and stagnation. The world is facing a rising tide of authoritarian groups. An authoritarian trend can be seen in the 2016 election of United States President Donald Trump and in the United Kingdom’s “Brexit” vote that same year. People link Brexit to a rise in populism, anti-immigration, and right-wing nationalist rhetoric that fueled the campaign (Grose, 2016; H. Stewart & Mason, 2016). Authoritarian political parties have advanced worldwide in countries like Hungary, Poland, and Brazil (Motadel, 2019). For example, Alternative for Germany, a new alt-right party, has gained seats and public support, gathering 10 percent of the vote in the past decade (Schultheis, 2021; Tharoor, 2021).

The internet has emerged as a crucial arena for extremist outreach and recruiting, often through the circulation of memes and coded language designed to propagate their beliefs from the far corners of the internet and introduce them into the mainstream (Glitsos & Hall, 2019; Pelletier-Gagnon & Pérez Trujillo Diniz, 2021; Winter, 2019). For this project, I selected discourses of the alt-right and authoritarian communists to understand authoritarianism in the 21st century better. The alt-right is a complex and occasionally problematic group to define (Daniszewski, 2016; Greene, 2019). Alt-right as a name encompasses a broad spectrum of hyper-nationalist, white supremacist, ethno-separationist, patriarchal, anti-internationalist, and socially conservative ideologies

(Askanius, 2021; Bezio, 2018; Greene, 2019). The Associated Press warned that labeling all these groups as “alt-right” can be dangerous (Daniszewski, 2016). The term “alt-right” can provide a disconnection between the alt-right and their Neo-Nazi ideologies. Alt-right groups have often used language and naming to separate their positions from what the public knows is terrible, using terms like ethno-nationalist, ethno-separatist, and so on to avoid potential ideographic links recruits and the media may make. Authoritarian communists are the extreme edge of Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, and Dengism, with the occasional Trotskyist. Nazism is commonly understood as the background of the alt-right. For authoritarian communists, the parallel is Stalinism (Malesky, 2021; E. Smith, 2020). These groups center their beliefs around anti-capitalism, centralized governance, anti-imperialism, and belief in the need for violent revolution (Dimitrakaki & Weeks, 2019; Donnelly, 2022; Lanza, 2021). Left discourse often names, authoritarian communists as tankies, originating from communists in Europe, and the United States supported Stalin’s brutal crushing of the 1956 revolt in Hungary (Donnelly, 2022; E. Smith, 2020).

In this thesis, I turn to Lacanian psychoanalysis and constitutive rhetoric to analyze the memes and discourse of the alt-right and authoritarian communists on Reddit with the goal of producing a helpful framework to understand how memes and comments build a sense of community and identity.¹ Psychoanalysis provides the means for constitutive rhetoric to move beyond interpreting the texts as they constitute ideologies and to locating the subject positions that speak these ideologies into the world.

¹ White nationalists, Neo-Nazis, and other groups frequently lumped into the alt-right have earned the majority of attention from scholars, the specter of Stalinism still haunts the left.

Through the labor of affective investment, authoritarian discourses achieve continual recirculation of meaning that sustains their worldview (Condit, 2015; Matheson, 2018). Simply dismissing the radical edges of authoritarian ideologies through degradation and de-platforming does not give credence to the evident power of these radical discourses. A frequent categorical denial of hate organizations is that they are hate organizations. As Sarah Ahmed (2014) avers, however, we should examine these groups as communities bound by genuine ties of love and affiliation. From this perspective, resisting these ideologies is not primarily about teaching these people how to love or what love is – rather, it involves creating new definitions of community. Moreover, the dismissal of extremist groups as psychotic or irrational underestimates these groups’ genuine threat. For example, scholarly work is coming out with titles like *The Dialectic of Unreason: Authoritarianism and the Irrational* (Langman & Schatz, 2021) or *Psychotic Discourse: The Rhetoric of the Sovereign Citizen Movement* (Matheson, 2018). As scholars, we know few people outside of discipline will read our work, and often, when our work does reach mainstream audiences, it is usually no more complex than the title or the abstract. Titles like this risk not only a dismissal of the danger by other scholars, as Kenneth Burke (1993) had warned, but also by the general public.

I contend that if we treat authoritarian discourses as consistent and coherent, we can better understand how they interpellate audiences into concrete ideological action (e.g., storming the Capitol building). Giving authoritarian discourses a close read to identify how they develop meaning and resistance to the current political hegemony allows us to challenge the system for progressive goals and to better resist the growing tide of authoritarianism in the world.

Literature Review

In this section, I discuss the academic investigation into authoritarianism. It follows the different attempts and methods of defining authoritarianism, the development of identity within extremist groups, the structure of discourses from extremist groups, and the impact of the digital and meme turn in political dialogue.

Studies of Authoritarianism

The quest to understand authoritarianism runs throughout several disciplines with multitudes of theoretical and philosophical backgrounds. Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Wilhelm Reich's analysis of authoritarianism related it to individual psyche and familial structure in their infusion of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud (Adorno, 1950; Fromm, 1941; Horkheimer, 1937; Reich, 1933). Their early work emerged from the failing Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazi regime. However, the Frankfurt School's theorizing about authoritarianism was not limited to the human psyche.

Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) argued that if the leading mindset of growth and human expansion is domination over nature, it was not much further to state that political ideologies and governments should base themselves on the domination of fellow humans. Horkheimer and Adorno, and later Herbert Marcuse (1964), also contended that the efforts to rationalize and instrumentalize society and culture function to expand authoritarian tendencies. Marcuse saw the progression of capitalism and technology as lending itself towards developing authoritarian governments. For Marcuse, the increasing blend of nature and science tends to trap people within the system through luxury goods and industrial automation. Similarly, Fromm (1941) warned that the alienation created by

capitalism would ultimately push people towards authoritarian politics as a means to feel whole. According to Horkheimer (1937), populist leaders inevitably turn against the very masses whose will they claimed to embody (Morelock, 2018).

Following Adorno and Fromm, scholarly research on authoritarianism often takes the psychological path. One of the first measures created was the “Right-Wing Authoritarian” (RWA) scale (Altemeyer, 1988; Manganelli Rattazzi et al., 2007). In consideration of psychological authoritarianism, a debate over the possibility of left authoritarianism has persisted for some time (Stone, 1980). Some have sought to adapt the RWA scale and create a “Left-Wing Authoritarianism” scale (Conway III et al., 2018, 2020). The scales measure people’s willingness to submit to authority, belief in punishment for dissenters, and degree of traditionalism or willingness to play the part (Manson, 2020). Both scales emphasize one’s willingness to back the use of force to maintain order. People who measure high on these scales are also more likely to perceive the world as dangerous and support action against perceived enemies (Conway III et al., 2020; Manson, 2020; Perry et al., 2013). At the same time, Hetherington and Suhay (2011) suggest that the degree of perceived threat may play a more prominent role in eliciting authoritarian reactions for individuals with lower authoritarian-personality scores.

Other scholars criticize the view of authoritarianism as a personality trait. Duckitt (Duckitt, 1989) frames authoritarianism as better understood by the relationship between the social group and its members. He reframes some aspects of the RWA scale developed by Altemeyer (1988) while further developing an underlying concept of authoritarian disposition. Duckitt refers to social identity theory to suggest that authoritarian tendencies

are predictable based on group identification levels. Other research shows that perceived threats to the ingroup also elicit authoritarian reactions (Stellmacher & Petzel, 2005).

The Frankfurt School greatly influenced research into authoritarian governments. Authoritarian regimes are often characterized as lacking core democratic procedures and protections of liberal individual rights such as freedom of movement, association, and speech (Linz, 2000). However, Marlies Glasius (2018) criticizes this position because “neither regime classification nor authoritarian personality theory helps us to comment intelligently on the concern that Duterte, Modi, Orbán and Trump may be ‘authoritarian’ or ‘illiberal’ leaders (p. 516). He proposes that authoritarianism should be understood separately from the concept of liberalism via the close examination of state practices. He argues that the primary feature of state authoritarianism is engagement in policies or actions that limit accountability to the people that the state governs. He further expands this analysis to international organizations that enact policy and set the global agenda with little to no accountability to the people affected by their decisions.

Other researchers have attempted to move beyond an exclusive focus on government form, focusing instead on authoritarian features embedded in capitalistic governance frameworks. Stuart Hall (1978) reflected on the rise of neoliberalism, particularly Thatcherism, in the United Kingdom through the lens of authoritarian populism. He noted that the particular timing of political crisis matching public demands had enabled the expansion of a right-wing ideology with distinctive authoritarian features.

Hall traced the concept of authoritarian populism to Nicos Poulantzas’s (2000) work on authoritarian statism. In contrast to Horkheimer and Marcuse, Poulantzas saw

the political shift not as the charted path to authoritarianism for states or capitalism but rather as a shift from government by consent to government by coercion (Hall, 1985). Hall critiqued Poulantzas' position on authoritarian populism as an authority-enacted move, while leaving out the analysis of socio-political tensions.

Poulantzas' analysis of periodization remains relevant, which "relates one or more series of historical events to other significant events or interests and seeks to explain them without relying exclusively on a narrative" (Jessop, 2019, p. 5). He further develops the concept of authoritarian statism as an alternative to Hall's notion of authoritarian populism. In his essay, Jessop identifies four stages of neoliberalism: 1) Thatcherism and Reaganism – characterized by dramatic policy change occurring under a single leader; 2) the collapse of the USSR; 3) neo-colonial efforts; and lastly, 4) a more reserved form of Thatcherism/Reaganism slowly expanding and undermining social policies.

According to Jessop (2019), Hall "sometimes interpreted AP as a passive revolution from above, sometimes as a passive revolution from below, thereby rendering ambiguous its authoritarian and populist qualities" (p. 7). Jessop approaches populism as "a point of no return" (p. 7): Once a population is widely mobilized on behalf of a political program, it becomes almost impossible to oppose through electoral means. The difference separates out the concepts of authoritarian populism and authoritarian statism. Jessop and Hall concur that the authoritarian turn relies on crisis in the socio-political sphere (Hall, 1978; Jessop, 2019).

Poulantzas' work continues to be deeply influential today. Ian Bruff (2014) retraces the positions of Jessop and Hall concerning Poulantzas' work. The main

disagreement centers on whether or not the state is conceived as an entity separate from the people it rules over, leading, in Hall's case, to the paradox of anti-government movements contributing to the emergence of authoritarian politics. In this reading of Poulantzas, authoritarian populist movements can affect and shape the government as they move throughout and beyond the government.

Scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism agree broadly around the notion that capitalism fundamentally operates by undergoing crisis cycles (Bruff, 2014; Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Fuchs, 2018; Hall, 1978; Jessop, 2019). In this sense, they extend the Frankfurt School's critique nested in socio-economic, political structure, and psychoanalytic frameworks. Fuchs (2018) draws upon Neumann (2009) to examine how the economy's structure creates political energy that fuel right-wing authoritarian movements. Ernesto Gallo's (2021) identifies three forms of authoritarian neoliberalism: rule by the masses, the technocrats, or the populist leader. Neoliberalism is an ongoing project in which states participate as one among several actors. Gallo's analysis echoes a point previously made by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) and Marcuse (2013): Capitalist markets can work as well in dictatorship as they do in democracies. The inherent contradiction in the notion of authoritarian neoliberalism fades away by delinking liberal tendencies of tolerance, multiculturalism, and capitalism from authoritarianism which is better defined instead of in terms of practices (Glasius, 2018).

Identity and Community in Extremist Groups

The power of communication in constituting social collectives by interpellating individuals as members of a community, bringing them together as a body, has informed the interdisciplinary field of public sphere studies (Asen, 2016). Within this scholarship,

the concept of counterpublics developed from efforts to account for marginalized people's struggles to overcome exclusion from the hegemonic public sphere identities (Asen & Brouwer, 2001; Felski, 1989; Kluge & Negt, 1972) In a seminal effort to amend Habermas' (1989) bourgeois conception of the public sphere, Fraser (1990) defined subaltern counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). While Fraser (1990) recognized the possibility of "anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian" counterpublics (p. 67), scholarship on counterpublicity shows a commitment to progressive democratic agendas by centering on the struggles of historically marginalized communities to expand the public sphere (Asen, 2009; Duerringer, 2013). More recently, public sphere theorists have responded to the claims of marginalization advanced by rising far-right movements in Europe and the U.S. by theorizing "anti-publics" as a critical term referring to movements that break from the hegemonic order in racist, sexist, anti-democratic, and otherwise exclusionary ways (Cammaerts, 2009; M. Davis, 2019a, 2021; Greene, 2019). Thus, I contend that the alt-right, and authoritarian communists are best understood as anti-publics. Mark Davis (2021) warns that while these fringe groups' rhetoric is often dismissed as being extremist, their positions and policies are infiltrating the mainstream.

Wodak (2019, 2021) explores how the talking points of online radicals become main features of the political debate. Wodak (2021) study of the rise of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria develops a model for analyzing how fringe movements penetrate into mainstream discourse that focuses on strategic performances that

recontextualize soft and strong versions of extremist themes, gradually moving them from party politics to the mainstream. The frontstage is where Wodak argues the ability for fringe discourse to spread occurs as leaders using intertextually related terms and phrases spread to the press, fliers, and advertisement campaigns that then influence the public discourse.

Hate and extremist organizations share some of the recruitment techniques of religious cults, such as the displacement of the self for the community identity and the process of easing new members into the depths of the extremist belief system slowly (A. Stein, 2021; Woolf & Hulsizer, 2004). Scholars also highlight how both offer solutions to perceived disaffection or depression and isolation. Even while the far-right express feelings of persecution, one of the core inducements of fascism is its promise to make one whole (Lundberg, 2012; Oaten, 2014; Wardle, 2016). The structure of hate groups and other political extremist groups displays the complexity of identity. Some people who join organizations like these do so out of a desire to belong (De Koster & Houtman, 2008; McNamee et al., 2010; Woolf & Hulsizer, 2004). Keeping your true identity hidden is also a frequent feature of extremist groups (Wilkie, 2021; Woolf & Hulsizer, 2004). The best explanation of this is not in academic literature but in Hollywood's *Fight Club* (Fincher et al., 1999). Disaffected people of society join an organization where they cannot speak about the organization. They do not say their names, and as they construct their identity more as the community and live together, they are entirely displaced by the group. The often-criminal nature of extremist organizations also explains their desire to stay anonymous.

Conspiracy plays a critical role in the discourses of extremist groups. The KKK spread conspiracies of communist Jews trying to take over the South (Wilkie, 2021). Mel Brooks (1974) highlights the conspiracy of Black people coming after white women in his movie *Blazing Saddles*. In an attempt to distract some Klan members Gene Wilder, a white man playing Jim, steps out and yells, “Hey boys, look what I got,” and pulls Cleavon Little, a Black man playing Bart, out from behind a rock, and Bart says, “Hey where the white women at?” The alt-right today promotes a conspiracy named the Great Replacement, wherein they suggest an intention to breed the white population away (Obaidi et al., 2021). Scholars analyze conspiracy rhetoric as a form of paranoia (Neville-Shepard, 2018). Stemming from that insight, scholarship frequently no longer attempts to disprove conspiracy, and more work investigates what draws people into the conspiracy in the first place (Douglas et al., 2019; Neville-Shepard, 2019).

The often-named post-truth era of politics also changes how conspiracies function. Ryan Neville-Shepard (2019) suggests framing conspiracies as a change in the understanding of presumption. In the sense that conspiracies are writ-large criticisms of the dominant system, they contain deep systems of logic and supposed evidence (Douglas et al., 2019; Neville-Shepard, 2018). Scholars argue that Trump’s rhetoric is the prime example of this, as he hops from one conspiracy and falsehood to another without care (Neville-Shepard, 2019). The status quo loses the assumption in rhetoric, and the burden of proof shifts to the status quo. The rejection of the status quo and thus requiring it to prove itself also functions to lower the burden of proof to develop criticism (Neville-Shepard, 2019). Conspiracy thus not only plays a function of logic in these extremist groups but is heavily relied upon in the creation of an enemy.

Psychoanalysis is a tool that rhetoricians use to gain insight into the far-right's discourse structure. Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Joshua Gunn (2020) argues that the universal grounds for discourse are fading away from the public. Gunn positions the Symbolic as a stabilizing agent, a unified ground through which subjects can engage in *intelligible* discourse. Gunn borrows from Slavoj Žižek and uses "symbolic efficiency," which relates to the Symbolic being the universal registrar. Perhaps now, the prime example of Trumpian denial from mainstream views is the rejection of the 2020 United States elections and continued conspiracies about the election (Gerhart & Crump, 2021).

Using the structural view of the psyche suggested by Lacan, the "psychotic" is one who never internalized not only the limits and failures of the Symbolic but also the authority of the Symbolic (Gunn, 2020). Gunn gives several ideas about what has led to this fading of the Symbolic and more "psychotic" discourse. First, he notes the assumption of a "civility" and true order existing before now as an underlying issue to this question. The supposed civility of the past and today only exists for certain classes of people. Another argument he makes is that people have too much going on; people do not have time for proper discourse, and social media and the ensuing rapid spread of information create an environment with too much information for the public to sort through. He is careful to note that proclaiming one singular cause or motion for cultural level shifts is oft folly. Parallels to Slavoj Žižek's (2006) view of the world where we are always called to "Enjoy!" can be made here. Even in the materialist framework, Žižek is working in, one can read Gunn's "psychotic" discourse as people who continuously answer the call to "Enjoy!" and never have to accept the "No!" of the Symbolic.

Scholars also work from Lundberg's (2012) affective investment to understand conspiracy theories and antipublics (Matheson, 2018). People create meaning through affective investment, which allows communities to isolate themselves from the authority of the Symbolic. To the subject outside of the discourse, lacking the affective investment, the discourse makes no sense. Matheson's (2018) work also relies on Lacan's "psychotic" structure as those engaging in the affective investment to create meaning can reject the authority of the Symbolic. Conspiracy functions as a rejection of authority by someone who believes the conspiracy rejects what is either proven or accepted by the majority. While extremist groups have been around for a while, the internet has provided new means for extreme counterpublics to grow.

Rhetoric of Extremist Groups Online

Research into hate rhetoric tracks the rhetoric as it evolved with the digital revolution. Early digital scholarship encounters earlier forms of the internet in the bygone days of message boards (Bostdorff, 2004; De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Rheingold, 2000; Zappen, 2005). The internet meme fundamentally changed the landscape of political discourse on the web. Memes are images that contain both text and visual artifacts, combining and reusing cultural artifacts with the intention of circulation (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Kulkarni, 2017; B. Lee, 2020). Scholarship has focused on the ability of memes to spread, adapt, and circulate (Chaput, 2018; Kulkarni, 2017; Milner, 2013). The nature and categories of memes are constantly evolving and being mixed, matched, and remade. This has led scholars to examine the multi-medium, textual and visual, and inter-textual nature of memes (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2014; Laineste & Voolaid, 2016).

The impact of the medium and modality of the internet significantly changes the development of a community. Some differences are channel reduction, reduced control over norms, and difficulty in truly knowing the other users (Zappen, 2005). Users can obscure the materiality of being marked as a cultural other on digital platforms (Grabill & Pigg, 2012). However, Grabill and Pigg (2012) note that some communities and forums base themselves on physical identities. Scholars also note how the variance of forums allows people to express only parts of their identity while concealing others (Rheingold, 2000; Zappen, 2005). These internet capabilities impede rhetorical study as the whole picture of an individual can be impossible to formulate (Grabill & Pigg, 2012; Rheingold, 2000).

The question of what a meme is doing also draws the attention of scholars. Memes can work to fulfill the role of social rituals for the bond to building and community (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). Ross and Rivers (2017) examine the function of spreading or sharing a meme, circulation, as a form of political action. The nature of political memes on the far-right with irony, satire and other forms of humor to produce political change is deeply studied (Glitsos & Hall, 2019; Greene, 2019; B. Lee, 2020; D. G. Young, 2020; Zhang, 2020). Concerning and highlighting the importance of intertextual considerations towards memes is perhaps the best-known tactic of far-right memes: taking obscure or popular images and imbedding extremist ideological messages within the boarder format or genre of meme (B. Lee, 2020; Wiggins, 2019).

Ted Cruz is the zodiac killer, according to 40 percent of voters living in Florida during the 2016 Republican primary election (Kulkarni, 2017). The example highlights the real impacts meme discourse can have on politics. The Occupied Wall Street

movement, one of the first protests to go viral in the United States, relied heavily on humor to spread messages (Milner, 2013). Internet memes function as a new form of political engagement (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Memes are both the shield of making community and the sword of attacking political opponents with tools like delegitimization (Ross & Rivers, 2017). The Ted Cruz example given from the study by Kulkarni also shows how criticisms can be unrelated to political stances other than faction affiliation.

The internet is a breeding ground for political extremism. Alt-right groups use the internet to foster community and new identities based on the worst of human nature. Bostdorff's (2004) examination of a KKK forum finds it functions as a place to meet other people who share their beliefs and foster community. Radical groups often view these websites as a place of reprieve from the physical world where their political views are not supported (De Koster & Houtman, 2008). At the same time, the internet presents itself as a fast-paced ever moving thing. Internet forums function as a solidifying place for radical ideologies. Early studies focused on messaging boards and how extremist groups operated there as those were the primary types of websites. As the internet landscape changed, so did the scholarship. A significant feature of digital extremists today is their memes.

Mememes of Discourse

Internet memes are more than macro images shared on forums; but bits of social information that transmit values, norms, and beliefs (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). Different communities articulate unique memes from digital cultures that create in-jokes and community references that reinforce social bonds. No meme is ever genuinely alive

or dead, as each meme comprises multiple components that will be reused and resignified later. Scholars note that the repetition of memes is critical to their affective ability, which identity and community building require (Zhang, 2020). According to Zhang (2020), communist-themed memes from Chinese forums often function as humor, yet more than humor in that memes reproduce a general “aesthetic pleasure” (para. 19) instead of being satire which is focused and organized. Memes represent a community game of meaning-making wherein the focus is community bonding through play (Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018). An air of fun and joy surrounds memes which lend to their power to act as political satire.

Internet memes are places of ongoing revision and adaptations, from troll faces, LOLcats, demotivational posters, rage comics, Twitter posts, and absurdist-surrealist compositions (Edwards, 2021; Glitsos & Hall, 2019; Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; B. Lee, 2020). In defining a meme as separate from other images, the feature of circulation of the memes among community members is heavily relied upon by academic works (Jenkins, 2014). Visual rhetoricians have studied the use of images in social movements, e.g., sharing a printed photo (Jenkins, 2014). The circulation of memes changes the audience from targeted messages to mass broadcasts. Scholars argue the channel-rich nature of memes and often label them multi-modal, with some discourse scholars developing a multi-modal method of analysis as memes are composed of text, pictures, graphics, and in some memes, color to transmit meaning to people (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; C. A. Smith, 2019).

Alongside the multi-modal nature of memes, another significant feature is that they are deeply intertextual. The connection between intertextuality and memes receives

considerable attention from scholars (Molina, 2020; Wiggins, 2019). However, this connection to intertextuality also bridges Lundberg's interpretation of psychoanalysis. Intertextuality as a concept is linked together with the rhetorical trope of metalepsis (Crisler, 2020; M. J. Lee & Oropeza, 2021). Studies in the narrative also find a use of metalepsis in which the author breaks into the text and shatters the supposed independent world of the story (Genette, 1983; Pantaleo, 2010). Or maybe even a thesis; hello there, reader. Intertextuality in discourse faces a similar intrusion-like behavior where signifiers from other discourses invade an already existing discourse.

The power of satirical memes is a common feature of alt-right organizations that use such memes to spread ideographs and talking points (Askanius, 2021). Scholarship argues that extremist groups' irony, satire, and parody function as tools of meaning-making (Tuters, 2018). Alt-right meme scholars also note how Neo-Nazi groups use memes with stolen or repurposed imagery to spread their message without detection by other people (B. Lee, 2020). The role of satire and irony as shields against criticism is another critical aspect scholars observe of white supremacist groups (DeCook, 2020). Trolling has become a political aesthetic that makes fascism tolerable to the masses. DeCook also notes how public figures who are not explicitly related to the alt-right but engage in bigoted trolling use irony to defend against the backlash. An example given in the essay focuses on Pewdiepie, whom the New Zealand Christchurch shooter talks about in his manifesto and while he was live-streaming the shooting itself. Pewdiepie distances himself from this fan of his because, as Pewdiepie argues, why would anyone take him seriously? He is just trolling.

Scholars also examine memes as a social ritual that helps build community and culture (Fang, 2018). Even seemingly meaningless memes can transmit norms and values within a subculture (Katz & Shifman, 2017). Memes function like a dialect for a community that helps highlight or draw the lines between ingroup and outgroup (Fang, 2018). Kecheng Fang also notes the ritual reproduction of Mao's face as a function of ideology. Having Mao's face in your home or a statue in town reflects the dedication to the state's agenda. In the study of propaganda, scholars also turn to ritual communication, where the participants have their emotions given to them and validated by an external, authoritative, Other (Langman & Schatz, 2021). This ritual of emotion related to authoritarianism can be seen in Orwell's (1949) "Two minutes of hate," where people purge all internal discomfort and contradiction onto the ideologically imagined other. In #GamerGate and the larger cultural war, reactionaries use memes to construct enemies like the "social justice warrior" to build community identity (Massanari & Chess, 2018).

Academics also query memes as a form of political action and engagement, in the sense that people reproduce memes and share them across the internet as a way of campaigning their ideologies to the public (Askanius, 2021; Edwards, 2021; Jenkins, 2014; S. Young, 2021). The study of memes frequently uses visual rhetoric to compare how sharing photographs and images work as a social movement tactic (Jenkins, 2014; S. Young, 2021). Visual rhetoricians argue that memes work as a coalescence of ideologies akin to ideographs or synecdoche (Edwards, 2021; Huntington, 2016).

Psychoanalysts employ theory to understand the internet in several different ways. Clint Burnham (2015) explores the concept of the internet related to the psychoanalytical concept of the unconscious. In a Žižekian materialist presentation of Lacan, he reads

actions like sending an email and the typing of an email address as the reflection of Lacan's notion of a subject as a signifier to another subject.² Examining Žižek, he notes that the rhetorical trope of Žižek is that his writing is like the internet itself, jumping from topic to reference to metaphor and often not explaining himself and thus requiring frequent googling. Another theoretical concept looked at is Žižek's interpassivity, where a Symbolic, personified by the Other, takes on the feeling of emotions and enjoyment through LOLcats memes wherein the meme is speaking on our behalf (Žižek, 2007). Here, the subject and the Symbolic's relationship is made clear to express oneself, saying "I" relies upon relationships to other signifiers to give it meaning (Lundberg, 2015). The compositional art of producing a meme with a network of signifiers that employ tropes, affective labor as coherent and rational is the same process of building a self-image that you express to the world. I am a meme.

The blend of theory here led to the development of the research question:

RQ: How do authoritarians on Reddit use memes to create identity and community in fringe subreddits?

Method and Plan of Study

I turn to authoritarian communities on the popular social media platform Reddit to answer the research question. Far-right extremism is focused upon by scholars, activist organizations, and the media (Gaudette et al., 2021; Rieger et al., 2021; Romano, 2017; Ward, 2018). Between changing, leadership, and conflict feelings over the value of free speech, subreddits dedicated to the harassment, degradation, and violence towards

² The proper metaphor is, "A signifier represents a subject to another signifier" (Žižek, 2007 p. 17) however this represent the confusion often caused by Lacanian language as this other signifier is a subject. Because, to each subject each are signifiers thus the metaphor.

marginalized people found their home on Reddit (Romano, 2017). Challenges exist within creating rules and policies to prevent such communities and the equal enforcement of the rules, which often got seen as Reddit taking partisan action

Methodology

I follow Lundberg's (2012) reading of rhetoric as informed by Lacan's account of the tropological economy of metonymy and metaphor. For Lacan, metonymy refers to "any point where signs and representations are articulated to one another as a point of investment producing a meaning for a subject," while "metaphor describes a function whereby certain metonymic connections become particularly significant points of investment, exerting a regulatory role on a chain of signifiers by retroactively organizing the series of metonymic connections within which the metaphor is nested" (Lundberg, 2009, p. 389). Not every part or fragment of a meme is a touchstone ideological that coalesces the ideology that uttered it. However, by charting memes use in a community, we can trace the structure of the discourse. According to Lundberg's reading of Lacan, publics form through an "economy of tropes" (Lundberg, 2009, p. 387), that is, from the tropological exchanges that animate a text, which configure the metaphorical assumption of an affectively-invested identity. As Lundberg argues, Lacan's economy of tropes operates through metalepsis, that is, through the substitution of a trope for another trope. The "specific economies of tropological exchange" are the productive ground "that constitute the subject and its imagined modes of social relation" (Lundberg, 2012, p. 72). They refer to "the space where subjects invest in texts and narratives about their relation to other subjects, where public discourses circulate, and where a subject takes on specific imagined modes of relation to others" (p. 74). Matheson (2018) explains this process

using the analogy of a town emerging around intersections: The roads (signifiers) begin to interact and overlap, allowing the underlying economy, the town, to form meaning and identity.

Psychoanalytic Theory and Understanding

Lacan is not the only relevant philosopher to engage in the analysis of subjectivity. Michel Foucault's position on subjectivity is through the lens of productive power, enabling the creation of some identities while repressing others (Butler, 1999; Dean, 2003; Foucault, 1976; Green, 2010). The lines of intelligibility in this perspective is related to the concept of insanity or madness His theories do not place the production of power solely in institutional or judicial power but also in the power of discourse (Dean, 2003; Foucault, 1976). The critical element of Foucault's discourse is that it exists outside of any particular subject, a notion that is not entirely different from Lacan's Symbolic (Dean, 2003). Judith Butler (1999, 2011) is influenced by from Foucault, Goffman, and small selections of Lacan and Althusser to understand identity as a performance shaped and limited by the cultural bounds of acceptability and intelligibility.

Butler (1999, 2011) further extends Foucault's notion of discourse and the relationship to materiality. They argue that since language is our primary tool for understanding and creating intelligibly, we never truly encounter the material world, but the discursive one. The real world or ontology is disconnected, left in lack by discourse, leaving humanity with "*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*" (Butler, 2011, p. 9). Circular definitions that use the word to define the word are considered foul. However, language

itself is entirely circular, and we find ourselves born into an always-already existing circle.

The disagreement between these schools of thought paradoxically articulate parallels. Neither Lundberg, Lacan, or Žižek would be considered postmodernists per se (Kaplan, 2014; Lundberg, 2012; Žižek, 1999). However, in my analysis I find productive use of the contradictions and parallels in determining how to frame a politics of desire. In more dramatic terms, Lacan posits, “The symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire” (1977a, p. 104). Lacan’s statement lays out the fundamental divide between his and Foucault’s definitions of subjectivity. His subject is not bound solely to the power structures of discourse but also a shattered subject, and it is language that shatters us.

Althusser’s (2014) interpellation and hailing builds from this split subject from Lacan’s “mirror-stage,” where a child sees itself in a mirror and realizes that image is itself (Eldridge, 1993; Lundberg, 2012). On several fronts, we are truly always-already subjects from Althusser’s theory. Althusser (2014) positions the moment of interpellation when someone recognizes themselves within an ideology like the child in the mirror. Althusser fails to account for identities that are a disavowal of a past self. People change religious beliefs, switch political parties, leave a cult, and so on. Althusser accounts how, from birth, we are hailed by ideology in our family structures, aesthetics, and class.

Societal expectations, parental desire, and the structure of the discursive world shape and presuppose our identities. Lacan posits that in this fashion, language has an agency that works upon us as much as we use language (Lacan, 1955; Wardle, 2016). Žižek (1989) argues that there is no beyond ideology/the Symbolic similar to

post/structuralist scholars (Dean, 2003). Ideologies are not something we are part of but a part of us (Fiennes & Žižek, 2013). The Lacanian Symbolic constitutes the subject who then in return speaks the Symbolic.

Building a sense of identity with the audience is a critical work of constitutive rhetoric. Similar to how people read ethos, however not as credibility instead comradery or similarity (Leff & Utley, 2004). The medium and style of the artifact also influence the constitutive force (Goehring & Dionisopoulos, 2013). Burkeian identification and creation of an enemy also play a considerable role in the function of constitutive rhetoric. Burke's influence on theories of rhetoric as constitutive appears through the importance of narrative to constitutive rhetoric. Charland (1987) argues that the interpellation process happens when an audience member recognizes themselves as a member of the audience. Stewart et al. (2012) argue for understanding constitutive rhetoric as a process that takes multiple steps to work. The first aspect is that the audience must feel the call. The second is that the values, norms, history, and shared identity must be made clear. The third is the order and hierarchy of this new identity, and the fourth is the social relationships with other groups. I argue that with a further infusion of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Žižek's (1989, 2006) concept of interpassivity. We can understand someone as being interpellated by rhetoric not when they see themselves within the artifact but when someone believes an artifact, rhetor, speaks for them.

Scholars explore the intersection of Lacanian psychoanalysis and rhetoric through Bormann's (1973) fantasy theme analysis. Joshua Gunn (2004) revamps fantasy as a core element of the communication process. Gunn argues that tracing fantasy in the rhetorical tradition can bypass Bormann's analysis through Robert Freed Bales' Freudian analysis.

Fantasy theme analysis has been frequently used to study the discourse of extremist groups and conspiracy theorists (Duffy, 2003; Goodnight & Poulakos, 1981). Critically, we see the role of fantasy acting as a function to get otherwise rational people to abandon the assumed rationality. Gunn uses the example of psychics offering the chance to talk to the dead, crossing the ultimate barrier but made possible through the power of communication. In another essay, Gunn (2008) examines the idea of love as it crosses the physical barrier of the self as two become one in the metaphor of marriage. Lundberg (2012) similarly conceptualizes the role of rhetoric in crossing the barrier of lack and give a “feigned unicity” over the lack between the other. Gunn (2004) notes that for Lacan and Žižek, “fantasies refer to psychical-rhetorical narratives about Self” (p. 5).

Rhetoric and Lacanian psychoanalysis cross paths in the formulations of publics. Michael Calvin McGee argues that a concept of a “people” which frames it as unified, together, and coherent is a “mass fantasy” (McGee, 1975, p. 236). Myres (2018) tracks five Lacanian concepts to the constitution of a public. First, people want to take in and be around other people. The second is a desire to express and externalize to others; however, given the lack, the third concept argues that the public never truly exists because it is undercut by lack. Forth is the belief in the public over this lack, and this ends with the fifth, which is radical enjoyment of the fantasized public and exchanging meaning with that public.

The central construct from Lacan I use for this work is his triadic metaphor for our lived experiences - the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. The Symbolic is the most apparent of the orders. For Lacan, the Symbolic is the constructing and constructive force behind the process of creating subjects and the social order they inhabit (Wardle,

2016). The Symbolic offers both the grammar and the text for discourse. The Imaginary is the land of archetypes, ideals, and self-concepts (Lundberg, 2012). The Imaginary is the home of the completed self, the unfractured subject, united and complete, our ego (Wardle, 2016). For the rhetorical world, “the Imaginary is the site where specific relations of address are envisioned, and is the storehouse for the specific contents of an address” (Lundberg, 2012, p. 29).

These ideals, archetypes, and self-concepts are indeed structured by the Symbolic, but being separate from the Symbolic order, the Imaginary is free from the lack produced by signification. According to Lundberg (2012), rhetoric and communication belong to the Symbolic and the Imaginary orders. These first two orders function in parallel for rhetoric as the Symbolic is the text and artifacts. The Imaginary, where the subject completes itself, is also the place where the subject conceptualizes social relationships (Lundberg, 2012). The Real is defined as the extra, the left over from the signification process (Lundberg, 2004), but also as the *lack* of coherence between our lived experiences and the structures we use to define and communicate them (Lundberg, 2004; Žižek, 2006). The Real is not an excluded or hidden value from the Symbolic but rather what the Symbolic cannot signify (Fiennes & Žižek, 2013).

The second concept from Lacan I use is his understanding of fantasy as soothing for the soul. Lacanian fantasy is expressed as “ $\$ \diamond a$ ” (Gunn, 2004). The slashed “S” represents the fragmented subject, and the diamond in the middle represents systems, structures, and so on, blocking the subject from “*a*” which is, in this expression, what one desires (Wardle, 2016). Lacan’s expression shows the dialectical nature of the subject and distance from the object of desire. However, the depth of what it means to desire is

located in the shattered subject. Objects of desire are only helpful in reducing the feeling of lack. Fantasy enwraps people in *jouissance* or the English translation enjoyment (Wardle, 2016). However, fantasy can only ever offer the lie of completeness. Like a sparkling drink chilled before serving, it begins rising to room temperature and going flat (Fiennes & Žižek, 2013). The persistent lack is only satisfied, even if not filled, in the metaphysical enjoyment of desiring that drink and not during the consumption, the signification, of that drink (Fiennes & Žižek, 2013). You cannot have your cake and eat too; the lack cannot be filled; humans desire to *desire*.

Rhetoricians use psychoanalysis as a theory to understand beyond semiotic analysis as semiotics “omits two functions implicit in the process of signification: that the sign is ... artificial labor – specifically the labor of tropological connection – and that, ... the sign is a site of affective investment” (Lundberg, 2012, p. 26). Post/Structuralist language theory works when signs and signified share a common meaning but breaks down when applied to competing orders of signification (2012). The political world finds itself over the disagreement of the meaning of words, what is factual or not, and who and what gets presumption or not. A fundamental disagreement over facts, values, and definitions has led to political discourse being better described as two ships passing each other in the night rather than productive dialog to advance society. This project turns to Lacan not seeking *the Symbolic*, *the Imaginary*, *the Real*, but in identifying and understanding ideologies and discourses as their discrete Triadic orders. An earnest and faithful read of discourses and rhetors, even those we find disagreeable, must be maintained to produce helpful knowledge. I extend this beyond Lundberg’s specific economies, not by rejecting the “tropological functions that ground rhetoric’s ontology”

(p. 74). However, my goal is to attempt to better decode what is so often known as psychotic discourse instead as discourses that have tropological functions that are so disconnected from the mainstream that they appear unintelligible to subjects outside of that specific economy.

Charting Analysis

Kenneth Burke (1941) traced the position that charting requires an “magical” element for realist analysis (p. 6). He pressed the idea to cast away the magic require the configuration of the chart. According to Burke the charting of a discourse requires the removal of the magic that makes it work, however, I contend that is it indeed the magic which a discourse work. The appearance of the Symbolic necessitates the appearance of magic to overcome the *lack* in discourse. In this sense rather than the notion to dispel the magic the point is to track the magic itself. This form of analysis charts the clusters of terms and the “interrelationships among all these equations” (Burke, 1941, p. 20). The rhetor can be unaware of these interconnections when but compelled by their enjoyment to author the symbolic action (Lundberg, 2012). Burke gave several equations for symbolic in his work one being synecdoche, a type of displacement, where “the figure of speech wherein the part is used for the whole, the whole for the part, the container for the thing contained” (p. 24). Synecdoche is related to identification as can name the whole and the whole can name a part. An academic literature review is the charting of an idea across a single discipline or a boarder field to find the similarities, identifications, and theoretical gaps, divisions.

The charting of a discourse is different from the critical analysis like Wodak (2021) and others use. Discourse analysis can examine symbols, their locations, and

usage as symbols fluctuate throughout history and a population (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020). I employ the analysis of spatiality and location of a discourse as the primary tools from critical discourse approaches. However, the subject is decentered in these methods of analysis in a way that psychoanalysis, and Burke from his Freudian influence, does not entirely allow. Burkean rhetorical analysis relies upon the guilt, the mode of enjoyment, that a rhetor engages in the production of their symbolic action. The critical discourse analyzer examines the relationship between a discourse, the people, and the power structures that alter it while the psychoanalytic rhetorician charts the subject position enabled by the discourse. However, that does not mean the location and position of symbolics to generate affect within the broader public are useless in the goal of generating productive analysis.

The rhetorician, the community, which utters a discourse and where is critical to the element of developing affect which can interpellate people. The importance of location is elevated in meme discourse wherein there are dedicated and particular communities of producing memes and spreading them to the masses. Burke (1941) makes the distinction between the public and private motivations of a rhetor in their construction of literary form. As disinterested as this thesis is in broader Freudian notions, similarly I focus on the public motivations (modes of enjoyment) that produce an artifact rather than the individual subject which utters the discourse. The chart, or map, is then made of the intersections of interrelations – intertextualities, of symbols as they reflect the constituted subject that spoke the symbols.

My analysis is produced from the interrelationships of the memes by authoritarian subreddits. The process of discovering interrelationships of these fragmented discourse

relies heavily upon a deep reading of the artifacts. The reading engages the memes to see how they borrow, link, and build from each other to make a chain of meaning. Returning to Matheson's (2018) example of roads and intersections these connections are not meaning themselves, but the grounds which enable meaning (Lundberg, 2012, 2015). In other words, the chart is not a charting of meaning, but the rhetorical tools which enable meaning. In particular for this study, I gathered memes which targeted the elements of identity and community.

Psychoanalytic theory informs the process of reading a text. Two principles of Lacan which are of particular note is to not mistake the discourse for a pathological subject, and second to let the subject articulate itself (Lacan, 1955; Lundberg, 2012; Žižek, 1989). The first rests upon Lacan's linguistic reading of Freud and critique of the position of the psychoanalyst. The second represents the relationship between the subject and the Symbolic both acting as a constitutive force on each other (Wardle, 2016). Humans only have the tools and ideas provided by the Symbolic to express ourselves and as such critical analysis on the particular Symbolic can be produced from reading the texts of the discourse that elucidate the positionality of the subject which speaks them without pathologizing the subject. The task of the psychoanalyst is not to identify and diagnosis the psychotic, but to understand the psychotic.

Data Selection

I intend for this study that the experience of the content, and data selection, to be a closer representation of what a user of Reddit encounters. Further, I echo Calum Matheson's (2018) particular claim about the nature of radical discourses that, "by its nature both fragmented and consistent across specific instantiations of speech" (p. 190).

Matheson's work does not focus on a singular artifact but examines the discourse at large by examining the emergence of the discourse across the broader public. This framework of analysis tackles discourses which are articulated across different times, modalities, and mediums. As such, the coherent determiner for a memes inclusion was not thematic or categorical, but the appearance or non-appearance of the authoritarian discourse. To accomplish that goal, I used Way Back Machine from Archive.org to access Reddit throughout the study's timeframe, along with an API called Camas reddit-search for non-restricted subreddits.³ As r/The_Donald is banned, accessing data from there requires such workarounds. It is worth noting that once a community is quarantined, the Way Back Machine loses the ability to archive the content as one must have a qualified account to access quarantined subreddits, and The Way Back Machine functions as if one is not signed into Reddit.

Reddit sorts users' posts based on the popularity of a given post. Users either upvote or downvote a post, and the front page of the site or any subreddit is a mix of recently posted content that has received significant interaction from the community. The Way Back Machine sometimes offers unique looks at subreddits as captures of sorting by top in a given month, year, or all-time is occasionally captured. Using these tools, I examine the communities set out in the case studies to look at the current condition of some of the communities and the older posts during the time key moments in their saga. This approach allows for a more human-focused interaction with data closer to what users experience and a better understanding of each community's chronological shifts and moves. I selected memes and the comment sections from those memes on the basis of

³ <https://camas.unddit.com/>

synecdochic expression of community, the self, and the enemy within the authoritarian discourses on Reddit. The development of this map leads not only to the underlying relationships between symbols and ideology, but also maps out the topology of the discourse itself – which in turn shapes the subject position of the discourse.

I did not code and recode to iteratively produce themes for analysis, nor is there a true map of the charting of the terms and ideas I reflect upon. I selected memes that articulated identity and read them until they made sense – until the irrational became rational. I read them over and over again in the dataset and throughout my years online. Unlike charting a single author where influences can be readily apparent from the known author this project engages bodies of anonymous users as they articulate their community.

Case Study One: Memes and Comments from The_Donald Community

The first case study examines the alt-right discourse on r/The_Donald starting shortly before the subreddit quarantine on May 1st, 2019, until the quarantine on June 26th, 2019. I followed the community as they behaved on Reddit, even under the threat of punishment and later when the community had a place of their own on TheDonald.win. I selected memes and comments TheDonald.win for the first few months after it opened in late November 2019 until February 2020 and returned to their timeline in October 2020 until the forum was closed in 2021. The time around the 2020 election shows how the community began building the foundations to reject the election results and interpellate people into taking physical action at the United States Capitol. The Associated Press warned that labeling all these groups as “alt-right” can be problematic (Daniszewski, 2016). The term can remove the connection between the alt-right and their Neo-Nazi

ideologies. Alt-right groups have often used language and naming to separate their positions from what the public knows is terrible, Nazism, using terms like Ethno-nationalist, Ethno-separatist, and so on to avoid potential ideographic links recruits and the media may make. In particular, I followed the Reddit community r/The_Donald, who were quarantined on June 26th, 2019, and then banned on June 29th, 2020. Throughout this time, community members of r/The_Donald became more opposed to Reddit as they took more action against rampant bigotry and violent content. An offshoot website called TheDonald.win was created in late 2019 to allow much more extremist content to be posted without much moderation. TheDonald.win would end up closing shortly after the January 6th riot due to federal investigation – they were not pressured to take the site down; instead, they did it as a protective action. I will examine the months leading up to the 2020 U.S Presidential Election and the months after the election, where the work to create concrete subjects that take action can be observed.

Case Study Two: Authoritarian Communists of Reddit and the Catgirl Conflict

The second case study examines the discourses of authoritarian communists through the story of the two significant leftist factions, Marxist-Leninists, and Anarchists, across a few subreddits: r/FULLCOMMUNISM, which was quarantined on September 27th, 2018, and r/communism, which acts as a safe-haven for authoritarian communists, and r/socialism which walks the lines of being a place for recruitment to the masses, and a delicately balanced left unity, and r/COMPLETEANARCHY. The clash between the communists I chart is the January 2017 ban of an artist from the r/socialism community for drawing catgirls, and the ensuing drama and types of posts that got /r/FULLCOMMUNISM quarantined later in 2017. I am in many shared social media

groups with these authoritarian communists. I have a lot of them on my friends list. At the same time, the left positions itself to resist the fascists. The left mires itself with internal struggle and dangerous factions that take shelter in the name of the left. In the same way, I return to the alt-right discourses. I turn to the discourses within the digital sphere of communism to understand how the Marxist-Leninists (MLs), Marxist-Leninists-Maoists (MLMs), and even self-admitting Stalinists build meaning and identity.

The drama of these two leftist factions across subreddits has never risen to the actualized danger of the alt-right; however, a pattern of history in communist movements can be seen in their banning of catgirls. While authoritarian communists and anarchists have never gotten along, there is often a desire for left unity to combat the force of fascism and liberalism. However, MLs and Stalinists have a terrible track record of turning against anarchists. In history, the influence of actions like this in George Orwell's (1938) best-known book *Homage to Catalonia* when he describes his 1937 experience when the communists sided with the fascists and turned against anarchist-controlled Barcelona.

A parallel between r/FULLCOMMUNISM (r/FC), r/communism, and /r/COMPLETEANARCHY (r/CA) and Catalonia is observable in the mass banning of anarchists and others deemed outside the orthodoxy of Marxism by the r/FC mod team on several occasions. r/FC sides entirely with the r/socialism modes and began banning almost the entire community of r/ANI_COMMUNISM because it is a community that uses anime images as the base text to produce communist memes. r/communism is a place of strict rules about criticism and discussion of the USSR, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and other world dictators. Like r/FC, someone commenting

in the wrong sub or associating with the wrong people can be banned. r/CA now takes an entirely oppositional stance against authoritarian communists. While no mass banning for the crime of posting in another subreddit took place, promoting or defending Marxist-Leninism earns you a ban. Suggesting that MLs and MLMs can be trusted and that the community should have left unity will get you banned.

While the journey of the authoritarian communists has not been subject to the same examination as the alt-right, to build a better world, one must identify the similarities between the alt-right and the tankies. It is necessary to note that scholarship has focused on the alt-right because of the immediate, authentic, and material threat the alt-right represents to the status quo. I am not saying both sides are bad or suggesting a horseshoe theory of politics. I am a radical anarcho-communist, but as history shows and as the case study investigates, authoritarian communists will destroy human life and inflict terrible violence given a chance. The fact that they do not commit acts of terrorism to the same degree as the alt-right does not mean these authoritarian communists should be set aside from critical analysis.

CHAPTER II – ALT-RIGHT DISCOURSE IN MEMES AND COMMENTS OF r/THE_DONALD AND THEDONALD.WIN

Media organizations like Fox News, The Drudge Report, and uncountable radio programs push far-right political attitudes (Senko et al., 2016). However, as the old gatekeepers lose their power, the digital revolution provides new ground for extremism to flourish (Lynn, 2021). Conspiracy theories find the chance for a mass audience during the era of Trump politics on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit (Miller, 2021). Forums like "Stormfront" are explicit places where white supremacy is the norm (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Steven Bannon during his tenure at the media organization *breitbart.com* proudly takes upon the task of creating a home for alt-right discourse and news (M. Davis, 2019b). The alt-right is a broad political category of fascist parties, white supremacist groups, and radical religious groups like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Identity Evropa (SPLC, 2021). Alt-right discourse also takes place on YouTube with figures like Sargon of Akkad and Laura Southerland (Lewis, 2020). Social media organizations allow for the promotion, profitability, and spread of extremist content creators (Lynn, 2021). The nature of social media algorithms creates a pipeline for radicalization (Roose, 2019).

Reddit does not operate like other more algorithms driven social media sites. Currently Facebook ranks posts from your friends list and shows users a select content stream. How often one interacts with someone or are in proximity of other Facebook users will change how often they appear in the timeline. Reddit delivers a platform where users select which feeds they want to see and posts are ranked through community popularity rather than personalized content delivery. Reddit is a popular social media

platform organized as a network of subreddits, forum-style user-moderated communities that are curated around specific topics. Upon registering, anonymous users can join existing subreddits, create new ones, and contribute to individual subreddits by submitting links or text posts, commenting on other members' submissions, and up- or down-voting content. While the Reddit front page features content from a selection of subreddits as the default view for unregistered and logged-out users, logged-in users can customize their personal feeds by subscribing or unsubscribing to any given subreddit. The company also maintains two non-subscription overview pages: r/all, which aggregates top-ranked posts from most subreddits (except for pornographic, gory, or violent content, and quarantined subreddits), and r/popular, – a selection of the most active communities assigned to the default feed.

I chart the memes and clusters of identity expressed from subreddit r/The_Donald at the end of their time on Reddit and the migration to their own platform TheDonald.win. The quarantining of r/The_Donald happened on June 26th, 2019, and the platform banned them on June 29th, 2020. TheDonald.win did not set up immediately after the quarantine, with the site opening up in later November 2019. I selected data from the months preceding the quarantine from r/The_Donald, the first few months of TheDonald.win, and the months preceding the 2020 election through the website's closure in January 2021. I selected 150 memes that expressed statements about the community's identity or its enemies. This community represents a unique subsection of the alt-right where involvement with explicitly white nationalist groups fell within the broader demand of Trump. The rhetorical synecdoche of the movement is articulated through the singular demand (Laclau, 2005). My analysis examines the two major

clusters of self and group identity through the forum's memes and comments. The first major theme examines the creation of a self through Lacanian psychoanalysis and rhetorical metaphor examining the materiality of whiteness in their ideology and charts the rhetorical connection to violent white supremacist politics. The second theme extends the analysis of materiality to constitution of an enemy. I use Lundberg's workings of metonymy and metaphor to form a position against overreliance on context and rationality to argue that we cannot reason our way out of stopping the alt-right.

It is worth repeating the Associated Press' warning about using the term alt-right. While it functions well as an easily understandable blanket term, it also works to distance these groups and communities from the white supremacy in their politics (Daniszewski, 2016). Reddit's r/The_Donald was a known place where alt-right rhetoric was spread (Atkinson, 2018). r/The_Donald promoted and helped organize the now infamous 2017 "Unite the Right" rally that resulted in Heather Heyer's death (Atkinson, 2018). Memes containing white nationalist code words, phrases, or hand signs were common (Ward, 2018). r/The_Donald presented the appearance of a normal political subreddit, which was part of the goal. Extremist groups function by slowly introducing new members into the radical elements of the groups (Douglas et al., 2019; Goodnight & Poulakos, 1981; Woolf & Hulsizer, 2004).

The spatiality of Reddit is more similar to old messaging boards where user activity drives the content feed like commenting in the case of message boards for gaming communities or 4chan. On the old messaging boards when someone comments, a thread moves to the top of all the threads. Reddit, however, prioritizes newer content and uses a voting system to rank posts instead of letting comments randomly bump threads to

the top. Reddit is a website and mobile application with several third-party mobile browsers. This has two effects; the first is that subreddits are less chaotic than old message boards wherein an old post made days, maybe weeks ago, would get randomly revived. Posts shift throughout the day, conversation shifting from topic to topic, votes coming in, and changing the order of the posts. The second effect is that the less chaotic form necessitates and constitutes homogenous content. For example, a controversial post, which is a sorting option on Reddit, will likely not end up in the users' feed, because only consensus material reaches the top 25 in a given day out of hundreds.

There are also a few different archetypes of Reddit users in terms of how they engage with a particular subreddit. One type can subscribe to the subreddit but never go into the subreddit, only seeing it in their feed and clicking on the links. Another is the opposite: they never click the link and just dive into the comments to see what people are saying. Political subreddits tend to have a lot of the second kind, and to some extent, it is understandable. If the content is behind a restricted behind subscription, a user may steal the article and post it as a comment or provide a link that avoids the paywall. Sometimes users will summarize an article or quote a significant part of the source. There are even bots, AI, natural language processors, and so on, in the more prominent news subreddits that read the article and summarize it in the comment section. This second kind of user can also be one that just reads the headlines and immediately posts a comment or someone who does not read the headlines and just argues with other people.

The next type of user is one that, in a real sense, uses the subreddit in that they browse the entire forum, e.g., <https://old.reddit.com/PoliticalCompassMemes/new>.⁴ This user may or may not read the article, but they will play a significant role in shaping the front page of the subreddit by voting and commenting here. People who browse /new are dedicated users of the forum and probably check the forum several times a day. People browse subreddits frequently without ever visiting /new, which is more common in the larger subreddits. It comes down to a level of content flow and the user's interest in the community. If a subreddit does not get very many posts per day and only a few hundred or thousand people are reading it at one time, it is unlikely that there will be enough content to fill the front page with entirely new posts. To get more content or stay up to date with the latest in the community, users browse /new. Further, for more prominent subreddits /new is chaotic as hundreds of posts come in per minute and automated filters remove some content, moderation teams delete content, and duplicate posts get made, and one rises out of that to claim its place on the front page. The algorithm that shapes subreddits is primarily the movement and action of the community.

Introduction: r/The_Donald and TheDonald.win

With the rising popularity of candidate Donald Trump, his supporters created a subreddit for his campaign, which is typical for most presidential candidates. People post positive news stories, polling, volunteer opportunities, and donation drives. Users post memes about the campaign or candidate frequently. r/The_Donald has become a common site of academic investigation (Gaudette et al., 2021). Gaudette et al. examine the critical

⁴ old.reddit.com instead of www.reddit.com directs to the same content. Reddit updated their user interface and left old.reddit.com as a method of long-term users to keep the formatting the same.

role the vote to rank feature of Reddit has on group identity creation. The community was always polarizing to the Reddit community at large. Users expressed their discontent about the amount of hate speech on the website, e.g., <https://old.reddit.com/r/AgainstHateSubreddits>. At the same time, Reddit's administrators were trying to balance the idea of free speech and how much Reddit believed in the idea. Outside of the normal American arguments is a special relationship for Reddit has unfortunate history with freedom of speech with the issue. One of Reddit's founders, Aaron Swartz, used his academic credentials to access JSTOR and download 4.8 million journal articles in 2011 to upload for free access (Goh, 2013). He would later be arrested and charged with data theft and ordered to pay a significant fine. After negotiations with the government went sour, Swartz died by suicide.

The site-wide policy always leans towards allowing more content than not (Gaudette et al., 2021). Explicitly hateful and outright dangerous communities lurk in the website's background. As the cultural war with the alt-right intensified, the topic came to a head on Reddit as the administrators tried to balance the debate. Dangerous conspiracies like Pizzagate, which had its own subreddit, resulted in harassment, threats, a man shooting rifle rounds at, and an attempted arson of a pizza shop in Washington D.C. by Trump supporters (BBC, 2016; Hermann, 2020; Miller, 2021). A user posted critical pieces of "evidence" on r/The_Donald, and Reddit began to remove the threads and ban the pizzagate subreddit (BBC, 2016). Other subreddits like <https://old.reddit.com/r/AgainstHateSubreddits> and others would track what they claim were sitewide rule violations in efforts to get r/The_Donald and other subreddits banned.

However, physical action against a small business was not enough, nor harassing other subreddits and users, but threatening police officers now is actionable.

The Quarantining of r/The_Donald

During a political debate in Oregon, Republicans left the state to prevent a vote. The state governor ordered the state police to find and return the legislators (Vigdor & Chokshi, 2019). Users of r/The_Donald who supported the effort of the Oregon Republicans began posting threats of violence against the Oregon State Police. The response from Reddit's administrators on June 26th, 2019, was to restrict the ability to view the subreddit to only those with accounts that had been email verified, checked a box in the settings, and age-restricted (Gaudette et al., 2021). However, users just entered their date of birth upon account creation with no actual check. Still, this pulls the subreddit out of r/popular and r/all. Users who set the appropriate account settings and still subscribe will see it in their feeds.

The quarantine reflects a critical factor about Reddit. First, the threats of violence against public officials are the redline for the website's administrators (spez, 2020). r/The_Donald featured threats of violence against ethnic, religious, cultural, and queer minorities, and the Reddit admins did not act. Because r/The_Donald was not even the most explicitly racist and awful place on Reddit, it was just the grounds to draw people into the alt-right antipublic. Subreddits with names based on racial slurs existed. Reddit's ban wave in 2020 took action against most of the worst aspects (spez, 2020). However, hateful content still finds ways to spread on Reddit today. Communities like r/AgainstHateSubreddits dedicate their time to tracking dangerous content on the website.

The alt-right saw the quarantine and ban as confirmation of their view that far-right ideologies are persecuted by the powerful. In Philippe-Joseph Salazar's (2018) Foucauldian analysis, the quarantine reflected the prohibition of the political hegemony. The Reddit admins effectively isolated and, in the same action, denounced the users of r/The_Donald. The move further reinforced the ideological element of widespread persecution in alt-right groups. It also created a solidified backstage that Wodak (2021) posits as one of the critical elements for fringe ideology to spread.

Right before the quarantine, discontent over the rule changes had soured the relationship between the moderation team of r/The_Donald and the Reddit admins. In 2016 the CEO of Reddit administrator spez, made an incredible move to use his power to alter user comments on r/The_Donald that attacked him (N. Lee, 2016). The absolute level of error here cannot be overstated, as even though this happened well before the quarantine, it set the foundation for the hostile relationship and mistrust between r/The_Donald and the Reddit admins. It quickly became a gathering place for the alt-right with the claim of free speech and reduced moderation (Robertson, 2020). However, the website never gained much traction, and similar to TheDonald.win, after legal pressure and general issues with hosting alt-right content, the website was closed. For alt-right subreddits, the uniting force behind Trump proved a difficult barrier to climb over after TheDonald.win came online. This community is separated from the rest of the alt-right ones in its devotion toward Trump. The particularity of this ideological pillar is dissimilar to other alt-right groups, which focus on a broader sense of authorship and are less dependent on singular leaders (Case, 2017; Salazar, 2018).

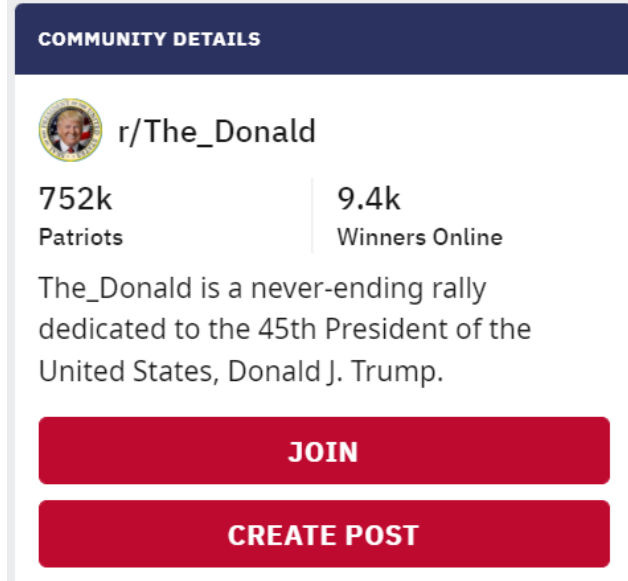


Figure 1. r/The_Donald Self-Description.

The community, which was over 750 thousand people strong in May and was close to 800 thousand at the time of the ban in 2020, ensured there was little doubt regarding the force of the community (Allyn, 2020). Different places like r/AskThe_Donald existed for questions and debate about Trump – r/The_Donald was the dedicated rally.



Figure 2. Trump Tweets a user's Submission.

Trump had a habit of engaging with the community by taking memes created there and posting them on Twitter. In this move, Wodak's (2021) analysis of backstage symbols becoming frontstage and thus enabling them to enter the mainstream discourse elucidates itself. However, beyond the disregard of the Constitutional presidential term limits in Figure 2, titled Praise Kek's submission, begins the chain of equations built from metonymy and metaphor for the meme. While some papers report the origin of Kek as coming from South Korean gaming communities (Greene, 2019), the term originates from Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft (Kek, n.d.). When an Alliance player from a Human, Dwarf, Gnome or Night Elf race would hear a Horde player from an Orc, Troll, Tauren or Undead race say, "lol" the game would translate it to "kek" for the Alliance player. It is also worth noting that this only happened when using the Orcish

language. Racial coding in the fantasy genre is a focus of critical investigation from scholars. Warcraft is no exception, with scholars looking at how the Horde is racially coded Black (Monson, 2012; Spiecker, 2011). The alt-right employs a tactic of inverting cultural symbols, using things originally unassociated with the alt-right, one of the most famous examples being Pepe the Frog (Askanius, 2021; Glitsos & Hall, 2019; B. Lee, 2020). Pepe inspired a flag beyond his physical face when a user on 4chan's /pol/ created the Kekistan flag.



Figure 3. The Kekistan Flag.

Note: Now, a lot is going on here. The little clovers come from 4chan's logo (Kekistan, n.d.; Papasavva et al., 2020). The design on the flag in terms of the circle and bars is just a Nazi flag.

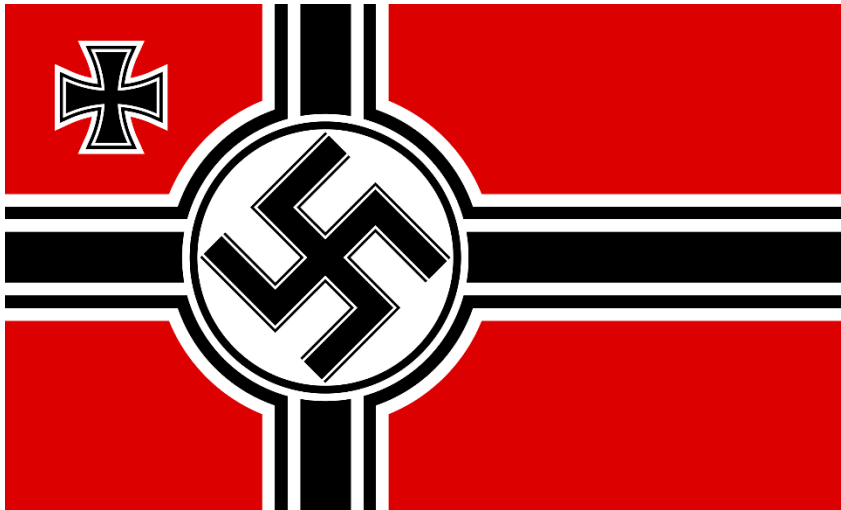


Figure 4. No Really it is Just a Nazi Flag.

Kek also took a religious element outside of Pepe (*Kekistan*, n.d.; Neiwert, 2017; Papasavva et al., 2020). The similarity here is a feature of the defensive use of irony and satire by the alt-right as they seek to create such absurdities through memes so they can deflect criticism and mock those who denounce them (ContraPoints, 2017; DeCook, 2020; Greene, 2019; B. Lee, 2020). The name overlaps with an Egyptian god of darkness and chaos (Neiwert, 2017).

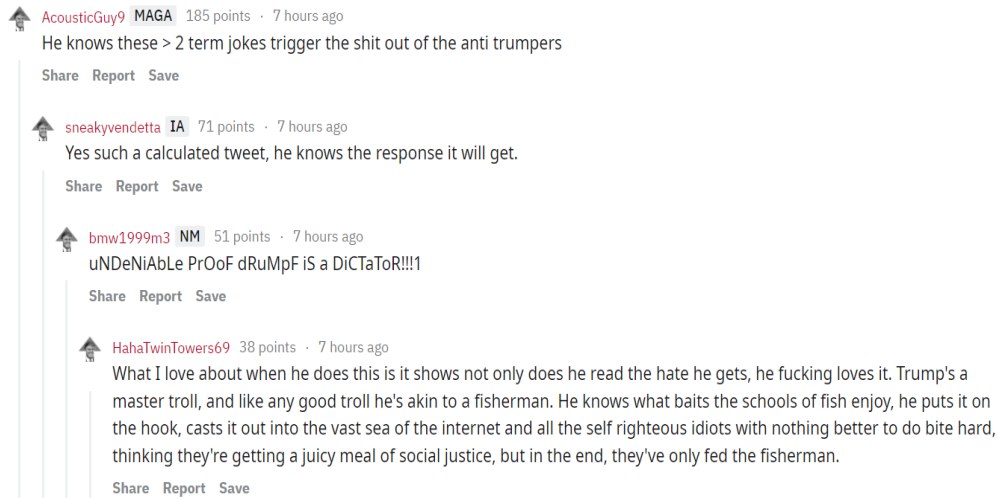


Figure 6. Comments from Figure 2.

The role trolling plays in their meme magic is also made clear in the comment section of that post (DeCook, 2020). The community engages in explicit disavowal towards authoritarianism being their goal, while, for a matter of fact, it is their goal. Salazar (2018) examines memes as particular tools to destabilize public understanding and cause confusion for critics. Trolling alongside irony and satire are the mechanic functions of the broader trope of an alt-right meme. A common saying on the internet is: do not feed the trolls. However, that stance faces criticism as it allows for dangerous and harmful ideas to go essentially unchallenged or dismissed, like the phrase, boys will be boys, trolls will be trolls (Hulk, 2018).

After Reddit admins quarantined r/The_Donald, accessing posts became impossible due to needing an account to view the page, which is not how the archive works. I will pick up the community's tale in the next section and discuss the banning of the forum while reviewing content from TheDonald.win, but before that, I would like to take time and present with little commentary on the extreme content allowed by Reddit before r/The_Donald was quarantined. I will return to this content later for analysis but

be in situ with the content for right now. The subreddit was full of white nationalist undertones, and sometimes more explicitly. Content on here was seen by tens of thousands of people every day for years, if not hundreds of thousands of people.

Posted by u/ReynardBeauregard ME 12 hours ago

5.9k

YouTube bans Tommy Robinson for talking about Muslim gangs sexually exploiting white girls, but I can go to YouTube and watch Muslims rapping about sexually exploiting white girls, and it was played by the BBC.

RidiculousBullshit

DJs Bobby Friction and Kan D Man both reportedly chose to spin 'grime' rapper Frenzo Harami's track "Chaabian Boyz" on the BBC Asian Network and Radio 1, according to [UK media](#).

Lyrics in the song include:

*"She just f**ked 100 men, she's like, 'Who's next?'"*

"Had them white birds on the side curbs, looking for a dirty Paki or a white nerd."

"I had a white girl, I used to call a cash machine. I got 20 white girls and they all trap [sell drugs] for me. They're all in the flats laying on their backs for P [money]."

340 Comments Share Save 87% Upvoted

Baggo-nuts-4-sale 72 points 9 hours ago

Don't forget, the Londenstan mayor is a muzzie

Share Report Save

NewSouthernBelle USA 45 points 8 hours ago

District of Columbia.

City of London.

Vatican City.

What do they have in common?

Independent (or semi-independent) states or cities located within another state or city.

Interestingly, all three have been, or continue to be, strongly influenced by a certain foreign hate ideology.

In the District of Columbia, the former Muslim Brotherhood-controlled occupant of the WH resides nearby and is apparently running a shadow, parallel government.

But this is probably a coincidence.

Right?

Share Report Save

 patriot451 1776 81 points 10 hours ago

Crusades 2.0

Share Report Save

 Twitch360 57 points 10 hours ago

DEUS VULT

Share Report Save

 Eugene_TerrBL CAN 10 points 7 hours ago


Most of Europe gave up their guns. They lost the ability to take matters in their own hands a while back.

Share Report Save

 femailhivemind 6 points 4 hours ago

But what can we do? In 50 years not many whites left in usa too, and most of europe will have fallen by then. Not that I particularly want to defend white women who basicly destroyed civilisation in 50 years but. Please save us again americans.

Share Report Save

 RedBloodedMeatEater AMERICA FIRST 12 points 8 hours ago

You get these "I don't play into identity politics" whites. The plurality makes the rules and the plurality plays into identity politics. It doesn't mean you have to be a douche ethno-statist, but we need to call out the double standards. It's not racist to do that.

Share Report Save

 femailhivemind 3 points 4 hours ago

LMAO. They call you racist and nazists for doing so! Just look at white man hating sweden.


Share Report Save

1 more reply

 Brinstar7 AMERICA FIRST 10 points 7 hours ago


What's wrong with an ethno-state? Sounds good to me.

Share Report Save

 spamshampoo AMERICA FIRST 10 points 7 hours ago

Because the vast majority of the retards ruining this country share my ethnicity and I don't want to share a state with them?

Share Report Save

 RedBloodedMeatEater AMERICA FIRST 6 points 7 hours ago

When you see an ethnic-minority proudly support this country do you really think they ought to not be a member of the state?

Europe is a different story, though. If they want to strictly limit immigration to protect their ethnic homelands then I don't see why they can't. Other nations are afforded that opportunity. It just seems to be Europe that must be multicultural.

Share Report Save

 femailhivemind 5 points 4 hours ago

Only us Europeans are forced to take in rapist terrorist invaders not russia, not japan or china.

Share Report Save

- DangerouslyCheeZ** **DTOM** 109 points 11 hours ago edited 9 hours ago
 European civilization will not survive the loss of European men. We should be an elitist republic with landowning men voting for their families. We should be 80-90% white. The multi-culti hasn't worked. Ethno-national factions besides European ones refuse to set aside their ethnic ties to form identities based on ideology. It was a fun try; we had some laughs. This shit has gone on far too long. Our altruism has left us on the chopping block. More importantly, it has left our WIVES and DAUGHTERS on the chopping block. We all know how things should be. Don't be afraid to think it.
 Edit: a word
 Share Report Save
- Motafication** **AMERICA FIRST** 22 points 8 hours ago edited 8 hours ago
 Yup. Multi-culturalism is a failed experiment. All it has done is destroy our countries and our societies. White people continue to import people who hate them, even though we're the most egalitarian societies on earth.
 The teaching of "tolerance" at all costs has made our men weak and submissive. Masculinity and the virtues of protection and security that accompany it have been labeled "toxic." Is it any wonder that our men refuse to fight for our culture and civilization?
 Only when our culture is gone will the women who propagate the feminization of Western society realize what they've done in the name of their selfish vanity.
 Share Report Save
- femalHivemind** 3 points 3 hours ago
 It literally took swedish white man hating women 50 years to destroy their country with their undeserved man hatred. And they import islamist terrorists who rape white women for shits and giggles in the hundreds of thousands. Never forget.
 Share Report Save
- DangerouslyCheeZ** **DTOM** 7 points 8 hours ago edited 7 hours ago
 We gave them the platform to do that instead of venerating them. Our luxury and wealth outpaced our family adaptation to it, which made circumstances less dire. No urgency. We should have taken efforts to propagandize motherhood and to re-incentivize it instead of letting women fall victim to the TV telling them to go wagecuck instead of raising children. This is on the men. It is our struggle.
 Share Report Save

Figure 7. *r/The_Donald Discusses Sexual Violence.*



Figure 8. *White Nationalist Code Sign Over Citizenship Paperwork*

The Ban of r/The_Donald and Rise of The.Donald.win

When r/The_Donald fell, it did so along with thousands of other subreddits as the company announced new sitewide rules to restrict hateful and violent comments on its website (Allyn, 2020; spez, 2020). In one sense, this allowed the website to avoid partisan claims about their actions and rule enforcement as many far-left subreddits were also banned. However, this truly set the fuse for the dedicated supports to fully exit Reddit to TheDonald.win, and create a space for themselves. Several surrounding subreddits that the frequent users of r/The_Donald would have browsed also got included in this mass ban wave.

TheDonald.win did not set up immediately after the ban launched around November 2019. TheDonald.win was created as the life raft for this community, and it grew and changed over time. Wodak's (2021) positioning of discourse dramatically changed the community around the trope "The_Donald" as it made it much more a backstage. The clusters of tropes on TheDonald.win did become as predicted in Wodak's modal, much more explicitly related to extremist political positions. The community on Reddit could be seen as the stage of discourse entering the mainstream. However, in Salazar's (2018) "discourse of fellowship" (p. 141), the strength of a discourse relies upon its isolation from the mainstream and the development of community jargon to maintain, even if each utterance slightly alters it, the community and identity are circulated. It largely mirrored Reddit's physical structure along with tools and sorting processes. At first, the website largely depended upon third-party tools to host images, and as restrictions on alt-right content spread across the net-o-sphere, the need was given to the community to create their platforms. Thus TheDonald.win started hosting their own images and slowly developed more features to copy features from Reddit. Unlike

Reddit proper, there were not multiple forums. It was a subreddit made to be an entire website.

On November 21st, 2019, or so, when the website first opened, a moderator from r/The_Donald and one of the founders of TheDonald.win created and stickied a post that justified the existence of the break-off website. The moderator, who went by, Shadowman3001, used the censorship and content moderator issues on Reddit as one of the key motivations to establish the new forum. Curiously, the moderator preemptively addressed concerns about the efficacy of their movement, with it taking home on a separate website disconnected from the rest of Reddit users. Shadowman3001 makes two interesting observations. One is the meme generation capacity of the community, in which an academic study of the spreading of alt-right memes is cited (Zannettou et al., 2018). Secondly, the location of meme generation is independent of the spread of the memes, in that it is up to the users to take material posted on TheDonald.win and share it.

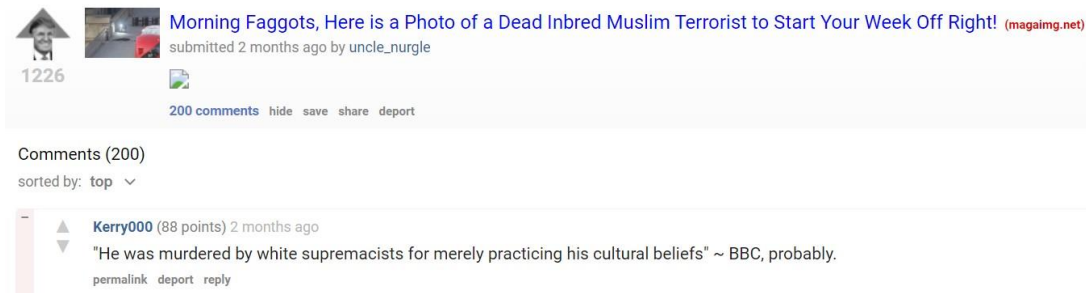


Figure 9. Post From The.Donald.win Using Language From 4chan

Note: Beyond the charting of a singular symbol to relationships with other symbols there is also the effort to chart internet terminology to the place it came from.

The community on TheDonald.win is much less shy about showing their political ideology, which is a bit of an understatement. While memes kept evolving and new templates were made, linguistic threads tied the community together. However, the

community knew it was under observation and scrutiny as their 8th rule of “Don’t be dumb” mentions how their comments can and did get turned into news stories or jackass’s master thesis. The community did not, however, abandon subtext and references. The chain of displacement clusters continued. The alt-right loves Helicopter Ride memes as a reference to Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile, where he would murder political dissenters by having them tossed out of a helicopter (Kantor, 2019). The community was still concerned with the production of memes as a method of political conversion. Users on TheDonald.win, or dot winners, called their efforts a meme war. Trump’s son, Trump Jr., called himself “General in the Meme Wars” on Instagram (Groppe, 2020).



Figure 10. A Boogaloo Meme Featuring the Chadface Design

Throughout the life of TheDonald.win, I argue that the community followed the larger internet trend of memes and moved away from some of the more classical 4chan memes of Kek and Pepe to comic characters like the one above in Figure 10. Here there is an example of a Chadface meme that, like rage comics, ties power and group positions

to particular characters. The use of Chad to describe the image comes from the incel communities, which have high cross-pollination with alt-right communities (Massanari & Chess, 2018; Stokel-Walker, 2021).

Figure 10 also highlights a sub-branch of the alt-right during 2020 and 2021 with the word “boog” in the title. I will quote a user from this post as they explain, “took me a while but it stands for Electric Boogaloo, codespeak for 1776 part II.” Scholarship ties the Boogaloo faction to the alt-right Libertarians (Wilson, 2020). In no small part to enact the cloud of satire, parody, and irony of the original meme use of Electric Boogaloo, which was a reference to the movie which used that as the sequel subtitle, was to point out how bad the given sequel is compared to the first movie (*Electric Boogaloo*, n.d.).



Figure 11. A Meme Feature Donald Trump as A Crusader of Kek

Here, Kek is being used and referred to as a deity. The basis of the meme’s text is the translation of the Latin phrase “Deus Vult” which is God wills it. In large, this deals with the anti-Muslim attitude held by the alt-right. In Figure 7, a user suggests the

solution to the immigration problem is “Crusades 2.0” and another user responds, “DEUS VULT.” The Cult of Kek memes lost either their grasp on the community and died out, or the meme was a displacement of the far-right Christianity behind it until the community had become more isolated and its members more affectively invested. Far-Right authoritarian movements have historically depended upon Christian influence in the United States (Steiner, 1935). The terrorist organization, the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, founded in the 1950s in Mississippi, was led by Samuel Bowers with the explicit ideology of Christian Fascism (Wilkie, 2021).

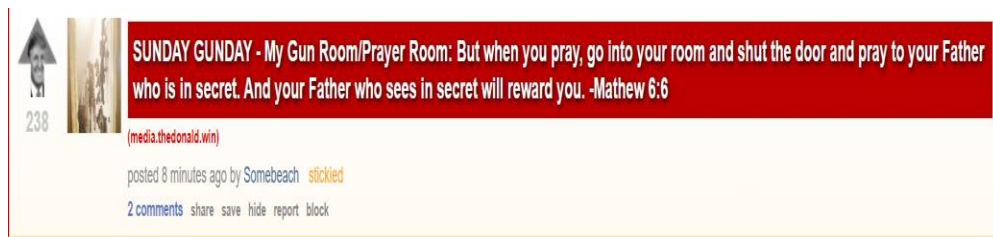


Figure 12. Gunday Prayer Room Post

Note: Each Sunday the r/The_Donald and later TheDonald.win would have a “gunday” post.

A user posted Figure 12 on the Gunday after following Trump’s 2020 election loss. In one instance, the continuation of the weekly ritual of displaying weapons and the infusion of religiosity into the movement. This particular Gunday was one of the most popular Gundays in the site’s history. Notable in this submission is the paradox within the Christian scripture cited to pray in secret while the post is calling for people to engage intrapublicly. However, the suggestion of secrecy can be charted to ownership of a firearm from the government or people around the users. The alt-right does not remove the threat of physical violence from the options for dealing with dissenters. In the comment section of the Gunday thread, one user asks, “Who are the enemy combatants?” and someone else replies, “Democrats, all democrats. Politicians, media, supporters.”



Figure 13. Gunday Post from r/The_Donald.

Note: Gunday was a community trope that began on the subreddit and continued on the forum.

Constitution of a Self and Enemy

The alt-right has targeted several groups as their enemies. The enemies characteristic of the alt-right frequently are Women, Queer people, Muslims, people from Mexico, Central, and South America, and to a lesser extent, unlike the fascists before them, Jewish people. Whether it is called populism or anti-establishment sentiment, another key target has been the media, which spawns some of the antisemitism. Nested within the rebuke of the social justice warrior is also a rejection of the current academic system. Memes featuring the pandemic fall into this same trope here as they reject the efficacy of masks, vaccines, and CDC policies. Now, the temptation of ideological critique stands here. I could investigate all the facts, stories, claims, and so on to find the evidence to contradict and disprove the worldviews and narratives in those memes and

uncover contradictions. The problem is that other people already do that, not just academics but whole subfields of journalism for fact-checking and social media disclaimers. Moreover, people keep believing in those things anyway.

As mentioned in the first chapter, I could join other psychoanalytic scholars and call these discourses psychotic. However, that forecloses our ability to learn why these people broke away from the consensus of credibility and expertise. Because, in some sense, there is this rejection of the Symbolic when framed as the universal registrar. However, then all communists and anarchists are psychotic as well for rejecting the authority of capitalism. If Lacan's metaphor is taken a step further past the clinical language, and let the text speak it produces the subject (Lundberg, 2012). Then arises the critic's possibility of viewing an ideology or discourse as a competitive system alongside the hegemonic order instead of irrational noise. The first step in charting this antipublic, or psychotic discourse, is the self that speaks it.

The Self of the Alt-Right in TheDonald Community

The *I* of the alt-right is white and Christian. The alt-right has promoted a conspiracy called The Great Replacement, which suggests a plan for non-white people to move to primarily white countries in a concerted effort to eliminate the white race (Obaidi et al., 2021). Another post made to TheDonald.win contained pictures of two headlines from The Guardian where one featured a headline suggesting that to fight climate change, one should stop having children. The second headline read that the population in Germany was declining, and thus there was a need for immigration. Found here is the more extreme Neo-Nazi call sign of 14 words focused on the continuance of the material race of whiteness (B. Lee, 2020). The Gunday posts intertextually link these

words with the father teaching the white daughter how to shoot. The metonymic chain that pulls the first aspect of our metaphorical subject is a material whiteness that, when push comes to shove, diplomacy comes to bullet, will engage in the use of violence to protect the metaphor that is itself whiteness.

Christian Lundberg (2009, 2015) defined a metaphor as a particular metonymy that holds affective force to structure a signifying chain. He suggests metaphors have the power to do that after the fact that, if someone did not see the line of white supremacy throughout the images from the figures before the paragraph above, the metaphor once uttered gives structure. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek (2004) argues that what a tyrant does to a discourse or an idea is forever change it once they utter it using the example of Nazi Germany. He argues that it was not Hitler who created antisemitism in Germany, but it was forever altered after he spoke it. The metaphor's ability to prefigure subjects is made clear when the fact that language preexists the subject and gives shape to the subject is understood thoroughly. For example, I walked through the construction of whiteness and ideological ties from the text of the images for the first aspect of our metaphorical subject. However, I am willing to bet that because of the prefigured ideas about the alt-right and the cultural context of this thesis and the literature review, no such process will be needed for the second aspect of that which is male.

In other words, as each step of the logical train was built, each cluster of context established, evidence was provided through citations and figures to prove the white Christianness of the alt-right. I make a claim, and there is a burden of proof to be met for a rational person to believe my argument. However, because of the context and structure surrounding those concepts and their relationship to the authoritarian right, the next step

in identifying the subject created by these memes can reasonably be assumed. One could go back through the figures or literature in the first chapter where the relationship between masculinity and the far-right is made and argue, I made it textually clear then, but I only make passing reference to that in the paragraph above. The threshold for evidence lowers as the chain of affective investment here where the metaphor of the cisgender heterosexual white man that composes the alt-right, a stand-in for several brands of Neo-Nazism, acts as its own evidence.

Salazar's (2018) examination of far-right memes functioning as a form of speech that performs knowledge rather than contains knowledge as the shift. In contrast, it is the cluster of metonymic displacement of ideas until there is enough power for metaphoric condensation. Lundberg (2012) notes this is the opposition between metonymy and metaphor. Lacan found where metonymy displaces in doing, so it reflects and targets other symbols on the chain. Metaphor is the replacement of the symbol, a complete stand it, spoken without utterance. The struggle and confusion to understand the dialect of the alt-right is part of the point. The affective labor one must do to render it readable lowers the barrier to integrating the new symbol presented by the metaphor, which constitutes the rejection of the hegemonic Symbolic. In other words, it is not the shift of speech delivery and engagement which has shifted the burden of proof and people's willingness to believe in conspiracy, but the act of creating obscure hard to relate and source conspiracies and beliefs creates the quest for a subject to follow. The shift is in the location and context of the subject in relationship to hegemonic symbols.

Lacan sees metonymy as more than the relationship between signs but also the difference between them and displacement (Lundberg, 2012). Lacan's same seminar that

Joshua Gunn draws the discourse of psychosis from is also the seminar in which Lacan encounters metaphor and metonymy (Gunn, 2020; Lacan, 1955; Lundberg, 2012).

Lundberg charts the development of the subject in the Imaginary, seeking completeness over the failure and trauma of the Symbolic. He notes that for constitutive rhetoric, the tipping point for interpellation is when a person acknowledges themselves as the audience of address. He suggests that rather than being called by a rhetor, the audience is addressed by the Symbolic of that rhetor. Borrowing Žižek's (1989, 2006) concept of interpassivity wherein the big Other engages on the behalf of the subject and assumes the responsibility of enjoyment. In so far, people have given up far more than their activity, but also their passivity.

I argue that the moment of interpellation is not when the audience hears the rhetor and recognizes themselves as the audience, but when the audience hears the rhetor and believes the rhetor speaks for them. The passive assumptions of the self and the world are traded away from the individual to the discourse engaging them. Interpassivity also expresses how a significant element of the world today is a series of false choices (Žižek, 2006). Žižek uses examples of where the ability to say no, or even keep private grumblings about a command is robbed from people. The 20th century totalitarian told people what to do and did not care if they approved or not. Whereas the 21st century neoliberalism will tell people what to do and demand they enjoy it.

The displacement of the self is an aspect of the Lacanian conceptualization of metaphor. Metaphors function as an organizing device created by significant affective investment that is not only referential but has the power to replace the words otherwise spoken (Lundberg, 2012). This line of unintelligibility exists in theoretical form,

symbolic inefficiency, psychosis, or lack of investment, and is understood that it renders texts meaningless to those outside. Imagine further the distance to the position that this seemingly meaningless text operates on some level of people saying it speaks for them. This is the chasm of one subject to another. It is the chasm of the mirror-stage where you are sitting there to see the impossible yourself while you are still just here. The connection between you and the image in the mirror is imaginary because there is no basis for the textual connection between you and the image or in the signifier-signified relationships (Lundberg, 2012, 2015). The efficacy of what most people consider absurd abandonments of logic to interpellate people suggests a disturbing underpinning of what might be considered to be proper logic and order.

The multi-modal and intertextual nature of memes shows their ability to function as metonymic links for the elements of a single meme and the constitution of identity in memes. A meme can be both synecdochic in relationship to an ideology as they can express the whole or by using related terms or images, a part of the whole, to develop the clusters that can be charted. A key feature of affective investment in Lundberg's work is Lacan's concept of repetition (Lundberg, 2012, 2015). Lundberg looks at repetition in material practices; however, repetition is two factor of circulation in memes. The first is the production of the meme with the reuse of images and deployment of metonymy to make a coherent and community-approved meme. Given that meme formats and genres come and go, as seen with rage faces and LOLcats and now shifted to the Chad face genre, someone submitting a meme needs an aspect of timeliness of what is popular, so their post does not die in /new and never make it to /hot. The community collective engages in repetition even if not submitting content. By voting on the thread, they shape

the discourse of the community and what is understood as acceptable (Gaudette et al., 2021). The second factor in repetition is seen in Shadowman3001's post when TheDonald.win was created, and scholarship has observed taking memes off the forums they were created on and sharing them with people outside the group. The digital action of spreading a meme is a material practice of any given ideology and a command from the alt-right.

Louis Althusser (2014) presents a two-factor definition of ideology. First, it is the altered worldview, but also materially practiced. Lacan's influence on Althusser is apparent in the mirror-stage reference. However, Althusser's first thesis of ideology is "the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions" (p. 256). Now in Althusser's explanation of this, he does not use Lacan's theory. In Lundberg's (2012) conceptualization of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, he locates the Symbolic as the position of rhetoric. The position of address is in the Imaginary as to speak, say I, is to imagine a figure and address an unknowable person due to the lack of the Symbolic is to imagine that person or audience. The ending of this first thesis also calls to another part of Lacan's theory, the Real.

For Lacan, the Real was not reality (Lundberg, 2012, 2015; Žižek, 2006, 2009). The Real is the absolute unadulterated inherent nature of the universe. However, the problem is that I just produced a reality as it was mediated through the Symbolic of this text (Lundberg, 2012). The lack that shapes the Symbolic is in part because of the failure of the Symbolic to contain the Real. Judith Butler (2011) makes a similar argument about the discursive nature of the material in that people only engage in the world through our sense and our system of reasoning, which is rooted in language. A deep root of

materialism runs through Žižek, Gunn, and Lundberg's work. The way each defines the Real breaks down with my turn of viewing discourses as discrete Lacanian orders. I am not saying the Real is the reality of each of these discourses but rather the boundaries of the logic of the discourse. These boundaries are not a contradiction or factual analysis either, but the lived experience of subjects and their identities that the discourse's Symbolic cannot express.

Post/structuralists, Foucauldians, postmodernists, semiotic scholars, philosophers, and rhetoricians all conclude in their terms that the relationship between a word and its meaning is entirely made up (Butler, 2011; Green, 2010; Lundberg, 2015; Sagi, 2002). In this sense, the alt-right has figured out post-modernism better than the rest of us. In a world where everything is made up, anything can be possible. Žižek (2006) notes this through the Christian apologist argument that claims, "If God doesn't exist, then everything is prohibited," and then the inversion if "God exists, then everything is permitted" (p. 92). The ability for whiteness to shift across the ages for Irish, Italians, and Jews – albeit several from the alt-right would disagree with Jews, shows the structure of the relationship to materiality for the alt-right. While based on outdated and racist beliefs about the science of race e even in authoritarian discourse where traditionalism and conventionalism are highly valued language, and identities allowed to be included are still flexible. Even if they argue and use the language of genetics and promote eugenicist policies the logic of race is still a discursive one and not truly material. Even in the harmful trope of the token minority, which were common posts for this community, displays an underlying point that at some level racial purity is displaced in for ideological purity.

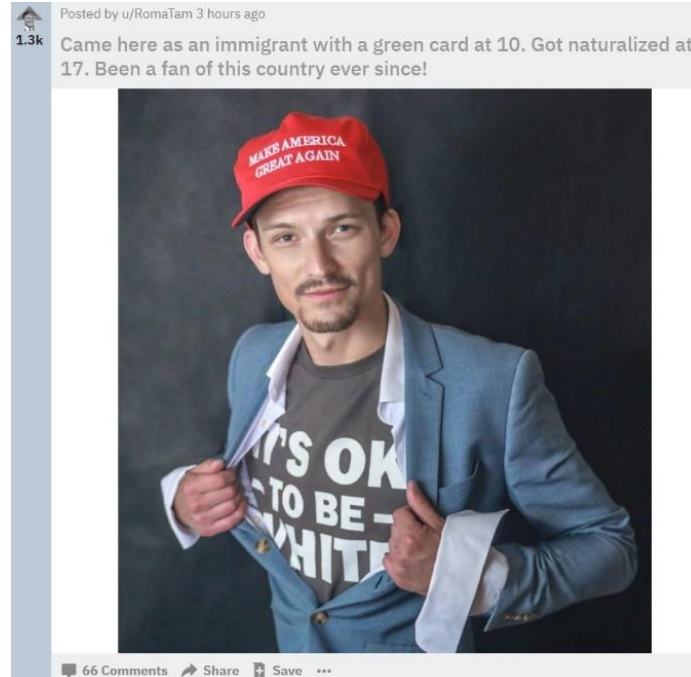


Figure 14. Picture with Man Wearing a Shirt with Common Alt-Right Phrase

Note: This post in particular highlights the broader genre of white immigrants posting to r/The_Donald and The.Donald.win.

Borders, like words, are made up. However, the alt-right sees borders as a means for racial purity in a country to be maintained through immigration policy. Also, in deciding how power should be disturbed for elections, the alt-right likes to equate space to power.



Figure 15. A Picture Depicting the 2016 Election Results by Landmass

Figure 15 shows a heat map from the 2016 election. The second half of the image shows the much smaller landmass that voted for Clinton. Other posts argue that there is no such thing as a blue state, just blue cities, and counties. The materiality alt-right presents of space and land completely disregards population density or economic activity. Mutual identity is constituted through similar living conditions in rural areas but displaces proximity in favor of living style. The conditions of what people experience are privileged for identity building. The debate over the cause of support for Trump plays out in the popular media, with some arguing in favor of the economic crises leading people to support him (Higgins, 2018). Others disagree with research that focuses on examining racial basis as the leading factor (Lopez, 2017). Scholarly research examines the question of left-leaning policies driving people towards authoritarian policies (Fetzer, 2019; Koronaiou et al., 2015). Authoritarian right-wing users post such memes saying people on the left drive them to the right. It is still clear that the lived conditions and material

relationships are working to form the basis of identity generation, while racial purity grounds itself more closely to ideological purity.

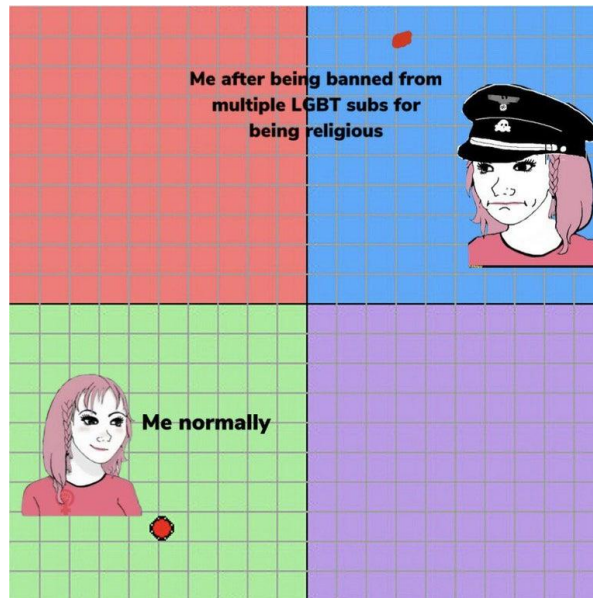


Figure 16. Alt-Right Meme Composition with Political Compass Memes

Note: Figure 16 was submitted with the title of “Who Radicalized You” tagged with the “satire” flair in r/PoliticalCompassMemes. While this meme in particular does not come from one of forums for TheDonald community it highlights the spread of memes reflecting their ideology across the internet.

Enemies of the TheDonald

The slippage of racial and ideological purity also takes place in the constitution of the enemies of the alt-right, as the targets of their anger are often white. This is also true in the history of the United States, while the Klan rarely kills or severely harms white people, even if they threaten people often (Wilkie, 2021). The Democratic party officials are still majority white, and the alt-right develops as many derogatories for their white enemies as they do names for themselves. Race is what enables the level of dehumanization that extremist groups need to conduct such acts of violence (Woolf & Hulsizer, 2004). Vitriolic sexism defines how they describe the women who object to

their political ideology that relies on aesthetical beauty standards. The toxic sexism is a call back to old anti-suffragette tropes in United States political discourse, but a continual tie of materialism in the constitution of the enemy (Tickner, 1988).



Figure 17. TheDonald Defines Beauty

This constitution is also seen in the anti-SJW memes of the alt-right (Massanari & Chess, 2018). The last element of this sexism falls into a chicken and the egg argument from the alt-right. The anti-suffrage imagery primarily positions the condition of an unwed woman progressing through her life as the enacting force for the political positions they hold (Tickner, 1988). However, surely, there is not such a Marxist analysis of ideology within the alt-right. In a similar vein and not that different imagery, the alt-right targets queer people. Rather than engage in questions of the materiality of queerness, visibility, performance, or being born this way, I would argue that this is an extension of ideological purity. The stigma around queerness has long been based on norm violation and disregard for the hegemonic social contexts (Blackman, 2011; Butler,

1999). Even within the Evangelic Christian community, there is discourse over altogether rejecting those who feel as if they identify as queer or only those who act on such self-identification (Kearns, 2015). The question is then over the belief or the material practice as the nature of the sin but surely, we could not find such an Althussurian analysis from the irrational far-right.

In the identification of religious and racial enemies, the alt-right further extends the token minority trope in the balance of belief and practice. Muslims tend not to be offered the chance to be a token minority position even while racial minorities are. The_Donald's community highlights the focus on ideological purity through religion because while one can always convert to a religion, one does not convert their genetic background or cultural perspective.



Figure 18. TheDonald Mixing Sexist and Anti-Muslim Stances

The focus on land elucidates the materiality of the identity constitution for the enemy through the stances against immigration. The metropolis versus rural dichotomy fades away here in favor of ideological purity. It does not matter if the immigrants came from a large city or rural area of their country. The fact that they come from another country takes priority. The community utters the racial undertones by celebrating immigrants to the United States from European nations. In Figure 8, someone giving the alt-right code sign with the OK hand gesture over their citizenship paperwork. Figure 14 is a post showing a man wearing the “It is okay to be white” t-shirt celebrating gaining membership. If an immigrant is willing to convert to alt-rightism, they can gain acceptance.

The internet meme plays a critical role in developing extremist groups by fulfilling the function of initiate level work that hate groups and cults use (A. Stein, 2021; Woolf & Hulsizer, 2004). The low-level member work is spreading propaganda and messages about the group. However, the constitutive rhetorical nature of memes creates the site where affective investment can begin. The production and sharing of memes function as the social glue that holds the community together (Zhang, 2020). What the alt-right describes as meme warfare can enact affect. The subtle dialect and undertones of the group get communicated through the memes. The user spends more time on the forum and develops an understanding of meaning through the metonymic chain. The subject is not interpellated until they understand the coded phrases and ingroup references and use this new dialect themselves as their new Symbolic speaks through them.

Žižek (2006) argues that it is not religious and modernists that engage in systems of belief; instead, the atheists and the postmodernist. Religious people take new scientific

advancements and craft them back into examples of how their religion is true. The faithful already know what they know; Žižek calls these “unknown knowns” (p. 52). New evidence is either discounted or altered to fit the absolute authority of the Symbolic. In comparison, those calling for human rights and other such practices of constructing ideas must honestly believe in those ideals for them to be made real. Returning to Joshua Gunn’s (2020) analysis of the structure of psychotic discourse, it is not just the rejection of the authority of a Symbolic but the rejection of the failings of a Symbolic. Gunn cites Bruce Fink (1999) as Fink compares the nature of absolute certainty as an element of psychosis. The insistence on ideological purity from the alt-right shows the function of authoritarianism that Orwell (1949) expressed as the ultimate command of the hegemony was to reject the evidence in front of you and still internalize the truth of the party.

Conclusion: An Insurrection of the Real

In my understanding of the Lacanian triadic framework, the riots on January 6th, 2021, can be seen as the Real making itself known. The Symbolic of neoliberalism suggests that democratic norms and values, the peaceful transition of power, and respect for the people's autonomy cannot logically hold, cannot signify, breaking into the Capitol and attempting to overturn an election. It is also a turn for authoritarians, who support and want authority, to reject the authority of the sitting government. Rather than a psychotic rejection of the authority, a new and different authority has been constituted by the alt-right – one of materiality, racial and ideological purity, and solidarity based on shared experiences and living styles.

In the book, *The Capacity Contract* Stacey Clifford Simplican (2015) examines two ways communities are built. The first is power and usefulness, a community of

strength. What can someone else do for me? The second type of community focuses on common vulnerability, where members are valued because of our mutual need for each other. Philosopher Abigail Thorne (Philosophy Tube, 2018) argues in a video essay titled Why the Left Will Win because of these different types of communities; the left stands a real chance to bring radical change to the system that places value on people. She argues that the power of a community that accepts people for what they are ashamed of, weak for, and made vulnerable by will always have rhetorical affect even in the face of oppression because of our shared need. Her logic continues that in so far, communities of strength can be damaged, with the example of punching a Nazi in the face, they can be beaten, as weakness shows the failure of the strength. However, humans will never outgrow our need for each other. She also examines the perversion of the community of vulnerability as used by hate groups through Sara Ahmed (2014) with how they build their hate from a need for protection from their perceived victimhood.

Liberalism uses a system of assigning value through the production of capital. Marxist theory argues that workers should get to keep the profit of the labor. However, both in our postmodern era leave the subject only to identify with the material conditions and economic value. Marx's theory of alienation examines the affective impact the theft of labor value has on people. Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests the lack, not from the emptiness of a commodified self or separation from the benefits of your labor, but the condition of humanity entering into language (Gunn, 2020; Lundberg, 2012; Žižek, 2006). The materialistic nature of fascism allows for a more appealing process of signifying the self through essentialist philosophy to hide from lack. Liberalism bombards the modern world with different enjoyment, luxury, and consumption methods

but offers nothing other than hedonism to cross the lack. Lacanian psychoanalysis seeks not pathological solutions or answers for problems faced by a subject but to “bring the patient to confront the elementary coordinates and dead-locks of his or her desire” (Žižek, 2006, p. 4).

Capitalism fails to answer fascism because instead of calling for people to face their desire, they are instead called to enjoy. I turn to the discourse that rejects the calls to enjoy, to find a better solution to fascism (Žižek, 2006). Confronting fascism will not be won by battles of knowledge or contradicting facts as their affective investment within their Symbolic already tells them what they know and enjoy. Lacan’s *jouissance* or *enjoyment*, in French and English, Žižek (2009) observes, is to “enjoy-meaning” (p. 43). To deconstruct the alt-right, the analyst must analyze the *object cause* of their desire. A neoliberalism system leaving people in alienation and commodified existences drive subjects towards an ideology rooted in essentialist characteristics to find meaning and enjoyment. The neoliberal discourse cannot overcome the alt-right with competing offers of enjoyment as the neoliberal Symbolic says to desire one object while the fascist Symbolic is already telling of another object. To change what the fascist subject already knows and the things they do not know they know, they must believe. The alienation of neoliberalism offers little to believe in. As long as the economic system is one that forces people to justify their own existence through material wealth generation, it will be weak to discourses that constitute ontological, essentialist and nationalist, identities.

I have argued in this chapter that using the rhetorical concepts of metonymy and metaphor as understood by Lacan and Lundberg, memes and their histories are traceable and how the repetition and circulation of the meme work to develop the metonymic links

that become a metaphor. This repetition and circulation, which is the defining aspect of the meme, are the affective labor needed to generate meaning and a sense of coherence in alt-right discourse. In the era of post-truth, post assumption, or symbolically inefficient discourse, the critical takeaway is that the world cannot logic its way out of this mess. The lack of true materiality from the alt-right also shows that work on education against extremist ideologies is key in undermining them, but the real work is developing a new sense of community.

CHAPTER III - AUTHORITARIAN COMMUNISTS AND CATGIRLS

In this chapter, I analyze the ideology of authoritarian communists through a rhetorical cluster analysis of Marxist-Leninist ideology utilizing Engel's writing and an interview with Stalin, memes, and narrative analysis of the great catgirl purge of Reddit. Authoritarian communist discourse around the nature of authoritarianism clusters near the terms of class character, dictatorship of the proletariat, and historical revisionism. To begin the chapter, I engage in the complexity of defining authoritarianism by reading Marxist literature and theory. I examine the use of irony and satire that the far-right and far-left share (Greene, 2019) in particular they relate to the notion of democracy and the definition of authoritarianism within Marxist-Leninist discourse. I choose the 2017 catgirl purge – a controversy within the leftist community on Reddit over catgirls – wherein the moderators of r/socialism (r/soc) banned the submission of memes that used anime templates when the anime or character had cat ears. The controversy started when a long-term community artist that had designed banners and other art for the subreddit was discovered to draw catgirls for commission. The decision is absurd because the artwork was non-pornographic or even sexually explicit.

Further expounding upon the absurdity of this decision, the catgirl art created by this community member was never posted to r/soc. I then chart memes that highlight the political conflict within the broader communist discourses to delineate specific elements of authoritarians' discursive demand for ideological purity. Next, I review a selection of authoritarian communist and anarchist memes which target what the other faction posted around and throughout the catgirl purge. I was able to gather quarantined data as well

from r/top of all time of authoritarian communist subreddits. I argue for understanding authoritarianism as discourses with a black hole's topology.

I selected memes from r/FULLCOMMUNISM (r/FC) and r/COMPLETEANARCHY (r/CA) from January 2017 until r/FC was quarantined on September 27th, 2018 (landoflobsters, 2018). Since r/FC was only quarantined and not completely banned, data collection from the most popular posts is still accessible. Reddit's quarantining of subreddits leaves them accessible to users with a verified account. The user must go into their account settings and enable viewing of quarantined content. While posts will then appear again in the user's feed, when users first navigate to the subreddit, they are greeted with a warning about the contents of the subreddit and must again verify the intent to see the subreddit (spez, 2020). A subreddit ban completely shuts down the forum and allows accessing them only through archives. Recreating the subreddit or a variant is considered ban evading and Reddit promptly shuts down the new subreddit. r/FC and r/CA function as backstage in Wodak's (2021) model for fringe discourses, and r/soc is a frontstage to more broadly promote left politics.

I also collected from the top of all-time posts to identify what the two communities themselves considered the best memes. The limited captures of r/CA on the internet archive led me to use <https://camas.unddit.com/> which functions through API access to perform precise searches. The Camas' search tool allows searches within any public subreddits and has date parameters to allow people to see the posts and comments of any timeframe. The API has keywords to narrow the search scope beyond the date. It would be incomplete to say my dataset of memes is limited to the 200 or so I gathered for this project because I am reflecting on a conflict I was engaged in. During the catgirl

purge, while I did not get banned from r/soc, I had a lot of comments and submissions removed. I escaped the r/FC ban wave. However, r/communism banned me for criticizing Stalin 9 years ago. In the timeframe of the catgirl purge, I selected memes that were made explicitly about catgirls. For the authoritarian communists, I selected memes that most faithfully, from my perspective, represent the style and ideology of r/FC.

During the catgirl purge in late January 2017, r/FC had 33,601 subscribers, and r/CA had 21,148. When Reddit quarantined r/FC in September 2018, it had over 60,000, and r/CA had 54,000. After being quarantined, activity on r/FC shrunk, and part of the Reddit quarantine removed the feature to track active member numbers or subscribers to a subreddit. r/CA has grown to over 154,000 subscribers to date. I selected these two subreddits to analyze the ideological conflict that occurred in r/soc because they represent the location where the extreme ends of communism on Reddit. r/Soc is supposed to be the middle ground for Stalinists and anarchists, more open to liberals asking questions, and an attempt at left unity.

To begin this chapter, I start by charting Marxist-Leninist texts for their perspective on authoritarianism. Two different opinions spring forth about authoritarianism from Marxist-Leninists. The first is that it is authoritarian but justified and moral because of the ends it produces (Engels, 1872; Stalin & Howard, 1978). The second is that it is not authoritarian or, at a minimum, no more authoritarian than neoliberalism. Research (Lütjen, 2022) into the far-right has approached the second opinion. For the far-right, the analysis highlights how people from the outside consider the alt-right to be authoritarian even while followers of far-right ideology do not consider it to be.

Charting Authoritarianism from the Marxist-Leninist Perspective

There has been a lengthy philosophical debate over whether or not left-authoritarianism can exist in both academia and the political arena (Conway III et al., 2020; Stone, 1980). Leon Trotsky (1927) warned of the dangerous parallels between Stalin's USSR and fascism. Even while noting the different social antagonisms as different causes for each, he argues they result in the same structure. From the birth of the USSR to now, Marxist-Leninists, whether they supported the USSR or not, usually argue that communism can never be authoritarian. Their argument underlies a question: if a communist utopia existed – where all needs were met but one could never vote – should it be characterized as an authoritarian regime? The Marxist-Leninists (MLs) that support the former USSR and even Stalinism, explicitly argue that political praxis can have a particular essence that acts as a shield against criticisms of authoritarianism. For them, this essence is class character (Burawoy, 2000; Rennwald, 2020). In arguing against criticisms of imperialism and other failures of the USSR, Sam Marcy (1977, Chapter 2) wrote in *The Class Character of the USSR*,

We of course, believe neither that there is a new exploiting class in the Soviet Union, nor that there has been a return of the bourgeoisie to power there under the guise of Marxist-Leninist phraseology. We firmly adhere to the position that the USSR is a workers' state, although it has undergone a severe strain, deterioration, and erosion of revolutionary principles. (para. 8)

Class character is a term used by Marx and Engels to analyze elements of the super-structure (Lähtenmäki, 2020; Marx & Engels, 1848; Stalin, 1950). Joseph Stalin (1950) argued that language could not have class character as it was not a part of the

super-structure. Stalin argued that a particular base produces a particular super-structure. He further stated that language comes from the totality of humanity, therefore, cannot be super-structural because it lacks a particular base. Stalin articulates the difference between dialect and jargon it that can differ between social classes. However, as the larger goal of his essay was to justify a national language, he condemns these differences as unproductive of social power and short-lived. Stalin here engages in what most would consider a form of genocide, the obliteration of all languages other than Russian in all Soviet territories. He positions himself away from the condemnation by dislocating language from the super-structure, and thus it is impossible for his action to have the wrong class character because language, according to Stalin, had none. Looking beyond the questionable definition of language Stalin reflects a definition of class character. First, it is held only by super-structure entities, and second, it reflects and has the class's character it benefits.

Stalinists define authoritarianism in terms of who is in power and how they got there. MLs argue that because a state's actions are in service and protection, the proletariat class, because the state and its actors have acceptable proletariat class character. The benefit of production and labor being held in the hands of the few, not being used for the good of the masses, is a critical element of the ML view of authoritarianism. From the ML view, ownership of material and capital is also a key element of authoritarianism. In the classical understanding of Marxism, the means of production belong to the collective masses and the additional value generated by their labor (Marx & Engels, 1848). The change in the relationship of owning the tools and land for your work to the mass factory owned by the capitalists is another crucial aspect of

Marx's criticism. However, the former USSR and current China participate in what many consider state capitalism (Althusser, 2014; Duncan, 1989; Sallai & Schnyder, 2021). MLs look beyond the criticism of state capitalism, where the state owns the means of production. The contradiction presented from the Marxist analysis and the government owning the means of production is ideologically resolved through the use of class character.

The dictatorship of the proletariat cluster is related to the political vernacular of populism. As I discussed in the first chapter, scholarship has long linked the idea of populism to authoritarianism (Gallo, 2021; Gounari, 2021; Hall, 1985; Jessop, 2019; Langman & Schatz, 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). ML positions on an authoritarian state and vanguard-style military party justify itself by assuming class character. The dictator of the proletariat, instead of the dictator of the elite, or by one person, or the technocrats, is the articulate class character. The debate over the authoritarian nature of socialism has existed for as long as socialism has existed. In *On Authority*, Friedrich Engels (1872) argues that “a revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon” (para. 13). Engels's other arguments examine the scope of the industry, complex systems, and critical timeliness as reasons authority will always be needed. This essay aims to critique anti-authoritarian socialists who “think that when they have changed the names of things, they have changed the things themselves. This is how these profound thinkers mock at the whole world” (para. 10).⁵

⁵ The ML command of “Go read theory” is equivalent from my perspective of the neoliberal arguing criticisms of capitalism are not authentic because they were made with things created by capitalism.

The treatment of democracy and willingness to place themselves in the top-left quadrant of a political compass meme complicates an understanding of authoritarianism as practice (Glasius, 2018). The Soviet state lacked public accountability, as does North Korea and China right now. Nevertheless, the authoritarian communist discourse still engages the idea of democracy as something meaningful. Scholarship notes that this is why linking authoritarianism to the lack of democracy does not provide a complete definition (Glasius, 2018). However, the Marxist-Leninists here are not interested in accountability, as Glasius suggests being the measure of the presence of authoritarianism. To unpack the definition of authoritarianism from the Marxist-Leninist view is to understand one of Marx and Engels' most infamous call phrases, "From each according to his ability, to each in according to his needs" (Marx & Engels, 1875, para. 38).

Rather than the policy, presence of elections or not, constitutional freedoms, or governments acting to prevent accountability, MLs focus on a system of government and economics that provides basic needs to the people. It is for this same reason that the shield of class character is so vital to the functioning of this ideology, as even when the government takes illiberal stances or commits a genocide or two, the prophetic nature of scientific dialectical materialism allows these to be overlooked in accomplishing the goal of each getting their needs. The Soviets regularly criticized the United States over the definition of freedom. They argued that there were no homeless or unemployed people within the USSR (Conine, 1988). Stalin (Stalin & Howard, 1978) himself, while being interviewed, argued,

We did not build this society in order to restrict personal liberty but in order that the human individual may feel really free. We built it for the sake of real personal

liberty, liberty without quotation marks. It is difficult to me to imagine what “personal liberty” is enjoyed by an unemployed person, who goes about hungry, and cannot find employment.

Real liberty can exist only where exploitation has been abolished, where there is no oppression of some by others, where there is no unemployment and poverty, where a man is not haunted by the fear of being tomorrow deprived of work, of home and of bread. Only in such a society is real, and not paper, personal and every other liberty possible. (paras. 59-60)

In this same interview, Stalin (1978) claims that Russia had not yet achieved Marx’s dream of a communist utopia. The Soviet state had enacted socialism, eliminating most of what MLs consider the world’s wrongdoings, but the promise of employment, food, housing, and rejection of ethnic oppression had been achieved. At the core, the Soviet state was fulfilling the function of a vanguard party, securing the established socialism against capitalistic imperialism. Stalin even notes that one of the world’s problems is the oppression of the masses by a few. He matches with Engels’ (1872) point that a revolution is perhaps the most authoritarian movement as it is the armed few coming to enforce their will. The position of Stalinism being authoritarian or considered evil is pushed to the side for the communist utopia beyond the actions, and ideology of the Soviet state for the sake of the *Thing* beyond the ideology. The communist utopia is supposed to be a stateless, moneyless, classless society where all are free to work according to their strength and needs met by the solidarity of their comrades. Either through representative federations or direct democracy, “true” communism is inherently linked to anarchism (Bakunin, 1870; Bookchin, 1982; Call, 2008; Goldman, 1910;

Kropotkin, 1906). I argue this is why frameworks like Glasius' (2018) that depend on concepts of illiberalism "which refer to patterned and organized infringements of individual autonomy and dignity" (p. 517) to define and understand authoritarianism fail to adequately capture the ideology of Marxist- Leninists - because they rest on idealistic liberal assumptions that are not a factor in the analysis of dialectical materialism. The analysis rests on more than just who owns the means of production, the private capital, the masses, or the state, but also on how those means of production are used to fulfill the needs of the masses.

In this sense, there is a strong tie to the idea of authoritarian practices and authoritarian communists in that there is a government that does not meet the needs of the public and is unaccountable (Glasius, 2018). Similar to Trotsky's (1927) warning about the ties between fascism and Stalinism, the different modes of what people commonly consider to be authoritarian communist governments are different ideas about achieving communism rather than any substantial differences in the government that results. A highly centralized state is usually composed of a singular party. 21st-century authoritarian communists also share the populist inversion that scholars observe on the right (Case, 2017). Authoritarian movements of the 20th century usually centered around a single leader, such as Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, and so on. 21st-century authoritarian movements now find themselves more located within some populist paradigm and pluralistic authorship (Case, 2017; Salazar, 2018).

The Politics and Memes of Authoritarian Communists

In 1956 what began as a student revolt in Hungary was violently ended by the Soviet military. The act caused a schism in communist parties worldwide at that time and

still does to this day. The modern supporters of the USSR, Stalin, Mao, and other authoritarian communists are known as “tankies” in leftist discourse (Pettersen, 2020). The word tankie originated late in the 1970s or early in the 1980s, depending on whom you ask (E. Smith, 2020). The word originates from the Marxist-Leninist defense of the Soviet Union using tanks to crush the Hungarian revolution (Pettersen, 2020). The word has always been a point of factionalism among the left. Student groups brought the word into life and evolved into more prominent use during infighting and later dissolution of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1991. The factions of the 21st century left to organize themselves between the tankies and anarchists. It is worth noting that many of these authoritarians consider tankie to be derogatory and harmful to the progression of left politics.⁶

Critical historical revisionism is often necessary for elucidating the past from the dominant narrative (Gilchrist, 1991). However, in a unique instance of Marxist ideology, historical revisionism weaponized by Marxist-Leninists against those that depart from orthodox Marxism (Markwick, 2001). Charitably accepting the claims of “scientific Marxism” gives new meaning to this phrase as then challenging Marxist theory is challenging the past and the prophetically given future. Authoritarian communists use their internet organization to spread disinformation. During the Hong Kong protests, tankies spread conspiracy about CIA funding for the protests and regularly criticized people from Hong Kong because they did not support China (Yam, 2021).

⁶ I reject this position because we have no common ground. A critique that our current system both political and economic needs to be replaced is not unique to communists. Neo-Nazis want their form of that and I am no friend of them.

Along with their dedication to authoritarian states, MLs present an ideology of class reductionism. Further than economic determinism, I use class reductionism to highlight the lacking analysis of race, gender, and accessibility. The community has developed the term “brosocialist” to categorize these individuals or “manarchist” when an anarchist does the same (Agostinone-Wilson, 2020, p. 25). Traditionalist Marxist organizations sideline such issues with the reply that once capitalism is defeated, everything else can be solved (Agostinone-Wilson, 2020). Authoritarian communists see their politics and violence as the only path toward defeating capitalism. They do not have faith in electoralism or even the affective power of rhetoric – only the might of a state to enforce a way of life.

Irony of Democracy

Authoritarian communists use irony and satire the same way the alt-right does (Askanius, 2021). On r/FC, perceived negative stereotypes about Stalin or the USSR are played as jokes. For example, when comments are deleted, they are replaced with “Content redacted for the sake of the Motherland.” r/FC and other Marxist-Leninist subreddits like r/communism or r/GenZeDong dance around and against elections and tendencies towards democracy using satire and irony. Some memes will portray North Korea, China, and the no longer USSR as democratic, while others will explicitly argue against democracy. The power of a democratic system to enact change or resist is itself a meme to authoritarian communists. A user submitted Figure 19 with the title, “this is how the Soviet Union defeated fascists.” An explicit part of the authoritarian appeal for tankies is the strength or ability to protect the revolution promised by the vanguard.



Figure 19. Democracy is a Common Cluster of Memes from Authoritarian Communists.

Some of the authoritarian communists on Reddit present these authoritarian states as democratic when it is rhetorically useful. Stalin (1978) himself provided the grounds for these arguments. In his interview above, where he talks about personal liberty, he refers to changes in the USSR that would make it a direct democracy where everyone could vote with secret ballots. Stalin would further argue that capitalism is authoritarian because of the exploitative nature of capitalism that holds basic necessities over people's heads if they do not work while not promising employment. In the framework of Marxist-Leninism, these communist countries are not authoritarian because of class character and what the state "provides" for the people.



Figure 20. Public Relations Photoshoots from Authoritarian Regimes Make for Good Memes.

Note: Figure 20 was submitted with the title, “Quick! The Liberals are asleep! Post pictures of evil democracy-hating Commies participating in democracy!” The meme is composed of dictator public relations photos. The limited power of non-authoritarian governments appears in Figure 21 through a political compass meme about Covid-19. Democracy gets metonymically displaced from mainstream understandings. MLs will accept the morality of democracy but argue that dictatorships are more powerful.



Figure 21. A Political Compass Meme Using Elements from Alt-Right Meme Formats.

Figure 21 presents the radical edges of each ideology with this photo-realistic Chad face meme standing in for China in this meme. The Chad face meme comes from

the incel community, which is closely related to the alt-right (Bezio, 2018; Stokel-Walker, 2021). I argue there are two elucidating means of reading this intertextuality. The first is the spread of fringe terms into the mainstream, as Wodak (2021) suggests. The second reflects the tie between fascism and Stalinism (Adler & Paterson, 1970; Orwell, 1938; Trotsky, 1927).

Bottom left is where the anarchists, syndicalists, red rose twitter handles, and so on, are begging for compliance rather than active with the power of authoritarianism. People on these ML subreddits are not shy about identifying as authoritarian. ML ideology puts democracy into a blurred position where the supposed communist utopia requires it. At the same time, the discourse doubts the power of democracy to defeat a crisis, fascism, another nation, or capitalism. MLs of Reddit use humor and memes to deflect criticisms of authoritarianism, the same as the shift in class character. The contradiction that is present for audiences to decode the messaging of 21st-century authoritarian communists then relies on the use of irony and satire that runs throughout the authoritarian discourse.

Understanding the ML position informs us better of the working of populism not as something only ever dressing up and setting the stage of authoritarianism as some research suggests (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) or as lacking a singular intellectual tradition (Lütjen, 2022). Nevertheless, as populism is linked to the communist critique and the inherent political antagonisms it causes, it lacks any true moral compass towards the result of that energy, as Trotsky warns (Linz, 2000; Trotsky, 1927). The issue of the missing moral compass also appears in definitions of authoritarianism as practices that sabotage accountability (Glasius, 2018). Two questions must be raised, accountable to

who and accountable for what? As Glasius provides, “authoritarian practices” which “interfere with the preferences and inhibit the civic virtues of those to whom accountability is owed” (p. 525). However, that rests on the parallel function in the analysis of illiberal practices. In this framework, it is easy for MLs using class character to argue that Hitler was not authoritarian but illiberal, as, from Hitler’s perspective, accountability is owed to the pure Aryans and has nothing to do with anyone else. Hitler faced a contradiction of accountability as he was not the pure Aryan he claimed to be protecting. The criticism of understanding authoritarianism as the state taking active measures against accountability here is that it fundamentally leaves out from what or whose perspective of accountability and towards what goal. The embracement then of populism is that power found solely within people and deferred to the state (Lütjen, 2022; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Now this amoral populism only gains access to the resistance of authoritarianism when it is a populism that includes all people and does not measure those people’s worth against a hierarchal power system. In other words, so long as there are states which create and identify different publics, accountability will still fall short

Historical Revisionism: Stalin Did Nothing Wrong

Users frequently post images that are just of a communist leader, a quote from a leader, or a photo of a leader with a fake quote regarding some situation today. Within the authoritarian communist subreddits, some believe everything Stalin was accused and that he was justified. Others reject the accusations as CIA propaganda. In both ways, they claim, Stalin did nothing wrong. The first and the ghastlier of the two share memes that recontextualize the actions of the USSR. Authoritarian communists on Reddit argue that people in the gulags hoarded grain, and those executed by Castro were wealthy

landowners. They are embracing the genocide by the Chinese government of the Uyghurs as them being ‘re-educated.’ These same users are the ones that post quotes defending authoritarianism, some from Mao, Stalin, and Engels. No denial is needed here as this is apologetics for Stalinism. Any and all acts by authoritarian communist states is/was/forever justified in the name of advancing the proletariat. The second type focuses on rewriting history and denying the past.



Figure 22. Screenshot of a Tweet that Rewrites History

Note: Twitter screenshots represent one of the difficulties in solidifying memes as these entirely text-based information format is playing the role of something more typically visual.

In /r/FC, for a time there was a pinned post by a moderator was titled “EVERYONE SHOULD BE GAY,” standing in contrast with Soviet policies on homosexuality. The USSR harshly regulated sexuality (Alexander, 2018). Stalin outlawed homosexuality in 1934 and saw queerness as being related to political dissent. However, even during the de-Stalinization of the Soviet legal code, homosexuality was still outlawed.

The Soviet-Chinese propaganda posters seem to be the story of a beautiful interracial gay couple who met in a metallurgical and got married and had beautiful children and a farm



Figure 23. Old Propaganda Posters are Reinterpreted and Given New Meaning

Queer revisionism is a frequent cluster in authoritarian communist propaganda using art from the Soviet era or, more broadly, with that aesthetic. China's own laws regulating queerness are varied. While not outlawed or punishable by law, queer couples in China do not have equal rights (Shaw & Zhang, 2018). The cultural arm of the Chinese government regularly takes action against queer themes from appearing in media (R. Davis, 2020). The authoritarian communists would also like people not to remember that China chose to work with Henry Kissinger over the USSR.



Figure 24. A Meme Articulating the ML Perceived Contradictions in the West

Marxist-Leninists invert the electoral belief of picking from the lesser evil. MLs compare what are considered the bastions of democracy and liberalism and use their faults to undermine the hegemony's power.

These communities engage in genocide denial. While modern genocide denial takes on the form of Neo-Nazism, it is important to remember that in the United States, people learn the art of genocide denial at the Thanksgiving dinner table. Whether historical genocides, such as the Holodomor or the ongoing acts of the Chinese state against the Uyghurs, MLs use humor to shape the denial of genocide. Several memes use crimes and evils committed by the United States and other countries to show how the communist leaders were no worse or better than the capitalists in comparison. The past is rewritten to justify the actions of Stalin and other leaders. Submitters imbue these memes

with othering of political enemies to validate the ideology of the community. Civilians murdered by their states are blamed, political dissenters turned into traitors, and the state held above all.

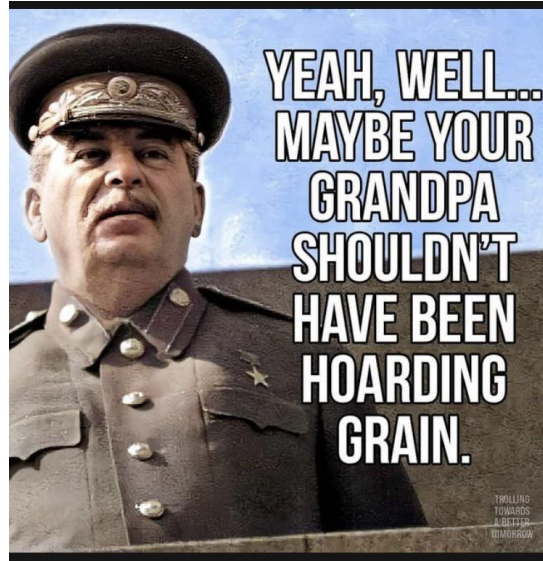


Figure 25. A Meme of Stalin Arguing for Holodomor Denial

Memes frequently follow the ritual repetition of ideology through the use of leader's faces in a similar fashion to how paintings of Mao used to do the same in China (Fang, 2018).

Like the alt-right, the authoritarian communists demand ideological purity. If people do not accept the authority's opinion, they will be ostracized by the community. Intra-leftist meme discourse presents the unique ground where the evil of capitalism is an accepted premise, so the argumentation is exclusively focused on what comes next. Authoritarians and anarchists engage in meme warfare with one another. The word "tankie" and "anarkiddie" have maintained their usage in this meme warfare. The conflict has been much more than internet memes in the past. Both authoritarians and anarchists took chances to stab the other in the back during other revolutions. Stalinists attacked anarchist liberated Barcelona. After failing to take the city, the Stalinists sided with the fascists and rounded up anarchists around Spain (Orwell, 1938). George Orwell sold out

a bunch of Stalinists to intelligence agencies later in his life (Norton, 2016). All's well that ends well.

When you don't want to read theory so you just give yourself the moral highground because Red Fascism and Authoritarianism or something



Figure 26. A Political Ball Meme of Authoritarian Communists Criticizing Anarchists.

Authoritarian communists take issue with terms like “Red Fascism,” similar to tankie. Red Fascism is a way that scholars began to unite an understanding of authoritarianism between fascism and Stalinism (Adler & Paterson, 1970; David-West, 2012; Maddux, 1977). Authoritarian communists frame their political beliefs as being morally correct as they see a vanguard party as the only possible end to capitalism. Depending on how one defines morality, they may be right. Even if a violent revolution was possible in a place like the United States, I highly doubt that it would be given the power of capitalist militaries. The death toll of the revolution would hardly match the toll

of climate change and global inequality that capitalism will sunder unto our world in the next 50 years.⁷



Figure 27. An Example of a Broader Meme Template Being Used for Political Means.

Disagreeing with tankies means you are a CIA plant or not wise enough to tell propaganda from fact. Marxist-Leninists like this place a high value on reading theory books about how to achieve communism. Leftists that oppose authoritarian states are seen as traitors and, depending on the authoritarian, deserve to die with the liberals and the fascists. Stalinism was never about anti-capitalism; it has always been about domination and control. The demand for ideological purity is not enough to oppose capitalism but requires it done the right way, or you also get the wall. Anarchists are the national traitors to authoritarian communists paralleled in alt-right discourse—heretics

⁷ Yes, capitalism has brought us to the most advanced and safest state for humanity to date. The same was once true of Feudalism. So.

rejecting the scientific path of Marxism. The profanity offered by anarchists is that of schism and ideology that breaks the façade of modernism. Consider the orthodox Marxist and their material determinism. More than the double-minded neoliberal that believes in capitalism, anarchists reject Marxism's dialectal path and science. The Catholic and Orthodox Christian churches affirm it is a far graver sin to be a heretic that knows the faith and with the knowledge rejects it than to be a misguided heterodox

Authoritarian Communists and Anarchist Catgirls

In 2017 the far-left community on Reddit faced a crisis. A community member who made art and banners for the r/soc subreddit had also drawn catgirls. The moderator team argued the idea of the catgirls was a position that women turned into domesticated animals and, with that argument, banned the artist from posting on the subreddit (r/SubredditDrama, 2017). As I argue in the second chapter, ideological purity is the ultimate demand from the authoritarian discourse. Even as absurd as a decision as it sounds, the authoritarian communists demanded compliance. The moderators deleted threads and comments from dissenters, and some users were banned. Getting banned from r/communism or r/FC and even sometimes r/soc is seen as a rite of passage by r/CA. When the r/socialism moderator team decided to ban catgirls, the anarchists happily complied.



Figure 28. Anarchists Infused Political Meaning Using Political Iconography and Regular Cats.

When r/soc banned catgirls, the reaction from the community was at the first split.⁸ r/Soc is the place of left unity, where both the radical anarchists and authoritarian communists take turns getting banned. As mentioned before, r/soc is the frontstage of the far-left compared to the backstages of r/FC and r/CA. When the users started questioning the mods and asking for changes the r/FC decided for a good ole purge.

A user named ayy_howzit_braddah posted a petition where they asked for the moderation of r/soc to be done through elections. Another user checked the post history and found the petition creator had posted some less than favorable comments, and for that, the petition creator was banned (femme_gariab, 2017). Now, what was this terrible content? The user's comments were disconcertingly transphobic, and he defended 8chan. He did defend the leftist side of 8chan, but the problem is that there is little to no

⁸ My research into the primary sources and reconstructing this narrative through digital archives and API was greatly aided by the community of r/SubredditDrama, countless users who took screen shots and created captures for the archives.

moderation on a *chan board. A particular authoritarian type is common on 8chan, and the community calls them Nazbols, Nazism-Bolshevism. Imagine someone looking at Hitler and Stalin and being inspired by both. Nazbols, are truly, and even most tankies agree with this, Red Fascists.

Leftists pretty much universally agree that Nazbols should not be accepted. Anarchists do not tolerate authoritarians of any kind. One of the critical defenses of authoritarian communist ideology is the USSR's actions against Nazism. The Stalinists would ask that people do not think about Poland too much or that Stalin had an agreement with Hitler called the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Kirby, 1996). It is important to note that even while Stalin got along with Hitler, the Soviet army's sacrifices should not wash away from history. Stalinism is an ideology that must be resisted, but anyone willing to fight and die to stop fascism is a comrade of mine.



Figure 29. A Meme Using Lenin as the Background which Highlights the Use of Liberal as a Derogatory

The denouncement of someone as a liberal from either the authoritarian communists or anarchists is common. MLs are critical of identity politics as a form of liberalism as it is an analysis of identity instead of material. Authoritarian communists also argue that the idea of elections and voting are pretty liberal as well. Anarchists press that liberalism is inherently tied to the idea of a state or nation as anarchists. The Stalinists ask that one not think about how identity can be material

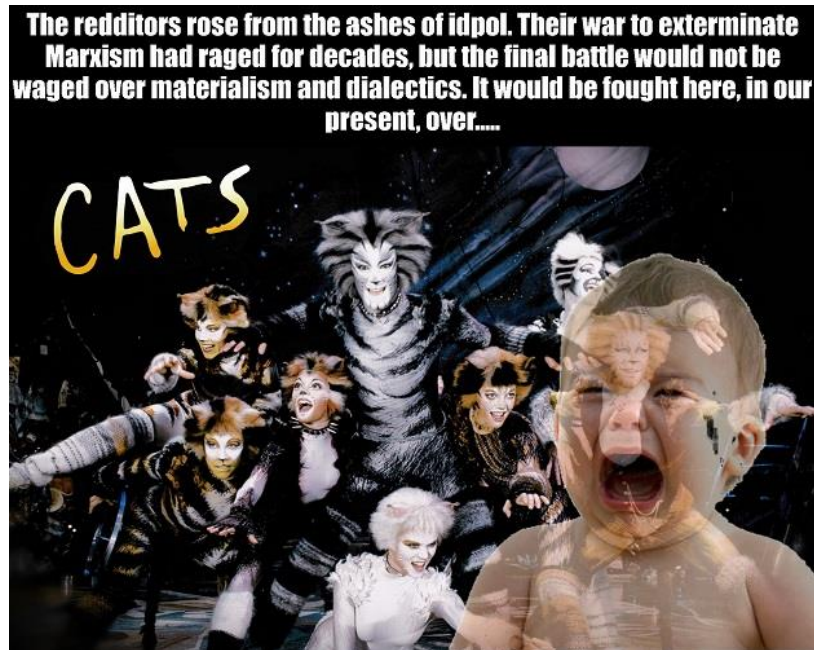


Figure 30. A Meme Using the Highly Criticized Live Action Cats as a Background with a Crying Child to Show the Absurdity of the Conflict.

The absurdity of the conflict was not lost on the community even as the conflict intensified over 2 weeks.

The Great “Purrge”

r/SubredditDrama (2017) came up with the post flair, which appears before a submission’s title, “The Great Purrge,” because the drama played out over several days, and for large scale drama such as this unique flair is often created. Once the relationship between the petition and 8chan was discovered, r/FC banned every single person who signed the petition (femme_gariab, 2017). The moderators of r/socialism that disagreed

with the ruling went on strike, and pornographic catgirls began to flood the r/socialism queue (BabyEngels, 2017; Keijjeman, 2017). A fun side note here, the user that discovered the problematic history of the petition poster was also the top moderator of r/FC.

In authoritarian communist subreddits opposition to the catgirl ban shifted to support as the link to 8chan justified the position of the r/soc mods. Anime's link to the far-right through the *chan boards also established some sentiment against the medium. It is worthwhile to acknowledge that anime can be problematic but give me capitalist media that is not.



Figure 31. Fictional Quotes to Address Current Debates are Common in Leftist Discourse.

Users from r/ANI_COMMUNISM, a subreddit that uses anime as the base images for meme creation, started intentionally getting banned (AnarchistDiogenes, 2017). Alternatively, r/FC would ban them for participating in r/ANI_COMMUNISM.

Favorably referring to the r/Ani_Comm or anime also became grounds for a ban (TheLionTamerWF, 2017).

The turn against anime as a whole did not immediately happen as the first wave of anarchist memes attempted to undermine the ban for the absurdity of criticizing catgirls and not the rest of the medium anime. However, this may have backfired into banning all anime memes in authoritarian communist subreddits. It is also possible that once anarchists decided to align themselves with catgirls and anime, Stalinists condemned anime because of its association with anarchists.



Figure 32. Anarchists Made Memes to Mock the Policy Changes

Note: Anarchists engaged in ideological criticism that may have solidified the authoritarian communist stance against anime.



Figure 33. Memes Used Faces of Authoritarian Communists Inversed by Anarchists

Note: Figure 33 was two different posts. The first “You’re banned from /r/soc for clicking this post” and the second “You’re not banned from /r/soc for clicking this post.”

The drama as it played out was documented by communities like r/SubredditDrama and by the pro-catgirl faction on r/CA (MrLoveShacker, 2017). Users took screenshots of their ban messages or arguments had in the closed doors of private messages and shared them with the community. The catgirl debate on r/socialism, in the end, went in favor of catgirls. The community pushed and got more transparent rules and selection of moderators, and most of the bans were undone. r/FC asked that to have the

ban undone you post on 8chan, tell them off, and then ask to get your name removed from the petition (femme_gariab, 2017). As Reddit defines it, brigading like this, a call to enter and act within another subreddit or website, is not allowed on Reddit (spez, 2020). The r/FC moderators quickly realized the error of this and then began doing checks of a user's post history to see if they could qualify for an unban.



Figure 34. Authoritarian Communists Used Images that Historically Relate to Murders or Assassinations to Suggest How to Handle the Catgirl Drama

As in any good political debate, both factions cite Orwell at various times, even though Orwell himself aligned with the anarchists. He (1938, 1949) was among those

betrayed in Barcelona and wrote *1984* as a critique of Stalinism. Authority demands compliance even in the face of the absurd.

The Public of a Black Hole

I have noted that Lundberg's definition and mine of the Real do not work together. So, where does this leave affect? Using the understanding of the Real as the boundaries and limits of a Symbolic, as lines of intelligibility, the primacy of affect in crossing those lines is made clear. Lundberg (2012, Chapter 5) further argues that affect is expressed in enjoyment in the discourse of someone who lodges a complaint even when they know it may not be possible to solve it. The subject here enjoys the act of lodging a complaint and the recognition the complaint produces. The question still rests, why does the subject complain? Lundberg notes that this standing conflict with affect is that what rhetors use affect to mean is signified and thus squarely outside the Real. He also argues that affect can be considered a field of possibilities to enable emotion in a given rhetorical situation. In short, we mostly agree beyond my separation of multiple Symbolics, which further enables us to understand Lacan's capturing as interpellation as one slips out of one Symbolic and Real, they are captured into their new discourse and have their modes of engagement shaped by that new Symbolic and Real.

Lundberg (2012) uses this discourse for two reasons. One is to highlight the nature of enjoyment, which paradoxically is sometimes unpleasurable. The second is to relate the concept of demand, its relationship to enjoyment, and the dangers of demand-based politics (2012, Chapter 7). He cautions that the demanding subject seeks to have their needs filled by the big Other. They reject the failure of the Symbolic and demand to feel complete. Lundberg argues that when this framework is applied to politics, one can

see a political ideology that demands the state fulfill all its needs. A displacement of the self and agency occurs as the Other becomes the one to act and fill your demand. A subject that demands the state fulfill the lack and be an impossible totality is an authoritarian.

Lundberg (2012, Chapter 6) charts three definitions of public. First is the act of public address, which allows for the creation of the second aspect of self-identification within the realm of address, and both of these are underwritten by the public space, medium form, where the address takes place. A navigation or coordinate type charting system is often found in semiotics, psychoanalysis, rhetoric, and engagements with the ontological topology of our discursive world. Post-structuralist semiotics offers another parallel to a coordinate system of communication. Syntagmatic analysis acts as the X-axis, paradigmatic, the Y-axis, frame of reference, the Z-axis, and finally, time itself as the signifier evolves beyond a particular signified (Pordzik, 2017). A good postmodern scholar would interject that what they theorize and engage with is only their tiny sliver or fragment of the world.

However, when scholars engage in critique, we often turn our beliefs ontologically and only treat that which is not ours as postmodern (Latour, 2004). Curiously, in Žižek's (1999) *The Ticklish Subject*, he encounters a similar problem with Heidegger's beliefs about metaphysics and political ideology. Heidegger justified his Nazi party membership, and the ideology of the state, through the idea that the totalitarian mode of government best matched the technology of the era. Žižek notes that this implies there is an essence to both technology and modes of government within Heidegger's

framework. This way implies there is something more beyond the ideology than the ideology's physical and concrete actions.

On another petal of the flower of the universe, we find psychoanalysis and the big Other, the cause to devout your life for, the perfect listener, the *Thing* worth dying for, killing for (Fiennes & Žižek, 2013; Žižek, 1989, 2006). The thing beyond ideology justifies the necessary action to enact the ideology, which gives them permission, the order, to enjoy. The constitutive power of rhetoric is not limited to enabling meaning but structuring and shaping both desires, demands, and fantasies. It is entering into the Symbolic that shatters the subject and creates the void, but it is also that very same Symbolic that offers the supposed solutions to that shattering.

The shattering of the Symbolic is how fantasy and the Imaginary registrar shape the modes of address, as well as how people see ourselves and imagine our relationship with others (Lundberg, 2012). The definition and understanding of a “specific economy” is what I suggest is the theoretical demarcation between our positions. Since a coordinate-like system is often used to explain communication structure, let us take that spatial topology metaphor to the extreme. Lundberg’s (2012) specific economies address gravitational wells. Signifiers become bound to each other and lay the lines for effects and relationships that enable meaning, which in this case, we can consider the bending of space-time. What Lundberg’s theory does not account for are black holes. Rather than letting an astronaut pass through with some distortion or entrapment, interpellation, the black hole has become so dense that there is no escape once a subject comes too close. Every path forward, left, right, down, up, and backward now points in the same direction back towards the totality.

So, how can signifiers act as Higgs fields that depending on rhetorical effect, can collapse into a particle and generate meaning (PBS Space Time, 2022)?⁹ Matheson (2018) uses the example of roads and intersections as they begin to overlay and generate centralized places meaning – is enabled. As Matheson explains, there was nothing before the intersection, and the number of roads leading in and crossing it enables a town, meaning, to generate. Lundberg (2012) expresses that meaning “is experienced by a subject, but the subject is not the efficient cause of meaning: rather, the subject is the site at which meaning is manifest” (p 182). If we return to the gravitational analogy, envision this process on the flawed example of the gravity of a heavy ball being placed on a trampoline, depressing the surface, and a small ball is then released and forms a decaying orbit. However, space is not two-dimensional, or even really three-dimensional, but three plus one – time.

Possible meanings of a signifier to different subjects act as the superposition of a Higgs particle. The affective labor by a public functions as the observed principle collapsing down a signifier into a particular meaning. Are catgirls simple UwU fetish art or a neoliberal commodification of the domestic narrative of women? Lundberg (2012, 2015) challenges rhetoric to go beyond using understanding as a tool used by rhetoric to rather something caused by rhetoric. The insight of the superposition of meanings also helps give insight into the workings of populism. The studies examining authoritarianism question this line between authoritarian leaders and authoritarian populations can expand with the analogy (Herzog, 2021; Stone, 1980). The two suggestions are that the rhetor

⁹ Support PBS and your local NPR station. Dr, Mathew O’Dowd is an Assistant Professor from Lehman’s College department of Physics and Astronomy is the writer and host of Space Time.

catalyzes the already existing public affect into concrete political action or that the leaders bring that to the public by some merit or personality trait (Laclau, 2005; Roberts-Miller, 2019). The Heisenberg uncertainty principle and quantum superposition insight let us understand how it can be both.

However, a fun thing about photons and electrons is that even if someone fires them one at a time, the same interference pattern appears. For this same reason, the orbital view of electrons around atoms is incorrect and instead based on the potential charge that alters the probability of where the will electron collapse. Fundamentally, this is the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum mechanics; because of the uncertainty principle, it is a vain effort to track or guess a particle until it interacts with something else, and the path of a particle is not truly set until after it is observed, as if the universe's retroactive organization of them gives them meaning. The fundamental building blocks of the universe once thought to *cause* the universe, meaning, are now better understood as an *effect* of the underlying principles of space-time.

Conclusion: For Bread and Roses

The discourse of the black hole also explains Žižek's (2006, p. 52) "unknown knows," which is how a person convinced of a particular metaphysics is enabled to convert all new knowledge back into things that reinforce their belief system. Recall the common evangelical trope that dinosaur bones were placed in the Earth to cause doubt in the faithful. Rather than function to disprove the notion that the Earth is only 6000 years old, it served to enable it further. Authoritarian communists, in this same way, are enabled to say, "Stalin did nothing wrong," and criticisms by anarchists are CIA propaganda. Orwell's book (1938, 1949) *1984* is correctly used as a critique against

Stalinism because that is what it is, but an anarcho-communist wrote it. The champions of freedom cheer as courts and lawmakers strip away rights. They accept the command of the state and chant back liberty with thunderous applause.

Cathode Ray Tube displays give a wonderful example of authoritarianism belonging to the people or to the leader. A photon gun demands the collapse into a single particle from its waveform and then uses magnets to control the path of the electron. However, the screen would not light up if no phosphorus but will remain inactive until a charged electron guided towards it lights it up. Affective investment places the layer of phosphorus alongside a guided electron to activate the potential energy. Žižek (2006) also makes a venture into psychoanalysis, totalitarianism, and physics in his work. However, he uses examples of special and general relativity.

He (Žižek, 2006) notes Einstein's shift from understanding matter causing the warping of space to the reverse "matter is its *effect* and the presence of matter signals that space is curved" (p. 73). Žižek then relates this to Freud's later work on trauma, that a child may witness their parents having sex, but not be old enough to understand what is happening, but then later realizes it, and the memory becomes traumatic. He links this to the authoritarian tactic of othering, the Jew in Germany, while not well-loved before the Nazis, only became the evil that must be 'true' Germans must be freed from long after their arrival to Germany and even the failure of the German state during the first world war. Žižek (2004) makes a similar point in this article on modern totalitarianism – it is not as if there was no anti-Semitism in Germany before Hitler, but it was forever altered after he spoke it.

In this chapter, I have reviewed the materialist arguments for the belief in a scientific Marxism and the struggle to define authoritarianism when engaging in a good-faith reading of Marxist-Leninist discourse, similar to Lütjen's (2022) reading of the far-right as an anti-authoritarian movement. I review and account for the specific beliefs of authoritarian communism and their striking similarity to the discourses of the alt-right. The reason I did this is explicitly not to provide some both sides are bad, or some horseshoe theory, but rather that both of these are *effects* that do not share the same *affect* but still produce a similar form of government, relationship to the means of production, and value generated by labor (Trotsky, 1927). I argued that the discursive barrier of language presents a barrier that material analysis struggles to overcome, affect. I presented the narrative of the catgirl war for the sake of absurdity, as the materialists against catgirls could not in good faith argue a material change would occur if this art stopped. As Walter Benjamin (2009), politics draws closer to authoritarianism when it becomes about the aesthetic identity of the political rather than a focus on the material conditions of humanity. The demand for ideological purity in the face of the absurd critically highlights this same action happening in the far-left.

The tactics of imbuing fake quotes into memes, historical revisionism, metaleptic references to deeper edges, is the same as new roads, intersections, and towns built (Matheson, 2018). However, in these towns, all roads lead to Rome. There are no walls, but no matter how fast one drives or which turn, they find themselves back at the singularity, the totality. As Žižek and Lundberg frame a subject looking toward the psychoanalyst, the government, the big Other, to become the "subject supposed to know"

(Žižek, 2006, p. 27). Lundberg's subject demands that the big Other make them whole again. We are left with a subject that has betrayed their desire.

In a paradigm of reversal, or inversion, the same must be applied to Lacan's own maxims to elucidate their meaning. His (Lacan, 1988) quote, "the only thing of which one can be guilty of is having given ground relative to one's desire" (p. 319), provides us no directionality or ethical judgment of desire itself. Žižek (2006) provides directionally an understanding that psychoanalysis is not concerned about people's health or goals, "but to bring the patient to confront the elementary coordinates and deadlocks of his or her desire" (p. 4). The last chapter of this thesis will encounter Lundberg's politics of desire, Žižek's point that neoliberalism demands we enjoy, and a desire to be free.

CHAPTER IV – A DESIRE TO BE FREE

The public imagination of politics has stagnated. The commonly accepted measure for progress in today's world is inclusion in the group committing atrocities against humankind. In other words, the world would rather make more people white than abolish white supremacy. The United States just launched a warship named after a queer rights icon Harvey Milk (Shivaram, 2021). Political discourse has broken down into echo chambers and political polarization (Cinelli et al., 2021; McCoy et al., 2018). The polarization of the public sphere has also led to an increasingly politicized world wherein commonplace features of our discourse have become sites of political debate (A. H.-Y. Lee, 2021). The intensity of political debate has become inescapable for the common population.

Fredric Johnson and Slavoj Žižek (Fisher, 2009) observed that people are more ready to believe the world will end than capitalism. Moreover, now the world is ending, our parents and their parents bled the world dry. Scientists debate whether or not Earth is at the point of another mass extinction event (Wake & Vredenburg, 2008). Our planet is getting hotter, water is getting scarcer, sea levels are rising, and previously abundant land has given way to drought. Millions will die – most from countries that did not cause this as the nations that enriched themselves with the blood of future generations will use that capital and protect themselves from the price of industry. Capitalism does not just let food rot while millions starve today – it has condemned millions before they had a chance. While the numbers are in a wide estimate (300-3000 tonnes) and the future unknowable current discourse around climate impacts has centered around the idea that for each 1000 tonnes of carbon dioxide burned one human life will be lost (Parncutt,

2019). Using that logic – human pollution rose by 1.5 billion tonnes in 2019 to 33 billion tonnes globally (International Energy Agency, 2021). The sins of humanity in one year alone could easily rise above 30 million people. They are killed before they had a chance – by us.

Neoliberal capitalism is a religion of death and human sacrifice to appease God, the unseen hand of the Market. The ideological inertia of capitalism makes it seem unmovable. Essentialist and modernist politics present a world where the political system is seen as a reflection of human nature rather than a human invention – a hegemonic code naturalized (Hall, 1980) as the primary operator of society. Hope and Change mean a Black man ordering the death of innocents on the other side of the globe with a drone instead of a white man. Progress means trans people announcing layoffs and wage or hour cuts as people struggle to keep their homes. Revolution means increasing the federal minimum wage. Our heroes are corporate productions as our nostalgia is commodified by the cultural industry and sold back to us. Rather than needing the state to create crisis, which in turn creates the political energy for authoritarianism, the market has delivered a true society ending event.

The ecological crisis better identifies the economic and socio-political strain caused by neoliberalism that spurs people towards authoritarian political ideologies. I argue throughout this thesis the primary nature of 21st century authoritarianism is ideological purity. In so doing such, the question of what ideological purity authoritarian neoliberalism demands and what better absurdity then to trust the baron lords which created the crisis to be the solution to the crisis. The market caused the environmental crisis and now the market will fix the environmental crisis – because the market can do

anything. The lack experienced by humanity is absolved in the free hand of the market which will guide humanity to safety.

Expressing a Politics of Desire

Lundberg (2012, Chapter 7) rather negatively encounters demand-based politics, which argues that political strife people encounter can condense into a broader political movement that stands in for multiple different demands of policy change (Laclau, 2005). Lundberg analyzes demand sharing a similar rhetorical function to the authoritarian discourse, the one who seeks the state to fill the lack and make them whole and the analysis of groups that demand to be identified as dangerous by the state. Articulated here is the position that these demands for identification are insufficient to move us beyond our current political order. Lundberg's (2012) main argument is that demand displaces not only the subject with the identity given in response to the demand but also displaces our desire. Žižek (2006) makes a similar analysis with the terminology of the "law of desire" (p. 81). Žižek does this through a more Freudian lens than I employ but relates the issue to the fundamental problems that our demands are shaped by the Symbolic, the big Other.

The underpinning of the problem of demand is the psychoanalytic concept I have discussed the least throughout this work: enjoyment. Lundberg (2012) maps out enjoyment as the particular modes of engagement and rituals of a given subject position in relation to their particular public and the Symbolic. Žižek's definition is both more mystifying and more precise at the same time, as he defines it as a "weird and twisted ethical duty" (2006, p. 76). The example he uses is of the Soviet executioner who accepts his fellow human, does not wish to kill anyone, but does it still, as it is the demand of the

big Other. Žižek further pushes this to say it is when the executioner recognizes the fellow human and loves this human and hates the role of executioner, but the *Thing* beyond ideology, the big Other, requires this human's death.

For Žižek, this is the true inversion of Lacan's maxim, "the only thing of which one can be guilty of is having given ground relative to one's desire" (1988, p. 319). Rather than redressing the demand of a subject, Lacanian psychoanalysis pushes people to encounter the desires at the core of their subjectivity which they assign away through interpassivity to the big Other. Rather than accepting the call, and demand, of the Symbolic to bring political change, we must confront our desire that the hegemon displace our desire with a mode of engagement to make us feel whole through the Symbolic. The moment we feel complete and erase the void that is the core of the Lacanian subject is when we are truly wrapped into ideology (Žižek, 1989, 1999). Žižek asks that we let go of our self-assuring ideologies and accept our existential terror.

Lundberg (2012, 2015) presses a similar point in his works to argue that meaning is not the cause of rhetoric but is itself rhetorically constructed. Both Lundberg and Žižek's points exist outside of psychoanalysis; however, existential philosophy makes a similar point. In particular, philosopher Albert Camus rejects the bleak nihilism that nothing matters but instead asks that people embrace that fact and choose to make meaning anyways (Sagi, 2002). The fundamental meaningless nature of the universe forces us to reconcile the fact that all meaning is absurd. The void in Lacan's subject generated by our traumatic entry into language is more than the inherent lack of the Symbolic, but the creation of meaning in a meaningless universe. We still do not yet fully understand the isolation of humanity in the infinite space-time.

If we have hopes of pulling people out of the ideological demand that is a black hole, we must better understand the role and power of affect and give people something to believe in, meme for, and not let our memes be dreams. Neoliberalism argues for an understanding of freedom and self-expression in a self-serving fashion. Moreover, doing such neoliberalism lays the political energy for extremist movements. Popular culture shows that when the Symbolic of governments break down, humanity's true condition is portrayed as chaos, meaninglessness, and wanton death and destruction (Saint, 2020). Post-apocalypse films such as the Mad Max series show humanity returning to a condition of self-interested violence (Saint, 2020). Neoliberalism capitalism is enshrined so well that even fiction imagines the end of the world before it imagines the end of capitalism (Fisher, 2009; Saint, 2020). Such depictions tell of social forces that want audiences to understand that the structure of government and political structure is that which provides the ground of meaning in a civil society. To neoliberalism, our existence only functions and has meaning within the Symbolic structure of the state. Raw humanity must be mediated for the world as ordered to continue.

The materiality of environmental collapse also strikes true for both authoritarian communists and the alt-right in that both rely upon modernist philosophies to create meaning. The chaos that is the absurd surrealism of the 21st century is answered with an ideology that bases itself in the material. Heritage, bloodlines, and borders for the alt-right and a metaphysical characteristic of class in the case of authoritarian communists each spelling out why and for which reasons the state is justified in its actions. The terrible ends of these ideologies are obscured through irony and satire, but also through metonymy and building of affect chains. As such, memes do not just provide the humor

needed to make them impactful, but act as the fabric of the chain as well. Memes present the composition of mode, technique, and praxis of political ideologies.

Using that conclusion, the host of different terrible ideologies across history can be understood. Someone thinks up a new system of government, the best way to control humanity, and through some mechanism, millions end up dead. The presupposition of liberalism is that humanity must be controlled, or everything will fall into chaos. People offload our civic engagement and mutual aid towards each other through interpassivity and leave it to the state to manage. Because the state can be trusted, but humanity cannot be?

However, this is not an unspoken truth of liberalism. In theorizing about society's structure, Thomas Hobbes believed that humans needed a commanding figure to organize society (Saint, 2020). Liberalism views the government as not just an efficient or effective method of operating society but a core requirement for society to exist.

The logic and function of dominant exists within the core of liberalism and thus ideologies and governmental systems which are caused by liberalism will share the authoritarian element. I argue this because that is the point of liberalism – not a free humanity but to find the best form of subjugation. Therefore, subjects born and shaped by liberalism when encountering the world will more likely turn to authoritarian tools to solve problems. The advancement of technocratic and instrumentalized lives and discourse further establishes the undeniable role capitalism plays in the shaping of domination today. The scientific ideal promises some assurance of our actions with distant laboratory analysis that there is indeed something beyond the technology that promises our desires are somewhere in the Symbolic.

Anarchism asserts that an organized and civil society without a hierarchical order is possible, the horrific Real to liberalism. An organized stateless society undermines the belief that the human condition ontologically justifies liberalism. Anarchist philosophers such as Peter Kropotkin have argued for understandings of humanity that stand in radical opposition to authoritarian communism, fascism, and market dictatorship within capitalism. In *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin (1906) provides such an example:

In the same way, those who man the lifeboat do not ask credentials from the crew of a sinking ship; they launch their boats, risk their lives in the raging waves, and sometimes perish, all to save men whom they do not even know. And what need to know them? They are human beings, and they need our aid - that is enough, that establishes their right - To the rescue! (Chapter 3.1).

Anarchism rhetorically creates a new Symbolic order for humanity that centers on the shared humanity between us all. Humanity finds cohesion and meaning from each other rather than a hierarchy demanding order. Emma Goldman (1910, Chapter 1), in her definition of anarchism, articulates “the philosophy of a new social order based on liberty unrestricted by man-made law; the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary” (para. 11).

Anarchism builds a connected humanity. Anarchism violates the liberal concepts of individualism where each family unit, or even each person, stands disconnected from the society around them. It can be seen as nothing less than diametrically posed to this united humanity. The relationship between the power system and those subjugated by it expresses these meanings. The power system sends a message arguing how people ought to be treated. The separation of humanity is how neoliberalism further justifies an

economic and political system that stratifies humanity into social and economic classes. Even the fascists in their monstrosities depend upon creating a community ideal. Neoliberalism stands alone in the modern ideology of celebrating the self-centered humans acting for their best interests. Fascists and authoritarian communists alike will cheer on genocide, while neoliberalism will look with disdain and say, "it is not my problem." Neoliberalism constructs the human needing authority to be civil, rather than provide a cure or solution to such a mindset. The ideology reinforces that "there's no such thing as society" (Thatcher, 2013, para. 7). The best neoliberalism can offer is a picture of self-interested people unwilling to care for another. Returning to Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread*, one can further understand anarchism standing in the antithesis of neoliberalism, even more so than communism:

The means of production being the collective work of humanity, the product should be the collective property of the race. Individual appropriation is neither just nor serviceable. All belongs to all. All things are for all men, since all men have need of them, since all men have worked in the measure of their strength to produce them, and since it is not possible to evaluate every one's part in the production of the world's wealth. All things are for all." (Chapter 1.3).

Anarchism posits a system of economic production within the framework of a united humanity that is not isolated from each other. The academic could not teach without building maintenance to keep the lights on. Building maintenance could not work without the engineers creating their tools for repair work. The engineers would have no material to work with miners and lumber workers. None of us would have food to eat without the farmers. Furthermore, the farmers need advanced technologies in machines

and plants developed by academics to produce enough food for us all. No one profession or trade stands alone from the network of humanity. It is then right for the summation of labor to belong equally to all. No system of assigning value to labor, either quantified or philosophized, will ever deliver the correct result. They all fail to see the condition of being human as enough.

As a guiding political praxis, I turn to anarchist positions because defeatism and cynicism present a significant barrier to bringing real change. I argue that humanity must have revolutionary optimism. The failings of political ideologies, fascism, liberalism, neoliberalism, Stalinism, Maoism, and so on are as different as many – yet they all share the same. None of them realize or accept the radical notion: that being human is enough. Enough to deserve food, medicine, water, enough to be owed dignity and consideration. Enough to have their lives matter and not be used as political and economic capital.

This is the final reason why Lacanian psychoanalysis sets the stage for this discussion of how to resist authoritarianism. For the suggestion of Lundberg's (2012, pp. 175–177) politics of desire to work politics cannot rest upon a justification of something beyond the ideology – no metaphysics, no appropriate relationship to technology nor the means of production. Neither a mythos of great leaders or national identity, but a confrontation that we are alone and no one or anything is coming to save us. The only thing we have are our fellow humans. Goldman (1910, Chapter 1 para. 15) argues,

Anarchism is the only philosophy which brings to man the consciousness of himself; which maintains that God, the State, and society are non-existent, that their promises are null and void, since they can be fulfilled only through man's subordination.

Gunn (2004, 2008) examines how rhetoric bridges the impossible using a psychoanalytic lens. People believe they are speaking to the dead through mediums. Marriage rituals and language frame two becoming one through the enactment of the ceremony. The bridge of the impossible is the bridge anarchism needs to cross. In the face of a dying world, we must have hope.

Nested within Lundberg's (2012, Chapter 7) criticism of demand politics is an argument for anarchism I doubt he intended. The artifact he examines is that of different political groups demanding to be recognized as dangerous by the state. Insofar that even though these people were protesting global capitalism, they still sought identification in the big Other. He quotes Lacan (1977b), "demand constitutes the [big] Other as already possessing the 'privilege' of satisfying needs, that is to say, the power of depriving them of that alone by which they are satisfied" (p. 316). Lundberg does not outright dismiss the usefulness of demands but argues that we ought to challenge our demands against our desire. Žižek (2006) parallels with the position that when we engage in the demands to enjoy by the Symbolic, we break and violate our desire. Žižek has argued that psychoanalysis possesses the power to bring political change. The inclusion of his philosophy allows for answering Lundberg's question of *do chains of equivalence bind us? With only so long as we hold onto the assurance of our desire in the Other* (Žižek, 2006).

Authoritarian communists, alt-right fascists, and neoliberal, all depend on the very guarantee that the collective must reject. The state offers the feigned unicity that rhetoric covers. The state will keep you safe. The state will provide for you. The state wants what is best for you. The state says all of this standing in the blood of millions. The violence of

anarchism is then not the revolution but in taking away the state as an existential guarantee where people can find wholeness and identity within. The state exists as the *Thing* beyond all of these ideologies. The fundamental ontology of the state found across these ideologies also provides the perfect place for a subject to engage in phantasmic enjoyment and thereby enables subjects to take whatever action is needed for the *thing* beyond.

Borders draw artificial lines and separate humanity. Economies assign value to human life that can be traded or expended. Only anarchism cuts past this to the existential truth that humans are all each other have and each other's only hope. Žižek (2006) points out this is also the radical self-violence of Judaism, that we must love another as ourselves. The terrorizing Hegelian other is what we must learn to love. There is no end to the cycle of violence and bloodshed that defines all of human history until we stare into the void, and unlike Nietzsche, we would not find monsters there but our fellow, beloved humans. Only when we set aside claims such as national, ethnic purity, the free hand of the market, and the science of dialectal materialism can we find our fellow humans.

It would be disingenuous to disregard either the real suffering of this world or the real nature of meaning in our universe. Anarchism argues that we must realize interconnected humanity (Bakunin, 1870; Goldman, 1910; Kropotkin, 1906). A political praxis that does not seek the value of labor or identity. A praxis that does not demean or abuse our fellow humans but regards each as a person. Capitalism will let people starve if they do not produce enough. Death can be accounted for in cost, and the availability of fresh and clean drinking water in the future made into a gambling game.

Nevertheless, a better world is possible. The power of discourse is to erase that hope. The Symbolic demands people accept the material doom and coming tragedy to tell us to quit trying, to accept the world as it is. **However, a better world is possible.** We must acknowledge that the production of this world is not just the action of humans and our so-called economy but the entire ecological system that is the totality of Earth. Human history is one of unthinkable horrors and terrors, and that is used to remind us that people cannot be trusted. Capitalists argue against communists citing in human nature our greed, violence, tribalism, and selfishness. *However, a better world is possible.* Neoliberalism overlooks and erases our compassion: we care for our sick, bury our dead, and comfort the afflicted.

Žižek's (2006) unknown knowns weigh further than just the discourse of the black hole, he also points out that religious people and those of strong political ideology do not believe they know. It is not new information that will bring about political change but a radical leap of faith towards the radical other. Žižek's argument calls to stop letting the hegemony complete us and let us work to help complete each other. It is a call for solidarity based on our mutual need for each other. The relief from existentialism and postmodernism is the thing that must be destabilized for political change. Both authoritarian communists and the alt-right essentialize identity in some form of material condition as described in my analysis. The shelter and comfort these subject positions offer are the targets of this critique. The safe feeling and lull of this world as it promises *everything will be alright.*

Rhetorical scholarship ought to place a higher value on Lacan and in particular Žižek's (1989, 2006) argument that there is no beyond ideology. And create one centered

on humanity and not some metaphysical charge or scientific truth. We produce more food than it takes to feed the planet, and in the United States, we have more empty homes than houseless people. We have trillions of dollars, and people struggle to make rent. We have abundant medicine and supplies, and people ration their insulin. Every day, most of the world wakes up and keeps choosing to keep the world this way. People justify all of this on some conviction of the *Thing* beyond our ideology that makes all this suffering and death acceptable. The current political system stands by and watches millions of people die while we ask ourselves who could be capable of running a Nazi Holocaust camp.

Productive political ideology must take an honest post-modern approach as the crux of political change relies on people giving up their knowledge and trading it in for belief. Apologies to Žižek, but the hard-relativist turn is the answer to the issue that there is no beyond ideology. The solution is to create ideology intentionally. Is this not functionally what the alt-right and authoritarian communists do? On the basis or grounds of nothing, create an ideology that shapes the world. A system to resist these ideologies needs to offer a better world to believe in.

Returning to the implications of Žižek's (2006) point about General Relativity, we often see what we believe is the cause is, in turn, the effect and match it with Lundberg's (2015) about meaning being an effect of rhetoric. We can better understand why people are pulled toward extremist ideologies. The political system only offers choices between death cults with different aesthetics and flavor text differences in big Others. Walter Benjamin (2009) articulates that once politics becomes aesthetics and unrelated to the material condition of humanity, danger begins. However, rather than the Marxist position of materiality, the anarchist position calls for the position of humanity. Fundamentally we

must reach out and turn to something different as James S.A Corey's (Jones, 2018) character Jim Holden from *The Expanse* argues:

I know you are trying to save lives. I am too, but we are on the brink right now because we keep reacting to things we don't understand. We're scared. We're hurt and we are reaching for violence cause we can't figure out what to do, but just this once, can't we try something else.

Rhetoric has seen the development of entire theories to recognize this repeated cycle of violence and trauma and attempt to overcome it with love and invitation (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Joshua Gunn using psychoanalysis offers insight that this force of love can bring about change (Gunn, 2008; Lundberg, 2012). We find ourselves with our hands wrapped around an electric wire, causing our muscles to tense, and we cannot let go. We define global peace as having enough weapons to ensure that if one country attacks it is a commission of planetary suicide. Humanity is actively committing planetary suicide to ensure the graphs keep going up.

It does not have to be about domination, control, or power. The collective of humanity chooses to create such a world. We distance ourselves and commit horrors onto each other in modes of enjoyment so that the big Other might desire us (Žižek, 2006). The assuredness offered by the absolute big Other shelters one from the horror of our fellow humans getting too close. Because with the same self-assuredness that someone engages in misrecognition when someone says *I* happens to a dramatically higher extent when someone says *you* or *them*. The chasm between subjects means all articulates of *you* and *them* are disfigured Lovecraftian synecdoche of that person or people.

As I argue in this thesis that the Real is better understood as lines of intelligibility, and we are all subjects caught in an orbit of an ideology or trapped within a black hole, then the absurdity of anarchism offers us a chance to let go, a chance to try something different. It is a prerequisite then to let go of our knowledge and comfort and choose to love, to believe again. As theoretical guidance to go beyond where we are now, “psychoanalysis is the only discourse in which you are *allowed to not enjoy* – not forbidden to enjoy, just relieved of the pressure to do so” (Žižek, 2006, p. 104).

On the topic of enjoyment, Lundberg (2012, pp. 168–169) interacts with Laclau’s (2005) *On Populist Reason* as Laclau writes, “no social fullness except through hegemony; and hegemony is nothing more than the investment in a partial object of fullness which will always evade us” (p. 116). Laclau further argues that on this principle, there is no difference in hegemony and enjoyment – that they are the same. No power structure will resolve the cycle of violence and alienation that humanity finds itself in. Thus, humanity must abandon the power structure. Not any given particular one, but abolition of the hierarchy as a whole is the project that needs faced. No Gods, No Kings, No Masters, nothing beyond our discursive world and ideology, only each other.

A reckoning of reason ought to come within academic discourse and the position of not being able to reason the unreasonable back to reason. If reason and rationale worked as implied, we would not be here in the first place. Either in Lacanian psychotic terminology or Foucauldian insanity and madness, to bring people back from these fringe positions one must meet the audience where they are and not expect them to climb a tower of several thousand pages to be enlightened. The left, even the center, has a messaging problem. The alt-right recruits the masses with easy answers to complex

problems, and the left looks disdainfully down and says: read more theory. Rather than readdress the extreme edges, they are met with dismissal and denial through empirical science and technological reason while the order slips closer to the apocalypse.

Research into authoritarianism must grapple with the rising notion of authoritarian neoliberalism and authoritarian capitalism. The question of why people are willing to accept authoritarian systems perhaps lies outside of individual psychological traits and more in the fact that the current system is authoritarian. Understanding the system as authoritarian exposes it to critique further as people push for political change that achieves a genuine level of radicalism. Further, we can finally let go of the circle of death and violence by embracing extreme linguistic relativism. To quote Karl Marx (1845), “philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it” (para. 11). I do not wish to be a philosopher but a rhetorician who understands that at the heart of rhetoric is power. It is not enough to understand authoritarianism, but we must provide suggestions to prevent or remedy states from using authoritarian power to continue the hegemon and imply a limited number of solvable political options. Even if one does not buy the anarchism critique, the issue of leaving people with only ideologies of death to select from and hoping for good results from that is folly.

My entire generational cohort has been raised in continual crisis. The towers fell, a two-decade-long war started, the markets crashed, and there was a brief stint where hope could be considered possible only overcast by the loom ecological collapse. A pandemic that will likely cause another market collapse and the decades away climate disaster can now be measured in days. The world must challenge the dangers of political

apathy, and must do so in the face of what appears to be impending doom. It is for this reason that I give such a high position to absurdist existential philosophy, because the task at hand is absurd. Moreover, the absurdity does not stop at just the creation of meaning but follows through into rhetoric's ability to do the impossible.

Memes in their structure, and reliance on circulation to function elucidate rhetoric tactics which are useful in undoing in as much as they are useful in doing. In other words, if a discourse can create a subject position another discourse can break it. Memes do this through their intertextual connections which enable them to spread and connect meaning by interrelationships. The hegemonic discourse is destabilized by fringe memes not just through confusion, but by creating new interrelationships.

Butler (1999) posits this argument in terms of causing confusion to queer a space and allow for resignification. However, I contend there is something memes can teach the scholarship about lines of intelligibility and how to break them. First is outlined in the paragraph above wherein memes use interrelationships to build new meanings as well as disrupt old ones. Second, is that because of the intertextual nature of memes highlights then the importance of the signifying chain to cross a line of intelligibility.

Interrelationships function as signposts guiding the audience towards the new meaning rather than just leaving the audience in a state of confusion. The coherence of these relationships does not have to be immediately clear, and in fact might be less effective if the coherence is clear. Affective labor via repetition, ritual, and circulation will handle understanding itself.

I know am I naïve and absurd, but I believe in us. We do not need a more perfect big Other nor assume we can ever truly live in a world where our existence does not

create one. The unity we must feign with our rhetoric is the one between us and the Hegelian radical other by transforming that radical other into our big Other. The emptiness of the universe, the lack of our language, and our shattered subjectivity show our need for each other. We must also fight for more than basic survival and our daily bread. A human is owed more than the right to keep drawing breath but a right to live with dignity, respect, and leisure. The analysis of the alt-right of TheDonald and authoritarian communism reflect similar structures, even if dressed differently, because the cause of them both is the same (Trotsky, 1927). As I argue, is there really any difference between the intentional genocide of Nazism and Sovietism and the apathetic genocide of capitalism? If the world ever wants a political system that resists extremism that makes people capable of terrorism and murder, then the world must offer them a real solution and not the apathy of neoliberalism. In such to build a politics of desire which unites us through how humans need each other and are connected to each other, I seek to express “a critical politics of love” (Chevrette & Hendricks, 2020, p. 183).

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