



The Alt-Right: An Introduction (Part II)

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This concluding article in a [two-part series](#) examines the drivers behind the movement's rise, particularly why the alt-right has gained prominence now, and where it may go in the future.

The [previous article](#) in this two-part series presented a brief overview of the “alt-right,” some of its major influences, and its distinctions from other types of conservative or right-wing movements and ideas. This follow-up piece continues the discussion by examining the drivers behind the movement's rise, particularly why the alt-right has gained prominence now, and where it may go in the future.

The Problems with the Popular Narratives

Particularly in popular media, the usual points of emphasis include:

- the reaction to increased immigration or migration movements to Europe and the United States,
- demographic changes leading to a loss of power by “privileged” populations who take on reactionary positions to maintain their power/privilege,
- and finally, political leaders/movements relying upon such reactions to gain power (be it Donald Trump in America or the Brexit movement in the United Kingdom).

While these factors play some role, they suffer from two notable failures as explanations. First, some of these events (particularly the election of Trump and the success of Brexit) appear more as symptoms of an underlying, already existent cause. Second, much of this style of explanation ignores the broader

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context, be it the actual words/beliefs of such movements as well as the broader discursive universe in which the “alt-right” has gained traction.

The United States provides a good example: immigrant population levels have been comparatively higher since the “Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965” (going from a comparative low of about 5% of the US population in 1960 to a previous norm of 14% now; but also an absolute increase from about 10 million in 1960 to just under 45 million now), influences on the “alt-right” (such as Kevin MacDonald or Michael Levin) have been writing for numerous years, and a preferred presidential candidate for much of the “alt-right” over Trump is Patrick Buchanan (who ran for the Republican nomination in 1992, 1996, and 2000). Partially, one could view the popular media’s attention to “alt-right” views (or statements from political figures that overlap with them) as inadvertently providing room for the alt-right’s rise. But a larger factor is that these ideas/views already existed, it was just that it was often socially taboo (or in some countries, illegal under hate speech legislation) to state them. As such, these ideas percolated “below the surface,” only recently having the ability to be said somewhat openly.

In other words, it is not necessarily odd that the “alt-right” has made an appearance – rather, what is strange is that it has made its appearance *now*, rather than significantly earlier. Why would this be the case?

Why Now?

Three factors are of particular note.

First, changes in telecommunication technology created a greater opportunity for “alt-right” individuals and groups to communicate their ideas, both among

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themselves and to a broader public. Before the Internet revolution, these groups and thinkers were comparatively limited in their ability to spread their ideas. Mainstream publications would rarely (if ever) give them space in newspapers or journals, and conservative or right-wing journals often would bar them as well. The American case again provides clarity: various members of the “alt-right” (or their influences) had been involved in the traditional conservative movement, but were “excommunicated” from the movement for their racist views (this border-patrolling function often being exercised by William F. Buckley and his journal, *National Review*). These “ex-communicants” include Peter Brimelow, Steve Sailer, John Derbyshire, Joseph Sobran, and Samuel T. Francis, among others. With Internet technology – be it on organisational webpages, blogs, social media, or other means – the “alt-right,” like numerous other groups, could spread its ideas without the same types of limitations. Technology changes have also aided in organisation, be it in street protests or other actions, as well as permitting greater communication and cooperation between individuals and groups that may not have been easily accomplished in earlier periods.

A second factor is scientific advancements, particularly in the mapping of the human genome, the increased attention to [pharmacogenetics](#), and the dominance of evolutionary/Darwinian language in mainstream discussion. Be it the controversy over [BiDil](#) (a heart medication found to be particularly beneficial to individuals of sub-Saharan African ancestry), the heritability of behavioral traits (including political preferences), or debates on the length of time necessary for major evolutionary change, advances in genetic technology have reintroduced potential controversies on race once again.

As the language of science – particularly evolutionary theory – has become “mainstreamed” into general discourse, the reintroduction of genetic debates in the policy realm becomes more likely. Such a change itself is not new: a similar dominance of Darwinian language existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, going into partial decline after the revelations regarding Nazi Germany’s actions as well as with the popularised use of scientific terms from quantum physics.

But as the science of genetics has gained popular attention again, the mainstream use of Darwinian language has returned. The issue of genetics is particularly sensitive, insofar as the advancements in genome analysis have opened up various interpretations of initial findings, as well as bringing back definitional questions: returning to the BiDil example, is the difference between “Black” and “of sub-Saharan African descent” a substantial difference (thus distinguishing “race” from ancestry), or are these two terms effectively denoting the same thing (and thus bringing race back as a biological topic)?

As a result, it is not so much that the “alt-right” presents a distortion of contemporary research, as much as it emphasises one possible interpretation of results. For various “alt-right” thinkers, however, mainstream discussion of these results reflects the cultural hegemony of “globalism” or “cultural Marxists”. The “alt-right” argues that an *a priori* assumption of racial egalitarianism (or, perhaps more accurately, racial homogeneity in all areas outside of superficial complexion and the like) is not science, but rather an article of faith. With the contemporary emphasis on science as the sole form of “true” knowledge, this critique is a manner in which the “alt-right” can spread its ideas in scientific language.

The final, and generally unacknowledged, factor is the increase in identitarian discourse more broadly. Identitarianism of this type is not new, nor did it come to the forefront with the appearance of the “alt-right”: rather, the language of identitarianism has been an ongoing discourse for some years among what could be called the “intersectional Left.” Traditionally this has been called “identity politics.” However, the distinctions between identitarianism and “identity politics” have frayed theoretically and, in some cases, have effectively ceased to exist practically/politically.

With the increased focus upon the “lived experiences” of marginalized populations, as well as the emphasis upon “standpoint epistemologies” of marginalized groups, identitarianism (even if of a “socially constructed” form) has played a sizeable role in social justice movements/arguments for some decades. This tendency has become particularly prominent in the discussions of removing “whiteness” and “white privilege” from areas as disparate as college literature curriculums to food choices. Using arguments similar to discussions of “Otherization” from the “intersectional Left” in the areas of “black,” “female,” “LGBT,” or “Global South” experience (among others), the “alt-right” views the scorning of white identity as “white privilege” as removing content from “White/European” experience.

In effect, the alt-right view is that other populations are partaking in significant “cultural appropriation” of “White/European” societies, while simultaneously denying that “Whites/Europeans” have any culture at all beyond colonization, oppression, and injustice. Following on their separatist tendencies, the “alt-right” essentially emphasizes that “true diversity” is indeed worthwhile (rather than a homogenizing uniformity of globalized neoliberalism), but for “true diversity” to exist, each population must have its own “homeland”: populations

from Africa, Asia, and elsewhere have a full right to their own homeland, but so too do Whites/Europeans.

The primacy of identity – racial, but also gender, orientation, or others – is an ongoing part of social justice discourse. The French New Right writer Guillaume Faye’s statement that “[o]ne doesn’t fight for ‘ideas,’ one fights for a people – ideas are only the struggle’s instruments, not its goal” could be used by any identitarian movement, even beyond the “alt-right.” In other words, the “alt-right” has spread so quickly simply because it is using language that dominates elements of popular culture as well as academic/political discourse: the linguistic structures and identitarian framing are similar, with the difference being the groups in question (White, male, heterosexual, rural instead of Persons of Color, female, LGBT, urban).

Many of the anti-“globalist” arguments of the “alt-right,” particularly as they touch on class, are similar to anti-globalization arguments from the Left in earlier decades (as expressed, for instance, in the “Battle for Seattle” during the 1999 WTO conference). Indeed, one could say that the emphasis of the “alt-right” on the hegemonic and detrimental influence of “globalists” and “cultural Marxists” mirrors the intersectional Left focus on the hegemonic and omniscient presence of “neoliberalism” and “white supremacy.”

The Future of the Alt-Right

It is unclear whether the “alt-right” will increase in importance as time goes on, or if its current prominence is temporary, fading off the public stage in a manner similar to the American Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, or the militia movement of the 1990s. Given its lack of organizational unity and significant disparities in the assumptions and aims of its members, there is good reason

to predict the “alt-right” will disperse into varying grouplets. Generally speaking, those involved in the “alt-right” do not hold positions in institutions that can provide “insulation” for their views.

For instance, few “alt-right” writers are tenured professors, and most “alt-right” organizations cannot rely upon funding from philanthropic organizations or other NGOS (such as the Rockefeller Foundation, Heritage Foundation, or Open Society Foundations, among others). As such, many “alt-right” writers and organizations may simply collapse from being financially unviable. Additionally, the increased focus upon stamping out “hate speech” on social media (be it by governments or media corporations themselves) may cut off the “oxygen” for “alt-right” ideas to spread.

But there are other reasons to suspect that the “alt-right” will continue to exist, and perhaps even grow (even if under a different name). The various electoral successes mentioned at the beginning of the previous article (be it Brexit, Trump, or others) indicate that there is some level of popularity for these views. Or perhaps, the “alt-right” has gained some momentum from their opposition to dominant parties and/or ideologies, despite most of these voters not likely agreeing with much of the more radical views of the “alt-right.” Many of the dynamics leading to this situation will likely not disappear soon.

Similarly, the ongoing discourse of identitarianism from progressive/Left movements and organizations appears dominant, which provides room for “alt-right” ideas to gain adherence as opposition. As noted above, identitarianism has already been a longstanding part of the “intersectional Left,” and increasingly influences mainstream language: notions such as “white privilege,” “toxic masculinity,” and (in the American case) “hate speech” have gone from the purview of limited academic institutions to everyday language.

As social discourse language increasingly identifies specific conservative, Rightist, or even centrist ideas and organizations as “white supremacist/patriarchal/heteronormative/transphobic/etc.”, various individuals and groups may shift to the “alt-right” simply as a reaction. Finally, many of the populations negatively impacted by globalization will likely find that the “alt-right” is a movement with which they can identify as supporting their interests. If social, economic, and political trends remain consistent, one can anticipate the “alt-right” will continue to exist, and perhaps even to grow.

Image credit: [Karla Cote/Flickr](#).

About the Author

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