

# The Alt-Right's Discourse of "Cultural Marxism": A Political Instrument of Intersectional Hate

**Tanner Mirrlees** is an Associate Professor in the Communication and Digital Media Studies program at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). His research examines the geopolitics, economics, and ideologies of communications media and popular culture. He is the author of *Global Entertainment Media: Between Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Globalization* (Routledge, 2013) and *Hearts and Mines: The U.S. Empire's Culture Industry* (University of British Columbia Press, 2016) and is co-editor of *The Television Reader: Critical Perspectives in Canadian and US Television Studios* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Mirrlees is currently researching the nexus of right-wing extremist movements and social media platforms.

**Abstract:** This article analyzes the history, production, circulation, and political uses of the alt-right's discourse about cultural Marxism in the context of the right-wing populist Trump presidency, the rise of fascist movements in the United States and worldwide, and the politics of intersectional hate.

**Keywords:** alt-right; conspiracy theory; cultural Marxism; hegemony; ideology; populism; right-wing extremism; Trump effect; white supremacy

## Introduction: Alt-Right Terror and "Cultural Marxism"

On July 22, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik car-bombed a government building in Oslo, Norway, killing eight people; he then infiltrated the Norway Labour Party's Worker's Youth League camp and murdered sixty-nine more people. Breivik, a white supremacist, says he committed this terrorism as a way to publicize his 1,500-page manifesto "2083: A European Declaration of Independence." In it, he (under the alias Andrew Berwick) called on white people everywhere to take up arms against "cultural Marxists," a group he frames as the "enemy" of "Western civilization" (Berwick 2011). Breivik's fascist manifesto was full of factual errors and gaps in reasoning, but the story it told about cultural Marxism was much more commonly told and believed than one might expect, especially in the United States. In fact, Breivik's manifesto took a page from the American far right's "culture war" playbook (Boston 2011; Jamin 2018). For almost three decades, everyone from paleo-conservatives to neo-Nazis has used the phrase "cultural Marxism" as a shorthand for an anti-American bogeyman, a symbol for every liberal or left-leaning group the right defined itself against, and an epithet for progressive identities, values, ideas, and practices that reactionaries believe have made America worse than before. As Beirich and Hicks (2009, 118) explain, "many white nationalists see the changes in American society, particularly since the heated decade of the 1960s, as the result of an orchestrated plan—called cultural Marxism—by leftist intellectuals to destroy the American way of life as established by whites."

During Donald Trump's 2016 "Make America Great Again" campaign, talk of a cultural Marxist plot to

ruin America moved from the fringes of right-wing extremism to the mainstream. Using the moniker of the “alt-right,” a new generation of Internet-savvy white supremacists supported Trump’s race to the White House, whipping up fears about cultural Marxism’s threat to America (Wilson 2015; 2016). Those in positions of political power also talked up this supposed threat to America. Steven Bannon, Trump’s Chief Strategist at the time, portrayed conservatives as under siege by cultural Marxism (Coaston 2018). In the first year of Trump’s presidency, Rich Higgins, the US National Security Council’s (NSC) former director for strategic-planning, bemoaned a cultural Marxist plot to turn public opinion against Trump’s presidency. In a memo entitled “POTUS & Political Warfare,” Higgins explained Trump’s unpopularity as the effect of “withering information campaigns” that “serve as the non-violent line of effort of a wider movement” to “execute political warfare agendas that reflect cultural Marxist outcomes” (Smith 2017).

A discourse “is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e. a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (Hall 1992, 201). Social science and humanities scholars recognize a heterogeneous Marxist cultural studies tradition, and some utilize Marxist concepts when analyzing culture and society (Dworkin 1997; Kellner 2013). But researchers are only beginning to acknowledge and interrogate the far right’s production, circulation, and political uses of its own discourse about “cultural Marxism” (Beirich and Hicks 2009; Jamin 2014; 2018; SPLC 2003; Wilson 2015; 2016). How does the alt-right talk about “cultural Marxism”? What statements do alt-right authors make about the history, identity, goals, and impacts of “cultural Marxism” in the US? What media outlets, sites, and platforms circulate this discourse of cultural Marxism, and what political uses does the alt-right make of it in its struggle for power?

To answer these questions and establish some foundations for further and more focused critical

studies of the alt-right’s discourse about cultural Marxism, this article interrogates the alt-right’s production, circulation, and political uses of a conspiratorial discourse about cultural Marxism in the context of the right-wing populist Trump presidency and the rise of fascist ideologies and movements around the world. The alt-right represents cultural Marxism in partial and selective ways and makes claims about what it is, has done, and is doing to “America” and “the West.” The alt-right’s aim is to try to get large numbers of people to think about and perceive cultural Marxism and the identities, values, and goals of all of the individuals and groups it frames as cultural Marxists in hateful ways. Overall, I argue that the alt-right’s discourse of cultural Marxism is an instrument of intersectional hate. While “Trump won the presidency by making hate intersectional” (Browne 2016), the alt-right wields “cultural Marxism” to advance a white, patriarchal, and Christian conservative vision of America and foment a racist, sexist, classist, xenophobic, and violent backlash against the gains made by the individuals and groups it constructs as cultural Marxist threats and enemies to its “alt-America.” In this regard, the alt-right’s discourse on cultural Marxism is a means by which it constructs a patriarchal, white, and Christian supremacist notion of America in response to the destabilization of this order by the ongoing pursuit of social justice and broader societal changes linked to multi-national capitalism and progressive neoliberalism (Fraser 2017).

This argument develops in this paper through four interrelated sections. The first section is a macro-level overview of the alt-right hate movement: its key figures, ideology, hegemonic strategy, media fronts, and convergence with and divergence from the Trump Administration. Having contextualized the alt-right’s hate, the second section presents a synoptic overview of the alt-right’s hateful discourse on cultural Marxism, tracking its historical emergence, narrative claims, organizational production sources, and widespread circulation. The third section shows the alt-right’s discourse on cultural Marxism to be an easily debunked and empirically groundless

“conspiracy theory of power.” The fourth section highlights the alt-right’s political uses of this conspiracy theory as a tool of intersectional hate. The conclusion briefly discusses the cross-border movement and noxious permutations of the American alt-right’s conspiracy of cultural Marxism in Canada.

## **The Alt-Right: White Supremacy in the Age of Trump**

In the same month that Trump announced his run for the US presidency and kicked off a right-wing populist election campaign, Panitch and Albo (2016, x) observed: “We are at one of those historical moments that compel socialists to undertake a serious calibration of the political forces amassing on the right. . . . Across the globe, the far right is on the move.” Hateful right-wing populist leaders, movements, and parties have grown over the past two decades. Such groups ascended in popularity in the wake of the 2008-2009 world capitalist slump and were emboldened by Trump’s presidency (Norris 2006; 2016). Today, it is incumbent upon everyone on the left to try to understand the “far right’s social base,” its “organizational strength and range,” its power to “influence mainstream parties and opinion,” and its march into “state institutions” (Panitch and Albo 2016, x). The goal of this section, then, is to present a macro-level overview of the alt-right hate movement: its key figures, ideology, hegemonic strategy, media, and convergence with and divergence from the Trump Administration.

In the US, the “alt-right” is a heterogeneous assemblage of far right groups, but the most significant expression of the alt-right today are the youthful, white nationalists that reject mainstream conservatism and neoliberalism, wish to dismantle the Republican and Democratic “establishment,” and seek to build a white ethno-State that compels all of society’s institutions to protect and promote the values of an idealized white European culture (Hawley 2017; Neiwert 2017; SPLC 2017). Identity

Evropa, Proud Boys, and The Traditionalist Workers Party are a few such alt-right groups, and these may link with longstanding hate groups such as the Aryan Nations, Blood and Honor, Stormfront, and the Klu Klux Klan (SPLC 2017). Some of these groups call for the removal of non-white people from the US; others call for the genocide of all non-white people. Some want to build a world of race-people separated into territorial ethno-States; others see themselves in a race war, believing that “white genocide” will happen if they fail to exterminate non-whites. Some perceive themselves to be racially superior to non-white people, a super-race in a world of clashing races whose destiny is to dominate the globe’s inferior races; others frame themselves as racial segregationists wanting to live amongst “folk and families” that look like, talk like, shop like, and pray like them. There are subtle differences between alt-right groups, but all extol the protection and promotion of a specious “white culture” and engage in a struggle to build an authoritarian territorial ethno-State that secures the dominance of white people and culture across every institution.

Apropos Gramsci (1971), the alt-right’s intersecting hate groups can be conceptualized as a political bloc or network of groups that struggle for moral leadership (hegemony) in the trenches of American civil society (war of position) while setting their sights on the institutional heights of State power (war of maneuver) using strategies and tactics that combine tools of persuasion and coercion. In civil society, the alt-right is rapidly building up its persuasive powers. It owns publishing houses such as Radix and Washington Summit Publishers (run by Richard B. Spencer) and Counter Currents Publishing (run by Greg Johnson). Steve Bannon’s Breitbart News is at the centre of an expansive alt-right media ecology while alt-right sites such as The Alternative Right, American Renaissance, The Daily Stormer, The Occidental Observer, Radical Agenda, and the Right Stuff proliferate (ADL 2018). The alt-right’s many groups and culture warriors use the Internet, World Wide Web, and social media platforms to spread their hate ideology, recruit members, and attack opponents.

The alt-right's social media presence is significant, and the "Gramscians of the alt-right" have had "remarkable success in spreading their ideas through their own alternative and almost exclusively online media content" (Nagle 2017, 53). The alt-right also uses violence to achieve its political goals; it has terrorized, injured, or killed more than one hundred people over the past few years (Hankes and Amend 2018; Miller 2016).

During the 2016 US presidential election campaign race between Hillary Clinton and Trump, the alt-right rallied for Trump. This was unsurprising given Trump fashioned himself as an authoritarian populist champion of white, conservative, working class, and petite bourgeois American men and women (Berlet 2015). Trump's populist campaign channelled these people's angst toward Clinton Democrats and his election was a "white-lash" against the modest social gains made by racialized minority groups (CBC 2017). As Trump battled for the presidency, the alt-right crossed over from marginal websites on the political fringe into "mainstream public and political life" (Nagle 2017, 27). Trump's campaign resonated with Richard Spencer, Andrew Anglin, and Nathan Damigo, and these alt-right figureheads entered the media fold in a struggle to speak with and appeal to Trump's base. They imagined that if Trump were elected, Trump might use his presidential powers to "make America great again" by making their racist dream of a white ethno-State come true.

Spencer, head of the National Policy Institute, which is "dedicated to the heritage, identity, and future of people of European descent in the United States, and around the world" and pushes "peaceful ethnic cleansing" in hopes of transforming the US into a white ethno-State, saw Trump as a leader who would support his racist cause (National Policy Institute 2017). At the 2016 Republican National Convention, Spencer said, "Trust me. Trump thinks like me." Harkening back to Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi-era propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Spencer called Trump's win the "victory of the will"

and wrapped up a racist speech at a November 19, 2016, meeting of the National Policy Institute by shouting: "Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory!" (J. Goldstein 2016). Spencer's crowd responded with a standing ovation, cheers, and Nazi salutes. Anglin, the neo-Nazi publisher of *The Daily Stormer*, which describes itself as "The World's Most-Genocidal Republican Website," encouraged his anonymous followers and alt-right trolls to "vote for the first time in our lives for the one man who actually represents our interests" (Anglin 2015). After Trump won, Anglin called upon his legion of hate trolls to use the social media to intimidate "brown people" and harass non-Trump supporters until they "killed themselves" (Westcott 2016). Damigo, former leader of the skinhead National Youth Front and now head of *Evropa*, a group for "a generation of awakened Europeans" who supposedly hail from "the great peoples, history and civilization that flowed from the European continent" (*Evropa* 2017), rallied neo-fascists to Trump as well. When Trump won the White House, Damigo enthused from his "Fashy Haircut" (@NathanDamigo) Twitter pedestal: "Everything that has happened since @realDonaldTrump was declared the future president shows that we are engaged in total war . . . Trump is the only candidate whose policies would make America Whiter" (Branson-Potts 2016). Jared Taylor, a white nationalist, board member of the Council for Conservative Citizens, and editor of *American Renaissance*, campaigned for Trump too. He interpreted Trump's inauguration as "a sign of rising white consciousness" and said he supported Trump "because the effects of his policy would be to reduce the dispossession of Whites, that is, to slow the process whereby Whites become the minority in the United-States" (Taylor 2017).

Evidently, Trump's right-wing populist campaign and election energized the alt-right's ideologues of hate. They rode Trump's Twitter-tales to the White House and moved the hearts and minds of many Trump voters to the idea that making America great again meant making white supremacy normal again. As Spencer put it: "We've been legitimized by this

election” (Posner 2016). For a time, the alt-right and Trump converged but lately they are diverging (*The New York Times* 2016; Vegas 2017). The alt-right chastised Trump for removing Steve Bannon from the NSC (R. Roberts 2017); complained that the US-Mexico border wall is really just a fence (Nguyen 2017b); and criticized Trump for being too friendly in international relations with the Islamophobic and anti-Semitic alt-right’s top two global enemies—Saudi Arabia (a symbol for the collective Muslim) and Israel (a symbol for the collective Jew). Furthermore, the alt-right is against Trump’s war in Syria and opposed to Trump’s militaristic sabre-rattling with Russia (Nguyen 2017a). AltRight.com articles such as “The Trump Betrayal” (Wallace 2017a) and “How the Alt-Right Broke up With Donald Trump” (Wallace 2017b) indicate that the alt-right has parted ways with Trump. In a recent interview with *Vanity Fair*, Spencer remarked: “A lot of us feel disillusioned and even burned by Trump. In a sense we thought that the alt-right could be Trump’s brain, but now he has Ivanka, and Jared and Paul Ryan for that. Basically people who aren’t me” (Vegas 2017). While the Republican and Democratic “establishment” that Trump initially campaigned against tries to bring Trump in line with the neoliberal geopolitical and economic framework of the US Empire, alt-right icon Spencer denounces Trump as a “cuckservative” (Vegas 2017).

In sum, although the alt-right supported Trump’s “Make America Great” campaign for the US presidency, it has not won a “war of maneuver” for State power. Currently, the alt-right remains engaged in a “war of position” in civil society and is fighting neoconservative and mainstream Republicans, as well as neoliberal Democrats and the socialist left. Over the past year, the march of the alt-right has been setback by “lawsuits and arrests, fundraising difficulties, tepid recruitment, widespread infighting, fierce [anti-fascist] counter-protests, and banishment from social media platforms” (McCoy 2018). Nonetheless, the alt-right is regrouping and continuing to battle for hearts and minds. A conspiratorial discourse of cultural Marxism is a significant weapon of its hate.

## **The Alt-Right’s Discourse on Cultural Marxism: From Nazism to Breitbart and Beyond**

This section is a synoptic overview of the alt-right’s discourse on cultural Marxism; it describes this discourse’s origins, narrative claims, production sources, and widespread circulation in society.

In Nazi Germany, Adolph Hitler and Joseph Goebbels used the term “cultural Bolshevism” as an anti-Semitic epithet and as cudgel for attacking any group of people or modernist cultural trend that they perceived to be corrupting or leading to the degeneracy of traditional German society. In post-Cold War America, paleo-conservative think-tanks and white nationalist organizations resurrected the Nazi idea of “cultural Bolshevism” but renamed it “cultural Marxism” (Jamin 2018, 5). One might assume that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the neoliberal “end of history” would subdue conservative anxieties about the spectre of Communism materializing in America, but this was not the case. In the mid-1990s, authors associated with far-right organizations—the Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC), the Free Congress Foundation, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the Christian Coalition, the Foundation for Cultural Review—started producing a discourse about cultural Marxism in America. Some of the key texts of this discourse include Michael Minnicino’s (1992, 1994) “The Frankfurt School and Political Correctness” and “Freud and the Frankfurt School”; Gerald Atkinson’s (1999) “What is the Frankfurt School”; James Thornton’s (1999) “Gramsci’s Grand Plan”; Chuck Morse’s (2002) “Enthralled by Cultural Marxism: Four Horsemen of the Frankfurt School”; and William Lind’s (2004) *Political Correctness: A Short History of an Ideology* (Jamin 2018, 5). This discourse about cultural Marxism is not produced by scholars or activists with specialized knowledge about Marxism, but instead by far-right thinkers with no record of accomplishment or experience in this area. What story do right-wing authors tell about cultural Marxism?

The far right's story about cultural Marxism in America usually begins with Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Communist who fought against the fascist Benito Mussolini. According to this alt-right narrative, in prison, Gramsci wrote the *Prison Notebooks* to re-think socialist strategy. Observing how the working class was not spontaneously organizing itself to overthrow capitalism or committing to building Communism, and recognizing that the coercive imposition of Communism upon working people was a recipe for tyranny (Stalinism) and mass resistance (anti-Stalinism), Gramsci devised a plan for winning the working class voluntarily to socialism called "cultural Marxism." To translate Marxism from "economic into cultural terms" (Lind 2004, 5), continues the alt-right narrative, Gramsci urged Marxists to gain "control of the organs of culture: churches, education, newspapers, magazines, the electronic media, serious literature, music, the visual arts and so on" (Thornton 1999). The alt-right says Gramsci's cultural Marxist seed was planted in America when, in 1934, Jewish Marxist intellectuals—Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich and Eric Fromm—fled Nazi Germany to the US and built a new research institute at Columbia University, New York City. There, the Frankfurt School Institute for Social Research supposedly achieved "destructive criticism of all the main elements of Western culture, including Christianity, capitalism, authority, the family, patriarchy, hierarchy, morality, tradition, sexual restraint, loyalty, patriotism, nationalism, heredity, convention and conservatism" (Morse 2002). According to the alt-right, from 1934 onwards, the Frankfurt School and its disciples influenced generations of Americans. The alt-right depicts the New Left social movements of the 1960s—feminism, LGBTQ rights, black power, anti-colonial liberation, environmentalism, and pacifism—as the effect of the Frankfurt School's cultural Marxist ideology (Atkinson 1999; 2000; Lind 2000; 2001; 2004; Morse 2002; Thornton 1999).

By the early 1980s, neoliberal parties had defeated much of the organized left. Yet, the far-right's story about cultural Marxism represents the New Left as history's victor. By the early twenty-first century, cultural Marxists had supposedly built their hegemony in civil society and taken control of the Federal government, the public education system, and the media and cultural industries (Atkinson 1999; 2000; Baehr 2007; Buchanan 2002; Glazov 2004; Hultberg 2010; Kimball 2007; Lind 2000; 2001; 2004; 2005; MacDonald 2011; Minnicino 1992; 1994; Morse 2002; Thornton 1999; Wenzel 2013). Once in power, this cultural Marxist elite sided with "virtuous" non-white people and minority groups in a battle against "evil" white conservative men. For example, the alt-right says cultural Marxists now use the US Federal Government and the courts to establish social policies and redistributive programs that favour non-white people. They use the education system to build social justice curricula to indoctrinate white students with the ideology of "political correctness" while censoring these students' freedom to speak in oppressive ways. They push affirmative action policy in the workplace to undermine white people's chance at climbing a meritocratic social ladder. They promote open immigration to instigate a demographic shift toward multiculturalism that makes it tough for white people to be proud of their racial heritage. Furthermore, cultural Marxists rule the media and cultural industries, and this control enables them to spread their politically correct ideology through news and entertainment content.

The right-wing authors responsible for this tall tale about cultural Marxism in America are not experts, make no reference to canonical scholarly works on the actual history of Marxism (and socialism) in America (Buhle 2013; Nichols 2015), and fail to substantiate their claims with research. Nonetheless, the story they tell about cultural Marxism in America has made a mark on the public mind. Since the turn of the millennium, derivative retellings, creative adaptations, and contingent remixes of this story about the history of cultural Marxism in America have proliferated.

The far right agitated against cultural Marxism during George W. Bush's two-term presidency (Buchanan 2002; Kimball 2007; Lind 2004; 2005; Morse 2002; Horowitz 2007) and continued its war against cultural Marxism throughout the Obama years (Rogér 2010). Tea Party activists claimed that the election of Barack Obama represented a coup for cultural Marxism (Left-Wing Noise Machine 2011) while "birthers" framed Obama as a foreign-born Muslim who was building a cultural Marxist dictatorship (aided by the Jewish-Marxist banker, George Soros) (Kapner 2009). Right-wing shock jocks (Rush Limbaugh) and Fox News pundits (Glenn Beck) echoed and amplified notions of Obama being a "cultural Marxist" (Beck 2010; Wenzel 2013), as did new alt-right info-tainment sites like Breitbart News. In *Righteous Indignation: Excuse Me While I Save the World*, Andrew Breitbart (2011) described his "discovery" of cultural Marxism as his "red pill" and, between 2009 and 2017, Breitbart News pandered to the ideology of an alt-right audience too extremist for Fox News's ad clients by publishing numerous stories about cultural Marxism with titles like "Political Correctness = Cultural Marxism" (Big Hollywood 2009), "Cultural Marxism is the Enemy" (Ruse 2015a), and "Even Little Girls Can be Cultural Marxists" (Ruse 2015b).

From the 2008 election of Obama to the 2016 election of Trump, alt-right stories about cultural Marxism circulated far and wide. A Google Trends (2018) data visualization of American search interest in "cultural Marxism" from November 2008 to November 2016 shows interest in "cultural Marxism" increasing; it trends upwards during the 2016 election campaign and spikes in the aftermath of Trump's victory. Before and after Trump took the White House, the alt-right's culture warriors of hate produced, consumed, added to, remixed, and reproduced articles, memes, hashtags, tweets and videos that together constitute a digital discourse about cultural Marxism. An April 1, 2018, Google search for "cultural Marxism" returned 1,490,000 results in .37 seconds. A glut of content about

cultural Marxism now circulates through the Internet and World Wide Web, and much of it stems from alt-right media sources—websites, magazines, and blogs.

Spencer, who co-edits Altright.com and *Radix*, promulgates stories such as "Ghostbusters and the Suicide of Cultural Marxism" (Forney 2016), "#3 - Sweden: The World Capital of Cultural Marxism" (Right on Radio 2016), and "Beta Leftists, Cultural Marxism and Self-Entitlement" (Follin 2015). Anglin's *The Daily Stormer* publishes stories like "Jewish Cultural Marxism is Destroying Abercrombie & Fitch" (Farben 2017) and "Hollywood Strikes Again: Cultural Marxism through the Medium of Big Box-Office Movies" (Murray 2016) and "The Left-Center-Right Political Spectrum of Immigration = Cultural Marxism" (Duchesne 2015). Damigo's Evropa website features a video called "What is Cultural Marxism?" On vdare.com, the alt-right's intellectual hero Paul Gottfried (2017) bemoans conservatism's capitulation to LGTBQ rights and says its cultural Marxism's fault in a piece titled "Yes, Virginia (Dare) There Is A Cultural Marxism—And It's Taking Over Conservatism Inc." Jared Taylor's *American Renaissance* runs stories like "Cultural Marxism in Action: Media Matters Engineers Cancellation of Vdare.com Conference" (Brimelow 2017). Before his downfall, the alt-right's clown prince Milo Yiannopoulos satirized cultural Marxism in articles such as "I've Been Censored, And It's Getting Dark: How Cultural Marxism Locked me Out of My Car," among others. When Twitter suspended Milo's account, his fans blamed cultural Marxism (Rudd-o 2016).

Yet, the freedom to hate is given more protection in the US than those who wish to live free from hate (Volokh 2015) and alt-right invectives against cultural Marxism freely flow across social media platforms (BBC Trending 2018). On Facebook, a "Stop Cultural Marxism" page describes cultural Marxists as "people who are cancer in human form"; an "Ending Cultural Marxism" group says its mission is "to right what has gone wrong, to stand against the oppression of those who would be enemies to traditional

cultures, races, religions, and creeds”; a “Stop the New World Order & Agenda 21” page describes Cultural Marxism as “the Left Wing tactic of brainwashing youth into living a sick decaying and perverted lifestyle where everything once beautiful and sacred is replaced with sick acts of public degeneracy.” Alt-right Twitter trolls “call out” cultural Marxism. For example, Cultural Marxism (@culturalmarxis) describes itself as a “group dedicated to spread the word about Cultural Marxism. Exposing the progressives for what they really are: a bunch of totalitarian control freaks!” The handle @ViscountTroll says, “Trigger-extraordinaire, smash Cultural Marxism, bring forth freedom and strength, Nationalist, exiled Rhodesian.”

As of April 1, 2018, the video-sharing site YouTube streamed almost 174,000 videos about cultural Marxism. Some of these included “Cultural Marxism: The Corruption of America” (starring the paleo-conservative Pat Buchanan and the Tea Party libertarian, Ron Paul); “Nazi Rubber Duck Explains Cultural Marxism”; and “The History of Marxist Infiltration and Subversion of Culture.” YouTube hate influencers run cultural Marxist conspiracy channels: The European Awakening channel circulates a video called “Destroy Cultural Marxism”; The American Patriot channel runs “Cultural Marxism: The Ideological Disease Destroying America and Western Civilization”; and Chad Jackson’s channel spreads “Cultural Marxism - Antonio Gramsci Effect on American Culture.” Amazon.com meanwhile retails books about the “corrupting” influence of cultural Marxism as well. Michael Walsh’s (2017) *The Devil’s Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West*, for example, claims that cultural Marxism “released a horde of demons into the American psyche” that has “affected nearly every aspect of American life and society.” For an anti-Semitic twist, Kevin MacDonald’s (2017) *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth Century Intellectual and Political Movements* reduces cultural Marxism to an all-

encompassing Jewish conspiracy to de-Christianize America.

## **The Alt-Right’s Discourse of Cultural Marxism: A Conspiracy Theory of Power**

Evidently, the alt-right’s discourse about cultural Marxism in America is massive, and it spreads around the world in a range of non-commercial and commercial forms and across numerous platforms, shaping what people think about cultural Marxism and the impact of cultural Marxism in America and elsewhere. However, far from being an honest or accurate depiction of cultural Marxism in America, this alt-right story about cultural Marxism is an all-encompassing conspiracy theory of power (Berlet 2009; Jamin 2018). Indeed, the alt-right’s story about cultural Marxism in America represents cultural Marxists as a malicious elite that is consolidating its power over America and controlling the Federal government, the media and cultural industries, the higher education system, public discourse and opinion at the expense of white conservatives. The conspiracy theorist might address its audience like this: “Hey white person! Look at all the social changes in America. To understand these, you need to first understand that a secretive cultural Marxist cabal rules the Federal Government, the cultural industries, and the education system. The plot to rule America began in the 1930s, when Gramsci developed it, and after World War II, when Jewish academic Marxists implemented it. Foreigners, not Americans, are responsible for producing and putting Marxist ideology in the heads of all of those politically correct social justice warriors (PC-SJWs). In fact, these poor Americans are dupes of cultural Marxist ideology.”

The alt-right represents cultural Marxism as responsible for or equivalent to every idea, value, person, group, organization, product and, practice that purportedly offends, challenges, or afflicts the identities of white conservative Christian Americans. Indeed, cultural Marxism is said to be the cause and effect of: social justice (Kirschner 2017); feminism, gender equality, and women’s right to get an abortion



or a divorce (Atkinson 1999; 2000; Muehlenberg 2016; Smith 2015); gay, lesbian, and trans people and their rights (Kuhner 2013); racial equality, multiculturalism, and race-mixing (Lind 2000; 2001; 2004; 2005; Storms 2017); affirmative action and “cultural sensitivity training” at Starbucks (Founder 2018); “Big Government” social welfare programs and “gun control” policies (Biver 2014; Torcer 2017); the United Nations’ supposed “New World Order” agenda (Hopkins-Cavanagh 2017); liberal organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Moveon.org; social movements: Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter (BLM), ANTIFA and #MeToo (Hopkins-Cavanagh 2017, Smith 2015; Storms 2017; The Taoist Conservative 2017); Colin Kaepernick and the NFL players who took the knee in solidarity with BLM (Canzoneri 2017); Hollywood films such as *Elysium* (2013) (because of its critique of dystopian capitalism) and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) (because of its multi-gendered and multi-cultural casts) (Forney 2016; Murray 2016; Right On 2015); and academic trends such as postmodern and post-structuralist theory (Apostaticus 2016; Peterson 2017; 2018; Salerno 2016). Evidently, the alt-right’s discourse about cultural Marxism is a totalizing or global conspiracy theory, as it attempts to identify or explain the historical origin or motor force behind innumerable phenomena that its ideologues dislike, disapprove of, or even hate.

The alt-right’s cultural Marxist conspiracy theory is totalizing and global, but it can be easily debunked. Bluntly, there is no empirical ground beneath the idea that Marxists rule the big institutions of American society. At present, Trump (a billionaire) presides over the most powerful government in the world and Trump’s Cabinet is full of millionaires, not Marxists. The Trump White House and the Republican-controlled Congress and Senate are in no way in league with Marxists and the US State is more supportive of trans-national corporations than it is of the Democratic Socialists of America. After all, Senator Bernie Sanders’ reformist social democratic proposals are too radical for the

Democratic Party’s leadership (and the moneyed interests that back it). Far from being overrun by red-tentured radicals, the higher education system is big business; high-salaried business administrators frequently run universities and colleges. Sure, some social science and humanities professors teach Marx (a canonical thinker), but Marxism’s influence is marginal in academia—and the wider society—as compared to the Chicago School’s neoliberal orthodoxy. No current studies of media ownership in America support the claim that Marxists have seized control of the means of intellectual production. Millionaires and billionaires such as News Corp’s Rupert Murdoch and Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg own the US-based ICT and cultural industries.

While Marxist theory has inspired the formation of some intellectuals, social movements, and parties in the US, none have ever achieved a substantive hegemony at any level of US society. No Marxist has presided over the Federal government, the media and cultural industries, the education system, or the nation’s dominant common sense. Moreover, the most powerful institutions of American society—the US government, the military, and the corporate sector—have mostly been unfriendly to Marxists, and Marxism has long been America’s unofficial “anti-ideology” (Herman and Chomsky 1988). The two dominant political parties are anti-Marxist and, in some instances, they have directly repressed Marxist-minded citizens and social movements (R. Goldstein 1978; 2016; Schultz 2001). In 1919-1920, the Lusk Committee investigated Americans that held Marxist views for sedition; in 1939, the Hatch Act attempted to remove Marxist-minded workers from the public sector; in 1941, Public Law 125 enabled security agencies to investigate public sector workers suspected of being Marxists and fire them if they were. In the early Cold War, Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy framed liberals as Marxist “pinkos” and “dupes”; the House Committee on Un-American Activities targeted, investigated and then blacklisted many Hollywood liberals (and Marxists) (R. Goldstein 1978, 2016). In the twenty-first century, right-wing politicians and pundits promulgate brazenly anti-

Marxist ideology to the public while alt-right hate campaigns against cultural Marxists go viral. For more than one hundred years, some US citizens have embraced Marxist, Communist, and socialist ideas, and US State agencies, corporations, and right-wing movements have flacked and demobilized them. In sum, the alt-right's notion that a cultural Marxist elite is ruling over America is ludicrous, and the idea that America's big institutions are backed by cultural Marxist ideology is absurd.

The alt-right's cultural Marxist conspiracy is easily put to the lie, but why might this conspiracy theory resonate with those who produce, consume and seem to believe so many of the circulating versions of it? Analyzed as a subcultural phenomenon, the alt-right's cultural Marxist conspiracy theory might be redeemed as a "problem-solving" device, a creative yet confused symbolic response to real social antagonisms and conflicts rooted in a fundamentally hierarchical and systematically unequal capitalism system. As a radically simplistic explanatory mode, the cultural Marxist conspiracy theory might provide the alt-right subjects that digitally prosume it with a way of feeling "in the know," of having special insight into the truth of society, and of being perceptive about the elite. Like all conspiracy theories, the alt-right's cultural Marxist conspiracy theory enables its alt-right prosumers to gaze behind appearances and reveal what they hide or distort. For example, for the alt-right, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) has a multi-gendered and multi-cultural cast, not because Hollywood seeks to turn a profit by producing globally popular films that target a diverse American and trans-national audience, but because cultural Marxists are pulling Hollywood's strings! For the alt-right, Starbucks is educating its employees about cultural diversity, not because of a brand equity crisis that emerged after a racist store manager called the police on black consumers, but because cultural Marxism has corrupted the way Starbucks runs its business! And so on. Like most conspiracy theories, the alt-right's discourse of cultural Marxism enables its prosumers to imagine themselves as an intellectual

vanguard—enlightened people who possess special knowledge about how the world works and therefore have a responsibility to enlighten the ignorant or "duped" masses.

However, this assessment of the alt-right's cultural Marxist conspiracy theory as a subcultural problem-solving device is misguided and far too charitable to those responsible for propagating it. Far from being a subculture, the alt-right is a well-resourced and well-organized neo-fascist hate movement that is struggling to win mainstream power in the streets, and through the Internet and World Wide Web. As the next section shows, the alt-right makes many political uses of its discourse of cultural Marxism, and all are actionable to alt-right's mobilization of intersectional hate.

### **The Alt-Right's Political Uses of the Discourse of Cultural Marxism: Intersectional Hate**

This section identifies and discusses seven political-rhetorical uses of the alt-right's discourse of cultural Marxism.

First, the alt-right uses the discourse of cultural Marxism as a "culture war" strategy for constructing an American self in its hateful image. The US is a sovereign territorial state, but the meaning of America is a terrain of struggle between political blocs that vie for hegemony over civil society and the US State. The longstanding American "culture wars" express deep disagreements about the essence of "America" (Hunter 1992). The alt-right's discourse of cultural Marxism is one tool in its battle to construct the meaning of what America essentially is and is not, to draw definitional boundaries—territorial and imagined—around who Americans truly are and are not, and to delineate who naturally belongs to the national community and who is an outsider. Using the discourse of cultural Marxism, the alt-right constructs America as constituted by selective ethno-racial, sexual, religious, and economic characteristics. America's ethno-racial composition is "white,"

“Anglo-Saxon,” and “European”; America’s gender-sex regime is patriarchal, heteronormative, and centred around the nuclear family; its religious order is Christian; its economic structure is capitalist; the values of individualism, meritocracy, and private property are sacrosanct. For the alt-right, this is the essential America, an alt-American imagined community.

Second, the alt-right uses the discourse of cultural Marxism to construct an anti- or un-American other, a foil for its alt-American self. The alt-right labels non-conformers to its white, patriarchal, Christian capitalist alt-American ideal—liberals, white social justice activists, non-white people, feminists, LGBTQ people, immigrants, atheists, Muslims, Jews, socialists and so on—as “cultural Marxists.” The alt-right also represents politicians, business elites, and celebrities who are not Marxists, as Marxists. A website called “Cultural Marxism: The Decline of Western Civilization,” for example, lumps together Hilary Clinton, Barack Obama, Justin Trudeau, Mark Zuckerberg, Eric Schmidt, George Soros, Pope Francis, George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, and Rachel Maddow, depicting them all as cultural Marxists. For the alt-right, it would seem that behind every liberal is a cunning Marxist, plotting against alt-America. In sum, the alt-right’s discourse on cultural Marxism constructs individuals and groups in the US that do not conform with or express the characteristics of the alt-American Self as an un-American cultural Marxist Other.

Third, the alt-right uses the discourse of cultural Marxism to construct the people it depicts as “others” to alt-America as not only un-American, but also, as enemy threats to America. For example, T.J. Roberts (2017) declares cultural Marxism to be the greatest threat to liberty in America. Ron Paul (2017, 53) says that cultural Marxism is “a form of cultural terrorism” against America and the West. Western Mastery (2017) maligns cultural Marxism as the #1 enemy of the West. For the alt-right, cultural Marxists are waging war against and destroying America; these anti-Americans trash the

First Amendment, wreck the nuclear family, deprive people of jobs, destroy communities, corrupt culture, overturn Christianity, and set back America’s military victory in the Global War on Terror (Breitbart 2009; Glazov 2002; Lind 2000; Minnicino 1992; 1994; Yeager 2003). Sometimes, cultural Marxism and “Islamic terrorism” are depicted as in cahoots, as growing and global-local threats to American security (Joondeph 2017; Lind 2001). By depicting people it labels as cultural Marxists and enemy threats to alt-America, the alt-right sews fear, suspicion, and paranoia about its opponents and ignites hatred for a wide range of people that are not anti-American, and most often, not even Marxists.

Fourth, the alt-right uses the discourse of cultural Marxism to agitate for violence against the people it constructs as cultural Marxists and enemy threats to alt-America. In a context where real and imagined threats to America are frequently responded to by the State with police and military violence, and war without territorial and temporal boundaries has been part of the American way of life since 9/11, the alt-right provokes its followers to see cultural Marxists as enemies and to perceive the use of violence as a way to neutralize this supposed enemy threat as legitimate, even necessary. For example, Blahut (2011) invites readers to wage a “war” against the cultural Marxist “enemy”: “The hour grows late. We must identify the enemy and fight him, even when that means punishment by the powers-that-be.” A “smashculturalmarxism.com” website depicts a white man using a sledgehammer to demolish a symbol of the hammer and sickle. The site’s disclaimer states: “We believe that White Europeans have a moral obligation to stand up for their own people and their nations and to oppose this Genocidal system which is destroying us all” (Smash Cultural Marxism 2017). The alt-right’s discourse of cultural Marxism agitates for violence against the people it constructs as cultural Marxists and represents violence as a way to “defend” and “secure” America from this threat. Given the flexibility of the alt-right’s epithetical label of cultural Marxism, anyone who does not fit into alt-America is vulnerable to being smeared as a cultural Marxist, and

everyone the alt-right demonizes as a cultural Marxist and enemy threat to alt-America is a potential target of a violent hate movement to “smash” cultural Marxism, online and off.

Fifth, the alt-right uses the discourse on cultural Marxism as a tool of right-wing populism, as a political strategy that “pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 3). The alt-right uses the discourse of cultural Marxism to construct non-white people and minority groups, as well as their allies, as cultural Marxist elitists, overlords, snobs, villains, snowflakes, and so on that use “political correctness” to undermine or oppress virtuous alt-American people. The alt-right’s discourse produces alt-American people as victims of cultural Marxism, as people oppressed in some way by this cultural Marxist elite and its ideology of “political correctness.” By constructing cultural Marxists as bad un-American elites and alt-Americans as a virtuous yet victimized people, the alt-right casts itself as a populist vanguard of a people’s national liberation movement. While left-wing populism is forward-leaning, and agitates for an intersectional social movement capable of overcoming racism and sexism, winning better jobs, higher wages, and more control over the labour process, and establishing strong public systems for provisioning healthcare, welfare, and education systems to all, the alt-right’s populism is backward-looking. It promises to bring its people back to a time when a patriarchal, white, and Christian-supremacist notion of American nationhood had not been unsettled by social justice movements or challenged by economic changes linked to multinational capitalism and the multicultural meritocratic superstructure of “progressive neoliberalism” (Fraser 2017). As a tool of populism, the alt-right’s discourse of cultural Marxism is fundamentally regressive.

Sixth, the alt-right uses the discourse on cultural Marxism to deny the reality of sexism, racism, and classism in the US. The alt right’s discourse represents historically marginalized groups and their allies as a cultural Marxist elite and frames ideas, movements, practices, and policies that seek to counter and eliminate racism, sexism, and classism as the result of a cultural Marxist elite, not people’s struggles. The alt-right’s discourse makes it seem as though people who call out and struggle to curb inequality and oppression are cultural Marxist ideologues and portray talk of inequality and oppression as little more than delusions suffered by cultural Marxist dupes. It makes social justice appear to be a top-down cultural Marxist conspiracy as opposed to a bottom-up community response to the existing problems of racism, sexism, and classism. In effect, the alt-right’s discourse denies the historical and contemporary social facts of sexism, racism, and classism in the US, invalidates the lived experiences of those people who live with oppression each day, and downplays the agency of these people and their allies to challenge and transform oppressive conditions. In this regard, the alt-right’s discourse about cultural Marxism denies and whitewashes reality.

Seventh, the alt-right uses the discourse of cultural Marxism to obscure the essence of the actual elite groups in positions of structural and institutional decision-making power in the US economy and State. While actual Marxist scholars point to the billionaires and owners of big corporations such as The Bank of America Corporation, Raytheon, and Exxon-Mobil as society’s “ruling class,” the alt-right depicts everyone from Rachel Maddow to George Clooney as cultural Marxist elites. For the alt-right, it seems that being an elite means holding certain liberal ideas as opposed to holding capital. By channelling alt-America’s anger toward people who supposedly hold cultural Marxist ideas instead of the people who actually hold concentrated economic and political power, the alt-right’s discourse masks and distracts people from the corporate elites that exercise real power in the US. Thus, this discourse enables these elites to proceed with business as usual, securing their profits with help

from two compliant parties. The alt-right's discourse of cultural Marxism is an ignorant alternative to the substantive Marxist praxis of trying to theorize and concretely analyze the complexities, conflicts, and contradictions of capitalism with the goal of moving beyond it. It is undoubtedly easier to rage against non-existent cultural Marxist elites from the comfort of one's smartphone than it is to build organizations and movements capable of taking on real social power. Clearly, the alt-right's discourse is compliant with the capitalist status quo.

### **Conclusion: The Alt-Right's Discourse of Cultural Marxism Goes Global**

Since emerging on the extremist fringes of the American Right in the 1990s, the discourse of cultural Marxism has gone global and has been locally adapted by right-wing thinkers and groups around the world. In the United Kingdom, the British National Party (BNP) depicts cultural Marxism as a "pernicious, destructive ideology that involves importing millions of immigrants from all around the world, particularly the Third World, along with their cultures and religions" and frames cultural Marxism as a form of "enforced multiculturalism" that is a "crime against humanity" (Green 2017). In Australia, the Australian Tea Party figure David Truman says cultural Marxism is a plot to destroy Western Culture, "including Christianity, Capitalism, Authority, The Family, Patriarchy, Morality, Tradition, Sexual Restraint, Loyalty, Patriotism, Nationalism, Heredity, Ethno-centrism, and Conservatism" (Jamin 2018, 8). In Hungary, Dr. Anca-Maria Cernea (2016) says cultural Marxism threatens the patriarchal nuclear Judeo-Christian family by supporting "abortion," "divorce," "homosexuality," "radical sex education," and "hatred of God and the entire human race."

Canada is a multicultural polity with a progressive liberal brand, but right-wing extremism is a problem (Perry and Scrivens 2015) and the American alt-right's discourse on cultural Marxism has been gaining ground. For example, the landslide 2018

election of Trump supporter Doug Ford as Premier of Ontario (Mulligan 2016) suggests that Canada's liberal brand may belie growing alt-right sentiment. Following the election of Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper as the Prime Minister of Canada in 2006, the American New Right figurehead Paul Weyrich (2005) sent Harper a congratulatory message advising Harper to liquidate Canada's "cultural Marxist" ideology (CBC 2006). The Rebel Media, a far-right news organization, published articles by Canadian alt-right propagandists such as: "Want to sop cultural Marxist indoctrination? Cut public funding of universities" (Nicholas 2017); "Social justice is socialism in disguise" (Goldy 2016); and "How progressives use our kids for Marxist social experiments" (Goldy 2017). The *Canada Free Press* circulates articles such as "Newspeak and Cultural Marxism" (Mann 2009). The Council of European Canadians (led by the white nationalist professor Ricardo Duchesne), has published articles such as "Cultural Marxism = Everything That's Wrong with the West" (Goodchild 2017). *Your Ward News* (edited by the leader of the neo-Nazi New Constitution Party of Canada, James Sears) is an overtly anti-Semitic, racist, homophobic, and misogynistic propaganda outlet that has regularly perpetuated the lie of cultural Marxism (and it recently organized an anti-Marxist book burning in the East End of Toronto, Canada) (Balgord 2017). In Whitby, Ontario, the ultra-conservative Campaign Life Coalition recorded and uploaded rants like "Radical sex-ed, transgender ideology, and cultural Marxism" to YouTube (Fonseca 2018).

The most high-profile anti-cultural Marxist in Canada is Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist at the University of Toronto who has not published peer-reviewed research on Marxism. Peterson became an alt-right idol when publicly challenging Bill C-16, a change to the Canadian Human Rights Act that aims to prohibit discrimination based on gender expression (Cumming 2016). Appearing in videos such as "Identity Politics & the Marxist Lie of White Privilege" (Peterson 2018) and "Postmodernism and Cultural Marxism" (Peterson 2017), Peterson has

tapped into the alt-right's discourse of cultural Marxism and cashed in on the anxiety and anger of a large and growing alt-right fan base (Southey 2017). Peterson is not a fascist and he often says he hates Nazis, but Peterson's deployment of "cultural Marxism" as a term of opprobrium when ranting against "political correctness" and "social justice" in Canada appeals to reactionaries worldwide. Every usage of "cultural Marxism" is not essentially fascist, but this phrase is used by contemporary fascists as an ideological weapon. When Peterson berates "cultural Marxism," he may be helping the alt-right bring its conspiracy theory of hate into the mainstream (Berlatsky 2018).

Currently, the meaning of cultural Marxism is embattled and articulated for different political and ideological projects by the alt-left and alt-right, progressive and reactionary, socialist and fascist. The alt-right has constructed the meaning of cultural Marxism in a struggle to organize trans-national consent to fascism, and the alt-right's meaning of Marxism is making an impression upon the minds of many. It is incumbent upon actual Marxists to look in the mirror held to them by the alt-right, and begin to counter the image and fascist movement behind it. This cognitive mapping of the alt-right's discourse on cultural Marxism is a small gesture to that end.

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